

JANE YEH

Hi. I'm Jane Yeh, and I'm here today with Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon.

JO REARDON

Hello.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Hi there.

JANE YEH

So I guess let's start by talking about your reading and/or viewing habits and how they relate to your own writing practise. Jo, maybe you could talk a bit about scriptwriting in terms of the different kinds of reading and viewing or listening you might do.

JO REARDON

Well, I work mainly in radio, writing scripts for radio, but the principles of script writing apply whatever medium you're working in. So I will watch a lot of TV. I love a good soap opera. I love a good crime drama. But I also watch a lot of films. I listen to radio plays a lot and read scripts. One thing that actually is really important is to read scripts, because particularly if you're writing for stage, you need to understand how it looks on the page because it's part of the presentation, and that will convey itself to the way the actors will interpret it. So you really do need to understand that, the written script on a page. But I think anything-- like any writer, you read as a writer. I read novels. I read poetry. I think poetry has quite a lot in common with script writing in terms of the concise nature of the storytelling, if you like, and the use of abstract and specific images that can convey ideas. So I read a lot poetry too. So I read everything, really, and everything feeds into it.

JANE YEH

Siobhan, what about you in terms of-- and obviously, your speciality is poetry, although you write in other genres as well.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Yes. Well, a bit like Jo, I read across several different kinds of material. I find non-fiction feeds well for me into poetry, so I'm addicted to things like New Scientist, National Geographic. I'm ashamed to say I'm addicted to The Economist magazine. But I'm generally coming at those kind of articles looking for something else in them, maybe a lexicon of words I wouldn't normally use myself but that feel up to the minute or that feel like they might dovetail into my own thoughts. For instance, I'm writing poems at the moment involving cows, and a few sheep and horses, but mainly cows. And I was fascinated to find recently that cows' gall bladders sell for thousands and thousands of pounds. So that's the kind of detail. I might be finding in the non-fiction, and it might wind its way into a poem. Obviously, I do read collections of poetry as well. My favourite thing to do is to read the full collection maybe over a few days, from start to finish if I can because poets do shape their collections. There's a sort of experiential thing about it, almost like going into a gallery, an artist's exhibition. They shape that exhibition. The same thing with a book of poetry, I think, in the main. So I try and read it for the pure pleasure of it first, and usually I'd be turning down some pages to come back to. And when I go back to those particular poems, I try and delve into, why did they arrest me? What stopped me in my tracks? Often, it's I'm asking, how did they do that? How did that poet achieve some kind of pressure? Was the shape of the line? Are they doing something interesting

with the voice? And at that point, I usually try and find that poem if I can recorded. Often, poets record themselves, and they might put it up on Vimeo or on YouTube. And then, other times you can find poets on Poetry Archive or the UCD poetry archive. So yeah, I'm reading all around, a bit like Jo.

JANE YEH

Jo, so in terms of reading a script, what is it that you're looking for or thinking about it?

JO REARDON

Well, I think, actually, just picking up on something Siobhan said about reading entire collections of poetry, you have to read an entire script in one go. I don't think you can just pick it up because it's meant to be performed in one go. So I'm always looking for how a piece is structured. That's very important to me, particularly in terms of-- because I don't mind saying that structure in the terms of drama is something I struggle a little bit with. So seeing how other people have done it really helps me to see that three act structure, the rising climax, the conflict, and then the resolution. And it really helps to read-- you've got to read the whole script in one go to be able to see that, or listen to a radio play, or watch-- it's different if you're watching serial drama, obviously, because that's broken down into episodes. But one thing I'll also do is be alert-- and Siobhan was talking about reading non-fiction texts. And I'm always alert to watching documentaries I like because you can get to hear how people speak, how people really do speak in real life. Because dialogue in drama is not conversation in the way we would normally think of it, but it can help you to hear how real people speak, if you like-- interrupting each other, pausing, not finishing a sentence off, not really saying what they mean to say, or sometimes being very honest about what they're saying. So I think also those non-fiction elements on screen can help as well. So I'm looking for that. When I'm watching something or reading something, I'm looking for how, usually, it feeds into the storytelling, character, structure elements for me.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

That's interesting what Jo says about structure, and I think it really rings true to me in looking at poems also, because we've all got a lot to learn about how other people do things. Are they good at beginnings? Where was that poem beginning? Because often, in an early stage of a poem-- I don't know if you find this, Jane-- you may write a stanza that's not the beginning of the poem that you lop off afterwards. And so it's interesting to look at, where do other people begin? Also, endings. How are they ending their poem? And I think this applies to drama. How do you finish a play? Where do you finish? Do you finish before the real end? Do you imply an ending? And the same thing applies to poetry. I had a review of one of my first collections which said, and she's addicted to the conclusion type ending. So I was disgusted. But of course, when I looked back, the person was being true and being honest. And so I learned how to do a different kind of ending, or several different kinds of endings. But again, I look to my peers to see what they're up to. And of course, we're all magpies as writers, so this is partly what we're reading for. What can we learn to bring back into our own practise? What feels right for the zeitgeist of the moment we're writing in?

JANE YEH

Jo, did you want to talk a bit maybe about the zeitgeist in terms of reading and viewing practises?

JO REARDON

Yeah. I think it's really important in script, actually-- I think particularly if you're writing for theatre, which more than the other mediums may-- perhaps to some extent television as well these days

with the way drama-- TV drama is changing. But it's very of the moment. It has to reflect life as it is now. Theatre is about what is happening now. And even if a classic play is revived, it's normally revived because it has some relevance to today, not because for the sake of it. Because some plays are very dated and they won't ever be seen again. So I think when you're writing for Theatre, that's something I'm very aware of, and that's why I do go-- you've got to go to Theatre a lot. If you write for the Theatre, you absolutely have to go and go to different types of Theatre, so not just somewhere like the National Theatre in London, but also the smaller fringe theatres that are perhaps showing more exciting, more diverse work. Got to be aware of it because to know where your writing fits in, to know where you fit in. So I think that's very, very important.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

Yeah. Once again, I'd have to agree on the poetry side because if you're not reading contemporary poetry, you will not be tuned in to what's actually going on. So I always find a good thing to do is to ferret out one or two or three magazines where some of the poems speak directly to you and you think, yeah, I'd actually quite like to write like that. That might be a magazine I eventually might submit to. And if you keep up with those-- and you can keep up with so many of them online now-- you get a sense of what people are doing. You know, again, as Jo says, how your work might or might not be fitting in. And it's really part of taking yourself a bit more seriously as a writer as well.

JANE YEH

Jo, did you have anything you wanted to add to that.

JO REARDON

I think the same, that idea of speaking-- about being aware of what's happening in contemporary writing you just mentioned in poetry, Siobhan, is also actually relevant to radio, because radio is changing all the time. You think it isn't, and you might listen to a radio play and think, oh, it's the same old thing churns out year on year. But actually, I think recently there have been quite a lot of changes on the hearing-- the key thing we're hearing a lot more is a lot more diverse voices, I think. And so I think what's really quite exciting, I think, about the way it's going is that there might be more opportunities to be much more of the moment in terms of what you're writing about. So that's what I'm thinking about at the moment with something I'm working on. But also, I was just thinking while we're talking as well, I go back to the old stories, so classical stories, again, which can help with structure. So I'm working on an idea at the moment that is based on Euripides' play *Alcestis* just in terms-- and it's got a lot of relevance today because it's about women who don't have a voice, who are sidelined. And I'm trying to find a new way to update it. But constantly, classical plays, and I think from-- and also reading things like *The Odyssey* can give you a very good idea of a journey for a character.

JANE YEH

So were there any other points that you wanted to make in terms of your reading habits and your own writing practise?

JO REARDON

Well, the one thing I think is really important is you have an idea, and whatever you're writing, you have an idea for a story or something. You think, how shall I write this? Should it be a short story? Should it be a novel? I think in script it's really important. Is it going to be a Theatre play, a radio play, or a screenplay? And some stories just do not fit a screenplay, or they're more suitable to

stage. And I think, if I can just say my-- I did do a lot of commissioning work in Theatre, and quite often we'd be sent scripts which were completely incompatible with Theatre. They should have been a radio play or a screen. So you really need to think about that. I've got an idea at the moment that I know isn't going to work anywhere other than stage. But I'm just thinking about how to do it because it's a smaller idea. It's quite a political, with small p, idea. So to me, that's very important. If you're writing script, you need to know where your story fits before you start.

SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

For my part, I would say that, even though you're reading as a writer, it's important to retain the excitement and pleasure of the reading. And for me, that often occurs most when I'm reading something that has a very particular voice. So for instance, Anna Burns' novel Milkman. You have to almost hear it in your inner ear in the accent in which Anna Burns speaks but surrounds people living in Northern Ireland, for instance. Luckily, I'm from there, so I can hear that on my ear. But I think the way she writes it, it conveys to any reader. And that is a journey, an imaginative journey into a set of language and phrasing that you come away from inspired, even if you're never going to do exactly that. But the fact is it's the excitement of the inspiration that you take away back into your own writing.

JANE YEH

Great. I think that's a good place to stop. And thank you both so much again, Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon