Amal El-Mohtar at Joseph-Beth Booksellers Cincinnati

Interviewed by Mike Yetter

Speaker 0: Books. She lives in Ottawa, Canada. Ladies and gentlemen, And window. Now I just wanna make sure everyone knows. This is a novella and a short story all in one.

Don't skip the short story because it is fantastic. Oh, thank you. But I'm gonna focus on the novella. That's alright.

Speaker 1: Of course. Yeah.

Speaker 0: Opening sentence. Well, actually, first. Sorry. How was your travel?

Speaker 1: Oh my gosh. Thank you. It was good. Although, thinking that I could get a 6AM flight was hubris. I I didn't fully factor in that would mean, like, waking up at four

Speaker 0: Mhmm.

Speaker 1: And stuff. I did make the flight, so I am but I did sleep a lot today. Oh, good. So yeah.

Speaker 0: And how's family? Great.

Speaker 1: Thank you for asking. How's your family?

Speaker 0: You know what? The daughters, they can be a bit of a handful, but they're okay. Yeah. And how's the Cincinnati weather treating you compared to Ottawa?

Speaker 1: It's so warm. I walked I walked here in, like, a velvet woven garment and stuff. I left Ottawa and it was minus 20 and minus 20 Celsius.

Speaker 0: But it's

Speaker 1: not, you know, it's close enough for folk music for, but, it was so cold and so snowy. And we went to New York first and it was balmy. And then we went to Portland. I say we. It was me.

I don't know. Really? Yes. Then I went to my my husband was with me in New York as a thing. And I, by myself, went to Portland and then, to Chapel Hill.

And it was just, like, journeying deeper and deeper into spring, and it's just been so warm and so nice. So I'm thrilled.

Speaker 0: Then you came here. And then I came yeah. It is

Speaker 1: still it's still very warm compared.

Speaker 0: Compared to minus 20 Celsius. Sorry about that. Good. The novella's opening sentence. The river lists runs north to south, and the waters brim with grammar.

Readers are gonna come to realize over the course of the book that there's a lot of information just in that one opening sentence alone. Crucial information that's gonna come up later and the conjunction right in the middle of the sentence, the and, and the rest of the book hinges on that opening sentence. I can't even imagine how hard it must have written. It must have been to, craft that. Oh,

Speaker 1: was it hard? I mean

Speaker 0: You're gonna blow my mind

Speaker 1: right now. It's so interesting to think of as there were lots of things about about writing this and about revising this that were hard. But, I think that I I definitely changed the opening sentence a bunch of times. Mhmm. There were a lot of things I wanted to do with the opening, that involved wanting to, like, foreground and highlight the sisters and their relationship and how that worked and stuff and at some point I wanted I decided to like hold back from that.

I knew that I wanted to have a a narrative voice that was a sort of storyteller voice that was a kind of once upon a time fairy tale narrator voice. And so I needed to kind of zoom out from what I had been doing beforehand. And it took a while to get there, but it wasn't I don't think of it as, like, hard, if that makes sense. It's more like I was just kind of in pursuit of it, if that makes sense. So, a little bit more a a little bit more sort of hunting, gathering than, you know, laboring it away at, like, a a block of marble or something like that.

Speaker 0: That makes sense. Yeah. Well, you're also the coauthor of the this is how you lose the time war. On the other hand, you're the only author

Speaker 1: of the river has roots. I am. Yeah. My my solo

Speaker 0: debut is what they keep saying. And I'm just wondering how the your writing process might have differed

Speaker 1: between the two. So it's funny because so writing Time War with Max was actually, you know, the kind of singular extraordinary thing. Before that I'd been writing short fiction by myself for fifteen years and stuff and this began life as a short story. It really like, it began as an audio original. It was it was commissioned to be an audio first story.

And so I wrote it with that in mind thinking it was going to be, excuse me, performed first. And, so so that process, like, the fact of working by myself was not, like, a particularly novel thing. What was very strange about it, though, was that the the people who commissioned it got as far as, like, copy edits on it before they were like, you know, we've decided just not to produce it, so for mysterious reasons. So, they reverted the rights back to me at which point we we sold it to to Tor instead. And then they wanted it to be novella length, at least, so so you could, like, put it between boards.

And, at that point, I was like, great. Well, I had been intending to revise it for print eventually. Like, after and turning it from essentially a novelette, like, something that was 12,000 ish words to a 20,000 word novella was really really hard, like easily the hardest revision I have ever done because I was simultaneously trying to keep all the things that I liked about it as a complete short story and then make it completely different at the same time. So, that that was really hard. Everything about Time War was pure joy.

Like, that that I wish everyone a writing experience as joyful and beautiful as getting to sit across a table in a gazebo with your best friend, just making up a story together where you're both kind of both challenging and competing with each other in the friendliest way to impress each other, and also, like, able to visibly change each other's work on the page and stuff like that, purely by your proximity and engagement. So that that's the kind of thing that I just don't ever expect to have happen more than once. You know? It was it was so extraordinary. But this one, like, I was so, like, relieved by the end of it that I I felt like I had pulled it off, basically.

The the the challenge of the revision, I felt like it kind of came together. But it was it was a lot more, like, it's just me. And if anything with Time War as well, because Time War has had this, like, beautiful reception far beyond anything Max and I ever imagined for it. There is a little little bit of, like, well, this is my book now. This is just just me.

It's not Time War. It's very small. It's just a little book, but I still hope people like it. So yeah.

Speaker 0: Little book, but it carries a heft. Well, thank you. I read in an interview that part of the inspiration were, murder ballads. Yes. Bonnie Swans.

Speaker 1: Yes.

Speaker 0: Two sisters. Is this a response to those kinds of ballads?

Speaker 1: Yeah. It's, so there's, I where do I start with this? I play the harp. The reason I play the harp is because of Lorena McKennett, my my country woman, Canadian folk singer from Manitoba originally. And she plays the harp.

And I, like, came to her music when I was 14 or something like that, and I was like, my music, I have found it. You know, the thing that, you know, my my school had, like, cliques of, like, skaters and rappers, and I like, every kind of everyone organized themselves according to the music they listened to. But what we listened to at home was, like, classical Arabic music, nineteen seventies political musicals from Lebanon and Celine Dion. And that was, like, genuinely, like, not even a spectrum, just just those things. Sure.

So it was, and I just didn't really know how people found music that wasn't on the radio.

Speaker 0: Right.

Speaker 1: And, and then a friend said, you like poetry. This person, like, put some poems that you like to music. So there like, she'd done the lady of shallots and stuff

Speaker 0: like that.

Speaker 1: Right. So I started listening to Irina McKenna and was like, this is my music for me, and it's got, like, stories in the songs, and I love that. And there's a song called the Bonnie Swans, and it's it's a type it it's like, there's a ballad type that's called the cruel sister, lots of variations of of it, and the general gist of this ballad is that there are two sisters or three but only two are ever actually involved in the plot. And there's an older and a younger. They're both being courted by the same man who is mysteriously not the villain of the story, and the elder sister is jealous of the younger so she murders her.

She, like, drowns her in a river and, the drowned sister goes through a series of transformations, ends up as a musical instrument that then like sings the song of her murder and accuses her sister and her sister comes to a gruesome but justified end. And and I cannot stress enough I love murder ballads. This is not me being like hashtag problematic about murder ballads. It's just like the thing is that I also am an elder sister. I am the eldest of four and I love my little sister very very much and the idea of murdering my sister over a man was just so obnoxious.

I just found myself just, like, wanting to write sort of, like, fix it fic for this ballad. And I'd wanted this for years to just be, like, I want to take up the the material of this specific ballad and just do something with it, do something different. Like, what if the sisters actually loved each other? You know? And, so when when I was asked to do something that was audio first, my my thought immediately went to like well there's a ballad I want to rework.

That would probably be cool for an audio project. So that's basically where the engagement came from. The book is partly dedicated to my sister. It's dedicated to my sister and to my harp teacher, who passed away in, 2021. So the, it just like but she taught me harp, and my sister and I sing together all the time and stuff.

So it was just very much they were both in my thoughts as I was, writing this.

Speaker 0: Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Alright. Well, then you use the opening two and a half pages of the book to describe the world to describe the world, to explain the magic exists in the world.

This magic has a name, grammar. I use that word with my students, and they start groaning in annoyance.

Speaker 1: Oh, that's right.

Speaker 0: But you also use the opening pages to establish a voice. And I don't wanna call this voice the narrator, but I think the storyteller might be more Yeah. Apropos. I'm just wondering who is this storyteller, and what is this magic system that they're describing?

Speaker 1: So there there is, like I I think about, narration a lot. I like, it's partly because of, like, having written short fiction for so long. Every short story would feel like an opportunity to play with, with with point of view and with, with with narrators. And I particularly like, there was in within genre circles there would be this back and forth about, you know, people would hate second person, or, or hate first person present tense

Speaker 0: or whatever.

Speaker 1: And I love second person a lot. Like, I I just I love a weird narrator. And then like but there came a point where I was like, you know, there's definitely fashion that comes in and out of play where narration is concerned. I remember Ursula Le Guin writing something about like, you know, why are people not writing third person narration anymore and stuff. And I had I had been rereading, Lud in the Mist by Hope Murley's which is like a 1920s fantasy novel that I deeply love and that narrative voice which used to be a lot more common just this kind of like the the voice of a storyteller like in The Hobbit or something like that where you don't ask who is the storyteller you just are being told a story

Speaker 0: right

Speaker 1: so the person who says in a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit is also someone who will like give you casual asides and stuff like that also this is actually slightly different but like in Lord of the Rings there's a moment where within the the epic of that narration a fox randomly passing by like observes the hobbits who are journeying out of the Shire and has some interiority. Like, you just kind of dip into the fox's head for a second. This never happens with anything else afterwards. And I just loved that so much. Like, love to have my attention drawn to that.

Mhmm. And I just found myself going, like, within again, within genre craft circles we talk a lot about technique and stuff like that and and there tends to become this this programmatic consistency when at this point I just wanted more weird things. Like I wanted just a weird delight and like what can you do with just just play being a little more playful with narration. So in this case, the initially I had found myself wondering as I was writing it like do I want this to be a character? Like do I want there to actually be a character in the story who is telling it in this way?

And I ended up deciding not to partly because I was just like you know Hope Marley didn't need to to have that narrator be a character but the voice is so pleasing to me to just be able to inhabit this voice that can float above the story or dip into it or turn to like address the audience in certain ways and stuff. And that was like the experience that I wanted a reader to have was of being told a story. So in terms of the magic system that's being described, it's funny to me, that I developed a lot of world building for the story that is nowhere on the page. Like, I just spent a lot of time thinking about it, and, and then and then when I was revising it from a short story to a longer short story, I, I was like, great. This is an opportunity for me to, like, get

Speaker 0: all this world building in that I'm

Speaker 1: quite proud of and really want to engage and I just completely didn't. There just it didn't anytime I tried to it felt like the story just veered too far away from the sisters. So I do find myself going like maybe I should write something longer in this world or something eventually. That'd be great. Thank you.

It's nice to get my encouragement. But it's also but in in this particular case I just like I find myself knowing the the context and stuff without having revealed very much of it and I think the magic system is part of that. I like when you say there's grammar magic, a certain kind of person who I feel deep kinship with becomes very excited, right? Like I I really I would be excited if someone told me that there was grammar magic in a book. But it's so like you know I love like R.

Huang's Babel for instance like it's just that is very cool and it's really about the like an experience of linguistics and stuff that's there. In this case it's a lot more abstract and diffuse it's more it's more about the etymological relationship of the word grammar to magic, to like, you know, grandma in French and the the origin of the word grimoire and stuff like that, and the idea of but but at the same time are what I love that you mentioned students earlier because I also taught creative writing for many years and trying to teach students about grammar in English was always really interesting because I grew up in Quebec and I grew up in going to high school in French and they drill you on grammar in French. Like it's just part of your curriculum in elementary school. You learn verb tenses, you learn parts of speech and it's it's always like it grows with you and it gets more and more complex as as you get older. And there was nothing like comparable to that in the English curriculum.

I was teaching in universities in Ontario and there was just nothing like that. I'd find myself like translating from French to English to like get, to even just begin to talk about it and I wanted students to be excited and interested about grammar and I'd always want to tell them that like you know the origins of this word are to do with magic and are to do and and it's there's good reason for that because the way that we talk about magic is about working your will in the world and stuff like that. They tend to be the working definitions. And grammar is all about organizing thought. It's about organizing speech.

It's about organizing communication. And once you realize like the power of of that then it's it really rhymes with with magic. But, in terms of like the book mostly what I want to do is draw attention to wordplay and words that have opposite meanings are particularly potent to me. So something like the word to like to cleave both means to like clap something close or to separate it apart, or a refrain is both something that repeats or an exhortation to stop. Right?

And those things because they contain their opposites feel very of fairy basically they feel so, like, the the refrain is the gate into Arcadia, you know

Speaker 0: Right.

Speaker 1: And stuff like that. So that's kind of, did I answer your question? I've I've I was just saying, I can start answering and then I just, like, become become a ramble player.

Speaker 0: No. You actually absolutely do. Well, I mean, you kind of already hinted that. I'm like, I should skip that one. But It's because

Speaker 1: I keep talking. This is what I'm saying. You know what?

Speaker 0: I'm gonna ask the question. Because I was proud of myself when I thought it might be. So this so then the actual story begins with this wonderful passage. At the time of our story, the willows of the River Lis belonged mostly to the Hawthorne family whose holdings hugged both sides of the river's length from Thistleford to the modal lands, our past the, our past the professor's roots. Those shifting simmering lands stopped at an assemblage of standing stones folk called the refrained.

Beyond it was fairy, and everyone knew it even if no one spoke in words so plain. And it sounds borderline verse, especially the recurrent s sound.

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Speaker 0: And that was I mean, you've kind of already mentioned this, but I'm gonna ask anyways, how important is music to you as a writer?

Speaker 1: Oh, so important. Another thing well it's very very important the I I also write poetry and the the way that something not only sounds but sort of like feels in the mouth like the kind of just the embodied experience of language is very important to me when I write. And when I read poetry often, like, reading it out loud is a big part of the experience for me. Part of the difficulty of the revision with this, was that I had a lot of difficulty maintaining the tone that I wanted across length.

Speaker 0: I had described this to,

Speaker 1: my editor at the time. I was saying I feel like I've knitted a scarf and I need to turn it into a sweater but I only know how to knit more scarf. And so, and just becoming aware at some point that it wasn't about making it longer, it was about giving it more dimension and making it into a story that had more layers or more depth and stuff was tricky. And what fixed it for me was my partner realizing I was first I just kept writing words and throwing them out basically which is very unusual for me because I'm a very slow writer, but I just kept writing things and going this feels like I'm writing like fanfic of my work as opposed to like just you know trying to make it its own which is great it's fine I don't mean this to I don't say that with a negative valence for fanfic which I love and consume a great deal of but but just to say that like it didn't feel like I was progressing the thing it felt like I was doing ancillary material, you know, for the thing itself instead. And what changed it though was my partner saying why don't you just do what you tell your students to do and just read it all out loud?

And I was like that's a terrible idea. Why would anyone say that? And it absolutely worked. Like, I I sat down and just read it over the course of, like it was probably at at that length, it was probably, like, an hour ish and stuff to do, and he sat and listened with me. And and then by the time I finished it as I was reading it, I was like, oh, no.

I see. This needs to change. Oh I need to and just it worked because it's great advice which I have given over many years to many people and it absolutely works, but it's very hard to take one's own advice so, but but absolutely like there's it's funny too because thinking of music when you like, listening to music and trying to to put music and musicality in the text is so intuitive and intimate for me and so much a part of, like, the the flow experience of writing. Sometimes when I'm when I'm stuck, on a passage for whatever reason I find myself really leaning into the experience of the prose to sort of carry me out of whatever I'm stuck in. If it's like a plot issue or a character issue, I find myself leaning into the language itself to sort of lead me out of whatever tangle I found myself in, but in terms of revising it and changing it I really had to get out of that and the like the the way of introducing that distance, was to read it out loud, to just have it be a separate thing from my own brain, essentially, to be able to hear it and experience it from a different direction.

So yeah.

Speaker 0: Well, I mean, do you listen to music at all when you're drafting?

Speaker 1: Sometimes sometimes. My my answer to this used to be, yes absolutely but it has to have no lyrics.

Speaker 0: Mhmm.

Speaker 1: And that has sort of weirdly changed. Now it's it's much more it's much more vibes based and much more diffuse and trickier to talk about. So, but with with this I had been listening a lot to Emily Portman's album the Glamory, which is like a 2010 album which I highly highly recommend if you like folk music, and it's it's she's a British, musician and she's phenomenal. And actually it was her version of like the the two sisters ballad was what finally made me like this is it's itching at me too much I really need to it's this is too beautiful a version it's bothering me too much that it's like I need to do something with it. But so I've been listening to that a lot.

When I was revising I was listening to a lot of Palestinian music and that absolutely ended up working its way into this. So I was listening to an album called Zajal by, El Funoun Palestinian popular folk troupe popular dance troupe I think, it's in the acknowledgments anyway and there's this song called Lover's Hymn on that that I decided I was going to have be the actual professor's hymn, and that song it has this feature called Umlula where you introduce, sort of nonsense la sounds into words to break them up and make them unintelligible to someone who isn't a native speaker, and it's a way of like encoding messages into music so that for instance if you wanted to communicate to your imprisoned family members that they were going to be busted out of jail and stuff like that, then this was a way of doing this. And there's this long history of using this music this way, like from the Ottomans through the British mandate, etc. And, and it was just so gorgeous and, I I was like I want to use this, I want to put it in here. And my sister and I actually sing it on the audiobook.

My sister and I got to record music for the audiobook and that was one of the things that ended up on it. So in a very real and very literal way like, listening to music has kind of imbued this book. In some ways it surprised me.

Speaker 0: That was you and your sister singing the audiobook? Yeah.

Speaker 1: I loved

Speaker 0: the audiobook. Oh, thank you so much. The production was fantastic.

Speaker 1: Wasn't it? It's it's so dazzling to me. Jem Carmela is an extraordinary narrator. She does her own singing. Like, so she, like, the the narrator does also, like, sing songs that are in the actual text.

Speaker 0: Seriously, if you get the chance Yeah. You gotta listen to the audio of that.

Speaker 1: It's seriously so amazing. So like I said, I I play the harp. My sister plays the flute. She is an actual musician. I am just a writer who plays the harp.

Like, there's there's a very clear distinction in my head between those things. And I've always felt, like, low key guilty about it because the harp is a very charismatic instrument and like we used to play music together at weddings and stuff and I could tell my sister is like an extraordinary musician and people would like just flock to me at the harp because the harp is really cool and, like, unusual, and people would just wanna come and, like, be dazzled by it. It's impossible to make a harp sound bad. So, like, you know, my sister trained for literally, like, two weeks before she could make a sound on her instrument. Meanwhile, you could hit a harp with a hammer, and it would

Speaker 0: sound fine. You know? Hitting the harp with a hammer, literally what a

Speaker 1: piano is, actually.

Speaker 0: You know?

Speaker 1: So Yeah. But, all this to say that, we we do also play harp and flute, on the audiobook. We we went into a studio for a day and, and did that together. The the Macmillan audio people were so so so wonderful to work with and so completely supportive of every weird thing that I said. Like initially they asked, do you have like any any thoughts on on a narrator that you would like?

Like what kind of voice and so on? And I said yes I have many thoughts. Could you could you make sure that that it's not someone putting on a British accent? I would really like someone to just speak in their natural accent. Could it also be ideally a woman with a Devonshire accent, like a West Country accent, who is, of Middle Eastern extraction?

Which if you know anything about Devonshire, it's kind of a tall order to ask. There's not a lot of diaspora in like the small villages of, you know, West Country Britain, but Jem Carmela is one such person and she is, she's absolutely perfect. I I could not, like, I I feel like I made her up inside my head to, like, specifically narrate this audiobook, and, it made me really happy. So she's it seriously blows her mind. I haven't listened to the whole thing beginning to end.

I've just heard the excerpts that, that I've been sent and stuff, but it just sounds so amazing. In addition to the music, the soundscaping that they do, like, you can hear rivers and birds and stuff, and it's just so beautiful. So it really blows my mind. And that, like, the fact everything about this book to me feels like, you know, the this enormous grace and, like, humbling gratitude that I feel towards the fact that I wrote this quite short book. And there are illustrations in it.

Like, this brilliant artist, Kathleen Meeley, like, you know Yeah.

Speaker 0: Are you

Speaker 1: gonna I'm sorry. I meant to talk to you.

Speaker 0: No. No. No. I was gonna ask, but go

Speaker 1: ahead. Yes. But it's just like, you know, there there are these beautiful, like, woodcut style illustrations. And but, like, Kathleen Neely literally, like, carved linocut, like blocks and stuff in order to make them so there's just this this gorgeous physicality to them. They help with this like fairy tale feeling just to have those illustrations.

The cover is so beautiful like and Face Out Studio did an amazing job and then everything with the audiobook is just like gift after gift after gift so I just, I feel like I'm like a participant in a process of like kind of collaborative is an interesting way of talking about it because it all happened it didn't happen like together it's like I wrote the text and it went to an artist who decided what to illustrate and stuff, the audiobook similarly but it just feels like there's so much art that has come together in this object, that it's it's incredible to me.

Speaker 0: Well, I thought the illustrations complemented the text.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Speaker 0: And I couldn't tell if it this the world was trying to get out or if it was trying to pull me in.

Speaker 1: Oh, I love that. It's such a beautiful way of putting it. Yeah. I love the idea of trying to get out is so exciting. Yeah.

Speaker 0: I like that one. Yeah. I haven't even asked about your protagonist yet, so we're excited to see you. So there are two daughters of the Hawthorne family, Esther and Isabel Hawthorne. Please tell us about them and where they came from in your imagination.

Speaker 1: Sure. So Esther and Isabel very much are, you know, these analogs from the ballad, and stuff. The the older dark haired sister is always the evil one, and the younger fair haired sister is always the, the the the virtuous one and so on in many of these ballads. So I set them up at the beginning to be like, however, forget all of that. They're just, like, two people who love each other very much, and, they are loosely modeled on my sister and me, loosely.

Although when my sister was reading it, I was like she, she started reading it while she was on a train to Montreal, and she, would just started, like, without asking me if this was fine, just started live texting me her reactions. And I was like, this is and I couldn't say anything. I was just like, this is terrifying. And then, and she she did she really loved it. But she keeps talking about it as, like, us, and I'm like, okay.

Well, if you you can say that. I I have to maintain some plausible deniability here. Right. But there is a lot of autobiographical stuff in there. Anyway Esther is the elder, Isabelle's the younger, Esther, because she's the eldest she's being courted by this odious man, Samuel Pollard from the town of Thistleford, but she's also being courted by an Arcadian who is someone from the land of Faerie basically, Rin, yeah Rin who she is much more into and, but it's it's weird to weird and difficult to, like, be in a relationship with someone from a place where time is not matched up with yours very much.

And, so there are these, like, sort of difficulties there. And, but Isabel, is she's kinda she the the kind of key distinction between the two of them is that she loves murder ballads and Esther loves riddle songs. So Isabel has this kind of, you know, romantic inclination to a bad boy sort of thing, while Esther wants, is is really interested in, like, cleverness and, being figured out and stuff like that. Mhmm. Riddle songs, if you don't know, are just like the kind of song where, you know, what what is what is deeper than the sea, what is sharper than a thorn, that kind of thing where you kind of put these tests before the person who you're wooing or being wooed by, for them to kind of demonstrate their cleverness but also their personality like all of these questions don't have hard and fast replies you could probably that's that's to me that's kind of like a key bifurcation between their personalities generally and Isabel loves her home and Esther is kind of like inclined towards travel and adventure and stuff, but also feels, like, held in place by the fact that she also loves her family.

Speaker 0: I mean, you mentioned Rin, but there is more to him. So what more can we tell about Rin without giving away too much?

Speaker 1: So so Rin, whose pronouns are theythem in the book, is because Arcadians are shape shifty and have, you know, different conceptions of gender, Rin is what can I say about Rin? Sorry because Esther has a hard time describing Rin in the text. Rin is like partakes of is sort of like of the land in a lot of ways, so sometimes is like an owl or sometimes a storm, and things like that, but also is, you know, to court Esther is, you know, human shaped. But also is one of a feature of Arcadians is that they are deeply affected by human singing and by human voices, because they don't sing themselves. They they aren't able to sing.

This is part of the world building that has really ended up on the page very much except very glancingly. But, but so there is this, like, real draw to human voices, from Arcadians. I think that's probably where I'll keep it

Speaker 0: with with Ryn

Speaker 1: and stuff. But yeah. Ryn is not interested in Esther for her land, I will say. Like, Ryn

Speaker 0: actually that's another key distinction. Unlike Samuel Pollard.

Speaker 1: Unlike Samuel Pollard, who's a jerk.

Speaker 0: Okay. That sums up that. Alright. Yeah. We don't need

Speaker 1: to know anything more about Samuel Pollard. His The

Speaker 0: book's a folktale. The it's mythology. It's a book about sisters. It's a book about family. It's a book about the environment.

We have the sisters singing to the willows. The willows have roots. We have family tree. We have, the Hawthorne family's lived on the land for quite some time and has roots. The River Bliss has roots.

Is all fiction slowly becoming eco fiction for her?

Speaker 1: That is a really cool question, actually.

Speaker 0: Yeah. Nailed

Speaker 1: it. Yeah.

Speaker 0: That's really good.

Speaker 1: I

Speaker 0: don't think it's,

Speaker 1: like, slowly becoming eco fiction, for me anyway. I think that, I've I've always written from a place of, like, sensory affect a lot of the time. Right. But I've also, like, literally since I was a small child been very just enamored of the nature. Sure.

You know, I can't say nature without thinking of, like, Timothy Morton and, like, various, ecocritical texts because I'm a vengeful academic, who is lapsed, and stuff. But, nevertheless, without getting into, like, definitions and stuff, it's it's I've always, I think, written things that interact with the natural world. What I find happening more and more in my fiction is just a sense of climate change change creeping in as a thing. Like the idea like a thing where you know whenever seasons are like the fact that the the modal lands between between Thistleford and Faerie they're not Faerie they're like these these this kind of in Lead in the Mist there's a place called the debatable hills basically like it's like an in between space and wherever the list touches there there's all this raw magic and so everything is in flux. The distance between the refrain and the the willow trees changes by like variables that are difficult to track.

You know there's weird vegetation that's out of season you get, you you get spring flowers and autumn flowers just kind of mixing up together in the same place and so that in the text I was writing that like it just struck me as like this beautiful thing, like this beautiful also threatening thing, but the more I worked on it the more I was like yeah I can't really get away from the fact that the world that we're currently living in is also one where the weather is wrong a lot of the time like the the weather just feels wrong to me like when I think of what winter should feel like versus what it is now or what spring should feel like versus what it is now is it's very troubling to me and especially thinking of it in terms of just loss like I'm Canadian and maple trees need a certain kind of weather to thrive and maple syrup maple sap needs a certain kind of weather to flow you need to have a period of weeks where it's above freezing during the day and below freezing at night in order to get the sap flowing.

So, the idea that within my lifetime, we might not have maple syrup anymore is a very, like, just terrible terrible thought. It's like not be not not just because, like, you know, maple syrup tastes nice. It's just like a thing that has existed for so long Right. That you don't think of as a thing that it's possible to lose, but that is subject to all of these vicissitudes. So yeah I think of that and I think that you know everything being eco fiction would probably be for the the best you know I think I think we should all be thinking about this a lot of the time.

And if not and I I say should be thinking about this not just in terms of it would be good to, like, you know, drive people to action, but also because a lot of us are wrestling with grief about it, and it would be good to kind of just acknowledge and channel that grief. So I

Speaker 0: mean, it was reminding me a lot of, The Matrix in The Vaster Wilds by Lauren Groff. Oh, yes. Other I mean Yeah. So that's why I mean, it really stood out on the page. Yeah.

Yeah. Thank you. Two more, and then we'll open it up. Okay. Novella is a powerful love story.

But I'm gonna be honest with you. What really brought tears to my eyes was not between Esther and Wren, but between the two sisters.

Speaker 1: Yay. Because that's what I was trying to do. I kept trying to I'm sorry. That was I'm interrupting you. What's the request?

Speaker 0: No. That was it. That was it. Okay. Cool.

So let's talk about that a little bit.

Speaker 1: Absolutely. I, I kept among the many words that I was, like, throwing out as I was writing was, like, just the the the romance between Esther and Wren just kind of kept, like, being a thing that I was finding easy to write.

Speaker 0: But I

Speaker 1: kept being like this is not the story I'm telling like that just it's it's just not right this is the story that I want to tell is about these sisters. And a really like key part in the revision came up when I realized that there was a a very autobiographical moment that I really needed to get into the book. And I like, to the point where I remember where I was when I realized that. And whenever I think about it, I remember being, like, on the on a bend in this road in the woods, just thinking about it and stuff. And I had this, like, full body shutter of, like, oh, yes.

Okay. Okay. I guess that needs to be in there. And,

Speaker 0: Does it have to do with the promise?

Speaker 1: No. It's to do with chasing the chicken.

Speaker 0: Okay. It's

Speaker 1: just, basically but to say about, like, the love story stuff, in the in the short story version of this, there was not there wasn't as much conflict between Esther and Isabelle. There wasn't like, that the promise wasn't there, like all of that kind of grew out of understanding what this kind of core tension between them is, and the the autobiographical thing this is also in the acknowledgments but, when my sister and I were little, so we lived in Lebanon like we were both born in Canada but we went to live in Lebanon for two years when we were kids, so I was seven and she was five and we were visiting my parents friends in this little village called Kredmishki and, we and like villages in Lebanon so like people don't have like tidally divided backyards with fences or anything there's just like a lot of common land So we, we were playing with the animals as you do, and there there was a chicken. And we chased this chicken because you wanna pet the chicken. Like, it's just a thing you wanna do as a kid. And so we were chasing this chicken to, like, pet it, and we chased it too far.

And suddenly we, like, looked around and nothing was familiar. Right. And we had just, like, left, you know, the boundaries roughly of the house of the people we were staying in, but we were little and everything was suddenly completely unfamiliar. We could see that there were people around, but we didn't wanna approach them because they were strangers to us and stuff. And I just became

Speaker 0: is that a bird? I thought it was Starfleet for a second. Okay. Okay.

Speaker 1: So I just like it. I I'm I'm I'm a bird nerd, and so I found myself going, what? Is that

Speaker 0: a bird? But anyway Is it a bird?

Speaker 1: No. It's not a bird. That's fine. We're in the store. Like a bird.

Speaker 0: It's have you ever

Speaker 1: been, like, in an airport and then there are birds?

Speaker 0: Yes. Yes. It happens. Yes. So I went bring the bird.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Exactly. And it wasn't beyond the pale for me that perhaps a bird had entered the store.

Speaker 0: Has the

Speaker 1: bird ever entered the store? Yes. Really? Really? Amazing.

I mean, hopefully, the bird got out fine.

Speaker 0: Anyway, the sisters Anyway,

Speaker 1: the sisters.

Speaker 0: There's a chicken. There's a chicken. Chase the chicken. He got distracted by

Speaker 1: a bird. Yes. Exactly. So, clearly a theme in my life you know just, we followed this chicken we got lost my sister started crying I was very aware of like needing to take care of her because I was the eldest and and I was but I was like really afraid and I had no idea where we were or and specifically what was in my head was that like my mum was going to be terrified because we were lost and the idea of my mother being afraid was so upsetting to me that it was just like this horrible feeling and my sister asked like are wolves going to eat us And, and I was like I don't I don't think there are wolves in Lebanon, but I didn't know. Like I wasn't sure.

And, and and so we just like wandered weeping around trying to like figure out what to do, and then we came to this little old woman who again I remember her as little and old but children have no idea how old adults were but in my memory she was no taller than me at seven and very wrinkled and, and she was very brusque and she was like why are you crying? And we were like we're we're lost and she was like well who are you staying with and we said oh the Ayyub which was a ridiculous thing to say because literally everyone in that village was named Ayyub but she clearly like recognized that we were the visitors in town and she was like over that your house is just down that way and we had like walked this like circle around the village apparently, and when we got back to my mom, she hadn't even realized we were gone. Like, we we were there in floods of tears. She was like, what's wrong with you? But that memory anyways was just like the the feeling of being lost in a place that was so that that started out being so familiar and and easy, but then was just this wilderness, really stayed with me and just felt like kind of it became the hinge of the book.

Speaker 2: Mhmm.

Speaker 1: And did I answer your question?

Speaker 0: Yes.

Speaker 1: Okay. Good. Alright. Awesome.

Speaker 0: I don't even know if I this is relevant anymore, but I don't know if I this is relevant anymore, but I don't know if I this is relevant anymore.

Speaker 1: Is this relevant anymore? A perennial question I ask myself.

Speaker 0: You have the town of Thistleford. Mhmm. It's very close to Faerie. Yes. There's the woods.

Mhmm. There's Arcadia. You have the love story. You have the musical aspects of the text. You have plenty of mythological references.

You appear to have all the elements for a series of poems. Do you ever consider writing this this as a collection of poems? Maybe challenging the whole conception of a traditional conception of a devic poem.

Speaker 1: Oh, that would never occur to me. What a good idea. I should I should think about that. Like, Gwendolyn. Yeah.

Yeah. No. No. I, it never occurred to me to do that, I think partly because it's so of ballads to me and I think that ballads are just they they exist in a different mode in my head than poems sort of the way that like you know, comics exist in a different mode to me than either prose or Mhmm. Like illustration.

They are like a hybrid form and so, like, ballads, ballads just feel like just the word ballad or balladry, like, it it evokes this very specific thing for me that feels very textural and very, evocative of kind of just more of itself. So, you know, the although having said that, my friends CSC Cooney and Caitlin Paxson and I have this or we we made this sort of performance collective together called the Banjo Apocalypse Crinoline Troubadours, and we have like written like, ballads together in this this context that Caitlin and Claire came up with together where it was like, what if what if a bunch of Appalachian Miners had been abducted by aliens to go and, like, do mining in space. Please tell me

Speaker 0: this is on Spotify.

Speaker 1: You can find some on YouTube, actually.

Speaker 0: Oh, really?

Speaker 1: Because we we have this one show at the Mercury Lounge in Ottawa. So, a lot of these songs are are there. And my sister also was, like, there and and singing and playing with us. Mhmm. I

Speaker 0: don't know. I guess when I was just listening to the audiobook, I didn't see the text in paragraphs. I saw it in stanzas. Oh, that's beautiful which was why I asked that question

Speaker 1: god thank you that makes me really happy that's that's an I take that as an enormous compliment I I could like you know other I really had not thought of it, but now I am thinking of it seriously. So, you know, I will have to I will have to thank you in the acknowledgments to a future project if that ever comes to fruition.

Speaker 0: Make sure you know how to spell my name, don't we? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah plenty of time for some questions.

Alright. What do you miss? Hi. So you kind of answered part of my question by mentioning Babble. So I wanted to ask specifically the line, that every translation occur incurs some loss.

Is that directly an echo of every active translation is an active betrayal or is it just convergent evolution?

Speaker 1: I think it's just convergent evolution. It's it's because I mean, what what, Rebecca is referencing there is, like, such a commonplace of, like, you know, that things are lost in translation is such a commonplace thing. The first time I encountered every translation is an act of betrayal and, like, Les Parises Fiedel as a concept was in Babel. I had not heard of that before, but that in particular was just like a reference to the fact that we lose things in translation. But I, like, I I've always to me, like, the the flip side of that is that we also gain things in translation.

And, and having done some translation of poems specifically, it's always interesting to me, like, the where the the balance is there, especially if you're working from something like a bridge translation where, you know, you're you're you're like, there's a difference between when you're translating directly from a language you're fluent in versus, excuse me, from from one where you're not as much, and so you're working with some some literalness that has been injected into the text, but that doesn't touch that. So, anyways, it's it's not a direct reference. It is convergent evolution, I think, but, but I still really love that book. Thank you.

Speaker 0: Anyone else? Yes. Favorite murder ballads?

Speaker 1: Oh. Favorite favorite favorite murder ballads. My the one of the ones that comes to mind because I sing it a lot is, the the version that I heard was called Babylon, but it's like the type of, story where there's like an an outlaw corners three sisters. Mhmm. Also sisters involved.

An outlaw corners his sisters and like one by one, holds them at knifepoint and tries to get them to marry him. And each one of them in turn says, I'll not be a villain's wife, but I will die by your penknife and stuff. And so the first one he murders the first one, he murders the second one, comes to the third one, and she goes, if my two brothers were here this night, you would not be so clear and bright or whatever. And he goes, well, who is your brother? And she names her brother, and he goes, gasp.

I am your brother. I have I have murdered my sisters all but one. And, it's it's such a So ridiculous. It's absolutely ridiculous. Wonderful.

I know. Right? But it's like the thing is a lot of murder ballads are rooted in real things that happened. And so and there's actually there was this wonderful podcast I usually hate to recommend like a Spotify exclusive but just because why? But I think it might have just been called murder ballads and it was specifically about like historical origins to a handful of of very well known ones.

And, and I learned so much from it, and it was specifically in a North American context would say the thing. Stagger Lee was one of them. Gosh. I forgot. In the Pines was another I love In the Pines so much.

If you haven't heard Kurt Cobain singing In the Pines, I highly recommend looking that up. It's it's really, really something, because he loved Blood Belly and there's anyways, the whole thing. But, so other murder battles that I love, though, let me think about that because that that's always the first one that comes to mind. Obviously, Cruel Sister.

Speaker 0: There are

Speaker 1: there's sort of a bifurcation between, like, favorite as a type versus ones that I listen to a lot. One that I listen to a lot is, The Wild Rose, by, like, Nick Cave, which I off his murder ballads album and stuff. So yeah. So it's Nick Cave. Yeah.

Speaker 0: God was in the cave.

Speaker 1: So good. So so good. But, yeah, that's I think that I think I'll stick with that. Babylon is definitely the first one that comes to mind. It's it's so, like, it's so potent when you listen to it and so goofy when you think about it.

And it's just, I I like that mix.

Speaker 0: I think the favorite part of your answer was you actually questioned the idea of what is favorite.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Listen. I truly cannot take that for granted. There are things when people ask me if they like, what is your favorite something? And I I sometimes have a very clear answer because it's always top of mind it's always what I'll say.

If you ask me what my favorite book is it's always The Hobbit. The Hobbit is just like 100% favorite book I've latched on to it like it's it's too foundational to me to ever be replaced by any other thing no matter how I like it there'll always be like you could say I could say my favorite book of the last year or like my favorite book type of a thing you know but just favorite book always be the hobbit and it's very handy as a writer.

Speaker 0: But is your favorite audio narrator of the hobbit?

Speaker 1: Of the

Speaker 0: Of the hobbit.

Speaker 1: Oh, I've never heard an audio version.

Speaker 0: It is I think his name is Inglis. Oh. Performs the song. Oh. Brings it all to life.

Use the actual oh, it's you That's wonderful. Gotta hear this.

Speaker 1: That would be that would be really interesting for me too because, like, I read The Hobbit one when I was seven and living in Lebanon, so it's, like, part of, like, this mix of of heady stuff from my childhood. But I made up tunes to the

Speaker 0: Yeah.

Speaker 1: To the songs and the book and stuff, so I I'm curious to know how I would experience somebody else's.

Speaker 0: Recorded books, Rob Inglis.

Speaker 1: Rob Inglis.

Speaker 0: Thank you. Who else?

Speaker 1: Any other question?

Speaker 0: In the back.

Speaker 2: Okay. So when you write, is there, like, a certain, like, setup you have to have to, like, get in the brain space to do it? And then second part, is there, like, a preferred beverage?

Speaker 1: Oh. I'm gonna answer the second part first because I am a drinks goblin who always has, like, three drinks. And then this is just, this apparently, this is an ADHD thing, which, the there's I don't know. There's, like, a lot of convergence on in in the memes of these things between, like, ADHD stuff and bisexual stuff. And this is, like, one of those, like, perfect Venn diagram things.

So usually, there's, like, a hot drink, a drink of water, and something else that which for me lately is, like, a protein shake, probably, or a glass of, like, creatine, which is I don't have to drink it the way I do, but I just do. And it just just reminds me, like, of, like, drinking water in London where it's just vaguely gritty and terrible. But, anyway, but so favorites so tea, though, usually,

Speaker 0: I No. No. You said favorite.

Speaker 1: I did say favorite. Okay. Well, so, anyway, there there are always three drinks. That's the main thing. Like, two to three drinks at the same time.

I I am I used to be very much a, like, I drink tea, not coffee person. I have changed that to embrace the wonders of coffee is delicious and amazing. It just has a disproportionate effect on me, so I have to be very careful with it. But, and I I love, like, a fancy coffee. Like, I I there are people in this world, more power to them, who love who drink coffee no matter what form it comes in, whether it is bad or good, whether it is, like, I don't know, versions.

But I, I I just I love coffee, so I feel like the guy in Ratatouille. Like, you know, I love food. If I don't love it, I don't swallow or whatever. I just love coffee so much that it hurts me if I'm drinking, like, a really bad I'm like, this could be so much better. This this feels like a betrayal.

Speaker 0: I pity the poor barista tomorrow morning.

Speaker 1: No. This is the thing. It's like, I mean, if if there is a barista already, like, probably most of the problems are solved. But, like, it just I wanna know I wanna know that the beans were roasted recently. I wanna know that they were freshly ground.

I wanna know that they were made by a person with skill.

Speaker 0: So do a truck stop coffee. Yeah. I it was as soon as you said Make your head look like it was about to explode. No. Now here's the thing.

This is the thing.

Speaker 1: As soon as you said truck stop, it a glamour, like, emerged. Right?

Speaker 0: And I was like,

Speaker 1: you know, I do acknowledge that diner coffee and truck stop coffee are both, like, genres of coffee. That given the like, given the correct circumstance, I will absolutely also enjoy. If I myself, though, am just, like, wandering a street in search of coffee and and before me appeared three separate beverages. And one of them was Truckstop coffee, one of them was diner coffee, and one of them was, like, a beautiful latte that had been made by a person in a very bougie establishment. That is what I would reach for.

You know, like, the others they were the others require context and, like, teh rohav. And, like, the the other thing is just flavors in my mouth that feel good. I just really like that. But, anyway, sounds like the other part of your question in terms of, like, writing I have recently you know been been blessed with like an office that I can sit in to write and it is it is well appointed there are books in it there is desk there's a standing desk I can make go up and down for the comfort of my body. And yet the place that I most reliably write is usually I don't know I wish I could understand why this is A dining room table.

Just like any it just it just needs to be a table in a dining room, and there is something in my brain that just orients towards it like a bird finding magnetic norths. And I just I don't know why. But I so I also will say just, like, sometimes right on the couch in a horrible goblin way, and sometimes, cafes will be the thing. A a lot of getting myself into the zone too right requires sometimes getting myself out of a situation where I'm just things are not happening. And sadly, because I spend so much time in my office answering email, a lot of the time, I need to exit my office Yeah.

Yeah. To, like, do a different thing and just find a different location.

Speaker 0: But

Speaker 1: there is, like, you know, I I wish there were not, like, so not so much distance between, like, the beautiful desk in my head by a window that I would love to romantically sit in right by and the fact that just a dining room table just makes me do it more.

Speaker 0: So yeah. You got time for one more? Okay. Yeah. Oh, well

Speaker 1: But we can

Speaker 0: do two more. We'll probably do two more. Yeah. Yeah. Miss her in orange.

Oh. Yeah. So just to tee up that question about your head space and favorite beverages for for writing, you're giving a really great compelling storytelling right now. Oh, nice. So how did how did you train yourself to do such a great job and be so entertaining?

Oh my gosh. This is this is the winner's question. Thank you so much.

Speaker 1: I, train myself. This is like a way that I often, like, introduce myself as, like, sort of slightly apologetically is to say I'm a very obnoxious extrovert, and I feel like that is probably, in at least most of the circles that I move in, 80% of the work done. I just really like talking. Like, it just brings me a great deal of pleasure, and this has always been the case. Like, a thing that my parents would say about me when I was a very small child, was that, don't get her going.

She'll talk you out of your day, and stuff. And I just love talking, like, and I this is actually going to be a problem for for doing a signing afterwards. It's like I am the world's slowest signer, and it's because I just really like talking to people.

Speaker 0: Yeah. I'll keep you on track.

Speaker 1: Thank you. Thank I really like that. I thank you. And and so I just, I really enjoy it. So there wasn't there wasn't so much, like I think because I I saw the or my parents saw that I had some native propensity for talking so much, that they put me in situations where, you know, I could practice public speaking or something like that from from being really young and just become very comfortable with it.

But it really it's it's so much easier to to practice doing something when you just enjoy it thoroughly. I think that is really most of what it is for me. And I mean within the storytelling, it's it's truly it makes me feel so good to hear you say that just because from my experience of it, I just ramble and then, like, get to a point where I'm like, did anything that I said make sense? I don't know. I hope it did, which is also an ADHD thing, but it's it is what it is.

So but thank you very much

Speaker 0: for that. And then one more.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Hi. How do you know when the piece that you're working on is finished?

Speaker 0: How do

Speaker 1: I know when a piece I'm working on is finished? What an excellent question. I think that there is often when I start writing something I know what the ending is so there's a lot for me of writing towards the ending. So I was just, chatting with Marco Shiro yesterday and like they were saying that they always know the last line of anything that they're writing and so they're always kind of orienting towards the last line and it kind of works like a compass for them and that they can if they're feeling lost they remember the last line and kind of pivot back towards it. It's not quite that intense for me although that has happened with like short stories.

So knowing that something is finished has not been has not been, like, a a place of difficulty for me, because, like, I genuinely, like, or generally rather know the ending, but the parts that are hard for me are actually you know writing through to the ending sometimes. I like like I said I talked creative fiction for a while and I would often see with students like there were students who whose difficulty was that they just kept writing and kept writing, especially if they had invented a world that they were really in love with and just wanted to keep on proliferating it and generating more stuff in it. And I think that that is kind of more the situation that invites your question where it's like you do have to ask yourself what story are you telling, what story are you interested in telling, which is a question I was asking myself a lot with this when I was revising it just in order to reorient myself towards how to bring it to the ending that I wanted and stuff. But for me the difficulty has always been writing length. Like in in the margins of my undergraduate essays, like the most common thing would be the word like unpack unpack, you know, because I just, I would like to say that I was concise, but probably what I was was opaque and, and, and it's it's also very funny to me because it's absolutely the opposite to the way that I speak.

Like I can just talk for days it's not a problem, but to to write there is my experience of writing is so often, like, just polishing a sentence over and over, like, if I've written a paragraph and and left it when I come back I reread the paragraph and I re polish the paragraph and kind of, you know, just write more from there, which makes me also very slow. So it's not so much for me knowing when something is done, although I guess I could argue that knowing that at the sentence level is something that I need to work on more so that I just move past it faster. But in terms of the story, generally, the shape of it usually is something I have at the beginning, and I'm trying to just, like, pin it down. Does that answer your question? Yes.

It does. Thank you.

Speaker 0: Next time you come, we'll have to get into the metatextuality of the text.

Speaker 1: I would love that. Yeah. Absolutely.

Speaker 0: I did not wanna get into it tonight. Amal El-Mohtar.