



Library podcast

Maria Dahvana Headley with Nicola Griffith

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[00:00:35] Good evening. I am a special brand and I am the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library.

[00:00:43] Thank you so much for being here tonight.

[00:00:46] As we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people.

[00:00:54] We would like to honor their elders past and present and we thank them for the stewardship of this land.

[00:01:01] Welcome to this evening's event with Maria de. HEADLEE And Nicholas Griffith presented in partnership with The Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our authors series sponsor Gary Clunis and to the Seattle Times for a generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we are grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. So to LaBrie foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support.

[00:01:35] Now without further ado I'd like to welcome our wonderful speakers tonight. Maria divine Headly is a number one New York Times best selling author and editor.

[00:01:46] Her books include the novels Magona erry Queen of kings and the memoir The Year of Yes she's the co-author of the end of the sentence and with Neil Gaiman she is the co-editor of unnatural creatures. Her short stories have been shortlisted for the Shirley Jackson Nebula and World Fantasy Awards and her work has been supported by the MacDowell Colony and by art studio. I'm getting richer. This is at Genesis Genesis sounds better when she says it and the first draft of the midwife was actually written at that.

[00:02:20] With the support of that residency Maria has been a friend for many many years since her time living in Seattle. But I can say without bias that she's one of the most talented writers that I know. Each of her books is fiercely unique and beautifully written.

[00:02:35] She'll be talking with another one of my favorite writers the wonderful Nicholas Griffith. Nicola is a multiple award winning author of seven novels and a memoir. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in an assortment of academic texts and a variety of journals including Nature New Scientist Los Angeles Review of Books and out Niclas novel hilled won the Washington State Book Award in 2014 and I will say that I was on the jury that year and I basically said I'm not leaving this room until this book wins the tournament. Yeah totally totally unbiased. Additionally Nicollette has won the Tiptree Nebula and World Fantasy Awards the premium Italia Lambda Literary Award which she won six times. Among others they'll be talking tonight about Maria's new novel The mere wife of modern recasting of Beowulf which Ron Charles of The Washington Post called the most surprising novel he's read this year which I think is just titillating and you know him in such a great way. So without further ado please help me welcome Maria de Vano. HEADLEE And Nicola Griffith. Well

[00:03:51] How would this evening is going to work as Maria is going to read for a little while and then she and I are going to talk for half an hour and then we're going to take audience questions. So for now

[00:04:03] It's up to them.

[00:04:06] Well first of all it's awesome to be at the library and here with Nicole Nicole and I have never gotten to do an event together and we've known each other for years and years and been such good friends for so long. And this is a privilege because Nicolaas work is all around the same realms as mine and she's my hero. So I am a lucky lucky person tonight. This book. Is based on Beowulf. It is based on riffing on fucking with dancing around. It's sort of Balal from the point of view of the women that don't get a voice in the original poem and get a lot of a lot of action but no voice. So this is. Beloff in suburbia is the one line and it's not exactly that it's like it's like kind of that I'm going to read to little sections one from the very beginning and one from deeper into the book. There are many different hobbies in this book including a pack of police dogs. And a sort of collective voice of the natural world of the of the story. So I'm going to read you one of each of. It's actually in this case because I just wanted to read a short piece to give you a taste.

[00:05:16] If you haven't read it. Okay.

[00:05:20] Listen long after the end of everything is supposed to have occurred long after apocalypses have been calculated by colts and calendared by computers long after the world has ceased believing in miracles. There's a baby born inside of Mount earth is it thieved place everything living it needs somewhere to be. There's a howl and then a whistle and then a roar. Wind shrieks around the tops of trees and sun melts the glacier at the top of the peak even stars seeing boulders avalanche and snow drift ice low. No one needs to see us for us to exist. No one needs to love us for us to exist. The sky is filled with light. The world is full of wonders where the wilderness. The hidden

river and the stone caves where the snakes and songbirds the storm water the brightness beneath the darkest pools where an old thing made of everything else and we have been waiting here a long time. We rose up from the inland sea and now half beneath the mountain half outside it is the last of that sea a mere in our soil there are tree fossils the remains of a forest dating from the greening of the world. There used to be a canopy. Now they spread their stone fingers underground inside the mountain. There's a cave full of old bones. There once was a tremendous skeleton hair ribcage curving the wall tail twisting across the floor. Later the cave was widened and pushed tiled tract and beam to house a train station. The bones were pried out and taken to a museum reassembled into a hanging body.

[00:06:54] The station was a showpiece before it wasn't the train it housed went back and forth to the city cocktail cars leather seats. The caves walls are crumbling now and on top of the stone the tiles are cracking but the station remains ticket booth wooden benches newspaper racks a café counter China's tea cups. Stained glass windows facing outward into earthworms and crystal chandeliers draped in cobwebs. They're drinking fountains tapping the spring that feeds the mountain and there's a wishing pool covered in dust. No train has been through our territory in almost a hundred years. Both sides of the tunnel are covered with metal doors and soil. But the gilded chamber remains water pouring over the tracks. Fish swim in the rail River and creatures move up and down over the mosaics and destination signs we wait and one day our waiting is over a panel and the ceiling moves out of position and a woman drops through the gap at the end of an arch falling a couple of feet to the floor panting she's bone thin. But for her belly she staggers leans against our wall and looks up at our ceiling breathing carefully. There's a blurry streak of light coming from the old skylight a portal to the world outside the world inside consists only of this woman dressed in stained cammo a tank top rope belted fatigues combat boots a patch over one eye hair tied back and a piece of cloth. Her face is scarred with a complicated line on her back. There are two guns. And a pack of provisions. Eases herself down the tiles. She calls

[00:08:22] To any God to all of them. She calls to us tree roots Stangl through the ceiling tiles a wandering bird swoops down from the outside world makes its way through the arch and settles into a secret nest cluttered with hoop earrings made of brass

[00:08:37] Candy wrappers bits of ribbon. The woman screams and her scream echoes from corner to corner of the station and there is no train and no help. There's no one but us silent. And this woman alone underground.

[00:08:49] She gets her teeth and pushes the watch. We wait.

[00:08:56] The Labor takes a day and at night the sun transits the sky and the Moon slips through the skylight. The baby latches fingers into the woman's rib cage toes into her pelvis and forces itself out breech unfolding punching pressing against something that will not give and then does she screams once more and her son is born what small bloody.

[00:09:16] He takes his first breath. He gasps gagging on air his fingers spread his mother's eyes flicker with fire and her hands glow as though a bomb has exploded in the far distance not outside but in breaths

[00:09:31] She clenches her fists and brings a knife out of her pack. She cuts the cord and ties it off with a strip of cotton from her shirt. She looks at her child holding him up into the thin beam of light.

[00:09:41] The baby's eyes open Golden and his mouth opens to his barn with teeth. His mother looks at him her face uncertain. She holds him carefully her hands shaking. Wonders have been born before

[00:09:55] Some time they've been worshiped. There have been new things over and over and some creatures have fallen groaning to the ground and others have learned to fly.

[00:10:05] Never mind the loneliness of being on earth that will come later. She touches the baby states. She washes him with our water and swaddled him in her shirt tight against her body.

[00:10:16] Gretton she whispers in our history the history of the mountain of the land that surged up out of the darkness at the bottom of the sea. This is only an instant and then it will be dark again. Listen she whispers to the baby all the other things that have been born here rise silently in the water of the mirror to listen with him to Clodd each with its own ridge of spiny gleam.

[00:10:42] The mountain citizens look at the infant for a moment. Listen to his mother for a moment and then dive back into the depths. He is born

[00:10:57] In that part now. I'm going to read some police dogs it's quite different. Harch.

[00:11:03] Yes dogs on duty criminals teeth robberies noses drugs bombs riding in cars with heads out the window official death we're off with our agitated the officer. Ten dogs without leashes the whole company met and released inclined by right of nose our officer blows a horn and we sniff his secret.

[00:11:23] He's taken a few things to keep himself awake Bulc illegal from India pure protein and adrenaline chewable fear. He's been scanning a map of the mountain and old when we smell that two railroad crumbling paper oily fingerprints hounds in a swarming pack moving as one sleek body leaping a wall made of stone an interesting smell there. Four hundred years ago someone died on this rock a hundred years ago. Someone hung from that tree 13 seconds ago. There was a squirrel.

[00:11:53] Run run run. Yes. Big Mountain cat spray dropped flat to the ground creep. No not above. Look up. Careful branches.

[00:12:02] Oh no no no no. Silence blinking murdering cat. Never mind.

[00:12:07] Long gone. House Cat. Tiny fluff and flea powder scratch over that dig a moment in disgust. Show them your work boys show them dogs can tell how many times a person's heart beats how many breaths they've taken whether they're sick whether they're dying. Dogs can find the secrets their people don't know tip them over spilled them onto the ground roll in them. Dogs can fill this officer in his cowardice making him miserable. He doesn't want to find the things we're looking to find. The world is full of secrets. No one cares about no one but dogs. Nip at his scared of the woman in this mountain but he has a long yellow hair stuck to his jacket for a different beast. We sniff it. Officer has been roaming. We have the target sweater again boy chocolate poison divine lick yanked back. Dirt bloodied me soap sometimes we're in a cage for days. Sometimes we're at a cafe for days waiting biding time eating clandestine crumbs with tongue out casually tasting toddlers. We are rarely used to our full sniffing capacity. Rubbing his nose in it. There you go get him the set good we already got the scent. We had the scent before you knew there was a scent from three towns away.

[00:13:21] We had said. We've been hunting this boy for two weeks. We travel on perfume lines drink them out of the air like you listen to the radio put our hands out the window or heads out the window of the speeding car and smell someone touching someone else. Five lanes over blowjob string cheese tequila and a new wedding ring. Respect yours back. Grin on. Yep rub his nose in it again. Yeah he's lost the scent there is a good boy. We never lose the scent. Scents don't disappear the way you think they do. We hug them like ropes hounds running uphill a wall of the correct smell that sweater again we know it by now don't we. Every day it smells more interesting. Now it's coffee doughnut plastics. Car keys sexual lubricant vodka yellow haired woman who smells like smell like the boy we're tracking. Where is that boy all over the mountains. Oh yes it's the smell of the sweater it's the smell of the last boy making his way up the slope. Highest leap over fallen trees over icy creek snow to the chest cold paws trip trap traps no ruins the smells he needs to shed stop the snow

[00:14:30] Look busy the horn again Roded breaks the snow off branches. One of us is military retired brought back on a flight

[00:14:38] Miseria forever. Mostly he only points for tobacco. But. He stands over a crack in the snow pawing a gap in the story of earth Riggall it's a he knows sand desert someone made of war. Bomb and bright and night and birds screeching overhead. Let's inhere shall we yes we shall. A skinny spiral of smoke coming up from a fire a chimney under the mountain we think about the underground because our officer thinks about the underground caves railways trains tracks. Where are they. A rail tie there a barricade there an old crack in the old earth. Point boys. All at once every hound here pod down nose down. Show them where the scent went. Our officer kneels a tiny crack and through it we smell the scent of the missing of the mother of the other. All three down there. Out of reach. But that is not our business.

[00:15:36] We thrust our noses into the dangling palms of police and we bark our victory for our quest is complete.

[00:15:54] That was great. I really liked that I love what you do. With boys and I want to get to that. In a minute. That's one of the questions I have to talk about. But first I to talk about how my. Felt when I.

First read that book. I was really struck by a sense of recognition. It reminded me of my own. Most recent book so lucky. I mean the really different books. But what struck me was this. Paradoxical sense of something that you've been thinking about for a long time but also something that you just reached the sticking point and said now now I have to do it right now. So I'd love to talk about that. That false drive. And I want to hear from you how it felt. Where the idea came from the circumstances of you actually writing that first draft. Because it does have that sense of urgency. So yeah.

[00:17:04] Tell me about that so I've been thinking about iterations of this book for probably ten years. I had been at the MacDowell Colony back in 2000 six I think after my first book came out and I was flailing around there doing what people do at that particular artists colony and many artists colonies is feel unprepared and unnerved that everyone else is going to be able to write a book much better and faster than you will be able to. And that you in fact don't know how to write a book. So I was I was lurking in the library and someone was insisting to me that I should read for reasons like Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates which to me I didn't understand why this was a famous book it's a book about misery of the suburbs. Mid century book and I didn't understand I didn't grow up in the suburbs. I came from like way out in the wild. So the notion of the suburbs as a paradise to me seemed very strange and that anyone would think that seemed strange to me. So I read this book and felt very aggravated by it and then thought about my annoyance for years and years and years and couldn't. Harsch what my problem was really. And finally sometime in about 2014 or so I was sitting in Paris. With my sister and she'd just had her her first son and her son was crying all night and he and I were sitting on the couch together in the dead of night and I started writing. A book about listening to a baby cry it was it was definitely going to be the summer book.

[00:18:29] I knew what it was. But I didn't at this point know that it was going to be Beowulf and somehow in there and I cannot explain how this happened I thought well this is obviously going to be a story about Grendell Grendel's mother and Grendell. Because you never get the story in Beloff of Grendell mother of the babyhood of Grendell. You don't understand where Grendell came from you don't understand where and you don't understand how they became monsters to the civilisation they're in and it started to occur to me that maybe this was a book about. Suburbia taking over the wild and making it like essentially the easy way to put it is that it's like a frat house gets built next door to a nature preserve and Harriett Hall which are tall is that mead hall. Hrothgar. Has built and it's so loud that it makes the people who are in there are people who live in the nature preserve go bonkers. And they just can't listen they can't stand the noise. So that's that's the sort of baseline and I thought well what if I write a book about suburbia and monsters and the way that we make monsters but it was that was so I wrote it in 2015 and like to frenzied frantic panicky weeks I took myself to another artist colony in Italy on a mountain and sat there and wrote a lot of words every day and it was finally time to write it and I understood how to write it.

[00:19:47] Mostly it's an amazing feeling isn't it. When you finally. Finally understand how you're going to do it. And it. All makes sense and then you have to really. Just

[00:19:58] Go for it. And I don't know about you but for me that was a moment

[00:20:04] Something bigger than the world and you don't there's you can't articulate it. You have to. Just channeling through

[00:20:14] That way. Yeah yeah yeah that's true. I think that in this case that's what I felt like I was doing but I had that the texture. I knew what the story was. It's if I knew who had to show up who had to fight who had to die but I just ran across it and like my Facebook memories it was like remember this date. In 2015 when you were writing writing the midwife and it's just like like fifty seven tweets about me not wanting to kill any of any of the monsters. It's me like eating a lot of cookies and thinking Do I have to. Is this going to have to happen. So yeah I was I was very inspired but then I wanted to diverge wildly. The book does diverge wildly. But but the basic outline. There's the dragon. There's Grendel's mother there's Grandel there's Beowulf like all of these things are from the original and also also propagators wife who is named Willow. This book is in their cars and they're named Roger in this book. Yeah I mean for anyone who's really familiar with work for many many many. Tasty little easter eggs in this book

[00:21:15] And there are many resonances and there are very many ways in which you work against it too. And so. The whole gender thing. And then there's a lot about. Race and colonialism which is a variation of deviation. But the thing I want to get back to right now which is also something. That really comes from Beowulf. With a lot is the voice. I love what you do with. This. Anglo-Saxon. Animism or maybe personifications is a better way to put it that the mountain has a point. I'm fascinated. And oh Peisley the dog. And then there's this. Kind of Greek chorus to of the matriarchs. So there's this whole sense of ancientness. In. This. Modern setting by. The way you do that is is great but you put so much in there and it's clear that he really has this energy behind it and it's clear that you also. Miss. The moment. So what was the most fun part.

[00:22:26] Well you mentioned the matriarch chorus in this book. There's a chorus of women who are running suburbia and they are they were somewhat for me inspired because I put them in in the second draft they weren't the first draft but they are the soldiers of suburbia their bail of soldiers. And I put them in because of the 2016 election because white women just voting en masse for Trump and I was like What. Why. Why would you do that why would you vote for this person who wants to take your power away and that the soldiers have Sabera suburbia in this case are women who are enforcing the patriarchy and enforcing rigid structures on other women mostly but also like running things killing things doing a lot of behind the scenes work. And that for me was it was fun to it doesn't seem as though it would be fun from what I just said but they're funny. They have a lot of very highly critical of everything and they and they speak in a rhythm that is essentially they're interviewing themselves they're kind of doing a call and response to their own. Navigated histories. I don't think about all the stories that don't get written down because that's of course what this book is usually about it's about it's about the voiceless and even in the case of like as that election happened people were like why why why did that happen why would women do that. And. I wanted to explore them telling their own story of why they might do such a thing. And in this case they're not talking about Trump they're talking about enforcing racist classist othering structures in suburbia. But it's. But it's me looking at the ways that that has happened throughout history. And for me that that is perversely fun I guess I like to navigate it and make a map you know.

[00:24:10] Yeah. And it's it's quite scary how I think people of other oppressed groups. Tell themselves the story about how how they. Will power and they perhaps

[00:24:22] Do. Except it's this weird tension because they have a lot of power. Because. They are. Kind of. Deputized. To. Oversee. Even more press. And I felt that so that's what the media. Are telling themselves the story they're believing. A story. And then making in order to to get more power for themselves they're making the people with less power even more. And it's just. I saw very many. Today's. Political. Experience are

[00:25:06] Intentional and that things I always like to explore. But also in the case of these voices. I wanted to explore the rhythms of the Anglo-Saxon. So it was interesting to explore the rhyme and not the meter specifically but this sort of alliteration and rhyming of slogans that we that the women in this book use. In order to enforce their their power. You give me an example. What do you give a woman who has what do you get a woman who has everything you get her more.

[00:25:35] You know that's that's one of their lines and that for me was like it's not that's not a rhyming line but it's a line that could be called as a chorus. I wanted it to feel. Like spoken choral language spoken. And in this case kind of Greek chorus language there is instructing the world on how to treat them and they're saying this is what we've done. This is what we deserve. Which is

[00:26:00] Yeah yeah. So that's that's a lot about the matriarchs but I would like to look for a minute. Dana. She is not. She's the person who she goes to war. She's a warrior. And we can. Get two

[00:26:16] Words and warrior. But. She. She comes back. To what she thinks of as home except it will completely change. Her. And. She is. She's really

[00:26:31] Profound. And when she's really provoked she goes full on warrior. I mean she really. Goes that because the circumstances demand. And. I suspect. That in the back of. The reader's mind is that

[00:26:51] We saw it as a provocation. Not that she's

[00:26:55] Likes to put things into children that she she's really provoked. And so is wondering what is. Your version. Of a warrior. Was

[00:27:08] There something I thought a lot about. Because part of the genesis of this being a Beowulf Facebook is the is that that the Grendel's mother character to me has always seemed like she was a soldier like she is a warrior a veteran and she she uses weapons and she is daunting in the way that that belief is daunting. So she's similar to heaven in some ways.

[00:27:30] And I in this case she is defending her child.

[00:27:35] But she's also all she has is her ability to be to go all in. Like she's she's got no privilege at all. She's living in a cave. And for me writing this. I mean it was actually very easy for me to channel that feeling I guess. I was thinking. About a worst case scenario like what would I do if if everything that I knew was safety was taken away from me. In this case Dana comes back from war she is pregnant with Gran. As you heard her delivering him in a cave on this mountain and her people are gone. Her where she says she came from is gone. It's been plowed under. It's underneath this planned community and she is. Other she says she's not safe there. So and her child isn't safe. As the two of them together are two of a kind they're not safe. And so her reactions are. I would say like writing writing scenes in which she ends up. What happens is that Gren ends up making a friend down in the plant community and destabilizing everything by making friends. And her reactions which are full on and ferocious

[00:28:44] To her mind. All she can do she can't come into that that community and be nice she can't say hi. I live in a cave up the mountain and my son might be down there in that one of those houses. She can do that. It does. It's like non-viable. It's not the situation where you can arrange a play date

[00:29:01] Right and even okay when they leave the gate. So. Yeah there's just no friendliness and no discourse which I think is the

[00:29:10] History of American fail. Basically it's like oh here we are we're just going to plow your land under we're going to take it. And now you're a monster. You're isolated. We'll put you off to the side and if you come back here we'll kill you. So that's. This is the small interpersonal version of that larger landscape of American history and I was trying to get out that through the internal voices of the people experiencing it in a story

[00:29:39] You want to talk about monsters. Yeah. OK. Oh yes. I think it's very easy to to think of monsters as metaphors for the other you know whether we're talking women queers disabled people. People of a different race to. Cover basic monsters theory holds that. Monsters our fascination with monsters. And. Testifies. To the human need to explore. Difference. And the forbidden

[00:30:11] I'm not sure I buy that. Would.

[00:30:15] I don't I don't know either. Like that sort of months. Like generally when I write monsters if I'm really reading a monster it's really a monster. It's not

[00:30:23] It's not a forbidden thing. It's like it's it's kind of magic. I'm interested and wonder is this the beginning of this book and interested in things that we cannot. That are not taboos but are unimaginable. And so sometimes those things get categorized as monster in my work anyway in a lot of the work of the world.

[00:30:45] I think that Monster is an easy thing to create a monster thing like. I don't know if it's exploring difference exactly. I personally think it's about exploring grief. I think it's about thinking to yourself what. Here's my here's my stuff. And. There are all these people who probably Wantage. So

one of the most convenient things that you can do is to think to yourself the people who want my stuff are in fact monsters so to me it's actually sort of like the Dragons sitting on top of the gold and thinking out there there are things that want my gold I will have to kill them. That is going to be the situation. And I think that like throughout the history of humans we've had many different ways of thinking about that but in this book it is indeed

[00:31:31] Other as monster but in both on both sides. I also think that the. Monsters. Are we create monsters because. We've turned the people

[00:31:43] Into machines. Yes. So you think about. The white colonial experience here in this country and the demonization. Indians. Native Americans. Just. Tune them into monsters because

[00:31:58] It's the only way to feel better about it.

[00:32:01] Right. Yeah and all of the stories that that. Deep narrative trope that says. We are

[00:32:09] Instead of being white invaders we're white victims of horrific wildness. What did we do to deserve this. Nothing. It was totally not our fault. Which is like the classic adventure narrative where where in the world is coming for you. They're not exactly human. They're probably not human in fact and it's OK to kill them because. Because. What did you do to deserve this horror you should have safety even if you have in fact invaded lands that belong to people already. It's interesting to me that lately a lot of. Really successful films are about the kind of monsters that we are

[00:32:47] Driving to extinction. The big shock the big. Basically apex predator. Is

[00:32:54] All the scary monsters these days in movies that are making billions at the box office are things that we feel guilty about. I'm at the same time we are

[00:33:05] Afraid of because they're apex predators. It's a very it's a very interesting and complicated thing. Yeah I think there's a case to be made that that that the world bites back is the coming narrative like the sort of apocalypse eco apocalyptic narratives of. Much of the field that are and

[00:33:26] Is is. How long can you prod the world before it eats you. And and we have lots of stories about that we have lots of stories about total total collapse whether it's whether it's ecological collapse or plague collapse. And all of that is having to do with humans who have made some choices

[00:33:45] And denied that consistent in Beowulf there is the word that no one is entirely sure how to pronounce. I'm going to pronounce it i. For now. A good way to pronounce

[00:33:59] That. Well actually. Why didn't you tell me about this. Because

[00:34:04] I will tell you about it. I will also show you part of it although my own apex predator garb makes it hard for me to reveal my effects Touchett. So this word which goes all the way up to here is

the word that is used in Beowulf to describe Grendell Grendel's mother Beowulf and The Dragon in different different forms of it. Grendel's mother has the feminine form of this word usually in almost all translations

[00:34:33] Throughout into English throughout the 20th century and before this word is translated for Beowulf as hero. Like the original guy who was scholar Kleiber 1822 this comes out and he's like that word means hero if it's talking about Beowulf for Grendel's mother is usually translated as Haggett or creature or Halbreich if you're Seamus Heaney so. Recently as recently as 20 years ago without translation How bright is absolutely what he decides to use for Grendell it's usually monster creature for the dragon. Of course we know what the dragon is but. This yeah this word probably means something much more akin to formidable it's also used to refer to other sources to the venerable Bede who is a scholar. So it's not like he's a monster and it's not like he's the hero or hell bride he is not a hell bride. So yeah. So basically in the scholarship what happened was this like long standing desirable legend of

[00:35:39] Monster hood how to make a monster. Generally if you. I think coming from some Victorian ideals of femininity this notion that if you take up a sword and you're a single mother. What are you your problem. You're a monster and in fact very ugly as well.

[00:35:59] Like what much of the language in sort of ongoing this was just adopted as as the way that you talk about Grendel's mother.

[00:36:06] You say Monster Monster Monster and in reality in the original she is probably human Grendel is a monster. Grendell Grendell has descriptions. He's huge he's. Got claws she's she is probably not. She is strong and good with she's good at fighting but and seems to have not occurred to anyone that like Grendel's father could be a monster and no one just dealt with no one with that they were like No it's definitely the mother who the problem. That's just how it works so obviously this is a story in which Beowulf kills free monsters and it's Grendel and it's Grendel's mother and the dragon who also kills bad Wolf. But. I think it's a much more interesting story if. It's actually Beowulf invades this woman's home after she's trying to claim the body of her son and comes for her and she's she's human like. That that changes everything about Beowulf and it changes everything about. Whether he is a hero whether he is pure good weather. What kind of guy is he. If that's what he does he goes in and fights her. A woman who has followed Anglo-Saxon law like she's gotten revenge she's taken one person in exchange for her son. And so like nobody has really done that version. And tell me which will be next year. But but it was the version I was looking for. Which is why I ended up having to translate it because. It doesn't it's not out there. And it's that's just because of the. Tempting tempting lineage of patriarchal narratives they think I am so looking forward to reading your version of. But because I want to see how and you've done a Vujanovic with this book but obviously no

[00:37:46] An actual translation but just a riff a resonance. But. I'm. Fascinated by the last

[00:37:56] 15 years. So many women have been going back. To history. And. Putting women into history where we have been written. Out. I mean it was nearly a hundred years ago that Virginia Woolf talked about how

[00:38:14] The history of people is the history of the male.

[00:38:19] What do we know about women. Maybe maybe no. How many kids they had. If they were important children. But we don't know the women's names. And. I certainly withheld wanted to to just look

[00:38:36] At how things probably were. I'm so tired of this kind of. Deliberate. Not. Seeing what's right in front of your face. It's like talking about not seeing

[00:38:52] Grendel's mom as a human being just having to see her as a mom. And it reminds me of what happened last year. I don't know if you're aware of. A paper that was published about. A Warrior's grave in Berka. Sweet

[00:39:09] Viking age. So buried with old accoutrement and then those genetic testing and it turned out to be a woman. Well clearly it's not a war issue. She wasn't. No she wasn't a war that's her bargain their fancy dress. And then at the same time these people women. Yes they were definitely worth. But this was just. Yeah I was just kind of the thing they did. And they just

[00:39:32] Wouldn't. They just threw logic away. And so I'm. I suspect. Your version available. To me. Such. Good

[00:39:43] Sense. I hope so. I was thinking about as you were talking about hilled. You know I mean we've all encountered these moments when people. Say about various categories of of. Person. Well there just weren't any of those in the in the 12th century or. Well there just weren't any people of color in the Elizabethan era. There just weren't any. OK. That makes no sense at all. But the longing to just whiten and. And

[00:40:16] I'm looking for word for like just turn it all dude. But that's the word I'm looking for. But the longing to do that is so great that it seems like it's real it seems that that is truth and that is you know people say those things all the time people say. I have certain I've had the conversation where people they just know women in the seventh century.

[00:40:34] Ok. Oh how do we have humans then.

[00:40:37] Like what. What do you think here. And the notion of like women not fighting when women's bodies have always been radicalized risk and radically used traded and sold and fought with and like. Course women were fighting. What do they think that women were just. Like just. Invisibly napping in you know with some apples and shriveled bits of potato and every once in a while they'd come out and put a baby out into the world a boy baby because no girls like. What do they think. It's

just people who are who are solid on all the rest of the history like in token for example who wrote a lot about Beowulf his very famous essay The monsters and the critics has Grendel's mother is like a footnote like she's not even part of the monster she's not part of the main characters she is a main character in the. But she's like not very interesting to him. He's just sort of like this thing. Well I just have to mention her because there's there is that big chunk. But like. Yes she is. Because if he has to see her as a woman that's problematic even for at that point in history. And it continues to be to see a woman as someone with. Any power or agency or ferocity I think is obviously an ongoing problematic notion for people. People have this notion of history as a

[00:42:05] Progression.

[00:42:08] Women start with nothing and then gradually we've been allowed a little bit worn a little bit more a little bit more. And it's like. They don't understand history doesn't look that

[00:42:17] Yeah narrative works that way fucked up narrative works that way. So like like the idea that women began with the invention of courtly love and if so then women now marriage. That's why women have ceremonies. But you know before that no women we didn't have them. I'm going to ask you

[00:42:36] One more question and then we'll get to that. But I. So my question really is. When you. Were going through that and had two weeks of the first draw. Did you have. Any. Idea. Of what a spark this book. Would. Define. Out there. And

[00:42:59] What you hoped. Did you hope for more or less different.

[00:43:02] I went to rule the world. So I

[00:43:07] Went when I had the idea and I knew that I was combining the two things. I thought

[00:43:13] Yeah that's going to work. I think that's going to work. And and I wrote it. And I wrote it really quickly but then lots of time passed it was three years from the time I sold the I sold it right away which was very awesome and exciting two to MTD which is where both were both at the same editor and it was very with Sean MacDonald there and it was great. And then three years passed because I was working on the book and everything was slow and the world changed in the last three years. Like we had massive political shift. And me too and much more discourse about things that I think you and I had like long standing we talked about on every Wednesday afternoon in our normal conversation was like smashing crushing blow it all. And

[00:43:56] You know with a cookie and glass of wine. But don't get caught not get caught. Weird consistent revolutionary discourse.

[00:44:04] But now the world is having that discourse which is I think has been because this book came out in July. This has been it's been nice and pleasing to me to not have to start at the beginning

of. Yes there is a gender disparity problem. Yes I know you don't think so. I know. So I could just be like Yes you know you've heard about this now. So and so the way that the book landed in the world I think has been more aggressive as a result. And also it's been nice because we've been able to talk about some of the stuff that's like just super nerd and here instead of having to explain feminism from the top. Which has been a very pleasurable situation it's been so nice to be talking about the lineage of words and talking about

[00:44:50] Why one would have collective PRV and something based on an Anglo-Saxon poem. You know it's as oppose. And then you know then we get the rage Chunkin and the rage trunk is also very pleasurable because you know the notion is to change the world completely and overturn this shit.

[00:45:04] So that's why I write books. That's why I write books like this. Me too. Yeah we both do. That's all of Nicola's work is exactly this and ongoing Lee has inspired my own work and made me braver We Rock We Rock.

[00:45:20] We we battle thank you very much. And so now. You would like to ask

[00:45:27] Yes the question is do you always write in a spurt of activity or do you have a different process from that. And basically what is the process is it the normal process. Lately I've been doing. I've been challenging myself bye bye. Because we all have a focus problem I have a focus problem so like taking myself off and saying I'm going to be writing a book and I have three weeks to do it or whatever a month means that I can actually get the book. Out of My Soul. Without getting distracted by every other thing that I want to be distracted by because it's real life. But the book is. Still my process in writing a novel has been like that for for a couple of years and I write a lot. I start writing I write like a thousand words a day for the first few days and then I just ramp it up every day until I'm writing 10000 words a day. It's like it's like marathon training I guess. And my brain needs the training. You can't start that way but if I do it for a little while I can get there. And in my normal daily life sometimes I have an idea for a story and I just have to get it out of my system and that's like an everyday writing kind of thing. I pretty much write everyday unless I'm doing what I'm doing right now which is walking talking happily about writing yeah. With their voice I wish I could have included but I didn't like how the whole voice out of here

[00:46:43] And I don't know if it should have villa Benden here. It was a ghost voice. It was. The voice of someone who

[00:46:50] Who was haunting just sort of haunting the mountain. And she was it was it was just another kind of woman's voice. And I think she might be a short story. I cut her wholesale I chopped like she has three chapters and I chopped them all. And basically she's like at one point she was taking care of Grendell like a hidden in her house. And she is trying to entertain him with like drifts of chipped paint like confetti and trying to make him happy trying to be his playmate. So I the idea of a ghost trying to parent a mortal with something that was tempting to me. But it didn't belong in this book is that in this book and this book didn't it didn't need it but it was for a long time I thought it did

so because she had been one of the first things that had spoken to me when I first started writing it. So sure that she was that she needed to be in.

[00:47:44] And when I chopped her I was like out she goes with her. You know it wasn't the killing of a darling because she was already a ghost but. It was it was definitely the angry little ghosts rattling around in my laptop for a while. Other than Nicholas and Beowulf what other writers and works are you in conversation with

[00:48:05] The entire history of literature. If I'm honest I am a book junkie. So like everything and I'm also interested I'm just interested in when they get interested in something I kind of have to dive all the way and it's always Angela Carter for me because she was the galvanises when I was very young and when I was learning about

[00:48:28] What one could do with an old story teach to change what it meant or to elucidate what was inside of it. She is turning fairytales inside out like sweaters you know and just showing the work that this glorious Nottie interestingness inside. And. In conversation with just sort of. You know Margaret Atwood Allie Smith I

[00:48:55] Lot of the people I read are poets because for obvious reasons this is obviously a very very poetic book.

[00:49:03] So I read like Bridget Piggini Kelly is someone that I that I have really loved over the years she writes a lot about the natural world and the natural world is often sentients and her poetry.

[00:49:13] Yeah that's the short list I've done a bunch of lists all over the place of like what are you reading. What do you love. And like an electric lid. I did one recently. So yeah lots of those books are in those lists.

[00:49:29] Is Noise a theme talking about. Yeah. Tell me about Grendel and noise pushing him over the edge. Well yeah I grew up somewhere that was very quiet. There were there were no there was no light pollution there was no sound pollution except that we had a lot of dogs so we did have all the neighbors felt that there was some sound pollution. I think we were a problem for a lot of people.

[00:49:54] So and yeah I live now I live somewhere loud but I often I hear the sounds of of humans. And this is Ventra. This is why I can live in New York. I think this sounds of like horns and humans and people singing outside my bedroom windows at 4:00 in the morning. It all just seems like part of the same tapestry of music that the world is to me generally unless it's this particular you know like once once. Carlos Santana was playing outside of my bedroom window for like four days and nights. And by the end of it was not a tapestry of music I wish she could know.

[00:50:31] I was like this is not the natural world this is about the human world. This is something else. This is the aliens. You know I see how noise can make you want to just. Do violence.

[00:50:43] But in this case and it was.

[00:50:45] I wish I could remember the horror of what the song was but I cannot. It was collaboration with somebody very popular and annoying. Anyway it broke away. It broke me down so so yeah the notion of peace being polluted by all kinds of elements is for me something that I think about my own life. That's not how I generally hear the world. I'm usually like it's all it's all of what everything all at once always and I'm interested in that complexity and my work is my work is like that.

[00:51:15] So that's that's what I write about was it quiet.

[00:51:19] It was a nunnery. It was a 14th century nunnery on top of a mountain on Mount Sebastião where Francis of Assisi had his cave. So it was quiet as fuck and I knew know but there were like wild boars and there were boar hunting dogs and there were like all of this was happening at the same time that I was there I was listening to it like a pack of hounds hunting boars all the time and also hearing Boris snuffling outside my window.

[00:51:47] So it was quiet but it was silent but not silent. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's precisely what it was it was that terrible terrible saga for four days. You imagine it's there the world is so lucky that I didn't just take 30 men every one of those days and just slay them because that would have made me feel it made me feel really Grendell way

[00:52:15] At one point in the process did you decide not to just explore her being a warrior. Dana Grendel's mother but to also explore PTSD always because she needed to come home from war in order to have Grendell I felt and in order to encounter that kind of suburbia. There was a version in which she was not damaged by war. And then I thought that is really unlikely for someone like her. And the story of her of what happened to her is pretty vague in the book. We are not sure and she is not sure either. But she came home pregnant and she doesn't know how it happened. I was interested in the way that even one's own narrative can become unreliable that you are not a reliable narrator of your own life and that is what happens to her. She's not she doesn't trust her own. She didn't trust her own truth and that is a lot of what motivates her in the book and a lot of foot and that for me was a way to keep her from the solitude that is necessary for her living in a cave with her young son.

[00:53:15] I needed her to be able to have a dialogue with something and and as I think is the case for many people who have trauma which is most people the dialogue is with the trauma the dialogue that hurt her discussion is with the pain and with attempting to make sense of why she is in pain. So for me that was also a narrative voice like I could feel her trauma talking back to her. And that's that's why I did it that way. But there was always it was always part of it was always how she was. Felt for me and also the voice that spoke to me because Dana in this book is First Person and I don't think anyone else is first person. And that's why she was speaking about her pain and her pain was talking back to her from the beginning when I first started writing it.

[00:54:00] If you take away the supernatural element what do you see as the difference between a monster and a normal antagonist. What is the distinction. Ha. I. I have always had in my work and I guess this is because I always this is the thing I think about all the time.

[00:54:15] I've always even when I was a playwright it was just how I started. I would always have the antagonist and protagonist would both have PRV they could I could not help myself. I could not tell a story that was one sided. I was always like Oh now there are too many people talking now it's too long not really to play anymore. Oh no it's a novel. OK into the drawer it goes.

[00:54:34] Because like I think that the supernatural elements are so often concocted and and the notion of somebody doing something you don't want them to do is so often a reason to create to say that that person is a monster. I think it's just all entangled so I don't in the history of story. I'm interested in Monsters I'm interested in battles. I'm interested in creatures and creepy crawlies. But I have always been interested especially I think in the ones that have agency that I can. That I can taste like I don't want monsters without a reason. Like in in a fellow lingo is often given as an example of a monstrous character he's just bad. Why is he so bad. We don't know. He's like just made of bad. And that that character has never been compelling to me. I want to understand his. I don't want him to just be bad. I want to know why the fuck he's bad and I want to know why he's so bad that he wants to destroy everything.

[00:55:36] I think there's always that reason and you know this that this doesn't always make for the cleanest short pieces of work. So I have to write novels. I think if I was if I was like able to write very short haiku it would be different.

[00:55:49] I'd be like a monster over there. And you know I would feel maybe calmer about this topic but I but I just want every moment interested in the voice so I'm interested in the justification.

[00:56:02] If you've done something really bad I want to know what your logic was. I think that's educational for all of us to think about when we're thinking about. You know. Our enemies like going through their path of what they. How they arrived at the very very bad and whether or not that very very bad is indeed very very bad or if we're just very very privileged often a question I'm looking to parse it

[00:56:29] If it is inevitable that Grendel's mother has to be disruptive. Or is there a way for our society to rehabilitate people who've experienced extreme trauma or extreme othering and have had it be a society in which community is possible. Is that. Accurate. Yes. In which like a compassionate community is possible I don't know. That's the fucking question right. That's what should happen. That's what it should be. That's what the world should be like. Lots of what I write is an attempt to encourage people to think think about that. About how to like just walking walking in this city.

[00:57:04] I see lots of people who are other in the way that Dana is other than this book. I see lots of people who are not seen as conversant or not seen as being able to be part of the conversation with the rest of people because they are very poor or they're very sick or of various various reasons. Very

angry. In some cases anger is seen as like if you're very angry you might be too angry. Anger is like. No you're not part of society anymore. And I don't know. I mean I think thinking about thinking this it's like love thy neighbor I guess is how how it needs to be. But I think that's a complicated thing to do and is a very complicated negative thing to do when one is quite used just thinking of oneself as a hero who is conquering without any. Questionability which I think is a lot of the narrative of of privilege and of of whiteness and. It's just such a thing. It's thousands of years of. Seeing oneself as the hero and that is a powerful narrative force. So. These things obviously need to shift. I think better storytelling is one way to shift them and. Louder simpler better storytelling like complicated story gets smaller gets like. I think there's a way to break it all down from like the really complicated to the much less complicated to the like. Step forward offer her hand kind of simplicity that is often frightening from. To look at from afar.

[00:58:37] You have time for one little quips. Do you think that the presence of powerful memorable female characters in novels has as increased. Or do we need more a lot more. We need a lot more obviously. I want a greater diversity of voice across the board and I want that in publishing and I want that in

[00:58:56] Media of all kinds. I want to hear the voices that we have for thousands of years not heard in mainstream culture because they were suppressed. So yeah more the facts. More as many more as can be as many more more marginalized voices as can be heard I want and I want an entire. Loud choral voice of that. Because we have had a loud voice. We've had allowed Currall voice and it has been one kind of voice for a very long time in Western culture and I. That voice is still valid but it is. There is no reason that seems to be the only voice that we're hearing. It's just loud. So I think the latter we are. The more we are

[00:59:41] The better the world is. I. Think

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