

EGSM 16: Mighty pens (Writing)

Content Warnings

- Brief explicit language
- Discussions of: anxiety
- Mentions of: death & murder, guns, COVID-19 pandemic, disease, alcohol

HELEN

Hello folks. Just a quick one to let you know that we had some technical difficulties on the audio for this episode. You should still be able to hear and understand everyone, but we thought we'd give you a heads up just in case. Have fun, and catch you soon.

IMOGEN

...and some of them will be like “oh that’s a short story”, or “oh that’s a novel”, or “oh that’s a poem - I should never show that to anyone!”

(laughing)

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusigasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today we’re talking about writing. And I am extremely happy and glad and honoured to be joined by Imogen, Lex, Nora, and Rhys. As always we are going to go alphabetically, so Imogen, can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

IMOGEN

Hi there, I'm Imogen Harris, pronouns she/her. I've been a voice on Rusty Quill for a couple of years now. I'm also a part time ghost writer, writer for hire, and yeah, so...I also administrate data for a large bureaucratic institution.

HELEN

I remember the last time that you said that you then said that you were a spy so we'll...

IMOGEN

I'm not a spy.

HELEN

We'll scoot quickly over that.

IMOGEN

My spymaster had such a go at me!

(laughing)

HELEN

Next up Lex. Who are you and what are your pronouns?

LEX

Hi, I'm Lex. He/him. I'm a writer. I made the Deca Tapes podcast which got me involved with Rusty Quill, which also incidentally got me a book deal two years ago. So I'm currently working on my first novel. Well actually it'll be a book and a podcast that kind of tie in together. So in full writing mode at the moment.

HELEN

Ah, lovely. And Nora, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

NORA

Hi, I'm Nora Unkel and my pronouns are she/her and I got involved with Rusty Quill through a podcast that I produce called Cryptids, and additionally I work primarily as a screenwriter and in the horror genre of film making. So currently just digging deep into a couple of new horror thriller scripts.

HELEN

We love a horror! And last but absolutely not least, Rhys, could you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

RHYS

I'm Rhys. I am the tech assistant for Rusty Quill. I listened to the Magnus Archives and said, "you know what, I want to work here now" and that's just kind of how it happened. On the side lines I am the writer for the Mnemosyne podcast and I do a fair bit of other writing. I have a book coming out next year called Burn Down, Rise Up. And it is a horror novel for the young adults.

HELEN

I'm so...I'm so happy, I'm so psyched to be here and talking about writing. Right, I mean we're going to start with a question that all interviews about writing start with, which is: when did we all start writing? And potential follow up, do you remember the first thing you ever wrote? Because I think for me it was a weird retelling mashup of like Beowulf and The Hobbit. They gave us like...

(laughing)

...as a project at school, they gave us the first paragraph of The Hobbit and we had to finish it. And I remember drawing a Viking for some reason in association with that. So I've been writing since I was a kid. Does anyone else want to tell us their origin story?

IMOGEN

I think we have very similar inspiration because I think the first time I seriously thought like, "no I'm going to write a book", I was probably about seven or eight and it was quite...it wasn't just a book, it was like an epic series of fantasy novels in my head. Sort of, I think very much inspired by The Hobbit and also my brother's D and D figures and I didn't get very far with it but in my head it was palatial and there was a horse and time was going to start and stop, and yeah, maybe I should finish that at some point. But yeah.

HELEN

Did you say, “there was a horse”?

IMOGEN

Okay there was a horse that controlled time.

HELEN

Oh! I see!

IMOGEN

The horse controlled time. Sorry I didn’t make that clear.

(laughing)

HELEN

Of course!

IMOGEN

I think it was because also, ooh, no, it’s also because I’d been to the Natural History Museum and there’s a like early kind of horse and it’s known as Dawn Horse?

HELEN

Ooh.

IMOGEN

So like in my brain this was like, the horse was like the horse that makes time and so if you cut the horse you control time, and some people at some point have got hold of it and keeping it underground all chained up and you have to go and save it because time's not working properly. It sounds way better now, like...

HELEN

Yeah that's not bad at all Imogen!

RHYS

I would watch a movie about that!

NORA

Yeah absolutely.

LEX

Yes this sounds amazing.

HELEN

Magical time horse!

NORA

Sounds like you have your next project.

IMOGEN

Yeah.

HELEN

Gosh. Does anyone want to follow that?

IMOGEN

I don't think I've written anything as good since to be honest. Honestly I've peaked, like, best idea I ever had!

(laughing)

LEX

It's because you never finished that one. It'll come after. First you have to finish this one.

HELEN

Alright, who's next?

NORA

I actually recently discovered this notebook that I had filled when I was in like fourth grade, you know so I was probably eight or so, and we had just read this wonderful book, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. And I got super fascinated by this kind of island indigenous culture, and so I decided to write this, almost *Romeo*

and Juliet epic love story that didn't quite work out between two neighbouring tribes, I believe, on two different islands and then killed one of the main characters in the end because I just like to be sadistic. But, found that, and it's true, true trash, but it was really enjoyable to find this horrible, scrawled handwriting trying to, I guess write a short story as a fourth grader.

HELEN

Well whomst among us has not killed off our main character.

LEX

Yes.

HELEN

Oh, Lex how about you?

LEX

Yeah kind of the same, I started off like really young, like drawing little comics before I could properly write which was basically Batman rip-offs and then starting my first novel series and I also found them a while back and I made...I started with making a kind of contents page which summed up that there were five books. So I started with huge ambitions before writing them, and it was called Michael the Detective and it was basically James Bond.

IMOGEN

Brilliant.

HELEN

I think that all books should be named like that.

LEX

Yes. It was very matter of fact. So the first chapter was called “the beginning” which could be philosophical but it for sure wasn’t.

(laughing)

HELEN

And Rhys, what about you?

RHYS

Definitely like super, super young. I think the first thing I ever like started with...it was a very crude comic book about a spy. I don’t even remember any dialogue. I think it was just watching the spy do her thing and I don’t, I do not recall what her thing was. It was just, her thing was being a spy. The first thing I ever wrote with dialogue was, um, I guess it was like a form of escapism from like middle school troubles. Just, you know when you get into your really angsty phase and you’re just kind of like, “urgh, no one understands me!” And I kind of coped with it by writing a very bad Harry Potter spin off but like about my home town. And I’m proud to say that I do not know where that writing has ended up because if I reread it today I would be picking myself apart.

HELEN

Right. I'm looking at the questions I've got and I want to talk about...I want to ask all of these questions actually.

LEX

Do it.

HELEN

We'll go with another classic one, which is who or what inspires you in your writing? I'd be really interested to hear this from people. I don't know if anyone still like, believes in a muse or anything, or if that is just an artistic painter kind of thing.

IMOGEN

I definitely believe in, like, muses in that, like Stephen King talks about it, like basically it's your, not really your ideal reader, but like who you're writing for; that this writing is for somebody. So it's more like the person that you really want to read it. Like, I think that it's that sort of thing, that like you have your ideal reader. The person you're talking to.

HELEN

Ooh. That's a whole other question.

IMOGEN

Ooh sorry!

HELEN

No, no, no, that's great, I'm writing it down. Ideal reader. So in that case, the person inspiring you is an imagined figure.

IMOGEN

Yeah you're sort of doing it...I guess to impress. I definitely have like an imagined figure that I'm trying desperately to impress with my writing.

HELEN

That's a bit relatable yeah.

(laughter)

Is anyone else inspired by anyone or anything in particular?

LEX

To me there's like two ways to look at it and one of them is just like you said, Imogen, and the other is more, you know, the David Lynch philosophy of staying as true as possible to the initial idea, right? Well maybe he's not the first to think of that of course, but he articulates it so well. So that really inspires me that there's this...there's this moment where your subconscious goes "this is awesome" and then it's your job to kind of, like, pull that thread and follow it wherever it goes. And I used to think of inspiration as this like third thing, so there's you and there's the idea and then there's inspiration and you hope that the inspiration motor keeps churning so you can follow the idea. But to me if I completely take that away from the equation and just look at the

idea as the inspiration in itself, it prevents me from getting writer's block because I just...I just delete all outside concerns and I just follow the idea and whatever feels right or befitting that idea, yeah, I just do that. So act three of the book starts with a way too long scene, way too long of a scene right now, but I don't care because if I worry about it I'll stress but this is just what the idea needs right now. So yeah, what I'm trying to say is that to me the inspiration should be in the idea for the story itself. Does this make any sense?

(murmured agreement)

HELEN

Yeah it does. I can see Nora nodding.

NORA

Yeah, no, I'm just, you're speaking the words of my heart. That's exactly...I think I enter into everything with a particular atmosphere, particular mood, something that...it might even be an emotion that whatever audience member that you're talking about Imogen, I want to evoke in them. But sometimes it's also just a feeling I want to evoke in myself. But yeah, like, meshing that inspiration and that, the idea into one and for me through an emotion through an atmosphere, that really helps. And so I often use this inspiration, obviously as a filmmaker, images and music are a big element for me so I will often, if I have that barely seed of an idea, you know just something that's...even just a single image or a single character or a single plot point. The way that I kind of pull that thread and figure out what I'm actually trying to write and eventually, you know, actually write it, is I often put together a whole pile of images that allow me to continue expanding that and I will also like make a playlist so that

whenever I turn on that playlist or whenever I look at that group of images, I'm immediately in that world. I'm immediately back onto the page. So yeah no I'm just listening to lots, I'm like "that's exactly it!"

LEX

I do the same thing. I make a playlist for each character. It's really funny.

NORA

Oh cool.

HELEN

Wow!

NORA

That's amazing.

LEX

Yeah and because...well for podcasting it's different because you compose...or I compose actual music but for like writing a novel for example, I have a playlist for like different places and different characters so that way it's easier to get back in the like tone and rhythm of the place so I completely get the whole mood thing. Yeah. Cool.

HELEN

That's super cool. Rhys what about you? What inspires you in your writing?

RHYS

I am just now realising that I did not give my pronouns. It's they/them pronouns for everyone listening.

HELEN

Oh!

RHYS

The thing that inspires me is I guess like the media that I already consume because I go into every writing project with a sort of a question. So like for example, the book that I, you know that is coming out next year, I came into that writing piece thinking "what if Stranger Things happened in the Bronx?" Like what if that was...like it's just a simple question and obviously I had to have watched Stranger Things to come to that question, but that's kind of how I enter. So it's like I'm inspired by a lot of the things that I watch and I read, and then I kind of like take elements of it or ask a simple question and then try to craft a story all around it.

HELEN

That's so cool. Do you make playlists?

RHYS

I do not, mostly because I don't listen to music all that much. It's very hard to get me to...like if you tell me like "oh you would love this artist", it will take me three more years to listen to that artist. And then I will, and then I'll message

you like “you were right about this” and you’re just like “what the hell are you talking...?”

(laughing)

That’s the type of person I am! It takes me such a long time to get into new music so I don’t really do playlists all that much.

HELEN

Out of interest, do you make playlists for your writing Imogen?

IMOGEN

No I don’t, I’d never considered that. Generally I guess when I’m writing I don’t like to have anything that would distract me emotionally so this is going to sound really awful, but like I listen to a lot of opera and things that are not necessarily wordless, but like if it was music, I don’t know, I feel like that would distract me but I really, really like the idea of making a playlist for a character to like help you think about like what they’re like and what they would be into and what their past is and then...because at first you think “well what were they into when they were a kid”, like, you know, what’s their kind of thing and yeah I think it’s a really good idea.

LEX

But I could see how you wouldn’t...how you would want silence because I’ve definitely had too melodramatic music on and wrote horrible scenes because of it.

(laughing)

So it's a powerful weapon. It's really dangerous if you use it the wrong way because music is so strong, right? It could definitely pull you in the wrong direction.

HELEN

Yeah. I've made playlists, because I'm, I'm...theoretically writing a book...

(laughs at herself)

...I'm so busy! I never get time to work on it. I'm hoping I'll get back on the horse next month in my editing pass. But I have a playlist for that, absolutely. I want to come back briefly to what we mentioned about the ideal reader because I think that was...that's a really interesting thing to look at, as in like, who do we imagine our audience to be? And what is that relationship? I mean...

IMOGEN

I think there is a danger in like, constructing it too much, because I had to rewrite...I'd finished a manuscript and, you know, was sending it round and the thing I got back a lot was, "oh this is YA, this is YA." And I was like "if you say so, like, that seems...yes I guess. No problem with that." And they were like "oh no, you need to write it younger, for a younger audience", so... Which I guess, I don't want to be too precious and be like "my book is for everybody! Everybody can enjoy this!" because I, you know, I've worked in publishing and I

understand...I understand all this kind of stuff and why you have genre and why you have these classifications but then going back and writing it specifically for that...I guess because it wasn't for an individual, it was for my sort of nebulous idea of a market as well, and that was definitely unhelpful. Because I'm like, well which, I should've gone "which 15 year old in particular?" and like, had an idea in my mind. But rather than be...I was like "oh okay well it's, it's, you know it's for The Youth then I suppose" and that wasn't a very helpful kind of way to approach it. So yeah, I think that did a lot of...I don't think it was productive to write in that way.

LEX

This would completely stress me out. Like if I had to think right now about what the demographic is, I would completely...I wouldn't be able to finish the story I think. I don't know. Unless the initial idea is for like a blatantly obvious young adult audience for example, that's for my publisher. Like I would completely, I wouldn't know where to go if I had to look at the other side of the table, right, so to speak. Of course you have to do everything you can to convey the story as good as possible to someone who doesn't have all the context you do, but apart from that, if I have to imagine someone else...that wouldn't work. Like, I would completely...everything would stop, I think.

HELEN

What do you think Nora?

NORA

Well in film there's an exercise that we do where we have to basically create profiles for, not only your primary target audience, but your secondary and tertiary audiences and yeah, for me, it's so draining and takes away from a lot of the writing. Like I see the necessity of it, I do, and it does help to a degree and kind of, I think primarily once you get it out of the writing phase and into how you're shooting it and how you're marketing it, it's really helpful to know your audience. But yeah, for me, it's always different per project and so thinking too hard about, like, okay so I have to give her a name, give her a place that she lives. Like really imagine this very specific person. And I'll immediately start going like, "oh well she's going to hate this." And I just get pulled out of it, and so, yeah again I always try to bring it back to, okay: whatever audience were to sit here and either engage in the art in whatever capacity, what's the emotion I'm trying to get them to feel? And that is something when I'm trying to approach it from kind of like the overall human experience and the overall human takeaways and emotions that you can get from art, I try to see it I guess in that more well rounded way. It's not as helpful and I'm told that by producers and people who actually have to, you know, market the material and get it out there, but in terms of the initial creation process, yeah it's more helpful for me to think of like "how I am going to emotionally manipulate you right now?" instead.

(laughter)

HELEN

What do you reckon Rhys? Are you writing for anyone in particular, or...

RHYS

Er no...I don't write for anyone in particular. I guess I write for myself. Only in the sense that like...let's say if I have, like, you know, this amazing story. If I don't write it, it's going to torture me for like, you know, a while.

HELEN

Yes!

RHYS

So it's just like, you know, I'm not writing a story to be like "oh I want all the little girls out there to like..." I'm just like listen, listen, listen, listen. I don't care.

(laughing)

On some level I do care. On some level. I mean I'm not...it would be a total lie to say "oh I don't care if you do or don't like it." What's important to me is if I like it. If I'm excited about the book, if I love the characters, then it's just like, you know what, someone out there will like it. I don't know who they are, I don't know what demographic they're going to be from, but I like it. They probably will too, and if they don't, it's whatever, I had fun writing this. And also it will not torture me at night when I'm trying to sleep.

HELEN

Yeah I think that's important. I think probably primarily every writer writes for themselves first. Like I'm...I'm writing...I write what I write because I write

what I would want to read. And I feel like if I want to read something like this, I figure other people would want to read it as well.

LEX

It's interesting because you do...when you say, "I don't care about the reaction", my first initial thought is "yeah I agree." But then I think why translate it to an audience, right? So apparently there is a need...like I completely write for myself, so I completely agree with that point, but on the other hand, I do want to be able to do it for a living, right, so apparently I do care about the reception. Yeah. So there's like an interesting tension there that you do it for yourself but not all the way, right? You need the other side to help you to be able to do it. It's really weird. Yeah, you don't want to think about it, but you are thinking about it.

IMOGEN

Yeah because if it was just one hundred per cent for yourself, you'd just like, you'd finish it, put it in a drawer, and go "well that was a success." You wouldn't then try and like, get it published or anything.

RHYS

It's more like...okay, so like, if I'm like looking to get something published, first I'm still writing something that I enjoy first. That's just it, because I can't write something that I don't like and that's even throughout my writing process. If I feel like a scene is not getting me excited and I'm just like "if this is boring for me to write, it's going to be boring for people to read" so I just like scrap it and try to find something else to fill it. But like I guess I care more about the

audience when I'm in the revision process, not so much in the writing process, because the revision is when I can think about, like, "okay, does this scene make sense in the context of the overall arching plot? You know, does this paragraph grab you the way that I'm trying to grab you?" I care more about it in, like after it's all said and done; but if I'm just like trying to get it on the page first I don't have space in my heart to care about what people think. That can wait till after it's written.

LEX

Yeah, same.

NORA

It's almost like the revision process for me is a translation process. You know like the first...the first version is just like "okay vomit this thing out, just get the story out there in a way that's not just like a swirling pool in your head", and then revision is like, "okay, now how do I tell this in a way that other people can interpret it the way that I interpret it, and how do I have my character speak that says and does all the things that I've initially thought of, but in a way that other people can actually understand?"

HELEN

I'll tell you something, a problem that I come across in my own writing is that I have a really vivid imagination, right, and that extends into everything. I have a very visual mind, I have extremely vivid dreams. I often lucid dream. And what that means for my writing is that I often, because everything is so clear to me in my mind's eye I forget to describe it for the reader. Does anyone else have that problem?

RHYS

Yeah, yeah.

IMOGEN

I know what you mean, yeah, especially with a character and you see them so vividly and they're so clear to you, and you just don't really ever feel you need to describe them because like, well I know exactly what they look and sound and speak and move like.

HELEN

Yeah! How can you not know what they look like!?

LEX

But sometimes those instincts are right, I think, because you don't always need a character description, and maybe the parts where you fill in the blanks is the parts where it's nice as a reader to also subconsciously fill in the blanks, right?

HELEN

Yes.

LEX

So it could also help you develop your style to just completely lean into that, right?

HELEN

Yes. I actually came across a writer who does that. The writer who did the...what was it...the Miniaturist. Umm, Jessie...something, I think. But she barely describes anyone at all.

(laughing)

And I like that!

LEX

I really struggle with when to go into detail with like just the way someone looks, right. Because it could totally like, it could totally break the momentum in the scene sometimes. I don't know. I find that really hard, like when to really tell you what someone looks like. It doesn't matter most of the time to me but maybe that's just a...

HELEN

I tend to put just little traces here and there.

LEX

Yeah.

HELEN

Like when it's relevant to what's happening in the scene. So it'll be like, I don't know, if they're getting ready to go out and they're looking at themselves in the mirror, I might say something about what they're wearing or something

that they're dissatisfied about with their appearance or something that they like about their appearance or something, because you know, we all do that when we're about to go out and you sort of stand in front in your little outfit and you're like, "hmm. I could do this. Or that."

LEX

Yeah so then it really makes sense in the scene and in the motivation to describe it.

HELEN

I can't stand huge paragraphs of just pure description of a thing if it doesn't actually have a point. Nora, I'm interested since you're largely a film writer and we're talking about visualisation, like how does that work for you?

NORA

Yeah, I mean, I've been recently toying with my own...and I emphasise "toying" with my own writing of a novel and I've found, ooh, the skillsets are completely different. Just the very act of screenwriting is in present tense and there's no particular narrator unless obviously you put a narrator in, and it's also, the rule of thumb is, you can't write anything that you can't see or hear. So any sort of internal monologue, any sort of thing that you want to kind of slide in there through the character's experience, you can only show. Basically. And you have to find really subtle ways of being able to do all the exposition without, you know, actually doing exposition. And so with a novel I've found, granted I'm not good at it, but it's...there's a lot more freedom to be able to kind of say what you want to say when you want to say it to a degree and so, yeah, with

the visualisation there's almost this minimalist quality to a screenplay where you're really just telling the bare minimum of what you need to know, the bare minimum of the movements, the bare minimum of the description. Like you rarely, unless it's plot driven, you rarely even describe what people are wearing, unless it's something that, you know, really...like you need to know this woman's in a yellow dress because you see the woman in the yellow dress later on or the yellow dress becomes a plot point, whatever it be, but otherwise, yeah, you don't even do those descriptions. It's a lot more about like how they stand and how they walk and what they're looking at, like to be able to describe a character and lots of, you know, words like surly and stuff like that. But...yeah what I like to do with screenplays is really kind of set that scene and set the mood and the tone so that your mind can be really creating the scenes as you go and I think a good screenplay is really something that just lets your imagination run wild and play the movie in your head because that's, you know, when you get bogged down by too many details you're trying to read at the pace of, basically, a minute per page right? So it's like you're trying to read at the pace you would be watching the movie, so if you have too many details or you have scenes that run on for longer than three minutes, three pages, it's...you're kind of dead in the water. So, yeah for me it's really about okay, what's the bare minimum I can tell you to make you imagine, you know, an entire Middle Earth?

HELEN

I think a lot about a screen direction from NBC Hannibal where one of the characters, Jack, walks into a room and it says something like he is offended at being here and then you look at the scene and you look at Jack's face and you're like, yeah he hates this.

(laughing)

Rhys, how do you feel about visualisation and imagination when it comes to translating things to the page?

RHYS

I struggle a lot with visualisation. Mostly because sometimes I don't know what things are called. Especially if it's in a very unique setting. So like, let's say this thing is like...if I have this scene that absolutely has to take place at like, you know, some...like a generic film location, I don't know any of the generic filming names. I don't know what a mic boom is. Obviously I know it now because I had to look it up at one point, but anything else, like whatever lights they use I don't know what it's called. So a lot of the times it's just like, I struggle a lot with it just because I don't know what these things are called, how am I supposed to describe it. And also I struggle with knowing what's important to show sometimes. So I don't need to like, describe how many freckles a character has on their face unless it's to show that the other character is so in love with them that the freckles really matter. Like it's one of those things. So, it's like, the only time I really go into detail with a person's appearance is if I'm trying to...well it helps to, you know, the reader to visualise but also it's to convey some sort of message to the reader.

HELEN

Yeah. Yeah it's that thing about like, the more detail you give about something, the more it indicates your protagonist is looking at it or cares about it. That's a really useful rule of thumb. I think we're going to take a break there while I

ponder everything that everyone's said. This is really interesting. We'll be back in a minute.

[BREAK]

HELEN

And welcome back. The next question I want to ask is one that probably the audience is interested in, which is about advice. I'd be interested to know, 'cause like, we're all at varying stages of our careers. I'd like to know something that you've learned along the way, or advice you would give to other writers that may be at different stages in their careers. Because I think...because for me, like, the most important piece of advice that I would give is not to worry so much. And I mean that in a sentimental, emotional way of like...it will be fine. If you finish, it like...good and finished is far better than perfect and unfinished. But also in a practical way which is if you worry too much about your writing you get trapped and you're probably going to get trapped in a cycle of editing and re-editing and re-editing, and, you know, a lot of books have a million different phases, but each of them have a point. But if you're doing it by yourself you often end up editing just for the sake of it because you're not sure of yourself and you've got to eventually just have the confidence to be like, this is done.

IMOGEN

Yeah it's never perfect, you just stop.

HELEN

Yeah. You have to find the way to, a way to stop.

NORA

On that, the best piece of advice I ever got is actually kind of like a trick in which to do what you were just saying Helen. Which is the best lesson I learned was don't go back and read what you wrote yesterday. You read maybe the last paragraph, maybe the last thing that you need to read in order to kind of get back into the rhythm, back into the flow, but the moment you start reading what you actually wrote, you start judging yourself, you start thinking about it. You're like "oh my god this is so bad" and because it is, it's the first draft usually. The goal is to just finish it so that you can then edit and make it actually good, but the best means for me at least to get through to the end of that is by not ever looking at what I wrote before because I get so in my head once that happens.

IMOGEN

That is very good advice. I'm gonna, like, remember that.

HELEN

Yeah

NORA

Locking that in there!

HELEN

I dated someone once who was just caught in a circle of rewriting his introductory chapter over and over and over again. Because obviously every time he opened the document it was the first thing he looked at, and he would be like “no this has to be perfect.”

IMOGEN

That’s like, sort of beautifully Chekhovian isn’t it? Like that kind of character – he spent ten years writing the opening chapter of his novel. I love that. That’s awesome.

LEX

You’ve got to fight through that first draft.

IMOGEN AND HELEN

Yeah.

RHYS

Otherwise you’re going to be just the author version of, like, Sisyphus. Just constantly trying to write the...

(laughter)

NORA

Truly.

HELEN

Do you have any advice Imogen?

IMOGEN

Okay so my advice is, right, this is...okay. Make yourself write a hundred ideas. Because you can feel like, oh I don't, you know, there's this temptation to think that ideas are like this kind of finite resource where it's inspiration that comes to you or like, you know, you've got this brilliant idea and it's not working out but you have to keep hammering on it because it's a good idea and like you won't ever have one as good and what if it's not good or what do you want to write about or all that kind of stuff. And ideas are an absolutely infinite resource and you can always have more of them, and the way to prove that to yourself is to make yourself write down a hundred ideas. And you don't have to do it all in a one. Like I do it over several days in blocks of ten. They don't have to be good, they don't have to be original, but there does have to be a hundred of them. And when you've done that, you can, you've a) proved to yourself that you can have as many ideas as you want, b) some of them are gonna be good! I guarantee you will not have written a hundred really bad ideas and they'll like...you'll be sort of free of them because you'll be like "okay they're written down, I don't need to worry about forgetting them and like I can come back to this document and read through it" and some of them will be like "oh that's a short story, or oh that's a novel or oh that's a poem. I should never show that to anyone!"

(laughing)

And I find it quite kind of freeing just to remind myself that, like, oh, you know, if you've had this...you've put your heart and soul into something and it hasn't worked out or it hasn't gone the way you wanted it to but you're like "that was my idea! That was my good idea!" It's like, no, you can have another. You will have a hundred, like, should prove yourself. So yeah, that's my advice.

HELEN

I'm going to take that advice because I write a short story every month for my Patreon and that will probably be a very practical thing for me to do. I'm sorry Lex I kept interrupting you before, what were you going to say?

LEX

Two things really helped me. The first was, so everybody talks about writing rituals right? And like, what desk a writer is sat at and at what time he or she started, et cetera et cetera. But then this Dutch writer had this really interesting talk about, he said it's really important to look at stuff like that as kind of a deal with your subconscious. He's like you expect your subconscious to, like, do this monumental task of solving all these plot issues, giving you characters and stuff like that, and he said there's no way to really control it but you can facilitate it by like making a deal with it, right. So that's a whole...or for me at least, a whole different way to look at a writing ritual and it's really helped me, especially now, to just say "okay this week, every day, between those and those hours, the only thing I'm going to do is solve this scene" right? And it really helps me to help your subconscious help you. Help you help yourself, kind of. And the second thing that really helps me when I get an idea for a new story is to really critically ask yourself why you're writing it, right? So I know some people who kind of fall out of love with their art because they're

like pursuing some kind of success and it doesn't really work out that way and then they don't pursue the art itself any more and that's really tragic I think. So it helps, like...like, there are some stories and I know this is just for me right, there's no...like practical outlet for it right now and that's fine. And to just kind of remind yourself of that, that's it's just for you and that's fine, it helps...do a different kind of project and keep the energy up. And it's really important to be ambitious too, right, so if you have an idea and you're like "this is going to be my worldwide break into..." like that's good too, but then you know that the time and effort spent into that project is very, very different. So that's two things that really help me get stuff done.

RHYS

For me I guess my advice would be...so there's this very, I can't remember who told me about this. I'm pretty sure it was someone from Rusty Quill. Like I remember being, like talking to someone and they mentioned this to me. I cannot remember for the life of me who it was, so if you're listening to this, I'm sorry if I've forgotten you. The one thing that I swear by because it is helpful is "and then there was a gunshot." So if you're finding that you're...let's say that you're trying to write a chapter or like a scene or whatever and things are very, very slow, and you're just kind of like "why is this? Like why does it feel like I'm trudging through mud?" You need to, like, do something. Like something completely random or out of the ordinary and then it will pick back up again. And what it's called is "and then there was a gunshot." Like, what happened? If, like, and it's a fantasy story, and then there was a gunshot, make it fit, I don't know. But like, obviously it doesn't have to be a gunshot. But you know, figure out what's like, the outrageous thing that can happen in your story, make it happen, see how the story picks up from there.

HELEN

I think I saw something like that written as like one of Pixar's rules, which was if you're ever stuck, think of what absolutely would not happen in this scene and then write it. And then even if that doesn't work, you probably have like a slightly scaled back version of something interesting that would happen. We have almost come to time, so I want to round us off with one last quickfire question, although now I'm looking at it, I'm like "oh actually this might take ages for people to think about." And that question is: if you could meet any author or playwright or poet...

LEX

Oh wow.

HELEN

...living or dead, who would it be?

NORA

I'll start since I know this off the top of my head.

HELEN

Oh go for it!

NORA

But, Guillermo del Toro, I would...

HELEN

Oh yes!

LEX

Oh wow, yeah.

NORA

...die and kill and die again to be able to meet...just what a gem of a person and an artist. So yes please.

HELEN

Pan's Labyrinth is one of my favourite films. I absolutely love it.

NORA

It's, I think it's kind of defined a lot of my own personal aesthetic. Just, I'm just going to steal from Pan's Labyrinth as much as I can, yeah.

HELEN

Same! I used to watch it, like, every Thursday. When I'd come home from school.

NORA

In school I did like a...like 60 page essay on like every shot, every decision made, and I still loved it at the end of that. And I was like okay, I guess this is really good.

HELEN

Rhys, what...who would you like to meet then?

RHYS

Oh, yeah, Octavia Butler.

HELEN

Good choice.

RHYS

She, yeah I finished reading...I'm...I remember reading Parable of the Sower last year at the start of the pandemic and that was a mistake because...

HELEN

Oh!

RHYS

Yeah. I, like, I read it and I was just like “what did you know Miss Butler? What did you know?!”

(laughing)

Like she got too many things spot on, and I'm just kind of like, ma'am? Excuse me. What? Like you can't just be out here like “oh I'm an oracle of like, you know, the future times” and then be dead at the same time. Like I need to talk to you now! So yeah like I wish she was still alive so I could talk to her because

god, that book. I'm slowly making my way through the sequel, Parable of the Talents, but I'm just kind of like absolutely floored by Parable of the Sower right now.

HELEN

How about you, Lex or Imogen?

IMOGEN

I was thinking about that, I've had a bit of time to think, and I guess, ah, here's one, favourite writer is George Orwell, but then like if I met him, what would I, I would shake him by the hand and say "you're the greatest writer of the twentieth century, Mr Orwell" and he would say "yes."

(laughing)

LEX

"Did I come back from the dead for this?"

(laughter)

IMOGEN

"Is there anything else you want from me?" So yeah I guess thinking about it, I would go Roald Dahl, because his adult short stories were a huge influence on me as a kid. I realised I read them when I was maybe a little too young, and then reread them like as an early 30 year old and thought "that's what I've been trying to write like for the last 20 years. Aah!" And I also think he would take me to some incredibly like...we'd go out to some bar in London and he'd

buy me a double whisky and tell me scandalous stories, and I think he'd be a good night out.

HELEN

And what about you Lex?

LEX

I read somewhere that JRR Tolkien had more story ideas than you could ever write in many lifetimes, he said, so please tell me all of the story ideas!

(laughing)

HELEN

Very good. And I have now been hoist by my own petard because I have no idea who I would wanna...who I would want to talk to. I think, I think I might like to talk to James Baldwin. I think it would probably be a very depressing conversation, because I'd be like "James look!" and he'd be like "yeah it's still shit innit" but he'd be a lot more, he'd be a lot more eloquent than me.

(laughing)

But I would love, I would love to have met him. Absolutely. And with that, I think that's the end of the show. I think we're calling it there. Thanks so much. I, like writing is such a huge part of my life and yet I actually very rarely talk about it with anybody so this has been great. I hope you've all had a good time.

IMOGEN

Yeah super good. Really useful.

LEX

For sure.

NORA

Yeah. Learned a lot actually.

HELEN

Yeah. I hope we all take each other's advice. And thank you audience for coming along with us. I hope that if you are also a writer we have done something helpful for you as well. I will see you in the next episode, I'm not sure if any of these people will because I still do not know in what order these episodes are going to come out in!

(laughing)

But until then, it's goodbye from me. Goodbye. And it's goodbye from all of them. Do you want to say goodbye everyone?

EVERYONE

Goodbye everyone! Bye!

[Show Theme - Outro]

Enthusigasm is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. It is directed by Helen Gould, produced by Lowri Ann Davies, with executive producers Alexander J Newall and April Sumner, and edited by Marisa Ewing, Tessa Vroom, Jeffrey Nils Gardner and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

Hosted and Directed by Helen Gould

Producer by Lowri Ann Davies

Executive Producers: Alexander J. Newall & April Sumner

Editing by Marisa Ewing & Jeffrey Nils Gardner

Music by Samuel D.F. Jones

Art by Anika Khan