How to make a table from memory: In conversation with Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun

Seth Robinson (00:28):

Thank you all for joining us. My name is Seth Robinson and I'm joined today by my co-host Tony Birch and Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun, who's just written the beautiful story that we've all heard, how to make a table from memory. Thank you both for joining us.

Tony Birch (01:09):

Thank you very much, Seth.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (01:10):

Thank you very much for having me.

Seth Robinson (01:11):

It's really great to be here with both of you. Frankey. We absolutely loved this story. To kick things off, I'm wondering, can you kind of tell us where did the idea for this come from?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (01:22):

There were several factors. I think like many writers, I'm interested in collecting characters and particularly peculiar and strange ones. And lately I've been exploring non-human characters from magpies to horses. And I think with this story, I wanted to experiment with the perspectives of objects. I think for me, it kind of arises out of this idea of, I guess the human separation from nature or the idea that humans are nature. I think it's a very profound idea for me, or something that I really resonate with is the idea that humans are very strongly nature and we do so well to separate ourselves from nature. But I think if humans are nature, then the things that we produce and make are also nature. So our houses and our objects. During COVID, I spent a lot of time with my desk and sort of wondered what that desk knew about, where it came from being constitutive of the bodies of trees and how much it knew about that life and what it might know about where it would go next. And that was the seed thought of where that story came from.

Seth Robinson (02:39):

And so there's a really nice connective element in there when we talk about human connection to nature. But in the story, we also have the human being the maker of this desk. Is that the case with your desk as well, or is that more of an IKEA kind of setup? It's been more of an IKEA

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (02:54):

Thing, although, yeah, like I do enjoy experimenting with making furniture a very kind of hobbyist kind of amateur style. And so that combined with thinking through what a more capable person and poor artist might be able to do with a table was really kind of influential in that. The

Tony Birch (03:14):

Philosophical underpinning of the story really struck me, I'm not sure if you're aware of it or not, but within Aboriginal society and certainly within Wurundjeri society, whose lands we are on today, there is no notion that you would separate a canoe from the tree that it came from, that you don't kill a tree to make a canoe. The canoe is part of the life of the tree. And you're talking about objects that are really central to aboriginal people. Of the greater cool nation, which we would call the greater Port Phillip area, are tar, which are water bowls. And those water bowls are fashioned again from timber. And the combination of water and timber as a, as a life force is central. The other thing I was interesting relative to this where you're talking about non-human and talking about the narrative position of the object. I was wondering because there are recent examples of this in short fiction in Australia and internationally. Are there literary influences on your work that were operating in a similar way? They're writing about stories from the perspective of objects.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (04:17):

I think in terms of yeah, the perspectives of objects. I was reading a lot of Chris Flynn and his short fiction collection Here be Leviathans. I was reading Ceridwen Dovey's, Only the Astronauts and Only the Animals. I was also reading, yeah, Laura Jean McKay's work, the animals in that country, Ursula K. Leguin's work, Octavia Butler's work. It intrigues me to inhabit that space of thinking through the perspectives of non-humans. And I think it stems from ideas about consciousness and these ideas that we have that humans are like the exclusive experiences of consciousness, and that our understanding of consciousness is limited by our human minds. And I think it's less convincing to me that humans are the only ones who are experiencing the universe. And that consciousness is more of an interconnected phenomenon, which allows me that freedom to explore these non-human perspectives.

Tony Birch (05:26):

I mean, that's a remarkable point which we're going to expand on. Just to, before we leave it. When you talk about influence, I understand that quite clearly from my own work when I'm going to work in a particular way, there'll be writers who I'm really drawn to story collections that I'm really drawn to. Do you worry about the connection between influence and mimicry? To the extent that sometimes I'm aware that while I'm

influenced by great writers who are working in a similar way, I don't want to simply repeat those ideas.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (05:56):

I don't think that I'm so concerned about mimicry. And I think that's a deep question about process and how I approach the stories. When I think about those works, I think of them as inhabiting that space of, you know, non-human perspective. But I don't think of their works as prescriptive in how they approach that exercise when I am doing the research into, you know, non-human perspectives and thinking about the scientific understandings of non-humans as well as some of the more spiritual perspectives there. For me, I'm more concerned about decentralising humans in narratives and finding a way to inhabit the perspectives that I rarely see on the page and, and the characters that I don't hear from or see from. And that for me is probably more appealing in, in how I approach that process.

Seth Robinson (07:01):

I think in terms of not mimicking as well, there's a bit of a distinction in this story versus some of the examples you mentioned before. Only the animals is one of my absolute favourite collections from Ceridwen Dovey. Anyone who hasn't read that, it features a wonderful story of a barnacle going to Pearl Harbour told in the style of Jack Kerouac, which is wonderful. But a lot of the examples you gave kind of you animals as the non-human in that story. And so they have that consciousness already. And we might almost, if we're anthropomorphizing, think of a kind of character that can be built from what we know about that animal personality. You've gone to the inanimate here and you've given consciousness to this table. How did you go about kind of thinking about and building your table's personality?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (07:48):

That's a difficult question. I think a lot of it is spending time with tables and with trees and being like in the presence of those objects and things. If I go deeper into the process of how I'm approaching it, I'm thinking about the relationship between humans and objects, and I'm thinking about how that relationship is deeply reciprocal. And I'm thinking about the various ways that objects affect us in ways that we don't typically think about or that we take for granted. And I think with this particular table, I was imagining a character who is selfless, yet somewhat aware of that selflessness and how it performs acts in ways that are taken for granted. And, and its kind of value in that context in thinking about the various effects in that way, the character kind of emerged in its own way.

Tony Birch (08:58):

I think that's remarkable. I got that sense. So that immediately when I began reading the story, it had a, an authenticity, a believability to it that I didn't question or doubt. And I think when you're talking about what might be the precondition or the research or the thinking that came before the story, it strikes me as really telling, because I remember I, I wrote a story about a stone, and that was based on going to a funeral of a friend's father. And after the funeral, they had a display of objects and they said you could pick

any object and take it home. So they had old tools, old paperback novels. And I was drawn to this stone. And when I picked it up and held it in my hand, my immediate thought was this stone is stronger than I am, and this stone is more intelligent than I am. And your telling of how this story came about is that you accepted before you'd written a story that this is not an inanimate object, this is a life.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (10:01):

Yeah. And it goes back to consciousness and the effect of that. And, and I think there is a, a certainly an intention to really resist the idea that humans determine what a life is. If I think of the table, for example, and how it, what it is constitutive of the bodies of trees and how trees can persist for hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of years. And how a simple human act or behaviour can interrupt that idea of what constitutes a life in resisting those ideas. My intention is certainly to decentralise the way that humans think about nature and, and how they kind of prescribe human sentiment to nature in a way that I think can be exploitative and dominating.

Seth Robinson (10:50):

So you're a Wattle Fellow here at the University of Melbourne.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (10:53):

That's correct.

Seth Robinson (10:54):

Which of course is a programme that's kind of about developing innovative ways to address climate change. And you've developed Nature-Human, which is kind of a project of storytelling. And I understand there's an exhibition as part of that, of which these non-human perspectives are kind of the key foundation in terms of addressing a challenge like climate change. What do you think it is that these stories of non-human perspectives offer us? Is there a unique way they kind of open that conversation up?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (11:25):

One of the key factors in terms of like how we've reached the point that we have reached today is this human idea that humans are separate from nature or that nature doesn't exist or is less than important than humans and human stories. And with this exhibition, I wanted to facilitate a space for people to think differently about how they interact with nature, to think differently about their relationships with nature and how nature affects them in diverse and vibrant ways. And for me, the exhibition was important because when I'm writing stories from non-human objects, I know that it's a limited space or like my perspective and my understanding and what I bring to those stories is, is just one of many different ways that we can think about nature. And obviously I don't have any intentions to be prescriptive about how that approach should be done.

(12:27):

And really what I'm trying to facilitate is the thinking through like how nature affects us. And I think that exhibition helps to enlighten ways to me about how nature affects us.

Also, I think it helps to create some safety in thinking from the perspectives of nature. I think there can be a, a, a little bit of a tendency to, I suppose, demonise anthropomorphism in a way. And, and to say that being anthropomorphic is inherently dominating or inherently controlling, but I think embodying and inhabiting non-human perspectives can really help to shine a light on, on us in different ways that I think is very valuable

Seth Robinson (13:14):

And it almost brings the humans back into that connection again, as you were kind of saying at the top of the episode.

Tony Birch (13:19):

I did a five year project on protection of country and, and climate justice. And at the outset, I, I thought climate change, I'll approach it in this way and I'll have this outcome and I'll get everyone marching on the streets.

Tony Birch (13:34):

I think what I learned by the end was something very simple when you're talking about climate change or protection of country, how you talk about it depends who you're talking to, that there are many ways of expressing a viewpoint and communicating particularly through the story, through short fiction. And, and this story in particular, who are you speaking to or who do you hope to speak to, to engage with your story and what do you want that conversation to be? What I'm interested in, I suppose, is what we might call reader reception, because what I felt in, when I finished the story, I felt this story was, was a tragedy.

Tony Birch (14:10):

It's a tragedy because the human here is suffers ignorance. The human here is not aware of the potential of what's just called a relationship at the out outside. It's the potential for a love story. Yeah, definitely. And that love story suffers a tragedy because of the, the maker.

Tony Birch (14:29):

The human just simply does not have the emotional maturity or ability to engage with the tree, the table as a sentient thing.

Seth Robinson (14:40):

And there's the human hubris there as well, which is almost the classic, you know, foundation of a tragedy that we need in that story.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (14:47):

I think in some ways I'm trying to speak to those people who, who neglect nature as being important. Or who think that being human is the epitome of life on this planet. But I also acknowledge that that's very challenging because in terms of getting them to read the story is also its own kind of difficulty in a way, or having them be open to the messaging within it is, is its own challenge. And so while I think, yeah, certainly I'm

hopeful that those who read it can find something insightful about their relationship with nature and that something like a table is also nature. That those ideas, I think I'm quietly hopeful that they can consume that in some way.

Seth Robinson (15:38):

Can we talk about the other relationship in this story, which is if it's a love story, it's actually kind of a love triangle because we have oh yes, human, we have table and we have Lily, which I actually thought was a wonderful addition as like a third character and a third entity in this story. And to me it almost kind of creates that cyclical nature again because you have the living plant and then the object made from the trees and those bodies beforehand. Did that always exist in the story or I almost, to me it read almost like maybe that was something that was added into a later draught where you kind of were like, oh, I need this to make it work, or how did Lily fit into things?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (16:18):

That's a good intuition there. At first the peace Lily wasn't necessarily a key character in the sense, and for the most part, there were other objects in the apartment that kind of helped to play a more significant role in, in the sort of environment or the ecology of the space. It's a great way of putting out the

Seth Robinson (16:39):

Ecology of the space, I love it.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (16:40):

Yeah, the ecology of the apartment. As the story developed, the human character desired something more living and more vibrant than the inert objects within their apartment. And once the piece Lily was introduced, that organically emerged as something that the table then kind of saw a bit of themselves in the piece, Lilly and really helped as a, I guess, a narrative device for rumination, for, for loss, for mourning, for a disconnect from a life that it once knew and yet still kind of repeating the same violence against it in the form of yeah, neglect within an apartment.

Tony Birch (17:28):

Can I suggest that the least living object in that love triangle was the human?

Seth Robinson (17:34):

Oh, yes. Certainly the least emotionally intuitive. Yeah.

Tony Birch (17:37):

Oh yeah. That the human has little understanding of emotional reality in the story and is, I think you used the word neglect because by the end of the story, it's the human who that seems most empty and, and lost and dissatisfied.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (17:55):

Yeah. I think that was very intentional, for lack of a better phrase, kind of flipping that on its head, right. I mean, the idea that so many of our stories suggest that only humans have capability or are capable of experiencing this deep emotion and to sort of decentralise that and focus more deeply on objects and on non-human characters, I think was very important for me to also elucidate the power of objects.

Tony Birch (18:26):

I just wanna read out a short piece from the story and then give you my response to it. It goes, the beginning is an end. Me as your new table, my legs, my face cut out pierced to fit together as a servant. My immediate response that I thought about was The Handmaid's Tale and the notion of servant and the notion of being captured, the notion of being reconstructed. It similarly made me think about the idea of, of beings and this, I'm talking about tables of being, being owned, being controlled, and being the servants of human to the destructiveness of society more widely. So I'm sure you weren't thinking of the Handmaid's Tale, but does that provocation make any sense to you?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (19:10):

Yeah, definitely. It certainly resonates and I think it goes back to thinking about how we've gotten ourselves into this whole climate change mess. And I think a lot of that is a product of humans thinking about nature in all of its various forms as servants for humans, and how everything we make is for human survival or human progression and how so much of what we do creates what Val Plumwood calls shadow places, these sites of neglect that kind of arise as a result of our exploitation of nature and how we hide all of those consequences which help to then further justify our behaviours and then helps to further kind of repeat that cycle. I think that idea of domination is so prevalent that it just kind of emerged in that piece whether I wanted to or not.

Seth Robinson (20:09):

I love that idea of justifying our behaviours. One of the things I wanted to ask you about was that this piece is really kind of a meditation on creative practise, but then there's also an element of kind of questioning activism in here too. My supervisor for my PhD, one of them was the novelist Briohny Doyle, and I had a conversation with her once where we were talking about how as writers we kind of try to justify sitting at our desks while the world burns around us, whereas realistically, if we really wanted to affect climate change or stop climate change, we would go out and be activists or we would do something that was a little bit more boots on the ground. Is there an element of that in this story? We're kind of reflecting on the value of creative practise as a method for addressing these things, or should we all just be out there chaining ourselves to trees and trying to stop the bulldozers? You know?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (20:57):

Yeah. Look, I think we could probably benefit from doing both, but the relationship between writing and activism is a very complicated one. But I think for me, certainly when I think about the artistic practise of writing these stories and writing from the perspectives of nature and the research that's required to sort of inhabit those perspectives, I know for me that it certainly changes the way that I interact with the

world and it changes the way that I think about waste, and it changes the way that I think about how I might potentially discard the objects in my apartment. And what I would do when I have to inevitably perhaps think about discarding the table of which I've had a relationship with for, you know, over a decade, there is great value in the process of inhabiting those non-human characters. And, and that is a kind of activism in a way which I've tried to inspire or facilitate as part of the Nature-Human Exhibition is to focus on the process itself as a kind of activism in the meditation and the research and thinking about how nature affects us. Allowing that to then question whether or not you are convinced that the way that you currently inhabit and interact with nature is something that you'd like to continue. And I think that has power.

Tony Birch (22:35):

One of the things that I've often been asked as a writer is as a writer, do you think your work changes people's minds? Do, do you think your work creates activism in people? And I always shy from that.

Tony Birch (22:51):

But as a reader, I can point to so many novels, articles that have actually had incredible impact on me, not just the way that I think, but to act thinking about that as both as a writer and as a reader. Do you see yourself influenced more to act through your writing or through your reading?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (23:10):

Probably more in the reading, admittedly, and I don't know if that's a, a symptom of, of shying away from, you know, the egotistical side of writing and, and certainly and in writing. So much of it for me is a product of reading. And so I think they're kind of quite closely entangled and intertwined. And so I certainly wouldn't be able to write if I didn't read. And I think what I read and research, whether it be fiction or nonfiction or you know, any, any kind of material that is, yeah, very closely entwined with how I write.

Tony Birch (23:49):

I thank you very much, Frankie, because um, I wish some of my creative writing students would understand that you can't write without reading it <laugh>. That that is a revelation there.

Seth Robinson (23:58):

Yeah. It can't just be doom scrolling.

Seth Robinson (24:02):

I think that you probably have really interesting thoughts on this since you're someone who's probably more used to writing for kind of different media and you've thought about your writing as part of an exhibition, but obviously we've all listened back to How to make a table from memory, as read by the wonderful Alfie Baker who is one of our actors who did this performance. I'm really curious, what was your kind of response to hearing that reading and that interpretation?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (24:25):

Look, immediately I was, I was in awe or I was struck. I think, you know, it was certainly very impressive and I think Alfie brought a very vibrant energy to it that I certainly hadn't really envisaged when I wrote it. I think when, certainly when I wrote it, it had a lot more of a sombre, mournful kind of tone. But yeah, if we go back to prescription and things like that, I think I enjoy the, the many different ways that people can interpret the work, and I think the way that Alfie performed it and, and interpreted it was quite magical. And I, and I was greatly entertained for sure.

Seth Robinson (25:08):

I think this is a really interesting thing in how we hear the voices of our characters in our heads, and then the way they're read or interpreted might be slightly different because you didn't give us kind of creative direction on how to produce the story or how that voice should be portrayed. That was kind of left up to the actors and us in the studio. There's an interesting thing there in that sense of somberness versus, I think Alfie was saying he read it almost as like a kind of that frustrated lover was kind of his interpretation of it as well, which perhaps lines a little bit more with what you read Tony.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (25:42):

Yeah, yeah. And I think as a writer, when the form shifts or transforms from the page to a performance, so much of that requires the creative input of that performer. You know, I think about theatre or I think about other forms. I don't have creative control of it after it goes into that form, and I don't feel like I should have any kind of creative control. And in that sense, I really loved his interpretation.

Seth Robinson (26:15):

Is that something you think about as a curator as well in the way that you kind of are taking other people's works and producing your broader project?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (26:24):

I mean, particularly in that exhibition though, I thought it was still important to have like some level of intention from those writers to be kind of, you know, represented on the page and represented through the exhibition. But like all forms of art, I think there is no way to control how that gets consumed and interpreted. And my role as the curator is really, uh, to attempt in some way to facilitate the ecology of those pieces.

Tony Birch (26:54):

Frankey, that's again, really telling, because obviously we know that if we're going to do anything productive about alleviating climate change or protecting country, it has to be a communal act. It has to be a shared act. I'm really interested then to consider how you see that relationship between the writer, which is often the solitary act, but your work both as writer, curator with others, the regard you give to working with other people to address these issues.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (27:23):

I think it stems from me, you know, knowing that I don't have the answers and I, I definitely maybe never will, and so much of how we navigate spaces is a communal act and involves community and affects community in different ways. And we can't ever achieve anything if we don't incorporate the diverse perspectives of community. And yeah, that was a huge reason why the work that I did with the Waddle Fellowship was a communal exhibition. I originally had thought about writing stories from objects myself, but as I kind of explored that process and thought about what I was trying to achieve, it just didn't make sense to do that from just one perspective.

Tony Birch (28:16):

Can I just ask you one more question about the writing process and structure? I'm the sort of writer who's always nagging other writers. How did, how did you <laugh>, how did you do it? <laugh>? Um, I'm struck by the fact that the story begins with a short poem, two stanza poem, and I'll take the liberty of reading the, the final stanza. I know what he wants to say. I am old, I'm useless. I'm taking up valuable space. Why did you begin with a poem?

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (28:44):

Hmm. I think I wanted to really set the tone for what is accessible to a table and the forms that are allowed for a table. I think I'm, I, yeah, I'm appealed by the various ways that we try to communicate and try to express ideas. And I think poetry was, for me, a beautiful way for the table to express itself.

Seth Robinson (29:14):

I think that that's probably a beautiful place for us to wrap up on the table expressing itself through poetry, through building community, and thinking about how our writing is shaping the world. Frankie ch Loon, thank you so much for joining us on Unfolded.

Frankey Chung-Kok-Lun (29:29):

Thank you very much for having me. It's been a pleasure. Thank you. Frankie

Seth Robinson:

Unfolded is produced with support from the Melbourne Public Humanities Initiative on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. The producers would like to pay their respects to the traditional owners, to their Elders past and present, and to acknowledge their storytelling history, which goes back tens of thousands of years.

This podcast is produced and hosted by me, Seth Robinson and Tony Birch. It's recorded by Gavin Nebauer at the Horwood Recording Studio here at the University of Melbourne. Editing and Sound Design is by Courtney McCarthy and Nick King at Nearly Media Original Artwork by Tim Baker.

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