



## *Farrow*: In conversation with Miriam Webster

Seth Robinson ([00:28](#)):

Welcome everyone to this episode of Unfolded. My name is Seth Robinson and I am joined today by my co-host Tony Birch and Miriam Webster, author of *Farrow*, which we've all just listened to and we loved Miriam. Tony, thank you both for joining us today.

Seth Robinson ([01:15](#)):

Let's get down to the dirty of *Farrow*. Let's pick these details apart because this is a fantastic story. It's a visceral story. It's a story with a lot of feelings and a lot of sensations. Miriam, can you tell us where was the seed of *Farrow* from?

Miriam Webster ([01:30](#)):

Thank you for that appraisal. I was reading a lot and I was under the influence of Claire-Louise Bennett's 'Pond', which I don't know if you've read, but it's a great short story collection. And in one of the stories her narrator goes and she puts her hands in the dirt and she, she says something about like going back to ground. It's where I lost my heart. And I was thinking about this idea of going to ground and like a connection with like the transports of the earth. And I came up with this phrase dirt longing. And then I researched it and I realised that it wasn't actually that original because like the fantasy X poets in Paris were talking about a longing, an attraction to like the seamy side of life. But then I thought like what would it be like if it wasn't just kind of like a metaphoric attraction to dirty things but to actual dirt?

([02:17](#)):

And what would it be like if I made my protagonist sort of like get down and dirty with the mud? It kind of started from there and then it morphed a lot. The first draught was a lot different. It, the protagonist was like a young woman and she was working in this community garden and it had flooded and anyway, I wrote it really quickly and I was like, there's something in here that that is really attractive to me. But the story just was kind of refusing to cohere. I had this bit at the end, which is like the bit where he goes into the compost. I wrote that crazy wild bit, but then I kind of was like, I don't know how I'm gonna work this.

Seth Robinson ([02:52](#)):

How do I get there?

Miriam Webster ([02:53](#)):

Yeah, how do I get there? Yeah. And then like, I don't know, sometime in the editing process it just like became about a boy and his grandma and I thought maybe the dirt longing was going to kind of speak to this like loneliness of a child who's kind of neglected and then he finds solace in a very visceral connection to the ground that he's literally like walking on and touching.

Tony Birch ([03:18](#)):

Can I ask, you mentioned Claire-Louise Bennett. I've seen a wonderful interview with her on, on Louisiana channel, which is my, my favourite go to place for interviews with writers. And she speaks a lot about her obsession, her fixation, her love of language. And one of the first things I wrote after reading your story was how clean, like, it's interesting, we're talking about dirt here, but there's a, it's a very clean style of writing. Just thinking about the process of writing when you're writing on the page, I love to see the words as they appear on the page. So equally, I think I'm interested in the concrete form of the word or language. At what point are you considering language itself or maybe a phrase or words and then thinking about the overall maybe narrative arc or the story of as a whole that you consciously engage with those as you, those two dynamics as you're writing.

Miriam Webster ([04:11](#)):

I try to resist in my writing this kind of detached, cool, disaffected millennial style that I think came from like Raymond Carver, but then like the millennials have really seized it and we've been like, yeah, we're so ironical and like everything's gotta be like, oh, I went to the pub, I saw my friend, we went home. You know, I want language to be like sparkly. And I feel like when I was writing this story, the boy is attuned to the transports of the earth, but I feel like I'm attuned to the movement and the transports of language. And it's funny you mention how the words look on the page because I feel like I have that too. And how they're kind of like alive and moving. Part of that story is motivated by attention between that feeling of language being quite like sensational and erratic and moving and you've, and you want to kind of like pin it down but you wanna allow it to be free. And then being able to write it in a kind of cool, clean way because

Tony Birch ([05:04](#)):

That's the interest. 'cause after I heard her and you and reading Pond and um, Richard Ford often talks about, he says, I'm only interested in language, is that thinking of those two writers as just examples, I think, well then how did they get this great story?

Tony Birch ([05:18](#)):

It was, I suppose, a comment on what I thought was the, the wonderful style of the writing. So it's a very clean story to read as well. Again, I know we should be talking about dirt, but it's the sort of story, it's doing the reading for me. I'm just, it's almost like I'm listening to the story, if that makes sense.

Seth Robinson ([05:39](#)):

Just to pick that thread up a little bit, you guys have talked about a couple of senses there. So you used the word sparkly, which I loved in talking about language and this kind of visual element of the words coming off the page is, is stunning. But the sense that comes across

the most in this story almost I think is smell. You know, the recurring word in motif is this idea of something being fecund, and all of that, you know, denotes with the kind of organic matter and being immersed in that. What was your approach in kind of thinking about how you write in this other synesthesia kind of way using this other sense?

Miriam Webster ([06:15](#)):

That is a great question, Seth. You know, we often hear, we talk about like the sound of language and you can kind of like write for sound instead of sense. And I did have this thought when I was writing this, I was like, what if we're writing for smell? I don't know if this is just one of my things. I grew up in Northeast Victoria in a place called the King Valley and it's mountainous and so the smell of the air is very, it's this beautiful alpine smell. So I think I'm quite attached to smell and the smell of place and the smell of landscape and like the smell of organic matter, like there's always rotting leaves and so yeah, I'm glad that came through. And yeah, that scene with the compost when he goes and the, and the smell kind of hits him in the face because smells can be like nauseating but also the nauseating smells are like simultaneously very compelling. Like you smell something gross and you're like ooh, I have to smell it again just to check that it was gross <laugh>

Seth Robinson ([07:07](#)):

A bit like touching the hot thing again <laugh>.

Miriam Webster ([07:09](#)):

Yeah, maybe that speaks to like this other kind of tension that I was working with in the story, which is this constant pull between like desire and obligation or like what you wanna do and what you should do or what is compelling and what is proper. And so maybe smell is a good one for that because in the end he's sort of forced to follow his nose.

Seth Robinson ([07:32](#)):

And I'm not a neurologist but I feel like I've heard that smell is the sense that we most directly associate with memory. Right. So it's really evocative.

Miriam Webster ([07:39](#)):

Yes. And this is quite a nostalgic story too. Previous drafts were like, there was a lot more about the childhood on the farm in there and I sort of had to tone that down 'cause I was like oh this is getting a bit too nostalgic. Smell is like a real vehicle for memory and desire. Yeah.

Tony Birch ([07:55](#)):

One of the things there that interested me a lot in this story is in the contrast between the garden and farm because when she goes, she gets married, she goes to live on a farm and she's told by her husband who's a farming person who bothers much with flowers, you know that that's sort of an indulgence. Then she learns to treat the land as criminal later in life. She talks about nature has no kindness for the weak. So there's almost this alienation of agricultural land and yet the gardener, every aspect of his engagement with soil with the earth, it's so rich, it's so fertile. He wants to be part of it, he wants it to be part of him. And I was really struck by that because when I'm thinking of the word country, Aboriginal Country

and reading that first comment on the land is sort of being alienated, which I really understand in the way of sort of agriculture, sorry, even though the garden seems ornamental as a concept, what I really loved about the story is the garden and his attraction to soil. There was something more akin to a notion of aboriginal country in that seeming ornamentation than there was in farming practise. It really struck me as a wonderful way of considering different ways of engaging with place.

Miriam Webster ([09:17](#)):

Yeah, I was definitely working with some of those mythologies. Yeah, like the grandma, she's kind of a new-ish settler and she comes and she's sort of a bit lost. There could have been an opportunity there to really connect with the new place and learn about it and she sort of goes to do that. But then she's gotten in with this farming family and yet they tell her to treat the land you've gotta cut down the trees and chop off the weeds and you've gotta reap the soil. But it's interesting you say that about the garden Tony, because I think too that even though the grandmother does get quite alienated the hydrangeas of this one like magic that she still allows herself or this one indulgence and this one way of like connecting deeply with like the magic of the earth, how the flowers change colours because of the metal components in the soil. I did want to kind of play with this idea that a garden could be like a really ornamental like cottage garden or it could be this, this crazy wild space. Yet it's like the one place you can go to be kind of connected to the land.

Tony Birch ([10:17](#)):

Well certainly not being critical of it because there's, for me there's great sympathy because there is also the, the issue here of the migrant. So early in the story there's a comment she suffered from want of green and there's that little aside, she would've made a fine doctor. So one of the things that I was considering, and I know this a lot particularly with younger women or girls growing into women who have come and migrated to places like Australia about what they've had to leave behind and there is a yearning and sometimes a nostalgia for what's left behind and using nostalgia in a very positive sense but also a sense of loss. And when you juxtapose that with the magic of the flowers is that it's almost like that's the one remnant of magic that she's able to hold onto. There's a lot of grit around her in a very unhealthy way. So I had a great sense of this. This story is also about what this woman has lost through the process of migration.

Miriam Webster ([11:11](#)):

Yeah, definitely. And maybe too like that process of migration killing all her illusions and therefore killing her sense of imagination. And she gets to this point where she can't imagine anything and so she just wears this one blue tracksuit every day and she and she swears all the time and she's like cursing everything out and the child comes into her life and he represents this imagination and this freedom but she's fearful of it. And so then his imagination I think grows into a kind of perversion maybe because because she's not encouraging of that romance and freedom and connectiveness, she's not open to it and so it has to come out in a strange perverted way.

Seth Robinson ([11:50](#)):

It's really interesting for me to hear when we spoke about kind of the genesis of this story and where it came from, you mentioned that it began with that scene in the compost heap and that was kind of the the catalyst, I kind of read this story almost as like two stories, you know that between the story of the grandmother and the story of the grandson, the gardener and that little bit of tension that exists within that relationship. And so that to me was the driving thing for the story. And so it's interesting to me to hear that that actually came a little bit later. I guess I'm just curious what the story was really like and what it was about before you had that relationship in there.

Miriam Webster ([12:26](#)):

Yeah, that's funny isn't it? I didn't know if this sounds crazy but like maybe it was already there. Some ways I think that the story finds you, I often start writing a story and I dunno what it's about. I just know, you know, something has compelled me and in this case it was that scene with the compost and so I was kind of writing around it and writing around it and then I was thinking, okay, how can I work this into something more substantial? And so I wrote this scene of like a, of a farmhouse and then suddenly that's when the grandma and the grandson and this whole kind of like legacy came into it. I don't think that answers the question <laugh>. It was

Seth Robinson ([13:03](#)):

Still a really interesting point.

Tony Birch ([13:05](#)):

I just wondered though, relative to that point, and Seth and I were talking about this, I'm really interested as a writer in what I might call another writer's faith in what they're doing or stubbornness or belief because I don't know if you've been through this, when you, you're asked to talk to a would be novel to your publisher, the more you talk about it, the more ridiculous it sounds and then then you start mumbling and you just think, oh this is, oh shit, I don't even wanna mention it. <laugh>, what I'm interested in here is if you pitch this story to me, particularly his action with soil, I, I don't know about that, that's stupid of course because you know it's in the quality of the writing, the storytelling. At what point did you think, okay I believe this story can work or this aspect of the story? How much faith did you have in your ability to pull this off? Basically,

Miriam Webster ([13:56](#)):

I don't know why, but this was one story where I had pure certainty. I was like, I'm gonna do this maybe because I was so excited about kind of the opportunity for like the language to unfold and and the like sensory qualities to unfold. But I started writing it a few years ago and I was teaching a first year subject at the time and I was kind of like trying to be like a cool teacher that would like put myself out there. And so when I was teaching the kids how to workshop, I took this story in like an excerpt of it and I was like, we'll do a practise workshop on my story. You can read it and like provide feedback and then you know, we'll go from there and that's how you learn how to do it anyway. They ripped it apart <laugh> like what is this? It's so strange and like it doesn't make any sense. Why is he doing that? I had to then go back and kind of like really figure out why the child was doing this and it became like a belonging thing and it became like the idea that he lacked love but the earth

and place and the landscape can be as kind of loving and nourishing and nurturing as as a human love maybe if you know how to be with it.

Tony Birch ([15:07](#)):

Just by the way, did you fail those students <laugh>?

Seth Robinson ([15:11](#)):

I was gonna ask if they had all written the kind of really dry, angry millennial stories you were talking about before. Like we all went to the pub and laughed at our teacher's weird story <laugh>.

Tony Birch ([15:21](#)):

I did think of um, Nan Shepherd who was a wonderful Scottish writer in the first half of the 20th century and she was a hiker and climb mountain outside near where she lived and there's a wonderful passage in that where she, you know, is in a perilous situation so she's halfway up a mountain in very cold weather in Scotland but she decides she not only wants to lay down with the earth, she wants to be the earth and she literally borrows into the ground and she can't get close enough and you can think, well you could bury yourself alive, she doesn't wanna go quite that far but how much that fascination with the earth, it's tactility the sense, et cetera. And I was very much reminded of that. So in that sense for me there's no lack of plausibility at all in what, in what he's doing. I thought that was one of the real qualities of the story that when you read it, unlike your first year students, that's why they're first year students <laugh> is that I didn't think, yeah, what's going on here? It seemed like a very natural process for me. So I think that was, that's a great quality of the story

Seth Robinson ([16:21](#)):

And I think there's something in the short story format that kind of lends itself to a little touch of the magical or the surreal as well. You actually have just released your first collection of short stories, the Slip, it's the first book that's actually been published by ANCO Press. So you've kind of done this cool first time publisher, first time press, first time author thing, so you're really pushing the boundaries there, which is very nice. Is this story representative of the rest of the work in your collection?

Miriam Webster ([16:50](#)):

Yeah, I reckon. I mean I wrote the collection in a very kind of PC way but I had amassed all these stories and then I was like how do I make this into a cohesive kind of unit? And I think how I did that is this tension between desire and obligation but also there's a lot of place through the collection. When we did the first round of edits my editor was like, did you realise that there's four stories in a row that take place on a boat? But I was like no, so you gotta spread them out. Yeah she's like, everything happens at the beach or like in the bush or on a boat. And I was

Seth Robinson ([17:26](#)):

Like, well you just like that was my maritime phase.

Miriam Webster ([17:28](#)):

Yeah <laugh> I'm still in it. I'm still in it. Yeah, so I think this is representative of the collection as a whole. It's all about people kind of like falling apart but then getting back to something that is really real, whatever that means to them. And often that does involve going back to ground or

Tony Birch ([17:45](#)):

I do think often, I mean in the collections I've done, there are two things. One is that you may not be conscious of the cohesion but it's there. The second possibility is Seth and I were talking about titles. You just become the title one of my story collection is called Common People. There's no story called common people and I didn't know they were common people until I wrote the title, but people Oh yeah, that's about common people. So everyone goes with it. I think the cohesion is usually there unless you've written like years apart. Although the other thing I'd say, I suppose, I dunno if it's a question or not, is that I, I think for a lot of writers, even if you venture into different territory with the types of stories for most writers there is a commonality within your emotional self that you're trying to explore anyway. And I think that you've just alluded to that a lot of my stories are about the failure or the potential of redemption When you think about what you're trying to do with your writing, it sounds like a both a simple and a unanswerable question, but what do you wanna do with your writing

Miriam Webster ([18:46](#)):

To answer this question in a roundabout way? I mean maybe it's on theme because this story is like my Irish story, my heritage is Irish and whenever I read Irish literature I feel very like at home in the language and the themes and like the perverse humour and this like Catholic guilt and like this kind of nostalgia for a place that you can no longer inhabit. Anyway, I read this interview many years ago with Edna O'Brien who is fantastic and she said something about like, I knew I was a writer from the beginning because I had this intensity of feeling that normal life could not accommodate. I think that's what my thing is. All of my characters have this like intensity of feeling that is just spilling out of them often in like very inappropriate ways and it's just gushing and rushing around and people are scared of it and they're scared of it. And so I think it's about kind of like, I don't wanna say struggle because I don't think it's necessarily always like a bad thing. It's kind of like wrestling with that and finding ways to live with it and to live it out.

Seth Robinson ([19:46](#)):

I love hearing that. I think that's fantastic <laugh>. And would you suggest that writing is your way of living that out almost?

Miriam Webster ([19:53](#)):

Yeah, definitely. You know how we're not supposed to say that like writing is therapy but it is like since I, I didn't start writing till I was like 27 and I tried to be many other things before that and I tried to do like politics and I tried to do a master's in English lit anyway, I started writing and I was just suddenly at peace in this really profound way.

Tony Birch ([20:14](#)):

Isn't that the um, a great example of the bullshit we come out with as creative writing teachers? I used to say the same thing

Seth Robinson ([20:20](#)):

Or creative writing podcasters

Tony Birch ([20:22](#)):

<laugh>, yes. I used to say writing is not cathartic, it's not therapeutic. And then I published my first book, Shadow Boxing, and I thought fuck that was therapeutic <laugh>.

Miriam Webster ([20:30](#)):

Yeah, exactly. Or even if it's just therapeutic in the sense of it being a practice, like a routine that you go to every day. You know, maybe like if you were religious you would do your prayers in the morning and the night we're writing it doesn't matter if you only do 10 minutes a day, it still feels like grounding because it's this ritual.

Seth Robinson ([20:50](#)):

So you are an everyday writer.

Miriam Webster ([20:51](#)):

Yeah, I mean I'm a huge procrastinator. I do everything at the last minute. So like I'll be writing but it won't be the thing I'm supposed to be writing <laugh>. It's something else entirely.

Seth Robinson ([21:03](#)):

And so you actually have crossed genres and formats a little bit as well. You're currently the uh, recipient of the Peter Steele Poetry award here at the University of Melbourne, which means you're about to kind of make a haiku that's gonna go on billboards across the city. But I think that that's actually quite a new thing for you working as a poet. Is that right?

Miriam Webster ([21:22](#)):

That is right. My confession is that I am a dilettante in poetry and winning that award was a big, big surprise. I'm very grateful. But it's exciting, it's a new format for me and I do like the idea of being like an all rounder where writing is concerned and you can jump from one thing to the other however it takes you. The next book I'm writing is a novel and I'm having this funny moment where I'm so used to writing short stories where it's all gestural and the story kind of unfolds in the gaps and what you don't say. And then when writing a novel, which I've never written before, I'm having to teach myself how to like describe things and transition between scenes and you know, you have to say what people are wearing and what they're eating and how they're getting from A to B, whereas in a short story you just jump around in a much different way. But yeah, I do like to span the genre <laugh>.

Tony Birch ([22:16](#)):

I mean just to um, talk briefly about Peter Steele, because Peter taught me and I became a friend of his and I think you would love the idea that you may not think about yourself as a

proper poet because I was taught by Peter and I had to finish a poem and I run into him in like on court and he said, how are you going? I said, Peter, I can't finish this poem. He said, just wing it <laugh>.

Miriam Webster ([22:39](#)):

Oh I love that. That's a great anecdote. That makes me feel a lot better about receiving the award. <laugh>,

Seth Robinson ([22:45](#)):

There's a nice observation there as well in thinking about the details that go into novels that don't go into short stories. I feel like often we fall back on the metaphor of a short story is a sprint and a novels a marathon. And those two things are equally different in terms of running style I guess. But those details that go into a novel like going to get coffee or getting from A to B are things that we don't really think about. And I wonder if in verse when you read a short story that's written like a novel, it's kind of weird. I wonder what it would be like to read a novel that's written like a short story where they just omit all of that stuff.

Miriam Webster ([23:21](#)):

Actually there's this great book by, oh now I can't remember his name, but it's called Jacket Weather and he's this Italian guy in New York and it's written just in like little poetic fragments and it's about kind of like the, like he eets this woman that he used to go out with years ago and then they get together in middle age and it's just, it's so beautiful because it, it's written in these little short story fragments and there's like so many ellipses. So yeah it's definitely, it's definitely been done somewhere <laugh>,

Seth Robinson ([23:50](#)):

I think one of the best tips I ever got on writing was that characters don't speak the way we speak. And so in writing dialogue, you know, they're much punchier, they get to the point a lot faster. They say things that we would never say. And so I think thinking about these differences between written work and real life actually is kind of where the joy is where you can get lost in it a little bit.

Tony Birch ([24:10](#)):

Well I've got some good advice once that I heard too and that was that. Just be a camera point it and show us the action. I don't mind that either. I mean I don't always do it. We were saying in another episode that I suppose I could pose it as a question that we're really idiosyncratic as writers. So you're talking about writing every day even for 10 minutes. Paige Clark was talking about not writing for months at a time. And both of those approaches working. I love listening to writers talk about their work, hence the Louisiana Channel. And what I suppose I enjoy is that I learn from all of them. Sometimes I'll hear something and go, okay, that's really, I, I want to explore that and other aspects that, yeah that might work but not for me. How influenced are you by the work of other writers over as a reader or over through other forms of engagement with the writer themselves?

Miriam Webster ([25:02](#)):

Incredibly, I would say I love listening to writers talk about their writing Same as you. I'm such a reader and such a mimic. I grew up in a musical household. My family are musicians and I failed to live up to my promise as a musician 'cause I always put down my instruments and I didn't practise enough but maybe I have a good ear. And so I find myself mimicking a lot and maybe accidentally ripping off a lot. I realised the other day I was like sending someone this story to read and then as I sent the story to them I was like, oh my God, I just realised I ripped an entire two lines out of that story and put it in mind. Had to change it. But yes, very influenced by what I read. I think that's probably the start of my process. Reading something, wanting to copy it, wanting to like somehow replicate its mood or its use of language and then figuring out my own way to do that.

Tony Birch ([25:56](#)):

Today I gave Seth a copy of Lucia Berlin's A Manual for Cleaning Women, which is my favourite story collection. I often reread that if I'm writing a female character because female voice in that collection is this, it's, they're so sassy cha in your face women and I want to get that. And then of course, but then how do you do it in your own style? And I might ask you if there's a seminal collection or a particular writer because I also love Alistair McLeod's collected stories, Ireland. Right. The problem with Ireland is that I remember, I published a story called Liam and it was a good story but then when I finished it, there's no plagiarism. But I just looked at him and said, this is the poorest poor man's Alistair McLeod on the planet <laugh>. So everything about McLeod except, oh no, there was a dog. <laugh> had found its way into that story. So I'm in here. Are there particular writers or story collections that you regard as saw your Bible?

Miriam Webster ([26:54](#)):

Yes, there are. Well this collection was definitely highly influenced by Claire Kegan, all of her writing, but especially walk the blue fields. Mm-hmm <affirmative> I just, I think that's, it's beautiful and maybe that speaks to what you said before Tony, about like the cleanness of the language that actually holds it's clean but it's really capacious. I think that's why I'm trying to, that's the point I'm trying to get to. Yeah, so there was that and then also one of Anne Enright collections taking pictures. Yeah, it's kind of dark but amazing, really beautiful. There's this story and it called Honey and I read it just after my dad had died and it's about a woman whose mom has died and she sort of has this sudden desire to like fuck life. Like she's so greedy for living and she, and she has this kind of failed attempt at an affair with the man and at the end she realises that's not the man that she wanted. It's this affirmation of, of living.

Seth Robinson ([27:46](#)):

We've talked about influence a little bit there and mimicry, which I think is a great word. One of the ideas I love is when writers talk about works being kind of in conversation with one of their influences and you know, not just, oh I was mimicking it or I was kind of trying to do something in the same style but I wanted to respond to it directly. Was there anything like that that kind of influenced your writing here?

Miriam Webster ([28:07](#)):

Yes, actually it's in the book and it's funny you mentioned Paige Clark because when I was in the first year of my master's here, it was locked lockdown and we were all on Zoom and Paige taught one of my subjects and I remember her saying this like amazing sentence, it was like, don't worry about originality. Originality is a redundant category because all contemporary writing already suffers from the affliction of polyvocal intertextuality <laugh>. And I can't believe I remembered it well enough to quote it just then that was like the green light for becoming a writer for me. 'cause it was like, oh you don't have to have this like horrible burden of making something new. What you have to do is put your work in conversation with the other work that you love. And so I think I really like this idea and I, and I hope that my work will always be in conversation with the writers that I love and admire and that there will be these resonances between what I've written and what I'm reading.

Tony Birch ([29:04](#)):

That's interesting 'cause one of the things I'd written down is there's a, your description of soil and descent, but you've written one line begins the tea stain sludge, glacially moving and um, I was thinking, I've used tea stain water about 10 times in poems and stories. I write about the river a lot and then I was trying to think where I stole it or where I found it. And the other week I reread for the first time 20 years Richard Flanagan's, death of a River Guide and there it is, <inaudible> Water. So

Miriam Webster ([29:34](#)):

Oh

Tony Birch ([29:34](#)):

Really? Um, yeah and he probably got it, don't worry, he got it from someone.

Seth Robinson ([29:38](#)):

Well it's almost a little bit like the Wine Dark Sea from the Odyssey, right?

Tony Birch ([29:42](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So this is again, I think 'cause your, your use of language, your descriptive language is so genuinely poetic. But I suppose one of the frustrations of a writer is trying to think about originality. And I said, when I talk great VI say, okay, gimme one sentence of how a wave rolls over the sand. It's very hard to do something new with that because you

Seth Robinson ([30:02](#)):

Horses

Tony Birch ([30:03](#)):

Yeah, <laugh> <laugh> it's very hard to do anything with that. One of the things I suppose your descriptive language is so strong. Do you feel that also as a writer there sometimes there's a way you want to describe but you fail because either the language or the words you're using don't match with what you are seeing or visualising or that when you write it go, no, everyone said the heavy cloud and or the, you know, the full moon sat low over the water <laugh>.

Miriam Webster ([30:31](#)):

Yes. I think that's what excites me about language and I'm definitely not the first person to say it, but the fact that language will never be what we want it to be. It can only fail. But I think in that failure is the spark. And I was talking about language being sparkly before and that's where it comes from. It's this like tension between wanting to say something and not being able to say it and searching for the right word. And I think English is, we have so many words, you know, like you looking at thesaurus and there's like a billion synonyms for one word. And so we have this amazing breadth of language to play with. I like that failure and I like running into cliché. And I also think that on that note, like sometimes it's necessary. I was reading Kate Brigg's novel slash thesis, the long form recently, and there's this bit in it where she's talking about the novels of sentiment in the 18th century and how the critics were like after a while, you know, oh these are so melodramatic and stupid and they're so boring because they're just full of clichés.

([31:32](#)):

But she was like, but they were immensely popular. Maybe because people need clichés and sometimes saying something in the way that it's always been said is actually a real point of grounding for a reader and it can really move the story along. And so maybe it's about this balance between comfort and originality.

Tony Birch ([31:51](#)):

Yeah, and I think though also some literary critics that shy away from a direct expression of emotion. Mm-hmm You used it first. I used it as well nostalgia. And I've always said nostalgia is a dirty word in universities or it was when I was a student and my friend Arnold Zabel, who's a great writer and when he thinks and write abouts nostalgia, he does it in a very European non Anglo sense. And it's deeply profound to feel nostalgia. It's not shallow, it's not a cliché, you know, and again, with this story, a woman, the sense of loss of where she comes from, that nostalgia for what she says, you know, the loss of green that is deeply emotional and I think we shouldn't shy away from that.

Miriam Webster ([32:33](#)):

Yeah, that's really interesting you say that because that was one of the struggles I had when writing this story and I kept revising it. It because the bits with the grammar, I was scared that they were gonna be too nostalgic and I was like, no one wants this or it's gonna seem kind of like, it's not gonna seem intellectual enough or like original enough yet. But then I did get to a point where I was like, no, nostalgia is a deeply moving and we all feel it and we should stop saying that it's uncool.

Seth Robinson ([32:58](#)):

Our actress who did the read for this piece was named Molly Hallahan and she was wonderful and she actually mentioned that her father was Irish as well, so she was very excited to kind of wheel out her Irish accent and she spoke a little bit about how she saw the Ireland in the story as well. So I think that she probably felt that nostalgia as well. I'm really curious, what was your kind of feeling or emotional response to hearing the way she interpreted the work?

Miriam Webster ([33:22](#)):

Well, she had a fantastic Irish accent, that's for sure. <laugh>. But she read it so beautifully and calmly and I realised it's so strange hearing someone else reading your work. Actually, it's quite a weird experience because obviously I am the only one who's heard it in my head and I have a particular cadence and when you're reading your own writing, you're kind of rushing. And I think I kind of tend to read to myself in a way that's like da da da da da. And it's kind of like running on. Whereas she was very kind of like every sentence was quite calmly placed. It sort of gave a little bit of credit to the writing that maybe I don't give my own writing where the emphasis was on the pauses and on the way language unfolds slowly over the course of a sentence. So yeah, it was, it was really beautiful to listen to. Actually we

Tony Birch ([34:09](#)):

Had this a similar conversation with Paige and it is interesting because one of the things we were saying is that where I've had to read my work aloud at a festival or at a, you know, radio programme, when I've read an external aloud, I've been so flat and monotone, I'd be too scared to put any verve into the dialogue. We forget that it's a performance, a piece of writing is a performance and maybe we need to employ more actors to understand that our work actually has qualities that we didn't know were there. Because listening to your work read by someone who understands as performance really gives great life to the work, doesn't it?

Miriam Webster ([34:47](#)):

Yeah, totally. Recently I was going to do a reading and I was like practising it to my sister and, and she was like, oh, this is so boring, why are you reading it like that? And I was like, what? She was like, be your sister. Yeah. And she was like, do it. Put a bit of verve into it. And then I'd just been to see Jeanette Winterson, who is a fantastic reader. She's like Shakespearean and she's got her man coy and accent and she really, she walks all over the stage and she reads like with emphasis and she does the voices for the characters. And so we were watching Jeanette Winterson videos on YouTube and I was like, I'm gonna read it like that, <laugh> <laugh>. And did you? I think I did because after it, the editor of the magazine came up and she was like, do you have a background in theatre <laugh>? I was like, nailed it.

Seth Robinson ([35:32](#)):

Working with these actors has made me realise as well, the way they interpret things I think is different to what I imagined as a writer coming to it and thinking about audio books. Hmm. I love audio books. I listen to a lot of audio books. I think half of my reading is probably audio books, but even those performances, they'll do a little bit of voice, but they don't often lean fully into, you know, the Irish accent or in Paige's story there's a little child and the actress really lent into the little child voice. And so I think that this is kind of a nice space as well that's probably a little bit different to even the way we think about, it's more like a radio play or something almost, I suppose. Hmm.

Miriam Webster ([36:09](#)):

Yeah. Like it's a nice reminder almost what you were saying just then, Tony, like the actors can remind us that it's not gimmicky to be passionate and to be entertaining. It's actually just simply entertaining and it can be quite moving. And I think sometimes as writers we're

so afraid of like becoming a gimmick or a cliché that we hold ourselves back from being, it's an irony. 'cause our job is to be expressive, but then I sometimes think that we deliberately don't express things because we're scared. <laugh>

Tony Birch ([36:39](#)):

I'm just going back. You did mention Raymond Carver. I'm, I was just thinking, I've never listened to an audio book of Carver because it might be hard to give life to a Carver story. Do you think you'll be doing more performance and vocal acting and such now?

Miriam Webster ([37:03](#)):

<laugh>? Yeah, that's what I'm going to get into. When I was in high school, I thought that I could be an actor and I was like into drama and then I remember doing my year 11 drama performance and I was like,

Miriam Webster ([37:13](#)):

Can't act, can't act, can't have to go behind the scenes.

Tony Birch ([37:17](#)):

Can I ask one more question on that because it's, it's interesting because you, you say you come, well you say, you say you come from a family of musicians. You come from a family of musicians and, and you failed at that or you decided to quit and you talked about being an actor and that didn't work or you decided to quit. Is it the case though? Sometimes I think that, and I've often, I've said this sometimes to potential writing students who don't write well, but I've tried to even say to those students, you have a desire to make, to be creative. It takes a long time sometimes to find your place. So, or at what point did you say, no, I wanna be a writer? Did that come later or while you were twiddling with a violin or whatever it was.

Miriam Webster ([38:01](#)):

Well when I was really young, you know, when you say your first thing that you're gonna grow up and be an astronaut or whatever, mine was a writer and I used to make these little books and I would write all these stories and I won all these competitions as a child. And then when I got to high school, somehow I got talked out of it, I think because, you know, I was good at school and people were like, oh, well you should go and do law or politics, which I ended up doing because I just thought, oh, you can't do writing. And it sort of took like a period of extreme crisis for me to get back to basics and be like, wait a second, this is something that I can do and why, like why shouldn't I do it? Yeah. So I think I've always been a writer, but it took me a while to convince myself of this fact.

Tony Birch ([38:43](#)):

You might add a bad poetry teacher in high school.

Seth Robinson ([38:47](#)):

Miriam Webster, thank you so much for joining us on this episode of Unfolded

Miriam Webster ([38:56](#)):

<laugh>. Thank you. It's been so fun.

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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