

Autumn Reads podcast Durham Book Festival 2020

Introduction *You're listening to a podcast by New Writing North.*

Rebecca Wilkie Welcome to the Durham Book Festival 2020 podcast. For the first time ever, this year the festival is taking place solely online. But we're really proud of the programme we've managed to put together under lockdown. Inevitably, we've not been able to include all the books and writers that we'd have liked to. I'm Rebecca Wilkie from New Writing North.

Grace Keane I'm Grace Keane from New Writing North.

Claire Malcolm And I'm Claire Malcolm from New Writing North.

Rebecca Wilkie And these are some of the books we're most excited about reading this autumn.

Claire Malcolm So obviously, we've all been talking a lot during lockdown, haven't we, about work things, and then books for Durham Book Festival. But it's nice, now, to have a bit of space to talk about the other stuff we were reading. I mean, I know, Grace, you've launched a YouTube channel during lockdown, so you've been very productive on the reading side, but I know a lot of people have struggled to read or have been reading different things. How's it been for you guys?

Grace Keane I remember talking to Rebecca about this right at the start of lockdown, where, you know, it was like the news every night. And you were saying, Rebecca, that you were kind of struggling to read a bit. Whereas I think I just went totally the other way, and basically all I've done since March is read as much as possible. And so yeah, I'm not sure what it is, apart from, I guess, trying to escape the world. I know concentration for people's been a thing, but for whatever reason, I've just been reading more than ever.

Rebecca Wilkie I did really struggle at the start of lockdown to read anything that wasn't a comforting book that I'd probably read before. So I was mostly just reading, like, Persephone books, and Eva Ibbotson books, and things like that. But then I think by about April, May, I was back on track. And I've been reading quite a lot and think that actually this year, it's one of the best years for books we've had for several years. I actually think there's so much both fiction and nonfiction out this year, some of which has been really kind of lost and fallen under the radar because of the way we've all been living. It's almost like there's too much to read this year. There's so much.

Claire Malcolm At the beginning of lockdown I remember thinking *this will be great* – like, the upside of all this horror is all the extra time for reading. And I think I've read about what I would have read anyway, in terms of the amount of books. But I think I've read quite differently. And I did definitely struggle, I agree, Rebecca, in the early weeks. I could not concentrate and I could only read things that were – I don't really like that term 'comfort read', but comfort reads. I do like Persephone Books, but my comfort reads for the early lockdown were Jack Reacher novels by Lee Child. Because I think what you get in those novels, which are brilliant on many levels, but is, you get somebody sorting everything out, and I think in those early weeks, and possibly still now, I'm still looking for the Reacher who's going to come and sort all this stuff out.

Grace Keane I think interestingly, my reading changed less when lockdown happened than it did with all the Black Lives Matter movement that came a bit later on, in June. I actually found that, and climate discussions, weirdly... I feel like my reading's changed more because of those sort of social and activist issues coming more to the forefront. So I've definitely – I wasn't a big nonfiction reader, to be honest, generally, just because fiction is my one true love. But since the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement I've been trying to read and educate myself a lot more in nonfiction about that. But then also just trying to put my money where my mouth is, and when I'm buying new books or backlist books, trying to make sure I'm reading really diversely. So I think that's interesting, that this year I did kind of change up the reading, but not to do with lockdown.

Claire Malcolm I agree, I think – I mean, I wondered if we would talk about that today, because obviously we read some things as a team, as well, around Black Lives Matter, didn't we? But it did set me off on a whole little reading thing of trying to get educated around a number of things. So Akala's book *Natives*, I really like; *Afropean* by Johny Pitts was great. And I read the Afua Hirsch *Brit(ish)* book, which I thought was brilliant, actually. But I think for me, it was more – I *do* read nonfiction, but that moment, I think, kind of re-politicised my reading and I just had a push. I remembered, like, there are things we still need to learn and work out about the world, and I had a real hunger for getting back into that a bit. So I have read, more recently, over the summer of the lockdown period, a lot more nonfiction than I would have ever read during a normal year I think.

Rebecca Wilkie I think, also, we can see it in a lot of fiction, can't we. A lot of these issues are coming out in fiction. A lot of the books were actually written before the Black Lives Matter protests of this year, but have felt even more timely when we've read them. So I'm thinking of things like Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, which you can check out on the Durham Book Festival website – we've got an event with Brit – and several others that just seem a lot more relevant and timely. One of the books I wanted to talk about today was *How Much of These Hills is Gold* by C Pam Zhang, which is one of my books of the year, if not the last five years, actually. And it's all about identity and belonging and the meaning of home, and the meaning of what it means to be American. It was obviously written, presumably, about two years ago. I was alerted to it because it was longlisted for the Booker Prize. I hadn't heard that much about it beforehand. It's published by Virago in the UK, and it is a debut. And it just blew my mind. I just think it's absolutely brilliant. I think the writing style is perfect, for me. It's quite literary, but also very, very – I read it very, very quickly over about two days. And it's just different. It's different to anything that I'd read before. It's the story of two siblings who are really young, I think they're about 11 and 12 years old. They're alone in the American West. We don't know the exact date, but it's during the Gold Rush, so it must be the mid-1800s. And their father has just died and they need to bury him. And it's about the wildness of California, and the brutality of life for those people who were carving out a place for themselves in this new world. And I've always been fascinated by America, and California, beginning with my love of *Little House on*

the Prairie when I was probably about seven years old. But this certainly isn't *Little House on the Prairie*. It's much more brutal. But also very beautiful.

Claire Malcolm Is it a Western?

Rebecca Wilkie It has elements of a Western, I suppose.

Claire Malcolm Because when you were talking about it, it made me think about *Days Without End*, the Sebastian Barry book.

Rebecca Wilkie Oh, well, Sebastian has blurbed the cover; he's describing C Pam Zhang a truly gifted writer. And I think the cover design for the UK edition makes it look a bit like a Western because it has two horses. And there is a horse in it. They have a horse.

Grace Keane I've definitely heard it described as a Western when I've heard people talk about it. Which is quite interesting, because I think that would have put me off... if it hadn't been longlisted for the Booker and I hadn't heard such amazing things, it might have put me off. I suppose that's the problem with, like, pigeonholing books too much into a genre. But I'm about halfway through at the minute and I'm really enjoying it. And yeah, I definitely wouldn't, maybe, have picked up if someone had told me it was a Western.

Rebecca Wilkie I hadn't read a huge amount about the Chinese diaspora in America. I'd read Amy Tan's novels and that's about it, really.

Grace Keane Yeah. Celeste Ng's first book, *Everything I Never Told You* is kind of about an Asian American family, and I picked that up.

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah, yeah, I've read that also. I was thinking San Francisco, though, and I was thinking about Amy Tan, and that some of the latter half of *How Much of These Hills is Gold* is set in San Francisco, which is sort of emerging at that time. The Chinese community were treated terribly – terribly! They were taxed something like triple what the white Gold Rush

miners were taxed – people did everything they could to stop them being part of society. There's an epigraph at the start of the book that says, 'This land is not your land', and I found that really moving and really poignant. It's this twist on, I suppose, on the Woody Guthrie song, and that's the question that comes up constantly throughout the book: What makes you American? What makes you belong? Is it something you feel? Is it about where you were born? And it relates to so much that's happening at the moment.

Claire Malcolm If I could follow that thought, and keep us in America, and the idea of belonging, one of the novels I've enjoyed the most during lockdown – and I've had it on pre-order; I was desperate to read it – is Catherine Lacey's *Pew*. She's written two other novels and a collection of short stories, and I've loved all of those. And I think there are themes that link her work. But this is a really extraordinary, short little novel; one of those perfect novels. It's about a character – we never know if it's a man or a woman or anything in between – called Pew, who turns up in a pew in a church in a small town – an unnamed American small town, very conservative, very religious – and is kind of taken on by the community. So at first you think it's a kind of homeless, lost person that something's happened to. You're never quite sure how old Pew is. And as the novel develops, it's very clever in that she basically lets all of the characters around the town, who take on the work of looking after Pew – different people have Pew to live in their house and over for dinner and things – ... Basically, what you start to see is that all those characters are projecting things onto Pew. So Pew becomes the place where the secrets go, and people say things to Pew they wouldn't say to each other. And as that plays out, you get this feeling of this community that's living in a pretence of lots of things. But also, everyone keeps talking about this festival that's coming. So you're also slightly dreading, as this town gets weirder and weirder, what on earth this festival is going to be. It's *deeply* weird. I won't go into too much detail about it, because it will spoil it. But it's basically like a festival of forgiving and renewal where people shed inhibitions and things that have happened during the year. It's *deeply* weird. So it's a really interesting book. I can't think of any other writer, possibly only Jesse Ball, who actually is Catherine Lacey's partner, which I think is really interesting, who is writing this kind of fiction.

Rebecca Wilkie I didn't know that.

Claire Malcolm Yeah, really interesting. And if you read their novels in parallel there's some very interesting ideas, I think, that they share. But it's just a perfect, unusual novel that I am still thinking about months after having read it. And that, for me, is always a marker that there's something really great going on. I've heard her talk, and she often talks about the crisis of the self being like an interesting thing. So often in her novels, there are characters – previously, it's always been women – who are looking for things, either about the secret to health and wellness, or they're trying to actively lose themselves and disappear. Really interesting territory.

Grace Keane Well, speaking of the crisis of the self, that kind of ties in with one of the best novels that I've read this year, which is *The Death of Vivek Oji*, by Akwaeke Emezi. So I read Akwaeke Emezi's first novel *Freshwater* only this year, as well, actually, but I was just immediately obsessed with their writing. Quite an experimental style, and Emezi's a non-binary author, and *Freshwater* deals with issues around identity and a non-linear or stable self. And then *The Death of Vivek Oji* kind of deals with similar things. So this novel's set in Nigeria, and as you may have guessed by the title, Vivek Oji, the main character, dies. So you know he's dead at the very start of the novel. But then you go back and see him grow up as a boy in Nigeria, you learn about his family, and kind of build back up to his death, interspersed with him, sort of, as a character, looking back on it a little bit. So again, it is quite a different style. I'm impressed, so impressed, by the way Emezi, I don't know, feels very liberated in the way they write their novels. And it's not a huge book, but it's one that does so much. I absolutely loved it. And it's kind of about grief, definitely. It's about family. I don't want to give anything away because it's quite a key plot point. But again, it very much becomes about identity and self, and it's really moving, quite upsetting. It's set in Nigeria around the time of the Civil War and crisis in Nigeria. And I watched such an interesting interview with Emezi, talking to Rivers Solomon. It was a Zoom interview, during lockdown. And after having read the book, watching that interview just enhanced it even more, because Akwaeke Emezi's talking about how they wanted to set it in that time in Nigeria, because the first book is kind of mainly set in America, so they wanted to talk about Nigeria. And that, really, the thing that had spurred on writing that book was what seemed like a small part of the book, which is this group of wives of Nigerian

men who aren't from Nigeria, called Niger wives, and they kind of all grew up together. So the children mix, and Vivek's mother is one of these Niger wives and the other characters who kind of make up his friends and family, and yeah... It was just fascinating to see where that sparked from, and then it made me enjoy it even more. But it is a very sad book and quite a difficult one. And it pushes a lot of taboos as well. There's a very taboo relationship that happens that I saw a lot of people on Goodreads couldn't work out, or it made them not like the book. I liked it and then, again, seeing the author talk about it and how they just wanted to see how far they could push the reader; see at what point would you stop rooting for this relationship? What's too far? I just think, yeah, it's a really exceptional novel. It's published by Faber.

Rebecca Wilkie That sounds good. Now, the second fiction book I was going to flag up – we're back in America again – is *Rodham* by Curtis Sittenfeld, who's one of my favourite writers.

Claire Malcolm Oooh, I've got that sitting downstairs. Can't wait to read it.

Grace Keane I'm currently listening to it on audio.

Claire Malcolm It's brilliant. I mean, it's as you would expect from Curtis Sittenfeld. She's a really smart, quite wry American writer who has form in taking real-life figures and writing about them. So her book *American Wife*, which was out several years ago, takes Laura Bush, the wife of George W. Bush, and takes some known facts about her life – she's a very private person, so there wasn't a huge amount publicly known about her – and then weaves a fictional imagining of that life. So *American Wife* was the first Curtis Sittenfeld book I read, and I thought was incredible. And she's done it again with *Rodham*, I think. It's a very brave thing to do, to take a living person – a living, well known person – and to follow their life. So she follows Hillary's life up till she is in her late 20s using known biographical facts, and embellishing them and adding her own imaginings and feelings in. And we know that Bill Clinton proposed to Hillary three times and that it was on the third time that she agreed to marry him and the rest is history. Curtis Sittenfeld imagines that when Bill asks Hillary to marry him for the third time, she says no. And she goes back, she leaves Arkansas where she's been helping him campaign

and run for local office, and begins her own life and her own career trajectory. And it's just so cleverly done, and so engaging, and makes you think so much about what might have been and which of the Clintons really should have been president all along. I read *Primary Colors* as well, which is sort of about the Clintons, Joe Klein's book. He was a journalist who had been on the road with them. So it's not the first time somebody's tried to fictionalise their really unusual relationship. But it's so interesting. Curtis Sittenfeld attempts to understand their marriage and their relationship, which we all know is probably quite unusual in some ways. And it's really hard to separate the facts from the fiction, actually. I kept finding myself thinking, "Oh, right. Yeah. Okay. That's why she stayed, you know, that's why..." then I'd think, "No, no, this is a novel. It's not real." I had to keep reminding myself.

Grace Keane It's really interesting, because it's written in first person, or at least, I'm only up to the first proposal – the first rejected proposal. So I'm not that far in. But yeah, because it's using this real-life person, and then it's narrated in first person, you do feel like Hillary Clinton is just telling you the story. And Sittenfeld does manage to make Bill Clinton – and as someone who, you know, was kind of a child when Bill Clinton was president, all I know about him is really the bad stuff – has made him really charismatic, and I really believe why Hillary's so in love with him. I am really enjoying the book so far. I definitely think you do sometimes feel like, "Oh, God is this... this isn't actually a biography. It's a novel."

Claire Malcolm Curtis Sittenfeld has form with writing about Hillary Clinton, though, doesn't she?

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah.

Claire Malcolm It's in the short stories. She's in the – I think it's called *You Think It, I'll Say It* story collection. There's a story about a journalist meeting Hillary isn't there? But it is the really real Hillary in real time, kind of...

Rebecca Wilkie It is, but I think it's where she got the idea that she wanted to do more and think more about Hillary, and I think, also, probably for a lot of artists and writers who are living

and working under Trump at the moment, it's a way of reimagining, painting and creating a world that they would prefer to see.

Claire Malcolm They should have just blurbed it with the line 'for fans of *The West Wing*'.

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah.

Grace Keane Yeah.

Rebecca Wilkie And it is – if you like *The West Wing*, which so many people do, you will enjoy it. It's very easy to read as well. It's very clever, but it's also very, very readable.

Claire Malcolm Just so we don't sound like we're only talking about American authors, I would like to bring us much closer to home. My second fiction choice was *The Bass Rock* by Evie Wyld. And I was particularly interested in this because it's set in North Berwick, which is not far up the coast from the North East. And the Bass Rock is the famous rock that you can see in the seaside there. I mean, Evie Wyld, I think, is one of the most brilliant fiction writers we have in this country at the moment, but I think she still flies slightly below the radar, I feel, and maybe not as many people have read her as would enjoy her. This book is astonishing. And it did get quite a lot of heat, I think from readers on YouTube and social media when it came out. But I think it is perhaps one of those novels that has suffered a bit from being published in the difficult summer period when bookshops and things were closed, and it is really worth reading. So it's the kind of a novel that steps over time lightly. You're in slightly different time zones, and you're with different groups of women who are connected through a house, but also in other ways, psychologically, kind of over time. And it's many things: it's a kind of family saga; it's a portrait of a marriage in the 40s and 50s; it's about parenting children that aren't your own; about disloyalty within a marriage. But also basically, overall, by the time you're getting towards the end of the novel, you realise what she's doing, which is taking a very, very deep look at misogyny. So I ended up slightly surprised with this book. I know you've read it as well, haven't you, Grace?

Grace Keane Yeah.

Claire Malcolm By the end of it I was like, “Oh my god, she has kind of fooled me for half of this novel”, where I think I’m reading a slightly spooky, historical, domestic saga, and then suddenly, it’s like, bam bam bam: here are the ideas that shape this novel. And I think it’s just an extraordinary achievement, really. I cannot believe it’s not been on prize shortlists this year at all. I’m really surprised. Did you like it, Grace?

Grace Keane I totally agree. I absolutely loved it. And, like you say, there’s these three timelines. And the one you spend the most time with is this sort of Gothic historical story, which I loved because I love like Gothic, creepy, spooky books. And, like you say, there’s all that stuff going on, and the atmosphere of being in this big house in Berwick, all the people who live there are a bit weird, and there’s this marriage and the kids. And then you’re getting these other two, slightly lesser, timelines. The one in the present day, at first, I wasn’t really connecting with and I was thinking, “I wish it was all this Gothic one”. And then, like you say, then you get to what she’s doing. And you realise that, basically, for all that the 1940s-50s storyline is a kind of Gothic story, the modern day one is equally as terrifying, but in no way spooky or ghostly. It’s about misogyny, yeah, and about male violence, and I think the whole book is an absolutely – just the best writing about female rage that I’ve ever read. And yeah, I think that book – I love Evie Wyld’s other novel as well, *All The Birds, Singing*, but yeah, I think *The Bass Rock* is amazing.

Rebecca Wilkie Wow.

Claire Malcolm It would make a brilliant film as well.

Rebecca Wilkie

I love Evie Wyld’s writing. I really link her with Australia, though, so strongly in my mind, it’s really interesting to hear that this one is *not* set in Australia, because she writes about the danger and the darkness of Australia so well. She’s half Australian.

Claire Malcolm I mean, she's brilliant. *After The Fire, a Still Small Voice*. It is that one...

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah...

Claire Malcolm ...the sense of place she summons up in all the novels is really strong. And the fun she has with location, I suppose, through form character is always brilliant.

Rebecca Wilkie I agree though. It's strange that she's a fantastic writer that really has, I think, sort of slipped under the radar a bit, given the quality. She also has a graphic novel that Claire and I read a couple of years ago. She's really talented, I would definitely recommend that people check her out. And I'm really looking forward to *The Bass Rock*.

Claire Malcolm I'm pretty sure we would have invited her to the Book Festival this year as well, if we'd had the chance. I think there's a few books in our lists for this programme that are the kind of people we would have loved to have invited to Durham.

Grace Keane Another novel that I think may have kind of slipped under people's radar because of when it was published, but that I think is brilliant, is a debut novel called *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* by Deepa Anappara. I'm surprised, actually, I surprised myself that there isn't a kind of straightforward crime thriller book in this four, because I am a huge mystery, crime, literary mystery, anything like that, reader. And I think if you are, but you also enjoy more general literary fiction, or just a good story, I would highly recommend this book. So it's set in India, and it's sort of looking at this basti, which is kind of like a – not a slum, but it's this sort of unregulated camp that people are living in and that the government are threatening all the time to bulldoze. And you're following this young boy, who's the main character, called Jai. I sometimes don't get on with children as protagonists, but it really, I think, opens up the book, and it gives it a really adventurous, fun feel. So basically, within what is not a very fun story, children are going missing from this basti. And Jai is about eight or nine years old, and he thinks he wants to be a detective when he's older. And so he and his friend set out to try and solve it. So you're following life in the basti; you're getting the bigger things that are going on around class in India. But then you're also following this young boy who's

really excited and thinks he can solve it. Whenever another child goes missing, you get a parrot or small chapter from that perspective. So the book has so much scope, because you're getting in all these different characters' heads. It's so atmospheric, the setting, and you know, you really can smell the smells of these markets and alleyways. But ultimately, you know, you do find out what's been happening to these children. And it's a heart breaking story. It's a searing look at class and all sorts of political issues in India. But yeah, I think I would highly recommend it because it's so compelling, and it's so richly written. It's fun, as I say, and adventurous, but also very moving. And it's saying some important things, I think.

Claire Malcolm It was actually one of the last books that I bought just before lockdown, when we knew it was going to happen. I made a mercy dash to Forum Books, to buy – I bought loads of books to send to my parents, who are older and in proper lockdown. And I bought, in a kind of panic of thinking it might be the last time I'd ever be in a bookshop for months – how right I was – I bought loads of books, and that was one of them. And I really want to go and read it now, because it's been sitting on my To Be Read shelf for the whole of the lockdown. But Helen – I know Helen at Forum Books, who is always a great recommender of books – told me it was brilliant.

Rebecca Wilkie Actually, one of the books that I was also going to talk about was recommended by Helen at Forum Books, whose taste is fantastic. It's a book called *Humankind* by Rutger Bregman. It's actually nonfiction. I saw that Forum Books had flagged it up on their Instagram, I think, and I thought that looks really interesting. And it is really interesting. It's also a really good book for everybody to read at this moment in time, when things are feeling quite difficult, and, you know, we're having to really motivate ourselves to feel hopeful and optimistic. The premise of the book is that humans are actually innately good and kind, and that there is hope for us as a society and as a world. Rutger Bregman is quite a young Dutch philosopher. So he's got a really engaging style, quite easy to read, but dealing with quite big ideas. He takes the two philosophers Hobbes and Rousseau. Hobbes believed that humans are essentially bad, and Rousseau believed that humans are essentially good, and he takes Rousseau and decides that's who he's going to get on board with, and then spends the rest of the book finding lots of really interesting examples of why Rousseau was

right. So as long as you accept that that's what the book is... I'm sure there are plenty of people that will read the book and go, "Well, I can find an example that totally disproves that." But I think, in the spirit of the times that we're in at the moment, I was happy to read it and kind of feel optimistic and inspired. There's all these brilliant examples that he finds throughout time of when humans have actually worked together, built communities in the face of all kinds of adversity. He has this fascinating example of a real life *Lord of the Flies* kind of scenario that happened. As we know, in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* book, the boys are marooned on an island and they all gradually turn against each other and they become feral, and everything just goes horribly wrong. It's a really sort of pessimistic, misanthropic kind of view. Rutger Bregman uncovered a story from about I think, some 70 or 80 years ago: a group of boys run away from their boarding school and are marooned on a desert island. I think the boarding school's in Tonga. So they're marooned on a desert island and actually form a really happy, functioning community where they all helped each other. They were only about 12 years old, I think. They were eventually rescued by an Australian sailor, who found them all perfectly happy. One of them had broken his leg, and they'd worked together to heal his leg creating a splint and bandages. You know, it was just the opposite to *Lord of the Flies*. So there's all sorts of examples like that that just show that actually humans aren't really that bad.

Grace Keane That sounds like what people need right now.

Rebecca Wilkie I think it is. I think it is. I think that's why Helen had flagged it during those dark days of lockdown as something we should all have a look at.

Claire Malcolm I think this is really interesting, Rebecca, because the next book I'm going to talk about I think probably shows the psychological differences between you and I [laughs]. In a time of darkness and fear, you look for hope, and I just go, "Give me the books that are going to tell me the truth about how bad this really is." So my nonfiction choice is an absolutely rollicking read, as well as, I think, a very urgently timely and important book about the world of geopolitics. So *Shadow State*, by Luke Harding, who has been at the festival before, and was great fun.

Rebecca Wilkie Yes.

Claire Malcolm And for a long time he was *The Guardian's* man in Russia, and still, I think, is one of the best writers we have on what on earth is going on with Russia. So this book, I mean, it reads like a thriller, basically. And its subtitle is *Murder, Mayhem and Russia's remaking of the West*. So it's all about how the Cold War hasn't ended. The Cold War has just become a digital, fake news, war of information. And so chapter by chapter, you get different perspectives on this. So it's everything from the Salisbury poisoning and how that played out diplomatically. You're getting the kind of stuff you don't hear on the news, which is what was going on between embassies and, politically, how people were quietly trying to use diplomacy to sort things out – but also how outdated diplomacy is becoming in the face of some of this stuff. But there's also just brilliant stuff about how old-fashioned some of the spying business is in Russia, so how weak it can be when citizen journalists and other people decide to try and unpick things. So you just get this picture of this really appalling state of the world where, yes, the Russians did interfere in the American election. Yes, they interfered in Brexit. We all just know this, everyone knows this now. We should just accept it and begin, I think, to understand everything through that prism. And chaos is the playbook, now, that we're seeing. So it's just brilliant. But it's also really amusing. Luke Harding couldn't write a boring sentence if he tried. And he also goes off and interviews lots of people, so you get former spies and people who are deep in the kind of spying world telling you how it all really works. So one of the things this book has made me realise is that it reminded me how much I love John le Carré spy novels. So I'm kind of now owning up, I think, to myself, that I probably have a quite strong interest in spy fiction and spy nonfiction, which I'm going to develop a bit. So I really recommend that.

Grace Keane It sounds interesting.

Claire Malcolm But also, I've just been reading another book that, again, actually talks a bit about how the Cold War is now framing a lot of our politics and what's going on in the world. And it's a long essay, really – *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Passing of Friends* by Anne Applebaum. I know her work because I read a book she wrote years ago called *Gulag*, which was amazing, again, because of my interest in Russia, but I hadn't

realised that she was on the right kind of politically and in terms of her journalism. And this set of essays is about how she has parted friends, basically, with many of her former kind of conservative middle-ground, right wing friends who have now all become really extreme right wing people. And she charts the fall of democracy in Hungary and in other parts of eastern Europe, then turns to England, and Boris Johnson, and Brexit, and basically starts to show us how we are following exactly the same pattern of behaviours in our government. So the book is really about whether or not democracy is sustainable, or whether or not it will turn out to be sustainable. So it's a kind of alarm. It's one of those books where you want to go [horrified breath]. This feels like a book really about now, but also gives you some really good contextual information about other parts of Europe. I'm just on the final chapter of this book, and it's about to be about Trump and Cohen. And actually, in the Luke Harding book as well, there is a bit which is just about, what is it that Russia has got on Trump? Because they've got something, you know. I just feel like the world we're living in at the moment is like a John le Carré spy novel, on many levels. So I, you know, I am feeling a real thirst at the moment to find those books that help you understand it, you know. But I'm finding the more I read of those books, the news is basically way worse than you might have thought, is the bottom line, unfortunately.

Rebecca Wilkie This really reminds me of my ambition to one time get Fiona Hill, who was the White House Russia expert, to come and visit us, because she's from Durham, grew up in Durham; now lives in Washington, DC. So it was...

Claire Malcolm She was impressive in those hearings, wasn't she?

Rebecca Wilkie In those impeachment hearings, yeah. And that's just reminded me that that will be on our, I would say, wish list of future book festival speakers or commissions, wouldn't it? How interesting, if we could lure her to come home and speak to us.

Grace Keane I stand somewhere in between, in that I haven't got as far as Claire into, like, actively looking for things that are going to make me stressed – although I would say that having just recorded our event with Laura Bates and her new book, *Men Who Hate Women*, that has fascinated and terrified me in terms of it's all about incels, basically, the misogynistic

groups that exist in the world. So definitely go and register for that event on the Durham Book Festival website, because it is... yeah, that was something that I wanted to know about, and afterwards you're glad you know it, as I'm sure you were saying Claire, but you're also a bit kind of like, "Oh, it's so much worse than I thought". So I haven't been going that far, but I did allow myself to read a bit of dystopian fiction, which isn't something that I usually do. I haven't gone as far into, like, the pandemic novels – which I just think, anyone who's reading pandemic novels now, like you're made of stronger stuff than me – but I read *Little Eyes* by Samanta Schweblin. It was on the longlist for the International Booker. Samanta Schweblin is an Argentinian author, it's translated. And it's really strange. It's very *Black Mirror*-esque. It's about the world, but there's this new invention, and they're called kentukis. And they're like little, almost like soft toys, but on wheels with cameras in them. And you can buy a kentuki and keep it as a pet, and in that you'd be a keeper if you have one – or you can pay to be a kentuki dweller. So you get to control a kentuki. You get randomly assigned one. And so someone will have this little panda toy, for instance...

Rebecca Wilkie So they're not human, like human size?

Grace Keane No, they're little robots.

Rebecca Wilkie Like Tamagotchis?

Grace Keane No, like a soft toy, say, so about the size of a teddy bear, or a little bit smaller. And it would look like a soft toy panda, but if you're the dweller, you can make it move. And you can see out of its eyes. You have no way of knowing who you're connected to. So some people keep them as pets because they're lonely' obviously some people dwell in them. But as you can imagine, a lot of people use them for much more nefarious reasons. It's kind of like – it reads a little bit like a collection of short stories and in that you follow a few, maybe like ten, or less than that, narratives of just someone's experience being a kentuki dweller or kentuki keeper, but they're sort of interwoven between them. And it's just such an interesting look at, I guess, the possibilities of technology, but also all the bad things that can happen. It's a really interesting look at power dynamics, because you know, someone thinks they have this pet and

they love them and they treat them like a pet. But there's a human side behind that. And at what point is someone taking advantage of the other? There's some really eerie creepy bits where you realise what the dweller or what the keeper has been doing, and then some really kind of horrific moments in it that are just horrific and scary in that, you know, it's just humans taking advantage. But yeah, it was such an interesting book. I do sometimes get a bit scared of technology and terrified that we're gonna... I don't know why people want to build AI robots when, like, every film you've ever seen where we do that, they take over the world and kill us. So that does sometimes scare me, but this was a good little dipping-my-toes into the future of technology. But yeah, it was a really interesting look at kind of human desires and the dark side. And yeah, I'd really recommend. It was really readable. I blew through it.

Claire Malcolm I read her novella a few years ago, *Fever Dream*. Lots of people were talking about that book a couple of years ago. She's Argentinian, isn't she, so they're in translation. That was billed as a kind of really, not dystopian, but slightly out there book, and in the end, I think it was really about pollution. It surprised me, because it was weird and creepy and odd things were happening, but then in the end, I thought it had a very direct and quite straightforward message, and it made me realise I didn't know much about what was going on in Argentina in terms of those kind of things being a real issue. *Little Eyes* sounds much more out there.

Rebecca Wilkie It sounds terrifying.

Grace Keane You're with characters all over the world as well because she is... I feel like, often, you know, you're reading something, even a dystopian, where there's lots of different characters but it'll all be set in, you know, in America or the UK. So it was really interesting, because these characters, these different stories, are all over the world and so yeah, I'd really recommend it.

Rebecca Wilkie The only piece of actual lockdown writing, that has been written during lockdown, I've read is the Zadie Smith *Intimations* essay collection – almost a pamphlet, actually. That just made me think. I actually loved it. I think it's brilliant, I'd really recommend it.

Claire, I know you're reading it at the moment as well. It's a really slight collection of essays from Zadie Smith, written in both New York and London. And written between, I think, just written over March, April and May. The foreword is the end of May 2020, London. I'd really recommend it to anybody, actually. There's some hope in there, but there's also anger, and lots of kind of relatable experiences, but just written in her incredibly smart, engaging, clever style. It will be interesting to return to this in a few years' time, maybe, and see how it feels reading these when we're hopefully on the other side of all of this, and kind of how it feels.

Claire Malcolm I saw on Instagram, Grace, that you were reading Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*.

Grace Keane Yes, I read it. I got quite into Zadie Smith over lockdown. I read *Swing Time*, and then I just wanted to buy all the other books of hers that I hadn't read. So yeah, I just read *On Beauty*, where there's a character called Claire Malcolm, which is your name!

Claire Malcolm Yeah, I know, I know! That's why I brought it up, obviously. I love that Zadie Smith's Claire Malcolm is a slender, difficult poet. So I think in character and form we're about as opposite as we could be [laughs]. But it was really brilliant. When that book came out, so many people messaged and went, 'You're in Zadie Smith's new novel!' And I was like, no I'm not.

Rebecca Wilkie These essays tell us about how she does base characters in her work on real people. So there's one of the essays references a man who lives at the end of her street in New York. Yeah. Good old Zadie Smith. It'll be really exciting to see what her next novel is, won't it?

Claire Malcolm My final book is a self-improvement book, and a book I would not, I think, have picked up a year ago, or a type of book I would not have picked up a year ago. So when we were having conversations around Black Lives Matter and reading diversely at work in the summer, one of our board members, John, and I had a conversation about what diversity really meant, which was really interesting. We were talking about books that we would never read or

books we don't think are anything to do with us. And he told me about this book. And I thought, "Right, I would never read that, so I'm going to have a go at reading it, a) I suppose, in my head, I need to see if I can understand it. But b) because it'd be something I would never have read." So I bought a copy of *The Deficit Myth* by Stephanie Kelton, which is a book about modern monetary theory, and how to build a better economy. And actually, it's great. And you can understand it even if you're not an economist. She was an economic advisor, or part of the economic advising team, to Obama. Do you remember when he first came into presidency, and it was the 2008 financial crisis, and it was about the stimulus programme. I mean, it's very similar to COVID times – the money that the state then has to just pump into the economy to keep things together. And the modern monetary theory is all about how if you have sovereign wealth, which our country does, America does, and many others do, you can actually print as much money as you like; put as much money into the economy as you want. But there are risks around inflation and how that behaves if you do it. So I found it completely revelatory, in that her pitch is, 'spending is basically just a political decision'. So all this stuff about how, you know – we've heard a lot of it from during austerity – about how we have to manage our budget like it's a household budget for the country, you know? And she's basically saying, "No, it's not like that at all. That's a fake, completely fake, way to think about and describe it." But, actually, she also believes many politicians themselves don't understand this stuff so that they cling on to ideas like that. So it's a revelatory book, really, about economics, and how different it could be. So I was really pleased I'd tried to read it. And I'm going to try and get better at having these arguments with people about spending...

Rebecca Wilkie ...yeah.

Claire Malcolm ...because it's kind of, you know, politically, to me, this is revelatory. If you don't have to decide how much money you spend on the benefit system, or on things like the furlough scheme; if that's actually just a political decision, then imagine how different the world could be with things like universal income or stimulus, you know, or green futures and green new deals and things. So I was really glad I read this. Naomi Klein really rates it which I think is probably a good sign. But I would recommend it to anyone who a) thinks they can't read books

like this, but b) might want a different view of what politics and economics are together. I think I learned a lot from this.

Rebecca Wilkie And that's just reminded me that the breaking news of today is, of course, that Barack Obama's memoirs are going to be published in November, the first volume of, which is quite exciting. So Penguin has just announced that *A Promised Land* by Barack Obama, which is going to be Volume One of his presidential memoirs, is coming out on 17 November. So that's something to look forward to.

Claire Malcolm You were a big fan of Michelle Obama's book, weren't you?

Rebecca Wilkie I was a fan of both Michelle Obama and Barack Obama's other books. He has two other sort of memoir-style books, both of them before he became president, which are really candid. For someone who was going to be running for office, and knew he was going to be running for office, they're really open and candid. I mean, I love memoir and biography. It's my favourite. I love it as much as fiction. So I'm very excited to hear about that.

Grace Keane Well that brings me nicely on to the last book I wanted to talk about, which is a memoir. I've been getting more into memoir. It wasn't something that I read a lot of, but actually I think you're so right, Rebecca, it can be as compelling and, sometimes, more moving and thought-provoking than fiction. And this one definitely was, and it's *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado. This is published by Serpent's Tail, but she's released a collection of short stories called *Her Body and Other Parties*, that everyone I saw talking about them, a couple of years ago, everyone said they're brilliant. I, shockingly, don't read – I love how I'm just like, "Yeah, I don't read memoir, I don't read nonfiction, I don't really read many short stories." I'm trying to get better. But I will be now because this memoir was so stunningly written. It's her memoir specifically about being an abusive lesbian relationship. And so she writes it in such an interesting, experimental way, in that the Dream House is this house that they, for a period, shared together. And she retells the relationship and reimagines this house as a variety of literary tropes and ideas, and looks at kind of a lot of queer theory. It's written in vignettes, sort of – some of them are quite long, some of them are quite short – but they'll all

be called like, ‘Dream House as famous last words’, ‘Dream House as romance novel’, ‘Dream House as déjà vu’. And so she takes these literary forms that we’re used to do and uses them to delve into what is obviously a really difficult and like quite traumatic time of her life. And I think it’s a really good mixture of the personal – it’s extremely moving and difficult to read about that. But also, like I say, she looks at her own experience in the context of abusive queer relationships – I’m using her words, she uses the term queer – and how that isn’t something that is written about; isn’t even really researched properly, and how, obviously, we’re very aware of abuse in kind of hetero-normative relationships. And it’s easier to understand that as, like, the man usually being abuser. But she’s really interested in how that changes when it’s to women specifically, because that’s in her case. So yeah, it was just – I mean, her writing is, honestly, like, breathtakingly good. And yeah, it just was on the one hand a really moving personal account of something that I think is really important to read about, if not always easy, but also it was really adventurous in its literary style, and I found all the engaging with that kind of theory, which isn’t something that I read a lot of, was actually really fascinating, it worked really well as well. She is Latinx, but she is an American writer.

Claire Malcolm I was just going to give a big-up and a shout-out, or whatever it is the young people say, for some books by previous winners of the Gordon Burn Prize. So there are three, at the moment, that I’ve got my eye on over the summer. David Keenan, who won the prize last year, has a new novel out with White Rabbit called – I think it’s called *Xstabeth*. I may have mispronounced that. I haven’t read this yet, but it looks great. He’s an amazing, out there, writer. Reading his book *For the Good Times* last year, when it won the prize, was something I will never forget. I don’t think anyone who’s read that novel forgets – it leaves a trace. But also Jesse Ball, who won the year before David, I think, has a new book out called *The Divers Game*. And again – he won the Gordon Burn Prize for his novel *Census*, which was an amazing, amazing novel about, well, it’s almost impossible to describe, it’s about so many things. This looks as weird and as brilliant. It’s about two little girls, Lethe and Lois. It says, “They navigate the perimeters of a segregated city armed with canisters of killing gas.” So there you go. So it’s a slightly future... It’s this world, but it’s a world, I think, where people have been segregated into rich and poor or something probably a bit more complicated like that. And you’re protected with these little canisters of gas that you have about your person. I’m only

a few chapters in and they're about to visit a zoo, so I have no idea what's going to happen. But I mean, he, I would just say, he's always worth reading. And if you haven't read him, brilliant, and if you read him alongside Catherine Lacey, I think that's even more interesting. And then, I know this is a writer that loads of us love: Denise Mina, who also won the Gordon Burn Prize, has a new novel, *The Less Dead*. This arrived a couple of weeks ago. I took to my bed on Saturday, basically didn't get up, read it all in one go. It's just extraordinary. It's a really clever plot, about a woman called Margot who is adopted and as an adult decides to try and find her birth family. But what she finds is that her mother had been murdered just not long after her birth, and had been working as a prostitute. So she gets involved with her aunt, who is plying a similar trade, or has done, and a whole kind of slight – I don't want to say underworld; it's not really that – but she's a kind of doctor, so she's a very straight, middle class person, and she basically discovers she has a new family, who are not all good people, in the kind of underclass, I suppose. So she gets taken into this different world to try and find out who murdered her mother. It's absolutely gripping, and like all of Denise's books, she writes real people extraordinarily well. So I believed everyone in this book. I believed everything about how they lived, how they talked, what they did, and it got some really creepy stuff in it as well. But it's a right page-turner. She's just brilliant. You love her as well, don't you Grace?

Grace Keane Yeah, I absolutely love her books, yeah, you're right. You just, you would need to have the time to take to your bed when one arrives, because they're so compulsive.

Claire Malcolm There's nothing like a really great crime novel, I think.

Grace Keane Agreed. Yes. Then I have to shout out the book that I am so excited for – potentially the most excited for this year – which is Tana French's new crime novel, *The Searcher*, which is coming out in November. I'm yet to be able to read it, and it's painful. Tana French is an Irish crime writer, and in my very humble opinion, one of the best crime writers writing. So she wrote the Dublin Murder Squad series, which is very popular, it got a TV show. And then her first standalone *The Wych Elm* came out in 2019, I think, early 2019, and was, you know, really well received. And now it's another standalone. And yeah, I just think she is

so brilliant. Really layered, but so compulsive. There's always a good, really satisfying ending, because she writes the settings of all the characters. I think this one's set in rural Ireland, which will be really interesting because previously, her books have been in Dublin. I love Irish fiction, anyway, and my family are all from rural Ireland, so I'm excited to see where that takes us. But yeah, I'm very excited for that one. I must say.

Claire Malcolm Her crime novel *Broken Harbour* is one of my favourite crime novels ever.

Grace Keane Agree. Yeah. Amazing.

Rebecca Wilkie Again, we've never had her at the festival. I don't think she does many events, does she?

Claire Malcolm No, I don't think she does.

Rebecca Wilkie She's got such a loyal fan base. I love *The Wych Elm*. And that's the only book of hers that I've read. And I was really absorbed by it – it's really long, but I was really absorbed by it. Hopefully a copy will be winging its way to you soon, Grace.

Claire Malcolm And then you can you can lend it to me afterwards.

Grace Keane Exactly.

Claire Malcolm So we've obviously all been reading a lot then, haven't we, over lockdown? We've got the festival coming, so I've also spent the last few weeks being reading books for that. And I'm looking forward to reading some of the books for events I'm not being directly involved in. But it has been, as you were saying at the beginning Rebecca, a really intense year for book publication.

Rebecca Wilkie It has.

Claire Malcolm And this October is going to be insane, isn't it, with the number of new books that have all been held back and...

Rebecca Wilkie Well, 600 books were published on the same day in early September, which is a lot for people to digest. There are so many I think that we should all be keeping our eyes peeled for, Tana French being one. I'm really excited about several memoirs and biographies. As discussed, that's one of my favourite genres. So Martin Amis's book *Inside Story* is being published this autumn. This is the much anticipated sequel, I think, to *Experience*, which was his memoir that was published in 2001. I think it's a bit more experimental than *Experience* was. I think he plays around a bit more with some fictional elements, weaving some fictional elements in. I loved *Experience*. It's in my top, probably five, autobiographies of all time. So I've got really high expectations for this one. I think he was motivated to write it by the death of Christopher Hitchens a few years ago. He's was one of the key players in *Experience*, as his closest friend. And I have been thinking a lot about what Christopher Hitchens would have had to say about what we've been going through over the last few months. I would have loved to have heard him talk about Trump as well. Instead, though, we do have brilliant Zadie Smith and her essays. As mentioned earlier, there is another authorised biography that I'm super excited for, which is called, *Let's Do It: the Authorised Biography of Victoria Wood*, by Jasper Rees. I mean, I miss her so much. I think we all miss her so much. And thinking about, again, what people would have made of this period that we're living through – if only we still had her around to help us a bit with this time in our lives [laughs]. So this is by the journalist Jasper Reese, who's interviewed her a lot. It's published by Trapeze, and it's coming out on 15 October. And apparently, the publisher sent me some information, and it's been written "with the approval and help of our family and closest friends, including Julie Walters, Dawn French, Celia Imrie" and also all of her family have contributed to it as well.

Claire Malcolm That sounds great. Because she was quite a private person, really, wasn't she? I don't know much about her private life or home life.

Rebecca Wilkie She was a private person, but this looks like... according to the information I've been sent, it goes right back. There's an extract from one of her essays when she was at

Bury Grammar School that they found. And I think this will probably be a very well received book this autumn. So I'm really looking forward to that. So many really. I'm very excited about the new Jonathan Coe book, which is called *Mr Wilder and Me*, which is, according to the publisher, "a dazzling new novel from the Bright Prize-winning, best-selling author of *Middle England*". And this time, "It's the heady summer of 1977, and a naïve young woman called Calista sets out from Athens to venture into the wider world. On a Greek island that has been turned into a film set, she finds herself working for the famed Hollywood director Billy Wilder, about whom she knows almost nothing. But the time she spends in this glamorous, unfamiliar new life will change her for good." Well, I can't wait. It makes me think a little bit of *Beautiful Ruins* by Jess Walter, which I loved as well.

Claire Malcolm Yeah, I love that book.

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah. Which is being made into a film, I think at the moment or perhaps already has.

Claire Malcolm Oh is it?

Rebecca Wilkie Mm-hm.

Claire Malcolm What else have you got? I know you've got a list, haven't you, of what you're looking forward to? Although I'm noting that is the second book you talked about that is about a real person in a fictionalised context.

Rebecca Wilkie Well that's my great love, isn't it. One, that isn't about a fictionalised person, I'm super excited for is *Love After Love* by Ingrid Persaud. It's already out. It was published earlier this year. I know, Grace, you love this book, don't you? And it's kind of on your...

Grace Keane Yeah, I read it last year, because we did proof party at Durham Book Festival and I got a copy. We've also got proof parties this year if you'd like to head over to the

programme. But yeah, it was one of the best books I read last year. It's absolutely beautiful. And, yeah, I can't wait for you to read it, Rebecca. I think you'll love it.

Rebecca Wilkie I just think it's got me written all over it: "Brave and brilliant, steeped in affection, *Love After Love* asks us to consider what happens at the very brink of human forgiveness, and offers hope to anyone who has loved and lost and has yet to find their way back." And Ingrid is a Trinidadian author who now lives in the UK. And yeah, I think this is going to be a really great autumn read. How about you, Grace? What are you excited about, other than Tana?

Grace Keane Other than Tana, in terms of 'haven't come out yet', I'm really excited to read Stuart Turton's new book, *The Devil and the Dark Water*. He wrote *The 7 1/2 Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, which came out a couple of years ago with Bloomsbury. And it's this mad, time travel, sci-fi crime novel that feels like an Agatha Christie, because it's set in the early 1900s at a big party. And it was just – it's massive. I read it almost exactly two years ago today, 'cause that's the sort of thing I remember, and it blew my mind. So I know a lot of people have been excited for his new book. But then I also think I want to use autumn to catch up on some of the summer releases that I've just missed. I mean, I've read 96 books so far this year, and I still feel like I've missed loads of stuff. So I really want to read...

Claire Malcolm 96!?

Grace Keane I know. Doesn't say much for my social life, does it? I really want to read *Anxious People* by Fredrik Backman, which was published in August. He's the author of *Beartown*, which I absolutely love, and *A Man Called Ove*. And it's about a group of people, I think, looking around an apartment, or an open house to rent an apartment, and then someone comes in with a gun and takes them all hostage. So that sounds brilliant. And also *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, which is like a horror novel set in Mexico in the 1950s. And it just sounds weird and wonderful, and I've heard great things about that as well.

Rebecca Wilkie There's so much 50s fiction, and I think the 50s seems to be this era that lots of writers are revisiting at the moment, don't you think? Because we've got two, in the festival programme, we've got Clare Chambers and Louise Hare, who have both written novels set during that time period, and kind of speculate that maybe there's something a bit comforting for us about it.

Grace Keane I don't think this one's going to be too comforting...

Rebecca Wilkie I don't think it'll be comforting, and the 50s wasn't comforting, was it? It was austerity Britain so it was a bit grim, really, wasn't it? But interesting something to...

Grace Keane Well this one has some quite extreme gory horror, so I'll see if I feel comforted afterwards. I'll let you know.

Rebecca Wilkie Yeah.

Grace Keane What about you, Claire?

Claire Malcolm I haven't got any gory horror, but do you either of know what a mountweasel is? Literary quiz...

Rebecca Wilkie No...

Claire Malcolm No? It is a "fake entry deliberately inserted into a dictionary or work of reference, often used as a safeguard against copyright infringement". How cool is that? I'm reading that from the jacket of *The Liar's Dictionary* by Eley Williams, who – I'd never read Eley Williams until she was part of an event we did at the book festival last year. I thought she was brilliant. And I know lots of people love her short story collection, *Attrib*. So this is her first novel, and it just seems brilliant. It's set in the final year of the 19th Century. Peter Winceworth has reached the letter S, and he's toiling away, writing a dictionary. And then we time-leap, I think, into contemporary day and somebody else is working on a contemporary dictionary. I

think it's about links between the past and now. I mean, Eley is brilliant with language, very playful with language in her short stories and things. So I am really excited to read this. I also find her writing really funny. And it's not often you read a genuinely funny novel, I think, so I'm hoping this might be a good laugh as well. I read, recently, this – I didn't know if it's out yet, but it's coming, and I know you like this author, Rebecca – Emma Cline's, short story collection *Daddy*. Brilliant title. I've been reflecting on the title of this collection now I've read most of the stories. She's brilliant. I mean, she's about age 12, I think, or something. And she wrote that amazing novel, *The Girls*, which was huge and brilliant. And these stories are great. They're often about people in transition. There's a lot of stories that end with people driving off or getting into a car, kind of like dot dot dot, you know, and I love – I have a bit of a soft spot for stories like that, that slightly leave you hanging, but she's just a brilliant writer. It's like she's been writing for years and years, you know, just totally confident storytelling. And then two authors that we have had contact with at New Writing North. Carys Davies has a new novel out, *The Mission House*. I loved, loved, her novel *West*, which was a Western, a short Western. But yeah, this is set in a former British hill station in contemporary India. And it's about an English man who, I think, goes to India to get his life together. It says it's about belief and non-belief, and kind of post-colonial ideas. I mean, Carys is the most beautiful writer, like, again, sentence by sentence her prose is amazing. So this will be as much about the style as it will be about the plot, I guess. But she's also really good at plot. So I'm genuinely really excited to read that. And then Andrew O'Hagan, who's an author of – I probably read more written nonfiction than fiction, because he's an amazing essay writer. But this is a novel. I've kind of been saving this. It arrived a few weeks ago, and I kept saving it. So I'm reading from the notes, "It's about two boys from a small working-class Scottish town, set in the mid-80s, who escape the life in that town as teenagers and go to the mecca that is Manchester, to find the music and freedom." I didn't read much about it, but it feels like it might be a bit autobiographical.

Rebecca Wilkie It's very autobiographical. It's really about him – I also have this on my pile, very excited. It's about him. His best friend in real life died from cancer very recently, and he asked Andrew to "write us back into life again", which I found very moving. And so he's

fictionalised their experiences. They remained best friends for their entire life, and he lost him very recently.

Claire Malcolm Oh God. I cry very easily, so this looks like it's probably going to have me in bits. Again, just a beautiful writer, I've enjoyed all his novels that I've read. So very excited about that. And then two more for the dark and depressing stuff, although I don't see them that way. I'm really excited to finish *Notes From an Apocalypse* by Mark O'Connell, which is all about how we are, obviously, there in the climate crisis. But it's really, I think, about how we are living through this moment of knowing the terrible potential future, and continuing to watch cartoons and get on with our life and do things like that. So he, I think, travels across the world to find out how different people in different countries – like billionaires building their doomsteads in New Zealand, and other people with less money, what we're doing. Preppers – kind of how people are thinking about what the future is going to be like, and how we negotiate it. It's got a brilliant picture on the cover of a man reading a newspaper with just burning trees behind him. But those burning trees look pretty much like what we're seeing in California at the moment. So you know, there is no getting away from this issue. And then just a very small book, an essay, *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* by Elif Shafak, who I know lots of us love. And this is really just how we stay sane in an age of division. And I've seen Elif talk at Edinburgh Book Festival before, and always really appreciated her take on this as a Turkish writer coming from a different culture and kind of political place. I think she really understands and has a meaningful perspective on some of these bigger ideas that affect all of us now, so I'm interested to read that. And I like a good long essay.

Rebecca Wilkie And that was written pre-COVID wasn't it? That was already out there.

Claire Malcolm It's published by the Wellcome Collection, and I think it might have been commissioned by Wellcome in some form of, like, contemporary thinking.

Grace Keane Yeah, Profile publish it, obviously with the Wellcome, and obviously it's funny, because the last thing that I did pre-COVID that was normal was have a meeting with one of

the publicists from profile, and she told me about that book. So it's funny, it's kind of bookended the experience.

Claire Malcolm So there's lots to look forward to. And I mean, I feel like I've hardly even really started to look at what else is coming out this autumn.

Rebecca Wilkie I know. And I've just remembered I haven't – I was going to mention a graphic novel. We haven't really talked about graphic novels, and we've got a couple of graphic novel events in the festival programme: one with New York-based graphic novelist, Adrian Tomine, and another with the northeast England-based graphic novelists Bryan and Mary Talbot. So please do check those events out, which I think will be really good. And another graphic novel I would have loved to have included in the programme this year, and we just couldn't, was *Glass Town* by Isabel Greenberg, which is all about the Brontë siblings and the fictional worlds that they created as children. So it's inspired by juvenilia, which is, I think, all at the parsonage, Brontë Parsonage, in Howarth. But it's really moving actually. And their lives were really difficult. And it, through illustration, it really juxtaposes how sort of bleak and grim the life in Howarth was, and the problems they were facing as a family and Bramwell's spiralling alcoholism and that kind of thing, with these very rich, imaginative worlds that they created and sort of lost themselves in, well into adulthood. It's a really beautiful, really beautifully produced book, I'd really recommend it. And I would really suggest if you think you don't like graphic novels, to give this one a go, because I think you almost forget it's a graphic novel. It's just this brilliant book about the Brontës and their world.

Claire Malcolm It's a lovely idea as well, isn't it? I've seen some of the – I once went to the Brontë Parsonage when we were doing an event with Sarah Waters, which was exciting in itself. But they showed us some of the tiny little books that you see on display there, which the Brontë sisters and their brother used to write, which kind of comes out in this novel, all these imagined worlds and little characters. But I thought that idea to form a graphic novel story out of that was really clever, really interesting. And also I think will appeal to a huge amount of readers.

Rebecca Wilkie Absolutely. And I always think, don't be scared of graphic novels, people, because there's actually a whole wealth of great stuff out there. So do check them out.

Claire Malcolm Brilliant. Well, this has been fun.

Rebecca Wilkie It has.

Grace Keane Thank you for tuning in everybody. If you want to find out more about any of the books we've talked about, you can check out the show notes to find out more.

Acknowledgements

Durham Book Festival is a Durham County Council festival produced by New Writing North with support from Durham University and Arts Council England. The 2020 programme contains over 50 free events. Please visit durhambookfestival.com to find out more.