Mary Jean Chan - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Parul - LWS: [00:00:00] It is welcome. Welcome to the London Writer Salon Podcast. I'm Parl. I'm your host, and I'm the co-founder of the London Writer Salon. And our salon interviews are a chance for us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey and dig into the stories behind the stories. And just about each week, we invite a writer that we admire into the salon to explore the craft of writing, the art of building a writing career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

And today we have the honor of speaking with Mary Jean Chan, who is the author of The Poetry Collection Flesh, which was the winner of the Costa Book Award for Poetry. And with shortlisted for so many different awards, the International Dylan Thomas Prize, the Angelic Award, Seamus Heney Center, first Collection, poetry Prize, and a Lambda Literary Award.

Mary Jean's second book, bright Fear, also garnered a number of awards and short listings. And Mary Jean is currently a departmental lecturer in poetry at the University of Oxford and a [00:01:00] research fellow at Harris Manchester College. They've been a judge for the Booker and for the Dylan Thomas Prize. And so how this is gonna work, I have some questions for Mary Jean about their writing process, poetry and their journey into this entire field.

But in around an hour or so, we'll hand it over to you for any questions that you have. So do chime in on the chat if anything comes to mind, and we'll try to circle around to it at the end. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writer Salon, Mary Jean.

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'll start with a poem and it's from Bright Fear and there is a central sequence called Spoa. I'll read one of the poems towards the end of that sequence, a poet 15. I cherish books because my mother first loved them. My grandfather found her a Chinese translation of Percy B Shelli's poems, and Charles Dickinson's great expectations in a [00:02:00] time of famine. What my mother taught me was how to revere the light language emitted my mother perceived that literature was precious, harvest from wild fields of sorrow. Stanza I'd someday read like those water reads, glinting under the Canterbury Sun that summer. We visited line clear as a reflection. syllable robust enough for a life. Thank you.

Parul - LWS: Beautiful way to start this. Thank you so much for that reading. And I'm so curious about, so you know, here you are today with these poetry collections you teach poetry as well, but I'd love to know where it all began. For you and I read that you first started writing poetry during your freshman year at business school in Hong Kong, which seems like quite an interesting juxtaposition there.

What was happening for you at that point in your life that led you to want to write poetry?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I suppose it is a strange place to [00:03:00] begin. One's poetic journey, but I was a. Disaffected and slightly depressed business school student in Hong Kong. It was not a choice that my parents made me choose. It was my own, decision to go to business school. And I quickly realized it was really the wrong subject for me. instead of doing my problem sets in finance and accounting, I was just browsing the poetry stacks in the English library at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as a way to disrupt myself as a way of finding solace. And then I started writing some. What I would say were pretty

bad poems, very sentimental, a lot of cliches and the like, but they were soothing and they gave me an outlet for a lot of the angst and the kind of difficulties I was facing.

Because it was a time in my life where I wasn't quite sure who I was. And perhaps that was construed to by the fact that I was in the closet. I was trying very hard to conform to a lot of perceived societal norms that were, at the time I held dear. And yeah, it [00:04:00] was a difficult year for me, but I found solace in language. And so after taking a class called Meanings of Life, serendipitously, it was an anthropology class called Meetings of Life. And speaking to the professor who taught me I realized I wanted to transfer abroad. And so I ended up transferring to a place called Swarthmore College in the United States to liberal arts college where I majored in politics and minored in English. And I continued my sort of tentative steps towards poetry, but at the time I still thought I was more someone who could appreciate poetry and maybe write essays about it, but I didn't really think I could write my own poems. it wasn't until I came across the poetry of Adrian Rich in my sophomore year that I yeah, realized maybe poetry could be accessible.

It could be something that was intimately personal but also political. It was the classic second wave feminism slogan of the personal was political, which of course has its limitations. But for me at the [00:05:00] time it was quite revelatory. And reading the work of a feminist, a lesbian poet was really eye-opening.

So that was in my early twenties where my journey towards becoming a poet began.

Parul - LWS: At some point further down the line, you started sending your poetry out, but I'm curious before that point, what were you doing to improve your craft and was that conscious or were you just naturally evolving it through reading and writing and maybe getting some feedback in?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah I had a few other sort of twists and turns in my journey towards writing poetry more seriously. I was writing a bit in college. I joined the Slam Poetry Team, but again, poetry was something I was doing. Writing the writing of poetry was something I was doing on the side as a hobby. And then when I came to the UK for my postgraduate studies, it was still in the social sciences, it was in international development. And I still felt that poetry was something I would do just, when I had time. But it kept calling to me. I went to more open mics, got involved in the Student Poetry Society at Oxford [00:06:00] and was encouraged to keep writing.

And so I decided to make another pivot. And this was the final one into creative writing. So I did then do a second Master's in creative writing in London. So it was during my ma at Roy Holloway in 2014 that I. Learned all about poetry. And the reason I did an ma I don't think it's for everyone. Even though I teach on one right now, really needed someone to teach me the ropes.

I did a minor in English literature, but it was a couple of credits. I did a Shakespeare seminar, I did some Victorian poetry, but it wasn't a comprehensive English literature degree or, comparative literature, et cetera. So I felt I needed someone to tell me, this is what a sonnet is, this is how you write a cistina, this is what poetry looks like in terms of contemporary poetry. So the MA for me was really pivotal and really eyeopening because I had some great tutors and I started writing and workshopping that year, and then towards the end of the MA sending work out.

Parul - LWS: How critical with things like work, shopping and getting [00:07:00] feedback on your work.

Mary Jean Chan: I think it was really important. Really believe in the power of sharing your work when it's still being formed if you will. And there are things that other readers or, people who come to your work

without any preconceptions or knowledge of, you can see that you can't. I was, apart from doing the ma I was enrolling in other poetry courses across London. There's something called the Poetry School. I'm sure a lot of poets here will know about it. I took a course with Piscal Petit at the time, and Matthew Dickman and all these other amazing poets just was really glad to be in the company of other writers who took their craft seriously and also realized that things I thought were clear and my poetry weren't in terms of content, for me it was very obvious that a poem I'll touch on later, perhaps called Wet Nurse.

For me it's very clear the wet nurse's own child had been abandoned. That was key to the plot because then the wet nurse became my mother's wet nurse, then nobody in the room knew that. So they were like, where does it say that in the [00:08:00] poem? And I realized there's a lot of backstory, a lot of things I thought was clear that wasn't, so I think sometimes having people look at your work, so important especially as an emerging writer, so you can hone the images that you're working with in the piece.

Parul - LWS: And so you went on to send poems out and you had them published in the Poetry Review Poetry London and other publications. Do you have any advice for writers who are at that point where they feel ready to share and they're thinking about starting to send it out to publication? Are there any considerations they should have before sending it?

Mary Jean Chan: I think it's interesting, right? Because when we hear a list of publications like that, there's the, maybe the presumption of that, that happened quite naturally or quite easily. But actually in between all those acceptances were so many rejections. I remember, on my submittable it was all rejection, decline, declined maybe one long listed in some prize.

I wasn't making the short list for [00:09:00] anything. And there's a period where I think all writers go through where. In some ways I believe that it was a good process, and I do think it's an indicative of something that perhaps the work wasn't quite ready. and actually I do believe that the times when I was, rejected or declined, I would go back to the drawing board and look at the poem again and realize I wanted to reline it to make the line break stronger.

Or actually, some of the imagery were a bit tired and worn, so maybe I wanted to find another way to express that same feeling or thought. Yeah, I think actually it's really good to put yourself out there and I think there can be a case made for putting your work out there sooner rather than later.

Because the worst thing that can happen is you get a no. Whereas if you're too precious about your poems and you think, I'm just gonna hold onto, I remember, even feeling that way myself, that I only have three good poems, so I must hoard them and then keep them close. And then someone once told me, which I think was so liberating, they were like you can always write [00:10:00] more.

And idea of only having three good poems is such a limiting one. It means that you don't believe in yourself, that you don't think you can produce better work. And so I wouldn't keep those poems close. I would if you think they're ready at this point in time, send them out. if they don't find a home, they will find a home at some point. There are problems that then got to me that I then worked on, and then they found. Better homes, so to speak. I think it's a process where you just have to be willing to put yourself out there, let it go and keep writing.

And the key here is to keep writing. I think sometimes people can get stuck on a particular stage, which is like submission and then you just wait. And sometimes the waiting can be very painful. And in order for that to not be a painful process, I think it's important to keep writing. So then you're always in the process

of writing, drafting, editing, sending out your work if one thing gets a bit or difficult, move on to something else.

If I can't write, I'll edit, and editing can be a lot of fun 'cause you're working with something that [00:11:00] exists. And if I'm feeling particularly confident that day, then I'll send some work out and not do any writing or editing. So it's a constant rinse and repeat, I think.

Parul - LWS: A little bit later we're gonna go a bit more specifically into the craft, because I'd love to know what it means for you to return to a piece of work and then reedit it or edit it, reedit it. But I'm so curious about this journey of you. I'm thinking of you there with these many submissions out there and actually really helpful to hear that you faced a lot of rejection, just like many of us do.

But in 2019, flesh was published and it went on to win the Costa Poetry Award and so many other accolades. And I'd love for you to just talk a little bit about how that project came together, was, how did you know you were ready to put this into a collection? How did you get that even published? Anything you can tell us around that journey is, would be insightful.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, sure. I I think it's again, a thing where one can't really plan that journey. I look back and I [00:12:00] think, gosh. How serendipitous, but obviously there are steps one needs to take, to put yourself, as I say, out there, to be engaging with the poetry community. I didn't set out to write this book per se.

I just knew there were poems I wanted to write. And I think often for a debut that's the case, it's, you don't, at least most poets I've spoken to, they have all these poems that are coming together. I was doing my PhD in creative writing after the ma. And so a lot of these poems were written during that period 20 16, 20 17 to 2019. And I just had a great mentor. Joe Kott, my supervisor at the time is just a brilliant person, human being. Really met me halfway and wanted to nurture my voice as opposed to imposing her own. And sometimes teachers or supervisors can have that. Can have that problem where they think there's only one way to write poetry.

But Joe was such a generous voice and person. And so really encouraged me [00:13:00] to stretch myself, and I began to gain confidence in my work. And that was around the time when some of the shortlists were happening. And maybe there's one poem that came third in this prize, or it was accepted by a magazine.

And, I think I got very lucky because one poem that was published by Ambit Magazine currently it's not, in circulation because they stopped it. But ambit at the time published a poem of mine and that was miraculously shortlisted for the forward prize for a best single poem. And so I think that's slightly. Sort of catapulted me into a sort of audience that I would not have had at the time without a book. That's just one poem. And somehow I was on the shortlist and so got to attend the forwards for the first time. I was terrified. I was in the same room with Ocean Vong and other people, who, whose debut night Sky with Exit Wounds was the shortlist of Best First collection all these other amazing writers.

But it was again, a huge boost of confidence and towards the end of my [00:14:00] PhD I just thought I wanna start sending out, and I guess I'll just share a short anecdote and that a lot of people probably don't know this, but some publishers, the big publishers, they do have submission portals.

It's just not maybe obvious or not widely known. So Faber has a poetry submission portal. It's always had it, you can just go and submit six poems to Faber and doesn't cost you anything. You send six poems. And I suppose partly not being born in this country helps with. Sort of a lack of preconceptions about what is

possible, what is usually done. Like I only came to Oxford in 2014, so I didn't know, obviously I knew favor because all the poets I studied growing up were, Silvi, Plath, Ted Hughes. But I didn't know what was the done thing. So when I see on a publisher's website, there's a submission portal. I think why not? I'll send work in and yeah.

So that kickstarted the journey towards publication, although it took almost a year. But I, yeah, somehow those six poems were noticed and. [00:15:00] picked up. I guess that the only thing I take from that is just don't, if people say there's no point, no one ever gets taken from the, that portal or, most people are commissioned, or sorry, not commissioned.

They're yeah, just they're basically chosen by the editors. I think there were lots of, there was a lot of advice going around that was like, you can't do that. You can't do that. That's impossible. actually why not try? Because really, again, the worst they can tell you is no.

Parul - LWS: I also really take from this, and what you said earlier about don't wait to send your work out, even if you're getting rejections. It makes me think about, I've heard this from certain novelists who will put short pieces out, no expectation, but just increasing, I think someone's called it like this, increasing the surface opportunity for luck, for serendipity and maybe, who knows who may read it and find you.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: I know less about the poetry world and agenting. How important is an agent for poets, do you think?

Mary Jean Chan: [00:16:00] I would say the landscape has changed a bit since when I first started publishing flesh. But it's still rare for poets to have agents, although more and more poets do nowadays. The kind of strange thing with poetry is that it's not strange, it's just a fact of it. The matter is that poetry just doesn't earn much money.

There's barely any money in it for agents. And so I think often there is less there's less desire amongst agents to represent poets, but also increasingly you have poets who then write memoirs or, they write fiction or nonfiction or all three, and there indeed some poets who, I met very early on in my journey, Kai Miller, who taught me, he's brilliant writer across poetry, fiction, nonfiction.

So I think there's a sense of, people can branch out beyond the genre they've chosen. So a lot of agents might represent a poet given that you, you might be interested in writing a novel or eventually writing memoir. And I think increasingly you see that across the board. Lot of poets I admire have written, amazing Yeah.

Novels and nonfiction, like women attributes, [00:17:00] just, put out the quiet ear and yeah, Andrew McMillan has pity his novel out, et cetera. yeah, so I got an agent. partly through serendipity. I think it was a timing thing. My current agent, Emma Patterson, who's brilliant was building her list 10 years ago and I think was looking more broadly.

And so when she came across the Royal Holloway anthology, just didn't just skip over the poets. And I got a call from Roy Holloway being like yeah, someone from RCW wants to speak with you, an agent. And I just, it was completely baffled, but also did not know the world of Agenting at all. So I had no idea what RCW was.

Obviously, looking back, it's again, a huge stroke of luck and still have not written any fiction or nonfiction for Emma. So she's very kind to keep me. Yeah, but again, I think sometimes you just can't plan these things, but. I think, again it's just testament to how if you have your work out there, who knows might who [00:18:00] might read it, who might come across it. Because the Royal Hollow anthology, I sent some work in because that's what you do when you graduate. And thought the agents are gonna pick up the fiction nonfiction writers. That's not really to do anything to do with me. but I'll put my work in there because why not? And again, something that I didn't expect.

So

Parul - LWS: That's great. I'm happy for you. I'm curious though, because if you don't have for, I'm curious whether you know this amongst your writer friends. If you don't have an agent, then I guess you are negotiating the contracts yourself mean, not you, but your friends maybe. I guess they're relying on like the Society of Authors and other bodies to help them negotiate those contracts.

Mary Jean Chan: I would say so. Yeah. And usually I'd say, so there's the sort of the mainstream publishers and. I dunno, I think maybe there is a sense of, oh if one of these big publishers want to publish you, firstly they'll offer you a standard contract. They won't try to do anything that's untoward, but [00:19:00] also it would be such thing anyway, so there's, yeah, maybe there is a sense of you would take that, without much negotiation. So yeah, perhaps that's to the detriment of the writers, but I can't really speak to that experience 'cause I haven't had that. But yeah and sometimes when people get chosen by a publisher it does feel like such a stroke of luck. And that was the landscape sort of 10 years ago. I think now you have more publishers, like Carnet has an open submissions period.

You have other publishers like Nine Archers, et cetera. They have, again, submission portals and places where you can actually send your work in blood acts. They do that as well. Whereas I think things were much more and opaque. Even just maybe five or so years ago. So things are becoming a bit more transparent and perhaps slightly ever so slightly easier for poets.

Parul - LWS: That's good.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah,

Parul - LWS: good news.

Mary Jean Chan: I hope it continues and

Parul - LWS: Yeah.

Mary Jean Chan: more transparent over time.

Parul - LWS: I'd love to talk about flesh, and I hope I'm not freezing too much on the screen [00:20:00] here. Do let me know if I'm the title Flesh comes from the French word for Arrow. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that title and what it means to you and maybe even what collection means to you.

Mary Jean Chan: yeah, sure. So I suppose the title came last, which I think is quite interesting. It was not something I realized was going to be the scaffolding for the whole book. But I, the word flesh firstly is a term that I grew up with. I used to be a competitive fencer or essayist in Hong Kong, was on the school team and briefly on the Hong Kong team as well.

I was a fencer for a long time. And apart from being arrow in French is also a, an attack, it's an offensive attack that fencers practice. So it involves running at your opponent at high speed and surprising them effectively. But because it's such a kind of speedy move often the two fences collide.

So there's a kind of, either you mutually get a point or you just end up on the floor. So there's, it is a high risk move and you don't use it often. And when I was thinking about this term, I think it captures that sense of, [00:21:00] yeah, running towards something that you want, a kind of risk taking that involves conflict but also potential reward. I like the kind of reverberation in English with the word flesh. The flesh of the body. 'cause underneath that fencing uniform, underneath your fencing mask is a vulnerable. Body. And often after hours of practice, I would have bruises all over my chest and sometimes I would bleed. So there was a clear sense of, yeah, if you're hit in the same spot over and over, that can cause bleeding.

Not in a dramatic way, a contact sport, right? So I felt it was an apt metaphor for themes of queerness of, race, of gender, of coming to terms with one's own body and the world the things that we have to negotiate, like racism and homophobia. Also growing up in Hong Kong, straddling the colonial and post-colonial period. yeah, I felt like there's all these themes that involved, conflict, but potential for reconciliation, for [00:22:00] intimacy, when you come close to someone, there is a chance that, you can fall in love. You could you could learn something about someone or, a place or Yeah, just yourself.

And yeah. So this theme of conflict and intimacy I thought was perhaps something I wanted to capture. And this title ultimately I felt was a word that could carry some of those connotations.

Parul - LWS: What I love about this is it really fits into what I've heard from you over many other interviews and you just talking about the craft. You've spoken a lot about attention, paying attention to words, and I can definitely see you doing this in the title. And I'd love to get a sense of how you do that as you construct poetry.

And I wonder as we go down that path of trying to understand how you think about poetry we have another reading from you. Is there another poem you would care to share with us?

Mary Jean Chan: Actually since I've mentioned the title and I talked so much about fencing, I might as well read one a poem to do with that theme. So I'll read from Flesh, and this is the [00:23:00] poem, practice. Practice. As a teenager, fencing was the closest thing I knew to desire girls swapping one uniform for another before practice, their white dresses replaced by britches. I thought we were princes in a fairytale with a twist. Since there were no princesses to be taken, wed as knight, we were told to aim for an imaginary spot just above our opponent's left breast. Often I left a bruise, the blades tip ricocheting off, chest guards onto skin. Just as often I would feel yellow blooms of ache where the girl I thought was beautiful had pierced my heart. Hours later I would transform. I would head back home with a deepening sense of dread. My bruises fading to quiet.

Parul - LWS: So beautiful to hear you read. [00:24:00] Thank you so much for that. And I'd love to know, I'd love to go behind the scenes of this with you if that feels okay with you just to, if anything you remember about how this started, this particular poetry, what were you thinking of? What were you trying to convey?

Mary Jean Chan: You mean that particular poem? Yeah. I think this was one of the earlier poems I wrote. In this collection. And it's interesting, when you put a collection together, you think through it in terms of not just chronology, but also like emotional arc and how the poems speak to one another. So the poems that come earlier in the book don't necessarily correlate to the poems I wrote earlier.

If that makes sense. But, so I'm trying to think about, when I wrote this poem, but I think it was one of the earlier ones, and I visually was trying to, I dunno if people can see, but basically there are these sort of couplets, these strips on the page. And they are mimicking the fencing piece, which [00:25:00] is a long strip of metal that, we fence on. So that was the physicality of the piece was something I wanted to convey in this poem. It's also a poem of 14 lines. So it's actually a modern sonnet. Sonnets are often love poems. So this is a, an emerging love poem or a closeted love poem, basically the speaker. Is coming into a sense of their own identity or desires in a, a space that is all female or but they can't connect with that part of themselves once practice is over. And so there, there is a kind of pun on the word practice as well, that this is just, guess this is just you're playing at to homoeroticism, but actually the real world doesn't allow for this kind of intimacy between two women. And yeah. So I think it was a poem that I felt was metaphor for some of the themes I would tease out later in the book. And actually I'm quite fond of this one, 'cause I think it, it [00:26:00] captures a kind of simplicity or a kind of straightforwardness of voice, of desire. I wasn't trying to play any complex poetic games.

It was just a poem that I really wanted to write and. It captures that fear at the end as well, where I say, heading back home with a deepening sense of dread, my bruises fading to quiet. And that felt so real to me. And I still remember that sensation of taking off the fencing uniform and getting back into the school uniform and being put into that gendered piece of clothing once more.

And so I wanted to convey some of that physicality as well in, in the poem.

Parul - LWS: I wonder if, whether it's this poem or another poem, I'm curious about what an initial very first draft looks like for you. Does it just look, is it just like a big piece of writing that you then whittle down, or are there lines that might come to you, or does it vary every time?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think I'm not someone who. [00:27:00] Actually writes very long poems. I've just noticed that about myself and they seem to be getting smaller as time goes on. So I think I often build from lines rather than whittling down. So often it's just a line comes to me like, bruises fading to quiet, for example, or I would head back home with a deepening sense of dread or even just deepening sense of dread, something like that.

And usually those phrases come about through music. Deepening sense of dread. There's that d sound that's re repeated, right? So sometimes it's alliterative or there might be a rhyme that comes to me and then the music contributes to a kind of imagery. And then I'll just jot that line down. Like for example, there's a phrase, a reconciliation of tongues, and then that's just stayed with me. And then I was like, oh, what am I gonna do with it? I don't know. I'll write it down. And at some point that. Finds its way into a poem. Sometimes a poem in its entirety does come to me and I just start writing it out.

And, usually the line breaks are placeholders, as in I know that's not gonna be the [00:28:00] final line break. 'cause otherwise if I'm too keen to get it all right. I won't write the whole thing. So I think it's really about letting something flow. And then have to go back and be quite strict with yourself and not let yourself off the hook and every single part.

Make sure the line breaks, make sense, make sure the imagery is as strong as you can get it to be. Make sure the musicality is what you want it to be. And ultimately, for me, the most important thing is, am I trying to say what I'm trying to say? If that makes sense. 'Cause sometimes a, an image might sound good or look good, but if it's not conveying the meaning that I do want to convey, then it's just an empty image. So emotional truth is what's what I'm going for ultimately? As I edit, I think,

Parul - LWS: Do you sometimes. Are you sometimes unsure what the emotional truth is?

Mary Jean Chan: yeah I often am. I think it's a, that's a great question. I realized with Bright fear, especially because there were, there's some emerging poems about my father. [00:29:00] I remember changing a final line, literally, like when the book was about to go to print. I wrote back to my editor and he was like, this is, version seven. We've done all the proofs, all the commas, everything's fine. We're gonna send it off now. And I said, actually, can I change the final line of this poem? And the meaning is completely different.

I think so I think the initial. Initial line, this is s poet 10. The initial line was something like, cannot ask, whether my father loves me or something. It was better than that, but now it is ask what I cannot ask, have I been there for my father? So the question the speaker wants to ask themselves now is, have I been there for my father? And that didn't come through to me until very late in the process. I was like, this whole poem rests on that final self interrogation and this needs to be right.

And so think my editor was like, yes, this is the [00:30:00] final edit I'm gonna take in. Please no more edits. But sometimes yeah the question or the answer isn't clear to us and we have to keep searching, I think.

Parul - LWS: So fascinating to just hear how you think about this. And it's interesting, that line about your father, it's almost like the reverse of what you'd said before.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: If we were to watch you in this process, in this mindset of trying to change, are you sitting at your desk? Are you wandering around? Is it anywhere and everywhere that you are contemplating something when you're in the middle of it, or I don't know, something else.

Mary Jean Chan: I, yeah, I don't think it's that of romantic. It's just hunched over on a desk or, yeah, sometimes in the shower. When one isn't thinking about something, things come to you, when actually on a walk, when one isn't trying so hard to solve the problem at hand, things will come to you.

So I do, I'm a firm believer in not writing all the time, and I think this works with poets 'cause with prose writers, sometimes when you really need to write, many thousands [00:31:00] words every day, you do have a deadline, you have to get the words onto the page. But works a lot with silence as well, and with space, a poem. It's not usually that long. So there's a lot that's unsaid. There's a lot of restraint, there's a lot of negative space. And so it's very important to be careful with what we, yeah. Put into a poem, but also what we leave out of it. And I think interesting because sometimes when people look at my work, they might think it's very confessional.

It's very like intimate, every piece of imagery that's put into it is carefully curated. None of this is accidental diaristic I'm just gonna blurt this out. It's what I've chosen to put in. And by the same token, I've chosen to leave a lot of things out. And also how that image is presented and why this metaphor and why this particular moment, and I think it's actually offers a lot of hiding places for someone. I've noticed that actually writers who work across poetry and memoir, for example. A poet called Billy Ray Belco, [00:32:00] who I is Canadian and I was really lucky to have a reading with him during the Edinburg book Festival quite a few years ago. And then after he wrote a memoir, I remember him saying, that felt so much more revealing than writing poetry, even though his poetry one could say was, apparently personal. yeah, so I think it's a different thing altogether.

Parul - LWS: I, I love hearing this. I'm curious, when you talk to your students about a draft that they have and you want them to look at it and apply some of your thinking to it, what questions might you have them ask themselves or the poem in order to think about what needs to be said or the emotional truth, or what needs to not be said?

Mary Jean Chan: I think actually it's a quite a similar process to what I've. Done for myself, so I would often read their work and then sometimes when I'm a bit confused about why this particular line or image, I would ask them, why have you put this there? And it's [00:33:00] interesting, sometimes they will come back with, I don't know, they're like, it just sounded nice, or that just happened, not quite sure, looking back. And then that's when I would be like that's not good enough. Because if the writer doesn't know why that piece of information or image is there, then the reader will certainly not get anything from it. And so sometimes interesting to have that, again, second pair of eyes to pick out these things.

And I think increasingly as one teaches, there's a, an intuitive sense of maybe what's working or not working in the poem. And then we can nudge our students towards just reflecting on the things that, we find might not be working as well. And the easiest ones are obviously imagery that we find a bit. or potentially cliched. It's if this is something you can reach for immediately, if this is the association that comes to mind just off the bat, that's too easy. That's my top tip for students is in poems, no image should be easy. Grass is green. That's too easy. Obviously that's very easy, [00:34:00] but it's interesting how we find that and we just sometimes let ourselves just do that, that one small leap and we think, okay that's sufficient. actually if we find it too easy, then the reader's gonna find it boring. That's just simple. So I think we need to be, yeah, I believe in like writing for joy and sometimes we do reach for the things that are closest to us in our imagination, but it's during the editing that I think one can be more, disciplined and think. this image actually doing much for the poem? And because a poem is so small, we need every word to count.

Parul - LWS: And you talk about juxtaposition actually, about how it's, it can be really powerful to put two things together. Does that lend itself to the imagery as well to images?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah. Completely. And again, I think it's juxtaposition is such a powerful tool for creating unexpected, sounds, imagery. And I think it's underused. I think understatement is underused. Often people [00:35:00] think I need to go for the big image, the impactful, like punchline. But actually, I think the bigger the emotion, the quieter the poem should be, and that actually sometimes conveys that contrast is what gives the poem its impact.

It's almost if you're dealing with something like grief, you can't create an image that's bigger than the grief. It's almost then it would become melodramatic or sentimental, or sometimes you will have to build up to that moment. But if we just litter the poem with things that are seemingly huge emotionally, it just falls flat. It's counterintuitive. Yeah. I do I do enjoy picking out these pieces with my students and figuring out how to just tweak things and make it a bit better.

Parul - LWS: It makes me think of it was funny. I was just thinking of how, I don't really watch Bollywood, but my parents do, and sometimes I struggle with Bollywood because the melodrama is over the top. And then I compare that to a really beautiful indie movie where it's so subtle. And staying on this topic, I'm so curious if you have, maybe you don't, I don't know, but if you have an example of [00:36:00] whether it's in your work, even if you flick through your book, is there an image that, is there a description that helps show what you're talking about?

This kind of like quietness or juxtaposition, images that might not naturally, you might not naturally think of them being together.

Mary Jean Chan: See, I, I'm just flicking through my book. How about we go back to flesh actually? On 61 there's a poem called Beauty it ends on, my mother is fearful of open windows, the abiding terror of the world's light. there was actually four more lines after that, my editor strongly suggested that I take those out and actually. I remember at the time felt quite difficult, even for me. Like I'm very receptive to feedback, but I just thought but those four final lines, tie up the poem, it really gives it that conclusive sense. And there's something I wanted to say more directly, [00:37:00] then I just, now I look at this poem and I think, I can't imagine it any other way, that he was so right to, to trust the image, to leave it with the abiding terror of the world's light. And just, in, in his words or in other people's words, like to step off lightly rather than hammer something home, and I really increasingly believe it, and I use it in bright fear as well. There's another poem where a few more lines and just took it out. Because I thought I can step off lightly, like precisely in the moment when you wanna really hammer something home, step off lightly.

And I think it tends to work.

Parul - LWS: Smell like you're trusting the reader.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah. You're trusting the reader Exactly. To co-create the poem and to Come into the poem and feel things for themselves.

Parul - LWS: I love that. Another topic that you've spoken up before is attentiveness and compression. And I was talking to a short story writer, Sarah Hall, about this idea, 'cause I'm writing short stories

She mentions this idea of the world on a pin, which [00:38:00] blew my mind. And I was just like, oh god. Short story needs to have a world.

Of course. That makes sense.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: then with poetry, it's even more compressed than that. And I wonder if you have any advice for writers on or budding poets on how they might compress an idea, and maybe it's partly what you've spoken about actually, but anything else you might wanna say on that? How they might compress things into such few lines?

Mary Jean Chan: It's interesting 'cause as you were saying about a world on a pin it occurred to me, I don't think poems. Our entire worlds, like poetry collection might be an entire world, but each poem doesn't have to be a world in its own right. And I think that's the beauty sometimes of reading poetry collections because each poet poem is a snapshot, it's a moment. there are quieter poems, there are interludes, there are things that will give clues to the next poem. And sometimes poetry sequences can build up to something that's bigger than some of its parts. So in some ways I find it, I personally [00:39:00] find it easier to write poetry because I think in prose, especially short stories or in novels you have to build a world, you have to have living, breathing characters.

You have to have a narrative. Something needs to be resolved. I think you have it harder. This is my personal view. And we just need to capture a moment, and in terms of how to compress things, again, I don't think I have a particular tip on how to do it, but I would say there are things that lend themselves to

compression. Like I think if it's a moment of it, if it's a scene or if it's a memory, then I want to write it as a poem because it feels that's true to that emotion or thought. then if I wanna convey something that unfolds over time or, there are multiple characters involved and I might not choose this genre, like I might write a short story, if that makes sense.

I think we, it's about the content finding the form that it needs. So I would say, especially teaching on a cross genre masters right now, we shouldn't all be [00:40:00] writing poems. We shouldn't all be writing novels. Like we need to find the form that is required to tell our story. So I guess my question first to the particular writer is what story are you trying to tell and which form would best suit that story? Does it need to be fiction? Does it need to be nonfiction? Does it need to be a screenplay? That's not immediately clear to me unless. One knows what you're trying to convey. I think so. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: I'm zooming out a little bit on, on the sort of topics that you write about. You touch on, queerness, you touch on race, family dynamics. Now, as you said earlier, although your poems seem personal, they're actually very carefully chosen and selected. But I wonder if there's still some things that are hard to put on the page, even in their condensed limited form.

And I ask this because I think many of us struggle with the same thing. What can we articulate

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: with [00:41:00] courage,

Paige?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think there's certainly quite a few poems, I think, especially in flesh that I found difficult. Especially, there, there's this poem that I think has been, again, inadvertently sort. Put into the kind of poetry sphere through the National Poetry Competition. And it's again, I guess a side note on surprising oneself.

I sent it into the National Poetry Competition one year, thinking that's surely the poem that won't get chosen. It's too short, it's 14 lines, usually a very long 40 line poem is what wins the prize. And then it, it came second and I was just utterly But also the subject matter of that poem is quite difficult.

Again, I think what helped was that I could speak to other poets and mentors and they were very reassuring and they encouraged me to only do what I felt comfortable doing. So there were interviews around it that I maybe didn't say yes to, or I just found a way of the poem in a way that felt more [00:42:00] soothing for me. think I've since been able to think about it as a moment in time, and also. The poem isn't reality, like it has difficult subject matter, but that is not what exactly happened. It's not like line by line, this is what happened on a Friday afternoon. Because that's not what a poem is. And so I still find poetry more reassuring and safer. If I were a hermit crab, like the poem is the Shell and I'm the crab in the shell. But yeah, if I were to write a memoir, I think I would find it a lot more difficult to deal with. So that's why I haven't written one. Probably won't.

Parul - LWS: What was the name of that poem? That

Mary Jean Chan: called The

Parul - LWS: second

Mary Jean Chan: yeah. If people wanna look it up, they can.

Parul - LWS: thank you. And thank you for sharing that on privacy and sort of security, because I suppose that is the fear. So it's really interesting to hear you talk about that. Hermit crab, the shell protecting you because you're not revealing everything and you're being very selective.

How have you found, or how, let me ask this again. How have you dealt with the response to your work, [00:43:00] whether it's good, bad, or indifferent? How do you personally deal with that?

Mary Jean Chan: I think in the early days when flesh started getting more attention, I think I was more sensitive to negative criticism. It was always a relief to, hear about a review that someone yeah. Had written that was nice or I went on good reads and then realized was probably a bit of a minefield. That certainly some people would find this lacking and then other people will be like, why have you even done that? And they want more of the other thing, so I realized quickly you can't please everyone. Once the book's out there, it's a cliche, but yes, it is really up to the reader how they respond to it. And I think I learned how to just not to worry too much about they like or don't like. Because honestly, of the day, the book's out there and I can't change it anymore. I can't go back and edit the poems further. So in a way, [00:44:00] it is done. I remember actually, this was a sort of gentler but funny anecdote, it's that I received a message through my website someone had the time to compare a version of my poem in Flesh to the version that had been published in the London magazine a few years before. And their conclusion was that they preferred the older version in the magazine. And so I read that and I laughed to myself. 'cause I thought, firstly, how nice of you to do a close reading of both and to notice that there are differences and to tell me why you preferred the older version. And I thought that perhaps they, they were right.

There's some things that they raised. I thought, oh, why did I change that? But it's too late ultimately. stuck with the one in the book, and I can only let the poem go. So I think bright fear was easier because there is less attention on a second book than on a debut. And also, as someone who was already teaching and had a bit more experience reception in general, I, again, just felt so grateful.

And I'm not saying this just, [00:45:00] as a kind of decorative thing. I honestly am very grateful. I know how difficult it is to get published and to have an audience and the thought of people even taking the time to read my work, even, borrowing it from a friend or yeah, spending time with what I've written.

It's such a privilege and never forget that. Like I'll never stop being grateful for that.

Parul - LWS: I agree. That sounds like a mess. Of compliment

Mary Jean Chan: yeah.

Parul - LWS: really cares, actually. Just a bit of a time check, probably another 10 minutes of questions for me, and then we'll hand it over to any questions that you might have. So if you have any questions for Mary Jean, you put them in the chat. And maybe just talking about your second, staying on your second collection, in what ways have you changed or grown as a poet from the first book to the next?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think reflecting on it a little bit I think I've been asked this once or twice, and I [00:46:00] at least that's my hope, that there is more of a clarity of in fear that things are sharper and somehow, more concise because I think. Flesh, even though I was already paying a lot of attention to language and trying to make sure that I was being incredibly precise.

I think I was still really at the beginning of my poetic journey and there was a lot of emotions and it was my first book or in a way, my first chance to share these things. So I think there was a lot more, yeah, maybe there's a lot more metaphor going on. There was the overriding metaphor of the fencer and, more masks and motifs and like that.

And I think bright fear is just more like just sparse and direct. there were things I wanted to say that I didn't think needed to be su sugarcoated, that it could just be there on the page. So maybe there are a [00:47:00] few more prose poems, because I think those lend itself to a kind of essay is stick tone. So there's a bit more of that. This is what I observed and this is what happens in the world of the poem. And it's not gonna be dressed up behind a metaphor. So I think in a way I feel that's an improvement and not quite sure yeah. Where the third book will lead, but we'll see.

Parul - LWS: Is in terms of you making those changes, is that, this might be a very obvious answer here, but I wonder if it's because your editorial and writing processes change or just that you have more experience and therefore it's coming out sharper 'cause of the wisdom and that you've accumulated.

Mary Jean Chan: I think partly because maybe a way the teaching has helped because I've been doing so much workshopping, right? With students and supervising their MA thesis, et cetera. And having done that so much with other people, in effect sort of being an editor of sorts, I think it, it helps me see my own work more clearly as well. [00:48:00] But at the same time, bright fear was mostly written during the pandemic and I think that environment of, this external environment of constraint and much pressure on language, on our daily reality made it, there was just more compression on what I was trying to say, if that makes sense. The external environment was, and therefore my internal environment was quite and so yeah, I think that has done something to the language of my work.

Parul - LWS: Who do you read? I'm curious who today you go back to poets and maybe just writers in general that you find inspirational, helpful.

Mary Jean Chan: I think that does change over time. Some people I've, I read during I, the writing of BrightView were, Seamus Heini I just went back to a couple of his poems, especially Postscript. And that's why I [00:49:00] have one called Postscript. Obviously mine's a lot worse than his, it was partly inspired by that.

Reading Anne Carson the Glass essay and some of her other work. So interesting. She has that essay sick voice, but that her images are so clear. So she has that lovely way with language that can be both argumentative, but also very pristine and precise. Was reading again, the oldies, Mary Oliver Adrian Rich, Audrey Lorde. These are people I go to often just for comfort. Then all the contemporaries who were publishing at the time, I was reading Will Harris, a good friend of mine who wrote Brother Poem, which is a book about a fictional brother. Yeah, just loads of other people. Can't name them all, but yeah, I would just say Emily Berry, certainly very important figure across both books.

Her Stranger Baby was very formative for me. Yeah, I think also I was reading some Claire Keegan at some point her small things like these, but also her book Foster, and I'm just fascinated by her. [00:50:00] Yeah. Use of language in, in Prose. And her books are, tiny, but they do create a lot of emotional heft.

So yeah, I think I'm in admiration of a lot of writers and so I read across like fiction, nonfiction a particular book by, Chetna Maru. I really loved the name's escaping me. It's brilliant. It's about a child playing squash in London and it's, yeah, absolutely amazing. And I should know the name 'cause it was on the Booker

shortlist that I helped judge, but I have a called, so I'm just gonna excuse myself and say the name's escaped

Parul - LWS: We, we'll find the name. Chetna Maru,

Mary Jean Chan: Chet

Parul - LWS: say

Mary Jean Chan: Actually I'll look it up.

Western Lane. Yes. I can't

Parul - LWS: Western Lane? Chetna. Maru.

Mary Jean Chan: I love it so much. It's

Parul - LWS: Okay.

Mary Jean Chan: brilliant gem of a book. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: And you mentioned the Booker, which is actually a nice segue into what I wanna talk to you next. So it's a huge undertaking. It's, first of all, it's a huge honor, but also a huge undertaking to become a Booker Prize judge. And I read that, that you had read 20 to 30 novels in a month, I [00:51:00] believe. I'm curious about what that immersion in outstanding literature left you with.

Did you feel like you, you came away with some understanding, some patterns that you observing about great work or about yourself as a reader?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think I, gosh. It was interesting reading so many books back to back. 'cause it literally was back to back for six and a half months. I was reading every single day. 'cause it's the only way you would be able to get through 30 books a month. There were some months that were like 25, but then felt like such a luxury in that it was just a lot of reading.

But I think reading books close to one another, you really do notice a good sentence looks like, because. You get to compare them. Just by virtue of reading them in proximity. And if, say there are lots of books on motherhood or if there are lots of books on family sagas, you get to see how different people do it. And [00:52:00] so the ones that really stand out in amongst this frenzied reading are books that actually are doing something very special with language it's easy to just get tired. And I think exhaustion is something that probably all judges experience, you just feel like there are just so many pages, and even the smaller books don't seem small anymore, and the 900 page tones will feel endless.

But I remember for example one of our other books on the long list it was like 600 pages. And yeah, I actually couldn't put it down. Like I, I loved it. So it's interesting how. so many books can actually crystallize the ones that you want to revisit. Like actually remember reading with certain books.

I want to reread it already, but there's no time 'cause I have to move on to the next one. And that's when you do know that something's different. So usually actually if you analyze the long list or short list, they are doing something either very special with language. The winner, [00:53:00] Paul Lynch did not have

any paragraphs in his book. And so it creates this real sense of claustrophobia. It's a kind of dystopian family saga at the heart of it, people talk about it being about politics and about, all sorts of other topics, but really it's about family and a mother trying to keep her family together during a time of, societal collapse.

But the fact that it had no paragraphs and the way it was written was so claustrophobic that it did contribute to that feeling that I think the author wanted us to feel. Yeah, I think it's just, it made me realize I am really interested in punctuation and just the sentence, because I think as a poet, that's what I'm drawn to. So

Parul - LWS: Did that change anything for you in the way that you wrote, or was it just an observation that you were curious to have made?

Mary Jean Chan: I think it just makes me realize how difficult prose writing is. And so I just have such a huge admiration for people who write. [00:54:00] Froze. Yeah, and maybe it's put me, it's made me feel a bit daunted and so maybe, yeah, I'll stick to poetry for now.

Parul - LWS: And as a reader of poetry, what do you look for? And this almost as a not as an academic, what are you hoping to get from a poem?

Mary Jean Chan: I think I, I do look for originality of language because again, maybe that expectation is heightened for poetry that I do want to read a poem and feel like I've not quite encountered that particular syntax or that particular way of thinking about something that is very old, like love or grief.

I want to be surprised still when we're talking about something so or so mundane in a way. Remember reading Lely Long Soldiers, whereas a collection that's published by Grey Wolf in the US and Picador in the uk and just being blown away by the syntax and the way she [00:55:00] structures the poetic line, as a Native American poet, a bilingual Native American poet.

And you know that's the kind of book that I would love to read and reread. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: What was the name again? Sorry. So we can.

Mary Jean Chan: it's called Whereas So one word, whereas by Lily Long Soldier I can type it in the chat. Lily Long Soldier.

Parul - LWS: Thank you, and we'll compile all these resources as well. Every every resource you mentioned. We'll add this to, for anyone who's watching this we'll send you the recording afterwards. What advice would you have, so we're coming to a close of the craft questions, but what advice would you have for someone who might sit down tomorrow with their poem?

And maybe it's in a slightly raw form and we may have touched upon this before, but Yeah. If they're starting tomorrow, what would you have them do or think about with their piece of work?

Mary Jean Chan: I guess looking at it and thinking presuming it's a lyric poem that it has line breaks, that's something I would immediately look [00:56:00] at. Are we ending on that then create a double meaning on the next line? Or is the line break actually doing something for the poem, or is it an arbitrary. Point at which you've just decided to break the line. Like line breaks are so underutilized sometimes, and I think they can be really wonderful engines for pacing, for music, for double meaning. So go through your

line breaks and make sure they're doing something. Yeah, again, it's like test for musicality. I mean it sounds like mechanical, but those are things I would look at. Look at the, read your poem aloud to yourself and are there moments where you trip? 'cause sometimes when we read our poem aloud, and supposedly we're very familiar with it, if we keep having difficulty over, uttering a line, there's something wrong there or there's something not quite working there. So I'm a big fan of reading aloud as I edit. Or sometimes people make edits as they read aloud, as in when they read, they've said something else. And actually maybe that is what the poem should be. Like. If you've added a word as you're [00:57:00] saying the poem isn't in the typed up version, then maybe that word needs to be there.

Or you've changed a word, sometimes we actually do that. And subconsciously. And so yeah, read aloud your poem. Check your line breaks. Yeah, just see whether this is what you wanna say, pure and simple, or is it just beautiful? Is, are there lines that are just decorative but they're not filled with meaning?

Sometimes I think we, in order to achieve something, we sometimes let something else. We let something else go. And that's okay. As we're building the poem. But once we've built it, it's time to make sure everything is exactly as it needs to be. And also, there's one last tip I would give is that sometimes when we write a poem we end up writing these lines, especially at the beginning, that are what I would call a scaffolding. Because that's how we enter into the poem. And we need those, we needed those lines, otherwise we would've never written the whole thing. But actually looking back, maybe the opening lines are the scaffolding. So you could actually begin the poem [00:58:00] later. And actually that's a quite common feature of early poems is that they begin to soon, but they were necessary we wrote it.

But yeah, so look at the opening and look at the ending. And I'm a big fan of cutting when necessary, yeah.

Parul - LWS: Ruth there with your, shes

Mary Jean Chan: It's like pruning a tree. We would prune the tree, won't we? Exactly.

Parul - LWS: Makes me think of, I, I sometimes hear teachers talk about say similar things to novelists about. Maybe you should start on chapter three actually. That's where the story begins.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: A few more questions from me and then we will hand it over to all these questions.

Mary Jean Chan: I think I'm always trying to understand everything, and the one way I do it is through writing. So I do write a lot about family dynamics, as you've said. I've tried to understand what love is given particular cultural expectations, societal. [00:59:00] Norms and queer, how does one Honor one's ties to one's family and other loved ones whilst also being true to oneself. Like those are questions I've always been asking. How does one live with structural oppressions, like racism and other forms of inequality. And, how does one engage with one's, reality? I do feel that a poet isn't necessarily, I think, did Adrian Rich say this?

I'm definitely butchering it, but she said something like, isn't revolution, but a way of knowing why it must come. A poem isn't revolution, but a way of knowing why it must come. And so I think I find that quite powerful. It is a way of facing the problems or allowing it to be spoken. And I suppose once something is spoken, it can be And when [01:00:00] there are truths that are aired about oneself, about one's conditions, then we can change them. And I do sometimes believe that some poems of mine are forms of not wish fulfillment, but a kind of hope. And sometimes when one can dare to hope, then we might, one might take

actual steps in one's reality to change certain things. then there are things that have become possible in bright fear that weren't possible in flesh. So I find that quite like in my lived reality, and in some ways I wonder whether writing those poems has helped me gain the courage to then, in Rica's line change, change your life, like to change one's life. and I do believe that I am a writer and I am who I am today because of the poets I read all these pioneering poets. It did change how I lived my life. So somehow I believe in the power of the written word, in that kind of sense,

Parul - LWS: that's beautiful. I think I think that's true for us too. I think

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you.

Parul - LWS: writing through [01:01:00] it's true for us. So thank you for that. And what's coming next for you? You mentioned a third book.

Mary Jean Chan: I hope there will be a third book there. Yeah, I've been writing some poems, but it's been a rather difficult year personally. So think what I'm glad about is that I have maintained a connection to language and unlike during the pandemic when there was like really 10 months in 2020 where I couldn't write, I just had lost the thread altogether. something I dried up completely. don't feel that's the case right now, even though I'm not writing like very quickly or a lot, but there is some connection to language that I still have in spite of a difficult year. Yeah, I'm glad for that.

Parul - LWS: Thank you for sharing that. If we, so one final question for me. If we were to look at a typical week of writing for you, and I understand it might change what might that look like? Is it in the morning, in the evening at your desk on the move?

Mary Jean Chan: Again, I'm not, I don't think I'm very good. [01:02:00] A very good example for people who are looking for like structure. I think I really just, because often there's so much going on, and especially this year, I've had caring responsibilities. WASA was in Hong Kong this summer. I did go try to go to a cafe like in the morning from 10 to 12 when those two hours would be mine and I would have some time to think and read or write. but then now I'm back in Oxford and I've been teaching, it really has been a. So it, yeah, a quiet hour here and there. Sometimes on the bus or on the train going somewhere. I would, again, if a line or image comes to me, write that down in my, on my phone. And I remember writing or drafting a poem on the train from Oxford to Manchester. This was last year. And then that's ended up becoming a poem. And it's called, this is Coach C. 'Cause I looked up and it just said, this is Coach C, like we've all been on trains and just looked up and I was like, oh, yeah. So I wrote a poem about that. So I just think, yeah, everything can be an inspiration.

[01:03:00] There's nothing that's too mundane to write about.

Parul - LWS: I love hear hearing about different practices, so it's really nice to just get that insight into what it is for you. Recognize it changes, and it's different for every writer.

I would love to. Ask you some questions from the audience on behalf of the audience, and I invite you friends if you would like to.

Feel free to turn your video on and say hello to Mary June. I think every really nice for them to see you in the room and see who has been listening in. So do come on in and say hello. And we've had some, as you're doing that, we've had some questions submitted ahead of time, which I might start.

Hello friends, lovely to see you here. And actually Danielle, we actually have a question that you submitted earlier. Would you like me to ask that on your behalf or would you like to ask that? Would you like me to ask that on your behalf, Danielle?

daniellestevens: shy. Yes.

Parul - LWS: Ah, okay. I should ask that. And it's so lovely to have you here.

So Danielle says, I often write about death, grief, and [01:04:00] intergenerational connection, the kind of themes that can feel like emotional excavation. I find it beautiful, but also draining at times, especially as someone who feels things deeply and carries a lot of ancestral memory in my work. I'd love to know what rituals, practices, or boundaries help you stay grounded while writing about such charged material.

How do you return to the work after you've poured so much of yourself onto the page?

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you for that question. Yeah, I think sometimes, it's good to have an awareness that, writing is work and that it's often emotional work. I personally found it very helpful talking to certain friends who maybe were writing about similar topics other writers or, people who. I also just knew would understand me. So they didn't have to be writers. There were other people I could talk to about what I was doing. felt helpful because they understood me as a person. And I think sometimes that's the difference is that we need people who can understand our work. We also need people who [01:05:00] support us, who understand us as people.

And in a way our work need not matter to them that much. 'cause sometimes we can end up sacrificing ourselves for our work a bit or being like, no matter how hard this is, the work comes first. And actually it's been very helpful to have a few friends tell me, Mary Jean, I honestly, I don't read poetry.

I don't really care what you do, but I love you and I want to make sure you're well and that you're taking care of yourself. And I think that's really a great thing to have because sometimes we do need to take a step back and realize, that poem is triggering or it's difficult and I need to take a break.

And it actually doesn't really matter at the end of the day if I don't finish that poem. There are some poems I have left, there's some topics. Haven't written about and won't write about for a long time because it's too much. And I think it's fair for us to draw those boundaries for ourselves. And we're not letting anyone down if we do that.

We're just protecting, the person who's doing the writing. So yeah, I do believe in that.

Parul - LWS: Thank you

Mary Jean Chan: helps a bit.

Parul - LWS: and thank you [01:06:00] for the beautiful question as well, Danielle. A writer is written in anonymously and has asked how can I build up confidence or write with confidence as a writer of color and or writing from a queer identity?

Mary Jean Chan: I think firstly is reading other writers of color, queer writers of color. I found so much solace reading other people who are like me or a part of the same community. I think it's also important to have that community. I think going to events that are particularly for yeah, queer writers or writers of color.

Just seeing people on stage from that community. I remember actually in 2015, I went to the South Bank Center. It was actually a date. The date didn't go so well in the sense that I didn't continue dating this person. But the date was great because I saw something called the Complete Works. And some of you might know as poets, it's a, it was a mentoring scheme that ran for five years, I believe funded by Arts Council England. But initially spearheaded by [01:07:00] Bernadine Aristo who'd done this report into poetry publishing in the uk. And I think in 20, in 2007, only 1% of poetry published in the UK was by people of color. In 2007. And so they created the complete work scheme to mentor, a new generation of emerging BME voices. that was the first showcase in 2014. and I was in the audience and I saw people like that. Most people know in Jay Bernard, Sarah Howe, all these people who I as friends and mentors, et cetera.

Mona Archie. And then sitting there in the audience, I thought to myself, maybe a space for me here in this country. perhaps might be possible. And I can't underestimate that. The power of Yeah. Representation and seeing other people, do things that, make them come alive.

And also, these are the people who have also mentored me. And so I do believe in the power of mentorship. So I would [01:08:00] also suggest that apart from finding community, finding mentors, spaces where you can be supported and mentored and actually just talking to people at events or reaching out via email. And you'd be surprised sometimes people will have the time and space to support you. And I do know a lot of people who have benefited from various other schemes. Like the re poetry critics scheme is one for of color. again, that was crucial in adjusting some of the statistics that were quite horrifying.

Yeah, we still have a long way to go, but I think there are more and more mentorship schemes available in all aspects of writing and publishing in the UK right now. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: For that and actually leading on, there's a question that kind of follows quite naturally after this, and Grace asks about maintaining privacy. So versus a life in public as a writer, and the choice that one might make between implicit and explicit expression.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think it's interesting somehow poets [01:09:00] read as writing nonfiction, right? Even though that's technically not what we're doing. But there is that maybe because poetry is an oral form, we do readings, where we read our poem is allowed to small audiences. So that creates a sense of intimacy and people feel that we are divulging these private things and sometimes we are I think, luckily poetry is also a very niche thing compared to, comparatively like compared to we don't tend to be at like large venues and doing sold out events unless you've Yeah, unless it's for a particular prize ceremony, et cetera. And of course there are increasingly spaces where poetry is staged in a more, I would say sophisticated manner.

But usually you are in bookstores and you are in, cafes, et cetera. And I find that quite comforting. I try to also remember this advice that I was given and that is that the audience is usually on your side which I found really [01:10:00] sweet. 'cause I think often, no matter how small the audience you are reading to an audience, so there can be that sense of, oh gosh, I need to perform, I need to make sure I don't trip over my words, not disappoint them, they pay tickets to come.

That's my, overactive mind. But I was told by someone that actually people who can. bothered in a way to go to a bookstore at 7:00 PM on a Friday night are actually already fans or people who care about your work. Or just interested and curious. So they're not waiting for you to trip up, like no one's actually gonna judge you. And so I do find it helpful to, in a way realize that it's a privilege again, to be doing what I'm doing and I'm just gonna do my bit and the audience can take whatever they want and that, I hope they also

understand that, the person they encounter in the book is not the person they see in real life. That. That we don't know someone just 'cause we've read their writing, even though there can be that false sense of knowing someone. And of course I've also had literary crushes and [01:11:00] felt like I've known someone because I just love the way they use language. But I've realized since upon meeting some of these people and then becoming friends with them, that they're not quite the same person that I've encountered in their writing.

So it's, yeah, maybe 'cause I know more other writers now, it's de demystified this idea of, the writer as a public figure in a way, if that's answering your question a bit, but I just don't tend to presume people know me. So I think it's, when you're a poet, even a poet who's won all the prizes there is to win.

You can still be pretty anonymous, I think. It's not really like you're often known maybe at events but not elsewhere. So that's quite comforting

Parul - LWS: It's good to know. That's actually really good to know. Thank you for that question, grace. Thank you Mary Jean for the answer. Dominique has a question. Can you talk about how grief for a loved one or a homeland or a former self functions in your work?

Mary Jean Chan: Oh

Parul - LWS: I guess it's maybe how you [01:12:00] approach it in your work.

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I think so. Maybe not quite to sidestep the question, but increasingly as I write, I realize grief is the flip side of love. If you grieve a place, it means you've once loved it, or there are reasons why you couldn't love it. I think initially I had quite a bit of grief over my sort of relationship to home, to Hong Kong because I left at 19 and closeted prior to leaving.

And then have always felt that relationship to my home city. And then this year, because of family illness, I've been back a lot more. I've actually realized that things are changing and that there are lots of things that I grieved that perhaps now I can reconcile myself with. And there are still ways of loving a place that is imperfect and no place is perfect in the world.

And similarly to the choices, one makes when one is young, all these things that, all the regrets, all the things that, one, even the relationship that I [01:13:00] had with, for example, my mother, there were things we both could have done better, but actually because we still love each other, there is always still time to love each other better.

So I dunno if that helps. It's this idea that grief and love are intricately interconnected. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: And maybe on, on that same topic, if there is a topic, there is a subject matter that you're too close to, that it's, still the wound,

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: how might you approach it in poetry? Or do you wait until it's more advanced than you've had time to reflect on it?

Mary Jean Chan: Yeah, I'm definitely increasingly a believer in not forcing anything because I think the trouble with sometimes writing spaces and workshops that I've been in is that there can be a lot of wounds

that are excavated and the poetry facilitator or the facilitator is not trained in therapy and is not trained in how to hold everyone's emotions or wounding. And then you can have issues where [01:14:00] then people are left feeling quite, emotional and bereft and they're struggling with what they've just written about or excavated. So I do think that one should definitely only proceed at a pace or in a way that is. It can be a bit out of your comfort zone, but it shouldn't leave you stranded.

It shouldn't, you shouldn't force yourself into an unsafe mode even for the sake of a poem. There's just, it's just not worth it, I think and I've realized that it's a topic that's come up for a lot of, like poetry tutors, whether some of us should be getting some kind of qualification in like therapeutic training or, or have say an arts therapist in the room, because, are these safe spaces?

Are we able to create a safe space for people to share these difficult subjects? And sometimes yes, sometimes no. Yeah. So hope that helps a bit.

Parul - LWS: Yeah. Thank you so much for that. And maybe one final question here. It's from Grace and it is, can you talk about entering the world of image in metaphor? [01:15:00] Is this something deliberate and intentional or spontaneous?

Mary Jean Chan: Oh, thank you for that. That's lovely. I don't know. I just, I do think in, do think in metaphor sometimes, or I just find English to be a really beautiful language and I do love Chinese as well, so I just love language and so there are just constantly these little floating lines that come into my head.

And, because maybe sometimes I'm always I suppose I'm always either reading something or a conversation or just glimpsing like a, a piece of graffiti. I think there are just so many lovely things in the world that can spark one's imagination if only we're paying attention.

I guess it goes back to that. It's if we're paying attention, then there, there's just so much write about and to think about. And I'm someone who, I guess I grew up as an only child. I was often in a room full of adults. I had nothing else to do, but pay attention. I was bored, I would just [01:16:00] look, I would look at people's faces.

I would just observe what was being done. The gestures the sort of minutiae of the dining table, the, yeah, the way people interacted with each other. I just observed. So I grew up observing the world and I think in a way it's turned out to be a good thing.

Parul - LWS: Thank you so much and thank you for that question, grace, and that brings us to a close. This is brings us to the end of the interview. Thank you so much Margene, for your time, your insight and honesty. It's been really interesting just to get a sense of how you think and how you approach the world.

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you so much. This was, yeah, really lovely. And thanks for all your questions and for coming as well.

Parul - LWS: Yeah. You're so welcome. We so happy to have you here. And I'm curious if someone wants to stay in touch with you or follow you, what's the best medium for you?

Mary Jean Chan: You could reach me on my departmental email. It's just on my Yeah. University website or I have a website as well, personal website and you can drop me a comment and that gets sent to me as well. Yeah, thanks everyone, and thank

Parul - LWS: Wonderful.

Mary Jean Chan: All the brilliant questions. You prepared as well for all.

Thank you.[01:17:00]

Parul - LWS: You're so welcome. And friends, I invite you to unmute yourself. Let's give Mary Jean a London writer Salon on round of applause. Thank you so much, Mary Jean.

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you. Thank you everyone.

daniellestevens: Thank you.

iPhone: Thank you.

Mary Jean Chan: Thanks so much.

Parul - LWS: It's yeah, such a treat to hear from a poet. Absolutely love this. We're gonna process this recording. We'll share it with everyone here. I'd check out Mary Jean's work if you haven't. Flesh and Bright Fear Wonderful collections. And we'll look out for this third book that might be coming our way.

That's it. Thanks so much for being here, friends. Thank you again, Mary Jean. We have writers out few fancy writing with us in silence in around half an hour. We do have that coming up@writersout.com. That's it. See you soon.

Mary Jean Chan: Take care. Bye.

Parul - LWS: Thanks so much friends. Bye. Thanks.

Mary Jean Chan: Thank you.