

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Hello, and welcome to the fourth episode, the halfway point of our third season of *Eight Days of Diana Wynne Jones*. I'm REBECCA FRAIMOW.

EMILY TESH: And I'm Emily Tesh and today we are discussing *A Sudden Wild Magic*, Diana Wynne Jones' first fantasy book for adults. Now, Becca, you told me you had not read this one since you were a teenager and you had could not remember anything about it. So having just read *A Sudden Wild Magic* for the first time since then, impressions?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [laughing] So the reason that I, like, when I read this when I was a teenager the impression that I had was basically, I picked it up, I was like, this is a Diana Wynne Jones I've not read, so I must read it. And I was like, well, this isn't like any of the other Diana Wynne Joneses that I like. And I put it down again and none of it stuck. Having read it for this project has been a whole different experience because I think that where it sits in her career -- understanding where it sits in her career and what this book represents for her made reading it really impactful for me. I still don't know that I, like, I would rank it high among my favorite Diana Wynne Joneses. I don't know that I would do that, but I think it's an important book. I think it's an important book for her, and I think it's an important book for us to read and talk about.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, the thing about *A Sudden Wild Magic* is, is it good? No.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [chokes, laughs] I had literally just taken a sip of my drink.

EMILY TESH: But is it special? I think it is. I think it's a special book. I think it's an astonishingly brave book. Because at the time when Diana Wynne Jones writes *A Sudden Wild Magic*, she is nearly 60 years old. She is 20 years into a fairly successful career as a writer of children's books and she has got children's books down pat.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: She has at this point a 14 or 16 chapter structure that she has used regularly since the mid-1970s and has it to perfection. She's got this mastery of the very close child point of view. She can do a children's book, I think, in her sleep at this point. But it takes something. It takes, I think, some real courage as an experienced creative to throw everything you know you're good at out the window and start again from scratch. And it does feel like *A Sudden Wild Magic* is that moment of daring.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. The thing that strikes me about this book is that it's a book that has, I think, very little == a lot of joy, a lot of exuberance, very little control, about having a lot of joy and a lot of exuberance and very little control. Like this is the thing.

EMILY TESH: Right, It's thematic.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Exactly. This is the thing that she's thinking about.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, but this is, above all, this to me is the book where Diana Wynne Jones goes, oh, finally I am allowed to write about sex and then wildly overshoots how much sex it is reasonable to write about.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. [laughs]

EMILY TESH: This is the one with the orgy. I love the orgy. I love this ridiculous book. Again, i don't think it's good. Those are not the same thing. But I think it's very, the word I keep coming back to is vivid.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: What was I saying?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Sex. Lots of sex.

EMILY TESH: Sex, lots of sex, yes. I mean, I do enjoy a book with lots of sex, which might be why I like this one so much.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And so did Diana. You get the feeling that she was just so excited to be able to write about sex and death that she threw as much of it as she possibly could into the first several sections of this book.

EMILY TESH: There is so much sex and death. But no the word I wanted, was thinking about, was vivid.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: If you compare this book to the most recent children's book she wrote, which is not Black Maria, because that's from the 80s --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: -- because she didn't publish it till later but she wrote it a while ago, the most recent children's book she wrote was Castle in the Air, and Castle in the Air is, I think, strikingly anemic by comparison.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Mm-hmm.

EMILY TESH: It's good, like, it's a competent, well-structured children's book, but it doesn't have the, the punch, the weight, the life. I don't know what I'm trying to say here.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [laughs] Well, it doesn't feel like, it does feel like this is a book that she was excited to write.

EMILY TESH: Yes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And she was having fun with it every stage. It's stuffed full of jokes. You could tell she was making herself laugh with every section.

EMILY TESH: There is so much that's funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Not that *Castle in the Air* isn't stuffed full of jokes. *Castle in the Air* does have a lot of jokes. But --

EMILY TESH: But it is not as funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It is not as funny. And there is something else about *Castle in the Air*, which is that the main plot of this book focuses on stealing other people's ideas and how eventually, if you do too much of that, it starts to destroy your own kind of inner world.

EMILY TESH: Diana at Diana, I've got to stop mining the *Arabian Nights*.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: She's told yourself this so many times.

EMILY TESH: But you actually pushed out we're on the back of a whole run of books that are about failures of imagination and limits of creativity. We have, *Lives of Christopher Chant* is a book about the imagination being exploited and turned to a mere profit-seeking monstrosity. We have *Castle in the Air*, which is about failed daydreams, stupid daydreams, daydreams that come up to nothing and the necessity of finding a real instead, and *Black Maria*, we have our storyteller girl, for the first time her storytelling is very much not what saves the day.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It's a trap.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, and the idea of the storytelling becoming a trap is I think quite shocking if you look at the arc of Jones' work and I think, basically all of these in a row following *Carol Oneir*, the short story about the creative well running dry and you don't know what to do. I'm like, Diana, are you okay? *A Sudden Wild Magic* is okay. There we go. And I mean that in the in the most loving possible way. This is a book that is once more coming from a place of creative abundance. Boy, that's the word I want. Boy, is it abundant.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. And we're not, this is the only thing going to say that looks forward because we don't do that. But having better knowledge of all the books that came immediately after one than this one, reading this one, it feels like it was necessary for this book to be written in order for those other books to exist. That's all I'm going to say. We'll talk more about when we hit them.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, no, I do agree with you. I think the the back half of the 90s contains some of Diana Wynne Jones's most impressive books and they couldn't exist without this. This is, this is also experimental. Wildly experimental. She really has thrown out all the things she's good at and started again.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. And I don't think she should thrown *all* of them out.

EMILY TESH: It's terrifying to o that. Like, just speaking as a writer.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: If someone told me that you need to write a book that is completely different to everything you've done before --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah!

EMILY TESH: And you can't use any of your usual tricks, or you can, but you have to use them differently, I'd be like, oh my God.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, it's scary.

EMILY TESH: It's scary!

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And it is -- so, like, the broad plot outline of this book is, again, about a woman who is depressed, who is hung up on past choices she's made. She's specifically hung up on a bad love affair. And so she makes a choice to leave, to make a clean break with everything behind her, to throw herself into a very scary situation in order to just put herself in a new place and with a new mindset where she can't think about the stuff she's left behind her anymore.

EMILY TESH: Ah, no, you're right. That, that is the, the emotional heart, isn't it?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: And what Zillah, the main character, calls it is a sort of death. And I read it in conversation with Christopher Chant, which is the suicidal depression book. Zillah is suicidally depressed and she escapes to another world, but in a very different way to Christopher.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. And there's a lot more going on. So -- a lot more going on. A lot more going on.

EMILY TESH: It's so much. I'm not quite sure how we're going to do usual thing of, like, talking through the plot as we go. We don't have that much time. I need to be out of here in an hour and a half.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, we're going to do our best. Okay. So I think we can get through the beginning setup pretty quickly. It's the nineties. We're on Earth. Bad things are happening. Chernobyl has happened.

EMILY TESH: So the 90s.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: AIDS is happening.

EMILY TESH: Very precisely the 90s. And this I thought was interesting, that many of the children's books, there's a sense of timelessness about them. And we know it's intentional. She thinks about story time, which is always now. And you have to, like, really be paying attention to notice that Eight Days of Luke is a book from 1973.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: And it's literally just that he's got a radio rather than a phone to play his music on.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: This one, again, setting it in a very specific moment feels like something she was excited to do because now she's writing a book for adults and adults are allowed to know that it's the 1990s and AIDS is happening and climate change is happening.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, this is a book about climate change also.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Climate change, it turns out, is the fault of a parallel universe.

EMILY TESH: I actually, I enjoy the setup, which basically is, we have our hero, question mark, we'll come back to that, is a guy called Mark, who is a boring nerd who works with computers, but secretly he's fantasy.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And I'll tell you how you know that secretly he's fantasy. He always wears a broad-brimmed hat to nod to the magician card and the tarot. And I read this and I was like, Diana, are you making a joke about Terry Pratchett? And I kind of think she was.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [laughing] If so, it's a mean joke. Because Mark is, so the thing about Mark, we will find out what Mark's real deal is later on in the book.

EMILY TESH: Much later.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: The thing about Mark is that he's boring. He's a very, you know, when he's first introduced, and it again, it makes his whole fantasy deal later on so funny, because when he's first introduced, he's just Mr. Boring Man, who happens to do fantasy. He goes, so he discovers this problem, which is that a parallel world has been sort of using our world as like a little test site to solve their problems for them. So they've got a climate change thing going on.

EMILY TESH: Right, so they've been starting wars. They've been introducing technological difficulties. They've most recently introduced epidemics and climate change. So they're responsible for AIDS. They're responsible for Chernobyl. They're responsible for the global warming.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, and they just wait to see how we solve them because we're so fun and creative. And then they take those solutions. Specifically, the UK is so fun and creative. Congratulations, Em, your country is the best at doing magic and solving problems of everyone.

EMILY TESH: I gotta say, this is not, this is not unique to Diana Wynne-Jones. All British fantasy authors secretly seem to think this. [both laughing]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: So he goes to, there's clearly sort of like a, in the structure of this magical organization that works on behalf of Britain, there's clearly a sort of maiden mother crone setup going on, although that is not really explicitly stated, maybe except for the one. And he decides to go to the crone. Now, I think this is very much a book that is in conversation with Black Maria. And I think

that Gladys, the crone that he meets, is very much a sort of reflection of and anti-Aunt Maria in a way that's really fun. Can I read the opening description of Gladys?

EMILY TESH: Yes, do.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: *A fat and freckled old woman wearing a red dress and pink ankle socks, squashily embedded in a floral plastic garden chair and busy shelling peas or something. Her hair had been dyed a faded orange and fussily curled. Her cheeks hung around her lax mouth, white where they were not freckled, and her guardian was strewn with objects and aswarm with cats. As usual. He had forgotten all those cats. The place reeked of cat. His foot pushed aside a saucer of cat food lurking in the grass, and he was unable to avoid fanning at the smell with his hat. And on top of all this, her name was Gladys. It was hard to believe she was any good. "Expecting me, were you?" Gladys looked up. Until you saw her eyes, Mark amended. Her eyes knew most things. So we have Gladys.*

EMILY TESH: I love Gladys. Gladys, the -- this is a weird -- but it's actually a book with multiple centers, which I think adds to the chaotic feeling of it. Gladys is a main character. Mark is a main character. Zillah is a main character. The High Head, when we meet him, is a main character. You're like, all of these characters appear to be main characters.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Todd is a main character. Maureen is kind of a main character.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, she is. Like, quite often, like -- it does feel like what Jones is doing here is the multiple point of view epic fantasy book in her own way.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: This is certainly the first time that she's gone this big on points of view. We've had dual points of view before. We've had occasional slides into bystanders' heads. But we've never had this kind of thing where this is a big book with six different plot threads going on and we need six different or -- no, it's even more POVs than that, because all of the women who eventually go to the monastery get their own little POVs.

EMILY TESH: Most of the time it's chapter per person, as well.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: So it's not doing what, when she normally does omniscient point of view she sort of slides in, slides out. She has a main head that she's in and she borrows occasionally from the from the rest of the room but what, this is doing the epic fantasy thing of, this chapter is about Zillah and it's in her point of view.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Is *Drowned Ammet* the only dual POV that she's done to this point?

EMILY TESH: I can't think of another one.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, I think that's it. I think that's the only one. No, no, no, no, no Power of Three.

EMILY TESH: But both of those were quite a long time ago.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Wait, no, *Power of Three* isn't duo. Power of Three is just is, is --

EMILY TESH: It's Gair. But it has the Ayna prologue.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, yeah, but that's it. Otherwise, it's been close. This is not close. This is...

EMILY TESH: Well, but I would say it is. It is exactly the kind of very close, very deep point of view that she always does, except she's doing like ten at once.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: True.

EMILY TESH: And the effect is overwhelming because I will say I've read quite a lot of the multi-point of view epic fantasy. Not so much recently, but, like, I was a kid and a teen in the 90s and 2000s. There was a lot of it about. And in -- and I loved it and it meant a lot to me.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Oh, yeah.

EMILY TESH: But in that, usually the different points of view are very seldom deeply characterized. Even someone like George R.R. Martin, who I think is a master of the art and who does very good character writing. There are a handful of deep character point of view. And there are some who are there to give you somewhere to stand while you're looking at this bit of plot or setting.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Not everyone is a Tyrion. In this book everyone is a Tyrion. Everybody is getting that level of inner life and complications and emotional problems. And you're going to find out about all of it. and, and it's a lot. This book is a lot.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. But Mark, to go back to Mark for a second, Mark doesn't seem to have very much inner life. for the first half of the book. You know, he shows up, again, his role is to show up at Gladys' and be like, oh, she's so much. She's a lot, which she is. She's a scary old woman. And I do feel like Diana is really excited to write a scary old woman who is, unlike Sophie, a real old woman. And unlike Aunt Maria, is someone you can imagine being. Someone who is, you know, unpleasant and selfish and takes up space and works for the good of the world. I think that Gladys parallels Zillah, who is the main heroine of this book in a lot of ways, is intended to be someone Zillah could grow up to be. And the ways in which Gladys makes herself kind of unpleasant are, I think, an important pattern. I think that is -- makes herself kind of unpleasant, laudatory.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, Gladys is, tell you what Gladys is, she's the poem. *When I am an odd woman, I shall wear purple with a red hat that doesn't go and doesn't suit me.*

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, yes.

EMILY TESH: And it's splendid. She is having a great time being an old woman and --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Oh, there's bit later on where she gets all dressed up.

EMILY TESH: And she is good. And also she goes everywhere accompanied by her pet Jimbo.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Plus the other fifty-two cats.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, they don't go everywhere with her though. [both laughing]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Anyway, so very rapidly, having discovered that this parallel universe is kind of parasiting ideas off of ours and causing all our problems, the wizards of Britain decide on a plan, which is that they are going to send a strike force to this -- they discover there's like a little, there's a big parallel universe. And then that has a littler parallel universe that just kind of hangs off to the side of it.

EMILY TESH: A pocket universe, which is kind of an observation platform.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Ad they're like, that's where all their wizards are. We have identified the bad guys responsible for everything wrong with the world. And we're just going to go kill them.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, they prepare a biological weapon, they prepare a magical plague.

EMILY TESH: In fact, they prepare various kinds of biological weapons.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: So Gladys observes the observer platform, the parallel universe, and deduces that everyone there is male, but occasionally they get visitors who are all women, and she makes an assumption.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right, yes, which I think is an important assumption for the structure of the book and the way the book thinks about sex. Gladys assumes that if a group of women is visiting a group of men, then they are clearly prostitutes or otherwise people who have come to satisfy the sexual needs of those people. This is not true. What we then learn in the next section is that these women are in fact important evil aristocrats from an evil matriarchy.

EMILY TESH: Right. So the strike team, Gladys, Mark, and the other two, the mother and the maiden, witches who lead British wizardry, British witchcraft, sorry: Amanda, in her aspect of the mother, who is a feminist and a professor of theology with teenage children, and Mark finds her very alarming.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. [laughing]

EMILY TESH: And Maureen, who is a very sexy young dancer who Mark once had an affair with.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. There's lots of affairs in this book.

EMILY TESH: Mark is very deeply embedded in in this community of witchcraft.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. And, you know, the backstory that we soon learn about Mark is that, a.), he once had an affair with Maureen, b.), his wife is having a long-term affair with some other hot young man. c.), he also once recently had an affair with a woman called Zillah, who he's sort of carefully not allowing himself to know is Amanda's sister. And what he actually doesn't know is that Zillah has a two-year-old child.

EMILY TESH: Side note, we got through this book and I was like, Becca, how many other SFF novels in the last, it has been more than 30 years, how many single mother SFF heroines can we name?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I think you named one.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. Shannon Chakraborty's Amina.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I thought of one and then I took it back.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. We'd be happy to hear about more, but I did think it was striking and an important choice that Zillah is the mother of a toddler.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: And that is absolutely central to the book. And the toddler is always there because when you are the mother of a toddler, the toddler is always bloody well there.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: This, you know, we talked in Black Maria about how it felt like Diana was kind of yearning to write about the mother rather than the child. And this book, I think, really is about mothers. It has several of the trademark, an evil mother is the worst thing in the world. Zillah and Amanda have a mother who's so evil that she can never make it on the page. We only see her in the sort of trembling, scared thoughts that Zillah and Amanda have about her. But also Zillah is a mother and a mother who makes mistakes. Gladys is a mother. I'm going to later on read out the one glimpse we get of Gladys's daughter because it's one of my favorite passages in the book. And the book, I think, is really interested in the way that they get to be human and make human mistakes and make choices for themselves that are good for themselves rather than being defined by their role as mother.

EMILY TESH: Unless they're hyper-feminine, in which case they're just evil.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: In which case they're just evil. A lot of evil women in this book about how it's wrong to be a misogynist.

EMILY TESH: [laughs] Right, it's wrong to be a misogynist. They're not evil because they're women. They're evil because they fucking suck.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: They're evil because they're bad moms.

EMILY TESH: [laughing] Yeah. Anyway, as I predicted, we are not getting through this fast enough.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right, right, right. All right.

EMILY TESH: There's so much book in the book!

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. So they're going to send a strike force. The strike force is going to have a virus. The strike force is also going to be full of beautiful young men and women because they reasonably deduced that on an all-male community there probably will be some people who are more interested in men than women. This comes up at the beginning and is not really addressed again, but Diana would like you to know that she knows.

EMILY TESH: Diana, in her first adult book: by the way, I do know that gay people exist.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. They put together the strike force. They get ready to launch it to the parallel universe, and at the last minute, Zillah, who is, as we said, extremely depressed, decides to join it. She takes her two-year-old son and just kind of -- she doesn't really know what the strike force is going to be there to do. She happened to be along with Amanda at one point when she was inspecting the big spaceship. And she's like, what better way to get rid of my depression and my problems and leave my ex behind forever than go to a spaceship going to another world? That'll probably be fine.

She has not read "The Cold Equations." She teleports herself and her baby into the spaceship right as it's leaving. And off they go. And that is the end of the first four sections of the book.

EMILY TESH: Well done, Becca. And it is, I think, important that Zillah doesn't know quite how she did this. Zillah is very, very powerful, has great potential for witchcraft and refuses to be trained. And to me, one of the, like, the most compelling relationships in the book is actually Zillah and Amanda, because Amanda is clearly someone who is very, very with it and put together. And that, maybe that's part of being 'The Mother.' She knows what she's doing. She has her career. She has her teenage children. She has her lovely partner who, almost uniquely in the book, she doesn't cheat on the partner ever. Almost everyone else in this book is constantly cheating on everyone.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Amanda is frustrated by Zillah because she tries to support Zillah and help her. She gets her away from their terrible mother. She encourages her to go to university. Zillah drops out. She tries to get her a good job. Zillah loses the job and goes to a work in a record shop instead, saying it suits her more. Then --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: She tries to get Zillah involved in magic.

EMILY TESH: And she's proud of Zillah, she's like, oh, she's so talented. She's going to really achieve things. And then Zillah disappears and then reappears later with a small child and now she's a single mother. And Amanda is so clearly terribly frustrated with her younger sister and doesn't understand why she keeps making these self-destructive choices, including leaving the universe by teleporting herself out of it, which is a self-destructive choice. And Zillah knows it is. And she thinks of it, I really think it was very striking. She calls it *a sort of death*.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: When she's thinking about the death, she'll never focus on it quite clearly, but she does say to herself, *it's not fair on Marcus*

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: So I think it's clear that Zillah is thinking about suicide and also thinking about how to commit suicide in a way that isn't unfair to her small child.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: There's actually a really striking bit, I think, I took down as a quote, where she's thinking about *a sort of death, not fair to Marcus*. And then instead, because she has to stop thinking about that, she focuses on Maureen and how annoyed she is about Maureen. And that's when, that's when Zillah is meanest. You know, she starts thinking really mean things about Maureen. *I think she's a bitch. It was better than thinking of death. Maureen strutting, sauntering, hitching her long, limber legs about taking all the best men for her own use*. It's like, there's this, there's this really interesting element in which in order to distract from the depression, you have to think --

EMILY TESH: I have to think about how hot this girl is and how much I hate her.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Exactly. [laughing]

EMILY TESH: But she's so hot. No, there is, I -- Diana Wynne Jones is really enjoying writing explicitly about people being hot.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yeah. Zillah is so hot. The first -- we don't know this, I think. We don't know that Zillah is devastatingly hot until they all get off the spaceship at the monastery. And we get the point of view of one of the young trainee monks, Tod, as he watches all the women get out. And when Maureen comes out, or, when Zillah comes out, he says, *the best looking one of all, an absolute wow-wow*. And we're like, oh, okay.

EMILY TESH: [laughing] Wow-wow.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Zillah's an absolute wow-wow. Who knew? And Diana also doesn't usually write hot heroines. I think the last beautiful girl that we saw was Polly.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, certainly as a point of view character. Flower-in-the-Night was beautiful, but she was a love interest rather than a protagonist.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Usually she's interested in writing women who look ordinary. I think part of the fun of this book for her is that she can just be maximalist about it. Yeah, Zillah is the most powerful girl in the entire world and the most beautiful girl in any given room. And what about it?

EMILY TESH: It's great. I love Zillah. And I'm interested in the way -- of the many, many, many characters, I do find Zillah the most compelling, I think. I'm interested in her selfishness. It's the selfish younger sister character we've seen before.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: But this time not treated with your selfish younger sibling as a weapon you unleash on the world. Rather, your selfish younger sibling is a person who is struggling.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Who is finding it very, very difficult, who is selfish for complicated reasons, and some of them are self-defense. Zillah's trying to save her own life when she attaches herself to the sex murder strike force that's going off to a parallel universe.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: With her two-year-old child.

EMILY TESH: With her two-year-old child. This is an insane place to take a toddler.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, and it's extra insane because, and she doesn't know this, but when they arrive, it kills two-thirds of the people on the strike force. Again, this is a book with a lot of sex and a lot of death. So they arrive, there were like fourteen people, I think, planned to be on the strike force, plus Zillah. And only six of them have made it there alive. And everybody else is dead for unknown reasons, or so it seems at the time. Eventually, it turns out that the reason that they died is that if you enter a parallel universe, in in this version of parallel universes, we've seen many throughout Diana Wynne Jones' work, in this version, if you enter a universe where there is an exact analog of you already present, that's it. You're done. Can't, can't, the two of you cannot be in the same place at once. And so everybody who had -- and it turns out that Gladys did know this and did not warn them, but also didn't think it would be as much of a problem as it turns out to have been.

EMILY TESH: What it implies, of course, is that these two universes are actually very close together and very similar, which I think is important in that we have not talked yet about the main point of view of the other half of the book. The second, the deuteragonist, the secondary protagonist.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: The High Head.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [laughs] The monastery, I think, is intended to feel a bit like a bad boarding school.

EMILY TESH: No kidding. A bad boarding school in a Diana Wynne Jones book. [laughs] But you're right.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: But the high head is happy in his role overseeing -- he loves the boring food. He loves the oath he that prevents them from having sex with women. He hates women.

EMILY TESH: As usual, when someone is deeply happy at boarding school, it's because home was even worse. So we had this with David, we had it with Christopher, and it does eventually turn out to be true about the High Head. But, so, the world, the pocket universe of Arth is amazingly beautiful and all blue. And you can see, actually, Jones being forced to write some bloody descriptions for once. And I don't think she necessarily enjoys it but she is good at it. So there's some glorious, like, descending through parallel universes and arriving at this strange blue city, which above sort of flowers out into strange crowns and horns. And below is just a blink of darkness. But it is essentially run like a boarding school crossed with a monastery. Everybody has duties to do. It's strictly, a very strict hierarchy. In charge of everything is the High Head, a kind of headmaster. And the lowest ranking people are the cadets and the servicemen. Cadets who might stay on to become full brothers, servicemen who are only meant to be there for a year to serve. It's part of their duty to the Pentarchy, which is the universe they come from.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And the two main point of view characters that we have for the monastery are the High Head, who is an impressive, imposing figure. We see him externally through the point of view of the other character, and everyone's very impressed by him. He looks important and confident and powerful. And Tod, who is a minor, or no, a major prince, who's being sent here for his mandatory service year and hates it. He is the boarding school child.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. He's also Konstam Khan.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. [laughs]

EMILY TESH: Eventually he gets to Earth and we learn that he's quite short. But has enormous hereditary power.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, he's got an incredible, incredibly big birthright.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. But the, you know, he's rebellious. He hates being here. There's, I think, echoes of Christopher Chant, actually, not Christopher Chant at boarding school, but Christopher Chant in Chrestomanci Castle in the way he exercises his rebellion. There's a bit where he's, you know, he's gotten in trouble for defending one of his friends, who's a centaur, for being bullied by the other servicemen who are all universally awful. And he says, *if I speak normally in this damn joyless place, some po-faced prat ups and tells me I'm being insolent. So if I'm insolent, it ought to work the other way around. Sir.*

EMILY TESH: It's pure Christopher.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And then the High Head --

EMILY TESH: I also love that Tod, Tod gets a description of, like, he's got a funny little mustache and a little cone of carefully styled hair.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. [both laughing] And the High Head listens to this and thinks about scathing punishments that he can put him through, which is like, it's so boarding school, right? It's --

EMILY TESH: Also, important to note, though, the monastery thing is they're all under an oath of celibacy. The brothers and cadets have an oath of celibacy, which is meant to preserve the magical vibrations of the fortress. And the servicemen, while they are there, are expected to live as if they have taken the oath. And the High Head very sincerely believes that any breaking of the oath could be devastating to the stability and the power of this community, which he loves, clearly, which he has been part of for many, many years, and which he deeply believes in as well, that his duty is to study the otherworld, which he considers to be a debased, degenerate copy of his own. We'll come back to that.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: One of the things -- like, the touchpoints of the High Head is that he genuinely believes he's doing the right thing, or he's doing a good thing. Everyone looks at him and can see this.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. And he believes this is used to help his country, his world, through, by using all his powers to make Arthur as successful as possible in, currently, trying to solve the Pentarchy's climate crisis, which they have and they can't figure out why.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And one of the ways that he's doing this, actually, is by, he's sent spies to the other world. So if someone's having an affair in our world, probably the person they're having an affair with is actually a spy for the High Head who's been sending all his disgraced brothers over there and compelling them to have affairs with these women that they don't like.

EMILY TESH: In a kind of sort of sex murder strike force way, actually.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: In a kind of sex murder strike force way. And also he's been using telepathy to spy on Amanda's children. Or at least he had until Zillah caught him at it and interfered. Now, I don't actually think that Zillah and the High Head ever figure out that --

EMILY TESH: They don't, that they have this connection. But they do, in fact, have this long relationship in which once Zillah protected Amanda's children from being snooped around by the spirit of a powerful wizard from another world, he started snooping around her instead. And because her magic is wild and uncontrolled, she isn't aware and she can't really defend herself. But occasionally she notices him and goes, oh, it's that bloody demon again. Get out.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yeah.

EMILY TESH: So he is a demon who has been haunting her soul for years. And I think Zillah and the High Head is one of the most complicated, nasty, interesting relationships in the book. The high head is also, we will discover, more or less the same as Mark.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Has more or less Mark's backstory. I think we're doing a father-husband thing again. And this time we're leaning on father.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Actually, I've just thought of this now. So on paper, the main, most important relationship of this book is Zillah and Mark, right? They're the romance. They're, you know, Zillah's feelings about Mark are what propels much of the action of the plot. But they don't actually spend hardly any time together in the book. They're never on page together.

EMILY TESH: I mean, Mark's never on the page. He turns up at the beginning and he turns up at the end.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: But Zillah spends a lot of time with the High Head and Mark spends a lot of time with Gladys.

EMILY TESH: Oh my God, you're right.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: They're both looking at the future versions of each other and being like, oh, God.

EMILY TESH: [both laughing] And in both cases, it's horrifying.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, which I think is really funny. Anyway, the women have landed. Unfortunately, of the survivors, none of them are the men that they sent to seduce the gay monks, which I think is a real shame for the book.

EMILY TESH: I think before we, like, we should talk about that thread, because the other thing that becomes clear in Tod's point of view in the monastery is that although the High Head believes greatly in the celibacy of his monks, in fact, it's very clear that the monks are not celibate. There is, there are gay monks. But the way that that is working out is nasty. We have Tod getting approached and pressured by people further up the hierarchy and he is able to resist it because, basically, he's a tough young aristocrat and he is not bothered by the hierarchy of Arth.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: We have Tod's very dear friend Philo, much less able to find a way to say no to more powerful men. Tod is the one who is having to constantly protect him and fend off men who are coming on to him.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: This is not, like, happy gay monks in space. This is, I think, a boarding school fagging system.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, it's clearly about --

EMILY TESH: So what sex is happening is ugly, hierarchical, secret, and shameful.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, it's about shame and it's about power.

EMILY TESH: Yes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And when -- I do think it's really interesting that we get these threads in the first hundred pages of the book, enough to make it clear that this is what's going on, to make it clear that sex is not new to the Citadel, whatever the High Head might think. But then our strike force arrives, and this is not mentioned again. The you know, the remaining nine people from the ship are dead, and the women who arrive, determined to get on with their mission, are, you know, seem to be -- they do overturn the hierarchy of, they put the hierarchy on its head. And I think that Diana Wynne Jones thinks that having mentioned it, that this does happen and that this sex already exists, is enough to lay the groundwork to explain that what the women are bringing with them is not necessarily heterosexual sex or not just sex to the fortress, but joy and chaos and whimsy and all the things that the fortress has been missing. It does sort of lead an unfortunate implication that what you need in order to liberate this fortress of monks is heterosexual sex and heterosexual sex only.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. I think if she'd let just one of the nice gay boys who died live and join in the fun, that would have been more fun. I would have enjoyed that.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Agreed. I would have enjoyed it too.

EMILY TESH: Although the book is, to be clear, already very fun. Let's talk about our six survivors. We know Zillah, but these other women are also important. And here's another thing about this book, this is a lot of adult woman characters who are individual and interesting. And that's another way in which it feels like a mirror of Black Maria in that it is interested in adult, adult women's individuality. In Black Maria all the Mrs Urs have this great individuality and personality but they're all evil.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: These women are not all evil, although we might make an honorable exception for Roz.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Awww, Roz, well -- I don't know that Roz is evil. I do think that Roz is the --

EMILY TESH: Roz is wrong, which is not the same thing.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Roz is wrong. Roz is the funny Elaine.

EMILY TESH: [laughing] She's so funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Roz is bossy. She wears big boots. [laughing] She stomps in and immediately is like, right, [claps] well, I've seduced 15 people today. How many have you seduced? Let's get cracking, girls! I do think, again, with the school situation, there is a really interesting description of Roz when the High Head is first interrogating to her as -- oh, did I get the description down? Maybe I didn't.

EMILY TESH: He calls her a schoolgirl.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Well, so the lie --

EMILY TESH: In the way that she lies to him, he's like, that's, he's instantly like, that is somebody lying to me. Because he's used to being lied to by people at the bottom of the hierarchy in a very honest-looking way.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: *Brave schoolgirl openness* is what he calls her lie where she tells them that they're sports team from Middle Earth who had been on their way to compete in the Highland Games by stratocruiser. Diana has like a bee in her bonnet about 'what if Middle Earth was a sports team?' Which I think is really funny. [laughing]

EMILY TESH: It's going to come up again!

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Mig is making, like, league tables of Arthurian knights in her notebook. It's clearly something that, like -- it's just a good joke and so she tells it as many, as often as she's going to. This is actually not the only time that one of the women is compared to a schoolgirl. And I noticed this when I was taking notes, is that later on, Judy, who's the one who, like, falls earnestly in love, describes the way that this relationship makes her feel as making her behave and feel like an insecure schoolgirl. So there's something about arriving in this place that makes the sex and murder strike force suddenly start feeling and acting like teenagers. Which I think is quite interesting.

EMILY TESH: Which is also quite funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Which is also very funny.

EMILY TESH: I think the thing about Roz is that Roz believes in hierarchies.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And that is the reason why Roz is wrong about her approach to defeating Arth, defeating the Citadel. It's because even, all the things she does aren't destroying the hierarchy. They're just trying to turn it around.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yeah, and I do think that that is, like, I think these are deliberately, or at least coming out of the same thought patterns as the Mrs. Urs. This is a group of very distinct women. Each of them has their own kind of special thing, and when they arrive on the Citadel, they all kind of scatter off into different areas of the Citadel to start trying to corrupt a different group of monks based on their particular interest. You know, Flan is a dancer, and Helen goes straight to the kitchen. And they all have their own particular modes of

trying to exert their power over these men. In the same way that the Mrs. Urs all have their own little, little shtick and they use it to maintain their control over Cranbury, maintain their control over the men.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. So we have Roz, who is bossy, and Roz attaches herself to Observer Horn and then steadily fucks her way through every man she can get her hands on.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. In two days. I didn't catch that until I was taking notes. She comes back and it's two days later and she's like, well, [snaps] I've had fifteen.

EMILY TESH: No, she says she's had twelve.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right, right, she's had twelve.

EMILY TESH: Because some of the others say they've managed fifteen, meaning it more metaphorically than Roz does. And she's like, oh, they beat me. It's a competition to Roz. [RF laughing] Roz also at one point thinks, I should go straight for the great Panjandrum, the High Horns himself. High Horns is what quite a lot of them call the High Head, which I do find very funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I think it's really funny.

EMILY TESH: I think it's a cuckolding joke.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, he's being cuckolded out of an entire monastery. [laughing]

EMILY TESH: But that's great because then you see her have a conversation with him when he's interrogating these women about where they came from and who they are. And like, have we got it? It's one of my favorite jokes in the book is Roz trying to explain. It is the same conversation where she does the honest schoolgirl lie.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: It's also, like, where she stamps about in boots, stretching her legs out, talking very earnestly about how much she believes in women's sports, and then tells him, *I considered being a homosexual at one point. Do you know what that means?* [both laughing] Roz feels like a portrait of a very funny person who did not know she was being very funny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. So in addition to Roz, we've got Helen, who's the sort of thin intellectual one who goes to the kitchens.

EMILY TESH: She's always described as angular.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Judy is the one who fell apart emotionally when, you know, two thirds of her friends died.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: She's the only one who falls apart emotionally when two thirds of her friends died, and the rest --

EMILY TESH: Everyone else is weirdly fine.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. I mean, that is a thing about this sequence is that it's very, very funny, and it is a bit glib because the emotional realities of the situation are not going to interfere with the joke of these women coming and taking over the fortress.

EMILY TESH: Right, so Judy spends a lot of time in healing, not so much as a strike force, but because she genuinely needs healing.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: And she becomes very close to the High Head's only friend in the fortress, who is Edward, the chief healer.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: And then, who've we had? Roz, Judy, Helen --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: We've had Ros, Helen, Judy --

EMILY TESH: Sandra.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Sandra. Sandra's important because she is a black woman. This is the first time that Diana Jones has actually written from inside the head of a character of color, actually. And Sandra's interesting because --

EMILY TESH: A woman of color. We've had Abdullah.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: That's true. Woman of color. Because when she arrives, everyone starts treating her very respectfully. Because on the Pentarchy, there's apparently a whole, you know, the people who are, the people of color on the Pentarchy are very powerful mages and everyone respects them very much and treats them as high aristocrats. And Sandra at first takes this as mockery because of her experiences. And later, when this is actually explained to her, what we get is, *Sandra began and then bit back, just barely, an angry description of the status of black women on earth.* This is actually the first, I think, overt acknowledgement of racism that we've seen Diana Wyn Jones put into a book.

EMILY TESH: And it works.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Yeah. So Sandra goes to the Divination Horn and begins telling them all kinds of lies about tarot. And because --

EMILY TESH: Yes, Sandra loves, loves to pull a trick and deceive people. So she starts screwing up their divinations by doing tarot readings backwards.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And has a wonderful time there, and because, and because, you know, they all think of her as this very high and important mage, they take her

word for it unconditionally. She's using her power without qualm. Well, actually, she does end up having qualm. She starts to feel bad about what she's doing because they've all been so nice to her. And --

EMILY TESH: And also, eventually, one of them gets in trouble for what a mess they're making of the divinations they're meant to be doing. And Sandra does feel guilty. She's like, well, but I kind of like him.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Didn't want him to lose his job.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. And then there's Flan, I think is the last one. Flan is a dancer. And so she goes to Ritual Horn and is like, you guys are doing rituals like that?

EMILY TESH: All right, everybody. Time for some exercise.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Have we thought about yoga? [bogh laughing] Flan is, I think, other than Roz, the one of them who actually does do a bit of fucking her way through the Horn that she's been assigned to. The rest all kind of attach themselves to a particular monk and eventually settle into a relationship with that monk. Flan has a nice time working her way through Ritual Horn.

EMILY TESH: Has some young dancers.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Has, you know, some young dancers. She also, a passage that actually really struck me, one of the older men in Ritual Horn tries to blackmail her for sex. And she's like, well, all right, I guess that's what I'm here for. Actually, that was fine. Actually, he's kind of sweet. There's this sort of sense that the women are in control here in this situation. The men of High Horn, who we've seen can use power and coercion in sexual situations among themselves in ways that are scary and damaging, they are never scary to the women in that way. The women are always in control of these situations. They never feel powerless when confronted with these monks, despite the fact that there's only five of them. And again, they do use blackmail sometimes to get sex. That's not serious. That's not a problem. Because the power dynamics are, I think, in the context of the book, or at least intended to be established as such, that it's not scary.

EMILY TESH: I think the power dynamics depend very much on the women all know something the monks don't know.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And it's having that extra knowledge. They know that they are a strike force from the other world sent here to destroy the Citadel any way they can. They're a team, they're an alliance, and they're succeeding. They're doing, their doing what they want to do --

REBECCA FRAIMOW:

EMILY TESH: -- gives them power in these relationships, even when it is not apparent to the monks. I'm not sure how well it actually works, but that seems to be how they, how the characters feel about it.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Again, it feels more like a joke and kind of a, you know, long exuberant riff on the --

EMILY TESH: Yes, it's extended sex comedy.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, exactly, than anything that actually lands emotionally. I think that with more practice at writing this kind of stuff, she'll be able to do both at once. And she hasn't quite managed it yet.

EMILY TESH: Yeah.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: But it doesn't really -- anyway, they're all really having a good time. It doesn't really get scary until Zillah's friend, Tod, is caught kissing Zillah. This is not, like, they're not entering into a relationship. Zillah is still hung up on Mark.

EMILY TESH: In fact, Zillah was crying about Mark.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And Tod was like, oh, you're so sad. Let me give you a cuddle and a little kiss. And it was just --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: You're so sad and so pretty.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. And this is presented in the text as natural and not bad and Zillah doesn't mind it. But actually, I would be pretty pissed off with if my friend was giving me a hug and then he snogged me.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. And there is -- one of the things that I think is interesting about Zillah, the fantasy of Zillah, who is depressed and miserable, but also beautiful and enormously powerful, is that she lands on the monastery, and while the other women are sort of fucking their way through the, the whole situation, she immediately bonds with these three recruits and is like, oh, e're just friends now. I've fallen in with this group of male friends. It's normal. It's easy.

EMILY TESH: I finally have friends.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. In fact, she gets the Christopher at boarding school experience of, oh, people, my friends.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. But I do think there's something about this fantasy of like, you know, Zillah doesn't make friends with the other women on the strike force. Her new friends are this male school friend group. I think there's something a little bit, a little bit of a a fantasy about that.

EMILY TESH: Yeah.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Anyway, Todd gets caught, making on Zillah.

EMILY TESH: And they're both brought to the High Head, one after the other.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And then we get what, for my money, is some of the most disturbing stuff in the book. And the one time the sort of sex and power dynamics on the fortress become really, like, believable.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: So the High Head is furious. He is unreasonably furious, in fact. It's really clear that he is reacting more strongly than he has a right to because he already doesn't like Tod, because Tod is insolent, in his opinion, although not in Tod's opinion. And he comes up with a punishment, he's going to punish Tod by doing the worst thing he can think of to him, which is sending him to the otherworld, which is populated by some sort of reptile people, so he'll be transformed into a reptile person and never be able to go home again.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And have to mate with other reptiles. His job is to be a honeypot trap for Mark's wife, actually.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. So the High Head decides this with enormous glee and very visibly goes running over several little legal details in the process, such as the fact that Todd actually isn't a brother of the Citadel, isn't fully under the High Head's authority, hasn't taken an oath and therefore hasn't broken an oath, hasn't actually done anything wrong. He kissed a girl. That's it.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. And everyone around him has been, again, participating gleefully in sex comedy.

EMILY TESH: Right. Lots and lots of the monks are having a lot of sex with these women. Tod kissed Zillah. The High Head feels something special about Zillah. He doesn't ever acknowledge it to himself in so many words, but he feels she's important. He knows her really well somehow. And of course, it's, he's been haunting her soul for years. He's the demon who she sees sniffing around from time to time. He's furious. So Tod is given this over-heavy, outrageous, awful punishment, which not coincidentally separates him from Zillah, means he'll never be able to go near her again.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: And then the High Head speaks to Zillah and basically says -- well, it comes in two stages. First, he's furious with her. He shouts at her. He calls her a whore and a bitch. Again, she got kissed. She didn't even initiate the kiss. It wasn't her idea.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep.

EMILY TESH: And I'll tell you the last time we saw an older man screaming at a young woman, calling them bitches. It was Time of the Ghost and it was Himself screaming at his daughters.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. Yep.

EMILY TESH: And then Zillah, thinking about her relationship with Mark and some of the choices she made and the selfish ways she behaved, says --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: She says, *Yes, I think you're right. There are times when I seem to behave like that, as if I can't help it. If I could hate myself for it, I would, but I can't. You're quite right to call me names.*

EMILY TESH: Right. And the High Head is so upset by this that he suddenly wants to defend her to herself right and sort of flips and then sort of sends her away with a very sort of, very pathetic, well, think about what you've done and don't do it again or you will be in trouble.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And even in this sequence, Zillah is hurt because she thought that the High Horns was a fair man when she interacted with him. But when she learns what's happened to Tod and the sort of double standard with which they've been treated, that's when she starts thinking -- *The injustice of it filled her with rage, a clean blast of that rage that seemed to make a whole lot of things clear to her. She had wondered that this place did not seem evil. Now she knew that evil was here. How stupid, how innocent of her not to have remembered that evil seldom appeared to be evil.*

EMILY TESH: Right. There is a core evil in Arth, in this citadel, and its nature is in, is disguised even from itself. The High Head has no idea he's a bad man. That's really clear. And also he has no idea that his behavior over this whole thing is like, a really gross sexual jealousy about a girl he considers his own possession and simultaneously doesn't seem to realize is even human.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: Like, this book is mostly about mummy issues, but I think this bit is daddy issues.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. [laughing] So --

EMILY TESH: Zillah decides to escape. That's what Zillah does when she's in trouble. She runs.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. And she takes Josh and Philo, the, her two other friends with her. She can't take Tod because Tod's already gone to Earth. Tod is about to have some very funny reverse portal fantasy adventures on Earth.

EMILY TESH: It's some of the best stuff in the book. This is a book of, with many jokes in it. And I like, I like the portal fantasy jokes even more than the sex comedy jokes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I laughed out loud when he's given a pullover, he's given a sweater and he looks at it --

EMILY TESH: He's given a jumper.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. And it's, hang on, I am going to find the quote because it's really funny. So he's replacing the former lover of Paulie, who is Mark's, Mark's wife. And he's in, you know, kind of getting him set up in the world. He tosses *Tod a heavy woolen floppy thing made of gray, brown knitting. The maker of it had industriously twisted the stitches into an ornate plaited pattern. It looked ethnic.*

EMILY TESH: Yeah. I'm like, that's a Fair Isle jumper, that is. [both laughing]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: So Tod's off in Earth having reverse portal fantasy adventures. He does, I think, again, I think this is striking compared to the sex and death strike force and the women who are all having a wonderful time seducing these weird old men in the monastery. He's presented with Paulie and it's clearly, it's, you know, and Paulie immediately is like, great, we're going to go into bed together. And I think that's there's a dropped line or it's sort of implied that this is a spell that the High Head has put on her to make her ready to jump into bed, eager to jump into bed with whoever he sends along. We're never asked to consider the unfairness of this, the way that this is --

EMILY TESH: One the book is very consistent about is no sympathy whatsoever for Paulie.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Paulie is awful. So when Tod arrives, where it's clear that this is disgusting to him to have sex with Paulie, and that is terrible. And it's clear that all, you know, whenever the High Head calls up these men that he's sent, they're always complaining about the women they're with, how selfish they are, how cruel they are. The fact that they don't want to sleep with them.

EMILY TESH: We haven't talked about Joe and Maureen.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Weirdest plot thread in the book, to my mind.

EMILY TESH: So the two key agents of the High Head on Earth are Paulie's lover, which was this guy, Antony, and is now going to be Tod, apparently, and Maureen's boyfriend, Joe.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Who nobody likes.

EMILY TESH: Nobody likes Joe. Joe sucks. And Maureen got home from sending the spaceship to the other universe and found Joe waiting for her and a magical trap laid for her where he said, you're going to stay here until you tell me everything. And she thought, I cannot do that because I need to give the strike force time to work and otherwise they'll be undermined. So Joe and Maureen have, like, a standoff in Maureen's flat that lasts for the entire book.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, and I think, personally, as a reader, I think Maureen is really quite heroic in these scenes. She's really --

EMILY TESH: I think so too, yeah. She's fighting for her life.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I think the book is very lukewarm on Maureen. It's not --

EMILY TESH: The thing about Maureen is that Maureen is hot and cool and ruthless and selfish, all of which are traits that we could apply to, say, Zillah. [RF laughing] Some of the problem here is that, and at one point Amanda says, or thinks about the comparison between Zillah and Maureen.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Maureen is threatened, I think, is the suggestion. Maureen sent Flan on the strike force because she felt threatened by Flan, didn't want her back in England taking over Maureen's dance troupe. And there's a sense that Maureen and Zillah are in competition for Mark as two hot girls who have both had sex with him.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. And so therefore, Maureen is sort of in this position of rival we don't quite like. But we get her interiority. We get her, like, pushing herself to her utmost limit to defeat her terrible boyfriend, who again, it's implied she didn't have a choice about picking this terrible boyfriend. She was compelled to have sex with this terrible man. And keeping him at bay so as not to spill secrets with everything she's got.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. So that's what she's up to while Tod is doing his reverse portal fantasy adventures.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: These are, this is, like, the meanwhile, back on Earth section.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Meanwhile, back on Earth, Tod gets there. Paulie makes a pass at him. He's like, absolutely not. Mark gets home. It's deeply awkward. Tod is just standing there.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, they're like -- it's actually like a really great, you know, husband walks in on the wife and her lover scene, except that the lover really never wanted to be there in the first place. And it's so awkward and so funny. And also it's so clear that Mark and Paulie's marriage is terrible and doesn't make sense.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: But also, Tod, with his powerful magic, notices there's a strong something of the Ladies of Leathe here. The Ladies of Leathe are the evil matriarchy. Did you forget the evil matriarchy? There is so much in this. [both laughing] There is so much going on.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: So much -- the evil matriarchy is very important. The evil matriarchy represents everything that's wrong about women. Anyway, Tod, in this

terrible awkward situation, much like Zillah, is like, well, I gotta get out of here.

EMILY TESH: I'm out.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I'm out! Just walk out. You can leave.

EMILY TESH: He leaves this house, and I haven't even talked to you through -- I love so much of the Tod in Surrey sequence. It's, it's like Howl in Wales.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: There's a bit where he's, like, walking down the main street wearing jeans and it's raining. And he's like, this is hell. I'm in Hell. Why is their hair doing that? [RF laughing] And then they give him a car. And Tod loves cars. But this is the worst car in the world. It's a Deux Chevaux.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: [laughing] It's cute.

EMILY TESH: Which is, I remember my dad in the 90s making jokes about Citroën. That's no longer the case, I think. But there was a reputation for poor quality at one point.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep.

EMILY TESH: Anyway, so Todd walks out and he sees outside Mark's house, Mark's BMW. Which he's left running with the keys in. And Todd sort looks at his car, looks at Mark's car, and is like, sod this.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah.

EMILY TESH: And steals Mark's car to drive home.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. Bye, Tod. Tod's going home. Meanwhile -- so there's three things that are happening at the same time during this sequence. One, Tod having his sex comedy, stealing the car, going home. Two, Gladys has realized that something's gone wrong with the strike force, and she's decided she has to go to Pentarchy and sort it out herself. So she gets dressed up in her finery and her special little outfit. Because we're short on time, I'm not going to read out everything about the special little outfit. But it's so good.

EMILY TESH: It's the 1920s cocktail gown, which belonged to her great-aunt because she's not actually that old.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It's the cocktail gown. It's beads. It's a feather boa. It's a flaming pink scarf. It's a headdress. And then it's big fluffy boots that everyone in Pentarchy looks at and is like, do you have animal feet then? And the reason that she dresses all this, she says to Jimbo, her little familiar, is, *I know, but I don't want anyone to take me too seriously, do I?* So she knows it's silly and ridiculous. And she's having a great time. She's carefully chosen this finery to look silly in.

EMILY TESH: Right, silliness, I think, is so key to what the book is arguing for, demanding. Like, the main reason that the initial attempts of the strike force to destabilise Arth through sex don't work is they're not being silly enough.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. There's a whole conversation that Zillah has with Roz, where Roz is like, we are doing this strike force thing and it's very serious. And Zillah says, *but the Citadel likes fun. People keep repressing it. It's sort of itching for something to enjoy.* Roz says, *do try not to talk nonsense, Zillah. You just don't have the training the rest of us have had. Everyone knows this is a serious, evil place.* And Flan --

EMILY TESH: Important to note, when Roz says this, we know how much training she's had. They were told nothing until the night they left.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. Yep. And then Flan turns to Zillah and says, *I like fun too, but don't tell teacher,* meaning Roz. Which is important because Flan is actually the one who is going to break the Citadel in what I think is the best sequence in the book. But before I get there, let me tell you, let me, let's say what Zillah's up to.

EMILY TESH: Yes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: So Zillah decides she needs to, like Tod, she needs to get the hell out of Dodge. But also, she has just learned something about Mark, which is that Mark has an identical twin? Living in evil matriarchy land?

EMILY TESH: An analog. Right. There's a parallel universe version of Mark living in the Pentarchy, who is the son of the vilest, vilest, evil witch of them all, Lady Marcenay.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And he's a horrible little jester man. That's how he's constantly described, is a horrible little jester man.

EMILY TESH: Like, I'm really struck by how often 'jester' in Diana Wynne Jones is code for sexy as hell.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yep. Yep. Because we've just seen this in Black Maria --

EMILY TESH: It was a thing for Antony Green as well. [both laughing]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And everyone, like, again, she never describes this man as attractive, but it's so clear that Zillah looks at him and is like, oh, what an awful little man. I must go to him. I can't not. So that's where she's off to, is trying --

EMILY TESH: With her two-year-old, she has still got the toddler.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: I mean, I feel like we haven't talked enough about Marcus. Marcus is so much the, so much of the comedy of the book is Marcus. Everywhere you go, a toddler is there.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Nobody understands -- he's two. And so he keeps making confident pronouncements that nobody understands, as two-year-olds are wont to do.

EMILY TESH: And in fact, a good sign of whether or not someone is a good person is whether they can understand Marcus. Tod understood him instantly. And Mark's parallel universe, other self, Herrel, understands him instantly.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. But it's not until -- I mean, Zillah is bringing Marcus everywhere. And it's not until quite late in the book, that Zillah decides that her number one priority has to be making sure that Marcus is safe. Hang on, I want to actually find the quote because she says, *I'm thinking this much too late*, that Marcus needs to be my priority more than whatever's going on with Herrel, more than whatever is going on with me, now, with 50 pages left in the text and imminent peril for the first time, like real peril, now I've got to be concerned about this.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, Zillah has been irresponsible. And other characters point that out. Amanda is appalled that wherever she's gone, she's taken her two-year-old. Gladys calls her a stupid, irresponsible girl. Zillah is, I think, quite rarely in Diana Wynne Jones, a mother who is flawed, very flawed, and still sympathetic. She has been a thoughtless mother here, but she loves Marcus and she's doing her best. Her best is not always good, but by God, she is going to do it.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And again, I think we get a mirror here in Gladys. We get one glimpse of Gladys's daughter. So Gladys packs herself up to go to the otherworld and sends all her cats to her daughter.

EMILY TESH: Who lives in Scotland. Gladys lives in Herefordshire. This is not quite as far away as you can get from each other and still be on the British Isles, but it's pretty close. [both laughing] The daughter's in Dundee.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And then Mark and his horrible wife end up at Gladys's house, having pursued Tod there in the stolen car. And they immediately get a call from Gladys' daughter. And Gladys' daughter says, *She said you would be in her house before midnight and I see she was right as usual. She sent the message up with her cats, you know. I have them all here, making fifty-two, along with my own, I may say. Dearly as I love my mother, we do not get on. And this is why. Long ago, I told her that only in a real genuine crisis will I do any other thing for her. And this is what I get. Fifty-two cats. So you may take it that the message is urgent.*

EMILY TESH: Yeah, there's the sense that, you know, a difficult, complicated, interesting woman may not always be an ideal mother.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Uh-huh. Which is, you know, one might imagine some self-reflection on Diana Wynne Jones' part. [both laughing] So that's what they're all doing. And they're all running around, you know, all of these people are sort of going to converge on the magical climax of the book, which is going to happen in the Pentarchy. And it's going to be a big confrontation with the evil matriarchy, etc, etc, etc. I don't think any of that, though, is the real climax of the book. I think the real climax of the book is what's happening on the Citadel with the strike force.

EMILY TESH: Right. A lot of the, the evil matriarchy, it turns out, cuts Herrel in half and sent half of him to the otherworld in order to have their own agent on the otherworld. And that's what Mark is. And that's why Mark is so weird and boring. It's because all the funny bits of him are trapped at home under his mother's thumb.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It's so funny that the answer to what's going on with Normal McNormal Man is --

EMILY TESH: Is that his mother is eating his soul. Literally. Lady Marcenay, like Gladys, and I do think this is important, I think Lady Marcenay is a kind of dark mirror for Gladys. The crone. She calls herself Granny at one point because she's Marcus's grandmother.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep.

EMILY TESH: Lady Marcenay also has an ether monkey. A Jimbo. An inner demon. And the fact of how differently she uses it and it uses her -- she is a monster, she consumes the souls of men, or at least of her son, and intends to do the same to Marcus.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. This is actually why Zillah left Mark to begin with, is because in the middle of their affair, when Zillah was like, well, this is the only man for me, even though he's the most boring man in existence, I don't know why, but he just is. Which is, you know, again, that's something that, like, Diana Wynne Jones writes about knowing that she was going to marry her own husband in this way. Like, I just saw him and I was like, right, that's it. Don't know why that one, but that one. And that's exactly what's happened with Zillah and Mark. Don't know why that one, but that one, despite the fact that Zillah is the most beautiful woman in the world. But Zillah has this vision of Mark as a shadowy reflection of himself at the bottom of a deep well. And there's a woman down there with him drinking him that he's letting have *all of the eager, interesting, vital parts of him, the parts that laughed or cried*. And so Zillah is only ever going to be allowed the pale, decorous, priggish parts of Mark.

EMILY TESH: I gotta say, we did say in the Black Maria episode, you don't have to let your mother-in-law live rent-free in your head.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Oh, my God. [laughing]

EMILY TESH: Guys, I think Jones' mother in law may still be living rent-free in her head.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Oh, my God, you're right. You are right She thinks at first when she has this vision that it's his wife who is the one who's down the bottom of the well feeding on him. But in fact, she learns that Paulie is also just a reflection of -- Paulie, Paulie's just kind of an annoying woman. Paulie is not actually the ultimate evil. The ultimate evil is Mark's evil mother. And when she meets Herrel, the funny part of Mark, he's, you know, the hot jester, he is basically insane. And I mean, I think there's something --

EMILY TESH: And totally untrustworthy.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And totally untrustworthy.

EMILY TESH: So Herrel does instantly understand Marcus. He also instantly recognizes that Marcus is his son. And he's sort of simultaneously delighted and terrified because Zillah has brought Herrel's son into Lady Marcenay's sphere of power, which is the most irresponsible thing she could possibly have done. Marcus is now in very great danger.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: But he doesn't do anything about it and he still betrays Zillah and Marcus to Lady Marcenay because Herrel is missing all the parts of him that have, like, a spine right and morals. Like, the boring parts of him are also, like, if you like, the framework, the necessary.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Like, I think that Herrel, the sketch of Herrel is really compelling in the couple lines we get. You know, Zillah describes him, again, clearly drawn to this man that she's never been drawn to anyone more in her life, *as deeply diseased, the fag-end left of Mark, a pair of screaming eyes in a face that doesn't match*. And I think that the concept of, there's this person that you love and there are these two halves of them and the other half that you've never met who everyone around, you know, who's just, like, this contemptuous human being, nonetheless feels this great connection to you. And like, there's, there's something very iddy about it, about the setup.

EMILY TESH: Yeah.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It doesn't quite land just because we haven't, we don't have enough time with it. We haven't had enough time with Zillah and Mark.

EMILY TESH: We don't have enough time with either Mark or Herrel. The thing is that I think both of them are stood in for by the High Head.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Whose backstory is that he also comes from the evil matriarchy and escaped desperately to boarding school where he became the world's most justified misogynist.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: It's all right because, like, his mother was really bad, probably.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. And we also learn that the way, again, these reflections of sort of coercive sex that are through the whole book, sometimes fun sex comedy ways, sometimes really scary ways, the evil matriarchy reproduces by capturing -- so there's this things called Gaudians. I would say we don't have time to get into it, but really there's not much about what's going on with them in the book, except that they're very magically powerful.

EMILY TESH: I'm pretty sure they're meant to be sexy elves.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. And we learn that the evil matriarchy kidnaps sexy elves and forces them to reproduce, and then the sexy elves are almost always so ashamed about it that they commit suicide. And this is what happened to both the High Head's father and Mark and Herrel's father.

EMILY TESH: Yeah.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And what is going to happen to Philo --

EMILY TESH: Because Zillah has brought him here.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Zillah's friend, because now he's trapped in this situation. That's all going on in the high fantasy plot. But back at the fortress --

EMILY TESH: Meanwhile, in the science fiction plot --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Meanwhile, in the science fiction plot. So again, the thing that breaks this sort of, like, sex comedy, there's no power problems here, is that Flan sees what happens to Tod. As much as Zillah is distressed and sort of sees the real rot at the heart of the fortress by this punishment that the high head inflicts on Tod, Flann sees him sent to the otherworld and is horrified by it. And the only outlet for her fear and horror at what's just happened is to start a conga line! [laughing]

EMILY TESH: Okay, it's dance, it's dance, it's dance that's big and silly and this I think is a direct echo again of Black Maria where the triumph at the end depends on Mig's willingness to dance and on Antony Green's heroic mad dance. Flan starts a heroic mad dance. She gets four or five of the brothers who admire her so much from Ritual Horn and is like, we're going to do the conga. And then they do the conga. And in a sequence that takes up, you know, it's quite, it's a pretty long sequence, bit by bit, every brother in the citadel, every monk is drawn into this, this sudden wild magic of a silly dance.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yes. Yes. Roz gets drawn into it. Roz -- actually, I'm going to just read the Roz passage. *Roz was aware she had a choice. It seemed to be handed her by the citadel itself. For the first time she became conscious that the place did indeed have vibrations, potent and awesome like a voice. It spoke to her. Either she could join in this unusual and crazy piece of magic and become part of it, or she must stay aside and remain aside for other forever. She was suddenly aware there were others refusing to join in. She sensed the worst of the brothers hiding in a cupboard full of spare uniforms, and the obdurate Horn Head of Defense who was still single-handedly guarding Arth from non-existent invaders. Roz could be like these, the Citadel told her, or... But Roz was always one who could not abide to be out of things. She sprinted after the capering line and flung herself onto to the end of it. Step and step and step and step and boot in, and yelled out her own individual words. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!"*

EMILY TESH: Right. And part of the fun of the conga is nobody can work out what the words are. So we get several different versions of the silly conga song. But by the time the conga line has reached its climax, it is becoming a murderous mob.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Before we talk about the murderous mob, though, can we real quick talk about Helen and Brother Milo?

EMILY TESH: Yes!

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Which I think is the other most notable bit of the conga. So, Helen's version of the strike force has been to take over the kitchens and provide sensual pleasures of food. Because they've all been eating horrible boarding school food until Helen comes in and is like, you could eat real food. It's fine.

EMILY TESH: Just put garlic in it. Just put garlic in it. This is pretty much the first thing she says*, thank goodness there's garlic*. And the High Head, who we later learn has a weak stomach, is horrified by this as he is by everything. And Helen has been involved in this sort of long flirtation with the head of the kitchens. And the -- there's something really compelling, I think, about, like, she's been trying to seduce him. He says, *I'm naturally celibate. I keep my oath.* And then they both join in the conga. And his words are, *decline and fall and conquer*, is what he sings to the conga. And she realizes that after the conga, he is going to break his oath with her. And she feels as much sadness as triumph. Like, there's something, this is something that was in fact important to him, that she is coming in and disturbing and destroying.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, it's, it's weirdly touching. Weirdly sad, in a way, that they, like -- the book does want you to feel sympathy for the brothers and their society, their monastery, this thing they take so seriously, which is why I think the book is really very unduly kind to the High Head.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It's so kind to the High Head. It seems like it's not going to be, because, as you said, the end of the conga line comes up and they're all yelling, *Let's pull the High Head's legs off, let's finish the old bastard.*

EMILY TESH: Which is great. And you get Edward, his one friend in the Citadel, runs ahead of the line and tells him, you have got to leave. There is no way you will survive this. The entire Citadel has turned its magic against you. Flee. So he runs for it.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: He runs for it.

EMILY TESH: And ends up back in the Pentarchy, by pure coincidence, or is it, because there is this sense of gods at work behind the scenes, stumbling into an old lady in fluffy boots who's on her way to see the king.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And Gladys takes one look at the High Head and says, oh, you look just like my poor dear old husband, who died so long ago and had a weak stomach just like you.

EMILY TESH: Right, it's clear that he is the analogue of Gladys' dead husband. But also, we should talk about what Gladys did before that. Before she meets the High

Head, she arrives in the Pentarchy with Tod. They've ended up travelling together across the border. She sends Tod off to deal with the Zillah situation because she has something else to do. First, she summons the gods of the environment in Pentarchy. She's going to solve the climate crisis.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: There is this real -- like, so the Pentarchy, this book is divided into nine parts. We spent some time talking about the structure before we did this recording and we're like, could we use the nine parts to -- no, not really.

EMILY TESH: Yeah, the structure is strange. It definitely works. It does what Jones wants it to do. But it's like, the first four sections are really small. Section nine is half the book. What is this? Eventually, I decided eventually this felt like episodes of a TV series.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Section 9 all takes place in the Pentarchy, and suddenly there's all kinds of new -- it's the last hundred pages of the book, which is about a four hundred page book, at least in my edition. And suddenly there's all this new high fantasy stuff that starts coming in because we're finally on the Pentarchy. Gladys summons a whole bunch of gods. We didn't even know there was more than one god before Gladys lands on the ground and is like, I'm summoning --

EMILY TESH: They have all been mentioned before. I did notice that people swear by them or bring them up briefly, but they've never been explained in any detail or taken seriously. It's just like, oh, the fantasy monks in the sci-fi fortress swear by Pearl, or whoever.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. So she lands and summons a whole bunch of gods. Tod goes off and starts contacting all his friends and relations, and suddenly there's this whole complex, like, political-social hierarchy going on with Tod and new characters coming in that he has all these complicated relationships with that feel honestly like sequel bait. But it's like, there's, she's trying to cram this whole rich, detailed second-world fantasy space -- which she hasn't really done very much before, you know, she's only done a couple of real second-world fantasies -- into the last hundred pages of this book that already has so much happening in it.

EMILY TESH: The word we kept coming back to was maximalist.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: This book has everything. No, more everything than that.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. Why should I use the characters, the thirty characters I've already got? No, I think Tod needs some more characters to hang out with at this juncture in time. Plus a hundred centaurs. Although, you know what, actually, that last bit reminds me of a little bit, which I don't think I said to you beforehand, but I was thinking about, is there is a certain Prince Caspian quality to the end of this book. Everything, the magic all freed and rushing towards this point to overcome the evil. There's a bunch of centaurs suddenly. There's, the gods have come down.

EMILY TESH: Right. The book is about cutting loose and going with what's wild and what's natural and what can't be controlled and shouldn't be controlled. And as usual with Diana Wynne-Jones, I do think it's a creativity metaphor.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: When is it not a creativity metaphor?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And therefore the book does need to go a bit nuts at the end. And boy, does it. There is so much going on.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: There's even, I mean, it's, it's explicitly a creativity metaphor because Zillah has a conversation with the High Head in the middle of the book where she's like, this fortress is so bare. Why is there no art in it? And the High Head says, well, art would disturb our vibrations. But they need the art. They need the creativity. They need the wild magic.

EMILY TESH: They need to need to dance. They need to dance.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: They need to dance. And then --

EMILY TESH: So we've got Zillah trapped in an evil ritual to control Marcus. We've got Tod driving his own car with a hundred centaurs to the rescue. We've got Gladys stomping across the countryside with High Head. Up in Arth, there appears to be an orgy going on.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Back on Earth, Maureen and Joe are imprisoned deep in the hell dimensions together as Maureen fights him off.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And then they all end up in the evil matriarchy.

EMILY TESH: Except Maureen and Joe. They are still in hell.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Except Maureen and Joe. Maureen and Joe never interact with anybody else in the book. Like after that first set up with Maureen, Maureen and Joe spend the entire book locked in mortal combat and then the end of their plotline is they come out of the mortal combat and are like, well, we're both tired. And I guess we're eternally inextricably bound now?

EMILY TESH: Yeah, they've got a soul bond now.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah. Okay. And the king is there. The king has come to Leathe. Not to Maureen and Joe. Sorry, I realized that was unclear.

EMILY TESH: Right. So actually, no, before we all get to Leathe, we do get, Gladys encounters the king and explains to him what was going on with the climate problems in the Pentarchy. Which is, the Pentarchy has been stealing so much stuff from our world that it has become bloated and damaged by ideas theft, basically,

and needs to be giving something back. And until it does so, it's going to keep having environmental problems.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Which is unfortunate because it turns out then that all of the women who went to the monastery are really happy there in their new, as queens of the new orgy, and don't want to go home. And Gladys is like, ugh, they have so many ideas. That's not helping the imbalance problem at all.

EMILY TESH: Right. So back in Leathe, we finally wrap up the Zillah plot with, the ritual plays out. I don't find this part very interesting, honestly.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: No, I don't think it is that interesting.

EMILY TESH: It just doesn't really gel.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right.

EMILY TESH: Except that Gladys marches in and Gladys' familiar Jimbo spots Lady Marcenay and is like, there, there is my eternal enemy, and it's the demon inside her that's been drinking Mark has been Jimbo's prey the whole time, and he seizes her, and there's a great sequence, and I think this is actually the whole reason that Maureen and Joe are in hell.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Ohhhh.

EMILY TESH: They are in hell, they look up and they see plunging down from above [RF laughing] which is closer to reality, down to the very, very depths of hell, hell, extra hell, two fighting demons and a spray of blood around them, which is all that's left of Lady Marcenay.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: You're right. That is why they're there. And then immediately they're like, well, fuck this. We're going home to our terrible soul bond. [both laughing] But yeah, there's this stuff at the end. Like, Mark arrives, he and Herrel are reunited, Mark-Herrel and Zillah and Marcus are going to be a family that, like, should be the emotional resolution of this book and just isn't. It's barely there.

EMILY TESH: I'll tell you what the actual emotional resolution seems to be. It's Gladys deciding that to balance all the ideas that have been stolen from Earth, she needs to take someone with a lot of ideas back with her to Earth, like, say, a very experienced and powerful wizard. And she's like, you --

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Who happens to look exactly like her ex-husband.

EMILY TESH: I want to just stop at this moment and spare a thought for Gladys' daughter.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Oh my God.

EMILY TESH: When she returns her mother's cats will discover her mother is now shackled up with her dead father's parallel universe analog. [both laughing]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: This poor woman suffers more than anyone else in the book.

EMILY TESH: And in fact, the High Head is like, I have forsworn women. And Gladys is like, that's all right. I've been a widow for years. They are definitely going to fuck.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: They are absolutely going to fuck. And it's so, like, it is really striking to me again how easy the High Head gets off. How --

EMILY TESH: Right. There are two great evils in the book, right? There's Lady Marcenay, who is a demon from hell and who gets exploded through the hell dimensions.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yup.

EMILY TESH: And then there's the High Head, who has to live with Gladys. [both explode in laughter]

REBECCA FRAIMOW: All right, well, when you put it like that. [both laughing] But it is, I mean, I do think that's part of the lack of control of this book, right? Like one of the things that we've noted throughout the course of this project has been, in almost every book, there's a sense that Diana Wynne Jones knows that the problem in the family, in a family, in any given family, is often the husband, but the anger that she feels is for the wife. The problem --

EMILY TESH: I remember all the way back in Cart and Cwiddler, it's, it's, I can see that Clennen is more to blame, but I'm angrier with Lenina.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Right. And in the books of hers that she writes with care and control, when she's thinking about it, that comes through. You can see how much the vitriol is, the unwarranted vitriol is unfair, that there is equal blame on both sides, even, or more blame. Even in Black Maria, which again, you know, and we talked about last time, that's a book that can, I think, feel quite misogynistic. But she's careful to put in signs and clues that she knows what an evil patriarchy can do and that it's often worse. She's not bothering really to do that here. There's a kind of, you know, the, the vitriol about terrible old women is at its height in the same book that, again, is about the problems of misogyny, about how you need to let women into all-male spaces, about Zillah coming into her own as a happy adult, a happy adult woman. And it feels like those two things are somehow connected.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. I do think it's -- you're right. It's a lack of control, which is, I think, necessary for the book as well. I think this book done with more care and control would lack something else. It would lack some of its -- it's so bonkers, Becca. It's so weird!

REBECCA FRAIMOW: It's all about big, weird set pieces, big, weird emotions. I'm actually -- so I know we're coming towards the end. I am going to read what I think is Zillah's climax in the book, which is when she finally gets in touch with her wild magic. And it says, *Wild it was. It lifted her in an exultant sheeting gust so long and so far that she lost all sense of time or of her own body. She was all mind for a nanosecond that seemed to last a thousand years. Understanding*

filled. This was why she had always ducked out, refused training in witchcraft, run from Amanda's kind of education. The restraints of knowledge harmed this wild power. In order to use it, Zillah could not know what it was. It would only answer a being as untrammelled as itself. It was wildness. Zillah hung on in its exultant aurora borealis, exalting herself, because she had always known this about wild magic, really. So that's how she wrote the book.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. Which is interesting. Which it, it actually makes me think of, what's the Le Guin line? What, why do women, why can't women think? Why do they have to feel? It's, Zillah gets vindicated in how frustrating she is.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Zillah is right to reject everything that, say, her feminist professor sister has done to encourage her to have a career, to have magical training. Zillah is fine the way she is, which is also the climax of a Chrestomanci book, incidentally.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes, so true. And it does feel like a turning point. You know, we've talked a little bit about how it feels like in the short stories, in Black Maria, how Diana Wynne Jones has been kind of yearning towards writing about adult women. And it does feel like a turning point that she can sort of apply this kind of, okay, you're fine the way you are, some of it's kind of terrible, but that's okay, that's the way you need to be, to an adult woman heroine.

EMILY TESH: Yes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: But it does also feel like that comes, at least in this book, this first reaching towards it, this first sort of big explosion of energy for writing this kind of adult fantasy, that in order to say, it's, I, you know, I feel okay being a woman, writing about being a woman, inhabiting this creative space as a woman, there also has to be this counterbalance of, but not like that. Not like that woman.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. We do also have to have the evil matriarchy.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: And that bitch does have to get exploded. But it is, it is, it is the unfairness, though, of that bitch has to get exploded. But that bastard, that demon, and, you know, the High Head is the demon who's haunted Zillah for years, who stalked teenage children, who genuinely believed that all the other world's inhabitants were not human and never bothered to question it once.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Who sent her, or rather drove her into this very dangerous situation -- like, Zillah only ends up in Leathe because she's running away from the High Head and what he's done in the Citadel, and out of his possessive, cruel, jealousy.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Like, this guy is a monster. He doesn't know he's a monster, he thinks he's just a nice old man who likes to eat potatoes.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And who, frankly, like, even if the inhabitants of otherworld aren't human, it's still not okay to climate change their planet.

EMILY TESH: No, no, it's not.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: So all of this, this evil, which we get really clearly in the middle of the book, this is the evil at the heart. It doesn't look like evil, it looks like a nice old man, but it is evil. But it's fine.

EMILY TESH: But then we, we turn on the dime and say, actually, no the real evil was this, was this nasty old woman over here.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Who's barely been on page

EMILY TESH: Yeah. And I think actually, we spent -- the High Head is the deuteragonist. He is the male lead of the book.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes. Yes.

EMILY TESH: And we spend so much time with him, it's almost like Jones can't quite bring herself then to give him the unhappy ending he thoroughly deserves. It's getting displaced onto an evil woman. I think he deserved to be exploded through hell as well, honestly.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yeah, maybe. I think they at least, did whatever happened to them should have happened to both of them, is what I think.

EMILY TESH: Maybe she should have been torn apart by a murderous conga mob, you know?

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Maybe she should have had to go live with Gladys. [both laughing]

EMILY TESH: I feel like Gladys and Lady Marcenay would be a matter-anti-matter explosion because I think it's very, very clear that they are the same woman, kind of.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Both of them with this demon companion and this terrible power and the aspect of the crone.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: But one of them is selfish, larger than life, thoroughly herself, laudatory. And one of them is selfish, larger than life, thoroughly herself, derogatory.

EMILY TESH: And, incidentally, wears makeup and heels.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: And incidentally, wears makeup and heels.

EMILY TESH: Except it's never incidental. The fact of the evil patriarchy's polished femininity is your biggest sign that they are evil.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: There's the internalized misogyny.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Their soft, high, charming voices is something that's returned to over and over again. With intent to manipulate. Like, I think that's really -- so I was, I happened to be reading *The Dispossessed* at the same time that I was reading this book. And there's a term that Ursula Le Guin uses frequently in *The Dispossessed* called body profiteering. And it feels like that's the thing that Diana Wynne Jones is angry about here. It's the use of your femininity for manipulative purposes. That is the unforgivable thing.

EMILY TESH: Yeah. And that's why a character like, say, Roz, who is wrong, is still treated with love and, and affection by the narrative, I think, and eventually gets to, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yes.

EMILY TESH: Whereas Lady Marcenay and the Ladies of Leathe get no such generous treatment.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Yep. But that's okay, because next time we're going to be talking about a very evil old man who does get exactly what he deserves.

EMILY TESH: Yes! It has been three seasons. Well, two and a half seasons to get us to *Hexwood*. I cannot wait to talk about *Hexwood*. What a book. The book. But I also don't think *Hexwood* would have been possible if she hadn't written *A Sudden Wild Magic* first.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: I absolutely agree. I think it's vital and necessary and I'm really excited to reread *Hexwood* having just read *A Sudden Wild Magic* and look at what she's taught herself from *A Sudden Wild Magic* because I think she's learned a lot from it.

EMILY TESH: Alright, let's call it there.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: Let's call it there.

EMILY TESH: See you next time.

REBECCA FRAIMOW: See you next time.