Jacks Thomas:

... all timezones today. Welcome to the Georgette Heyer Un-Conference, A Century Spent Having a Ball, which is celebrating the publication of Georgette Heyer: History and Historical Fiction, a volume of essays, published today by UCL Press, edited by Dr. Samantha Rayner and Prof. Kim Wilkins, with whom I, Jacks Thomas, a self-confessed Heyer hobbyist, am delighted to be a co-chair of this un-conference. It is with great pleasure that I introduce our guests today to discuss Heyer, the Nonsuch of her Time and the Original Influencer.

Jacks Thomas:

As the majority of us are based here in the UK, I think it is surely polite to welcome our international speaker first. Lois McMaster Bujold joins us from Minnesota, and is the award-winning SF and fantasy author of Sharing Knife and World of the Five Gods, among other series. She was named a grandmaster by the SF Writers of America in 2020 and we're honored to have you here today with us, Lois.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Thank you for inviting me.

Jacks Thomas:

You're most welcome.

Jacks Thomas:

Harriet Evans worked on the inside of the book industry as a publisher for many years, but in the end her love of writing won out over her publishing career, and she enjoys being lucky enough to focus on her writing as a full-time novelist. Harriet is the author of 11 novels, which have all been bestsellers, including A Place for Us, Going Home, and Love Always.

Jacks Thomas:

Hello, Harriet.

Harriet Evans:

Hello. Thanks for having me.

Jacks Thomas:

Lovely to have you here with us.

Jacks Thomas:

Cathy Rentzenbrink, very well known in the book-selling and publishing arena, is the author of The Last Act of Love, A Manual for Heartache, and Dear Reader. Her first novel is called Everyone Is Still Alive, and will be out in July.

Jacks Thomas:

Cathy, I believe you're speaking to us from Cornwall where you live. Lucky you, better than lockdown London.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Yeah. No, it is very nice to be down here. It is pouring with rain at the moment. [crosstalk 00:01:56]-

Jacks Thomas:

Oh, that makes us feel marginally better.

Harriet Evans:

I'm in Regency, Bath and it's pouring with rain as well.

Jacks Thomas:

Right.

Harriet Evans:

Yes.

Jacks Thomas:

And now to Katie Fforde, who loves being a writer. To her there isn't a more satisfying and pleasing thing to do. She particularly enjoys writing about love, as she believes that falling in love is the best thing in the world and she wants all her characters to experience it, and her readers to share their stories. That certainly seems to be the case, giving that your books have sold over 3.4 million copies worldwide, Katie.

Katie Fforde:

Gosh, have they really?

Jacks Thomas:

Yes.

Jacks Thomas:

Happy publication week to you, I understand you have a new novel out, and hello to you. You're residing in the Cotswolds?

Katie Fforde:

I am. Where it's actually not raining, although it has been raining. But it isn't raining now.

Jacks Thomas:

Well, we are in the UK. So, it's bound to at some point.

Jacks Thomas:

What a pleasure it is to chair this session, during which I anticipate my job simply to be to ensure that we don't run away with time, given how informed and passionate, and I understand that you all love Georgette Heyer.

Jacks Thomas:

So let's start, if I may, with you, Harriet, by posing the question I'll ask everyone in turn, but in a succinct, old-school, 140 character Twitter-style answer, when did you discover Georgette Heyer? And which is your favorite novel?

Harriet Evans:

My mom had them all and was a huge fan and still is. I have two joint favorites, I'm really sorry, and they are Venetia and Devil's Cub, because both the hero and the heroine are the right level of inexperienced and experienced. They're my two favorites. I couldn't choose between them, like my children.

Jacks Thomas:

I think that's fair enough. I think it's quite hard to choose your favorite Heyer novel as well, yes. Lois, how about you?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Oh, I stumbled across Heyer quite randomly in a remainder bookshop in Columbus, Ohio, where I lived in around 1970, and bought a couple of... [inaudible 00:04:06] picked them for the covers because they intrigued me, and I still have them.

Jacks Thomas:

Now, which editions were those? Oh, fantastic.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

From the 1960s, 1967. Then I proceeded to look her up in my local libraries and came across the rest of her oeuvre.

Jacks Thomas:

And the favorites? The favorite-

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Well, probably Cotillion, although it works best if you've read enough of Heyer to you know she's working against your own type in that one, but Cotillion is perennial. It's wonderful.

Jacks Thomas:

Yeah, now you've mentioned it, it could be a favorite as well. Katie... It's terrible. How did you discover Heyer? Was it your mom?

Katie Fforde:

I was quite young. No, my mother was a bit snooty about Heyer, I have to say, but somebody left a copy of Friday's Child at our house. Honestly, I was very young and I didn't understand all the words, but I was still swept away by the story.

Katie Fforde:

But my favorite is the next one I read, which is The Grand Sophy. Although hearing other people's favorites always, oh, you think, "Oh yes. That's my favorite." I'm very fond of The Talisman Ring as well, both of which are very funny. That's part of her, I think, her humor.

Jacks Thomas:

Yes, which-

Katie Fforde:

I'm sorry, that's my husband coming out.

Jacks Thomas:

... witty. Yes. Sorry, I got momentarily diverted because as soon as anyone's mentioning the next Heyer novel, I think, "Oh, hang on." They're all sliding around in terms of priority in my head.

Jacks Thomas:

Cathy, what about you? How did you discover her, to start off with?

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

My mom, I don't think read her, or still isn't interested. Good old Snaith Library, I think. And then, which I still like doing, hunting for them in charity shops. I like all those old Pan editions.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I could go along with anybody's favorite. I don't really have... I mean, it's difficult. I just pick a different fave on a different day. There's probably about maybe 12 or 14 that I think are top flight. I mean, they're not all... But for the purposes of this, I have picked on Frederica.

Jacks Thomas:

Oh, yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

My cousin bought me this. She found it in a car boot sale.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

I know that edition.

Jacks Thomas:

[inaudible 00:06:31] edition, yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I like the older heroines. So if I probably have a favorite, it's the older, slightly woman-of-the-world heroines would probably be my favorite sub-category.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

But of course, one of the reasons why they're each so fascinating is that you could just endlessly have this conversation and come to a different conclusion every time.

Jacks Thomas:

Yes. I've come to the conclusion it's the last one anyone mentioned, because I'm like, [inaudible 00:06:57]. And she hasn't been out of print, I understand, for the last century. So, absolutely enduring value of Heyer.

Jacks Thomas:

Then that brings me on to, the respected academic Kathryn Sutherland writes in Heyer: History and Historical Fiction, which we're celebrating here through this conference, referring to the historical novel, "Escapism is a response and a protest within history." I was somewhat intrigued, because just at the moment, as this scary pandemic wages war on the world, how apposite is that quote, and is escapism synonymous with a less literary type of work?

Katie Fforde:

I would say it is, probably. I think escapism probably isn't literary, but I don't care. I want that. I like it, and I read it. Because I do want escape from the current pandemic, and a book is a perfect safe place. So I'm unashamedly an escapist.

Jacks Thomas:

Anybody else want to dive in there?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

I work in a genre that is schizophrenic about whether it's escapist or engaged with current events, and it could go either way. I read for escape. I read Heyer for escape, certainly. I read comedy, I notice when I read that the ones I enjoy are the comedies, not the romantic melodramas. Georgette Heyer is reliably comic. [crosstalk 00:08:35] She also does world-building, which we can get into in a bit.

Jacks Thomas:

Yeah. How about the other two?

Harriet Evans:

I think it's what people mean when they say escapism, because what they quite often mean is something patronizing, and the most escapist book I ever read was Atonement and I read it on holiday and I spent all day by the pool. That was total escapism. I left the world. I was completely absorbed by it. But no one calls that an escapist novel. They call it [inaudible 00:09:02]. What people quite often mean when they say escapism is lesser fiction, and that quite often is applied to fiction by women.

Harriet Evans:

When I was about 25, I remember sitting, reading a Georgette Heyer and picking up someone's Evening Standard on the tube, and the night before there'd been a ceremony at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich to honor Patrick O'Brien. I've tried to read Patrick O'Brien so many times, and I can't get past the first chapter. Georgette Heyer's, writing at exactly the same time, exactly the same part of a woman's world, and yet who is holding a conference for her at the Bath Assembly Room? I'm going to

do that next year, but like Malcolm Rifkind had been... The list of guests, it was incredibly British establishment thing. That for me, Patrick O'Brien's escapism to millions of people. Not to do him down, millions of people enjoy him but it's the use of the word, like airport novel.

Harriet Evans:

Loads of people are sold in airports but what you mean when you say airport novel is something that's got gold foil in it. I like having gold foil, I like being a top ten best seller, but most of all, I want my books to be good and her books were really good.

Harriet Evans:

I'll shut up now, because I can go on about this-

Lois McMaster Bujold:

I think a better term than airport novel might be hospice novel. And anchor it a little more appropriately. It's where I see my readers, at least.

Jacks Thomas:

What about you Cathy? What's escapism for you and what's escapism-

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Well I basically agree with everything that everyone else has said. Heyer herself said something like, "I'm sure my books are terrible nonsense, but I think I'd quite like to read one if I was sitting in an air-raid shelter-

Jacks Thomas:

Yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

... [inaudible 00:10:38] flu. Which I think is... she was writing some of them in the Second World War. She would have been, literally, sitting in an air-raid shelter and knowing what it means to sit in an air-raid shelter.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I never feel, oh I'm very pro... I think a big function of books is to escape and what's wrong with that? I also completely agree with Harry, that often it just depends what gender the writer is. And I also agree with Lois, what really I love about Heyer is that they're funny. I'm less interested in the romance plot than the... I think they're social comedies and they're very funny.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

My comparison, when I'm out there, trying to get people to read her is, it's P.G. Wodehouse with a really well researched Regency setting. And, of course, because again, like Patrick O'Brien, who I agree, never been able to get on with, but people don't talk about P.G. Wodehouse with the slight sneer that you might get when you talk about Georgette Heyer.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

But I think, there's another saying I like which is that, art should disturb the comforted and comfort the disturbed. I think reading does all of it. Sometimes I look to reading for stretch and challenge and sometimes I just want reading to get me through this awful day on this planet so I can continue doing my job, raising my child and not checking out. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

What's wrong with making people laugh and making them feel engaged with the work, making them enjoy themselves. That's what I would say-

Jacks Thomas:

[inaudible 00:12:06] escape, read, be absorbed or displacement. Yeah, exactly.

Katie Fforde:

Can I just put in a word for Patrick O'Brien, he's terribly funny. Terribly, terribly funny.

Harriet Evans:

[inaudible 00:12:15] is, it's blokes on ships and I don't-

Katie Fforde:

I read him when I wanted to write a historical novel and I couldn't be bothered to do the research, I just thought I'd borrow his and I got hooked on the novels and never wrote the historical fiction set on a boat.

Harriet Evans:

I guess [inaudible 00:12:35] try him again.

Katie Fforde:

Well, only if you're desperate obviously. It's not like we don't have enough to read, but like Georgette Heyer, his dialogue is terribly, terribly good.

Jacks Thomas:

Let's look at the packaging then. I wonder how much the cover tells you what to think about the novel as well. Is Patrick O'Brien's packaging, is his more masculine? Possibly, I don't know. I'm putting it out there as a... I mean, it doesn't have people in pretty dresses on it, necessarily, does it?

Katie Fforde:

No. There's ships.

Jacks Thomas:

Does that immediately divine... does that allow people to sneer? I don't know, I'm just asking.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

But there's also nothing wrong with pretty dresses is there? Again [crosstalk 00:13:15]

Jacks Thomas:

No, absolutely not.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

It's not the number one reason I like her, but all that detailed stuff about clothes. But again, she does it in such an interesting way because I'm not interested in fashion or clothes at all, but because when she writes about fashion and clothes, because she's telling you other things about, the color of the reticule, or the half chemise, or whatever. As you see, I can't even remember the words but it's telling you stuff about the characters and the way they interact with each other-

Katie Fforde:

And social differences.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

... the social differences in the world.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Clothing is a social language.

Harriet Evans:

This is [inaudible 00:13:50] interesting bit, I started re-reading Arabella yesterday, sorry Lois, and her mother, it turns out, has been putting a nest egg away to send Arabella to London. And Arabella isn't one of my favorites, because she's a bit too [French 00:14:04], for me, but her mother's been putting this nest egg away, they have no money and she says, mother, why have you done this, you should have spent the money on a new carpet or whatever, and her mother says, in a very cool way, "I regard this as a good investment."

Harriet Evans:

I've saved up this money, because I have four daughters and if I send the really pretty oldest one off to London... it's not la, la, la, la, la, la. This is investing... her mother is a sensible woman.

Katie Fforde:

Yes, Mrs. Bennett really, isn't it?

Harriet Evans:

More successful than Mrs. Bennett in a [crosstalk 00:14:34] before Mrs. Bennett. As time goes on I really warm to that woman.

Jacks Thomas:

Okay, so coming back to Heyer's writing, is she pretty device driven? Villain to hero, plucky heroine, convenient brother or other, major misunderstanding, love and happiness always prevail, all with a backdrop of, I think we all agree, meticulous historic detail and fabulous dialogue, but as writers, do

your blank sheets of paper have any such apparent formula noted on them prior to starting a new novel? Or am I slightly underselling story telling, writing and Heyer? Shout me down.

Katie Fforde:

Yes, there are a few things I like to have in a novel, but sometimes the story doesn't allow for that. I love to have a friend so my heroine can tell her friend stuff, so she doesn't have to tell the reader stuff. But the reader needs to know. But if the heroine doesn't have a friend, I have to manage without.

Katie Fforde:

And as for Georgette Heyer having all those devices? Yes, she does, but do we care? No, we want to just go along for the ride, even if the characters can be similar, the aunts and things can be similar, we don't actually give a damn. We just read the book and enjoy it.

Jacks Thomas:

Lady Jersey appears in them all I think.

Katie Fforde:

[inaudible 00:15:59]. Yes.

Jacks Thomas:

How about those other blank sheets of papers? Cathy, you've just written your first novel, how-

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Having finally managed to write a novel at the age of 48, I am an [French 00:16:16] in this setup, so I'm almost not sure I would dream to make any grand claims about my own process yet, I just feel very glad that I've managed to do one.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I think the thing with Heyer is, she's continually refining/playing/undercutting herself in a playful way. Some of the novels poke fun at some... You think, well, like Cotillion, you expect the hero to be one particular type of person and he's another type of person. So the idiot friend of one novel becomes a type who gets explored as the hero in another novel.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Likewise, with the heroine. Quite often the heroine is the unlikely character, like in The Quiet Gentlemen. It's the unusual, she doesn't really appear like a heroine. So, there's all sorts of playful meta stuff that she's up to, I think. I think that's why... I'm always wanting to just read the whole lot in publication order, because I feel really interested in tracking the development of her thought and I like the old ones. Even though, again, as they get late, some of them do...

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

There's three that I really like, but I do confuse them because they're quite similar and they're all set in Bath and they've all got an older heroine and stuff, but they're all very good and there are types that rebound. But I only ever really want to read more of her types, I think.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I'm just there for it. All of it. I'll just have more of it, please.

Jacks Thomas:

[crosstalk 00:17:52] re-read them and to do it in chronological order. Lois, what were you going to say.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

I was going to say, I ran across a discussion of Heyer which divided the heroes into type A and type B. The type A being the alpha male hero who was the younger [French 00:18:08] bride that she wrote when se was younger. And the type B hero of which Freddy is the quintessential example from Cotillion, the fellow who can procure you a chair in the rain-

Harriet Evans:

Useful fellow.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

... thinking about that, I thought that the type A is the kind of hero when you were a girl and the type B is the kind of hero you would want for your daughter when you're grown.

Jacks Thomas:

That's very nice. It's growing up with Heyer, isn't it. As well.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Yes. She does. She comes across-

Jacks Thomas:

Shall we hear from Regency, Bath as well? What do you think Harriet, and you're saying you're there in Bath, are you?

Harriet Evans:

I am, yeah.

Harriet Evans:

What the process, or the-

Jacks Thomas:

Yes. But, I mean, 11 novels under your belt and you've sat on the other side of the desk, when they-

Harriet Evans:

Yeah. I'm fascinated by her productivity and how she took it really seriously and she also was really obsessed with tax problems and things like that and her office and it was quite mechanical for her. And that's why it's so funny that the books are so effortless. And I think it shows at things like the swan, my old boss used to say, the swan effect, that I think she worked super hard to make them seem effortless.

Harriet Evans:

It's like Mozart, when you're writing something actually quite complicated and it has to look really light, that's really tricky. And I'm not good at very plotty, plotting out, but I'm also not good at just flying by the seat of my pants so I'm somewhere between, and that's quite difficult because I do sometimes feel, oh god! You're making it much harder than it needs to be.

Harriet Evans:

That's what I admire about her so much, her work ethic was extraordinary. A book a year, every year... [crosstalk 00:20:17] hard.

Jacks Thomas:

First published at 17. That's absolutely phenomenal really.

Harriet Evans:

And you can see why maybe she sta... I re-read Lady of Quality last year, when I moved to Bath, and Lady Quality is one of her last books and you can see, it's a bit creaky, it is very light. Lois, maybe you were saying this is a bit like Black Sheep, which I think is better and you can feel it's a bit, oh, maybe some years...

Harriet Evans:

My agent and I were talking about this, this morning, authors don't always write better books, sometimes they do write better books than the last one, sometimes they don't, sometimes it's way bet... it's not, otherwise we'd all end up as Shakespeare by a natural progression if you wrote that many books.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

[inaudible 00:21:04] can not be better than all the others, it just doesn't work that way.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah. But I'm fascinated by her because she gave away so little of herself, so you don't quite know what the process... there's no Insta quotes from Georgette Heyer's. Today guys, I'm dreaming of this, she was-

Katie Fforde:

But I think she did struggle with her plots, didn't she? She describes playing patience time after time after time, working at the plots. Which is what I do a lot, I have to say. It's my excuse and I'm sticking to it. Because if Georgette Heyer did it, it's fine for me to do it.

Harriet Evans:

What? You play patience on the computer or you-

Katie Fforde:

Yes. Thinking.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah.

Katie Fforde:

About my plot, working stuff out. So the front part of my brain is occupied which means my subconscious can worry away at things.

Harriet Evans:

Penny Vincenzi used to go for a long dog walk. She'd take her dog for a walk, every morning, really long dog walk and she'd be thinking about, well, I'm outside, I'm this and that and she wouldn't think about it, just at the back of her head she'd be thinking about it. Sort of front brain, back brain isn't it?

Katie Fforde:

Yeah, a walk will also do it, but it means getting dressed and...

Harriet Evans:

Such a pain.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Also, very good for the process, I think, pumps more blood up into your brain, and maybe you have more function.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah.

Jacks Thomas:

We're very much now into your writing careers. Everyone around this virtual table is a best seller, but could you actually say that Heyer actually had any influence on your style, your desire to write, your-

Katie Fforde:

Absolutely. Absolutely. She affected my writing, my essays when I was at school, which I didn't really realize because I wasn't obviously deliberately trying to write my essay about Julius Caesar, in the style of, but I realized I did pick up her writing style because I am one of those people who do pick up other people's writing styles.

Katie Fforde:

I mean, I don't worry about it, because you notice when you read it back, instantly, it's not you. So, it's not something that I think about a lot, but definitely, right from the beginning. Before I was even thought about being a writer and someone at my very first book signing said, "Do I detect an influence of Georgette Heyer?" And I said, "Well, she writes historical, mine are contemporary." But then I realized that's really nothing, it doesn't make any difference.

Jacks Thomas:

It was completely unconscious, but-

Katie Fforde:

Completely.

Jacks Thomas:

... she had inspired you to-

Katie Fforde:

Yeah, but when somebody pointed it out to me, I realized, oh yes, well, who am I kidding? Of course.

Jacks Thomas:

How about others? Lois?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Oh gosh, the language in the world building leak and writers pick up language like lint, it comes from everything. But certainly that, her slightly archaic style mix into my fantasy when I want to give a sense of not contemporary... Probably the most directly inspired by her work is a novel of mine called The Civil Campaign, which was explicitly a Regency romance in space, which-

Katie Fforde:

Wow.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

... [crosstalk 00:24:11] much too long to describe the setup. It actually is the second half of the duality. The first one is Komarr and it's romantic suspense so it's playing with... crossing romance and science fiction, which is tricky because science fiction tends to be a very anti-domestic genre, I guess is the broadest way of putting in.

Jacks Thomas:

Yeah.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

And that backs in, it's an interesting process

Jacks Thomas:

In the books that we're celebrating today in this conference, there's an entire essay by Kathleen Jennings on the influence of Heyer on science fiction writing, which I think is quite interesting and [crosstalk 00:24:52] would necessarily have been obvious. But how about you two other ladies, Cathy and Harriet? Direct influence or subconscious influence or...

Harriet Evans:

A fluency, this idea that... but also very expressly female worlds are just interesting to write about and that's okay. When you grow up and you're a bit... everything's all male football teams or a lot of the films I saw, people like, oh, princess Leia and I'd think, but she's a one girl, I just want somewhere where there's...

Harriet Evans:

And I went to an all girls school and that was confusing when reflecting [inaudible 00:25:37]. I never thought about it before, actually. I think just that idea that a lot of this stuff is just a world where women are doing their thing, as I am, as a woman going around, doing my thing. I think just that confidence, oh, just write about this world. And as Katie and Lois both said, that's a world building, that complete... My books, I wish they were, but the one thing I do really try hard to get with them is a total world having been built so you feel entering into it if you buy one of my books. She's very good at that.

Jacks Thomas:

She is extremely good isn't she? You are there, aren't you? Watching somebody step out of a carriage. You are... Those nicely turned ankles. Cathy, how about you?

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Yeah, I've not thought about it before and I would have said no. But thinking about it now, I'm not sure the answer isn't, completely.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

[crosstalk 00:26:28].

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I've utterly forgotten about this but I just remembered that in the novel I was writing years ago, which I didn't finish, which I was writing at university, but there was a character in that who knew someone called [inaudible 00:26:45] and then met her brother who was called Aubrey and then at some point Tweed that this was because their mother was a reader of Georgette Heyer. And I've completely forgotten about that, but it just came to me then.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I suppose, probably if... one of the things I think she's so good at is, I do think she's really good at the old show, don't tell, and she's also very good at annoying characters-

Jacks Thomas:

Which characters?

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

... annoying people.

Jacks Thomas:

Oh, yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Incredibly good at annoying people. But again, without laying it on with a trowel. I'm thinking of Edward, I mean, Edward Yardley in Venetia, it's the [inaudible 00:27:19] literary example of mansplaining. I think there is, I just give him to you.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Cousin Maria, who I think is in Lady of Quality, but as I say I get those later Bath ones a bit muddled, but cousin Maria, again, what an absolute triumph of putting a repressed, silly person on the page. It's just brilliant. Probably in that thing of, maybe, I hope, I mean I don't know, I wouldn't almost want to say that I could do it. But there may be something in the way that I'm trying to put human folly and vanity on the page, but not in a cruel way and not in laying it on with a trowel but just letting it breathe. I don't know. I wouldn't say I've achieved it, but thinking about it, that I might be trying to do that because of Heyer. That might be something that's in my mind.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

And also the way she confounds you as in do you think a character's going to be this and actually it turns out that they're not what you were expecting, that also might be which I also have tried to do in my novel. To the point where I wonder whether people might, after two chapters, throw it across the room and think, "Oh, I don't want to spend time with these people who are all this, this and this." And I might say that oh, but by chapter 10 you might've found out that they're that, that and that.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Attention spans are short, I don't worry about it. I've done my bit.

Jacks Thomas:

I should remember that in the reader notes for [inaudible 00:28:43].

Harriet Evans:

Because there is one, isn't there, where, I think it's, ah, I can't remember what it's called, but the one where he marries this girl who's very rich and her father's a Cit, oh, the shame.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Oh, A Civil Contract.

Harriet Evans:

Thank you. A Civil Contract.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Wonderful book.

Harriet Evans:

And there's a Max [inaudible 00:29:05] who's a dud, a total dud. And I love that because he arrives and you think, oh, it's going to be him. Phew, right, okay, he's here and then you keep thinking no. She does make you do the work and you realize it and you keep thinking, oh no. And that's again, made to look so easy but, ah, it's so hard, isn't it? It's so hard.

Jacks Thomas:

Well, everything that looks so easy, is always somebody who's got complete mastery, isn't it, of their craft, I suppose.

Jacks Thomas:

Bridgerton. Now, I didn't really want to mention Bridgerton and I don't want to linger, but I do think it does beg the question, is it the nearest that we're going to get to contemporary Heyer on the screen or do we hope, paving the way, for these wonderful novels that we can't decide actually which is our favorite going to appear.

Jacks Thomas:

I mean, Katie, I think you mentioned that there possibly were a couple of dramatizations a long time ago?

Katie Fforde:

Yes, The Toll-Gate, many years ago, was dramatized. And I think, it was certainly on the radio, but I think it may have been a film as well. But, to be honest, if you're not getting the dialogue and the wonderful characterization and the writing, which you're not really in a film, you're not left with an awful lot because let's face it, plotting isn't absolutely what she does best.

Katie Fforde:

You love it for the people, you love it for the dialogue and the quality of the writing and the jokes, but is it the plot? I don't think it is. Am I going to now be physically chopped? Maybe it's as well we're not all together and you can't throw things at me.

Harriet Evans:

I never thought that before, but maybe you're right that the plots aren't... but she's got control of the plot though.

Katie Fforde:

Oh, yes. Completely. But it's not one of those books where you read it because you have to know what happens and then you throw it aside and said, well, that's absolute rubbish. And you don't pick up another of that author until you're next on a plane.

Harriet Evans:

Mm. Mm. You're right.

Katie Fforde:

[inaudible 00:31:09] I mean, she's much more... It is more about quality than width I think with her.

Jacks Thomas:

Have the others, I mean, are we all, Bridgerton... I mean, I watched my first Bridgerton last night, for the purposes of this panel, because I thought everybody would've watched it but-

Harriet Evans:

Then you've got a treat in store.

Jacks Thomas:

Oh, right. You haven't... Oh, you have watched it?

Harriet Evans:

Ooh, yeah.

Jacks Thomas:

Ah, okay. I haven't got to the, apparently, the raunchy ones, yeah. But I was fascinated with the narration, because for me it was central casting Heyer in the way that it was narrated in the script and everything. And so, to your point in a way Katie, it was... the narration device was needed in Bridgerton, to give you what was really going on, otherwise it wasn't enough.

Jacks Thomas:

I don't know, is that-

Harriet Evans:

I think-

Jacks Thomas:

... I've only watched one.

Harriet Evans:

I think what works about Bridgerton is, an American saw it as a slice of quite extraordinary life to her. It's totally other worldly to her, well Shonda Rhimes, I mean, and I think she developed it, but it's her production company, so she said, "Let's take this, wow, god, it's extraordinary, look at this." Like a spaceship or like a...

Harriet Evans:

That is why it feels so fresh and that's why the colors are very vivid, the music is adaptations of pop songs. And I think if it had been done in Britain, and I think this is why a lot of Georgette Heyer adaptations I understand from talking to people who know people who work in production companies, whatever. When you say why the hell has this never happened? Is, I think it's all a bit tepid and British and we make it...

Harriet Evans:

And Bridgerton works as A, it's adapted by people who know how to make... she made Grey's Anatomy, it's just incredibly addictive TV, but B, this is extraordinary this world, and she makes it look new and fresh. And you have to remember the Regency is not like, I mean, you all know this, but it's not like Victorian. Georgian times, everything was new. Bath, living in Bath, it was not this heritage thing that it's become now. It's a really exiting new, bold city and I think that's why the TV adaptation got green lighted and that's why, for me, when you look at it, you're like, oh, they see it as something new and extraordinary. And I don't think we'd be able to do it in the same way. I think we could maybe now. That's why I think Georgette Heyer hasn't worked.

Jacks Thomas:

But the costumes are so deliberate, aren't they? They're almost shouting synthetic fibers.

Harriet Evans:

And all the families have different colors. The [inaudible 00:34:06] all wear green and the Bridgertons all wear... it's really cleverly done but it's treated like a slice of... whereas we go, oh, it's like our...

Jacks Thomas:

Yeah. Yeah. We've been [inaudible 00:34:20] to it, I guess. What about you Lois?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Speaking from the American side, Heyer is very much like reading science fiction, because the world is totally alien, coming out as a 20 year-old in the Mid West, it was all very mysterious. I think I used the same reading protocols I would use for reading about Bradbury's Mars. Let the strange words just wash over me and follow along and let the story show me what it is, but it was an alien world for me.

Jacks Thomas:

Cathy, have you viewed some dramatizations?

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

No, I haven't. I don't watch much telly to be honest. Mainly for the reasons that Katie said about Heyer not working so much, I would rather read books. I find it so much more satisfying to read books. Sometimes people think, I think, I'm morally superior because of that. It's not that at all, it's just somehow, it suits my brain better. So, I'm one of the few people in the world that doesn't have a view about it.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

And, again, I wouldn't... I love Georgette Heyer, but again, because I don't really care so much about whether or not it gets made into something. Though I'm sure the clothes would be fun, for people like... the world she creates. I'm sure that you people that like those things, on your strange planet of television watching, might enjoy it.

Harriet Evans:

[inaudible 00:35:43] be the worst, wouldn't it?

Jacks Thomas:

It would be nice for the next generation as well though. Next gen of Georgette Heyer, I think, is something that we [crosstalk 00:35:53] promote.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

But I do [crosstalk 00:35:53] did that though. I do think you'd miss the subtlety of it, so I do think maybe Georgette Heyer on the telly would just be... again, I would never feel, I shouldn't even say this, not really liking telly, I never feel Jane Austen really. I mean dramatizations of Jane Austen, all these really good ones, it's just eye candy isn't it, because without the language it's just like, oh this pretty woman likes that handsome man but he likes that other one and what's happening next.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Again, maybe that's why it doesn't... the eye candy for me just never makes up for all the subtlety that you miss.-

Katie Fforde:

It's, for me, it's the houses. I'm always looking at the houses and think, oh, that's a lovely house [inaudible 00:36:32].

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Which is nice, isn't it. I mean there's nothing wrong with pictures of nice houses.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

[crosstalk 00:36:38]

Jacks Thomas:

[crosstalk 00:36:41] gardens in the episode I saw last night as well.

Jacks Thomas:

Okay, well, I think we are getting towards the end so I'm going to just ask, I mean, Heyer was notoriously private. I think she might have been perceived to have been slightly rude about her fans on occasion, but she was a phenomenal best seller and how do you think she would have reacted to influences et cetera?

Jacks Thomas:

So, as you guys were authors writing in the 22 century, what does the 24/7 opportunity for publicity give you and how much does it pressure you really?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

[inaudible 00:37:23] horrors. One of the first things I retired from when I semi-retired was public speaking and the convention circuit and book tours and all this kind of thing. I can stay home and write and just have the good parts version of my career. I'm kind of a 21 century drop-out in that sense.

Harriet Evans:

Did you enjoy it?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Which?

Harriet Evans:

The getting up and speaking, the public speaking.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Oh, no. Not at all.

Jacks Thomas:

[inaudible 00:37:58] meeting your readers?

Lois McMaster Bujold:

That's fun, although I can do that online as they write fan mail or they write reviews, I can see what they're thinking. I don't miss the readers. I'm not losing the contact. In fact, prior to the internet, the only way you ever had contact or feedback with readers was with personal meetings. Book tours or conventions so that nourishment has been taken over by the internet.

Jacks Thomas:

Katie, you must have seen quite a difference since you were first published and now, as to how much pressure there might be out there, in terms of interaction?

Katie Fforde:

I don't interact as much as I used to. I used to go on terrific book tours with Charlotte Bush and we used to have such fun, I can't tell you how much fun it was and we don't do that now. Partly because it's so fantastically expensive and possibly I'm a bit better known so I don't have to do that quite so much.

Katie Fforde:

And, of course, since lockdown, we're not doing it at all. And I do miss, I did a library event online yesterday, and it was lovely to get the questions but it's not the same as seeing the people. It's not the same when people come up to you, the mother and daughter or the sisters and say, we will share your book and then one will read it and then the other, and all that lovely personal thing that makes you think, "Oh gosh, real people read my books. How about that?"

Katie Fforde:

Because sales figures, that doesn't relate to people. Unless you see people reading your book, which, so far, I never have, I don't believe they do. It's really nice to meet people and say, no, look, I really do. Look, I've got it. And I do miss that really, although it does save me so much time and energy not doing that.

Jacks Thomas:

I think you should hold up is the book that was published this week, Katie.

Katie Fforde:

All right, I will, because I've got it handy [inaudible 00:39:55]. I'm now officially a historical novelist because it's set in the '60s.

Jacks Thomas:

That depresses me somewhat and my daughter always refers to it as vintage times. I was born in the '60s and now it's historical novels.

Katie Fforde:

Yes, I don't know which is better, historical or vintage.

Jacks Thomas:

I think vintage is a nicer euphemism.

Jacks Thomas:

How about you, Harriet?

Harriet Evans:

My nine year-old asked me if I was born in the Second World War yesterday. Wow, how long will half term go on for? This is just unbearable.

Jacks Thomas:

That's cheered me up.

Harriet Evans:

I struggle with it, because I used to work in publishing and I really miss the office, I really miss talking about books, I'm quite an enthusiast, so I miss being enthusiastic about things in building consensus and writing is like being in lockdown. You're always on your own and everything, but I also really, really like being on my own.

Harriet Evans:

When I did that Myers-Briggs personality test, I was right in the middle between an introvert and extrovert. I love the library tours, I need to do them. I love the random people who come along, one of whom might have read your book the other people who are just sheltering from the rain, that kind of thing.

Harriet Evans:

But, I dislike the way I've started to pass out pieces of my life to see if they can go on social media. I find that really tiresome and I enjoy connecting with the readers on the Facebook page. That's just actually a dialogue and the rest of it, I've left Twitter now, I might have to go back on it, but I just found it to... Katie does it really well. I wasn't able to. I just got too wound up all the time and more and more I think...

Harriet Evans:

She never gave interviews, she never said, "Yes, please come to my house." And... I quite like that, I'd love someone to come to my house and tidy up for me but she just wasn't much more like, no, I want to do that. I like that feeling that she was quite sure of herself.

Jacks Thomas:

Yes. Yeah. Cathy, is it...

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Yeah. It's very interesting. I mean, I'm a raging extrovert so the most difficult bit about writing for me is just having to be along. And I realize lately, this is how much of an extrovert I am, I would almost rather be with someone I dislike than be [inaudible 00:42:21].

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

It's crazy isn't it? But it's true. I struggle so much with being alone and I know most writers aren't like this, but for me, the public stuff, that's the prize, that's why I do it. The reason I write is so I can then talk about writing because I love talking about writing. I love talking about it with other writers and I love talking about it with readers. I love readers who want to become writers. Again, loads of writers don't really like those category of people. I adore them. I immediately want to sit them down and get a pen in their hand and start giving them exercises. I love all of that.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

It's not that it isn't sometimes a bruising and exposing and tricky. It's not quite as straight forward as that, but what I would say, is the real life bit of it, without the internet I think I would be really sociable writer and really, really happy.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I must say the online bit for me, feels really different. Again, I find... I think we're just developing, we're still working it out. I find them really addictive. Also, I think, actually, actively depressing. I have to be really careful, I have to monitor my own input, monitor myself with them really carefully and do very little.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

That's hard. It's interesting, isn't it? It's really interesting that Lois doesn't want to do the real life stuff but she can meet her readers online, whereas I, would sign up non stop for as much real life as you can throw at me, but feel, I don't really like the Twitter chat. It's that idea of something you say in an unguarded moment, you say something that's not fully thought through and then somebody tweets it out of context and the idea that, that becomes something it wasn't. I find that all really scary.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

I also love the company of other writers. Of course, Georgette Heyer called other writers, inkies and was quite dismissive about them, whereas, and I'm not just saying it because these ladies are here, but one of my finest memories was a Pizza Express lunch I had with Harriet after we'd been at an event together, and I was in the audience in the late '90s when Katie talked about being a writer, whilst I was still like, dare I, can I, could I ever. And it was so sustaining and wonderful and again, just that thing, she treated us like we were real people. And that's what I carry on from her.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

This huge privilege and joy for me in that being out in the world with the work and I can't really imagine... When I think about Georgette Heyer, the point of being so productive for me would've been I could then go out to party and talk about it.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah.

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

And not have to do horrible boring work with spreadsheets. For me it's like, if I work really hard at that then I don't have to do that horrible job and I get to talk about it with nice people who I will like and find emotionally sustaining.

Jacks Thomas:

[inaudible 00:45:21] funny with Georgette Heyer, isn't it? It's almost as though se was ashamed of her craft and her art. I don't know, what do you... Or she just deeply private and had two parts to her life, one was writing and one was being missus [inaudible 00:45:33]

Harriet Evans:

And maybe being a little bit-

Lois McMaster Bujold:

[crosstalk 00:45:34] reviews when she was young that really traumatized her.

Harriet Evans:

And that thing like Elizabeth Taylor, she didn't... writer, she didn't like giving herself away, she kept herself very private. She had a completely different home life to her writing life. Maybe it's something you don't expect of a man who writes a book or... I don't know why I expect her to match her brand a bit more, but I think it is... maybe it's not my business to expect her to sit with a life recreation of the royal crescent next to her at all times.

Jacks Thomas:

It's what we want rather than what she wants and we're saying she was odd because she didn't.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah. Yeah.

Jacks Thomas:

Well, I'm afraid that we've come to the last question. It's a rather frivolous one but there are lots of descriptions of Gin and for Gin in Heyer novels et cetera, and I don't like Gin but there seems to be a plethora in current times of lots of different Gin brands. Surely it's time for a Heyer Gin. I mean it might now for a Heyer Gin, there doesn't appear to be a Heyer Gin [crosstalk 00:46:47] market for it?

Katie Fforde:

The only thing I would say is that I think Gin was drunk rather by the lower orders and I don't think she should have anything remotely lower orders about [crosstalk 00:47:00].

Katie Fforde:

Although that was rather sweet, so I think, I find Madeira myself [crosstalk 00:47:07].

Lois McMaster Bujold:

Very Madeira.

Harriet Evans:

Yeah, that's like Gin Lane, she wouldn't have wanted to-

Jacks Thomas:

No. So we think Madeira, do we?

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

[inaudible 00:47:18] isn't it, [Leaky Peg 00:47:19] brings Arabella's brother the Gin to drink, doesn't she, I think [crosstalk 00:47:25]

Lois McMaster Bujold:

[inaudible 00:47:25] which I have never been able to find out what it was.

Jacks Thomas:

No, I don't think-

Cathy Rentzenbrink:

Yeah, I looked it up at one point, Lois, and I did find out apparently that it's basically a fruit brandy.

Jacks Thomas:

Ah, well, maybe... would that be acceptable or have we all agreed on Madeira?

Katie Fforde:

[crosstalk 00:47:43] fruit bat, well, I suppose [inaudible 00:47:45] does. [crosstalk 00:47:49] But it's still quite strong liquor.

Jacks Thomas:

Yes. I think Heyer was probably a more of a Madeira woman actually.

Katie Fforde:

[crosstalk 00:47:57] sherry.

Lois McMaster Bujold:

[crosstalk 00:47:59]

Jacks Thomas:

Maybe I think it's Madeira o'clock.

Jacks Thomas:

Thank you very much indeed. That was enormous fun. Thank you for all being Heyer fans and thank you for giving-