

Kim Wilkins:

Well, good morning, everyone. Or good afternoon, or good evening, depending on where you are in the world, given that we're on a range of time zones today, tonight. And welcome to the Georgette Heyer unconference, A Century Spent Having a Ball. Celebrating the publication of Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction, which is a volume of essays being published by UCL Press and co-edited by me and by Samantha Reiner from University College, London.

Kim Wilkins:

I have such immense personal pleasure introducing today's guests as they're both dear friends of mine. I have with me today Kate Forsyth and Alison Goodman, who are both international bestselling novelists, who you may have heard of, who are both Australian like me. Kate is the author of approximately a bajillion books, including the fairytale retellings Bitter Greens and The Wild Girl.

Kim Wilkins:

Alison is the author of The Lady Helen Trilogy, which has been described as, "Georgette Heyer meets Buffy." It's not just me who describes it that way, is it? That is how you've been described.

Alison Goodman:

Yes. Yeah.

Kim Wilkins:

Welcome Alison and welcome Kate.

Alison Goodman:

Hi.

Kate Forsyth:

Lovely to be here. Thank you, Kim.

Kim Wilkins:

Thank you. Well, I'm going to ask you both the first question I have been asking everybody, because it's the question I want to know. Why you first picked up Georgette Heyer? And what the stories meant to you then? Kate, do you want to go first?

Kate Forsyth:

I will. So I first read Georgette Heyer when I was staying with my grandmother. My mother was a single mother and had to work all of our summer holidays. And so, we were always shipped off to our grandparents. And my grandmother had this enormous library of books. And every summer when I went to stay with her, I'll just read my way through them all. And she had dozens and dozens of Georgette Heyer books. And the first one that I read was These Old Shades. I always think that you love your first Georgette the best. So These Old Shades is very close to my heart. I absolutely adored it. I can still remember the thrill of surprise I got when Leon was suddenly shown to be Leonie. [crosstalk 00:02:23] I hope that's not a spoiler. No spoilers here! And after that, I just read them back to back. And so I made the whole oeuvre. I think I would have been about 14 or 15.

Kim Wilkins:

Yeah. And Alison?

Alison Goodman:

Well, I was given These Old Shades by my mother when I was about 12 or 13. It was almost like a rite of passage for the family. And my mom's got all of the Georgette Heyers in her book shelf and continually reads them, on rotation. And so I was given These Old Shades. And it was one of those moments where I was reading under the sheets with the torch, because I could not put down the beautiful Leonie and Lord Avon. And, it has really imprinted on me. I look at all the heroes that I write and all of them have got a touch of Lord Avon in them. And, I just love that girl-disguised-as-boy trope, as well. So I was just like a little duckling. I just went [inaudible 00:03:30] straight into that kind of trope. So, yeah, These Old Shades is very important to me as well.

Kim Wilkins:

And it was the best one I read as well. So what's that about? That's all three of us. And, the interesting that mother or grandmother, passing the books on to you. There's an essay in the collection by Helen Davidge, who's a data scientist and it is one of the most common ways that people come to Heyer, through their mothers, which I think is lovely.

Kim Wilkins:

All right, I'm going to start asking you a little bit more about historical fiction, because, of course, Heyer is an amazing historical fiction writer, and you are both amazing, historical, fiction writers. But let's just start talking in more general terms about Heyer and her influence on you as a writer, particularly in terms of craft or storytelling style. What do you think you might've picked up from her? And I'm happy for you to answer that separately or discuss it? Whatever suits you best.

Kate Forsyth:

I know that for me, what I love about her is her lightness of touch, how swiftly she can draw character and how vivid and real her characters are right, from the very moment that they walk onto the stage. I often go back and read some of my favorite Georgette Heyer books when I'm writing, because I'm trying to learn. I'm trying to absorb from her that ... It's a combination of delicacy and vividness, which I really love. And the other thing I think she does really well is she deals with time leaps really adroitly, so that you can actually move forward in great leaps of time, but you never feel any disconnection or any gap in the story. And so I think that is really well done, as well. And so I'm constantly trying to learn from her how to do that better.

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). I think when I was thinking about The Lady Helen books, one of the things that was stopping me from writing the Regency period was just the amount of fabulous research that Georgette Heyer puts into her books. As you say, it's a light touch, but there is a solid background of research there that just creates this concrete world. And then, of course, I actually met Jen Kloester, who I think is a guest in the unconference as well. And, and she said, "No, there's plenty of resources now that Georgette did not have at that time, but which we have now, which you can access. Primary and secondary, that you can build your own Regency world."

Alison Goodman:

But what I also love, and which I think that I again try and absorb, is the way that she creates class distinction and gender distinctions and things like that through clothing. It's quick and ... Or sometimes it can be a paragraph. But the amount of information she builds into the way that people dress and the way that people talk and things like that, it's just a superb masterclass in doing that for the Regency era.

Kim Wilkins:

Yeah, I did. I interviewed Jen Kloester for the unconference as well. So people can definitely go and watch that. She was fantastic. And one of the things she said, I can't remember if it was when we were recording or later was, can you imagine she's created that many male love interests, and they're all different. And it's been sitting in the back of my mind and I'm thinking, "Yes. How did she do that?" And I hadn't thought of the clothes, I guess. But, not just the male love interests. All of the characters are all so rich and diverse. Sometimes you see a similar type of grumpy uncle or slightly histrionic aunt or whatever. But the characterization is really quite superb. Is there anything we can draw from that? Do you think as writers?

Kate Forsyth:

Yes, I absolutely think so. It's one of the things I most admire about her and she does say that she has no Mark A and Mark B heroes, but they're all very real on the page. And they all seem to be people that you recognize in your own lives as well. So one of my favorites of her types of characters is the ailing mother that is thin and beautiful and always ill. And loves to be at the center of everything, but will do nothing and wants everyone to do everything for her. And, I really love the way that every time that kind of character appears, it doesn't feel like she's just transplanted it. It's a whole new set of hypochondria, if that makes sense. And I also really love the way that she often has more than one romance in a book, so that you often have an older, more mature and more passionate one. And then you have these innocent young men and women also falling in love. And the contrast between the lovers, it's almost Shakespearian, I think.

Alison Goodman:

I think it's also to do with the fact that, although there are characteristics within some of the heroes that are similar, we take, for instance, Lord Avon and Tracy Belmanoir ... I can't quite pronounce that right. But, it's the chemistry between who, ... Tracy's not quite the hero. But, it's the chemistry between the male character and the female lead, because they're always very different. They're always coming together in a very different way. So I think that that creates that difference in the male lead, as well. Because they're always reacting and acting in different ways towards those heroines. So you can see some of those characteristics. But, because they are combining with the female lead, you get these lovely differences.

Kate Forsyth:

And, we can't talk about Georgette's characters without talking about dialogue. And that I think is where her books really shine, because her dialogue feels so real. It's so persuasive. I can remember when I first read them. And even though all those Regency cant terms that she used all the time ... I had never heard them before. I knew exactly what was going on. And I never felt a moment that I didn't understand, or I couldn't feel what was going on. And then I actually even began to find myself using them in my everyday speech, because there was so expressive. And so [crosstalk 00:10:49] slightly spot on.

Alison Goodman:

What a bouncer!

Kim Wilkins:

I loved all the terms for being drunk. They were all so great. And then there's a chapter in the book that we're launching that is actually about her language, and it's got some photographs or at least one photograph of notes for different ways of saying things. Oh! We have a dog!

Kate Forsyth:

I have a dog. She can open my door. [inaudible 00:11:17] Come here. I'm so sorry. [inaudible 00:11:23] She'll go out. Don't worry.

Kim Wilkins:

No, it's fine. All right. So let's talk a little bit more. So, of course, Heyer brings historical periods to life so vividly. Ant, obviously the Regency mainly is what she's known for. But she has written about other historical periods.

Kim Wilkins:

As a historical fiction writer, I'm guessing that you do a lot of research. But then you have to decide what goes in and what stays out. And that must be one of the hardest decisions that a historical fiction writer has to make. So how do you decide what to put in and what to leave out?

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). Well, it's a bit touch and feel in the sense that I do a lot of research and there's some great stories that come up and great real historical figures that I'd like to include. But it is, is it really what's in service of the story that you're telling. And so if it's not in service of the story that you're telling, then unfortunately, and tears can be shed, but things have to be left out. Or, put aside for perhaps another book or another series or whatever.

Alison Goodman:

I know I have slightly pretzeled myself to fit something in, because I love it so much. And that can be interesting in itself, because, if you say, "Oh, I really want to put this in, how can I get it in there?", it can make you work very hard and change ... Because when I'm writing things, they're organic and I have the set story that I want to tell. But, in between is all organic. You can say, well, "Oh, that's actually bringing up something that I like even better." We've all been writing for a number of a number of years. And I think that there is a little alarm bell in me that goes, "[Inaudible 00:13:14] time to stop," in that particular description or that particular piece of information. And it's the "You are now waffling," bell.

Kim Wilkins:

"You are now waffling," bell. I can think of a couple of writers who don't have those. No one in our acquaintance, of course.

Alison Goodman:

No.

Kim Wilkins:

Kate, how about you? How do you decide what goes in, what stays out?

Kate Forsyth:

For me, it's always remembering what is my core story? Who is my protagonist? What is their journey? What is their struggle? What do they desire? And what stands in their way? Sometimes I want to try and paint on a broader canvas. But, what I really want is that warmth and intimacy and depth and intensity that comes with focusing on the small, rather than on the large. I generally find that in my first couple of drafts, I put too much in, because I'm teaching myself about the world and my characters. And I'm trying to understand what's happening myself.

Kate Forsyth:

And then as I do edits and rewrites, during the process of rewriting the book, I gradually strip out, along with that. Because what I'm searching for is a single telling detail that somehow encapsulates everything that I want to say about a place or an event. So reducing it down to its most potent form. And that I think is part of the process of rewriting, which is just so important. I'm working on a novel at the moment and I've had a couple of weeks away from it. And rereading it through, I was astonished by how much I was already stripping out, because I was trying to cram too much on the page. I like to leave as much as possible to the reader's imagination and to the reader's intelligence, to trust in their intelligence, rather than trying to make it a history lesson.

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). That's interesting, because I come from the other direction. I am very sparing first run on the page, where I get the action and the dialogue and the emotional through-line of the scene. And then I come in on my rewrites and I layer in what I want in terms of the world and that kind of stuff. So, yeah. So we end up with a similar situation, but from different directions.

Kim Wilkins:

I wanted to ask about some characterization and historical periods. And the reason I ask this is, I was listening to a podcast the other day about Boudicca, the Celtic queen who took on the Romans and did very well for a little bit of time and then didn't do so well. And one of the people on the podcast said she was a feminist icon and another of the historians said that is a meaningless term in 63AD. And because I know you both, I know that you are both feminists and you're all about women's empowerment and agency. How do we write that back into historical fiction in a way that's not anachronistic? Or, does it not matter?

Kate Forsyth:

There's a couple of things there. I think that that's semantics, that kind of argument. Okay, call her a proto-feminist icon. Just because the word "feminism" had not yet been invented, does not mean that women in all eras of history were struggling to live a self-determined life, and were struggling against the strictures of their society, regardless of what that society is. So the struggle is real. The triumph and the tragedy is real. The emotions are real. That's what matters, not the terminology that we choose to describe it by. So that's my first point. I always roll my eyes when people make comments like that, because it's an argument about what words we choose to describe something. So it's a change in language, not a change in attitude.

Kate Forsyth:

My second point in regards to that is that, we are always a product of our time. Our psyche is shaped and also misshapen by the times in which we live. And I think it's really important that we understand that women of the past were not formed in the same way that we were. And so to give a woman living in the 19th century or in the sixth century a modern sensibility is actually to deny the extraordinary distance that we have already traveled in fighting for women's rights. I see it a lot and it does trouble me a little bit.

Kate Forsyth:

Now, one of the books that I've just read recently is Pharaoh's Daughter, which is the story of a young woman who is orphaned, lives with her aunt who opens up a gaming hell. I just love the term "gaming hell". And she is helping. She's doing her best to live and help her aunt and survive in a very hard world, where gender lines and also class lines are so rigid. Now, what I love about that book is how desperately she struggles, and how much she wants the world to be a different place, but also the fact that the world is what it is. And that's one of the things that I think Georgette Heyer did very well. She's often accused of being very classist, but she's setting books in a very classist time.

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). Yeah.

Kate Forsyth:

That is actually true reflection of what, in many ways, not in all ways, but in many ways, it's a true reflection of what society was like there. And I think that's more interesting, to show a woman's struggling to choose her own destiny and to make a living for herself, to show how difficult it was and how it hurt her psychologically speaking.

Alison Goodman:

Yeah. In craft terms and writing and creating a 19th century woman, but who is going to sit with a 21st century reader, I think about what are the really big things that are impinging on that character at that time? Because they are different. And yet, they are the same, in a way. And so, one of the big things that perhaps impinges upon the 19th century women that maybe not so much for us, is religion and that all encompassing ... It was so much part of their world, so much woven into the part of their world.

Alison Goodman:

And so things like that, and also the necessity of marriage. We've talked about that. We talk about that when we talk about Jane Austin and definitely with Heyer as well. But it was. It was an imperative. And so these things are different from us, but within them, they hold the big questions. Can we marry for love? What is love? What is our relationship to a higher spiritual being? Do we have one? Or do we not have one? And so these hold the big questions. So, although I think that they're formulated in a different way for the 19th century woman, they have those resonances right through to the modern world.

Kate Forsyth:

Yes. I'd really like to speak to that one as well, because it's [inaudible 00:21:24] something I've thought about a lot and have struggled with in certain of my books. So, for example, in The Wild Girl, which is actually set in the early 19th century, it's contemporaneous to Jane Austin and also to Georgette's

Regency books, my heroine there was a German Lutheran. And, the story is inspired by a true woman Dortchen Wild, who was the young woman who told the Grimm brothers many of their most famous fairy tales. Now, I longed to be able to have her dress up as a boy and climb out a window and run off with the romantic hero. I don't know. Elope to Gretna Green.

Kate Forsyth:

But in Hesse-Cassel in 1810, there was no Gretna Green and it would have been actually inconceivable for her to have dressed herself up as a boy and to have eloped, because there was no chance for her to elope anywhere. She was not permitted to marry without the permission of her father. And if that permission was withheld, there was no choice for her. And so many people email me going, "Why didn't she just run away with the him?" And I said, "Well, because for a young woman of a very conservative and deeply religious society, that would have been to have turned herself into a whore. And that's not something that she would have done." And so there was a tension, for me, in what I would have liked to have written, but having to be true to her and to her times, and to watch how she would have felt about that.

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). And it's also the expectation of the reader. That the reader brings the expectations of certain tropes to the novel. And it's like, "Well, why not?" And that tension between what you want to do, what the reader is expecting and what is feasible within the world that you've created. It can be very difficult, but it can also be very productive in the way that we solve our problems.

Kate Forsyth:

I do love the way that Georgette Heyer's books are so persuasive, so that when you're in her world, you actually accept a whole lot of extremely unlikely events. All sorts of things happen that you just can't actually ever imagine happening in a real world. But she's so persuasive that in the internal logic of the world that she's created, those events make perfect sense. And I love that. That's one of the things I'm always saying, "How does she do that?"

Alison Goodman:

I think it's meticulous, emotional through-line.

Kate Forsyth:

Well said. That's exactly what it is.

Kim Wilkins:

I'm going to have to wrap up in a minute, but I'm going to finish up with a question, which is a bit of fun. Now, don't jump in. I'll ask the question, but then there's going to be rules, because [inaudible 00:24:36]. So the question is, choose three Heyer characters to join your zombie apocalypse survival team, and why? But, I'm not going to let someone choose three and then the other person choose three, because then you'll be fighting over who's already on the team. So, Alison ... I nearly called you Helen. Sorry [inaudible 00:24:55] Lady Helen books. Alison, who is your first member of your zombie apocalypse survival team?

Alison Goodman:

Mm (affirmative). Lord Avon.

Kim Wilkins:

And because?

Alison Goodman:

Coldly and meticulous again. Planning. And he's omnipotent.

Kim Wilkins:

Kate?

Kate Forsyth:

It's so interesting, because I'm actually choosing his son. Lord Vidal has no compunction shooting dead a highway man on his way to a party.

Kim Wilkins:

Alison? Number two on your team?

Alison Goodman:

Abigail Wendover.

Kim Wilkins:

Because?

Alison Goodman:

Common sense. Calm in every situation.

Kim Wilkins:

Yep. And for you Kate?

Alison Goodman:

And humor.

Kim Wilkins:

Good. You will need laughs on the road.

Kate Forsyth:

Oh, my gosh. I'm being torn between who I love the most and who is actually going to be a better member of my team. And I might actually go for Leonie now. So we're having a bit of a family party. I hope they're not batting against each other. [inaudible 00:26:10] I hope it's all the one team.

Kim Wilkins:

Okay. Alison?

Alison Goodman:

Oh, my third. The third one's difficult.

Kim Wilkins:

Someone who can drive a fast carriage and shoot a gun?

Kate Forsyth:

Yeah. That's exactly what I'm thinking.

Alison Goodman:

Yeah, I'm thinking that although they might ... I think they'd either be great friends or instant enemies. But, Sophie with Abigail, because I think Abigail and Sophie might be great friends. Or else they might rub against each other. But I think that Sophie would be great within the firing the guns and doing the [crosstalk 00:26:44]

Kate Forsyth:

Sophie was mine! [crosstalk 00:26:47] I was going to choose next.

Alison Goodman:

How much would you pay to see that buddy movie?

Kate Forsyth:

How much would I pay to see any of Georgette Heyer's books made into fabulous movies? [Crosstalk 00:27:01] They're crying out for, I don't know, a whole universe of movies.

Kim Wilkins:

Yeah.

Alison Goodman:

Yeah.

Kim Wilkins:

They are. Okay, then. Well, I'm going to wrap up by saying goodbye and thank you so very much for your wonderful insights, your delightful wit and your gorgeous faces, which I always love to see-

Kate Forsyth:

So lovely to see you.

Kim Wilkins:

Even though we are separated by a pandemic at the moment.

Kate Forsyth:

Yes. Thank you everyone for coming and joining us.

Kim Wilkins:

Yes [crosstalk 00:27:29]

Alison Goodman:

Thank you.

Kim Wilkins:

Fantastic event. Great! Bye!

Kate Forsyth:

Bye.

Alison Goodman:

Bye.