



## The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 2

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these story prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?



## Season 2, Episode 3. Oliver Jeffers reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Can you think of a time when a piece of art (be it a story, a painting, a piece of music, etc) tapped into/ provoked a particular strength of feeling for you? Why do you think art has such power to access and provoke deep feelings in us?
2. Oliver says that the final step in the artmaking process is 'what happens in the head of somebody else', and that, sometimes, when he hears a particular interpretation of one of his books, he thinks 'I didn't have that intention at all, but that doesn't mean that it's not about that'. How does that sit with you? What are some of the ways in which you've experienced art as a participatory exercise?
3. Oliver talks a lot about perspectives, and the moments in life in which his own have been altered. When you think about your own life, what are some of the experiences which have shifted your perspectives, in big or in small ways?
4. Pádraig and Oliver talk about the ways in which books can introduce children to difficult topics. Can you remember any stories that you read (or that you were read) as a child which first introduced you to, or helped you to navigate, issues which you now recognise as particularly thorny/complex?
5. Oliver says: 'most of western education is just teaching people how to pass an exam, but that doesn't prove real intelligence. [My Dad's] always said that real intelligence in another person is curiosity and imagination'. What strikes you about that as a way of defining intelligence? What other definitions might you add?

Oliver Jeffers is a visual artist and author working in painting, bookmaking, illustration, collage, performance, and sculpture. His acclaimed picture books have been translated into over fifty languages, and have sold over 14 million copies worldwide. His original artwork has been exhibited at such institutions as the Brooklyn Museum in New York, the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and the National Portrait Gallery in London. Oliver grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and currently divides his time between there and Brooklyn, NY.

*Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.*

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

*Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Oliver Jeffers. Oliver is a visual artist and storyteller, and he's created 19 picture books. He's also exhibited artwork in galleries all around the world: Dublin and New York, London, Vienna... So Oliver, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.*

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Thank you very much, Pádraig.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Oliver, I'm curious as you look back at your childhood, are there any experiences or friendships in your childhood that prepared you for the work you're doing now?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Ooh, friendships or relationships... Er, I think, probably growing up with three brothers has become particularly informative. Um, and, you know, and I do think, there's- I was thinking about this recently actually just for the- an essay that I'm making for this book about moments of my life that have altered my thinking. And, I think in some ways, there's not a particular person, but a particular relationship with a group of people that had a big impact. We kind of joke that we grew up bilingual. Because growing up in a Catholic, working-class Catholic family - middle of the working class Catholic family - in a pocketed area, walking around the roads that we would have grown up with, you had to be able to pass the test. And that test could come from two very different directions. And you had to know where you were, in order to know which test that you had to pass. And so I think I grew up with the idea that I could hold two opposing ideas in my head at the same time from an early age. And I think that's probably, that sense of duality is a relationship that's, that informed me. Erm, somebody did point out that I clearly grew up as an only child, because a lot of my picture books for children are very much about empty space and friendship and loneliness. And I think they get surprised when they learn that I grew up with- I was one of four boys. And so in thinking back on that, perhaps, there was a degree of want, in the manifestation of those worlds, where actually what I really craved was not friends, but a bit of solitude.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

It was wishful thinking!

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yeah, a bit of quiet where I could hear myself think! But the- I think the relationship with my brothers is probably the one... And my parents, but familial relationships are the ones that I think most framed me.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. I saw once that at an international event where 'artist' wasn't an option for your profession, your occupation was described as 'observer and translator'.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yes.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I'm interested now that you talk about being able to translate yourself in terms of a sectarian divide where somebody'll be asking, you know: are you British, or Irish or Catholic or Protestant. Does 'translator' work for you as a bigger thing- not just a survival mode back then?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Erm, well, I think it's actually- that's the way in which I choose to describe myself now in some ways. Having gone through art college, and, the degree in which I've got a qualification in is visual communication, and primarily that is done by people who then go on to become photographers or designers or typographers or illustrators. But I had one foot in this bookmaking/design/illustration world, and one foot in this very much fine art painting, sort of conceptual art making world and that old, you know, that old chestnut of: coming up with a description for yourself, coming up with a title for yourself is always tricky. Because whenever I was graduating from college and decided that, I am interested in book making, but I'm also interested in fine art making...maybe I'll just keep doing both until somebody tells me otherwise! And, nobody ever did tell me otherwise; I just sort of kept going. But, so for a long period of my time I was very hung up on: what do I call myself? How do I define myself; by which discipline, by which boundary do I put myself in? And, I didn't like the idea of illustrator, because when I was trying to make it in the fine art world that term was used as a negatory thing; it was, you know, that was kind of a put down: oh, you're just an illustrator- an illustrator was sort of seen as this, you know, like the lowly stepchild in the fine art world. You were sort of seen as lesser than, so I didn't like that term. But then also to just call myself a fine artist would betray the very real situation in which I'd stumbled into that people enjoyed my books, and they enjoyed the simplicity

and design of that, so how I defined myself always was problematic, or too many things to put into a mouthful. And, so it was COP26, when I went along, and it hadn't really occurred to anybody that artists should have a place at that table. That's why there was no box for artists to tick. And the, you know, I think it was a young girl from Ghana, who, I asked how many languages she spoke, and she said seven, which made me feel vastly inferior... considering I struggle with the one and only language that I mostly communicate in, which is English! But she just goes: er, I've just sort of put you down as an observer and translator- will that do? And I remember thinking: will that do?! That's perfect! 'Cause I- you know, a big part of the work that I do has always been: I can, I can sense how I feel, and I've tried to communicate how I feel so that others feel the same thing. And I recognise that my dad has always been a very good tour guide. And he is very good at taking something that's very complicated and distilling it and conveying it in a very palatable way. And I always liken to that so it's like he can translate, he can sort of, take this, you know, this sort of nuanced, almost academic concept, and explain it to different ways to different people, in a way that will work best for them. And I think I've picked up on some of that and so a lot of the work that I'm doing is trying to say something as simply as possible. And one way to look at that is that I'm translating. I'm observing, and I'm seeing the patterns, and I'm taking my time to, to really quantify that, and then I'm trying to translate that.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. We'll come on to that in a while 'cause I am very interested in talking to you about communication, but I'd like to go back a little bit. I know that you grew up in Belfast, and you mentioned already that you were in a pocketed area, you know, where as from a Catholic working-class family in an area that was primarily British-identifying Protestant. And you attended one of the first integrated schools- was that your choice or the choice of your parents or a shared choice?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

My input into it was not necessarily a decision that I made that was a sort of a rational, political, religious decision. It's something my parents felt very strongly about: they did not like the, I suppose the aggressive separation that went hand in hand with education here. My dad was very interested in this idea of breaking down these, these boundaries, these borders in between very close neighbourhoods. So they were interested in it and I think, I probably tipped their hand a little bit by failing my 11-plus... And so I didn't, and er, you know, it's one of those ones where it's- my dad is a teacher. And he has always- he never put pressure on us for the 11-plus, and, and he was not disappointed when we failed. And he's spoken to me quite articulately, since then by going: you know, the, if you think about education, it's, what we're really doing is, most of western education is just teaching people how to pass an exam, but that doesn't prove real intelligence. He's always said that real intelligence in another person is curiosity and imagination. And, they don't really come out in tests like that. So he was never worried about us, he was never sort of pushed us in that direction. But the fact that I failed sort of made that

decision easier. But really, it was something that they were very interested in is breaking out of this sort of recurring cycle.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. And the integrated sector in Northern Ireland at the moment, I suppose has near about 10% of young people who'd go to a school where their school has a demographics where they will have maybe 45% Catholic/Irish identifying students and 45% British/Protestant identifying students and then 10% other, or depending as to where the location is. And, 11-plus, just for anyone who isn't familiar, is a selection examination you do at 11 as to if you can go to a school. So does it, did it benefit you, from a political point of view, as well as educational?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Oh, completely! Absolutely massively, you know, for, considering most people - when I say most people, like 99% of kids - would not meet somebody of the opposing religion until they were at university or full-time adult employment age. And by that stage - 18 years of your life - you've had the opportunity to build up all sorts of poorly informed stories, anecdotes, you know, generalisations about what the 'other sort' were. Um, by going and mixing with, with kids- it didn't occur to us at the age of 11 to ask each other what religion we were, because we weren't genuinely that interested. And then to find out when you got to third year or fourth year, somebody who you'd been playing football with or sitting beside for years, like: oh, wait a minute, you're Protestant? Oh, right, OK. It just, it demystified the whole thing and made it very, palpably obvious just that we are, we are all...the only difference between us was the flags that we were flying, really.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I was going to ask like, was religion in that context about you know, if you went to a church service over the weekend, or was it more about Britishness or Irishness: where did it land for you?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Well the, this is an interesting way to kind of look at the differentiation: in having to explain to people outside of Northern Ireland this religious struggle, it never really was about religion, that was a telltale for how you can indicate where somebody, where their, their background lay, but it was definitely Britishness and Irishness. And, one manifestation of that is of course, what, the way in which you- where you went to church on a weekend. And you know, when I was growing up, I think almost everybody went to church one way/form or the other. That, of course, is no longer the case, it's become a much more agnostic world out there or an even atheist world out there. But the- our family was somewhat religious, my mother probably more so than my father, my mother's family very much so;

and I think once we turned 16 my dad was like: OK, you guys don't have to go anymore. You can if you want, but I'm no longer making you go, yeah.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I'm curious about that kind of era in your life: when did you move towards art?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Well, I think I have always been interested in art. When it occurred to me really that it was, it had power, it had leverage, is when I was recognised as being talented enough to get out of, you know, doing geography so I could go and help decorate the set of a school play- things like that. And then when it had actual transactional value, whenever in the secondary school that I went to, when some of the tougher kids were asking me to decorate their skateboards or their school bags, and you know, in turn that led to, shall we say, mild protection. It just, I realised that there was value to this. But I think it wasn't until, you know, at that point where you're starting to seriously look at that, and, course in the UK education system, you start to close off and specialise at a very early age. And I'm almost the exception that proves the rule that nobody knows what they wanna do when they're that young, when they're 15. You know, you can't predict what kind of an adult you're gonna be. But it did work for me, because once I figured out that making art was a genuine job, I knew that was the direction that I wanted to go. And so that's probably about 15 or 16.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

And where did you go to art college?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I went to art college in Belfast, somewhere called the Belfast School of Art. And so you did, you do the one year of foundation, which is a little bit of everything, and then you, they specialise for, for three years in one discipline.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

You know, I'd like to talk to you about your picture books, Oliver. As I was thinking about them, I do see that they address both the delicious and the difficult. And I'd like to talk to you about both. You know, I was looking at the one where there's a boy who has a kite stuck in a tree. And as he tries to get the kite out of the tree, he just throws all kinds of everything: a lorry, a ladder, a whale, and firemen... And there's another one where there's a boy who eats books. You know- could you talk about your interest, first of all in the delicious. 'Cause, I mean, there's difficult things as well that you address, and sometimes you address them both at the same time. But, there's kind of, there's the absurd and the delightful, and the funny that you, that you do, and those appeal to people of all ages.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

They do yeah, and, looking back, I think I had maybe a better tap than I realised on that sort of observation and translatability, where, you know, the- *Stuck* is that, the story of when the boy tries to solve the problem of getting his kite stuck in a tree by throwing ever increasingly larger objects in it. And there's a luscious visual to that. But of course, how often is that the way in which we actually go about trying to problem solve, in a, not very effective way? So there's a ludicrousness there that lends itself to a good story, because it's so close to reality. And that story itself was one of the trickier ones to resolve. When I talk to the students and to young children about storytelling, I say d'you know that all good stories have three things. And they're so simple that people often forget them. And that is a beginning, a middle and an end. And that applies to films, books, novels, picture books, essays, poetry even- narrative poetry. And, if something leaves you unsatisfied, or unfulfilled, or you feel like something didn't work, they hadn't figured out one of those three aspects: maybe there was a good beginning and a middle but the end left you cold; or, maybe there was no end, or maybe a jump from the beginning to the end without a middle; it's very easy to look at it like that. And so for *Stuck*, it was, I had a great beginning (somebody gets their kite stuck in a tree) and then a great middle (they tried to throw every object under the sun, which also got stuck), but I couldn't figure out the ending. And here's why: because I kept trying to- for me, the natural resolution was, well obviously everything has to come down again. And so you know, but waiting until autumn and then everything fell, just- it didn't feel like a crescendo enough. So I sat on it and it mulled in the back of my mind, in the back of my sketchbooks for a long time. And then it was watching my nephews play one time where the ending clicked in and this has become such a valuable lesson going forward that, they were playing, they were really intricately involved with this game, and then something more interesting came along and they quite literally just dropped everything and moved on to the next thing. And it was therein that I learned that, things don't have to just end; you just move on to something else. And that was the ending of the book then, that he just forgot about it!

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Leaving everything there! It's so interesting that when you spoke earlier on about, you know, visual communication and finding a way where feeling is communicated where whatever you're feeling is being picked up by the people who are reading the book or observing the piece of art. Do you think that feeling is a language that you're dealing in mostly? It's obviously a visual medium that you work in, as well as linguistic you know, 'cause there's always words in your books. But, so much of yours seems to be about feeling: there's deep poignancy, and there's deep sympathy in the characters, the faces you see: simple, but they carry so much emotion. What is it about feeling for you?



**Oliver Jeffers:**

D’you know, I haven’t quite thought about it like that before. But I think you’re absolutely right, Pádraig, that it is feeling that I’m, that I’m dealing with, it’s not about moral life lessons or anything like that; those things click into place because we- there’s a fine line between satisfaction and predictability. And for a story to be satisfying, it has to be, to a degree, predictable. And the way people feel and want to feel is, to a degree, predictable. But somebody once said that 100% effective communication is impossible, because nobody will ever be able to see inside your head. So as soon as you say words, or as soon as you draw a picture, even in your body language, it’s open to interpretation and interference, or static, or whatever it might be. And so, the trying to get to the purest form of having somebody feel what I feel I think is absolutely the business on which I’m dealing with. And it’s a...yeah, feeling is what the books are about. And it’s what so much of the work that I do is about.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. And you deal with difficult feelings too, you know, in *A Little Paper Caper*, there’s an entire story of blame. And that blame- it feels like you’re falling down a well; I mean, I felt that in me. And, by addressing difficult topics: conflict, blame...

**Oliver Jeffers:**

In that book *The Great Paper Caper* I say almost nothing: the lion’s share of the work is done through the pictures. And, you know, we learn how to- we learn how to read a room, we learn how to read body language before we learn how to read a word, or how to count or- and it’s that innate ability within us to sense things that are, that are not quite spelled out. And almost in fact if you don’t say it, you leave that interpretation for somebody else. And you picked out- you said earlier there about you know, the facial expressions and the way in which I do characters are so, so so simple. And I think that is why they’re so effective. Because the more detail, it just adds to that possible interference, that possible static, and by being vague, you allow room for people to apply themselves into the story. And as empathetic as we all want to be, we’re all a little selfish, too, and so it feels like the work is about you, and is about your world: you are a little more emotionally invested in it.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Sure. I mean, it’s a fine line you manage to hold between communicating feeling but not controlling feeling. That is a complicated thing to achieve, Oliver.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Well, I think ‘cause the only thing I can control is what I feel. And I’m not tryna tell anybody else how they should feel, all I’m trying to do is show them how I feel. Or how I felt when I was making this book or this work. I think within that, kids actually- there’s a, kind of an unspoken respect where, I think

kids can pick out the thinly veiled books that are trying to teach them something or tryna tell them what to do. As opposed to: I'm just presenting a world and leaving them the crumbs- they can put it together or not.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Have your relationship with your own feelings been something that you've had to work on? I mean, 'cause there is a profound kind of emotional sophistication where you can communicate loneliness or isolation or sadness or blame or delight in the art you make: what's your relationship with feelings been like- did it take you a while?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I think probably I was a late bloomer and then all of a sudden, and, you know, I think I'm, I'm a rare Irishman where I'm actually willing to be vulnerable, willing to be- articulate vulnerability, and that is not, that it is not a common trait among, I was gonna say Irish men, but even Irish women, I'm discovering. But the- I think, for me, I recognised that if I am going to feel something, that's going to make the art all the more important, which I think encouraged a vulnerability. But also, I think at the right moment in my life, when a few things clicked into gear that cleared the clutter for me. When I was early in art college, it was a matter of- I was making art because I enjoyed the validation and because I enjoyed people liking it and telling me that they liked it. And, my foundation year tutor, a gentleman called Dennis McBride - he was a great painter, and he was a respected painter back then; he retired not long after I was there - and he just, he sort of said to me, he was like: you know, who are you making this art for, Oliver? It's like you're like a little child, always needing to be told that you're good. And it did make me think and I was mulling on that and, and a year or two after - my mother had MS for as long as I remember - and then she, she died right in the last year of my art college and, all of the things that I had been worried about, all of the people who I thought I cared about, whose opinions I validated or sought- it suddenly occurred to me that they didn't matter. That none of it mattered. That I had just been valuing the wrong things, measuring success by the wrong metric. And suddenly, in the clarity of that moment, recognising that nobody really knows anything, everybody's just stumbling along. And, I could suddenly see quite clearly that everybody is vulnerable. That everybody is just stumbling along, and that everybody is seeking validation, and no one really truly knows what they're doing. It just gave me this absolute freedom, and my friend once said, it was almost like a superpower where, I have kind of tapped underneath the well of, of how people wanna feel. And I think a lot of it stems from those moments where it was like, I can't tell people what to feel, but I can recognise in myself what I care about, and how that can be translated to other people.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

*You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is artist and storyteller, Oliver Jeffers.* Oliver, you mentioned the death of your mother, and I'm curious about how that changed you as an artist. Or did it just deepen what was already there?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I think it, it partly deepened what was there. But I think in the, the way in which I just sort of, I just mentioned, I think it massively changed because I recognised that if I am making this so, because I want other people- if I'm doing anything, because I want other people to approve it, it's never going to be very important art. And, the only thing- art, I've thought since then, is one of the only endeavours where the more selfish you are, the more generous you are. Because if you're making art because you want to help other people or you, you wanna make something that you think that they want, it just ends up being pandering somewhat, and disingenuous. Whereas if you truly get lost on your own spiral of, not necessarily trying to make yourself feel good, but just if you get lost down a spiral of your own willingness to be vulnerable, and to explore the rabbit holes of: well, what happens if, and you don't really care what people think, I think that is what leads to art that actually is so much more in touch with other people. So by forgetting them, that's what lets them in.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. Like, I know that people of all ages engage with your work. But, I wonder do you experience some resistance from people who observe your work - particularly your children's books - and think: oh, children can't cope with complex emotions; and so therefore, the complex parts of the feelings that you speak about and depict in your art: do you ever get resistance from that? I mean, it's clear that children do have very sophisticated emotional lives and respond very well to art that takes their emotional lives seriously. But do you ever get resistance from adults?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Um, yes, occasionally I do get- I don't, I don't check in too often to sorta see what people are saying or, tryna break it apart to see how it works. But, occasionally things do get through to me or comments after events at literary festivals. And it is quite comical sometimes, how the way it goes where it's, so often it's parents' projection onto children. Erm, for example, you know, whenever I was- people say that *The Heart and the Bottle* is a very difficult book, because it's about a young girl who loses this paternal figure in her life (I never specify whether it's a father or grandfather). And adults have a very hard time about that, because they, they kind of use it as a reflection on their own existence and their own fears. Whereas children intuitively get it, maybe in a way more so than adults do, but they don't see it as sad. And I've often dwelt on that: that they just see it as the, sort of the slow progression and order and pattern of things. And again with - this has happened a few times where people have asked

me - there's a book called *The Fate of Fausto* where this man who, in trying to prove that he owns the ocean, drowns. And some parents have written going: what am I supposed to tell my child happens to Fausto at the end? And the answer is, I always say to them it's like: it's easy you just tell them he died. You know, it's like you- I don't know why you're avoiding this conversation because, as far as I know, nobody's ever lived forever.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

There's a big question that happens as I listen to yer about what the purpose of art is. And you know, I hear that some people might wanna go: so this piece of art is about trying to convince people about blame; this piece of art is about trying to convince people about friendship; this piece of art is trying to convince people about what happens after grief. But, I can hear you resisting that, just kinda saying you're, you're creating modes of communication of feeling and then you trust people to feel what they feel. In a broader sense, how do you think about the purpose of art, and how do you push back against anybody who has an idea about what art's purpose is?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Well, even you saying that, you know: this piece is about this, this piece is about this; I remember studying Sylvia Plath poetry in school and the teacher saying: well, this is what she meant with this, erm and, you know, breaking it down to the, to the letter practically. And I remember my friend Michael and I going: did she really, or is she just making this all up? And the answer is probably somewhere in between both. And, I've- people have sent me essays that have been written about my work for, you know, for doctorates and whatnot, where people have been saying: clearly, this is what this book means when this thing happens. And, and part of me is like: no, I didn't have that intention at all, but, that doesn't mean that it's not about that. Because, it's, there's a joke in *The Simpsons* when Marge takes up painting, and she's painting and the tutor comes over her shoulder and sort of jokingly says, 'Stop! It belongs to the ages now', and there's truth in that, because it's- I'm not gonna be there when people are reading the book; I can't hold their hand to say: no, no, no, this is what it means. Or I'm not gonna be there, when people are looking at a painting of mine in a museum and going, you know, this is what it means. It's like, it's, I brought it into the world, and I brought it halfway there, and then the completion of it is up to whatever happens in the head of whoever looking at it. So art can mean- the specific pieces of art can mean different things to different people. It's like that, you know the: if a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a noise? There is an answer to this in quantum physics ('cause I work with a quantum physicist on a project for a while). And the answer is no, because you need an ear for those reverberations to be translated as noise. And so therefore, art needs a set of eyes, a set of ears, and a processing device to put them together in their own head for it to be a piece of work, for it to be completed. That's the last step is, not what has happened with me, but is what happens in the head of somebody else.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Oliver you mentioned being in conferences with physicists and with scientists and I know that your *Our Place in Space* project was a way of um, well, was art that looked at different points of view by looking at what was happening on Earth from the point of view of the moon or further afield. You depict conflict in a way there where you're stepping back from it to ask what the plotline of conflict is, and where it's leading to, and what it's reflecting back to us and, if conflict was art, you know, would it be good art or boring art or predictable art? What is it, first of all about conflict, and then we'll get on to talking about point of view and perspective in a while, but first of all about conflict: what is it about that that interests you so much? 'Cause, like in the while that you and I have known each other over the last couple of years, it's often been conflict that we've spoken about.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yeah, d'you know, in the context in which you just asked it, because I think it's, I look at- conflict has become an interesting way for me to look at perspective and vice versa. But why conflict I think is interesting is 'cause I'm fascinat[ed] about what a, what a waste of energy, and what a distraction it is for these big brains of ours, you know, the only consciousness known in the universe, and this is what we spend our intellect and our endeavours doing is beating each other up. And it's just- as advanced and as enlightened as we are, this is still the most interesting story that we tell, is fascinating to me because I just can't work out why. And I think a big part of the work that I'm doing, that I've been doing for the last few years, and will probably continue to do is, is trying to answer that question. And the, like, why is it that we feel the need to be more important than somebody else? Why is it, and even kind of taking from the Northern Irish perspective, growing up here the reality that too often, having an enemy is the biggest form of somebody's identity? Whereas it's not, you know, it's not like, I don't know who I am, but I know who I'm not. And why is it that we need an 'other' so we know who we are? Are we not interesting enough without that? Or are we still in a stage of intellectual evolution where we're trying to get past that? I don't know. But the conflict is, became a way to look at perspective, because when I moved to New York in 2007, and then would explain to very well-educated American people and British expats there that, oh, no, actually, Northern Ireland is a separate country from the Republic of Ireland. And I ended up having to draw that same map, dozens and dozens of times with the two islands and the two lines in Great Britain, and the one line across Ireland explaining the difference between the United Kingdom, the British Isles and Great Britain, and just sort of realising that, there we are killing each other on an island and to be either British or Irish, and once you left there, nobody really cared.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

You are, you're not shy of giving out public opinion about matters to do with politics, or, whatever's being voted on in a referendum...

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I would only do it after consideration; I wouldn't just spout out the first thing, I would really think about how I felt about it; and I don't know if you've ever noticed, I try to generally do it in a way in which there's either a hopeful perspective or a call to action, rather than just adding to the noise.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

How did you learn that?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

My father.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Really?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yeah...

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Say a bit more about that.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

It's like, what is the, what is the point in complaining, if you're not going to do something about it; it's better to offer a solution than point out the problem. And in, just in sort of the recognising- and my wife as well, would sort of point out was like: you know, you, a lot of people, you kind of represent the voice of a lot of people, just be careful what you say, try to not say anything that's too negative, too aggressive, too isolating of a particular group or anything, but just, you know, if everything that I'm about is about sort of unity, and simplicity and equality, try and speak in a way that reflects it.

After making the book *Here We Are* for, for my son, when he showed up on Earth, as, you know, here's- what's it like to be a brand new human walking around, I'm gonna have to teach you everything. And when I was looking at that, I started researching what astronauts have said about outer space, or sorry about looking at planet Earth from outer space, and the way in which they were talking about seeing Earth from the distance of the moon, I recognised was not dissimilar to the way in which I'd been speaking about Northern Ireland from the distance of New York. And so, that- trying to explain conflict with the perspective of distance and time became really interesting. And then whenever I went to Tennessee to see a total eclipse of the sun, and that brief moment, that two minutes where the moon finally becomes visible, because it's a big black circle, right in front of the sun. And, your...the

intelligent spatial recognition part of your brain - you know, you look out a window you can tell, oh, that car is so far away from that tree, even though they're in the same line - you can work out spatial awareness, and that same thing happened, but on a cosmological level. Where the object- one I was looking at was a quarter of a million miles away. And then the second object that I could see behind it was 450 million miles away. It just, my knees dropped with the scale of it all. And I was like: how do I translate that, how can I do that again, and have other people see this and sense this, but rather than having it just be a scientific model, what's a way to do it so we place humanity at the centre of this and how we look at ourselves; and, you know, the only- this is just how vast the distances are between all the other things that are floating out there. It's called space for a reason, because it mostly is space. And if we get far away and we look back at ourselves, does it become obvious that what, how we're using our energy is not the best use of our time? And so that's how this 591 million:1 scale model of Earth's place in our solar system was born and it's called *Our Place in Space* and, where the sun is about three metres in diameter, Earth is smaller than a ping pong ball. And, about 500 metres away. And, er it takes 12 miles to get from the sun to Pluto, which would be the size of a match head.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

The more I listen to yer today, Oliver, the more I keep on thinking about how one of the, kind of transformational moments that seems to enliven you as a person as well as in your art, is something you said earlier on: moments in life that alter thinking. Like, I'm already thinking about that eclipse you just talked about there and, looking at the measurements of you know, between planets and moons, etc. But then I'm also thinking about what you said about the death of your mother, and the way you speak about becoming a parent yourself, and also about being in Brooklyn and having to explain, d'you know, British-Irish conflict. Each of these seem to be moments where your thinking was altered, something happened that moved you towards some point of view, some perspective that was, that was- well, I don't know what it was. Is it creativity? Is it imagination? Is it insignificance? What is it that you think you're moved towards in those moments of altered thinking?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I think, in those moments of altered thinking, I think what I recognise is that nothing is absolutely sure, or certain. That everything that we know is basically a story that we've told ourselves or taken somebody else's word for it. And in those moments, I think I recognise, I tap into a much deeper current or rhythm that transcends or undercuts language or narrative or storytelling, and it's to do with that feeling- it's that feeling which we haven't quite articulated yet. Or don't quite have rules for yet. But that doesn't mean that we won't at some point in the future. And that perhaps my work on Earth is to be a conduit towards taking a step towards that clarity.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

That clarity of feeling?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

That clarity of feeling, yeah. Tapping into the, the movements, the patterns, the rhythms of natural life; of that which, you know, really can't be contested.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

There's a theme of home through a lot of your books too, Oliver; would you say that home is an emotional experience for you, as you think about it...

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Absolutely.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

...is it a sense of belonging that you're talking about?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

It really is a sense of belonging and it's a, it's a sense of feeling, to continue even with that. The, the house in which we grew up was sold, and, we were all potentially going to get quite emotional about it, but my father pointed out that, that's only bricks and mortar; that feeling and those memories, those stories live inside your head. And you can take them anywhere.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

And what and where and who is home for you these days?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

What and where and who is home for me, I suppose, is my family. And it is my extended family: my father still, my brothers, my wife, my children. And in a way, also New York: I think I feel very much at home when I'm close to my, to- I have two studios, one here in Northern Ireland and one in Brooklyn, and it's that ability to be able to, to make, and comfortably make, knowing where everything is that I, where I need it to be.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Is there any projects that you're working on at the moment that you can talk about?



**Oliver Jeffers:**

I've spent the last four years thinking about, writing, rewriting, editing, and then painting, over the last two years, a book that is hard to describe. The publishers- we're still not entirely sure where to put it in the bookshop or what to call it, but it is, it's a book probably primarily for adults (not to say it's not for kids) about the patterns that I recognise in the story, the human story of where we came from and where we might yet go, and it's called *Begin Again*. I suppose it's even a nonfiction, visual, poetic thread of the stories that govern humanity.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Huge themes then, held together in extraordinary language, as well as visuals, as I've seen it.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yeah, you know, it is, it's like the complicated lofty themes. And what's the best way to go about them, I think, is to just keep thinking about them, saying them, showing them to a point where you can distill them to enough simplicity that they can't really be disagreed with. So there is a poem at the end of the book *Begin Again* that I think sums the whole thing up. And, it's whenever- I've travelled a lot, I've travelled to most of the states in the USA; I've travelled to, to countless other countries, and I always talk to people- it's amazing the sorts of people that come along to book events and when- I've noticed that when you ask people what they want, especially in, you know, in a kind of a context of current affairs, people tend to answer what they don't want. And when I started really then scratching at the surface, and trying to get to the heart of what people actually do want, I made a kind of a startling revelation. And I wrote a poem about it that is at the end of the book *Begin Again*, and it's called 'The Heart Of It'. And it says: 'when you dig deep enough by asking the why behind the why enough times, you come to a truth at the heart of it, that all people, no matter who they are, where they're from, or what they believe, all want the same simple things: community, purpose, health and dignity'.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

The why behind the why.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

The why behind the why. Just keep asking the next question.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Oliver Jeffers: artist, communicator, translator, and friend, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Thank you, Pádraig, it's been an absolute pleasure.

*The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace Studios, and presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.*

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I wonder, is there something in your life that you've changed your mind about?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Oysters.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

That was very quick! D'you have a sentence about which direction you changed your mind about oysters?!

**Oliver Jeffers:**

Yes, I was like, you know to quote Oscar Wilde, 'twas a brave man who first tried an oyster' it's like: what is that about? And then being in Cancale in France and watching those old ladies shuck them, and the way in which people sort of just relish them with gusto, and then the smell and just- it was, it was a feeling, just it was like it felt right in the moment, and I tried it and it was delicious. It was a context thing.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Are there books or poems or films, or any work of art, really, that you've turned to again and again, throughout your life?

**Oliver Jeffers:**

I um, there's, there's one album that I keep, tending to go back to, and I think it's because it happened at a trans- sort of a transcendental, or you know, a moment of transit, in my life, where I was on the move, and in between people, you know. It was like one- an old version of myself was, was out of service, and I was in, basically, renovation to become the new version of me. And the album was *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison. And I do put it on periodically, just when I recognise I'm in a moment of transition.

