



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 8. Sarah Perry reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Are there currents of exceptionalism that exist within your political, religious, local or national community? What do you see as the potential consequences of those ideas? What approaches might you take to challenge or complicate them?
2. Sarah says: ‘I was taught to knit by a Victorian...that’s how close the Victorian age is’. Are there objects, stories, old photos/ relationships etc. in your family which anchor/ connect you to the past in some way?
3. Where can you see the existence of and value in the interconnectedness of science and the arts? Would you place your own interests or work or experience in one or the other? If in the arts, where/how have you been enriched by exposure to scientific understandings (or vice versa)?
4. Can you think of a time when you took delight in the act of learning something? It might have been a whole new subject, an obscure fact, a new skill, or some work of music or poetry that you learnt by heart.
5. Is the idea of ‘original sin’ one that you’re familiar with? What do you make of Sarah’s view that the loss of original sin as an accepted principle is having an adverse effect on our public discourse?
6. Do you identify with Sarah’s view that there is ‘good’ (or moral) and ‘bad’ (or immoral) art? Can you think of examples of books or films that you think of as being virtuous in the sense that Sarah articulates?

Sarah Perry is the internationally bestselling author of the novels *Melmoth*, *The Essex Serpent*, and *After Me Comes the Flood*, and the non-fiction *Essex Girls*. She is a winner of the Waterstone’s Book of the Year Awards and the British Book Awards, and has been nominated for major literary prizes including the Women’s Prize for Fiction, the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Folio Prize and the Costa Novel Award. She is the Chancellor of the University of Essex, and a Fellow of the Royal Literary Society. Her essays have been published in the Guardian, the New York Times, the Observer, and the London Review of Books. She has been the UNESCO City of Literature Writer in Residence in Prague, and the Writer in Residence at the Savoy Hotel in London. Her no. 1 bestseller *The Essex Serpent* was adapted for television starring Clare Danes and Tom Hiddleston in the lead roles. Her new novel, *Enlightenment*, will be published by Jonathan Cape (UK) and Harper Collins (US) in May 2024.

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 the writer Sarah Perry. Sarah has published four books, the second of which, *The Essex Serpent*, was made into a six-part television series for Apple TV, and her work explores religion and time and politics and ethics and history and science and nature and morality, and we're gonna be talking about all those things. Originally from Chelmsford in Essex in England, Sarah became chancellor of the University of Essex in August 2023. So Sarah, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Sarah Perry:

Thank you so much for asking me. I'm really delighted to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

So I really wanna start off with a question which is: was there any particular experience or friendship in your childhood that you feel was formational for who you are now, and for what you do now?

Sarah Perry:

Erm, I think the experience- it's certainly not friendship. Erm, I've always been quite solitary by nature. Erm, I say that, and it surprises people, 'cause I'm also very sociable and gregarious, but I'm happiest alone. And I'm never lonely, as long as I'm on my own. And the more I'm around people, the lonelier I get, and so I would say it wasn't formative friendships that contributed to what I am but that sensation of being alone and of being strange; I was raised in a very curious religious sect that required me to be in a, in a sort of austere, early 19th century chapel for many many hours of the week, where I would sit in a hard pew and listen to extraordinary devotional music sung in four-part harmony by the congregation. And it gave rein to my imagination in a way that I think has really made me what I am now; existing in this place between the sermons coming down from the pulpit, often couched in extremely beautiful

language, and a child's imagination, knowing that they were kept very separate from ordinary life, very separate from other children, and it created, I'm sure, created what I am now.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Do you feel like the separateness was, was benefited by your capacity to be comfortable in solitude?

Sarah Perry:

Absolutely. And I think that, for all of us, our disposition and our upbringing and experiences can be at war, or they can be in conversation. And I was very fortunate: I'm the youngest of five girls, and I'm very fortunate in that my disposition is to want to be left alone largely, learning and thinking and playing and making things. And so to have this upbringing where there was little else to do was a real gift, erm and I flourished, and I loved it. And occasionally now, at 43, I realise that I actively try to cultivate and return to that in my life now... Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I find myself associating with the imagination of you in that pew, who was having all kinds of fantastical imaginations, as you're listening to the words coming down. Is that true? Or is- am I just projecting onto you?

Sarah Perry:

No you're not, not projecting at all. One of the erm...d'you know there were two things that I would do; I, I feel as if my life could have gone in two very specific directions - of course, all of our lives could have gone in many directions - but, people will be familiar with the hymn board that you used to have in churches where the hymn numbers were put up in a rather lovely wooden board. And I used to make maths puzzles out of them: stare at them and use the numbers to do algebra- I found algebra fascinating. So I would either be doing that or thinking about the refraction of the light through the windows, and, you know, what sort of mechanics of physics was holding the roof up. And the rest of the time I would be making up stories. And one of the things that you were allowed to do as a child in our church was to take sermon notes. So children and young people always had little notebooks where we would diligently make note of the sermon, and I would be writing stories; but because if anyone saw I was writing stories, I would be in trouble (because I should have been making sermon notes), I wrote in this cramped, illegible hand, with no gaps between any of the words- I couldn't read it myself

afterwards: I would have had no idea what I wrote. And I, I remember that happening. And then sometimes I was taking sermon notes, you know, I was quite a devout child in many ways. Yeah, so strange suspense of a consciousness between imagination and science and the Divine and I'm afraid I haven't really trespassed very far from that!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, that's right - there you have stayed! You know, you talk a lot in other interviews and in articles that you've written about a Strict Baptist upbringing, and I'm curious about where it is that you see that that background is misunderstood- I know you're insistent on speaking about the, the openness towards literature and certain forms of music that you experienced and also the profound openness to mathematics and physics and science within your family. And, do, do, you often get the impression that people think that that's a surprise, that strict religious background and openness to physics and mathematics went together?

Sarah Perry:

You know, it's, it's not just a surprise, it's a disappointment. That's how people receive it. People often say to me: was your upbringing like in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*? which is obviously a remarkable account of a religious background...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, by Jeanette Winterson. Yeah.

Sarah Perry:

Yeah. Erm, and a sort of novelised version (as I understand it having read her memoir) of very similar experiences she had. And her mother was, as I understand it, very mentally ill, and an alcoholic. And the church was a pentecostal charismatic church, which gives itself over to great displays of emotion and spirituality- violent spirituality, literally. So the child in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was beaten and thrashed and exorcised, and the mother was abusive. You know, my parents were very loving. It was a very stable home: they were loving in, according to their own lives of kind of slightly 19th century, you know, not cuddles and affirmation and praise, but great routine- you know, strict routines and so on. Erm, the idea that my mother would get drunk and beat the devil out of me is absolutely absurd. And when people understand that I love my parents and continue to have a close relationship with them despite the fact that I very rarely attend church now, I think disappoints them because people like a binary and they

like to have a villain. And for those people who are entirely secular, it's very troubling to understand that an upbringing that was by any standards of the modern day extremely constrained and extremely strict, and quite troubling in many ways, could also have been delightful. Erm, and I think they would rather that I'd been sort of thrown out on my ear, erm, dragging baggage, you know, because that's easier to understand.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I do want to ask a question, like you mentioned that you, you're not somebody that goes along to church very regularly, but reading your work, it's so clear that there is a heavy weighing of theology and the concerns that theology carries with it. What's your relationship now to theology and what it can say to the contemporary concerns about politics and science and environment that are occurring for us these days in 2023?

Sarah Perry:

I think the firmest thing that I hold onto, as I work out my own salvation with fear and trembling, and vacillate between virtual agnosticism and devotions every half hour, I believe very deeply that the loss of the concept of original sin is very damaging. Because, to me, the notion of original sin is that we were all born equally capable of failure, and equally capable of real catastrophic flaws in our actions and our thoughts. And, importantly, equally able to access grace, redemption of some kind, whether that is by an act, whether that's by received forgiveness, whether it's personal redemption, or collective. And the loss of that I think has been very damaging, individually and to the public discourse, because, what has happened is, if somebody fails in some way - in public life, for example, or on social media, speaks out of turn, you know, offends - it's almost impossible for them to say they have sinned, or erred, or however we want to call it, because we've lost the idea that that's something that we all do, and we've certainly lost the idea that there is a capacity for forgiveness and redemption, so what happens is a total entrenchment of position. People believing that they are the good and the other is the bad. The bad will only ever act in bad faith and spite and malice and stupidity. And the good, which is your own tribe, will only ever act noble and benevolently; this is a kind of ad absurdum reading of it, but I, I really think it matters. And I spend a lot of my time rolling my eyes and, and thinking everybody needs to go back to Sunday school, or some form of religious instruction, because, there are no good or bad people. And, and with the news that has been out lately, that is a very challenging thing for people to hear, but I don't believe that anyone is born worse than anybody else, and consequently, I feel moved to pity as much as

horror when I read about the wickedness that we see every day. And I'm also painfully conscious of my own capacity for, for failure. So, that's sort of where my theology is located, I suppose. And that's why I keep writing books about: what is goodness? And how to find it, and how to pursue it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well, you've given us a nice segue: I wanted to talk to you, Sarah about *The Essex Serpent*. I think briefly without giving too much away, it's a story about a woman, Cora, who goes to Essex to investigate the reports of a serpent that's killing people. And it's set in Victorian times. I was curious, I mean, you've mentioned in terms of your, your kind of time travelling childhood. But I'm curious about some of the other layers about that period of time that interested you. And of course, you can correct and add to the very crude summary of the story that I've given as well.

Sarah Perry:

No, that was beautifully done! Erm, I- there was so much that I wanted to do with that book, and a lot of it was done out of a sense of downright mischief which we can, erm, add to my slate of sins! Erm, the Victorian age really wasn't very long ago. And I wanted to challenge this idea that we have of the Victorians as being some kind of distant lost in the, in the mists of time theme park of Victoriana where everybody thought differently and behaved differently, and women, in particular, were content to faint away on a fainting couch hemming handkerchiefs as they endured their 56th pregnancy of their marriage. And, and I wanted to challenge that and I wanted to bring it into the modern age. And I often invite people to think about how close they are to the Victorian age. I'm 43, and I was taught to knit by a Victorian. Because my great grandmother was born in 1899 - or 1900, I lose track - and she taught me to knit and crochet when I was a child: that's how close the Victorian age is. So I wanted to show that moment of scientific progress, of increasing secularism, of questioning of theological norms that had been accepted since the Reformation, really. And also show women as what they were: working in medicine, working in the natural sciences, working in mathematics, engineering, administration, you know, all of it. And I also wanted to write about love and goodness. And to challenge I- I like to challenge readers as much as I like to entertain them, and there are some parts of *The Essex Serpent* that have proved very challenging, and people have been quite angry with me about it, and that makes me very happy!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

There's that mischief! Um yeah, they're- so many of the characters are so likeable, and you see their flaws, you see how their, their motivation toward the good is complicated by the fashion within which they try to work out their motivation and their actions; you come away thinking that all of them are believable, and that, that their actions too are actions that could occur to anybody. It's an interesting- there isn't, there isn't a kind of a hero narrative, but there are characters of great admiration in it. That seems to me to be a characteristic of all of your, all of your fiction, that there isn't a kind of a standout, standout, perfect golden character.

Sarah Perry:

That's right, and also very rarely a villain. Because I don't think there are any. I've never met a villain, and I've had lunch with Boris Johnson, so...! You know, I've met weak people, and broken people, and foolish people, and spiteful people, but they're all humans. And when I meet people, you know, like former prime minister, who by their actions and their speech have shown themselves to be wanting virtually every admirable virtue that you might find in a human being, rather than thinking: there but for the grace of God go I, you know, thank you that I'm a better person than he is, oh Lord, I think: what cataclysmic series of degrading and diminishing events could have led somebody to this position in their life? and I feel moved to pity as much as anything else.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I want to go back to something you just said, which is, you know, about having been taught to knit by a Victorian; there's a quote from the biblical translator, Robert Alter, and he is kind of asserting that the biblical texts, the Hebrew Bible, need to be taken with great sophistication for the politics and the governance of the time. And he has this line where he says:

'One shouldn't assume that the ancient writers were naive simply because they were ancient'. And he's speaking about literature that's, you know, two thousand years/ two and a half thousand years, or, old - and three thousand years, old, some of it - and there's a, there's kind of an ethic of the past in that, that tones down the imagination of our contemporary sophistication, and says: look, just because we've got an iPhone, it doesn't mean that we're that far evolved from somebody who was writing about the politic of a city three thousand years ago. It seems to be a profound moral assertion that you also have about the past.

Sarah Perry:

I think it is a moral assertion, and I think it is also humbling. Because I think it's very easy to think that in the modern age, we have arrived at some sort of apex of ethic and understanding and scientific endeavour. And actually, it's more useful to think of us as being part of this continuum of human endeavour. Erm, I'm very attached to the Italian theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Who wouldn't be?! My God! Poetry and science, and physics, and....

Sarah Perry:

...he's my hero! And sort of the ideal human being as far as I'm concerned. He writes in one of his books of physics as being 'the learned rebellion'. I think he wrote that in his book on Heisenberg, *Helgoland*, which came out last year. And this is a man who really is at the height of the study of one of the most kind of arcane and penetratingly difficult studies that there can be, and he conceives of it as being a learned rebellion in the sense that you learn what has been taught, and then you rebel against it. And that also means that when he makes his assertions (on white holes, for example, which is his current area of study), he is doing it with a degree of humility, understanding that in 20 years time, some paper will be published which demonstrates the flaws and the failings in what he's achieved so far, so, I think that it's necessary for our present humility, to understand the wisdom of the past and the closeness of the past. So that we don't feel that we must stop seeking after advance in some way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You've said - and we're going to be talking a bit about this when it comes to the arts - but you've said that 'the best historical fiction is always about the present'. Could you talk about that- in a certain sense you already are, but I'm interested in the way that you're bringing, that you bring fiction into this question about the past and the present, too then.

Sarah Perry:

Well I think there's two ways of looking at it, and one of them is that all fiction is historical fiction. Because you could write, you know, someone like Ali Smith writes these very immediate books, like her previous four books written virtually in real time. And by the time they have been copyedited, proofread, typeset, published, put on the shelves, bought, put on a

shelf for a little bit longer, finally taken down, and read, it's already become history. And so I think the division between historical fiction and contemporary fiction is a little spurious. But I would also say that historical fiction, certainly at its best, it doesn't fetishize difference, and the odd little words for clothes that they used to have 300 years ago, but is rather about human dynamics around religion, politics, personal dynamics, the family, gender, that reflects the way we are now necessarily. And so *Wolf Hall*, to take the primary example of the last few decades really of historical fiction, is about power. It is about the Tudors, but it's about power, and it's about a single human consciousness, growing, and navigating its way through life, and through the demands of politics and his own conscience, and ultimately coming to its end. And that is historical, because Cromwell was a real man, but it is absolutely contemporary because humans, in their essential nature, are unchanged, and certainly human interrelations are not much changed.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is the writer Sarah Perry. Sarah, how do you respond to the question of the purpose of art- I'm interested in how you today, not in a way that would tie you to holding to this in the future if you ever change your mind, but how you today respond to that complicated question as to whether art has a purpose, about how you explore that and what the impulse towards art is.

Sarah Perry:

I'm grateful that you point out that I might change my mind about this at some future time! But at the moment, because of the book, the book that I've just written, I've been very preoccupied with physics in particular. And my father, who ignited my love of physics, who has himself studied physics and was a scientist, erm, he once said to me: physics is about how the world works. And if you study physics, and you know the formula for calculating the return of a pendulum swing, a moment of clarity and lucidity arrives in your mind that's really very beautiful, to me, I think. And I sometimes wonder whether art achieves the same thing. And that it is about, it's another way of understanding how the world works. So I don't have the capacity to understand the, you know, molecular formation of a particular chemical compound, and what that might do under certain stresses. But for some reason, I seem to have been given the ability sometimes to show people a way of understanding the way they feel about things, and to put into language feelings and emotions and experiences that they have felt and been

unable to convey to others, or even to frame adequately for themselves. So I wonder now as I talk to you, whether there's a way in which art is a form of physics of experience, rather than object, and a way of understanding how the world works. Erm, yes, that's, I think, what I think now. And I will email you, if I change my mind!

But the, the most precious things that have happened to me in my writing life, have not been- I've been very lucky to have, you know, a certain degree of attention and praise and I'm incredibly grateful for it and feel I would die without it, but erm, the most precious things have been people waiting in a signing queue, to come to my desk in tears, and say for example that they had endured devastating chronic pain, and their family had never believed them. And then they had sent them the essays that I've written on pain, and the family have softened, and finally understood what they'd endured. Or the people saying to me- an elderly man wrote to me, after *The Essex Serpent*. His best friend - and I've got no reason to assume that it was a romantic relationship, I will assume that it was his best friend - had died 30 or 40 years previously, and he had never recovered. And he said it was only in reading *The Essex Serpent*, that he had felt that friendship was as beautiful and as prized as he felt it had been and that he felt able to mourn. And that is a form of physics of life: putting into some form of lucidity and language a way of explaining or accessing the muddles and confusions that we all feel.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, I was struck, I was reading something that John Berger wrote, and he said: 'What's unsaid one time can be said on another occasion, but the unsayable can never be said, unless maybe in a prayer, and God would know that, not me. Before the unsayable we are alone, and this, I believe, is why stories are told'. I'm- there's a, there's a way within which you're highlighting the absolute necessity of story as something that's vital to the human spirit; of course, we need healthcare systems and legal systems that are supportive and safe for human flourishing. But those alone are not enough, that the arts have a vitality and a necessity to them that you're compelled towards, even in a way that seems to at times disquiet you because of a certain complicated comparison that can come at times when need is heightened for, for healthcare or legal representation.

Sarah Perry:

Yeah. And you know, there are overlaps. The great advocates in court are great orators, and they're storytellers: they're telling the story, as they have been instructed by their client to the

jury, and the barristers- I worked in law for a time, and the barristers that I've seen who are the most successful are the ones who are artists and performers. Erm, and certainly in medicine - I've spoken about this many times with my friend who's an oncologist - it's a great benefit to any doctor to have studied the arts, to have written in particular, to have read poetry and fiction that distils these devastating human experiences into language that is benevolent and useful and painful. And so it's, I think breaking down the perception of a barrier between the artistic life and the scientific life is essential for all of us and can only enhance those professions.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Staying with the question about the purpose of art, I'm - and whether that word is the correct one or not, of course - I've heard you talk before about literature and morality, and I've read that you've written stuff about 'bad books'; you spoke about books that are 'bad, ignoble, small, diminishing, deceitful, they might be written exquisitely and show mastery of language and form but be fundamentally bad'. I'm interested in what standards you hold yourself to when it comes to questions of truth and morality in the fiction that you represent.

Sarah Perry:

Erm, impossible standards, that I've failed to meet! I'm really interested in Platonic- in Plato's ideas of nobility and beauty as being intrinsically, you know, mixed together, indistinguishable from each other and that for something to be beautiful, it must also be noble and good, and that beauty is itself noble and that nobility is itself beautiful. And I do try to pursue that on a line-by-line basis in my fiction, and my latest book's 111,000 words, and attending diligently to ideas of nobility and beauty over such a long book has nearly been the death of me and everybody who knows me. Erm, but it comes down, on a very practical level, to ensuring for me that I do not think myself better than my characters. So never setting up a character purely to be a vehicle for my own ideas of, of what constitutes stupidity or ugliness or malice. I would never, never do that. Which I'm aware has led to accusations of me being overly sentimental about my characters, and that's fine. But I cannot bear the idea of the creation of a character to be a vessel for the reader's spite and dislike. I also feel very strongly (and have argued this to people who don't like the idea) that wherever you go, there you'll be, right, so I am not a different person when I sit down at my, at my desk to write than I was before I sat down. All of the moral and ethical principles that I hold as a human being must apply in my work. And so I don't think that art elevates you above yourself, actually. And certainly not above anyone else, but I've sort of noticed a feeling that almost that you owe no obligations even to your own

moral frameworks while you're writing, which I find bizarre; writing is living. When I'm writing my books I'm living, it's part of my life. And I really, I'm not going to name any of the books, but there are books, and ones that have been very popular, which seem to me to be degrading to the reader and to the writer and to their subjects. And they're never the books that you think, I mean one of the reasons I love horror fiction is because it's so moral! My husband and I have had rather a difficult few weeks for all sorts of reasons, and we thought: ah, we just, we just need to watch a comfort film. So we watched *The Exorcist*.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Ah, amazing, I was hoping you were gonna say *The Exorcist*, it's my favourite film!

Sarah Perry:

So, what a profoundly moral film, what a beautiful, moral, godly film- *The Exorcist*!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yes! My God..

Sarah Perry:

And so it's very easy for people to think when I talk about virtuous art, to think that I just want everybody to watch, you know, erm, *It's a Wonderful Life*, or something...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Enid Blyton!

Sarah Perry:

...yes, and that's not the case at all! It's not the case at all.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My favourite part of *The Exorcist* is where the two priests sit at the end of the bed and engage in a question about the purpose about what's happening...

Sarah Perry:

Absolutely.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

...I think the entire film centres around that small dialogue.

Sarah Perry:

It does, and how rare to see a film that treats respectfully and honestly the notion that there is a God, a benevolent and loving God who might intervene if you have faith, if your faith is, is resting in him. It's just a wonderful film!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, you talk about that, you know, there have, might have been accusations about some of your characters being sentimentalised, and at the same time, like you've written: 'I hope no one comes away from it' - you're speaking about *Melmoth* here - 'I hope no one comes away from it without feeling guilty about something'. There's a way within which the macabre and almost the, the terror, not of, you know, a devil bursting out from your closet, but of yourself bursting out back to yourself and the accountability and the bearing witness that needs to come from that. And again, not to say: therefore, you're going to rot in hell forever, but, you're going to have to face yourself; that seems to be at the heart of your work: you take your characters seriously, and it sounds to me like you hope that your readers take themselves seriously while they engage with your work as well.

Sarah Perry:

I hope that and I believe it and I think one of the great failings in some quarters of contemporary literature is people massively underestimating their readership. Erm, people are deeply inquiring, they're willing to be challenged and moved. They're easily made angry, and they're easily made to laugh, and they enjoy both of those things. And that- I exist as a writer to move and to affect the reader as much as if they met me. Erm, so it's not for me merely a question of entertainment (although I do like to think that people want to turn the pages), but, erm... I can't remember who said this, a French writer, I believe: 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader'. And I feel that, you know, no guilt in the writer, no guilt in the reader, no laughter in the writer, no laughter in the reader. And I want the reader to feel what I have felt, erm, down to the guilt, which is an essential - and, and I think ultimately benevolent, if treated correctly - aspect of the human condition. And *Melmoth* was specifically written to, you know, really upset people, but to a benevolent extent, because it's a book about bearing witness, and it's a book about the availability of grace should you choose it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and this is The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Sarah Perry, the writer. Sarah, I'm interested in talking to you about three overlapping areas: Britishness, Englishness and Essex. I think the politics of the last number of years when we think of European and British identity and then particularly, coming from Ireland, the question of how Brexit has risen up questions to do with British identity, English identity, Irish identity, the United Kingdom, the borders of that jurisdiction... These have all been elevated politically in recent times. And in general, I suppose I'm curious to hear how it is that the last number of years have brought you to reflect on questions to do with political identity and the reductiveness of that, and perhaps what it is that you wish to say in response to some of the ways that those identities are spoken about in public.

Sarah Perry:

I think the last 10 years has brought me round in a sort of loop, erm, not back to where I was precisely, but to a more tutored and certain place. So, after the catastrophe and shock of Brexit, I engaged in the very common and slightly thoughtless discourse that would suggest that of all countries in the world, England is the most bereft of any culture, bereft of folk music and folk song; stupid, venal, hunched little people sitting in their chilly homes, eating their awful British food, and generally being the worst there is, and I sort of quite enjoyed that. And then a friend of mine, who I used to play folk music with quite a lot when I was young, he said to me: the trouble with that kind of discourse is that it's actually English exceptionalism. So there is a certain vein of broadly leftist Englishness, who will speak of the English as being uniquely bad. Er, uniquely bereft of decent food, uniquely bereft of any interesting culture or history; any history or culture that it does have, it sort of thieved from elsewhere. Erm, and that's English exceptionalism, right, actually, the truth is, we're as good and as bad as many other countries, you know, so, many, many other European countries have the most heinous and devastating histories of genocide: England, Belgium, Portugal, France, and so on. It's, it's a, it's a human sin. It is an unspeakable wickedness that doesn't have any borders. And we must somehow face the present and past devastation caused by this wickedness, whilst also understanding, with sorrow, that this isn't exceptional. And the corollary of that- I have a very close Irish friend, who recently said to me something about, erm, English folk music is, you know, it doesn't really have any folk music, and it's really rubbish. And I, I understand that that's the kind of thing that people say; it's not true, though...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, it's not true.

Sarah Perry:

You know, I'm afraid! ...The English folk tradition, much as people might not like Morris dancing and folk music, it does exist...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Exactly.

Sarah Perry:

...it's real, it is living, and it is not located in a kind of, I don't know, white south eastern idea of Englishness, but you have folk music from the north east that is a poignant and devastating record of labour conditions and fights for labour laws. And you have the murder ballads. And you have these extraordinary records of the changing of the seasons, songs like 'John Barleycorn Must Die' which turns the harvest for beer into, like an awful, bloodthirsty ballad. So, I now find myself able to say that I love my nation, my stupid, venal, shortsighted, narrow-minded nation, because it also has about it music and traditions and buildings and histories and food, that I- that are very precious, and it's OK to say that. And I think it's really interesting that we back ourselves into a corner by being so keen to disavow any idea that England is special, that you end up going round in a big loop and saying: well, we are special because we're worse than everybody else and we have no culture! So, that's the circle I've gone in, I suppose.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'm struck by how you speak about exceptionalism here as an imagination that will fail the public imagination, the public consciousness, the public politic, and not just in England, but like as part of any grouping of people that has an addiction to a certain approach to exceptionalism; it seems to me like you're issuing some kind of warning to pay deep attention to the mechanics that are operating underneath exceptionalism.

Sarah Perry:

I think so and I think also it comes back to this idea that people like to have - and I understand why they like to have it - that the world consists of the good and the bad and they're located, of course, unassailably in the good and that, and the others are the bad. And I'm not saying that that's not a very useful and broadly true model, and you don't have to look back very far in history to see those factions playing out on the world stage. But I do think there is a great risk in failing to see the human side of these national failings, because we can all end up exculpating ourselves, so, the English who say to themselves: England is the worst of the worst, and I hate everything to do with it, you're sort of abdicating yourself of any responsibility. You're saying: this has nothing to do with me, this is not my country, I hate it and everything about it is appalling to me- well then you, you're not invested in doing anything about it. You don't have to go along to a folk festival, for example, and find out for yourself what's going on there; you don't have to join in with your local community, erm, if you live in a small town, and actually find out whether things need challenging and changing, because you've just held up your hands, and said: it's nothing to do with me, gov', and I don't think that that helps anybody.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Erm, recently, you've been made chancellor of the University of Essex; um, I've two questions about that, one of which is the way within which when I've read you, you glory in the delight that can come from learning, you know, learning by oneself or, you know, learning in a classroom. I'd love to hear you talk a bit about, about learning and what that does for the human enterprise. And then also, you've been critical of the implication that there's, there's good degrees and bad degrees, I'd like to hear a bit about that too, but, I'd really love to hear you speak about education as something of delight.

Sarah Perry:

I, I feel um, I'm smiling as I talk, you can probably hear it...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I can hear it, yeah!

Sarah Perry:

There is nobody, I have never met somebody who didn't enjoy learning, and I mean that quite seriously, whether that is just: you're down the pub, and you happen to have heard some

bonkers fact about an animal, and you say: hey, did you know...?! And people say: get outta here, and you go: no, it's, it's absolutely true! Or, you know, you talk to a child, and they might say, you know: why is the sky blue? And you go, oh, actually, it's, you know, the atmosphere has particles in and it's filtering the light in a certain way, and they go: ah, that's really cool... It does something to your spirit, to feel, er, you know, enlarged, and it does it for everybody.

And one of the reasons I was so delighted to be appointed chancellor at Essex is that it is a university that has a very large intake from what they call first in family students, so the first in the family to go to university, and, just before I took up my post, I was invited to go along to one of their graduation ceremonies, not to preside, because I hadn't formally taken up my position, but just to see what it was like. And, the pride of these families- and they would be sort of, you know, local white families from Essex, or whole families flown over from Nigeria (because Essex has a really big intake of global majority students and people from overseas), and the, the total unity of joy in attainment, in educational attainment, was absolutely intoxicating. And it was particularly intoxicating, because it was largely from a demographic that doesn't have the luxury of taking it for granted. So it wasn't muted and sober - you know, another degree in History of Art from St Andrews, the fourth in the family - these are people who couldn't believe that their child had progressed this far in nursing or social sciences or computer sciences. And erm, one young man, from I think a Black British family, came walking across the stage in this incredibly smart suit. And he was incredibly insouciant 'cause he was, you know, he was 21, and he wasn't gonna show too much emotion, and he sort of took his degree from the, the pro-chancellor and then, as he walked away, he held his degree to his cheek, and he just went: nice, nice! It was so great, and it seems to me, Essex in that moment seemed to me to access something incredibly pure about learning, that I think in other places has got a bit jaded, because if you are the first from your family to go to university, the extreme joy and delight in attainment reverts back to what it should be, which is that it's extraordinary that you study for three years, and then you've learned some things. It's amazing.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And then, shortly after you were appointed Sarah, I saw an article on the BBC about your response to the prime minister speaking about, you know, degrees with good outcomes and, implying bad outcomes, and the question as to the economic value of a degree and measuring the value of a degree based on that.

Sarah Perry:

I think that there's two ways of looking at this. And one of them is the, is the total falsehood implicit in the idea that an arts degree can't help you in your work. You know, as we mentioned earlier, the study of the arts provides an enormous understanding, not only of language and different ways to communicate, and different ways to listen and different ways to decode what you're being told, or what you're seeing, but it also provides an access to kinds of feeling and empathy, and understanding of other human souls that you perhaps might not have accessed otherwise. It's incredibly precious, and those things are useful whether you're designing wallpaper for, you know, an arts institution, or you're a barrister, or, you know, you work in the trades: all of these things are incredibly useful. So I refute their central premise, essentially. And, and I also add to that by saying, you know, we are, what is this Gradgrindian concept of education, that it is designed purely to affect your tax band? You know, this is absurd. Education and learning is enlarging and a delight and benevolent to the individual and to the community regardless of what it can do to your income; and you know what makes me really angry, it's that I don't believe those Tory politicians actually think that for a minute. Because when they go along to Glyndebourne, when they go and take up their seat in the box for the Proms, they don't want those musicians to not have studied music. What they're saying is that it's, it's for the likes of 'us', but it's not for the likes of 'you'. And it is a way of further entrenching social and economic division, and, and I'm not fooled for a minute that they are saying these for a benevolent purpose, not for a minute, because they are not talking about, you know, they're not saying nobody should be going to Emmanuel College, Cambridge to study Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, they're saying that nobody should be going to Sheffield to study English Literature. And I think it's worth everybody pausing and, you know, wondering why they're picking at certain institutions and certain subjects.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Sarah Perry on that note, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Sarah Perry:

Thank you so much. I've really enjoyed myself.

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:

Sarah could you tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you?

Sarah Perry:

Yes, I, and I'm going to take national identity to mean my Essex identity, actually. I, I'm a flatlander: I don't, I don't feel right in- amongst hills. I like a trudge up and down a hill, but generally speaking, I wonder why there's something in the way of the sky. And I can distinctly remember, having been in the Peak District for a few days and really - I love the Peak District - coming back to Essex and going to Mersea Island and taking a little boat out among the Withy-sticks and the oyster beds, and I suddenly understood that I'm absolutely the product of Essex. You know, if I get a bad cut, I think river water would come out, you know. I- It feels so vital to me; I could never live anywhere other than East Anglia, I don't think, and it surprises and disappoints me: I'd like to be the kind of person who wants to go and live in Patagonia or New York or something, but I don't- I like marshes and reeds and curlews and mists and Withy-sticks and bits of old Roman pottery turning up in the back garden.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Are there books or poems or films or albums or some works of art that in particular you've turned to again and again over your life?

Sarah Perry:

Yeah, erm, there are things that I keep on my desk and I'm looking at them now: I have the annotated facsimile of *The Wasteland*, here. Erm, and *Paradise Lost*. And I go back again and

again and again to *Under Milkwood* which my father had on vinyl when I was a child, and I listened to it over and over and over again. And it's, it's never left me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Organ Glamorgan! Sarah, could you tell us about a time when you felt foreign?

Sarah Perry:

I can, I, when I was- I went abroad for the first time when I was 21, to be a missionary in Manila in the Philippines. And I was there for six months, and the vast majority of the people in the part of Manila that we lived in had never really seen a westerner. And I was tall, large, with sort of waist length, very blonde hair, and wore long flowing blue clothes... Erm, and they thought I was the Virgin Mary! Because I looked so sort of angelic- I was absolutely angelic when I was younger. And the first - erm, I mean, can you imagine how big I looked compared to little Filipino girls? - and, one of the first phrases of Tagalog I learned was: 'mataba siya pero napakaganda', which means 'she's fat, but she's very beautiful' and I've never felt more foreign in my life!