diyMFA

Cadwell Turnbull

269: Writing Speculative Fiction

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/269, because it's Episode 269. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please, subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, or you know, wherever the usual places where you might find podcasts; and also leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Cadwell Turnbull. His novel, The Lesson is a work of speculative fiction, and it's about what happens when a spaceship arrives at the US Virgin Islands with a race of super-advanced aliens on a research mission on board. The story grapples with the tensions between these newcomers and the local Virgin Islanders. And, it explores various themes, including: the nature of belief, impact of colonialism; and also, how far are we willing to go for progress?

This book breaks new ground as one of the first Sci-Fi novels to be set on Saint Thomas, in the Virgin Islands. It's a combination of literary social fiction and speculative fiction, and it also paints a vivid picture of Charlotte Amalie, which is Cadwell's hometown.

Now, about Cadwell: he is an author who has an MFA in fiction from North Carolina State University, as well as a Master's degree in Linguistics. He was the winner of the 2014 NCSU Prize for Short Fiction and attended Clarion West in 2016.

His short fiction has appeared in a lot of different places including: The Verge, Lightspeed, Nightmare, and Asimov's Science Fiction; and several of his stories have received honors or been nominated for Best-Of lists. I have been reading his debut novel, The Lesson, and it is absolutely un-put-downable. So, go out there, get it, read it. It is awesome. Welcome, Cadwell. It is so great to have you here.

Cadwell Turnbull: Thank you for having me.

GP: So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story, what inspired you to write The Lesson, and why?

CT: So, the basic idea, the aliens came out of a dream that I had when I was in my early 20s. It was about aliens that had integrated into a small town, and they acted pretty much like the Ynaa in the book. They responded to small threats with disproportionate violence. So, if you insulted them or you pushed them in the grocery store, they might kill you.

So, the dream stuck with me for a few years, and I didn't start actually applying it to story until I was in my MFA; and I wrote a couple short stories set in a world where aliens like that were integrated into the Virgin Islands. And that slowly, over time, developed into this novel.

GP: I love that, and I love that it came to you like in a dream. So, did it come like fully formed somewhat, or was it like-- Did it come as a complete picture or did you sort of have to unpack it as you developed it into the novel?

CT: So, some of the basic stuff was already there. So, the aliens acted and behaved in ways that are quite similar to the book. They were more humanoid than I think the Ynaa are. The Ynaa have this weird way of moving and acting; sometimes that seems a little uncanny. The aliens in the dream were a bit more humanlike except for how they responded to threats or insult.

And that particular bit, I took just as it was. Then I tried to explain it and give it more context in the book. So, I give them a back background, and give them a home planet, and give them a language. And, I also give them some motivations for why they would have that kind of culture of responding to threats in this way.

GP: You know, it kind of reminds me a lot of like the Twilight Zone. I'm sort of obsessed with the Twilight Zone; and that idea of things sort of look normal on the outside, but then you scratch the surface and all of a sudden, 'oh my gosh, it's just weird'. Like, there's that element of it in the story as well, where like the aliens seem, like you said, uncanny. Like, they seem almost human, but not quite. And, to me, that's fascinating,

CT: Right. It's definitely something that I wanted to do as well. I grew up watching The Outer Limits, not Twilight Zone, but the Science Fiction horror version of it. It's definitely something that I like to play with in fiction, having something be just a little bit off.

GP: Yeah. So, one of the things that right at the get-go caught my attention was the way you frame the opening. And, I have to know, like, if this was something that came after, as you were editing and revising; or if it was something that came from the get-go. What I'm talking about is it starts with 15 days before, and then 14 days. You know, like we kind of are inching closer and closer to this thing that we don't know what it is, but we know it's important, because everything else is framed as being relative to that event.

Obviously, we figure out what that event is pretty quickly once we get there. But what I'm interested in is sort of why you chose to frame it in that way. It kind of reminded me of that book, Looking for Alaska by John Green, where the whole book is either before or after the pivotal event in the middle of the story.

CT: Right. I think that I wanted a reader to get to know the characters before the aliens. I wanted them to be their own people, independent of the Ynaa. And so you could see how they carry themselves into this new world that they were entering with the Ynaa present. And, some of the themes that I wanted to develop before the Ynaa arrived so you could see how those themes are affected by the Ynaa, or how they are subverted or redirected by the Ynaa.

So, I have a character, Patrice, who's struggling, who's starting to ask questions about her faith; and Ynaa complicate that. And then I have characters that are exploring their sexuality, and the Ynaa complicate that in different way.

And so like having characters thinking about normal stuff, normal human things that happen in chapters of their lives; there's a character that's going through a midlife crisis. There's, of course, a lot of young people that are coming of age; having them already embarking on those journeys and then have those things be complicated by aliens.

GP: Yeah. You know, what really jumped out at me with this book is that it feels like for the first, I don't know, like 50 pages or something, it feels like contemporary literary fiction; and then aliens show up and it's like, you know, we're kind of in this world and we're really with these characters. And so it's interesting to me because usually speculative or Sci-Fi, we kind of get the weird stuff right up front.

But, like you said, with the way you did it, it makes us invested in these people as humans and not as humans dealing with this weird Sci-Fi thing. So, can you talk a little bit about the challenges of keeping that sort of character-driven thrust, even when you get the aliens in there and now it's definitely got the Sci-Fi elements woven in?

CT: So, one of my favorite writers is Ursula K. Le Guin, and her fiction tends to be a bit more out there than mine. She sets a lot of her novels on different worlds or alternate earths. But one of the things that I think is very similar, or at least, something that I'm inspired by, by looking at her work is how she uses social context or cultural context to look at character.

And that was one of the things that I really wanted to do with The Lesson. I wanted to have this alien presence be a lens to look at different aspects of humanity; and look at how culture is affected by invasion, occupation, by violence, by trauma. And so it was really important to me to have that human anchor, that character anchor first; and to maintain that anchor throughout the story. So, sometimes the Ynaa are foregrounded.

They're very important to a certain part of the novel; but other times, they're in the background. It's really about how the characters are dealing with their everyday lives while this stuff is happening, and trying to give those everyday things weight in a world where aliens exist. It was really important to me to not follow characters that were always doing some kind of actiony thing; they were trying to defeat the aliens or trying to fight back.

I wanted to look at characters that were just trying to get through their lives or dealing with illness or dealing with failing relationships. And, it was important to me that those things, those characters had equal weight to the characters that were dealing with some of the more centrally-motivated Ynaa stuff.

GP: Right. Like, it gives it sort of more of a humanness to the story too, because let's face it, even if, you know, we were to have an alien invasion tomorrow, like in our lives; to a certain degree, there's still is that element of just trying to get through your life, through your day-to-day. And so, like, I love how you kind of juggle the two elements; both like the more extreme dealing directly with the aliens, but then also these characters just grappling with what happens when a marriage falls apart.

CT: Absolutely.

GP: So, one of the things I also thought was interesting was that we very quickly, after that beginning part, we kind of lock in on two characters. I'll add a caveat. I haven't finished the book; I'm about halfway through. So, there may be like some of those characters that were very present in the before-section may be coming back; I just haven't gotten there yet, but I've noticed that like, at least where I am right now, Jackson and Derrick are taking center stage.

And so I was curious to hear from you, like, as you crafted that opening and we kind of get little bits and pieces of, you mentioned Patrice, we've also got Aubrey; and then we sort of center on these other characters, like Jackson shows up in the beginning, but then we really focus on him for a while once the aliens have arrived.

What made you choose kind of that slightly different take on point of view? Like, usually, when you read a book that has multiple point of view, it's pretty even; like, you know, they'll do this chapter for this character. Like they kind of alternate, but you definitely alternated in the beginning section. And then you kind of stayed with Jackson for a while, which was fascinating to me.

CT: Yeah. I wanted to do something-- At least, I wanted to give it some kind of aspect of unexpectedness. I wanted the story to feel like it's moving in a direction that you can't anticipate. I do that a few times in a novel; I kind of change directions. So, right now, where you are, there's Jackson and Derrick, but then it gets, then it moves out to other characters that I haven't even covered yet. And, then it returns to some characters as well.

Patrice, who I consider to be a really important character in the story that shows up in the first chapter, she's absent for a really long time. I wanted to play with that absence. I wanted people to, as they're reading it to be like, what's going on with Patrice? And then when you get her again, you see, 'oh, there's all of this other stuff that's going on as well'.

And so sometimes when I was playing with perspective, I wanted to subvert people's expectations, but I also wanted to have people ponder and wonder about what is going on in the background or what is going on over there. Because to me, the novel is about having a very wide view of this alien occupation, not just staying with one person and treating that person as if they have the most importance in this narrative.

GP: Yeah. What I love about what you just said is, you know, the idea of Patrice's absence being in some ways as crucial as a character's presence and sort of playing with that negative space, like what happens when you purposefully omit a character or an element from the story for a time and you kind of create that void that then the reader is wondering about? To me, that's fascinating. Can you talk a little bit more about sort of playing with that idea of absence as well as presence?

CT: Okay. I'll talk about Patrice a little bit more because I think this is the best example of this. Patrice, in the beginning of the novel, even before the aliens arrive, she's dealing with questions about love and relationships, but also her faith in God. She's starting to feel like there's a hole in her life; and the thing that she used to believe in and trust is now gone.

And, now that it's gone, now that she's starting to question relationships, particularly because her parents are going through a rocky period in their marriage; that turns out to be quite devastating. And because she's starting to develop feelings for her neighbor and best friend Derrick, she's starting to wonder about human relationships; and whether or not it is worthwhile to invest time and energy long-term in romance.

But she's also looking at what role God has in her community for her people, and why she believes what she believes about God. Derrick gives her a book of Asian mythology, and she starts reading in and starts having like, you know really fundamental questions about her own beliefs; and that stays with us throughout the novel.

But it also, I think works as a thematic thing, a feeling and an absence in your own life or feeling like there's, a thing that you were once certain about that's now uncertain. I wanted to mirror that in some ways in the narrative, have this character that you felt like was a really foundational character, disappear; and for you to feel that missing, for you to feel that kind of loss. So, there's a scene in Chapter Two where Jackson texts Patrice, Jackson is Patrice's father.

And, you don't hear from her for the entire chapter until at the very end, where she responds to the text; and you are supposed to feel, or at least I'm trying to make people feel like something's going on there, something's uncertain there. And that's supposed to mirror in some ways how Patrice is feeling right now, even though you can't see her.

GP: Yeah. It's interesting too, that Patrice's character seems to be really driven by loss or, like you said, she has a hole in her life; and yet, she is the one who's then creating that hole for the readers, you know, in that part where she's missing. So, like, I find that parallel so cool.

In terms of, one of the other elements in the story, obviously, is this idea; you've already sort of alluded to it, the idea of the occupation, the alien, you know, arrival and takeover, as it were. And, obviously, there's a parallel here between that and then sort of all of the colonization that happened in the Caribbean, throughout history, et cetera. In fact, Jackson is sort of exploring that in his own, you know, research and writing.

So, can you talk a little bit about that parallel because while it's there, it doesn't feel overwhelmingly; like, we're not getting hit over the head with sort of social message. It's very woven into the story. So, can you talk a little bit about doing that? Because I find a lot of times, when writers try to have like that message in the story, it can kind of be a little too overpowering.

CT: Right. People have actually responded in different ways to that, so far. Some people really like that, that I'm not hitting them over the head with the message; but some have felt a little bit, they've resisted a bit the fact that I don't outrightly say what the lesson of the novel is, despite the fact that the novel is called The Lesson.

And it's because I want people to bring their own interpretation to what they think it might be for different characters and for the novel as a whole. But one of the things that I was thinking about when was trying to make this connection between the Ynaa and colonialism, was that I didn't want to tell that story in a way that was clean. I wanted it to be messy.

I didn't want it to feel like I'm saying these things are the same, because I don't think they're the same. I don't think the Ynaa presence in the Virgin Islands is the same as, for example, the Danish slave society that took place in the Virgin Islands before the US acquired the Virgin Islands. So, I didn't want to make those things equivalent.

And so in a lot of ways, I try really hard to make those different eras very distinct, the Ynaa occupation versus the Danish Slave Society. And, it's important to me as a writer to not use-- Science Fiction can sometimes be used as a allegory to talk about society. But it's also important to me to have those speculative elements be their own thing as well.

And that you get more out of those things if they're not just acting as metaphor. The Ynaa have their own identity, have their own existence in the universe, and they have their own motivations for being on the planet. It's not the same as what Denmark was trying to do during slave era Virgin Islands.

GP: It totally makes sense though. I'm like right there with you, this idea-- I mean, it's funny you mentioned the word 'allegory'. You know, that was definitely something that popped into my head. And it's funny, like when I was thinking about, as I was reading, I started thinking of other books that kind of use sort of that speculative element to tell some sort of cautionary tale, right? Like Fahrenheit 451, 1984, Animal Farm.

It didn't feel like Animal Farm in the sense that like when I read Animal Farm way back in the day, you could almost like attach the character and be like, 'oh, the horses are these people, and the pigs are those people, and the human--', you know what I mean?

Like, you could almost translate each element in the fiction to the entity that is being commented on in the society or in whatever the social commentary is. It felt more like, more theoretical than that; more metaphorical than that in the sense that it was making a commentary, but it wasn't like a direct translation of the issue, if that makes sense.

CT: Yes, exactly. I feel like despite the fact that these things are very different and there's a few scenes; you haven't reached them yet, but there's a few scenes that are set during the Danish Slave Society era. But what I was trying to do was talk about how those early traumas relate to present traumas; that even if those things aren't the same, the Ynaa occupation and the Danish Slave Society, the Virgin Islanders have that history in them.

And they're bringing a lot of that response to the Ynaa. There's been a lot of occupations throughout the history of the US Virgin Islands. And so the people of the Virgin Islands are going to bring that experience, that history, that trauma to whatever new experience they had, even if it's a little bit different. But there also are a lot of similarities in the way that the Ynaa are responding to the people.

There's a sort of paternal objectification that the Ynaa imparts on everyone that they meet in the Virgin Islands. There's also this kind of enclosed effect where whatever is happening in this particular part of the world is not being seen or commented on by the rest of the world; it's happening in its own bubble.

And that no matter what is happening on the Islands; no one's actually trying to interject or trying to influence anything. So, that Ynaa have been giving the rest of the world technology. And, they're looking for the benefits of the Ynaa presence, but ignoring all of the harm that the Ynaa are causing.

GP: That's really interesting too, because, I mean, one of the things that has definitely been going through my mind, like I haven't gotten to the part yet where we see sort of the deeper motivations of the Ynaa, but the first thing that came into my mind is like, what the heck is happening in the rest of the world?

Like, usually, when you have, you know, an alien invasion kind of a story, you get a sense of like, okay, we might be following the humans in this particular area, but they're having alien sighting-- You know, like I'm thinking of, what was that Mel Gibson movie, the M. Night Shyamalan, that one.

CT: Signs.

GP: Yeah, that, where we get snippet, like we're in the farm, but we get snippets of what's happening around the world; same thing with the Independence Day, the Will Smith. Like we see that there have been alien ships in all these major landmarks, we just happen to be following this one particular character's experience. But in this, it's almost like you said, we're this enclosed space.

It's almost like a Petri dish. Like, we're sort of stuck and separate apart from the rest of the world. And there's no sense of like, is the rest of the world even invaded? I don't know yet. I haven't gotten there, but it's interesting. It creates a very interesting dynamic for the characters who are in that world.

CT: Right. And, there's two reasons why I wanted to do that. One of the reasons I decided to keep it contained to the US Virgin Islands and it does remain contained there, is because I wanted to center that story. It was important to me to tell the story of that place and not talk about anywhere else, because I feel like we've seen that story before.

We've seen the aliens invade New York, and America going to war with the aliens to protect the earth and all of that. But we haven't seen the aliens invade a very small place and we haven't seen how that small place would respond to that aliens or at least we haven't seen that very often.

GP: Yeah.

CT: Because I wanted to depict that, but I also wanted to say that the rest of the world is used to ignoring small places.

GP: Yeah. That is such a great point. I love it. It's fascinating to me too, like, what I-- I mean, as you were talking, I was thinking; just the fact that it's an island, it's already isolated. It's separated. You know what I mean? Like, in a way, it's easier to sort of not notice because it's apart from all the other stuff that's happening. And so, yeah. I mean, isn't that a commentary on the whole world?

CT: When I left the Virgin Islands when I was 18 and I went to undergrad in Pittsburgh, I had a conversation repeatedly with a bunch of folks. They would ask me where I was from and I would tell them, and I would get this blank expression. They would ask, "So, where is that exactly?" And then I would have to give them some kind of marker.

It's like, it's close to Florida or it's like 15 minutes away from Puerto Rico; hoping that they would at least have heard of Puerto Rico. So, there's this kind of, even among Americans, this kind of absence of knowledge of its territories. The US has several territories throughout the world, and a lot of Americans don't know about it. A lot of Americans have no experience of what it's like to live in those places.

GP: Yeah. So, how does that feeling tie into this book? Because it does feel like that feeling of isolation is one of the things that makes the story, kind of-- I mean, it feels very real. First of all, the setting feels very real to me as I'm experiencing it in the book, but then there's also that element of like, 'these characters are here, isolated, dealing with this Ynaa, you know, that have come and take over'. Can you talk a little bit more about how that plays out in the story?

CT: Right. So, I think I should mention that the Virgin Islands isn't completely isolated. It does have like a really strong tourism industry. People come there all the time. There's some scenes in the book where I mentioned cruise ships and Main Street filled with tourists. And so that people visit but they visit in a very shallow way.

They get out of their cruise ships, they go down Main Street, they shop, they buy jewelry or they buy some souvenirs; and then they go back to their cruise ship. It's not like a intimate relationship with the island or it's people.

GP: Right.

CT: And so you can have like, you know, elaborate dramas happening among the local community that the tourists visiting would have no idea about because they're in transition; they're moving in and going back out. Whereas the people are staying and they have to engage with these problems long-term. It's the same way with the Ynaa.

The Ynaa had been there for five years, and they've had to learn to live with them. This is something that nobody else has had to do. The rest of the world has received the benefits of the Ynaa, but they haven't had to live with them because the Ynaa chose to settle in the US Virgin Islands.

GP: I love what you said also about sort of that transitory connection. I mean, so my family is from Brazil. My parents immigrated before I was born. And it's funny how a lot of times when there is that tourist element to a place, that people use shorthand. You know, like they use like mental shorthand to sort of understand because they don't want to take the time to really understand the culture or what's happening.

And so it's interesting to me sort of that, the stark difference between these transitory tourists who are like, kind of, you know, getting off the cruise ship and then getting back on; versus the Ynaa who are now staying there.

And, you know, we meet this one ambassador lady. And even though she's not quite fitting in, you get the sense that she does try to blend in or make some, not effort, but you get the sense that she's both terrifying, but also trying to connect in some way.

CT: Right. This is a little bit of a spoiler. So, Jackson has a theory. And if you've seen this part yet, that Mera has been there for a while. She's an ambassador, she's the Ynaa ambassador. It's not a huge spoiler, but it's true. She's been there for quite a long time. And the Ynaa are very long-lived. They can live for thousands of years. So, she's seen the Virgin Islands experience all its changes. She's been there since, not the beginning, but pretty early on.

And so, some of the reason why she's trying to connect with the people, is because she's already connected with them in several different capacities over centuries. And, she wants to now connect with them as herself, as the Ynaa. And so, it's one of those things where before the rest of the Ynaa arrived, Mera had the opportunity to really have deep and meaningful relationships with the inhabitants of the Virgin Islands.

But now that the Ynaa are there, now that they know who she is, she's found herself fenced in; and she's not able to actually do much of what she's really wanting to do, which is connect with the people of the Virgin Islands, and also protect them in some ways from her own people.

GP: You know, it's interesting, like you mentioned the Jackson's theory and like, I don't know if I've quite gotten to the big reveal, but I've certainly seen hints of it up until this point. And, sort of, when he's going through history and kind of, you know, we see his research and how he sort of is trying to find this person throughout the history and sort of drawing those connections.

And that, I thought, was also really interesting; sort of the way that past, present, and speculative future are all kind of both blended in this story. Can you talk a little bit about how your-- I mean, you mentioned that we go back in time at one point to colonization and whatnot. Can you talk about blending those timelines and sort of putting all those things together?

CT: Right.

GP: Without spoilers. [laughs]

CT: Okay. I'll try-- I'll try my best.

GP: Do your best. Do your best.

CT: Yeah. So Mera, because she's lived many years with the Virgin Islanders, she's developed a sort of mythology around her. She's used her technology in the past to help slaves, to cure sick people. And

so she's kind of seen as this kind of local medicine woman, and the Caribbean already has a mythology around that; we call it Obeah. And so it's someone that has the ability to use magical arts for good or ill.

One of the ways that I was trying to weave the speculative element and the human element is by tying together those mythologies; so having the Ynaa presence be interpreted in magical ways to inhabitants over a period of time. So, there's quite a few references in that Jackson section to Mera; or if it's Mera, her being an Obeah woman--

GP: Yeah.

CT: -having to heal the sick and use magic. And so it's like taking this Science Fiction element and adding a little bit of fantasy or a fantastic interpretation of it. That's one way I try to weave those things together.

GP: You know, it's interesting too, that like, oftentimes-- I mean, fantasy and Sci-Fi are two very different genres, even though they are often lumped together. But if one looks at science from the perspective of people from a long time ago, like a lot of things today that are, you know, normal to us, like cellphones for example, would look like magic to people in the Middle Ages or something like that.

So like, I can totally see that connection that people back then, probably would have seen some of these things that, you know, her as an Ynaa, what she can do, her abilities; like they would see that as magic, even though it might be more sort of Sci-Fi in the, I'm making air quotes here, in the "reality of the story".

CT: Yeah. Arthur C. Clarke has that concept of advanced technologies seen as magic to people that had not seen something that advanced before. He talks about it in terms of super advanced technology, but you can see it in the same way when, if there's aliens appearing, not in our present day, but in like the 1700s, what would people of that time, how would they respond to the types of technology that they see aliens possessing?

It would seem magical to them. And it was really fun or interesting for me to try to tie that into local culture, that there's already a really good comparison there to magic, Obeah women, being able to use medicine or magic to heal people. You would see local inhabitants tying those two things together. It's like, 'oh, she can heal people? She must be an Obeah woman'.

GP: Totally. At the beginning, when I did my intro for you, I mentioned that you have an MFA. And, you meant mentioned when you were talking about where the idea for this book came in, that you sort of, you had the dream, but then you kind of came back to it in earnest in the MFA.

So, I'm curious, doing an MFA program, like how was it received to be writing speculative fiction? And, I asked this as someone who also was writing 'out of the box' stuff in an MFA program. And so I'm curious to hear sort of how that worked in the program where you went.

CT: Part of the reason I went to the program at NC State was because there was a professor that was writing Science Fiction; and he had been writing Science Fiction for many years and had won awards in that genre. He's very literary and he's old-school, but he's an incredible writer. So, I was attracted to that. And, I was like, 'okay, well, there's at least room for me there to explore that part of myself'.

And so, it was a mix, like oftentimes, people would respond like, 'oh, that's really cool. I like what you're doing there.' Sometimes they would be bewildered if I got really weird; and it depended on the professor, some professors got it more than others.

I think that's just, you know, the nature of the beast; like being in a workshop with a professor that doesn't primarily read or write speculative fiction, they're going to have a different read of the story than someone that does. And oftentimes, I would write stories that was either really weird, or just a little weird; and you could interpret it as speculative or not.

And oftentimes, the literary professors would interpret it as not speculative, and some of the members of my class would interpret it as speculative. And, it would be interesting to listen to them talk about and debate it. So, yeah. And as you're doing a program and you're getting used to different people's reading and writing styles, you tend to accommodate a bit. And so I did accommodate a bit.

Sometimes I wrote things that were more literary than I was inclined to, because it was a way of giving the class something that they could recognize, but also, it was a challenge for me. I think, you know, ultimately, it helped me as a writer of speculative fiction. It made me think about character.

It made me think about going at a problem slant and thinking about it in a way that isn't expected. Some of the literary stories that I read and love, it's because of that playing with genre or playing with expectation. I found that very attractive in that work. So, I tried to bring that into the speculative fiction that I was writing.

GP: You know, it's interesting too, like, so I did an MFA as well; and I was in a program specifically for writing for children. One of the things that I found was when I presented, like, you know, something that would be very clearly YA or Middle Grade to "not writing for children people", that it was kind of like what you were saying with the literary professors or the students who are like more inclined to look at it through a literary lens; it's like, they kind of interpret it through their own genre or their own lens.

And then, like, you show it to people who are in that genre and that sphere; and suddenly, they see it totally differently, which is really fascinating. The other thing that I thought was interesting too. So, you did Clarion after doing-- Was it after your MFA or before your MFA?

CT: It was after.

GP: What was that experience like relative to the MFA? Because Clarion is an incredibly well-respected, really competitive just, for our listeners, Sci-Fi-- Do they do Fantasy also?

CT: It's Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and Horror.

GP: Yeah. So, like, it's a workshop that's like super, super hard to get into; and in a way, almost like a pseudo MFA, but compressed into a summer. So, how did that compare being in a very sort of intensive program like that versus a more sustained two-year MFA program, and also being around people who were doing exactly that same kind of speculative writing versus being sort of like a, you know, 'fish out of water' in a more literary space?

CT: So, I found that, so if we're comparing the MFA and Clarion West, I found that I learned a lot about craft at the MFA. I learned a lot, the mechanics of writing and how to make a story flow and make sense; and to think about structure and plot and character development and theme, all those things were things that I picked up on the MFA side of things. But when I went to Clarion West, I was in a room with people that were weird like me or weirder than me--

[laughter]

CT: -in terms of the things that were writing about. I was reading stuff in that workshop that, you know, just blew me away; that just some beautiful writing, really crafty work, but also immensely speculative like speculative and unashamed. And, it affected my own writing. It made me embrace the weirder parts of myself and explore things that I wasn't exploring in my MFA.

And so a lot of my Short Fiction tends to be depending on the era. So, like my MFA-era Short Fiction tends to be a little bit more literary. And my Clarion West; we wrote a lot of stories, we had to write. It was six weeks and we had to write a story for each week, and we also had to critique 17 other people's stories every week.

GP: Wow.

CT: Yeah, it's really intense. I was sleep-deprived, and of course, I got sick because, you know, it's stressful, but it's also like really exciting.

GP: Yeah.

CT: Doing that, a lot of my Clarion West stories tend to be stranger and more speculative. I find that, now, when I'm writing, I'm trying to merge those two impulses; the embracing of my weird side, but also thinking about all of the mechanics of writing and digging deep into character. So, they both were very influential just in different ways.

GP: I really love what you just said, because I think it's so important, I think, for writers to hear about different educational experiences. I think one of the really valuable things that, you know, listeners can take away from what you were saying is that you can get different things from different experiences or different genres or different spaces in your writing education.

Like, for instance, I know that often I will look to different writers or like friends of mine who write in different genres for different types of feedback. Like, I know that my friends who write thrillers are going to give me really good feedback on things like plot and story; whereas characters that have, you know, like the character development stuff, maybe that's where I might turn to one of my more literary friends, or like world-building definitely go to one of my friends who writes Historical Fiction.

So like, I love what you were saying about how you can kind of get really great learning experiences from two very different places, two different sources of education. So, I think that's really great.

CT: It also really emphasizes the value of different genres. I think sometimes as writers, we get very clickish. We fight with each other in ways that it really doesn't even make sense why we would be having these fights or drawing these lines in the sand. Like, what is literary and what is speculative, or what or who's craftier? Because what you just said when you were talking about talking to your thriller friends, there's certain things that thrillers do really well; and it's craft, you know?

GP: Yeah.

CT: -to understand plotting and to keep people engaged over a book, takes a lot of craft. And, to world-build, to build entirely different worlds, takes a huge amount of craft; and to do it in a way that doesn't make people feel like they're reading an encyclopedia, is an exercising craft. And, nice Speculative Fiction friends, are really good at immersing people into a world without giving them the, 'you know, Bobs', like paragraphs and paragraphs of, 'this is what this world looks like'. They kind of do it as you go.

GP: Yeah.

CT: And, that's craft. And so, oftentimes, I'll have conversations or I'll see people arguing about what genre is valuable, or why those genres are esteemed. It just seems to me that as writers, we should try to break down those walls and have more conversations among each other, because we're all doing the same thing. We're all using stories to try to think about and have conversations with the world.

GP: I wholeheartedly agree, and I find-- I mean, having been in a writing program specifically for children's books, I often, like there's definitely certain categories and genres that the get brow-beaten a bit more than others. [laughs] And so, it's kind of-- I think it's important to recognize the validity of all these different types of writing and that we can learn from every single one. So, I'm really glad that you said that. So, what's next for you? What do you have coming up that you'd like to share with our listeners?

CT: This is actually due pretty soon. I'm working on a novel that I'm hoping to be a trilogy of novels that imagines-- So, the way I pitched it, is the Civil Rights era, but modernized and with monsters story that was in The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy last year. And, it was about a soucouyant, which is like a Caribbean vampire, like creature; removes its skin and then it slips into people's houses, and it sucks their blood.

And so I wrote that story and ever since I wrote it, I've wanted to return to that world. And so I started to develop that world out and there's a whole bunch of different monsters from Caribbean folklore, but also from popular fiction. I'm looking at it in the same kind of way that I was looking at The Lesson. So, like, with The Lesson, it was a threat from outside. Now, I'm looking at the world from the perspective of a threat from inside.

There's all of these monsters that exist. They're now coming out of the shadows, and they're advocating for their rights. There's all kinds of different relationships between these monsters, depending on class and gender and race and orientation.

And so exploring the complexity of monstrosity, but also at it from an activist angle; like how do people that have differences as intense as being a monster, how do they interact with the world and how do they try to find peace with the rest of the world? And so that's what I'm working on now. Hopefully, it's going to be a series, but I'm not sure yet.

GP: Wow. As you were saying, all of that-- First of all, I have to read that. I can't wait for it to be out so I can read it. But also, part of me, was like, 'oh my gosh, can I like live in your brain for like, just like a few minutes?'

[laughter]

GP: Like, it's got to be like the most fascinating place to be, because monsters and activism and all, and then it totally ties to what you're grappling with in The Lesson, but in a completely different new way too. So, oh my gosh, I love it.

CT: Thank you. I appreciate that.

GP: I always end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

CT: So, I think the thing that has helped me the most, and this is just getting words on the page help, is when I was younger, I would give myself like these really high word count goals for the day. I would

give myself like, 'oh, I'm going to write 2000 words today, and I'll do that every day; and then within three months, I'll have a novel': it never worked for me. It took me a long time to realize why, and this might not work for other people.

But I think that a useful tip is to set yourself a really small goal that you can achieve that is consistent. You'll know you'll show up and you'll do it. You know that it's very hard to cheat down, you'll always cheat up; and that will help you over the course of a year or two, write something that's much longer. It'll take a little longer, but that consistency is going to give you the ability to keep going and to build your confidence every day, when you come to the page.

GP: That is such fantastic advice. And, it's definitely advice that I need to hear because I did the same thing. I used to put these like 'pie in the sky' goals in front of me. And then, of course, I'd inevitably fail gloriously; and it would be horrible, and then I'd stop. So, I think that is just such, such great advice.

I love that idea of cheating upwards, as opposed to cheating down. Like, if you break the word count, it's better to like surpass it than to not make it. So, that is awesome. I love it. Thank you for that. And, thank you for being on the show today.

CT: Thank you. This was a lot of fun.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.