

[Season 2 Episode 8]

Stories in the Water: Conversation with Erin Shields, Part Two

Erin Shields: And, and, and, but, but, then again, we're beautiful, fragile, gentle, caring, weird little creatures who are, you know, trying to be good and trying to do good and trying to care for one another.

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W Y R D, The Wyrd House radio I'm Lisa Dickson, and this is Wyrd Words, conversations about literature and learning in higher education.

Welcome to part two of our conversation with the award-winning playwright actor, educator, Erin Shields. In this episode, Erin talks with my co-host Jessica Riddell and me about building paradise in the Canadian landscape, who her literary travel companions are, and where hope may be found.

Jessica Riddell: When you were working with your actors at the world premiere of The Stratford Festival, you sat with that text and you were willing to be broken open alongside your director and your actors and the way in which you co-design that space in collaborative ways.

Erin Shields: Yeah. Yeah. It's a very, very similar thing. And I think too, you know, listening to you teach, you're not leaving your mastery aside. In fact, you are talking with as large and huge vocabulary of ideas and thoughts as you do, and challenging your students to also participate in that way. And that's sort of what I'm endeavoring to do with my work, as well, is to invite an audience in and say, "Hey, I know *Paradise Lost* seems like a big, scary thing you had to read in grade 11, but there's going to be funny bits. You're going to understand it. And also, it's going to be challenging, but you're going to get it. You're going to get it. Come play, you know, be here. Let's be together and let's go on this journey together."

Jessica Riddell: Yeah, and it's an invitation, right? It's an invitation to transform over the time that we spend together, whether that's a class or a performance. And I remember this so vividly as an undergraduate. I would leave a classroom transformed. I would have the fireworks going off in my brain and think I am different than when I stepped into this classroom. I feel the same way with theater. I feel the same way leaving, you know, a performance and thinking, you know, I'm going to tear up thinking about, you know, the *Othello* that we saw a year and a half ago in Stratford. And the ways in which we're shaken and transformed in those spaces is magical. I think that's why the classroom and the theater for us map on so beautifully together because they do some of that same work. And I think one of the challenges the Academy is facing right now in designing for a post-COVID world is our relevance, is to be able to make a case for engagement with people and meeting people where they are, rather than speaking in scholarly speak and making ourselves, you know, impervious and impenetrable. And I think that I take a page out of the theater's playbook on breaking down those walls between the Academy and our communities and opening up and making transparent those spaces that we can transform together.

And, you know, it was really interesting. We brought Amelia Sargisson in to talk to us after we had a chance to workshop *Paradise Lost* with you, because we were interested in her role

as an actor. She's also a director and a writer and a magical art maker, but she was your Eve in Stratford and she reprised her role at the Centaur Theatre in January of 2020, and when she started to talk, she was like, "Well, you all know this in the Academy, and you're scholars and you're experts here." And she was giving us authority that I really wanted to challenge. I really wanted to sort of, like, deconstruct and say, "No, in fact, you have Eve"--she was talking about having, even inside her, just as you were talking about having Shakespeare and Milton embodied in you--she was talking about her relationship to Eve and her journey of discovery. She actually told us a story about her going to find paradise and to find paradise for herself, so she could understand in that critical empathy role of Eve and Eve's journey. And so you know, instead of going to Northern Ontario or the Laurentians where there's maple syrup and landscapes which show up in *Paradise Lost*, she went to Costa Rica to find paradise and had to do some of that journey of figuring out what her ideal place is.

And I wonder if maybe you could talk to us about your paradise, understanding that Satan talks about "you can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven." You can make a paradise anywhere. Can you talk about maybe what you imagine as a paradise, and if you take paradise with you?

Erin Shields: I mean, this country is paradise. We have all of this beautiful, stolen space that we live on. And so, I guess, first of all, just when I think about the paradise and *Paradise Lost*, I think about this space that has not been destroyed by humans, and we're so fortunate in this country to have still so much of this space that is not destroyed by humans or really marked by humans. We also have the rights and privileges afforded to us by living in this developed democracy of a country with a pretty good healthcare system. Yes. We absolutely have problems that we need to deal with, specifically with our colonial past more than anything else.

But this is it, you know? And in some ways,

I was taking a page out of Milton's book in that his garden is very much an English garden. And so, adapting paradise to our paradise really made sense. And it really, I hope, provoked the question to the audience: What are we doing with our paradise? And are we kicking ourselves out of our paradise by doing all the things we're doing, like being addicted to plastics or selling our natural resources to big companies in the States who do stuff with them and then sell it back to us? What are we doing? Let's think about this.

It also made me think of being up North in Ontario at one point, I was hiking and I met this American and he was like, "Oh my God, this is the most beautiful place I've ever been. Honestly, my wife and I, we come here every year. I think it's the most gorgeous place on earth." And I said, "Oh really? Where are you from?" And he was like, "Oh, we're from Hawaii."

Just back to what you said about the relevance, like, it's relative, how it's all relative, you know, and I sort of looked around with fresh eyes and I was like, "Oh yeah, these trees are pretty incredible."

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, it's interesting. You know, because I'm just now working through an interview with a poet and a scholar named Sarah deLeeuw, and she works in the Northern Medical Program and working on health inequities, particularly in rural and remote geographies, and one of the things that she talks about is the way that there's a narrative of the

landscape of Canada as a kind of a wasteland. It really does come down to how our imaginary is mapped out in the material, lived experiences, right? The way we envision who we are and where we are is a kind of act of change. I'm thinking back to what you're saying about dealing with wicked problems and what theater can do and what stories can do.

I want to ask you--I guess this is a little bit of a redundant question, given what we've already been talking about, but I wanted to ask you about literary fellow travelers. We started out our season by looking at who we have on our team in terms of storytellers or a text to, you know, give us a Zen boot to the head, or remind us that the sun will come out tomorrow, or to give us ways of thinking about where we are and where we're going. And you clearly have some very important texts that are helping you work through and think through these things. But is there someone in your dugout or on your team that you've found yourself kind of leaning on in the last year?

Erin Shields: Absolutely. One thing I did pretty early on in the pandemic is I went back to the novel that got me interested in reading before I was 16. I didn't--I hated reading. I was a slow reader. I learned to read slowly and I was in the "bad reading group". And I, you know, it was always such a chore. And then when I was 16, my friend gave me the book *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and I was like, "Oh my God, you can write like this?"

And I'd been scared to go back to it because I was scared that it was, that I wasn't going to find it as, maybe earth shattering as I had the first time around. But Tony Morrison does not disappoint. It was, it's probably arguably the greatest novel that's ever been written, I think. And what's extraordinary about it is that she invites you into the belly of the world and of the characters and of the story that she's telling through heightened text or a poetic text that is at once sort of disorienting because it's not quite naturalistic and it seems sort of foreign in some ways, but in other ways you can understand it with your body in some way.

So, yeah, that, and then I also, on the recommendation of a friend of mine, read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* for the first time, and I had a very similar feeling with that book in the sense that you feel sort of suspended in that text because the story sort of morphs and shifts and moves you along through the lives of these six characters, and you're constantly sort of shifting perspective and, all of a sudden you're in a dance hall or all of a sudden you're in a garden, and you're also very much in proximity to nature in a way that seems both unfamiliar, if you live in a city as I do, but also like, oh yes, of course, the flowers, the grass, the water, the waves. So yeah, those are two books that I've returned to quite frequently.

Lisa Dickson: That's wonderful. I think we need to do a Wyrd Words book club and bring together all of these interesting people to talk about their favorite books. I think that would be amazing because I love *Beloved* as well. That was one of those books that, and Virginia Woolf, two people that kind of changed the way that I thought about what language could do. So, I feel those recommendations very deeply. That's wonderful.

We're almost at the end of our time, so I'm going to turn it to Jessica to ask our ultimate question for today.

Jessica Riddell: Thank you. And, you know, maybe I'll use Toni Morrison as a way into this question. Toni Morrison is also one of my guides and fellow literary travelers, and she was a really important guide for me when I had small children and babies and no time. She has this famous quote that when somebody said "How did you do it? How did you write?" she said, "I

wrote on the edges of my day." I just recently stumbled upon an essay responding to Toni Morrison from an author, and she has this beautiful quotation. She wrote a letter to Toni Morrison and she said, "I stood at the border, stood at the edge and claimed it as central. You said your voice weighted with intent, claimed it as central and let the rest of the world move over to where I was." And that put me on the floor, that took me and transported me to an edge, and not an edge of anxiety or fear but an edge that we could peek over and wonder at the unknown, and I do feel we are at an edge, that we're peeking over into an unknown world as we design for what a post-COVID society, a post-COVID theater, a post-COVID classroom looks like. And so, my question is: if you're peeking over the edge, if you're bringing the center to your edge, to your margin, and you're peeking over, what gives you hope? What do you see? And is it hopeful?

Erin Shields: You know, I thought about this question a lot. I sort of tend towards skepticism rather than optimism which fuels my writing and my work. And it can also be hard and a dark place to be. I think there's a lot of people that talk a lot of shit right now. I think social media is turning us into vain, self-centered, instant-gratification tools of evil corporations. I think we're willfully killing our world, but we'd rather keep buying junk wrapped in plastic than do anything about it. And, and, and, but, but, then again, we're beautiful, fragile, gentle, caring, weird little creatures who are, you know, trying to be good and trying to do good and trying to care for one another.

And that makes me hopeful.

Jessica Riddell: Well, and at the end of your play with *Paradise Lost* where Satan is looking at these humans and looking at what they've thrown away and what they're both capable of and what the reality is, and the difference between those, and she, Lucy Peacock as Satan, says, "and yet you have a fist full of seeds." When we did a play reading over teams with students, cold-reading that play, we all cried because there's that moment of "you've got that fistful of seeds." It's inherently hopeful, even as we are flawed and fallen and imperfect, we still...

Erin Shields: Stupid.

Jessica Riddell: And stupid, and so destructive, and yet capable of such a beautiful and hopeful transformation.

But those seeds as a metaphor that you end the play and you know, when you see it in person, when we were at the Centaur, nobody spoke for five minutes, just sitting there thinking about those seeds and the difference between what we're capable of and what we're doing--in that gap is that hopeful, critical love that we have to, maybe, close that gap a little bit and be a little better than our current selves.

Erin Shields: Yup. Yup. And I think we are. I think people are trying and working hard and trying to make this moment a moment of significant change. And I think people are really, really trying to, in whatever capacity, to find ways to take this as a moment of opportunity to re-examine the systems and the structures around us and to go, "Okay, let's... we have to stop. So, let's reorganize the space a little bit. Let's get some new furniture in here. Let's open the window. Like, let's change. Let's change." So, yeah, that, and that's happening in the theater landscape, as well as many other facets of society. And yeah, that makes me very hopeful.

Lisa Dickson: That is a great place for us to end, I think, we'll end on the idea that we're trying. We're trying, you know, which I think, is pretty important actually in the grand scheme of all of these tensions and all of these things we're trying to hold in our hands at the same time, which is not easy and often can cut us, you know? But we're trying.

I want to thank you, Erin, for sharing your time and your thoughts and your work with us. It's been lovely to talk to you. We're very much looking forward to seeing what develops out of the projects that you're working on now. So, stay tuned. And as I said, we'll put some links in our show notes, so people can follow you and see what you're up to.

And I want to thank Jessica as well for coming co-hosting and being your usual wyrd and wonderful self. So, thank you.

Jessica Riddell: Thank you. What a treat and what just a beautiful space to have conversations and to dream about, you know, that golden world for 45 minutes, and to imagine Sydney's just two steps to the right, right? What can we do? And what can we imagine together? And it has to be a communal experience.

Erin, you've brought hope into our, my classroom with Milton and wicked problems, and created those generative and creative spaces for us to find ourselves in strange and unfamiliar places, but to find our way into new spaces that are future-facing.

So, thank you so much for all of the work that you do.

Erin Shields: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's been lovely to talk to you both as well, have a moment of conversation.

Lisa Dickson: Wyrd Words is made possible by the generous support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our Wyrd apprentice and technical producer is Cecilia Alain. Our intro and outro music is "Memorized" by Josh Woodward and this piece and the other incidental music in the episode are used under the creative commons license at freemusicarchive.org. The details can be found in the show notes.