

[Season 2 Episode 1]

## **Going Hand in Hand Out of Paradise, Part 1** With Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell

**Jessica Riddell:** And so Milton and Michelle Obama, 400 years apart, are speaking to our experience across this historical void, because grief and resilience seem like unlikely bedfellows at first blush.

**Shannon Murray:** "With wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way," but they're hand in hand.

**Lisa Dickson:** You're listening to W.Y.R.D. radio free Elsinore. I'm Lisa Dickson and this is Wyrd Words, a conversation about literature and learning in higher education.

In this first part of "Going Hand in Hand Out of Paradise," my two-part conversation with Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell, we talk about who we have in our literary dugouts, our literary backup and mentors who've helped us to navigate the wicked problems of the past year of emergency pandemic teaching, and the ways that this global common experience is complicated by the simultaneously very particular nature of that experience.

Before we embark on that conversation, a little bit of news. The Wyrd Words podcast began in the wild summer of 2020 as a way to generate interesting conversations for our students and colleagues, who like us, were setting off into the largely unknown territory of online pandemic teaching and learning. Since then, we've produced episodes featuring theater practitioners, students and educators who shared their experience and insights into the craft of writing, performing, and creative learning. Now, as we move into what I'm going to call our second season, we have a permanent home. Shannon, Jessica and I are happy to announce the launch of our website, [thewyrdhouse.com](http://thewyrdhouse.com), where you can find all the Wyrd Words podcast episodes, the Wyrd Words blogs, and links to talks, workshops, and resources for educators and learners.

The Wyrd Words podcast will also be available on the usual podcatchers like iTunes and Spotify, so we'd love it if you were to subscribe. We hope you'll visit the website, let us know what you think, and maybe even get involved in ongoing projects! We are grateful for the generous support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation, and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence.

So, that's [thewyrdhouse.com](http://thewyrdhouse.com), "wyrd," W.Y.R.D. of course, for all things wyrd.

My guests today are my two wonderful collaborators. Shannon Murray, full professor of English at the University of Prince Edward Island, is a 3M National Teaching Fellow and former coordinator of the National Teaching Fellowship. Also a 3M National Teaching Fellow, Jessica Riddell is a full professor of English at Bishop's University, where she holds the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. She's also executive director of the Maple League of Universities. So hello, Wyrdos! Welcome!

**Jessica Riddell:** Hello! Thank you!

**Shannon Murray:** Hi!

**Lisa Dickson:** Hi! Yay! So, you were guests on the very first Wyrd Words podcast, way back in what seems like the dark ages, the deep past, when we started to launch our ways into emergency pandemic teaching. So now to end orderly where we begun at the end of 2020, you're back again, on the other side of what, for me, it was at least once the longest semester of my entire career. I don't know, you probably felt similar.

So in that very first episode, we asked the question "why Hamlet?" and "why now?" and we talked about the ways that that 400 year-old play could speak to us about our current circumstances, and we talked about how that play gives us a kind of vocabulary or conceptual repertoire to deal with all of the complexities of lockdown and shifting information and policy and dealing with uncertainty and resisting what Jessica has called the tendency toward toxic positivity, and the difficulties of grappling with reading a world that seems to be increasingly out of joint.

So now we're almost a year into that pandemic space. There's some light at the end of the tunnel, right? We've got that dream of the vaccine sort of on the horizon for us, but a lot of those issues persist and have not gone away. So today I'd like to take a moment to look back and maybe cast our gaze forward a little bit into the coming months and ask ourselves how the literature we're teaching contributes to our navigation of that sense of out of jointness that we've been dealing with.

But before we do that, I want to just start by asking you, how are you? How are you now, in December of 2020. Shannon, how are you?

**Shannon Murray:** All right. I'm fine! Right now. If you'd asked me two hours ago, my answer would have been different. If you'd asked me first thing this morning, it would have been different. It's... One of the most extraordinary things for me about this term, in particular, in this year in general, the, the, the term people use is the "COVID-coaster" and I'm feeling it and it's not... it's still scary. It's still up and down. I mean, there are moments of incredible joy and excitement and hope, and then I can be plunged down into despair right afterwards. So right now you've got me at a good moment!

**Lisa Dickson:** Excellent.

**Shannon Murray:** So I'm fine! How are you, Jessica?

**Jessica Riddell:** I love that idea of a COVID-coaster because I think it captures some of the tumultuous ways in which our day can look very differently, depending on what time and what context we are in. And, you know, I think for the most part, to answer the question "how are you" is, especially in December as the days get shorter and the temperatures get colder and the landscape gets darker, I'm starting to get quiet. I'm starting to get quiet and starting to wrap up the term, some projects, some year-end reports, even trying to wrap some presents if I can get my act together, And I'm trying to wind down because I know that the runway is very short into Winter 2021.

You know, when we connected in the summer, the runway was long, right? We had a relatively long amount of time to stretch out, to imagine, to get nervous, to, to grapple with our discomfort before the term began in earnest. And I feel like right now it's more essential

than ever to get quiet, to do that reflection that Lisa pointed out, to look backwards in order to look forwards.

And so I'm trying to wind up and wind down, but also create that space to get quiet and to do some of that critical reflection, before the festivities begin, but also the excitement and the terror of a new year dawns.

**Shannon Murray:** So I think it's appropriate that we're having this conversation at the winter solstice, right? That's the shortest day of the year. And it's also where we mark the coming of the light, right? The, the days are going to get longer from this point on. One of the things that struck me today, when I was thinking back, was how, I liked your idea of the short runway, it's just how, I don't know, how hard March, April, and May felt. And we now know that December, January, and February are going to be harder.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yes.

**Shannon Murray:** But we also know that we made it through March, April and May. So, I feel weirdly comfortable going into what's going to be a really hard winter because I know we survived something really hard already. It's like that was the rehearsal, and this is the real play that we have coming up. And we can do it!

**Lisa Dickson:** Hmm. Yeah. Yeah. And we're, we're sort of moving in with some new ideas and some experiences and some "this: not to do!" I've had a few of those moments and I understand what you're saying, Jessica, about trying to have a moment to reflect and to create a little bit of space to go back, and think not just about, you know, best practices and what worked in a space and what didn't, but also how our energy unfolded, how our students' energy was parsed out, and ran out in a lot of cases.

To come back to the theme for today's conversation, we're not just taking the last nine months of experience into that space with us. We're all Renaissance scholars, and, so we have a lot of allies and a lot of fellow travelers who've been through a lot of the similar kinds of things, which I think is really fascinating. We talked at the start of the semester about *Hamlet*, we're all teaching *Paradise Lost*, so we have some tools, I think, that we can take away with us or take with us into that new space.

So, can I just ask you both in general, what texts or readings or authors have been on your mind this semester, or even projecting into the next semester. Jessica, do you want to start us?

**Jessica Riddell:** Sure. I think it depends on, you know, from March to December, where my go-to guides have been. And they change depending on the context, the COVID-coaster, but I have been really playing with and revisiting *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming*, and odd bits and bobs along the way, as I've been trying to find a pathway forward, that as you, you mentioned before, trying to avoid that toxic positivity, and move into spaces of critical hope. So we're at the moment where we feel uncomfortable when somebody is erasing our transformation, where do we find spaces of candid and contested awareness of transformation, and the difficulty. So those guys, whether that's Milton or Shakespeare or Michelle Obama, giving us those spaces for the messiness of transformation, have been my most influential and well-worn mentors.

**Lisa Dickson:** Excellent. We're very lucky to have this very deep roster of people to call on, right? It's like, if you've got Milton and Shakespeare and Michelle Obama in your dugout, you're on your way to having a good team there to back you up. What about you, Shannon? Who has been on your mind?

**Shannon Murray:** Well, certainly Milton. I taught a full course in Milton this term, so *Paradise Lost*, from, from beginning to end. I also taught a survey of early literature, and what struck me was that, there are all kinds of works on there that I dearly love and I expect to respond to them, but what I didn't expect was a couple of them that I put on there because they're just really good things for my students to read, resounding with my students in ways that, that I just hadn't anticipated. So, especially Margery Kemp's autobiography, so that, that wonderful autobiography of the creature, as she calls herself, from the middle ages, and Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, the interesting narrative, narrative of an enslaved person in the 18th century.

And I put these on, I think they're fascinating, but I have never had my students respond to them, respond to the suffering in those narratives, in quite this way before. And I think that's just because of the experience of the pandemic. They're thinking differently. And in some cases they're thinking differently because they're looking at the Black Lives Matter movement as well, and they're getting outside themselves and they're paying more attention to news than my students normally do. So those were two that, I really found, resonated with me because they resonated with my students.

**Lisa Dickson:** Hmm. Can you expand on that just a little bit, what was unexpected in their responses?

**Shannon Murray:** Radical empathy, honestly. I mean, an absolute empathy. And I always find Margery Kemp a little bit of a hard sell with my, you know, very secular and clever 18-year-olds, because they see someone who has a variety of religious spiritual experiences, and they don't get that, they code that immediately as a mental illness of one kind or another. They did not do that this term! They saw her struggles as an attempt to assert herself, and they saw her suffering and misery and difficulties and all of those things, I think, in ways that the pandemic gave them. And it's the same with, we do Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and then Equiano's autobiography, one right after the other, and my students knew more about the Atlantic slave trade, transatlantic slave trade, this year than they normally do. And that's just because of the moment we're living in.

**Lisa Dickson:** Hmm. Yeah. There's something about that shared experience that we're engaged in. This is the first truly global experience that kind of puts us in that larger context in an interesting way. And I love that idea of, of empathy finding a point of connection with these people who otherwise seem so far removed from us in a lot of ways. And I found that too. I taught that little bit of Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, which is Edmund Spenser's epic tale of the virtues and how we become virtuous in the world, and we talked about that in the context of learning the Redcrosse Knight, who starts out with, you know, his armor on, but he doesn't really know how to use it, and found some really interesting points of, of empathy. And of course, *Paradise Lost*, but I find that really interesting, that point of connection that comes out of this global experience.

And that kind of brings me to my first question that I wanted to raise with you, which I'm going to contextualize a little bit, just with my own experience, because this was really on my mind. And when I'm thinking about, you know, people who I have in my dugout, people on my team, Shannon, you came to mind a lot while I was thinking through this because of the talk that I saw you give a few years ago, which I'm going to come to. So my experience this semester has been largely defined by my father, who's currently dying from a degenerative disease. And so in the fall I decamped from home and packed up my entire office into my suitcase and headed off to Ontario to help to care for him, while I was teaching my courses.

So I had this very interesting experience where I was, you know, during the day I would be dealing with the mortality of gods upstairs, and then I go downstairs into my little borrowed office space and work on lectures about *Hamlet*, which is a play that is, really at its center, about the deaths of fathers. And I found myself coming back and, again and again, to that tense exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude and Claudius right at the beginning of the play in Act One, Scene Two, where Claudius, who I would... I just want to say upfront, I would never take advice from him normally, like he's not, he's not in my dugout generally, but there is a moment when they're sort of trying to figure out why Hamlet is still sad about his father dying, a whole month later, and Claudius says to him, "your father lost a father, and that father lost, lost his." And that line has been kind of rolling around inside my mind for months now because it connects my time to this past time, but also to, you know, one of those experiences that... I resist calling things universal because our circumstances are so different, but, you know, parents dying, other than being born, that's really the thing that we all share.

So on the one hand, I found that very comforting to be part of this, this commonality, but at the same time, I can hear Gertrude coming in and saying, as she does to Hamlet, "why seems it so particular with thee," and sort of trying to hold both of those things in my mind at the same time, that this is a universal experience that in some way seems so unique. And I'm thinking about that in the context of the pandemic experience and the rising up and the visibility of all of these groups and Black Lives Matter and #metoo, all of these things roll together and that's been something that I've been struggling with and thinking about a lot.

And a few years ago, Shannon, you actually gave a talk about that exact moment about the particular and the common. And so I wanted to start with you, and to ask you if you could talk a little bit about the particular and the common and how we connect those things and how the literature can maybe help us to do that.

**Shannon Murray:** Yeah. Because you know, very modestly, I think that's the core of what it means to be human! Connecting those two things, the common and the particular. And you, you, you said you were uncomfortable about talking about the universal, and I really understand that, though there are things that are going to be common to most of us: illness, for example, pain, loss, disappointment, as well as joy, happiness, maybe love, all of that kind of stuff, is what unites us. But as, you know, Gertrude and Hamlet cleverly point out, it is both universal and it is particular to us. So yeah, your experience with your father really moves me because that's exactly the point that Hamlet is trying to make, and Shakespeare makes repeatedly through the whole play, that we can recognize the commonness of our experience, and that's important, but it's not all that's important because it's also the particular experience.

So the other example that I use... Because that early example is so much fun because Gertrude is just being a jerk, right? And Claudius is also being a jerk, and yet they're right at the same

time. So Shakespeare is able to do that really frustrating thing where he gets people you don't want to like, saying the right thing. But later on, in that really famous gravedigger scene, Hamlet does the same kind of thing again. He sees the gravedigger bringing up bones and skulls one after the other, and he makes jokes about them and he says, "this is the way we're all going to end up," and "isn't this interesting," and Horatio is giving him very sensible advice about, you know, not thinking about it too much. And it's only when he sees the skull of someone he knows, it's Yorick's skull, that the common becomes the particular. So what he's, what he's been essentially saying is, "yeah, we're all gonna die. We're all gonna die. We're all gonna die. We're all gonna die... wow, this is a dead person I know." And it's a shock to him, and it's gotta be a shock to the audience, it's gotta be a shock to Horatio, because yeah, people die every day, right? That's what people do. But we can recognize the commonness about the universality of that.

And when it happens to us, somehow it's completely different. So you're going through this with your dad. And I did with my sister. And I have all kinds of friends who've lost siblings before. Why did it never strike me before as so incredibly destroying? Because I saw it as a common thing that happens to people. People get cancer, people die all the time. But when it was particular with me, then yeah, I found myself thinking about Hamlet as well, then, then it was real.

So what I think Shakespeare gives us, in *Hamlet* especially, is that balance, as you say, of both at the same time. And to be really human, I think we have to start with the common, "yep, everybody gets sick, everybody dies," as well as, you know, lots of good things happen too, but that's the common, and then recognize what happens when it's particular with us. But then we have to go to that next step again, which is to say, "okay, well, I felt like that," then go back out to the common again. That's how everyone's feeling, particularly, right? There's the common in the particular and the particular in the common again.

So, I mean, it's so tempting to do this with *Hamlet*, isn't it? *Hamlet* is about X, *Hamlet* is about X, Y, Z, and A, B and C, but one of the things *Hamlet* is about, is about balancing that common with the particular. So you said it's about the death of fathers. It's really interesting, the point at which Hamlet switches from saying "my father's dead, this is really bad. I have to avenge my father" to "I just killed someone's father." And I see the mirror of my experience in his mind. So he switches that around and recognizes that his particular experience, which he was completely obsessed with, is the experience someone else is having to. It's a good moment for Hamlet.

**Lisa Dickson:** Mm. Yeah. Yes. And the thing that happens in between those two things is the Player, and the story about the death of Priam and Hecuba, right? "What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba that he should weep for her?" So it's like art fits into that space and enables or facilitates that transfer into that empathetic space, in that way, just as your students were able to connect with, with an 18th century slave, or with a medieval young woman who's going through a spiritual conversion. It's what Sidney tells us about how we take those giant ideas and give them, as Hamlet says, "a local habitation and a name," that's the bridge that literature enables in some way, right? It's to manage that flow of energy that enables a kind of empathetic connection, which I think is really interesting. Jessica, what do you think about this idea of sort of balancing these opposites or the particular and the general in literature?

**Jessica Riddell:** Well, I love this notion that Shannon takes us through, moving from the common to the particular and the deep discomfort, from moving from the common to the particular, and what that means when we have to hold in our understanding that people die every day and that's what they do, but. And I think that I've been looking at the final lines of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and this is about a story of taking the particular into the common, right? Going back to the first parents, Adam and Eve, they haven't died yet. Nobody has died yet. Once they leave the garden, death... death arrives, and they are grappling with this notion of death and the unknown, and of despair and hope commingled, and we are on that journey with them in a very particularly intimate way that literature gives us, those kinds of insights. They are the common, they are the first parents, they are the first man and woman, and yet we have this intimate experience with them as they go through that.

And so those final five lines as they're standing and leaving the garden and going into a world that is unknown and going into a world that has death, even though they don't know what death is yet, there's that beautiful moment where... and I cry every time I teach it and it moves me now even more in this moment than it has even in the past. Milton writes, "some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; the world was all before them, where to choose their place of rest, and Providence their guide: they hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way." And there's this moment, and I mentioned Michelle Obama a little bit earlier, but she wrote that grief and resilience live together.

And so Milton and Michelle Obama, 400 years apart, are speaking to our experience across this historical void, because grief and resilience seem like unlikely bedfellows at first blush. But the pairings seems to capture the centrality of our discomfort right now that we're experiencing in the midst of this global pandemic, where of course we have both common experiences, we're all in the midst of this massive disruption, we're all in the same storm, but we're in different boats. We have very particular contexts. We have different layers of privilege and luxury and heartache of, you know, the horror and the heartbreak on one side, but also these moments of, of beauty or surprise on the other.

And I think that that is, going back to what Shannon said a little earlier, what makes us fundamentally human, is understanding that we can hold these together. That they're not mutually exclusive. They're in fact inextricable. And so that the strange bedfellows in this time of COVID, for me, are places where I have to go back to the literature to find ways to navigate, because it gives a kind of shape or an aesthetic representation to something that would otherwise feel chaotic and unmanageable.

**Shannon Murray:** Can I jump in? Because I love that, Jessica, and those last four or five lines, I have the same difficulty and when I read them in my class it was our last day, thank heavens for Zoom because I get to step out of the frame, cry my way through the last, the last few lines... And it's wonderful what Milton does there, because it's exactly what you say, it's that combination of misery and hope or sorrow and, and, and the potential for joy at the same time. He also manages to say essentially that they're alone and together, which is, I think, the other thing that's really struck me in the literature we've been working with, well, I've been working with this term, and in what I've been thinking about, what I miss in the pandemic experience, generally in the pandemic experience of teaching in particular, "with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way," but they're hand in hand. They're solitary and they're hand in hand, and... so that's something that I think I find myself coming back to: we kind of find more ways to connect even when we're only able to connect in this

way, right? The three of us on Zoom or talking to students on the phone or something like that. Because yeah, we're going to get through this, but together, not alone.

**Lisa Dickson:** This brings us to the end of part one of "Going Hand in Hand Out of Paradise," my conversation with Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell. I hope you join us for part two in which we explore what exactly it means to go hand in hand into the world and how we use storytelling to shape and negotiate the discomforts of change and transformation.

I want to thank everybody who's listening, out there in the podosphere, and to remind you to visit our website, [thewyrdhouse.com](http://thewyrdhouse.com), we're very excited about that! And we will have Wyrd Words with you again soon.

Wyrd Words is made possible by the generous support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Steven A. Jarislowsky Chair of Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our technical producer and wyrd apprentice is Cecilia Alain. Our theme song "Doubt" is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings. Incidental music is from [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org). You can find all of our podcast episodes, the Wyrd Words blog, and more on our website at [www.thewyrdhouse.com](http://www.thewyrdhouse.com).