



Tales from The Leeds Library

season 2

S2E1: Susan Watkins – Professor in the School of Cultural Studies and Humanities and Director of the Centre for Culture and the Arts at Leeds Beckett University

Transcript

00:00:14 Molly

Hello and welcome to tales from the Leeds Library. The Leeds Library's Podcast series in which we talk to members of our extended community about their lives, their work and their relationship to books, libraries and literature. Founded in 1768, the Leeds Library is the oldest surviving subscription libraries in the UK and throughout this series we will also be diving periodically into the library's rich history to find out what makes us and our members one of the most interesting and unique cultural institutions in Leeds and the UK.

00:00:51 Molly

I'm Molly Magrath, the projects assistant of the Leeds Library and today our guest is Professor Susan Watkins. Susan is a professor in the School of Cultural Studies and Humanities and director of the Centre for Culture and the Arts at Leeds Beckett University. She's an expert on contemporary women's fiction and feminist theory, and her research interests are in Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, contemporary women's dystopian and apocalyptic fiction and ageing and gender within the creative industries. She has published widely within these fields and her latest book, *Contemporary Women Post-apocalyptic fiction* published in 2010 by Palgrave Macmillan, UK, explores women's post-apocalyptic fiction and its surrounding themes.

00:01:31 Molly

Firstly, hello welcome, thank you so much for being on The Leeds Library podcast.

00:01:36 Susan

You're welcome.

00:01:37 Molly

Pleasure to have you. My first question is before I started researching his podcast, I hadn't realised that there were so many apocalypse adjacent terms out there, and I suppose the primary distinction I wanted to ask you about was between dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, but then even within dystopia there are different categories. And then there are things like speculative fiction and utopian fiction and sci-fi and a new one which I learned recently, which is 'cli-fi' to do with climate change. Can you talk about the differences between these genres?

00:02:15 Susan

Sure, yeah. I mean, I think the first thing to say really is that I'm not sure that there are any hard and fast distinctions and I think really this is partly because, as Jacques Derrida said, the laws of genre are always flexible.

00:02:32 So, his essay the law of genre is about how if you set up these rules then nothing fits perfectly. So, if you pick any one text it will always kind of break rules slightly or exceed them and also, I think there are commercial considerations around genre. It makes it much easier to publish and market books to kind of package them up in these supposedly tidy ways.

00:02:59 Increasingly, currently I think if you look around book shops then you can see the way that different kinds of writing are presented in certain way. So, so I think actually genre is to some extent a flexible concept, which doesn't mean that it doesn't have any meaning or doesn't have any power. But I suppose it just means that we need to be a bit aware of it as a category that, like many categories doesn't actually ever really completely work.

00:03:35 So having said that, I think that the thing about post-apocalyptic fiction is that there has to have been some kind of disaster that's caused the end of the world as we know it. You know, so uhm, that disaster might consist of many different things, you know, an asteroid hitting the planet or climate change, or a pandemic. So there's various different things, and usually in a post-apocalyptic novel that event is within the living memory, I suppose, of the remnants of humanity that have survived it, although increasingly there may be quite a distance between the time period in which the post-apocalyptic novel is set and the event itself.

00:04:23 So, it can be quite a big distance. Thinking of one I've only read relatively recently, not a woman, not a woman writer, *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, which I which I loved, which goes thousands and thousands of years into an imagined nuclear holocaust. And of course, there were lots of novels mid to end of the 20th century which centred around the end of the world, imagined as a nuclear disaster. So post-apocalyptic fictions have to kind of have that, I think, as part of them. Dystopia needn't, I guess. So, you could have a dystopian novel in which there hasn't been some kind of crisis event like that.

00:05:10 I think with dystopias, famously Raffaella, Ballini, and Tom Moylan have distinguished between the classical dystopia and the critical dystopia. So the classical dystopia is the one where everything is completely dark, and there's no hope for the future, but in the critical dystopia there's a little bit of hope somewhere within the text.

00:05:33 Now again, I'm actually not sure that that is a completely watertight distinction either. It seems to me to be very difficult to imagine a dystopian text with no hope at all, because part of the pleasure of them is trying to see the resistance and see the possibility of resistance and hope. So, I'm not sure about that. A term that I think is useful is Margaret Atwood's term *US Topia*, which kind of mixes utopia and dystopia, and for her she's kind of saying it's about perspective, you know, someone finds the dystopian world to their advantage and so for them it would be a utopia. So, it's about where you're looking from if you like.

00:06:15 And that word 'us' in the *US Topia* I really like because it kind of says, well, it's down to us to decide what perspective we're taking. And so I do find that really useful. And then in terms of the distinction between, for example, speculative fiction and science fiction. Again, I think the general perception is that something like sci-fi is going to be a bit more hard and techie in its imagining, but I also think that's probably a little bit, you know, not really that a helpful distinction, I mean Ursula

Leguin said that speculative fiction is a snobby literary term for science fiction. So it gets writers who usually write literary fiction out of what she called the ghetto of, you know, science fiction and its fans to call it speculative fiction. So I don't know. I mean, I think there's a huge amount going on there, and I think if people find these terms helpful, then fine. But if we want to get caught up in these distinctions, then I don't think that's particularly useful. Yeah, so that's probably where I'd leave it. I think that it's about the publishing industry, but also about the nature of classification itself, if you like.

00:07:35 Molly

Well that kind of ties into my next question, which I think is I think in your book Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction you kind of you challenge the strictness of these genre categories and yeah for example The Handmaid's Tale, you say, is both a feminist dystopian classic and a post-apocalyptic novel, and you talk about the term sex tinction, which was coined by Claire Colebrook. And you use this quote here "It's precisely here in the genre of the post-apocalyptic that the most tiring gender narratives are repeated. One might say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world and the end of capitalism than it is to think outside the structuring fantasies of gender. There must always be an active male heroism driven by a feminine fragility that appears to hold the promise of the future" and that's from sex afterlife essays on extinction? Do you think that these genres are still helpful and relevant to contemporary women's post-apocalyptic fiction. I guess we've kind of answered that, and no, but do you think like women's post-apocalyptic fiction particularly, and its inability or unwillingness to conform absolutely to genre conventions, say something about how male dominated the genre is. Or do you find that women's fiction is often more likely to kind of defy these the genre conventions or not fit as comfortably as men's post-apocalyptic fiction.

00:09:02 Susan

Hmm, great question. Yeah no I think it's about that connexion between these two terms. Isn't it gender and genre, which etymologically have Connexions. And if you go on the Oxford English Dictionary and do that great thing which I often do of looking at the history of a word and where that word has come from and when it's been used in the past, and so on, and they connect, the etymology of both of those terms gender and genre is linked.

00:09:32 And I think the thing genre, as we've just been saying, is a way of classifying texts, isn't it? So, it's a way of trying to demarcate one kind of text from another. Gender is a similar kind of classification system in the sense that it tries to classify people in binary terms, but for the most part though people are increasingly and in a positive way wanting to question those kinds of binary classifications. But conventionally gender has always been in the past about distinguishing between male and female, masculine and feminine, and so genre and gender are classification systems if you like, that want to pin things down and define things. So I think what women writers are doing when they question generic conventions is actually making a broader point about classification and thinking about how classification works in relation to gender as well.

00:10:23 So when they mess with genre categories they're also trying to get us to think about messing with gender categories. And as I said, I think that can only really be a positive thing because if you think about all those post-apocalyptic movies and texts by male writers which are about, you know, the man saving his family pride, trying to preserve his nuclear family and ensure their survival after an apocalyptic event and trying to recreate the past as closely as possible, so restoring everything back to the state it was in before the apocalypse if you like, that seems to me often to be

the two motivations of those kinds of texts, then I think it's those things which women writers are wanting to question. If you see what I mean. I guess that they're wanting to resist classification because those kinds of classifications haven't been very positive for women in the past.

00:11:24 Molly

Yeah, and you say that in in men's post-apocalyptic fiction, as in written by men about men and their heroes are "nearly always men trying to survive and then trying to protect women, men trying to rebuild things as they were before or men who are nostalgic for the world before things changed. And in women's post-apocalyptic fiction, on the other hand, there's a focus on analysing the ways in which patriarchy and neo-colonialism are intrinsically implicated in the disasters they envision rather than nostalgia and restoration after such a disaster, they successfully transform and rewrite the apocalyptic genre to imagine different possible futures for humanity and in this way it's also an important intervention in the present mode" And that's from your book. So, can you talk a little bit about what differentiates women's post-apocalyptic fiction from the mainstream, or from men's post-apocalyptic fiction. And why is it important to pay attention to the issues that it raises.

00:12:29 Susan

I mean I think what a lot of contemporary women writing in this genre is trying to do is show how women have got less invested in our current status quo than men. So they're actually disadvantaged by lots of the structures and systems that we've got in place in our present world, so why would we want to restore those? After an apocalyptic event, why would we want to hark back to them? Why wouldn't we want to change things and improve things and do things differently if you like. So I think the message of this body of work is that it's trying to show us what's wrong with our present society that might have led to an apocalypse.

00:13:11 And, you know, how we might choose to rebuild after an event in a different way that's fair to women and fairer to others who are less privileged in our current environment. So, one example of that would be, you know, our attitude to the natural world and Earth's resources. We have tended to have the assumption that the natural world and animals and the environment around us are kind of there for us to use. I suppose it's what people now call this kind of extractive approach to the Earth's resources and in a sense, I think there's a parallel between the way that women have often been viewed.

00:13:57 You know, not, not by everybody, and not always, but you know, there's often been this approach that women are there to be used, that we can kind of take what we want from them. And we've seen that, increasingly becoming apparent in in some of the horrible things that have come up recently around you know sexual exploitation, et cetera, et cetera and that isn't over, it's still a really current issue and a really big problem. I'd call it rapacious, that's quite an interesting word. A rapacious extractive approach to both women and the climate, the natural resources of the Earth, et cetera, et cetera.

00:14:40 Criticising that and thinking about how we might reorganise after an apocalyptic event to avoid that is a really prominent theme in a lot of contemporary women's post-apocalyptic writing.

00:14:52 Molly

And you talk about this kind of pervasive idea that we're living in the end times, which is a phrase that comes from Slavoj Zizek, and I wanted to ask you about some of the context surrounding the popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction. I guess yeah, as you were just saying, the climate and the

extracting of resources is obviously one, but also this question of why when we feel like we're living through an apocalypse, do we seek out fiction that mirrors that experience back to us? I suppose it's either what you're saying about finding a kind of alternate, active solution right?

00:15:31 Susan

Yeah, I think that's true, but also I think that particularly during the pandemic. I mean all of these pandemic films that everyone was watching at the start when a lot of people would have thought that you wouldn't want to see what was happening around you being kind of echoed back to you, but I feel like it's the opposite. I think it's a way of allowing us to work through the issues raised by the apocalyptic, things that have happened recently, and by the fact that you know even before the pandemic, lots of people felt like things were on a, you know, worrying trend and people were talking about these end time scenario videos. So you know we've had the pandemic, we've had these dystopian restrictions on our freedoms where, you know, we're not allowed to go out of the house except once a day or see people outside our immediate family. You know things that would have been unimaginable before. So we've actually lived through an apocalyptic event and through a dystopian response to that for our own safety obviously but it still echoes a lot of those kinds of restrictions on individual freedom that you see in dystopian texts.

00:16:38 And I think reading about this in a fictional form is kind of cathartic. It actually allows us to process the trauma that we've all been through. Recently I was interviewed quite a lot about Squid games, the South Korean Netflix drama because, you know, people were saying, well, why do we want to watch this stuff? And so again, that's something else that I think is a similar thing. People want to engage with this stuff creatively as a way of working through what they've experienced.

00:17:13 Molly

Yeah, I think there's like a theory about why we dream as well which is that it kind prepares you for things that your subconscious kind of views as a threat, and I remember listening to this BBC sounds podcast about dreaming in the pandemic. And apparently people's dream about insects. People have reported having loads of dreams about insects and it's, I don't know, I wonder if it kind of is a similar psychology with post-apocalyptic fiction. Your kind of subconscious brain is trying to prepare you by creatively kind of exploring disaster scenarios and how you can respond to them maybe. I know I weirdly at the beginning of the pandemic started watching loads of like.

00:18:04 living off grid videos like I know so much about pickling now. I think, I don't know, I think part of it was kind of a uh, kind of needing to explore those different ways of reacting to these scenarios.

00:18:19 Susan

Absolutely, and I think The thing is, it's also about, you know, ethical and political dilemmas, isn't it? It's not just only dealing with trauma, but actually working through different well yeah, ethical and political responses that that one might think through and experience and consider and I suppose that's the great thing about fiction, that's what it does and that's why we love it.

00:18:48 Molly

One of, I mean following on from the conversation about genre particularly, but also I guess from this. Do you think that because of this apocalypse mindset, contemporary realist fiction or autobiography might begin to take on some of the tropes of post-apocalyptic or dystopian fiction? I think, certainly dramatically, there can be a lot of crossovers, and I know you talk in your book

about ways in which women's post-apocalyptic fiction and women writers imagine literature and its place in a post-apocalyptic world. But what do you feel? What effect do you feel the end times is having on literature at large? If any

00:19:29 Susan

Yeah, I mean, I think we're just starting to see the publication of literature that responds directly to the pandemic, and there was a good piece in the Guardian about this only a couple of weekends ago, which was looking at some of the more recent pandemic fiction and not all of that is actually post-apocalyptic fiction. But some of it is so one that I've read really recently is Sarah Hall's *Burnt Coat*, which is fabulous. Um, scary and beautiful, and really, really mind blowing actually. But I also think that another thing that's happening now is there's a lot of really weird nostalgia for the past.

00:20:10 Some of it not in such a good way in in my opinion. Now I have to say I haven't read Jonathan Franzen's *Crossroads* yet so this is, you know, absolutely based on what I've read in terms of reviews and stuff rather than having read the text itself, so feel free to totally ignore my comments on that basis listeners, but I think some of that return to the 70s and return to the 20th century I don't know whether it's nostalgia, and I don't know whether that's maybe not a good thing.

00:20:44 I'm not sure, I just think that actually we won't for a long time see what the genuinely creative and thoughtful responses are to the pandemic. Just as with post 911 fiction or even with something like modernism as an early 20th century response to the Great War, it's not until really quite a while afterwards that you kind of realised, well, OK, these were the great texts or these were the innovative responses and maybe some of those responses like you say, wouldn't necessarily be ones which address it head on. So going back to the example of modernism, a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway* doesn't really seem to be that much, though it does in lots of ways it is about World War One quite directly, but the way that it's written is so innovative. And you know, maybe it takes a while to actually kind of get to the point where you can say yeah this is the great stuff that really dealt with there with those events. So I think we need a bit of distance before we can see what literature is really gonna do as a direct response to the pandemic.

00:21:57 Molly

Yeah, I've seen loads of weird kind of early internet nostalgia recently, which I find bizarre 'cause it I mean I don't know it sounds like a long time ago for me. But yeah, I mean in the grand scheme of things, it's really only kind of 10/20 years ago. That stuff, it's a bit early to be looking at it as Ancient history.

00:22:27 Susan

But I think it depends how old you are. So 10 years ago is a lot of years if you're in your early 20s or even in your early 30s, it's like half to a third of your life. You know, and so I do think that young people who've been particularly hit hard by the pandemic are bound to do that kind of backward looking.

00:22:48 Molly

Yeah, and there's a chapter in your book called the post human body, which draws on Donna Haraway's *Cyborg manifesto* and she's saying these fictions which are capable of pushing the post human body to recognise its alignment with the animal and the machine are also those that are able to move beyond the dystopian genre into a genuinely new space of post-apocalyptic writing, in which conventions of embodied selfhood can be questioned. C can you talk a bit about how the

posthuman body is so relevant to feminism in post-apocalyptic fiction? that was area that I was really interested in.

00:23:29 Susan

Sure, absolutely. I think it's about going beyond human exceptionalism really. So, humans have always tried to distinguish themselves from animals and more recently from machines by arguing that we're unique that we've got traits that make us distinct and superior. But I think that attitude is what's led to the exploitation of animals. The destruction of the natural world and the climate. Whereas if we accepted that you know we're not superior, we're just different and we live on a continuum with animals and nature, and our survival is fundamentally connected to theirs then I think we would do things differently. You know? I mean, who knows whether it's true that the pandemic was caused by a virus crossing species barriers due to the way that humans are used to exploiting and eating animals and so on and so forth. We don't actually know if that's the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, but if it is then that's an example of the kind of attitude to other species that posthumanism would want to question, I guess.

00:24:35 So as I said, Posthumanism is about seeing the continuity's rather than looking at ourselves as this superior species, and I guess also fear of the machine is another thing that's such a big thing in literature and such a big thing in dystopias. You know the machines taking over this kind of thing, and that's understandable, but I also think it's not really led to us making the best use of technology. There's still quite a lot of suspicion about AI, about what technology is going to be capable of which kind of means that we don't have those conversations about an ethical way to approach it and how to actually be living in harmony with some of the technologies that have developed and some of the new sciences around humanity and embodiment if you like.

00:25:30 Susan So I think that yeah, women writers are also exploring that a lot in post-apocalyptic fiction. There are lots of texts in which there are robots or cyborgs or various kinds of visions of post humans. A lot of those texts are really interesting, I mean particularly something like Margaret Atwood's Maddaddam trilogy, which ends with a kind of new post human species that's a hybrid of humanity as it was before the pandemic, that features in that trilogy. It's a blend of the humans that have survived there, and also these kind of new species that have been engineered in a biodome by a scientist and the two interbreed and produce this new kind of species that are that is really kind of I don't know. It's suggested, I think at the end of the last book that it's going to do something equitable for humanity and for the survival of that new species. So yeah, I think those kinds of imaginings are thinking about all those issues around human exceptionalism and the problems it's led to.

00:26:45 Molly

Yeah, I found it really interesting because I think the the the general kind of information or atmosphere that I'd kind of seen of technology had been always quite a negative one. And I read an article recently about Google's kind of head of AI writing being fired for writing an article and the the the algorithms being kind of racist and you know, like tech is obviously kind of a massively male dominated area and yeah so I thought it was so interesting to see a kind of a take on technology being used in a positive light and important that there are kind of narratives that explore that because it otherwise you know, like it or not technology is obviously here to stay.

00:27:40 Susan

That's it, we can't just kind of avoid it and pretend it never happened. And you know, you hear about as you say, these tech entrepreneurs who won't let their own kids have screens and phones and so on and you kind of think, well, yeah, OK, but we can't just kind of do this Luddite thing where we destroy the machines, yeah?

00:27:58 Molly

Exactly, yeah, and it I mean it ties into like this idea of the, uh, what's the term, the Anthropocene, where we've irrecoverably altered the natural landscape? The natural world and, I guess you may as well strive for that to be ultimately a positive thing, and not, uhm, you know.

00:28:27 Susan

Yeah, we can't go backwards, can we really?

00:28:30 Molly

Uhm, so you worked recently with a group of young women from Bradford Bellevue Girls Academy on dystopian and apocalyptic fiction and did a series of workshops with them. Can you talk about what that experience was like and what kind of themes came up in these workshops and I guess I'm interested to know, were they markedly generation specific? Did you see that in the fears and anxieties that were being explored the ideas were really specific to that generation?

00:29:08 Susan

It's a great question. Yeah, well it was a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the being Human Festival, and that festival runs every November. And it's about getting the work of humanities research is out there and engaging with the public and proving that what we do is relevant. Uhm, so not that we're just stuck in some ivory tower. And what I loved about the project was how much the young women students enjoyed visiting the Leeds Library. You know, they just loved the space and they've never been anywhere like it.

00:29:39 Before they you know they were walking around looking at the books, taking photos, et cetera. Et cetera. And we talked about what might happen to books and libraries after an apocalyptic event. And so that was one great part of the day. And then, as you say, the other part was doing their own creative writing based on a kind of a prompt around it, dystopia, apocalypse those kinds of things and their creative writing was amazing. And what came up really strongly was the issues of young women having a voice and the right to express themselves and thinking about your question, I was thinking about, well, is that new? is that a new thing or is it something that has been an issue for a long while and I think it's both? It's both is and is not a generational thing really, because women have often been silenced in the past.

00:30:31 But I do think that silencing operates in specific ways now, especially for younger women. So, I'm thinking more about, you know, social media appearance, body image, sexual exploitation, you know, I think that it's not so much literal silencing, is it? It's more kind an internalised silencing about what you can and can't say in in a climate where you might feel endlessly visible actually, if on social media. Or feel the pressure to be endlessly visible and endlessly available actually. So yeah, it was kind of those kinds of things that came up quite a lot. I think it's on a continuum around the issues that women have often experienced, historically speaking. But with an inflexion that's very much of our present moment I guess.

00:31:26 Molly

That's so interesting, yeah, that makes so much sense. The idea that in a, you know, if a culture is dominated by the visual, yeah I think you're right. Like social media really makes us so conscious of how we present visually.

00:31:45 Susan

Right?

00:31:45 Molly

And the yeah, when that becomes kind of a huge part how everyone lives it's actually women who are going to feel that most strongly because, you know, they are what's that like John Berger quote. 'men watch, women watch themselves being watched or something?'

00:32:07 Susan

Right, right? Yeah, yeah, I think that does extend beyond women, increasingly to men as well. But I think that the point is that if you have internalised a view of yourself as the object of the gaze, then that inevitably puts you in a kind of subordinate position and a subordinate position is a feminist position. So even if men experience themselves as objects of the gaze, it's a feminine position to be in, in the sense that it's a dis privileged one, if you like.

00:32:42 Molly

Yeah, that's so interesting, and I suppose, kind of at the other end of the spectrum I wanted to ask you about women and ageing. Another area of your current research, and it seems to me that there's a common thread here with your interest in dystopian women writing which, this is a tenuous link so I hope that you agree but you might not, is to do with navigating and representing the past and the intersection of personal and cultural history. And of course, what we're talking about is this great reckoning with the frailty and mortality of the body. Can you tell me a bit about your work in this area?

00:33:20 Susan

Yeah, yeah, and I don't think that's tenuous at all, although it's not something I'd really thought about before in that way. So thanks, but yeah, I'm working in two areas at the moment and the first one is about getting older women who've left the cultural industries for various reasons, mostly to do with ageism and sexism, back into engaging creatively through creative writing workshops. This project has been funded by the ISRA, The independent Social Research Foundation, and it's led by my colleague Doctor Rachel Connor with me and another of our colleagues, Professor Jane Razbor who's in the media side of things in the School of Cultural Studies at Leeds Beckett. We've had a few workshops over the summer, and we're now working on editing the writing that was produced in them for an anthology. And what's really striking is how much grief and trauma there's been around ageing for women.

00:34:17 But how that's also been transformed or adapted by the women themselves to become something creative and positive, and that was very much the kind of point of the workshops to be, you know, allow people to address any issues around having been pushed out of the cultural industries that they might have experienced. Although not always. Not in all cases. And then enable them to do something creative and productive with their own creative writing. So that's a project we're kind of just finishing up right now. And then the second thing I'm working on is the way that ageing is represented in dystopian fiction.

00:34:54 Or well, and speculative fiction more broadly and actually there are a lot of dystopian texts that do engage with ageing more than you might think. So one good example is PD James' Children of Men which is pretty typical, a lot of these types represent ageing as this terrifying waste of resources, you know? Older people as this big drain on humanity and alongside that lots of them imagine the birth rate dropping catastrophically and so all these old people are getting to be a real problem because they're this, as I've said, horrible waste of resources when there are no young people coming up behind them, as it were. This is a kind of pattern in lots of this fiction and so the dystopia is, well, what does humanity do to kind of manage that situation?

00:35:46 So? I'm looking at those, but I'm also looking at some more interesting ones which do do something more creative with ageing in the future and kind of imagine the place of older people in relation to the future in more interesting ways, because actually we don't tend to think about the future in terms of older people. So, when we think about the future, we tend to think as the song has it, the cliché you know, children of the future.

00:36:15 And that notion of reproductive futurism, that the future always has to be about imagining children and imagining the next generation, it's quite heteronormative and it's quite ageist actually, because it doesn't think about, well, older people have the right to imagine a future too, and they also have the right to imagine a place in that future. So I'm just kind of thinking about issues like that and thinking about how some literature does explore ageing in more creative and interesting ways.

00:36:47 Molly

That's really interesting that link between ageing and post-apocalyptic fiction. And I suppose in a culture where women I the burden of ageing more strongly or certainly earlier and this kind of anxiety about the future or a hyper awareness of the future and a fear of being kind of reduced to a resource, uhm that can expire would be felt more strongly and therefore there is a kind of more of an impetus to creatively find ways to deal with that. Whether that's you know catharsis, or whether that's a imagining a kind of possible practical solution.

00:37:31 Susan

Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, probably both.

00:37:46 Molly

I saw a quote, it was not to do with science fiction or postapocalyptic fiction it was to do with DIY, the other day. But it was saying DIY is a really, one of the great things about it is that it doesn't replicate kind of oppressive or exclusive structures that already exist. And I thought that it really kind of. It was when I was researching this and I thought it really reminded me of the kind the positive potential of post-apocalyptic fiction, or Science fiction or whatever, as a way to imagine a future that doesn't, where these structures don't exist, or how that might work.

00:38:32 Susan

Yeah, yeah, definitely. I think that's, you know, the great thing about literature really that it has that capacity to take us beyond the world that we're in and imagine new ways of doing things.

00:38:43 Molly

Yeah, and I you know I get the idea from the research I've done for this that women have, you know, a greater motivation to do that really. And that leads to actually some really interesting work that that often goes beyond the kind of established genre conventions.

00:39:08 Susan

Definitely well, they're less invested in the status quo. Aren't they? Winning writers and women generally and other people who are not benefiting from society as it's currently organised.

00:39:21 Molly

And my final question is, is I want to ask you about, I guess more broadly your work, but so aside from women's post-apocalyptic fiction you've written and contributed to books on 20th century women novelists and British women's writing, and one called scandalous fictions which is interesting. And what struck me about all of these topics as well as the ones we've already talked about, was that they're all kind of to some extent concerned with cultural crisis, and specifically women's literature that deals with cultural crisis and societal crisis. Do you think that's fair to say, and if it is, what is it that draws you to these themes and what do you find interesting, what can we learn from them?

00:40:05 Susan

Yeah, I think that's a really perceptive comment although it wasn't something I had realised myself. So again, thank you. I think what I'd say is that I want to look at literature that's important, and that's done something important in the world. So, as I said earlier, if I didn't believe in the relevance and importance of literature in society and culture more widely I kind of wouldn't be doing what I do. I think reading is so important. People read because they want to think about what's going on and of course, that includes thinking about the past in order to process the present. So you know, I'm not saying you when I say that I'm interested in literature that's relevant, and that's done something important that doesn't mean I'm not interested in looking at literature from earlier periods either, but I think that as a woman I'm interested in women's experience and their writing about that experience not in any essentialist way, so you know. I'm not saying that a woman has to be any particular kind of thing or you know it's not a definition that that relies on anything from biology or anything like that. I just think that women are thinking and writing from a different position socially and culturally than men, and so they've got a different stance.

00:41:21 A different perspective on the things that are going on in the world and I think it's just important that we recognise and take note of that, really.

00:41:32 Molly

Well, thank you yeah, I guess we'll wrap it up there. But thank you so much for talking about your work.

00:41:41 Susan

You're really welcome. It's been great to chat.

00:41:43 Molly

You've given me actually so much to think about, so thank you.

00:41:49

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