# Event transcript: Celebrating Island Literature

**Peter Mackay – Host**

**Harry Josephine Giles**

**Raman Mundair**

**Evie Wyld**

**Peter**

Welcome to Celebrating Island Literature – books inspired by Scottish islands. I'm Peter Mackay and this event is part of the Book Week Scotland 2021 Digital Festival. Book Week Scotland is a national celebration of all things reading and writing and we hope you enjoy the event. Joining me today are Harry Josephine Giles, Raman Mundair and Evie Wyld. Harry Josephine Giles is a writer and performer from Orkney now living in Leith. She has, in her own words lived on four islands, each larger than the last. She has an MA in theatre directing and a PhD in creative writing from the University of Stirling. Harry Josephine's work generally happens, she says, in the crunchy places where performance and politics get muddled up. Their poetry collections Tonguit and The Games were shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award – twice, the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Saltire Poetry Book of the Year. They've toured globally as a poet and theatre artist. And their verse novel, Deep Wheel Orcadia came out with Picador in October 2021. Raman Mundair is an Indian born queer working class British Asian writer, director, dramaturg, artist and filmmaker based in Shetland and Glasgow. She is the author of two books of poetry Lovers, Liars, Conjurers and Thieves and A Choreographer’s Cartography, and the play The Algebra of Freedom. She is also the editor of Incoming: Some Shetland Voices, and has the film, Choreographies of resist///dance, and Trowie Buckie. Earlier this year she was an IASH/Traverse Digital Fellow, and she is an intersectional feminist and an activist who has worked on a grassroots level against racism, fascism, state violence, No Borders, and against gender based domestic and sexual violence. Evie Wyld was born in London and grew up in New South Wales and Peckham. She studied creative writing at Bath Spa and Goldsmith's University and her first novel After the Fire, a Small Still Voice won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and a Betty Trask Award. In 2013, she was included on Granta magazine's once a decade, once in a decade best of young British novelists list. Her second novel All the Birds Singing won the Miles Franklin Award and the Encore Award and the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize. And her third novel The Bass Rock was published by Penguin Random House last September. Good afternoon to you all - great to see you here - looking forward to a very interesting discussion. This is first of all, a celebration of, of islands or books that celebrate island literature. And I'd like to throw this open just to, to see what it is in particular that you might like to celebrate about islands. I think we'll also get onto problems with islands as we go in the discussion. But to begin, Harry Josephine, what would you like to celebrate about islands?

**Harry Josephine**

I, I think the thing that excites me about islands and the thing that I think about my own islands is how I suppose how oriented to the future they are and to their own future, but in an island place. The community is always thinking about how, in a small island place the community is always thinking about how it's going to last into the future and what it takes to sustain that community into the future. So, something that I always talk about Orkney, is how both, you know, I grew up surrounded by Neolithic houses and stone circles - but it's also a global centre of marine energy research. And it's, it's both kind of rooted in the past and that way, and always kind of innovating and working to the future in that way as well. And I think that, that tension between timelines is something that becomes very clear, in an island context, I think.

**Peter**

That's brilliant, the connection with the deep past and the deep future on, or the, the half the deep sea too. Raman.

**Raman**

Yeah, I think what really interests me about Shetland in particular, and I've always been attracted to islands, is the sort of liminality that kind of, the kind of feeling of being in between spaces as well and on the borders. And, and the language that, that meets that I love, Shetland dialect and the specificity of it and how you can have a word like shoormal which means that liminal space of where the sea meets the shore and it's just so perfect for it. And I love, I love the way that the dialect is a living language and how it is capturing the energy of the youth now and, you know, we have... there's lots of, kind of, creative, playful ways that people are meeting the idea of a Shetland dialect that's fit for 21st century and I like the way how it's all, the language and the lived experience of being in Shetland is absolutely married to the natural world. And all of those things really moved me and are one of the reasons that I'm drawn back to this place and why I've, I've laid down roots here.

**Peter**

The fitness for the 21st century world, I think is the crucial thing and the linguistic fitness for the 21st century world – how you develop that. Evie.

**Evie**

I think, having grown up going on lots of holidays to the Isle of Wight, and then my, my family live on an island in Australia. The place that, the thing that's always like excited me about islands is that it's so contained, you know. If there's, if there's a monster on there, it's not getting off. And I think also the weather and the fact that islands are often kind of seen as this sort of holiday destination and then off season they take on this incredible life of their own and the kind of I like, I like an island in winter. I think that's, that's an exciting place.

**Peter**

I come from Lewis and I think there's always the question of 'can you survive the Lewis winter?' And if you've done that, then you deserve the summer – if the summer comes. I was really interested in the, the way you framed that there in terms of containment, as well as liminality and openness. And Raman, you've written wonderfully about the, the question of incoming and moving into Shetland, and the process of being not recognised that happens in Shetland. I'd like to, to invite you to talk about there – and I think you've got some things to read for us as well.

**Raman**

Yes, perhaps I could start by maybe reading from a wee piece that I wrote. So, I've – we've– you know, relatively recently had children...so I'm living in Shetland in the middle of the North Sea and raising wild children in a wild place where the winds can be so strong, you can't stand up. That's the reality of it. The weather's bad. Your boat literally doesn't come in, and the shelves and the local shops lay bare. Here, I'm confronted with the fact that although I feel married to the landscape, and committed to my relationship with the natural world, the human natives don't always recognise me, as a fellow species, let alone local. Where are you from? Here. No, where are you really from? Originally. These microaggressions have happened in town, city and country. It's a familiar and draining struggle. I now have children who have a local familial connection with Shetland. They were born here, but will they face the same challenges as me in having the right to claim belonging here on their own terms? When do you finally arrive home? When can you claim autonomy in your natural landscape? Recently, things have happened, which have made these issues even more urgent. My experiences make me feel that I've been backed into a metaphorical corner with the violent chant of 'you don't belong here' ringing in my ears. Why can't I live where I choose? Why can't I inhabit the countryside? Live a rural or remote wildlife? And I think, part of the reason why that's often-held suspect or questioned is that the history of art, literature, photography and visual images in general, they present the European English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish rural landscapes as being the preserve of, of white people. Think of any visual representation of British rural landscapes? How often do you see a black or Asian person of colour in them? What this creates is a narrative that the countryside, the rural landscape, is fundamentally a white space. Anything that challenges that concept that disrupts that narrative is seen as an anomaly.. an anomaly. The perceived norm is basically whiteness. And in relation to Shetland there's a lot of mythology around it. For example, the Norse mythology that is the, you know, very much a passionate part of island identity for a lot of Shetland folk. And, and that Norse identity is branded in a way that is it's very much this white, you know, white space and white ideology and white cultural, cultural landscape as well. And I think what happens when somebody like me comes along and, and others just that there is a rich people of colour community that's been in the islands quite a while. It really challenges people's notions of who they are and what they are attached to, and what they – what brand if you like, they want to present of Shetland. And, you know, it's interesting for me as a writer, you know, I think this is wonderful to be part of this conversation. I'm delighted to be, but it's a rare opportunity for me personally because often the people that get to speak about Shetland and represent the creativity of Shetland, they don't look like me. And, you know, often the work that they're creating, you know, when I just think about writers that get a lot of, have a platform, and are definitely seen as Shetland writers, for example, Jen Hadfield, you know, their work is very much married to the natural world, and writes about it in a way that's not problematic and that's quite, you know, kind of, buys into the brand of Shetland and it's a romantic notion of, of the wild north and, you know. And for me, I, I recognise that romantic notion, I also indulge in it myself. But I also write about the disruption of it – the fact that it's not, it's not easily read like that for all of us. And actually, it's not that I'm saying that it's, it's something to be dismissed or that it's a difficult space, I just say that it's a more nuanced conversation and more nuanced dialogue. And there needs to be room for that. And there needs to be room for people that need to represent.

**Peter**

One of the questions I would have about that – is there something in particular about Shetland or islands that makes some people more visible or less visible, some who are able to be recognised in a way that city spaces might not?

**Raman**

I think, you know, I think with any sort of rural spaces, and particularly with Shetland if I'm being specific to Shetland, what I do love about it is that the communities here, there is a possibility of them embracing, the eccentric, the people who are on the margins. And, you know, there's a lot of possibility of reinventing yourself, and I wrote about this in, in, in my book Incoming, where I look at the idea of who comes and enjoys, reinvention, and Shetland, and you know, people who come and settle. And who, who have difficulties with that and who have more barriers to negotiate, and more kind of reframing to do, because although, if there is this sort of generosity, that island spaces and world spaces, and particularly, specifically Shetland can offer, there's also a reductiveness, as well, that, you know, it can be both things at once. And the reductiveness is that, you know, can also be tied to how you want to present. So, you have to – the way that your eccentricity can be part of the community or your otherness is if you're willing to play a certain game, if you're willing to sort of present a certain way. And if you're, if you're actually going to be there, challenging things and saying, actually, 'my child is experiencing racism at the school, can we look at this lovely village school and the diversity that we have and look at the community and how we want to respond', that suddenly, you know, is seen as a disruption because it doesn't fit in with the, the received notions of what the community is. And it's the same with, you know, you could be gay in Shetland, you can be queer – but as long as you the right kind of queer, you know, you're the entertaining type of queer, you're not going to be the queer that's like radical and trying to, you know, ask for lots of things, you know, and ask for more space. And I think you know, things are changing but it's almost like, you know, if you, if you're too many of the intersections it's just all too much – if you're, if you're queer, and a person of colour and disabled and, you know, anything else it's like 'whoa, you know, steady on, pick one. Come to us with one'.

**Peter**

I think you, you write very well as well about the ways in which individuals might be allowed to pass in certain spheres but communities it is much they are, they are disallowed in various ways. In Incoming, which is a great book, you write very well about chosen-ness. The, the idea of choosing a space or choosing an island, and I'd like to move on to Harry Josephine now and Deep Wheel Orcadia because you've got a great moment talking about Orcadia's history in the book where there is the 'the thraan mixter-maxter o fock at biggid the staetion, the trachle tae cheuss anither wey o cheussan,' and there's this reinvention of the space of, well, maybe Orkney, maybe not Orkney, but in futural terms, in deep space terms. I don't know if I can go about describing the book, other than it is that all too known genre the verse novel and Orcadian, about science fiction, or... how important was it for you to reimagine Orkney since we're looking at islands? Or is this just jetting off from Orkney in the first line.

**Harry Josephine**

So, I suppose the science fiction, approach to, to Orkney into the Orkney language as well that the book is written in kind of came about through a frustration with, well the kind of kind of romanticism that Raman was just speaking about. And also, a sort of nostalgia or in language in around islands that can sometimes confine a language and its literature to the past and only to consideration of the past. And then it constructs rural spaces, island spaces as a place that is always declining, always fading, always leaving. As if, as if islands don't embrace their change into the future or can't embrace their change into the future. I think that dynamic that romantic nostalgia is actually very bound up in the mechanisms of power that that Raman is, is talking about. That if we create this kind of romantic mythical past that we're trying to fix and hold on to, then we get more anxious – violently anxious – about the borders of that past, right. So, making a science fictional leap for me was a way of breaking into a different space to think about Orkney and specific, the language and, and islands or, or small place life more generally. And then another element of that is also that something I talk about Orkney a lot is that it's a, it's a place that has moved from, from, the centre to the periphery in terms of like global flows of trade and culture and empire, that in the Neolithic period, Orkney was very clearly a cultural centre and a centre of a great deal of trade because of the sea roads, because of how trade routes moved around what became Europe. And we know that from the archaeological evidence of the goods that you can find, and then the significance of, of what looked like religious complexes like the Ness of Brodgar and the Viking age and then again, in the British imperial period, Orkney becomes a really important staging place for colonisation, for the violence of colonisation and empire. And so, there's so much traffic through Orkney, an expansion is happening through Orkney that it becomes a place of transit and a place that's at the centre of these global dynamics. But now, through road travel, air travel, Orkney is placed on the periphery, and it's not a thing to thought about in these terms. So, making a leap to space and into that imagined period of human expansion, which is a metaphor again, for as science fiction always is, for empire and its violence it became a place to, to play that story out on a different kind of canvas. And to look about how communities are constructed through that and how different kinds of life, different kinds of freedom, and unfreedom are possible in those spaces.

**Peter**

You've talked about the, the exploration of complex utopias before and how that this is underlying Deep Wheel Orcadia. I'm really interested in how this works with the language as well, because it's not just that it's passing through Orkney, it's passing through Orcadian. And the, the ability, and this is one of the great things about the verse novel is that the language is absolutely central to it. The change in vowel sounds are markers of identity. But in some ways, it's just a medium for telling the story as well. And it's done very, very lightly, but very in a very powerful way. I'm interested in the extent to which you could draw on resources that were already there in the language, or the extent that you might have to innovate, but we should probably hear some of it, I think, to give a sense of, of it.

**Harry Josephine**

Sure, sure – well, yeah, I'll read you, I'll read you a bit of it. Actually, do you know – I'll have to – now that you've mentioned that I will, I'll do a poem from the book that, that touches directly on those themes. So at the centre of the book, it's a, it's a love story between two characters Astrid, who grew up in this, this space station, Deep Wheel Orcadia, and Darling who's, who's a visitor from Mars, which is the big, big cosmopolitan centre. This is a poem where, where they've met, they've formed a relationship and it's called Astrid taks Darling haem fer dinner – Astrid takes Darling home for dinner. This is the first meeting of the parents moment – and I'll just, I'll read it in, I'll just read it in the Orkney although the book has a sort of English version as well – but this is just the Orkney so.. Astrid taks Darling haem fer dinner - “This is me new freend” – an the layers in “freend” isno ferly clear an’ll no be explaened. Darling is winsome noo; sheu’s somtheen ither as the skarr thing o a toorist Astrid met. A smile in her fernteckled face, rorie claes. I’the mids o this faimly hid’s like her body is lowan.Mibbe the thowt o parents luntit performance. Wi Darling’s silence aboot her awn faithers, Astrid’s ower thankful fer Inga an Øyvind’s– that's her parents –maet an kindness – until fair intae the meal. Sheu feels her vooels roondan, hir consonants clippan, thir wirds sweetchan tae marry Darling’s awn, an gits unspaekable barman. An whan her awn “een” is “one” sheu sits quiet, waantan a body tae notiece, her mither tae smile an say “Buddo” an tak her back tae the aald faimly taeble, but the hairt o Astrid’s silence haes aafil gravity, an so the conversaetion is faggan, faan, hearan hidsel, is less an less real gittan, til hid’s jeust Darling at’s smilan an spaekan yet.

**Peter**

There's this wonderful sense for language, I guess, is political in the language, language. are markers of power, language are markers of distance. And you have to try and combat that in the world. And so there is the movement between different types of vocal sound. Obviously, there's English in the book as well. And the translation politics are always an issue with minoritized languages. And you use a technique of composite translation, which I think we both first saw in the work of Rody Gorman – a really interesting way of exploding the dictionary definition, more or less, so you have a more precise Orcadian and then an English that is more diffuse for me. What was the thinking behind this? And, and did you do enough harm to the English language? Or could you, could you have done more?

**Harry Josephine**

No. No, that the English language always needs more harm doing to it. It's a language that must be taken apart. It really, really must – and is being taken apart by communities globally in all sorts of exciting ways. And it was a, it was a wrestle of a question for me because I could just publish the book in the Orkney, but – and I kind of wanted to – but it's going to limit its readership. Orkney has a population of 20,000 and if that, you know, maybe half will speak the language. And fewer than that will read it, because we do have an Orkney language literature. And it's a beautiful literature. It's mostly published in the islands and rarely gets read outside the islands, which I think is a great shame. But it does, it's not that widely read. So, I could do that, but it's going to dramatically limit the readership. But on the other hand, if I include an English translation, most of the readers are then likely to just read the English and not read the Orkney. That if I give them this easy option, then they're not going to have the work in the Orkney language that I want them to do. I want them to work on reading it. I want to work on them, them to work on understanding it. So, I wanted to, if I was going to include the English, to minoritise the English within the text. So, it's printed in prose rather than poetry. It's printed in a smaller font. I had a bit of a conversation with the typesetters where it's like – "..how small, can we make it smaller? Can we make it smaller?" but obviously, I still wanted people to read it. And then I borrowed this, this technique from Rody Gorman of when there is an Orkney word that doesn't have a cognate in English – it's translated with multiple words at once. So in that last poem, I, I had the word buddo, which is a really important term of endearment in Orkney, quite a precious one, that gets translated as friendchildlove, as one word because it means all of those. And barman is ragefrothseething and some of the compounds are longer and some of them are shorter. And we think about those as like speed bumps essentially– speed bumps in the English text or, or things that interrupt it and make the reader return to the Orkney, make them curious about returning to the Orkney so that instead of reading English fluidly and transparently, and that transparency is this thing that English pretends to have, they keep going back to the Orkney as the primary text that is there to, to think of it about.

**Peter**

And I think one of the interesting dynamics for me in the novel as a whole is that you've got the precise Orkney language. But it's also a novel about mystery at the heart of it are these wrecks that appear in space, and I'm not going to give anything away, but I have no idea what's going on. But I don't think there's any... Yeah, I'll leave it there. I want to move to, to Evie with that, because the role that the wrecks, I think, play in Deep Wheel Orcadia, more or less is fulfilled by the Bass Rock. In your novel The Bass Rock, because it is a novel which, as Ursula Kenny says in The Guardian, tells the story of three interlinked women across several centuries and explores the ways that men seek to subjugate women and how women fight back. And it's got this Bass Rock hovering in the background, but never really explicated what it is as a symbol – or explicated what the Berwick Law is as a single – what was it that attracted you to that image? And, well, it's there just something ominous about North Berwick.

**Evie**

I think the Bass Rock, for me, is like a lynchpin for the three stories. I was, I used to go to North Berwick a lot when I was a kid, and I had a great aunt who had a house there. And so, my father had been going in his childhood and, I have to say, like, none of us loved it. It was, it was very, it was a very, very English holiday. So, when my father was little, they would take him on like winter picnics, which is like the most sort of British thing that you could imagine. And, and I have all these photographs of him and my grandmother on the beach with the Bass Rock in the background. And then later on pictures of me with the, with the same landscape. And it sort of did this with telescoping, in my mind of just, you know, it joined us. At the time that I was writing the book, my grandmother and my father had died in quite quick succession and, and it felt suddenly, like this place that had witnessed a lot of stuff. And I think it's also, I think that coastline is, is fascinating, as well this, like, wildness, that's, like, gently papered over with a golf course. And you know that sort of trying not to acknowledge all of the birdshit - and tar - and oil spills - and all of this stuff that comes in from the sea. So, it's always, it's always been a place of nostalgia for me. And I think, like, I think anywhere within the UK that, that people kind of decide in the 1950s is a holiday destination is really interesting. Because what we think of as a holiday now is very, very different from that, you know, those... the sort of outdoor swimming pool in the freezing cold rain is a memory from my childhood. But yeah, I think the Bass Rock itself, this place with an incredible history, you know, there was a hermit that lived there, and then it was a prison and, and now it's home to the largest colony of, of gannets in the world. And it stinks. And you go up to it in a boat and it's so sheer that you can't imagine how anyone ever got onto it. It just feels like a really secretive place. But it's got a, a tunnel underneath it that opens up at low tide. And, you know, there are kind of, there are stories of my family of people who went in there and, and it just feels like a literary place for me.

**Peter**

I'm always interested in the way that islands can also become prisons and the Bass Rock was literally one of those - and especially islands can be prisons for women, so you've got your St Kilda and Lady Grange there. And I love the idea of a golf course as a veneer – as a thin papering over – of much more interesting and much more wild things. The... in the novel there are three main interconnected narratives – Viv in the present, Ruth in the post war period, and Sarah in an unspecified mediaeval period. And Ruth was based on your paternal grandmother, I understand. But these are also interwoven by short stories almost, short vignettes – all of which revolve around, again, male violence against women. How did you choose which time periods to settle on when you were writing? When you were choosing between the, the possibilities? And then can you give a taste of it, I believe, just from the beginning of the novel.

**Evie**

So I was, I think the Ruth in the 1950s and Viv, in a more or less present day – they kind of fit in quite nicely and obviously together because Viv is clearing up Ruth's house in the now and kind of sifting through artefacts and discovering that there's something in the house that was perhaps haunting Ruth. And then, Sarah, it kind of, as you say, in a sort of mediaeval timeframe, there was, there was an idea that I was thinking about that witch hunting, never went away, but it just sort of changed shape. And, you know, with domestic violence and, and violence against women, and, and it felt, I kind of felt this thing that you could imagine the tone that a witch hunter would say something in, and it, it felt very similar to the tone that is used today in kind of incel forums and stuff like that. So, it, it just sort of fits together quite nicely. And then the, the little short stories in between are stretched over a, a large time frame and I, I had imagined going into the future with it, but that felt a bit depressing. And so, yeah, I think it was, I think those three in particular stood out amongst a lot of other timeframes that I was working on. Just as they, they felt like they were talking to each other. So that was it really and the... I was gonna read right from the beginning of the book, which is from Viv's point of view as a young child. And then I don't have to explain too much about it. I was six and just the two of us – my mother and I – took the Booey for a walk along the beach where she and dad grew up, the shore a mix of black rock and pale cold sand. It was always cold. Even in summer we wore wool jumpers, and our noses ran and became scorched with wiping on our sleeves. But this was November, and the wind made the dog walk close to us, her ears flat, her eyes squinted. I could see the top layer of sand scittering away so that it looked like a giant bedsheet billowing. We were looking for cowrie shells among the debris of the tideline I had two digging into my palm, white like the throat of a herring gull. My mother had a keener eye and held six. I felt the pull of victory slackening. Resting in a rock pool was a black suitcase bulging at the sides. The zip had split, and where the teeth no longer held together, I saw two fingers tipped with red nails and one grey knuckle where a third finger should have been. The stump of the finger like the miniature plaster ham I had from my doll's house. The colour had been sucked from the knuckle by sea water leaving just a cool grey and the white of the bone. It was the bone, I suppose, that made it so much like the tiny ham. I moved my arm to swat something away from my face. And as I did, flies rose from the suitcase in a cloud thick and heavy. Behind me my mother. "Another one" she called "I found another one". And then the smell, like a dead cat in the chimney in summer. A smell so tall and so broad that you can't see over or around it. My mother walked up behind me. "What's..." I kept looking at my fingers and trying to understand - my mother pulling me by the arm. "Come away, come away" she said and spitting over and over onto the sand. "Don't look, come away". But the more I looked, the more I saw. And peeking through the gaps between the white fingers was an eye that seemed to look at me. That seemed to, that seemed to know something about me and to ask a question. And give an answer. In the memory, which is a child's memory and unreliable, the eye blinks.

**Peter**

That's an amazingly capturing, opening. And it's one of the inexplicable things in the novel, again, the blinking of that eye, whether it happens. And there are various elements that, again, I don't want to spoil the book for anybody who hasn't read it, but they are inexplicable. You've talked about how you were working on this at the time of 'me too'. And there's a lot of anger in the novel. And there's an awful lot of appropriate and necessary anger in the novel. The, the resistance to politeness, the resistance to being told that women shouldn't complain because they're being difficult or hysterical. I think there might be a tension in it as well, for me, which is really interesting, because you also talk about your love of Stephen King, but your frustration of, with, Stephen King's endings, because he always shows the monster, he doesn't leave it. And I'm wondering if there is perhaps a tension between, okay, expressing anger and the targets of that anger, and not showing the monster of leaving it a little bit diffuse and might be the question of where the novelist leaves off from, the activist begins, or vice versa.

**Evie**

Yeah, and I think, I think the monster in this case, is, is often kind of wrongly attributed to men. And, and it's not - that's not what I was kind of writing about, I think the thing that you can't see is the, is this societal pressure on men to be something that they're not naturally. So, I think, for me, that's the, that's that anger and the, because I really like men, I know some nice ones, and the struggles that they come up against, with not being allowed to be themselves and, and how that turns into something toxic and putrid. And how sadness turns into anger is, is something that I've, I've always looked at, and always been interested in, in all of my books. My first book – After the Fire, a Still Small Voice – was about, sort of toxic masculinity in Australian men, and the trickle-down effects of different wars. And so, it's always something that's fascinated me trying to get like a fingernail under the skin of the toxic masculinity. And I think the, also the way that we teach our little female children to, to, you know, kiss the creepy uncle, because it, it kind of, it again, papers over – it makes everything comfortable. And it feels, to me it's always felt like a very English thing. It's like, you know, whatever we do, we cannot make a fuss. And, and the importance on, that's driven into us from a very young age of just making sure that the men in the situation don't feel uncomfortable, are not made to feel uncomfortable, that you know how hard it is to say, "I'm sorry, I don't want to give you a kiss or a cuddle" as a woman has always bothered me. And then when I started writing the book, I'd just had a son. And I think there's this panic of like, you know, there's...there would be a panic if I had a daughter, because how do you keep her safe? And then there was a panic of like, what if I inadvertently raise someone who harms another person? So yeah, I think for me, that's the monster in the book. And I do love playing with the supernatural. So those ghosts, you know, the, the old sort of idea of a monster in the background. But yeah, I think showing... it's impossible to show the monster of toxic masculinity because it is so layered and it's in the air we breathe, and it, so it just looks like a perfectly decent looking man. So, yeah.

**Peter**

The horror of institutions, the horror of the institutions of education, of church, even of the family or society. And every, everybody in the novel seems perhaps trapped by some reason having to work their way out of this. I like to throw this open a little bit more widely, and particularly to Raman in the first case, because you've written so well about trying to find spaces for queer black bodies. And I love the idea of the Mundair test that you came up with, to, to focus on the representation of people of colour within the theatre world and within television and film in general to make sure that you have, that they are not constantly placed in a frame of whiteness - or a predominately white community. But especially through your poetry, I see largely as a celebration, as well of queer black bodies. How difficult is it to maintain the positivity of celebration?

**Raman**

Actually, I wanted to add that it's not just about the framing of whiteness, you know, it's also about, you know, it's also an assertion of that we can be many things and, you know, including joy. And joy is, is actually hard won by and it's something it's, it's something that's an active process as well, but I've found in my own, own kind of leaning to, leaning in towards it, that I have to maintain it like a buyer. And it needs to be tended to. And yes, certainly there is, you know, there was a negotiation that takes place, that's a – that can be fraught, but I also think that it's a very useful place for a very human conversation. And I think, you know, what, what, whatever I, you know, my work is really about engaging with that conversation with that dialogue and certainly, it's not just about taking up space, it's about kind of showing how we can... this, this other self can also refract and present and reflect back some, an element of beauty that maybe you've not seen, you know, that you've not actually been aware of, and that actually, I can offer, that it's not just trauma. You know, that it's like, you know, I'm not just all trauma, you know, I have other things to offer you, so can we make space for that, and also, maybe you could learn about your own, specifically here...we're talking about island, island identities and cultures and communities. Maybe you could learn from me. And obviously, you know what I'm thinking about this conversation in relation to Shetland. I'm also thinking about, you know, I'm living on a, part of a wider island the you know, the UK. I'm also very interested in language and how it holds all that – particularly Shetland dialect. And when I first moved to Shetland, I was really struck by the conversations I was having with local folk, and particularly, you know, probably the baby boomer generation, who spoke about, you know, being at school and literally having Shetland dialects sort of, you know, hit out of them, you know – physical using physical corporal punishment. And, you know, they were, they were encouraged to knap, which is like the Shetland word for kind of taking on an English tone and identity. And, and I found that really fascinating because that's, and actually viscerally you know, moved me because that's very much been my experience of learning English as a second language. And, you know, my, the way that I negotiated, you know, first went for my, my first when I landed in the UK, I landed in Manchester, and kind of negotiating that lived experience and how, you know, my, my languages that I came with, you know, Punjabi, Hindi were dislodged and in, in a frantic kind of bid from my family, and I suppose myself, you know, although I was a child, I filled it up with these knapped words, you know, with this knappin. And so I really, really related to that, and I wanted to read a wee, a wee piece from my second collection. And in the, sort of, preface, so I, I write 'you swallowed my tongue. You left me fantin without voice. Now I look for my tongue in other people's mouths'. Fantin is such a beautiful and again, you know, it's, it's, it's a, it's a Shetland word that's, that I feel has such an abundance because it's not just about fantin it can be used to stay that you're you know, you're you're so famished – you're so lacking in, like in, in nourishment, not just the food kind, but in any kind you know and it can also mean kind of like an emptiness, you know, like, like being almost ghost-like and I, and I just loved the quality of that.

Dis toon is no big anoff fur dee ta loss desel. Ta hadd dee dis toon is no big anoft. But hit's peerie enoff ta echo aa dy past lives; scremmin tae every coarner, remindin dee du wis wance wan o' da promisin eens. Du lassoed dy tongue shaepit him intae a "sooth mooth" an knapped desel raa, dy lugs prunkit fir approval. Du becam da wan destined ta geng far Noo, riggit in black lik a Reservoir Dug, du veils desel in da English wroucht, wry wit, while aroond dee shadows hing fae nooses. So that Shetland poem for me captures a, really, you know, I wanted to write about what is lost as well, in the knappin, you know, we lose a sense of ourselves and we kill a sense of ourselves. So, in the Shetland dialect, I'm talking about, you know, this image of, of bodies hanging from nooses, you know, in Shetland, and because those are almost the sacrifice, in order to, to be a modernity is to, kind of, lose part of self. And, and I'm also kind of creating that connecting medium and saying, I understand that, that loss, you know, can you recognise in me, and I'm coming here that I recognise your pain. So, perhaps we have a connecting medium.

**Peter**

I love the line in that poem, that the, the, the toon is peerie enoff ta echo aa dy past lives that, precisely because of the space of it, you have all of yourself there with you, for better or worse.

**Raman**

Aye, totally, and that could be suffocating and that can be liberating as well, it can be a constant reminder of a grounding mechanism, you know, and particularly in terms of the natural world. But it can also for some, you know, the, the, what I also really love about Shetland and, you know, Harry Josephine was sort of also alluding to it, I felt was like, yes, this wider, you know, the sea roads and the history and the fact that actually, it was a centering place, you know, it was a place that many travellers pass through. And from that it's been dislodged to the periphery, you know, and, and that place in the periphery, you know, what does that mean, to your sense of identity, when, you know, before you were a centre, you were essential to the bigger identity of colonial self that, you know, that Great Britain was, you know, entertaining itself with, and now, it's, you know, it's, there's almost like an, an inner fight within itself, but like, you know, wanting freedom, like, there's, there's ideas in Shetland of, you know, actually, we're more Norwegian, you know. We should have, like more kinship with the Norse, and, and Norway, and there's also this kind of sense of, actually, we, we, we didn't have a connection with the Scottish, Scottish mainland, really, you know, that, that, that our needs and wants are different. A lot of this interests me because I think this, this conflicted space is a fruitful space, because it's... we, we need to... it really, it's about kind of rooting and digging down and find drilling down and finding, you know, what, what are, what is it that we want to be, you know, what is it that we're aiming to, what is lost? What is it that we yearning for? What is it that that's being fulfilled by being part of the bigger Scottish projects or, you know, whatever it is? And I, and I like, yeah, the idea of the poem for me is that, yeah, you could be in this space, and it can be both something that enriches you and comforts you and at the same time, it could strip you raw.

**Peter**

I think the question of what it is that we're yearning for is a fascinating one. And Harry Josephine in Deep Wheel Orcadia you talk about Orcadia as a dwining piece, somewhere that is decaying. And somewhere that you could escape from, or somewhere that you could choose to learn to love and find the intricacy of it. And this could be a source of anxiety, the, the idea of decline. But for me, this is a, a joyful poem. And especially there, there's the fantastic, wonderfully erotic scene between Astrid and Darling where you use the full force of the Orcadian to have this love scene, and I was almost, almost clapping the way through...oh great, the words. I was wondering if there was a mix of linguistic joy and erotic joy and bodily joy at the heart of this.

**Harry Josephine**

What a lovely question. I've never..not.. been asked that one before. But yeah, I mean, language is very embodied for me and I, it's, I'm a poet because I love, because I love language and I mean, I love it physically. Like I like how language moves in my body. I like how language makes me feel and I think that you have an interest in, in language and its rhythmic effects – it's what, what's speaking that the magic of effective speaking. That combined within the interest in the language that I grew up with – Orkney – and its relationship to Scots literature to, to kind of make this work. Yeah, yeah of interest for me. And that, the yearning is, is like at the, at the centre, at the centre of the book. And it's a yearning – for me it's a yearning for the language and yearning, a yearning for the language to keep going – to exist, to go into the future. And the book is about the struggle, the yearning for home and the struggle to be in a home – both if you're, if you're from a homely place and leave it can you get back to it? And if you're not from a homely place, and you come there, can you make a home there? And those are the, those are the questions – and that's a question that I would ask if the, the language as well as of the place – Orkney, Orcadia – that's, that's kind of, that's kind of what's at the heart of it. I should say as well. It, it's nice to hear about knappin – and the Orkney word for that is chantan. And I always thought that the difference between the knap – which is a knock and a clip – and the chant which is this performance, that Shetland folk knap in English, in Orkney folk chant in English. I always thought that got to the difference between Orkney and Shetland in quite an important way. And they're both things that we do that, that as you said, that dislocate us from home. And the things that I do, both in Orkney and in English, that dislocate me from that language and home. So, the book's about that – that complicated yearning, I suppose.

**Raman**

I'm really interested in what you were saying, Harry Josephine, about language and embodiment, you know, and very much something that intrigues and interests me and how, you know, you're pointing out about chantan and knappin – how close they are, and how, how performative, you know, they are those words. But actually, in terms of sound and embodiment, how different they are. And the violence of knappin, and the softness of chantan of almost like, this is something splendid that we're doing, we're all chantan together. And this idea of like, yes, we're all knappin together, it takes on a very different tone. You know, and, and, and I like the way that some, the language, the dialect embodies almost, like the – what's the word – the falsehood, you know, the fact that that there is this, there is the crossing there, and you make a choice.

**Peter**

I'd like to move this on to, to bring Evie in at this point as well, partly because it's the question of yearning for what kind of world we would actually like to have and how that's embodied in language. And I think this is tentatively explored at the end of The Bass Rock as well. It's the possibility of telling ourselves slightly different stories, or the possibility of shaping the world in slightly different ways. But this has come after a novel with an awful lot of, well, death in it – death and murder. Is there optimism? Is there a possibility that there is a better world? A utopia complex or other?

**Evie**

I mean it is, like you say – it's got a high body count. But one of the things that sustained me writing it was the humour of the women in there. And, and the women swapping their stories, listening to each other and believing each other. So, I think, when I was about three quarters of the way through writing it when 'me too' happened, and, and that like watching that movement around the world, and how it just produced conversations between men and women and women and women. And the great power that, you know, talking about something that had happened to you that you didn't even realise maybe was a particularly bad thing. And then it turns out that everybody, everybody has been masturbated on the tube or, or had their drink spiked – or you know, it becomes this pandemic and, and you see the size of it and being able to see the edges of it through people telling their story, I think is, is an amazing thing. And I think my sort of great hope that I felt writing the book, was that women trust their intuition more since movements like 'me too' and allow themselves to act on it. And, and I feel like intuition is really women's witchiness. That's, that's their – that's their weapon that they have had to forge because life has been dangerous. And so, we've inherited intuition and that feeling of something's not quite right, so I'm going to act. I've, I've never felt it as strongly as I have in the last five years. And, and I feel huge support from women as well, which I hadn't –for some reason – thought about before. Before the stories were all out there and available.

**Peter**

Raman, can I pull you in here?

**Raman**

So just want to I really, I really, really feel what Evie is saying, I really agree with everything that she's said. And I wanted to sort of add, I suppose that, you know, I think women have always believed in their intuition – it's more that they, they were gaslit around it. And that's what's happening now is that the shifting around our lived experience, and it being recognised, and, you know, in a nuanced way is, is the, the most powerful thing that I think, you know, has taken place in the last few years. And, and it's not just around gendered violence, it's also around racial violence, as well. And all of that is, it makes - it really, you know, talking about embodied language, once we start recognised lived experience, it means that the language can have more meaning as well when we talk about our experiences. And that's really what I wanted to draw to the fore here, which is, you know, I think we're all writing things that are, you know, really, really important and offer something about the, the world that we live in and specifically, we we're tying this to islands, about island experience, but just - but universally as well, I think it's about actually taking this embodied language and giving it another, another connecting medium, another way of fulfilling itself.

**Peter**

Harry Josephine you've got a minute, because we're coming close to our time.

**Harry Josephine**

Okay, well, I'll try. I'll try and get it in briefly. I suppose, as well as, like, endorsing and feeling the importance of, of, of what both the other speakers have said, like – something to add into that, for me, is just belonging within this moment of cultural dialogue around gendered violence, belonging to a population whose experiences of gendered violence continue to be excluded from that, that collectivity is quite defining for me that, that in terms of what gets spoken about, and who gets spoken about – and whose experiences of violence are recognised. Being frequently outside of that – often in quite dramatic ways – trans people's experience of gendered violence, both trans women and trans men is, is often still not in that conversation. And that I think, ties me into this question of hope, utopia, and that whenever there is a burst of utopian hope, or there is a movement towards something better, the existence of that often excludes and includes at the same time, but it makes some things possible – and some things impossible which, I think, is something that's in my book as well, and something I'm always wrestling with, as a utopian, and as someone who wants to be part of those collective experiences, and is sometimes outside of those collective experiences. I suppose that's, that's what islands are about as well.

**Raman**

Yeah, no, absolutely. I really, I really feel what you're saying. And obviously, you know, the intersections of being, you know, if you're a person of colour and a trans person, you know, or, you know, whatever it is, it just layers and layers and layers and, yeah, very much who, who gets to speak – who could, who's can speak for Shetland in the Shetland lived experience? It's not usually someone like me, you know and, and who gets taken seriously in that conversation and dialogue as well. And I think that extends out to not just localised island identities, but just actually, you know, wider spaces.

**Peter**

I think my utopian version of an island would be one that is one in transit that allows for conversations to be had that allows every voice to be included, but I also am aware of the ways that islands can quickly become insular, closing spaces. So, I think it's something we have to fight for at every point is to allow these different flows of communication between them. And in islands to, to have every voice represented, to have the sense that trans people, black people, queer people are allowed voices in the Scottish island spaces, and the broader discourse of Scotland as well, which is not always the case. I'm gonna have to bring it to an end there. I'm sorry, this has been a fantastic discussion. I'd like to thank so much personally, and for everybody listening, Raman, Harry Josephine, and Evie. And you can't hear them but I assume there should be a huge round of applause happening out there in the internet. And this Book Week Scotland event has been brought to you by the Scottish Book Trust. The Scottish Book Trust is a national charity that believes everyone living in Scotland should have equal access to books. And if you've enjoyed this event, please consider sharing your love of reading with others by making a donation at scottishbooktrust.com. Thank you very much.