

Nicola Griffith interview transcript

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SPEAKERS

Mary Anne Mohanraj, Nicola Griffith

Mary Anne Mohanraj 00:00

Hello, everybody, I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj behind the camera, and I'm here for the Speculative Literature Foundation interviewing my former teacher from Clarion, Nicola Griffith. Nicola is well known for many of her works. Her early books, *Ammonite* and *Snow Lips*, *Slow River*, I would say, were groundbreaking queer texts in the science fiction and fantasy field. Just generally, in fact, groundbreaking. But today we're going to talk about some of her more recent work. We're going to talk about *Hild*, and *So Lucky*, and her new book *Spear*, which is coming out in April 2022. So starting with *Hild*. So *Hild* is set in the seventh century, correct? Okay. And I did read this a few years ago, so correct me if I get things wrong. I had a few questions about the book, which I would say, for anyone who hasn't read it, it is the story of a young girl who is growing up and being sort of cultivated, trained to be a seer. Is that fair?

Nicola Griffith 01:13

Kind of, yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 01:15

Maybe if you have a one or two-line description, that might be a better starting point.

Nicola Griffith 01:19

It begins with the young child. She's called *Hild*. She's three years old, and begins in wood. And then she finds out her father has died. Turns out her father is basically the atheling, next in line for the throne, but he's in exile, because the country is just at war. And he's just been poisoned. And so suddenly, *Hild*, her mother, and her sister are in pretty deep shit. They are going to be hounded and pursued. And so they have to immediately make friends with powerful people. And so *Hild*'s mother trains her to appear to be a seer. *Hild* really is just very smart and very observant. [Mary Anne Mohanraj:] right. [Nicola Griffith:] Very politically astute. And she uses her observations to make what seem like predictions.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 02:17

I almost feel like if this book were just coming out, I would have said, don't- this was a really fascinating kind of slow reveal as you're working through the book. So, hope we haven't spoiled it for anyone. I don't think so. Because even though Hild is in a sort of very tense situation at the start of the book, the stakes are clearly really high. I think part of what makes this book so remarkable is the pacing of it. You build this world in tremendous detail, with such an immersion in nature and the environment, that I think that's perhaps the thing I found most unusual about the book. And I think in genre fiction, we often have such a focus on pacing, such a sort of commercial sense of, oh, you must keep the eyeball cakes coming, you have to like have something dramatic happening on every page. So the reader keeps turning the pages. I never wanted to stop turning pages, right? So even though in some sense, the pacing was very slow. So could you talk a little about how you decided to write the book in this way and that pacing in particular, and maybe the sense of nature and immersion?

Nicola Griffith 03:45

Yes. I did a lot of research for this book, mainly because I fell in love with the notion of the seventh century and trying to figure out who Hild was, how, in what was used to be called the Dark Ages, people have this vision of the Dark Ages as very primitive, where might was right. And women were basically chattels and all rape toys. They were just playthings of powerful men. And yet there is an abbey in the north of England, that Hild founded in the seventh century. And she's still known for that. So those two pictures of this era, they just didn't fit together. And so I had to figure out how this woman could become, who she became, how she could become so powerful that even 1400 years later, she was well known. And I wasn't sure how to do that. And so what I had to do was all the research: flora, fauna, building techniques, jewelry, clothes, textile work, etc. And I used all that to essentially build the seventh century. And then I put Hild in and watched how she reacted to it and how she grew. And I basically learned through Hild, how to tell the story. And I always begin with nature. I love nature, and setting is my primary joy as a writer. And how do you tell? Do you want me to get ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj 04:21

Oh, that's really interesting.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 04:47

As much as you like.

Nicola Griffith 05:21

OK. What my work basically does, in Hild in particular, is, I call it "norming the other," and I do that through creating narrative empathy. And I do that using focalized heterotopia, that is to say, to take my focalizing character and create a world for them that is a heterotopia for them. So, for example, Hild is queer, but she never, ever has any stress, harrassment, punishment for being queer. So for her, from the queer perspective is heterotypical.

Nicola Griffith 06:26

I actually wrote my PhD thesis on this, I can send you a copy.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 06:29

I'd love to see a copy.

Nicola Griffith 06:32

So nature is a big part of that, because one of the ways to create empathy is to essentially immerse the reader inside this character, except it's actually the other way around: what I do is I get the reader to create the character inside them, so that they are living the character's life. They feel what the character feels, they see what she sees, they smell what she smells, because there are some basic human emotions, things like fear, lust, excitement, disgust, that are common to all people everywhere. And so if you can get the reader to feel those things, you are bringing them closer to the character. And so I use nature to do that. I put Hild in this place, and it also helps the reader understand how the world works, because a child is learning how her own world works. The way all children do. So it was necessarily kind of stateliness. And it was easy for me to do that with this book. Because it was not a genre book. So it's published as a literary novel by a literary press, and slightly different.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 08:04

That's right.

Nicola Griffith 08:05

And as it was, they actually crunched down the apparent page count. I mean, they didn't crunch down the amount of words, but they used thinner paper and smaller typesetting because they were terrified of it looking like a big fat fantasy. Because there's actually no fantasy in it, even though it really feels like it's fantastic.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 08:28

It does feel fantastical. And I think partly, part of the feel is the sort of ways in which she convinces people she's a seer. But I think more than that, you know, a lot of the joy that people get out of reading fantasy and science fiction has often to do with the world-building, with being taken to a different place and immersed in that; and that comes across so strongly here, right? So it's really effective, I think.

Nicola Griffith 09:05

And I loved it. I loved writing that book. I had the best time.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 09:09

I think people, people have generally loved reading it. So I think I- my friends all rave about it as well. Okay, I want to cover so much in 45 minutes. Let me ... we may touch on Hild again. But let me - and just to remind myself, the real life person she was based on who, I gather, we knew almost nothing about her actual life. Is St. Hildegard...?

Nicola Griffith 09:36

St. Hilda of Whitby.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 09:38

St. Hilda of Whitby, who was different from St. Hildegard von Bingen.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 09:42

Yes. Several hundred years between them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 09:44

Yes, St. Hilda of Whitby. I just wanted to clarify that. Okay, so Hild came out in 2013. If I'm remembering right, and I think your next book came in 2018, a very different kind of book, So Lucky. So I, I don't know how you'd characterize it to me; it ended up feeling a little like a thriller. Is that fair?

Mary Anne Mohanraj 10:17

My agent describes it as a thriller of the body.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 10:21

Yeah.

Nicola Griffith 10:21

I have no idea really what that means.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 10:24

Well, it has a little bit of maybe body horror to it in some sense, and kind of exploring the boundaries of what that means as a genre. It's not a book I expected from you, right? in terms of - it is fast-paced, and it is tense, and it's tonally so different from Hild.

Nicola Griffith 10:46

Very different. It's the only book I've ever written that's about an issue. Most of the other things I do to focalize heterotopia. So whether we're talking about disability, or queerness, or being a woman, my main characters that in those senses, is heterotopia; So Lucky is actually about what it is like to be disabled. So in that sense, it's really different to all my other work.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 11:19

And she becomes disabled at the start of the book and is struggling with that, right? So this isn't someone who has lived with it for many years and is-

Nicola Griffith 11:28

Brand new.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 11:29

Right. And so, you know, so your protagonist there, she is, I believe she's like, at the beginning of the book, she's married, she's heading a large AIDS organization. She's just stable work, stable life, stable health, and then she's diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And, fairly quickly in the book, her life falls apart, her wife leaves her I think, and she leaves her work. But then there are also these threats, there seems to be this looming violence at the same time that she's dealing with her own body. So maybe if you could just talk a little about what you were kind of trying to do with this, if that makes sense.

Nicola Griffith 12:16

This book is not about me. It's not an autobiography, anyway, and yet there are many parallels. So I used to teach women's self defense, study martial arts, I was very physically competent. And when I got MS, and gradually started to lose my physical competence, two things happened. One, I realized how vulnerable - I felt vulnerable for the first time, in my whole life. And that was really scary. And it was really brought home to me one day. I was, I was really tired. And I just turned on the TV. In the days when people watched TV, and it was CNN, and they were doing this story about a guy and I forget which state, in a wheelchair who had been tortured to death in his own home by two men, and that stuck in my head, stuck in my head for years. And then the second thing that happened to me, when I started to become impaired, was realizing just how badly treated crips are. And also more to the point how badly I regarded myself. I had this massive amount of internalized ableism, really, a huge amount in a way that I've never been sexist, or homophobic. You know, I never had a problem being a woman or being queer. But I had a problem being disabled. I did not - I didn't dive into it and accept that I [inaudible]; I'm like, Oh, this sucks. This sucks. If there had been a cure, I'd go bang, I would I would do that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 14:16

It's not a parallel, it's not the same thing at all: but I had cancer and I'm fine now but I went through chemo and surgery and radiation, and towards the tail end of chemo, at one point I tried to walk down the street like go for a walk around the block with my husband, and had to turn back after half a block because I didn't think I could make it all the way. I had a really hard time accepting help. I had a really hard time admitting that I had limits that my body just was not capable and might not be capable for some time of doing things, and of course there's so much uncertainty, you know, you have some sense that chemo will end and you should get your capabilities back. But then there's the surgery and the radiation. And there's just a lot you don't know when you're going through the process. And of course, always the chance that it might come back. And so I guess I just don't know whether that seems similar to you. But it was interesting to me, because if any of my friends had been going through cancer treatment, I would have absolutely been wanting to help them, and wanting them to accept that help, and frustrated if they didn't want to accept help. And so it was a little jarring to be in this position where I knew intellectually that it was fine to let people help me, and yet I really didn't want to, and I was very angry about it.

Nicola Griffith 15:48

I had no problem accepting help. The problem I had, was being perceived as a poor, sad little cripple. And that was because of my own internalized ableism. I used to look at people with canes or crutches or in a wheelchair thing, their life must be so horrible. And so I thought people were looking at me that way. And in fact, many of them were, because most of the world is quite ableist. And I really wanted to talk about that in So Lucky. And I also didn't want the main character Mara's distress to be directed inwards. And so that's why I made the metaphor really concrete. I put the stress and fear outside. And that's where the whole thrill of it all comes from.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 16:51

Okay, that makes a lot of sense. Yeah, I can see that. So, yeah, because it is this sort of parallel structure, right, where she is experiencing these things were very, very close to her in her experience and her frustrations and anger. And then at the same time, there's this external threat and thriller plot,

which we don't know how seriously to take it either, right? And I think, as readers, I thought that was very interesting that I was unclear, like, is this is she actually in danger? And it just put us in a place of uncertainty that is similar to, or at least echoing, a lot of the uncertainty she would have been feeling.

Nicola Griffith 17:39

Absolutely, I mean, she was afraid. And so she needed something specific to be afraid about. But really, she was just afraid of becoming less and less able, and needing more and more help. And, of course, I was certainly afraid when I heard that CNN story, I thought, wow, yeah, people really do single out the vulnerable people. I used to teach women self defense, and one of the things I taught was, how not to walk as though you feel vulnerable. Because there's so many studies showing how predators work this way. They look, but it's just like a lion, right? Or a lioness because the lions never actually bothered to hunt, and it's just like a lion, going after a herd of antelope, they don't go for the biggest they go for the little one, right pick off the weak first. And so Mara immediately assumed she would be targeted as a crip. And that's where all that came from.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 18:55

I have a 14-year-old daughter right now. And I was talking to her about self-defense classes. And we were thinking about taking some this summer and then I just learned that our high school, all of the sophomores get self-defense classes as part of PE, which is terrific.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 19:13

So that's coming, which is great. But it's one of those things where I've never taken a class. But you said that you don't feel- you didn't feel afraid or vulnerable right before MS. And I also, like in my head, I think I'm six feet tall. So I walk alone in the city at night. Sometimes I'll be on our local mom's mailing list, and people will be saying, Do you think it's safe for me to take the train at 9 pm into the city, and it's so interesting to me because it would not have occurred to me that it might be an issue, and so I don't know, I'm not sure what I'm going for here, I guess there's an interesting intersection of gender concerns around vulnerability, safety, strength, capability, and in how that intersects with disability perhaps. Right. Did it feel very challenging to work so much with material from your own life, as compared to the earlier books? I was just talking yesterday with one of the other writers here - we're at ICFA, an academic conference in Florida at the moment. And she was saying that as much as sometimes it can be valuable to write from your own experience. And we have certainly a big press in publishing right now for more Own Voices representation, which is, I think, a good thing. There's also a way in which you shouldn't feel obliged to write about your own experience, right?

Nicola Griffith 19:13

Oh that's cool.

Nicola Griffith 19:22

You should not feel obliged to monetize your own trauma.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 21:07

Right; that's a great way of putting it - right. So when you came to writing this book about MS and taking it on, so directly, maybe you could talk a little bit just like what led you to that.

Nicola Griffith 21:20

I really didn't want to do it. I really didn't want to do it. But it wouldn't go away. It was one of those--. Okay, let me explain that. I've written Hild, it was out. And I spent a whole year touring with Hild. I did a hardcover tour in the US, I did a hardcover tour in the UK. And then when I got back from that, I did a paperback tour. I mean, I was exhausted. And I had already started the next Hild book and started a new one. And I was just really tired. And so one of my classic behaviors is avoidance behavior. Here's this big thing I should be working on. Let's do something else. And so I started a Ph.D.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 21:20

I didn't know that.

Nicola Griffith 21:31

I got only halfway through that. And I thought, you know, I need to avoid this too. And so I wrote So Lucky. And then I went back to the Ph.D., and then went back to England. So it was like this nested avoidance behavior.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 22:27

My general feeling when I don't know what to do with my life is to go back to school and collect another degree. And sometimes in the middle of a degree program, like I was doing my Ph.D., and partway through, was trying to write this book, and I thought I just don't know enough Sri Lankan history or politics. I should go get an MA in political history, and then I'll be able to write this book, preferably. I managed to not do that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 22:51

Yeah, I mean, I have never actually - I didn't have a degree of any kind.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 22:56

Oh, really?

Nicola Griffith 22:56

Yeah. No bachelor's, no master's, nothing.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 23:02

[laughter] I'm laughing only because Nicola is so brilliant. It's, it's startling to me. So I just want like my university, they hand you a couple of honorary degrees at this point.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 23:12

So basically I did a Ph.D. [inaudible]. So I went from no qualifications whatsoever to PhD in one year. And I had to learn so much. But it was great. And it was just the perfect removal from Meanwood for a while. But actually doing the Ph.D. is what made it possible for me to write So Lucky, because it was doing the Ph.D. that taught me how I work and what I write. And I had been avoiding writing this story, this MS ableism story for a long time, because I did not- I couldn't figure out why it felt so hinky to me. I don't - that's not what I do. I can't do that. And doing a Ph.D. taught me what I actually do in my work,

generally speaking. And so then I understood what the problem with So Lucky was, it was actually dealing with disability, which made everything very, very clear. It's like, okay, you need to write this story. People need to understand how ableism works. There's- and I just can't avoid it anymore. But now at least I understand why it's going to be so hard for me. Why it's going to be not like anything else I've ever done. And not like anything I will ever do again. I'm never going to write a book like that again, I just had to get out.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 23:40

So interesting. There is a - I went to - I think it was, MLA Modern Language Association conference two decades ago. I was a little baby writer and I went to a panel on South Asian literature. And so I was attending the panel and all the panelists were up there, and they were talking about tropes in South Asian diaspora literature. And one of them said, Well, you just have to write your arranged marriage point book at some point and get it out of your system. Just, you know, until you write it, it's, it's just going to keep poking at you. So just write it and then you can write all the other books; which is pretty much what I did with Bodies in Motion. And it did clear the way. Okay, let's talk a little bit about the new book. Now you keep referring to it as a different name than the one that I- so you're saying Meanwood? Merewood?

Nicola Griffith 25:46

Meanwood is the second Hild book.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 25:50

Okay. And the book that's come out now, Spear, is not part of that trilogy?

Nicola Griffith 25:54

No it's completely different.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 25:56

Oh, I misunderstood. Okay, so, because I thought- I knew that Hild was supposed to be the first book of a trilogy. So Meanwood, we're going to then continue Saint Hilda's story.

Nicola Griffith 26:07

Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 26:08

Okay. And Spear is someone else entirely. I looked at it. I've pre-ordered, but I don't have it yet. In a few weeks, it will come to me. I was reading the description. I was like, this this doesn't sound like Hild. Okay. It's different characters. So maybe just tell us a little. What's this book about and what's exciting to you?

Mary Anne Mohanraj 26:30

Spear is set in sixth-century Wales. It's about a young girl who's raised in a cave by her mother, who is traumatized and hiding. And the girl is nameless for a very long time. And eventually, she gets her name from her mother because her mother has not named her because, as the mother says, naming

calls, and she has a very good reason to be hiding. But she finally gives in, gives a name to this girl, and the name is [Bere Hoot-mir], which means hard spear or spear enduring. But which becomes [Petatirck] who of course - it's spelt "Paratur," it's pronounced Paratir. And that's basically the beginning of the- what is now usually known as the Percival stories - so Paratir, in my story is a woman - a girl then a woman. And so it's essentially a queer Arthurian retelling. And I have loved the matter of Britain, since I could read.

Nicola Griffith 28:30

And I never, ever wanted to write one. Because it's a national origin story. And so inevitably, it's bound up with all those difficult manifest destiny, nationalist, crap, all that stuff. And it's always about straight, white, able-bodied, rich men. But I love the idea of Camelot, because it was always meant to be where people fought for justice and truth and a better world. And I wish Camelot had existed - but more to the point I wish it had people like me in it. And so I just thought, Well, fuck this. I'm going to put people like me in it. And so in my Camelot, there are people of color, disabled people, women people, queer people, polyamorous people, you know, and I cover the Grail legend, the Percival story. The Merlin Nimue story, and the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot story all in 45,000 words.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 28:38

Me, too.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 28:51

That's a slim book, and that's a lot that you've packed in.

Nicola Griffith 29:18

It's meant to be a short story. And then it grew and it grew and grew and grew.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 29:25

Well, I'm thrilled. I love the Arthurian stories. I at one point thought about becoming an Arthurian scholar, and have always loved them and I love seeing the changes that happen. I wrote a paper at one point about Guinevere through the ages, and I was looking at how she's depicted by Mallory, then by Tennyson. Tennyson makes me crazy. There's this whole scene where she's in the convent at the end and Arthur comes to visit her and she made her face of darkness from her lord. She's like down on the ground, with her hair spread out. And I was like, this is not my Guinevere! And my Arthur would not let her do this either. You know this, and then eventually we get to T.H. White, who I love his take on the three of them. And actually Guy Gavriel Kay, and what he does with Fionavar was very healing for me.

Nicola Griffith 30:22

I haven't actually read them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 30:24

Oh, yeah, it's lovely; it's just lovely. The main- it's funny. The Fionavar tapestry is one of Kay's earliest works. It's a trilogy. It's not as I would say, probably as polished as some of his later work. But it starts with, you know, five college students from our world going to this fantasy world. But one of them, it turns out, is Guinevere reborn. And later in the trilogy Arthur is woken and called to the battle. And they

also raise Lancelot and it's heartbreaking initially, and then he gives him such a lovely ending. Okay, I don't want to spoil it.

Nicola Griffith 31:16

But I will tell you that Spear has a great ending. There's no one that we really care for has a bad time. But lots of people die.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 31:30

I don't know a lot about Percival, I realize. Is he the one with the questing beast? No, that's one of the other knights?

Nicola Griffith 31:36

I think so. I mean, it depends which version you're talking about. But no my- essentially, you don't need to know a thing about Arthurian literature in this book. And in fact I would say most, many people will get two-thirds of the way through it before they realize, because it feels a bit more like Hild. In that way, it immerses you in the world of a sixth-century world.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 32:05

So well, I think given that maybe my last question for you, I could talk to you forever, but I'm going to let you go and pack soon. But I'd love for you to talk a little about how you did the historical research for both Hild and Spear. We have a lot of young writers who are newer writers who are likely to be watching this. And, you know, I'm not sure I would know where to start with that kind of research.

Nicola Griffith 32:33

I worked my way back through historiography. And by that what I mean is, when I was trying to find out about Hild, all I could find were a couple of little tourist pamphlets at the abbey ruin. And I was like, this is great. Now I want to go find the book, I need to find, for example, a novel about it. There aren't any. I thought, well, I need to find a biography. There wasn't one. So I thought, well, I don't even really know much about that time. So then I got an old English history book. It's a pretty famous one written -- I don't know -- in 1944. But it was published in 1944. So it's very behind the academic research, but it was a beginning. It was kind of like starting with Wikipedia in that way. You get the summary. And I read it, and there really wasn't very much about Hild's era in it, really not much at all, mostly because, in that time, very few people were literate and certainly not in that part of Britain. And so then I went to the only source we have for Hild and that is Bede, and he has five pages total in big letters, lots of whitespace about Hild and almost all of that is hagiography. So it is just all bullshit. Okay, all we know, actually all we think we know about Hild is that she was the daughter of Hereric and Breguswith. She was baptized when she was 13 and joined the church when she was 33 and died when she was 66. Her sister was called Hereswith and that is all we know. We know nothing, right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj 34:51

Right. I think that question of hagiography is interesting me in part, you know so when I was trying to do research for some of my own work set in Sri Lanka, I read this book, an essay in the Presence of the Past. And I'm going to blank on all the titles now, because this was back in 2002 or something like that, that I read it. But the book it was in was The Presence of the Past, the essay was talking about how in

Sri Lanka, we have close to 2000 years of recorded quote-unquote, history, right. But it's recorded by these Buddhist monks. And so not only is it, you know, biased in the way that anything might generally be biased by people's perceptions. But also, they were often warring like they were fighting for control of different sects were fighting for control and power. And so as another group came to power, they would rewrite the history, quote, unquote, history. And that happened over and over and over again. So you know, I might say that in the fifth century, this particular king, you know, managed to conquer all of the Tamil, you know, small kings around, and ruled the entire island. And that might be true, that might not be true, it was certainly a story that would have served the monks of that era, and possibly the monks that follow and it becomes so difficult to parse it out. And yet, and this, this goes a little to what you were saying, I guess, about the matter of Britain and Arthurian nationalism, and how it supports that in Sri Lanka. This history gets used in the service of Sinhala nationalism, right? And is part of what you know, fuels tensions during the conflict, etc. And so it's tricky material to work with, in that sense, I maybe with seventh century didn't have quite the same issues.

Nicola Griffith 37:02

Ah well, the biggest issue is that what we did have was written by a monk trained in the whole classics tradition. And, of course, you know, women's place in the tradition, and certainly, especially early Christianity was still very Greek- and Jewish-influenced. And there are many gender issues.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 37:33

I was working on a video game set, Sigiriya, in the fifth century, Sri Lanka, and there are still these frescoes on the wall that I've gone to see of these temple maidens, or royal maidens. The King's concubines, presumably, but they're bare-breasted. And so the monks have destroyed most of them. Earlier monks, and the ones that remain, were the ones that were very hard to reach without risking life and limb back in the day. And so it's tremendously frustrating, you know, and you're trying to get a sense of what were these women's lives, like, how much power might they've had, and your cues are in the clothes they wear and the jewelry they wear and the way they're represented, and the positions that they may be in, whether they have servants, etc. And much of that has just been wiped away. And we just don't know.

Nicola Griffith 38:34

Exactly. That's the problem. And we have, we just have no information. And so going back to the research question, I worked my way through, I started with something written in the 40s. And then in the bibliography, I would find other things. And then I would go look at the rest of those people's work. So I traced through footnotes and bibliographies, and gradually worked my way up to very-recent scholarship. And then even better, I discovered early career researchers, blogs, and then I was dealing with the people who were actually doing new stuff. So you can pose questions on blogs. And so they didn't know me from Eve, and so I was just like, I, maybe they thought I was a perfect [inaudible]. I don't know. And I would just ask a question, and they would take it seriously. Or, actually, most often, they were so terrified of actually committing an opinion that they will say we don't know that. And so I actually started developing little tricks. So for example, there was one point where I wanted to know what seventh century English people thought and felt and dealt how they dealt with dogs. As I said, so dogs and then like, we don't know, we have no idea. I said, okay, so you know if he'll pet a Pekinese? No, no, there were no Pekinese. Ah, so you do know something. What else do you know? And

eventually, you know, he would get talking and they would just be guessing and I was fine with that. I just wanted informed guesses, and then eventually I started to disprove them and say, oh, no, it would not go this way, here's how it would have gone, I worked it out, right? That sounds great, you know, I would go to places have a pint with someone I, you know, I would go to a convention, I go visit my family in the UK. And I would know some medievalists close by and we'd go to the pub and have a pint and just talk because no one- they were much more willing to risk opinion when it was not visible to anybody else.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 40:53

Of course, right, especially if they're early career and, you know, they're concerned about reputation, and so on. And it's always a little nerve-wracking, saying even when I talk about Sri Lankan history material on here, and I keep wanting to like, wait, let me pause and go check my citations and make sure I'm giving you the right details.

Nicola Griffith 41:14

But I ended up basically doing original research. Certainly, for me, one of the things I've spent a lot of time on is solving battles, there are certain battles that occur in a couple of years in the 630s, that make no sense. So that couldn't, shouldn't have happened. So how and why did it happen?

Mary Anne Mohanraj 41:41

Now, that's interesting.

Nicola Griffith 41:41

So I went and researched the typography and the weapons, and then I've worked out how it happened, why it was called that, and why it went that way. I mean, obviously, I'll never publish any of that, except in the story of the novel, because I'm not a historian. But I love- I think in a different life, I could have-

Mary Anne Mohanraj 42:02

You could have been, yeah.

Nicola Griffith 42:03

I really enjoy it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 42:05

You can always, you know, give your notes to somebody who's working on it, and they might incorporate it. So you might give them a little bit of a jump start on something, or collaborate, you know, co-author something. All right. Well, I've kept you my allotted 45 minutes. This was so wonderful Nicola. I feel it was such a privilege to be your student.

Nicola Griffith 42:33

Yeah, I'm really glad. I don't do a lot of teaching anymore. I mean, I would if I was asked to, but I don't like - not really a fan of Zoom teaching. I sometimes have a bit of a hard time with screens.

Nicola Griffith 42:45

Yeah. So but you know, I especially love it when I've actually managed to help somebody. That's part of the joy of it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 42:46

It's challenging.

Mary Anne Mohanraj 43:00

Well, we're hoping to start doing in-person workshops in Chicago again, soon. We did a few pre-pandemic, and possibly eventually work towards a six-week Clarion-style thing in Chicago. We'll see. That's a few years out, if so. But we would love to have you come teach there. So well, if it happens, we will lead we will be in touch. So thanks again. This was Mary Anne Mohanraj, interviewing Nicola Griffith, author of many books, most recently *Spear* coming out in April 2022. We also talked about *Hild* and *So Lucky* so I recommend you go out and get them all. Thank you.

Nicola Griffith 43:40

Thank you.