

Transcript of The Last Custodian Podcast Episode 1: Mike Carey

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Guest: Mike Carey (MC)

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Introduction:

SL: Hello, and welcome to The Last Custodian podcast. I'm Stephen Lightbown. In this podcast, you'll hear my latest collection of poetry *The Last Custodian* read in full, as well as conversations I've had with other creative people to discuss process, disability in the arts and other topics.

Stephen Lightbown reads from *The Last Custodian*:

Day 1: Bristol

I drink the juice from the tinned peaches.
Gulp down survivor syndrome, ignore
the urge to add cream and lady fingers.
Thinking of dessert doesn't seem right
when I can't smile at you across our table
raised on four yoga blocks. A small ooze
of sugar water escapes from the tin
and settles in my beard. I leave it, fantasise
about an exhausted bee replenishing
itself on my chin. I wipe the sticky residue
away with a grubby hand. I'm so bereft
of contact that the thought of a bee
coming for pleasure, then leaving
to return to the hive, revitalised,
is simply too much.

Day 2: Bristol

Dear [REDACTED],

Your breath used to hibernate in my ear,
then crawl out of the woods to stretch.
I've waited for it to break through
the tree line...

Dear [REDACTED],

You used to sleep so beautifully,
a five-pointed star to curl around...

Dear [REDACTED],

From the window it looks like the world
has ended. I haven't seen anyone in weeks...

Dear [REDACTED],

You gave up work to bring me home,
nurturing this vegetable patch in a bucket
of sludge, chose to remain married.
Why won't you tell me: should I stay
here, with you, or leave?

Dear [REDACTED],

I have the attention span of your favourite mug.
I'll leave it outside the door. There's no
more medical supplies, the plants have died,
I've started drinking shampoo.
Somehow, I need to survive...

Dear [REDACTED],

This is goodbye. Today, I leave.
I will not take your name
out there with me.

Luke x

Day 4: Bristol

Freedom One: I was Danny Torrance
with his famous bowl cut, a back garden
in '84 and plastic slide. A seat scuttled
through the grass. Green trainers
a whir, riding with no helmet. Pedal
faster to become a better lap, Mum
calling from a window, *Time to come
in now.*

Freedom Two: Before dawn
and school registers I grafted for
escape on two wheels, a Diamondback
mountain bike. It gave me helter-skelter
hills, gravel grazes, Mars Bar lunches,
still no helmet. I had calves
carved like Michelangelo's David,
never braked for fear.

Freedom Three: Wheels
without pedals, constant
movement. The tarmac is mine.
I'm flirting. There is no one to respond.
Now I've got calves like David's
diminutive dick, but with woodcutter
forearms. I know nothing of the road
ahead. No helmet. No call from inside.

Day 8: Bristol

Take

only what you can carry
and drag.

Leave

everything else. Egg cups,
fridge magnets, the sofa
cushion mould of your
arse.

Leave

room for a hot water
bottle, tin opener, two pairs
of gloves, your inner
lava.

Leave

time to look around.
The smell of decay
won't obediently heel
when you close the door.

Leave

your fear of being alone.
There will be plenty
of new phobias to collect
along the way.

I've left
the way ████,
used to run her finger
along my surgery scar.

Take

care. I'm all that remains,
the claggy bottom of a

peanut butter jar.

Day 12: Bristol

Before, I never questioned
how a rocket went into space,
or how you made a pavlova.
That wasn't me.

I consider asking the bench
if it knows what happened.

On the seat
is engraved a name, Eric.
Why did the dust come?

He's silent,
like a four-year-old
would be if you challenged
her to split an atom.

Eric knows
as much as I do.

We are the world's
most eminent scientists.
I take the knife out of my bag,
scratch Dr before his name.

Happy graduation day, I say.

Day 14: Bristol

I'm sorry you're all dead.

At last I can leave
the house without
being spiked by jealousy.

I would see you

jog to work,
walk barefoot along
a beach collecting girlfriends,
fuck in a disabled toilet,
ride two horses bareback
through Wilko, chase
a lion scrapping with another
lion, use a clutch in a 1984
Mercedes convertible,
save a kite from a rainbow.

It's scary how free I feel
to not look at your
potential, wish
I could be the life
you took for granted

like breathing.

I would see you walk
from an argument
into an embrace.

Where's your air
now?

I want to say
I miss you –
all the things
we could have shared.

I would pick
our scab and
you'd feel it bleed.

Day 19: Bristol Airport

I think back to the first person I met in a chair who wasn't newly injured like me. He sat outside an artisan coffee shop with a metal cup and a hopeful smile. He wanted change. The sticker on his wheelchair said *DESERT STORM*. My new chair didn't have one, but if it did it would say *MOUNTAIN BIKE PUNCTURE*. I told him back in the UK people would assume car crash. I took the offered fist bump anyway. I felt like an imposter. That the respect wasn't deserved. We were comrades, though.

He told me in the States they respect their veterans.

I noticed his cup was empty.

Day 25: Bridgwater Services, M5

CLEAR UP BEGINS AFTER DUST STORM

The last headline.

It came. We didn't know
why Robert from Durham
spoke of Martian dust
hiding in the creases
of his washing. Farmer
Francesca complained
of shearing sheep dyed
candyfloss orange.

I grab a red top,
a Chomp, Peperami
and biro. Leave three
pebbles and a dandelion
leaf on the counter
because what's currency
now?

I look at the paper.
This historical document,
vacuum of pointlessness,
it told us nothing about
the poison to come.

Still, the crossword
will give me something
to do.

Day 30: Taunton Deane Services, M5

The driver's licence said her name was Eva.
The van she was driving said she delivered
for a meat wholesaler. The location said
this was where she would be laid to rest.

KeepCup on the dashboard, noise-
cancelling headphones on her head,
empty Tupperware box, bamboo spoon
on the passenger seat. Her own teeth
and nails collected in her lap.

Her last memory had been here
at a service station. I hoped
it had been a good one.
Perhaps flecks of paint
in the sky through a cheap
plastic telescope, not the
Eddie Stobart lorry
she had parked behind.

The car park was full of drivers
who had pulled over to digest
themselves, pool into their
footwells like a footbath
of their own liquifying
organs.

I took a scrap of paper and a pen
from the glove box. Placed
a eulogy under the windscreen
wiper. Turned the van
into a grave. The corpse
into a person.

HERE LIES EVA

Day 33: Clyst Honiton

I had come to find a toilet. Some cover, hopefully food, a pint and a game of pool. I got four out of four. Swordfish on tap, bag of Burts, polished cue ball, bathroom with running Molton Brown. And a mystery. On the bar, a book. *Lone Wolf*, by Jodi Picoult. Interest piñataed. A character called Luke, alone, comatose. Left foot, right foot, header. A perfect hat-trick of coincidences. The tagline: A life hanging in the balance. I thumbed the pages like a Rolodex for more clues. A photo fell from the last chapter. A woman. On the back a message. *There are more books like this. Titles with meaning. Keep moving.* It was signed, *The Librarian*.

(c)Stephen Lightbown *The Last Custodian* (Burning Eye Books, 2021)

Conversation:

SL: My guest for this episode is Mike Carey, who's written several acclaimed books and comics as well as the screenplay for the film of his book *The Girl with All the Gifts*. His latest set of books *The Rampart Trilogy* follows the main character Koli around a future world where humanity as we know it has been wiped out so he was the perfect guest to chat to about building post-apocalyptic worlds.

MC: I write as MR Carey, I write as Mike Carey, I've done a lot of work in different media: comic books, screenplays, novels. Novels are what I mostly do at the moment. I'm probably best known for *The Girl with All the Gifts* and in comics I'm best known for *Lucifer*, which is part of the basis for the Fox TV show of the same name.

SL: I could have booked this podcast for, like, an hour or two hours and not got through everything I wanted to talk about. Probably what you're best known for is *The Girl with All the Gifts* and what I'm really interested in in terms of actually how you build an apocalypse and particularly I know in your new set of books *The Rampart Trilogy* of which I've just read and really enjoyed the first one, again, is set in an apocalypse so what kind of draws you towards that as a genre?

MC: I guess it's a really effective basis for thought experiments. It seems to me that the way we normally live in society a lot of our behaviours are kind of mediated and controlled for us by the roles that we've taken on or the roles that we've been assigned.

What apocalyptic settings or post-apocalyptic settings allow you to do is to sort of explore what human nature is like when all of those frameworks have fallen away; what's the basic kit and what is just a social role? Also, apocalypses go in and out of fashion according to what's happening in the real world and at the moment I think apocalyptic fiction and

post-apocalyptic fiction are having a bit of a moment because the real world feels so precarious, feels so dangerous and so frightening it's a way of sort of, like, touching the sore spot. It's a way of exploring the possibilities in reality. You know, as Ursula Le Guin said, science fiction is mostly not excursions outwards, it's incursions inwards. It's probing the nature of the world that we all live in at the moment.

SL: Fascinating, and in terms of the two that I've just been referring to, so *The Koli Trilogy* and the world that *The Girl with All the Gifts* exists in. They're set slightly differently. So one is, it's kind of near future isn't it? *The Girl with All the Gifts* is maybe what? Ten, fifteen years ahead and *The Koli Trilogy* is a century, more than that ahead? So there's been a real big change in terms of how, kind of, things have kind of broken down and maybe started to reestablish themselves.

MC: It's about three centuries we learn, eventually. It's far enough away that they don't even really remember what the world was like before. They have stories about our world, they have their own sort of mythologies about the way our world broke down and became theirs but they're largely in the dark and I think there's something fascinating about that as well, about our relationship to the past. Obviously, we've created a society that's made of billions and billions of independently moving parts and it seems to be very fragile, in a lot of ways so it's interesting to sort of imagine what happens to history, what happens to our sense of our own identity in relation to that past when the past itself becomes so distant that it's disputed or shrouded.

SL: One of the things I thought was really interesting about that book in particular was the use of language in the sense that you've almost created a new dialect and place names are very different.

MC: The language was actually the starting point for the whole enterprise, in a way. I wanted to write something that was kind of analogous to what Mark Twain does in *Huckleberry Finn*. I wanted to write a story told from the point of view of a character, a narrator who is barely literate; who's come to literacy very late in life and who writes very much as he speaks, in a kind of a rough and ready hacked together sort of way with... Koli doesn't know what an irregular verb is so he just sticks the same verb endings on everything. They've got their own argot. Their language has continued to develop from our time. I wanted his language to have a sort of rough-hewn poetry to it, to be expressive without being literary, if that makes sense.

SL: When you settle down to start a new piece of work, particularly something where it is sci-fi so there's a different, maybe world element to that, or an apocalypse; does the character come first or does the apocalypse come first? Do you populate the apocalypse or do you build the apocalypse around the characters that you want to develop?

MC: It's very much horses for courses I think. In the case of *The Girl with All the Gifts* the character came first and that was because before there was a novel and before there was a screenplay, there was a short story called *Iphigenia In Aulis* which was — I wrote it for a

themed anthology. Charlaine Harris and Toni Kelner used to do these anthologies every year and the theme would always be something really banal and everyday and reassuringly normal, like one year it was family holidays and another year it was do it yourself/home improvement and the year that I submitted a story the theme was school/schooldays so the idea was write a dark fantasy or a supernatural story or a horror story with a theme of schooldays.

I sat for a long time staring at the proverbial blank page trying to figure out a way into that and then I woke up one morning with the idea of Melanie: the idea of a little girl in a classroom writing the essay that you write a million times during your school career ‘What I want to be when I grow up’ but we can see what she can’t, we can see that she is a zombie; she’s undead; she’s a Hungry and therefore growing up is not really an option for her. That was the starting point and everything, the whole world was built around Melanie. So the nature of the apocalypse, the fact that it’s an epidemic became central early on and then the search for a cure and the road journey that they make, all of that was in order to facilitate the relationships between Melanie and the other key characters in the story. So in that case, definitely character first, world afterwards.

The Koli Trilogy, I think it was different because it had a much more confused origin. It started out, again, as a much shorter piece that was fantasy rather than science fiction and the character who becomes Cup in the novels the young trans girl, the teenage trans girl is actually the narrator in that shorter story. So what I did was I separated out the character and the voice in a way and made two different characters out of them. So again, voice and character were quite early on, then there was a stage where I was sort of furnishing the world and then came back to the characters and fiddled with them some more because the world was clearer in my head.

SL: Did the trilogy come at once or have you kind of — the first part came and then you wrote the second one and then the third one or has it felt like it's one big piece that you've written that then naturally lent itself to a trilogy?

MC: I think it's definitely one big story. In some ways the break points are a little bit arbitrary. It's one journey, it's one long... in fact it's one circular journey, really, that ultimately takes Koli back to his point of origin.

As T.S. Eliot says in the *Four Quartets*, ‘We shall not cease from journeying but the end of all of our travel will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.’ It's kind of that... sort of, like, the structure of the trilogy. I could never have fitted it into one novel. It would have been ridiculously long. Three was an arbitrary choice that seemed to make sense and it turned out there were, I think, three books' worth of story there.

SL: What's interesting for me is that you said that, again, that started from a short story that's effectively become this huge trilogy which is really interesting that it's the idea that actually you can build something from that genesis of an idea and this entire world grows that you, I

guess as a writer, can enjoy getting lost in those worlds. Do you feel as though you... Do you start dreaming about the characters? Do you start, kind of... Is part of the fun of it for you building that world and those characters and thinking what might be in that kind of timeline?

MC: You certainly do, I think, inhabit the world when you're writing it. That was especially true for *The Girl with All the Gifts* because *The Girl with All the Gifts* I was involved in both ... I was writing the novel and I was writing the screenplay so there was a sense in which that story dominated my life for um, in one form or another for about two and a half years, maybe a little more than that. You do, in a weird way, you get this sort of dual perspective where part of the time you're living in the real world and part of the time you're living in the fictional world that you're making and you kind of treat your characters as real while you're in the other world. I think it was Ursula Le Guin who said that, wasn't it? That reading fiction: it's a kind of madness you voluntarily accept is true while you're reading things that you know are not true and then you put them aside and you go back to your real world perspective but it, yeah, it's very intense especially something like *The Girl with All the Gifts* where you're writing in a multiple media or like the Koli books where I was working on them for a year flat-out. I wrote those three novels in just over a year in a sort of crazy ferment. I've never worked that quickly before and I don't think I ever will again, I think it was a one-off thing, because I just knew exactly where I was going which is a great feeling. It's definitely not the feeling I've got with my current book!

SL: Some context as well for people listening: I mean, the first Koli book is just short of 400 pages so that is some output to have kind of, to have put that together in a year! I've been sort of patting myself on the back that I've written this poetry collection in a year which is about 40 poems that don't really go over a page. It's only 80 pages long and people are sort of saying 'Wow, you managed to write that in a year!' but to write effectively a trilogy has been pretty good going. Was that during the pandemic then or was that just pre-pandemic?

MC: It started pre-pandemic and then it took me through the first six months or so of the pandemic and I think it was very therapeutic, when an awful lot of the worst stuff was happening, I was miles away, I was somewhere else. I think though comparing the trilogy to your poem cycle, it's not comparing like with like, is it? I think poetry requires a different kind of concentration. It's... it plays out... or it comes out of you at a different pace, doesn't it, because you have to test the ground in front of you with every word, which I don't think you do with a novel. I think with a novel once you've got the... once you've sorted out the question of voice and style it flows... it can flow, anyway in a much more unproblematic way.

SL: Yeah, I guess that's an element with the poetry is that... the sense that every word has to earn its place on the page and with a novel I guess you've got a bit more flexibility; you're not going through and eliminating all the 'and's or 'the's and 'it's and 'of's which you might do in a poem; which I tend to do sometimes where I think 'Oh, you know what? That's not necessary, that word's not adding anything.'

MC: Yeah, yeah.

SL: I guess in some respects the pandemic helped because other than making sourdough bread and watching boxsets you were able to kind of crack on and dedicate hours at a time. Do you just get into it then? Is that the kind of process where you maybe spend a good few hours a day writing?

MC: Yeah, if it's working well then I start early and finish late. I am very easily distracted, having said that so normally my days involve bursts of hyperactivity and then periods of ridiculous digression and loss of concentration. I can follow stupid things down rabbit holes on the internet for an hour at a time and come out feeling really, really ashamed.

SL: And call it research!

<both laugh>

MC: Yeah, and call it research. But I think my biggest asset as a writer has always been my insecurity. I'm terrified when I'm not writing. I'm thinking 'I'm going to starve to death if I don't get some words down'. So I'm typically quite productive because I'm afraid of what will happen if the process breaks down.

SL: Am I right in thinking that when the film came out, you got to do something which probably not many writers have been able to do and actually spend time physically in the world that you've created? Did you and your family members get to play zombies in the actual film version?

MC: Yeah, damn straight! I was on set for... principal photography was like, about six weeks. I was on set for, I think almost half of that time. It's still incredible to me how kind and welcoming and forbearing the crew: the director, the producers, the crew all were to me because I think there are many ways in which having the writer on set is a massive pain in the arse; a kind of funnelling away of resources because someone's gotta kind of babysit them but Camille Gatin who was the lead producer and Colm McCarthy the director said early on 'If you wanna be there you can be there. Just let us know when you wanna come up and we'll arrange it' and I was there for a long time. As you said, I was a zombie, a zombie extra, so were an awful lot of my family, and an awful lot of my friends. I got my head blown off on-screen which was a great moment. <SL laughs> I'm actually the second zombie that dies at the fence. Most of the zombies who are around me are people I know. The family that eats brains together remains together!

SL: <laughs> How method did you get when you were being the zombie? I've always wondered if you have to kind of go to like, zombie school and that bit that always happens when the jaw first clicks, when the senses reawaken. Did you have to kind of practise that or did it just come naturally?

MC: No, there was zombie school! Yeah, there were movement coaches. One of the things that was decided early on was that because the Hungries are driven by their hunger, because when they smell flesh they're kind of dragged towards it, the movement coaches (who I think in many cases were professional dancers) they developed this kind of forward-thrusting run where you're bent over, your head is tilted up and your body is tilted down and your arms are just dangling at your sides 'cos your arms are irrelevant, it's your mouth that matters. It's almost like a swallow-dive.

So yeah, we did, we did practise that and of course the kids for the classroom scene had another set of movements to practise for what you were just describing, that moment when the hunger starts to activate and their jaws click and crack and you have that almost insectile creaking open of the jaws. So all of that was extensively practised.

SL: Staggering. And how long did you have to spend in makeup? Because you might be on-screen for a fraction of a second but I imagine the makeup is significantly longer.

MC: There were three different levels of zombie. For the first couple of days shooting we were just basic zombie grunts. That was only sort of 40-50 minutes in makeup. Less than an hour. But on the last day we were promoted; we were Grade A zombies and we got the full treatment with much more emphasis on the prosthetics and the facial sculpting which again was fascinating to watch. The makeup artists took their inspiration from... because they'd read the screenplay, they'd read the novel and they'd talked to Colm about what he wanted and they'd decided that the look of the zombies should be based on vegetable lifeforms so the sculpts that they were sticking to our faces; the mouldings were based on things like funguses and broccoli and cauliflower, <SL laughs> and I think they really do look organic. They look distressingly organic!

SL: I'm very conscious Mike, that I could, as I said at the very start of this, could probably talk to you for hours if not days about your career. I'll bring us to a close but I will do with one last question. The fact that you have written a number of different — I don't know if there's a plural for apocalypse. Apocali? <MC laughs> I don't know — but given that you've created a number of different versions of an apocalypse, is there one in particular that you think you might survive best in? And if that was the case, where would you go first or what would you look for first?

MC: Oooh, gosh. I think the answer is no matter what kind of apocalypse it is, I'm gonna be the guy who dies before the title sequence. Yeah, I'm gonna be the guy who's rushing out to the car, packing all of his beer into the car, and then realises he's forgotten something vital like a flashlight or a bottle of whiskey or something, goes back into the house and gets bitten and then sort of goes down in a storm of zombies or birds or whatever form of monster we're dealing with. I'm so impractical and so forgetful there's no question of me surviving past act one in any apocalypse. I think I'll just go into it with a kind of zen mentality and take it for what it is. <laughs>

SL: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Last Custodian podcast. *The Last Custodian* was written by me, Stephen Lightbown. This series was produced by Rowan Bishop with many thanks to all our guests and Arts Council England for funding the series. If you enjoyed the episode please consider subscribing to the series wherever you get your podcasts to be kept up to date with the latest episodes and feel free to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts.