

Transcript of The Last Custodian Podcast Episode 6: Q & A

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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 280: Canterbury

I remember calm and I stop, roll *U* over the skin
on my left shoulder, and *U* are there kneeling
behind me on our bed, and I feel *U* push *Ur* fingers
into the places I don't want to go. And I remember
calm as the smell of cloves from cheap massage oil
dripping into the sheets. And I pilot *U* over tender
fingerprints left on me, desperate to smooth out
the octopus that has nestled on the seabed.

And *U* would whisper, I carry the distance in the spool
of my sockets and calm is somewhere in the reel
of tangled wire. I remember calm as *U* would say
if I find myself somewhere I can't push from
then I should hold *Ur* touch, massage *U* deeper
into the tissue, count off each mile to calm.

Day 315: Sturry

He used to call me King Luke.

The first time **D** hid his disappointment

I was fourteen, kicking a ball against a wall
when I should have been weighing cauliflower.

A petrol smoothie had more appeal. Occasionally

I would help out; I'd hear him whistling
Gilbert and Sullivan whilst arranging oranges.

It made me want to press thumbs into
my eyes, bruise them like an apple skin.

I wasn't made for heavy labour; I was barely

made to be an adequate son. At school

I'd imagine swapping places with friends;

any one of them would've been better

suited to eulogising yoghurt raisins.

I carried his sadness when it would have

been easier to ask about the perfect time

to sell a persimmon, but the question

never came naturally, like the trade

was meant to do, like being alone

has come to me.

Day 356: Dover

I'd heard stories about these arms that follow
you home. Long since dismembered, hunting
in packs. The advice is clear. DON'T FEED THE ARMS.
Calloused digits that move slightly. Covered in tattoos
of ex-lovers' names. Gravel grazes, torn-off flesh
that swings like a fat cat's cat flap.

I saw one once. It was caught in the polluted
blackberries of the bramble. I made no attempt
to free it. Left my own arms by my side.
It was grey, still, like a ravaged rattlesnake.

Streaky bacon forearm. Elbow malevolent mauve.
Bluebottle knots where a shoulder should be.
On closer inspection, it was (perhaps) filthy.
A single arm can't wash itself. Can it?
Now I lie in bed with a death row conscience,
thinking I hear it tap Morse code at the window:
Let me in.

Whenever I leave the house, I worry it will be there.
Up on its hind knuckles. Thumb and forefinger
formed as a mouth. Panting through its blood
smear lips. A muscled index finger a mottled
wand of misadventure. No magic. Only fear

always shuffling behind me. Chuntering.
Words caught behind thick scabs and fury.
Desperately trying to make its point. Until
it lunges at my throat. Embalms my
nostrils. It has no eyes.

It will not see me smile.

Day 364: Folkestone

*I think this is where we say goodbye, I say to [REDACTED] as I take her in my hand. I marvel at her in my past, notice that some of the Sharpie line has been smudged, most likely from tears and morning kisses. I wait for something in return. I smile. *It's OK, U don't have to say anything. Just being with me has been enough.**

I've already dug a hole. The others are in there. **M** rolls towards **D**; is it a sob or sigh? They all face up, take one last look at the orange sky. This time I want them to know what's coming, to come to terms with it before it happens.

I ask if she's ready, place my discreet whispers against her grey granite surface, then gently lower her. I sweep the earth over my family, let them disappear.

Day 365: The Channel Tunnel

The weight of the Channel takes its toll
on my shoulders. A body is not built to carry
the sea, even one that could be held
in a glass. The antiseptic cleanliness of
darkness conjures the idea that the year
of death is nothing more than sugar
dissolved in tea. There, but only if you think
about it. At Point Median, between Folkestone
and Coquelles, I focus on a memory.
Foreplay after cheesecake. Wonder
for a second if that memory could be
a premonition. I know now I am lost. A voice
can disappear without ears to receive
and it's tiring to realise this could be it.
The menace of the water above is heavier
than I expected. If this tunnel is the cheesecake,
I'm not sure I want the gentle stroking
at the other end. My eyes falter, as if
I had a choice. It starts to take me under.
Is this what free feels like? I call out,
Where are you?

Je suis là.

Q & A:

SL: In this final episode of *The Last Custodian* podcast, I wanted to answer some of the questions that I've received on social media about the book in this series. There's loads of great questions and I've picked through a select few to answer here. So here we go.

So there's quite a few questions that came in around the book itself and the idea for the book and where the inspiration came from. With my first collection of poetry I'd written a book called *Only Air*, which was about my reflections of being a wheelchair user over the past 20 years and I'd put a lot of myself into that book and those poems and I knew I wanted to write something about disability and about being a wheelchair user but didn't necessarily want to pour myself onto the page again. So the idea was to maybe create a new character and give that person some experiences but maybe explore the world from a different perspective without having my backstory so I came up with the idea of Luke. But also, I'm a big, avid film fanatic. I love sci-fi and dystopian TV series and films and it's always struck me that there's not many people in those films or TV series with disabilities and the ones that are tend to get offed in the first few episodes or they sort of drag people down and I wanted to explore what might happen if somebody with a disability not only survived but thrived in an apocalypse. Then I thought, well, what happens if they were the only person left alive? And that's where the idea for the book came from, of creating a character called Luke. I gave him a backstory, I invented how he had an accident and felt quite bad for that and put him in this world and built the world around him.

Which I guess leads me to another question which is:

What do I think the red dust is?

And again, when I was thinking about what a dystopia could look like or what an apocalypse could look like, around the time of thinking about that, there was the Australia bushfires and I was really struck by these incredible photographs that were coming out of Australia, of this red dust settling across cities and only being able to see one car in front and just lone figures as black silhouettes in the red dust and for me, that just felt like a terrific idea of making something feel really apocalyptic. But then I thought what happens if that dust wasn't caused by something on this Earth? What happens if it had come from somewhere else? What happens if it was maybe the atmosphere eroding and it was some sort of poisonous gas that maybe only a few people or maybe only even one person was immune to? So that's what in my mind I think the dust is but I also like it to be fairly vague. I never talk about what the dust is in the book. I like the idea that maybe you wouldn't question that because again, I think if you woke up and you open your curtains and you realised you were the last person on Earth, you'd have nobody to ask. You'd have no answers. You wouldn't know what it was. So I quite like the openness of leaving the reader to wonder what the dust might be.

So one of the questions I've been asked is:

Will there be a sequel?

I really like the idea of that, but also that also answers another question of is Luke really the last survivor? Now those that have bought the book will know—and actually, if you've made it this far in the podcast you'll have heard all the poems so you'll know that he does encounter other people and again, I think some readers have wondered are these people fragments of memories that he talks to? You know, if he really is the last person or are there actually a select handful of people? And I really love the fact that there's an interpretation out there that maybe he really is the last person and he is actually just talking talking to stones and lampposts and tables and assuming that they are people and projecting his memories onto those and I really like that as an idea. That wasn't necessarily the idea that I had in mind but I like it and I've often thought about stealing that as the thinking!

When I was writing the book, I started writing it before the pandemic and most of the poems—the biggest chunk of the poems that I wrote were during the pandemic itself and there was a time obviously when people were self-isolating, where people people that were... had maybe disabilities or various illnesses were having to stay indoors and I wanted to flip the idea of what about actually if the most vulnerable were allowed out? What about if the most vulnerable weren't the most vulnerable, if they were somehow immune to this thing that had happened and therefore they became the strongest? So Luke—I don't explicitly say this—but those that he meets in the book, in my head all of those people have a disability of one kind or another but I don't need to explain it because actually it doesn't matter any more in this world. Those that have maybe listened to the first episode of this podcast where I talk to Mike Carey, he talks about his book *The Girl With All The Gifts* and he's recently just released a second book which is a companion book set in the same world as *The Girl With All The Gifts* but with different characters and it's called *The Boy On The Bridge* and actually I really like the idea of not necessarily doing a sequel but maybe imagining another character who's woke up and thinks that they're the last person alive in maybe Newcastle, or Dublin or somewhere like that and actually imagining a year in their lives and what they would encounter so rather than a sequel it would be a companion piece but I really like the idea of that.

Someone asked me:

Did I write it knowing there would be a pandemic?

I mean, <laughs> I like to think that I am a fortune teller with my words but no, I did not write this knowing there would be a pandemic! But the pandemic helped in terms of giving me ideas when I was feeling like I was stuck in a rut. I was looking at the world around me and that actually drew a lot of inspiration because it wasn't too hard to imagine what a dystopia would look like; what an apocalyptic world would look like. What would it look like if people were

only looking out for themselves? What would it look like to feel isolated? What would it look like to lose contact with all friends and family? Those things actually, they're ideas and themes that drew out of the pandemic so no, I didn't know the pandemic was on the horizon but I did use it to my fullest of advantages.

There's a question here that I like which is:

Do I like Luke or did I use him to explore the darker side of humanity?

And they caveated that by saying 'You're quite a nice person so maybe you wouldn't have done some of the things that Luke said' which I quite like, so thank you for thinking I'm quite a nice person! I maybe wouldn't do what Luke did, but I don't know actually. I've obviously written the book and I've thought 'What would I do in a lot of these scenarios?' and I think if somebody was trying to steal my chair, that would be pretty devastating for me if I didn't feel as though there was going to be someone along to come and help in a bit. If this was the first person I'd met on my travels, would I do the same thing that Luke did? I think if I was really tested, I'm not sure what I'd do. I'm not sure I'd sit down and have a chat and plead with them because if they're running away with your chair at that exact moment in time there's not much you can do about it. I think I would probably also find myself talking to pigeons and stones. So yeah, I think probably I do see myself in Luke a little bit.

When I mention my first collection *Only Air* and I was writing about my experiences, some of the things that happen in this book, or things that he talks about are things that have happened to me that maybe I didn't know how to put in another way? So I've kind of fictionalised parts of them but there are definitely elements of me in this book. I would find it very hard to write and not put elements of me in this. I have chosen to write about a Northern male who suffered an accident when he was younger, is now a wheelchair user and lives in Bristol. So it's not a massive leap to think about where the inspiration for some of those ideas came from.

There's a question here that says:

Did I have any other topics in mind and why did I choose this one?

I think there were two ideas that I had when I knew I wanted to sit down and write another poetry collection. I definitely write in bursts and I need some inspiration. I find it hard to just sit down with an open page. I like to have a project that I'm working towards, something that I want to complete and when I was reading from the first book, some of the poems that really struck with the audience; that people would come up and talk to me about afterwards were poems about relationships, about intimacy, about lying in bed next to a partner, about going on dates as a wheelchair user and people seemed to be intrigued by that and it baffled me somewhat because it's just a normal experience. It's just a normal relationship.

So I really wanted to write a collection of love poems about people with disabilities and I wanted to maybe go and interview 100 or so people with disabilities and talk to them about their relationships, about dating, about their experiences and to maybe write some poems about that. That's definitely an idea that I've got for the future and then the other idea was this book but I'll be honest with you, I guess I was feeling more apocalyptic than I was romantic when I set down to write these poems! So the apocalypse poems came much easier and I didn't need to go and interview anyone and I could just make stuff up! So that felt like something I very much enjoyed doing.

One question that I've been asked is:

What do I think the world might look like in 100 years?

And it's not really a question I've thought of before until I sat down with Matthew Sanford for episode 4 and we got talking about what he would do if he was the last survivor and he said that he would apologise to the Earth for all things that we've done wrong. He's not particularly hopeful that there'll be much left after 100 years and I'll be honest with you, I'm sort of minded to think in a similar way. As we record this, there are queues outside petrol stations. This is a very middle-class problem but I went for a pizza and they'd ran out of mozzarella because they'd not had their delivery and there's shelves empty and we seem to not be bothered by this. There doesn't seem to be an outrage and I wonder if we are just sleepwalking into a load of problems and you know, is there a select few that have got really vexed about the issues of the world and the rest of us are more concerned about whether or not we'll be able to watch our boxsets and eat mozzarella? That bothers me. It bothers me that I think we may not notice until it's too late that actually we should be doing a bit more. I think we live in a world where people have been so quick to take off their masks and feel outraged about having to stay two metres away from people that if we really needed to double down and do our bit to protect humanity, if push came to shove, would we actually do it?

So I don't know what it is that might finish us off eventually but whatever it is, I'm not sure we would all band together in the way that maybe we would hope. That sounds quite a defeatist way of looking at it but I would hope maybe that we would find a way to come out of the other side. But if not, we might be joining Matthew and putting our hands on the Earth and apologising for all the things that we've done.

<laughs> That's a bit bleak!

So following on from that question, I think it's only fair to end this podcast and this series with the question that I've finished all the episodes with and that has been asking the guests if they were the last survivor on Earth, what would they do?

I've been fascinated by some of the responses that people have said and I won't give them away, I'll let you go back and listen to the other episodes but I think it's only fair that I ask myself the same question. I think if I think back to an earlier answer that I've given already in this episode about how much of me is in Luke, I think there's a lot of me. I think I would really enjoy the freedom that I might have, to just go wherever I want, to see whatever I want, to feel the open road underneath my wheels and not worry about being on pavements with broken paving stones and just enjoy the tarmac. I would do as much as possible. I would find my way absolutely to the coast and I would sit and look at the sea and I would close my eyes and I would listen to the waves against the shore but then I'd do loads of other random stuff. I would go into a cinema and see if I could get a screen to work. I would definitely go around and look at as many museums as I could do. I would find some spray paint, do a load of murals and write 'Banksy' underneath it and finally reveal myself to be this person who has been spray painting things on the wall—it's a thing I like to pretend to my wife! She never believes me! But no, I think I would very much enjoy sightseeing. I think I would also talk to my collection of stones about the things I've seen along the way and write down for anyone else that maybe followed me on my path to sort of band together and start again through stories, which is what I've liked to have done with this book.

SL: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Last Custodian podcast. I want to thank all of my guests who've been a part of this series. I've really enjoyed talking to them, finding out about their lives, their creative process and what would they do if they were the last person on Earth. *The Last Custodian* was written by me, Stephen Lightbown. This series was produced by Rowan Bishop with many thanks to all of our guests and thanks to Arts Council England for funding the series. If you enjoyed this episode please consider going back and listening again to the series wherever you get your podcasts and feel free to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts.