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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the *CARC Podcast*, the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*. I'm Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. And today, it is my great, great pleasure to be speaking to Christine Leunens. Christine was born in Hartford, Connecticut to an Italian mother and a Belgian father. She went on to earn a Master of Liberal Arts in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard Extension School in 2005, and later, a PhD at Victoria University of Wellington in 2012.

It's also worth mentioning, Christine was a co-winner of the Dean's Thesis Prize in the Humanities upon her graduation from Harvard Extension School. Her debut novel, *Primordial Soup*, published in the UK in 1999 was a critical success, receiving praise in *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Independent*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Her book, *A Can of Sunshine*, was selected as best books of the year 2013 in English worldwide by the *New Zealand Herald*. Since its first publication in 2004, her novel, *Caging Skies*, became an international bestseller and was later adapted to stage and film.

The play adaptation had its world premiere at the Circa Theater Wellington in 2017. Taika Waititi's film adaptation, *Jojo Rabbit*, was nominated in 2020 for two Golden Globe Awards, six BAFTAs, and six Academy Awards, including best picture. It won the Writers Guild of America award, the BAFTA award, as well as the Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. It also won the Humanitas Prize for writing intended to promote human dignity, meaning, and freedom. Both the film and the book were nominated for the USC Scriptor Award 2020, and won the American Film Institute Award for their contribution to America's cultural legacy.

Christine's 2021 bestselling novel, *In Amber's Wake* is currently being made into a film. Her novels have been translated into 25 languages. And in 2023, she was awarded a UNESCO Prague City of Literature Residency to work on her new historical novel. Christine, it is my honor to have you here with us today.

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: Chris, thank you so much for having me.

CHRIS DAVIS: It is such a pleasure to speak to you as a writer, and certainly as an Extension School alumna. And I wanted to start off by asking you a little bit about-- I know that you've talked about this here and there in interviews before, but your experience as a student at Harvard Extension School, how that contributed to your development as a writer, what some of your memories are of that experience. Is there anything you'd like to share with our students about what your HES experience was like for you?

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: I think it was life-changing for me, really, because at the time, I had just written my book *Primordial Soup*, it was still in the draft stage. So I came and I started to study. I had felt somehow, because I had done a bachelor of arts, and I had studied French and a lot of French literature, but I felt that that wasn't quite enough. That to become a writer, I needed a lot more, I would say, fuel, or a lot more knowledge and learning and understanding. And when I came to the Extension School, I immediately felt that I was listening to what the professors were teaching me.

But not as a student, as I had been in my undergraduate years, but as an adult with a lot of experience, and someone who had already attempted to write something. So I was able to really take in more probably than I'd ever been able to, up to that time. And it really remains a golden era for me. I had, funnily enough, I started, I was still single. I had just met my husband. But by the time I came back, I had had two children. And they were very young. And it was very important for me, at that time with two young children, to still have the feeling that my education mattered and that writing mattered.

And I could still be a very good mother to these children, but also still enriched myself and do what meant the most to me. So I remember it was specific classes, I was coming at the time from France to the Harvard Extension School. So each time, I took three courses, which was quite a workload for me. And I remember, each time I had one course with Dean Shinagel, which was just wonderful to have him, and he went into such depth of the novel and details and how to tear a novel apart and how to look at the moral consciousness.

And I'm examining all this as a writer. But at the same time, Dean Shinagel also brought everything to the novel but also to life. So he would say, for example, we were speaking about *Emma*, and he would speak about who's the moral consciousness in this novel? But then he would say, do you do that in your lives? Do you look who the person would be that you can depend on? And how can you be more critical about what a friend is and what meaning is? And it really helped me a lot to -- after, be able to look at people, perhaps a little more differently, not necessarily critically, but with a little bit more about what the human experience is and the richness.

And it's a really go in depth of the characters and the complexity. And I took another course too. It was with -- I think the first time with Professor Theo Harris, and we had studied Oscar Wilde. And it was just so, so interesting to actually look at that or look at Virginia Woolf and not just read novels again, but look at them as a craft. What is each writer doing differently? Why does it work? So rather than taking creative writing classes, what I did is I came in as an aspiring writer, but I took courses in literature, but I was examining it on my own from that angle, what makes writing great.

And I found it actually very liberating, because the novels that I studied there were so very different and each worked in 100 different ways, which is quite liberating, because it taught me that there are many ways that a novel can be good, and hence, you can try to do something personal and try to find your own space.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's fascinating. So if I am not mistaken, if I have my chronology right, was this around the time that you were starting to write *Caging Skies*?

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: Yes. So the first time when I came, I had just written *Primordial Soup* after the first semester, and then when I went back to France, then I found out that it was going to be published. However, I did have to go through a long period of doing rewrites. It was back in the day, I ought to mention this, that was in 1998. The book was published in 1999. And that was the time where publishers had time. So like in the olden days, they used to send drafts back and forth and help me make the novel the best. And we sent five drafts between us, each time making it a better draft. Publishers don't do that anymore.

OK. So that's just how it changed. Then I began writing *Caging Skies*, but I came back. And I remember I was actually just going into a class with Dean Shinagel when I had just found out from an email that it was going to be published by Planeta, the novel. So he was the first person I told that that novel was going to be published.

CHRIS DAVIS: Then and now, our students are adults, part-time students, they're juggling other commitments in addition to their workload. And for you, you were, it sounds like you were starting to raise a young family, you were commuting back and forth between France and Cambridge, you were working on the development of this novel, all the while that you were taking courses for your ALM degree. You were juggling a lot during that time, it sounds like.

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: I still have memories where I couldn't read in bed or anything, so I would sit up and then I was still falling asleep, so I, at some stage, had to read my assignments standing, because it was the only way I could do not to fall asleep. And to -- and to get through them. And at the same time, it's really some of the best memories I have, going back. And I remember, when I was actually at the Oscar ceremonies, and they had put the a big photo on the screen, and you could see *Caging Skies*, Christine Leunens.

And it took me about 10 minutes. I couldn't even speak, and then I became very choked up because I remembered all these times and all the sacrifices that had gone into it, also financial sacrifices, the eating the bowl of rice. And so it was -- it was very touching and very meaningful.

CHRIS DAVIS: I can imagine. The long life that that particular novel has had is rather remarkable. It was translated into -- if I'm not mistaken, it was translated into several languages before it was published into English, I think, right?

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: Yes. Exactly. So it was published first into Spanish, and then it was published into Italian and French, and then finally, into English. And then of those people who read the -- when it came out in New Zealand, I think they published 1,200 copies, which isn't much, but Taika Waititi's mother was one of them. She had read it, and she would not, after eight months, she would not give Taika his peace. She kept saying you have to read this, and he kept saying, I don't have time, Mom.

Finally, he read it, just so she'd leave him alone, not even because he wanted to read it. And then he said he was reading, and he was at about page 15, and he already knew that he wanted to make a film of it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, that's a whole other story. Yes, I mean, the novel has had a long life, and the film certainly took a while to come together. And when it did, it certainly made an impact when it was released. I do want to ask you more in detail about your writing process, but I have to ask you, because I think this has come up with each of the authors that I've spoken to in recent years, who have all had at least one significant film or television adaptation, and that they haven't necessarily been involved in adapting.

And in most cases, have departed somewhat from the source material. So you see, I reread the novel again, and I was struck again by how remarkable the film is, and how they're both their own entities that stand apart. But they're quite -- they're so quite different. And you've talked about how -- I think you very eloquently put it that, when something is being adapted, it has to be its own creation in a way. Adaptations that are too faithful can sometimes fall flat.

But now, in hindsight a little bit now that the film is 3 or 4 years behind us, as the writer of that source material, now that the film has had another life and lives on its own, as the originator of that story, what are your thoughts about it now?

**CHRISTINE
LEUNENS:**

Well, I feel that Taika and I, we meet in the middle. So for example, I wrote something that's dark and that's a drama and with some notes of humor, and he wrote something that has a lot of humor but that has some notes of drama and darkness, and somehow we both had a similar approach and a similar reason for writing it. But we came from two different angles. And we met in the middle. So I find that his approach was able to reach a lot of young people in a way they could take in this story, and they could take what they could of this story, and then eventually learn more about this terrible subject and the Holocaust.

But they could take it in a way that is less upsetting for young people these days who are more sensitive. And I thought that was very good, because he made the story become just pretty much known everywhere. There's hardly a country where you would say *Jojo Rabbit* and people wouldn't know what it is. And so through that, many people saw the film and then they came to the book after, which I thought is fine, because then the book is very serious, it goes into a lot more of the history and a lot more of the details and the historical context.

So I find that they're complementary. I find that there's not one -- it's funny because when the -- when the film first came out, some people treated it as if it were a competition. And I didn't feel like it was a competition, I felt that they were just two different art forms. And to take each one for what they were. So I never saw that as that, as such. But a lot of people told me that's very rare for an author to feel OK with someone doing something that's different. But I was comfortable with that because I always said Taika did a Picasso, and I did a classical painting. And each one has its reason for being and each one touches people in a different way.

CHRIS DAVIS:

My follow-up question to you would be, this is certainly one example, but you are -- you've written several historical novels. And it sounds like you're working on a new one as well. What draws you to writing historical fiction? I know you've talked about the research that you did for *Caging Skies* and *In Amber's Wake*, which is about a specific time period in New Zealand history, certainly. But the process of research, is that something that kind of draws you to telling historical stories? Or are there other reasons for that?

**CHRISTINE
LEUNENS:**

So I would say I like to sometimes frame a story, because the story has to work on its own. You can't just say OK, I'm going to write a period of history. The bigger the period in history, the more powerful in fact the story has to be, to be able to cope with that, and bring it together. It's almost like weaving it together. But I do like to put it in a certain context, because as humans, we are attached to the time and period we live in. And we don't think of it as history. I think the key to writing historical fiction is not to think of it as history but what the characters are really undergoing then and there.

Just like we wouldn't think when we were going through the whole pandemic. We weren't thinking of it historically. We were just putting up with everything we were having to go through and but it will be one day historical, but so that's the way I like to have it an approach that it's very, very much the way we experience life.

CHRIS DAVIS:

So you've been a published author for almost 25 years now. Has your writing -- yeah, next year, it will be, I guess, 25 years since *Primordial Soup*. Has your writing process changed as a writer, the way you start writing a book, writing a novel, how you go about continuing to write it? Has that changed at all? Do you approach it differently?

**CHRISTINE
LEUNENS:**

Well, one thing, if one day I'll be teaching creative writing, which I hope to do one day, I would try to explain to the students, and this is where it's tricky, because of the now five novels that I've written, and I'm currently writing, it's not the same process exactly from the first to the last. Each one has its own challenges. And that's quite tricky, because if you teach something like how to play violin, you pretty much teach everyone the same thing, and they have to learn that. But creative writing is very difficult, because it's so unique. And to make it good writing, it has to be very unique to what that person can do, and that no one else can. So it's got to be like their iris or their fingerprints.

Something very unique to them. And at the same time, every different story they write is going to have different challenges and require a different process. So that's a very, very tricky thing. Because basically, what you're trying to do is to bring the person out with their writing. Who are they as a writer? What are their strengths? And how to do this? And there's all kinds of things happening at once. It's hard sometimes for young aspiring -- by young, I don't mean by age. When I say young, I mean new, aspiring writers. Because for example, there's the micro level, so just how to write even a paragraph, so that the sentence feels alive and that the description and the characters immediately, when you read that, it's lively, and you enjoy it.

Compared to something that's a little bit, I would say, it's not bad in itself but to aspire to be something that's going to be published. It's not lively enough. It's slightly too dull. It's not -- it's on a level of, sometime, just the sentence and paragraph. So that's the small level. And there is a technique to learn how to do that and how to just each time sharpen it and crystallize that writing, just on a very small framework. But then there's also the macro technique. How do you have a structure or a plot or something that's going to work? Where is the dramatic tension? And is it there? And something, I like to tell people.

Because a lot of time, a writer knows themselves that something's not really good, but they don't want to cut it because they put a lot of time. I always say, if when you yourself are rereading it, if you yourself are not enjoying that passage so much, no one else is, cut it. It's better to cut things and to leave it out. Because publishers today, if you leave these parts in and these passages, they just won't keep going. And sometimes, what's there is very good, it just needed trimming and focus and tidying up. And so people always say it's a writer. Actually, I have to laugh, because you are a writer just for the first draft, and that's the worst draft. After that, you become a rewriter, and a rerewriter.

And that's where you have to become very good at it. When I've spoken to other authors, we often have this phenomenon where at the end of the day, something can sound like really great, and we think, "Wow, this is powerful!" And in the morning when you see it, you say this is embarrassing. I never want anyone to see that. And sometimes, something that you didn't think was very good has something delicate and salvageable in it. So you also have to be your worst critic. If you feel like you're reading it in front of just friendly people and everyone who loves you, that's not good enough. You have to have in your imagination somebody who you would feel would be very, very critical to you.

And if there is a part you come upon that you would not feel comfortable reading out loud, scratch it. And if on the contrary, you feel very happy to read that particular part out loud, you know that that's working.

CHRIS DAVIS: Before, you and I were talking about what you just talked about in terms of rewriting and how I think when you'd written your first book, there was more of a back and forth with your publisher in terms of the editing process and the rewriting process and how that's kind of changed over the years. I can't think of anyone better suited to ask this question to, because as someone who's had their work published and translated into so many languages, I think you've probably seen very firsthand over the years how the publishing industry probably in different countries has maybe changed or evolved. But for budding writers today, what would your advice be?

I mean, the publishing industry for writers, for novelists is certainly not what it was 10, 20, 25 years ago. What is your perspective on that? And what input, what advice would you give to aspiring writers?

CHRISTINE LEUNENS: OK. One of the first things I would say is that, if you look back, you know when Henry James when he would write something, and then finally, it would start to get exciting after page 121 or something. OK. When I wrote *A Can of Sunshine*, I think the novel starts to pick up around page 20 something. OK? Today, that's a death sentence. The people have to take interest practically on the first page these days. Why? Because we're competing with the screen era. And people have, especially adults, they have less and less time. So if it doesn't grip someone sooner, and it just goes on, it's just not going to work for us, the publisher's not going to get there.

And then even if it did make it to a book store, people would pick it up, they read the first page, there's nothing, they put it back down. So one thing is, a lot of time people, young, again, aspiring writers of any age, they have something. And it's a good, what I would call start of the story. But they shouldn't start writing yet, because there's not quite enough there. So I'll give an example of what I mean. When I was first trying to formulate *Caging Skies*, I had the idea of Elsa who was in hiding. And I had the idea of there being a wall and there being someone else. But it was only the moment when I realized actually that it would be someone from the Hitler Youth who was taught to hate Jews, that suddenly, OK, there's the dramatic tension.

Now, there's something there, and this can go in many different directions, but there's something there. OK. Well, a lot of time, people without quite the-- how can I say? They start a story, but there's not the something else. There's just what I call the nest that's there, and there's something there. And they're on to something, but they have to keep working to actually get there, that there's going to be a story and a story that's going to be actually easier for them to write once they get that extra, even if it keeps them turning in circles for weeks or months. When they get that little extra something, there it is.

That's their story, and it'll be easier to go from there. So sometimes, they want to write sooner before they actually have enough. Or I know a lot of writers, and I'm not -- I wasn't always the same with every one of my novels. So sometimes, I know what's going to happen in the end. And sometimes, I don't. But with *In Amber's Wake*, I needed to know the end, because I knew the ends could change the beginning, which it did. And so if an author wants to go that way, they have to take the time it takes. It takes -- you can be at your desk every day writing, once you've got that, but actually, that finding the story takes time.

And a lot of people don't allow themselves that time. It could take months that you have something, but you're still thinking and you're still thinking and you keep saying, "But, I'm not going to get more than that." Wait. Keep going. Keep going. And you will. Suddenly, *ping*, it comes. And but they shouldn't start writing prematurely. Because however beautiful the writing is and however good the characters are, there just won't be the story or the drive or the dramatic tension.

CHRIS DAVIS: Christine, I want to say thank you so much for joining me today. I'm again honored to hear your perspective. I think it's so wonderful to have you as one of our Extension School ambassadors, a published author, someone whose work that we are excited to read. And I can't wait for your next book. Thank you so much for joining me today.

**CHRISTINE
LEUNENS:** Thank you so much. It's been really wonderful to talk to you.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.

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