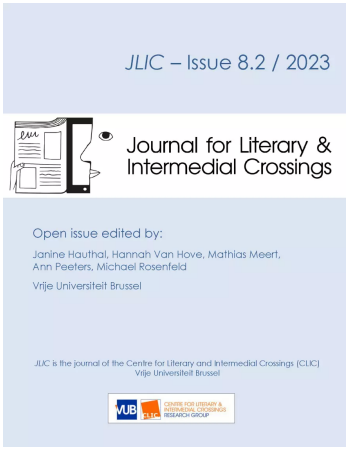

Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: https://clic.research.vub.be/journal

Submit your article to JLIC

'Hearing Characters Speak Over Your Shoulder': Laura Fish in Conversation on Writing as Practice-Led Research

Patricia Neves da Costa, Katrijn Van den Bossche, and VUB students

Transcribed by Jana De Wolf

Issue: 8.2

Published: 15 December 2023

Published online: 28 June 2024

To link this article: https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-8-issue-2-2023

To cite this article: da Costa, Patricia Neves, Katrijn Van den Bossche, and VUB students. "'Hearing Characters Speak Over Your Shoulder': Laura Fish in Conversation on Writing as Practice-Led Research." *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2023, pp. 75-91.

'Hearing Characters Speak Over Your Shoulder': Laura Fish in Conversation on Writing as Practice-Led Research

Patricia Neves da Costa, Katrijn Van den Bossche and VUB students
(transcribed by Jana De Wolf)
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Dr. Laura Fish is a Black British writer of Caribbean parentage. She is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Northumbria University and a Fellow of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. Her third novel *Lying Perfectly Still* (forthcoming in November 2024) is set during the 1990s AIDS crisis in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) and was inspired by her own experience in aid and development work. This interview, in which Fish talks about her new novel and her earlier novel *Strange Music* (2008), took place on 30 March 2023 in the African diaspora bookshop Pépite Blues, while Fish was writer-in-residence at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Patricia Neves da Costa (board member of WeDecolonizeVUB) conducted the interview and moderated the subsequent Q&A session. Jana De Wolf (MA student in Linguistics and Literary Studies at VUB) subsequently transcribed the interview, which was then edited by Katrijn Van den Bossche (doctoral candidate at VUB's Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings).

Keywords: Black British literature, Laura Fish, *Lying Perfectly Still*, *Strange Music*, aid work, rewriting

Introduction

Dr. Laura Fish is an award-winning writer of Caribbean parentage. She holds a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of East Anglia (2007) and is a Fellow of the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. In the course of her career, she has received (amongst others) the Seth Donaldson Memorial Award (UEA 2000), the Society of Authors Award (2000), the Society of Women Writers and Journalists Award (2001) and an Arts Council England Award (2009; 2020). Her first novel Flight of Black Swans (Duckworth: London, 1995) is set in Aboriginal Australia and received favourable reviews. Subsequently, Fish was selected by the British Council to promote the work of women in Britain and South Africa and worked at the University of Western Cape. Her second novel Strange Music (Jonathan Cape 2008) was listed for the Orange Prize in 2009, nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2009 and selected for the Pearson Edexcel Black British Writing A-level reading guide 2017/18. Her latest novel, *Lying Perfectly Still* (forthcoming October 2024 with the Manchester-based publishing house Fly on the Wall Press) occasions the interview at hand. It won the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize Readers' Choice award and took third place in the SI Leeds Judges' Award, a biennial prize for unpublished fiction by UK-based Black and Asian women.

Currently, Fish is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Northumbria University. She has held posts as a Creative Writing tutor at the universities of St Andrews, Western Cape and East Anglia. Additionally, she has over ten years of experience in broadcast television and radio, working for the BBC and ITV in current affairs, light entertainment and on documentaries. Her research interests include Black literature and literary criticism, the politics of marginalization, the ethics of authorship, issues of gender, the constructs of difference and otherness, and retrieving and rewriting hidden stories and histories.

This interview took place on 30 March 2023, while Fish was writer-in-residence at the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).[1] This residency was coordinated by Katrijn Van den Bossche in the context of the FWO funded research project "Self-Reflexivity and Generic Change in 21st-Century Black British Women's Writing" (2022-2026). Among the events in which Fish engaged during her residency were a creative writing workshop and this interview, both hosted by Pépite Blues, a Brussels bookshop -and cultural project celebrating art and creativity mainly through the literatures of Africa and all its diasporas. The interview featured as part of VUB's weKONEKT.week, during which the university connects with partners in the city, and was organized in collaboration with the student organization WeDecolonizeVUB. The interview was moderated by Patricia Neves da Costa, who is a novice writer with Angolan roots (Weekend Knack; Stampmedia; podcast host for Liefste Kleine Ik) and a board member of WeDecolonizeVUB. The interview which follows is an edited transcription of the public interview and the subsequent Q&A (transcribed by Jana De

[1] For more information about the event 'An Evening with Laura Fish: Interview and Reading from her Novel-In-Progress Lying Perfectly Still', see: https://clic.research.vub.be/writing-back-with-laura-fish.

Wolf, Master student in Linguistics and Literary Studies, and augmented with additional questions and edited by Katrijn Van den Bossche).

In the first part of the interview, Fish concentrates on her new novel *Lying Perfectly Still* and responds to the excerpts she read to the audience on the occasion. The novel is set in Eswatini (formerly the Kingdom of Swaziland) during the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s, when around 38% of young Swazi women and girls were reported to have experienced sexual violence in childhood (Reza et al.). While on a research trip, years after working in aid and development, Fish asked young women to relate the story they would want the book to tell. The novel is therefore partly life writing, as these women's voices inform the narrative. Having lived and worked in Southern Africa as a researcher for Save The Children Fund in Sudan, and as a Network Africa / BBC World Service reporter in Eswatini and Mozambique in the 1990s, the author possesses first-hand experience of these aid and developmental concerns. In the interview Fish raises the question of what 'aid' can entail in a globalized decolonial world and expands upon the role of the reader, on the different motivations for writing her three novels, and on the relationship between fact and fiction, history and story, research and writing.

In the second part of the conversation Fish dwells on how the physical act of writing can function as a form of practice-led research. She discusses this in relation to the creation of her second novel *Strange Music*, which VUB students in Linguistics and Literary Studies read for the Master course 'Contemporary Literature in English' (taught by Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers). This polyphonous neo-slave narrative revisits the abolitionist poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848) by the eminent Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning and delves into the colonial past of Britain and the Caribbean by including the perspectives of two (formerly) enslaved women alongside the British poet's. Although Fish laments the inanity that she associates with "writers who write about writing" in the interview, she wrote this piece of historiographic metafiction to address the complexity of giving voice to people who were historically silenced.

The evening concluded with a discussion of global power dynamics and how understandings of the concepts such as 'giving', 'aid' or 'advocating for' have developed, now that the British Empire's legacies of disenfranchisement are increasingly addressed through a postcolonial lens.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Welcome Laura. The first question I would like to ask you is: what motivated you to start writing?

Laura Fish: I found much inspiration in books like *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, which centres on a character from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847): a woman who is described as a 'mad woman' and who is locked up in the attic. Rhys reflects on who this 'mad woman' is, how she got there, why she is brought into the narrative in such an uncanny way and why she is ostracized in *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* puts a very different slant on *Jane Eyre* and sort of shows the reader that there's always another story or another side that a writer can tell [laughs]. That's one of the reasons I like that book in particular: it plays with the idea of what stories really are, what are the most important stories. Rhys takes a character who is considered unimportant and makes them central to her novel.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Some Black authors have spoken on the "burden of representation", that they feel the weight of responsibility to always write politically engaged works and sometimes don't feel free to create art just for art's sake. In the past, you have very carefully explained your view on the ethical responsibility of authors to use their voice to raise awareness. Can you elaborate on that?

Laura Fish: That makes me sound dictatorial [laughs]. I feel increasingly that we listen to stories to learn about things, and storytellers have incredible power. Stories can entertain us and comfort us, but there are many other things they can do, and I think it's awesome that those other things happen as well.

Patricia Neves da Costa: In the extract from *Lying Perfectly Still* that you read to us, after her father's tragic death, Koliwe takes a job as a development worker in Mbabane in Eswatini, her father's country of birth. Having grown up in England, she only knows Eswatini through her father's paintings and stories. She meets her father's sister, Rachel, for the first time. The way Koliwe's aunt is described is very recognizable to me. Did you mean to describe this kind of stereotypical 'auntie', and to what effect? Is she based on a specific person you met, or does she portray a combination of multiple people?

Laura Fish: I hope people will identify with that sort of aunt, who is mothering. It's a character Koliwe really needs, because her mother dies when she's very young, and she's left with her father, who is struggling and then dies. So yes, I think I wanted people to be able to identify with her as a very nice and warm sort of character throughout the book. Most families have someone like that, if they're lucky.

Katrijn Van den Bossche: In this excerpt, Koliwe's father's paintings are described vividly. The brushstrokes seem to trace the experiences he had, but it isn't quite clear what is depicted in the painting. On the other hand, the aunt's photograph seems to create distance. Koliwe doesn't recognize the children in the picture as her father and her aunt.

Could you elaborate on how the different artforms of painting and photography function in the story, or on how you conceptualize memory?

Laura Fish: The paintings appear throughout the novel. They are like a trope, I suppose. Most times when Koliwe thinks of her father, she thinks of his artwork. That was the side of him she respected, because he was really creative. But the style and colours he uses in his paintings change as his mental health deteriorates. At the beginning, she only knows Eswatini through her father's paintings and upon arrival is taken aback by how modern it is. There are people smoking in the streets and it's just not this traditional place her father had painted for her. He didn't really succeed as an artist; he was dependent on his wife's money, which was humiliating for him. Koliwe also paints, and while she's doing her self-portrait, she realizes how alike her father's face is to hers. There is this connection between them through the artwork. I hadn't thought about it very deeply, but it is there. It is actually quite an important thing, because that is how she first experiences the country, through his artwork. When she tries to paint herself, she realizes what she's creating is a character who is more like him. Koliwe feels she is two people within one body, the English Koliwe and the African Xolile she is beginning to know.

Patricia Neves da Costa: In the published fragment (Fish 2017), Koliwe loses faith, in all sense of the word. Can you elaborate on the role of spirituality, and maybe also of hope, in the novel? Will the protagonist regain hope, in some sense?

Laura Fish: I'm hoping readers will interpret the ending as her having gone on a journey, or they will have gone on a journey with her. Although it's quite a difficult journey, she is a stronger person at the end, and therefore, hopefully, will be able to deal with these situations in a better way. Because she doesn't deal with everything well herself. She doesn't lean on any religions or spirituality herself, but she does gain inner strength.

Patricia Neves da Costa: In the second fragment you read Koliwe is rushed to Queenie and Nathi's homestead, a couple who work at the house of Koliwe's Scottish manager Cameron, to try to save their baby's life. The passage is bleak and distressing; the different expressions of shock and mourning hit readers quite hard. Which reaction do you hope this elicits in your readers? Do you hope to shock and make them aware of the hidden trauma, the trauma your reader may not see every day?

Laura Fish: This fragment shows how in aid and development, people believe that development workers can miraculously save people. I too went to Africa to 'help', but it's very, very difficult to do because it means actually giving up something of oneself. So, I think I gained a lot and did not actually give very much at all. What I would like people to see is the loss that the local people have as well. Literature can take people into another experience, and that is, for me, one of the important things about literature. Of all the passages in this book, this was the one that from the first time I wrote it, I've edited the least. It seemed to just come; I wrote quite quickly. The voice is very much my

voice, you know. Other bits I had to rewrite and rewrite, but that's a piece that I feel very comfortable reading. Not because of the content, obviously, but because it's a piece that I know sort of comes from my heart, really.

Katrijn Van den Bossche: Do you think of your works as being able to move readers towards action? Or do you sometimes think about how your readers might find solace in your books?

Laura Fish: I do think of the reader, and I think about what it is I'm trying to say and how I'm trying to say it. I think about the effect I'm trying to have on the reader. But I'm also aware that I actually have no control over that. Because we all think differently. There are books which some people think are amazing, and I'll read them, and I don't really like them. So as a writer, the big thing to remember is that we can't control our readers. Whatever I want the reader to think, I can't make them do that. But if I could, my intention is to… I guess it's been different with each book, but with *Lying Perfectly Still,* I would hope that the reader might think about the act of giving and what it actually is about. I mean, giving is a good thing, but when we give, we often also take, even if we are unaware of what we are taking.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Your descriptions of the natural environment of Eswatini are not only beautiful, but are often also connected or contrasted to the traumatic scenes you depict. For instance, after Koliwe's boss Cameron collects her from the baby's funeral and takes her back to his lodge in the mountains in the harrowing passage you read, you connect Cameron's sexually aggressive behaviour to the rape of the land. In another part of the book, Koliwe has an intense experience of traveling through the beautiful but uncompromising mountainous natural terrain, before she can relate to the perspective of Gift, a girl who has mysteriously gone missing. How did the nature you experienced in Eswatini, together of course with the people you met, inspire your writing?

Laura Fish: How did the nature inspire my writing? I grew up in the countryside. On a smallholding, quite remote for England, and I love remote places. Eswatini is really beautiful. I think a lot of my writing is haunted by the experiences that I had in Australia as well, and the relationship indigenous people have to land, to 'Country', I feel, is very, very, very important in my writing. Yes, because I don't write about cities.

Patricia Neves da Costa: How did you connect the beauty of the environment to the trauma of the people who live in it?

Laura Fish: I think the land is a contrast, because it is so beautiful. Terrible things happen; they can happen naturally, but humans also cause them and I suppose that juxtaposition – or reflection – is a technique I use quite a lot. But a reflection is not exactly the same as the thing it represents. Reflections can be very powerful. Reflections can create strong contrasts.

Patricia Neves da Costa: You also very emphatically relate here the abuse that takes place within aid organizations, something that hasn't been part of many discussions of aid work. Did you mean to make a broader critical claim, and could you elaborate on this a bit?

Laura Fish: In England there has been quite a lot about abuse in aid work in the news over the last five years or so. Before that, you couldn't tarnish an aid worker, because they were thought to be absolutely wonderful, but they're human beings like anybody else. The character Cameron is based on a real person. I wanted to show there are perpetrators in any kind of work, whether it's aid work or anything else. Obviously, someone like Cameron, who is working with very young, vulnerable girls, is in a unique situation, in that he can take advantage of them. He doesn't believe what he's doing is bad, because he believes he's helping them. I hope the book will make people think, more generally, about the power people in certain positions have.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Much of your writing in *Lying Perfectly Still* was inspired by your lived experience. You have stated in earlier interviews that you see writing as research and that it can be hard to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. How does the research you undertake feed into your literary writing? What is that process like?

Laura Fish: I think of my writing as practice-led research, the practice – writing a page or a chapter – the physical act of writing is a form of research. The process of reading, editing, revising, developing characters, deciding on the voices and the colours, the themes, all the different layers that go into a piece of fiction – these are the actual research, because all the time the piece will develop. It is rare, you know, that a writer will keep a piece completely unchanged. The writing in itself, as it grows and develops, becomes an act of research. That's how I see it. And the process – coming up with an idea, writing it down, reflecting, being informed by further reading – can be triangular, and can keep going round. Then the writing is a form of research.

Patricia Neves da Costa: I would like to delve deeper into your second novel, *Strange Music*, with you. Some of the audience members here today are students at VUB who have already read and discussed the novel. It is such an intriguing work of historiographic metafiction, where you were really successful in employing literary writing as a tool for uncovering gaps in white histories of abolition and of Britain's share in the slavery located in the Caribbean. You show how, after the abolition of the slavery, indentured labour even worsened the conditions for enslaved people on plantations and exacerbated issues of class and colourism in the Caribbean. You also highlight the torturous situations that enslaved women were subjected to.

The novel was primarily inspired by "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1848) by the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In this poem, an enslaved woman addresses her abusers after she was raped by her masters and fell pregnant. The woman in the poem, like one of the characters in your novel, finds the burden of birthing the white slave-master's child unbearable and ends up killing the newborn, both saving it from an enslaved existence but also taking its life. This poem was published in the American abolitionist journal *The Liberty Bell* and is also added as an addendum to the novel.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's family were plantation owners and, in the novel, you address Elizabeth's reactions to their crimes, but you also go beyond the limited British perspective. In your own words, the novel engages "imaginatively with the family of (canonical) poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning from a Creole and Black woman's perspective". The novel has three narrators, who speak their truths in a parallel way: the poet's fictionalized voice is rendered in many historical Victorian letters and diary fragments; the voice of the Black field worker Sheba is written in a variant of the

Jamaican Patois and her story bears strong similarities with the life of the speaker in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point". Through these first two perspectives, you reflect both on the content and on the creation of the poem. You have also added a third perspective, voiced by the mixed-race house servant Kaydia, whose story was inspired by Easton Lee's "Strategy" (1998), a more recent poem in which a young enslaved woman is advised to sleep with her white master to gain agency, by birthing his mixed-race child.

In your eyes, what connects the three women?

Laura Fish: The three women have very different lives, but each one is trapped. Although technically Sheba isn't supposed to be enslaved, in practice she still is. Kaydia, as a housemaid, is also trapped in terrible relationships and her work. Elizabeth is trapped in a different way, because she's very privileged, but at that time in her life she was bedridden. I think it's important to look for similarities in people. Elizabeth could never have written that poem if she hadn't been able to empathize in some way. So yes, entrapment is something that links the three women.

Katrijn Van den Bossche: Generational trauma seems to be an important issue in both *Strange Music* and *Lying Perfectly Still*. Do certain characters also find strength in their ancestry?

Laura Fish: In *Strange Music*, generational trauma is a theme: Kaydia's relationship with her mother; Kaydia's relationship with her own daughter. I was interested in portraying fractured mother-daughter relationships, because they are one of the results of the system of slavery. Children were bred, so there was often no family and children could be taken away and sold, rupturing not only mother-child relationships, but also father-child relationships. These terrible fractures continue. I mean, I don't know my parents and my parents don't know me. I know my children. It's obviously something that I'm trying to change within my family, but it's very difficult. The number of single parent families today is incredibly high, and sometimes the number of fractured relationships in families is a result of slavery, really.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Why did you decide to write from the white perspective and how was that experience?

Laura Fish: I'm not conscious of writing from a white or a Black perspective. And I'm not quite sure why that is, and I don't know whether that's good or not. When I started writing the book, I was very determined for Elizabeth not to have a voice, because so much has been said and written and published about her that I thought there really didn't need to be anything else. But the more I read of her work, the more I warmed towards her actually, and I felt there was a side of her that had not been written about. I wanted that to come out. It was very, very difficult to write, because she wrote a diary from the age of about 11. Almost every day of her life, she wrote letters. So, the scholars on Barrett

Browning know absolutely what she was doing. That was the most difficult thing: not writing from a white perspective, but making sure that some scholar in Oxford wasn't going to write and say "she can't have been doing that". But nobody has yet. This draws on a wider issue, namely whether Black people should write from a white perspective about Black people rather than from a Black perspective, which is an interesting question. It shouldn't matter what colour or gender, or what circumstances. Writing is about using your imagination. Shakespeare wrote from different perspectives. The best writers can write from any perspective. The point of view shouldn't matter, what matters is doing it convincingly.

Patricia Neves da Costa: *Strange Music* and *Lying Perfectly Still* are very different in voice and style. Was this a deliberate choice based on the story, or do you believe this is also due to the evolution of your own voice and style as an author?

Laura Fish: I think it's partly for the subjects, that the format needs to be very different. But yes, I find it very difficult to open *Strange Music* and *Flight of Black Swans*, my first novel, because I can just see so many things that I would change. So, I hope that my writing does get better, not worse. I think there is progression, hopefully.

Katrijn Van den Bossche: How important was it for you to incorporate your own views in *Strange Music,* or did you mainly focus on what Barrett Browning wrote about being an author? Do you also have a little bit of that in *Lying Perfectly Still* or is the 'writing about writing' less prominent?

Laura Fish: I hope it's not there in *Lying Perfectly Still.* One thing I don't like is writers who write about writing, because a lot of writers write about characters who are writers, and

I always say: 'Oh, that's so boring'. And then I realized I was doing it myself! With the character of Elizabeth, it was important for me to recreate her, not an image that I have, but in her own image as much as that's possible. I wanted to show a side of her that I think is not often shown. I worked hard in terms of listening to her voice as a writer and trying to familiarize myself with it. The letter extracts are actually her own letters. The other passages are mine, my ideas of what she would have thought. So, I immersed myself in her letters. I mean, I just sat in libraries and read them and read them, and I read books about her because I wanted to try to hear her voice. Sometimes when you are writing dialogue, it's not like you are constructing that dialogue. It's almost like you can hear the characters speaking over your shoulder. I worked until I was in the position where I could hear her. The only way to do that was to immerse myself in her work, and to have real passages of her writing in the book as well. So, obviously, I wanted to get it 100% right. I could hear what she would have said and how she might have spoken.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Did you find any particular difficulty in rewriting poetry and taking into account its form?

Laura Fish: Well, I don't know very much about poetry in theory. I think sometimes ignorance can be bliss. So no, I suppose I didn't really. But I think, if I knew a lot more, I would probably find it more difficult because I would realize mistakes.

Patricia Neves da Costa: By now you have written three wonderful novels, the last of which is soon to be published. Where do you see your writing career going in the next ten years?

Laura Fish: The next thing I'm working on has similar themes and it has to do with a story, again, going into a very different form. I'm working with an indigenous dance choreographer and experimenting with another form, but I'm also writing something more like a memoir, and some short stories. So I'm just continuing, but experimenting with different genres and forms as well.

Patricia Neves da Costa: But still in writing?

Laura Fish: Yes. But I'm also moving into… I suppose that the similarity between what I'm doing at the moment and *Strange Music* is that it's about other people's voices. Also *Lying Perfectly Still,* because I did interview a lot of young girls. I didn't want it to be just *my* perspective. I really felt I wanted to enable their voices, and to have their stories come through. Working with the indigenous choreographer, again, is allowing that part of that story to be told by somebody else as well. That's what I'm interested in working on, you know, across different cultures and different voices and different forms.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Do you have any advice for novice writers, advice that you already wish to share ahead of the creative writing workshop you are directing here at

Pépite Blues on the 31st of March 2023? Any practical or attitudinal tips for the students of Vrije Universiteit Brussels who signed up?

Laura Fish: Well, what they should do before this is have a nice evening. It is quite heavy stuff. But generally, my advice is to read and write. I mean, writing is about writing: at the end of the day, you have to sit down and do it. I would just encourage people who want to write to protect the time where they can write. Find out when is a good time for you to write. Whatever it is, an hour in the evening or an hour in the morning, in the middle of the night or at lunchtime, make sure you are keeping the practice going. Because the more one writes, the more one becomes a writer, generally. And then the other thing is reading. For advice, I would say read. Read widely, but also read around the subject you're interested in. See what other people are doing and how they're doing it. Because other writers will have encountered similar problems and come through, hopefully. Or not. We learn from good literature. We also learn from bad literature. Reading is a good way of learning about writing.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Thank you, Laura, I am sure these tips will be very valuable for novice writers and we will take them to heart. I know I certainly will. We will now open the floor to questions from the audience.

Question: The story is set in the 1990s in Swaziland on a topic we don't hear that much about, aid work. Why do you feel the urgency to write about this topic now?

Laura Fish: Well, I did start writing it while I was writing my first novel. Originally, it was just going to be short story, and then I couldn't write it. I don't know, for some reason it wasn't happening. So, I put it away, and when I had finished *Strange Music* I went back to it. The ideas have been there ever since I was in Swaziland. About people not talking about it. I mean, I was very aware when I was there… Because I've worked for the BBC, I know quite a bit about news reporting and how these things work. I was so shocked when I went there and saw how the country was destroyed by HIV, and the world just wasn't interested. I think these stories still matter. It is a shame the way that news is reported and that we know more about what happens in England with Prince Charles, King Charles now, than about all these other things, when really they're all important stories. Now is as good as any time for these stories to be told.

Question: What was your role in Save the Children and how did you go about interviewing the girls?

Laura Fish: When I first worked for Save the Children, I worked as a researcher in Sudan, and that was perhaps one of the first co-ordinated international aid programmes, when food was air-dropped. I was out researching in the field with a translator to find out what the women needed. That was the first thing I did, but later I was paid to entertain as an expat wife, which I am almost certain wouldn't happen now. When interviewing the girls,

I wasn't working for Save the Children. I went back to Eswatini to research the book. I taught at Waterford Khamlaba United World College of Southern Africa, and through that contributed to a voluntary development programme the college was running; opportunities to interview the girls arose from the voluntary work.

Question: Do you think that your status as an aid worker influenced the girls' answers to your questions? Do you think that they might have been mystified by you as an aid worker or a writer and that this might have influenced the way they answered your questions and stories?

Laura Fish: Some people expected cameras, all kinds of gifts, because they were in need. There can be a power relationship in that kind of situation. Generally, local people benefitted from aid or voluntary work; they did not expect anything in return for interviews for the book and were not remunerated.

Question: After #METOO did you decide to focus more on Cameron's storyline? Was that always the big storyline, or was he initially less prominent?

Laura Fish: No, it just made it so much easier, because that was always what the book was about. When I first started out, I was really, really badly harassed by this guy. While this was going on, it was really, really difficult to write about it. But things have changed so much. Before #METOO, there was much less interest in the publishing world in writing dealing with the sexual abuse of girls and women, sexual harassment, and rape culture. #METOO has opened up really important spaces. It didn't motivate my writing; it just means that people are more likely to listen and to hear these stories.

Question: How do you shape your research process? Do you work with an editor?

Fish: Well, Isabelle Kenyon from Fly on the Wall Press will edit *Lying Perfectly Still*.[2] Generally, after I've written something and I think it's finished, I'll put it away. I can put it away for a week, or maybe for a couple of months. And when I look at it again, I think "Oh no, it's not finished". So, it is a continuum of revising of my own writing. But I also do work with other editors and other writers at universities. That's another piece of advice I would give to people who are starting to write: find somebody who will read your writing. It doesn't have to be an English teacher. It doesn't have to be anybody who knows very much about literature. Just somebody who will be honest, and who reads a lot. If something isn't working, then I hope they would point that out, that they will help to reshape characters that are inconsistent or not well-rounded. Often, the basis for the characters is a combination of my imagination and certain traits or personalities drawn from real people.

[2] Ellah Wakatama Allfrey (OBE; writer, editor and journalist) edited *Strange Music*. Alice Thomas Ellis (writer and essayist) edited *Flight of Black Swans.*

Question: I find it interesting that you voice other people's perspectives through your work. It kind of goes against that general idea that you have to write about what you know. How do you remove yourself from your work?

Laura Fish: Well, I don't, probably. I can't see outside the way that I see things. But more and more I try to have that space for other voices to come through, as with the different voices and multiple protagonists in *Strange Music*. In *Lying Perfectly Still,* the girls' voices are *their* voices, that's not all me. In this upcoming dance piece, the choreographer and the dancers tell part of the story. I have no control over that. I write my words, but I can't do the choreography. So, I hope that my voice can mostly be heard in dialogue with other people's. I mean, people do say "write about what you know", but… I often don't even know huge amounts about what I'm writing about, but I interpret that as meaning: learn, get to know what and who you're writing about. If you don't know it, then you need to get to know it, and then you can write about it.

Question: How does writing affect you? How did writing *Lying Perfectly Still* compare to writing *Strange Music ?*

Laura Fish: I don't know if it's the same for other people who write, but each novel has just been a really, really difficult struggle, to be honest. Starting all over again, each one brings up different problems. Hopefully, I do learn things at the same time… Actually, it doesn't feel any easier. I think *Lying Perfectly Still* has taken longer and I have found it more challenging. Things with *Strange Music* sort of fell into place. Not very much, but the characters were real people. Each of them I know existed as a real person. Some of the characters in *Lying Perfectly Still* were real people, too, but the two main protagonists were kind of made up. Some people would find that easier to write, but with *Strange Music*, I had these shapes that were partly filled in already. So, I think it wasn't as time consuming.

Question: Could you explain what your writing routine is?

Laura Fish: I used to be really precious about my writing. I had to be in a special place at a certain time and it had to be silent. Before, I would need a little bit of a rest, but, because I brought up two kids on my own and I work full time, that went totally out the window. There are certain periods when I'm writing that I do need to focus every single day. So, I actually get up at half past four or five o'clock. Because I've been finishing *Lying Perfectly Still* the last year, I get up at that time just about every day, because it's the only time of day that other stuff isn't there. I can actually protect that time, it's the only time that I can get. Even if it's only twenty minutes a day, that is better than nothing. So that's what I do, I get up very early.

Question: I have a question regarding you working at the BBC. Sometimes institutions like these, with recruiters, you know… they do appear a certain way. I was wondering if you feel like the BBC has taken steps to change certain dynamics in their own systems. Do you feel like there has been an actual impact?

Laura Fish: Yes, I think the BBC is virtually unrecognizable, behind the scenes as well as in front of the camera. They do an incredible amount of work now to ensure that it is diverse and inclusive. When I started working there, it was right at the top of the agenda, but the climate was different and much more discriminatory. I was working in film editing in the Natural History unit for one summer. And then they started doing this programme called *Ebony,* which is a Black programme, and they put me to work on that. It was like all the Black people went to *Ebony,* whether we were interested or not. Now there are Black people behind the scenes as well. It is much more diverse, and they are working very hard at it all the time. I think it is very different.

Question: Do you have any advice for racialized people entering these kinds of spaces and how to navigate them?

Laura Fish: Keep going and believe in yourself. Working in the media is very difficult for everybody, but believe in yourself. And find people who can be supportive, just one person who reaches their hand out can be really helpful. So, I recommend getting to know people, showing a real, genuine interest, and working hard.

Question: How do you look back on your experience in aid and development now, after writing about the abuse of power in your novel? Do you still see any value in it?

Laura Fish: I'm just trying to think how to answer… I suppose there is. I think that aid and development is really important, of course, but it I can do a lot of damage. But I wouldn't want people to think that, therefore, we shouldn't take action. When I worked for Save The Children about thirty years ago, my husband was acting as head of Save The Children Southern Africa. I was in my twenties, and we had a house in many of the Southern African countries and a staff of about twenty. I was paid to entertain as an expat wife. Mine was a lifestyle most people dream of – all under the banner of helping people. But my world consisted of… you know, swimming pool staff. It's important to understand that helping people means actually giving something up, not gaining something. And I hope there are other discussions within the book, too. I mean, it is a difficult dilemma, because Cameron is helping those girls, in a way. These things are so complicated, aren't they? But I do hope that people will reflect on this. A lot of countries still give back more in debt than they receive in aid. There are really big political problems that need to be dealt with, obviously. But on an individual basis, I think if people really want to help, it would be far more helpful to visit an elderly person who doesn't have any visitors, rather than visiting somebody in Tanzania, where you don't speak the language

and have no understanding of the culture. If it's actually about giving, helping somebody a few doors down the road might be more effective.

I think people's motives pose a big question mark, including my own when I was working in aid and development. There is some sort of remuneration going on, but what do people actually get out of this? With aid and development, sometimes the donors are the people who benefit as well. It's very easy to walk away in aid and development, if you live in another country and things don't go well. I would hope that some readers might reflect on those things. I suppose it's a bit like what I said before: If people actually want to help somebody, chances are they have far more impact within their own country. I'm not saying that we shouldn't help people in other countries at all. But I think in England, the attitudes, the behaviours, the approaches… There's a lot of work that needs to be done. The emphasis could be more on practicing what we preach in terms of good behaviour, rather than just pointing the finger at other people and saying, "you ought to be doing this", "you ought to be doing that". Leading by example. A lot of the things that we do in the western world are really wrong. We should be looking at how we could change the way that we are, rather than trying to change others.

Question: You said that you gained a lot from aid work, perhaps more than you gave. What have you learned from your travels?

Laura Fish: Well, I'm hopefully still learning and reflecting upon things that I've seen and people whom I've met, but one of the things that I've learned is that we are at a crucial time. There is a lot of indigenous knowledge out there, but we're not listening to those people who have lived on the earth for a very long time, in a very successful and sustainable way. I've learned that it's really important to listen to what these people are saying and trying to do.

Patricia Neves da Costa: Thank you so much for reading for us tonight, Laura, and for answering all of our questions. We very much look forward to the publication of *Lying Perfectly Stil* in November 2024.

Works Cited

Fish, Laura. *Flight of Black Swans*. London, Duckworth, 1995.

---. "'Black Fish in a White Sea' and 'Letter to My Self'." *In Search of Belonging*: *Reflections by Transracially Adopted People,* edited by Perlita Harris. London, BAAF, 2006.

---. *Strange Music and The Black Woman in the Mirror: Reflections on a Literary History*. Diss. U of East Anglia, 2006. The British Library EthOS.

---. "'Strange Music': Engaging Imaginatively with the Family of Elizabeth Barrett Browning from a Creole and Black Woman's Perspective." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2006, pp. 507–24.

---. *Strange Music*. London, Jonathan Cape, 2008.

---. "Angry Black Birds." In: *Kwani?*. Kwani Trust, 2015.

---. "Woman in the Mirror: Reflections." *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, no. 7, May 2015, pp. 92–105, doi.org/10.12681/syn.16199.

---. "Exclusive Excerpt from *Lying Perfectly Still*, a Work in Progress by Laura Fish." *Johannesburg Review of Books*, 2017. johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/12/06/fiction-issue-exclusive-excerpt-from-lying-perfectly-still-a-work-in-progress-by-laura-fish/

---. *Lying Perfectly Still*. Manchester, Fly on the Wall Press (forthcoming).

Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." *The Liberty Bell: Friends of Freedom*, 1848, pp. 29-44. *HathiTrust*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.69015000003364?urlappend=%3Bseq=55%3Bownerid=115061953-54.

Lee, Easton. "Strategy". *From Behind the Counter: Poems from A Rural Jamaican Experience*. Jamaica, Ian Randle Publishers, 1998, p. 125.

Reza, Avid, et al. "Sexual Violence and its Health Consequences for Female Children in Swaziland: A Cluster Survey Study." *Lancet*, vol. 373, no. 9679, 2009, pp. 1966-1972.