*Produced by Aparna Abhijit*

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[Theme music]

**Ben Farmer:** Hello, and welcome to the 2019 Spread the Word podcast. In the three episodes of this series, we speak to the winner and two highly commended authors of the 2018 London Short Story Prize, which aims to find the best short stories from emerging writers in the capital.

In this episode, you’ll hear Abel Czekes’s interview with Emma Hutton. Her story, *Dead Shark*, was highly commended by the jury of last year’s London Short Story Prize. *Dead Shark* is a story of Dot’s struggles to break out of her monotonous life and her mission to reconnect with herself.

**Abel Czekes:** Hi, Emma.

**Emma Hutton:** Hi.

**Abel Czekes:** Welcome to LCC.

**Emma Hutton:** Thank you for having me.

**Abel Czekes:** Thank you for doing the interview with us. First of all, what I want to ask is, what’s your background? How did you come to writing?

**Emma Hutton:** My background is basically I have always wanted to write. That’s been like forever. All writers say that, though, don’t they? “It’s something I wanted to do since I was a child.” But I really just didn’t do anything with it. I guess I didn’t think I could in many ways.

So I went a circuitous route in the sense that I started copywriting as a job. I feel like that gave me a bit more confidence in what I could do, just as a writer in general. People were paying me money to write stuff, so I thought, okay, I’m going to give this a go and I’m going to actually try and write my own stories.

I found a local group called Literary Kitchen in Peckham. There’s a woman there, Andrea Mason, and she does these groups. She starts with beginners, but she does all different kinds of levels. I went there, and that’s where it started from, basically. That was maybe just over two years ago that I really started writing, like writing my own stories. That’s essentially how it started.

**Abel Czekes:** This writing club in Peckham really helped you find your own voice?

**Emma Hutton:** Yeah. It gave me confidence. It gave me confidence to be surrounded by other people who were in the same boat as me. Lots of different age groups, lots of people from different backgrounds. It was learning the craft. There is a thing about writing where you do have to learn. You have to learn very simple things. Even dialogue or scene-setting, building character. It all takes work to get it right.

I enjoyed that process, though. I think it makes you a better writer. I think it makes you consider the reader more, and when you consider the reader, the reader’s experience, I think it makes you a better writer.

**Abel Czekes:** I keep hearing the counterargument for that, that you cannot really learn how to write and you have to find your own way and you have to fail and fail better, even. Do you think you can actually learn how to write?

**Emma Hutton:** I would go with you in that way. I don’t think you can learn how to write. I think you can learn the craft of writing; I think you can become a better writer. I think the only thing that makes you a good writer is being a good reader. If you don’t read, you’re never going to be a good writer. That will give you your voice. You will have your own voice, but it’s how you tell your stories.

I think that’s where me having my group – at the moment I have a writers’ group, and we meet once a week and we workshop our stories. Some people are writing novels, short stories, film treatments. That’s also really interesting, to read other people’s work and see where it can be improved or what you think works and what doesn’t work. That’s probably been the most helpful thing.

But yes, I agree with you. I don’t think you can teach someone how to write.

**Abel Czekes:** Let’s talk about the prize and *Dead Shark*. This is your fourth short story?

**Emma Hutton:** You’ve been doing your research. Now I’m trying to think, which stories are these?

**Abel Czekes:** There was *The Dogs*, *Flitter* I think, and there was a third one.

**Emma Hutton:** *Sal*.

**Abel Czekes:** *Sal*, yeah, and then *Dead Shark*.

**Emma Hutton:** Yes.

**Abel Czekes:** I read *Dead Shark* many times, actually, and I’m always like, wow. I think it’s great. What was the inspiration behind the story?

**Emma Hutton:** It was a culmination of things, I think. For me, every year I read J.D. Salinger’s short story collection, *Nine Stories*. In the UK I think it’s called *For Esmé – with Love and Squalor*. I’ve read it every year since I was a kid. I love that collection. I always find it changes every time I read it.

There’s a story in there which is called ‘For Esmé – with Love and Squalor’, and I thought about this character Esmé and then the first line just came into my head. Honestly, that’s how it started.

But then it was all these other things that had just been bubbling around inside, and suddenly they all seemed to coalesce and come together. There were things like in the story there’s a reference to Woody Allen and ‘dead shark’. That’s always in my head as well, all the time, this idea of relationships being a dead shark. If they don’t move forward, if you don’t maintain momentum, then you’re a dead shark, or your relationship’s a dead shark. That was part of it.

Then there’s also an incident in the story which is really the catalyst for her determining or sailing her own journey, which is she meets a woman in a poetry class who tells her that she has a dark heart. That actually happened to me.

**Abel Czekes:** Oh really?

**Emma Hutton:** Yes. It’s one of the weirdest things that has ever happened to me in my whole life. [laughs]

**Abel Czekes:** Tell me about that.

**Emma Hutton:** Like every person who lives in Camberwell or Peckham, I decided that I would do a pottery course. I thought that would be a cool thing to do. So I went along and it was great, and I was enjoying it. I was okay. I wasn’t brilliant at it.

But one day – I think it was the second to last class – we were cleaning up and everyone left, and this woman was still there, and I was like, “Oh no, we’re going to have to clean everything up by ourselves.” She just turned to me and she went, “You’ve got a dark heart. You seem like a really negative person.” Of course I didn’t say anything. I was just like, what?

But I could not get it out of my head afterwards. It was just the strangest thing. I was talking to my friends about it, going, “What is this? Is this person crazy, or do I actually have a really dark heart, do you think?” [laughs] When I was with my boyfriend, “Do you think I have a dark heart?” He’s like, “Slightly. It’s not too dark.”

So it was all these things that had been in my head, and they just seemed to come together in the story. Nothing was really forced. This was probably the easiest story I have ever written in the sense that it almost just came out all at once, in one sitting. And I loved writing it, which is not generally the case all the time.

**Abel Czekes:** How much from yourself is in this character?

**Emma Hutton:** You have done so much research. This is quite terrifying. [laughs]

Okay, I’m going to be brutally honest. There is this guy in America called John, and he has this CatCam. A few years ago I got really into it. I find it is the most soothing thing in the world. When I finished work – I was working for myself at home, but in the evenings instead of watching films and things, I would get into bed and I would watch this CatCam. It felt like the most soothing thing in the world. It was strange, but I really loved it. It also made me feel slightly crazy, like, “What am I doing? This is bizarre.” But yes, the CatCam thing, I have done that. [laughs]

Barbara Stanwyck is in it as well. She watches lots of Barbara Stanwyck films. I love Barbara Stanwyck.

So there are these threads that I’ve definitely pulled in that are parts of things that I love. But I think that gives it – because it’s quite a weird story. Is it? Maybe it isn’t that weird, but I feel like you have to give characters – for me, at least – details that make them feel truly real.

**Abel Czekes:** I really like the part about her – I don’t know if it’s a friend, but the tarot reader, basically, because I have weird friends. [laughs] I see my friends in that character. Who’s the character based on?

**Emma Hutton:** Who’s the character based on? I don’t know that she’s necessarily based on any person that I know, like a particular person that I would know in my life. I just thought, I need someone who offsets Dot as a character.

Dot has had this accident and she can’t make decisions. She’s lost her gut instinct, essentially. So she brings in all these different people that she feels can help her. Leona, this tarot card reader, is one of her friends. We say ‘friend’, but she actually pays her, so she’s providing a service to her.

But the thing about Leona is she has echolalia, so she just walks around singing and has weird ideas about Woody Allen films and how that should inform the way you are in the world and in your life. Leona – I don’t know. The echolalia thing, again, I would say that’s more a part of me. I used to actually have that myself when I was younger. I always thought it was just a really interesting thing that would be useful when building character.

*Dead Shark*

*People call me Dot, but that’s not my name. My name is Esmé, like in the Salinger story. The one where Esmé sends Sergeant X her dead dad’s watch. Do you know that one? You should know that one. Everybody knows that one. I was born with a mark under my right eye, a perfect little circle. A dot. That’s why my family started calling me Dot. I call myself Dot too. One syllable. You can’t mess with one syllable, right? Then I met a man who called me ‘D’. He should’ve called me ‘E’. Why is everyone always trying to shorten everything? We were together for six years. During a fight he told me I was boring, and I tried to push him over, but he was a tree. He was also a liar and a narcissist. Swings and roundabouts. The dot hasn’t stopped growing. It covers almost all of my cheek and it’s slipping down behind my ear. The doctor says it’s not malignant and that I should count my blessings. If they dig me up in a hundred years, they’ll find just the dot. Maybe it’ll sink into the soil, the sea, cover the earth, an encroaching, endless mark in memory of me.*

*A year ago, when I was almost twenty-six, a man pushed me off a bridge and I fell onto the pavement below. There were teeth and broken elbows and legs and lots of small bones I can’t remember the names of. I lost my mind for a while, and my gut. You know people always tell you to trust your gut? Well, my gut has been out of whack since the fall. It broke apart with all those little bones, and I couldn’t think or feel or make a decision. I believed all of my choices would lead to terrible consequences. Now my life is a list. A list of shopping. Seven cartons of soup, cereal, milk, and oranges. I eat the same thing every day at the same time. Cereal for breakfast, soup for lunch, an orange in the afternoon, and soup for dinner. I shit at the same time every day. I watch movies at night. I like the old ones with blonde women who peel off long gloves to answer the telephone. I have a rota so I never have to decide. Tuesdays are best because the films all have Barbara Stanwyck in them, and I love Barbara Stanwyck. Her real name was Ruby Catherine Stevens, and she started smoking when she was nine. Nine. I didn’t start until I was twelve, and then I had to stop after the fall, what with the collapsed lung and all. I watched* Double Indemnity*, then* Sorry, Wrong Number*, and then* No Man of Her Own*. Barbara can play good and evil, but I love it when she’s the doomed woman. Nobody does doomed quite like Barbara. When I’m done watching movies, I like to watch the cat cam on the internet. Watching cats grow from shut-eyed babies to silky, slinky creatures makes me feel better. It marks the passing of time in a way that’s better than hands on clocks, hairs on legs, plaque on teeth. Watching tails grow is better than almost anything. Almost always, one of the kittens gets sick and nearly dies or does die. But that’s life. We can’t all live. I was going to kill myself until I got a reply from Dear Phyllis. Everyone knows Dear Phyllis. I wrote a ton of emails to agony aunts, but Phyllis was the only one to get back to me. I was all set to go gently into that good night, so I guess it’s pretty lucky she replied when she did.*

**Abel Czekes:** Do you have any exciting or any upcoming projects, writings?

**Emma Hutton:** I’m working on my short story collection. This story being recognized in this prize has really inspired me and spurred me on to write my collection. Fingers crossed I will have that by the end of the year.

But yes, short stories, I’m still going to keep working away at them. I would love to write a novel. I think that would be the ultimate thing to do. Terrifying, but yeah. I think if you love writing, being able to finish a novel and have people read it would just be the coolest thing in the world.

**Abel Czekes:** Yeah. Do you have any advice for future writers, for writers in general?

**Emma Hutton:** Read. [laughs] Read. Read books. Read anything. Read. If you don’t read, you don’t have anything to draw on. You can have no life. You can have literally no life. You can live in one room in a house and not move from that room, but if you read books, you’re in the world. You know the world. You know people. You know characters. You have to read to be a good writer. Otherwise, just don’t bother. [laughs]

**Abel Czekes:** Since we’re talking about the London Short Story Prize, what connects you to London? Are you from London?

**Emma Hutton:** I’m from Northern Ireland. I did my degree in Liverpool and then I moved to London with my boyfriend at the time, and I’ve been here ever since. I went to Goldsmiths and I did my degree there. I think there’s a thing of it’s hard to get out of London sometimes when you come here, because you love it and you deeply hate it at the same time. It just traps you. I like being trapped in London, so I think I’m here probably forever.

So yeah, it was a no-brainer for me to enter this story to the London Short Story Prize, and I’m so honoured and absolutely delighted that they selected my story.

**Abel Czekes:** It’s a great story.

**Emma Hutton:** Thank you.

**Abel Czekes:** Thank you for being here.

[Theme music]

**Ben Farmer:** This podcast is a co-production of Spread the Word and London College of Communication. This episode was hosted by Abel Czekes and produced by Aparna Abhijit and Steven Breese [sp]. Intro by Ben Farmer. Our theme music is by Lobo Loco.