*Produced by Eleanor Austin and Ben Farmer*

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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 Lauren Bach’s interview with Guy Ware. His story, *the year of peace*, won last year’s London Short Story Prize.

**Lauren Bach:** My name is Lauren Bach. I’m here with Guy Ware, who is the first place winner of the London Short Story Prize for his story called *the year of peace*. *The year of peace* follows a relationship between a man and a woman who only meet a few times every year. Welcome, again, and congratulations on winning the London Short Story Prize.

**Guy Ware:** Thank you.

**Lauren Bach:** That’s quite the feat.

**Guy Ware:** It is, yeah. I’m really pleased.

**Lauren Bach:** One of the questions that I was really wondering is what gave you the inspiration to write it in the first place.

**Guy Ware:** There’s usually a couple of things behind a story. There was a very clear spark for this one, which was another book, as is often the way. A guy called Ian Cobain’s book called *The History Thieves*.

He’s an investigative journalist, and it’s a book about obsessive British state secrecy and things that the world doesn’t get to find out about too often, one of which was a war I’d never heard of because nobody else had really heard of it very much. [laughs] In part, obviously, from the people who lived in Dhofar and southern Imam, where it went on for years without the UK government ever admitting that that’s what we were doing.

So that was quite an interesting prompt, including what became the title of the story, *the year of peace*. Right in the middle of that, in 1968, it was this little snippet about there’s this mythology amongst the British army that it was the only year in the whole of the 20th century in which they weren’t on active operation somewhere in the world. It turns out they were; they just weren’t admitting it.

That was the starting point. There’s lots of history crammed in there, and part of the challenge of writing the story was writing history in a way that was still a story. I wanted to make it more anonymous, make it more generic if you like, because in part it’s also about that colonial backstory. Applies to an awful lot of countries in the world that Britain frequently invaded and didn’t leave for quite a long time.

So I wanted to keep that nonspecific, but also to keep – you don’t have to read very far between the lines, but not to be too specific about the faith, the race, the nationality, particularly of the woman involved, just because it helps with that constant wrong-footing. Hopefully the reader gets some of that as well as the male protagonist.

**Lauren Bach:** Right, especially the part where they’re sitting in the restaurant on their date, talking about everything that they know of their home countries. The fact that it’s set in London, do you think that holds a lot of significance to other Londoners as well?

**Guy Ware:** Well, London is different kinds, of course, because London is the classic metropolis of the empire. It’s home to all kinds of people from all over the world, and increasingly so. That finding out how you get along with other people whose backgrounds you don’t know is obviously not exclusive to London, but is very familiar, I hope, to people who live here.

**Lauren Bach:** Yes, and definitely very timely. We could do a reading now. Perfect timing.

**Guy Ware:** Perhaps just a bit of orientation for your listeners, if it isn’t obvious from what we’ve already said. [laughs] The setup here is the male character has written a book about the history of a country unnamed in which there was a coup 50 years ago that was sponsored by the British. He’s written a book about it, and he’s at a publisher’s launch party for the book. Our female protagonist, when he gets to the end of the reading, is where we’re going to pick up the story.

*she stepped up to the table and said*

* *I’m only here because of that coup*
* *here in London?*

*-that too she said her father like his father had worked for the old sultan, but unlike his father, hers had stayed loyal and followed him into exile, or retirement, here, helped him settle, here, and when the sultan died, she said, two years later, he stayed because he’d met a woman, my mother, and there you have it, I am here, she smiled, and he, not knowing what else to say, asked if she would like him to sign her copy of the book, and she said yes and told him her name, for the dedication, she knew his, of course, and had no need to ask for his phone number, but did so anyway, and*

*they met, again*

*for a drink, although she did not drink, and then dinner - yes, she said, don’t*

*worry, I do eat -*

**Lauren Bach:** At the end he ends up hoping for something. Is there a reason that he does end up having these positive feelings looking back?

**Guy Ware:** This story came more easily than many of my stories do, and I found it grew quite quickly. There’s a line in it that took me by surprise for a moment, and then I thought, no, that makes sense of what this story’s about.

They meet up after their first date. They meet up four or five times a year, but never more, and always because she instigates it. She rings him up and says, “Come and have dinner tonight.” So apart from the anniversary date, he never knows when it’s going to happen, but that it will every few months.

That could be really frustrating and challenging, and you might think, God, why would anybody put up with it? But almost to his own surprise, he realizes that that’s perfect, that he really likes that. The word ‘perfect’ just kind of dropped into the story because in a way it’s also a bit of a male fantasy that you can have this relationship with a woman, who he obviously finds very beautiful and very attractive, that’s surprising, but it doesn’t have any of the domesticity involved in it.

So yeah, he might not see her for several months at a time, but then he does, and he suddenly discovers that that’s actually what he really, really likes, until… and I don’t know how far I can go without ruining the end. [laughs] But until that doesn’t happen anymore, and then he’s left wondering, was that what he wanted or didn’t want? Or did he want something more out of it?

**Lauren Bach:** Right, and almost wondering, if he could go back and change it, would things have ended differently for both of them?

**Guy Ware:** Yeah. Also, being forced to think about the other people in her life, relatives, family, whatever, and wondering does he have the grace to hope that she had a happy life that he didn’t know about it because he wasn’t part of it? Or is he jealous of that? Kind of wrestling with that.

**Lauren Bach:** Right. I took away from that that the title, ‘the year of peace’, is actually quite ironic because even in these times of colonialism, people called it a year of peace, but was it really? It’s a year of peace from the perspective of the people in power.

**Guy Ware:** Indeed, indeed. Although, of course, 1968 – on one hand, hippies were having a great time.

**Lauren Bach:** That is true.

**Guy Ware:** On the other hand, not only post-colonial wars in the Horn of Africa, but it was the Prague Spring, it was the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, it was all kinds of things. It was a pretty tumultuous year. As you say, it depends an awful lot on which end of the telescope you’re looking at each of those events. Tet Offensive wasn’t exactly peaceful, was it? So it was obviously a very traumatic year.

One of the things that I find fascinating, apart from being old enough to vaguely remember some of this stuff, is the way we look back and mythologize various periods.

**Lauren Bach:** Romanticize.

**Guy Ware:** Romanticize them, yes. Is people’s first image of 1968 Sgt. Pepper, or is it the Vietnam War? A lot will depend on your own personal history and your politics and whatever.

**Lauren Bach:** It’s funny, because when I was growing up I always thought of the late ’60s, early ’70s as Woodstock and the hippies. The older I get, the more I realize how messed up everything was. [laughs]

**Guy Ware:** [laughs] Yeah, and serious insurrection, even outside of Vietnam, in the U.S. and in France in particular. Czechoslovakia was having its own problems, and so on and so on and so on. These things are always there. Those struggles are always going on in one way or another.

As I say, part of the origin of the story, being a book about how histories get hidden and obscured, part of that is the more conspiracy theory end. This particular war was a war the British government never admitted it was having. Harold Wilson was Prime Minister during quite a lot of it. He wrote his own memoir of his time in government; he didn’t even mention this war, even when he was writing his memoirs.

**Lauren Bach:** That’s crazy.

**Guy Ware:** It’s bizarre. So it’s completely written out of the record, but presumably not if you come from Imam. There’s that end of actual suppression, but there’s also what you choose to focus on. Is it the music and the peace & love and the festivals? Or is it the struggle for equal pay in Dagenham or whatever? At different times, different things come forward.

**Lauren Bach:** I love the parallel between that ‘year of peace’ and the year of peace that this relationship is supposedly going through, with her only reaching out and him surprisingly liking it, even though he may not have actually liked it. It’s an interesting parallel between what seems to be something good and something nice and what we actually just romanticize.

**Guy Ware:** Yeah. Again, without the spoilers, there is a different form of peace at the end. That’s where it gets to.

**Lauren Bach:** That is very true. Shall we have another reading?

**Guy Ware:**

*she paused long enough to let him know she was choosing whether to be distracted, to let him down gently, then said she’d lived in the States, in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a few years - studying? he asked – and she agreed, yes. a masters that turned into a PhD but along the way I got involved in Obama twenty oh-eight and spent a couple of years in Washington and he wondered, not for the first time, what she was doing here at all, with him, but asked why she’d come back here, to London, and after a moment she said*

*- to get married*

*which luckily she said while he still had his fork raised, having just*

*taken a mouthful of fish, which allowed him to pretend the bone had caught in his throat, necessitating several coughs and sips of water and the ingestion of a wholly unnecessary pallet of bread, before he said, and what does your husband do? - and*

*she threw back her head and laughed like a drain, not like a drain, like nothing he had ever heard.*

**Lauren Bach:** We also need to talk about the format of the short story. It kind of has this Ulysses-esque, stream of consciousness, no punctuation style to it. That was obviously quite intentional.

**Guy Ware:** Yeah, but it’s not just because I can’t punctuate.

**Lauren Bach:** Can you explain why you chose to write it in that style?

**Guy Ware:** This is going to sound terribly trite, but it came out that way. I’ve written a lot of stories. Most of them have full stops in them. But it came as a bit of a blurt, and it seemed to work because one of the things about the protagonist is that he’s deeply unsure of himself in many ways and is slightly on edge and slightly nervous about things.

Out this stream of consciousness came in which he keeps wrong-footing himself, and it kind of fitted, I thought, quite well with what the story’s about, which is about hiding things. That’s where I started, that history that nobody knows about, and in this case his personal life people don’t know about.

**Lauren Bach:** There’s this point in the end that really struck me, and I’ll say it without giving anything away, but it’s the very last part and he has this inner monologue with himself. He hopes, he doesn’t hope, he hopes, and he keeps going back and forth. The way it jumps across the page and hits you is really jarring, in a sense.

**Guy Ware:** Good. There are parts that are I hope not overdone, but key parts of the story where the layout – it would be familiar in a poem. It’s not familiar in a story. But just using the shape of the text on the page and gaps within lines and so on to emphasize exactly that thought process in the guy’s mind.

**Lauren Bach:** You’ve published two novels and written three, right?

**Guy Ware:** Yep. Just finished Draft 4 of #4, but that’s got a long way to go.

**Lauren Bach:** Do you have a preference over novels versus short stories? Do you find more freedom in one?

**Guy Ware:** They’re different. They’re different types of work, in a way. I don’t just mean as finished products, but the way I go about the work. I wrote a lot of short stories when I started writing seriously, in the way I think quite a lot of people do – partly prompted by the Creative Writing course at Goldsmiths, which got me into that.

Then I wrote a novel. It’s much more time-consuming, obviously. I now find I want to go back and write short stories in breaks. Not exactly as relaxation, but writing a novel takes a very long time, and I kind of crave getting to the end of things. [laughs] Getting something finished, getting something I can put out and submit to competitions or whatever I’m going to do with it.

I just need that sense of I’m actually completing something from time to time, which takes, as I said, a matter of years with novels and hopefully not that long on a short story.

**Lauren Bach:** You mentioned a minute ago that this story was a lot easier to write than most other things. Is there a reason it happened so quickly?

**Guy Ware:** I’m not Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It didn’t come to me in a dream and write it out until a knock on the door stopped it. But it did come relatively easily, and then details started to drop into place and I could see where it was going.

Kind of luck, I think. Also, part of the point of the story is that wrong-footing, him being wrong-footed or wrong-footing himself. That partly mirrors the way things get written. An idea will pop into your head – into my head, anyway – by word association or thought association, and half the time the job of writing it is to cut it all out because it’s taken you off on an irrelevant direction.

But here, it seemed to work quite quickly. Things that struck me, like I was saying, about the intermittent relationship suddenly striking him as perfect – yeah, it is, from one view. That happened a number of times, and it just made the structure of the story come fairly easily.

**Lauren Bach:** What advice would you give to someone who is maybe a new writer, has the urge to write, but doesn’t know maybe where to start?

**Guy Ware:** Oh dear. [laughs]

**Lauren Bach:** Big questions.

**Guy Ware:** Write is the only advice. Don’t take advice from other writers. [laughs]

**Lauren Bach:** Just don’t listen to anything you say.

**Guy Ware:** Don’t listen to what I’m about to say. No, obviously, that’s facetious. But there’s an awful lot of twaddle written and said about rules of writing. You take from them things that you find useful and feel entirely free to ignore / satirize anything that you think is preposterous.

Because the short answer is that people don’t know. Obviously you can get better, but you do that by writing and listening to what people say about what you write. It does help. It is painful, but it does help to have other people read what you write who are not directly related to you – because you can’t really trust anything that the people who are directly related to you say.

**Lauren Bach:** That’s true. Don’t ask your mum.

**Guy Ware:** For obvious reasons. Read is the other thing that all writers say when asked this question, but it is true. You can’t underplay. Read and read and read and read and read. I find there are writers whose style is so strong, it bleeds into what I’m writing for a while.

**Lauren Bach:** Really?

**Guy Ware:** Oh yeah, and then you have to go back and make sure that you’ve cut it all out again. It can be very different people, but just people with very strong signature styles. So while reading all the time, do be aware that the reason you’re doing that is to find out how things work. Writing pastiche is a good exercise. It’s really good. But don’t mistake it for anything else.

**Lauren Bach:** Is there anything that’s on your reading list right now? Are you reading anything that’s really impacting you?

**Guy Ware:** Oh, another tricky question. I knew I was going to get asked something like this, so I have to look things up in reading recently. I’m in the middle of Anthony Powell at the moment, which is deeply unfashionable. It’s a kind of guilty pleasure, in a way. It’s pre-war upper class people in a not-quite-Woodhousian world, but very, very far removed from where we are now.

Some of the things I’ve just been reading recently, very different. I loved Anna Burns. I thought that was a tremendous book.

Some of my older favorites – there’s a writer who isn’t terribly fashionable here called Richard Ford. American. He’s not very well-known in this country, and I think he probably ought to be. He’s just a man of enormous wisdom and incredibly good sentences.

**Lauren Bach:** Enormous wisdom and incredibly good sentences.

**Guy Ware:** Mathias Énard. I’ll give you another one. Again, for people who like stories, big fat books with not much punctuation, he wrote a book which is sometimes described as a 570-page novel in one sentence.

**Lauren Bach:** Oh, wow.

**Guy Ware:** It isn’t, in fact, because it’s got some inserts in it. It’s got some little chapters put in that are normally punctuated. It’s called *Zone*. That, I will press upon people, is a tremendous novel. It’s a kind of Iliad for our days, with the war and what’s been going on all around the Mediterranean and what we used to call the Near East.

**Lauren Bach:** You’ve been writing a lot recently. Is there a certain routine that you follow?

**Guy Ware:** No. One of the questions you asked before about advice for writers, one of the most common is write every day. People get very precious about it. I’ve never been able to. [laughs] Partly because I have a job. I’m lucky enough now to work part-time, but I do have a job, and I do have a family. One of the reasons I started working part-time was because I had very small children in those days.

So the reality is, I certainly do not write every day, and I stopped feeling guilty about it some years back. But I think I write relatively fast, just by comparison with the things that other writers say when asked these questions. When I do have time, I tend to find I need decent blocks of time to write in.

Then the job is cutting out all the stuff that shouldn’t be there in the first place. This is going to sound terribly pretentious, but I think it was Michelangelo who said the job of a sculptor is to find the elephant inside the block of marble as you chip it all away. He said it’s quite simple, really. You just take away all the bits that aren’t an elephant and what you’ve got is an elephant.

I take 100,000 words and chip away all the ones that shouldn’t be there and I get a 60,000 word novel, broadly speaking. That’s where an awful lot of the time goes. [laughs]

**Lauren Bach:** Guy, thank you for coming in today, and again, congratulations on winning the 2018 London Short Story Prize.

[Theme music]

**Ben Farmer:** This podcast is a co-production of Spread the Word and London College of Communication. This episode was hosted by Lauren Bach and produced by Eleanor Austin and Ben Farmer. Intro by Ben Farmer. Our theme music is by Lobo Loco.