*Produced by Benjamin Mayr*

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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 Alison Dominguez’s interview with the Australian writer Kira McPherson. Her short story, *A Complete History of Portraiture*, was highly commended by the jury of last year’s London Short Story Prize.

*A Complete History of Portraiture* illustrates the complicated and intimate emotional state of a young artist who lusts after an older politician. The story depicts the struggle of age difference, how societal roles reflect political identity, and ultimately how love and infatuation supersede all. Here is Alison’s conversation with Kira McPherson.

**Alison Dominguez:** Kira McPherson, welcome to the 2019 Spread the Word podcast. We are delighted to have you.

**Kira McPherson:** Thanks.

**Alison Dominguez:** Can you please start us off by reading the beginning of your short story, *A Complete History of Portraiture*?

**Kira McPherson:** Sure.

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*There was a painting of a woman with black hair in the gallery, and it made me think of you, not without embarrassment because I know that you are not art and would not like to be compared to it. This comparison tends to reveal more about the observer than the observed, you would say, which makes it ineffectual as a means of communication. You believe analogies are about control and should be used sparingly. They wrench you into the perspective of another person, but after the first one, a resistance starts to build. As would be expected, your speeches are as literal as a dog.*

*(…)*

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*The picture came into view in a stupid way. An old man was hogging the space in front, forcing people to look around him. At this angle, the face went kite-shaped, the lips caught the light and turned pink, and he dislodged and it was me looking straight ahead, and it was you in the picture.*

**Alison Dominguez:** Thank you so much. I guess the first question I have is concerning the structure of the story. It’s actually the first thing that jumped out at me when I read it. It’s laid out in 35 short paragraphs that are all numbered, and it’s quite an unusual way to structure a short story. Did you know right from the start that that’s how you wanted it to be structured, or did it develop over time in reflection of the text?

**Kira McPherson:** It took me ages to come up with this structure, and I think originally it was a more standard narrative that began in an art gallery and then went on. Then, partly through editing and partly through expanding it, I think eventually – I liked the idea of doing a triptych, and also that’s kind of like art.

**Alison Dominguez:** Yeah, triptychs.

**Kira McPherson:** This is my process. I guess it gradually became more and more fragmented. I can’t actually remember what made me think these very small paragraphs were what would work for it. I think it partly came up through editing and taking things out and whittling it down.

But it also allowed me to move through time in a really freeing way. It allowed me to show the complete span of the relationship without having to go into detail – partly because the nature of the relationship, I think, makes you think of a lot of questions around what is the genesis of it, how did this come to be. I guess the nature of the dissolution as well is kind of ambiguous. I wanted to address enough of both of those things for it to be satisfying, but not really bog myself down in the detail of the exact logistics. I think the short paragraphs are key to that.

**Alison Dominguez:** You mentioned art. As we’ve seen through the title and the beginning of the story, art clearly plays an important role. The narrator herself is an unsuccessful young artist, and the relationship she has with the older woman in the story, they meet at an art gallery which they continue to revisit.

There’s also the fact that the narrator talks about the portrait as a reoccurring theme. Can you maybe talk to us a little bit about your interest in portraiture as a metaphor?

**Kira McPherson:** It really came from – I read this really great book. It’s called *Portraiture*. It’s by a woman named Shearer West. I didn’t really know a lot of that from going to the portrait gallery and really enjoying it, so I read this book, and it gives you an overview of portraits in art history, but also goes into what makes the portrait different to other types of art.

The one thing that she talks about in that book that I really remember is the idea that each portrait has this matrix of power that governs it. I think she uses the phase ‘the painter, the sitter, the patron, and the viewer’. Every portrait has that complex inter-dynamic over it.

I enjoyed the idea of writing a story that had some of that in it, or maybe had portraits in it as the stuff around it. I’m not saying that the story successfully deploys that concept, but I think for me that was a really interesting way of thinking about it.

I suppose there’s a trick with it, because portraits are really visual and obviously a short story is not. I think originally when I wrote the story, I got bogged down in describing the picture. As it currently stands, there’s not really much of that in there. I wanted to think more about the actual viewing, the active viewing, galleries as a space as well, and I think these are more in the story than an actual description of art.

**Alison Dominguez:** You said that you were inspired by this book about portraiture, which is a specific type of art. Was it art in general that drew you to that book? How did you come upon that?

**Kira McPherson:** I have no memory of what made me want to read that book. I was working at a university at the time, and I think I just had access to a lot of books. I know libraries still exist outside of universities, but it made it easy. [laughs]

**Alison Dominguez:** Doesn’t seem like it anymore.

**Kira McPherson:** That’s true. But it made it easy to just pick up a topic and then go and find a book that seemed reasonably accessible. So I can’t remember where it came from. Probably it came from the idea – I think I knew I wanted to write a story that had some kind of recurring object or painting in it, and I liked the idea of a portrait.

Portraits are just inherently creepy as well, right? This idea that you have pictorial representations of actual living people. So I think I knew I wanted to do that, but reading the book expanded how I was thinking about it. It also introduced me to actual artists who were famous for portraits, which is quite helpful in thinking about them, because I knew nothing.

**Alison Dominguez:** I really want to talk about the characters in the story – in particular, the age difference and how that seems to be a big reason that the two women are attracted to each other. The narrator herself, she’s maybe in her mid-twenties, whereas the MP is probably twice as old. To me, it seemed that both of them seemed to enjoy the power dynamic that came with that age difference within the relationship. Would you agree that that’s present throughout the story?

**Kira McPherson:** Yeah. There is definitely meant to be a sense that the attraction is partly fueled by that difference, because the difference in age reflects a difference in power that they both have, as you said.

Not just that of course the older person has more power, but is more established, has a career that is also constraining, I think. There is a freedom that the younger person has that enables her to do things like go to this house for a weekend randomly, as she does in the story, that of course the older person could never do.

It’s not necessarily that they’re attracted to each other because of the age difference, but it’s certainly a governing dynamic between them.

**Alison Dominguez:** It almost upholds the relationship in a way.

**Kira McPherson:** Yeah, I think so, even as it dooms – I don’t know if it’s the thing that dooms it, but it certainly is doomed from the beginning. Maybe that’s just more of a symptom of why it’s going to be unsuccessful than the cause.

**Alison Dominguez:** Apart from the obvious, the age difference also manifests itself within the fact that they have opposing roles within society, which influences their opposing political views as well. While they have these opposing political views, that doesn’t really seem to compromise their relationship, but it does provide political undertones for your story. Was that your intention when you wrote it?

**Kira McPherson:** Yeah, the story does have political undertones in the sense of this ambient suggestion that they have different views. I don’t think it’s spelled out explicitly. What I wanted to convey is that you have this relationship that politics is in the background to, but because the relationship is proceeding in a bubble, in a way, it stays in the background. In some ways the weird containment of the relationship pushes that stuff further into the background.

I think it is the source of conflict between them, but it gets buried amongst everything else that is happening. In some ways the narcissism of the character is her pretending that it doesn’t matter that they have this difference.

**Alison Dominguez:** There’s actually a section of the story where the narrator realizes that she has completely opposing views to the older woman that she’s in a relationship with, but she also doesn’t really care when she realizes this. Would you mind reading us that section of the story?

**Kira McPherson:** This part is in the middle of the story, and it’s the narrator watching the public figure that she’s having a relationship with on TV.

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*I hate this stupid show. Combs in your hair, or tape or something, to contain it. This is an excellent metaphor for whatever is taking place, a series of curated outbursts. It makes me sick to see you. Nausea. How do you do it? It seems to be truly amazing to know the exact size and shape of your labia, and that this remains constant whether you are on television or not. Aliens might come to Earth and ask me to draw it from memory. Your strategy of containment would be powerless. They would force it out of me, and then what?*

*It would never suit me to be a spouse of some importance. I would always be thinking thoughts of this kind - the sound you make when you urinate in the morning. Do they know that you are liable to sigh? Perfect contentment. Nothing like this soapy riot, this Poundland lather.*

*You have not changed your personal views from a year ago, you were saying, but the fact is we live in a representative democracy. You do not always, at any given moment, represent yourself. Other people will hear that and think that you are not a straightforward person, but you sound so much like you then, it makes my head snap.*

*It occurs to me I don’t agree with you on anything, and I want you just as much after this thought as I did before.*

**Alison Dominguez:** When I first read the story, I found it extremely relatable. I thought it was because I saw my past relationships within the characters, but I actually think it might be how the narrator talks directly to the woman she desires rather than to the reader. How did you decide on that strategy? Were there other works that influenced you in regards to how it was written?

**Kira McPherson:** I think the idea that you found it relatable is really interesting. I think that’s the beguiling nature of not just first-person ‘I’ narrated stuff, but that mode of address, that second-person ‘you’. It is really intimate.

I have used it before. Really, the reason that I like using it, or probably just the reason that I started using it, is that it allows you to evade a lot of the usual infrastructure of writing a character. You get to bypass all that and just introduce the idea of this other person, and you introduce them with a lot of intimacy. In some ways it’s kind of like a cheating form, because you don’t have to establish the relationship. There already is one by using the mode of address that is ‘you’. You also don’t have to describe the person. You don’t have to say they have black curly hair or something like that.

So it came quite naturally to me, and it is something that I use a lot. I do think it is because it allows you to move very quickly into relationships and people. When you’re writing about that, it’s useful. That is actually something that probably I took directly from a lot of Ali Smith short stories. When I first read those, I hadn’t read anything that used ‘you’. It is really intimate.

I think also, there’s something to it that I’m not so consciously doing, but obviously when you use ‘you’, you avoid gendered language as well. I’m aware of that, even though I don’t really want to hide that the story is about two women. I’m not trying to be coy about that. But of course at the beginning there is a coyness because you don’t realize that until a couple of paragraphs or pages in.

**Alison Dominguez:** I guess I just want to understand how you came about writing about this theme or this story in particular.

**Kira McPherson:** I think the story came about basically because I smushed together a bunch of different ideas I had that were not really working very well in isolation.

I knew I wanted to write something set in a gallery, I had this developing or one-off interest in portraiture specifically, and I very much wanted to write quite explicitly about relationships between women – which I had done in other stories, but this was probably really the first time I did it in such an explicit way, both in the sense that there’s no coyness with the language, as I said, but also there’s overt descriptions of the things that they do to one another.

**Alison Dominguez:** The story is about the relationship between two women.

**Kira McPherson:** Yeah, and I very much wanted to write about that. Separately, I had this idea of writing a story that was about an affair that I imagined, at the time, these two public figures would have and how that would work logistically. Then I guess that wasn’t very interesting to me, so eventually it changed. That parity between them was replaced by a younger woman, an older woman. An established woman and a younger, less successful woman.

**Alison Dominguez:** In regards to the story and London as a setting, do you have a particular relationship to London? Was there a reason that you thought London might be an intriguing setting for a short story?

**Kira McPherson:** I think the story couldn’t be set anywhere other than London, partly because what it is about is the collision between people from maybe not necessarily different backgrounds, but in different stages of their lives. That is obviously very much a city experience, and a London one especially because London has all these different functions – entertainment, politics – that converge on it, unlike American cities or Australian cities, where I’m from. They don’t have that complexity to them. London was the natural setting.

There was something kind of weird for me, though, in writing this story. I felt very much like I was imitating the view of someone who is more local than I am. So that was an interesting challenge.

**Alison Dominguez:** That didn’t come out at all in the story. I thought it was really, really natural.

**Kira McPherson:** It’s quite an English story, which I say as someone who is not English. [laughs]

**Alison Dominguez:** I’m also not English, but I definitely felt that.

**Kira McPherson:** Yeah. In that sense I felt almost like I was cheating. But again, I think that is just because the first-person mode makes you feel that you’re writing in some ways more intimately than you are. It hides a lot of the artifice and makes it seem more like an autobiography, which this is not.

**Alison Dominguez:** As another non-English person – I’ve lived in London for a while, but reading it I did feel like I was English, almost.

**Kira McPherson:** That’s such a high compliment. [laughs]

**Alison Dominguez:** Definitely. I think you nailed it.

You said you always wanted to be a writer. Did you know what kind of writing you wanted to do, or is that something that you learned over time?

**Kira McPherson:** For me, at least, I always have had an idea of what kind of writing I like, and therefore to some extent what writing I would like to write like or imitate.

But I think there’s this weird process that at least I’ve gone through, where you have this idea of who you like and how you might write, and then you have to actually discover the way you are writing. Often there’s a really big gap between those things, whether because it’s not as good as your expectations or because it’s just different.

For example, some of the writing – I really, really like Ali Smith. I think especially because I started off writing primarily short stories, I really liked her short stories, which to me have this combination of – they’re very banal. They’re about everyday stuff, but also have a lot of weirdness in them.

When I first started writing, I was definitely not doing that. It just took me a long time to not write things that were imitative. But it was something that I didn’t really know what I was imitating. I wrote a lot of stories that were kind of comedic, but in a silly way. I tend to do less of that now, but I feel like that was an important part of working through and getting closer to accessing the type of story that I want to write.

This one that we’re talking about today is more in that banal but subtly weird or strange vein.

**Alison Dominguez:** Can you tell us a little bit about any projects you’re currently working on?

**Kira McPherson:** I’m working on a novel at the moment. It’s set in Perth, in Western Australia. It chronicles the university years of the main character. That’s all I’ll say about it. [laughs]

**Alison Dominguez:** All right, thank you so much. Can you tell us a little bit about anything you’re currently reading or any recommendations you might have for our listeners?

**Kira McPherson:** Oh my gosh, I wish I had prepared this. I read a lot, which I’m sure everyone on this podcast will say. I try to alternate between fiction and nonfiction. I’m trying to think of what I have been reading.

**Alison Dominguez:** Okay, just the last book you read.

**Kira McPherson:** The book I’m reading at the moment is *How to Change Your Mind* by Michael Pollan. It’s about LSD and all the psychedelics and how they can impact consciousness in his own experience trying them. It’s very good. I’d heard a lot about it. It is really interesting. It has all those elements of nonfiction that you want, which is obscure trivia and an overall narrative of his eventually coming around to trying them. It’s kind of a history of psychedelics in American culture, so that’s kind of cool. That’s a good book.

The last fiction book I read was – gosh, I can’t even remember. I read *Murmur* by Will Eaves. That was a great book. It’s about a character who is similar to Alan Turing. It’s told in this really, really inventive way. So that’s a great book as well that I would recommend.

**Alison Dominguez:** Thank you so much, Kira, for coming and being on our podcast. We really enjoyed having you.

**Kira McPherson:** Thank you for having me. This is my first podcast.

**Alison Dominguez:** Really? You would never guess.

**Kira McPherson:** Oh my gosh. [laughs]

**Alison Dominguez:** Really, really well done. Thank you so much.

**Kira McPherson:** Thanks.

**Alison Dominguez:** Thank you.

[Theme music]

**Ben Farmer:** This podcast is a co-production of Spread the Word and London College of Communication. This episode was hosted by Alison Dominguez and produced by Benjamin Mayr. Intro by Ben Farmer. Our theme music is by Lobo Loco.