

**Iona Gibson:** Hello, and thanks for tuning in to this year's Spread the Word podcast. We are here in the studio with Caroline Rae, author of 'flesh-meet', highly commended in the London Short Story Prize.

*Maxi Tweens Dancehall be well plus bigger than what Rad innerpixed and the beats be so meganormous he sensed they in his corps fro the top of his bonce to the finish of his toes. Twas mighty weirdo!*

*Evrywhere be the stink of lads and gels. Up in the circle tweens be verballing and kissing wiff they loveliners and down in the pit they be shaking down and rolling and hi-lo booting. Tho plenty critters be pacing lonesomas and Rad inner-feeled he be a lone critter 2. Fo a coupla secs he floated his mum and Flower and home and supper – they be eating chickslice tonite. Truly he hearted to exit but he inner-verballed he musted be bold. So he floated Juliet and then he eyeballed roun and spyed a door wiff the neon FRESH FLESH-MEETS. And now he feeled mighty inner bangbangs.*

*Ousside Rad paced and selfed to style his mane. Then he flashed his eyeballs and the door opened. Kwikkwik he entered pre he cud brain-change.*

**Iona Gibson:** Hi.

**Caroline Rae:** Hi, Iona.

**Iona Gibson:** First of all, welcome to the show.

**Caroline Rae:** Thank you.

**Iona Gibson:** It's great to have you here and meet you in person. We're here at London College of Communication, and you mentioned that you used to study here yourself.

**Caroline Rae:** I did. I did my Master's here a few years ago. I did a Master's in Script and Screenwriting. It was a very, very good course, I have to say.

**Iona Gibson:** Would you mind just giving a quick rundown of what the story is about, almost like a short synopsis?

**Caroline Rae:** 'flesh-meet' is about – well, it is as simple as a Romeo and Juliet, I guess, in some ways. In fact, there is a bit of Romeo and Juliet in it. It's about a London boy, Rad, who's 13. He lives in the 'ousside' part of London where poorer people live. He's doing internet dating, basically, although he would term it – there's different terminology for all that.

There's a concept throughout the short story that poorer people start dating and having sex very much younger, and in this society that I'm imagining, it's quite natural and normal. He goes

to what's called Tweens Dancehall. In 'flesh-meet' there's some quite antiquated language as well that I like to think might still project into the future.

He's arranged to meet a girl. They both wear masks. They've arranged this beforehand. He masks himself as Romeo and she masks herself as Juliet, and some of that is up to the reader's imagination, how they see these masks. I see them one way, but I haven't told the reader to see them in any particular way.

They meet, and there is this big passion, this connection between them. He's bowled over by her. She's unlike anyone he's met before.

**Iona Gibson:** Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and about your short story?

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah, I can give it a go. I actually first wrote a shorter version of it about 10 years ago now. It was in a whole bundle of material that – every now and then when you're looking for inspiration as a writer, you go through all your old junk and you try and find something, a lead, which might get you into doing something with it.

I looked at it and I thought, "Yeah, I think I could really go somewhere with this now," so I was away with it. It's funny; it wasn't actually difficult to work on it, in a way, because I kind of wrote it initially to amuse myself – which is probably why I write most things, actually. [laughs] I just carried on in that vein, thinking, "I'm finding this really entertaining, so I'll just go with that."

**Iona Gibson:** Probably the best way to start, right? If it entertains you, then it's going to entertain other people too.

**Caroline Rae:** I think it's a big mistake to try to have in mind too much who might be reading it because I think that brings in all sorts of other blocks and influences. I think it's quite good to just trust your own judgment, and if people don't hook into it, they don't, and if they do, they do. That's the way it goes.

**Iona Gibson:** That's a fantastic way of looking at it. Never assume your audience. When you were writing this, you say that it was because you wanted to entertain yourself, but what actually brought you to submitting it to the competition?

**Caroline Rae:** Because I expanded it and wrote it, and then actually, my boyfriend, who reads most of my work – poor thing – said, "I really think you should do something with this." Because it turned out that he liked it, too. So I did go outside of myself and hand it over to someone else, and I think his judgment is very good. He said, "Send it in," so I did.

**Iona Gibson:** Wow. How did you feel before submitting?

**Caroline Rae:** I try not to feel about submitting things at all because I submit a lot, and there's a lot of rejection in the world of writing. You just have to try your very, very best to be quite tough on yourself and not attach too much to anything, not attach too much to rejection, not attach too much to other people's validation of what you're doing. It's hard to do, but you have to keep trying to detach, in a way.

I think once you've done something, you kind of leave it. You say goodbye to it. Once you've stopped endlessly fiddling around with it – which unless someone actually physically grabs your hands and takes you away from the laptop, it's hard to stop fiddling around. But there comes a time when you think, "I can't do this again. It's just going to have to go as it is," and that's the point where you say goodbye to it and send it off, and then try not to worry about it too much.

**Iona Gibson:** I suppose there's a sort of artist's lifestyle surrounding that, where you try so hard to perfect something, but the more and more you edit it, the less and less you like it and the more you try and change it. But then you end up preferring the original, at which point you can't return back to.

**Caroline Rae:** That's absolutely the case with a lot of things. I've completely ruined my own work many times by over-editing and then thinking, "This is absolute crap. I've got to go back to the first thing I did." And I do, and then I think, "What happened to all that time I spent fiddling about and it didn't work out any better?" It's really weird how often the first thing that you go for actually does turn out to be somehow the right thing.

**Iona Gibson:** What advice might you give to someone who wants to start out writing?

**Caroline Rae:** I think first of all – this is nothing new, but you have to actually do it. It's the doing of it that makes it happen. Projecting into this idea of yourself doing it is a bit fatal. You can't go around thinking, "I'm going to do this thing." It's the physical act of doing it.

As you sit down and you have paper in front of you and a pen, and you actually do this very physical thing of writing words, then you're lost. Nothing is going to happen. So I'd say you have to be a bit brutal with yourself and force yourself to do that, whether you do the three pages in the morning thing that people were doing from some creative writing book. Morning Pages, that was it. Whether you do Morning Pages or whether you do '11:00 at night with a brandy' pages, you've got to do your pages, simple as that.

I have found that I can only write longhand. I can't write directly onto a laptop. I think I read something about how the human brain is very connected to the way you write with your hand or something, and it makes your brain work in a different way or something.

**Iona Gibson:** Yeah, the sign of a true creative. It's a very kinaesthetic way of going about writing, I think.

**Caroline Rae:** I guess some people might be able to do it directly onto a laptop. I envy them because it'd be much faster, I guess. But I just scrawl out pages and pages, and that's how I do it.

I do want to say that I think we all tell ourselves all these rules about how we can and cannot write and get very precious about it. I guess if the only alternative is to type, then you'd just type it, wouldn't you?

**Iona Gibson:** Yeah. Did you write 'flesh-meet' by hand?

**Caroline Rae:** Yes.

**Iona Gibson:** How do you think it would've come about if you had typed it instead?

**Caroline Rae:** I do think that somehow, writing it by hand suits the pace at which I'm thinking. As I make things up, it's just this nice tempo between writing and thinking, whereas if I type – I'm actually quite a fast typer – I think then my writing pace would be too fast for my thinking pace.

Also, when you write by hand, you can stop and do little drawings. I can't draw at all, but I do my own little drawings and things of symbols or squiggles or whatever you feel like doing just to break the pace of what you're doing.

**Iona Gibson:** Do they often tie in to what you're writing?

**Caroline Rae:** It's either/either. But you wouldn't want to see my stupid little squiggles. [laughs]

**Iona Gibson:** I'm sure they're fantastic. [laughs]

**Caroline Rae:** Trust me, you wouldn't.

**Iona Gibson:** What are some of the challenges that you face when you're writing?

**Caroline Rae:** The syntax, obviously. Once I'd started – it's great when you're creating a different kind of language because you can just make it up. But then when you want to go back and repeat or use a word in a different way, you have to remember the rule you set up for yourself.

I ended up having to write out a little dictionary that I could refer to of how I was creating the past tense and how I was using this word and that word. I used to know grammar quite well, but I can't remember all the different rules. You can go on forever with grammar, can't you? But I knew that once I'd set up certain things, I had to stick to them.

Actually, I got quite obsessed with it, in an enjoyable way because I quite like the minutiae of – well, obviously, I like words, or I wouldn't be trying to write. So that became quite a big deal, trying to make it all logical within its own terms.

Someone could probably pick through and say, “Aha, you didn't use that verb in quite the same way here that you did there,” but then again, it is told in the close third person of Rad, the main character. If he gets it wrong a little bit, it doesn't really matter. [laughs]

**Iona Gibson:** There are some really interesting choices of words within the sort of – can I say sublanguage you created? Of course, it is written in English, but it's not clean English or classic English. Like you said, it's your own diction.

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah, it's my own thing. It's not really a language, is it? Did you say a sublanguage?

**Iona Gibson:** Yeah, sort of. It's very slang. It's almost written in 'slanguage'.

**Caroline Rae:** Yes, it is. It was almost a bit of an ego trip because I got to use all my favourite slangy words that I have in my head, or I've got silly words for things that I do use here and there, like 'nankies' for blankets. That would've been something I've said to my own kids. I think we all have them. Some people call it baby language, but it's a kind of stress-reducing way of communicating, isn't it?

**Iona Gibson:** It's like having a personal dialect, if you will.

**Caroline Rae:** That's exactly it. I could just use all the words I quite like.

**Iona Gibson:** Not only does it make it personal, but it also avoids having to follow the logic of the English language, which is actually quite illogical.

**Caroline Rae:** It's desperately illogical and very, very complex.

**Iona Gibson:** I actually want to play a little game, if that's okay with you.

**Caroline Rae:** I don't mind.

**Iona Gibson:** I've written down a few of the words and phrases that you used in 'flesh-meet'. Some of them are rather intuitive, but others are a little bit more obscure. What I'd like to do is I'll name a couple, and I'd like you to tell me what they mean. Perhaps the listener might have their own interpretation of what it meant, and perhaps you giving them your intention may help them to understand the bigger picture of the story as well.

**Caroline Rae:** To me it's all so obvious, I think, “Surely this is crystal clear that's what I mean,” because it's quite familiar language in my head.

**Iona Gibson:** Of course, and I would love for you to share your dictionary with the listeners as well. The first one here is 'crossed to trash'.

**Caroline Rae:** Oh, if you cross to trash, it means you literally do a cross, make the sign of a cross to reject someone, to put them in the no-go pile of people you don't want to date.

**Iona Gibson:** The second one is 'inter-fessed'.

**Caroline Rae:** To fess, to fess up, to confess. Anything with 'inter' in front of it is to confess to each other.

**Iona Gibson:** That was the more intuitive ones, but I wanted to get exactly what it was from you.

**Caroline Rae:** I find it fascinating, the ones that you are searching a bit more for.

**Iona Gibson:** Third one: 'inner bangbangs'.

**Caroline Rae:** Oh, inner bangbangs, I love – sorry, that sounds really smug about my own writing, but I do like that because it's like your inside heartbeat. Your heart banging because you fancy someone. *Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom*, like that.

**Iona Gibson:** So it's not necessarily anxiety related.

**Caroline Rae:** Well, I think when your heart's going like that, you're always feeling a bit anxious, even if it's a pleasurable anxiety. It's heart racing.

**Iona Gibson:** The next one is 'geo-bands'.

**Caroline Rae:** Geo-bands was my concept for the world geographically – it's not really divided up anymore between the shapes of countries, but it's done in quite a linear way. There are bands. You have longitude and latitude lines, and that's how it's decided where someone comes from. You say what geo-band you're on.

**Iona Gibson:** 'Schluff' or 'schluffing'.

**Caroline Rae:** Schluff, that's my Yiddish.

**Iona Gibson:** Oh, schluff.

**Caroline Rae:** That's it, you've said it. Schluff is to sleep. I used to say to my kids all the time, "It's time for a little schuff." They've grown up saying schluff, so I think they think everyone

knows what it means. I just assumed. It's quite onomatopoeic, actually, isn't it? Like slump into a schluff.

**Iona Gibson:** The next one is 'hun-sweetner'. I love honey, and recently a lot of supermarkets or brands have had their honey taken off the shelves because it has been realised that they're actually filling their honey with sugar syrups to increase the quantity.

**Caroline Rae:** To bump it up. That's really bad. My concept there, I suppose, was a little bit of an ecological warning thing because bees are – actually, you know what? If bees die out, there is no flesh-meet, full stop. Which is not funny at all, obviously, but that's that. It was just a little reference towards the fact that there is no longer this substance called honey, but it's come to be called hun-sweetner because all sweeteners are artificial.

**Iona Gibson:** Interesting. It's sort of synthetic or manmade honey.

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah, it's manmade honey.

**Iona Gibson:** That relates also to another term that I want to ask you about: 'pickly-cu'.

**Caroline Rae:** Have you ever looked at the gherkin? What's a gherkin look like?

**Iona Gibson:** It's a cucumber, right? It's a pickle

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah, so a pickly-cu is a pickled cucumber. A gherkin is a pickled cucumber, so they refer to it as it looks like a pickly-cu. [laughs]

**Iona Gibson:** I thought it was interesting how you phrased that. Instead of saying a pickle, a pickly-cu. I like that.

**Caroline Rae:** Sometimes I quite like putting things in a more – again, it's more 'baby'. I quite like Y's on the ends of words, like 'pickly' rather than 'pickle'. It sounds a bit –

**Iona Gibson:** Entertaining?

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah, a little bit, maybe.

**Iona Gibson:** Another thing was 'kandy-kandles'.

**Caroline Rae:** They've got – there are actually candles with fire. I've imagined that. I just find it cute to imagine that it's candy candles because it gives the idea that they're a little bit like candied fruits. It just gave me that feeling that they're maybe sweet-smelling. Sometimes it's just the bleed of one word into another. It's not a literal meaning; it's just got that connotation, these kandy-kandles.

**Iona Gibson:** Scented light.

**Caroline Rae:** Yeah.

**Iona Gibson:** Interesting. Some of the insults and names that you used in the story were very interesting too. They were an exaggerated version of things we already use. For example, Rad calls his home-dad, Porsche, a maxi wanker.

**Caroline Rae:** I think some words do their job so well that they're not going to lose that job. [laughs] They're just going to keep on getting it. Hopefully 'wanker' will keep on going because it's a great word.

**Iona Gibson:** One last word I'm going to ask you is 'showpix'.

**Caroline Rae:** Showpix are the pictures you put up of yourself to advertise yourself. He likes her showpix. It's a kind of selfie idea, but it would be obviously different. It's moved, changed, advanced.

**Iona Gibson:** The interesting thing about that word and why I've asked you about it is mainly because it's not dissimilar to a term that's used for profile pictures nowadays. A lot of people will call them display pictures or display pics, and 'display' being synonymous with 'show', it's interesting that you use it like that. Especially because it's quite a condensed or rather abbreviated version of it.

I wanted to delve more into the online dating aspect of the story as well, because I think an interesting topic, especially in our present day, is the idea that a lot of meeting people and a lot of relationships beginning starts with a click now, with dating apps like Tinder or plenty of almost online directories of people looking for partners. I thought you could let us into your perspective on this and why you decided to entangle it in your storyline.

**Caroline Rae:** I think in a way, it wasn't even a decision I made within the story because it seems to me so obvious that that's the way relationships are going in terms of how we form them. It's sort of a no-brainer that will continue. I don't see that as a sinister aspect or a problematic area. There's tendencies, I think, for people to think that's in some way going to end up in some terrible predicament for human beings. But the fact that people meet on the internet, you could see it as something positive to take forward.

Also, the other thing with 'flesh-meet' is I didn't want to write some kind of completely dystopian story. I wanted to have some really great bits about life that were still there, hanging on in there. Otherwise I don't think I'd be that interested in writing it.

**Iona Gibson:** Yeah, definitely. It is very humanistic, and it has a lot of human values in there too.



**Caroline Rae:** I wanted people to still be able to be funny or to see things in a funny way because I think without that – again, I wouldn't be interested in writing it because I'd just basically give up. I'd say 'whatever' if there wasn't that still to see or to understand.

**Iona Gibson:** I think a lot of people get caught up in the idea that dating apps and dating are never happy endings, but that's not necessarily the case.

**Caroline Rae:** I read actually a really interesting statistic. Marriages or long-term relationships that come about from internet meetings are more likely to work out than so-called 'natural' meetings. In a sense it's because people know more about each other, and therefore they've narrowed down. They've done a bit of homework. In the olden days the homework was "There's a pub, there you are, there I am. Yeah, you're all right looking, I'm all right looking. Let's do it." [laughs] That was it.

It seems bizarre now that people – I'm not describing myself, by the way. [laughs] But it just seems bizarre that that's all people had. And if people lived in rural areas, God, it's like, who do you meet down the village hall at the end of the road that one bus goes past a week?

I think for Rad and his love interest, the moment is still the moment when they actually meet physically. However much prepping and this and that and narrowing it down and thinking you're going to really like someone, it's still that moment. You've got to still be in the same room to work that out.

**Iona Gibson:** Just to end this podcast, first of all, thank you for your time. Thank you so much for coming in.

**Caroline Rae:** It was an absolute pleasure. It feels very indulgent to sit here and opine about my work. [laughs] It's great.

**Iona Gibson:** Well done again for getting highly commended in the London Short Story Prize.

**Caroline Rae:** Thank you very much.

**Iona Gibson:** That's absolutely fantastic.

**Caroline Rae:** Thank you, Iona.

**Iona Gibson:** Thank you, Caroline. Thank you so much.

This interview is presented by Iona Gibson, produced and edited by Kirstie Peters and produced by Chloe Thomson.