



## **ON THE SAME PAGE:**

An interview with Meg Mundell, author of *The Trespassers* (UQP)

Welcome to *On the Same Page*, the Fuller's bookshop podcast. My name is Damon Young, and I'm Ruth Quibell. Today we're speaking to Meg Mundell and Australian writer and academic. She's the author of two novels, *Black Glass* (Scribe) and *The Trespassers* (UQP), and a short story collection, *Things I Did For Money* (Scribe). Meg is also a researcher, with an interest in place and ethics. She edited a collection on homelessness titled, *We Are Here* (Affirm) stories of home, place and belonging. Born in New Zealand, Meg now lives in Melbourne with a partner and young son.

Today we'll be talking to Meg about her second novel, *The Trespassers*.

### **Ruth:**

Welcome Meg. Now there's a question we always start our groups with, and today you're getting that question. What sort of book is this?

### **Meg:**

Yeah, I think it's a book with a lot of love in it, a lot of fear in it. I hope it's a bit of a page turner. It's got allegorical elements, it has got literary elements. A bit of a genre mashup. Hopefully, really strong story.

### **Damon:**

Sometimes it was a bit like reading a thriller, not a typical thriller, but there were always the questions: What is the danger and, and who is behind it?

### **Meg:**

Well I did try to write a literary thriller. I wanted that kind of strong emotion and threat, running through it, and that went through in several directions, so that my characters were kind of put on the spot in a kind of crucible situation and that's where your characters are really tested. So I tried to keep that up through the thread running through the book.

### **Damon:**

Okay. And I suppose it's also part of an emerging genre of ecological novels or, you know, sort of environmental place novels, often where there's been some catastrophe

### **Meg:**

Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because the other elements of the book, for many readers, have tended to crowd that out. But the book was also informed by a deep love and deep fascination and also terror of the ocean, as a place, and what's happening to our oceans in the world at the moment. And so I wanted to bring that into consciousness because it's a world that I find very fascinating. And we often forget what's happening every day because we don't see it, so I wanted to bring that closer to people's consciousness.

**Damon:**

The novel begins with a poem from Carolyn Duffy, *Who Loves You*. Was that a guiding image or a later discovery? How did that work in your writing?

**Meg:**

I found that, I love poetry, I'm not very good at writing it myself. I've stolen from the talent of greater poets than I, but she's a Scottish poet so that fit beautifully as one of the main characters, Billie, is a Scotswoman. And as soon as I read the poem, I was looking at Scots poets, looking for something that I could use as an inspiration, part way through [writing], maybe write three quarters of the way through. And I found that poem and it immediately rang a bell, it chimed for me. The idea of being far away across an ocean, terrible things happening, please deliver, you know, please come home to me. I'm thinking separation of people, and the bonds of love across distance, in a time of fear.

**Ruth:**

Speaking of which, last year, during the fires here in Tasmania that went full weeks and weeks, we were reading Chloe Hooper's *The Arsonist*. Now this year, we thought we were choosing something that was set well in the future. And here we are now, during a pandemic, reading *The Trespassers*. This is obviously a very timely novel, what prompted you to write it?

**Meg:**

Although the book is set slightly in the future, it was actually something that happened 200 years earlier, 200 years before the book is set. And that was a real event, it's really about one significant event: a migrant labour ship called the *Ticonderoga* set sail from Birmingham in England and headed across to Australia. It was full of people who were being imported to do the grunt work of the domestic work because a huge chunk of Victoria had run off to the gold fields in 1852. So it actually was inspired by the past in the beginning. I did initially write one chapter as attempting a historical novel and soon realised that was not my forte.

And then switched into another plane in the near future, which to me is almost like a parallel version of now. So it was inspired by past event.

So, obviously, you know, epidemiologist scientists have been warning for a long time that we're now seeing unfolding, that events of that nature were coming. So I was interested in that through line of history, but also how social arrangements and social mores have shifted over the past 200 years in terms of: who's coming where on a boat, who's welcome, and what they might be bringing with them, and who makes a

decision about who belongs.

**Damon:**

Speaking of which, there's obviously a lot of research was involved in writing the novel. What sort of research did you find yourself doing to write this? And were there any findings that especially stuck with you?

**Meg:**

There were lots of things to research. You know, I had to get out maps and figure out how long the ship would take to get from point A to point B, what route it would take, where the equator was in the story. I try to avoid too much technical stuff in my research because I find it that makes it into the work to a high degree it becomes distracting.

But I've sailed across from New Zealand to Australia myself, that's how I'm migrated here, so that was a form of research, but it was a casting back into my memory to conjure back up the sensations of that journey: the sounds, the smells, the vision. And I was horribly seasick when I did that crossing, so calling up that visceral physical memory of that crossing was a form of research, but that was dipping into memory. I guess embodied memory.

And then of course I had to research the bug itself. The novel virus as it's called and how that might unfold. And what were the protocols for trying to contain a horrendous, deadly infectious disease like this, particularly in a small place. And another part of research was looking at the psychology of how people respond in a fearful situation like that. And what kinds of mechanisms get triggered off, or what kinds of behaviours tend to come to the fore when people are frightened of something that's invisible and are frightened of each other.

**Damon:**

There's sort of two obligations here. There's an obligation to the facts, to the science, to history. But there's also an obligation to the art of the form of the novel, making it a page turner as you said. Were there any liberties you had to take with the facts, in order to make it work?

**Meg:**

I based a lot of the research I did around containment protocols on responses to the Ebola virus. But, of course, I'm not a biochemist or or an epidemiologist so I had to leave where I wasn't sure. I would say that it wasn't blatantly wrong, but that people could follow the story. I've since made friends with an epidemiologist, a lovely man, and he's read and either he's too polite to tell me there are glaring mistakes in there – he's a very polite man – or he's found it to be sound enough.

Sorry, the question was, did I take liberties with the truth. Oh, absolutely. I think fiction is an act of taking the truth. The story was always foremost for me. The research was important, and I love research, and I had to a little bit step away from it.

**Damon:**

Yeah, I know the feeling.

**Meg:**

It's too much fun. But not very productive, always. So I kept the characters, the characters in my mind the whole time, and they also kind of manifested physically for me, as was writing them I would slip into their consciousness with them, in to their body. So I did let the characters in the story lead the way, rather than being constrained by a slavish devotion to the facts. I did have to do calculations about how many people have died at which point where, and I was checking that. Maths is not a talent of mine, so that was probably one of the trickiest bits. Going back and checking who was dead, who's alive, who's sick.

**Ruth:**

On the story, you've divided it between the three protagonists – Cleary is a young boy, Tom the school teacher, and Billie the nurse. Why did you choose these three, what are they doing for your novel?

**Meg:**

I think all three of those characters I guess, particularly Billie the nurse, and Tom the teacher, are connecting characters in that they have to play a role whereby they connect with other people across the ship. Tom is in charge of the children of schooling them as was the case in the Ticonderoga, there was a teacher aboard. So he's like a conduit between the children and the parents, and filtering some of the frightening information that's coming through.

And Cleary is deaf, I should mention. Tom's interactions with Cleary have an added charge for that reason, he needs to communicate what's happening to the whole class, let's make sure that Cleary can also pick up on what he's saying.

And Billie again is connecting character, although unwillingly. She's also a singer. So, initially, she is persuaded into singing in the bar in the ship by a friend she makes called Robbie. And so she's part of bringing people together through her voice. And that's a beautiful thing, a grace that she's been blessed with.

But then when she is effectively pressganged into caring for the sick passengers, she then became a connecting person and it was useful for me as a writer to have those characters who connected each other, together.

And I chose three perspectives because I like, I like hopping into and out of different voices. That's part of how I write. I almost slip into the consciousness of those people and I like almost ventriloquising.

**Damon:**

Each character has their own voice and Tom, even has his own narrative perspective, he's in first rather than third [person]. Can you talk a little bit about how your writing changed with each character?

**Meg:**

The voice was changed, obviously in the edit you and you just check that the voice is consistent to each person and you haven't let the voices bleed over too much. But

Tom is in the first person. The other two are in close third person. Something a bit perverse in me made me do that because I like the asymmetry of having one direct voice speaking to the reader, and then two other voices where you're actually third person I think you can get pretty close with that. And so you'll, you'll slip into that consciousness in a different way. I wrote it in scenes, so as rotating scenes between each viewpoint. And I usually try to stick with one viewpoint on the day that I was writing because otherwise it got a little bit, that jumping in and out of consciousness could get a little bit confusing. It's better to spend, for me, a bit of time inside the person: you know when the sun goes down the sun comes up and you move on to the next person.

**Ruth:**

This is a sort of a thriller. We've said in the first questions, with a sort of a bad guy with his black beard, as seen through Cleary's eyes. But in the end the bad guy is actually 'disaster capitalism'. That's our take.

**Meg:**

[Laughs] That was a bit of a leap to the entire structure of our society and economy.

**Ruth:**

Why was this an important point for you to make?

**Meg:**

I guess even before that current situation occurred with the Corona virus sweeping the world, I would say when chatting about this book, there's nothing in here that hasn't already happened. So, although it's speculative and that it's slightly in the future.

I also think it's highly plausible. And that was important to me. I want to keep an element of strangeness, and also an element of familiarity, so that it creates a kind of dissonance in the reader and for some that makes the book resonate more strongly with them on an emotional, and mental level, cognitive level. And with Blackbeard I guess he's in a way partly allegorical, although he does unravel a bit towards the end and we start to see him as more of a human being. But there are elements of allegory in this novel as well and Blackbeard is, you know, has associations with the pirate. And we're seeing this through Cleary's eyes and [he sees] the bad guy.

But as for 'disaster capitalism', I mean... the book is also about work, and about how work has changed over the past decades so rapidly. And we see these private companies leaping in to take up incredibly lucrative contracts doing work that effectively manages segments of the human population, as if they were cattle, really. Or lower down the pecking order. So I was interested in exploring that: how that shift towards perhaps outsourcing of essential government's services, kind of, enables the kinds of abuses that we see occurring in a prison system, obviously in our migration system. So I was interested in how that's playing out and how it connects on a global scale. That's almost its own kind of virus that has spread slowly and stealthily across the world over the past couple of decades. These companies just making incredible megabucks by doing the dirty work of governments so governments can hold it at arm's length and not be accountable for what they

perpetrates. That sounds a bit heavy.

**Damon:**

It's very much in the book. It's a plausible story but it's also a very plausible world. One last question. The philosopher Iris Murdoch talked about a kind of moral looking. A gaze that tries to overcome its own delusions and selfishness and really see the world clearly for what it is. What were you trying to see really clearly here? What were you trying to look at with as little distortion as possible?

**Meg:**

I think the character of Cleary offered the most lucid moral gaze in a way. He is an innocent, but he has a deep-seated understanding of maybe right and wrong – he's just trying to survive. So allowing readers to take on Cleary's gaze, for me, was a way of showing them what's happening in this world, what the adults are doing, what's unfolding in front of this little boy, and to see it through his eyes. And then perhaps to reflect on it from a child's point of view, which children don't tend to perpetrate evil, in general. I mean I've got one myself. He's gorgeous. He can be a little horror. But they don't, they have a different moral order than adults. So having having him as I guess the anchor point of the book allowed me to explore love and kindness, compassion, the loyalty and caring that can arise out of situations of fear and horror.

And to me that's a really important part of the book. I do want to mention it because it does sort of sound like everything in the book goes bad, but I also think it's about what when things go bad, how do we behave towards each other. And I'm seeing it that now in the fear that's circulating online. People turning on each other. I mean I do that anyway on Twitter. Attacking each other over toilet paper, and I don't mean attacking each other in the supermarket over toilet paper. I mean online...and that sort of 'attack as defense' mentality. In the book I call them 'howlers', people who just going online and rage and anger. So I wanted to contrast that also with Cleary's viewpoint, which is, it is fairly clear eyed, even though he doesn't really know exactly what's going on...I hope I partially answered the question.

**Damon:**

You have. He's not a kind of implausible saintly figure. He's very much a child. But he embodies, you know, loyalty and love and his intentions are good, and he's not really out to use anyone else for his own kind of fairly nasty gain.

**Meg:**

He is dependent. He needs protection. And I think that's something that true for all of us. No matter how old or how grown up we are. We all have that we all need for protection, that need to be safe, that need to feel connected to other people, and that vulnerability. Even though we may not always be behaving perfectly, we still need that and so does this little boy.

**Damon:**

Yeah, that came across really nicely just the way. Billie, for all her caution and distance, and you know she's pretty jaded, she's there for him. And she feels that love – I think we can call it love, it's a kind of love – very intensely.

**Meg:**

I think it does become love, and I think that's my favourite point of connection in the book, the connection between those two characters, those two people. It helped that I had a child when I was in the early stages of writing the book. It didn't help getting the book written more quickly, but I think it did help me slip inside both of those characters and see the world from the position of a small person. And, and somebody coming to terms with loving a child that they in her [Billie's] case did not expect to come into her life.

**Damon:**

And with that I think that is a really nice note to wrap it up on.

**Ruth:**

Thank you Meg that's been really helpful. And I think that the book group members will have got a real insight from you, sharing the stories behind this. Thank you.

**Meg:**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the readers through this audio thingamajig after they've so generously also read the book. And I want to say thank you to you and to them. And everybody, stay safe and hang in there.