

The BruPod

Series 2 Episode 1 – Tabitha Carless-Frost

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SPEAKERS

Tabitha Carless-Frost, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:04

Hello and welcome to BruPod, a podcast from Brunel University's Graduate School. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on impact and how researchers can achieve it. We're chatting with doctoral researchers about their research, who might benefit from it, and how they hope it will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Tabitha Carless-Frost. Hello, Tabitha.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 00:30

Hiya.

Catherine McDonald 00:30

So can you kick us off by telling us what your research is focusing on?

Tabitha Carless-Frost 00:34

Yeah, sure. So, I'm a creative writing PhD student, which means that my research is practice based. So essentially, what you would normally think of as someone writing a novel, writing a book, writing a memoir, poetry; that's my research. And my specific strand of research is to do with kind of the ethics around approaching historical figures or personal figures from the past who can't speak for themselves, necessarily, but have to speak through archives, speak through research, and therefore also speak through the creative process of the person who's going to try and address their life in a creative way. So, my primary output at the moment is a novel that I'm working on, which centres around the life of an 18th century wax anatomist called Anna Maria Morandi. So, she's based in Bologna and born in 1714, really cool person, kind of obsessed with her. And basically, the PhD focuses on me being in the archive, working out, piecing her life together, basically because a lot of women in science weren't really recorded very well, and often women in science were kind of neglected by the archival record and the history books. So that essentially is my way in.

Catherine McDonald 01:47

And so is Anna Marie, a fictional character that you're creating, like a sort of an amalgamation of others.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 01:54

So no, actually, she was someone who really lived. She was alive 1714 to 1774 basically, there's just very sparse historical record on her, but we know that she lived. We know that she existed because of these works that she

created. Basically, her practice, which was also a practice-based approach, is dissecting bodies, cadavers, in order to further scientific research into understanding the human body. And from that, she would then make wax models for students to be able to learn from. So, we have some of her models left, and we can kind of deduce things from those. But the record of her life, of what motivated her to do that in that kind of historical context, is kind of pretty bare. So that's where the creative writer comes in, and kind of uses theory, uses practice, uses any other skills that we have but to kind of reconstruct a life in a way that's going to speak to the truth of history.

Catherine McDonald 02:50

I'm picturing her already.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 02:51

Oh, she's a legend. Honestly, yeah, she made this portrait in wax of her and her husband, who sadly died, probably when she was in her kind of 30s. And it's a wax portrait, she's done one of herself, and she's wearing a beautiful 18th century pink, kind of frilly gown, and she's dissecting a human brain. And then she made the portrait of her husband, which he's wearing quite dour black, kind of what we'd call surgeon's coat, and he's dissecting a human heart. And it's still in a place called the Palazzo Poggi in Bologna, so you can go see it. I saw it, and was like, wow, this is so interesting.

Catherine McDonald 03:29

How did you first find her?

Tabitha Carless-Frost 03:31

So, yeah, literally, being in that museum a couple of years ago. As well as a PhD researcher, I'm also a filmmaker, so I was attending a film festival in Bologna, yeah, just had a spare day and started kind of roving around, found this museum, and was absolutely gobsmacked by the intensity of her work and the fact that there was no historical record about her.

Catherine McDonald 03:52

Wow. I wonder what she would say about the fact that someone is now focusing in on her.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 03:52

That's a secondary kind of thing that I'm really interested in, which is, like, the ethics of, kind of going back over someone's life in this way, you know, what right do I have, in some ways, and also to kind of re-enliven her, kind of bring her to life. And speaking for historical figures who can't speak for themselves. So that is basically also the critical component of my PhD. So, I'll be doing a kind of sustained thesis looking at the kind of ethical difficulties that I face, or I'll come into contact with during this process.

Catherine McDonald 04:28

So why did you decide to do a PhD?

Tabitha Carless-Frost 04:31

Good question. I've often been faced with people who said, but if you are writing a novel, why do you need a PhD? And it's a fair fact, you can, you know, write a novel without doing this. However, what I'm very interested in is that dissemination, that teaching that kind of being part of an institution that has real research, but weight, real research weight behind it. Doing a PhD means that I have access to archives I probably wouldn't otherwise have access to. So, if I'm going to make a really rigorously historical novel that works on many levels, that. Going to kind of stand up on its own. Doing a PhD felt like the only real option for me. That was literally the first thing that my supervisor asked. She sat me down, went for a coffee, and said, okay, Tabitha, why do you actually want to

do a PhD? Because you could probably go and write this book right now. And that's literally the answer I gave her.

Catherine McDonald 05:17

So with Anna Marie watching on, let's, let's focus a bit more on the PhD. Tell me about the methodology you're planning to use.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 05:24

I'm doing a practice-based PhD. So, in a lot of ways, the writing itself is the research. So, it's a kind of developing my own methodology, you know, researching through archives, critical papers, seeing her sculptural works in the flesh. So I'm having a research trip to Bologna next month, and a lot of kind of embodied ways of understanding and researching so kind of visiting sites. It's a lot about kind of, like putting yourself in someone's shoes. I'd say, yeah, it's creative writing as practice, as a methodology.

Catherine McDonald 05:55

And you've alluded to reimagining, I don't know if that's a word you would use actually, but re-imagining Anna Marie and re-enlivening her. What other new insights do you hope your PhD will provide? And so, who do you think is going to benefit from this?

Tabitha Carless-Frost 06:11

So the kind of key thing that I'm hoping to do from this is reinvigorate history for a lot of new readers. The end goal is going to be creating a book, creating an artistic work that's gonna stand alone in and of itself, so the novel. And hopefully that's gonna kind of reach out to people in a way that's gonna be entertaining, hopefully, hopefully induce some emotion, but also to kind of shed light on these untold female figures, because there's loads more of them, honestly, the choice from incredible people who've lived throughout history, who have not been documented. Another person I'm also interested in is a filmmaker called Alice Guy who was essentially one of the first filmmakers ever in 1896 I think, maybe 1895, working in Paris. So, there's a whole shed load of history to be able to access, to shed some light on these incredible women.

Catherine McDonald 07:05

And how are you going to go about ensuring that your PhD has the impact you want it to have, you know, like, logistically how are you going to go about that?

Tabitha Carless-Frost 07:16

Yeah, so it's a mix of kind of conferences, which is a more traditional way of accessing and spreading, disseminating knowledge. But also, something that we're doing right now, podcasting. I think there is, hopefully in the works, grounds for having a podcast explaining some of these amazing hidden female figures in a way that we can kind of introduce other academics, people I'm reading. I want the research that lives inside my head to go out into the world so people know.

Catherine McDonald 07:43

Absolutely. I mean, I want to read the novel already. So best of luck with your research. Before we let you go though, I'm really keen to ask what advice you would give to somebody who is either just embarking on a PhD or thinking about embarking, and just isn't sure whether to take the plunge.

Tabitha Carless-Frost 08:00

Tricky one. I mean, finances, PhD funding, very difficult kind of situation. I would say, on a kind of internal level, you need to love what you're doing. You're going to be doing it for three and a half years. It can be very lonely, it can be very, you know, just you and your books kind of thing. But apart from that, don't be too worried about not

quite knowing which area or what specific thing you're doing at the beginning of it, because that will become very clear throughout the process.

Catherine McDonald 08:27

Great advice. Tabitha, thank you so much for joining us today, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of the BruPod from The Graduate School at Brunel University of London. To find out more and how you can become a researcher at Brunel please visit brunel.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.