Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Zoe Wicomb’s Writing Lesson

Artwork by: Jenny Nutbourne

**Laura Dolan:**

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**Zoe Wicomb**

Writing Lesson is a tribute to the Women's Library because it references its celebration of women's writing and publishing now. In the archives of the library I actually found a book called a Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes with a recipe for toast water, uh which I use in the story but I also of course use it to indicate self-reflexivity.

um other references to books in the library include Lily Briscoe's Tree which she moves at the dinner party to the lighthouse and Tony Morrison's Jazz the last lines of which I cite at the end of my story

Writing Lesson

And so, and so I… I maybe kill…maybe my husband…they… they kills…

The woman, whose name she thinks is Sameera stops, clutches her elbows, then drops her upper arms, up and down, up and down. Transfixed, helpless, Ellie follows the movement of her hands. The woman's English is shaky, her use of tense unreliable, and a fondness of ‘maybe’ misleading. Did the father and brothers actually kill her husband? Or does she believe that he may be killed? Or indeed, the plural pronoun may be faulty, in which case the husband himself has killed someone. Events have from the start been unclear as she stammered her story, agents and affected improbably entangled with several confusing ‘maybes’ thrown in.

Earlier, Gulnar shook her glossy curls free of a headscarf that slipped down to her shoulders and helpfully supplied ‘Sunni’ and ‘Shiite’ when Ellie's eyes darted with confusion. Perhaps the others have heard the story before. Now that the word ‘kill’ seems to ricochet about the room, bounced from wall to wall, seems brutal to ask questions. Besides, Sameera hangs her head as if she herself is guilty of killing, as if there is no more to be said, and the five other women look baleful, or is there reproach in their eyes that flit between Ellie and Sameera? Then Solange clutches her elbows and rocks from side to side. My children, she all but whispers, my children, until the sound breaks down into a stutter. Ellie feels the band tightening around her head. She won't cry. But, like a child, she would like to run away. What has she unleashed here? What has she let herself in for? Mercifully, Solange stops as abruptly as she started.

Ellie has herself approached the Refugee Centre. What was the point in guarding her time when she'd been unable to write for so many months? Might as well face up to a failure and do something more profitable than sitting day after day at a desk, at best squeezing out a few words of unleavened prose that cling to the screen, refusing to rise into story.

The director, Ms McFarlane, a young woman whose teeth bore the stamp of red lipstick, pumped her hand enthusiastically. No, she smiled, unfortunately, unqualified persons were not allowed to teach refugees English. That was the specialist domain of those with TESOL qualifications, although there were opportunities, funding even, for volunteers to take a TESOL course. No, Ellie said in turn, she has spent enough years in higher education, also as a teacher - of English, she stressed; she would manage all right helping people to learn the language. Did the woman really say, Oh yes, your English is very, very good? Afterwards when Ellie recounted the conversation to Scott, he said surely not, and no, she could not be absolutely sure. At the time she was preoccupied, interrogating herself. It was of course snobbery, on her part, although once you recognise and admit to snobbery, was it not in a sense cancelled out? Or, at least transformable? Ellie would never have uttered the words, but it was surely the case that a TESOL qualification was… No, to subject yourself to such a course was unthinkable.

Ms McFarlane's smile was fascinating, nothing short of ingenious, having managed to remain on display whilst marking the various shifts in her thoughts. Now it was congratulatory as the woman inclined her head, raising her left ear to attention. What was that charming accent of Ellie’s? So heartening when refugees or immigrants did well for themselves and were prepared to give back to society. We all have to do our bit, she said, but there can be no short-changing those in need. The adamant smile turned swiftly to encouragement, as she reached for a form. While you're thinking about it, it will do no harm to get yourself on the waiting list; you may well come round to the idea of helping others.

Had she not come there to help, and of her own volition? Ellie stared at the woman who stared at her, waiting for a response. Perhaps she should say, There’s lipstick on your teeth, but McFarlane had had enough, offered a closing smile, and pushed her chair back. Instead, Ellie found herself saying, Look Ms McFarlane, I'm also a published writer. There must be something I can do without TESOL.

Genuinely delighted, the woman abandoned the smile. It's Marie, she said, call me Marie. Ah fantastic, that's absolutely marvellous. Why didn't you say? I'd love to have a published writer on board. Please sit down, she said do the still-seated Ellie, let's have a little chat. You see, our people have been through unimaginable hell, many of them terribly damaged by the suffering, the extraordinarily brutal experiences. They have incredible stories to tell, and this is where your, where your experience comes in handy. They need help. Their stories must be told, must be written.

Ellie noted with dismay the slippage from tell to write. She asked, And I won't need TESOL to do that?

Oh no, no, no absolutely not.

The ghost of a smile flitted momentarily across the woman's mouth. Which flustered Ellie who thought that she had got its measure.

Yeah, Marie said, piously putting together her hands as if in prayer, Yeah we are talking about the art of writing and it would be wonderful to have on board someone with your first hand professional experience of writing your story. An inspiration to our refugees, you'll be. It’s so good of you to help.

Ellie hesitated. Did the woman believe that she wrote memoir? Transcribed her own experience, her life whatever that may mean? Of course. That has always been assumed about the writing of immigrants, minorities, women. It didn't matter. If Memoir was not a genre that interested Ellie it was hardly of consequence, although a prickle of pride persisted. Not going to ask her what she wrote? Ellie wouldn't volunteer information; she must rise above such vanity. Why would a has-been, one lately incapable of writing, want to be acknowledged? She had after all not confessed that she's produced nothing for over a year. In fact, should she still call herself a writer? How tiresome it was - the same kind of questions that hounded her so many years ago when she first put pen to paper.

Marie rose to put on the kettle; she stepped onto a chair to reach for a book of recent refugee stories that Ellie absolutely must read. And she thought of her own top shelf where, in spite of alphabetising her books, a row of Women's Press and early Virago volumes kept together, defying the classification system.

If she hadn’t reached for any of them in years, they also somehow managed to escape the regular donations to Oxfam. Perhaps it was too much trouble to get the ladder; a chair dragged from a desk was as far as she would go in the peremptory clear-outs. There was no doubt a thick layer of dust on those books, and nowadays a bunch of well-dried proteas, tossed onto the shelf, balanced there precariously.

The books seemed to have drifted together of their own accord, the distinctive spine seeking each other out. She could see them: black and white diagonal stripes interspersed with a green and white, with their respective icons of steam iron and bitten apple. They marked the years of Ellie's struggle with a professorial bellow: objectivity, objectivity, objectivity - that is the touchstone of art. Was it not the case that some of the female models too, Woolf and lately Gordimer, argued against women's writing as a valid category? Even as Lily Briscoe murmured, brush in hand to the echo of ‘women can't write, women can't paint’, Ellie’s models snapped, Mere therapy. How then could she dare to differ?

The women of that top shelf - she thought of them as sculpted figures, dykes in dungarees with ankles resting on knees, in pensive pose, munching at forbidden apples – well, they had dared. So, was she, Ellie, not free to try her own hand at writing? Could she not be freed of snobbery and vanity? Yes, like coming up from the bottom of the ocean for air, so that something, words, drifted upward, bubbles bursting the surface, and breathing, she knew that the notion of art, of objectivity, no longer mattered. All she could do was try, no matter how hard, how ungainly the words that came. Work, that was all it was, relentlessly, until something took shape. Her attempts could do no on any harm; she was free to write and others were free to dismiss her work or not to read it at all. Shunning autobiography, she, a woman from the bundus, had finally dared to transform what she knew into prose fiction. So why now, a new question tugged, had she stopped being a writer?

Marie could not find the book. Mysterious how things simply walked off. Still, it would reappear, and Ellie would see how precious, these lives committed to print. As if Ellie were a funder, she launched into a well-rehearsed lecture on what it meant to be a refugee, and as for those who helped persons in need, well they soon discovered how enriching it was. Ellie preferred the euphemism of working with rather than helping others, but Marie assured her that that was no euphemism, that mutuality was the name of the game. You will be an inspiration to them, she said.

Inspiration - to breathe life into – heavens, what a tall order; she had never been obliged in that way. Ellie wondered if taking the class would make more valuable the hours she spent struggling at her desk, or whether it signalled giving up. Ag, the world she felt compelled to write about, the world of her own country, had changed so drastically that there seemed nothing left to say. Apartheid, what's that? A young man asked her on the last visit home. And really there was no telling whether he was being ironic. That's the stuff of old people, he added. So now that history itself is departed there is no need for - and she lifted an ironic eyebrow - for therapy.

The woman in orange, whose name Ellie can't remember, rises. Teacher, she says, we'll have some tea. They all stumble to their feet, grateful, rescued by a British cliché. The cup that cheers, but not inebriates, although a stiff gin and tonic is in fact what Ellie needs. She bustles about, filling the kettle, finding milk, putting out mugs. She would like nothing more than to reel off the time-worn clichés demanded by a colonial education. Complete the following idiomatic expressions: A Stitch in Time… every cloud has…. a procrastination… ah, she can no longer remember. The women chatter in their own languages. Even Sameera, for all the talk of killing, seems composed as she stirs three spoonfuls of sugar into a tea. Ellie’s hand is on the woman's shoulder, but it is she who is helpless. What has she let herself in for? How will she resume the session? The plan for the class, the first of the distancing devices, telling a story about yourself which then is written by another in the first person, must, needs to be dropped; she has to think on her feet.

When Ellie tries after 10 minutes to get the women seated, they are reluctant. could they play a game? Solange asks. Not today, says Ellie who in any case knows no games. Today we're going to write a short paragraph. About the house I used to live in. That, she figures, may well avoid tales of trauma and atrocity for which she turns out, today at least, to be too Lily-livered. She tells them about her childhood home in the Western Cape. About walls washed with ochre dug from the hills; the wooden shutters, the clean smell of floors freshly plastered with clay and cow dung, and the etched oval mirror that she loved, that her father used, that that her father used for shaving. Poor but clean. Ellie smiles to herself. But when the time comes for them to write about their houses, they sit quietly, with arms folded. Strange, they'd come to the writing class without pen and paper, so she scrambles about in cupboards and finds materials. But they do not make a start instead they look anxious, they nudge and whisper to each other.

Ellie suggests they should write in their mother tongues, but the women are unable to do so. They've been learning to write English words; they attend classes on a Wednesday, but writing a description of a house, well that - they mutter and shift about - that they've not yet learned to do.

Next week, Gulnar consoles, next week they’ll try and do it for her. In fact, Gulnar has a better idea. In the library where she does her English conversation class she has seen a picture of her house very like her old house in Afghanistan: she could get the book out and bring it along. Next week.

There is still some time to go before the end of the session. Ellie must keep the panic at bay. They will have to do something, some conversation directed by her. Let's see, she says, what we can remember. She starts speaking of ambivalence, of conflicting feelings, but Solange, moving a hand back and forth across the patterned oil cloth interrupts to say that she has forgotten, that she can't remember anything.

Ellie holds her hand up in a halt. Right. Okay. She feels like Hamlet's old ghost, the demanding father of remember me, remember me. So she says that forgetting too could be a good thing. What they should do now is to learn the new things they need to know here in Glasgow. Learn the language, practice their speech. Anything, she says desperately. Sameera says the weather, how cold it is, the problem of wearing nice, clean shoes, and then it rains. Everyone has something to say, they call on each other to help out with English words and it is not long before the conversation turns to food. The women want to know from each other what they've cooked that day. Pakora, biriyani, brinjal, pulao… Ellie plays along, pretending not to know what these are so that they describe and repeat enthusiastically, explaining what the vegetable looks like, how the dish is made. Just before they leave, she makes another attempt, and yes they would be happy to try writing down the ingredients for a very nice biryani with meat, Sameera says since this dinner on paper will be a special one. Not so different from her pulao, it says Gulnar; they should write down both names. Next week.

You don't listen to a word I say, Scott complains. They're having breakfast. Ellie watches through the window the trees whirling in the wind. Individual branches bend, swoop, momentarily stand to attention, then in deepening greenness, whip up a frenzy, and all at different times, each doing its own thing, although anyone casting a casual look would be deceived, would say that the entire tree is swaying to a prevailing west wind. It's all chaos up there, she says, branches blown in every direction. Were you asking drama class at school to be a tree swaying in the wind? Expected to stretch and bend your entire body elegantly, first in one direction, and then another? All wrong. Against nature. We can't be trees. A tree does its own magical thing.

She butters her toast. God knows how these poor people put up with Scottish weather. If it isn't relentless rain, it's the wind. Imagine swaying in a dilapidated high-rise- not like a tree - on the outskirts of the city. Ellie stops to look at him; she still finds it odd that he's called Scott.

Scott shakes his head. Okay, I'll try another time. By 'these poor people', do you mean the refugees? So how did it go with your class last night? Chapter one of the autobiographies done and dusted?

Nope, the women don't seem to want to write. Or rather, they're not equipped.

Och no, he reprimands, that won’t do. What will your Mrs McFarlane think of that? Give them pen and paper. Don't they know it's obligatory? What every Refugee wants to do. Needs to do. How will they earn their right to stay if they don't give us their memoirs? The stories of patricide, infanticide, matricide, genocide, famines, holocaust… Anyway, how come your group's all women?

Please stop. No need to scoff. I'm not up to it either: the wrong kind of tutor knows no games. So we're going to write a recipe book instead.

Ah, I hope you’ll include an introduction, as tribute to the host culture, our own Scottish favourite -toast water.

Toast water? What do you mean? Yes, beats your African mealie pap hands down. Take a slice of bread, he intones in a mock English voice, then corrects himself; take a clean slice of bread and brown thoroughly without burning. Place a clean jug and cover with boiling water. Steep until cool then decant into a clean cup. Your toast water, missus, is fit to drink.

You're not serious, Ellie laughs. Oh yes from, A Plain Cookery for the Working Classes written as a sideline By Her Majesty's Chief cook, a Charles Francatelli, who’d clearly lost his culinary roots in our damp and pleasant land.

**Laura Dolan**

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