Louise O'Neil 05-04-17

Duration: 61.21mins

Dr. Aoife Lenihan:

Hello everyone, that was a real natural silence that is rare, or was I just talking a lot more loudly at the front than I realised. Well I suppose I just want to say hello again, there's going to be a lot of again in this. And so my own name is Dr. Aoife Lenihan and I'm co-director of the Regional Writing Centre. So on behalf of the team at the writing centre and the centre for teaching and learning who we operate under the auspices of I would like to welcome you here today to the second event of the UL One Campus One Book initiative for 2016/2017. This year's chosen book as you already know is Asking For It by Louise O'Neill and it gives me great pleasure to welcome Louise again as our feature author for this year. We are very grateful for her time here and coming to us in UL.

So today is the Regional Writing Centre's How I Write Ireland interview series meets the UL One Campus One Book initiative. So the How I Write Ireland is a series of interviews that inquire into the processes through which and strategies by which good writers achieve both short and long term research writing and publishing goals.

Previous interviewees include academic and creative writers such as Stephen Kinsella from the Business Faculty, whose facilities we are using here today in the KBS building. And of course Joseph O'Connor the Frank McCourt Professor of Creative Writing here at UL. And Donal Ryan as well who you will hear from in a few minutes. And with this series of interviews the Regional Writing Centre pays tribute to the How I Write interviews that are held at Stanford Hume Writing Centre in the USA. The interviews at Stanford are conducted by author and lecturer Hilton Obenzinger and these are recorded, transcribed and uploaded onto their ITunes. And Obenzinger is advertising his inquiring into writer's habits, idiosyncrasies techniques trade secrets, hidden anxieties and delights, which Lawrence will emulate here today.

How I Write Ireland interviews are also recorded and made available on the Regional Writing Centre's website as a resource for all writers. You can see that today we have our cameras on Louise and Lawrence as they are chatting. And today's interview will inquire into Louise's writing process and strategies. Her insights may well be an excellent way of informing our own writing process, practices and strategies.

So the focus of today's event is of course the interview with Louise conducted by my fellow co-director of the Regional Writing Centre Lawrence Cleary. We also have allowed some time after the interview for questions from the audience and myself and Caoimhe are cooperative students at the Writing Centre will be going around with microphones so you can wait for us to get to you with one of the microphones if you'd like to ask a question. And to conclude the event Louise is happy to meet attendees and to sign books and books are available to purchase here today from the Crescent Book Shop over here on my right and your left as you are looking at it.

So finally I just want to thank you all again for being here with us today. I'm now going to hand over to Donal Ryan UL's writer in residence and also a former UL One Campus One Book author to add a few more words of welcome.

Donal Ryan:

Hi, I hear the question asked all the time - what is the point of fiction? And I've heard answers of varying shades of insight, pickiness and eloquence. The best probably from our own Sarah Moore Fitzgerald. I'm misquoting Sarah now and passing her polemic against the denigration of fiction to an unforgiveable degree but Sarah says – "that fiction is where she turns for answers. Fiction is what she uses to make sense of this senseless world. "

Doris Lessing is a writer I've seen described as one people turn to when they needed to be shown what they looked like. Louise O'Neill is a writer to whom we can turn for the same reason. Because she turns a mirror on humanity. And Louise's mirror is true and unforgiving, there is no soft ambient light. There is no dilution of the bitterest truths, no padding of the sharpest corners. Louise is fearless, she draws blood. She takes a torch and holds it against the heart of darkness and confronts us with the banal evils that can propagate so easily in any community. Louise's books should be mandatory in schools and colleges and workplaces and everywhere really. Like Lessings, Enright, Steve Walls could see it before her she has set herself the task of delineating the terminal flows in the brittle edifices we construct and hide behind. While victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them, objectified, divested of their humanity, tried and judged and convicted in their own communities. In the so-called communities we form on line, all sympathy, all mitigation reserved for the poor accused. I thanked God for writers like Louise O'Neill recently in an article, if you don't believe in God just thank the universe. Or better again thank Louise herself, either way we should all be grateful to her.

I am delighted to be here today to hear Louise interviewed about her writing and her writing life by the wonderful Lawrence Cleary. Thanks so much to the Regional Writing Centre and the University of Limerick for affording us this opportunity. I think we'll all learn a lot.

Lawrence Cleary:

Thank you Donal and thank you Aoife and thank you Louise for doing this for us. Making the writing process more visible to people, that's what the whole idea is behind the How I Write interviews is that we can watch fishing on TV and how to make a Lure, but you never see anybody writing on TV and like all the decisions they make…

Louise O'Neill:

That's because it's so boring (laughing)

Lawrence Cleary:

It is but like fishing is exciting! But anyway you know it is something that people don't know how to do, they don't get to see people do it, it's not like I'm going to go watch my Dad write. So I can figure out how to write. They can go play baseball, they can go fishing, whatever but they can't, and they never see other people writing. They don't know how it works. And so people have to start lost and maybe trial and error their way through it. And so the idea behind the interviews is to kind of just find out what people do okay and see if there's anything people in the audience its up to them to see if there's something in there for them. So that oh that's something I might try myself. And because you are a good writer your habits are probably something that we could emulate you know because if it works for you it would probably work for us as well.

Louise O'Neill:

Prepare to spend a lot of time in your pyjamas if you want to copy me. (Laughing)

Lawrence Cleary:

Sounds good! Okay let me get started, all the questions are related to the two things that we focus on in the writing centre which is the writing process like everybody has an individual writing process. And the other thing that we focus on is your strategies for getting through the process. How you negotiate that process. One aspect of the process that we also focus on is the situation that you write into, so all my questions are in relation to those three things.

It's my habit to begin these How I Write Ireland interviews by asking the writers to characterise his or her process. I asked you, right that was your first question. In the Irish Examiner though at the beginning of this year you described your process as sitting in front of my laptop and trying not to cry. However in a 2014 interview in the Irish Post just after publishing your debut novel Only Ever Yours…

Louise O'Neill:

Oh no I'm contradicting myself.

Lawrence Cleary:

Well no not contradicting but you described your experience of writing is therapeutic process. And I guess the question I had is - is it still a therapeutic process? And can it also be frightening and exasperating at the same time?

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah, I mean I do think like I really enjoy writing and I mean that's why I wanted to do it but some days are frustrating. I suppose for me I am, I can be quite self-critical and the idea of what I want to create is so perfect in my head when I sort of conceive of the idea. When I imagine what the novel is going to look like. And then sometimes, some days it really seems to flow and then other days it's much more painstaking. And when particularly when I'm editing it when I'm rereading my own work it never seems to quite live up to the promise of what I had initially I suppose hoped for. And I think that sort of, a little element of disappointment is sort of becoming part of my, maybe that's becoming part of my process. I think it's about accepting that, because before I always wanted to write but I was afraid of starting. I've said this before, because I always said you know if I wrote a book it just had to be, it had to be so perfect you know it just, it had to win you know every prize going. And you know sell millions of copies and my exboyfriend had to really regret breaking up with me when he read it. He still hasn't contacted me so I don't know (laughing). I think I had to sort of let go of all of that and just say that I was going to do my best and that maybe in my head the end goal would be sort of 100% there. But even if I got 85% of the way that I suppose there would have to be an element of acceptance. And because I'm sort of a very, you know I'm a perfectionist and when people, I think when people say that they nearly boast, its like oh I'm just you know its like when you are asked in interviews you know what's your weakness you are like I'm just such a perfectionist. But I actually think that when it comes to creativity there's that quote you know – perfectionism is the enemy of creativity. I think that's so true because you have to be prepared to make mistakes, you have to be prepared to write badly, you have to be prepared for the first draft to be really, really messy and sort of confront that. And sometimes it's easier not to write and to look at other people who are writing and say well if I wrote my work would be better than theirs. And its about having the courage to actually put yourself forward and sort of I suppose maybe accept your own limitations but to work against them as best you can as well.

Lawrence Cleary:

Yeah fair enough, was there a lot of, I'm going off script here…

Louise O'Neill:

I love a good tangent.

Lawrence Cleary:

Yeah, but I'm kind of curious what kinds of things happen between the first book and the second book in terms of your process? Did it change?

Louise O'Neill:

Actually I found the first book really easy to write. In a lot of ways, easier to write I suppose. And I think people, other authors not all obviously but other authors have said that I suppose because sometimes it feels like the first book has probably been percolating in your subconscious for years until you sit down and you write it. And then you get a deal and they are like now we need the next book within sort of you know ten months, you are like oh shit! And I just wanted the first one to sell twenty million copies and then never have to work ever again. So I found the first one it seemed to, the moment that I sat down I suppose I had been sort of making notes but I never made notes as extensive as I did for subsequent novels. The notes that I made for subsequent novels have been more extensive. The first novel I sat down and it just seemed to flow like the first chapter that I wrote is, there was very few edits actually that I made to that in subsequent redrafts of it. And I suppose some days it just felt like I was nearly channelling it. And I said I'm sure this in the last interview when I was rereading it there was like entire passages that I couldn't remember actually writing. I presume I had written them, my dad wasn't like sneaking in at night time and having a go. (Laughing)

But I thought to myself this is great! I don't know what people are talking about, like it was done in about five months I was like this is amazing. And then I started the second novel Asking For It and I found that just really, really, really difficult. Like every day I was dreading going to my desk. And really painful, and the first draft was such a mess. Like I gave it to my editor and her notes, her initial notes were really extensive, but the one that I still remember was – Louise you are a much better writer than this. (Laughing) So yeah a good editor is also crucial.

And yes I think it was much more painstaking and just I suppose it was the topic was quite difficult and the research I was having to do around it. I found that sort of emotionally difficult to kind of go through. And then the third book was different again. I don't know I'm not sure, I mean I'm starting to write the fourth, my fourth book at the moment…

Lawrence Cleary:

So you have finished the third?

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah, I've submitted that. So I'm going to be editing that while I'm writing my fourth book. And trying not to have a nervous breakdown so we'll see how it goes. Yeah so they've all felt kind of slightly different. I suppose you learn, you know, now at the beginning of each novel I know exactly what I'm going to do to begin. Like for me it always starts with characters. And those are the most important so I always, its so old school, I always buy an A4 pad and at the front of it I kind of have all the characters so I know you know say if there's ten characters in the book and I'll devote maybe like ten A4 pages to each of them and I'll do like really extensive interviews with them. Which sounds really embarrassing but…

Lawrence Cleary:

Do you write these interviews?

Louise O'Neill:

I do, yeah and it's always the same stuff. And a lot of the time its things like the reader will never know like you know their biggest regret. Or the secret that they've never told anyone else because that kind of stuff is things that you don't actually generally tend to know about other people. But it does inform their behaviour or their motivations. So once I feel like I know the characters really well because I think if I asked you, if I gave you a scenario and I asked you how would your mother react to this scenario. You'd have a pretty good idea because you know that person so well. So I like to do that kind of for each of the characters. And then on the other side of the A4 pad I sort of have like notes and different scenes in my head that have, its kind of like a jigsaw so I'll have like maybe forty pieces of a hundred piece jigsaw in my head that I want to sort of craft the rest of the story around. And then its trying to sort of figure out how to place them in the rest of the jigsaw.

Lawrence Cleary:

You are kind of anticipating a question I was going to ask later, and that's good because you are actually telling us stuff that I might not have been asking you about but it's actually informing the question. I guess when we talk about writing in the writing centre we tend to think in terms of like writer based writing which is when we are just trying to figure out what we are trying to say. And that's what you are talking about there, it's like you are starting out and I guess one of the things that was going through my head is at some point you talk about, I think you talk about having plot notes on the wall in your bedroom where you are, where you write. And so I was wondering is that how you begin, what is the way that it begins. But you are saying it begins with characters.

Louise O'Neill:

It begins with and I have them for each novel it begins with that sort of A4 pad and I'm just, it's funny because I don't write long hand in anything else. but for that I feel it needs to be very free flowing and I suppose to be honest a lot of the time when you said there I don't actually necessarily know what I'm trying to say, or sometimes I don't even know what the book is about. I've had that experience with particularly when I signed after Asking For It came out and I signed another two-book deal with Quercus and they were a little bit, well they were like can you give us an synopsis or can you give us you know a chapter breakdown for the third novel. I said I can't give that to you until it's done because I really don't know and when I got the notes back from my editor and she was like I think it's about the intersection of gender, wealth and privilege. I was like thank you, because I had no idea (laughing), you know that elevator pitch and I was like that's what it's about.

Lawrence Cleary:

Well okay so I guess that's what my question was, was basically you don't start with a structure you start with minutia. And it works into some sort of organic whole. And so you are filling in the all the spaces between these people.

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah and its funny actually because I have a column for the Irish Examiner which is every Saturday and when I write that I've noticed that its informed my other writing a bit because whenever I write a column I have another A4 pad I'm just surrounded by A4 pads! And I will just put a heading you know say trans-women or teenage girls or whatever the main heading of it is. And then I'll write down all of the points that I want to make and then make a quick kind of plan, like step 1, 2, 3. I've noticed now it's not as prescriptive but I've noticed when I'm writing a chapter, before I start I'll tend to do that sort of general oh this is kind of what's going to happen in this chapter. And it just keeps me slightly more focused. Because before I would just let it flow and then the editing was always very tortious because it was so terrible. Whereas now it's trying to maybe keep it slightly more focused as I go along.

Lawrence Cleary:

Is that something you might do after you've written some stuff in that section?

Louise O'Neill:

I never reread anything, I never ever. I keep, because I'd be so discouraged, I remember with one it was something like slowly, she slowly walked down the road or something and I was like my god! If I had read that mid-way through trying to write a book I would have been like there's no point in continuing. Have I had a brain trauma recently? So I just try and keep writing and you know it's that whole thing of like you can't edit a blank page. And like I think once I had the bare bones of something down on paper I can edit it then and actually the writing I just find, like as I said some days it is difficult but I much prefer the writing to the editing. So I think the editing is where the real work happens. Because that's where you have to get into the real, I don't, I really don't enjoy rereading my own work in general. Like since Only Ever Yours and Asking for It have come out I haven't reread either of them and they are making a movie out of the first book and they keep asking me questions. I'm like I've no idea what you are talking about, none.

Lawrence Cleary:

It's interesting because it's like I read that actually that you say that you produce a complete draft before you edit. And I was in my notes I wrote wise move! That's exactly the kind of thing…

Louise O'Neill:

Well if you read my first drafts you would definitely think it was a wise move.

Lawrence Cleary:

Not to mention the fact that's one of the recommendations that we have for students when they are writing their papers is write it, because there's so many, you say in your article that its just a lot easier to edit, no its very difficult to edit a blank page I think is the way you put it. And that's exactly what we would say as well.
Okay so I guess in terms of editing I also read that your editor is a big part of your editing process and that is another kind of question, like who gets involved in your writing process? Who do you pull into the writing process? Who do you use for feedback, why are they valuable, what other things do you do with people to help you make your text better?

Louise O'Neill:

This is an interesting question, because I know Donal's wife is great and my friend Marian Keyes her husband is really involved as well. I was like I just need someone to, maybe just marry my editor that would be a great life! Its funny I remember at university when I would try, when I would say I'm going to write something creative and if I was really resistance to any criticism I think you have to be very careful particularly when you are at the beginning of a project who you show you work to because you know its going to be rough. And sometimes, I'm probably not particularly good at explaining what I'm trying to achieve or what the story is. And if someone, it's a bit like if you are pregnant and you say oh we are thinking about this name and someone makes a weird face. And then you are like oh god I can't call the baby that name it's a terrible name. If someone sort of goes oh! And then you have this spirals of self-doubt and I think especially at that stage particularly when you are beginning you have to be really, nearly like tunnel vision. You can't let any negativity or any self-doubt or any self-criticism, I mean we all have it but like as best you can try and sort of like block it out and just get the words on the page.
So I would be very, very cautious about who I would show my work to. And I think its, I have friends who will give first drafts to each other or they have critique partners I don't, its my editor and my agent and I mean I'm very reluctant to give it to my agent.

Lawrence Cleary:

Do you direct them on the kind of feedback you want or do they just tell you what they want to tell you.

Louise O'Neill:

No, I really trust my editor. As you can tell she's very blunt and it's like I completely trust her opinion. I'm not afraid of hard work, so if she says this is terrible and we need to do so

much on it that's fine. But I don't need it by committee either. A friend of mine is an actress and she was workshopping a play that she had written and she had to sit down afterwards while about forty different people sort of critiqued the performance and the play. It was maybe the first time she'd ever performed it, I was like I think this is a terrible idea. I think that you know it's in a very infant stage you have to be very protective of it and very careful and only show it to people you really trust and are not going to be too harsh.

Lawrence Cleary:

Yeah you would think that that would kind of quell any risk, once you want to be adventurous and do something bold and yeah I would imagine. Like on your topic for the last book for Asking for it, that was probably a tough book to write just in terms of trying to figure out I'm going to say this and yet people read it and it makes people uncomfortable. But it needs to be said. And so if you had a committee they might be trying to tone you down or something.

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah I think I'm lucky in that way in that even with my publisher because when Only Ever Yours when I first started sending it to agents I think I sent it out to twenty five and within the first week I'd heard back from sixteen saying that they wanted to read the full manuscript. So I remember thinking, like why is everyone giving out this is so easy. I'm like this is great! And then they started sending it to publishers and the same feedback kept coming back. They were like it's too dark, it's too bleak, the ending is to sort of uncompromising and I suppose the reason why I signed with Quercus was they were like we won't censor you. and I know other friends of mine who were writing for young adults and they were like oh they keep making me take out fuck and I was like god I got like three cunts in Asking For It and they haven't said anything to me. So they were like just keeping doing whatever you want to do. And also I think I came from, like my parents were very much like write whatever you need to write. Even with my columns I'm constantly referencing them and they are like oh grand whatever. So there was never any sense of censorship either from home or from, probably more from societal level. But I don't care so much about that.

Lawrence Cleary:

Yeah good for you.

Louise O'Neill:

I'm going to die alone (laughing)

Lawrence Cleary:

People like myself who like that kind of thing, it's nice to be bold I think. We are kind of, this is really reflective of the writing process in the sense that we started out talking about invention how you come with ideas. We immediately moved into the end of the whole editing process, talking about how we involve other people in our process. So I'm not going to worry about that, I'm just going to ask you some questions that I'm dying to ask you. I guess one of the things I wanted to go back to is the rhetorical situation that's what we call a situation you are writing into. And I'm looking at September 2015 interview in the Journal.ie and you said Asking For It was inspired in part by "a few incidents". Todd Atkins comments about "legitimate rape" and Whoopi Goldberg "rape rape" comments about Roman Polanski, the case in the US and the so-called Slane Girl in Ireland who is pictured in a sexual situation at Slane with two men. And then you decided to respond but through fiction. And what were your first thoughts about how you would respond. Do you envisage the story as a whole or did it emerge as you wrote. I know that in your 2017 Examiner article you talk about scraps of paper and post-its handing on a wall, certain plot points, I guess I already asked you about the plot points but tell us how did you envisage the story. When did it become whole?

Louise O'Neill:

I suppose it was when I was writing, I said that to you, when I was writing Only Ever Yours I had sort of slightly put that idea of legitimate rape and rape rape into it. And my editor said I think you need to cut that, you know you are trying to shoe horn a really important issue into this. And she was like I just think its too important to kind of throw away like that. And so I think it was something I was still thinking about and then I went to a birthday party, 21st birthday party and there was this group of guys there and they ended up talking about Slane girl. And they were saying what a disgrace she was and you know what a dirty slut and all this kind of stuff. I kept trying to push it and I was like but why, why is it so? Why is it not Slane boy and they were like oh its different for men and women? I was like but why like? Trying to tease it out of them. And I went home that night and I was really upset about it and just I couldn't stop thinking about it. I said you know I'm going to write a book that deals with that. And then I don't know I suppose I knew I wanted it to be before and after this, it was going to be inspired by Steubenville but I wanted it to be like the before the incident and after the incident. And I was very clear about the fact that I didn't want the rape to be, there's like scenes where she's you know she's looking at the words, Emma is looking at the photos that had been put on Social Media and she's putting it together. But I was very clear about the fact I didn't want the rape to be, I didn't want to write about that. Because sometimes I think and I've seen that a lot with TV or you know Game of Thrones or you know sometimes it's nearly gratuitous. And you don't know if its supposed to be, I'm not sure and I just didn't want it to be used in that way. I just wanted to sort of happen off stage as it were.

Lawrence Cleary:

That was really effective.

Louise O'Neill:

Thank you.

Lawrence Cleary:

Because it really facilitated that, it leads into another question that I had about the pace of the novel. For me there were two places where I wondered I was just thinking about the skill it took to write the Monday of last year chapter. And then the end of the book you had Monday and Tuesday chapter. And the Monday chapter you had portraying Emma's confusion over her friend's behaviour, her struggle to rationalise what people were accusing her of with her inability to remember. And finally confronting the reality of what was on Facebook, it was amazing. But the pace of it, it was like how long did you have to work on that to get it to where it was so effective. I have to say I'm not a comfortable person when it comes to crying in movies and things like that but I'm in tears.

Louise O'Neill:

Oh thank you, I live to make men cry! I have to admit that I don't think that I'm…

Lawrence Cleary:

You are not the only one that makes me cry (laughing)

Louise O'Neill:

I have to admit I don't think I'm actually naturally very good, I have a friend and she will send me her first drafts and her pacing is so tight. I don't think I'm naturally very good at that, I would think that's my editor. Because I always, my books are always much longer when I first submit them. And she's like cut this, cut this we don't need this, this is too slow. And she likes to get it like really, really down to the bear minimum and so I will give her full credit for that.

Lawrence Cleary:

But she'll say to you that this is moving too slow, its inconsistent with the feelings of the person, because it was almost like you could, at times Emma's heart would stop, at times it was racing and the text seemed to be corresponding with it really well. As a reader I was sitting there going holy shit I'm moving with this really, just like I could feel it. It was amazing.

Louise O'Neill:

Thank you. I suppose particularly at the start of the book she was like you know because obviously it was supposed to be before and after and she was like there's at least twenty thousand words too many in the first couple of chapters. So she made me like cut out so much stuff and she was right, she was like you are not giving the reader enough credit. You're really trying to spell out all of these relationships and trying to set up the relationships, she said you can do that in much less time you know. It will just take, it's kind of to be smarter about it. I'm making her feel really horrible, she's actually really wonderful. She sounds really brutal but she's like amazing.

Lawrence Cleary:

But she's very audience minded, it sounds like for instance there's some things you were talking about in the book because I recognised that you are an Irish author and you are in Ireland, you are writing in Ireland but at the same time if this book was to have an international audience some things would need to be explained. People just don't know what these things are.

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah that was actually really interesting experience when it was being, because obviously I had no idea what the foreign editions, they would just come and I'd look at them look I wrote those words, amazing. But with the American one the edit was really interesting because they tried to change so much stuff, and some of it I understood you know they were saying to me what does getting the messages mean? I was like okay well that means running errands or whatever. And then there was other things and they were like okay we want to change the carpark to parking lot and we want to change the toilet cubicle to stall, I was like no.

Lawrence Cleary:

So American.

Louise O'Neill:

Yeah, but I said this, I was like I feel like you are really insulting your reader, if you think that they can't understand what a car park means. They shouldn't be reading (laughing). I really fought for most of it and like you know there was stuff like GAA selector and they were like oh we have to put scout. And I was like no, no, my dad is really into GAA and so whenever I kept saying they wanted to scout in he thought this was the funniest thing ever. So I really fought for most of it, because I felt like, also you know I'm not sure if any of you have read Lisa McAnarney's Glorious Hierarchies but you know that's very colloquial, the language is or you know Ivan Walsh Trainspotting. And you will make sense of it, obviously there will be parts of it you don't understand but like you make sense of it within

the context of the book. I Just feel it's slightly, I felt it was really insulting to American readers and also we read a lot of American fiction and we are just expected to absorb their use of language. I just felt like you know the same courtesy should be afforded to us as well.

Lawrence Cleary:

That's a hard sell, I know, we are talking about people who come to Paris and want to go to McDonalds to eat. Just going back to the writing situation, in academic writing we talk about the writing situation in terms of the context for writing and this involves restraints on space and time like how many pages is this thing going to be and how much stuff can I put in there. How much time do I have to do it, you said ten months for your second book. Those kinds of concerns, contextual expectations about content and form so if you have a genre that you are writing towards maybe there's certain expectations about how you are going to arrange ideas and so forth. The relationship of the writer to his or her topic, the relationship of the writer will adapt to win over the audience. And the writers purpose. And its interesting that you speak a lot about what you want fiction to do, because you do say that in a lot of the articles you talk about for instance for this book here in a 2016 University Times interview you said "you want your fiction to bring feminist issues to a wider audience". And in the previously mentioned 2015 Journal.ie interview you said that "you wanted the reader to finish this book Asking For It and be absolutely furious". So you have times in the interviews when you talk about what you want the book to do and that really does speak to purpose. So when choosing the topics, structuring the story, contemplating the phrasing of dialogue and narration and scene, do identification and persuasion consciously influence your writer choices. If so can you think of any examples or decisions?

Louise O'Neill:

I suppose it depends on the book again, with Only Ever Yours which is my first book and that's an dystopian novel and I had studied, this is such a hard one to get out, but it's Post Catastrophe and Apocalyptic Fiction and in radio interviews I'm almost like I'm totally going to fuck this up. So I had studied that at university level so I suppose I was very aware of the genre I had read very widely in it, I suppose you know you are aware of certain trop or I suppose things that are specific to the genre that you are trying to play around with. Brave New World and Handmade Tail and 1984 I suppose were particularly influential on that book. I suppose what I really wanted to do with Only Ever Yours was I was really interested in feminist literature and I had been reading it either fiction or non-fiction books around feminism for years. And a lot of it particularly I suppose the non-fiction you know stuff we were doing at university like Judith Butler or people like that its very dense material. And I suppose there's a sort of elitist attitude to it nearly, it's like you need to have a certain language or possess a way of unlocking that language or deciphering it, which is usually taught at university level. And I felt the ideas I suppose or the ideology at the core of those books were really important and actually when they were distilled down to their base core they were quite simple in a way. But they had been put in all this very complex academic language that made it inaccessible for a lot of people. And I thought it was really important that people, particularly young people I suppose have access to those ideas because I thought

that would be really useful as a way of navigating a world in which particularly as a young woman it is very difficult. And I suppose there's a lot of emphasis on you know how you look and how attractive you are and what you weigh and so the image that you are presenting to the world. I wanted to maybe give younger readers the tools that I would have found useful when I was fifteen. I think that was something I was trying to achieve with that book.

Lawrence Cleary:

So its kind of in some ways it was didactic in other ways it was political. And there's always the ascetics and you know of course sometimes there's a big connection between the ascetic and the political. It depends on what your ascetic is. But I guess the question is in terms of persuasion like I guess you are not trying to persuade people to be feminists you are persuading them to be…

Louise O'Neill:

I am a bit (laughing)

Lawrence Cleary:

Okay so maybe you are so how does that work in the novels? How does that happen is it just through the telling of the story and exposing certain consequences in the story of the actions in the story. How does it work?

Louise O'Neill:

I suppose sometimes we accept so much of the world around us as normal because it's just what we have been brought up with. I suppose what's interesting in the dystopian, just easier to talk about it in this particular because I suppose that book had quite a strong point of view I suppose what's interesting in a dystopian novel is that you can take aspects of our everyday life that you find problematic, exaggerate them and then see them through a dystopic lens. And then when people say oh that's crazy like that's so farfetched, I hope that never happens. And then they realise that actually the core of what you are speaking about is evident in our everyday lives and I suppose it just highlights how ridiculous that is. Or I'm not sure if any of you read The Power by Naomi Alderman and in it's a switch like from a patriarchal to a matriarchal and there's this scene in the book and it's told through different perspectives. One of them is a male perspective and there's this scene where he's going out, he's walking the streets at night time and he's feeling very afraid. And these three women corner him and there's a moment where he feels he's going to be raped. I remember reading it and it was so strange, it just felt so unbelievably strange. And then I said but I feel like that every night I go out, but it's like I'd nearly excepted that as the price I have to pay for existing in a female body in a public space. And then when you see, when it's the role reversal and you see how strange it is and when it's happening to man I think that's what, that's where you realise this shouldn't be normal. I shouldn't accept this as normal. Something has to

change. And I think that that's where it becomes really interesting. Because you really start seeing the world as it is, but not accepting it.

Lawrence Cleary:

So it kind of puts the reader in a position of having a new reality to consider that they hadn't considered before and the strangeness of that new reality. And that's what is convincing and that's when they start identifying with these ideas that you want to.

Louise O'Neill:

Of course, I think its like, its funny once the blinkers come off you know I would have always considered myself a feminist but then I think it was really only when I was about 25 / 26 that I really started considering what that meant. And once the blinkers came off and you start seeing it you can't unsee it. And I found it really interesting because I will constantly you know point out a radio show or a TV program or sometimes my Mum is like oh please just let me enjoy this movie. And I'm like no, it's so problematic. (Laugh) And I've noticed now my mother will notice things or she'll point out, shell be like oh you know look at this ad, isn't this funny I would never have even noticed that five years ago. Or I remember at the Irish book awards most of the women, not this year 2015 most of the winners had been women that year. And they were showing it on TV and all the people that they sort of had like the main interviews were all with men. And my grandmother rang me and she was like "that was very sexist wasn't it". And I was like yes! And I felt so proud of that moment. So I think it's like trying to as I said once you kind of start seeing it you just can't unsee it. So just I like to ruin everyone's fun.

Lawrence Cleary:

That's brilliant, I hope there's a lot of guys out there that felt really uncomfortable with what they are seeing here. I could be selfish and just keeping asking questions but we really do want to give people in the audience an opportunity to ask you questions. I'd ask people in the audience that when you are asking questions that you try to focus on how she's writing not about the book itself but about how she wrote the book, what kinds of things she did, what kinds of things she thought and felt and people that she did it with.

Question:

Where do you get your main inspiration for the characters like do you base them off characters you would have read about before or are they based somewhat off real people?

Louise O'Neill:

No, yeah its funny I've had people, I've had friends who have been very odd with me since certain books have come out. I really feel like saying it was not based on you. But I would never base a character completely on someone I know. you do pick up like certain mannerisms like if I'm talking to a friend and they are really anxious and I'll notice that they are doing something with their hands or they are you know something about their body language and I'll think that's kind of interesting. Because it's those details actually, I think sometimes no matter how universal the book is or a book is actually the honesty and the authenticity comes through the small details. And the thing is if you are reading a character and you say I know that person, that's my mother or that's my second cousin then I think actually the writer has done their job. And it's about trying to just really pay attention, like really pay attention to the inflections in someone's voice, their mannerisms, and the way that people act. And also trying to, I've been in therapy since I was 17 and I actually think its one of the most beneficial things as a writer because I am constantly wondering about people's motivation, wondering why people are acting the way they are. And you know even like when friends of mine say oh she's just a bitch, I'm like no one is just a bitch. There's some reason why that person is behaving the way they are. And so I think I do read a lot and that will inform it but it's definitely I think just about trying to observe people, just whether I'm at like on the bus or whether, I love people watching at the airport. Just really just like trying to figure out what makes people tick. I used to act when I was a teenager and I suppose when you would try and inhabit a character its you but its not you. So you are trying to create a character and trying to find your way in, so I would always say okay well this is how I would react if this happened to me. But I'm not this person so if I was that person how can I take elements of my pain or elements of my joy and sort of put that, channel that through someone else's perspective. Yeah I suppose sometimes its parts of yourself but its never really you and it's never really people that you know either. It's just like a little magpie that I take little bits from everyone. You are going to be in my next book (laughing)

Question:

Hi, I suppose I just wanted to ask you about I found myself when I was reading Asking For It, I've read it twice. I couldn't just sit down and read it for a few hours I had to take breaks, because I felt the intensity of it so much. I found it really overwhelming sometimes, amazing book. But I was just wondering for you writing it did you have certain coping mechanisms that you had to use maybe when you were trying to evoke that particular emotion, did that affect you in any way.

Louise O'Neill:

I'm really, I'm a terrible person to live with because I'm very all or nothing. So when I'm writing I tend to sort of, it was easier with the first two books, its definitely got more complicated as its gone on but I would have tended to sort of lock myself away. I barely left my house. Barely washed my hair. I came down one day in jeans and my dad was like my god are you going to a wedding or something, you're dressed! But yeah I didn't, I didn't drink, I didn't date, and those are my two favourite things to do in life so it's like a major

sacrifice. So I think it was just easier, it's a bit like and this is very portentous like I'm not saying I'm like Daniel De Louis or anything but you know that idea of method acting. It's like when you are in it, you get, for me I really got into the voice. And if I took a break you know if I went you know to Dublin and I was out with some friends and then you know had a great night and you know I'd go home and try to get back into it, it took me a couple of days to get back into the voice. Sometimes it was easier just to stay in it. But again I definitely wasn't the easiest person to live with, I did find it difficult. So I don't know if that's actually good, like I don't know if that's good advice for you emotionally but as a writer it will definitely help (laughing).

Question:

Hello, I just wanted to ask you Louise about the role of creativity and what you were saying because I would come from more of a theatre background. But it's that same thing I found when you were talking about producing the first piece of work its something you've been ruminating on for ages and easy done, great. And then the next show or the next piece of work is like oh god it's a wall kind of thing. I was just wondering in your process how do you allow yourself to block out the negativity, but allowing the creativity in, how do you nurture that in order to help drive the work?

Louise O'Neill:

Actually its funny what I find, I'm going to sound like you know WB Yeats here as if I'm channelling like a medium that's how I write my books. But I actually I'm not sure if any of you have read the Artist Way by Julia Cameron, its sort of this, I have gotten superstitious about it now and I read it before I write every novel. Because again I'd wanted to write for years and never sort of managed to get past a bit, you know I tried a couple like ten thousand words and I read the Artist Way and it's like a twelve week program for unblocking creativity. And I think one of the biggest things about it was sort of giving, letting the universe, oh god I know I'm going to sound like such, just stay with me okay. (Laughter). I suppose just this idea of just letting it flow through you. I remember there was one part of it was just like I'll take care of the quantity if you take care of the quality. And sometimes it's just like nearly getting out of your own way and letting it flow. Some days that's much easier than others. But I found that because it has all these little tasks and little, you have to write warning pages every morning which is like as soon as you get up you write like three pages of just like mine are usually I'm so tired, my god like, bla-bla-bla, I need to get my nails done. It's really shallow. And then its funny its kind of like if you are warming up, its like it gets all the rubbish out of your head and then when I sit down I'm ready to go. I'm trying to think of any other tips. The other thing is with it you have to do an artist date every week which is where you go by yourself and you do something to refill the well. so for me what's really good because I'm writing is things that are non-verbal. So I love going to art galleries or listening to music though it tends to be more art. And its funny it's like it sort of, it creatively refills you, because you are sort of depleted you know when you are writing or using it up. And you need to kind of keep I suppose nurturing, oh god I'm sorry, you need to nurture your inner child. (Laughing)

Lawrence Cleary:

I know you said in one of your interviews that you read poetry and there was something else?

Louise O'Neill:

And nonfiction but I actually, poetry is great particularly if you are writing fiction because poetry particularly a lot of the modern poetry uses language in such an unusual, if you are looking at particularly people like Worth and Shire or Wahid and I read a lot of African poets whose names I won't attempt because I will butcher them. But they tend to use language in a really, really surprising way. Or they'll create images that are beautiful but really unexpected. I love that, I think that then sometimes that will come out in my own, I'm just plagiarising now (laugh).

Lawrence Cleary:

Kind of an abstract it's like an abstraction.

Louise O'Neill:

It is yeah exactly and that's the same with the paintings, I see something and I want to try and verbally describe it but I'm experiencing it on a non-verbal level, which I think is useful.

Lawrence Cleary:

You have to do that, yeah good for you.

Question:

I totally get that total emersion thing to lose yourself and just have the voice going in your head. How do you deal with the internet?

Louise O'Neill:

Yes this is a very good question. There's a few things that I have. When I'm writing an hour before I to go bed I put my phone in a different room so I'm just reading which is normally poetry or something like that at that time of night. And then the next day I don't look at it, I don't pick it up until, because I start working really early. Usually it's about, I'm up at about kind of 5 or 5:30 and then I'm at my desk, you know I'll mediate and I'll sort of get into that zone for quiet. And I think the best thing about that time of the morning for me personally I know other people who I know will write at night time because I think it is actually that level of stillness and that kind of quality of silence. You need, you need to be in that zone. And I

think that as soon as I check my phone, as soon as I check, and I'm very active on social media but as soon as I check all that its noise. And when I was living in New York I had the iPhone on every hour and I couldn't. My dad was like well you know you should be writing, I said I don't feel I have any space. I don't feel like I've any, its all people and noise and just clamber. I said I just needed quiet and I think the problem with the internet is that it's just a lot of noise. And what I found amazing is that, sometimes when I write my column on a Sunday and I'm not as strict when I'm writing the column, so I'll bring my phone in with me and I notice that on a morning where I don't have my phone with me it is like I could have, because I write a thousand words a day and I could have those thousand words done in like three hours. Whereas the days I have my phone in its like seven hours later and I'm like why is this taking so long. I can't focus.

Lawrence Cleary:

I understand you don't watch a lot of TV.

Louise O'Neill:

I don't watch TV no, I think when I came home when I first moved home and I didn't really know what I was going to do. I had broken up with this long term boyfriend and I didn't have a job and I moved back in with my parents at 26. I had a lot of shame around that, I felt really like I had sort of failed. And I had been doing really well and I couldn't get, I wasn't sure, I didn't want to work in fashion anymore. I felt like it would have been very easy to sort of, my parents come home at 6 o'clock and then I could have been still in my pyjamas and watching TV and you know being on the internet. I think I had this sense of I have to be really productive which actually I probably am a bit of a work alcoholic, I need to learn how to switch off. But I was very much like I need to fill up my days. I don't want to fill them up with just trash. I don't want to sit here and watch TV and so I think it was partly just I think just a shame around being unemployed. Which is terrible because you know lots of people are, there's no shame in it but just I had the personal, I didn't want to, I wanted to do something. I wanted to achieve something, I wanted to be productive, and also just the sense with work is that, I think that's why I have real sympathy actually for people who are unemployed because for those first six months that I wasn't sure what I was doing, I really did feel like a failure. I did feel like that I was sort of like lazy nearly. And that wasn't the case. I think the thing is with work as well whatever kind of work you are doing it gives you a sense of purpose. It gives your day a shape, it gives your sense of fulfilment. And yes I think I needed that so even though I wasn't, I didn't have another job I was like I have to be doing something.

Lawrence Cleary:

Now you are your own boss.

Louise O'Neill:

I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. And actually the other thing I was going to say with focusing if I have had to do something in the morning because I tend to write in the morning I don't like, after lunch I'm usually pretty useless. But if I have to do something what I tend to do is I'll write intensions for myself. So I'll say I intend to focus for the next hour, I intend to get a thousand words written. And actually its funny, I usually write out maybe 15 intensions and by the time I've come to the end of the 15 I'm like I'm sort of in that zone again. So it's like a good way of getting in, I intend to let these words flow, I intend to feel inspired, I intend for these words to make sense. But its funny by the end of it, even writing it, just sitting down and writing those 15 intensions down I'm sort of back in that zone. I think that's useful.

Question:

Hi, you spoke a lot about, this is all about the writing part of it but I was curious about the professional part as well. And so when you were first starting out and you know doing that writing then how did you, you said you got a good reaction from agents and stuff but how did you choose agents and how did you begin that process? What tools did you use?

Louise O'Neill:

I'm actually a very, probably quite unusual mix of very instinctive and also kind of rootless. So when it came to agent wise, it was difficult because I went over, I think in the end I had offers from six and they were all like you know John Banville's agent, JK Rowling's agent and you know these really impressive, and they all had very different, I remember with one of them it was like oh its all about branding. And then another one was very old school, and the reason I choose my agent was because I really liked her. I just felt as soon as I met her, she was the youngest because I was 28 and she was 26, she was the youngest. She was the least experienced but she wrote me this amazing letter about the book and how she had responded to it. And I just implicitly trusted her, the moment I met her. And I've never regretted that because she just is, I think it was my editor, the reason I choose my editor was because I had a couple of offers but she was 30 and we were all starting out. All at the beginning of our careers, very hungry, very ambitious, very driven. I felt like I really saw myself in both of them. And that's the reason I choose her. And then I think after that when it came, because I suppose it's the whole side then afterwards with publishing and trying to be just you know I've always been very professional and I've always been very collaborative, I'm very open to criticism and very open to suggestions. I'm very open to sort of working with people, because I've heard of other authors who are like no I'm not editing that, or I'm not taking that out. And they feel that, which I can understand you've put a lot of work into it but I think I'm always open to them, that people will make suggestions that will make the book better. And then I suppose for me a big part of it is that when I was working, when I was living in New York it's the sort of culture where people are very good at talking themselves up. And I think that as an Irish person we are not very good at that all, so I was very self-deprecating. And I think the thing is about self-deprecating is that it's not actually that you think you are no good at it, it's because you want other people to like you. And you don't want them to be

like oh I'm, no my clothes are shite don't be saying that. And so you know I kind of did that for the first few days, I was like sure I'm useless, sure I've no electricity. And it was really funny because they were like okay so you are not capable of doing this, that's fine I'll give the job to this person. I was like oh shit. So you very quickly learn that like self-deprecation they don't understand it. It was interesting coming home because I was so determined like you know my editor and not even my editor but I suppose everyone with my publisher they were working really hard but also trying to manage my expectations. I was like no, I'm really ambitious, I want certain things for myself. And I really felt, I hustled, I swear to god I hustled so much for that book. Every interview I got at the start like I remember the first interview that I got was John Murray. A friend of my parents knew a researcher, begged to get me on and they were really generous and they had me on and I remember I was like I'm going to nail this interview. And afterwards they were like, my publicist was like we got six other interviews, radio stations wanting to interview you. I was like okay and I pitched so many stories, I cultivated, on twitter I was like contacting people in magazines and in newspapers you know try8iung to cultivate that relationship so when my book came out and it was going to be sent with five hundred other proofs to a book editor that they would be like Oh Louise O'Neill I think I know her from twitter, I might give this one a read. And so I think it was, as I said just trying to you know there's loads of good writers, so many good writers and loads of people who are writing incredible books. Its like you have to just be prepared I think to self-promote and to hustle and again Irish people the idea of self-promotion in people they feel so squeamish about it. I'm like just going to have to do it.

Lawrence Cleary:

I'm going to stop the questioning just because we have to, sorry. But we are running out of time. I wanted to thank Louise again and I hope everybody else would thank her for joining me. (Applause). We have a few things that we wanted to give Louise just to say thank you. We are going to have Louise sign some books. So we'll go to that. And thank you again to everybody who came, and thank you for the questions, great questions. And I hope you come to future How I Write and One Campus One Book events. Thank you again.

End