WRITERS MOSAIC

Fiction Prescriptions: The state of the world

Ella Berthoud and Isabelle Dupuy

[Intro music]

Ella Berthoud (EB): Welcome to *Fiction Prescriptions*. I'm Ella Berthoud, and I'm a bibliotherapist and an artist.

Isabelle Dupuy (ID): And I'm Isabelle Dupuy, and I'm a writer.

EB: This month, we're going to be talking about the state of the world.

ID: And how fiction can help us live better in it.

EB: We begin with this question from Jen from Oregon, a listener to this podcast, who says, 'Now that I'm an empty nester, I thought I'd be able to write the novel that I've always wanted to write. But I find the state of the world takes up too much of my brain, and I cannot write a word.'

ID: There is a line that's being spoken quite often right now. It's from ancient times, the Greek—

EB: Thucydides.

ID: Thank you. I cannot say his name, but I can say the line. 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.' We're going to start, surprisingly enough, with the return of Western civilisation, which may sound counterintuitive in terms of what the Western civilisation descendants are doing right now in this world. But we're going to start by talking about this book, the *Aeneid*.

EB: By Virgil.

ID: By Virgil, written 2,000 years ago, about 30 years before Christ was born. This is a new translation by Scott McGill and Susannah Wright. It is absolutely beautiful. The

aesthetics of it are incredible. It makes you feel like getting on a cruise around the Mediterranean.

EB: And I can agree, it's a book that you pick up, and every passage you read is incredibly beautiful.

ID: It's stunning. But deeper than that, the translation is so current that they actually do call Aeneas what he is, a refugee. So, this is the man whose destiny it is to found Rome and to found the Roman Empire, and yet, he begins life running away from a burning city, destroyed forever, called Troy, with his father on his back, his son in his hand. Unfortunately, his wife got lost along the way. A few other—already then, already then, Ella.

EB: [Laughs] Collateral damage.

ID: Already then. And they end up on these ships, 2,000 years ago, with no engine, no map, no compass, no GPS.

EB: A familiar story.

ID: In the middle of the Mediterranean with a dream, a dream of Europe, because the gods came to him and said to him, 'Your future is in a place called Italy.' They don't even know where this Italy is. They are leaving what is effectively today the coast of Türkiye. And they end up beaching up in Libya, in North Africa. And they are in very bad shape. The boats are destroyed. They're sick. They've been through a terrible, terrible storm. And in Libya, they are welcomed by this queen called Dido. And Dido is a widow. And because she's a chaste widow, she gets respect from all the other kingdoms around her in Africa. And she has built a city called Carthage. And she welcomes them, and she fixes their ships, and she gives them food and clothes and shelter and falls madly in love with Aeneas, who falls in love with her. And it's a beautiful love story.

EB: But doomed.

ID: But doomed, because the day comes when the gods tell Aeneas that this is not where he is supposed to be. He is supposed to go to Europe; that is the future, not Africa. Very interesting already back then, isn't it? And he chooses power over love somewhere, doesn't he?

EB: He does, and he listens to the gods and leaves Dido.

ID: He leaves Dido.

EB: In an awful way.

ID: Without looking at her.

EB: Yeah.

ID: That scene was so modern in a way, wasn't it?

EB: Typical man, we might say [both laugh].

ID: Not all men! But indeed, we have seen these types of men, haven't we Ella?

EB: We have.

ID: This is a type of man who told his—when the message came to him at night from the gods, he told his men, 'Pack up the ships quick, we have to go.' And while he is thinking about how to break this to Dido, she of course hears that they're packing up to go. She's the queen; she knows what's going on in her territory. And she confronts

him, and she's like, 'What is this?' And he's like, 'Well, yes, I was trying to think about how to say this to you.' And with his eyes on the future, which was not her face but somewhere out there in the air on a cloud or in a rock on the sea.

EB: On the gods, maybe.

ID: He says, 'I have to go. This is not where I'm supposed to be.' So—

EB: And off he goes.

ID: And off he goes.

EB: And then he does found Rome.

ID: Well, yes.

EB: Eventually. But that's not the story.

ID: But that's not, no, that's not in the story. But he does get to Italy, where enormous violence awaits him because as we know, refugees are not always welcome. And he

does leave. Dido dies in a rage and also in despair because as a widow, she was getting respect, but now that she had displayed her love and that she basically had sex with this refugee, the other kings around her were closing in on her. And so she builds a pyre on top of her city and burns herself. And Aeneas gets to watch this from his departing ships.

EB: It's pretty tragic.

ID: But he made his choice. And so when he gets to Italy, he is confronted by a number of tribes who do not want him there with his men. And he has to fight. And this is what I wanted to read about because this choice of violence is quite striking, and Virgil writes violence amazingly.

EB: He doesn't beat about the bush.

ID: So, at some point, there is this fight. [ID reads from *Aeneid*] 'He next cut off their master Remus's head and left his torso sobbing streams of blood, black gore that warmed the ground and soaked his bed.' And the first line, when he gets to Italy, is what the gods were thinking. [ID continues reading from *Aeneid*] 'You see Troy's children armed against the Latins. They drove us off, though we are refugees, a

shameless act of war.' And so, this shows you a very different mentality back then. And also, what happens? How does a refugee become a conqueror? These are all very interesting questions. I mean, I think that Virgil, at some point, leaves love behind in Africa and goes to find power in Europe. And these are translations of power. The last line I wanted to read from this book is this one, where actually, Aeneas has to ask himself what he's doing. There is a lot of self-reflection here that makes this work quite sophisticated. And every time Aeneas wins, he loses. Every time, there is such a price for power that I think this is a very illuminating and important book for our times. Nysa said, [ID continues reading from *Aeneid*] 'Do the gods stir up this fire we feel, Euryalus, or do we turn our terrible desires into our gods?'

EB: Nice, that is very, very modern and prescient, isn't it? It's a brilliant translation and a fantastic read considering that it's 2,000 years old. Moving on to another book that looks at the price of power in a very different way, a novel by Benjamín Labatut called *When We Cease to Understand the World*.

ID: Translated by Adrian [Nathan] West.

EB: Exactly. This is a book which is all about science and about the amazing cost of mathematics and science to humanity. But it's told in this incredibly beautiful and

mind-blowing fashion. It sounds maybe like a slightly off-putting topic because it's all about all these massively complex mathematical equations and scientific formulae that were discovered, many of which became poisons, but the way it's written makes you want to follow every train of thought that the author has, and it actually literally rewires your brain while you're reading it. And that's one of the things that we were talking about in terms of why these are such brilliant novels to read right now for these times. The *Aeneid* rewires your brain in a different way that's all about thinking about refugees and the way that power worked in those times. This one, *When We Cease to Understand the World*, makes your brain spark in all these crazy, completely mad fashions that actually makes you feel more connected with the universe. Although it's full of lots of depressing aspects of the world, it also does have an interesting aspect of being able to influence the world around us with quantum mechanics. So, he talks about that idea that when you're measuring atoms, you directly affect them, and you can only measure them by affecting them. So, whatever you do as a human changes them. And I feel this is very true of life at the moment. We're living in this strange world where—

ID: A few people feel they can do whatever they want.

EB: Yes, but we also can affect the world ourselves by choosing to live in a particular way.

ID: I think that this book is a very good mix of emotion and science. It reveals the emotion behind the scientists, their passion for discovering the secrets of our physical universe without any idea of what these secrets can unleash. And so, the same man—there's a story of a man in there called Fritz Haber. This man is a war criminal. He was such a war criminal that—he was a Jew and a chemist—that when he wanted to escape the Nazis, the British refused to take him. They sent him away because he was the inventor of the nerve gas in World War I, which then became a pesticide, which then became Zyklon B, the gas used in the Holocaust. Yet this same man won a Nobel Prize.

EB: Yes.

ID: Because he also is the man who invented how to extract nitrogen from the air and turn it into a fertiliser, which has transformed the fate of this planet and taken our planet from, I think, maybe 2 billion people to the 6 billion people we are today.

EB: Yes, and he actually worried in the end that he single-handedly had changed the whole nature of the atmosphere by taking so much nitrogen out of the air. This book also goes a lot into ideas about art and the ways that different substances and

minerals are made into paints. And we're just going to read a tiny bit about Prussian blue because Prussian blue is what eventually became cyanide, am I right about that?

ID: Yes.

[EB reads from *When We Cease to Understand the World*]

> ‘As soon as it appeared, Prussian blue caused a sensation in European art. Thanks to its lower price, in just a few years it had all but replaced the colour that painters had used since the Renaissance to depict the robes of the angels and the Virgin's mantle. Ultramarine, the finest and costliest of all blue pigments, which was obtained by grinding lapis lazuli brought up from caves in Afghanistan's Koshka River Valley. Crushed to a fine powder, this mineral yielded a lavish indigo, which proved impossible to emulate by chemical means, until the 18th century, when a Swiss pigmenter and dyer by the name of Johann Jacob Diesbach discovered Prussian blue. He did so by accident. His aim had been to mimic the ruby red made by crushing millions of female cochineals, small parasitic insects that grow on the nopal cactus in Mexico and in Central and South America. Creatures so fragile that they require even greater care than

silkworms, since wind, rain and frost can easily damage their downy white bodies, while rats, birds and caterpillars continually prey on them.'

EB: I won't go on, but that gives you a little bit of a flavour of the way Benjamín Labatut writes, in this very diverting way. He keeps going off on different tracks, but he keeps you engaged and gripped.

ID: But he keeps you engaged, and at the end, he wraps it all together. Because this is also about the birth of quantum physics. And the whole idea of quantum physics is that if you get down to the atom, you realise that things are moving all the time, so you cannot know anything. All you can know is the snapshot of whatever you got with your microscope at that moment because everything is moving. And it's really a very humbling book because then he brings it back to his own life in Chile and some dead dogs, actually, that are in his path, on his walk, and how this illusion of control, that we can get control if we squeeze enough, if we press enough, is what is leading us down a very, very dangerous route. It's about respecting life.

EB: There's several of the scientists in the book that he mentions who actually give up their mathematical quest because they realise that what they're discovering is so potentially threatening to mankind. And actually, at the end of the book, he talks about

the night gardener who's his neighbor, who was also a mathematician, and he decided that he didn't want to keep going on his journey of discovery because it was too terrifying.

ID: It was too terrifying. And so, I think that the book is about we have to protect our humanity, first of all, beyond anything else. And from there, we're going to talk about another book, which also goes into this, by Matt Haig.

EB: So, that's *The Humans*, which is a book also investigating a mathematician, who discovers a very profoundly important formula called the [Riemann] formula, which it comes to the notice of some aliens from another planet that if this formula is enacted and brought about on our human world, it will have terrible repercussions around the whole universe. So, this alien race decide they have to stop what's going on in the world. And they come down and take human form. So, they have to kill the poor mathematician who made the discovery. And this alien takes the mathematician's body, so his soul is dead but his body is still alive. And the alien then becomes human. And his mission is to kill anyone who has any relationship with this formula, but becoming human, he slowly falls in love with the wife of the guy that he's killed and understands what it's like to be a father. He was going to kill the son, Gulliver, but he realises he can't. He begins to love food and wine and having lovely times and takes on

all the joys of humanity. And it's a very positive and uplifting and gorgeous, typical Matt Haig kind of book. But it's all about why actually being human is a great thing.

ID: It's not that bad if you take it from the right angles. Fiction is a great way of exploring the state of the world because only fiction gives you the opportunity of stepping in someone else's skin. And that is so important if we're talking about the problems of migration today, of intolerance, of racism. And so, we're going to talk now about a book called *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon. It's a very old book. It's a classic, 1950s. And it's a story of a guy from Trinidad called Moses, who comes to London looking for a better life and his mates. And these guys—it's a light book, actually. It's very funny. They give themselves very funny nicknames. They're having a good time, but they're having a hard time. They can't find work. They can't even find a place to live because of racism. They won't let rooms or apartments to them. It's a tough life for them. And just when you think they're going to give up and go back to the Caribbean, spring comes in London, and they think there's a bit of hope. I'm going to—and the characters have fantastic names. There's one called Sir [Galahad]. There's a guy called Five because he's so black they told him, 'You're black as midnight.' He's like, No, blacker than midnight. Five past midnight', and the name Five remained.

EB: And there's also Big City. Big City, one of the characters, because he's always wanting to go to the big city.

ID: And London, for them, is a dream. It's a dream to be here and to see this big city that's so legendary and that's loomed so large in the colonial imagination. This is a little excerpt about the—so, they're all young men, and they're hanging out with this older lady that they call Tanty, who's also from Trinidad.

[ID reads from *The Lonely Londoners*]

> "All right Tanty. [And she's making them tea] But make the tea quick.' 'White girls', Tanty grumble as she put the kettle on the fireplace fire, 'is that what sweeten up so many of you to come to London. Your own kind of girls not good enough now, is only white girls. I see Agnes bring a nice girl friend from Jamaica to see us, but you didn't even blink on she. White girls! Go on! They will catch up with you in this country.'
>
> The place where Tolroy and the family living was off the Harrow Road, and the people in that area call the Working Class. Wherever in London that it have Working Class, there you will find a lot of spades. This is the real world, where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come.'

ID: This gives you a flavour. And I really think this is a wonderful book about being in the skin of another human being and a great way of accessing—of leaving behind this alienation that we're having right now among each other.

EB: Yeah, I love the way it gives you so many real flavours of actually living at that time. It's just hilarious and very vivid and feels like it could be now, really.

ID: Yes, it's a really lovely book. And I think it gives such a privilege to be able to see the inside of this community at that time and trying to fit into this city, this country, which still is having the same problems of stirring up trouble with immigrants that are needed for the economy and for the life here. So, yeah, we highly recommend.

EB: Yeah, and it is a book that remains positive even though they're going through a lot of real hardships.

ID: Yes, it is. It's a good read.

EB: So, another book that looks at the idea of integration in London in a very different style is *High and Low* by Amanda Craig, which is coming out in May. And this book approaches the idea of inhabiting people's skins and empathising with people.

ID: Through plot.

EB: Through plot. So, where *The Lonely Londoners* is all about really inhabiting their skins and feeling what it's like to live their lives, this is a book that, actually, drives you with a really big drama through one day in an area in North London, where there's a group of people who are all from very different warts of life, from the high and the low. But it's mostly about a bunch of aesthetes who are in a literary café on this road which has, on the one side, very posh houses, and on the other side, this rather grim estate. And all these authors are hanging out in this café every day, trying to write their novels rather desperately and feeling sad that they don't get recognised for what they do. And Amanda Craig is very funny on what these authors are like and how their fragile egos are nurtured by their wives or husbands and each other. But meanwhile, while they're having this rather precious existence, real life is happening outside, and there are race riots going on, there's a hotel full of immigrants down the corner.

ID: Refugees.

EB: Refugees. And there's a boy who has been stabbed that morning in his leg. He's only 12. And we know that his mum and other members of his family are in great mortal peril. And he seeks refuge in this café, and that's what makes the book incredibly exciting and dramatic.

ID: Because what happens is that the people in the café now have to live up to their values, to what they preach. They have to get their hands dirty. Are they going to save this boy and put themselves in danger? The boy is being pursued by a very nasty gang of white supremacists. And so, what Amanda Craig manages to do, which is the same as Sam Selvon, is to create a new environment through the stress, through the plot, where all these people learn to be less self-focused on their ego and on their sense of achievement and more generous with each other and with the boy and to look a bit broader around them and create a community out of their survival, their joint survival and their joint action against this evil.

EB: And we get to know all the other little families around this literary café. There's a bakery right next door, which actually funnels its heat into the literary café through a groovy pipe. And you get this amazing sense of place.

ID: Very, very good sense of place. Very good.

EB: Yeah, and there's the corner shop where there's another—

ID: The Husseins.

EB: —immigrant family living there. And everyone gets involved with each other, having to some degree, ignored each other.

ID: Participate in this drama, in this stressful event.

EB: And there's also a massive pothole that opens up in the road and becomes huge and everything starts falling into it. I mean, she is very much satirising all of our current concerns with potholes and immigration and race riots, but it's real.

ID: In London, yeah. No phone coverage. I mean, there's a lot of it that feels incredibly detailed and real in terms of how she creates the space.

EB: It's a very satisfying book.

ID: Yes, it really is. It really is.

EB: So, thinking in terms of different fiction prescriptions, that's one that really pulls you in and drives you through the plot. And it's a great contrast to *The Lonely Londoner*.

ID: But it's also a great—but both of them are very good in terms of showing how much richer, both books offer you, in terms of your life if you accept the community as it is today as opposed to wishing for something that probably never existed anyway. So, from there, we're going to go to our poem for the month, which also plays into all of this because this poem, we thought, was playing into *The Lonely Londoners* and *High and Low* in terms of promoting a life that is less selfish and less driven by ego. So, this is called 'Do Not Ask Your Children to Strive' by William Martin.

[ID reads 'Do Not Ask Your Children to Strive']

'Do not ask your children
to strive for extraordinary lives.
Such striving may seem admirable,
but it is the way of foolishness.
Help them instead to find the wonder
and the marvel of an ordinary life.

Show them the joy of tasting

tomatoes, apples and pears.'

[EB continues reading 'Do Not Ask Your Children to Strive']

'Show them how to cry

when pets and people die.

Show them the infinite pleasure

in the touch of a hand.

And make the ordinary come alive for them.

The extraordinary will take care of itself.'

EB: Such a lovely poem. It's great. So, from this rather fabulous poem and feeling, we were then going to talk about the short story, *Yair*.

ID: I was calling it 'Yeah' because, yeah. So, thank you, Ella, for correcting me. So, this story is not easy to find in print because you have to order this book from the BBC. It was the second runner-up for the BBC National Short Story Award last year. But you can easily find it on the BBC iPlayer, and you can listen to it. And it's a wonderful story. It's by Emily Abdeni-Holman, who is a Lebanese writer. And it's a short story about a woman, a young woman, who moves to Jerusalem and is looking for a flat because

she's got a job there and she needs to live somewhere. And she's Arab, but she's not Palestinian. And the estate agent who helps her is a young Israeli estate agent called Yair. And it's beautifully written because although it's a short story, she really takes the time to describe the nature that they all share, this rocky nature with the olive trees and these very fragrant bushes and the sun and the air of that part of the world. It's very, very beautiful in that sense. And what happens is Yair, who is married, falls in love with her. And so, he takes her on a rooftop of a building after seeing an apartment, and there's a beautiful view of Jerusalem from this rooftop. And he says to her, "'You know," said Yair, "when I first met you, I didn't think you were beautiful. I mean, I thought you were normal. But the more time, do you know how sexy you are? You are very, very beautiful.'" And she says no. She says no. And at the end of the story, it's not like she dislikes him, but he is married. She's not angry at first, and then she finds it a bit of a transgression that he's doing on her. And at the end, he doesn't quite understand, and so he says to her, 'If I were Palestinian, would you have gone for me?' And it's such an honest short story in that sense because of course she says, 'No, no, no.' But this question does stay with her and his presumption, as a married man, that he could seduce this young woman. So, it's a very intimate, non-political story. And yet, all of the politics are in there.

EB: Yeah, it's a pretty sexy book—story, I mean, as well. And it's incredibly atmospheric with that sense of place again, looking over Jerusalem. That's a really beautiful moment. And when they're going through the countryside on the back of a motorbike, and he's commenting on how flexible she is when she can get on the motorbike really easily. And it's a sexy story, but it's very interesting the way she says no.

ID: Yeah, and I think in what's going on right now in the Middle East, we thought it was such a soothing story.

EB: Yes, very, very good.

ID: And still doesn't conceal anything. It doesn't conceal anything of the realities of the place, and yet, still a soothing story about two young people.

EB: It's very honest, isn't it? It feels very real and honest.

ID: So, about the state of the world.

EB: So, this leads us to our final book, which is a very beautiful book called *Firefly*, which is written by Robert MacFarlane of *The Old Ways* [inaudible] and also of many other

beautiful books, and Luke Adam Hawker, who illustrated it. And it's all full of etchings, which are really gorgeous. Luke Adam Hawker is a very successful and brilliant illustrator, and he and Robert Macfarlane collaborated on this gorgeous book, which is a book I've already given to at least six people, and—

ID: Including me.

EB: —it's fantastic for any age, literally. And the reason we loved it and thought it was a fantastic prescription for modern times is because it's looking at the darkest hour. It's talking about winter and how all the light disappears in winter and how we have to gather the light from wherever we can, whether it's from glimmers of stars or glimmers on the water or little sparkles in the sky.

ID: Or fireflies.

EB: Or fireflies. And we need to gather that light and then release the light at our darkest moment and burst out with an exuberant, gorgeous, ecstatic, firefly-like light. And I find it amazingly positive and moving. And I just think it's really beautiful.

ID: It's a beautiful book, and because it's not only in words, but there's a lot—the drawings, and it's in black and white actually, and yet, it is about light. And so it's, for the question, I think that if you're sitting there and the news is crushing you, opening this book gives you a beautiful perspective. It's a great distraction.

EB: Yes. I'd love to just read a little bit of it. And obviously, it would be great if you could see the pictures too, but the words are beautiful, as is always the case with Robert McFarlane.

[**EB** reads from *The Night Creatures: Firefly*]

> ‘In the shadows of November,
> When the coldest wind is blowing,
> In the darkness of December,
> Through the winter's deepest snowing,
> When the world is steep in camber,
> And all hope is downwards-flowing,
> That's the time to seek what's glowing,
> Find and gather, bring together,
> Streams bright gleam and rivers silver.
> Rowan's berry, Saturn's glimmer,

Snowdrifts shine and comets shimmer.'

EB: I could easily read the whole book to you, but I'll stop there. So gorgeous.

ID: And so, this brings us to the end of our podcast for the state of the world. I think we have the perfect quote, actually, for Jen, for the question.

EB: Yeah, so in answer to your question, we found this perfect quote from Han Kang in her Nobel Prize speech, 2024. She's the author who wrote *The Vegetarian* and other books. In this very beautiful Nobel Prize speech she said, 'The work of reading and writing stands in opposition to all acts that destroy life.'

[Outro music]

ID: And so, our recommendation is stop watching people who are destroying life and read and write.

EB: Get writing. Write that novel, Jen. Now is the time.

ID: Thank you for listening to *Fiction Prescriptions*. It's been a pleasure to have you with us today.

EB: The poem that we read today has inspired us for our next podcast, which is going to be all about parenthood. Do send in questions if you have any. We'd love to know your particular thoughts, and we'll be ready and waiting with *Fiction Prescriptions*.

ID: Yes, so please send us your questions. We can't wait to see them.

EB: Thank you.

ID: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk