

## *Fiction Prescriptions: Parenting*

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. Our topic today is parenting.

**EB:** We have a question from Jade, a listener, and she said, 'Is parenting primarily a matter of style?'

ID: Oh, see, I think that's interesting because it's so easy to put parenting into some kind of a moral question, isn't it?

EB: Absolutely, yes.

ID: And it's wrong because parenting is what happens when you have a baby, which is a biological function.

EB: And we're very influenced by our own parents and their parenting styles. So, my parents, I think, somewhat modeled themselves on Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*. I think my mum was basically Mrs Durrell. And if you haven't read the book—

ID: No, I haven't. I'd love to hear more about that.

EB: It's a really lovely book. And Mrs Durrell is living on Corfu, on an island, her husband has died, and she has three children who run completely wild. And they are allowed to be completely free. And Gerald Durrell grew up collecting animals and putting them in his drawers, in his—down the corner of the sofa, bringing every single bug and fish and insect back home. And his mum just let him do that. The other kids

were running wild in their own different ways, but Gerald wrote the book, so I completely identified with him. And I thought that was the perfect way to live and be a parent. And my mum was a bit like that. My dad was around very much, but being a diplomat, he was out a lot of the time. So, it felt like a bit of a Durrell-type adventure.

**ID:** Would you say that—did you ever wonder about questions of judgment and morality, thinking back to how you grew up?

**EB:** I think I was just living in a lovely bubble. And I also went to boarding school, so I was sent away. So, that's another story. But when I was at home, I just really enjoyed that sense of freedom. But I mean, when I say freedom, it wasn't like it was completely unvetted because we were living in a diplomatic world, so we actually did have a lot of rules that we were bound by. So, it was quite a complex situation, really. But no, the morality—

**ID:** I'm asking because in fiction, very often parenting is used as a tool by the writer to talk about morality, to talk about judgment, judgments on the character that they're writing about, a way of explaining why the character is the way they are.

EB: That's true. I mean, the Durrell's adventure is a memoir, so it's not fiction, though it often reads like that because there's so many incredible adventures. So, it's a little bit different, but I think that's something that we need to explore in the books that we're talking about. But tell me about your experience of parenthood.

ID: I grew up with Haitian parents, and I feel that my parents very much went into a Haitian way of thinking. I don't think they made a decision, which I think is very common, that they were going to parent us in a certain way, my sister and I. I think they just thought, *this is how we grew up, and this is how we were going to raise our children*. And so, in a way, it didn't prevent some emotional traumas from being passed down.

EB: What would you say is the Haitian style of parenting?

ID: Well, the Haitian style of parenting is also quite laissez-faire, I would say. But it's an interesting one because it's very much a village that raises a child. It's not the nuclear family. And so, I grew up with a lot of cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents, and they all had an impact on how I grew up. And it's interesting because I ended up raising my kids here in London, and mainly as a single mother, and so, in a way, they had the opposite of me. They really had a nuclear family with one parent. And I mean, their father moved to a different country. We got divorced. Of course, he's part of their

lives, but the day-to-day was really just me. And I was really sad for a long time that they didn't have the village that I had. But on the other hand, we also had a lot more freedom in determining our path and what we talked about and what we could explore. It wasn't preset like it was for me. So, yeah.

**EB:** Yeah, I mean, thinking of my style of parenting, I very much wanted to be Mrs Durrell as well and let my kids run wild and have a million pets. We have ended up with a million pets, but [laughs] we live in a village in Sussex, so it's not quite Corfu. But I think I was very much trying to parent in her style of being free, and I think I've succeeded in that. So, we've got some fantastic books to talk about this morning.

**ID:** So, we thought we would start with interesting situations that families will create that maybe don't fit into what we expect when we set off maybe to have children and consciously decide that we're going to raise a family. And so, we're going to start off by talking about two books: Colm Tóibín, *Long Island* and Yvette Edwards, *Good Good Loving*. They are closer to each other than may seem at first glance. I'm going to start off by reading a little excerpt from *Long Island*. This is a story that begins with a wife, who's Irish and who's married into an American-Italian family. They live on Long Island. And she's just heard that her husband, Tony, has had an affair, and that the wife of

the—the lady he had the affair with was married to someone else and is pregnant with Tony's child.

[ID reads from *Long Island*]

'One evening, she found Tony in the kitchen. He averted his eyes when she came into the room and mumbled about being tired. "There's something I didn't say to you," she began. He nodded his head slowly as if to say that he had been waiting for this. "There are no circumstances under which I am going to look after a baby. It is your business, not mine."

"Maybe you don't want to be," he said softly, "but you are married to me."

"It's a pity you didn't think of that when you were out fixing leaks, but I don't want to go over that. I need to let you know that if that man comes with the baby, I will not answer the door. And if he leaves the baby on the doorstep, I will not open the door. I am not dealing with this."

"So, what are we going to do?" he asked.

"I have no idea."

ID: So, this story basically is that the husband, the wrong husband, shows up at Eilis' house and says, 'When my wife has that baby, it's coming here. It's not staying in my

house.' And that was the exchange. And so, what happens next? I mean, it's a lovely book, super interesting. And super interesting questions of morality and of judgment and of love.

**EB:** And of true parenting and whether it's important to be the parent of the child in the house.

**ID:** Because this will affect the other children in the house. So, we have another version with exactly the same problem where the husband, again, has gone off and gotten a lady pregnant. And in this story, the lady dies in childbirth. And so, the husband is coming home with this baby and going to give it to his wife. From *Good Good Loving*, Yvette Edwards, which is about a lady who is married to a philanderer and how she handles all his infidelities throughout her marriage and her children.

[**ID** reads from *Good Good Loving*]

'She would treat that motherless child the same way she would treat a baby she had given birth to herself. Something had given her another chance. God, karma, fate, mischief of the jumbies, the good kind this time. This was a chance to move beyond her grief, and the possibility both broke her heart and rejoined the fragmented pieces into something

that might alleviate the guilt she felt. And so, it was settled. She would not return to work. She would phone in tomorrow morning and hand her notice in with immediate effect. It would cause problems for a few days, but in the long term, Mrs [missing name] would simply replace her. It would also mean she didn't have to explain Clyde's greatest betrayal to date or the consequences that were costing Ellen the life she had formerly crafted to all her colleagues who were under the impression she had her head screwed on.'

**ID:** So, these are two women. One is of Caribbean extraction, moved here as an adult, and has a very difficult family life because she feels that her children have actually taken her husband's side, although morally speaking, he has been in the wrong. But he is charming, and he takes life easy, and she doesn't because she has to carry the weight. In this story, in *Long Island* by Colm Tóibín, we have a similar situation where the wife actually leaves. She goes back to Ireland to avoid being there for the event of the child's birth, the child born outside of her wedding. And her children actually come and follow her to Ireland. So, it raises these questions about is parenting only about your biological children?

**EB:** It's a very good question. And both of these books, I found really heart-rending and painful to read because they both have these terrible dilemmas of the child coming into the house, or maybe coming into the house in the case of *Long Island*, and that being an awful, unbearable possibility for Eilis. And then in *Good Good Loving*, the mother does actually accept the baby.

**ID:** You could say these are cultural questions, but I don't even think so. I think these are questions of love and of character. And I think in both cases, both women are trying to find a way of saving their family and their integrity as mothers and as women and as wives.

**EB:** Yes, and there's another part to *Good Good Loving*, which is that the mother in that book has also lost a child. So, when she accepts the new baby into her life, there is an element of redemption from this new baby.

**ID:** There is an element of redemption, but I'm not sure—I think it's because she feels that she's against the wall and because of her children's love of their father, and so, she doesn't feel she has enough choices in that sense as well. She feels like by taking this baby, maybe the father will be grateful, her husband will be grateful, will appreciate her more as well. And does that happen? You have to read the book. And in *Long*

*Island*, she feels that all her power has been taken away because her husband's family, which is Italian, they operate more as a group than as units. So, the whole family is basically with her husband, Tony, and she is alone. And they all have decided before they even asked her that they're going to take this baby. And so, she feels very much like she's been erased in her existence. And this is another question about parenting. And maybe now culture does come into it because you have some cultures, like the Italian and the Caribbean culture that Yvette Edwards talks about, where the individual has to go under the group.

**EB:** Yes, and in both the books, it's the extended family that has a huge impact on the parents. Because in *Long Island*, the grandmother, Tony's mum, has a very—

**ID:** Is a matriarch.

**EB:** —powerful effect on the whole story because she's basically saying, 'I'm going to take the baby, and there's nothing you can do about it.' And she's a really Machiavellian character. I found her agonising to watch. But that is her grandchild that she's wanting to protect.

**ID:** Protecting. And cannot leave out in the street to become a foundling baby or an orphan or to be taken into care because the baby has a family. So, these are very interesting questions, right? And it's about—and also because in Eilis' case, you wonder can her love for her husband survive in this? And it's—so I think these are—parenting in terms of—we were talking about the biology of parenting, and these two books talk about that in that sense, right? Because what do you do with a child that you did not go look for, that comes actually as a result of betrayal, is not your blood, and yet is part of your family?

**EB:** Yeah, so they're both fantastic, really interesting descriptions of parenting. And the parenting styles in both are very different because in *Good Good Loving*, the family come from Montserrat originally, and in *Long Island*, it's an Irish Italian tale. So, they both have very different styles, but ultimately, they are all united by love.

**ID:** Well, they're in the same problem.

**EB:** Exactly. Love and betrayal.

ID: They are both confronting exactly the same problem. The style of dealing with it is different. And I'd wonder if—because what I like about the word style is that there's no moral connotation to it. Style can encompass anything.

EB: That's true.

ID: And I think that the style—that they're both problematic. Because the problem of *Good Good Loving*, which comes out in the first chapter, is that the daughters of this lady, they all have problematic relationships later in their own lives with men. Because, well, they're all heterosexual, but they do have this issue that came from the model they saw growing up.

EB: That's true, none of them end up with a straightforward relationship.

ID: Exactly, exactly. So, it's all very interesting the style of how they understood what they could negotiate in their own marriages and what was passed down to the children.

EB: So, on a completely different parenting style, we have Natalie Haynes' new book, *No Friend to This House*, which is the story of Medea. And everyone knows something

about the story of Medea. She's one of the most notorious mothers in literature because we all know that she ended up killing her own children. And this fantastic story tells us how Medea got to that point. And it starts with the beginning of the whole story with the Golden Fleece and Jason and the Golden Fleece. And what I love about this book is it's told in Natalie's style, which is quite fragmented. She takes lots of different voices of all the different protagonists in the book. So, we have not just Medea, we also have Alcimedede, the mother of Jason; we have the Argonauts; we have crew members on the Argo, on the boat; various deities; Artemis, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, etc.; and Helios, the sun god, who is the grandfather of Medea. And by the way, Medea is a sorceress, which lots of people forget about, that she was incredibly good.

ID: But she's also an outsider.

EB: She is an outsider, yeah.

ID: To Jason's family.

EB: Yes, and Medea actually—

**ID:** Can you tell us more about that? About where she came from, and how did she end up in Jason's family?

**EB:** Yeah, so she is the daughter of Aeëtes, who is—I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing these people right. Aeëtes, maybe. And he was a famous despot who lived in—he was the king of Colchis, and he was the guardian of the Golden Fleece. And so, Medea is one of a few siblings. And basically, Jason turns up one day on their shore. He has been sent by the gods to find the Golden Fleece. And the gods ensure that Medea falls in love with Jason the minute she sees him. She literally gets one of Cupid's arrows through her heart. She sees Jason, and she is forever more obsessed with him. And she literally lies down and is nearly vomiting with her desire [both laugh]. Something I'm sure you're familiar with.

**ID:** Is that in the book?

**EB:** Totally. Yeah, no, she really portrays that brilliantly.

**ID:** That's fantastic.

**EB:** And she, at first, even doesn't really know what's happening to her. She takes to her room and is just feeling agonising, but all she knows is she's got to get together with Jason. And Jason asks her father, Aeëtes, if he can have the Golden Fleece. And Aeëtes is notoriously evil. And he asked Jason to do all these trials, which he knows are absolutely impossible, so that—and then he says, 'I'll give you the Golden Fleece if you sew this field with dragon's teeth,' and get through various impossible situations. And the thing is that Medea, because she's in love with him, she helps him do it. And she basically makes a concoction which makes the dragon go to sleep so that he can go and get the Golden Fleece from the orchard where it's hanging. And she completely helps him to the point where she knows that she can't stay on the island; she's got to run away from her father. And she goes off with Jason and the Golden Fleece on their own adventures and remains completely obsessed with him, even though when he lands on a new island, they land on Corinth, and he falls in love with the daughter of the king of Corinth, who's called Glauce, Jason does. And this is where it all goes wrong. It's the beginning of the end.

**ID:** Has Medea already has children with Jason by then?

**EB:** Yes, Medea already has two children, but they have not technically been married, so that's something that he holds over her. So, he falls in love with Glauce. And Medea

then, at first, tries to stay with him, does her utmost. She's portrayed by Natalie Haynes as being incredibly—as a fantastic mother, I mean, as someone that all she wants is for her children to be happy. So, she then tries to take the children away to escape. She tries everything. But Jason, of course, says, 'I want to keep my kids with me. But Medea, you've got to go.' That's Glauce. She makes sure that Medea's got to go because Glauce is young and beautiful and Medea's probably 30 by now. So, she's past it [laughs].

**ID:** Exactly. Yeah, yeah. What do you think about that, Ella? I mean, 30, you're over the hill.

**EB:** Yeah, we're in our 50s and we're just beginning [both laugh].

**ID:** Exactly.

**EB:** But these were Greek times. So, this is where Medea begins to turn from, I mean, she's always been quite a scheming and powerful sorceress, and she's slightly feared as well as admired within her community, but all the people in her immediate vicinity go to her for help all the time. But she decides she's going to get revenge on Glauce, and she gets really fantastic revenge. Shall I reveal it, do you think, or not? We could save the spoilers.

ID: No, no, read the book.

EB: Yeah, read the book.

ID: Read the book. Read the book.

EB: So anyway, Medea is a really great, vengeful character. And what I love about the book is that we do very much feel the maternal love. There's one section I'd love to read because it's a different perspective. So, we have the whole story of Medea, which is very powerful, but we also have the story of Theophane, who is the mother of the Golden Fleece. So, nobody thinks about the Golden Fleece as being born. It's just a fleece. I'll read you this bit, and then you'll understand.

[EB reads from *No Friend to This House*]

“Chrysomallos, the golden ram, my golden child, however foolish that sounds, a woman grieving the loss of a creature as though it were a boy is scarcely remembered by anyone. He was once an important part of the story. Phrixus and Helle carried away from a terrible fate by this magical golden creature. Helle was lost, of course, through no fault of

Chrysollos, [and that is the name of the Golden Fleece] and she is remembered. That strait has been called the Hellespont ever since, Helles' sea. All I hear when people say these things is the sound of a world that forgets that my son was a living creature, my miraculous, beautiful, living child. Oh, I know, I know, not a child, just an animal. So, who would grieve for him if he died? Who would mind if someone tore off his skin and hung it from a tree in a sacred grove, an artefact to bring glory to god? When you think about him this way, his skin was just an object. It's curious, isn't it, that anything wanted by a man or a god becomes just an object.'

**EB:** So, she's referring here to the fact that she was taken by Poseidon. Poseidon turned her into a ewe. He turned himself into a ram. He impregnated her. She then gave birth to Chrysollos, who became the Golden Fleece. And she's objecting to the fact that everyone is calling it, 'it'. The Golden Fleece is it.

**ID:** Interesting. It's a very interesting thought this because just like in *Long Island* and in *Good Good Loving*, you have the—what do you do with the—how these children, in a way, from these men who breed, but do they think of themselves as parents, those men?

EB: Yeah, absolutely.

ID: Because if they can objectify—and this is what—and does Medea, do you think she—this is her way of showing to Jason that, no, he can never objectify those children?

EB: Yeah, that's interesting. Jason is portrayed by Natalie Haynes as a bit of a vainglorious idiot, and he seems to only really want his kids around as his future heirs. He's not really that—

ID: But also, as his, I don't want to say object, maybe that's too strong a word, but as his—as feeders to his glory.

EB: Absolutely, yes.

ID: Not as their own people.

EB: Yeah, there's a line in his book, in the book, that he wants them to grow up to know the exploits of Jason and the Argonauts.

ID: And that's their reason of being, in a way.

EB: Exactly, yeah.

ID: And this is something that—and this is something that we're going to go back to this because the mystery of this podcast will be what is the next podcast? And about men as—because men, biologically speaking, right, they can be breeders. They can have 50 children. And who has time to raise 50 children anyway? So, it's not realistic that they would be so involved in any of them. It's just a matter of propagating the seed.

EB: Sewing their seed [laughs].

ID: There's a famous French dictionary called Larousse, and their motto is, 'Je sème à tout vent', which means, 'I throw it with the wind', like I'm just spreading the seed all over the place. And so, what makes a man a father?

EB: That's a very good question. Maybe we need to move on to our next book to answer that question.

**ID:** So, this is a seminal book. It's very famous. It came out 25 years ago. It's *The Last Samurai* by Helen DeWitt. It was a huge success when it came out. And it's a very colourful book. It's basically the story of an American woman, who moves to England to go to Oxford, has a one-night stand that she regrets, as far as you can tell, but gets pregnant, and now has a son called Ludo.

**EB:** So, I read this book when it came out, I think, and was very, very much affected by it and thought it was fantastic. And it's, for me, a seminal book about motherhood because it tells the story of a single mother, and she is bringing up her child, who is a prodigy, and they have an incredibly close, intense relationship. And she never wants to tell her son who the father is. And she's not interested. He just, for her, he was just the provider of the seed. So, the first half of the book is all about him growing up and being a genius.

**ID:** And the way that she raises him, she doesn't have any money. She basically works as a linguist in translation and in transcribing ancient texts. And so, they spend their days on the Circle line because the tube, the train, is heated, and their house is not. And so, they go around the Circle line, and he's reading in his pushchair these very complicated books. He's reading *The Iliad*.

EB: In Greek.

ID: In Greek. He's reading old Icelandic myths in Icelandic with the translation book next to him. And so, they speak with everyone who comes on the tube because they wonder about this child. So, they have all these interesting conversations. It's very imaginative as a premise. But then what happens is she thinks that she has given him so much in terms of academic knowledge, and she's obsessed with this movie called *The Seven Samurai*.

EB: Which they spend all their time watching on repeat. And *The Seven Samurai* is a film in which a village is protected by seven samurai from bandits. And the seven samurai come as a team. They all represent different aspects of masculinity and wisdom, bravery, fortitude, strength. So, each of the seven samurai has something very, very important, but none of them has all of the qualities together.

ID: But together, they win. And she really thinks that she has given him enough in terms of stories, in terms of things to think about, education, that he can live without the father. And of course, it is not true. And in a bit of a similar vein as *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry, the boy, when he's 11, decides to go find his father. And he does. And I guess we shouldn't reveal too much about the story, but it's about archetypes,

and it's about how he goes from—he thinks that his father must be a hero. And there's a very interesting part where the movie, *The Seven Samurai*, is analysed from the director's point of view as a non-Western story because in Western stories, the hero has a giant task to do, just like in *Medea*, in *Jason*, which is Greeks are the base of Western civ to a certain extent, right? So, and in this book, the Japanese, they talk about how the hero is always the unfinished character. You see, the villain is finished character because he's finite. He's come to the end of what he will ever be, and that's why he's a villain. Whereas a hero is always a work in progress. He's never finished. He's always striving. He is always improving. He is never complete. And so, in the beginning, the boy goes to look for a Western style of completion; he looks for a hero. When he actually meets his father, and of course his father is just a human being, he decides to see if he can find a better father somewhere else. And so, he explores London and all these very interesting characters, some of which actually become quite violent towards him. And I'm going to read a little part about how he approaches these characters that he knows are not his biological father but maybe could be his spiritual one.

[ID reads from *The Last Samurai*]

“What's going on?” the lady asked.

“This is my son,” the man said.

"No, I'm not," I said. [This is the boy, Ludo]

"What do you mean," he said. [This is one of the men he approaches and tells them, 'You're my father.']

"Have you seen *Seven Samurai*?"

"No."

"I have," said the woman.

"It was a test," I said. "I couldn't tell my real father because it was true."

"I don't begin to understand," said the woman.

And the man said, "In some parts of the world, you'd be flogged for this."

I said it was not necessary to leave England to find people who did stupid things.

"Who are you?" he said angrily. "What's your name?"

"David," I said without thinking.

"I don't understand," he said angrily. "Did you want money? You made it up to get money?"

**EB:** Interesting.

**ID:** And so, sometimes it gets violent, he gets hurt. Because the other thing that's interesting is that all these men, they all believe it at first.

EB: That he's that son?

ID: Yeah. Which means that they all have these weird lives. I mean—

EB: They've all got a secret.

ID: Yeah, exactly. It's like they've all strayed somehow because they're married or they're not. And then he has to tell them, 'No, I'm not your son. I was just testing.' And then they get incredibly hurt. It's a very interesting story about the process of having a child.

EB: Yes, and also about that idea of an ideal father, what would an ideal father be? And Ludo is effectively looking for the different archetypes of maleness, whether it's being incredibly clever and nerdy and scientific or incredibly strong and brave or sensitive.

ID: Athletic.

EB: And he tries all these different possible fathers, and we won't tell you what happens, but he does find a different kind of wisdom in the end. And it's something

that we were talking about, the idea of parenthood, that in the end, you have to be the parent to yourself. And perhaps what Ludo discovers is the father within, that's what he's been unconsciously searching for. And we were saying earlier today that we feel that you have to discover by the time you're 35, you can't blame your parents for what they've done to you. You have to take full responsibility yourself. And everyone goes through that stage, in a way, of discovering their inner parents.

**ID:** Yes, which is—and I think that this is what the mother in this book was—as he goes through looking for his fathers, you feel the mother shrinking, you feel the mother suffering, you feel the mother dying to a certain extent. And she comes back to life when he finally comes to this conclusion that he needs to become his own father. And maybe that's what she was trying to teach him all along. It's a beautiful, beautiful story with a lot of love. And it's because she, of course, if he would find this ideal father, where would that leave her? She's, yeah, she's just the mother. And at the same time, she's everything. But it's true that growing up means letting go of giving your parents all responsibility and actually taking some for yourself and inventing who you are. And I think this goes back to the idea of these different cultures, some of which are more, I mean, I guess in the Greek times as well, this would fit more with the Italian and perhaps also with the Caribbean culture, where the individual has to be subsumed into a group, and the group defines how you raise your children.

**EB:** Yes, the village effect. It is a book I've recommended a lot to my bibliotherapy clients because I think it's a lovely book about motherhood. And actually, I've given it to some people when they're just about to become a mother or have just become one, and they've really related to it, loved it, and been very inspired by it.

**ID:** It's a celebration of growing up and of learning. Huge love of learning in this book: huge love of science, of literature, of languages, of communication. So, there's a lot of things in here, and it's really lovely.

So, to continue on the subject of fatherhood, we're now going to go to our poem of the month. So, this is from Kwame Alexander, fantastic African American poet. And this poem is called 'The Heavyweight of Fatherhood'.

[ID reads from 'The Heavyweight of Fatherhood']

"My father sometimes loved us like a boxer,  
would tag us with biting jibes when he was too  
busy to answer a question, throw numbing jabs  
that stabbed our ears and growing hearts when  
he was upset.

Round after round my mother would referee, but  
he would back even her into the ropes. The man  
would not stop until he knocked us all down.

And then when he was satisfied that we were  
down for the count, my sisters emptied of joy,  
me defeated, repressed. He'd retreat to the  
corner and massage our wounds with a  
softening tongue and honest humor, a familial  
allegiance that lifted us all up, that left us each  
smiling and revived and almost forgetting the  
sting of his love.'

**EB:** That's a great poem. So, what do you think that tells us about fatherhood?

**ID:** Well, I think it's very clear in this poem that he's the only son of this family. There are girls, there's a mum, but then there's the dad in him, and it's that symmetry, that nemesis between the man and his son.

EB: Father and son. The pugilistic quality.

ID: Yes. And again, this goes back to what you were saying about Jason. It's like the father in this poem, he loves his children, he loves his son, but he needs to box him down sometimes and lift him up again as if to show him that he is the master.

EB: Yeah, the boss.

ID: The boss. And maybe also to encourage that kind of behavior in his son as well, to show him a model, a style of fatherhood and masculinity.

EB: Or is it to show him respect? Is it to show him that—is it to teach him the respect? Is it because maybe the father himself—this is about the transmission, I feel, this poem, the transmission of some emotional traumas that in Greek mythology comes out as the god's wills, but in our speak of today, we would call traumas. Because again, I mean, this is the story of Black men in America and the father's own processing of sometimes the humiliations that he's had to endure. 'My father sometimes loved us like a boxer.' And so, it's, yeah, it's because that's the thing, right? Parenting is—what is parenting? The style—and the style is what? The style is who we are and our blind spots, the things that we're scared of.

**EB:** That poem is really interesting because the title of the collection is called 'Why Fathers Cry at Night', which is a really intriguing title. And I wonder if he's written a lot about his own experience of fatherhood because he's written about—

**ID:** This is about him as a child. And he has written about his own experience of fatherhood. And interestingly enough, he has another poem, the poem called 'Why Fathers Cry at Night', which really is about the fact that he has two daughters, and his feelings about when these daughters begin dating men, begin having men in their lives, and as a father, how does that feel?

**EB:** We've got a short story on the topic of parenthood, which is a slightly lighter tale than some of these that we've been discussing. So, it's by Saki, whose real name was H. H. Munro, who had a very short life. He lived only from 1870 to 1916. He was killed in the war in 1916. And he was actually a very sensitive man who, apparently, as an officer, was very much loved and admired. He wasn't a military man by nature. And he wrote lots of fabulous short stories. One of our favorites is *Tobermory*, which we might talk about another time, about a talking cat. But this one, *The Toys of Peace*, seemed very appropriate to today's topic of parenthood because it's about some parents who decide that they don't want their kids to be playing with war toys. They want to give

them peace toys and to encourage them to play peaceful games, not games of destruction. So, one day, these parents bring back some toys for their kids and give them to them, hoping that it's going to be a great success. And I'll just read you a little bit so that you get a flavour of the story.

[EB reads from *The Toys of Peace*]

'On Easter Saturday Harvey Bope unpacked a large, promising-looking red cardboard box under the expectant eyes of his nephews. "Your uncle has brought you the newest thing in toys," Eleanor had said impressively, and youthful anticipation had been anxiously divided between Albanian soldiery and a Somali camel-corps. Eric was hotly in favour of the latter contingency. "There would be Arabs on horseback," he whispered; "the Albanians have got jolly uniforms, and they fight all day long, and all night, too, when there's a moon, but the country's rocky, so they've got no cavalry."

A quantity of crinkly paper shavings was the first thing that met the view when the lid was removed; the most exciting toys always began like that. Harvey pushed back the top layer and drew forth a square, rather featureless building.

"It's a fort!" exclaimed Bertie.

"It isn't, it's the palace of the Mpret of Albania," said Eric, immensely proud of his knowledge of the exotic title; 'it's got no windows, you see, so that passers-by can't fire in at the Royal Family."

"It's a municipal dust-bin," said Harvey hurriedly; "you see all the refuse and litter of a town is collected there, instead of lying about and injuring the health of the citizens."

In an awful silence he disinterred a little lead figure of a man in black clothes.

"That," he said; "is a distinguished civilian, John Stuart Mill. He was an authority on political economy."

"Why?" asked Bertie.

"Well, he wanted to be; he thought it was a useful thing to be."

Bertie gave an expressive grunt, which conveyed his opinion that there was no accounting for tastes.'

**EB:** There's more, but basically they get out all these toys, little statues like an official of the local government board and all these municipal buildings, and the uncle desperately tries to get the children to get excited about ballot boxes and political games that they can play and jolly ways of putting all the litter in, collecting the litter around the town, etc. And then, they leave the boys to their game, hoping that it's

going to take off. And I won't give away the end of the story, but essentially, there's a conclusion that boys will be boys, and they convert the peace toys into war toys, pretty much.

**ID:** But is it a boy thing, or is it just a human thing? I mean, because I think it's easy to say it's a boy thing, but girls do the same, they just do it a bit differently.

**EB:** Yeah, that's true.

**ID:** I think that conflict is a very essential part of life and of being a human being. And so, it's how the style perhaps means how do we convey this in a way that is socially acceptable, that still takes into account our spiritual nature, our capacity to love, but accepting the truth that we are biological creatures, and conflict and competition will always be a part of our lives. Although it's a satire, right? It's quite deep because it talks about this: the fundamental nature of human life. There was a philosopher that I like called Niels Bohr, who was a theologian. And he talks about children of light and children of darkness. And the children of darkness, for him, are people who only see the competition and the struggle for survival, no spiritual side at all. And the children of light are those who maybe lean too much into the spiritual dream of a more kind humanity, without taking enough into account the impulses that the children of

darkness are very aware of. And so, it's a balance between those two that give you the world and how we need to always take into account our spiritual nature, which distinguishes us from a firefly, from a cat, but how easily corrupted that spiritual nature can be into pride and into power, will to power. And so, I think that parenting and this style is about balancing these things.

**EB:** Which brings us back to Saki, who said, 'Bring the wine for the night is short and life slips by like sand. Take the cup and fill it high. Tomorrow is not in our hand.'

**ID:** That's a beautiful ending. And so, with this, we feel, have we answered the question, Ella?

**EB:** On parenting, is it a question of style? I think we have, haven't we? I think we've gone through a lot of books where there's a lot of very different parenting styles. And for me, I think the answer is yes, it is a question of style.

**ID:** Definitely. I think the style includes what we don't control. On this note, we will say thank you very much, and stay tuned because our next episode is about—

**EB:** The manosphere. Very topical.

ID: With love.

EB: With love.

ID: From us women.

EB: Toujours gai.

ID: Toujours gai. [Laugh] This was *Fiction Prescriptions*. Thank you so much for being with us.

EB: 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.

[Outro music]

A recording of this podcast can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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