

JOE This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, writer of the MIT Alumni
MCGONEGAL: Association. In the decade since Monica Byrne earned a master's in geology and earth science at MIT, she's redirected her interest in science, research, and discovery, towards the arts.

She studied the craft of fiction, playwriting, and poetry, and found success. Earning an award the New York Fringe Festival last summer and an artist fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council last fall. Byrne sold her first novel, *The Girl in the Road* to Crown Publishers. And the book releases on May 20th.

The Girl in the Road follows the journeys of two young women, one in India and one in Africa, in the not too distant future. Like your other creative work, one can clearly see Byrne's influence is an interest in science in this debut novel. Among her literary flourishes with symbols and metaphor, Byrne's story makes some important observations about physics, and chemistry, technology, and climate change in the 21st century. I spoke to Monica Byrne by Skype and asked her about her own long journey in publishing this book.

MONICA BYRNE: I wanted to write this book now because I feel like this century is in need of new heroes, and a new hero journey and a new hero arc. I grew up, as many people did with Frodo, and with the Pevensies in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and with Harry Potter, whom I adore. All of the hero journeys of the 20th century are very much present to my mind. But I felt like so much of literature is very much centered on the Western canon and on Western experience, and on Western races, on Western cultures.

And part of travel for me is just like blowing all of that open and seeing how much more there is out there. And I wanted to reflect that the hero of the 21st century, the hero of the whole globe was in fact an Indian woman, and always has been. And I wanted to make the point that the default hero of the human race has always looked like that actually.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about some of the challenges in writing the book.

BYRNE: Even-- God, even before I started writing. And again, I'm in this mindset because I'm reading all of these journal entries and letters from Ethiopia. I was just like, this is so ambitious. This is so ridiculous, this is never going to get written. Like, how could you think you could do this? And so it was just a tremendous-- and the only answer I had was, because I can't not, I can't

look down. I just have to keep climbing and not allow myself to get immersed in self-doubt, because that's a waste of time. Like, either I'm going to [INAUDIBLE] it's not going to happen. What was your question?

[LAUGHTER]

MCGONEGAL: Some of the challenges writing it. I mean, there was plenty of travel involved in thinking about the book ahead of time, yes?

BYRNE: Yeah, yeah. But in writing it too, I'd say this draft, the draft you have in your hand is maybe draft six, number six. The drafts that came before it-- God, the first draft was so bad. And I mean it was well written in the sense of there were new ideas, but it was just so badly cobbled together. Just even the best writers, you don't want anyone to read your first drafts.

Then I actually had this experience, I went to a residency called the Vermont Studio Center. I was at dinner, and this writer asked me, so tell me what your novel is about. And I was kind of in a bad place that I was feeling grumpy. So I was like, ugh, it's about a woman who walks across the Pacific Ocean, and there's another character from Africa and she is from India. And she said, well, if one character is from India and the other is from Africa, why is she walking across the Pacific?

And I said, because, because, she just does, because-- you don't get it! And of course, you know I had this very strong reaction, I was just like oh, but that's the inalienable core of the novel, and you just don't understand. And then I was walking back to my studio and I thought, she's totally right. She's totally right, it makes no somatic sense whatsoever. And so I threw out the entire 70,000 words and started over that night. And sometimes you just have to do that, and it felt so much better because was just like, I don't have to be enslaved to this entire draft that like I can-- I'm not enslaved to rehabilitating it. I can just start over, now that I know the novel is about something completely different. So sometimes that just has to happen.

MCGONEGAL: What else got in your way of-- talk about the publishing process and any obstacles you encountered there.

BYRNE: Publishing process I will say was criminally easy in the sense that as soon as I signed with an agent he had it sold in seven days. And that is coup. I mean, I've just had nothing but a glorious experience in publishing to be honest. It makes every other experience I've had in

art seem dysfunctional in comparison.

MCGONEGAL: And you just have been through a very difficult experience getting that to play at the French Festival.

BYRNE: Yes, what every girl should know.

MCGONEGAL: That's right. Yeah. So an Indiegogo project and fronting the money yourself, and a real shoestring effort. And then this windfall of success.

BYRNE: The dysfunctionality of the theater world is really grading on me these days, it just oh, wow. It's like night and day. It's such a different experience.

MCGONEGAL: How does your MIT experience factor into this book if at all? I've got plenty of oceanography at work in here. Climate change, technology, chemistry, physics. Oh, that couldn't have happened at MIT, but some of it did.

BYRNE: Some of it did, some of it-- I mean, I took classes WHOI. I took classes at Woods Hole. My advisor was a chemical oceanographer, and so there are some points like when Meena runs into the scientists where I could talk about things like wave forms, CTD data. But I was like, I did that, I did all of that. And it felt really good to retread that territory. I feel like, God, that was good for something. It was good of something.

And even when I was at MIT. I mean, it's comical for me to look back at my time at MIT and remember how I was fighting against myself even then, because I would be reading all of these papers for my thesis and for my experiments, and then on the side I would just be like, I really just, I want to have a journal where I just make things up. And where I could just no ties to experimental data, and I could just make a sort of self-containing internal system that makes sense in my head.

And basically what I'm describing is fiction, that's exactly what I'm describing. But I had this idea when I was a graduate student to make up a fake journal full of fake papers of things that sounded cool, but had no experimental basis. And that's what I do now basically.

MCGONEGAL: So without that crucible of MIT, there might not have been the longing to escape into the world of fiction?

BYRNE: No, I feel like-- I wanted to be an astronaut from when I was 14, an astronaut and

astrobiologist. That was my vocation. And I went as hard as I possibly could in that direction. I got into MIT, and I got a pilot's license, and I had all of these connections with good people, who if it was going to happen, were going to help me make it happen.

And I just realized that I really didn't like it. I really didn't like it. And all of the things that I was doing to sort of help myself through graduate school like, take yoga classes, take improv classes right from the MIT tech, entertaining ideas of a fake journal with fake papers goes with what I actually wanted to do. Finally, just was like, can I allow myself a life of pleasure? Of like pursuing what I actually want to do instead of this dream that is a really beautiful dream, but it's actually not what I want.

MCGONEGAL: And you've got a character here, Meena who wants to cross the Arabian Sea. Can I have you read a piece, Monica?

BYRNE: Yes.

MCGONEGAL: There is the first description of the trail from the narrator at the museum.

BYRNE: The TALG only resembles a [INAUDIBLE]. As its overall shape is more like that of an upside down caterpillar, each segment is a hollow inverted pyramid made of aluminum. And each sunward surface is faced with solar paneling, which seems brilliant to me, makes me want to applaud. Between the segments are [INAUDIBLE] called non-linear compliant connectors, each of which contains a dynamo, in each of which is suspended an egg of steel that bobs up and down as the wave does. This generates energy, as does the solar panelling. Making the TALG a dual action apparatus. Mohini would love this. I wonder if she knew about this.

MCGONEGAL: This is the bridge that Meena will find herself on, and we'll leave it to the readers to find out what happens. And Meena slowly sheds a lot of those disciplines that she, herself, a student at a institute of technology in a hope to be more connected with the world, it seems.

BYRNE: Yeah. Yeah.

MCGONEGAL: And she has her own fictions to confront and struggle with.

BYRNE: She constructs a very elaborate parallel reality. And a system of parallel reality and omission can be an [INAUDIBLE] about what it is she's actually after.

MCGONEGAL: You set the novel in the future. You're probably going to be asked, what is it you're telling us

about the future? Are we to be afraid of the GPS units and all of this modern day science that can supposedly help us out on such a journey, but doesn't?

BYRNE:

I mean, it does help for the purposes that she needs it to, or that she thinks she needs it to. Self-actualization is just not necessarily one of them. I feel like there is a tendency to conflate the words science fiction and dystopian. A lot of science fiction deals with technology in a really threatening way, or in a really sinister way that is fundamentally sinister. The only reason I set *The Girl In The Road* in the future is because the trail doesn't exist now, and so I extrapolated far enough in the future so that the trail technology would be plausible.

And so 2068 seems like a good estimate of when the trail might be possible. Her experience of technology and all of their experience in technology, all of the characters, is pretty benign. I don't experience technology to be sinister. I experience it to be a benign everyday organic presence in a way that does not feel threatening, that feels very exciting. And so the things that Meena experiences like the [INAUDIBLE] halo and [INAUDIBLE] in the pod, of these are just things--

MCGONEGAL:

Of course, the other big question is, here's two women in two countries, where we know today, women face issues of equality and inequality much like that of the past for the United States at least. Is the narrative telling us something about your hopes for the future in these places?

BYRNE:

I treated the future in my book the same way it is now, again, just extrapolated in the future, which is that the future is here, it's just unevenly distributed. I forget which famous science fiction writer said that the future is here but unevenly distributed, and same place with India. I mean, Meena is queer. Meena's girlfriend is transgender [INAUDIBLE] who is named Mohini. And actually, India just passed third gender recognition laws. Like the uncanny thing, I kept experiencing, in the last five years of writing this novel, is the things I was writing about came true, or were headed there and it was so uncanny to watch.

I was trying to understand how India might look in terms of acceptance of queer lifestyles, queer people, same sex couples, transgender couples. I just thought it's probably how it is here now, and how it is there now, which is pockets of acceptance and pockets of nontolerance. And that the pockets of tolerance will probably be bigger. It's easy to point to Africa or India and say they have issues with women. I will say, issues with women in the states are nowhere near what I'd like them to be either.

MCGONEGAL:

Right. There is the aspirational outlook towards cast too in some of her narrative, right?

BYRNE: And it's very powerful now. So Meena's grandmother would be in her 30s about now. Yeah.

MCGONEGAL: So talking about what you're reading right now.

BYRNE: I'm reading *A Feast For Crows*, [LAUGHTER] *Game of Thrones*. Reading *A Feast For Crows*. And also reading *Subtle Bodies* by Norman Rush, who is just my favorite literary fiction writer. In terms of female role narrative, I mean he basically-- I read that at MIT too, I read his book *Mating* at MIT, and it was groundbreaking for me. I had just never read anything like it. And so he has a new book out called *Subtle Bodies*, which I am also reading, and it's like being with an old friend.

MCGONEGAL: Good. What books by MIT alumni or professors would you like to see written someday in any of these disciplines?

BYRNE: MIT people know the value of data. I honestly just want to figure out a way for our government to support artists. There's so many countless times when I was working at my day job that I absolutely hated thinking I wish there was a way for my work to be recognized in a way that made economic sense to the government, in a way that they could incentivize and make it to policy. God artists struggle, and I've seen so many burn out. Incredibly talented people who give up, because there's just no harder way to make a living.

And if some MIT people could put their minds to how to support and incentivize artists in our country, God, I would love that. You know what? I would love for an MIT alum to invent the trail. Please invent the trail, because I want to walk on the ocean, that would be the coolest thing. And make it like so it can harvest energy and all of that, I guess.

MCGONEGAL: Monica Byrne is the author of *The Girl In The Road* published this month by Crown Books and available online or at your favorite local bookstore. Monica Byrne, thanks for joining us.

BYRNE: Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.