

TheWriteQuestion_1015_EmilyRuskovich

Lauren Korn Hello and welcome to The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn speaking with Emily Ruskovich, author of *Nightjar*. Collection of five short stories grounded in rich geographical, emotional, and psychological landscapes. With a writer's tenderness and devotion, Emily has written multi-layered characters and corresponding histories, buzzing with both joy and grief, vulnerability, candor, and closely held secrets. Writer Paula Hawkins says of *Nightjar*, quote, these are stories of enduring love, marital, parental, fraternal, of the hurts and indignities of childhood, the wonder of the natural world, of seemingly harmless lies that grow and swell and threaten to overwhelm their tellers." End quote. These stories have been called slippery, mysterious, eerie, and provocative. I can't wait to dive into them. Emily, thanks so much for joining me. Welcome to The Write Question. Thank you so much for having me, I'm excited to talk. I'm going to start our conversation by jumping into your book's third story. That's Round Lake. Hoodoo Mountain makes an appearance in this story, and I understand this is your childhood home. Is that correct?

Emily Ruskovich Yes, and almost I would imagine every book that I ever write in my life will have Hoodoo Mountain in it.

Lauren Korn Describe this part of Idaho for our listeners. Put us on the ground where you grew up.

Emily Ruskovich Yeah, well, I grew up in this very remote part of Idaho when we moved to the mountain. We had 40 acres, very steep, brambly, wild acres. There was nothing on the mountain, but well, there was nothing on the mountains. We moved there, but we put in an outhouse and then we lived in tents for a while. My parents in one tent and my little siblings and I in the other tent with our cats. And we spent this... Wonderful summer, one of the best summers of my life, living without running water, without electricity, and with all of our animals right there. And then we built a barn and then we moved into the barn. And we lived there until the winter and while the house was being built and it was an amazing place to grow up. I grew up. You know, some might think it was a lonely way to grow up, but it was just wonderful to be out in the mountains with my family and reading books and imagining and I, you know, playing. Just playing was a huge part of my life. And I look back on how those days of just endless play with Barbie dolls or dolls or... Pretend in the woods, you know, I'm pretending to be some lost child in the woods and it really formed me as a writer and to a large degree. So it was a beautiful place to grow up, a wild place to grow up and it was surrounded by probably a lot of not great people and we felt that certainly that it was it was slightly dangerous place to up to, but my parents cultivated. This, you know, 40 acres as a place of love and kindness and joy.

Lauren Korn Apart from maybe later knowledge of the people, but certainly the raggedness or the roughness of the land, you said that you kind of felt that danger. What did that feel like? What were you feeling? Can you get back into your childhood body?

Emily Ruskovich Yeah. Let me think about how to phrase this. It was not a friendly place. There might be a sign on someone's private property that just says, not trespassers will be prosecuted, but trespassers will be shot. I remember that sign somewhere. There was just a sense that some lovely people did live in those woods and we sought out those lovely

people. That there were people that were not so good. I remember one time I got dropped off from the school bus. The school bus dropped me off a little bit early and my mom wasn't there yet. And the schoolbus wouldn't drive all the way up to our driveway. We lived so out there. And so it was a long walk on the Forest Service Road. And my mom came just a few minutes later, but in that time between... A truck pulled up, and I was just a thirteen-year-old girl and it was a man, and he just said, why don't you hop in? Like, I'll take you to the top of this mountain." And, you know, that was just a few minutes alone on the mountain. And luckily my mom came a minute later. But yeah, there was a sense of danger out there. It was people moved out there because they wanted to be, they wanted secrecy. They wanted privacy. Isolation, yeah. Yeah, an isolation.

Lauren Korn I haven't asked this of a guest in a while, but it seems fitting given where our conversation is now and where you now live here in Missoula, Montana, right? What does the phrase American West mean to you? And I don't know, what does it conjure for you? What does it mean to you culturally now?

Emily Ruskovich Gosh, that's quite a question, the American West. I'm trying to think how best to articulate. That's such a vast, vast- Oh yeah, you can take-

Lauren Korn a vast history. And I guess I could make it either, I don't know if this will either broaden it or, you know, make it a little bit more specific, but maybe just the West, right? Yeah. How do you think about this region?

Emily Ruskovich This region is so tied to my identity. It's, you know, I sort of feel like I am Idaho in a way. I feel that I'm always carrying around my own personal history. And in my own personally history is the awareness of so many histories. You know, just the history of exploration and also of incredible loss and devastation for so many people. As a little girl. There was an old homestead on our property that my dad discovered and all that was there was just some wire that was under the ground that you could pull up and see that it formed a pasture and then some mattress springs and some old wood. It was all crumbled. You could hardly see it, but when the rain would fall it would bring up little bits of porcelain that Before there was ever a driveway, it was just a dirt driveway. It was just wild land, and you would find these shattered bits of porcelain from somebody's China from long, long ago. And I was aware of this land holds memories that I can't ever access. I can access them through these little bits of Porcelain, but what was before that? And what did those people feel? And I think living in the West. Here in Montana, I now live in the mountains of Albertan. And in my childhood is the sense that the past is always with us and it's informing every moment of our lives. And I've always felt that very keenly and I think that's a large part of my imagination and how I became a writer. I think the West, the isolation, the beauty. And the brutal history, it's always there in the air and just in the ground as you're walking over it. And I feel like I'm a very happy person. I lead a very rich, fulfilling life, and I have a lot of people in my life that I love, but I also carry a deep sadness that I do think that I got from the land.

Lauren Korn You're now teaching here in an MFA program here at the University of Montana that really defines itself or it used to anyway by its location here in the West, Western writing, nature writing. How does this idea, if this idea does it all, how does it inform your teaching?

Emily Ruskovich Yeah, I think one of the main things that I focus on as a teacher is a sense of place and evoking the many different layers of feeling and history inside of a place and how memory and landscape are intertwined. And that's something that I'm

always trying to draw out of my students' work. And it's something that everybody wants to be able to do in their fiction is to make the place, the mountains, the rivers, an active character in their work. And that's something that we work on together in workshop.

Lauren Korn Let's dig into this new book, this new collection of stories. It's called Night Jar. A night jar is a kind of bird, correct? A nighthawk. Birds, whether they be these nighthawks or otherwise, owls, falcons, osprey even, there are birds in every single story in this collection. They're kind of all over. What can this bird, a night jar, which I'd never, I had to like look up what is a nightjar. What kind of this bird or any of the birds in these stories. How are they telling of this book's aboutness?

Emily Ruskovich That's a great question. When I was living in the barn on Hoodoo Mountain, everything was so quiet. It was a quiet like I'd never known before. In the evenings, there would be a sound that was unlike anything that I had heard, and it was a buzzing sound, a falling sound, and also a rising sound, and it sounded like a sigh. And we couldn't figure out what was making this sound, and my dad discovered one day that it was birds. Any word? Free-falling out of the sky. They would fly up to get insects and then fold their wings and they'd fall like torpedoes and that would be the sound of them falling, this free-falling. And it was a nightjar. We didn't know the name of the nightjar when I lived there. We just called them the buzzbirds. And then many years later, living in Albertan, Montana, I heard that same sound again and it connected me instantly to those early days of wonder at all that was undiscovered. And we can, most evenings, go out and stand on our porch and listen to the night hawks falling out of the sky. And so birds arose thematically in the book, just naturally. It's true there's birds in every story, but that wasn't a conscious decision. It was just. Part of my natural discovery of the stories and then afterwards sort of I saw this I think that the line in the story is then for no reason or not for no reasons but for the reason of joy which is not no reason even for a bird that they fall out of the sky it uh the idea that an animal's life is has so many more dimensions than you might granted at any given moment that joy is important to the animals, that excitement and the thrill of falling, free-falling, you know, just that almost everything that we look at is so multi-dimensional and the birds, I think, capture that throughout the stories.

Lauren Korn You're listening to A Conversation with Emily Ruskovich. I'm Lauren Korn. This episode of The Right Question is supported by Fact and Fiction, an independent bookstore located in the heart of downtown Missoula, Montana, providing books for all ages and supporting the literary community in Montana and beyond. More information can be found at factandfictionbooks.com. What do you do, Emily, and maybe writing is the answer to this question, but what do you do solely for the joy of it? There's no maybe rhyme or reason outside of that. It just brings you great joy. Lots of things. Good.

Emily Ruskovich Writing is the great joy of my life. Teaching, I do that for a reason. Of course, it's my job. But it is also, when I'm in the classroom, it is one of the great joys of my life to talk about books with other people who love books. And I like to go into the woods with my kids and just be there for no reason at all but to be there. Um, this, this might not make it onto the show. This is kind of a random thing, but I'll, I'll tell you about it. It's, it just, it's about joy. Um, last year, my daughter, Heidi was five and so she could have started kindergarten, but she was just on the cusp of four. And so we decided to keep her home another year and start her when she was six years old. So she just started kindergarten. But for one year, I decided to. Give her the most joyful year that I could. That was my whole goal of my year, was to give Heidi this extra year of joy. And so I, how to put this, I had an elf from the North Pole come and to get to access her, I would put on this long rainbow colored wig. And I had, I bought this outfit That was it. A figure skater, I got it at a

thrift store, sequins, red, one shoulder cut off, jumpsuit, sparkly, ridiculous. And her name was Tinsel, and she spoke with a... An accent that can't be derived from anywhere but the North Pole and she would come into our home and we, Tinsel and Heidi, spent a year together in the woods doing nothing but being there. There was never a goal to any given day except to be in the wood and to let Heidi and my youngest, Peter, who was then only two years old, just feel. In the presence of magic. And it was, it was one of the best years of my life to the point that when I see Tinsel's wig in my cupboard, I choke a little bit with tears. I miss her. She was truly the best of me. I, she had infinite patience. She was funny and silly and ridiculous and so earnest, you know, embarrassingly earnest. If you were to see what was happening on the mountain. It was so silly and so purely silly and wonderful. And she felt like truly a different person and she was the embodiment of my joy and all that I most want to be as a person on this earth.

Lauren Korn Is there something from your own childhood that at some point, maybe when you just got a little bit older, you look back and you're like, Oh, that was my parents creating magic and not, I'm not going to say it's not magic, but it's you give credit maybe to your parents where you would have given something maybe ethereal or something. Yeah.

Emily Ruskovich My parents were very hardworking people. They were farmers. And then they were homesteaders on this mountain. And everything was for us. My dad was an English teacher. And so books, dreaming up books was a major part of our rapport together. He was writing poetry all the time, reciting poetry. Sometimes in the car, we had a long drive to school because I went to school an hour away. And he was an English teacher an hour away, and I would write down, he'd come up with poems on the drive. And so there was just a natural, casual magic that was part of my daily existence that certainly I wanted to replicate for my kids. And play, you know, tinsel is like that old play, like where you can bring something to life just by giving it a voice. And that's that really is real magic on Earth, which is what I think language, voice and language is.

Lauren Korn Casual magic is a great phrase. Thank you. Love it. Let's go back into the book and kind of into a craft conversation, maybe. Each of the stories in this book, there are five of them, they sort of, I'll say, benefit from a certain level of restraint. And that might just be your style. But to me, I felt that restraint almost tangibly, right? Bye. I felt so much tension at what I was allowed to know as your reader and what I felt that there was all this, kind of like an iceberg, right? Like I was allowed to know what was above the surface, but I knew that there so much more below the surface that wasn't on the page. Talk, Emily, if you can, how you think about restraint while you're writing and whether that's in the process of writing or even as I said, kind of stylistically, like on the sentence level, how you, how you consider restraint.

Emily Ruskovich That's a great question. The stories took a long time to write, and that is because I've written so much more than what appeared in the final draft. And so restraint is not something that I think about when I'm creating. On those initial drafts, I will write everything, and I will give everything that I have to the page. And I write very long. And then where this restraint comes is in editing. And I love revision. Revision is where I make my best discoveries. Revision is where tension... Comes through is in the cutting of material that tells too much and I'm very interested in secrets and so a lot in stories is kept secret. The first story is a novella and it's 84 pages. Initially I had written this story as a 90 page story and I gave it to my husband Sam, who's my first reader, and he said, This is wonderful, Emily. So good, I love it. And I said, okay, but what's the critique? What should I do? And he pointed to a sentence on about page 84, and he said, what if you started with this sentence? And I say, and what happens to everything that comes before that

sentence? He said, I don't know, maybe, nothing. And I did it. You cut it. I cut 84 pages of a 90 page story. And I started with that sentence. And I wrote a new 84 page story, and it was the right thing to do. I had written basically up to the beginning of my story. So there's a whole version of this that nobody will ever see, because I had to write. I had to get it out of me in order to find that sentence. That later became, well, it isn't actually still the first sentence of the story that changed, but it was near, it was nearest.

Lauren Korn You said that you love a secret and secrets are all over this collection. Each of the stories features some sort of secret or some sort withholding. Talk about what the appeal of a secret is. What is it about a secret that makes for a good story or a good short story specifically? Is it that restraint that you're talking about? Talk about secrets, Emily.

Emily Ruskovich I think I just love a mystery. I just, I love reading mysteries. I love, I loved when things, you know, if somebody, if a friend tells me a story about a secret, I'm just on the edge of my seat. It doesn't, almost doesn't matter what the secret is, just that something has been withheld and that the world sort of forms around what's being withheld. And so I think it's just basic entertainment. I'm enchanted by following details towards something that is yet to be known and so in my daily life I love secrets if they're happy secrets I keep a lot of fun shocking kind of surprise secrets that are that are meant to um I mean I've kept very huge things secret before for the fun of it uh but like if it if it was a bad secret I wouldn't be able to bear a bad It's it's funny that I love them in fiction, but I I can't keep a, let's not go down that road. But fun secrets in daily life. I'm very good at keeping them and I love surprising people.

Lauren Korn Emily, there's moments in many of these stories, and a couple very specifically, but in many of them where religion takes not center stage, but there's a religious undertone or a spiritual undertone, or praying is mentioned, or a character, for instance, in this first story we've been talking about once believed in God. Longer believes in God, but then wants to teach her children how to pray. So tell me about how religion or maybe more broadly, spirituality drives these characters or your creations of these worlds. That's a

Emily Ruskovich really fascinating question, and I've not been asked that about this book. I was asked about religion with Idaho, but not Nightjar before. So thank you for that question. I would say that I'm an atheist, but I feel like I have a kind of religious impulse inside of myself. Um, partly that's guilt. I feel like I carry a very Catholic guilt. Uh, with me that's constantly, but I have no, uh, unfortunately no release of that guilt except through fiction. Um, and I guess what I want to get at is that I, I feel that the act of writing is a very religious thing that I do. Um and it's not connected to my idea of, of what God is. I, you know, I, that's, that has never been a part of my upbringing or my... My conscious life but I feel that it's it's a really a very sacred thing that I do and I'm aware of that sanctity as I write I feel there's something inside of me that that can't be explained that is that is greater than myself and I think that's what most artists feel is that it is the best of them and I want to put the best of me on paper and I try to save the best of me and try to have it endure. I am actively trying to create a kind of afterlife where I am putting the people that I love, putting my childhood, putting my mom and my dad and my husband and everything that I love so deeply that I know will be lost someday, putting it into a book because a book will survive. I want it to matter that I was here and I want to matter they were here. I want that to matter my dad wrote a song when I was a little girl. And so I am religiously putting these pieces into my book to save them. And that feels like the only way I can bear going on existing in this beautiful and brutal world is to write my loved ones and my own feelings into a book.

Lauren Korn I feel like now might be a good time to read from the book. Is there a passage that you're particularly practiced at reading or, again, one that you've come to over and over again?

Emily Ruskovich Okay, so this comes from the final novella in the collection called *Nightjar*, which is the title story about a 12-year-old girl living in the remote mountains of Idaho, and she discovers a miracle that happens inside of this bucket in the pasture where her goats are. And the bucket is just there for her goats to drink water out of, but there's something miraculous that she sees there. And that's what I'm going to read a bit about. What this does for her psychology and understanding of who she is. July arrived. Tess's existence sharpened, but her daily life faded. Her life and all the stuff in it went on as usual, but it did not add up to Tess' life like it once had. There were still the occasional thoughts of school and meals to prepare and television to laugh at and animals to love and Rory to care for. But there was no longer the dread of summer ending, nor was there the ever aching hope of Avery's return, nor the nagging thoughts of other people's thoughts. What mattered now, what really mattered. What mattered more than anything was a moment of time that passed inside a bucket of water and a goat pen in the mountains of Blanchard, Idaho, sometime between sunrise and 5 a.m. It mattered what the bucket saw. It mattered whether the wind blew this direction or that at some time in the early morning when everyone was asleep. It mattered if there were some clouds or no clouds and what kind of clouds they were. It mattered if a horde of gnats had chosen these treetops to haunt or if they hadn't. It mattered if the rain blew sideways or fell straight down or not at all, or if pollen sifted down in a haze that obscured ever so slightly the branches above. It mattered that on a Tuesday a pinecone petal fell. She found it lying dry upon the skin of water, and beside it she saw the reflection of it falling hours before. She could see the memory of its fall but also hold the pinecone petal in her hand, the only thing the reflection ever caught whose source was left behind for her to hold. And hold she did, close to her heart. She made it a

Lauren Korn That was Emily Ruskovich, author of *Nightjar*, out now from Penguin Random House. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, or to learn more about Emily, head to mtpr.org. You've been listening to *The Write Question*. This episode was produced by Chris Moyles and me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. Chris also engineered this episode. The artwork for *The Write Question* was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for *The Write Question* is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008, and thank you for listening. *The Write Question* is a production of Montana Public Radio.