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HOST: Maybe you've taken up cooking, or online Zumba, crocheting or tie dying during these Covidian times. Whatever form it takes we're all creative creatures. But what can we do when our creativity feels stalled? Join us in this hilarious pillow talk with the muses as Emma Donoghue shares the playful, demanding, sexy, unexpected sides of creativity. AND the ways we can strengthen our connection to making the things we love. This is The Conversation Piece. And this is Emma Donoghue from The Walrus Talks Creativity in London, Ontario.

EMMA DONOGHUE: Good evening, I'm Emma Donoghue. And I'm a keen Walrus subscriber. They didn't make me say that, I just thought I should.

So, I was going to call my talk "Seven Ways Creativity is Like Gardening," because I find that the most accurate metaphor. I don't have intense one-to-one romances with my books where I devote myself to each book and ignore the world. It's more like I go into the garden, putter around and say "that one's looking ugly but maybe spring will come, and I should plant something there and ooh that one's past ready to be harvested," and, as with gardening you can always recycle to rotten bits.

And then I thought, no no, I know so little about gardening that really it won't take me past two sentences, so then I thought, "I'll call it 'Seven Ways Creativity is like Kid's Stuff'." Because kids are just intrinsically creative, they're like mini-Gods. You know, my son gets on Minecraft and he's just not remotely inhibited about the idea of dreaming up a planet from scratch. But then I thought I talk about my kids enough, so let's NOT do it tonight.

So, finally I decided to call my talk it's real title (which I didn't want to put in the program) "Seven Ways Creativity is like Sex." Reason number one: it takes an ordinary situation and it makes it buzz with excitement. The thing about sex is that you take things that were there ten minutes ago - you know, legs, fingers, mouths, zips, and you put them all together and suddenly you've got a thunderstorm.

I would say that a scene in a novel doesn't have to be about something intrinsically exciting, it's just the writer has to make it sound exciting. And I think the writer needs to be feeling excited themselves. I think if you're not feeling thrilled, why on Earth would your readers?

So I try to put myself in a state of regular intense excitement. Now, sometimes, in the middle of writing a scene, sometimes it does occur to me that what is exciting me may not excite all my readers - I mean my tastes are a little bit specialist. I write about things like... my last novel when I mentioned it to a journalist that I was writing about a cross-dressing frog-catcher in 19th century San Francisco. He said, "Good one!" But in fact, that was true. But at least when I'm writing, I'm having fun and you never know, the reader might too.

Reason number two that creativity is like sex, there are no rules about where and when you get creative, so long as, to quote Mrs. Patrick Campbell on two male actors, "Don't do it in the street and scare the horses." I would say you can't force creativity to happen but you can certainly set the right conditions, the right conditions for you. Whether that be flying at 30,000 feet or with candles and an open fire, or rock-climbing, or in a dark cinema. And, as with sex, clearing



schedule and leaving your mind time to wander can certainly help. The muse is an unreliable guest but you can keep an eye out for her, welcome her in, keep in mind always about when and where.

For instance - when we were going to have kids, I had this completely unrealistic image of how I would write novels with a baby cooing in a rocking bassinet by my side. Now that's never in fact happened, but I have had plenty of quick and dirty writing sessions while my kids are in tennis lessons here at Western - in the big bubble. I sit there with my laptop for an hour and half, writing good stuff and ignoring my children.

Reason number three that creativity is like sex - there are no rules about who you do it with. You can do it with one other person or with hundreds - whatever rings your bell. For instance, under certain circumstances I will collaborate for a while, sometimes with a theatre company I will have a few weeks of intense collaboration and I get crushes on all of them and then afterwards there's an anticlimax but there's also a certain relief as I head back to my solitary writing office and I think, "Well, at least I know what I like here, and at least I'm always on top."

Now, some think of writing as a lonely business, I would say that I'm not spending my days alone, I'm with all my little characters in my head. Particularly as I often write about the dead, the real dead and they're often obscure real dead, they're not Henry VIII. So I feel they're rather grateful for my paying them attention. And because they have certain facts about their lives, I find it's as if those long-dead people kind of wrestle with me and say, "It wasn't like that, it was like this." And even if it's invented characters I'm working on, even they become, what Chris calls my imaginary friends. They seem to take on a life of their own and they say things like "I wouldn't do that on page 5."

Reason number four that creativity is like sex - is that there are no rules about what to do or how to do it. You can write a book backwards, forwards, you can -- once my dad wanted to write a memoir and he'd only ever written literary criticism, so to get past his inhibition, he wrote it on postcards. Random postcards, and then put it together afterwards. You can edit a lot or not at all. You can show it to your writing circle or show it to nobody. Phantom pen, laptop, doesn't matter. My only rule is that when the school bus takes the children away, I go to my computer and I see what happens - what happens is sometimes online shopping - but not every day.

Again, like sex, reason number five: breaking rules is inherently sexy. So feel free to break any rule you have set for yourself. Even a rule like I must write 500 words a day. I like, for instance, in the middle of working on a novel and feeling really committed to it, I like to just sneak off and write a short story. Short stories feel fundamentally illicit because they're never the thing I'm meant to be working on. Sometimes if I'm feeling a little bored working on one book, I'll come here to the library at Western and I will research something that I won't be writing for maybe five years, and that feels completely like an unproductive use of my time and it's thrilling and it refreshes me. And it means that when in five years I finally get to write in that book, I've done a lot of the work already.

So, I would highly recommend trying a genre you've never tried before. I most recently tried murder mystery, I was terrified I'd get it wrong. I'm now trying writing children's fiction - it's always good to draw on that feeling of stage fright - that feeling of "I'm going to mess it up in public."

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Emma Donoghue from The Walrus Talks



Now again, like sex, there are dry patches and you must not panic. You keep showing up. You keep holding hands with your muse, even if you're not jumping her bones. You keep her company, treat her like a lady. And luckily there's a lot to be done in most artistic projects that is not itself wildly creative - a lot of a novel is just moving bits around and trying to make them fit, so you can always do that. And if you stay with it, stay thinking about it, the juices will start to flow again.

Finally, reason number seven: like sex, creativity is associated with the young, but the old often do it better. We know ourselves, we know what we like, we're more relaxed, we know little tricks to get ourselves going. There's no age when you have to retire, you may get slower, but some would say that's a good thing. You get less self-conscious, you're aware you have less time to waste so maybe you spend less of it on Twitter, and more of it writing the book. Sometimes I think I'm 45, that's probably past the mid-point... which books do I really want to write before I die? Thank you very much.

HOST: Emma Donoghue is just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks. If you enjoyed this talk as much as we did, our YouTube channel is the place to find all The Walrus Talks. And we're coming up with a plan to deliver you The Walrus Talks at home. Sign up for our weekly newsletters to stay in touch at thewalrus.ca/newsletters. And keep creating, people!