



## **Laura Lam and Temi Oh with Nicole Brandon**

NB: Greetings everybody. Really fantastic to be able to welcome you to this event at Astra, originally scheduled as part of Scotland's Cymera Festival, Scotland's premier event in its second year festival for science fiction, fantasy and horror writing. We're really sorry that we weren't able to bring you that Festival in person this year but even ... even then we've got the ... the delight on our hands of being able to meet so many more of you, you through the Big Book Weekend. So thank you so much for joining us. Cymera is a festival for all writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror, including some who you may not have heard of yet. We would usually have the Strange New Words introduction prefacing each of our events. So though in just a few minutes you're going to be treated to the fabulous conversation to come between authors Temi Oh and Laura Lam discussing their new books about space travel.

I'd like to introduce you first to a writer from Caithness who has a dark urban fantasy on her hands that she'd like to share a little parcel of for you. Please tune your ear, get the lights down low and enjoy just a couple of minutes of a reading from the fantastic Caithness-based writer, Charlotte Platt, with her book *A Stranger's Guide*:

Charlotte Platt: Thank you very much. So *A Stranger's Guide* is just a urban ... dark urban fantasy based in Glasgow. It's going to be available by Silver Shamrock Publishing in June this year. Because of that you have me reading off paper rather than the actual book so apologies for that but I'll just jump straight into it:

15th October 1885

Glasgow is a city alive with others. Entire families of creatures live among the people hiding in the scum of life that's amassed around industry. Worship of the others is carried out next to the Sunday service; no one seems to question this. It's fascinating. I plan to document as much of the undercurrent as I can while I pursue my studies. I've managed to ascertain there are various families of flesh eaters, vampires, incubus, and a variety of spirits which can be found with far less effort than one would anticipate. The city environment offers them a level



of protection that's lacking in the villages and their numbers flourish with discretion. This is useful though I'm yet to decide what I can do with this information. I shall record it as I am able.

27th October 2017

October in Glasgow was much like October in Manchester: wet and edging into cold. I woke in the guest house to the drum of rain hitting the skylight. It was still dark out and a check on my phone showed that it was just before 6 a.m. Growling low in my throat I rolled over. I wouldn't have complained about a bit more sleep after the coach trip yesterday. I dreamed of dark spaces, pacing through blackness in the cold echo of high chasms, and I'd just get more of the same if I put my head back down. Grumbling as I got out of bed, I switched on my laptop, watching it boot while I stretched out my spine. The bed was fine but I'm tall and a good stretch is a guilty pleasure. If I checked for work early I had the rest of the day for tracking people down. I mused over the bones of my plan: find people, talk to them about Sarah, find the next person. It wasn't a sophisticated way of finding her but it could work, and after three weeks I was getting desperate. I had a base here and I could probably stay longer if I needed depending on what I got from Sarah's friends. The owner would probably be happy to extend my stay so long as I kept paying the bill.

And that's us!

NB: : Fantastic! Thank you so much, Charlotte, and that is an excerpt from the upcoming novel from Charlotte Platt, *A Stranger's Guide*, dark urban fantasy. Sounds a little bit historical too by the ... by the tune of my ear there, and ...

CP: Yes, we've got Glasgow in the 1800s, which was an interesting place.

NB: How ... how, how could you not be drawn right into that? That's fantastic. Thank you so much, Charlotte. Everyone listening: if you enjoyed a little snatch of that please do look out Charlotte's book in future and we've been really delighted to have you on board, Charlotte, as our Strange New Words reader to open one of our flagship events Cymera 2020. Thank you



so much.

CP: Thank you so much for having me.

NB: Okay, everybody, now we're onto the discussion element of this fabulous flagship event. Again, so pleased to welcome two of the UK's, I gotta say just like some of the most inspiring sci-fi writers around, I am so delighted and so honoured to be able to chat to them. I also realise I haven't told you who I am yet: that's because I am unimportant in the grand scheme of things. But I just want to tell you quickly my name is Nicole Brandon. I'm a PhD Researcher at the University of Dundee and my job is now sci-fi. So the dream can come true, kids. Play video games and watch *Star Trek*. You'll wind up just like me. You know, take that how you like.

TO: That's very cool.

LL: It's been artificial intelligence.

NB: Yeah, welcome, Temi and Laura. Yeah, I'm having a fabulous time with that. And there's a smidgen of chat around A.I. in both of your tales but in honesty one of the things that's really wonderful about Temi and Laura's books is the new places that they take humanity in, and in specific the women of humanity who so often have not really gotten a chance to have centre stage in real or imagined space travel from Planet Earth. So I just wanted to really quickly introduce you to both of them and their books. You all are in for a ... absolute trip to the stars today and in the company of these two authors. We have first of all all Temi Oh whose debut novel, *Do you Dream of Terra-Two?* this fine tome right here, follows a crew of born and bred UK space cadets on a 23-year journey to the new possibly habitable planet for humanity known as Terra-Two.

We also have Laura Lam, an SF veteran who is joining us with *Goldilocks*, an SF thriller set in our own near future and with plenty ... plenty of interesting warnings contained within those pages. You can find out more about these two excellent authors and people in general and their projects by investigating the biographical detail that's appended to this video. I



heartily encourage you to do so – they're both up to some amazing work, they're both fantastic people, but like all great space race adventures time is a factor for us. So let's just get right into it.

First of all, I wanted to welcome Laura to tease all of you into this event with a brief reading from *Goldilocks*, and we'll have Temi at the end to set us on our journey.

LL: All right, so I'm just going to read from the beginning and *Goldilocks* is released on April 30th so it's brand new. This is only the second time I've read from it. So ...

In 30 years Dr Naomi Lovelace has never given an interview. When I asked her to tell me what happened up there Naomi would say no one who has been to space could ever describe it to someone who hasn't. They could use all the pretty language they liked, you might be able to come close, she told me once. She was always complimentary about my writing. But you'd never really know what it was like. Others will judge the choices she made, what she risked, how close she came to utter destruction. Let them, she always said. I'm used to their hatred by now.

Over the years I've often imagined Naomi up there floating alone, curled up like a white comma against a black sheet of paper, her bulky space suit the tethering cable an umbilical cord back to the ship. The silence but for her own breathing and the crackle of the comms. Twisting out to gaze at the stars, the reflection shimmering across the goldline vizor of her helmet. I don't know what she thought about the expanse before her; if it changed her understanding of humanity and our place within it, if that led to the decision she made.

I've watched the recording of the court testimony. Even there she said as little as possible. The whole world had been desperate to hear her statement, to put her on trial as much as the others. Naomi had stood surrounded by the polished wood of the courtroom, all warm browns compared to the white metal of the *Atalanta*. It must have all seemed so loud and so messy after so long breathing recycled air, drinking recycled water, seeing nothing organic except for the plants she had grown in her greenhouse. Naomi had lifted her chin, her posture



ramrod straight and her pressed stiff suit, her short hair only beginning to grow out again. The scratches on her cheek were still fresh.

Thirty years later they were the barest seams hidden among the faint wrinkles. Her face was strong not only from what she saw among the stars but what she'd faced when she returned. Dr Naomi Lovelace has been many things over the years: scientist, criminal, villain, hero, famous, infamous. Who would she have been if she'd never gone? In the home clips I watched of her before she left Earth Naomi was still quiet but a smile often hovered at the edges of her lips as if she held a secret she wished she could share. In one clip taken the year before she left Earth she'd opened her Christmas presents with the careful, considered way she did everything. A scientist through and through. Lifting the tape with a plum-purple nail, peeling back the shining paper to fold it up and set it aside, opening the cardboard top, peeking in, a dark wave of her hair covering her face. The slight laugh as she took out the snow globe Valerie had given her, her mentor looking on with her own crooked half smile. Valerie had bought one years ago at the Kennedy Space Center and growing up Naomi had always played with it. It had likely been out of production for years but Valerie had found another just the same. Naomi shook it, the blue glitter murky and opaque, before it settled to reveal the little space shuttle on its little launchpad. She brought it with her when she left Earth. It still sits on her nightstand even though the glass is cracked and the glimmer within leaked out long ago.

I never knew the first early incarnation of Naomi. Sometimes I'm not sure I've ever seen her beneath that meteorite mask – not really. Every anniversary journalists try again, begging for just one feature, or a publisher will contact me on her behalf and offer me an eye-watering deal for her memoir as one of the Atalanta five. No one understood why she kept saying no. I do. Naomi has never craved fame or money. Over the years people have tried to fill in the blanks or simply made up lies that further poisoned her legacy. She always claimed that her past was better left forgotten. What really mattered was what happened after and what we built from the remnants and rubble.

You'll be wondering who I am to her but I am not the important part of this story, I never have been. I only meant to stay with her for a week, one of my infrequent visits. Always so



difficult to get away and see her and it's so far to travel. It was easy to let too many months pass. At least I visited her though, the rest of the family never does. She spends so much of her time alone. I was meant to leave tomorrow yet just half an hour ago at 2:30 in the morning she shook me awake. She leaned over me, greying brown hair tickling my face, her hands like claws on my shoulders. Dark eyes wide she said she'd tell me everything. Her face was red and splotchy with tears, her voice nothing more than a whisper, her sour breath hot on my cheek.

I've checked the news long enough to understand what set her off. Naomi will have turned off all incoming comms. The journalists are going to be circling and buzzing like flies. It'll dredge up all the old pain anyway, so perhaps that's why she's finally telling me what I want to know. Better than finding out by other news drones. She owes me that much.

I've gone to fetch a pen and paper, anachronistic of affectation but writing longhand helps me think better even if decoding my handwriting is a struggle. I'm scribbling my thoughts trying to untangle them before I go back through. Naomi has offered me the same silence as everyone else over the years, given me answers so slantwise to the truth that they might as well be lies. I might hear it all tonight but will it be worse than what I've imagined or managed to piece together over the years. The night sky is so clear, spilled ink speckled with stars. Naomi always said no matter how dark the night is you can never mistake a planet-side sky for the true black of space.

I'll start at the beginning like she wants.

TO: That was really interesting hearing the beginning now I've, like, read the rest of it. I'm like, 'Oh Naomi, now I know her'.

LL: I know, so many hints.

NB: All that foreshadowing, it's fantastic. Thank you so much for ... for reading us into the start of our event, Laura. That's fantastic and everyone, hang in there. This is a reason to stay till the end because you're going to get a reading from Temi to close us out.



So having said that and set our stage and begun to set our scene, the first thing that I wanted to pick up on was something that's highlighted in that reading from Laura. And that is certainly at the very heart of the mission that's featured in *Do you Dream of Terra-Two?* which is the concept of fame and infamy as it relates to space travel. So the concept and the idea that heading out into space is ... has an element of just instant, instant life-altering attention to it. And obviously, for the 'Atalanta five' who are featured in Laura's novel, it comes with an awful lot of infamy if that reading's anything to go by. Temi, to start with I wanted to throw this topic open to you at the beginning. How do you think that concept of fame and potentially also heroism influences the way that we think about space travel, space exploration and being in space?

TO: Oh, yeah, well, I just ... I just want to say first that I'm really excited to be doing this interview, especially with Laura Lam, because I've done like a ... a couple of interviews with other people whose books I suppose you could draw comparisons with, but I think they're ... we're definitely sort of riding the same kind of wave of questions and thoughts in both of our books and trying to answer, like, similar questions. So it's really exciting to read your book for that reason. Yeah, so, well, like in my book because there are seven astronauts who ... seven young astronauts who were chosen to be the first. I was thinking a lot about the idea of being the first and the kind of fame that comes with that. But then also I started writing the book in 2012, which was around the year of the Olympics. So I think I was thinking quite a lot about what it means to represent your country and what that would mean if you were young and that ... and the kind of effect it will have on your self-image and your psyche. So I think, yeah, I was thinking about all of those. But then as I wrote the book I sort of feel like the book is an argument why you shouldn't go to space because by the time I got to the end of it ... Initially, I was like, 'Oh, this is such a great opportunity for these children', but then by the end I could definitely see how someone would be like, 'This is abuse: choosing these children to go on this mission – they're too young'. So I think my ... in the book it sort of has a kind of nuanced view because as I wrote it my view changed.

NB: Oh, that journey as part of the ... the themes and the ... the emotional heart of the book is just ... it's heart-wrenching. It really is. Starting with so much optimism and I suppose



naivety and, and then discovering the reality and your own place in it. It was genuinely fascinating. It's really interesting to hear that that was part of your own journey as you were writing it. That, that ... and to be inspired by the Olympics as well, to have that element. I wanted to pick up a little bit on that: the idea of representing your country in space. Space travel seems to be one of the places left where one can become a national hero and I wanted to explore just, just a little bit further with both of you, with ... with, with both you, Temi, and with Laura the idea of what it means to each of you personally the idea that someone can represent their nation in space. Like: what are you taking with you? Why does it matter? Are you not just a human?

TO: Yeah, it's so true. When I was doing a lot of research for the book I was really interested in, like, just how much of the space race was, it was kind of like nationalist. And a lot of the decisions that are made aren't just informed by the science or what's practical. It's also a sort of political ... and ... and I was thinking that, like, if there is another Earth definitely that would be, it would be hugely political who gets there first.

LL: Yeah, like so much of the space race was the Cold War, right? It was symbolic of the Cold War, and I think too like who we choose to remember in space flight history is interesting too. So I got really inspired by the Mercury 13. Did you research them, Temi?

TO: Yeah.

LL: Oh, they're so cool. So they ... if you don't know who they are they did the same astronaut tests as the Mercury Seven in the 1960s, and they actually performed better than the men. There were 13 women. But the whole programme was shut down and none of them were allowed to go to space. And so I think that's ... that really stuck with me this idea that if any of those Mercury 13 had gone into space, the whole trajectory of space flight history I think would have been very different. Like we still don't have ... we haven't had a woman go to the moon. Hopefully, they'll send a woman to Mars whenever they go to Mars but we don't know. But yeah, I think if once you become an astronaut you become a symbol of so much more than just you yourself. You represent your country, you represent all this, like, hope and heroism. But yeah, I think it's, it's a bit complicated. I don't think it's as black and white as a



lot of the time people depict the idea of going into space.

TO: It's so true. I found this interesting as well when I was researching. A lot of the, like, international space stations had totally different cultures. It's like, the idea of the cosmonauts I guess because they're from Russia, they have this real 'I'm doing this for my country, I'll sacrifice my life for my country, I'm just part of this system,' especially sort of like earlier on in the space race. Whereas like it seemed like the Americans had a slightly more individualistic kind of like hero view. And there's that sort of anecdote that everyone is always talking about, about how the ... the Americans spent like huge amounts of money trying to develop a pen that could write in space and the Russians just used a pencil. Yeah, so I always found that, that quite interesting how your culture and your country influences the choices that you make and you're there as well.

NB: Well, absolutely, it's definitely, it's definitely been something that's made, it's made the narrative in our, in our real life, in our real history so ... such a rich environment for learning and also having an understanding of what our own cultures are reflected back to us by how we view who's ... who's up in space. It's genuinely fascinating. It's one of the real values that I think talking about space travel and imagining space travel in varied and, and different forms really can bring to, to people and to ... to readers and to ... to broader society that collective imagination. It's kind of hard to get captured any other way, huh? It's definitely something interesting.

Okay, well, on that topic I wanted to say, well, I wanted to ask both of you a question. Laura mentioned how different it might have been if those, the Mercury 13, any of them had been selected to get into space rather than a programme just being shut down. And there's kind of been an infamous sort of string of incredible performance by female astronauts and a complete lack of attention paid often to what they do beyond the idea of them simply as figureheads. You can just imagine the treatment that Sally Ride got and it's, it's just bamboozling. Dr Mae Jemison as well. It's ... these are names by the way you at home definitely want to look up and, and research. Also more, more than a few female space-farers from other countries besides North America as well that are well worth looking up.



I wanted to ask both of you a little bit about how that reflects back on the way things are in the real world because, in a way, what we throw up into space kind of, it came from here. So what's really being highlighted and reflected do you think by the real situation of women and, and non-binary, and ... and other non-male potential astronauts and their likelihood of ever making it up into space? And how did that tie back into your books and the stories that you were writing?

LL: So I think I've been interested in just like institutional misogyny and how insidious it can be, and how a lot of the time, you know, marginalised genders are having decisions made about them but without them as part of the discussion. So I was thinking when you mapped that on to space what if, you know, Earth keeps getting increasingly misogynistic and the best people who can go off to this new world – I called mine Cavendish after Margaret Cavendish in *The Blazing-World* – what if they were the best people for the job but because of political stuff on Earth this misogynistic land couldn't be seen as sending five women into space? So what happens if they kick them off and then the women are, like, well, no; and they steal the spaceship and go off anyway because they know they're the ones who can actually save it?

And I also looked a lot at private space corporations as well, and it's Valerie Black who actually funded this spaceship only to get kicked off at the last minute. And I really like that she didn't stand for it. She was like, no; I'm just going to steal my own spaceship and take off. But I think, I really wanted to highlight women taking charge of their own destiny and going forth to ... you know, there is so much hope placed on Cavendish, just as there is with Terra-Two. It has so much opportunity, it's a blank slate; it could be whatever you want it to be. But do humans just bring their own, like, problems with them?

TO: Yeah, I was thinking a lot about the way that sort of astronauts right now and ... sort of especially like around the 1960s and 1970s, they kind of embody, they're sort of like our modern-day heroes like in the same way as like Greek heroes. They've gone on this voyage, it's kind of ... epic, it's like more than human and they come back and they kind of like represent, I guess, like what we kind of like to see as the best of what humanity can achieve, the kind of like pinnacle. So, the ... the ... what they look like, their gender, their race does like it does send a message about, about humanity and who we consider heroes though.



In my book I definitely, I tried to, I focused a lot on like having different genders and lots of different races. When I was, during the research of the book I was reading about, it was called like *The Afronauts*. It was this sort of short science fiction film about Zambians who beat the Americans in the space race to the moon. And the pictures are so beautiful ... because they're like, they're wearing astronaut helmets but then they have, like, African print space suits, and I remember even then just thinking, 'This is amazing'. And it sort of made me feel like the feelings that I got the first time I watched *Black Panther* where you're like, 'Oh, this is what it looks like if there's a hero who looks like me'. So I definitely was kind of trying to reflect that in the book.

LL: I'm gonna have to look this up as soon as we get off of this.

TO: The pictures are really beautiful.

NB: Oh, I'm like writing notes right now, like yep, I wanna go look it up.

LL: Touching on, touching on what you said about like the image of the astronaut and I think a lot of that's from like *The Right Stuff*. It's that machismo, the testing pilot who would like, you know, drag-race across the desert and drink a bunch, like a whole bottle of whisky, and you know, they were men, they were very macho. And I think we're kind of, still kind of slowly unpicking that initial kind of stereotype of what it means to be an astronaut, and allowing room for other spaces, other voices to show themselves as astronauts.

TO: Definitely. I found it interesting when I was writing my book as well. I was showing it to people and they were sort of saying, 'Yeah, I think the thing I find hardest to believe is like, that they're like the ... this, like, black guy's the head of the team but also, like, that this is a British mission and it made me think that – this is science fiction, it could be anyone going into space – but that, like, our imaginations are so limited by what we've already seen. So I ... for a lot of people they found it really hard just to imagine a British space programme. Yeah, like a manned space programme.



LL: I really enjoyed seeing the kind of British take on space in your book. I remember I saw Face-Out on I-Write in March of last year and I was like ooo, and I made a beeline across and I picked it up and I looked at it. And then I ended up listening to it on audiobook a few months later while I was writing *Goldilocks* when I was about—

TO: Oh wow, that's so cool!

LL: —three-fourths of the way through. And I kept seeing like, all, I was like 'Oh yeah, she researched, we researched the same things'.

TO: ... the moment when I read *Goldilocks*, which is why I was so excited about this conversation—

LL: I remember the image. You had, like, the algae and the like green, glowing columns, and I was like—

TO: Ah, I was like you're on the like same, like, zeitgeist, wavelength. Yeah, definitely. So exciting.

LL: I know.

TO: Oh, man.

NB: Well, speaking of, speaking of things that your books have inspired or interconnected over, there's one fantastic feature that finally ... We've both, we've mentioned the names of both of the Planet Bs that each of your stories involves a mission to. So in *Terra-Two, Do You Dream of Terra-Two?* they're headed out to Terra-Two; in *Goldilocks* the Planet B, so to speak, is Cavendish. And that similarity between both of your stories is, it's incredibly rich to read them both side by side because there are commonalities between what that new world represents to each of your sets of characters, and indeed to each of their Earths.

But there are differences too, and there are questions that both sets of space flight crews have



around what they're gonna do when they get there and what this new planet genuinely represents. And I just wanted to ask each of you, for each of you, maybe start with Temi. What did Planet B represent to you when you were writing this story? What did Terra-Two represent to you while you were writing this?

TO: Well, I think while I was writing it the main psychological question I was interested in asking is like, 'Why would you leave Earth forever?' 'Cos it was around the time that it looked like the Mars One mission might actually happen, which doesn't look like that's ... But I was really interested in seeing the videos of the different people who sort of like auditioned to be part of the mission and I met one of them in a convention. She was sort of discussing how, she's a scientist and she knows that she doesn't want a family, and she really wants to be the first on a new world. And I just remembered sort of feeling like, 'I would never do it! I like to be comfortable too much. I'd ... I'd never be the first'. So I was kind of trying to write a story that sort of answered my own question, which is: 'Why would you leave your family behind? Why would you leave this perfect planet that's just for us behind?'

So yeah, I was sort of thinking about that, and in order to answer that question I kind of thought about what are the different backgrounds of the different people? So like, one of them her ... the ... their parents, their father is a missionary and the job of a missionary is to go out somewhere where there's sort of like overarching philosophy and it doesn't matter if you're uncomfortable, it doesn't matter if you're putting yourself at personal danger because you have this sort of ... this sort of moral calling to do it. So that's kind of how they're driven. But then I also thought about sort of more, I just think jingoistic British idea of like, 'We'll be the first and it's important that we're British'. So there's one character who's like this, in his mind it's sort of like an idea of like an expansion empire. So all of them had different views and I was thinking about how that influenced their ... their character and also their behaviour on the journey, yeah.

NB: Fascinating – oh, we're coming back to some of that! Okay, Laura, how about you?

LL: So Cavendish I named after Margaret Cavendish because *The Blazing-World* was like proto-science fiction, utopian book that came out in 1666. And for 1666 it's quite feminist but



it does have a lot of, like, colonialist undertones and 'The monarchy is great' sort of thing. So I found it really interesting to read. It also has some really long philosophical digressions and lizard and bird men. It's wild.

But I kept thinking about, 'How would you feel if ...?' 'cos Valerie was one of the people whose ... she's the captain of the mission but she's one of the people who really helped explore Cavendish, detected it, looked at it through, you know, cameras and that sort of thing. So I think she feels an ownership over it even though legally you can't own an exosolar planet as an individual according to the Outer Space Treaty. So I thought, like, what would make her so driven that she would give up, she would funnel her whole fortune, she would build this spaceship, she would give up everything to go to this new world because she thinks she can make it, you know, a bright future for humanity and it can be so much better than ...? You know, our Planet A is beautiful but it's also breaking and especially in *Goldilocks*, there's only 30 years left of habitability and then that's it, like, we're all doomed. So they're trying to save humanity but also recognising that humanity itself can be quite flawed and selfish, which I thought was really interesting, and it opened up the opportunity for a lot of really morally great questions. And I don't know how I would answer some of the questions that I made the characters answer in the book.

TO: Yeah, I found that really interesting about your book. We see a lot ... a lot more of Earth and the different ways that it's flawed and the different way that sort of climate change has, like, ravaged the lives of different people and how it affects different classes of people, which I found ... I found really interesting and, and definitely does kind of answer that sort of like, 'Why would you go?' question in a sort of, like, I guess sort of more practical way.

LL: Yeah, 'cos you have to. Like with yours they're teenagers too so they're giving up their whole life to go off and do this, and I think your book looks a lot at faith and what it means to like believe in a cause that deeply.

NB: Well, speaking of the cause there was something that always struck me that was interesting around the language of space exploration that we use. Things like: 'colonising other planets', 'establishing colonies', and what it is that we imagine taking with us. You



know, the idea of being first, of ownership, of staking claim. And I wanted to ask both of you: as you were writing these stories and writing these stories about people trying so desperately to get to Terra-Two or Cavendish did you ever have a moment where you stopped and thought, 'This is extremely colonialist'? Do they have any business even going out to this place and trying to take it for their own? Like, where did you sit when you were thinking about the idea of humanity rushing out to claim places that humanity is not from?

TO: I mean, I guess there's, there's definitely a difference between taking a land that, like, I mean like in my story it's unpopulated so that, I mean, it has wilds. But, like, taking a land and establishing a colony somewhere that other people don't already live and have their own colony and their own culture that you sort of decide to usurp and destroy. But then I guess there is, you can't ... you can't ever really get away from the fact that there is this history of British people deciding, 'Wow! This, what's this country called? Oh, I don't know – *mine*'. So I think like my characters, I tried to make my characters really aware of that and I think it sits more comfortably or uncomfortably with, like, some characters than other characters.

But then also when I was reading it I was thinking a lot about the, the Fermi Paradox. You know, like the, 'What if we are the only ones? What if we are the only kind of intelligent life in the universe?' And there is one argument that like, well, let's say that we are, we're the, let's say that we are the only creatures that are able to like look at trees and plants and clouds and kind of have this awe and comprehend beauty? Then it's, it's, you could argue: shouldn't we go everywhere and experience it because we're the sort of eyes of the universe looking at itself? So there are, like, some of my characters who think that.

LL: And I think science fiction has only emphasised that colonist kind of undertone. Like even *Star Trek*, 'Space is the final frontier' and you know they're meant to go and just observe and you know not break the prime directive but then, of course, every now and again they do break the prime directive. But like Terra-Two Cavendish doesn't have any aliens already in situ. It just has plants and maybe some bacteria.

But one thing I thought was interesting is: even if the humans went there and just, like, touched down, observed things, didn't do anything and went away, the act of physically being



there would fundamentally alter that planet because we ourselves are colonised with loads of bacteria and there's no way that we would be able to not influence it, even if it's on a microscopic level, a little bit. And, you know, what if we're poisonous to that planet? That's something that Naomi's really thinking about 'cos they don't know anything about this planet and they're going to try and potentially colonise or settle it, but they themselves could unintentionally destroy it, which I thought was interesting. You know, what if they plant corn and corn is incredibly invasive and breaks the delicate eco-system? Life is very like difficult and yeah, difficult to balance.

TO: Yeah. I think I ... I sort of mention this in the book as well that basically, like, kind of the ... the arc of history – my characters only really see it going one way, which is that, like, they will, they will change the planet by being there. They'll ... they'll establish different colonies and like even ... They might try and hopefully succeed to come up with a sort of like system of like commerce that isn't the same as the kind of destructive capitalism we have here. But there's ... there isn't a way as humans for them that ... they'll interact with the planet without sort of really radically altering it. And yeah, I think a lot of my characters just kind of come to peace with that fact. Yeah.

NB: Well, I guess it's one of those things you're gonna have to accept if you're, if you're gonna undertake that mission. It's fascinating to hear as well from both of you just in ... just in response to that question the sort and the level of detailed research that both of you did, and the depth of thinking that you both did in order to imagine and then write these books. I wanted to ask each of you one of my favourite questions, which is: what was the weirdest or most interesting thing that – like fact or story or idea – that really stuck with you in your research for your story that you can share with us?

LL: Gosh, there's so many.

NB: One of them, Laura?

LL: I spent a long time trying to get to figure out how to calculate, like, the speed of light and how long it would take them to like accelerate versus decelerate and relativity back on earth,



and it all gave me such a headache that I basically just cheated and decided to use the Alcubierre Warp Drive Theory because it was just easier. But among that research currently the best way to get anywhere close to speed, the speed of light is like giant gold laser kites in space.

TO: Oh, I love that!

LL: That stuff—

TO: I found this too and it—

LL: 'Cos I was like I feel like your average reader would accept warp drive easier than giant laser kites in space.

TO: It's so true! This is the reason I didn't use it but, like, I love the idea. I like to just kind of imagine, like, a giant pirate ship in space.

LL: Oh, I know. It's so ... details.

TO: But yeah, I remember hearing that too. Actually, I had a physics teacher who was saying, 'Yeah, we can use solar sails,' and I was like 16 and I was like, 'I don't even have a PhD but even if ... you, you ... No, I'm not that gullible, okay?' Yeah.

LL: They'd have to be massive. They'd have to be absolutely ginormous.

TO: Yeah.

NB: Oh my gosh! I think they did do that in *Star Trek* one time as well as the warp drive but it ... it didn't end that well.

TO: Yeah, I don't know why, I don't know why it's sort of, it just stretches credibility too far even though it ... it, it is possible. Yeah.



LL: Even though warp drive, drive is about like contracting and expanding space and like breaking into the fourth dimension really—

TO: Yeah, when I had that. I was okay, I buy it, that's fine. No, no more explanation needed.

NB: I guess that touches on something that ... that you, you both just said, which is that you could believe it easier because you've seen it in other science fiction before, haven't you?

LL: I think that's why, like, yeah.

NB: We've seen actual sails before. We've seen kites but not in a sci-fi context. And you believe warp drive because you know the Starship Enterprise can use it.

TO: That is true, yeah.

NB: It's wild how that works. If there was one thing that you hope that your, each of your books could kind of chip in to the pot of how we imagine the future what would it be?

TO: I mean, definitely for me it's just, I ... I sort of feel like when people imagine the future there aren't as many like ... I was, I was definitely trying to make sure that people try and imagine the future as multicultural as I hope it will be. Yeah, so ...

LL: Yeah, I think, I hope that they have better food in space than I envisage. The poor nutri-blocks. I don't, I don't wanna eat those for decades.

TO: Yeah, I, I actually think I made the food worse than it sounds like it actually is. Because you know, your characters need to suffer a bit. But ... but when I was looking at like different menus for astronauts all of the things sounded just too ordinary, like potatoes and roast and I was like no, no, there needs to be macro-nutrient broths and ...

LL: You can ... you can occasionally have a nice meal, but only occasionally.



TO: A lot of the research that I did actually was just, yeah, was just kind of around life and space and the kind of, the everyday things like that. One of the things that I read was: what do you do with toothpaste? I have a real squeamishness about toothpaste and I read that this one astronaut would say, 'Oh well, you have to swallow it,' and I was like, 'That is it, now I know, I will never be an astronaut – if I have to swallow my own toothpaste'.

LL: I know that on many levels I do not have the right stuff to go into space. It was fun pretending and writing about going into space. That's the closest I will ever get.

TO: I like the comfort of my own room. Even with proper plumbing I'll write about go into space.

LL: There's a lot of interesting stuff about bathroom situation in space, like Mary Robinette Kowal. She did a whole thread about it that went completely viral and the funny thing was reading it I was like, 'Oh yeah, I knew basically all of that'.

TO: I remember hearing an astronaut saying every now and then doing for a number two can turn into hand-to-hand combat and I was like ...

LL: I thankfully managed to bypass a lot of problems by just giving the ship a gravity ring. I was like, everyone's feet are on the ground.

TO: And actually, you kind of overcome a lot of the physiological issues as well. So I did, like, a module in space physiology when I was at uni partly 'cos I was writing this book and I was, like, killing two birds with one stone. So one, what are some of the main things that we discovered was just how much our bodies need gravity to, like your bones, people that astronauts their bones stretch out the fluid from, that's used to sort of working against gravity kind of overcompensates so your face gets really swollen—

LL: Skinny legs and puffy face.



TO: ... the smell changes. So there are like loads of physiological ways that being in gravity is really quite detrimental to our physiology – not being in gravity, sorry – and so yeah, you do kind of overcome that by having some system of gravity.

LL: Yeah. They don't have to work out for two hours every day on our spaceships.

NB: Well, it occurs to me listening to both of you that, well, obviously, we're ... we're holding this Cymera event from our own little capsule environment due to the current situation that we have regarding the pandemic. And I wanted to ask each of you: was there anything that in your thinking about having to live on a spaceship being confined to quarters such as it were, or a limited environment such a long way with a ... with a hostile environment outside and all these rules you had to follow: is there anything that you discovered while you were researching or that you thought about while you were writing your books that you think might be good advice for people getting through the situation we're in now.

TO: Well, I definitely, that was sort of one of the main things I was thinking about in my story 'cos my characters they're young, they're like 18, 19 the main characters, and they ... they've left Earth and they're going to be in space for 23 years, so basically their entire adulthood they're in a space that's like, that's basically like the size of a maybe like a small flat or something with the same people for their whole lives, and that's sort of causes a kind of existential crisis for almost all of them at certain points in the story. Yeah. I ... I think I've just kind of realised they already have more endurance than I do. I've only been here [in lockdown] a month and already the days are blurring into each other. But yeah. A lot of, a lot of, a lot of their struggle is just to kind of trying to keep routine and there are lots of characters who are like, 'Keep doing your jobs, keep trying to get up at the same time and, you know, going to bed at the right time so that the days don't blur into each other' and that's definitely the main struggle I'm having right now.

LL: Yeah, yeah. I read a lot of astronaut memoirs last year, like all the ones I could find on Audible basically, and my favourite one was Chris Hadfield's *An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*. He's like a lovely like Canadian dad. He's the one who sang David Bowie on the ISS.



And I just, I love that book, it's just so lovely but and I, it's actually also really inspiring for being a writer as well 'cos you're trying to beat impossible odds, like 30,000 people apply to be an astronaut for like 12, 12 slots. You're like, okay, my odds of getting published are higher than that.

But also too, like, self-isolation is a lot about mindset it seems, like, according to the astronauts. Like yes, routine, super important, but also trying to find pockets of joy rather than focusing on the negatives. So, for example, right now it's really easy for me to be like, 'Ah, I can't go out, I can't see any of my friends, I can't do this, I can't do that', so I'm trying to focus more on the stuff I *can* do and what's in my control, you know. I can write for half an hour. I can at least go out for a walk which you can't do in space. I can, you know, still reach out to friends really easily thanks to the internet. I can, you know, read a new book. And trying to focus more on the positives rather than like, you know, scrolling through the phone and just being caught in that spiral of doom – doom scrolling – is, I think, the best thing. So I'm trying to not go on the phone as much in the evenings and, you know, connect with what's actually important to me and, you know, it's ... it's a very strange situation but it's also interesting to have that opportunity to kind of just slow down and reassess. And I think the whole world, like, I wish I could feel more hopeful that we as humanity will realise this is an amazing opportunity where we could course-correct and we could lessen inequality rather than exacerbate it, and we could, you know, move more towards a green future and there's so much amazing stuff we could do if this is a wake-up call.

TO: Yeah.

NB: Well, in terms of a contribution to all that I guess the more stories we can get out there imagining the better things that humans are capable of, the bigger foes that we're capable of grappling with and coming to understand and live with, that's something science fiction can do for all of us really – part of its remit, I suppose. And it's one of the truly valuable things. I know that these are wild times and particularly for people who do a lot of research into the real science of a lot of the challenges facing us, the world can look a little bit grim.

LL: I do feel like I have to say that there's a content warning: there is a pandemic in



Goldilocks, just so people—

TO: Yeah.

NB: Freeze for that one.

TO: I do sort of feel like this is the most science fiction thing that's ever happened to me so, yeah.

NB: Well, that's happened to you yet, Temi.

TO: Yeah!

NB: Who knows what's coming up next?

TO: Will you see me on Mars?

NB: But we know ... we know unless there's instant transmission of people you ain't going up in that spaceship.

TO: Unless in it, unless it has the same kind of luxury as a hotel they're not gonna see me on Mars.

NB: They'll put you on the *Avenue 5*.

Okay, well, everyone, this has been a really fantastic conversation. It's been such a privilege to be able to speak to both of you and, and to get, you know, a sense of your stories, both in terms of their imagination, their reality and our shared reality. And remember, these are the two fantastic books by our authors we've been talking to today that you can get your hands on now. Please do order them from your local independent bookshops, get them out from your library, read them and have an amazing time imagining stars and imagining a journey out there to see what we might take as humans and what we might find as humans out there in the



big wide yonder. Why not? What else you got going on?

So everyone, thank you so much for joining us as well. This has been a fabulous conversation and all the richer for knowing that we have an audience watching who really care about what we've been talking about.

I'd like to invite Laura and Temi just to say their last wrap ups and then we're gonna have Temi's reading to see us out.

LL: I just want to say this is wonderful. I'm ... I'm so glad that I was invited to do this and, though it's a shame we're not doing it in person, I'm yeah, I'm really grateful the BBC was able to run this amazing weekend. And I'm looking forward to seeing all the other panels and events that are going on too.

TO: Yeah, I'm also really grateful that I got to do this and that I got to still speak to Laura Lam about her really beautiful book. Yeah, and I hope that we all get to meet again at some point in the future. Definitely, this time being at home has just made me really grateful that I'm a writer and also just so grateful for all the ... all the art I have to keep me company and help me to contextualise all of of the things that are happening.

LL: Definitely. So thank you everyone at home for supporting the arts and artists, and yeah.

NB: Let's see it. Let's hear you, Temi. Let's hear you read us out.

TO: Okay.

Sometimes her father would call upon new believers to tell the story of how they came to faith, their testimony, and this was hers: Astrid had grown up knowing that there was a distant planet outside her own solar system, a green twin of Earth orbiting dual stars. The first date that a longing to go there she'd been in assembly. All the children in her year group had been ushered into the school hall to watch a video, part of a presentation delivered by a team from



the UK Space Agency. 'Another habitable planet,' announced one of them across the darkened room and the screen lit up with dazzling vistas of an alien land. Astrid saw an ocean, lush mountain ranges and terracotta canyons ridged like jewel box shells.

'They call it a new earth,' said the young astro-biologist with exaggerated air quotes, 'but our findings actually suggest that Terra-Two is many millions of years older than our own earth – truly, *we're* living on Terra-Two.'

Under the collar of her shirt Astrid's neck prickled with goosebumps. She sat up as if she'd been called by name and, in a way, she had. This, they told her, was the place for the intrepid. The first settlers would not arrive until they were middle-aged even if they left today. Their job would be to chart terrain, to explore the land, to name the secret schools of fish that swept through coral reefs and photograph night-blooming flowers.

'Someone in this room,' they'd said in a reverent whisper, 'may be the first to set foot in the crystalline caves that have formed underground. Astrid had imagined herself descending to find her own adult face reflected in the frosty mineral beams. 'This is a job for the brave,' they'd said. 'A job for dreamers.' The people who, like Astrid, woke every morning longing for another world.

'Imagine it,' the recruiter had said and Astrid had.

That week she bounced around with the hyper energy of a new convert. She would get into Dalton, she would specialise in astro-biology, she would be accepted into the beta and she would go to Terra-Two.

Astrid would remember the years after that assembly and before the launch as a single shining line of triumph. The shortest route between point A, the naming of her desire, and point B, leaving Earth, its sole zenith of realisation. Later, they would ask what she had been thinking when the hatch slammed shut. Had she been contemplating what a slow labour their mission was? How many minds and hands it had taken to get her to this point – to this two-minute launch window? Or was she counting every sacrifice, every year of her life she had given and was still to give?

As the Flight Director commenced the countdown she heard Professor Stenton's measured voice crackle through the headset, 'Take care of yourself,' she'd said. The things she'd said whenever she bid them goodbye from the driveway before a school trip. Or at the start of a holiday with the sun in her eyes.

They would ask Astrid if she'd been afraid and she would answer 'No' every time. And



if she ever looked back at the strange arc of her life and wondered if any moment had ever been as perfect as the dreaming of it she would say, 'That one, the shuttle launch'.

Astrid burst through the luminescent atmosphere and into the black firmament beyond. She'd been longing to leave her whole life and finally nothing was standing between her and the stars.

NB: Thank you so much, Temi, and thank you, Laura, as well. And just a final note for us to end our event on. The title of our event was 'ad astra' but the entirety of that quote is 'ad astra per aspera' – 'to the stars, to adversity'. So remember that everyone, see you through the tough times and thank you so much for joining us here at The Big Book Weekend.