



Sarah Hilary talking to Luke Jennings

SH: Hello. I'm Sarah Hilary author of the award-winning Marnie Rome series and I'm here with Luke Jennings, creator of the anarchic sensation that is Killing Eve. We were scheduled to have this chat at a brand-new festival in Lyme Regis, the brainchild of author Paddy Magrane whose book Red Desert is about to be published by Audible. Like so many other festivals Lyme Crime had to be shelved this year, but I'd encourage everybody to pencil in the last weekend of June 2021 because this new kid on the block is going to be a crime weekend to remember. Luke, your new book is out now, Die for Me. It was the New York Posts book of the week. Can you tell us a little bit about it please and read a passage?

LJ: Sure, it's the third book in the Killing Eve trilogy and the passage I'm going to read is from near the beginning. Eve and Villanelle are now on the run together in Russia and they stray into the gangland of St Petersburg.

So – erm what happens is that they get separated and Eve, without going into too much details, gets captured by the workers in the factory. Sorry, I would just like to retake that

SH: I can edit that – where do you want to take from

LJ: I'll just start from the beginning again

LJ: Die for Me is the third book in the Killing Eve trilogy. It sees Eve and Villanelle on the run together in Russia and the passage that I'm about to read, from near the beginning of the book, is where they've got separated and Eve is in the hands of a group from the ganglands of St Petersburg.

This is spoken from Eve's point of view:

There are five of them. The four men are young, thuggish, and sharply dressed. They stop dead when they enter, and glance at each other with disbelief. The woman ignores the smell and the milling employees, strides to the centre of the warehouse floor, and looks about her. In these surroundings, she's a vision. Black shearling jacket zipped to the throat, cool green eyes, lustrous chestnut hair cut in a chin length bob.

She beckons to the men. Two of them approach me, preceded by a dizzying gust of cologne. The first pulls me to my feet and subjects me to a disdainful body-search, the second empties my rucksack on the floor and separates the Glock and the ammunition clips from the crumpled sweaters and dirty socks and pants. The woman glances at the handgun. Placing her hands on her knees, she leans forward and stares at me thoughtfully. Then she slaps me, hard.

I almost fall out of the chair. It's not the stinging force of the blow, it's the assumption that I'm someone who can and should be hit that shocks me. I gape at

her, and she slaps me again. 'So what's your name, you rancid whore?' she asks. Russian insults can be colourful.

Something shifts in me, and I remember Villanelle's words. Her demand that I should be more like her. More like Oxana. She wouldn't be slumped in a chair, tearfully waiting for the worst. She'd be ignoring the fear, sucking up the pain, and planning her next move.

I've never hit anyone in my life. So when I propel myself from the chair and punch Dasha Kvariani smack on the tip of her pretty nose, I'm almost as surprised as she is. There's a biscuity crunch, blood jets from her nostrils, and she turns sharply away, clutching her face.

Everyone freezes, and the two men who searched me grab my arms. I'm so high on adrenalin I don't feel a thing. Even my ankle is anaesthetised. The Kvariani woman is swearing vengefully, in a voice thick with blood and mucus. I can't follow all of it, but I catch the words '*ogromnaya blyat' oshibka*', which means 'huge fucking mistake'. She issues a series of orders, and two of the warehouse employees slip away, one returning with a long coil of industrial twine, the other wheeling one of the tall, steel garment hangers.

The two men stand me in front of the hanger and bind my wrists behind my back with the twine, knotting it with practised fingers. My confidence wavers, and I'm not sure that my bad ankle is going to go on supporting me for much longer. As my knees start to shake, the two men lift me by the armpits and stand me on the horizontal bar at the hanger's base, a foot off the ground. Then I feel my wrists wrenched forcefully upwards, and suspended from the upper bar. I slump forwards, my arms vertical, pain knifing jaggedly through my neck and shoulders. I fight to retain my balance, knowing that if my feet slip off the bar both of my shoulders will be wrenched out of their sockets, but my knees are gluey and my sprained ankle is on fire.

The pain gets worse, and becomes inseparable from the sound of my gasping and sobbing. Dasha Kvariani steps in front of me, so that all I can see of her is her fur-lined ankle boots. Then a plastic bucket of water is placed beside one of the boots, her hands lift it, and a moment later I'm drenched, and gasping at the icy shock. I jerk and writhe so violently that the garment hanger tips towards the floor. I'm a split second from a smashed face when invisible hands catch the hanger and ease it back upright. There's no feeling in my arms and shoulders now. I have to fight to breathe, dragging the air into my constricted lungs. I'm so cold I can't think.

There's a gunshot, shockingly loud, followed by a dimming of the lights and a pattering of falling glass. Then there's a meaty crack and a thump.

'Dasha Kvariani. You're looking good, *suchka*.' It's Villanelle, her voice deadly calm. She's come back for me.

SH: Wonderful. Fantastically visceral as all your writing is. You really feel that you are in there with Eve don't you. And also, cheering when she punches and cheering



when Villanelle appears. It's that reaction from the audience, from the readers that you have talked about several times before.

But I would like, for a moment, to go right back to the beginning, Villanelle started life online, is that correct?

LJ: That's right, yes

SH: That's right. I have some experience of online readerships. And they can be incredibly passionate and incredibly protective of the characters that they love and there is no question that they took Villanelle to their hearts. How did it feel having such an avid and obsessive audience whilst you were creating the series? Did that help you or hinder you or did it fire you on to new heights?

LJ: Well it was encouraging because as you say I wanted to publish these stories online originally because I had gone the conventional publishing route a number of times, but I wanted these stories straight up there being read. I didn't want to have to wait, you know, a year, eighteen months for publication. And so that was immediate, and it was very gratifying to start getting a reaction from readers literally within weeks of finishing writing the book. So they have been very, very loyal and very, very faithful, the Villanelle faithful. They let me know what they like and what they don't like and I count myself very lucky to have this readership who are so attached to the characters.

SH: Yes fantastic. I think also there's that immediacy of the immediacy of the publishing, the immediacy of the connection to the readers and their reaction. It's very much how the series feels, the series feels electrifyingly modern and different. And I think this was in many ways the perfect opening salvo for the series, will have been that the online instance, you know, a new book series, a new heroine for this new era, this new era of publishing, where you can access writing, and audiences with that sort of immediacy.

LJ: Well, it did feel right to launch Villanelle and Eve online. I mean, at the same time, it can be, it can be a lonely business, you haven't got the support of the publishing company. You're dropping your book into an ocean of countless books. Any publicity you have to do yourself and actually that's effectively impossible. So it's a long shot always. Have you published online?

SH: I haven't done no, not published online. I mean, I've been part of various online writing communities, but not you know, nothing of the sort of, like, official level that you've achieved. But I think also, how much more gratifying must it be that that long shot paid off so spectacularly? You know, it's still resounding now. I mean, I you know, that that must be, you know, without that backup, without that great machine behind you, you know, the publicity, the editors, the publicists, all of that support that we've been trained really as writers to think of as being the scaffolding, as being the launch pad, you know, we can't, you can't do it without that. And you did and look



where you are. I mean, that's fantastic. You're a fantastic role model for that sort of publishing, for that adventurous spirit.

LJ: Well, one of the other factors that I was taking into consideration was the fact that these stories were quite short.

They were the kind of stories you could read in an hour on the train on the way home from work. And so, I think they, they had the appeal that they weren't a massive commitment. I wasn't asking the readers to get stuck into 450 pages of epic. These were quick, short, sharp stories. Episode length, TV episode length, deliberately written that length, because I thought that television really was the home for them. But I think that's it is exciting all the new possibilities for writers now, all the new destinations for their books.

SH: Absolutely. And I think, you know, just following your journey is a real experience I think for any aspiring writers out there both the screen and for the page. Now I'm aware obviously a lot of the focus certainly for the television series has tended to be around the character of Villanelle but I think I heard a rumour that your favourite character is Eve is that correct?

LJ: I, well, I love them both, I guess. I mean they're polar opposites in some ways. But I think Eve is easier to identify with. And the third book *Die for Me* is done from her perspective. I think we know where we are with Eve. She is always Eve; you always know where you are with her. She's a straight arrow. That's her strength but in Villanelle's world that's also a vulnerability. But Villanelle is always wearing one mask or another. She's predatory. She's manipulative. She knows exactly how to pull Eve's strings and so we never quite know where we are with Villanelle and neither does Eve. Eve is always trying to catch up with Villanelle.

SH: I think that's really interesting. I can see exactly how that pans out, reading the books, but at the same time, I find myself in my own mind then flipping it the other way and going well actually, Eve is the one who is most changed and affected by the relationship between the two of them. Whereas Villanelle you know, I can't ever see Villanelle settling down to a life of domesticity and deciding that actually, she's going to hang up all those guns and hairpins and settle you know for the stove, but whereas Eve I think is on this dangerous trajectory isn't she, once she's in that orbit when she's in Villanelle orbit, and it's pulling. My feeling was it is the way in which she is pulled away from her essential self by that attraction, by that sort of deadly cat mouse game they're playing that I found really fascinating to watch. How somebody who, as you say, seems to be such a straight arrow seems to be so knowable and so identifiable is actually also subject to these, you know, obsessive, dangerous, sort of excesses of behaviour, which don't come as any surprise from Villanelle because she lays her table out very firmly at the beginning of the book, doesn't she? You know, in some ways you could say, you know where you stand with Villanelle. It's probably cowering in a corner, fearing for your life, but I think, I know you've said that



you wanted audiences to be appalled by Villanelle at the same time as cheering her on. And you know, I think it is her, you know how different she is to those tropes of assassins or, you know, killers in fiction is very obvious from the first page. And so I'd like you to talk a little bit about that. But at the same time, if you put her next to real life assassins and killers, nothing that she's doing is actually that outrageous. Would you say that that's a fair comment?

LJ: Well, I think it is. I mean, you've got to pick and choose to find somebody as extreme as her. But when I was, when I was thinking about the character of Villanelle, I as reading about, there was a Spanish assassin for ETA. A woman called Idoia Lopez Riano.

She killed 23 people, and she was clearly a psychopath and completely, completely without empathy. And they caught her, and she did 23 years, she did one year for everyone she killed.

And one of the details about her, I mean, she was clearly an absolutely appalling person. But one of the details that I found out, reading a Spanish newspaper, a story written by one of her co-conspirators who had also been in prison describing a stakeout that he was on with Idoia they were staking out, I think, a policeman that they were going to assassinate. And at the key moment, Idoia who was supposed to be doing the killing didn't actually see him because she was so entranced with the window of a fashionable store, and her own reflection in it that she completely missed the moment. And so while clearly this is a real person, and I would absolutely not want to romanticise her. Villanelle is not, not a million miles from real people.

SH: That's the truly scary thing, I think, isn't it? Because when you're watching the TV series in particular, but also, when you're reading your books, there is this sense of such high drama, such you know, sort of, outlandish behaviour and colourful scenes and exotic locations and big clothes. And that you, you sort of you tend to think, Oh, well, I know where we are. We're in a sort of fantasy realm. We're not trying to be realistic, whereas in fact, some of the things that you touch on are very much closer to reality than I wonder, I wonder how many readers know about the killer that you've just described, for example. Or how many of them really do think that the book is, you know, just a wonderful fantasy story. Was it important to you that it did have some anchors in reality? Or is that not really relevant when you're when you're creating the world?

LJ: Well, I the odd thing is, is that I don't know if you found this. But what I found is you think up a character, and afterwards you find out that that, sort of, that kind of validation seem to come afterwards in some strange way. You find out that, that the character that you've dreamed up actually does have foundations in reality, does have predecessors. I mean, the thing about Villanelle is that she is a psychopath and psychopaths are performative.



They are not quite sure how to enact real life and so they perform scenes for themselves and for each other. So, so there is always this very theatrical, dramatic performative side to the to the murders that she does, but also the way that she lives. And the TV series makes this visually clear by the way that she dresses. And the way that she dresses is absolutely not to attract other people, to attract men or women. It's for her. It's, it's because she at that moment wants to be making a statement of indulging herself. And, I think partly it's why a lot of very young women are very attracted the character of Villanelle is that she has this power, she doesn't give a damn about anyone. She does exactly what she wants, she answers only to herself. She only knows how to answer to herself.

And so this, this gives her a curious untouchability and I think in a world in which a lot of young people lead difficult lives, this kind of invulnerability and recklessness and self-indulgence, this answering to no one, side of her is very appealing to them.

SH: Yes, I think you're absolutely right. I think no question about that. And I think also, I think, certainly, as not a young reader or viewer of it, as a sort of older reader, but appreciating very much everything that you've just said. I think also what comes out very clearly in the books and also in Jodie Comer's performance on screen is the fact that actually, although she is utterly in control of her own life, and is free, very powerful in that sense, free from all those moral norms by which the rest of us are required to live.

There's still that sense in which she, that key sense in which a psychopath is somebody who is missing something. Not somebody who has an extra something. And that's brought up brilliantly in that opening scene to the whole series on television where she is emulating the smile. She tries to copy the little girl with the ice cream. She tries to copy the smile, doesn't she? And then she can't she get a response. And then she sees the waiter smiling at the little girl and he's showing his teeth. And so, it's suddenly, Oh, that's what you need to do. You need to, you know, and so the best shows about psychopaths, I think, bring out that sense of performative exuberance and control. And yet at the same time, this searching for this connection. And I guess that's really why she ends up in this cat and mouse game at one level with Eve, isn't it because there's a connection there. And I think the most intelligent psychopaths know that they've got something missing. They know that they can't quite pull it off unless they are very good mimics and they are very good mimics. So, they're always mimicking human behaviour, but they know that they're not it doesn't come naturally to them because of the lack of empathy. And I think that's captured brilliantly in the way you write Villanelle, Oxana, and also on screen.

LJ: The thing common to all psychopaths is that there is underneath their behaviour. there is no Me. There is no, there is no identifiable self. And that's the great absence that they carry around with them. And I think what happens to Villanelle is that she understands that she's seen by Eve. Eve gives her a self that she doesn't feel that



she has. And so her attraction to Eve is partly is because Eve fills this this blank that she feels. And as the novels go on, yes, Eve very obviously has this journey where she has to access, if you like, her inner Villanelle but in order to survive emotionally Villanelle has to access something of Eve too so there's an exchange there.

SH: I think that's what's most fascinating in the books certainly is that pull and push between the two of them. And I think, I mean, my feeling is the way the TV series was named Killing Eve and everybody had, you know, had the cliffhanger at the end of first season on television. You have the cliffhanger at the end of the second season. Is she, you know, it has the title of the show finally come to fruition? But my sense was always that it was more to do with the way in which Eve's true self is subjugated, if you like, in this pursuit, in this obsession with Villanelle. And I always felt in the in the power balance between them, as I said before, I can see Eve going further towards Villanelle's side making more sacrifices in terms of her own character to meet Villanelle halfway, than I can see Villanelle managing, I guess that's the difference between a psychopath and, you know, a normal person in inverted commas.

LJ: And, well, I think a mile for Eve is an inch for Villanelle. But they're both immense journeys in a way.

It's funny, you should talk about the title because that came about because BBC America who first broadcast the series wanted Eve's name in the title. And there was myself and the producer, Sally Woodward Gentle and Phoebe Waller-Bridge and the three of us for a couple of days tried to think of a title involving Eve that didn't involve the obvious things about temptation, apples and all the rest of it. And I suddenly came up with Killing Eve, and none of us had the faintest idea what it meant. But it just, it just sounded like a name. And so, it really wasn't more calculated than that. It wasn't supposed to sort of shine a torch on the progression of her character or anything like that. It just, it just fitted, and it just seemed right. And, you know, like, like, like a lot of other things. In retrospect, it's kind of, it's more right than it seemed, perhaps at the time.

SH: It's a brilliant, brilliant story about how you arrived at the title. I love it.

I think that one the ways in which readers are flocking to your books and certainly it's been, it's always the most exciting part of one of your new books to me is the exotic locations. I just love that being transported to the different places a bit like the, you know, the best bit of the Bond movies is always when they, you know, go off to Monte Carlo or wherever it might be, or Italy.

But I think that especially during this time of lockdown, we were going to mention it sooner or later. So, I think I may as well mention it now. I just feel that that escapism that feeling of being in those amazing locations, feeling the sun on your shoulders, you know, the different colours, the different foods, the different textures and your writing is very visceral, so you get a real sense of being in those different locations.



So it seems, it's a bit like sort of escape with a psychopath you know, just you know, you're in your own house, but you can still go to those amazing places. But that then made me wonder how do you how you feel that Villanelle and Eve might fare during self isolation, I had a feeling that Villanelle might go slightly stir crazy, but I don't know?

LJ: I have thought about this, I think that what Villanelle would do is she would admire the virus. She would almost identify with the virus and its ability to adapt and survive, and its lethality and, and the horror of it. I think Eve would go completely stir crazy. And together, I think, they would tear each other apart. But it's interesting what you say about locations, because I do feel in a book, that it's nice if you can do that theatrical thing of imagining your readers in the dark, so to speak and like in a theatre, you open the curtains and there's blazing sunlight and or a dark and sinister place or whatever. I think you need to locate your action in interesting and, in places that the, the audience can see in, the readers can see in their mind. Place is I think terribly important for any fiction because I think we all almost see in a filmic and televisual way. So we need, we need location. We need all of the senses to be engaged when we read, I think, otherwise, it's a bit flat on the page.

SH: I think that's it, you know, you definitely pull that off fantastically. Let's talk a little bit about the theatrical nature of, of the series, because that's one of the first things that appealed to me about it. Some of the scenes in there are sort of pure opera, they're so full of colour and drama. And you start wide, in the same way, it reminded me a little bit, some of your writing of the beginning of Hitchcock's films, for example, where he will start with a wide angle on an apartment block, and then he will gradually bring you right through, down into the minutiae of whatever is through the window on the table by the hand of whichever character he's going to start the film with. And I think, you do both of those things very well. So you've got the grand gestures, you've got the big clothes, you've got the colour that's really in your face, a lot of the time, but you've also got those sort of very precise actions and moments, quiet moments as well between Villanelle and Eve which I think is very important too. As you said, sort of, completely anchoring the reader in the moment in the story. Did you always know that was the dramatic scale of what you were doing? I mean, it goes very wide, but you also go very deep. Was that deliberate from the outset? Or is it just the way the characters took you?

LJ: I think, I'm just aware that as novelists we have to compete with other voices, other media. I just wanted to create something that grabbed readers and pulled them in as deep as possible and was as entertaining as possible.

So there's no, there's no profound message if you like in these books, but it's just story. And I have a great respect for story and I'm very, very uncomfortable when it's poorly served in anything, in a film, in an opera, in a ballet, in a play, in a novel. Story is a science and it has to be it has to be respected. And exactly as you say, we learn as writers from film to, to take the wide shot and to cut in close and to know when to



cut out again and how to move between scenes and close ups and big set pieces. And the rhythms of that are something I think you just learn along the way as a writer. It's very, very hard to teach. I think a lot of it's instinct, I think, you just know what should come next and you begin to get a feel for it. One of the nice things about writing, this has been a trilogy now, the Killing Eve novels, is that that sense of the rhythm of a story gets established. And as the writer, you get comfortable with it, and you know where you're going. And it helps carry you along, rather than starting a new novel each time and having to rediscover and, and set a new, you know, a new pace.

SH: Yeah. And I think you've established such amazing characters that you know, wherever you were to place them down, even if you were to put them in some quite unexotic location, you know there's going to be fireworks because of the way in which you've established those characters. So, the dynamism is already there. So if Die for Me, is, as you've said, the final book in the trilogy. What's next?

LJ: Well, I've got a couple of projects that unfortunately, I can't really go into. Both involve fiction and adaptation for television. So, I'm working on those but both are at a comparatively early stage. And this lockdown has kind of rather frozen a lot of things in TV. So, let's see. I mean what I'm actually doing every day is what I've always done, which is going up and sitting in front of a laptop. Much as most of us do as writers. I'm not doing any more journalism. That's been something I've loved for the last couple of decades, but I feel I've kind of reached the end of that particular line. I do want to concentrate on fiction and those kinds of projects now,

SH: It's very exciting. whatever comes next, I'm sure it's going to be brilliant. And I do, you know, the idea that it's linked to TV adaptation is exciting as well, because I think, as you'd said, you write very filmicly. And you set out with the Villanelle series to do those episodic, sort of chapter tellings. And so it lends itself perfectly to TV. And I think also, your fans will be reassured to hear that you're going to be writing something that will end up on the screens again, as well. So you said, a little bit earlier, you said that there was no great message in what you were doing, in the Villanelle series, but it's has actually been quite seriously lauded for its feminist credentials, hasn't it? And so I wondered whether that was a surprise to you when it happened, or whether you feel that the conversation we had earlier about young people responding to the power of Villanelle's character made it, you know, it was inevitable that it would, it would end up with those sorts of credentials and accolades.

LJ: Well, I didn't even set out to have those kinds of resonances. But I think anybody writing fiction with a contemporary sensibility is hopefully going to write in that kind of way. I mean, one of the reasons that I think that I, one of the things that I set out to do was to make thrillers more enjoyable for myself. Because I mean, I love thrillers, I grew up with in Fleming and the Bond books, but I, you know, I had felt the whole thing has got a bit stale and a bit, these kind of macho cardboard heroes that had done the dash really. So it was time to look somewhere else. There is an association



of the thriller genre, particularly the kind of male spy, action, thriller genre with quite a kind of right-wing sensibility. And that, again, is pretty creaky. So I just thought it was time to do a thriller. I mean, I'm not the only person doing this, but to write a thriller without falling into all of the traps that thriller writing often tends to fall into.

Particularly, there's a certain kind of doorstep, thick, American, spy novel CIA, yada yada yada - you know what I mean? That's very techie, very, very gadgety, very unblinkingly macho. And I just think that is so boring, all of that sort of stuff. And that's not, we don't meet people like that in our lives. Life isn't like that. Life is made up of much more human things. And so it was just an attempt to really write a thriller that that had a feel of the times about it.

SH: Yeah, you definitely succeeded. I think also there's such an energy and a joy. There's a sort of glee to the, to the books and to the TV series, which I think is really exciting to watch and to participate in and to have that connection to. Rather than thinking I must sit in a constant frown at the screen and try and work out, you know, whether the hero is going to get to the bomb in time. You know, it's that sort of, there's something quite, as you said, quite onerous, quite dull about those commitments to those kinds of thrillers. Whereas I think here, it's can you keep pace with these two women. But I think also the use of humour in your books and subsequently in the TV series is again so refreshing. It's quite hard to think of another writer who is creating thrillers that have quite so much sort of humour in them. I mean the nearest example I can think of is Mick Herron. But his series is very different to your series, although I feel that the MI6, that the Slough house MI6, is a little bit similar to yours, you know, in the fact that you are contrasting the boring dreadful bureaucracy, the petty fogging tyranny of working in those awful, you know, offices for those dreadful people with the glamorous life that Villanelle is leading with the chance to dip your toes into those sorts of waters. I mean that makes it even more compelling because of course we if we'd been brought up even with James Bond or with something like a TV series Spooks, you know, we've come to associate MI6 with glamour. But in fact, your MI6 that you've created is you know, Eve's MI6 is, you know, not a place where anybody glamorous would want to be seen dead really. Although I did see somewhere the other day, the theory that Fiona Shaw's character Carolyn is the real psychopath in the series, which I thought was quite an interesting avenue to explore.

LJ: Well, it's funny, as you say MI6 and MI5 and TV things, they're always presented like a kind of advertising agency. All sleek greys and kind of fabulous office layout, but I think Eve would definitely recognise Mick Herron's Slough House with its awful leaking radiators and horrible furniture and deadbeat characters. Yeah, I mean, Mick's books are hilarious and I don't think people are prepared to put up with humourlessness anymore. Why would you? And there's so much that's funny about life. And I think, you know, those of us that definitely want to bring a bit of humour into these stories. It just, if you dispense with humour and I think, you know, the best



writers - I mean Ian Fleming is very funny at times and he's constantly undercutting himself and the glamour of the scenes. He doesn't spare us the full treatment. But there's an irony there, that is incredibly enjoyable. And once that's missing, and you just get these, this kind of cardboard machismo it's utterly unengaging, I think.

SH: Yes, I agree. Absolutely. And I think also what it removes as well as that sort of intimate connection that the readers have to the characters, I think you know, intimacy like that comes from warmth that comes from humour. And certainly in your books and the TV series that it comes from the sort of almost like nudge nudge, wink wink, you know, we're sharing in this incredible joke. We're sitting down for an hour where we're going to laugh at, you know, psychopaths killing people and we're going to admire their wonderful clothes and then we're going to, you know, really feel for Eve when she's got some terrible domestic issue. It's a perfect combination I feel in your books of the of the domestic and the extraordinary. And that domestic although the domestic bits in some ways, if you were to see them on their own might be seen as being quite banal or quite trite or quite dull, there are such an anchor to the glamour because the higher and more glamorous and wilder and more anarchic Villanelle becomes, the more you need Eve there you know, with the frustrations of her shopping bag collapsing in the middle of the street or, you know, then that I think is the genius of it. I think if you just had the glamorous Villanelle then it would be still quite an enthralling, you know, joyride. It would be exhilarating. But you wouldn't have that very human heart, the core to the series that I think certainly makes me come, you know, look forward to reading your next book and feel really connected to the characters.

LJ: Well I do think as a writer, it's important to establish a kind of complicity with your readers. So there's the action that they're reading about, but you as the writer, and them as the readers are sharing a kind of quite intimate private joke at the same time. So I think you have to, I think it's important to, to feel that you're all part of the same conspiracy. It's not very easy. It's a difficult thing to put into words, but I think you can, if you can bring your readers with you by going to them and saying and giving your characters problems and issues that they understand. So at the same time as Eve is burning toast and you know, filling the kitchen sink with burnt food, as you say, Villanelle is swirling around in Paris having a fabulous time. So you're, you're bringing people in through situations they're familiar with and then leading them to situations they're not. I mean, I didn't know, there may be some people who love the Killing Eve books who have fabulous apartments in Paris and don't work and spend the day shopping. But that's not how I imagine most of my readers.

SH: That would be funny, wouldn't it, to imagine that, for those readers the fantastical elements of Eve's life, because that, you know, they would never



encounter a sink full of, you know, burnt food because their chef would never allow that to happen.

LJ: Yes quite, cooking for themselves. How extraordinary. Yes.

SH: I've noticed that there's a certain kind of man who feels quite threatened by the series both on TV and in the books. I admit it - I dipped my toe into the dirty water of the Guardian comment thread and some of the stuff on there! Never do that, never do that, Luke never. Nothing makes you want to reach for Villanelle's private phone number quite as much as reading those lines.

But it was extraordinary to me the degree to which they did obviously feel incredibly threatened by the idea of this, you know, sort of powerful, sexy, dangerous woman and it affronted them. It affronted their sense of, I don't know what it was, masculinity or machismo, but you obviously upset them and that, to me was again a great accolade to you that you've been able to do that.

LJ: I think it's good to upset the right people. Yeah. I mean, it's not what I set out to do. But I'm astonished by that kind of reaction. The need to comment on and damn something that you feel no involvement with whatsoever. It's very, very strange. And as somebody who wrote, I wrote for the Observer for years. You know you read the comments below the line at your peril. And you know, I was writing about dance so, so a lot of them actually were very benevolent and informed. But some of those people are complete nutters and it's just very peculiar just a thing of our age.

SH: I think also, it's as you said, perhaps that you, you're spoiling their playground. That certain kind of man sees the thriller as being much as you described it earlier, that sort of machismo male territory and you've basically you know, you've upturned that, you've let this this crazy girl out to play, and she's destroying all the men with whom they might otherwise identify. Because let's face it she doesn't kill people that we would think, you know, what I loss to society. I mean she does kill those people. She doesn't kill the ones that we would wish were still around. So I think there's a certain kind of right wing political bias in a certain kind of thriller in America, particularly, that perhaps they just felt very threatened by this new kid on the block who is upturning all their play things and laughing at them because she does a lot of laughing does she - Villanelle

LJ: Yeah, yeah, I hope so. Yes. Yeah. I mean it does upset people and occasionally sometimes I have a look, again definitely a mistake, at Amazon reviews and there's a certain kind of male commenter who will say this is not a proper thriller and then will list what he thinks is the proper thriller and it's the stuff you know we're all very familiar. And there's a sense of affront that something as you said has been spoiled. Which is odd because there's room for every colour of fiction.

SH: Absolutely. I do think also it's it speaks perfectly for the anarchy that is at the heart of your series though. You know, you've basically kicked over all the tables haven't you when you were doing this? I think what you said earlier about wanting to



break away from those tropes that were so tired and dull. You've done it deliberately as well. So it's nice to have that have that payoff that you did upset the right people, the ones who you deserve to be a little bit....

LJ: That is gratifying. Definitely.

SH: So I wanted to talk a little bit about the inspirations. I know, obviously, we've discussed how you came to the series, but I'm also conscious that you recommended a series of books and some films as well, that had possibly been inspirations for Villanelle. And I wondered if you had any that were inspirations for Eve?

LJ: I don't know I think, no, not really. I mean, it's, it's a very complicated thing. I'm sure you'll know what I mean when I say that when you create a character - People say well, does Sandra Oh look like the Eve that you imagined? And that's really not the right question because when you're when you're creating a fictional character, you're not so much looking at them from outside as looking through their eyes at the world. And so, in a way, my vision of Eve was never something I could have drawn or photographed. It was it was never that exact. It was always a slightly shifting thing. Physically, I mean, I knew how she thought and felt, but what she looked like was, was always quite shadowy. I don't know if you find that with your characters? People think that someone is, as they always say, 'based on'. In other words, it's the sort of face and body of somebody that you've just attached to a character but it's not like that. Is it really?

SH: No, not at all. I mean, I remember when I was first writing the Marnie series the question I got most asked most often when I went and did book events and things was so who have you cast in the in the TV series in your mind? And I was appalled to learn that lots of writers have Pinterest boards where they've dream cast their novels. And often they do have actors and actresses in their mind when they're writing their characters. Now, I I'm glad to hear you say that, the way you've described creating Eve because it's exactly like that with me. I mean, my first draft of every book I write, I haven't even described the hair colour or the eye colour of the characters. And I'm always asked to put that in because readers like to know these things and also how roughly how tall, whether someone is tall or not, apparently is another. I suppose that's to do with anchoring the reader in the physical world that you've created as much as anything. But no, I see shadows for faces, it's a nice indulgence if you're bored, it's maybe a nice lockdown sort of pastime is to dream cast your books those of us who haven't you know already had them cast for us. But I've never gone about creating characters based off of other people. But I was really interested to hear about your inspirations for Villanelle. I thought that were some great suggestions there, including some books that I had never read before. And there was just one book that I thought I would mention, I don't know if you've ever heard of this book because it reminded me a little bit of what happens to Eve in the



in your book series. There's a little known American writer called Jenefer Shute, I think she only wrote about four books. She's a lecturer in Boston. And the best of her books, for my money, is a book called Sex Crimes which is about this sort of a 40 something very, very successful professional single woman who begins this disastrous affair with this younger man and it ends in absolute catastrophic horror . And it's, you know, the way which she becomes obsessed and then the way in which it unravels her life reminded me very much of what's happening with Eve in your series although albeit that Eve isn't, you know, at the pinnacle of her career and sort of slickly professional in the way that this character was. And that's why we love Eve because she's, you know, she's more like us, more recognisable. But I love the, you know, it's always really useful to hear what other writers, what their influences are. And I think one of the joys of this lockdown has been people recommending books and films and TV series. And so I wanted, I just thought, I'd end on a question to you about what you feel the impact of this crisis we're living through at the moment ultimately is going to be on the arts on a creative level and at a sort of audience level. If you thought about that at all?

LJ: Well, it does seem to me that, in a very heartening way, that people are, people are going to poetry and music and, and all of those things to, to discuss and to involve themselves in. So while it's incredibly hard for all the practitioners of those things, I think there's been a huge reinforcement of the value of the arts and the part that they play in all of our lives. They're not just an add on, they're not an adjunct. They're absolutely central to our lives, our relationships, the way that we get through the day and I see on social media a lot of people are getting together on zoom to listen to music, to discuss plays and poetry and things.

And this is, you know, this is not indulgence, this is response to a crisis in which people are dying. So, I think at the end of it all we will come out of it having to do a lot of rebuilding, but with the importance of the arts absolutely reasserted.

I mean that's my take on it. What do you think?

SH: That's, that would be my great hope. And I think you're absolutely right. I mean, even just at the most sort of banal end of the scale, I mean, who hasn't been bingeing Netflix or, you know, digging out their DVDs or watching the latest dramas or rewatching dramas. I mean, it's, you know, and that's been an important way in which people have been keeping sane at one end of the scale, isn't it and families have been coming together to, to watch things. But I think you're absolutely right. There's a sense in which, the arts are absolutely the custodians of our sanity and our understanding of what it means to be human and to be social and also what it means to be in good health in inverted commas. I mean, I'm thinking back to when the Italian lockdown suddenly became about singing on your balconies in the evenings or, you know, musicians playing for their neighbours on those balconies because that's what they needed in order to be able to cope with that situation and because it enriched and it reassured. So yes, I absolutely hope, and look at the agility with



which various parts of the arts have been able to respond to this crisis. So there's this whole virtual Literary Festival weekend this this Big Book weekend has come about because, you know, so many of those festivals have such rich material. And certain people didn't want to just let that be fallow ground at the moment whilst we're all frustrated and, and desperate for the kind of content that might help us to make sense of, of what's going on in the world at the moment. So I think the fact that we're talking like this now and doing this instead of, you know, as we planned to do in a couple of months time do it at seaside in Lyme Regis. I mean, it's there, there's a need for it, there's a want for it and an appetite. So let's hope very much that yes, that comes that's we hold on to that and keep that precious when this is over.

LJ: Yes, I mean, we're all very conscious of health, but we're not just body we are mind too and it's becoming very clear to all of us, that we have to look after ourselves and the people around us. But holistically we have to keep sane and this is a chance to, to read books that maybe we wouldn't have time to read or that involve a kind of intensity of involvement that we haven't got time for. We haven't got the mental space for otherwise. So, and as you say the arts themselves are responding we can see fabulous operas and ballets and plays on television and it is a reasserting of the importance of those things in our lives.

SH: Absolutely and I think there's going to be some really interesting books written about this one day, probably not for a long time, I think the good ones. But I think certainly the psychology of the way in which we've responded, you know, that the best of us, the worst of us, has really been exposed, hasn't it, laid bare in quite a compelling way which I certainly as a writer, I'm going to find fascinating to explore in books. Not books about the pandemics but books about you know human beings. But it's been fantastic talking to you, Luke, about the amazing Villanelle and Eve and all the very best for Die for Me and whatever exciting projects are coming up next.

LJ: Thank you so much Sarah It's been a great pleasure.