



The Coast is Queer - Juno Dawson, Patrick Ness and Katherine Webber

KATHERINE WEBBER: Hi everyone, thank you for joining us digitally for the Big Book Weekend, supported by BBC and Arts Council. This panel is brought to you by The Coast is Queer, and we'll be talking about YA and books and writing and finding your place in world. It is my great pleasure to introduce Juno Dawson and Patrick Ness. Hi Juno, hi Patrick.

JUNO DAWSON: Hi.

PATRICK NESS: I do have a last name. I know it just says 'N'.

JD: Patrick N [laughs]

KW: And Patrick Ness. There you go, there's the last name. And I'm Katherine Webber, a YA author, but mostly today I am a super-fan of both Juno and Patrick, and very excited to talk to them both about their newest books. A brief intro, in case you are new to them: Juno is journalist, screenwriter and best-selling writer of YA fiction and nonfiction, including *This Book is Gay*, *Clean*, and her brand new novel *Wonderland*. Patrick is a screenwriter and bestselling novelist. His works include *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, soon to be a major motion picture; *A Monster Calls*, which has been adapted for stage and screen; and his latest is *Burn*. Among other awards, Patrick has won the Carnegie medal twice, the Costa Children's Book Award, and the *Guardian* Fiction Prize. I absolutely love both of your newest works so so much. If you could maybe let everyone who's watching know when exactly they're coming out? Because they both aren't out yet. And then also a little bit about them. Juno, do you want to tell us a little bit about *Wonderland*?

JD: So this just here, which is not – this is such a cheat. I haven't even got a copy yet, so this is my old book, *Clean*, wrapped in the cover of *Wonderland*. I don't even have a proof, we're the last to get one. *Wonderland* is out on May 28th, and you can pre-order now, and if you pre-order through Waterstones it will come signed. There's the plug. It is a retelling of *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice is a 17-year-old trans girl who has the biggest crush in the world on a socialite called Bunny Liddell, and when Bunny Liddell goes missing, she



follows a trail of breadcrumbs that lead her to a three-day weekend festival called Wonderland, where she comes up against a fearsome young woman called Paisley Heart, who is after her head.

KW: Excellent. I thought it was so compelling, I thought it was hilarious, and smart and thoughtful. I loved it loved it loved it. It's Juno Dawson at her best, so well done. And then, Patrick, if you could tell us about *Burn*? I have the proof, not the finished copy. I'm very jealous. I want one of your beautiful finished copies. I will be buying them.

PN: I have no idea why mine is backwards, I don't know why it's gone...

JD: I'm reading it, *Burn*.

KW: It's not backwards to us.

PN: Really? 'Cause it's totally backwards to me, I mean, not in real life obviously. But okay. Very well then – that's very strange, I'm seeing it backwards – *Burn* is the first book I've ever written that can be described in one sentence, which is: 1950s but with dragons. 'Cause it's set in 1950s America but dragons have always been a part of the world, and have had an uneasy truce with mankind for hundreds of years. And as the book begins, a teenager called Sarah Dewhurst and her father have just hired a new dragon to work on the farm, which is kind of the lowest of the low, because you only would do that if you're really really poor. But the dragon, who is a Russian blue dragon called Kasimir, arrives with a possible prophecy and things go crazy from there. I don't know what to give too much more away. But there's assassins and the FBI and cults, just like my daily life basically.

KW: So just on the note of spoilers, I've tried to stay away from anything in my questions but if you feel like I'm about to ask you a too-spoilery question, just say STOP and I will immediately stop. Yes, Juno.

JD: Stop. I was just practising what I would do...

KW: And also, Patrick, when is *Burn* coming out again?

PN: May 7th.

KW: May 7th, so soon. Very exciting. Well I also think it...

PN: Three days ago, according to the day that this airs. It was three days ago.



JD: When this goes out, it will have come out, because this goes out on May the 10th.

PN: So three days ago it came out for you people.

KW: Three days ago, yes. So you can go out and buy it now if you haven't already bought it. And I do think...

JD: Don't go out, you're not allowed out, Katy...

KW: Okay right, yes. Don't go out, go out digitally. Order the books to your house and disinfect them when they come as well. Such strange times we're living in right now, I don't know. But I just wanted to say Patrick, I loved it so so much. I finished it and immediately started it again. It's extraordinary. It's so wonderful, so congratulations. Yeah, it's fantastic. Both of you, I feel like you're at the top of your game right now, so good luck with your next book. I wanted to start off by asking maybe the obvious: Juno, what drew you to an *Alice in Wonderland* retelling? Have you always loved Alice? And then also, Patrick, I want to know what drew you to dragons. So whoever wants to answer first, go ahead.

JD: Shall I go?

PN: You go.

JD: I was on tour in Australia two years ago when *Clean* came out, and there was a lot of downtime when I was in Melbourne and a friend of mine was living there and he said there's a really beautiful *Alice in Wonderland* display on at the Melbourne Arts Centre – I think it's called the Melbourne Centre for Creative Arts – and we went down and it was actually all about visual representations about this, from the original photographs of little real-life Alice Liddell to the illustrations in the CS Lewis book, and right the way through to the Disney film, that crazy 80s one with Fiona Fullerton and, you know, the Johnny Depp one. And it really struck me that Alice has looked every way Alice can look. She's been Hello Kitty, she's been in a Gwen Stefani video. But what I didn't see was a transgender Alice, and so I thought, 'well I wonder, if I take these iconic characters that we all know really well and a story that we vaguely know, it would allow me to kind of drill down into what it is I bring to the table'. You know, I've written a lot of books now, and it was kind of, what makes a Juno Dawson book a Juno Dawson book? And so I thought, if I take



those characters, I can find out. Because everyone knows who they're meant to be. And it turns out that I do loads of swearing, debauchery, very broken rich kids who have too much time and too much money on their hands. And yeah, kind of, that's what I wanted to do. And it started off as a bit of a writing exercise like, what would the Juno Dawson remix of *Alice in Wonderland* be like, and it ended up being my next novel.

KW: Well it's fantastic. And when you were a child, did you like *Alice in Wonderland*, or was that like... when did you first come to Alice?

JD: Katy, I'm transgender so of course I'm an Ariel from *Little Mermaid*. [crosstalk and laughter] She really really wants a vagina. Sells her soul to get one – so I was much more of a *Little Mermaid* kid. But the Disney version of *Alice in Wonderland* felt like it was on every Christmas, and she's an oddly underdeveloped character. She goes on a journey and she doesn't really grow or change from it, and so I wondered, there must be more to Alice than what we learn in the original text. So I set about trying to ask why she does the things she does as well. Because in the original she doesn't really have a horse in the race. She inserts herself into somebody else's problem.

KW: Yeah, that's really a good point. And then Patrick, I said I want to know what drew you to dragons – I have my dragon mug as well – but also just on the topic of *Alice in Wonderland*, were you an *Alice in Wonderland* fan growing up at all?

PN: No.

KW: [laughs] You never know.

PN: Well, really, I have actually seen that – I actually went to that exhibit in Melbourne as well.

JD: No!

PN: Yeah. There's not a lot to do in Melbourne – I'm sorry, sorry Melbournites. It is a beautiful place to live, there is lots of culture there, and there's a great run down by the river. But the Arts Centre is kind of what you do, and so I saw that exhibit and the Mad Hatter Dinner Table Experience and all that stuff. It was pretty cool – I'm very tall, I'm trying to crawl through the little doors. But no, I mean, I never read it and I never actually saw the Disney film, but it's one of those things that is culturally everywhere. So everybody – my last book was



about *Moby Dick*, and nobody's read *Moby Dick*, but everybody knows about *Moby Dick* and knows about the white whale and Captain Ahab and the wooden leg and so on. It's one of those sort of seminal texts that get underneath Western culture, we all refer to, we all know of. I love that that's what we do, I love that that's what storytellers do. There's a writer called Jonathan Lethem who talks about creativity coming from cultural stew – rather than just instantaneously generated in your head, it always comes from somewhere, and that in a way, we're always rewriting something. And so I love that. That's what literature does. It can take a story and make it fresh and make it new and make it show you in a different way and show yourself in a different way. I mean, I've done it with *Moby Dick* and *Mrs Dalloway* and so I think that's – I love that we can do that in fiction.

KW: It's very exciting and it's exciting when it's done well, which both of you have done in various works. But now back to dragons. I want to know why – you know, you've obviously covered a wide variety of things in your work. You've tackled mental health and you've done – you know I think you're an author who's impossible to pin down genre-wise, so I want to know: one, have you always loved dragons? Why dragons? And then also what drew you to the 1950s as the setting.

PN: I've always loved dragons. For me there's a movie from the early 80s called *Dragonslayer*, which still has I think the best cinematic dragon. I mean it's just stop motion but it looks amazing, it looks incredible and it's got, the heroic hero – 'heroic hero', that's a stupid phrase – but the hero, the sort of medieval great hero, is played by of all people Peter MacNicol from *Ally McBeal* and Ralph Richardson is in it, and I mean the dragon is amazing, absolutely amazing, and it obviously made a huge impact. And then there are a lot of really terrible dragon movies, like *Dragonheart* and then that one...

KW: I love *Dragonheart*!

PN: It's terrible!

KW: I know, but I love it!

PN: And then that one with Christian Bale with the...

JD: *Reign of Fire*.



PN: That one, yes. It's so dark you can't even see them. And I just, what I also thought about was – I thought that Smaug in *The Hobbit* movies just talked way too much. There's comes a point where you're just like 'shhhhhhh'. And so I just wanted to write about dragons, and I wanted to write about a dragon who talked the way a dragon might talk. I'm on book number 12, I feel like I've done my duty [laughs] – so I can just write something I really want to write. Not that the other books weren't, but you know what I mean. I just wanted to have some fun. And on the other hand, the 50s idea comes from the thing that nobody really talks about about *Back to the Future*, which is that *Back to the Future* is only a comedy if you're a straight white guy. If you're anybody else, being sent back to the 50s would be a nightmare. It would be a severe reduction in your current circumstances, and like, for example, I have eight nieces and nephews and six of them are multiracial. And when I was doing research for the book – so is Sarah the hero, heroine, of *Burn*. My home state, which is where it's set, which is the state of Washington, changed the law in the late 1800s to make interracial marriage legal, and so obviously interracial marriages existed before then, but the legal recognition came that early in my home state. So these couples, these families, existed, and you just don't see them. You don't see them on *Happy Days*, you don't see them in *Mad Men* really even – a little bit, but – then I worked with a woman who was actually born in a Japanese internment camp in World War II. And she would tell me these stories about how she was born in a camp in California because her family were forced to move there from Los Angeles, and when she went back to Los Angeles she would tell me these stories about living in Los Angeles in the 50s and going with her high school friends down to the movie studios and hanging around outside, mainly because they wanted to meet Elvis. And they did meet Elvis many many times and got his autograph and all that. And I thought, 'so here's a Japanese teenage girl who is living her life in the 1950s and I have never seen her on screen. Never.'

KW: Yeah.

PN: Certainly in America, and so it's just that idea really, really interested me, that all of these people existed. Of course they existed, and living lives, rich, you know, and difficult and the same dramas as everyone else plus the



additional dramas of being a minority in a rural place in the 1950s and so it came from that, that *Back to the Future* only works if you're Michael J Fox. If you're anyone else it's like 'oh shit'.

KW: That's a brilliant concept, and I love how you're like, 'I'm going to take that, and I'm going to throw some dragons in it, just you know, make it even more exciting'.

PN: It makes sense to me, so.

JD: And it makes it real as well. My favourite fantasy books are the ones which feel like you could go and live in that world, and dragons fit so seamlessly into your world, I believed it from page one.

KW: Yeah. That's super interesting Patrick, about how you did an alternate history but with dragons. And on the topic of alternate history, Juno, yours is obviously grounded very much in reality, in the London that we know. You've taken some liberty with clubs and areas, and also it is a London where *Alice in Wonderland* does not exist. No one's ever heard of it. The book is so self-aware in so many ways, except for that. Was that tricky to do, or did you enjoy putting in all the puns knowing your characters wouldn't get them?

JD: Yeah, that was the rule. And I always think when you're dealing with fantasy, as long as you create your own rules and then stick to them, you can do whatever you want. Of course, *Game of Thrones* fell foul of some really, really fast transportation system that hadn't been introduced in the first three seasons. By season 8 they travelled very quickly. And so the one rule with *Wonderland* was, they'd never heard of it. And there was a fine line when I was writing the book, because you didn't want it to become eye-rolling. Like, the character is not called Cat Cheshire or something like that. But it's more, they're the characters you know, but just presented in a roundabout way. And it's the same version of London that readers read about in *Clean and Meat Market*.

KW: That's what I was going to say as well – it's really nice to see characters referenced. But you know, I think you can read – just for anyone watching who hasn't read *Clean and Meat Market* – you should, but also you can read *Wonderland* without having read *Clean*. But you'll get a lot more out of it if you do.



JD: Yeah, I mean. I've always been a big Stephen King fan and I've always loved the way he hides little Easter Eggs in his stories and I mean, there's even – a very very keen reader might spot a link back to *Margot and Me* with this book as well. There is a character from *Margot and Me* hidden in the pages as well. So it's more about, you know, as an author you spend two years working on these books. And you spend a lot of time in this little fantasy world you've created. It's a bit like *Animal Crossing*, you spend a lot of time creating your universe.

KW: I can't play *Animal Crossing*. I've got to admit.

JD: This lockdown has gone so much faster with *Animal Crossing*. But I loved the characters in *Clean* and *Meat Market* and I wanted to just reference and see how they're getting in. I've never written a sequel, ever, so this was a chance to check in with Lexi and Clara Keys without having to do a whole second book about Lexi or both characters. But I think we're done now. I mean, I say that, but for now three is such a nice round number so *Clean*, *Meat Market* and *Wonderland* are very much set in the Juno-verse, if you like, but then next year we'll do something different.

KW: I don't know, I feel like you might keep adding – I wouldn't be surprised if you went back to this kind of world and the types of characters, how they reference each other, you do it so well. So I hope that there is more for that.

JD: Never say never.

KW: Exactly. Going back to *Burn* for a minute, and again, I'm going to be very careful not to say anything spoilery, and if I do just stop me, but there are kind of three key storylines in *Burn*. There is Sarah, as you were saying in your intro, and the dragon that arrives, and then there are some FBI agents who are on the lookout for serious dragon activity, and then a boy kind of on the run, for lack of a better way to describe him without being too spoilery. Patrick, I'd love to know from you, who came first? I'm guessing Sarah, but then when did you pull in Malcolm and the FBI agents as well?

PN: Well, first of all I'd like to say that Cat Cheshire is my Goth name. And I'd also like to say that I do the same thing about the Stephen King – I also love the idea that there's a Castle Rock, there are Castle Rock books and there are Derry books, and so, *The Rest Of Us Just Live Here* was set in Frome,



Washington, which I made up and which is named after *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton, which I've never read. I just like the name.

KW: But we've got Frome here! Sorry I got excited...

PN: So *Rest of Us Just Live Here* is set in Frome, *Release* is set in Frome and *Burn* is set in Frome. Different times, different...

JD: I didn't spot that.

PN: Yeah, well, I do little jokes for myself all the time. It's totally fine, none of those are spoilers. You can say, Malcolm is a member of the Believer Cult which worship dragons, and he has been sent on a mission. It's pretty clear from early on that his mission is to assassinate Sarah for prophetic reasons. But the prophecy gets messier and messier, so the FBI agents are on the trail of unusual dragon activity, but Malcolm is who they're really really after. So all those plotlines converge, and then they blow up, and then they converge again, and then they blow up again. Who came first? Um. The first thing that came was the image of me being – the book opens at midnight in 1957 at a gas station, a Chevron gas station.

KW: That's one of my favourite description lines, just a short one, but you say the 'sky's sloppy with stars', and I just loved that line so so much. It's just a wonderful evocative line.

PN: I probably subconsciously stole it from somewhere. Every time I think I do something great, I realise I saw it in *Buffy* once. [laughs]

JD: I hear that.

PN: Yeah, that felt like such a rich image for the book, of here's this completely normal setting. It's quite cinematic, you know: dark surroundings with one light on and a Chevron gas station, which is just such an American, typical thing. And they're waiting for a dragon to land. And it's all about – it's like Juno was saying, my belief is that all I have to do is create a universe where the story can take place and that's it. This story makes sense to these people, and that's the important thing, that they don't notice anything different. And so those kinds of details are the ones that really, for me, work like that. I don't know, it felt a strong image and I reacted to it. So that's where it started, and I also wanted somebody like Malcolm in the story and it just – I don't know. I don't know where this shit comes from Katy, I mean, does anybody? We all



sort of faff about and say this la-di-da-di-da, but I mean when you're putting it together on the page, it's just as mysterious as any old thing.

KW: I just loved Malcolm so much, I want a sequel about Malcolm, I want a prequel about Malcolm, I want his whole life story. I love all the characters, but he really – yeah, I was very very attached to him. On the topic of characters, going back to Juno a little bit, I know we were talking so much about the *Alice in Wonderland* inspiration, but I've got to know who you had the most fun writing that inspired – obviously Alice is the title character, but other than Alice – who was the most fun character inspired by the original work? Because it's so clever the way you do it. It's so wonderful.

JD: Thank you. I mean, I take – I don't want to say too much, spoilers – but I think when you have to somehow feature a caterpillar, a talking caterpillar, into the plot, I really like how I did that. Again, great fun. That was great.

KW: Great job.

JD: And I'm copyrighting that, by the way, if anybody out there is thinking of starting that. But Paisley, Paisley Heart. It was really fun because I knew she couldn't arrive too early, so Paisley rocks up almost exactly halfway through the book and very nearly steals it away from underneath Alice because of course everybody loves a villain. And I am a huge fan of Cersei Lannister, I always was, I was rooting for her (with her bad wig), and I thought, yeah, I wanted to do something, a sort of YA Cersei Lannister, just kind of like: she's mad and bad and kind of knows she's mad and bad and revels in it. And she's sort of made being awful the core of her identity. So then the fun was, well actually, is she that bad? Is there something human in the Queen of Hearts? And again there's got to be more than just barking on.

KW: That's going to be your next one. I want a whole Paisley book as well. These are my special requests, take note.

JD: It's sorely tempting. I adored Paisley. Every single scene with Paisley was my favourite thing to write about this book. I was almost counting dead on.

PN: I pictured her with a giant head like Helena Bonham Carter.

JD: Well, and also I'm still writing characters for Kaya Scodelario. One day I will have film version with Kaya, even though I think Kaya Scodelario is 30 now? And I'm just going to keep writing venomous brunettes with the hope that...



KW: – you can play it?

JD: Mmmm.

KW: It's interesting that you mention it because one of the questions I had were that the baddies in both – Patrick, there's a few baddies in yours but specifically I'm talking about Deputy Kelby – and Paisley our Queen of Hearts, they're both fairly unhinged and they both have quite a lot of power and a vendetta. And I would like to ask you both: do you think that power corrupts, or are evil people just way more ambitious and good at getting shit done, and so they get to the top? Which one?

PN: Well I think there are lots of lazy evil people. I think there are lots, really, we just never hear of them because they're lazy. I mean, to me it's the age-old question of, is evil something you are or something you do? And I always think that it's something you do. I think it's a choice. Because if it's not a choice, then we let ourselves off the hook. We say, 'Oh, well I'm not evil so therefore everything I do must be okay'. Well, no. I think you have to choose to be good and I think you have to choose to be evil. It's like, you know when we talk about people like Hitler and Pol Pot, I think calling them monsters is a mistake, because calling them monsters makes them something other than what we are. And I think they have to remain human doing monstrously monstrously evil things, or else we will never be on the lookout for another human who would do that, if you see what I mean. We need to be slightly complicit in that kind of evil, I believe evil is a choice. Kelby is – I say it in the book – he's what's harmed history the most, which is a stupid man with power.

KW: Sorry, I was trying to find that bit because it's really well done how you phrase it.

JD: Who could he possibly be based on, Patrick? I didn't see any parallels with...
[crosstalk]

PN: I was, it's just that someone who's convinced they're right – certainty to me is the most dangerous human thing, where you are certain you're correct, because there's no changing your mind. There's no mercy there. So, you know, he's dumb, but he's certain that what he believes is true. And he's weak so he takes all of his anger at his own weakness out on other people and people he



perceives as weaker than him. So his destiny is an odd one in the book. I won't give anything away.

KW: It's interesting what you say about the certainty, because I think a lot of the characters in the book kind of grapple with that certainty. So Malcolm at the start, as you said, he's come from a cult so he is very certain in his beliefs as well. And Kasimir the dragon is very certain in theirs as well, so that's an interesting way, as well, some of them take on other people's thoughts more than others.

PN: There are two movie that I wish I'd had the chance to write: one is *A Wrinkle in Time*, because I love *A Wrinkle in Time*, I love the book.

KW: Best book ever.

PN: All Americans say that. The British have barely heard of it. But the other was, there's the daughter, or granddaughter, of Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church, the horrible people who protest at funerals and 'God hates fags', those people. She was their social media person and she was just a full-on Westboro Baptist Church, full of hate on twitter. And then some guy just started talking to her normally on Twitter, one to one, not yelling, nothing. And she eventually left the church and she eventually lost her certainty and rejected the church. And that to me is so interesting. I would have loved to have written that movie, for one thing, but that to me is so interesting when your beliefs are questioned and you step out of who you are – which is kind of what being a teenager is. You are stepping out of this whole belief system that you've grown up with and are greeted for the first time with your own decisions and your own beliefs and they rock, they can completely shake your foundations. And Malcolm meets a boy. Malcolm meets Nelson. And I say, 'and thus the fate of billions was changed', and it is. Because he meets this one boy and falls in love, and imagine that. And that's so moving to me, and that's so what teenage life, to me, is about.

KW: I had my next thing. We were talking about villains, but actually I think both of these books, even though on the surface they don't sound like it – one's an alt-history with dragons, one's an *Alice in Wonderland* retelling – but to me they really, at the core are kind of love stories. Because Malcolm has, as you said, he falls in love, and Sarah has a love story as well, and I think Alice



has several dalliances, but also for me hers is a real journey to love herself. I know that sounds sort of cheesy, but really that's how it came across for me.

PN: Prince is here, Prince has arrived!

JD: Yeah, who cares, Prince is here! [laughter] There is a reason Alice has several love interests over the course of the book, and that's because, one it helped with the trippy, psychedelic, quite episodic nature of *Alice in Wonderland*. In the original she goes from one to the next to the next. So Alice kind of does that, but she's – she doesn't know herself, and she really is trying to figure out... you know, she's created this version of this girl. She's sort of self-knowingly quirky and she's developed these idiosyncrasies. She's bolted them on, a bit like armour, which is like 'don't talk to me, I'm the weird trans girl'. But she's figuring out who she is, which is of course the question that the caterpillar notably asks in the original, 'Who are you?' Is she a social justice warrior? She goes after Bunny with little regard for herself. What is it and who is it she wants to be? And by the end of this version of the book, those three days kind of fundamentally change who she is and the kind of adult she's going to be. You start to see in some ways at the end of it it feels like the last page of *Wonderland* is almost the beginning of Alice's story, and I can see her as going off being this Lesley Knope character who has recognised a huge inequality. Whereas, maybe, in *Burn Deputy* Kelby is about power, the kids in *Wonderland* are about privilege, lack of consequence.

KW: When did you know that you wanted to make it a little bit of a love story?

PN: Oh, gosh. You know, I kind of never set out that sort of plan. I just know that I've got characters and I want them in relationships and I just sort of see how they go, and for Malcolm to... Malcolm to me is the interesting one about the idea of evil as something you are or something you do. He's about to do a very evil action, but that's all he's been told that he's going to do. And he's been told it's a good thing, so is Malcolm essentially a bad person? I thought, no. Nobody's essentially anything because if we're essentially something then there's no chance of redemption for any of us. But I thought – I don't know, he just crosses in and he meets Nelson and they hit it off, and it just felt so sweet. And what would it be like in the 50s to meet another boy if you're a boy? And



Malcolm raised in this cult has an entirely different view of what societally acceptable than Nelson.

KW: He's very relaxed about it in a kind of – In just a nice way. He doesn't think that – you know, he's just excited to kind of explore something that he never has before.

PN: Yeah, so it just felt sweet. And there's, with 'sweet' the challenge is always... You know I'd written two books in a row, *Release* and *And The Ocean Was Our Sky*, which had very challenging, strict, stricter plot needs. One was over the course of the day; one was adhering to the plot of *Moby Dick*, and so I wanted my own plot. I just wanted to go back to writing a wild freewheeling story, because I really believe in plot. You get authors who say, 'oh plot isn't important, plotting. It's all about character, so plot isn't important' and to a person, authors who say that are authors who can't plot. [laughter] And I really really believe in plot and it working. There is one reveal halfway through the book, and that is my favourite reveal I've ever done, and that reveal would not happen if it weren't for plot. I might just leave it at that.

KW: Yeah there are several excellent reveals in the book, but I think I know the one you're talking about and it's a mindblowing one.

PN: So this book's plot is super important, particularly in the way the book is in two halves and they are not quite the halves you think they're going to be, and so it was so important to get that story knitted together and really functioning and really satisfying all the way through to the end. But once I do that, then it's kind of like the same if you're writing something experimental. The challenge is not the experimental thing, the challenge is can you do the experimental thing and still be sweet, and still be moving, and still be exciting? So getting the plot in place and getting it working is only part of the challenge, and the other challenge is where does the humanity come in? Where's the stuff you remember and hold to your heart, and the sweetness between Malcolm and Nelson kind of breaks your heart because Malcolm has this inevitable mission that you know is going to doom this relationship, and in any case go wild. So I don't know – it gives Malcolm a path to redemption surely, but it's also, I don't know, it's kind of the love we all want. We all want that feeling, we all know



what heartbreak feels like; we all know the nervousness of it. So it's where the humanity comes in.

KW: And it's not the only love story. I feel like Sarah has a bit of a love story as well, which is also so tender and beautifully done, and I really fell hard for Jason. I loved that – theirs is more of a – they've got more history, I guess, than Nelson and Malcolm. And the way that everyone is knitted together is just an absolute feat. It's interesting when you're talking about plot versus character. Personally, for me, the very best books do beautiful writing, have characters that you love and a plot that you are just so drawn to. And I'm always like, I need a book that does two out of three, cause very few do all three. You do consistently do all three. I'm very envious, and *Burn* is the perfect example of that, because, as you say, it's got that tight plot that you're able to do, and then it's got the humanity in the characters that you love, and then the writing. I know you've won a lot of awards, as you said at the start, but this one is your best one yet. You've got the Katy Webber stamp of approval, 'This Is The Best Patrick Ness Book'.

PN: It's really, really fun. It's really fun, this book.

KW: The joy comes through in it actually. In the reading the joy, you can tell you were really having fun, even though it's quite sad at times and really scary as well. But there's a real joy. You can tell that you've really had a lot of fun with it.

PN; That's the thing I always tell young writers who, you know, and I tell young writers, you know, the book you should write is the book you want to read yourself, because so many people don't. They write what they think the market wants, and they write – 'well there's still a lot of vampire books, I'd better write one of those. I'd better write this'.

KW; I want you to write a vampire book!

PN: Or they think, oh, you know, everybody's got these moral issues, I'd better do that, you know. But if you don't want to read it yourself, no one else is going to want to read it. They really aren't. If you want to read it yourself, no matter how weird it is, if you can't wait to get back to it, then your joy's going to be on the page. That's the secret sauce. The example I always use is *The Da Vinci Code*, which is a terrible book, terrible, but he's clearly having a whale of



a time, and that I think is what people responded to, the joy. There's joy in Harry Potter, there's joy in *Twilight* – another fairly terrible book, I think. I have a lot of issues with *Twilight*, but importantly it isn't for me. *Twilight* was not written for me. It was absolutely 100% not written for me, and that is okay, and if you are the person that *Twilight* was written for and you love it, then fantastic. I do not judge. But whatever you may think of *Twilight*, she's clearly having the best time.

KW: It's so true, I think you're right. I think the books that do do the best commercially are those ones that people you can tell they've loved the writing of them. I have a question – obviously I have a question, I have many, that is my literal job right now – but in addition to being a novelist, you also have been doing a lot of screenwriting. Do you think that screenwriting has made you a stronger novelist, you know, learning that craft and applying in that. Or in your head do you feel like they're still quite separate?

PN: I think being a novelist made me a better screenwriter. I mean, it's more that... novels are so different from screenplays. So different. They have to do such different things with such different tools. But in a way that they're also about finding the moment that does the thing, and you have to be a lot purer about that in screenwriting. So I don't know. I'm so worried about complacency. My books tend to be different from the one before because I don't want to repeat myself, ever.

KW: And different from what everyone else is doing, which is always extremely exciting, to see what you're doing.

PN: That's not on purpose. That makes it sound like I've got some genius plan, but it's mostly just, I need to do something different and I need to feel something unusual so I can be scared about it and possibly fail at it, and that way I know that I'll pay attention to it. I mean there are other dragon books coming out now. You've got one out, Eoin Colfer has one out, so it's not that different. It's just – I don't know – I just want to be challenged and I want to keep growing, and I want to get better at stuff, and I want to get better at screenwriting and I want to get better at novel writing, and you don't do that if you do the same things, so I'm just about to start doing this screen adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* for Warner Bros...



KW: Congratulations by the way, that's very exciting.

PN: Thank you very much. And it's also terrifying. It's a huge risk, and really putting myself out there in this high-profile thing. It's probably the most high profile thing I've ever been attached to and, yeah, the chances of failing are hopefully what'll make it good.

KW: Had a slight technical difficulty there prior to this whole new world. Juno dropped off, but now she's back. Yay!

JD: Hi!

KW: Glad you made it back! Patrick and I were just chatting about how he feels about screenwriting versus novel writing, and you have also written screenplays, and also have various projects in the works. So I'd love to know if writing screenplays makes you feel like a stronger novelist, or vice versa? And also any updates you can give us on your various film and TV projects.

JD: Not really, so that's very frustrating. I've just done my first greenlight, so something is definitely getting made, so that's exciting. So by the end of this year or next year there should be something to see, which will be great. I think, with the strengths, I don't know what Patrick just said, but I think they are very different disciplines. I love the sense of spending real time in a novel, and it's very much you out there by yourself just doing your own thing. You can do whatever you like, whereas TV really is a collaborative thing and everything I do – hopefully it still sounds like me and it's still authored – but there's going to be a lot of cooks standing around that broth, and everybody has an opinion, and if you've don't like working as part of a team, I don't know if TV writing, or working for TV, I don't know if it's the job for you. But I love doing both. I see them as being almost like different jobs. But I like them both equally. So very, very lucky to be working on three or four different projects at the moment. It's cool. I hope I can share more soon.

KW: Very exciting. I admire you both hugely and how you excel at so many different skill sets in writing. Do you know what, I want to go back a little bit, when you're talking about Alice's love story and how she – It's to find herself, but also something I loved in the book is how she explores her sexuality? So, she, I don't think it's a spoiler to say, as you say, she's got a huge crush on Bunny but she also is kind of coming to terms with – not coming to terms with,



but she also has boy crushes as well, and it was just really, for lack of a better word, really inclusive. Was that something that you wanted explore for her, to have her having a – being interested in boys and girls, and having separate anxieties about both?

JD: I think people are really waiting, and I think certainly when I was on the festival circuit, a lot of young readers were saying, 'When are you going to do a big trans main character?' I'd only ever done one trans character previously, in *Clean*. And I think people were really waiting for me to do that, but as soon as you start writing a character who comes from the same minority as you, people start thinking it's autobiographical.

PN: yes [laughs]

JD: So I also wanted to make Alice not like me. And I have only ever fancied boys. I wish I was more bisexual, more pansexual, life would be way more interesting. And so again I wanted to explore that in Alice, which is just this real sense of her trying to figure out who she is, and a big part of that is who she likes. I think she's drawn to Maxim, who's our Mad Hatter, she's drawn to him, she's drawn to Bunny.

KW: Very sexy.

JD: [crosstalk] Maxim is so sexy.

KW: Durham's very sexy

JD: Durham's goddamn sexy. He's there for me.

[laughter]

JD: And I had to spend a year writing. And so I also wanted to put her down with Kat and Bunny as well and present lots of options. I think I'm wary of taking a 17-year-old girl and basically marrying her off. You know, 'I've found my one true love and now we will be in love forever'. She's 17, so of course she's still weighing up her options. I think Bunny even says, 'I don't think you have to have it figured out yet, you're 17'. So that's the point I guess.

PN: I've really got to say too, that I think the thing that I try to do and that I think Juno does so well is that there's, particularly if you are, you know, a gay boy, was a gay boy like me, or a trans person like Juno, that it's – the importance of getting over the shame of your body is so important. And one of the ways to do that is in a sex scene in a book. That is not shameful. We are



taught explicitly and implicitly, our whole lives growing up, that what we do is shameful. And to show that it is not can be a revolutionary act on its own. And so just the exploration of a body that is curious and hot and funny is – I find it an antidote, when I was reading growing up. It said it didn't have to be furtive or shameful or some taboo. You know, or a fetish. The exploration of a body without shame is an extraordinary act, and I think it's something that authors like me and Juno I think need to do in particular, you know, because of the shame kids grow up with.

KW: And you both do it so well as well. Actually, Juno, when I was reading *Wonderland* some of Alice's sexy scenes reminded me, harkened me back to Patrick when I was reading *Release*. These really tender, really beautiful moments that I think are – a lot of readers who identify with that are really going to appreciate to see that way. But also, you know, for people who are cis-gendered or straight to be able to be like 'oh this is such a beautiful sex scene'... I don't know it was really – well done, across the board.

JD: Well, I must admit I don't read enough YA, but I've not read a sex scene with a trans character because I think the trans books I've read have been very much coming-out narratives. And so I don't think those characters have been too concerned with sex because they're very much kind of in the maelstrom of coming out and figuring out their gender identity. And I figured, you know, if I'm going to play hell about cis-gendered people writing trans characters poorly, then I need to put my money where my mouth is and actually do it. And I figured if I'm going to shy away from doing a transgender sex scene, then so is everybody else, so I really did feel like I had to.

KW: It's interesting because the book is so funny and it's satirical and it's got all of these wicked observations, but then it is so tender and thought-provoking, and something we haven't touched on is Alice has, um, it's a lot about her mental health as well. And I just love all the layers upon layers in the book, and how you just wove all those together in a really beautiful satisfying way.

JD: Well, I mean I have spoken a lot about my hashtag-battle-with-anxiety, and I think it was once, the other Patrick, Patrick Strudwick once said to me, 'You take your baggage with you'. And it's so true, you know. Transitioning didn't magically cure me of my anxiety problems, and I think had I been younger, had



I transitioned as a teenager, I think I would have fallen into the trap of thinking that the transition would be the magic bullet, that all the problems in my life were going to go away once I was a girl, and of course, Alice finds out the hard way that just because she's figured out her gender doesn't mean she's magically cured of all her mental health problems. So that was really important to me, to keep that in.

KW: Yeah, no. And it comes, like you say it's so nice, because the book is still so funny and got all these things in it, and it's got this wonderful – not serious, that's the wrong word – it's got a gravity in it that works really well. On a slightly different topic, you know, the elephant in the room, we're all currently in our houses because of the pandemic. I would be curious to know, how has this current time and everything we're all experiencing – how has it changed your writing in terms of what you're writing? Has it changed your writing schedule? I've seen lots of writers saying, 'I'm having a hard time focussing'. I'm curious to know how it's impacting your writing.

PN: Er, not much. I work at home all day every day anyway, and I have to keep to my schedule and writers always have trouble focusing. Writers always have ways, reasons to put things off. We always will complain about something. I don't want to discount anybody's bad quarantine experience, certainly not, but the only real noticeable change in my life has been a suffering of lack of incidental contact, which has been really accumulatively challenging. It's nice to see people. And also just the number of UberEats deliveries that I get. So those are the differences.

JD: I don't work at home. I have an office space down in Brighton, which obviously I've not been able to get to for about six weeks now. I will be honest, the first two or three weeks were just... nothing good was coming from the end of my fingers. And I did put a lot pressure on, and people were saying, 'Well you know, this isn't really going to affect you is it? Because you know you're freelance and you're a writer so you can write anywhere.' And so the first couple of weeks I sat down every day and just failed. I went back and recently read what I wrote in the first couple of weeks of lockdown, and it was gibberish. Now, again, people keep saying 'new normal'. This is not normal. I haven't had a croissant in about six weeks. Not normal. But I've been able to



write. That initial sense of 'the sky is falling', I think the first two weeks it really was, 'is this the end of my life as I know it?' And I couldn't do anything creative in that time. I wrote 'cause I felt I had to, but I certainly didn't write anything good.

KW: I did think, Patrick, your book is coming out - there are some slight apocalyptic themes in *Burn*, so it's coming out at an interesting time. I think...

PN: There's always an apocalypse happening somewhere. The important apocalypse is the ones in your personal life anyway, so.

KW: You have always said that. And I think now people are really looking for hope and I would say that both of your books offer a lot of hope, even though I've said there are some intense and sad and scary and emotional things in both of them, I think they are uplifting at the heart of them and inspire a lot of hope. So I would encourage anyone watching this to definitely read them. I think you will be able to – they're also so compelling and they're the kind of books that really distract you from what's going on around you, so definitely good quarantine reading and good anytime reading as well. I think we're about out of time, but there is going to be an opportunity for anyone watching to ask some text questions, and then we'll be able to answer after. This was fantastic, I loved talking to you both and so excited for the books to be out in the world and everyone to love them as much as I do.

JD: And people should read your books as well. Katy Webber is also phenomenal YA author, and *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* is a wonderful novel. I enjoyed it greatly.

PN: A wonderful novel with a perfect title.

KW: With a great title! Title by Patrick Ness: that is my claim to fame. Thank you guys so much, and thanks to everyone for watching. Bye!

JD: Thank you, bye!

PN: Bye guys.