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Claire Stanford

405: Change vs. Stasis: Character Development in Literary Fiction

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/405 because it's Episode 405. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

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Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Claire Stanford. Born and raised in Berkeley, Claire holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Minnesota and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at UCLA. There she studies science fiction/speculative fiction, as well as narrative theory and novel theory.

Claire's work has received fellowships and grants from the Jerome Foundation, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, the Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts, and the Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts & Sciences. Claire is also an avid watcher of BBC mysteries, and the author of her debut novel Happy for You, which we're going to be discussing today. Welcome, Claire. It's so great to have you here today.

Claire Stanford: Thanks so much. I'm so excited to be here.

GP: So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story, and I'm really curious to find out where the idea for Happy for You came from. So, can you tell us, what first inspired you to write this book?

CS: Mm-Hmm. I think this book really started in some ways during my MFA program at the University of Minnesota, I wrote a story for workshop that was called The Caller. And, it was about a scientist, totally different than my ultimate protagonist in the novel.

At the time, this word didn't exist, or I didn't know it, but 'wearable', she was developing this, kind of, collar necklace that would show the user's emotions based on the color. And, that was a self-contained speculative fiction story. But then a couple years later, after I got my MFA, I was trying to work on a new novel.

My first novel for my MFA was in a drawer. And, this idea that just kept sticking with me, I just really wanted to explore it further. And, I kept trying and trying to figure out how to make it a novel originally with the same scientist as the main character, but I was just getting kind of stuck.

Where it really kind of opened up the possibilities for the novel was coming upon my main character or my main character emerging Evelyn, who is a philosophy PhD student when the novel starts.

And, she decides to take a leave of absence from her philosophy program to join a tech company, the third largest internet company in the world that is developing an app that is measuring user happiness, and they're hiring outside consultants in all kinds of fields. So, she's on a team with other non-technology people who are, kind of, not quite the ethicist; the book is clear that they're not ethicists.

But that they're consulting on this program, and on how one would objectively quantify happiness. So, then coming upon Evelyn, Evelyn is a half-Japanese, half-Jewish woman in her early 30s, and that reflects my own background also.

And, I was just really interested in the idea of, how does a person who doesn't fit easily into some of the categories that US society, especially, is imposing on people, especially racial categories, but she also has some ambivalence about marriage.

So, some category defiance in terms of some of those roles as well, how would she interact with this company and this technology that is really trying to quantify and categorize this really uncategorizable emotion of happiness and of being?

GP: Okay. There's so much in there that we need to unpack. I'm so excited to dive in. So, as you were talking, one of the things that jumped out at me and that I can also personally relate to is the uncategorizable nature of Evelyn's character.

In a different way, I've had a similar experience growing up. My parents are Brazilian immigrants. So, while surface-wise, you know, to the eye, I may look white, I grew up speaking Portuguese, eating different food, listening to different music, traveling back and forth to South America.

I mean, there were lots of not very nice jokes that kids at school made about, you know, what my dad must be doing, working for a coffee company in South America; and being like, 'yeah, he just sells coffee. You know, kind of dealing with like, not quite fitting the American norms, but also like not being completely an outlier to the point where like, it's hard to complain when you can, sort of, fit in.

So, I'm curious like how that aspect--I mean, with Evelyn, it's, you know, she's half-Jewish, half-Japanese, so clearly there's going to be some element that will be visible in terms of her racial makeup, but then there's also the Jewish side of her family that maybe people might not notice.

At one point, there's even a character who picks up on that, and they sort of bond over it. So, can you talk a little bit about how she navigates that in-between world, and how that affects her journey in the story?

CS: Mm-Hmm. I mean, I was thinking of her as someone who, her experience every day is inflected by the fact that she is biracial, but it's not something that controls every experience she's in. It kind of depends on what the interaction is and who she's interacting with.

So, throughout the novel, the novel is a little bit more focused, I think, on what we would call 'microaggressions', and the way that Evelyn is dealing with these microaggressions and confronts these microaggressions, and whether she just has to kind of let them happen to her. Well, she sometimes does, because sometimes it's easier for her to just let it slide, or whether she confronts them.

But what I was, you know, particularly interested in then is the conflict between this company is representing that, in my opinion, tech is, or I should say social media, maybe more specifically, is

really encouraging a certain normative understanding of what a person should be like through this idea of, we post and then we get Likes.

And, certain kinds of posts tend to get more Likes, and they tend to be posts that are in this kind of more normative vein. I mean, there definitely are exceptions to this, and I love seeing people who are using social media in kind of defiant or different ways.

But overall, one of the questions of the novel is, what does it mean to have this massive industry of social media kind of changing our behaviors and changing our sense of identity when it's run primarily by white heterosexual men of a certain age too, in certain socioeconomic brackets? So, what does it mean then to have someone who doesn't fit into those parameters?

And, it is also really inspired, kind of, going back to my experience and how you're talking about your experience-- You know, something that's really in my mind and happens to Evelyn in a different way in the book is having to fill out these surveys, where you have to say what-- You have to do these like a dropdown menu or a checklist of what your ethnicity is, or what your race is.

GP: Thank you.

CS: And, when I growing up-- Yeah, when I was a kid growing up, I never knew what to do and the options that-- Increasingly, there are more options. So, the options didn't exist when I was a kid.

So, it was just Asian or Pacific Islander, White, or Other, and I would have to choose, am I going to choose one half of my identity? Or am I going to say 'Other', which is such a problematic word to have to also self-select as other.

So, Evelyn confronts this through a beta test of this happiness app where the app is not really designed to understand different kinds of race or different gender, different marriage or romantic or sexual partnerships.

It has very limited possibilities for that. And so, there is a scene where she's going through and experiencing that much like I experienced that as a child, although she's an adult, of course, when she's experiencing it.

GP: You know, I distinctly remember my college application, checking "Other", and writing "Undecided", because I was like, what kind a question is this, like seriously?

But you know, it brings up a really interesting point, where we have these tech-driven things like surveys or applications or whatever, job boards, anything that we are filling out biographical information, but the biases of the people who are creating those things are automatically going to affect how you can fill it out.

My personal experience was that, so I have a two-word first name that is longer than, you know, has multiple, like three syllables in the first word and four syllables in the second. So, it's not like Mary Jo or Susie Beth or something like that. You know, it's a long first name where they space in the middle.

Apparently, computer forms in the United States, until like the last 10 years, could not fathom that idea. So, there was a period of time where my name did not match on different documents because my passport could fit one thing and my driver's license fit something else.

And like, I mean, imagine like nowadays with security and trying to travel, like not having your documents match each other, that's a serious problem. And, it took some doing to get things kind of centralized and deciding like, 'okay, I'm going to have to give up part of my name.' And, like you said, it's like, you're giving up part of your identity. Like that just stinks.

CS: Mm-Hmm.

GP: So, yeah, I'm fascinated by that aspect with this character. So, let's dig a little deeper to the happiness piece because while she's living in this in-between zone, she's also trying to define, you know, you refer to it as like an undefinable thing, like happiness. How do we quantify that? So, can you talk about the push-pull that she experiences as a character, as she's trying to pin down what happiness really means?

CS: Mm-Hmm. I mean, I was really interested in pursuing this question of, what is happiness? I started writing this book in 2015 when, I think, a lot of stuff was starting to bubble up about happiness books, happiness blogs; happiness apps didn't exist yet, but they're starting to exist now. And, it really interested me.

And so, in, kind of, a writing sense, what I realized after, you know, I wish that I realized this earlier, but I realized after however many years of writing that I could just write the book about the thing I wanted to write about. It didn't have to only be like metaphoric in the book.

And so, what I decided to do was have her be put into a situation where she was straightforwardly researching happiness, and straightforwardly in a then slightly speculative, still slightly speculative, but becoming more realistic situation where a company is also really interested in happiness, although they're trying to quantify it, objectively define it, and then capitalize on it.

Whereas she has this much more nuanced and complex understanding of it that I think comes from her background, from her personality, and also from being a philosopher or philosopher in training who is, of course, interested in seeing the complexity. So, that's where one of the primary conflicts of the book comes up.

And also, in terms of her character, her character growth is in terms of her trying to figure out this question of happiness and come to some kind of individual and personal understanding of happiness by the end; instead of feeling that she needs to conform to either what US society deems happiness, capitalism to deems happiness, or this company deems happiness.

GP: So, let's dig into that because, you know, as you mentioned, like the company's motives are different from her motives. Like, she's much more, sort of, a pure, like I want to understand intellectual pursuit kind of motive.

Whereas, you know, whenever a tech company wants to understand anything, we all know what they're really trying to do; they're trying to turn that idea into dollar signs. So, there is some sort of element where like, she's not a dumb-dumb; she knows that that's what the company wants to do.

So, can you talk a little bit about that? Because I get the sense at the beginning, and full disclosure, I haven't quite finished the book yet, so no spoilers about the end, but we get the sense pretty early on, that she's trying very hard to justify why she's doing this research for this company as opposed to staying in academia and doing that research purely for her own purposes.

CS: I mean, I think at the beginning of the novel, what Evelyn wants or what she thinks she wants is a normal, "normal life". And by that, I mean she feels behind. So, she's 31 when the novel starts, she is living with her boyfriend, but she doesn't have a job. I mean, she's a graduate student, so she doesn't have a full-time job that's secure. She doesn't have a house, she's not married, she doesn't have children.

And while 31, you know, in my world is still a little young to be worrying about a lot of those things, she is starting to worry about those things and starting to see her peers move on to do those things and starting to feel that pressure especially as a woman. So, what she thinks she wants is to enter this kind of normative life, and she sees leaving the PhD for this leave of absence.

I mean, I'm also, as you said, a PhD candidate; and it's, in some ways, reflective of some of the lack of jobs and stuff like that in academia and the pressures of being a grad student. But also, she's just worried about, where is this going in academia, but she leaves academia for tech with a much higher salary. She's on this six-month probation period. So, it's not necessarily secure, but it could lead to security.

And, she sees this as possibly this doorway into this more "normal life" that she thinks she wants to achieve. So, I then I think she has to embark on this path of justifying it to herself, which is also complicated by the fact that her co-workers are much like her, her immediate team, and her immediate boss is a, or is intended to be kind of a nebulous figure of, has some really good motives and is a benevolent figure and is not necessarily--

I really wanted her boss to not be just this tech caricature of someone who completely is just looking at optimization and bottom line. So, her boss does have a backstory that we learn later in the novel that really humanizes her boss and humanizes the project, to some extent, I hope; and is looking at showing how the boss really thinks that this project is going to benefit people and benefit humanity, and be a real mental health tool that even saves lives.

And, the boss truly believes that, which is also reflective, I think, of some people in tech who truly believe in the mission, and then there's the other people who have a more cynical capitalist view. And, this is all part of the technology industry right now.

GP: Yeah. And interestingly enough, too, oftentimes it starts in that more benevolent place. You know, I'm thinking, for instance, the TV show, the HBO show Silicon Valley that, I guess, ended a couple years back now.

But it started in a reasonably good place, where they wanted to build something cool and give access to everybody and that sort of thing, but it becomes much more sinister so quickly the minute, it, kind of-- I don't know, there's something about Silicon Valley, in general, that just, I don't know, it just, kind of, engulfs the ideas in darkness I think, or something.

CS: Well, I think this is something that Evelyn is really grappling with is the idea of the algorithm, which we're all grappling with these days, become more aware of the algorithm. You know, Evelyn, in particular, as a biracial character, doesn't feel that the algorithm understands her at all, but I think everyone, in their own individuality, isn't really understood by the algorithm.

So, I think that's kind of a universal idea that is just being presented through this specific character of Evelyn. And so, things become even the best ideas, the most benevolent ideas I think can become pretty sinister when they're having to be forced into an algorithm, and, kind of, take our individuality out and putting it into this more algorithmic sense of, I don't know, self.

GP: Mm-Hmm. Yeah. It's interesting also, like, as you were talking about the project and trying to like quantify happiness in some way, it reminded me of the very first day of Psychology 101; we learned about operational definitions. Like, how do you define how you're going to measure something that's not measurable like hunger or depression or sadness or happiness, happiness?

And, you know, scientists are constantly, like in the psychology realm, it's often one or two degrees of separation away from the actual emotion that you're trying to measure. Because if you ask someone, do you feel happy? Are they being truthful? Are they not? Are they trying to be truthful, but lying to themselves?

And you know, as you talked about the algorithm too, that raises the question, 'well, if we're all aware that we're basically all encompassed by an algorithm, does that really help things?' Like, being aware of the algorithm, does that just allow us to engage within the algorithm more? I don't know.

There are all these questions that come up that when you try to take something that's fuzzy like happiness, and pinpoint like a number or an algorithm, a formula, and attach that to this fuzzy feeling.

CS: Mm-Hmm. I mean, one of the main pushbacks she gets is from her father who was born in Japan, came to the United States very young. And, he is saying, "Happiness is such an American concept. I don't understand why there's this obsession with happiness."

And then, this also leads to a conversation between the two of them about whether he is American or not, and how he views that and how Evelyn views that. But it's bringing in this idea also of, there's vast differences in culture and how we consider happiness; what it is, how important it is, how people self-report.

So, it is also a response to the fact that it seems like to me, that in the United States, there's this intense focus on happiness right now with all of these products bubbling up about how to achieve happiness. And, I was wondering why that was, and how to explore that through fiction.

GP: You know, it's interesting too, you mentioned like this is something that's certainly becomes salient recently. But we go back to like the beginnings of this country, like the pursuit of happiness, it is baked right into one of our founding documents. And, if you look back on it, it's sort of a weird thing to include, you know what I mean?

Like if you think about like, you're starting a new country, you're creating a country from scratch and you decide, 'okay, we're going to stand for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' like, it doesn't seem to really belong in the same category. It seems kind of almost a little lofty like, we're all supposed to be happy now? Like, how's that going to work?

CS: Totally. I think that also is the question, you know, of American individuality, which is something else, I think that Evelyn is grappling with in some sense in that. The book is grappling with, happiness is this really individual thing. And yet, the tech companies are making it, flattening it into this uniform non-individual thing.

And, she does also have times of pushback when she is talking about, in her reports to the company, what she sees is the possible problems that, you know, it becomes clear that the company has kind of hired her to just do their due diligence, but it's not necessarily going to be using a lot of her research in creating the actual app.

GP: Yeah. I think it also, as you were talking about the individuality aspect, I mean, there's definitely a lot of cultural differences with that too. I mean, I know Brazilian culture is a much more community-centered and family-centered culture.

And, I know that like that often stands in the face of American individuality, like growing up, you know, spending time with your family was very important part of my growing up existence. So, like, you know, how do you reconcile that with being on sports teams and doing all these individual things and having your own life?

You know, it's very much a cultural thing. And, when American culture is now saying, "To be happiness, you have to check these boxes," but your culture is saying, "But that's not what we think is happiness." That can be a problem.

CS: I think when your culture, or just even also when you individually, the book starts with one of her several conflicts internally, is that she's been with this boyfriend who she loves for an amount of time that in the US, we consider it's time to start thinking about marriage.

It's time to get engaged, but she, for whatever reason, they're multiple, it's a little bit of a mystery to her as well, but isn't quite ready for marriage. And, what does that mean? That she's not ready to check that box, is I think one of the questions that's kind of plaguing her also throughout the novel.

GP: Yeah. And you know, it also made me think when you were talking about social media and what we think should make us happy, right? Like being married and, sort of, what we present, like the photos of like the wedding or the anniversary, or like the new babies.

And, I mean, I remember phases of my life where all of my friends were getting married, and then they were all having babies. And now, like, all their kids are in like elementary and middle school. Pretty soon, it's going to be like all the kids are going to college. So, if you're deviating from that, all of a sudden, you feel like you stick out.

I know with my husband and I, we have two kids now, but we were very late to the 'having kids' thing compared to when we got married; we got married really young and we waited almost 10 years to have kids. And, there were a lot of people who just did not understand how that could be. And, we had our reasons and we stuck to what we wanted, but it can be kind of tricky. It can make you feel like you're a fish out of water when you're not conforming to that.

CS: Yeah. So, Evelyn definitely feels like a fish out of water in so many ways. One of which is this question of marriage, kids, what she's going to do in terms of her career. And, I think one of the arcs of the book is her tuning into, figuring out what she really wants, instead of what she's told that she should want or what she thinks that she should want.

And so, some of these things, it turns out, she believes that she does want at the end of the book and some of them, she isn't as sure about by the end of the book. So, I'm also trying to explore some of these questions of 'yeah, what does it look like to deviate from that set-out course of life? I mean, I hope that it liberates readers to feel more open to different paths in life.

And, through Evelyn, this is another point of Evelyn being able to just look at the thing that she wants to look at instead of having to all be shrouded in a metaphor; is that she uses philosophy, and she thinks about philosophy and what she's read in philosophy to help her decipher some of these decisions. So, she's thinking about philosophers, and what they say about personal freedom and individuality.

Those scenes are always meant, or those paragraphs are always meant to inform her emotional state in those moments. So, there aren't long swaths of philosophy, but it comes in because she naturally, as a philosopher would sometimes be thinking about it. And, it helps, I think, to give a larger context to some of these questions.

GP: It kind of reminds me of in that show, The Good Place, one of the characters, I think, Chidi, right?

CS: Yeah.

GP: Like he was the philosopher and he's using his knowledge of philosophy to try to teach the other characters, how to be better humans and the nature of, I guess, good versus evil and all those big philosophical questions.

So, yeah, there's kind of a delicious meta irony in the story, sort of, woven throughout because she is like staring at the thing right directly at it and not through a metaphor. But then there are times where you're like, 'dude, you should know this, you're a philosopher.' And so, like, it's kind of delicious how she's kind of navigating those shades of gray throughout the story.

CS: Yeah. Although, I mean, philosophy is pretty confused about what happiness is and also what emotions are.

[laughter]

CS: So, she has the grounding in terms of how to approach things, but there really just has no answer.

GP: Yeah. And that, of course, is like the biggest irony of it all. And again, came up in The Good Place, where like of all the characters, the one who has the hardest time making decisions is the philosopher, because he just sits and keeps asking questions instead of coming up with answers. And so, yeah, it's kind of funny how that works.

So, you touched on this earlier, but I want to dig into it a little bit more, the idea of the somewhat speculative near-future nature of this story. When you started writing it, you mentioned it was a bit more speculative, we've now, you know, with current events, have aligned a little bit more with where tech is now than where it was a few years back, but it doesn't read like speculative fiction.

It doesn't feel Sci-Fi. And, I'll admit, when I read the first couple of pages, I was like, 'oh, it's the third, most popular internet company. This is going to be like, one of those bouncy, let's make fun of temp company, kind of books.' And, it's a lot more, sort of, thoughtful and introspective and sort of heartfelt than that.

Like, I was sort of expecting Silicon Valley in book-form to some degree, and it reads much more like literary fiction. So, can you talk a little bit about that and sort of the voice of the book, how it comes through, and then also like how you would categorize it? Like, where would you put it on the shelf?

CS: I mean, I definitely consider it to be literary fiction. My kind of inspirations for it as I was writing were much more in the literary fiction world and much more in the world of books where the arc is an interior arc. So, I'm thinking of books like Teju Cole's Open City, Ben Lerner's Leaving the Atocha Station, Rachel Cusk's Outline.

So, these are books that pretty clearly don't have as much plot, I think, but I really learned from them in terms of how to make an interiority, the movement of the book. So, that was really what I was more interested in.

And then, I felt that I wanted to ground it in still a plot and in something contemporary, which for me in my interest was this technological narrative. So, when I started in 2015, the world was still pretty tech-optimist. You know, it was before a lot of the scandals in tech.

It was before a lot of the privacy scandals in tech, the political ramifications of tech. So, it was started as a more kind of contrarian book in that sense. And, in the time I've been writing the book, and in the time since selling the book, I think the world's orientation toward tech has really changed, but I think there are still--

You know, the app is still a little speculative in that the AI of the app is at a place where the AI, of at least what's publicly available in these kinds of emotion apps, isn't there. So, it was something where I was revising throughout writing the book to keep the book slightly ahead of where things are in our current world.

Also, there's a scene where they run into some ads that are on a bus station side, you know, the map of the bus station, and the ads shift depending on whose phone is nearby, which I'm sure is coming very soon, might already exist in some places, but isn't widespread.

At the time that I wrote that in 2015, 2016, it seemed really like futuristic to me, but obviously the tech-- The tech catches up faster than I could have ever imagined that the tech is going to catch up. I also was doing a lot to just try to keep things a little bit one step ahead, in terms of the biometrics and things like that, that the app is using.

So, the app is using a lot of stuff like heartbeat, eye, the pupil dilation, blood sugar, things like that to help measure happiness. Although there are these wearables now that are getting very close to that, but you know, I tested out a wearable recently just to see how close it was, and the app is still a little bit ahead of that.

So, it wasn't intended to read as straight speculative fiction right into that world. But you know, I more wanted it to be something that's literary fiction with a trace of the absurd; and the speculative nature brings out that absurdity and that surrealism of our real world, our real relationship with tech.

GP: Yeah. And, I think in a way too, having it-- It has like sort of a dreamy voice at times, which in a way I think makes the whole, like there's a company out there trying to measure our happiness concept, feel a little less terrifying. You mentioned like, we were in a much more tech-optimist place.

It's not optimistic so much, but like there's sort of a softness to the voice that doesn't quite, I think, makes the slightly or very sinister aspects of the tech, and where the tech could go in this story feel less terrifying because the voice, kind of, placates that in a way.

I don't know if I'm being completely clear, but like that was sort of the feeling I've been getting as I've been reading. It is like, it kind of pulls us in and like hugs us while telling us scary things about tech.

CS: Well, I think, you know, my goal was never to create, kind of, a thriller about tech. So, the book is just so focused on Evelyn's individual interiority. And, I think maybe what you're saying is that the book, the book is really interested in how can an individual--

GP: Yes.

CS: Work and deal within these systems of the world. I think the ending is ambiguous, but I did want there to be possibilities of liberation of individuality, and to show that we're not at a place yet where individuals can't still retain their individuality and can't still be free of some of these systems, but that it takes a more concerted effort given some of the pressures that we face right now.

GP: Yes. I think what you mentioned earlier too, about the interior arc being really the driving force, I think that's really what gives it that literary feel that it isn't a tech thriller with like, you know, explosions and like we're downloading something as the clock ticks down and any of that stuff.

But it's very much Evelyn's story and her arc that drives the narrative, which is interesting because another thing that kind of jumped out at me is one of the writing class clichés that I remember being taught in many different workshops is the whole, your character needs to change between Page 1 and the end. And, this character, Evelyn, is just trying so hard for nothing to--

Like, she just wants things to not change. And, her dad's life is changing. Her boyfriend wants to take things to another level with their relationship. Like there are all these changes happening around her, and she's like trying so hard to hit the brakes. So, how do you navigate a story where the character is so vehemently opposed to change? [laughs]

CS: I mean, I think for one thing, what I realized is that I just needed to directly say it again, that I didn't need to dance around it. So, at the very beginning of the book, she talks about how she doesn't want anything to change and everyone around her seems to want things to change and she's trying to grapple with this.

So, you know, another rule of writing, is making it clear in some way, it doesn't have to be that you specifically say, but what does the character want? So, what if a character wants to not change and wants the world to stay the same, but of course that can't happen?

So, they're going to run into some obstacles if that's what their great desire is. And, she's also very self-aware, you know, overly self-aware person. And so, she knows also that it's not going to work for things to not change, but she's trying to figure out, what things is she willing to change and what things is she not?

CS: I also think for Evelyn, I think that it can look like she is not a very active character, but I think she actually is making some pretty active choices. She just doesn't see herself as being someone who has a lot of agency, which isn't the same thing as actually not having agency.

And, I think that's another thing she's realizing by the end of the book that she does have agency over her life in different ways, in different areas of her life. And, she doesn't have to give into certain standards of society or that she can, again, going back to the interiority, that she can feel differently about them or think differently about them, frame them differently than the way they're framed for her.

So again, going back to those books, I mentioned earlier, those books were really eye-opening for me in terms of seeing that a book's arc or a book's movement could be one that was almost entirely internal.

And as long as, to me, it's just fascinating when a character ends up internally in a different place by the end of the book than where they were in the beginning of the book, even if not that much has shifted externally.

Although I think for Evelyn, things have shifted externally, the question is how active has she been in those shifts? That movement is what's really interesting for me. So, she has changed in some ways; she hasn't changed in other ways.

I also just think that I'm examining that rule a little bit more in terms of, 'who does that rule apply to? What kinds of people in the world can always change within the span of a book? What kinds of people can create narratives of cause and effect, and have these different outcomes?'

And Evelyn, for a variety of reasons, some having to do with her background, her ethnic background, but also having to do with, I don't think this is a spoiler, it comes up pretty early in the book, having lost her mother at a relatively young age is somewhat paralyzed. And, the book is just exploring the idea that a character can for various reasons be somewhat paralyzed and then, what do they do? How do they move forward?

GP: Yeah. You know, it's interesting, as you were talking about the idea of thinking you have agency versus actually having agency, and also this notion of like not wanting to change also being a desire, right? Because oftentimes, it's almost like we're looking at the negative space around change and that's where her desire lives, as opposed to like focusing on the goal that she's striving for a new job, a boyfriend or whatever.

And, it's interesting because at DIY MFA, we often talk about when we're looking at a character's desire, like pretty much every desire that a character could have, either can be some form of change either within themselves or in the world or their surroundings or what have you.

Or it could be some sort of preservation; so, like trying to survive, stay alive on the desert island or survive the horrible fight to the death, dystopian, whatever, you know what I mean? Like, it could either be change or preservation. And oftentimes, I think preservation is the piece that's harder to pin down because it's not the clear goal.

It's not the thing that you can like look at and say, that's what I'm going after. It's the, 'I'm going after the opposite of that thing, I'm going after staying the same or keeping things the way they are,' or things of that nature.

And so, I think as writers, it opens up a whole world of possibilities for us if we consider the character's ability to not change as being also a driving desire or not change some aspects of their life, maybe they change some things, but not others.

CS: And, I think the conflict comes from the fact that she knows that the world expects her to change in certain ways that are in line with the game of life. And, she's trying to decide which of those are true

to her. And then, the conflict; a background conflict is also what I was mentioning before about, why does the character, not just Evelyn, but any character, why are they somewhat paralyzed?

Or why are they maybe not paralyzed, but actively choosing not to change? So, that's also a little bit of the mystery for the reader is trying to understand this character better.

And, in her case, it is related to her relationship with her parents, and particularly, to the kind of attenuated grief that both she and her father are experiencing over her mother's passing, which was, I think, 18 years prior to the action of the book or maybe 17 years prior to the action of the book, but has really never resolved. So, how is that also affecting her when she doesn't have this kind of more active guidance to move into adulthood?

GP: Yeah. And, you mentioned also, like the world expecting her to change. There's also the fact that the people around her are changing. Like her dad is dating someone new; her boyfriend has said, 'I want to get married.' They're like clear things where like she's trying to stand still, and the world is like rushing past her.

At some point, she's going to have to deal with that. Even if the expectations weren't there-- Like, even if people weren't saying, "You're supposed to feel this or want this," I think just having everyone else moving on with their lives and she wants to stay exactly where she is, is going to pose problems.

CS: Yeah. So, I think maybe one of the-- In terms of writing, it still has conflict and problems and obstacles for a character to desire stasis. So, I think those obstacles are still coming up, but then especially that she's been plumed. She does make a change at the very beginning of the novel.

That is, is this change going to work out for her or not with her leaving the PhD program, at least temporarily leaving academia for this tech company? It is just a totally different world, different financial state. And, this is a change she's trying out as kind of entry level change before embarking, maybe on some of these other changes.

GP: 100%. Speaking of her PhD, and you mentioned you have a PhD, did you find that any of the work that you're doing in terms of your research informed the writing of this book? Like, you mentioned, in your bio, it said you study narrative theory and novel theory, like did either of those things come into play?

Were you thinking about them the way she thinks about philosophy when she's grappling with her life stuff? Were you thinking about your research when grappling with the writing?

CS: I mean, I started this book around the same time I was starting my PhD, which, you know, I don't know whether I'd say I recommend that course or not, but it's nice to be still in academia and be in a community of writers. I'm in an English program. So not a creative writing program, but around people all the time who are deeply invested in literature, and really feel that literature is important and vital.

And, that's so helpful to being a writer. My work is in Contemporary Science Fiction; and specifically, in the representation of Asian and Asian American bodies as posthuman. So, I'm specifically looking at kind of technological fusion in the body, in my dissertation; so, things like clone, cyborgs, artificial intelligence.

So, I do think those, kind of, evolve the novel and my scholarly projects evolved hand-in-hand in terms of just thinking through some of the ways that technology is affecting all of us, but then especially the racialized body and the way that that's commercialized.

You know, it's a little bit lighter in my book, but I do think of the app as almost kind of like a technological apparatus that is fused to the body, right? Our phones are in some ways, almost a cyborg thing for

us, at this point, because so much of our mind is stored in the phone in a lot of ways, and the way that the phone interacts with us.

In terms of narrative theory and novel theory, I can't point to a specific example, but it was just really incredible for me to be able to delve into those things more deeply, which didn't come up that much in my MFA program to really be looking at the actual theorists of narrative theory and novel theory, and just looking more deeply at the history of the novel as a social form and the way that it is responding to social events.

So, I think that that's just kind of in the background of my understanding of, yeah, the novel is a really vital form and it just really helped deepen that. I think, more generally, just helped deepen my understanding of writing in general; and of the novel, in general.

GP: So, one of my nerdy obsessions and our listeners have probably heard me talk about this before, but I love looking at storytelling as basically a form of virtual reality, like an immersive interactive--

CS: Totally.

GP: -entertainment experience. Right? So, one of the things that I've been nerding out lately reading is a lot of like story psychology stuff that looks at how our expectations for the way a story would go, how that's affected by what we actually read, and then how it affects also our engagement level with the story.

Like, there are all sorts of different types of like Cognitive Psych Research out there, and story psychologists researching this stuff. There's this one study that was super cool, where they looked at video clips and what parts of the brain would light up in an fMRI based on like the type of videos.

And, if you look at the actual clips that they selected for the different experimental groups, it really had to do with like internal versus external. And, it was the combination of like plot-driven clips, but then that were also character-driven that got the most brainwave and neuro engagement. And, things that were just character-driven or just plot-driven, people were still watching.

And like you could tell the brain neurons were firing and lighting up and whatnot, but not to the same level and not in the same sort of widespread places across the brain as when you kind of did both in the story. So, it's, to me, I think, so cool to see that all these things that we study on the page when we're studying literature, also apply in other facets of our life and at--

CS: Oh, totally. I mean, some video games are so complex, they're really narrative, and I think people study them and a scholarship. I took a class actually in Game Design during this lockdown just for fun. And, it was--

It was just so cool I got to test out a different part of my creativity, but it was completely still a writing exercise with visuals added in. But you know, you have to keep balance so many aspects of the story when you're creating, even an extremely short game, the way I was creating.

GP: Yeah. I mean, even just something as simple as point of view in a game, right? Like, is it going to be a first-person point of view or is it going to be more of like a bird's-eye view; or a side view like Mario, you know, the like jumping up and down?

It changes how you experience the game, depending on whether it's, you know, I'm in the brain of the cyborg fighting soldier person from the future versus like, you know, Donkey Kong or something.

CS: Mm-hmm. Totally, I mean, it just brings to life some of the same questions, the craft questions of writing stories and writing novels.

GP: 100%. I feel like we could keep talking about all this stuff for the next, I don't know how many hours, but in the interest of our time, I wanted to wrap things up. First off, your book comes out next week. So, folks we're going to put links.

So, for folks who are interested in grabbing a copy or pre-ordering, just check the show notes page and we'll have links there. And yeah, I always like to end with the same question. So, what's your number one tip for writers?

CS: I was thinking about this. My number one tip, I really think is just being true to yourself and your vision and your story. And, I'll just give the example of when I was writing this book, I really had questions about whether anyone else would be interested in a biracial narrator, protagonist, whether it would be able to sell, whether people would be able to connect with it.

And, I just decided it was the book that I really had to write, wanted to write, and that it was the book that only I could write; you know, it was my individual and unique contribution.

And so, I just went all in on it, and I've been so thrilled with the response to it and with the connection that I'm already seeing in the lead up to the book. So, I just really encourage everyone to write the story that only you can write, and it will find readers and it'll find connection.

GP: I love that. That is such great advice. Claire, thank you so much for being here today. This has been an absolute pleasure.

CS: Thank you so much. I loved being here.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.