

Claudia Durastanti and Jessica Andrews

What Is the Relationship Between Truth, Memory and Fiction?

Jessica Andrews: Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. This interview is part of a free series available on the Bristol Ideas YouTube channel and the Watch section of the Bristol Ideas website, so please do have a look at some of the others. This event is also in partnership with Spike Island as part of a series of events celebrating writers from around the world. I'm Jessica Andrews, the author of *Saltwater*, which was published in 2019, and *Milk Teeth*, which will be published in July. I'm really excited to be chatting to novelist and translator Claudia Durastanti about her most recent novel, *Strangers I Know*, which is published in the UK by Fitzcarraldo. Hi, Claudia.

Claudia Durastanti: Hi, Jessica.

Jessica: I'm really excited to speak to you about your brilliant book. I thought we might open by talking about your relationship to truth, memory and fiction. This book is a novel, but I know that it has semi-autobiographical or autobiographical elements in it, and it seems very much to interrogate the boundaries of these things, which is something that I'm also personally really interested in. And I love the way that your work second-guesses itself, so there are details that your parents misremember, or family mythologies that change or are retold over time. And I wondered if you could talk about why it felt important to you to keep those things in, as maybe a way of resisting a kind of true, cohesive narrative.

Claudia Durastanti: Yes, so *Strangers I Know*, which was originally called *La Straniera*, came out three years ago, at the same time that *Saltwater* was out, I remember that very well. And you can tell, I think, by the structure of the book, that there was a sort of resistance in writing this book for a very long time. I didn't want the story of my family to be a debut novel, and I had high standards of what literature should be, and memoir and autobiography were not included in it. My mother has always been an intense journal

writer. She has journalled since she was a little girl. And to me, it was immediate in the household that autobiography would be the genre of survivors in a way. So you had this woman who had disability and deafness, had a partial borderline syndrome, had a very epic and reckless life. And so to me, the form of the journal, the autobiography, was also tied to gender in a way. If my mother had a different perspective, or different aesthetical parameters, it would be considered autofiction. So to me, it was very important to figure it out who could write from what position and following what you consider that genre to be. So I was with an author that I translate, Joshua Cohen, years ago, and I was mildly thinking about writing a sentimental, linguistic essay on deafness and my family that had no bits of real events, if we want to call them that, and so he asked me what I was working on. And I said, 'Oh, it's a kind of a family lexicon only from an intimate sociological perspective. There's no literature. It's the story of how my parents met, migration, too,' and he said, 'Oh, so you're writing a memoir.' And I got prickled and offended, and I wondered, why did it hurt me so much? What was wrong in thinking that? And then I realised, and it was really a sort of discovery for me, that what defines truth and fiction or literary nonfiction to me had nothing to do with the real occurrence of the event, but with the tone or with the sentiment with which you're approaching the page. So I was really investigating the possibility of using a sort of desaturated I, a sort of first-person that would visit this family almost like an anthropologist visiting a foreign community, and maybe remember, did I belong to this community? Did I have a form of exile? When I'm walking in, what's the process of intimacy? What's the process of not remembering? And these kinds of erasure of personal and family lexicons, how did that affect the form of the book? So I was very lucky because my parents do not believe in literature in a way, in fiction. They're hardcore supporters of nonfiction. And so I was educated in a sort of environment or ecosystem where the boundaries of these two areas of literature were very confused. And that was, I think, good and liberating in the process of writing this book.

Jessica: I think that's really interesting. I think those boundaries probably are confused a lot more than people like to admit or talk about. Thinking about the more autobiographical elements, I love this part that you wrote about autobiography as 'a bastard genre of literature, at least according to the old cliché of the literary elite. To those readers, it lowers the threshold, is fodder for anyone, refugees, women, people with disabilities, Holocaust survivors, survivors of all kinds.' And then you go on to talk about the idea of making ourselves important through autobiography, and I thought that was such a brilliant sentiment – the idea that to write from an 'I' that is close to a personal 'I' has a kind of self-importance about it, and how that can be quite radical, actually, if you're writing a story that is not often considered to be literature or worthy of literature, and I wondered if you could talk about that idea a little bit more.

Claudia: That had to do with expectations we have on the margins. One of my mother's favourite words when I was coming out was *emarginato*, which means out of the margins, in Italian, and it was so interesting when this word became central and in my later studies, and I've been thinking about a lot lately, from bell hooks to Elena Ferrante, there's a lot of focus on what margin means. And it was very clear to me in the books that I read growing up that you had expectations of what deafness or disability should be in novels or in nonfiction. What poverty and class should be, or what migration should be. And this kind of inescapable subject of the good poor, the good migrant and the good deaf person. The other way in which disability maybe had been portrayed was the grotesque or the exceptional, a sort of, you know, excessive body and monstrosity, overly sexualised. And so I wanted to use my mother, a very strong way to put it, as a sort of prism to focus on how all these kinds of marginalities get represented. The reason why I insisted on calling this a novel is because the characters, people I grew up with, were not maybe very bookish people, but had a strive, you know, I call them romantic imposters, because they were kind of desperately asking for an epic of themselves, like they were self-marginalising people. And so with that, I thought, if I go to a publisher and say these two teenaged deaf kids met in

Rome in the 70s, where you had a lot of political restlessness, and you had a time of social life in Italy that has been heavily portrayed but never through the perspective of these kinds of people on the margins, they would say, 'Oh, but if they refuse deafness this way, if you have a grandfather that buys a pair of headphones for his deaf daughter, this is excessive, you know, it's not believable.' And so they would have maybe edited what I proposed as a novel that I drew from my real life, making it sound implausible. And this is why it was also a little bit playful, in a way, to work around the expectations we have on the margins, and how we kind of put them in the field of nonfiction or fiction. And sometimes it feels to me that novels, even if they should be very liberating in terms of imagination, are increasingly getting standards on what the representation of certain subjects should be, even if it's in first person.

Jessica: That's really interesting. I also think as a child listening to stories of your family, there is kind of like romance or reflection to them, a sort of larger than life or unrealistic kind of texture to those stories when they're things that you've listened to your whole life.

Claudia: Yes. There's a lot of focus on the character of the mother and I remember people saying to me, 'Oh, the father is less present,' but the father is present a lot in visual terms. There are sections where I speak about my father's relationship with fiction and the cinema. He was very attracted by these larger-than-life characters and American films from the 70s, Scorsese, all these kinds of alienated characters that you would find probably in a Paul Thomas Anderson movie now. Anyway, I remember going to the movies with my father and seeing an inappropriate film for my age, and something turned in him. And so as soon as he walked out of the threshold of the cinema, he would start acting like those characters and confusing the boundaries. So this could have been pedagogically very difficult for a little girl, but in a way it really educated me, I think, to the liberating potential of fiction, even to that extreme of embodying fantasies you have or fantasies that were produced by someone else. And it also disclosed this idea that

fiction hurts and it can hurt more than family ties, in a way. So in the book, I also discuss in a veiled way what literature is and there are painful moments. And I remember a friend saying that the most traumatic thing that happened to him was witnessing violence in my family in the little town. And I had no memory of what happened to me. But I was very impressed by the fact that someone else would retain a trauma in someone else's life and make it so personal. And I realised that me and my parents, and even my grandparents, maybe we didn't perceive what happened to us that way but we would it intensely live emotion and pain, or whatever you want to call it, through fiction. I think *The Piano* by Jane Campion affected me way more than my mother did in many ways.

Jessica: That's really interesting. I really wanted to speak to you about language, partly because you're a translator, but also because the search for language is so present within this book. The narrator is a child of Italian migrants, both of her parents are deaf and didn't teach her to sign. And you write a lot about your parents' mistrust of illusion and metaphor, perhaps because it's a different way to the way they might understand the world. But then I also think it's fascinating that they have become your tools in your adult life. And I just wondered if you think there's a connection between your childhood, living in a space between all of these different languages, or searching for a language, and your work as a writer and a translator today.

Claudia: I remember years ago, I was hanging out with a poet, and she asked me, 'Why do you translate?' And it's a very simple question, but it was trickier for me compared to 'why do you write?' And I realised that I have been doing that since I was born, basically, because I was not only in this environment with deaf people, migrants that moved from Italy to United States, but I was also living in this family that used the black market of language. My grandmother never fully knew Italian, she spoke dialect. She arrived in the United States, she barely spoke it, or used some sort of slang. And so there was this transitional language that would change and be very fluid every day. And I think that was a strong influence that unfortunately I

removed for a long time, because when you enroll in public school, when you're a migrant child, you have this very intense, almost soldier-like pose of being performative and learning language in a very orthodox way. So I wanted, I really believed in that, you know, full access of being a good citizen and turning into a good person, and so making a distance between me and my parents, who were very disordered speakers in many ways that had not only to do with their disability, but with their attitude towards life. Unfortunately, I couldn't pick up all the nuances that were hidden in my language. So I started publishing and writing in Italian. And the most common idea was that it sounded a little off because I had a lot of English in my mind. And then I realised it sounded a little off because I had this very peculiar syntax, this sort of invisible language or broken language I shared with my mother. And we often move from the premise, of course, that language is a mother, but also a mother is a language, and I think I was trying to write this book to translate that specific lexicon I shared with her that suffered of a kind of mutilation because she didn't use sign language, and that forced us to find you know, different rivers and paths to understand each other. And it's not true that that kind of language stamps you or marks you forever. I remember one point feeling very tired about talking with my mother and feeling a sort of guilt, because how do you forget to speak with your mother? How can you feel, you know, physical boredom or feel very tired? And I think that happens, one, to everyone, but two, it was interesting because my mother said, you're not used to it anymore. And we were in an airport. And she said, if you feel so tired it's because you've spoken English and you've spoken Chinese for a week, and you don't even know Chinese. And I'm like, because I was physically exhausted by gestures that don't mean anything. And it was very moving to see this woman that would turn herself into another continent and sort of, you know, cover the gap that was between us at that time. So this was also a process of archaeology in a way to recover that lost language that shaped my style and my writing.

Jessica: I guess in a way, going back to talking about most things sitting in the boundary between fiction and truth, and most languages, you know, there's

no such thing as a pure speaker of a particular language. And it is something that's... it's a tool that's organic and fluid. And I love the way that you write about being drawn to the errors in translation, because the way we interpret or translate everything is dependent on our own personal context and understanding. And you call translation 'a story of poetic imprecision', which I thought was great, and I wondered if you could just explain what you mean by that a little bit more.

Claudia: Yes. I was focusing on 'standard', let's say, translations, and it was Peter Pan that kind of gave me this intuition because Neverland was translated in Italian into *L'isola che non c'è*, which means the island that's not there, which feels not exactly equivalent to the original meaning. And I thought that a better translation for that would be a literal translation, like *never land, mai terra*, which doesn't sound good in Italian, but has all of the kind of poetical reverberations and effects that were interesting to explore. And through this mistake, which is a poetic mistake, I realised that *mai terra* is kind of cry or shout that a child, as opposed to the world of adults, would use. So in a way, the elegance of the solution of the original translation of that word, Neverland, was not apt in a way a mistake that could lead you to different possibilities, and it also brought in a different point of view, which was the point of view of the Lost Children, who don't get involved in the Italian translation of the title because it feels like a judgement, *this place does not exist*. And I felt that it was interesting because through this poetic error, sometimes someone else cracks in. It's not a binary relationship between the author and the translator. There are also all kinds of ghosts and own mistakes that the author originally translated. And I think it's kind of a detective game, in a way. So if you're very good at translation, you're not only good at translating what's on the page, but you're also able to detect the mistakes that were eradicated from the page or from the history of literature but which could have provided a wider meaning and context.

Jessica: I'm also thinking about the idea of control, so kind of, I suppose, the ways in which, in relation to translation and mistakes, I guess you could call a

perfect translation one that's very controlled, and perhaps not always a positive way. But I'm also thinking about writing. And I think about this a lot in my own work as well, like, is writing about your life or based on your life a way of gaining control over things that have happened to you? I don't know. I don't know what the answer is.

Claudia: Yeah, I think, I don't know about you, but it felt like that for a very long time. And I think to me, control was achievable only relying on a high level or tax of fiction. In my early work, I had my family in disguise, you know, it was also a different time, a different perspective of writing, where third person was also almost mandatory, and it felt very standard and classic. So if you were trying to ease in in the world of imagination it felt that I was supposed to wear certain clothes. And so I had the orthodoxy of Italian, I was not allowing myself to have any slips, even if I have this troubled syntax, but also I was really trying to edit certain events by switching them. In *Strangers I Know*, there's an episode where I tell about this man's father that kidnaps daughter, which happens to be me, but I had already told this episode in my second novel. But in my second novel, that episode was called fiction, a pure novel. So the characters had different names. The tone and the feeling of those pages, if I read it back, feel very visceral, very angry, very from the perspective of the little girl. I was very grateful for switching this time, trying to focus on the adult man, on how he was feeling. I was trying to do this very impossible quest of imagining the life of parents or family without us or before us in a way, and not trying to focus only on my reception, or the little girl's reception of events. So I think it was a very, very long process to gain control. But I felt that my writing was more visceral when I was doing it, and now that I have loosened up, and a lot of barriers fell, not only did I have more fun, I think, but it was in this case that I reached higher fictionality, if that makes any sense. I feel that what was exposed as a fictional tale of my life was way closer on the border of memoir, whereas this book, that feels conventionally nonfiction, has a higher degree of... it feels like a full circle. And so I think I gained control by losing it.

Jessica: I think as well perhaps sometimes it can be difficult to... like, there are different kinds of truth. So, for example, you could write a scene that is highly fictional, lots of events are made up, but if it contains an emotional truth that's very true to what you felt, then in some ways that can be more true than something that's a blow-by-blow account of exactly what happened.

Claudia: Yes, and I think I was lucky. This book started out of hints, you know, my parents telling me two different accounts of how they met, my mother being proud of being called a stranger and not a deaf woman, which really unnerved me, because I thought that, you know, to have a straight path in life, you should accept what was given to you and then decide what to do with that. And I was very perplexed by this kind of being so ambiguous with something that pertains to your body, or the loss of a physical sense. And the other thing that was a clue was the Emily Dickinson quote which opens the book, you know, 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'. And to me, the word formal was important, not only because it's... what form do you give to life? But it was also on the kind of distance and temperature. So to me, if that makes any sense, truth has not to do with a solidified sequence of events, how you recall them, but with the tone that you are willing to take account of these events and go back to them. And to me, finding this kind of decentered perspective, it's what distinguishes this book compared to the convention of something that happened to yourself that has to be very warm, in a way, or necessarily hot, I don't recount that in my journals. The most traumatic or intense or happiest experiences that happened to me were quieter sometimes compared to, you know, the huge spaces of boredom that I had in my youth that were instead overwritten to counter the force of boredom.

Jessica: I think as well that so much of this book is about striving for a connection and a sense of belonging, kind of through the experience of migrations, so from New York to southern Italy to London amongst the landscape of Brexit. And also as the child of deaf parents, kind of searching

for a shared experience. And my own younger brother is deaf, and I think about this quite a lot, the feeling that in lots of ways our childhoods were very similar, and yet they were also completely different because we had vastly different experiences in the way that we experienced the world and interacted with our parents. And I thought you summarised this feeling really beautifully when you write about your partner, or the partner in the book, playing the piano, and your mother resting her hands on the top to feel the vibrations and you write, 'She says she can hear it, and I believe her. We may be listening to two different things, but I wonder if they converge somewhere, if at some point, what's visible of a sound might blend and dissolve into what's invisible.' It's very poignant, talking about that specific relationship, but could we apply this to everything, really? The act of translation, reading, writing, trying to communicate with another person? What do you think?

Claudia: Yes, I do believe that this kind of approach to share the commonalities, even in the most paradoxical situations, because over here you have, you know, a daughter that lives in a certain realm that we consider made by sound, noise and gaps of silence, and that really makes you question in the mother's world, what it means – sound, noise, silence and meaning. And I felt that these were not necessarily completely mutually exclusive experiences. I had an outside world that was encouraging me to think that the meanings between me and her would never overlap in a way. So the piano, in that case, vibration is a device in the sense that a word, a sound, content you read, a scene you see in a film, I think, for all of us retain personal meaning, and also have a little bit of it that is shared, but maybe it's shared in unexpected ways. So when I wrote *Strangers*, I know I was very troubled, but also curious too, and I really felt I wanted it to be an intersectional book in a way, where all parts of identity of the self could clash and dissolve one into the other, and to focus on what shatters, what stays, you know, the sources of personal history. And I was worried that with this abundance of marginalities, let's say, exceptionalities, there wouldn't be a connection or understanding. And weirdly enough, this book created, in

many ways, tiny portals where I met people that had very like circumstances, had a completely different experience of family lexicon in silence, and then they connected profoundly. And so I wondered, I think it was almost provocative as a perspective to show that in even marginal or exceptional circumstances of life, this is why we do read fiction, we do find a bit of ourselves. And I think that was really automatic for me growing up, always, you know, building these bridges, and also sometimes burning them behind me. Because I think I always wanted to say that it is possible to forget, reassemble and also give up on this kind of search for a common space. It's something that comes and goes, in a way, and I think the mother/daughter relationship shows this in the book. There are moments where they do find common meanings and there are moments where this dissolves. I think I wanted it to sound very fluid as an experience and not have, you know... it's like a vocabulary that gets reinvented all the time rather than having a certain standard grammar of relationships.

Jessica: Do you think as well that if you are a child who grows up in any kind of multilingual household, do you think it sort of alters your relationship to language a little bit? I sometimes think about having grown up in a house with English and sign language, the sort of materiality or the symbolic nature of language felt more true to me, more so than perhaps it would if you'd only ever grown up with an awareness of one language. Do you think that alters the way as a child you form your understanding what language is?

Claudia: Definitely. A lot of people make fun of me sometimes because I have what is considered to be a defect in understanding, which is funny for a writer, you know, the symbolic, allegoric or metaphorical ways of life. This is very strong for me, in you know, reading literature, but when you live and you have daily experiences, I often have the issue of taking things literally, like my parents, that happened with them. So the total inability... it's like almost surrendering to the literal meaning of something. And that affected, I think, my way of perceiving things and perhaps sometimes made me more.... It definitely made me more visual, in many ways, but it also made me more

an essentialist, I would think, in certain things and trying to find a true core of that experience and stick to that. And so it was in a way, switching from the world of text where I was able, you know, to learn about all the kind of hidden under-meanings or higher meanings or everything that floats around an image, and instead, you know, in daily life having this kind of instinct of taking things literally. So I think that was... and I'm curious about how these two forces influence each other and how I approach writing.

Jessica: I also wanted to talk to you about your representation of disability. You touched on it a little bit earlier. But it felt really radical to me, to read about someone such as the father in the book, who was not interested in facing disability with bravery or dignity, but with recklessness and oblivion. And at the end of the book, the mother says that if she hadn't been deaf, she would have been insignificant. And I found that very moving. And it made me think of how rarely we see deafness or indeed a lot of disabilities portrayed like this, as a kind of a driving force behind these characters lives or something that is so integral to who they are and source of strength. And it made me wonder if one of the messages of your book is that to have true agency or to have true power or to have true equality, it's about the choice to face your life in whichever way you want, not about having to be dignified or humble or sad. Is that something that you were thinking about?

Claudia: Yes. Going back to the title of the book, so you had this woman who was deaf, she moves from New York to a town in southern Italy, and I would go with her, visit little villages, and people would say, 'Oh, she speaks funny, she speaks loud, her sounds are not right, her words are not right, where does she come from?', almost as if she came as, you know, an alien from outer space. So the immediate thought was not about disability, but it was about a difference. And it was interesting to me why my mother was, and she said, 'Oh, I fooled them, you know, they think I'm a stranger.' And I thought that it was kind of sad, the fact that the frame around her would make her feel that being deaf was something shameful, or using sign language would make you very visible, theatrical, immediately exposed in the

streets. But then when I was writing this book, I found out that in a way she was disclosing the sense of self-affirmation. So any word, especially the word stranger, it can be beautiful if you reclaim it for yourself, but it can be hurtful if someone else is using it as a tool to remove you from a space or a society or a country. And to me, it was very clear about shape-shifting words, even deafness, in that case, sometimes it was very visible in the household and I was relating to a deaf woman, sometimes it disappeared completely and I was dealing with an artist, with a person that had certain interests. And it was also instrumental. I remember that sometimes my mother, who was violently opposed to the idea of being considered disabled, she just wanted to be considered different, she would say, 'Oh, I can do this. I'm like you.' And we'd say, 'Then do it.' And then sometimes we would say, 'Do this,' and she would say, 'Oh, no, I'm deaf. I can't.' So to me this kind of playfulness and ambiguity around something that would constantly be renegotiated was very fascinating. And I think that does not relate only to disability. It was, again, using a concept or an object to see how we do play this game with all areas, in a way. To me, when I had to focus on something that was relevant to myself, it came to me maybe the way my mother had to deafness. I had it when I went to college with class. I never used a kind of parameter. I found out that I belonged to the working class when I met the radical left in college, because I was in a little town and it was obvious to me that some people had money or they didn't have money, but it was a very informal way. So it's when I met theory that I realised, oh, there's a definition, should I claim it for myself? What happens if I do? What happens if I don't? What happens if I'm in a liminal space, and I don't feel at ease? And this is a process of conquering back something. And so my mother who never called herself openly deaf... we were walking in London years ago, and I said, 'How would your life have been?' and she said it would have been insignificant and I thought it was very moving because it had nothing to do with happiness in a way, but it had to do with meaning. And so that was one of the few times where I felt that she was really owning it, as you said, so she was using agency for something that has been very... a question. I think deafness or some parts of identity are questions you ask yourself constantly.

Jessica: I know through my brother that that can be quite a strong sentiment. Like within the Deaf community, not that deaf people have a disability, but that it's the way that the world is structured that's the problem, because the world is structured for hearing people. And you said something similar where you were talking about the subtitles on the TV, and you said that it's hearing people, often, who deem what's worthy of being translated. The people who are doing the translating hold a lot of power. And I wondered if you think about that in your own work as a translator as well, maybe the joy of it and the freedom of it, but kind of the responsibility of it, maybe, as well.

Claudia: Yes, it's interesting, because lately, I've done something that never I've never done before, which was translating for a TV series written in English for the Italian audience, and it has to involve subtitles. I was trying to explain to the author that his dialogue would be exposed to the reduction of subtitles, and I felt the pain of the loss. And he was asking, 'Who's going to make this choice? Who selects one word compared to the other?' We have to do this dramatic shrinking of information. And that got me back to this kind of paradox where you are selecting information in texts meant for a Deaf community, for non-hearing people, but then you have error keys over there that are set. And often the error keys are based on the simplest thing, but then you're giving up, if you're opting for, you know, a continent simple, you're maybe giving up on what can be a poetical aspect and you are assuming that who's reading that is not interested. So I think good translation and good writing always have to keep the two moments together. Of course, the preoccupation we have with form and content in our own work, it really gets political and radical when you are treating texts for a widened community that have to make sense in different contexts. So I just wish there was more awareness and not given for granted the idea that what you want to do... but this is also relevant for media information that is not addressed only to deaf people, it's addressed also to people that have low levels of literacy. Why is that you think that if you summarise, shrink and reduce the essence of information, you're doing what it's meant to do, it's

good work, it's a good operation of translating the language and giving up all the other affects – that's giving up a lot on the possibilities of what languages do. And I think there's a shared hunger for beauty, and we assume that beauty is a preoccupation that only certain parts of society or readership has.

Jessica: And I also wanted to talk to you about class. You touched on it a little bit earlier, but I really appreciated how nuanced your portrayal of class is. You describe the way that to be working class in Basilicata is completely different to being working class in Brooklyn, or your own class identity, where you might take long haul flights or have brand new trainers but be unable to afford food and be in a lot of debt. And I really liked the way you deconstruct the rags to riches narrative that we're very familiar with, and talk about, in a similar vein of kind of, like, having agency as we were talking about earlier, like to really have any kind of equality it's about maybe just staying where you are, or maybe not striving for success, or maybe having opportunities and not following them up, and how to explore those aspects of class... It seems like we're only really ever given one narrative when we're talking about working-class culture, and it's someone who's worked hard and bettered themselves and joined the middle class. And I wondered why that felt important to you, to deconstruct that.

Claudia: I think I followed the mainstream narrative that as a working-class girl who wouldn't recognise herself as such -there's a moment in your life where you're poor, you grow up, you read theory, you find out about Marx, then you call yourself working class. But before I developed a consciousness of it, there was this issue of poverty, and poverty came in my family with a sort of disguise that was not out of shame, in a way, there was no humility in my mother's approach to it. There was this kind of fantasy or fictionalising yourself and having wider possibilities through debt, which became very common after the past two financial crisis and also for our generations, in a way, I felt that that we all of a sudden discovered that our material conditions wouldn't match certain ambitions. But if we were constantly recurring to debt, why that debt was different from, you know, certain poor

families that were using it as a device as they always did, and I've seen that for a long time. And so when I started to think about class, I realised I had a sort of melancholy, and it's not only the melancholy of, you know, entering a different realm compared to my mother. When I suddenly had jobs, I could help her, and we have this reverse approach of who's taking care of who, and so we do... I say that in the book that sometimes, in order to give my mother empowerment and agency, I pretend, and she knows I'm pretending, that I need support, and then I give back to her. And so we have this sort of micro-economy that is a protected form, but it is not sufficient for her, and it's not sufficient for me, because the melancholy I was talking about is about all the time that I didn't waste, and I could have wasted, and discovering other parts of myself. When I say that I was following the narrative, I was very militant in bettering myself and studying. To me, there was only one course of life. You have to study, you have to improve your situation, pretty much as in a Victorian novel, and then you will belong to this society of adults. And so I was thinking, because I'm always obsessed about the holograms of ourselves, what happened to the person that may be squandering time. Squandering time is not only a privilege, it can be also a right, in a way. So in the book, I was arguing that not only the sons of the bourgeoisie, the bohos, you know, have the right to squander time and find out about their artistic selves. And maybe not even artistic, maybe I would have been interested in other jobs. This is relevant for everyone, I guess, you know, to second-guess your life or what you could have done, but for working-class children, it feels that it's shrunk, in a way. And so I was also trying, as you said, to kind of counter the idea that the desire is always to grow, improve, make more. I think that's a distorted message, and what kind of energies can you liberate if you didn't necessarily want more, want something different?

Jessica: I think that's really key. And I think maybe there's an idea that if you're working class, you have smaller wants, you're not allowed to have desires just as big as someone who is middle class or very affluent, often. I think that's not recognised, or that's not a narrative that we recognise.

Claudia: Also, yes, but one thing, one positive side of it, is that we are, sorry, if I use this larger 'we', but we are both preoccupied with class, is the fact that the only guilt is that if you don't do more, but once you give up the idea of doing more in a certain way, then you realise that desire can express itself in different areas of life, you do it without a sense of guilt that is very relevant to the personalities and ideals of who's raised and born and writes in a middle-class way. I don't know. At one point, I just got so fed up with novels that had this kind of guilt or sense of guilt with money. And as a paradox, it rarely comes in working-class fiction, I must say.

Jessica: Yes, I think that's true. Well, thanks so much for being so generous with your thoughts. It's been brilliant to talk to you. And thanks so much to everyone for watching and Claudia's novel *Strangers I Know* is out now from Fitzcarraldo, and you can order a copy by clicking the link below. Thanks, Claudia.

Claudia: Thank you. Bye, everyone.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.