

K: I am Kelly Fordon and I'm here today with Susan Perabo and we are talking about a story from her collection *why they run the way they do*, and the story is called this is not that story. hi Susan thank you for being on the podcast

S: thank you for having me I'm really happy to be here

K: I'm so excited to talk about this story because well first I want to ask you about I guess the central themes of the collection itself and then we'll get into the story but the story is such a great story for writers that I'm really excited to talk about it So what is the central theme of this collection?

S: I didn't think that there was a central theme to this collection when I was writing these stories these stories I wrote over a lot of years it really is a collection in that way a collection of work that I wrote over 10 or 12 years when my kids were little I didn't have a lot of time to write and I was also I've got full time teaching job and so I wrote a story or so a year and so these stories are written at very different times of writerly life and personal life and so yeah there's no I didn't think that there was a unifying theme however I will say that after I put all the stories together I realized and this is relevant for our discussion today I realized how many of the stories are about stories I think that that is something that I am really interested in um professionally and personally is how we define ourselves with stories and how the stories that we tell about ourselves and about our lives really dictate who we end up being and where we end up going and so I think that you know if there is a theme I would say that that that that it is not a theme that's something at least that comes back repeatedly in the stories that would say what do you think?

K: well I thought the same thing there's a lot about stories but then when I was looking at the title *why they run the way they do* and I was thinking that it does have to do with stories whether you run from this story you know what whether you right you're trying to tell the story straight on whether you're trying to tell it from a peripheral standpoint but it's all but there were quite a few stories about how to tell this story which I thought was fascinating so it's a great collection for writers to read in general I think because there's so much emphasis on that like how best to convey this story and in terms of getting some to some deeper meaning about the story

S: yeah I think that that I mean that's the question that I'm always asking myself as a writer and that I think all writers are asking themselves and what's interesting about this story we're going to talk about today which I just reread and I hadn't read in some time it's a it's one of those stories from the collection that's older that I wrote many years ago is that you know that that I'm kind of trying to work that as the story progresses that the story is really this is not that story as a meditation on trying to find meaning in stories and so I think that that it sort of speaks for the whole book and maybe all the work that I've ever done is kind of you know this this process of trying to figure out OK in this and that that most story writers are trying to figure out in this vast scope that I'm looking at what is the thing that I can that I can dig deeply into in the short space and illuminate for the reader in a way that that is meaningful and resonates.

K: and it seems like in that story you know it's a story about a boy who dies and even you know when I was in college there was a boy who killed himself like the first week of college and then you don't know anything else about his story I mean we never got his back story we never knew where he was from so I was thinking a lot about him when I was reading this story and so I'm curious about when you first started writing this story what did you first think it would be about and then how did it evolve into that current format that you have.

S: yeah it you know it's one thing I love about this show and conversation that you do is that I think it gets at the fact that stories even from a single writer even from a single period of that writers life all stories grow and in different ways you know that there's no I mean that that every story seed is a surprise I feel like you know and that that that I don't I've never known a writer who says you know here's my process and here's how I go about it every single time for me it's just wildly different every time and so when somebody you know asks a question at a reading like you know where do you get your ideas or something like that it's like I have no good answer to that because it's so different for every single story but this story started out not even as a story this story started out as I would say almost an exercise or a meditation on storytelling and it I wrote it because and you mentioned your own experience with this at college and I think that sadly a lot of us have had come and experience like that where a student dies and they're rumors and you know people who know people who know people or whatever but you know never really you don't ever really know that the true story you didn't know the person and in a lot of cases so this happened on my at my college on our campus maybe a dozen years ago and maybe more than that now and uh and I wanted to the students that that I was teaching at the time or obviously troubled by it and wanted to talk about it and wanted to kind of figure out ways to deal with it artistically right uhm ways to think about it in you know and ways to use writing to kind of grapple with it and I wanted to do that to I mean and I figured you know that that this is sort of the a central question one of the essential questions of art is like how do we how do we use it to soothe ourselves to comfort ourselves to relieve ourselves and also to explore what we can't ever know and what we can't understand and so I wrote this story sort of along with my students I didn't share it with them at least not immediately but I wrote it sort of as a as my own grappling with what they were grappling with and I didn't think about it as a story like I didn't I didn't think I was writing a short story I thought it was right in essay or again like a meditation or just an exploration I didn't know what it was and you know there's that long thing at the end where I just kind of go off as like the teacher like this would be a great exercise but a fictional workshop and you know there's all the questions that it tries to ask so I thought well that's not a story but then when I was done with it I felt like it got somewhere or did something or was able in it's not store inas it was able to kind of get to some kernel of if not truth at least meaning in the ways in which all those lives were connected so I submitted it to a magazine and I called it a story and it was published and my editor really liked it and wanted to put it in the collection but it's still for me kind of stands out as a story that even though it's called this is not that story if it almost be called this is not a story because I don't I don't know if it is I don't know I don't have the answer to that So what do you think this story

K: I think it's a story about an artist grappling with how to tell the story of something that happened but then on a deeper level I feel like it is about connection to and how well I was going to talk about this later but I'll just talk about it now since we're into it the idea of the tagalongs and I thought that is so fascinating so it happens in Section 2 and in that section there's this young man who hosted the party and his kind of girlfriend and he starts thinking about how you know there would be inevitable tagalogs end the tagalongs of tagalongs coming to his party and later it occurred to me that a tagalong you know everyone is A tag along and someone story and sometimes you're the approval person and sometimes you're you know the protagonist you're the crucial element of the story but every tagalong is affected by that to some degree you know like there's the tagalong who's the who's the groundskeeper you know I mean he's the newest member of the crew but he's also the oldest and he's gonna be in section one you know his wife says she feared that seeing the boy reminder has word list been of all the things he had seen and works so hard to forget all the other things they've been running from for so many years so in a way I was like OK well he's the guy who's running you know who would run from this story who's running and then the second section the guy who's hosting the party is the one who just gets caught by the story you know he's just he's just there and he has faded price just for being a bystander so anyway that whole concept of the tag lines I thought well this is the story about how connected we are

S: yeah and about the fact like you said that that anybody can be the main character uh depending on where you focus the camera right that that a tagalong becomes a main character one by what that tag along dozen in this case horribly the tagalong dies right I mean that that that that is that he becomes the center of the story this kid who's just somebody some nameless person at a party to the young man becomes the center of this story and so partly that's how you know that that's how somebody becomes the central character but also that the story I think gets at this idea that that depending on who we look at depending on who the writer chooses to look at everybody is the central character right every one of those five or four people who are focused on for a few pages in the story that could be a whole story and that person could be the central character but it's just because of what has happened that person becomes peripheral in the story even though if we followed I have a good friend read this story before I published it a great writer and one of my one of my best readers and he said man I loved that groundskeeper I just I was sorry when the story shifted I really I wanted to follow the groundskeeper I wanted to know where all that lead and so I had this moment of like maybe that is the story I mean like I was I was sort of living out what happens in the story in real life you know it's like maybe OK so maybe that is the story and maybe I should follow that and maybe this isn't the story about the boy dying and the college kids maybe I maybe they're just part of his story and so yeah I love that idea and I loved how you how you described it that we're all kind of you know tagalongs and minor characters and in each other stories and it's just a question of the moment that the writer chooses to play out whether or not we end up being featured or whether or not we're just somebody at the party when you were first writing it you just wrote it this way I just wrote it this way yeah and again like in my in my head I sort of traveled down the road a little bit further but because when I wrote it I didn't even think it was a story I just thought it was an exercise for me for my students for just kind of trying to make sense of this situation wasn't thinking about it in those terms so it wasn't until afterwards like I

said then I had this friend rated that I thought oh maybe the whole thing was just an exercise to get me to that groundskeeper and he's the story but then I decided no I think I think it is a story about stories and that's OK and I can I just have to let it be that

K: the other thing I was thinking was that it's kind of like a false story about the fall you know like a fall from grace and fall from innocence it was just interesting to me in the first section when the groundskeeper arrives it's still snowing he arrives in this dirty white truck which you know like in my mind was just conflating with the snow and making me think about dirty snow you know so it was kind of cool that it was a dirty white truck so he arrives at 6:15 and that's after the fall and you know just the word dirty is there so it's afterwards but in the second section there's all sorts of stuff about how the man who's hosting the party feels before the fall and it's and I love this line they were at a wonderful stage immediately preceding panic when life after graduation is far enough off that it seems any number of breathtaking opportunities might arise before then and his applications are out and then it says this was the time between possibilities and choices when he could relax it was also the last time he would secretly believe that anything was possible and it just reminds me I don't know if you've ever read like the Michael Byers story the beautiful days it was then best American probably like in 2000 but it's just it is also about a college kid and a fall from grace and how you can never go back he also you know will think about on that last night and I love the way they none of them have names so they're all sort of like these archetypal characters later when he looked back on this night this would be the moment he would remember most clearly the moment when he should have said something meaningful should have said what about next summer or what about next year or at least told her how beautiful she looks sitting there on that wall instead he said beer

S: and it's so true that but you don't realize it's the last time you're gonna be able to do something like that up and I you know it sounds weird to say that I enjoyed writing those characters because it was a tragic situation that the story stemmed from but I really did you know I spend so much time with college students crazy amount of time and I'm kind of in that world but I'm also really outside that world I mean obviously I had my own experience and so you know I can think back on that but just to be able to kind of go back to that place where I see them you know and how each year of college you really do see you know these students going through these very similar kinds of things and as seniors when just starting to when they're really torn between those kind of panic of Oh my God the real world but also Oh my God the real world you know and it's just it's a beautiful thing to watch and I and part of what made that section so sad is that yeah that he has this this moment there where he's living in that and then because of something that he has no control over that moment is kind of taken away from him but yeah I liked I like being a part of that of that that time in their lives

K: so then section three we go on to like the chaplain and I thought that was really fascinating like I don't know if you meant it to the chaplain to be like kind of a doppelganger for a writer but like the way that the chaplain's like if only I could unload this story if I could only tell them then it'll then I will it will be over for me you know the burden will be lifted or whatever uhm he's thinking about what the father is thinking and he's deciding like well the son is probably tucked away in the father's brain you know he's at this conference and no one can reach them I

also thought that was interesting part about how the world has changed you would never go 7 hours without being able to reach someone

S: I thought that as I was reading it this morning I thought wow 7 hours that's way too long and I was like yeah but they didn't have cell phones no I know it's so wild you know the chaplain at the very end of his section he finally gets an answer on the phone and he's like Oh my God what was I thinking I thought this would all end I just was curious what you were thinking about that section what that character was doing in your mind yeah it's interesting that what you say about it being like a writerly I didn't intend that but you're right absolutely that this idea of trying to get a story out trying to kind of free yourself of that knowledge and that understanding and then and then once it's out there the moment it's out there you're thinking wait now I want it I want it back I want it but it's not it's not ready to be shared this news is not ready for the world and he feels that in a very personal way obviously because of this tragedy but yeah that's an interesting does an interesting way of reading it and I think that even if I didn't intend it because the whole story is about stories and about telling I think that it I think it fits right in with what struck me what I thought about when I was writing it and I thought about it again as I was reading it um is just this terrible it's terrible power of knowledge and of knowing things that will change This idea that you know that you have a secret or if not a secret yeah just a piece of information that that is that is so you know that is that is that is so essential to someone's life that you can't believe that that you hold it and that they don't and that that is that that's just it's it feels very uncomfortable for him and you know as a parent that I think that's one thing that we all you know obviously we all worry about our kids 24/7 right no matter how old your kids are and just this idea that that things that we don't know happening and that we can't know until somebody tells us you know I mean it's just it's a it's an uncomfortable fact it sounds obvious but it's uncomfortable fact of being alive that things that are going to change us sometimes we don't know about until two hours or four hours or six hours or a day or three days later that something awful can happen or something wonderful can happen and we're still in the dark so The thing is exist out in the world already but we're still part of the old world where it hasn't happened yet I just I think that I'm fascinated by that the fact that the chaplain holds that knowledge and that power even though obviously if he doesn't tell them somebody else is gonna tell him but the weight of that knowledge that he's not that he's about to take this on out of that place he's tucked into in his father's brain and move him somewhere else forever is just overwhelming I mean it reminds me a little bit of the heroes journey the way that you know person going along their life and then something happens out of the blue and then the story begins there but in this case the chaplain is thinking all the story will end here when I tell them you know if you're telling a story from chaplains perspective it's like yeah it doesn't for him you know and that it's not that he'll it's not that the chaplain will forget but obviously once this burden is off him you know a story that you're writing seems so real and so complete and so fully realized you have the thought but nobody has seen it but me like it exists but it also doesn't make sense right that that like as long as it's just you and just what's on the page that's come from you and nobody else has looked at it it's sort of like a tree falling in the forest right I mean it's just it really it and the moment this story has eyes on it besides yours it exists in a different way right it's not yours anymore because the reader is going to do with the story what the reader is going to do with the story and you

can't you don't have that power you don't have that control over it anymore and the information you know becomes um becomes public and that's a strange feeling and he's right to I mean and it's not going to be less of a burden when that happens you know it's going to be interesting and you know but it could be interesting in the bad way or good way but there's gonna be some sort of reaction that's gonna emanate from that moment right yeah and the burden shifts right I mean the burden changes what the burden is different but it's still it's still a burden Albert yeah so the RA and this was an interesting part where I was thinking a lot about storytelling so she's the last person to see him alive but the conversation is utterly dull and this is a point where I was thinking you know if the writer were writing a story about writing a story about a story writing the story right it would of course fill in and make it much more interesting and even cheyvan says that I wish I you know I told the story of million times and I wish I had something else to say and even the part about the fact that he's not wearing any shoes you would fill in some explanation for that if you were telling a fictional story yeah and that's you know that that that's another interesting thing that I was hoping this get it in the in the story which is that is not a story which is that that most of the things you know that that make a scene dramatic UM that we as fiction writers you know rely on when we when we build scenes um those things rarely really happened organically in in real life you know that that that most of our dialogue is pretty dull and we don't talk about meaningful things except very occasionally and you know the and you talked about this in that earlier Section 2 with the young man wishing that he had said something profound or at least something kind or something meaningful UM but you never know when those scenes are that you're gonna go back to in your mind right I mean that goes back to this idea of we can never know about the main character now is this the big scene is this climactic moment you know when we build a story we know all those things so we know that yeah OK this is a climactic moment between this boy who's about to die and this young woman and so something of meaning should pass between them they should they should they should get into it they should talk about stuff and you know that as a writer but you never know that as a person you never know what the big scenes are 'cause there's no music in the background and you don't know how many minutes have passed in the movie right and so you don't know you don't know where you are in the arc of the story and so you just say dumb stuff you just ask people for cigarettes and talk about the weather and add you know that that drives her crazy when she thinks back on it but how was she to know she had no she had no chance of knowing that that that moment was gonna matter as much as it did

K: yeah and I and it's interesting because in ending this you know or having that happen and having you know not answering the story or the question about his shoes and not having them discuss everything I suddenly realized wow that is what I turn to fiction for I want them I want that writer the right or whoever I'm reading to close that gap to give you an answer that I've been looking for I mean it's weird in not answering it you answered the question of like why do I read fiction well I read it because I want the answer

S: why you wanna know why he doesn't have shoes on and you don't want me just spit falling like maybe it's insert maybe it's that hell I don't know no you want to know you're right that's what's unsatisfying about real life is we don't ever know why people don't have their shoes on

you know unless we ask them and if we don't think to ask them then we may we may never find out and that's the question that that that stories are supposed to answer for us because art is supposed to make sense of things that don't make sense right and make order out of chaos like John Cheever said because we crave that we want things to make sense we want things to add up

K: and I always told my children that too before they you know they've now started reading now that they're older but they used to just watch movies and I'd always say well in the movie you can see the person move around but in the story you can see what they're thinking you know also which is so fascinating also in this story because you know we know what the chaplains thinking we don't really know what the ground I mean we know a little bit about what the groundskeepers thinking but we don't know if he suddenly Harkins back to his earlier traumatic we know what his wife's thinking we know what the RA is thinking you know but we don't know what the boys thinking and like that's just a conscious choice that that you made as a writer because that's the point that you know

S: yeah yeah this is not yeah and I did you know I did think about that it is his POV one it does his point of view in the story I mean you know that is that where we end up that was a really important choice for me and that was when the story became more about the writer as you said then about the character um because I think that I don't know I've never thought about this before but just now I'm thinking that if the story had been entirely fabricated like if I had just thought what if a kid on a college campus died I might have been more tempted to go into his point of view and end the story in his head but because this was a young man who I did not know but who I knew people who knew him and again this is not his family this is not his most of the story is made up as I say but I think that I felt like it wasn't my place to do that and that I didn't want to that that there's some there are some perspectives that you just say that doesn't belong to me I don't say that about much as a writer I mean as a writer I'm sort of like anything goes but because of the personal connection I felt like that was not my place to do and again as you said I think what I realized when writing this was that this is a story about writing and it's not a story about this person or even this situation it's a story about writing and so it made sense to end with sort of my meditation on what it meant but then at the end to come back to him because it is his story that is the story this boy died the story is not about me and it's not about any of those other characters it's about the boy who died but because and because I choose not to explore him because I don't know him the story circles around him but never intersects

K: I love this last paragraph the truth escapes me people say those surely those surely we are willing accomplices to its flight we loosened its chains leaving cell door slightly ajar allow ourselves to become distracted as it lumbers off into the waning light it's easier that way for then everything and everyone is fair game yes this story is possibilities for a fiction workshop or an exercise in character and plot in beginnings and endings a study in POV the story about a college about a generation about a culture of access and tale about the splintering of friendships about priorities about the weight of the past the weight of the future the weight of the single moment and how it resonates through dorm rooms and classrooms into bedrooms

and waiting rooms and this story could be all of those all those things yet it is none of them So what then is the story only this a boy died and I was thinking about that line the famous line about you know once the story the story is the king died and died of grief and um but it's true it is only this a boy died and yet it is also a story about all the tagalongs to this story in a way

S: yeah, that that that that the central fact of the story is a boy died but everything that surrounds it is its own story and could be taken in any different direction

K: well, it's an amazing story is there anything I didn't cover in the story that you wanted to talk about

S: no, I don't think so

K: OK good that's good alright well I've loved this story so much and I really appreciate you talking to me what are you working on now I'm just curious

S: UM I'm working on stories uh I'm also working on novel so I'm doing both simultaneously I got a lot of writing done during the pandemic UM strangely you know I don't know you're lucky 'cause I yeah I don't know if it's this way for you but I know for most people that is not the case my children are of an age of self-sufficiency and so I had a lot of good family time with them being home for much of the last year but also I had I had some chunks of time to write that were kind of unexpected and so I wrote a lot of stories or a lot of new stories and uh and started working on novels so yeah so tastic that's great anything we can look for anything coming out in literary journalism yeah it just had a story come out in story magazine the most recent issue of story magazine or the spring issue there may be another one out right now I'm just out but the spring issue of story and I had a as a story up on Oprah daily which is the website that is formerly Oprah magazine a row magazine it's now all electronic

K: and so, I read that one and the 7th garden

S: yeah

K: I love that story thank you yeah, I even joined Oprah just to read it really

S: wow yeah I told people I have posted about it on Facebook, and I was like if they make you join like please just wait a few weeks 'cause it'll probably be free I think that's how it works it's like exclusive for awhile and then eventually anybody

K: I didn't know I don't know why I just was like OK I'll just join I like I like Oprah too, so I thought

S: I do too, and I'll tell you also they've got they're doing great fiction I mean they come they're publishing I don't know if it's every Sunday but I think it's maybe two Sundays a month they're

publishing new stories and they've had a lot of really good writers so I was very happy to be included in that and yeah I think it's worth the price whatever it is

K: I do too I do too well thank you so much it was great talking with you

S: Yep fantastic thank you and thanks for doing this because I think this is such as I said earlier I think this is such a portent and I guess when Caitlin Horrocks did it she said something like I'm friends on Facebook and maybe she said this on Twitter I can't remember but she said something like this ones for the nerds and I was like yeah right on you know like I love story nerds I love like getting into the you know the choices and the and the questions that that only you know only kind of deep reading and deep thinking about can get you too so I think you're doing a great service for writers and for students of writing and that's all of us right yeah thanks oh yeah

K: well, thank you I hope we get a chance to talk again sometime.