

In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 4: Fire

TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. (Music swells)

Joshua Green:

(Singing) We come from fire. We come from snow.

Linda France:

Episode four: Fire.

Joshua Green:

(Singing) In our element...

Linda France:

When Homo sapiens emerged in the last glacial period, 300,000 years ago, fire helped our species stay alive. It plays a starring role in the great acceleration and the anthropocene, both terms used to describe the period since the mid 20th century, when we've seen a dramatic surge in population growth, industrial production and consumption, and a massive rise in technologies. Human actions and choices are shaping the planet as never before. Not always for the better.

Deborah McGregor:

Speaking from Massachusetts, it's 10:00 AM. We have evidence of smoke from the fires all the way across the continent in British Columbia, in the American west.

Linda France:

The most alarming consequence is global warming.

Deborah McGregor:

We have a red moon in the evenings and the feeling of, in spite of the sun, of a slight filter over the sun. And it's astonishing to think that I'm on an island off the east coast of the United States and that those fires which have been burning for a long time now are just simply moving across the globe.

Linda France:

Earth's temperatures have always fluctuated, but since the industrial revolution, the planet has seen a steady rise. And especially in recent decades. Since 2001, we've had 19 of the 20 warmest years on record.

John Kinsella:

We live in a valley in the, what they call the Western Australian Wheatbelt. We suffer horrendous droughts here, and severe fire seasons, which have got longer and longer as the climate has changed. When 97% of the vegetation's gone in a massive region like this, the environmental catastrophe has already happened, but there are many people trying their hardest to restore it.

Linda France:

Poets Jorie Graham and John Kinsella check in with weather reports from very different parts of the globe. Each with the unavoidable sense of a world on fire. Closer to home, Welsh language poet Menna Elfyn tells me about the legacy of coal mining in Wales.

Menna Elfyn:

There was a mining disaster in 2011, the Gleision Colliery, when four men died underground, and there was so much concern whether they'd come out alive. Many did, but four died. I just could not get my grandfather out of the scenario. And then I just remembered the faces of my mother whenever there was a disaster, especially a mining disaster, then she would turn away and there'd be tears in her eyes because she remembered that day. My grandfather, he was the only one the tram came down on, on top of him. And he died instantly I think. And the way all the women would come out knowing if the foreman and the manager walking up the street, something's happened. And they were all fearful, of course, would it be their gate? So the gate is a kind of symbol, but it also represents how we do live, hoping that that gate won't be opened, but it's shut and kept shut.

Menna Elfyn:

[Title spoken in Welsh first] The Gate (After the Gleision Colliery tragedy, 2011) [Begins in Welsh, fades out to English translation]. Sometimes a day like a lightning bolt will remind us that there's only a breeze under the door between us and death. Yesterday men died under ground. And I remembered my mother sparing words. 1947 pit manager and foreman walking slow down the village street towards her home. The women watching either side of the street to see which house was their journey's end. But as she heard the gate close, my grandmother knew the dark message that came with a knock on the door.

Menna Elfyn:

Today I think of them both, my mother, my grandmother. Better understand how they'd switch off any mention of underground disasters. The minute they started, they remembered the closing of the gate. And to this afternoon, there's news from a friend in Mumbai who tells me of an earthquake in [inaudible 00:05:31], how her parents, heard this murmur in Calcutta, near and far gates are opening, closing. The end of their world for some, and the world coming closer, drawing us to it. And every ghost of a rumor, good or bad, murmurs that we live through boats, some which close, some which won't. At the end of the day, we gaze for a long time at the still gate. Given the blessing for peace for today, for today, we were given peace.

Linda France:

One of my grandfathers, who I never met, was also what was called on his marriage certificate a hewer. A coal miner in the Northeast. And so that's something that we share from Wales and the Northeast of England, that long tradition of coal mining. And it's such an important part of the culture and the identity, and traditionally such a source of pride.

Menna Elfyn:

Yes.

Linda France:

The coal was a treasure. It gave heat, and it was the source of income in the family. But then latterly, it's been discovered that it's problematic in terms of the effects on the environment, the challenge to the earth.

Menna Elfyn:

And that was the dilemma, really with the miner's strike. We did campaign, or we did do things, collect food for the miners, and so forth. And I even went on a picket line, which I hated. And I regretted going because there were men who were on strike, but there were men coming on a bus going to work, and you could feel empathy for both sides and knowing that it was a dirty business, being a coal miner, and yet there was nothing to replace it. And it meant we were fighting for communities, sustainability of communities, and the scars of that are still apparent today. And I think people recognized that it wasn't a sustainable way of living, apart from the other kind of sustainability, that it was exploitation basically. And that it made the wealthy wealthier, and the poor, poorer. But what was lost was the sense of community and that sense of coming together.

Linda France:

There's a long tradition of poets, like folk singers, speaking out about injustice and calling for change. For John Kinsella in Western Australia, there's no division between his work as poet and his work as protestor.

John Kinsella:

We forget our communities, we forget our purpose. And one of the interesting things about dealing with any protest situation is that you have to understand the very people you are protesting against. Often decisions are made far from them. They are working, they see it as work. They see it as doing their job to feed their families. They see it as their way of rising out of wherever they are, quotation marks around rising. They see themselves as sustaining what they have. And if you don't try and understand the psychology of those you're protesting against, you can almost become so insensitive that you undo your own actions through that insensitivity. The end result we desire is to stop the damage. Its not to affect negatively other people. It's to show other people that other ways are possible. And poetry does that. Poetry, you can make an example that people can look at and come to their own version of. They can make it part of themselves, or they can reject it. And I do think that the communal and social part of these things is highly essential.

Linda France:

Environmental activist and artist, Suzanne Dhaliwal also takes a holistic view to call out the root cause of exploitation and ecological devastation.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

Well, if we think about the climate crisis and when it started, it started in 1492. It started when the settler-colonial imagination decided to destroy land, to steal land, to destroy communities. Sometimes in Britain, we're like, oh, we don't really understand this. Or there's this selective amnesia about history,

but most British people know that the wealth that has been amassed by the UK and its corporations and governments has been taken by theft. It's about connecting the dots. And they make us have look at deep things like settler-colonialism, racism, really violent situations.

John Kinsella:

Colonialism is pretty well at the root of all evils in its various versions through history. And it has its present versions too. There are many colonizations taking place in many different ways in the now. In Australia's case generally, in Western Australia, specifically, you are talking about any kind of settler culture that comes to a place to restructure their lives in the image of where they've left in many ways. What was here was land covered by bush that belonged to other people. So, it was pushing those people aside and in many cases murdering those people and taking it, clearing it and farming it. And European farming methods just didn't work here. The land is different. We have phenomenally hot summers getting hotter and hotter. The soil is often quite marginal in most of the Wheatbelt. Traditional Aboriginal methods of fire stick farming, and so on that had gone on for millennia, worked here, but the colonial push - supposedly sustainable, supposedly increasing the bounty - was actually diminishing it all the time.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

Those land struggles, those colonial relationships are all at the heart of why land grabs happen. Why companies can displace communities, get away with it, profit from it. And that's seen as legal. With the tar sands in Canada, the indigenous community signed treaties with the Crown in Britain, and those treaties were signed to protect their land, to protect those rights. And it's those rights that were violated by the Crown, by the Canadian government, against indigenous communities, that allowed for the extraction to happen, which is now leading to the tar sands, which is leading to the climate crisis.

Suzanne Dhaliwal:

What the Canadian tar sands looks like, is removing the forest, which is one of the most important carbon sinks in the planet, second to the Amazon. The industry calls that overburden. Using natural gas, they mix really hot water with the soil to separate the bitumen. And then it needs to be refined multiple times with a chemical process. Those chemicals are then released into these open toxic tailing ponds, which are not regulated. They're not lined. So you can imagine just a quick stat, it's three to five times more polluting than regular oil. It uses large amounts of hot water and natural gas to make this dirty oil.

Linda France:

Canadian academic Deborah McGregor is Anishinaabe and Whitefish River First Nation. She reflects on what indigenous climate studies can bring to the conversation.

Deborah McGregor:

I think indigenous criticism, when it's coming from a different world view and knowledge base is helpful because it helps people kind of poke the holes a little bit. And hopefully what that does is push it a little bit further. Push the conversation a little bit further than what I call tweaking the status quo, like electric cars. Where do you think that electricity comes from? And who's paying the price for the generation of that? In Ontario, a lot of it's generated from nuclear and guess where they want to bury the high level nuclear waste? In indigenous territories. Like how can you imagine what it's like to live in the world without having all this stuff? Well, I think indigenous peoples have been doing it. So they can show that. People are never comfortable with the criticisms, but I think that's what indigenous peoples can offer.

That would support things like language. People don't necessarily relate language revitalization to any kind of climate action. So a lot of it has to do with like understanding what those relationships are like.

Linda France:

Menna Elfyn.

Menna Elfyn:

People tend to think, oh, Welsh is a minority language. but it gives you a world view that is as rich as any other. 'Cynefin' is a Welsh word. It's a place that is deemed to be special. It is a better word really than the environment, because it connects everything from plants to people, to the land. Writing in Welsh, which is still an endangered language, gives me another sense of purpose to make sure that it isn't only about Wales, and that it connects with other communities, languages, countries. They are all connected. And I think we face the same challenges and the same possible human disasters, which is a kind of wake up call that we have to do something drastic about what's happening in the environment.

Linda France:

Whether in protest or in praise, poetry and song are able to hold the tension between diversity and unity, keeping faith in a vision of basic goodness, the possibility of harmony. [Guitar music begins] After anti-fracking protests in Lancashire, Northumbrian folk duo, The Brothers Gillespie, were moved to write this, 'Tina's Song', about the leader of the Nannas, a campaigning group of concerned grandmothers.

The Brothers Gillespie:

[Singing]

Now they are plotting to send our grandmother to jail
If the fine handed down by the courts isn't paid
55 thousands' the sum they demand, for defending us all and for taking a stand
Now they all will be gone in a few more short years
but the powers that be need borders, frontiers
So the frackers have come to blast open the ground
And crack the earth's core, to make dollars and pounds.

The Brothers Gillespie:

We wanted to celebrate and empower as much as possible those people resisting fracking in their community at the same time as challenging power and calling it out as much as a song can do. There's only so much that you can do as a singer, but there is a time and a place for bringing your voice and your words.

The Brothers Gillespie:

[Singing]

Oh... is this what we are?
Oh... have we strayed so far?

The Brothers Gillespie:

When we hear the word protest, we think that means you're putting yourself against something. But I think the literal meaning of it is you're testifying for something. When we protest then, we're speaking for what is beautiful and what is healthy. And I think in a way that's a way of potentially disarming some of that kind of oppositional stuff that can come in.

The Brothers Gillespie:

[Singing]

Folks didn't want it, no we're on this land.
Democracy is for the top 1%
You look to the law, you'll find that it's bent
For the deal is wrapped up, there's no need for consent
And they call it free market to get us on side
Because we all like freedom, but folks its a lie
It's a psychotic system, quite cruelly devised
To steal your birthright from under your eyes.
Oh... Is this what we are?
Oh... Have we strayed so far?

The Brothers Gillespie:

Even a protest song that is trying to get its head around a lot of the darkness that's happening in our world. At the end of the day, it's still a song. It's still trying to articulate some kind of belief in some sort of possibility, some kind of dream of a possible world that might be in some way better.

The Brothers Gillespie:

[Singing] I am just a bard, there's not much I can do
But I'll write a song and I'll try to sing true
For we are your grandsons and granddaughters too
We'll be there by your side when the law comes for you
And all you good people now take my advice
Don't let these frackers come ruin our lives
Our Mother is fierce and loving and wise
Let's stand up beside her and open our eyes.

Linda France:

The Brothers Gillespie, ending our Fire episode. In Our Element was presented by me, Linda France. It's a Sonderbug Production with New Writing North, in association with Newcastle University, and is supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England. Thank you for listening.