

Season 3.9 Denise Baden

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SPEAKERS

Denise, Eric Benson, Narrator



Narrator 00:00

This podcast is a project of the climate designers network.



Eric Benson 00:03

Hey, this is Eric. I can't believe we are already halfway through season three. I started recording this season back in December of 2022. And Denise Baden was, I believe the second or third person I interviewed for this season. I waited to slot all my guests in, including Denise after I interviewed everyone that's in this season. Denise, a professor of Sustainability, and a climate storyteller. It's going to kick off a series of three special episodes here in June, dedicated to teaching climate action in the college classroom. Denise Baden is doing a job that I one day hope to do. She writes climate. And by the way, they're all really good. In this discussion, she shares a great deal about her writing process, something that I'm super interested in climate stories that she's written, the value of her butterfly mind, and a great topics like nation rights for oceans. And why the composting toilet? Yes, the composting toilet is the perfect example of circularity and why we should all have one. So put on your headphones, grab a nice cuppa, and relax to the summer episode with Denise Baden.



Denise 01:21

Hi, I'm Denise Baden. I'm professor of sustainability at the University of Southampton in the UK. I'm also a climate activist and I have a side hustlers eco fiction author. You can find me online at Dabaden.com. That's B A d n or at [Green stories.org.uk](http://Greenstories.org.uk).



Eric Benson 01:48

Denise, it's wonderful to have you here on the program. I'm thankful that you had some time today.



Denise 01:55

Eric, I'm delighted to be invited Hello.



Eric Benson 01:57

Yeah. We had a small conversation a week or so ago before we started recording. And you shared with me a lot of things that I hope to get into today. So you have a lot you have a really impressive career. So I hope to be able to get into everything but if not well, it's just because you're do so much. But yeah. I wonder what led you to be doing this work in sustainability and authorship around climate.



Denise 02:31

I guess I started off studying politics and economics actually way back, and then went then went out into the world of business. And then I came back to the study psychology to PhD in that. And somewhere along the way I became a greeny and I think it was I read a really funny book and some funny adventure book by Ben Elton called Stark and, and in it he kind of introduces little green vignettes amongst the the main plot. You know, he might introduce a character called Dave. And he says Dave was a water birth and within moments of you know, being born, he died and then you find out Dave was a dolphin caught in a tune in it that well dog friendly. And I suddenly got a wow, that's tragic. You've got to like date. And I think well, I can buy tuna friend, Dolphin friendly tuna. That's something I can do. And it was my first hint of being that you can reach people through stories through fiction, without making them depressed or anxious. Yeah, I've never have watched a climate documentary. And that I've read a few more of his books, and he does it really well. And I suddenly found I was a bit of a fully fledged greeny and that's what led me into this work.



Eric Benson 03:54

Well, that's awesome. There's the Dr. Seuss book, The Lorax. Right. The underlying message is environmental, but you can enjoy the story without even seeing that, but I think you get it in the end. Right. And that's the best stories. Yeah, you write stories. You're a sustainability professor. Author. And what I found were super interesting was you're also a, you're a playwright.



Denise 04:24

Yeah, I'm a bit of a jack of all trades I a butterfly in my life. But I think sometimes when I'm up against academics who've just focused down into one area know everything about it, I feel a little bit like an imposter. But then I think, well, I've done so many different things that actually I think I've got quite a good bird's eye view of how it all connects and how it fits in one piece, and that's really great if you're a writer who wants to imagine a better world because I know a

bit about politics. I know a little bit about finance and economics. I know a bit about business. Another art and literature I did a science foundation degree way back. Yeah, having butterflies in my mind has actually paid off in the end.



Eric Benson 05:09

Yeah. Yeah, my friend calls that conversational currency, or you. Yeah, you know a little about a lot of things. And yeah, I like the way that you described it as giving it like a bird's eye view a big, bigger perspective. And when I was reading through your website, your couple websites about the things that you were doing, there was part of it that I really connected with, and that I'm also a professor in teaching sustainability, but I have so many other interests, right? Yeah. I can't just do that one thing.



Denise 05:47

That's right. And I mean, a restless mind. Yeah.



Eric Benson 05:52

Yeah, that's true, I'd have a totally restless mind.



Denise 05:55

It can be a useful thing. And I have to say, since I became a fiction writer, even during the heart of the COVID crisis, I never once felt lonely, because I was busy constructing my own own world, my own



Eric Benson 06:08

power building world. Yeah.



Denise 06:11

Building wells. And I had complete control over my fictional world. And I have to say, it was a wonderful feeling it got me through that line,




Eric Benson 06:19


while you are doing something that I hope to do one day, and that's great fiction, and particularly science fiction. And my partner asked me last weekend, about my bucket list. My birthday is coming up. And so I think that's why right, and yeah, there's places I want to travel. But I said, I'd like to write a fiction book one day, that's on my own. It's on my list. And you've done how many now three?

 Denise 06:45

I guess. So. I mean, I've done three short stories for the anthology, no more fairy tales, stories to save our planet. And I contributed to two more. And that was fun writing with co authors. One was Steve, okay, chemical engineer, working for Herculean climate solutions, and, and he'll wake up in the middle of the night. And, you know, the story will just come to him, really write it all down, and he'll send it to me, he's like, there you go. I've written another story. And it's like, but there's great idea to rest the plot.

 Eric Benson 07:22


Yeah. And do it.

 Denise 07:24


And then so we brought in Martin, who's a freelance comedy writer. And together, we'd actually get his really great ideas into a great story that none of us could have written on our own. And actually, it was a very fun sort of partnership there. And not something I was used to just sort of having fun writing fiction with other people. Yeah,

 Eric Benson 07:47


that would be fun just to bounce ideas off somebody and vice versa for when you're when you're moving. Stego. You got it. You gotta check that, you know? Yeah. Yeah. It was interesting, too, about the writing you were doing was you wrote a play about Fidel Castro.

 Denise 08:06

Yes.

 Eric Benson 08:07

Howdid that happen? And it was performed in London, right?

 Denise 08:12

It was several happened there. Actually, I had a really good friend and colleague, who does a lot of stuff in the pharma, surgical sector, and public health. And she said, Do you know that Cuba has more innovative drugs and treatments, then, you know, Western medicine, okay. And it's tiny and has no money? How does that work? And I at the time, was teaching business ethics. And I was interested in Cuba for a whole other reason. Because when you talk about things like sweatshops and greenhouse gas emissions, and things like that, you begin to realize

that business leaders only have a limited power, because they operate within a competitive environment. You know, they might decide they want to give everyone a fair wage and be nice to the planet, but will their shareholders let them so I thought, well, what does business look like in a country, which is all about solidarity and, and so on, when you don't have that capitalist background? How does that work? And I'm really interested in human nature versus environment and culture. So I went to Cuba, and I guess I expected it to be awful to brainwash people, you know, ruled by this dictator. And it wasn't lots of I found, I found very politically literate people who could discuss the difference between, you know, market socialism and neoliberal capitalism. Keynes, you know, they, they were very, very politically literate. No one was afraid to talk to me. And so I was doing my bit of research on Cuban businesses and enterprises, and also working with my friend on the bigger pharmaceutical sector there. And we came back and wrote a paper about the pharmaceutical sector and the reason we do discovered is that their metric of success is hell, first and foremost for the Cuban people. And then second world health, global health. Yeah, our metric of success in the West is profit. Right. And actually, it's more profitable to do 101 drugs for something like acid reflux, which lots of rich people suffer. List in quite difficult research into, you know, diseases like cancer or antibiotics where we're encouraged not to really use them. And so we tried to publish the paper and we were told, No, because Fidel Castro is a brutal dictator who ruined the lives of his people. This was from an RO kid, Nick jam, I mean, hadn't mentioned him. He likes the peer review, right? Just ya know this. And then we try it again. And again, the editor overruled the peer reviewers, and it seems apparently is the cube and curse. You cannot write anything that isn't critical of Cuba and get it published in a hurry right. Now, I know it's shocking. It's really shocking. And it wasn't what I've seen. I mean, I was talking to people who ran them, you know, ran papers. And they were openly debating with being critiquing certain aspects of the government bureaucracy. They weren't scared to talk to me, right, basically not an impress people. I mean, it's different. I mean, if you say, Do you have a, you know, a multiparty democracy with a free media? They'll say no, and that sounds terrible. Yeah. Did you say Do you feel you can contribute to the country's policies, you find out that everyone attends these councils almost like sort of citizen assemblies, where they feed back on policy and most policy changes as a result of that. And suddenly, just from asking a different question, they seem like a model of participative democracy, and it's like, you cannot have a conversation about Cuba without being massively divisive. And like, they've had to be sustainable. They're about the only country that has good literacy and health and, you know, all the UN Development Index those metrics, and loose within its own planetary footprint. The only one I think Costa Rica as close as well.



Eric Benson 12:14

Yeah, islands nations have to, they do and



Denise 12:17

It's, you know, they partly it's because of the embargo, but they've made a virtue out of necessity. Yes, so much we can learn, but you can't write about it. And get it published. So on thought, sort of, there's only one, only one thing to do write a musical. and Cuban music is so much fun. And I know, I got to know some Cuban musicians. And yeah, we did that. And we put it on in my local town. We put it on in London, and I could have gone further with it, but I stopped for two reasons. One is I started getting stalked by nasty people. Oh, really? Yeah. And

it's like, they say, you know, Fidel, this Fidel that and as if I was basically, you know, Dancing with the devil and that would have everything except was true. Yeah, but it's not you know, this is very special stories. Not a hero's not within a you know, he's in power for over 50 years been a good bit of bad like most leaders in heaven. He's been demonized. And and I got demonized along with it. I don't want that. And also, it was really demanding. Yeah, I had to devote myself just to that. And that wasn't my cause. Really, Michael has more sustainability. So yeah, I still one day. I would love to go back to it because it was really fun. And



Eric Benson 13:46

maybe there's another play that you need to write.



Denise 13:49

But well, that's happening at the moment areas. It is one about one of the stories I wrote for the anthology, no more fairy tales, stories to save our planet was called the assassin. And it's eight people in a citizens jury. And they're debating climate solutions. And just to make it fun, one of them isn't assassin. So it's an opportunity to explore these different climate solutions. Also to promote the idea of citizens juries, which are kind of, you know, I could direct form of democracy, you randomly select a representative group of people, they're informed by experts, not just conspiracy theories,



Eric Benson 14:33

right? echo chambers, you would hope.



Denise 14:36

They actually research has shown it gives rise to quite long term thoughtful, more sustainable policies. They agree. I mean, I think they're the magic bullet that can avert a climate crisis because they do make those kinds of policies that the government on a four year electoral cycle, and often often paid for by corporations might find it hard to do So I really like the idea of of using the story to promote the climate solutions and the idea of citizens juries. And then a lot of people said this would make a great play because you got a set location. Yeah. So we've got funds now to turn it into a play. That's wonderful. Yeah, one of them is just going to be just a fun one, the public, but we're also going to do one with a bit of audience participation, where we engage them in what solutions they'd like. So they're kind of almost like part of that citizen engineering.



Eric Benson 15:34

Yeah, there was one movie in the US to 12 angry man. Yeah, like that. So less than one of that? Well, in one of your pieces you wrote, you said something like, all the solutions are right here. They just have to catch on. And that I agree with that. I hear climate scientists say that all the time, and that we already know how to fix our climate crisis, or at least it vert, the worst of it,

we'll just say that. And we just have to embrace the change. And so I'm wondering, as you are a storyteller, you're also a sustainability professor, of course. What have you found through telling the stories that you have that have really connects with people around the idea of embracing the change needed? Okay, good

D

Denise 16:32

question. Well, firstly, one size does not fit all. Yeah, it was Steve, the chemical engineer who originally said, let's do this anthology of climate solutions, because he was full of great ideas for capturing carbon, you know, turning rigs to reefs, you know, to capture kelp and sea grass, you know, because we will focus on planting trees, but there's way more land in the ocean to capture carbon with that isn't given over to agriculture or housing. You know, the glaciers are melting that What about refreezing them, and as an engineer, he loves movies. And he had this idea. Let's write it about that. But myself as more of a social scientist, I thought, well hang on a minute. If we're going to get all this stuff going, what do we need to get there? First, you need to harness the power of finance. And to fund these things. Second, you need to make the decisions. So that's why I thought of citizens assemblies. So I looked at what that would take and then look back, what we'd need to get there. And I thought, we can't get there. Until we start judging our success by our well being. At the moment, we judge success by the gross domestic product, which is basically production and consumption. Yeah. That overlaps with well being but it's not the Sydney thing. So conversations are about the economy, not whether or not you know, we're doing well. So I thought a first step is switching to a well being index or Happy Planet Index. And some countries have done that. So several stories, reference that and raise awareness. We've got one or one idea, which I think is wonderful, I'm really excited by is the idea of the ocean as having nation status. So as I said before, we focus so much effort on our land, but the ocean takes up way more space, and it absorbs way more carbon, if we let it. And a number of people is bound in our head of law at Southampton University says a great way to protect nature is to give it legal status.



Eric Benson 18:47

Yeah, sorry, New Zealand got it, right.

D

Denise 18:51

Yeah. And someone said, it was Steve, who was talking to someone at the ocean Summit. And they said, well, America only achieved success once it became independent and threw off its colonial status. You know, by analogy, the ocean can only achieve its full potential once it has nation status, and then it can at the moment, you know, we can't do whatever we want to the land but people can trawl a bottom of the ocean, unless it's a marine protection area. This shit they can pollute it, put plastic in it, there's very little protection. We use it all the time. Like if we go by rail we pay for the maintenance in our ticket price. If we go by ferry, we don't know though we completely take for granted something that is so essential to our planet. If you give it nation status, it could charge for those services. And it could put that money into things like little coastal areas, maybe planting mangroves that reduce erosion provide sea walls capture carbon, you know planting kill seagrass protecting what's there yeah, all these things we would make such a difference. And so we wrote three stories. One was where the idea was just being

floated. One where it's just started, and the President of the ocean is having to negotiate, you know, issues like conflict and people not paying, and so on. And then one set in 60 years in the future, where we look back and actually see how it worked out. Yeah. And Steve took this to the Asian ocean summit in December last year, just a couple of months ago, and go, people loved it. They were really inspired by the stories. And now we're thinking right, can we get this on the agenda for the next World Ocean Summit? Oh, yeah. And really start getting some traction behind it. You know, we've written the story now, can we make it happen?



Eric Benson 20:51

Now is this story in your latest project, which is the No More fairy tales stories, they have the political



Denise 20:57

fray stories on that thing. So it's a real mix. Actually, some of the stories on techie and science based, some are more about social science solutions, like the assassin is more, you know, citizens, juries, and so on. Yeah, some of the more about nature once about a turtle. And again, the genres are very different in a some are funny, some tragic, some are both some a dramatic, some are quite dry and informative, some and very poetic and lyrical. So one of the things I found that's why I started off by saying one size doesn't fit all, is we got loads of feedback from readers. And the idea was we keep the ones that people liked, and then do an updated edition. Because we got way more stories than we could use, in the end, do an updated edition 21. But people all like different ones. There's just no consensus,



Eric Benson 21:51

of course, right? No, site size does fit. All right. Yeah. So



Denise 21:55

you know, different things appeal to different people. So actually, I'm not even sure we could drop down or just become a bigger.



Eric Benson 22:03

Well, I'm curious about, then, you just touched upon this in terms of when you presented at this ocean Summit, or your your partner did co authored it. And I'm curious about what you feel writing fiction can do for the reader in terms of imagining a better future? What are your What are your sort of thoughts on that as as someone that creates stories?



Denise 22:36

Okay, so what's bothered me for a long time about the world of climate communication and

climate fiction and climate movies, is that they focused almost entirely on the problem. And the idea has been, if we say how terrible things will be, if we don't address it, then people will do the right thing. But actually, I've done quite a lot of research into this. And some people are scared into action. But just as many people go into avoidance, denial, or they just get scared in an eco anxiety, real grand problem, or they become preppers, and sort of buy up all the guns and toilet roll and yeah, hide out.



Eric Benson 23:18

We've seen that happen, right? Yeah, none of



Denise 23:20

which are constructive responses. And another thing is, only people who are already interested are going to read these. So that was why I set up the green storage project back in 2018. There was no one filling that space of hang on what would a sustainable society might actually like to live in look like? What would it look like if we do it? Well? Yeah. And then can we show that in some way? Not necessarily. Some might be set in the future, some might be right now, but touch upon bits of it in different contexts. So we run 15 different writing competitions, we've got one going on at the moment, superhero competition.



Eric Benson 24:05

And this is the green Writing Challenge is a new project that you're doing.



Denise 24:11

Well, we it's not new, we've been running it for five years, we do a different format each time. So we have filled in multiple prize, short stories, TV series, you know, it's all on the green stories website. But one of the reasons I started writing is people still kept writing about the problems rather than the solutions. Like we had, I don't know, so many stories about people going off to fight evil, you know, rainforest loggers. Yeah, the day one, you know, your average reader is not going to ditch their job and wander off to Indonesia to confront evil, you know, tree choppers to they're not necessarily evil people. They're driven by their circumstances, you know,



Eric Benson 24:54

pay their rent, you know? Yeah. But when



Denise 24:57

I wrote habitat man, for example, which is about If that's your



Eric Benson 25:00

first novel, right, definitely first not weaving in and out of all the difference, Neil,



Denise 25:06

I'm sorry, I



Eric Benson 25:07

totally fine, right? It happens he stories called flashback, we're in a flashback at the moment, right.



Denise 25:16

But he's he this is about a guy who gives up his job to become a wildlife gardener. And he help people make their gardens wildlife friendly. And in the process, he falls in love, and he digs up a body. Now, when you've got a body, you got an opportunity for a funeral. And, you know, then I can talk about natural burials, you know, you don't want to put a load of good word into the ground, you know, right. Yeah. So, and, actually, I found that we did, University of Utah actually doing some research on reader responses to habitat man, and the natural burial scene loads, people said they changed their wills, to really have a natural burial. So fiction can change behavior.



Eric Benson 25:58

What did you write in that though? Got them,



Denise 26:00

you'll just have to read it.



Eric Benson 26:02

You'll have to read the book. That's fair, that's fair.



Denise 26:06

But But that will help it if you start looking hang on it. Do I need to eat all this beef? Do I need a mahogany coffin? You know, but So these kinds of things do make a difference? So I forgotten the question. Now I have gone off on a trip



Eric Benson 26:25

while we went into a flashback. But we were we were talking just about how you as a writer, can, how you see these solution based stories impacting the reader.



Denise 26:42

That's it, I'm getting there, I'm getting back. So I think a lot of the existing climate fiction, it can lead to eco anxiety. And what I want to do is focus just on the solutions. So for example, in habitat man, there's so much I could have said about biodiversity loss and extinction and the dangers of pesticides and so on. But I focused on the story and characters and the solutions instead, so people could enjoy reading it. I mean, you know, there's a problem in order to actually think this is a nice practice I can engage in, yeah, you can bypass the alarm and go straight to let's do it this way. Because there's usually very good reasons for green behaviors other than the environment as well. And so that's been my approach. And I kind of want to harness that eco anxiety, and try and tie it to constructive effective behavior change. And yeah, what I found through quite a lot of research now, that if you show characters that you can relate to engaging in behaviors that you feel you can do, that are, you know, environmentally friendly, that is much more likely to lead to actual behavior change. Were just saying, Oh, my God, everything's going terribly wrong. Yeah, we're doomed. You need to this kind of passive despair, you know, someone should do something, rather than find out I can do this. Yeah, I just want to cheer people up. Because I suffer from eco anxiety myself. It's a byproduct of being in this fear.



Eric Benson 28:13

If you're tuned, it's hard not to. Yes, I don't



Denise 28:17

watch a lot of stuff about climate just to protect my own mental health. I will, because I'll miss nations. I like things reasonably upbeat. And that's not for everyone. Some people like it dark. Yeah. But that's that's not how I roll. Like I like to, you know, go clear eyed into a situation. But let's focus on what can be done. And bringing a sense of agency to it.



Eric Benson 28:40

I wonder there. If you are reading enough of these hopeful novels, that Denise is writing, that you might be able to watch some of these documentaries that are sad. And then I go into a fetal position, because you see that there are solutions, right? It's not all doom and gloom. Yeah, I wonder, I wonder, I don't know if that's been researched. But



Denise 29:09

that would be that would be an experiment you could do? Does it insulate you against that

that would be, that would be an experiment you could do? Does it inoculate you against that



Eric Benson 29:16

by all of Denise's books, read them, and then go watch any any manner of eco documentary and see see how you're feeling? and report back?



Denise 29:29

So thank, you know, having a positive vision to latch on to is really hopeful. And I think a lot of the solutions we need are difficult for politicians to talk about, you know, we have quite an adversarial media environment, you can be quoted out of context. As a fiction writer, the, you know, the world is your oyster. So I do think there's a responsibility actually on writers if you're writing fiction, that if you are attempting in any way to change people's minds or behavior Yeah, just to double check, you know what you're talking about?



Eric Benson 30:04

Because you got to do the research on the topic, you can't just,



Denise 30:07

yeah, make it out, make mistakes, and then had to go back and rewrite and thought, hey, I'd double check my facts. I thought this was a good thing. It turns out it's not. No, you know, I was promoting sustainable palm oil. And then I looked into it. And actually, it's not that sustainable at all. This greenwashing. Yeah, it's a kind of fake solution, you know, the real solution is to find ways to to use less, but to bring it back to design, you know, because that's your area. Yeah. Yeah. I do think all of it starts with thinking about the end result in a broad way. So it starts with a what is the intention? Here? What kind of world do we want to live in? And is that in whatever I'm designing, whether it be a product or service, or a policy, but like my album, was clearly designed? Yeah, by someone who prioritized what things look like, over health and safety. It's got a hob with lovely, beautifully curved metal, where you put the saucepan on curved so wonderfully. And aesthetically, that the source was fall off, smashing hot water



Eric Benson 31:22

and you burn your hands. Basically,



Denise 31:25

I would wager the person who designed that had never cooked in his life. And so again, when you design anything, think ahead, like, quite often we designed for efficiency rather than resilience. Right? Yeah. Yeah, we designed for performance, rather than sustainability. We

designed single use rather than to use repair, reuse. So I just think, having that mindset, what does sustainable world look like, in your head, and designing for that is set to hand,



Eric Benson 32:04

I always, I got into writing, I would say, from a serious perspective, maybe 10 years ago. And I always considered that writing process for me, similar to my designing process. And I'm interested to know, from my listeners, if you write if you agree, I know many of you are design educators, so you do both. But I'm interested in your creative process, and how you write your stories, because it does seem that you could be thinking about the moral or the end result before you write it. And that's what you're sort of poking at the designers to do, as well. And so I like that, I do that. And I think it's really helpful. And I find my writing process is as messy and I guess, stop and start as my design some I'm curious about yours, I want to nerd out about writing here for a minute.



Denise 33:15

Oh, I wish I could know that about writing forever. Let's do. I read to find I had to learn a lot when I moved from academic writing to fiction writing. It's a whole



Eric Benson 33:29

very different.



Denise 33:31

And I have to say my early drafts, my partner were like, don't give up the day job. Because I wanted to put it all in there. And it's just like with with my stove, you need to balance health and safety with aesthetics. In writing, your first priority, I guess, is the reader's attention. So an if you writing for a cause, or you got anything you want to say, the danger is that you overload that. And what I've had to do is write it all down to get it out of my system, then look at it and just think people aren't reading this for a lecture Bay. They would read nonfiction if they wanted to read all this.



Eric Benson 34:17

Yeah, it's like a sketch. You know,



Denise 34:18

yes, I had to write it just just to get it out of my system. And then I probably took about 90%



Eric Benson 34:26



ERIC BENSON 34:26

To really 90%



Denise 34:27

Wow, now I'm exaggerating. But in the process of doing that, the characters became more and more real to me. And their backstories became more and more real. And I became more invested in the characters, which is of course what the readers will do. That's what they did. And then it became easier to show rather than tell, like I started out really important. Oh, that I mean, that is the mantra. So no, no, no. Every point I wanted to make is I wanted to talk about burials. So I thought, well, let's have someone die? So you can show rather than tell and every draft and redraft there was more showing and less turning. So the key points remained in there, but the reader discovers them through what happens rather than being told anything. Yeah. And that's the, I think that's the mark of, I feel I've developed why I now do that more instinctively. Whereas when I first started writing, I just had to do so many drafts.



Eric Benson 35:34

You were describing it as opposed to Yeah,



Denise 35:37

before I got used to showing it. But that's, that's the key point is how can you make it entertaining and



Eric Benson 35:45

well, in climate and succulent, specifically, climate solutions, show not tell is also a great mantra, because I've seen so much research on if you have the ability to you put those solar panels on your roof, you show that solution to renewable energy, and your neighbors slowly adopt, right they see what you're doing and say, Oh, maybe I should look into the solar panel things like it so much. Yeah. I've been making a lot of research on it.



Denise 36:22

I know one thing actually maybe your listeners can help with and do let me know if you get any feedback on this the current thing struggling with with the play The assassin here remember wind back a bit. So on set in a citizens Jerry, were they debating climate solutions? I went to see an Agatha Christie play in London witnessed prostitution. Yeah, and it's one of the you can actually be a member of the jury is a little bit of interaction. So if you've done it, I'm going to pay the ticket price. I'm



Eric Benson 36:53

going to go and see it's a murder mystery party.

D

Denise 36:55

Murder Mystery. And the very opening scene. The accused is thrown onto the stage. And the police are sort of holding him down. He's going on. And then a gallows is erected trigger warning here. This is a little bit yeah, yeah, it's scary gallows are erected and a noose comes down. The trapdoor opens in the stage, and you feel his fear. You feel it viscerally. And without a word being said the stakes for that character are set. Yeah. So dramatically. And I thought I want to do something as the opening scene of the assassin, because people are only going to care about the solutions. If they think it's really urgent and it matters. Yeah, perfect. I don't want to feed them a load of dry statistics. I don't want to show them. Those are news bulletins be seen, you know, koala bears on fire and decimated forests? And yeah, oh my God. You've had it really bad in American, Southern Europe on fire. And Stein in Germany. We're desensitized to that. Is that I thought, what can we do on stage? That would be as dramatic. But show the stakes for climate change. Get that sort of visceral sense of urgency? Yeah. So if any of your students have got any ideas, do you mean?



Eric Benson 38:22

Yes. It'll be a call. We can do this. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So I'm really interested in writing, specifically creative writing. And I wrote academically for years. And it was such a, I still do, but it's such a breath of fresh air to not do that and write for fun. And I did it recently. And I don't think I've done that since grade eight. And, and middle school. That's a long time ago, unfortunately. So I want to know from you, who's who's written a lot. And about climate, if someone is listening here, and they want to kind of use your mantra, right. What kind of tips can you give them about getting started writing fiction for a cause?

D

Denise 39:15

Okay, I think my main tip is enjoy the process. Because if you want to get anything published traditionally is harder and harder. Because M is now I've taken such a big share of the profit. Yeah, pharmacies are now really focusing just on their best sellers. And with very few exceptions, even people who've already got traditional publishers if they're not in the top 10 are not really getting such great value. Eric King,



Eric Benson 39:47

JK Rowling, you know, it's just more books. Yeah, but that

D

Denise 39:51

nowadays, these gatekeepers don't apply anymore because there's a whole independent publishing movement, and it's easy enough. To get published the marketing then is the issue. Yeah, the marketing. The Alliance of independent authors is quite a good. There's some groups

like that, which can give you tips on writing and so on. So I would just just write and enjoy it. And there's creative writing classes. I, like I said, keep an eye on our green stories, competitions, because we often have competitions and they can create a nice deadline for you.



Eric Benson 40:28

Yes, that's what helped me just I entered a writing competition on climate fiction. And the deadline was like in two weeks when I saw it, and I'm like, okay, lovely.



Denise 40:39

Competitions are scams, you have to pay an awful lot to enter. And it's just a money making. Yeah. And yours is free, though. Right? Yours is mine is free. Yeah. And what we're doing now I'm trying to previous winners, publish them, I set up an imprint habitat press to support Oh, that's wonderful to be published one of openers. I'm hoping to publish the winner from last year soon. He's he's still working on it. And it's a great



Eric Benson 41:09

way to your assassins question. And one of the techniques I learned in creative writing, I took a few courses in it actually, that's how much I want to do this. In world building was around characters, and really building the character. So I'm wondering with your assassins question, the way that I've been doing it as I draw little circles in a circle, and each circle is a character in the story, and then I draw connections between the characters if there is any, and I find out who's maybe I don't need this character anymore, because they're not really connecting with anyone. So I'm wondering if there's a character in your story, where there's going to be a lot of connection between that character in the audience and the readers, I should say, and everyone else in it, where something happens to that character? And it's like, yeah, well, there's the whole web. Right? Yeah.



Denise 42:08

The everyone has a reason to dislike the victim, which becomes apparent, but I know not gonna get checked. Because at the start, and you don't know who the victim is going to be, yeah. who the murderer is going to be, but yeah, exactly. That it's a Web.



Eric Benson 42:24

Web of character, web, and you can, you can make us care. Right, that Yeah, that's right. I want to as this solution, this season is all about solutions. I want to focus on some of this success stories that you've had from storytelling. And what have been some of your favorite outcomes from the stories you've told in terms of maybe some climate action? Maybe a response from a reader or, or anything like that?



Denise 42:57

Yeah. No, that's, that's a good question. So like I said, there was some research on readers who read *Habitat Man*, we had 50 people who sort of gave their responses before the book during after and then one month after, Oh, wow. And so I'm not directly part of the analysis, but the preliminary results were sent to me. And I, that was really exciting. Because you, right? It's just you and you and your keyboard, and you don't always appreciate the effects it's having in the real



Eric Benson 43:34

world. And then you hope, and you and you never know sometimes, yeah.



Denise 43:37

But I got some lovely reviews on Amazon of people who said, you know, how they responded to it. And that that was really nice. And a couple of people have written to me personally, Oh, my. In terms of the research, 98% of people adopted at least one green alternative. So sometimes that one person said, I was going to pay those in my back garden, but actually, no, I think I'll let the grass grow. And then I didn't want to mow the lawn. That's why I wanted to do it. But now I realized long grass is better for habitats, and I'll get more wildlife and butterflies. So now I think, right, I will embrace that. So I wrote my hero. And one of the big things I wanted to talk about was home composting. Yeah, it was it's a big deal. If you throw sort of food waste in the bin, it, you know, causes methane emissions if it goes to landfill, generated uses more energy, whereas actually, it makes really, really good compost. So I actually thought well show don't tell I had I came across a composting toilet at a music festival. And I been to Glastonbury in the toilets, this stink, and then only one festival where they had composting toilets and they just smelt of saw dust and hamsters. And if



Eric Benson 45:00

I've used one, but nothing on Bay. I was told I was like grossed out at first but then that didn't smell



Denise 45:08

so much nicer. So, and you can get really stylish ones online as well that really groovy. I'm going to try one in my own designers coming



Eric Benson 45:17

through.



Denise 45:18

Denise 46:19

Yeah, they really are cool. I think strong pitch and trollop was the composting toilet can't argue with a name like that. Yeah. So I got one in my own shade. So it's meant that we have barbecues, people didn't have to tramp all the way through, you know, especially in COVID times it's really handy having an outdoor toilet. And then I wrote a scene I put my hero has a big life turning revelation in the composting toilet. And you know, the light shine through her. There's a religious moment. And other people, I don't know if you can relate to this, but I've, a lot of people have big moments on the toilet, where they got time to think, yeah, well, let's just embrace this. And what more ultimate metaphor is there for the circular economy, then I can't. And other than that, other people responded to that and said, they were really inspired by it. If people are saying, can I come and see your compost, do



Eric Benson 46:18

a tour of your home to see how it works?



Denise 46:21

Yes, I most of my stuff. I mean, I had stuff on pesticides. And a lot of people change their attitude towards that they didn't realize that pet flea treatments and worming treatments was so toxic to wildlife. I



Eric Benson 46:35

know, I learned that a couple years ago. And yeah, a lot of people just



Denise 46:39

don't know that I didn't bother putting stuff in there, everyone knew I kind of dripped stuff in, you know, character as a dog, you know, and that people maybe didn't know so that a lot of people respond to saying, I really didn't know that I used to do it every month, even if I didn't need to just in case, now I'm just going to be much more selective when I use it, or, say use. So that was really heartening, particularly when people took the time to email me directly. But also from some of the reviews, which was really nice. And just the general research of people who wouldn't necessarily have chosen to read this, but you know, the wild take part in research, they get paid a bit. And I mean, not everyone will like it. And that's one thing I noticed, if you're not into rom coms, you're not going to like Habitat man, it's it's not laugh out loud, funny, so gentle, lyrical, sort of, you know, humor, rather than sort of jokes or anything like that. But if it's your kind of thing, then people like it. And the danger is if you try and get people to read it and think it's something different. Yeah. And this is where I learned because I originally sort of put the, you know, as a mystery of the body in the garden, and people are expecting a thriller then. And they didn't like it. Because actually, it's not a thriller. It's more sort of nature and more gentle than that. There are exciting moments, but it's not going to fulfill someone who's after that. So I learned as well that managing people's expectations of

what the book is going to be. But it was hard, because, you know, in the publishing world there will say, Well, what else is like that right out? And say, this is like this, but I couldn't find any books that were eco themed romcoms I really cannot find another book like it.



Eric Benson 48:34

A whole genre with this.



Denise 48:37

Maybe I am. Maybe I am. But



Eric Benson 48:40

love actually beats me after tomorrow.



Denise 48:44

Yeah, but I look forward to reading yours, Eric,



Eric Benson 48:46

so I need to send that to you. Yeah. And he just sent that to you. And I bet it was really nice to have that feedback from your readers. It's always kind of unexpected. And I mean, you don't you're probably not writing to get those responses. But when you get them, it's, it makes it all worthwhile. I got a few recently,



Denise 49:11

it's so nice. And if anyone's out there and reads anything they like, do take the time to write the author. We love it. Yeah, he says, the dark days when we're stuck.



Eric Benson 49:21

Yeah, I recently got to two really nice emails about this podcast, which was unexpected and just had made me feel like okay, all this work is potentially worth it if just those two emails, right. We need that their way. Yeah. Well, from Fidel Castro to composting toilets for rent and here and you never thought you'd say that. Did you say oh, no, it's a great name for the show as well. What to ask you there the last question and my favorite one is, if if you were to jump into my shoes or any designer Educators shoes for a day, or a week or a month and teach a class on, on what you know, climate action, what would you assign to the students? What would you make them do?



Denise 50:17

Okay, what are they designing?



Eric Benson 50:21

That's up to you? Right? This is a tough one.



Denise 50:26

It is a tough one. I would always think I mean, certainly, as a writer, I think what do you want the reader to do? As a result of reading what you've written? Right? So what, you know what results from that? And people often don't ask themselves that question. So I think, what do you want people to do with whatever it is? You've designed? And it's an obvious question, but it's amazing that people don't ask it more often. Yeah.



Eric Benson 50:57

Yeah. And to your point earlier about thinking ahead, what do you want? That whatever is designed, where is it going to end up in the world? For not using it anymore?



Denise 51:10

Exactly. So So think that through luck with the stories about people going off to tackle rainforest loggers, it's like, are you really expecting your readers to do that? If not, what can they do as a result of reading this album or



Eric Benson 51:25

not? Jones right. Well, isn't it



Denise 51:27

terrible? We're chopping wood? You know, forests down, we already know that. So but your point, you kind of answered your own question. How's that product or service going out into the wild? Where we'll end up?



Eric Benson 51:38

I'm sorry, for stealing your thunder there?

 Denise 51:40

No, it was a good one. And it made me think some of the arguments I had with some of the engineers writing stories that they'd want great big solar shade, like reflecting Sun back up into the sky. Yeah. Wonderful. Yeah, that could do amazing things. But what if it got into the wrong hands? Like, you kind of created a weapon or sort of James Bond villain? Yes. Spider thing?

 Eric Benson 52:03

Yeah. You don't want to do that.

 Denise 52:04

It's that short sightedness of thinking yes, this may be absolutely wonderful. But how is it going to pan out in the world? pragmatically and realistic? What are the dangers? Yeah, like that, too?

 Eric Benson 52:18

What if your design fell into the wrong hands? What would happen? Yeah.

 Denise 52:22

And I think sometimes we're too quick to innovate, and too excited by our own ideas. So yeah, they might manifest in the world do I still

 Eric Benson 52:32

latch on to our first ideas and never give them up? And that's not a good strategy, especially students do that?

 Denise 52:40

moral imagination? I think it's about just taking the moral imagine it just is that you're ready to realize, visualize how it might work in the world. And will you get any unintended effects that you hadn't expected? So just in the thoughtfulness? Yeah.

 Eric Benson 52:57

Yeah, that's a great answer. Well, thank you for your nice. Yeah, it's been a wonderful hour together. And it's been a pleasure having you on clima fie. Before we go, Where can we again, find you online?



Denise 53:12

Okay, so you can find me online at dabaden.com.. Yeah. Greenstories.org.uk. And the books I mentioned, which have a habitat man, and no more fairy tale stories to save our planet, are available from all online retailers in paperback, ebook habitat, man is also an audio book. And you can also direct from the habitat press.com, which is the publisher website, I look. Ebooks will get there very quick paperback, because it's coming from the UK will take quite a long time. So he won't have need the black fast Beskow via Amazon.



Eric Benson 53:51

Yes. Well, thank you, Denise. It's been a pleasure having you and I could talk way more about writing. Maybe we'll do that over email because there's a lot of questions I still have. I think Well, thank



Denise 54:06

you for inviting me and I want to hear back from your listeners if they've got any good ideas.



Eric Benson 54:09

Your help everybody for her story. All right. Thank you Denise.



Eric Benson 54:16

Climify is produced, edited and engineered by me. A huge Special thanks to Season Two Ellen Keith Shaw and Christine Piolet for their gorgeous work on our new branding Batul Rashik and Mark O'Brien for their continued design help. Bianca Sandiko as our new podcast manager, and brandy Nichols and Michelle went for their strategic guidance and always supporting me on helping to improve the offerings of this podcast. If you enjoy the work we all do here and you have a spare minute or two.



Eric Benson 54:49

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