

From the Old Brewery S1-EP8.mp3

Introduction [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Ian Grosz [00:00:22] Hello and welcome to 'From the Old Brewery', a podcast highlighting the work of the staff and students of the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture here at the University of Aberdeen. My name's Ian Grosz, a Ph.D. research student in Creative Writing, and I'm co-hosting today's episode with Marianne Fossaluzza. Hi, Marianne.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:00:42] Hello, I'm Ph.D. research student as well, but in visual culture. And our guest today is May Toudic, a Ph.D. student in English here at Aberdeen. Her research focuses on adaptation, modernisation, and the relationship between 19th-century novels and 21st-century media. She enjoys all things storytelling particularly in New Media, and is currently writing and producing *Murray Mysteries*, an audio drama podcast adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Ian Grosz [00:01:13] May's research focuses on adaptation's role in embracing diversity and the representation of marginalised communities. She asks: 'How can adaptation properly address issues of social justice to bring more diverse stories to popular media?' Her thesis postulates that by bringing new perspectives to older works of literature, revisionary adaptation of Victorian women's *bildungsroman* can bridge the gap between the past, present and future, and between the individual and society, in order to advocate for social justice. Her work aims to provide concrete examples that show how adaptation can best be utilised to benefit and empower marginalised communities. May, hi, how are you doing? Welcome.

May Toudic [00:01:55] Hi. I'm good, thank you.

Ian Grosz [00:01:56] Great. Just before we begin, then, can I just ask, please, what *bildungsroman* is?

May Toudic [00:02:04] So it's basically a novel of education or a novel of growth. It's a novel that takes a character and goes with them through a journey where they learn something, where they change. So that's basically it, I think the ones that I'm working on, for example, are *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables*, so that kind of stuff.

Ian Grosz [00:02:25] So where did the term come from?

May Toudic [00:02:27] It's German. So it's *bildung*. It's kind of the similar, it's a similar thing as English. It's growth, building something. And then *roman* is a novel.

Ian Grosz [00:02:37] Ah, great. Okay.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:02:38] Brilliant. Thank you very much. And can you tell us a little bit about your background? Where and what did you study previously and how did you end up in Aberdeen?

May Toudic [00:02:48] Yes. So if you couldn't tell by now, I'm French. But I came to the UK when I was 18 and I did a BTEC diploma in popular music performance at BIMM London. So that was a year. And then I came to Aberdeen, came for the tuition fees,

stayed for the people [laughs]. I did my masters in Edinburgh for a year. And then I came back to Aberdeen for my Ph.D. again because I loved the people and I love the university.

Ian Grosz [00:03:18] What is it you like about it?

May Toudic [00:03:20] I think just the personal feeling of it, the fact that people really care. There's definitely a community feeling, and just I genuinely went through my undergrad really loving and admiring the professors that I worked with, and I thought: I get to be their co-worker, you know, like I get to be on an equal level with them. And that really appealed to me.

Ian Grosz [00:03:43] That sounds lovely, so everyone in the English department is going to be like "yeah".

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:03:45] Yeah, yes, it's a special shout out to May's professors!

Ian Grosz [00:03:50] So can you tell us a bit about the history of adaptation and perhaps adaptation studies in particular for people who aren't ... for people who are new to the field? I wonder if you could outline perhaps some of the more important work that's been done in that area?

May Toudic [00:04:06] Yeah. So adaptation itself, it's kind of always existed. Think of stuff like mythology and Arthurian legends where there's, you know, maybe one source, but then it kind of spreads out and everyone has their take on it. And when you think about it, even sort of written culture is an adaptation of usually oral storytelling. So adaptation has always been there. Usually when adaptation studies kind of started, when films and TV started, that's what it started with. And it began with ideas of fidelity and debates over the status and rights of each medium, you know, is film... does it have the authority to take over literature and stuff like that?

Ian Grosz [00:04:58] Reinterpret it with its own...

May Toudic [00:04:59] Yeah, exactly. And then it moved into more close readings where instead of trying to debate about the big theory of the media, people were just taking, you know, specific pieces of work and comparing them and figuring things out like that. And nowadays it's kind of broadening and expanding the ways in which we define a successful adaptation. So one of the biggest ways in which it's changing is the inclusion of New Media adaptations. But it's also anything from talking about, you know, using multiple media to do an adaptation or, you know, intertextuality how do other... previous adaptations of a work influence an adaptation? So there's tons and tons of ways to think about it and the way that new forms of adaptation studies kind of begin and emerge is kind of you take literature and visual culture and you go and pick up a concept from a different thing. So psychology, there's a lot about kind of like, why do we like adaptation, what it does to our brain in terms of it being comforting because it's familiar. Yeah. So there's lots of ways to think about it.

Ian Grosz [00:06:15] It's a very rich area.

May Toudic [00:06:16] Yeah. I would say if anyone wants to know more about it, check out the Oxford Bibliographies entry on adaptation by Thomas Leitch and Kyle Meikle. It's really comprehensive and it's really accessible, so.

Ian Grosz [00:06:27] Okay, well, we might put that up as a link...

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:06:30] Yeah, good to know and they have...

Ian Grosz [00:06:31] Under the episode, great.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:06:32] Now your thesis, your research focuses on diversity, what made you want to focus on that and what makes a good adaptation in this regard, for you?

May Toudic [00:06:45] So yeah, first of all, it's just personal to me. I'm a queer neurodivergent woman. So representation is quite close to my heart. And I know that the literary canon is anything but diverse, and there are several options for solving this issue. A lot of people want to completely uproot the canon and replace it with different things, and I think that's completely a valid take. But I'm more interested in seeing what we can do with that existing canon, with reinterpreting and re-appropriating those texts in new and challenging ways. So for me, a good adaptation either will highlight and deepen the existing social themes of its original text, or it tries to fill in the gaps. You know, like asking questions like, where are the people of colour in this text, where are the women, the queer people, the working class? And what would this story look like from their perspective.

Ian Grosz [00:07:42] People that would be absent in the original story?

May Toudic [00:07:43] Yeah, exactly.

Ian Grosz [00:07:44] Because of the lens that it was looking through at the time. Repopulating the...?

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:07:50] It's a bit of a 'death of the author' kind of thing. You go further in the text and completely appropriate it to yourself.

May Toudic [00:07:56] Sort of, yes. Although I'm not a fan of 'death of the author' as a concept because I think, especially when you're studying existing themes, it's important to know where they come from in the author's life. So I think it's more of a 'take what you want to take from the author and leave what you want to leave'.

Ian Grosz [00:08:21] As someone adapting a story?

May Toudic [00:08:23] Yeah, definitely. But also, when you're looking at an adaptation, intent counts for a lot. So the adaptor is also, you know, you could say 'death of the author' kind of extends to an adaptor. You can sort of see an adaptation as whatever you want. But I think looking into their intent in adapting the thing, is... it's really illuminating. It can tell you a lot.

Ian Grosz [00:08:52] About current issues of the time that the adaptation took place: what was in the focus at the time, that kind of thing?

May Toudic [00:08:59] Yeah, exactly. About, you know, what they wanted to say, what they saw in the original text that stood out to them. I think it's really interesting and it's why I've actually been interviewing a few adaptors, those who actually will speak to me and asking them, you know, specific questions about, you know, did you mean to do that? You know, what did you... what kind of obstacles did you face? Did you... were you fearing any

backlash? Did you hold anything back because of that? You know, it's really interesting to know, to me the context is really important.

Ian Grosz [00:09:34] Yeah. So, presumably there's good and probably quite bad adaptations as well?

May Toudic [00:09:39] Oh, yeah, definitely. I'm actually... my birthday is next week and I'm doing a party that is watching really bad adaptations.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:09:49] Quite a concept.

May Toudic [00:09:50] I know there's a 2003 modernisation of *Pride and Prejudice* that's like a high school like rom com thing, but it's also like made by a Christian production company. And apparently it's a mess. So I'm very excited to see it.

Ian Grosz [00:10:05] What do you think of *Death on the Nile*. The new *Death on the Nile* with Kenneth Branagh?

May Toudic [00:10:09] Actually, I have got to admit, I'm kind of ashamed I haven't read the original. But I did read *Murder on the Orient Express*, but I'm pretty sure I read it after watching the movie.

Ian Grosz [00:10:22] It felt that was trying to do some of the things that you were talking about there: by repopulating a story with...

May Toudic [00:10:27] Yeah, I...

Ian Grosz [00:10:28] People who were absent in the original...

May Toudic [00:10:29] I definitely think that's the case, I've had friends kind of ask me questions about it, you know. I know there's a queer couple in that movie that doesn't exist in the original text, and they were saying, you know, is it really, is it a good thing to kind of add, you know, add queer people when they weren't there? Is it kind of betraying the author to change something that big? And I was saying, no, it's completely something that could have existed. And it was treated in a way that worked with the plot and kind of...

Ian Grosz [00:11:02] Absolutely.

May Toudic [00:11:03] Yeah. It would have been something that was possible at the time.

Ian Grosz [00:11:07] Yeah, because Dawn French plays the lover of the old lady but...she's a companion: a nurse and a companion, you know, officially, because that's how they would have had to have presented themselves.

May Toudic [00:11:19] Yeah, there's a big reveal, but they're never sort of demonised for it. Nothing like that.

Ian Grosz [00:11:23] No, it's accepted. She's great. So, sorry, I was going off a bit there. So you've probably touched on a lot of that already, actually, but this next question just talks about those new perspectives to adaptation: to bridge that gap between past, present and future, but I was interested in... you mentioned also the individual and society, and I wondered if you could expand on that aspect of adaptation?

May Toudic [00:11:47] Yeah. So that's something that's very much going into the nature of the *bildungsroman*. A big component of the *bildungsroman* is that you... the character has to negotiate their inner self...so, learning at the same time to know themselves, to know who they are and what they want, and fitting into society. So it's... I kind of want to explore the ways in which we're constantly balancing different parts of ourselves.

Ian Grosz [00:12:16] Yeah, that tension that exists...

May Toudic [00:12:17] Exactly. So whether that's being marginalised and attempting to fit in, or deciding what we want to take relief from the past or canonical literature. So yeah.

Ian Grosz [00:12:26] Okay. Yeah, it makes perfect sense.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:12:29] Now, from what I've understood, you are actually currently working on an adaptation yourself, *The Murray Mysteries*, and I am curious about what came first. And I mean by that your involvement in producing media or your research topic, and how do these two complement or inform each other, if they do?

May Toudic [00:12:52] Yeah. So *Murray Mysteries* actually was completed recently.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:12:56] Wooh, congratulations!

May Toudic [00:12:56] So if anyone wants to binge it, it's, it's all out now. And I'm working on a different project right now, which is an adaptation of... It's called *Morland P.I.*, it's going to be an adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*.

Ian Grosz [00:13:10] Oh brilliant!

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:13:10] Brilliant!

May Toudic [00:13:11] But yeah...

Ian Grosz [00:13:13] So what platform can we find *Murray Mysteries* on?

May Toudic [00:13:15] Any podcast platforms. So, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, anything like that. Probably the same places you can find this podcast.

Ian Grosz [00:13:24] Oh Yeah... It's a stupid question.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:13:26] There are no stupid questions!

May Toudic [00:13:28] There are not. So those interests kind of emerged at the same time, I would say, although I was always interested in producing media. As a quick little anecdote, when I was in high school, I did a project. It was a personal project, so we got to pick the topic and I picked something relating to English literature and women's rights and stuff like that. And as an additional thing for the project, to kind of set it apart, I decided to make a video and I got my friends to dress up and I dressed up as well. And it was a video that showed Virginia Woolf talking to the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and kind of like asking them, 'Why did you do this? Like it's anti-feminist and stuff like that'. And them explaining that they didn't have a choice, that these were the circumstances of their time. And then it ends with Virginia Woolf waking up with those books next to her, and

basically, she dreamed that she was talking to these people. I played Lydia Bennet, by the way.

Ian Grosz [00:14:30] That's a real adaptor's dream that one, isn't it?

May Toudic [00:14:32] Yeah, exactly. And you know, so looking back on that, I was 16 at the time and so I've always been interested in stuff like that. So yeah, they kind of evolved in parallel.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:14:46] Brilliant. So both through your own practise and your research, I am curious about... Do you have to think about diversity in a different way, depending on which media you're adapting to and how it's going to work? So yeah, what are the differences, if there are any?

May Toudic [00:15:04] Yeah, for sure. I think a big thing is in the podcast medium, it's very difficult when you're speaking about ethnic and racial diversity because it's invisible. Like you can't see it and you don't want to get into, you know, like speech patterns and stuff like that as a white writer, that's definitely not okay to do. So then you have to decide, you know, am I able to cast people of colour? Are they auditioning? You know, do I ask them to disclose their ethnic background or is that out of line? And so there's a whole dilemma with it. And a lot of podcasts just choose to cast whoever has the best voice no matter what they look like, and just let people imagine what the characters look like.

Ian Grosz [00:16:00] But I suppose, then, you've got that question of potentially not being able to bring...sort of personal life experience to it: to a role?

May Toudic [00:16:07] Exactly. That's definitely an issue. I think the ideal way to do it is to find an actor of colour that is able to talk to you about their own experiences and do a meaningful, meaningful representation of a certain identity. But in my experience, with very limited funds and marketing, it's, it's really hard. And, you know, it's also that you want to compensate people and especially people from marginalised backgrounds who are... have to work harder to get compensated. And so far, nobody is getting compensated, not even me.

Ian Grosz [00:16:46] It's all on goodwill, at the moment.

May Toudic [00:16:48] Exactly: it's all in goodwill. We can definitely do better, and I want to do better, but it would be easier with more resources for sure.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:16:57] Unending problem.

Ian Grosz [00:17:00] So you finished *Murray Mysteries* and you said you're working on a new adaptation, and I wondered what you enjoy most about running a production company – which is a pretty good achievement, by the way – while you're in the middle of a Ph.D?

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:17:11] You're juggling with many things.

Ian Grosz [00:17:12] And just wonder, what do you enjoy most? Is it the writing? Because I know you got a writing background as well, haven't you?

May Toudic [00:17:18] Yeah.

Ian Grosz [00:17:19] The adaptation itself? Reinterpreting something, or working with actors or all of these things? And if any of those areas are like, a particular challenge for you? Is there any bit – anything – you don't like doing?

May Toudic [00:17:31] Yeah. So I do enjoy the writing, but surprisingly enough, and it surprised me, that's not the thing I enjoy the most. I really like the production aspects. I like sort of having my hands in every, every part and kind of working on whole projects and getting to do a bit of everything. I love organising for sure, and there's nothing more rewarding than watching your insanely talented friends bring to life the words that you wrote. So recording sessions are really, really good. Also, fan art. Fan art is very rewarding. I have a wall of fan art in my room. But yeah, recording sessions are exhausting, but they're really fun. And as much as working with actors can be the most fun part, it can also be the most challenging part, especially when those actors are your friends. It's kind of hard to toe the line between friendliness and authority when it's hard to... it's kind of like herding cats. And I have a cat, so I would know.

Ian Grosz [00:18:31] Herding cats...with big egos potentially?

May Toudic [00:18:34] Oh, no, they don't have too big egos. You know, they're not getting paid for this, so...

Ian Grosz [00:18:38] It must be great seeing it come to life, though, if you've got an idea...

May Toudic [00:18:41] Oh yeah it's amazing!

Ian Grosz [00:18:42] You've written this idea and then seeing people just bring it to life, it must be really rewarding.

May Toudic [00:18:46] For sure, especially because, you know, you write something and it takes on a whole new dimension with delivery, with the way people are doing it. And as much as I do most of the directing, everyone has an input. And if they say, 'Oh, I thought I could say it like this', or 'I thought I could add this line here', it can take on a whole new dimension. It can become something completely different. And sometimes I have actors that are particularly good at ad-lib and so I leave them dedicated spaces to ad-lib.

Ian Grosz [00:19:17] Oh brilliant!

May Toudic [00:19:18] We have a character in *Murray Mysteries* who famously does not swear. And so everywhere there would be an expletive, I used to put in sort of harmless substitutions, but the actor kept improvising and doing something much funnier than the one I was doing. So, so I just started putting in brackets, 'improvised expletive', where there should be one and letting him do his thing.

Ian Grosz [00:19:47] And then let rip.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:19:48] It really becomes a collaborative, collaborative, really hard to say for me, a collaborative work then, in a way.

May Toudic [00:19:56] Yeah, it really is. It really is. And, and that actor also plays two different characters and in this show. And so the funniest thing is seeing him do entire conversations between those two characters with himself, that's, that was one of his auditions, it was improvising an entire conversation between the two characters.

Ian Grosz [00:20:17] That'd take some courage though, anyway: if you've dreamt the whole thing up, you must have a really...kind of clear idea in your head of what you want it to be – what you want it to look like – but then it becomes something else when you hand over to...for the people that get involved with it.

May Toudic [00:20:32] Yeah, I think I'm not...

Ian Grosz [00:20:34] Not precious about it?

May Toudic [00:20:35] No, I think I can be a bit of a control freak with certain things, but I'm not a perfectionist, so I'm always open to the idea that something might change and evolve as the production process goes. And I, I have so much, I do so much for this, for these projects that any little bit of help to make it better is definitely... Like I've, I've begged people to do some editing for me before. I don't do all the editing because I want the control over it. I do all the editing because I feel bad asking people to spend like, 3 hours editing an episode for my project. So I had to teach myself to edit, to sound design everything, and then do it myself. And it's only when I get really stuck that I ask if other people can take a look at it and try to improve it.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:21:27] That brings one major question to me. Between the production, the writing, the editing, the thesis, the everything. You seem extremely busy. And how are you managing to make all of that fit in one week? And are you on track with your thesis at the moment, if that's not too indiscreet to ask?

May Toudic [00:21:52] No. Yeah, I swear I'm not that busy. Sometimes my supervisors are worried about me when I talk about everything I do. But I swear, I think time management is kind of my superpower.

Ian Grosz [00:22:05] Can we have some?

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:22:06] Please give me... I was going to say, please give me some of that.

May Toudic [00:22:09] So yeah, I am actually on track to submit my thesis in two years or maybe two years and a couple of months. I'm in final edits right now. I just tend to be very strict with myself about working consistently and scheduling time for everything, to do things like exercise, hanging out with friends, just rest and do nothing, work on creative projects... So I have, for example, I have currently three days a week where I work on my thesis. One day I teach, one day I work on my creative projects and then I take the weekend off.

Ian Grosz [00:22:43] Well that's pretty organised. Yeah.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:22:46] I am amazed you managed to do that, and I'm sorry, but finishing a thesis in two years, I've literally never heard of it.

Ian Grosz [00:22:53] Are you on track with that?

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:22:54] So, kudos to you!

May Toudic [00:22:56] Yeah. There's a bit of a scheduling issue with one of my supervisors being on leave. So the... Basically I'm on track for that. It's going to be all about how fast I can get the feedback for the very final edit. But otherwise, I'm on track.

Ian Grosz [00:23:12] That's amazing.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:23:13] Congratulations. Yeah, it's just... Whoof!

Ian Grosz [00:23:17] It's amazing. So what comes next, then? If you manage to get your Ph.D...sort of signed off and everything, and revisions done: if there is any! It sounds like there probably won't be any, to be honest. You're too prepared.

May Toudic [00:23:28] There probably will be.

Ian Grosz [00:23:30] What comes after that? Are you looking to do more research, or are you going to continue to try and develop your production company, or just find a job, go back to life? What? What comes next?

May Toudic [00:23:40] So honestly, it's a bit of everything. Realistically, my production company won't be making enough money within the next few months to pay me. And I really enjoy research, but I don't think academia is a particularly healthy place for me right now. So I'd like to work in production and preferably for companies and projects that kind of merge my interests in education and creativity and in diversity. So I've been, I've been working freelance with a few companies...

Ian Grosz [00:24:11] Oh right, ok.

May Toudic [00:24:12] And sort of going through those projects, I can see, 'Oh, this actually really interests me, this, this kind of merges everything'. And I'm always on the lookout for permanent jobs within companies that I really enjoy working with freelance.

Ian Grosz [00:24:25] And is that...are you finding that work up here in Aberdeen or elsewhere? Is it remote work, or...

May Toudic [00:24:31] Yeah, it's usually remote work and that's kind of what I'm looking for as well. I like the idea of flexibility because I think community and friendship is the most important. It's my priority right now, so I'd like to be where my friends are and that, yeah, I wouldn't necessarily want to move for a job and not have anyone around me.

Ian Grosz [00:24:52] And start again...

May Toudic [00:24:31] Yeah, I've done the starting again thing many times. And when I moved to Edinburgh, I realised that, 'Oh, I found my people'. And I'd rather just be around them. So hopefully remote. And the projects I've been finding so far are remote.

Ian Grosz [00:25:10] Right. Sounds good! Sounds like you have a really bright future, May.

May Toudic [00:25:13] I hope so.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:25:14] I do. Yeah, we do hope so for you as well. Thank you very much for discussing all of that with us, sharing about your thesis, bringing some of

your joy and busyness to the room. I have to admit, I am still amazed by how much stuff you've managed to fit in a week. So let's hope that this is just the beginning of your production career.

May Toudic [00:25:39] I hope so.

Marianne Fossaluzza [00:25:40] And thank you again for speaking with us.

Ian Grosz [00:25:41] Yeah, thank you.

Conclusion [00:26:04] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.