Toni Lahtinen: I found myself enjoying the past world more than the present one. Perhaps that— that's a form of escapism for me as I'm growing older [*laughs*] and everything is getting more complicated. But yeah, I like the very classic stuff. It's interesting when you read about books written about one hundred years ago, you really realize how fast things have changed. The 20th century was such an exceptional time in human history. The technological development was something that had never happened before. And if you think about that rapid development in technology and our culture in the past hundred years, what will it be in the next fifty years, for example? Everything is happening more quickly all the time.

Colin Gioia Connors: COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 and commonly referred to as coronavirus, has many people worried about the future. While all fifty states have announced plans to reopen in the near or distant future, there is still much uncertainty about what comes next, and still much we do not understand about the virus. Our knowledge about how quickly the virus mutates, whether those infected develop immunity, or when, if ever, a vaccine will be ready is all still developing, with new updates coming sometimes multiple times a day. We are learning, in real time, the social, economic, and political effects of rapid, large-scale change necessitated by a global crisis. Many people are eager for things to return to normal, but others are just as eager to take this as an opportunity to reimagine and reshape what our idea of “normal” means. The current crisis has many people thinking about our relationship to the environment, our relationship to one another, and how our current economic system influences or even dictates the terms of those relationships. If you could rebuild your world, what kind of world would you build?

Toni Lahtinen is a visiting postdoctoral research fellow from the University of Tampere in Finland currently at the University of Washington in Seattle. He is an expert on Finnish literature, and he studies how humans understand their relationship to the natural world, as well as how and why we tell stories about the future. I spoke with him over the phone last week to discuss his last two months in the United States, and what — if any — progress he has made on his research amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Toni: I'm Toni Lahtinen from Tampere University, Finland, and I'm a— at the moment I'm a postdoctoral researcher, focusing on my own project funded by the Academia of Finland, and it deals with the contemporary Finnish literature, environmental risks, dystopias, eco-dystopias, and myths. And that is probably how I ended up here in Seattle.

Colin: When, when did you arrive to Seattle?
**Toni:** I arrived early March just as this Corona madness began.

**Colin:** Oh my goodness! I— I thought that you were here before that.

**Toni:** No. Actually, I was here two days after they closed the University [*laughs*] of Washington, and the next week, if I remember correctly, they closed down the whole city and stopped the flights between U.S. and Europe. So I was— I was in a tough situation.

**Colin:** Did you even have the option to return at that point?

**Toni:** Indeed, I had. And I had recommend recommendations from Finnish government and also from Tempere University to return me immediately, [*laughs*] but I refused and I’m glad I did.

**Colin:** Why are you glad?

**Toni:** This visit has not exactly been what I expected it to be. But on the other hand, this is a historical situation, and for me this is an unexpected perspective [*laughs*] to this [pandemic] and everything around it. So I could have been home in Finland doing nothing during this time. And I’ve learned a lot of things during this visit.

**Colin:** So— So what have you been doing while you have been here?

**Toni:** Well, I have been living quite [*laughs*] minimal life. I have been doing my research and I have been writing about this corona pandemic and and I have been able to focus on my work better than for a long time. [*laughs*]

**Colin:** [*laughs*] Well, I’m very happy for you. I— I know that coronavirus and quarantine does different things to different people, so I’m glad that you’re finding it productive.

**Toni:** Yeah, I have a wonderful landlady who has been taking care of me, —

**Colin:** That’s really good.

**Toni:** —cooking for me [*laughs*] and she made me my own mask and everything. So she has been keeping me safe.

**Colin:** That’s good. Well, why don’t you tell me a little bit about your work? I guess it would be nicest if you could start by explaining: what is dystopian fiction?

**Toni:** Well, dystopian fiction is a fiction about near future and a kind of future that we would probably like to avoid—something unpleasant but not really unexpected. So the dystopias that I’m really focusing on are all ecological dystopias, so-called eco-dystopias. And of course what’s also important to understand when we are speaking of dystopian literature—it always depicts the contemporary society. All the fears that it reflects are derived from contemporary society—what’s been going on lately. So it’s not about future. It’s— it’s really about today, this moment, and this time that we’re living right now.

**Colin:** Would it be fair to say— I mean, you must have read a lot of dystopian fiction for your work. Do you enjoy it?

**Toni:** Not anymore, I have to confess. And, and dystopias, there are— there are great moments, but dystopian literature is also very generic. So it’s— it’s all always the same formula. [*laughs*] It’s very repetitive. It’s based on repetition so much that— I enjoy it as a as a part of my work but when I go home and try to relax [*laughs*] I’m not reading any kind of dystopia.
Colin: So what is the formula? How does a typical dystopian novel—or should I ask, how does a typical Finnish dystopian novel go?

Toni: Well, typical Finnish dystopian novel resembles the trends in Western literature. It's very similar, for example, to American fiction. But most—most of those dystopias that is published in Finland at the moment is—somehow deal with ecological crisis or most usually climate change. Finland is a very small language area and when those trends, international trends, hit Finland, most of our—most of our authors usually take their shot at it. What happens in—in the—in the world literature usually very soon happens in Finland, too.

Colin: So does Finland have a long history of dystopian fiction or is it a relatively new trend?

Toni: It's a very new trend. It's—it's a funny thing that the Finnish literary tradition is based on strong realism, and the older generations have always liked literature that kind of depicts reality as it is—which is impossible of course, it's just a style of writing—but dystopias were really marginal until the turn of the millennium. And, wh—At the same time, when the ecological crisis started to get more acute, then dystopian literature also started to get more popular in Finland. ...Actually my refrigerator is humming behind my back.

Colin: Oh, okay.

Toni: [*audible sound of Toni as he unplugs the refrigerator and drops the electrical cord to the floor*] I turned it off.

Colin: Okay. ...Well probably the most successful dystopian fiction that I can think of is The Hunger Games series that came out 2008-2010, and then was made into a series of films. Was that translated into Finnish and did that have a big impact on the—the literature that you're reading?

Toni: That's an excellent example of those international trends that I mentioned, because after Hunger Games there have been numerous novels for young adult readers that somehow repeats the formula of Hunger Games: the protagonist is a young, strong woman who has to survive in—in a world, kind of a post-apocalyptic world, that—that has been somehow changed by this environmental catastrophe. So it had a very huge influence on Finnish literature, and they're still publishing a lot of books with—with the same kind of ingredients, with this brave girl fighting for a better world, and this is also an important thing to notice when we—when we are talking about dystopian apocalyptic or post apocalyptic literature: these books—novels and stories—they don't really deal with the end of human race. There's always survivors who continue their—their being, and they try to build a better world. It's—it's not the end of the world; it's the end of the welfare state that we are actually dealing with.

Colin: And so is that the major fear, that the welfare state will end?

Toni: I think it's a major featuring in contemporary dystopias in the Western world, and it's—in Finnish literature that is very strong feature because as a—as we are part of the Nordic—one of the Nordic countries, the welfare state idea is so strong in our culture, and—and these Nordic welfare states has—has been idolized in many ways. So I think we live in constant—in constant fear of losing it somehow.

Colin: Well, what replaces it, then? What is the scariest form of government, or—or is it just the absence of government?

Toni: It's usually—it's usually the absence of government. It's kind of a returning to a—in a primitive world, when people have to fight for their survival, kind of a Robinsonade-based ideas.
Colin: So the idea that you will be alone and have to find a way to survive on your own?

Toni: That's right. And there's no— there's no government, and there are no social services, and there— there are no rules, no laws anymore that has held our society together so far.

Colin: That's really interesting because it sounds to me like a lot of the kind of cultural stories that we have in America as well. At least for— for some people it's a joke, but I mean, we talk about “the zombie apocalypse” that is going to come at some point in the future, and so we have to prepare for it. And so, oh, I've— I've met people who, you know, sometimes organize parts of their life around this. They say, “Oh yeah, I decided to take an, you know, emergency medical first responder class because I want to be ready for the zombie apocalypse,” or, you know, “I'm learning this skill for the zombie apocalypse.” And we've been talking about zombies for a long time in this— in this country, but there— but there's always, sort of, this idea that I— I'm going to try to escape and get away and be alone. So when you said Robinson Crusoe—just try to get to my Island and I'll just hold up there and wait for things to blow over—I guess I'm just curious, what are Finnish people afraid of, and do they have cabins in the woods that they are planning on going to?

Toni: I don't think this kind of a survivalism is that big of a thing in Finland, but [*laughs*] we have a lot of cabins and cottages in Finland anyway because that's part of our culture, that many people live in their cabins during their summer holidays. Zombies— they are a fear of the other, and I think that is, as you said, zombies stand for so many fears, but I— I'm not sure that Finnish culture has such a strong fear of the other. But that may be due [to] several reasons: we are not as ethnically diverse as you are, for example, and we have a very strong middle class, so the differences between the rich and poor ones— they are growing all the time, but most of the people are middle-class. So that of course affects the way that we create these collective fears. But— but that's a— that's an interesting question for which I don't have a good answer: what are— what are the basic fears? We have this national myth about “the bird's nest.” And this is an old myth that derives from Scandinavian mythology and it has been used in Finnish literature for hundred years now. And “bird's nest” means a safe, distant place, far away [on] the edge of the world, where the— where the earth and sky meets, and it's a place where birds fly during the winter time. So it's— it's this place of milk and honey, and our idea of Finland as a nation, as a state, has been based on this utopian idea of a safe place somewhere far away. And now when these global threats have arisen in so many ways, the climate change, also coronavirus, but before coronavirus, for example, AIDS epidemics, that— that's a— I think that's the one of the strongest fears that we have: that we lose this very safe nation somewhere apart from the rest of the world. That's— that's a very Finnish thing.

Colin: So does Finland then become the “bird's nest” for the rest of the world?

Toni: Yeah, I think that it's possible that this idea of “bird's nest” is behind— it affects us when we, for example, deal with immigrants, with, kind of a— We are afraid that they will have our nest.

Colin: Then in the novels that you've read, are they dealing with waves of migrants coming in, of refugees? Are those plot points, and how— what happens to those people in these novels?

Toni: Yes, it's— it's a— Climate migration is one theme: the idea that as climate change changes everything, it will change also the national borders, and people from eastern and far away countries will seek place to live in northern Europe. That's one— that's one narrative that you can find from these books. I think the books don't raise fears—more fears, I mean. They often depict the world where people have learned to live with different cultures and with different kind of people. For example, the novels for young adult readers, I think they are very— they show very positive attitudes toward the immigrants, which is— I find it very important because the debate about immigration has been so heated up during the past ten years in Finland, and that's why it's important that the books that are written about the subject don't frighten us. [*laughs*]
Colin: Well yeah, taking on climate migrants, climate refugees, is something that’s already happening and countries are already dealing with. So it’s not that distant of a future. It’s— it’s already, to a degree, what we have in the present. I think that it’s really interesting, though, to see that the novels are dealing with, sort of, the consequences further down the line and finding stories to talk about what living with those consequences already are because, at least what I’m thinking about the zombie apocalypse, I’m not thinking that far into the future. I’m thinking about the early stages. And I’ve been reading a few think pieces about what’s going on right now with coronavirus in just how different, at least for Americans, the coronavirus is from the kind of cultural fears that we have about the zombie apocalypse, and the narratives that we have about the apocalypse happening—and that idea that you can run away to a cabin in the woods is kind of falling apart, and the idea that it’s, um, you know, you’re going to go to the cabin, and you’re going to have your shotgun, and you’re going to shoot zombies as they come—it’s a very, kind of, masculine fantasy in which we are going to be the action heroes of the film and protect our families, but protect them with guns. And that’s not really what the pandemic is that we’re living in right now. Instead of using guns, we’re baking bread and we’re sewing masks, and it’s much less masculine—I mean, there’s— there’s no monster for us to fight because the virus is invisible. And so it is—we’re not running away into isolation so much as coming together to help people out. It’s—it’s a very different, I think, kind of apocalypse from the one that, at least Americans, Americans have been imagining for a long time.

Toni: And still the gun sales went up when this pandemic began! [*laughs*] But— But it’s the same thing with, for example, climate fiction. It needs new kind of a ways of storytelling because you cannot fight it with masculinity or with guns or violence, and that is why it also is such a challenging topic for authors: how to make a, kind of, a compelling— compelling narrative about the changes in—in our natural environment.

Colin: I think that we are so used to stories about heroes who use violence to solve problems because that’s part of the generic requirement of action films, that there’s a problem and the way that it is solved is with violent tools, which is very different from a genre like horror where instead of being empowered, you are the victim and you don’t have power. It’s in this intense feeling of powerlessness that— that these things play out. How do dystopian novels deal with that? Is— is there a spectrum of— of being action heroes, Katniss Everdeen with her bow, fighting, or— or does it go in— in different directions?

Toni: There is a variety of ways of dealing with it, but I have to say that, like I mentioned earlier, the American— the influence of American popular culture is so strong on Finnish literature right now that there are more and more these action kind of narratives, which have also been leading to Finnish literature that tries to hide its Finnish roots and Finnish culture to make it more appealing for international audiences, for audiences. But still there are— there are some older generation authors who deal with these questions more in a more philosophical way. For example, speculative fiction is a growing field of literature in Finland right now, as it is in all over the Western world, so there are different kind of ways, ways of depicting our crises. But— But I have to say that action is getting more and more common.

Colin: Are there any Finnish dystopian novels that have become as popular within Finland as The Hunger Games was here? Are there any stars that rise to the top of the pack?

Toni: I think one of the best climate fiction novels that has been written in Finland for some time is Emmi Itäranta’s Memory of Water. It has been written in two languages at the same time. She wrote this book both in English and in Finnish, so it’s not a translation that you can find. And it has been doing very, very good in other countries as well. You can see the influence of American fiction in that book, too, but— but it’s quite rich, and it’s a cross— it’s a crossover book. It could be read as a novel for young adult readers, but at the same time it has some features that I think that more grown-up readers would— would enjoy. I think that’s— that’s one of the best books that we have produced for global markets for a long time.
Colin: Could you tell me a little bit about some of those parts you enjoy?

Toni: Well, it's— it's idea of Scandinavia after this terrible [laughs*] ecological crisis—as always—the mysterious past, something has happened, and nobody really knows, and then there is this totalitarian society which is based on regulation of water, and then this young protagonist rises against this terrible tyranny. So there's this kind of a action plot. But at the same time it's aesthetically very refined, and there is this kind of philosophy that is— resembles Eastern religions that deals with this very nice water imagery, and I think that—that's a good example of a book that can be entertaining and philosophical at the same time. So I— I sincerely recommend it to everyone.

Colin: Philosophical in the sense that were the parts that inspired you?

Toni: Yes... I am— I'm too old [laughs*] I'm so old nowadays that— that it inspired me in— in a way that I was surprised in a good—in a good manner, that it still had some unique qualities, you know, you can— you can see the connection to the popular culture, but at the same time it's not a copy of everything. It has something unique in it. It has a voice of an author that you can recognize and that's why I like it a lot, because I find it sad that many times contemporary literature is reviewed only by the morals of it. It's not appreciated as a aesthetic piece of art. So sometimes it seems that the novel is good if it's— if it says the right things about right issues, and I don't think that's enough to make a good novel. I appreciate that people write books for the better world, but that doesn't necessarily make it good literature. So we should not forget about nature of literature, which is something different than just political views, for example.

Colin: Right, because you have all those different layers within a piece of art, of the core of the ideas of what it's trying to give a message about, but then you have the layer on top of that that is the the idiom of the genre—

Toni: Exactly.

Colin: —and how well it works within that, and then above that is the, you know, the shiny outside of how— how, you know, how beautiful is it.

Toni: Yeah. Yeah, that's right because it's easy to agree on things that we should fight against climate change, for example. Anyone can say that. It doesn't take a lot. But to make an interesting novel about it—it's a totally different situation. It's a different task and it should be also valued in different parameters.

Colin: Well, when thinking about climate change today and now, I often get, you know, very depressed and have a lot of despair, and so I imagine that that is one of the the main emotions that is running through any dystopian fiction. Is— Is it just despair all the way down? Or like, is that why you are now not enjoying these novels as much? Or— or is there something that brings hope?

Toni: Dystopias usually have these utopian elements. If you think about these fiction stories like Hunger Games, there are people who still believe in a better world and a better society, and they are willing to do something for it. So they are not all hopeless. But of course I think the perspective have darkened a lot in the past 20 years. If you think about whole cultural scene in the Western world, at least, we are expecting the worst all the time. And maybe that's because we have— we now live in this rich society—that our everyday life is dependent on this technology, which produces large-scale risks, also. And if this technology fails, we are in trouble because everything is built on this— on these machines. So we have to think about the future all the time. We have to think about these worst scenarios just to avoid them, and I think that our collective consciousness has been turning more intensely towards the future in predicting these risks and counting the risks all the time, and that's why also these dystopias are so popular right now. But it's not all hopeless. There are actually very few stories I think that ends in, that really ends in “end.” The End. [laughs*] —that everything ends. There's
always hope, I think. I think in these books that I have read there’s always some kind of element of hope underneath all this fear, and fear and anxiety.

**Colin:** Well, maybe this is the question I wanted to ask, is that dystopias are always set in the future. And the future has a future—

**Toni:** That’s right!

**Colin:** —So, so how do these novels end?

**Toni:** For dystopias it’s very typical that they have a kind of an open ending, so that leaves the reader wondering where are we going? What’s gonna happen next? They don’t close the stories. It’s kind of a “let’s see what is coming.” And that’s of course a rhetoric that tries to encourage the reader to think about these developments and maybe do something about it if they can. But it’s also, people— That’s one way to read dystopias, kind of warning that teaches us to change our way of living. But it seems that people who read about climate change, who read climate fiction, they already are quite aware about climate change, and they are already willing to do something about it. So it’s questionable how much these books really change the views of their readers because the people who don’t believe in climate change, for example, they are not about to read a dystopian story about it. They pick up another book. So it’s preaching for the converted.

**Colin:** Yeah. So, I mean, what does it offer to the converted? Because when thinking about climate change as an individual, it’s hard to know what to do to make a positive difference or even how to do it, and so these are societal-wide problems, I mean global problems [with] climate change, but stories always have human protagonists, single protagonists. So what is the— what is the human story?

**Toni:** Yeah, it’s— Exactly. These dystopias are also always about humans. It’s our future and it’s—it’s the very human-focused perspective to things. But on the other hand I don’t find it that bad. I would rather see a future with humans among other species than world without us—there are people who think otherwise—but these are very selfish stories because, as I mentioned earlier, it’s— they’re also stories about the societies that we like to live in right now and losing them. So these fears are very human-based, but on the other hand I think these books also, they raise awareness and they change the focus a little bit to the non-human nature, also. So they might have a effect on those things, too.

**Colin:** But is the— is the way that the individual succeeds in a dystopian novel to be the strongest and have the most survival skills, or — or is it to make the most friends and to— and to cooperate with others? Are there— are there dynamics like that in play?

**Toni:** I think that the most of the stories just reminds us that— that we have to consider our natural environment, that we have to find a new kind of way of living to maintain our life on Earth. So stories that would imply that only the strong survive, I don’t think that they would be that popular [*laughs*] in their genre.

**Colin:** Well, coronavirus is definitely showing us that we have to work on new ways to survive right now. Could you tell me a bit about what you’ve learned living here in the States since this began?

**Toni:** It’s very hard to comprehend it still, because when I arrived things started to happen so fast. And nobody really knew what was happening. And after those 2 or 3 weeks, first 2 or 3 weeks, I was getting ready to leave because, as I was following the American news all the time, I just got completely frightened. I just panicked because the news stories, 24 hours a day, were just numbers of the dead people. On the brighter side, it seems that people are able to change their behavior in a large scale very quickly, and this has created a lot of hope for people who are concerned about climate change—maybe this will last and maybe we could use this experience as a resource in a fight against climate change. And on the other hand again, I’m afraid that after all the restrictions are over, we will go
back to the life that we once knew, and we will consume, and we will produce, and we will pollute, and we will travel, and we will take back the time that we have now lost. And if there— if we have the opportunity, I think that people as a human race, as a species, we're so selfish. We probably forget [*laughs*] about the whole corona thing and go on with—with the way that we have learned to live. But who knows? There is— there are a glimmer of hope, and there are other fears that this raises.

**Colin:** I— I think that a lot of those fears and the terror that you're describing has just been how quickly things change day to day and that it's really hard to make any sense out of what's happening right now. It's hard to know what the future is like, or going to be like, and it's hard to make plans if you don't know what the future is going to be like.

**Toni:** Yeah, it's an interesting perspective. And also there are a lot of people who really wished that this would bring a positive change to a lot of things. You've noticed there were lots of articles in the media about recovering nature, —

**Colin:** Yes.

**Toni:** —dolphins got back to Venice and so on. And some of those turn out to be fake news. They weren't true. But people created these stories because they wanted to believe that this is going to turn out good. And that's kind of an interesting psychological reaction to it. It evokes so much hope that people start to create these stories in order to change things. Of course, many of those stories were also true and I had a lot of messages from Finland, from my friends who said that they are hearing the bird singing because the traffic has died down and everyone is quiet in their homes so you can hear nature and different species are getting more more brave to approach the city environment and etc.

**Colin:** I think— I think that's maybe one nice thing to focus on, then. Even if animals aren't coming back in the ways that they are always being reported on, that we are learning to listen for animals in ways that we didn't listen to them before.

**Toni:** Yeah, it's— and it's— it’s nice to be reminded about that they are also listening us—

**Colin:** Yeah! [*laughs*]

**Toni:** —all the time, and now that we have been [*laughs*] quarantined and on our sofas, they are— they are noticing it, and stopping by to see what's happening.

**Colin:** Well, I hope we'll have some good stories to tell them when we go back outside.

**Toni:** Yeah! [*laughs*]

**Colin:** I guess maybe what I forgot to ask you is, what drew you to dystopian fiction in the first place?

**Toni:** That was a bit of an accident. I was interested in these ecocritical themes in literature, and of course, ecocriticism was becoming — was fast becoming a trend in Western science, and after I had done my thesis I was looking for a new— new research project. And then I realized that there's so much happening in Finnish literature right now, all these ecological themes and in different genres of literature were just blooming, so it— it was a—a— partly it was an accident and it was something that I was heading towards anyway. And I have really been enjoying these— of course, now everyone is interested in these same themes, and they have to— there has to be an end also for this— these dystopias, because they have been so popular for so long time. Eventually people will get tired of it, they want something different, and I'm surprised that it has been lasting this long, just dystopias after dystopias after dystopias and these apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic worlds. It seems that it's— it's an endless, endless trend.
Colin: Do you think that coronavirus will renew the trend and bring life back to it, or do you think it's going to put an end to it right away?

Toni: Unfortunately, I think there will be [*laughs*] more dystopias after this. And there will be more dystopian writing, and there will be more academic dystopian research and academic papers about dystopias. There was a year or two years ago, perhaps, there was a lot of talks— talk about that we should move to utopias, we should do more research on utopias, and we should encourage people to write more utopias. But it’s a very challenging task for an author to write a utopia that appeals to readers. Because how do you make interesting plot out of building a utopia that ends very happily? [*laughs*] And I think that there are many authors at the moment who try to figure this out, and I would be glad if these utopias would be more common because I think that this dystopia— this very strongly dystopian popular culture and literature— literary culture, it kind of feeds us in our dystopian thinking. It frames everything inside the dystopia. So if there would be more utopias, we would perhaps start to think more positively about things. The worst scenario, which I personally always like to think first, is— it’s not necessarily the best way to approach everything. And I have also often been wondering about younger readers, child readers and young adults, how does this dystopia boom, dystopia trend, affects them, when they are surrounded by these very grim ideas about future all the time, and it also involves media, which is very negative in everything. So they must have a lot of anxieties concerning these global issues.

Colin: I’m thinking now just about young adult fiction and young American readers, and then I suppose that at least for novels like *Hunger Games* and things like that, that perhaps part of the appeal of it is, I dare say the freedom, —or the autonomy, maybe, of all of, sort of, the restrictions of the old society of what we know of society, that young people, especially in America, feel, and having the power to be agents and actors of their own free lives, and to do something about problems, and to rebel in different ways, —that that might be very different for— for Finnish children and Finnish young people, who maybe are more used to— to a bit of autonomy as young people than American children are?

Toni: Well, I don’t know. Some have offered an explanation that young people enjoyed these dystopias because of this very freedom, that this fiction about societies destroyed brings them some kind of relief in their own lives because they are so stressed out about the reality that they live every day. So it’s kind of a escapism for them. And— And as you said, they have a— they have power in those stories and they are free and independent and even heroic. So it’s a form of escapism for them, also. They might be very dark and grim stories, but the reading brings them pleasure and enjoyment.

Colin: Yeah, I guess— I guess that’s the question is, in these Finnish dystopian novels are the young heroes and heroines— do their moms and dads ever check in on them, or scold them for doing something wrong? Do they have parents in these stories?

Toni: They had— they have parents. Well, many times there’s some kind of twist in a story that their parents are not the ones that they thought they are. They are actually adopted or something like that. There are parents but they’re all always on the background. Because young adult literature, it’s all about developing into an adult. So it’s a story about independence. That is something that even these global scenarios about catastrophes have not changed. It’s about young person’s development and growing up, maturing. So that— that’s the core of young adult literature.

Colin: And hopefully trying to do something better in the world than their parents did. [*laughs*]

Toni: Yeah, and that’s another, also an interesting, thing because these novels and books are written by adults and they expect the next generation to fix up the mess [*laughs*] so— so they don’t have to do it themselves.

Colin: Yeah, so— yeah, so there’s a different perspective on who’s writing it and who’s reading it and who the story is about.
Toni: Yeah, green trends are also capitalism. If you think about, for example, the books for the most young readers, youngest readers, the children, are—it’s the— it’s the adults that write the books, it’s the adults that buy the books, and often reads them to a child. So it’s—it’s their values, and it’s their kind of a guilt that they are pouring [*laughs*] into this younger generation, that they hope will live better than they have lived themselves. So there’s so many perspectives [to] this kind of literature.

Colin: Yeah, I think—I mean, the idea of trying to create a better world, and you said before that maybe we should be talking about or writing about utopias more—I feel like it’s two sides of the same coin—that you try to imagine a utopia, and then you have to start thinking about the nuts and bolts and the gears and all the machinery that makes it work, and you realize what is needed to support that utopia, and sometimes you realize that it’s standing on someone else’s neck that that creates that utopian world. So it’s a utopia for some, but dystopia for others.

Toni: Yeah, exactly. And in children's literature and young adult literature, you have to think about that the childhood itself is often considered as a utopian state and when you grow up, you kind of enter the dystopia, the unpredictable world that you cannot control, and you have to survive without your parents in it. So— so when there's child characters, there's always this utopian element that protagonists have to leave behind herself or himself in order to grow up in a world that is ever-changing.

[*Outro music starts*]

Colin: Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a course or declaring a major. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

[*Outro music ends*]

SHOW NOTES

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