

From the Old Brewery - Eden Unger Bowditch FINAL (1).wav

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Ian Grosz [00:00:23] Hello and welcome to another episode of *From the Old Brewery*: a podcast brought to you by the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture at the University of Aberdeen, aimed to highlight the work of students and staff here at the school.

My name is Ian Grosz, a Ph.D. student in creative writing, and I'm co-hosting today with Jane Hughes, who was a guest on a previous episode. Welcome back, Jane!

Jane Hughes [00:00:44] Hi Ian. Our guest today is Eden Unger Bowditch, who's currently working on a Ph.D. in creative writing with the University of Aberdeen, and she's joining us from New England in the United States. Eden's first degree was in rhetoric from the University of California.

She and her husband were in a band, signed to A&M Records and toured and recorded music together before settling in Baltimore where Eden worked as a journalist. The family moved to Cairo, Egypt, and Eden did a master's in comparative literature at the American University there and went on to teach in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition. Eden is the author of the award-winning *Young Inventors Guild* trilogy for young adults. As part of her Ph.D., she's writing a novel provisionally entitled *250 Years at Home*. The title of her Ph.D. thesis is *Fields of Meaning: The Singular Nature of Ambiguity in the Literary Text*.

Hi, Eden. It's so great that you can join us!

Eden Unger Bowditch [00:01:42] Thank you so much for having me. It's an honour. I love this podcast!

Ian [00:01:47] Thanks very much. How's the weather? How's the weather with you?

Eden [00:01:49] Well, I told Jane this morning we've had a dusting of snow, but it's a bit more than that. And it's well below zero.

Ian [00:01:55] It's about minus five here. It's too cold for me! But it is what it is, as they say.

Jane [00:02:00] Well, okay, so we thought the best way to...to introduce your work would be to start with a short reading from right at the beginning of your novel. Did you want...do you want to go ahead with that?

Eden [00:02:11] I will!

My house has ghosts. Not the kind that rattle chains or moan in the attic. They do not groan from beneath the bed. They do not shake things from the shelves in the cupboard or hurl themselves at windows in the night. But these ghosts are very real. And I can feel them. I can see the signs of their presence in the woodwork, in the corners of rooms, in the details of my home. I've come to understand how precious their presence is. I've come to hold dear what they left behind, even if what they left means something different to me that could not possibly be what it meant to them. And I know that by stepping across the threshold and calling this house my home, I am destined to join the ranks.

Ian [00:03:06] Wow. Thanks, Eden. That's so evocative. I really love that...that sense of haunting that you bring in. And that's the opening passage to the novel. Is that right?

Eden [00:03:16] Yes.

Ian [00:03:17] I know it's not a literal haunting, but I wondered if the idea of that...you know, that spectrality that you've brought in, if that's a feature of the novel and...and if so, how do you develop that as...as you go through it, as the novel progresses?

Eden [00:03:30] Well, in some way, you know, we think of the past being the thing that haunts us in the present. But in the arguing of the necessity of ambiguity in literature, the idea that the present can change the past and can haunt the past, in a way...the idea of the ghosts that live in our home, that we are also living in, that we change the home that we live in and therefore change meaning of that home. The idea of haunting kind of goes both ways: from the present to the past, and the past to the present.

Ian [00:04:14] Yeah, I noticed just in your notes about your thesis, you say that “the present changes the past because history is not simply a list of events”, which I really like...

Eden [00:04:24] No, it's not stagnant. And you know...heroes... you know, we watch in the world as we tear down statues of former heroes who are now villains. And we as we change the perception of things that happened and whether we better understand them or differently understand them, or meaning changes. It's not that it didn't mean that at one time. We can have concurrent meanings and changes of perception, and therefore we can in the present, change the past. T.S. Eliot was really big on that...on that kind of thing.

Ian [00:05:03] So it's the idea of reinterpreting the past and the part of the house that is...is how you introduce that idea of haunting then.

Eden [00:05:12] Yes. Well it...and the house is something that stays throughout, but it evolves.

Jane [00:05:20] Yeah, I was going to say that....

Eden [00:05:21] and means something different...

Jane [00:05:22] The text is very kind of grounded in the house. It's obviously the thing that holds everything else in the book together, really, and I was wondering if it's based on a real house. When you say “my house has ghosts” at the beginning, who is that first person narrator. Sorry, so those are questions...is it you, I mean?

Eden [00:05:43] Well, you know, that's the thing. A friend of mine in the publishing world once said to me, “Whatever you do, don't be confined by your own reality.” So I would say that the closer to the present – and obviously that first chapter, which is in the present, kicking off this excavation into the layers of the dwellers of the house – was the most difficult because the first time I was writing it through, I kept imposing myself in there and I found that if I could just remove myself and have the narrator tell a very different story, it was much better.

Jane [00:06:24] So. Does that mean that the point of view of the narration, the viewpoint changes?

Eden [00:06:31] Well, there's the first chapter is in first person and the rest of the book, the novel, is not. It's in third person, really, but in you know, in the first chapter, the narrator goes through various things that reinvent who she is, reinvent her perception of things, reinvent her relationship with her husband, her surroundings, and her burning desire to find out all these people who lived in this house before her because she's sharing a house with strangers and it's kind of just crazy.

And then realising that, you know, by knowing a name, by knowing a list of people, that's not going to tell her who lived there and what that house meant to them. So she, ehm...and also understanding that she's become part of them.

Ian [00:07:26] Right. So, does she delve into the history of the house and its occupants: that...the first-person narrator that opens the novel...or is it like, ehm...?

Eden [00:07:35] Yes.

Ian [00:07:36] Sorry. Go on, Eden.

Eden [00:07:37] Well, I was going to say, yes, she does investigate and she finds these remnants of people who left things behind and altered things. The Latvian family that curved the ceilings, and, you know, things that she finds in the garden, as well that, as we read through, we begin to excavate what these things were, and what they meant to the different people. It doesn't negate what they meant to later generations, but it changes how we perceive them as we learn more about the past.

Ian [00:08:13] So it's these traces that are left in the house – the echoes from the past – that are starting to change how that narrator starts to view her own place within...within that...within that evolving history, I suppose, if you like?

Eden [00:08:27] Exactly.

Ian [00:08:28] So because it is a sort of excavation, as you say: a sort of drilling down to the layers of the house back through time, and the novel's structured that way isn't it - it starts in the present and goes back rather than being the usual kind of linear, forward in time narrative, then, So, how about..

Eden [00:08:48] I like that idea.

Ian [00:08:49] Yeah. Yes, it's really nice. And I just wondered how much, you know, how much research then you have to do. It's a very heavily research-based undertaking, the novel.

Eden [00:09:02] So much research, I mean... first of all, I love research. It's like being a detective, you know, excavating things myself. I love that. So, every time I went into the old folios in the library, the librarians just shook their heads like, she's just inventing reasons to have to look into these old books, you know? And as a journalist, I was doing some project, and I did find these photos of our house from the 1860s, and at the time, we'd thought that our house had been built much later than the other houses. But these showed that it was there long before the estate had become a public park. And so we figured there must have been caretakers in the house – in the estate, living in that house.

As we began to reinterpret, you know, what we were seeing around us...you know, it is our experience of it that changed. But in some way, it changed the house as well. So, in the sense that, you know, while a literary text is the vessel of information and narrative, every reader affects that text by interpreting it and experiencing it and giving something to it that they leave behind once they read it. One can say the house behaves that way.

Jane [00:10:30] **Oh, wow.** So whole additional layers, and it's not just what's on the page, it's...it's what the readers are bringing to it as well.

Eden [00:10:35] You know it...

Jane [00:10:36] And I've got to ask you – whenever I meet someone who's already successful as a writer or in their field, I always want to know why they've decided to do a Ph.D. You're... you're already a successful author with an award-winning young adult fiction trilogy, but this...this is quite different, I guess. And the novel is intertwined with your...with your Ph.D.

Eden [00:11:01] Well, I mean, what is "successful"? I'm not sure what that means. I kind of came sideways into the world of book writing. I thought this would be interesting. And I had an idea for a young adult collection of books, a trilogy, and a friend who was a young adult novelist – I was living

in Cairo at the time – said, “Oh, do you mind if I show my publisher? And the publisher said, I'd like to give you a deal. And I said, “Great!” And that was it. So I never had an agent, I never had anything. And would I have had a better deal? Would I have had a, you know, I don't know. Who knows?

Jane [00:11:39] So for this novel, this...with this novel...it's obviously part...it's intertwined with your...with your PhD thesis.

Eden [00:11:48] So, this is a book that I've been wanting to write for 20 years. You know, this is a book that I've thought about. And the later chapter, the very short chapter, “Her Unforgivable Beauty”, actually was published as a short story, and people wrote the magazine and wanted to know more about it. And, you know, was it something based on history. And it made me wonder about, you know, the different people who lived in this or any house, in an old house, and how we share it with all the people who lived before. And so, this was sort of hanging, you know, somewhere in my mind.

Jane [00:12:36] Waiting to be written, yeah...

Eden [00:12:36] Exactly. And then when I was working on my masters, the idea of ambiguity in literature – even as an undergraduate – it was something that really fascinated me, that, you know, we can have concurrent conflicting interpretations of something that are valid. Mm hmm. And that is important. That's what makes literary texts last through time as compelling. And I remember reading in *The Iliad*, that moment where Hector has to go to war and he's telling his wife, Andromache. You know, she's like, *Why that? Why don't you just hide under the table*. Basically, why do you have to be an idiot? You know you're going to die. And he says, well, you know, if I hide under the table, I won't be the man that you love. And you'll never be able to look at me in the same way. And if I go and die, at least you, even enslaved, will be respected. You can walk with your head high and be the wife of the hero. I remember crying [laughing], reading that, just so powerful and human and thousands of years old. And if something can still reach us, with that humanity, yet we can each interpret differently because of who we are and what we bring to the text...

Ian [00:13:58] That's because it encourages... engagement that way, doesn't it? And you say “the reading of the novel shows the essential role of ambiguity for the unfolding narratives of text and personal history.” And I like the way that the...the house itself acts like a metaphor for the text. Is that...is that right?

And going back to you, this idea of ambiguity, and then you've sort of already answered a couple of our questions. I think actually just saying that, you know, where did the idea come from? And, you know, why is it important, which we can go back to, I think. But I wondered if when you started thinking about ambiguity and developing your own thoughts around it, who did you turn to or who have you drawn from to help you to develop the idea that in your thesis?

Eden [00:14:50] There are a few authors. And again, it's funny because, you know, Derek Attridge's *Singularity of Literature* was really inspirational. I read it in grad school and I was blown away. Like, there is something that happens, a singularity in a literary text, in the reading, in the engagement of a literary text, or in a work of art, or in a piece of music, that is particularly unique to everything in that engagement, that individual thing that happens. And, you know, he's a Derrida scholar and considered deconstructionist and yet what he's saying plays into this.

It plays into this, like, what Wolfgang Iser's, *The Act of Reading* says to me, and Louise Rosenblatt, who was an American professor at Columbia [University in New York], wrote about the importance of how we perceive what she calls *efferent* readings, which are readings that are very linear that we are trying to receive information from, and then *aesthetic* readings, which are broader and more engaged in what is happening in the text itself. And you can do an efferent reading of a poem by counting the nouns or measures or the rhythm, the style, and you can do an aesthetic reading of something else.

You know it's the kind of engagement that all these...Martha Nussbaum as well. She's a philosopher and legal scholar. Her book, *Poetic Justice*, argues for engagement, in a just society, with literature. And I believe that as part of a just society, we need to be able to read other voices and other minds and other experiences to build empathy, and build understanding.

Ian [00:17:10] But why do you think ambiguity is kind of...so important for that: to that process, to engagement with literature? What is it about ambiguity, do you think, that so important?

Eden [00:17:26] Well, I think that I'm calling it *ambiguity* because I think that's the closest thing to what it is. You know, Derek Attridge's *Singularity of Literature*. It's, you know, everyone asks: what *is* the literary. You know, what defines a literary text? You know, we're all in search of that answer, and I think that a hallmark element of the literary text is an openness.

Umberto Eco has a book called *The Open Work* and for him, in fact, this is another very inspirational thing. I disagree with some of the things he says because he really feels like the more abstract something is, the more open, the more an ambiguity is allowed to occur. Where I disagree; I think we can interpret all manners of literary texts and art. I mean, look at the Mona Lisa. That's, you know, we can look at it and everyone has some different emotive response to it.

But he talked of *lines of meaning*, in the same way that Rosenblatt talked about the efferent reading: that you are reading something to receive a piece of information, [Eco sees lines of meaning going from a text and offering specific information]. You don't want ambiguity there. In most texts, you don't want ambiguity. You don't want to wonder whether, when you read the clock or read the weather report, whether, you know, that it's accurate or whether they mean here or there. Whereas in *fields of connotative meaning* as...in that in the title of my thesis...comes from Eco, and this is what we find in literary texts and what we find in a more open work of writing.

Ian [00:19:21] I like that word "open". You know, there's an intentional ambiguity which...which allows for an openness of interpretation, I guess, rather than, you know, it just being intentionally vague or, ehm, you know, obscure.

Jane [00:19:36] It really draws the reader in, doesn't it?

Eden [00:19:37] Right you mean, the problematic ambiguity? And we can have problematic ambiguity. But when I was a teenager and I was doing fabricated metal sculpture, we had a sculpture show and I had this piece that I did with this sort of DNA shape coming up. And I called it "Everyone's Tattoo". And this little old lady came up to me and said, *I know exactly what you mean*. And she showed me her arm and she had a, you know, from the concentration camps, a tattoo on her arm. And I had never thought of that. But she wasn't wrong.

Ian [00:20:17] Oh, like her own tattoo, in a sense, is everybody's: humanity's...

Eden [00:20:23] Right? So, she, yeah, for her, that... that was the meaning of it. And she was not wrong. And so my meaning, what I felt – And think of the times that you've written something and you've gone back to look at it and it means something different to you.

Jane [00:20:37] Yes. So, it's funny when you...when...

Eden [00:20:38] I feel like in some way...

Jane [00:20:39] ...when you hear somebody else reading out your stuff, isn't it? You hear, you hear...stuff comes out of it that you didn't know was there.

Ian [00:20:45] Yeah, if you ever get feedback, you know, on a piece of writing, surprising things come up that you didn't realise were...were present when you were writing it.

Eden [00:20:54] Mm hmm. Right. And I think that, you know, we look at things like author's intention as a way to decipher the meaning of something, but what does that even mean? So many times, we intend to write something and something comes out very different than that intention. And that intention doesn't have anything to do with what's on the page.

Jane [00:21:13] It's one of the things I really enjoy about the process. I might go back and reread it.

Eden [00:21:14] Yes, and I think, in some way, as authors, we are the first reader. You know, weirdly, we become...we join the ranks of readers as we reread our own work.

Jane [00:21:29] I wanted to ask you, because you've been teaching the course called 'How Do We Know It is True?' And I know that you...you taught at the American University in Cairo and also at Long Island University. Ian and I were talking about saying it sounds like a course we'd absolutely love to do if you ever put it online, or even maybe brought it to Aberdeen University. And from there, I started thinking, "I want to know why you've chosen to do your Ph.D. with Aberdeen University." Is there a Scottish connection?

Eden [00:22:04] There is. First, one of my dearest friends from Cairo, who is Scottish, was living in Aberdeen. I looked at people at University of London. We lived in London when we were kids and I thought that might be a good place to go. And I was really looking for somebody who could do different voices and understand, like, the shift in time, since this is a novel that really requires that. Second, Helen Lynch is just so amazing with that. And, and so I felt like this was the person I really wanted to work with.

In addition to that, the book takes place, and was inspired by our house, which is on an estate that was founded – that was the estate of George Buchanan – who was from, um, you know, outside of Edinburgh and had family from up north. And his, his great...great-grandson founded Aberdeen, Maryland in...in the US, and because their cousin was the fourth Earl of Aberdeen, so there's a very strong connection.

And Buchanan's family was originally from the Highlands and in 1716 or something. Huh, it was in 1729 he was one of the founders of Baltimore City, so there was a very strong connection to Aberdeen and this estate and following the, you know, there was always a Scottish shepherd...

Ian [00:23:49] It was a bit of a pull for you in a sense.

Eden [00:23:52] Yeah.

Ian [00:23:53] Or something pointing the way, maybe: the ghost of Buchanan pointing the way...

Eden [00:23:58] The name of the park is Druid Hill Park, which was inspired by, you know, the Druid history in Scotland.

Ian [00:24:08] Well, given the nature of that course and the, you know, the main...the main thrust of your thesis on ambiguity, I wondered if you could talk a bit more about how perhaps the...your teaching practice and your writing practice might inform one another, or if they do...or are they quite separate, or do, you know, do you come away from teaching a class and thinking about your thesis and vice versa?

Eden [00:24:33] Well, when I teach creative writing, it's much closer to my own work because I try to get people to mine their own creative space. Like the course that you mentioned, "How Do We Know What Is True?" It's an interesting thing, right? We're just talking about ambiguity and then we're talking about how do we know when something is true? And we want to know that there is ambiguity with perspective, that there are certain things that aren't ambiguous. And we live in a time where there's been a real confusion between the two, and –

Ian [00:25:07] It's...

Eden [00:25:08] – allowed for a lot of nonsense.

Ian [00:25:10] Yeah, with something that's been deliberately obscured, which is very relevant just now. And you know, that's completely different from the ambiguity that you're talking about.

Eden [00:25:21] So the course, which I am happy to share with you, and we can look at it and I'd like to update the readings and –

Jane [00:25:31] Great.

Eden [00:25:32] – I divide it into, you know, the first part is truth on trial, where we look at witness testimony and memory, which is notoriously faulty. And the second part is sharing the truth. How do we impart things that we feel are very important and true and use the rhetoric that allows somebody else to perceive it? And how do we know when we're being lied to and being told things that are not true? And that's a very important thing to teach young students as they're heading off into the world, like to be able to discern that.

Ian [00:26:08] Yes, be able to filter it out...

Eden [00:26:09] Right. And then the... Yeah, the last part of the course is finding the truth. And the question really is, is there such a thing as truth or Absolute Truth.

Ian [00:26:23] Or is it all relative?

Eden [00:26:24] And how do we know? There's are ways of looking at things that are challenging and necessary, and learning to think critically is vital.

Ian [00:26:35] Fantastic.

Jane [00:26:36] Yeah. You've tied my brain in knots actually, trying to work this out? Yeah. Oh, we're going to wrap it up?

Ian [00:26:46] Weren't we going to finish with the...

Jane [00:26:50] –Yeah, it'd be nice to bookend our discussion with the second reading from the book. Maybe if there's a piece where it introduces one of the inhabitants.

Eden [00:27:00] Wonderful. This does. I have a short reading from Chapter Seven, which is called "Her Unforgivable Beauty". Okay. And in this moment, the caretaker of the estate, who lives in the house, is remembering a moment from his childhood. So please forgive any mispronunciation.

Jonathan had been taught that words only led to trouble. His own father reared five children alone and rarely said a word. Jonathan, the youngest. And we just remembered his mother. She died in childbirth. Both she and the child. And Jonathan was only four, perhaps five. The priests came Jonathan had been taught that words only led to trouble. His own father reared five children alone and rarely said a word. Jonathan, the youngest, only just remembered his mother. She died in childbirth, both she and the child, when Jonathan was only four, or perhaps five. The priest came around but Jonathan's father would have none of it. To save the cost of the bell man to ring the bell for the dead, Jonathan's father borrowed the deid bell and had the boy stand outside in the rain, ringing, until late, since the dark skies made it hard to tell when the sun had truly gone down. Jonathan held on tight to the bell with both hands and rang it loud. He kept his mouth shut tight, but let the rain fall on his face so his tears would go unnoticed. Except for an occasional sob that escaped the prison of his lips, the little boy did not make a sound. He knew, they all knew, that speaking in their father's house only made mischief. It was a silent home unless his father found fault and then there was only the sound of a switch. For any grievance, the children were punished

with a swift hard beating but ainneamh, near never, a word came with it. The most brutal whipping would be the answer to any question about their mother or even the mention, the whisper, of her. They kept their wheeshts, their hushes, and held their tongues. His father had burned the small gifts his wife had left her children: a ribbon, a cloth doll, a wooden spoon, the drawings she had made for them with the scraps of coal upon scraps of wood. He made all the rest of her disappear. Except for the children she left him. They all understood that the day Jonathan's mother died was the day she abandoned them, left them all alone. The man never spoke of the loss. Neither did his children, unless they were asking for the switch. There were rules and the children did not need to be reminded. Every day they were up by dawn and worked until dark, rain or shine, warm or cold, all of them. Complaining was not done on any count. You did as you were told. That was the rule.

Ian [00:30:02] So evocative, Eden. It's beautifully written, beautifully read as well.

Jane [00:30:08] It's given me the shivers that.

Ian [00:30:10] I could have, yes, sat and listened for ages. It makes...it makes you want to read it.

Jane [00:30:15] Yeah, me too. Sure.

Eden [00:30:17] And that makes me happy.

Ian [00:30:19] John is such a real character, you know, all these memories. And, ehm, but I also loved the, you know, the ambiguity you bring in. You know: he's four or perhaps five. Just a little... little...I suppose, nudge to remind us that the memory is as fallible as history, you know?

Eden [00:30:35] Exactly. And no one really knew things like that...people didn't really celebrate birthdays and things.

Ian [00:30:40] No, that's right. People didn't know sometimes exactly how old they were, you know? So, ehm, but just to say thank you very much for coming in and talking to us about...about ambiguity.

To close, perhaps, uhm, I'm putting you on the spot here, but would you be able to say what it is you think, you know, what the ambiguity that you're talking about, is exactly, and... and why it's important, and...and remind us again about the title of the novel and where we might find out more about your work, if that's all right?

Eden [00:31:15] Of the novel, let's see, is [at time of interview] *Two-Hundred-and-Fifty Years at Home*, which, you know, I thought, do people really want to read something called that after COVID? You know, maybe I should change the title. [laughing] Felt like we've been there. But it follows, you know, that story.

We should be able to connect with each unfolding chapter in some way and be able to read ourselves into the story, and that is the importance of reading. The ambiguity in a piece of literature is how we can find our way through it, how we can journey through that piece of literature and make it our own.

Ian [00:32:05] Yeah.

Eden [00:32:06] Or not. You know: that's what draws us to stories written by other people; written about other people.

Ian [00:32:14] Perfectly...perfectly put, Eden. Thanks so much.

Announcer [00:32:43] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.