JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: At The Rabbit Room, we're always saying that art nourishes community and community nourishes art. Here's another way to say the same thing. We can all be allies in bringing good, beautiful, true things into the world. One way you can be an ally with the musicians and writers and artists whose work you care about is to leave a review. It helps other people find and benefit from the work that has meant something to you. And if you want to leave a review for this podcast… well, that'll be okay too.

(THEME MUSIC)

JR: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

Christie Purifoy is the author of *Placemaker: Cultivating Places of Comfort, Beauty, and Peace*. It's a beautiful book that invites us to notice our soul's desire for beauty, our need to create and to be created again and again. *Placemaker* isn't just a book about hospitality; it's a hospitable book. As one reviewer said, "through her lyrical, thoughtful prose and keen observation, Christie Purifoy invites her readers to see — truly see — the beauty that exists around us across the many different landscapes of life."

Christie Purifoy, I am so glad that you are here on The Habit podcast today. Thank you for making time for me and for my listeners.

Christie Purifoy: Oh, absolutely, it's so good to be with you all!

JR: So, you're most recent book is called *Placemaker*. Could you talk a little bit about what you mean by that term "placemaker"?

CP: [laughs] Sure. You know, I thought it meant one thing when I started writing. I thought it meant that we make places, that we create them, that we make them better, we make them more beautiful, whether that's a garden or a home or a, you know, a community center. But I realized as I was writing that we also are charged with tending places, keeping places,

protecting places. So, I felt like this idea of placemaking gets at… yeah, God's own heart. We're made in his image, and he has made places for us, special places like the Garden of Eden, or you know, gave us directions on the Temple. He prepared places like the Promised Land. So that's really the model I'm looking toward when I think of placemakers.

JR: So one thing that I wanna talk about and think about is the relationship between placemaking on the one hand and writing on the other. You're obviously interested in both hospitality and writing, and I'm sure you've done some thinking about those two things.

CP: Absolutely, absolutely. I think writers are simply our greatest placemakers, aren't they? I write a little bit in this book about Narnia, of course! I mean, one of my favorite places to visit as a child. And I revisited in a few spots in this book because it shaped — y'know, C. S. Lewis created this place, he made this place, he made it real for us in his words. It's so real, even as an adult I want to go back and visit it, but it's also changed how I see places where I live. I look at a certain kind of forest or wood and I think of Narnia, right? So it's just an incredible thing to do.

I think of my tools, my placemaking tools, as language, absolutely. And also things I do in the garden. We live in an old farmhouse that we are constantly trying to restore and renovate, and so that's placemaking as well. I felt so grateful when I sort of stumbled on this idea of placemaking, this word. Because I felt like for the first time I had a word that sort of captured everything I do and everything I love most. That was the writing, but also the hospitality and welcoming people into this place. So I've just felt so grateful that in writing this book I've been able to since exercise this hospitality on a bigger scale, right? Like, I can only have so many people in my house, but in this book I can write about my love for the place where I live, which isn't just a house but a particular corner of Pennsylvania. I can write about that place and I can invite every reader into it through my words. And it's like my hospitality has — my opportunity for hospitality, when I see it this way, has just grown exponentially, which is so exciting to me.

JR: That's great. Well, okay, there is a kind of hospitality — or at least a use of the term "hospitality" — that's really more about display, about ostentation. It's kind of a "look at me. look what I've collected. look what I've put together. Look at what I've gathered." Of course there are whole magazines devoted to that kind of hospitality that has more to do with "look at me" than has to do with welcoming others. And, of course, at the same time, theres a kind of writing that does that sort of thing, right?

CP: Yeah. Ohhhh yeah, that's such a good point, yes. Yes. You know, when I think of the word "hospitality," I think of like the old monastic forms of Christian hospitality, right? I mean, there was nothing — when you think about a monastery, there's nothing that's "look at me" about a monastery. [laughs] It's just a functioning thriving, or it's meant to be a thriving, flourishing community. And the hospitality that's offered there is an invitation into the life of that community. To say, "Hey, our work will continued. We are not stopping and putting on a song and dance for you. But you are welcome here, and you can participate in our meals and in our worship and in our work and in our lives. And I feel like when I think of that kind of hospitality, it's not only what I want to practice in my home, but it's a good model I think, perhaps for our writing as well.

JR: I love the phrase you use, and I hope I have gotten this right, that "hospitality is an invitation to join in community."

CP: Yeah, and when I write I always try to keep my questions foremost. So I don't start with answers, right? I start with my own questions, and I start with the questions that are most burning for me. And also — this is a scary thing to do as a writer, right? Because I don't know that I will arrive at satisfactory answers. So it's a little frightening but — that's what I mean as a writer, now I'm inviting my reader into my own work. To put my questions out there and say, "these are my questions. Will you join me as I journey toward what I hope will be some satisfying answers."

JR: So, I'm familiar with the idea of starting with questions instead of

starting with answers, I think that's such an important idea and important principle or concept for a writer. I never thought of that as a principle of hospitality until right this minute.

CP: You know, I hadn't either until just now. [laughs] But I think it works. I started this book placemaker with a question about… [sigh] I… I have thought for many years that, because I'm made in the image of God and I love places, well, I'm a placemaker, I can do it well! And If I bring that placemaker's mentality to every place I live, well of course I'll leave that place better, of course I"ll leave it more beautiful. But I've been so humbled over the years as certain places have just bettered me or been too much for me. Or as I've grown as a gardener and I've realized like oh my goodness, I make so many mistakes. I think I'm doing the right thing. I think I'm caring for this tree or this rose bush, and I mess it up. And I start to ask, goodness, would the world be better off without me? Am I just — would it be better off without my interference? You know, creation tends to work so well, and then we get involved. And I started to realize, goodness, I make more mistakes than otherwise. And so that was the question I started *Placemaker* with.

But I felt like maybe the hospitable element of that is that I begin in humility. So those who come to a book like this with "I'm not a placemaker, I'm not a gardener, I don't live in an old farmhouse." But they too have maybe questions, they have self-doubt. And so, in sharing my own I think that's maybe one way of helping my reader kind of put down their own defenses and enter into the questions with me."

JR: Yes, "entering in with me." That's such a great way to talk about the overlap between hospitality and writing.

CP: Mmhm. Yeah, I think so too. Yeah.

JR: Yeah you've already talked about the idea of creation, the idea of cooperating with creation. {CP: mmhmm!] And gardening and uh… whatever you call taking care of trees. Arboritage or whatever?

CP: Yeah, uh… goodness, I wonder… we need a good word for that don't we? Cause it's not quite forestry. It's… yeah. [laughs] The one who is an arborist. What is it they do? [laughs]

JR: Yeah, anyway… you mentioned that your father taught you about participating in creation? I think you said whenever he came to visit you in Pennsylvania he would always plant a tree?

CP: Mmhmm, mmhmm. I think it's about being aware of the abundance of life that is already there, right? So as a gardener, you know, I feel like one reason I garden is because I'm just so aware of the beauty and fertility of the trees and the shrubs and the flowers. I'm aware of the bees buzzing around doing their thing, and I want… it's a kind of greedy love, you know? I want more of it. I want to be in the middle of it. I want to see more of the colors I love or see more of the shapes I love. And It's almost like I want to… you know, as a kid you dig your hands into the Play-Doh. You know, I feel like that's what I want to do.

You know, it is a way of loving the gifts that have been given to us, the gifts of creation and the gift of the earth and its seasons and its fertility. Um, and I think… yeah, I think that probably is true for all the creating we do, is that if we love words — you know, here's another example. I actually grew up convinced — never once thought that I was a writer, never thought I could be a writer, never dreamed of being a writer. But I was a reader. I loved books. I loved words. I loved language. If anything, my love was so great that it blinded me to my own… maybe ability to do that? Because I admired these writers, I admired these books, and sort of assumed, "ah, I could never do that." But the love caught up with me, right? Because I loved these books so much that finally I couldn't say no to trying my hand at creating my own.

So it's that desired to almost immerse ourselves int that thing that has brought us joy, and uh, brought us happiness. Whether it's gardens or books, I think it's the same kind of feeling.

JR: Oh, I love what you said about greed and greediness. It makes me think about something in an Over the Rhine song — and I hope I'm getting this right — "when it comes to wanting what's real, there's no such thing as greed."

CP: Awww that's nice! I like that! [laughs] Good, good that makes me feel better!

JR: Actually, I'm not *entirely* sure that's true. [CP laughs] There is such a thing as disordered loves. You know, and Augustine would say it's a matter of wanting the right things in the right order, right?

CP: Yes.

JR: It's a matter of ordered loves.

CP: "Ordered loves, yes, yes.

JR: So as much as I love that line in that song, I can't decide if it's entirely true or not.

CP: Yeah, yeah.

JR: But in any case, I think this idea of writing, like gardening, as a way of participating more fully in abundance… and I think there's a lot of wisdom in that.

CP: Mmhmm. And you know, it's a way not only of participating but of responding. So in that sense we can think about gratitude and worship even. You know, I think a lot about the Scriptures that talk about the stars singing, the skies proclaiming, the trees clapping. And I think not only do I want to be awake enough to hear those things, I want to join the song. I want to be a part of that. And so it's also about a response, and often that

one way to respond is in worship, is joining the chorus of praise.

JR: Yeah, and I think it's a kind of gratitude too, right?

CP: Mmhmm, mmhmm…

JR: That makes us more aware of the goodness of the world in which we find ourselves.

CP: Oh, yes, yes. Awake to the good. I like that.

JR: It's like C. S. Lewis says in I guess it's *Mere Christianity*. When God commands us to praise him, it's not that he's this vain being that needs our praise. It's that we complete our pleasure when we praise him.

CP: You know, ahh — yeah, that's another way to think about it. The pleasure I take in the created world, the pleasure I take in language and books and reading — um, one way that I have completed that in my own life is by becoming a gardener, learning how to grow things myself, learning how to tend natural things, and also by writing. And it doesn't have to be books, right? You know, it could be your journal writing. You know, it could look like all sorts of things. But it certainly completed the pleasure I have taken in those things all my life.

JR: You know, one of the things I love about your book is this, this constant reminder that there are so many ways to be creative, to participate in creation in ways that aren't what we normally think of as the arts.

CP: Mmhmm, mmhmm. Yeah, it's been important to me, especially because, um, I've always had this pull towards the arts. It's something in me as a kid. I wanted to be an artist, but as I grew up I started to realize like, gosh, I don't really seem to have [laughs] certain skills that I thought of as necessary to being an artist. I took art classes, but I was not the best student. I didn't have those technical skills. Hand eye coordination, you

know, not always there. But still this desire to create beauty, this response in myself to beauty. So it's been really important for me personally to learn how to exercise that part of myself in ways that go beyond what is typically offered. Um, and to realize that, not only does it make art and creativity an exercise that more of us can participate in, but it also can then infuse more of our lives.

So if I become a painter, maybe I would've made paintings and just thought of my art as, well, it's just when I'm painting. But because I couldn't paint, I had to figure out how to make a meal at the table, you know, part of my creativity. Or an arrangement of flowers. Or how, you know — just all of those ordinary aspects of daily living became ways for me to exercise my creativity. Because those were the tools I had and those were the things I do day to day. I hope that's encouraging to people, to realize that not only can anyone do it, but it can also be part of your life from morning to evening. It's not just a special occasion thing.

JR: Yeah, yeah. There are so many ways to tell a truer story.

CP: Mmhm. So many ways.

JR: Okay, so this kind of a half-baked thought… actually it's not even a half-baked thought. It's more of an eighth or quarter baked thought.

CP: I'll take it. [laughs]

JR: So in the energy of the created world… so much of that energy gets expressed in weeds and scrub trees and the kind of things that we dig up from our garden, not that we encourage. And I guess I'm trying to work my way toward… how do these ideas relate to writing and to creativity?

CP: You know, a gardener does two things, or I feel like has two options. She can look at that weed and sometimes see its beauty, and decide — you know, I'm gonna rename it. So now I tell a different story, right? I tell a different story about this weed. But that, I will be the first to say, is *not*

always possible nor desirable. There are plants out there that uh, you know, maybe they cause a rash, or maybe they are invasives that are taking over that will throttle everything else. But there are certainly plants that I think deserve the name of weeds.

And so then placemaking does become a little more ruthless. And writing can become a little more ruthless when we say, “this doesn’t belong.” I think especially for myself, because I write memoir, because I write non-fiction, because I write personal essays. And the raw material of my writing is personal experience. Um, I can look at aspects of my life that are good. They’re creative, they’re important, they matter for my life, they’re a part of my story. But I have had to teach my self to discern that nope, when it comes to this book, that is a weed and I pull it out. And it may be one of the most precious memories that I have and be related to the story I’m telling. But if it doesn’t serve my reader and if it doesn’t serve the story I’m telling, then it doesn’t actually matter if — you know, if biologically, it’s a great — why call it a weed? No, in terms of the book it’s a weed.

I’ve learned to be, I think, I hope… my first attempts at memoir were much more just, “let me write it all down, here it is!” But it can be hard. It can be hard to be telling a story and know, oh, there’s all these beautiful memories and stories connected to it. But I think those are for me or those are for my family or those are for my close friends, but these are not for this book and not for this reader. And just discerning that.

JR: Do you mean in terms of, “this is too private for a book?”

CP: No, I don’t mean that at all actually, because, um… so I actually believe I’m quite a private person, and sharing anything personally is difficult, but I do feel like I have been called in these books I write to do that often. To be very open beyond what I’m naturally comfortable in. I feel like that is part of my obedience to he work God has called me to do. So it’s not that. It’s the discernment of knowing that this… this aspect of my life, this story… I could write it beautifully. But it does not serve… it isn’t for this story. Maybe it’ll be told in some other book or some other format,

but it is not for this story, it is not for this book.

So it's about the shaping of the particular book, and it's about always keeping that reader in mind rather than my own desires as a writer. Because I have experiences that I think, "Oh, I would love to write about that." But maybe that would just be for myself because it isn't a story that, you know, others need [laughs], or in this particular context. So keeping that reader in mind.

JR: Right, okay. Okay, so you're talking about the borders of the garden…

CP: I am!

JR: And the border is one of the most important parts of the garden…

CP: Yes, absolutely.

JR: I love grass, but grass doesn't belong inside this border.

CP: Exactly, exactly…

JR: You know, in Andrew Peterson's book *Adorning the Dark*, he talks about his English garden and the wall around it, and how — I think he says that's the most important part of the garden, maybe he doesn't say *the* most important part of the garden. But you know, it's the borders in which I say, "I'm going to tend *this*." There's all these acres out here, and I can't tend all those acres, but I can tend this, what's inside these borders.

CP: Exactly, exactly. Yep, and there are weeds I let in my garden. For me they would be the native violets, which grow everywhere in my lawn, and I love them! They're a native plant, they flower beautifully, bugs love them, and I let them come on into my flower beds. But everything else I pull it out because it does not serve the garden.

JR: I love what you said about a weed is a weed because of the story we tell. Now it may be a true story, right? I'm sorry… poison ivy is just a weed!

CP: [laughs]

JR: [laughs] I can't think of a story I would tell that would make me want poison ivy in my garden.

CP: I was thinking about poison ivy, yes! [laughs]

JR: Now, as I've lived these last few minutes with this idea about the stories we tell about weeds, it occurs to me that every story we tell is a story in which we, uh… we're telling a story about what's a weed and what's not.

CP: Exactly, yeah. Yeah, that's so… we have so much power as writers to tell stories about hard things, ugly things, even hurtful things. And as we transform those things into art it's… I don't know, I think it's an incredibly powerful thing. We can't do it with everything. We shouldn't do it with everything. But when we bring our own imagined hurts and hard things and weeds into the art, they are changed! They are changed. And maybe in some small way, we talk about our God who can do good with anything, really, right? You know, he can create good out of just anything. No matter how wrong and it's gone. And I think in a small way — maybe just a tiny, tiny way as writers — we're privileged to do something similar.

JR: Yeah. Okay, moving on to my next half-baked idea: your house in Pennsylvania is called Maplehurst, built by a Quaker in the 19th century?

CP: Yeah, 1880 or so. Yeah, Mark Hughes, a Quaker farmer here in Pennsylvania, built it.

JR: And you remark that when Mark Hughes went to build Maplehurst — I mean, of course he didn't make the sun to rise in the east and set in the

west. But he did decide to situate his house in such a way that would make the most of that movement of the sun. And he didn't pile up the hill, the "hurst," that it was named for, but he did recognize that this would be a good place to build a house. And your point there was that Mark Hughes was cooperating with creation.

CP: Mmhmm…

JR: And I feel like this is — this has to be relevant to writing? [CP: Yes] I can't quite put my finger on it. I haven't thought about it enough, but I bet you have.

CP: Mmhmm. Yeah, you know I think of it… so with the house, what was he doing? He was creating a vessel that would capture the light in a way that would… magnify the light? But um… [pauses] make the light accessible in new ways? You know, the moon rises here, and I can see the moon when I'm outside. But when I'm in my house and the moon rises, then I see the moon at the top of the staircase framed in a window, and it's real powerful. And that's what the builder of this home did. He didn't — yeah, he didn't create the moon, didn't think of the moon, but what he's done by framing the moon in that way is really precious to me and really powerful and beautiful.

And so I think as artists, as writers, that's what we're doing. You know, we're dealing with things that have been given to us, that have been created. You know, these raw materials. They might be the actual world, or they might be the circumstances of our lives or the fruit of our imaginations, you know, whatever it is, this raw material. And it's all animated — it's good, it's true — it's animated by the light of the world. And I think ideally we're crafting these vessels that don't make the light anything different than what it is. But we're able to frame it such a way that maybe someone can see it for the firs time or notice it's importance for the first time, or realize its relevance to themselves, or just see it and be grateful for it. So I think that the light is the right image that helps me sort of figure out what that might look like in our art as well.

JR: Your talking about light that way makes me think about a rainbow. A rainbow… it's just showing us what's there all along. All those colors are always there.

CP: Yeah, it's just wild. It doesn't — yeah, it doesn't change anything, but it reveals, you know? And I think ideally that's what we're doing. We're revealing. I mean when I think about — so I wrote a lot in this book about trees and nature. And I didn't make any of it up. I just sort of — I read books and I went outside and there it was. And yet what I hoped I was doing was showing people things that they could see on their own. They could walk outside and see. But I'm shaping it, I'm gathering it, I'm framing it so that they can see. So they can really see.

JR: Alright, that's great. Okay. Last question: which writers make you want to write?

CP: Oh, yes yes! Great question. You know, the writers who make me want to write aren't necessarily the writers I love the most or the writers I love to read. They're usually the ones who draw my attention to language or make me recognize the power of really close observation. So like um, a poet like Christian Wiman, or an essayist like Leslie Jamison or Rebecca Solnit. Sometimes they make me uncomfortable, but they make me uncomfortable in ways that spur me to write.

There is one writer actually who always makes me want to write. I just love, love his work. And that is Brian Doyle. The late great Brian Doyle, who, um… yeah, is just incredible. So he not only is a favorite that I love to read, but also makes me want to get out there and write.

JR: Yeah. Well, Christie, thank you so much for taking half an hour to talk with me today.

CP: Thank you so much. It's been a lot of fun.

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville. Special shout-out as well to The Arcadian Wild for allowing us to use their delightful song "Finch in the Pantry" as part of this podcast. Check out their album of the same name for more excellent music.

JR: The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

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