(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

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

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

JR: Trillia Newbell is the author of several books, including *United: Captured by God's Vision for Diversity* and, most recently, *Sacred Endurance: Finding Grace and Strength for a Lasting Faith*. She's a former journalist, and currently the director of community outreach for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention. Here's what Russell Moore said about Trillia and her book *Sacred Endurance:* "As a friend and colleague of Trillia Newbell, I can testify that the author lives out the message of this book every day."

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

JR: "She is characterized by joy, exuberance, and persistence." That joy and exuberance come through in the conversation you're about to hear.

Trillia Newbell, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast!

TRILLIA NEWBELL: Thank you for having me!

JR: So your most recent book is about endurance. Sacred endurance. And at the risk of — I'm not trying to... you're obviously talking about things that are much bigger than just the endurance that's required of a writer. But, I kind of would like to talk— I mean, the truth is, endurance is an important part of a writer's life. And so even though you're talking about an endurance that goes way beyond this, that's more important even, um, what do you... I suspect there's some things you learned about sacred endurance that are relevant to the writing life.

TN: Yeah, absolutely! So endurance, in the book, is about enduring in the

Christian faith, right?

JR: Uh huh.

TN: But! Part of the Christian faith is work and commitment and tenacity and perseverance, and that absolutely... when I think about writing, I've learned a lot about persevering and being faithful. Faithfulness is a hard thing when it comes to writing. I mean, think about it. You have to sit and be committed to something that people may not acknowledge...

JR: (chuckles)

TN: You know! (laughs) Or may not even read! And the rewards are so little – typically, not all the time. So in a lot of ways I can see the enduring in the unseen, in the mundane, is really similar to the Christian life. And enduring in the unseen and the mundane, one day there will be a reward.

JR: Mmhm.

TN: And that's such a greater reward, right?

JR: Yeah.

TN: But... yeah! I can see a correlation to that in the writing life.

JR: Yeah. I think, you know, one of the things from your book... at one point you talk about, you were talking about a relay race you ran. And one of the things that helped you endure was knowing that there were other people that needed what you were bringing. And I think that's been an important thing for me in terms of, you know, pushing through writers block or whatever. Is knowing there actually are people in the world who need what I'm bringing.

TN: Yeah, so in the book I'm talking - I was a track athlete, and I ran in a

lot of relays. And relays, for those who aren't really familiar, you typically have four people who are running with you, and you do have to rely on each other, and you're cheering each other on. And it is about something greater than yourself. And for me, much of my writing is discipleship oriented, and so I am focused on and thinking on how can I serve the church? How can I serve people, my readers. It's discipleship oriented, so I'm teaching or instructing something like that.

Okay, so I... I absolutely, one of the things that motivates me and keeps me going, is knowing that in some way my writing is serving others. It reminds me of the text in Scripture that we get to comfort with the comfort that we've received in Christ.

JR: Mmhmm.

TN: And so how God is comforting me, how God has been teaching me, shaping me, helping me, I get to do — not have to do — but I get to do, using the gifts that he has given me to serve the body. So it is a way that I can serve others. So it does help me endure through long writing sessions and, frankly, endure through, um, when I'm away from my family. Because there's a cost to writing!

JR: Yeah.

TN: And yeah. Time, energy, and you have to draw away from your family or community or something for a period of time to get it done. So, thinking about others, and ultimately, thinking about the Lord — whatever we eat, drink, whatever we do, do to his glory — so, thinking about others and the Lord enables me and pushes me towards continuing this task of writing. Yeah.

JR: Yeah, I get the impression that maybe you're an extrovert. Is that true?

TN: You know what? It's sooooo funny. Everyone thinks I'm an extrovert because I am... when I'm *with* people, I'm extroverted. I'm talking to them,

I'm engaging with them, I'm listening to them. But, I'm actually... have you ever heard of the term ambivert?

JR: Yeah.

TN: Okay. I am... an... I am an extrovert in so far as I enjoy people, but I don't get my energy from people like a true extrovert does.

JR: Huh.

TN: I have to pull away to refresh so that I can go and give again.

JR: | see.

TN: Um, so I... yeah, I'm not a true extrovert in that sense. I am a little bit more introverted then some people would think. I loooooove to be by myself. (laughs)

JR: (laughs) Yeah.

TN: I mean, I road cycle for example. I mean, you can't... yeah. And I'm okay with being by myself for a couple hours on a road. So that's an example of that.

JR: When you're by yourself on a road cycle, are you listening to something, or is this just silence?

TN: You know what? I go back and forth. So sometimes I'm listening to something — and it will be music. It wouldn't typically be.... a sermon...

JR: Yeah, listening to audio books or podcasts or whatever.

TN: You know... I think I could now. But I didn't start, it would be music typically. But! Over the last little bit when I was writing, when it's not cold, I

wasn't listening to anything. It was just experiencing the creation, the nature around me, and it was fine. It was refreshing. (laughs)

JR: Well, the reason I was asking earlier about whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, especially — I'm probably something like an ambivert too, but I'm definitely not an introvert. And I think extroverted writers, you know — I mean, I don't care if you're an introvert or an extrovert, you're writing because you want to connect with people. Because you have this need — we all have a need to connect to people — and yet writing requires that you be alone. (chuckles) It's this weird tension of being a writer. I'm going into my room alone so I can reach out and connect to people.

TN: Yeah, that is a funny thing. I, um... a lot of my writing sessions — which even to use the word "session" kind of gives you a clue —

JR: (chuckles)

TN: If I have something to do, and it's a bigger project, a longer... a manuscript of some sort and not an article, I will often spend 8 hours just going. Going at it. Writing. After... by the eighth hour, I am so ready to see people. (laughs) I am missing my family. So it is an interesting thing. I am not... I'm okay with spending time writing by myself, because again, I don't get that energy from others.

But I do know — and I'm gonna change it from writing — with motherhood, for example, I know that there are periods of time I have experience — or had experience, but I don't now 'cause they're big — I need and desire to see other people. So yeah, I can definitely can see how loneliness can be a part of that enduring in writing. But I haven't personally experienced it to a great degree. Yeah.

JR: Uh huh, I see. I always say the reason I can go down into the cave to do the work is because I know there are people outside the cave who need what I'm bringing.

TN: Right... yeah, absolutely!

JR: And are cheering me on and all that kind of stuff.

TN: Yeah...

JR: So speaking of racing and endurance, um... (pause) You know, when Paul talks about endurance, he talks about laying off — how does he put it? — laying aside every encumbrance so he can run the race better. I think I'm getting that right?

TN: Yeah, "every weight of sin" is how one of my Bibles, the ESV, says it. So everything that clings close to you, you wanna put off things that weigh you down, yeah.

JR: Uh huh. Yeah. Because the race is... it's hard enough without the extra encumbrances, right? (chuckles)

TN: Absolutely.

JR: And I was thinking about that, again, in terms of writing, because I always turn these things around to writing, especially for the purpose of this podcast. And um... and I was thinking about all the encumbrances that we add on. It's, so much that — I teach grownups creative writing. And I feel like so much of my job in doing that is not giving them new things to do so much or new skills so much as clearing off all the things that have piled up, the bad habits that have piled up, and the wrong ways, unhealthy ways of thinking about writing. And so we end up spending so much energy on things we don't need to spend our energy on. And we're not saving it for... I mean, writing, in best case scenario, is pretty hard. You know? (chuckles)

TN: Yeah. Yeah!

JR: And then when you're spending half your time instead of writing you're thinking about, you know, why isn't Oprah gonna call me for a book— for an interview or whatever, there's so many ways to take on encumbrances that are unnecessary.

TN: Absolutely! So, for writers... okay, so I do... nonfiction. Typically. And... (laughs) Yeah, that's what I write. And a lot of the things that I've heard writers... that hinder their writing, is actually things that are well outside of even the writing task. So it's things like... numbers. Where am I listed on Amazon?

JR: (laughs)

TN: Those things.

JR: That way madness lies.

TN: Yeah! And, or, or... is my platform big enough? Orrrr... or who am I gonna get to read this? Will I be published? Will this et cetera et cetera et cetera. So it's all of these outside things that keep them from writing. And so I think that when that weight in sin — or, weight. It's not sin necessarily. It depends on how you're focused on it. But that weight will keep you from using your gifts, because a lot of times you're listening to some sort of lie in the culture or lie in your own expectations, or measures that will not... they don't matter in the long run. Sure, they will tell you something about sales or whatnot, but they're... are you being faithful is the question. And so those things, I really encourage people to try to not think about. Especially when you're just trying to write.

Another thing, which I imagine you've experienced as you're teaching writers how to write, is doubt. A lot of people are doubting their skills. They're doubting them— like, filled with doubt. And that's all of us. At some point, you're gonna get to your writing and think, "This stinks. Why am I even doing it?" And so we have to trust the Lord and put that off. Yeah, there's always gonna be someone who's better. That's just— and!

The good news is we can always being growing. And so we want to grow! But in the middle of writing, that's not the time to start... succumbing to your own doubts instead of trusting the Lord and continuing.

And so, yeah, I think there's a lot of things that we can... that can weigh us down as writers. And another thing, which, I don't know if... (pause) I don't know... I'm gonna use the word "time."

JR: Mmhm.

TN: And I'm gonna say it in... that, we can listen to the false idea that we don't have time.

JR: Mmhmm.

TN: I think a lot of times busyness can be a weight, if you will, that is a lie. We *have* time. I— think about how many times you've scrolled through social media, or how many times you've hit that snooze button, or whatever it is. So, even if it's 30 minutes, there's probably more time in our schedule than our— than we really believe. Or really... yeah. There's just more. So I think that's a lie in a lot of ways.

JR: Yeah... I know the question I often ask people is, "What are you willing to give up?" I mean, do you wanna write bad enough that you wanna give up another episode of Netflix.

TN: Yes.... yeah.

JR: And if the answer's no, then the answer's no. That's fine! But stop beating yourself up about it. If you'd rather watch TV than write, okay! That's fine!

TN: Yeah! No, I— this is something really interesting. A lot of times, I'll have people come to me and say, "I really wanna write a book." (laughs) "I really really wanna write a book." And I'm like, "Okay! Tell me more!" And

so I ask 'em more, and then I say, "Okay. Here's your assignment. Write a thousand words. You can even send me them. Send me the thousand words. Write it." And almost every single time, no one does it.

JR: Yeah.

TN: Because writing takes endurance. Because writing takes time. Because writing means sitting down, by yourself, without anyone saying anything and doing the work... it just takes work!

JR: Yep.

TN: And so I'm so surprised by how many times, because — and it's okay! Like you said, everyone isn't called to write books, or be a writer, or do this work of ministry. Not everyone is called to do it, and that's totally fine. But if you're gonna do it, you have to have a realistic picture of it. And so that means sitting your bottom in a chair.

JR: Yep.

TN: Or standing up at a desk. (laughs)

JR: Even better. You can do that, yeah.

TN: Yes. And actually doing the work.

JR: Yeah. It's not especially glamorous... (pause) doing the work. yeah.

TN: It is not.

JR: Well, okay I'm gonna switch gears just a little bit, because there was an insight from *Sacred Endurance* that I— that really struck me. And that is about the word "witness." And as you pointed out — I say an insight. I guess we all already know this, but I just never thought about it. There's a

dual nature to that word "witness," both a witness as a person who sees something, but a witness is also somebody who says something. So the person in the witness box at the... in the, you know, courtroom, is a person who is telling something. But then everybody who is in the courtroom is witnessing that person— those are people in the audience.

I know you weren't talking — you didn't have writing on your mind at all as you were talking about that idea. But I thought that was so relevant and so important for writers to think about. That it's our job to bear witness to the truth. To keep our eyes open, to hear stories, to understand information, and to be a witness, to be an audience to the life that's going on around us. As well as being a person who speaks out and gives an account of what we've seen. Um... I know that's not a question. I'm, but—

TN: Oh, it's a statement. Yeah!

JR: But the floor is now open, Trillia. (laughs)

TN: Um, so yeah. So, as writers, we have... gosh, it's really... it can be really weighty if we think about the responsibility we have. And I'm gonna speak from the Christian perspective, because that's what I write. From the Christian perspective, the Scriptures even warn not many of you ought to be teachers, right? And there is a weightiness to... that when you're reading God's Word and trying to share about it... um, there's a weightiness there. That we're witnessing to something, right? We're learning about God's word, and then we're trying to be a witness to people, if that is what you're referring to.

But that's the first thing I thought. Just... the weight of that, and of proclaiming what we're reading and trying to interpret in some way what we're reading and teach others, and to be a witness to the Lord. And then of course, if you're talking about in reference to telling other people's story, and what the responsibility and joy of that — like reading and hearing other people's stories and then sharing what we are reading. Um, yeah! So I would love to... how — just kinda toss it back to you — how have you

done that? You're a creative writer. What does that look like in your context?

JR: I think... I mean a big part of the way I think about this idea is, you know... (pause) I think that a lot of writers see it as their job to somehow... create reality. To create new realities or, I don't know, kind of invent... (pause) um... what's the word I'm looking for? I wanna say invent reality. Whereas I really think it's super important that we see what we see, right? That we just look at the world that — in trust — that God made as shot through with meaning. And if I just pay attention, if I just notice and pay attention to to the world that's going on around me, I don't have to exaggerate. I don't have to, um... a great starting point for the writer is just to bear witness to what I've actually seen.

But there are so many ways that we don't actually tell what we see. We tell what we think we should've seen, you know? Or we sort of dress up reality, or somehow work things around so that — again, as I said — we show what we think we were supposed to see instead of what we actually see. Whether that is... um... again from a Christian perspective, maybe I have it in my head what I'm supposed to think about reality because I have some interpretation from Scripture, and when I look at the world around me, instead of giving a faithful witness of what I've actually seen with my eyeballs, I might tweak things a little so they match up with some idea that I'm trying to get across. Does that make sense?

TN: Oh, so that's really interesting. So, are you saying that sometimes when we are witnessing, it's skewed by our own interpretation? Our own...

JR: Mmhm!

TN: Well, yeah!

JR: I'm saying we bear false witness a lot!

TN: That's what I thought you were saying! Abs – well, I mean... sure!

Now, bearing false witness — (laughs) getting in Scripture — is really a lie, right?

JR: Right!

TN: So...

JR: Yeah! And so I think writers should take that seriously.

TN: Absolutely!

JR: Especially Christian writers who are coming up with little illustrations to illustrate some idea... um... it's so tempting to just tweak this little news story juuuuuust a little bit so it makes my point better.

TN: Oh! Ah, goodness. So, in that regard... absolutely. It kind of goes back to the first point I was saying. We will give an account! Not many of us should be teachers.

JR: (laughs)

TN: And so if we are going to... we... it's weighty. It is so weighty when we're writing. And we wanna be really careful anytime we're telling anyone's story, not to twist it to make it what we want it to be. I was a journalist, and I wrote for a paper, a secular paper, and it featured stories. And we had to be so careful to write down word for word what that person said, no matter what. Even if it was... made absolutely now sense. (laughs)

JR: (laughs) Right, right.

TN: You know, you wanna kinda help them out and share... nope! You share exactly what was said, because otherwise, it was not accurate reporting. And there's two-fold here. We, as writers, have the opportunity to be a witness — and again I'm speaking of Christian writers — of the

greatest story, right?

JR: Mmhmm.

TN: Of the best story, the Good News, the greatest and most freeing and most grace-filled story. But the moment we add any of our humanness to it... (laughs) it's no longer a good story. It's not the best story, right? It's such a... yeah. We just have to be very careful. So that's an interesting way to think of the witnessing as writers.

JR: I don't know if you're a Flannery O'Connor reader, but she, you know, she was devoutly Catholic, and yet her stories could be kinda dark. And in her mind, it was her Catholicism that made it possible for her to look at the darkness of the things of the world. In other words, it's God's job to redeem all this, so I can just show— one thing she said I thought was interesting was, "My faith is not a substitute for seeing."

TN: Hmm.

JR: And that is to say, um, becau— she didn't feel the need to say, "I got this story." I know Flannery O'Connor knew the big story, right? She knew the Gospel. She knew that God was gonna make all things new in Christ someday. And yet she didn't feel the need to, um... sort of rearrange every story so that it got to that final redemption every time. It was important to her just to sort of give an account of what she'd seen with her eyes.

TN: Yeah, and to let the, the... it kind of makes me think of, in some ways, the Psalms where they're lamenting — now, it typically does go back to praising the Lord, but there is a darkness and reality there that is sorrowful, yet — always rejoicing, but sorrowful, and it allows for lament. And really, I think that's the reality of this broken world. And as storytellers, I think it's important for us to not feel the need to always button things up. I mean, things are not buttoned up all the time. They're hard. And there is a, a, um... yeah. That's the reality of this world. So I really appreciate that. And when you see writers who are able to write in such a way that is... raw... I

kinda hate this cliché of "real," because real has become kind of a cliché.

JR: Yeah, sure.

TN: But! Honest. Honest is a better word. And honest writer, where you see okay, this is the reality that we're seeing. I think it draws people in.

JR: Yeah.

TN: But we do love those love stories too, where everything just kinda, you know, works out in the end... (laughs)

JR: Yep, that's right. Happy Valentine's Day. We're recording this on Valentine's Day.

TN: Yes! (laughs)

JR: But, okay, one more thing - and I know we're running out of time, and I really wanted to, I'd hoped to spend more time on this topic than we're gonna be able to — but when it comes to the idea of bearing witness — of witnessing and then bearing witness -I really appreciate your voice in guestions of race in America. You're African-American, I'm white, and I've really needed your voice in some important ways. And there's something I heard you say in a radio interview or a radio – actually, probably an essay that you did - where you were talking about the importance of us white folks and black folks knowing their shared history, and not rearranging history for our own convenience. And you said, "We can't weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn if we don't know their stories. Learning about them helps us guard against self-centeredness." And I know you're specifically talking about race there. (pause) And that's such an important application of this idea. And it's also relevant in a lot of other areas. But I do - the writer's in a position to tell the truth, to set the record straight when it comes to, as you said somewhere, the stories we share. the history we share. And so I think it's so important as writers that we not look away from stories that we don't - that are inconvenient for us, or that

make us feel bad. And frankly, you know, the history of race in this country makes me feel bad! And it's easier to look away and not bear witness to things.

TN: Yeah, I mean... when you, when we look away and focus on our own feelings, it is, absolutely... it all becomes about us. And so it is a self-centered kind of approach when we're thinking, oh, I'm not gonna read that story because I don't like the way it makes me feel. Now that doesn't mean we have to expose ourselves to every, you know, terrible tragedy that happens in the world. But it does mean that if we're going to love our neighbor, it's probably good that we understand about our history or their history or whatever. And all history, obviously, for African-Americans is not sorrowful, and there's lots of joy. But the beginning our country... wow, is there a lot to lament and to be sorrowful about.

And so we... we don't want to... so often people will say, "Wait a minute, aren't we past that?" What, 1865 was when slavery was abolished? Isn't that just yesterday? It's not that long ago. My family and I just were studying about people who were born in the 1900s, the early 1900s, who achieved great things. Well, one of those women in particular is still alive!

JR: Wow.

TN: Yeah! So it's remarkable to think that these are people who only... they're immediate ancestors would have experiences slavery. There is something so important about reading about and learning about the history of others that we can love them and serve them. And for writers, we definitely don't want to look away from these stories. I think it only helps us — well one, it helps us love our neighbor, which is the most important thing.

JR: Sure.

TN: But it will help us in our craft of writing if we can be faithful to telling the real story, and not um... flowering it up. But getting into the hard parts

of every aspect of those things. So that when we rejoice, we can rejoice rightly. We know when we're rejoicing, right? When we understand the sorrow or the plight of someone and you can see that they're enduring through pain, or they're, um... the suffering that... and you can rejoice when you understand, okay, this is what they've been through. If there is a time for rejoicing. There's a time for everyone, so it may not be the time. But it's really good and essential for us to understand our history.

JR: Yeah, and I think in a really important way if we're better at loving our neighbors, we are better at the craft of writing. Cause that's kind of what, um... I know there are issues of grammar and sentence structure that are not directly related to loving your neighbor. Although, I often make the case that good grammar is a way of connecting with your readers because you love them, but anyway. In important ways, being better at loving our neighbors really is the same thing as becoming better at our craft.

TN: Yeah. It really is. In so many different ways. I'm really glad — and this is such a change of topic in a sense — but I'm really glad that you mentioned grammar as a way of helping. (laughs)

JR: Yeah. (laughs)

TN: Because I think that sometimes we can think the more confusing... or ignoring cerain punctioantion... then that is most creative, and so... (laughs)

JR: (laughs)

TN: It's a funny thing. Writing is such a funny thing. But if we're wanting to love our neighbor, we don't— that doesn't mean that we are always making them guess.

JR: Yep!

TN: So... yeah. (laughs) Like, what is she trying to say here? (laughs) Yeah.

So anyways.

JR: Okay, Trillia. Last question. Who are the writers who make you want to write?

TN: Oh gosh. Eesh! Let's see... I haven't thought about this. Who are the writers that make me want to write? Ummm....

JR: This ain't the same thing as "Who are your favorite writers?" 'Cause sometimes your favorite writers make you kind of... you know. Not wanna write.

TN: Yeah, so... it's like one of those questions when you say, "What's your favorite book?" And all of a sudden you don't have any... it's like you've never read a book in your life.

JR: Yeah, right.

TN: That's what's happening to me at this very moment. (laughs)

JR: (laughs)

TN: I'm like, I can't think of one. Writer. Oh my goodness, this is really funny. But, um... but, and I have people in my head... Toni Morrison is one.

JR: Oh man, isn't she great?

TN: Yes. Um, there's the poet that I can't — my brain is going — this is hilarious.

JR: (laughs)

TN: But, there are... if you asked me not on the spot, I would've come up

with a thousand writers.

JR: (laughs)

TN: But at the moment, my brain is flatlining and I can't...

JR: Okay. Well, I tell you what -

TN: And I can't. So. Yeah. (laughs)

JR: Toni Morrison, that's great. That's a great answer.

TN: There we go! (laughs)

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: Hey, Trillia, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast. I really enjoyed talking to you.

TN: Thank you.

JR: And I hope we can catch up again one of these days soon.

TN: That'd be great.

JR: Thanks, bye.

TN: Bye.

(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.

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Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song "Too Good" as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

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