

(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: Laura Fabrycky is an American writer living in Brussels, Belgium. Her work has been published in *Books and Culture*, *The Foreign Service Journal*, *Good Housekeeping Middle East*, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, *Comment*, *Christianity Today*, *Fathom*, and elsewhere. She focuses on questions of political theology and cultivating the moral imagination for the common good. Laura's husband is a career diplomat, so she's lived overseas for much of her adult life.

(THEME MUSIC FADES)

JR: During her stint in Berlin, Germany, she became a tour guide at the Bonhoeffer Haus, the house where the adult Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived when he was in Berlin, and where he was arrested by the Nazis. Laura's latest book, *The Keys To Bonhoeffer's Haus*, is an historically grounded memoir of her experience there.

Laura Fabrycky, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast. I'm so glad you're here.

LAURA FABRYCKY: It's really great to be with you, Jonathan. Thanks.

JR: You were a tour guide at the Bonhoeffer Haus for a couple of years, right?

LF: That's correct, yes.

JR: And your book *The Keys to Bonhoeffer's Haus*, uh, tells about what you learned in that process.

LF: Yes. Yeah, it's, my book is, as I describe it, a historically grounded memoir about my experience as a volunteer guide at the Bonhoeffer Haus, and our family had moved to Berlin for my husband's next diplomatic assignment in the summer of 2016. And as we were settling into life there, I discovered that we lived literally within biking distance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's adult residence. So it wasn't the home that he grew up in, but it was the home that he lived in as an adult when he would come to Berlin, and it was the home that the Gestapo arrested him from in 1943. And it's now a memorialized home, like officially recognized as a memorial site, as there are many places in Germany that are related to World War II and the Nazi era.

And so when I learned that, I made— we scheduled a visit with our family to go, and I kept going back. I would schedule more visits, and I kind of became known there enough —

JR: (chuckles)

LF: — that some of the guides would say, ohhhh Frau Fabrycky, here you are again! And just like, here I am!

JR: (chuckles)

LF: And then I asked them kind of jokingly, like, could I— I come so often, I should become a volunteer here. And they said, yeah, you should! And that was the point at which I kind of made a more diligent effort to learn Bonhoeffer's life and how to narrate it to others.

JR: So, in that house, um... you learned a lot about... from being present in that house, um, the Bonhoeffer story went from being this abstraction to something very concrete and very— something that you lived in.

LF: Yeah. I had a vague, you know, kind of growing up in the church, I had a vague, kind of ambient knowledge from understanding it from like

references in sermons or from professors I admired. But I, you know... I had also known of him as a Christian hero? So I had sort of the Hollywood idea of who Bonhoeffer was, which is a very kind of American telling of his life, and imagines him as sort of this... you know, a David against the Nazi Goliath. And I had never really thought of him as an actual flesh and blood person and not simply a character in a heroic tale. And then to actually situate him in a physical home — not even a museum, but it really feels like a house, like just a regular house — um, kind of bust open all the categories that I had. And I really wanted to get to know him as a man, and it was— I realized that in order to do that I actually had to get to know the shape of his life and his relationships to other people, and to stories of his life, like his family stories, and then his relationship even to his nation.

And so in some ways it helped me to kind of unpack those... oh sorry, I hate that word. I hate using “unpack.”

JR: (laughs)

LF: Okay, start over! Um, exploring his life through the lens of his house helped me to think better about the places of my life, the stories of my life, and the stories that I live in that are related to my country and my nation as an American. So not related to Bonhoeffer's German life.

JR: Yeah. So you said a minute ago that you had kind of an Americanized vision of Bonhoeffer. Can you say more about that? What do you mean when you say an Americanized vision — you might not have said vision — but an Americanized version?

LF: Yeah, version. Yeah. I mean, I think probably the... the biggest feature of that story, um, has a very bright and central lens on him as the singular and central character of his own life. And if you imagine his life as a stage, the spotlight is always on him. And as I got to know him better, I realized that the spotlight kept getting wider and wider, and that more people — we needed to account for more people in the story of his life. And that I don't think he would've even put his own life as centrally as we tend to

place it. And uh... he understood Christ as the center, and he also understood the church as not simply a group of atomized individuals who are the central players in their own lives, but as people who are intimately related to one other in Jesus. And we become proximate, and he becomes central.

JR: Hmm.

LF: And that was— that to me was in some ways what the house represented. Not that Bonhoeffer wasn't there, but that he was not as central of a character as I had imagined him to be. And I think that that's a very, very common American telling of his life.

JR: Uh huh. You used a phrase — or at least one of your endorsers quoted you as saying — “people matter to places.” What do you mean by that?

LF: Yeah, that line comes in a chapter, one of the later chapters that's related to my exploration of his friendship with his friend Eberhard Bethge. And I use it to say that even for Bonhoeffer and his friend Eberhard Bethge who wrote *the* definitive biography of Bonhoeffer. Um, their friendship belonged to the house and to these particular places, and we do too. Like, all of our learning, all of our engagement in the world is through our bodies. Like, our bodies, and our bodies are never two places. We can't be absolutely everywhere, even though we're talking through this digital format. I'm in a place, and you're in a place, and these places are... we can easily kind of imagine them away, but they're actually really integral and central to who we are as people and the stories that we tell, the way that we imagine themselves.

So for me, the Bonhoeffer house is part of that. And Bonhoeffer and his friend Eberhard Bethge were — they belong to one another. And they belong to that particular house. Like, Bethge would come and stay over in their travels, and they would hang out in his room. So that's what I meant in that line.

JR: So, it's easier for me to understand the idea that places matter to people than people matter to places. Tell me a little more about that distinction.

LF: Yeah. (pause) Um, I think because our family is in the US Foreign Service, I tend to think a lot about how I... how we move to new places, and how those places kind of put their imprint on us, but we also put our imprint on them. And we can't ever escape that kind of bodily exchange in some ways. Like, literally breathing the air, eating food, smelling smells. And obviously that describes the way a place and cultures bear on us, but we also bear on places to which we belong. And that's in part what I'm hoping will come from readers engaging in my book. That they will think about how they matter to places that they live in, that they belong to, and that their imprint, what they actually bear on those places — their responsibility to those places, the way that they articulate love and care for those places — deeply matters.

JR: Yeah... one thing I kept thinking of as I was reading your descriptions of the Bonhoeffer Haus is — something that gets said around The Rabbit Room often is “feasting is an act of war.”

LF: Mmmm...

JR: And, um, this house was a place where in spite of all, there was joy and there was friendship and, you know, good fellowship. You know, I just finished reading *The Lord of the Rings* — I'd never read *Lord of the Rings* all the way through before.

LF: That's a great book.

JR: (laughs) I know, I'm so proud of myself! Um, and but the, um... but the importance of joy and the word “merry” and “merriment” keeps coming up in that story, because evil... its first casualty — or maybe not its first casualty, but one of the first casualties — is joy.

LF: Yes!

JR: So that pleasure is sort of the first bait, but then it's not the mission of evil to hand out pleasures. It lures us in with pleasures, then takes those pleasures away.

LF: Yes! I... yeah.

JR: Bonhoeffer's house is a place where joy persisted in spite of evil.

LF: Absolutely. And I think that's something we don't get as much in Bonhoeffer per se. Like we can read his letters, but because he was formed as a German academic, we get a lot of German academicness out of him. But apparently he actually had a pretty decent sense of humor, and I know he knew how to party. He definitely knew how to have a good time, and he learned a lot of his skills of having a good time in his family, first and foremost. His mom, especially, was really skilled at gathering people, disarming people, creating fun events where there was often a lot of communal singing? I think that's one of the things that I found so... something that we've really lost is, um — and not that I'm trying to recapture — I'm not advocating for everyone should do communal singing. But just that they, they really knew what to do with themselves when they got together. the knew how to have a good time.

I think it's easy to kind of get mesmerized by the political conspiracy, and of course anything related to Nazi Germany just makes it dark and dramatic. But underneath their refusal to participate in the Nazi myth... underneath that was this really deep and rightly defiant joy. And that joy is what makes human life good and pleasurable.

JR: Yeah. I love it. Um... a phrase you use — and you didn't originate it but you use it to good effect — and that is “civic housekeeping.”

LF: Yeah.

JR: Um, and which sounds like part of what you're describing when you talk about what was going on in the Bonhoeffer house.

LF: Definitely. So part of the... the Bonhoeffer family knew how to feast, and they knew how to be together in a really pleasurable and formational way. And they also saw that as not simply something that happened within their walls, but that actually needed to be connected to their neighbors and fellow citizens. So ideally, all of our politics is informed by that more basic sense of joy and pleasure, in forming bonds of affection and friendship and belonging and care. And I think they really saw their participation — and I think his really formed Dietrich's participation in — in being willing to fight for something that was good. It came from that deeper place of joy.

So civic housekeeping... you're right. It's not from Bonhoeffer. I take it from Jane Adams, who was, um... a leader in social justice in the early 20th century, the early 1900s. And she saw that um... she saw civic housekeeping as something that was primarily in the language of women and women's work, but it was caring for larger spaces outside of the home.

So she actually in Chicago, um... she created a place called the Hull House. I'm sorry, this is a lot of Jane Adams! (laughs) If you want to take this out you can! But I see a lot of these, you know — Bonhoeffer never used this language, but I see him doing very similar kinds of things, a care for his nation that attended to civic spaces and caring for neighbors. And I think as Americans, it's something that we've lost. It's actually part of our story, and I want us to get it back and see it as something we can joyfully participate in. And I think that Bonhoeffer is a classic example of someone who is doing civic housekeeping.

JR: Yeah. I tell you what, um... I know that here in the middle of this, we're recording this in the middle of the coronavirus quarantine, and so I know it gets a little tiresome talking about this all the time. However, I've noticed in my little neighborhood, the fact that we can't — well, we don't get in our

cars and do other things means suddenly we're all out walking around, and we, from a safe distance, we're talking to one another. I've met people I've never known, and now I know what their dogs' names are. And it feels like this sort of reset and a reminder that we live our lives locally.

LF: Yes...

JR: And it's so easy to forget that. You're in Brussels, Belgium, and I'm in Nashville, Tennessee, so in that sense we're... what we're doing right now sort of aligns with what I'm saying. But the truth is, you know... I've been praying and hoping that... you know, none of my work requires that I be local. And so I've been thinking about having a more local life. I wasn't picturing quite this local, but it's been doing good work in my heart, really. To have such a local life and to know my neighbors, and um... this all feels relevant to what you're talking about.

LF: Yeah, I think it is. And you rightly say we're recording this in the mist of, um... my book was released in the midst of this pandemic. And it's been interesting to see what some of the arguments I make in it, how they matter to this time and moment. And I think they do. And uh... yeah, I think we're being, in some ways — and it's an awful moment — but we're being given the opportunity to discover things that we might not have been ever forced to look at. And I think that's exciting. It's exciting.

JR: Yeah. I wanna close the loop on all this with regard to writing. Cause this is supposed to be a writing podcast. I think everything you said has been relevant to writing, but now is the time to just sort of bring it back to that. Um... civic housekeeping. What does that have to do with the work of the writer?

LF: Ummm... I think in part... for me, I've actually given this a lot of thought. It matters too in a number of ways. It matters to what I read, and it matters to my faithfulness in actually writing. So in my vocation as a writer, I actually have to be quite attentive to what I read, and we live in a time where it's easy to be mindless about our reading. And so I know on

some of your earlier conversations on this podcast, you've talked about the deep work, or um... how attenuated our levels of concentration have gotten, and um.. so for me, it's important that I've set aside time that I've done concentrated and deep reading. And exercising — literally exercising with the pen on paper — writing. And to me, those are things that I regularly both fight and also try to incorporate in um, in my life as a writer. And I see that kind of as writing housekeeping.

JR: Uh huh. And by the way, what kind of reading are you doing that's... the reading you are making yourself, or making yourself do? Yeah. Maybe I shouldn't say make yourself do, but...

LF: Yeah. I tend to typically have a book that I'm reading that's more related to my spiritual life. I'm re-reading Kathleen Norris' *Acedia and Me* right now.

JR: Oh man, what a book.

LF: It's such a good book. And then also I'm working on entertaining another book idea that's related to life in Belgium. It's about — called *Cities of Ladies*, and it's about the Beguines. The Beguine religious movement. So, more on that later. (laughs)

JR: (laughs)

LF: Um, and that's like an academic book. It's a very dense study about the late medieval Beguine religious movement.

JR: Uh huh. I don't know anything about the Beguines.

LF: I know! That's why I gotta write a book about it. (laughs)

JR: Yeah, right. Um... (9pause) Yeah. I think the things you're talking about, when you're talking about love of neighbor and cultivating... now, I'm

drawing a blank on the language you were using, but it was so good. In terms of that our political— you're a foreign service family and think a lot about larger issues than I do, in terms of probably world events and politics. But as you say, I don't care how big the scale is, it starts with local life and loving your neighbor, cultivating a moral imagination that makes sense, right? That's not market driven for instance.

LF: Yeah.

JR: And if we are — whatever our positions are on markets or on politics — hopefully they're informed by these deeper— connections that go way deeper than economics and politics and these other things. and I think that the writer has a gift and responsibility to shape those bonds.

LF: Yes. And a writer needs to be, um... particularly a writer that does understand themselves as related to other people and not just operating out of their own sense of self-actualization, right?

JR: (laughs) Yeah.

LF: I care very much about the life of the mind, about the moral imagination, and I even care about the political imagination. I studied political theory in college. I continue to be a student of political theory and political theology. I think that the metaphors and images that we use to think about politics very much shape our political lives. And I tend to think of politics — I refuse to give into politics as a contact sport. I think politics is simply how we relate to one another. It's just simply how we do community.

And so that's part of what I'm also doing with this book is... I am wanting to seed the ground with different forms of fertilizer, and hoping that different things will grow. And I see that in my task as a writer is to turn up ground, pull out stones, and then hopefully plant and fertilize some new ideas.

JR: Love it. Talk to me about— you spoke of political metaphors.

LF: Yes.

JR: Um, what's a... so instead of politics as a contact sport, um... what's a better metaphor... I guess that's a simile. (laughs)

LF: Yeah! (laughs)

JR: What's a better simile, um... you may have already said all you're gonna say on the subject, but what metaphors can we replace?

LF: Yeah, I prefer to think of politics as pothole filling and solving hard problems with a group of people. And so we're typically— there are a lot of, you know— there's sausage making as a metaphor for politics, right? You don't wanna see it made, but it gets made. The classical metaphor for politics is slow, boring, through hard boards... those kind of images. I tend to think of it as more on a street, filling potholes. We find on a street we are related to each other. We are all using these pathways, and we're gonna hit potholes, and we need to figure out who's gonna fill it, how it's gonna get paid for... that's basically what politics is.

JR: Yeah. Good. I like it.

LF: Good!

JR: There's a humility in the way you talk about your relationship to Bonhoeffer and Bonhoeffer's house that I think is really helpful for writers. Um, so there are two things you say, and I think we can get to both of them. You said at one point you were tempted to discern analogies between Dietrich Bonhoeffer's world and your own, but you learned to resist that. How... let's start with why. Why do you resist the temptation to discern analogies between his time and yours — that seems like a healthy thing to do, when you consider an historical figure. Um... why do you

resist the temptation to draw those analogies?

LF: Yeah. Bonhoeffer's name gets invoked a lot, but he's often not really known for being himself. He's often, I think... he's drawn into conversations about things like, "We need a Bonhoeffer for our time!"

JR: Mmhm.

LF: Um, I was interested in understanding Bonhoeffer in his time. And I was also a little suspicious of making him my avatar? Like, using him as the way I would make a point? It was kind of important to me — and I'm very glad you see it as humility — but to establish myself as a character who is in a posture of learning, and not as the person becoming the expert.

So I am still only a student of Bonhoeffer. The Bonhoeffer Scholar Guild is crowded and *smart*. And um...

JR: (laughs)

LF: I was never going to actually become a scholar of Bonhoeffer. But I was also very aware that Bonhoeffer... he kind of inhabits the public imagination, a popular imagination. Like, there's all kinds of historical fiction that's been written about him, and um... there's things that we don't know about him. He's kind of an easy character to paint and to use. And I was concerned about seeing him as an easy hero or a hero that I over-identified with.

And I think we do that even with Scripture. We always want to imagine ourselves as Bonhoeffer, just like we always wanna imagine ourselves as David and never the Goliath. And we tend to think that we'd be Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany and not necessarily one of the German Christians who was joyfully imbibing Nazi propaganda.

JR: (laughs) Yeah...

LF: Um, and (laughs) and I didn't wanna take that for granted, that I would be simply able to see as clearly and courageously the truth and the lies. And I needed to make sure I let him be him and to get a clear understanding of who I was, and then to discover the correspondences between our lives. And that's when I used the metaphor of the keys.

So I don't, like, "Bonhoeffer did this, therefore you should do this." I tried to say, well, this is what I see in him, and I think this is how it might correspond to my life and other people's lives. And they seem kind of cute, but these were really the things I took away from my time at the Bonhoeffer Haus. I can't neatly say figure out who's the, who's the Nazi villain and then figure out who that is in my life. I have to figure out my life! I actually have to understand the characters and stage of my life.

JR: Yeah. (pause) Um... there's a— at the end of Ava DuVernay's documentary *13*, or *13th* — I don't know if you've seen that.

LF: No, I haven't.

JR: But... somebody, and I think it is, um... I think it might be... well, I'm not sure who it is at the end who says, um, don't ask yourself— or don't do the thought experiment of, "If I were in the time period of slavery, what would I have done?" Or, "If I were in the time period of Jim Crow, what would I have done?" He says, you're already doing it! The way you're living right now *is* what you— it's not like — and this is specifically with regard to race — it's not like this is all over and you can imagine what it would've been like back then. You're already being who you...

LF: Who you would be. That's right.

JR: That's who you are. Anyway. It was very convicting to me, to tell you the truth. That moment in that documentary. But... next question, related. You said something along the lines of you realize you were not making discoveries about Bonhoeffer. That you just had some keys.

LF: Yeah.

JR: What is the difference between having keys and making discoveries?

LF: I had to rely *heavily* on my German colleagues at the house, on other scholars and other writers, to teach me about Bonhoeffer. And so nothing that I was saying was particularly new. I was saying it for myself. I was saying it in a way that mattered, that helped me understand my life. And my publisher thinks that other people might find it helpful as well. But I... in the same way that Bonhoeffer was not a singular hero, I was not the singular character in this story. Like, I was discovering things that I needed, that needed to be restated in my life. But it's not like they were major discoveries.

I think the places where I found correspondence helped me to discover things, but in general they're just pretty standard human fare. Like, we gotta love each other!

JR: (laughs)

LF: You know, like just stuff that has to be re-said over and over and over because we struggle to remember.

JR: Yeah. Did you struggle with self-doubt knowing people who knew a lot more about Bonhoeffer than you would read this book?

LF: Yes. Constantly. I constantly struggled with self-doubt. I still do. I'm kind of... I've been nervous that I have done my due diligence as a student, that I really can show to those who have — deeply know Bonhoeffer's work — that I have done him justice. And I cared about that, because he's not someone that I can simply... I can't paint him by number. He was a real human being, and there's real documents that we can refer to. And I couldn't just make stuff up, and I couldn't just say what I thought. It had to correspond to a historical record. So yes, I struggled a lot with

doubt.

JR: Yeah. Okay. Well, I'm glad you pushed through and wrote this anyway. 'Cause as you said, you're not framing this as here's a definitive story of Bonhoeffer.

LF: No. It's not. And I hope readers will find their imaginations fired for their own places.

JR: Yeah. Yeah, great. I love it.

LF: Thanks.

JR: I wrote a biography, a spiritual biography of Flannery O'Connor. And every day I woke up and would kind of tick off the list of people that I knew of who knew more about her than I did. And it was hard to push through that every morning, knowing that there are a lot of people who are more qualified to do this than I am. But I was the one who was doing it. I mean, that was my job that day, to do it. I didn't matter that there were people who— that there are still people who know way more than I do on this subject. But... oh well! (laughs)

LF: Oh well! And in some ways when you're engaging with a figure like Flannery O'Connor or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you're trying to befriend them. And there's gonna be something that you see in your friendship with them that's unique. But no one else might be able to share that.

JR: Mmhm. Yeah.

LF: But other people will be able to say, welllllll, that's not really Flannery. Or, that might be you. Or, that's not really Dietrich. So, yeah. You kind of have to suss that out.

JR: I had to learn to wake up and think about people who might need this

book, instead of the people who already know so much they don't need it.

LF: Ahh. Did you find that with Flannery O'Connor? I needed to write this book. I had to write it so I could help myself remember. That's why I wrote it. Yeah.

JR: Oh, absolutely. I... and you know, when I finished that book — and it took me forever. I don't know, 20 months, 24 months, and it's not a big book. And um... the day after I submitted that manuscript, I got up the next morning and wanted to read some Flannery O'Connor, 'cause I just love her that much.

LF: That's great.

JR: So anyway... okay! I always end these conversations with the question who are the writers who make you want to write?

LF: Yeah. I'm ready.

JR: Well, good!

LF: Um, I love that question. I love discovering who people love to— so! Penelope Fitzgerald. (pause) Oliver O'Donovan—

JR: I don't know...

LF: You don't know who Penelope Fitzgerald is?

JR: Right, I— no. Okay, start over. Penelope Fitzgerald?

LF: Yeah... *Blue Flower*. Do you know Penelope Fitzgeerald?

JR: No.

LF: (gasp) You must! She's... she's incredible.

JR: Okay.

LF: She also... what I adore about her too is she did some of her meatiest and most award-winning writing in her 70s and 80s.

JR: Really!

LF: Yeah... like, she's a perfect, ripening figure.

JR: Love it.

LF: Oliver O'Donovan in political theology.

JR: Okay.

LF: Um, Kathleen Norris who I've already mentioned. And in poetry, Denise Levertov, Kay Ryan... I love Katherine Paterson. She wrote *Bridge to Terabithia*. Like I love... oh, she's a genius. Um, particularly her... I actually really like her nonfiction. Um, her *Spying Heart* book, and... she has another book that I actually am completely blanking on the title, but she called it her kitchen sink memoirs.

JR: Huh.

LF: It's like her stories she would tell her family members as they washed dishes at the kitchen sink. I love her nonfiction.

JR: Yeah...

LF: That's it. I'll leave it at that.

JR: Well, great!

LF: (laughs)

JR: I'm glad you told me about Penelope Fitzgerald. I did not know about her.

LF: *Blue Flower*. Um... she also wrote *The Bookshop*. She's an *increeeedible*, incredible writer.

JR: Is she American?

LF: She's British.

JR: Okay.

LF: She's also deceased.

JR: Yeah.

LF: Yeah.

JR: Okay. Alright.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: Laura Fabrycky, thank you so much. This was great.

LF: This has been great.

JR: I know this wasn't a great time to release a book, but I hope a lot of people read it and are blessed by it.

LF: Thanks so much, Jonathan. I appreciate it.

(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 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.

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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(THEME MUSIC OUT)

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