

JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: Hello, Habit listeners! Jonathan Rogers here. Before we get started, I wanted to tell you about my new six week online writing course called Writing through the Wardrobe. Starting February 6th, we'll walk together through *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, to see what C.S. Lewis has to teach us about writing. To find out more, go to thehabit.co/wardrobe. Thanks. I hope to see you there.

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

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

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JR: Heidi Johnston is the author of *Life in the Big Story: Your Place in God's Unfolding Plan* and, most recently, *Choosing Love in a Broken World*, a book for teenage girls that attempts to tell the truth about relationships. She lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland, C.S. Lewis' hometown. Heidi is a delight and very wise. I think you're gonna love hearing from her.

Heidi Johnston, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast.

HEIDI JOHNSTON: Good to be here!

JR: I always love talking to you, and uh, I love your wisdom and your insight. Um, last time we talked — so we actually recorded an episode from my old homegrown podcast that was not salvageable for the purpose of this new, highly professional podcast produced by The Rabbit Room, and uh... and so I wanted to sort of, re— talk to you again, get some of your — sort of salvage some of the things you had to say there. And last time we talked it was October, and you had until December to finish your most recent book *Choosing Love*. And, at the time at least, you were struggling with procrastination. Did you make it? Did you get your deadline?

HJ: That would be very common, yep.

JR: [laughs]

HJ: I did make my deadline, yes! I did. I didn't do a lot of awful lot else between October and December, but I did make my deadline.

JR: So how did you overcome procrastination?

HJ: Ehh... I'm very much a pressure worker in every aspect of life. At school I was the person that started studying two days before the exam and didn't sleep, so I tend to think if I have a couple of weeks I have plenty of time. And I work under pressure generally, so... yeah, that suited me.

JR: Well, I'm so glad that you overcame these procrastinatory tendencies of yours...

HJ: Temporarily.

JR: Uh, it's only temporarily, okay.

HJ: Only temporarily. [laughs]

JR: This was not a story of victory for all time. This was just a one off...

HJ: No, I really wish it was, that would've been a good story. But yeah, it's definitely something I struggle with.

JR: [laughs]

HJ: Particularly with writing actually. But generally, yeah, I'm a terrible procrastinator.

JR: Yeah. Do you have any idea why?

HJ: Um... I know that I think with writing it's because I work from home. I think in some sense, writing is one of the hardest things I do from a discipline point of view. It's so much easier to put on a load of laundry or prepare the dinner or do something that I feel like I can do without having to face the possibility that I'll have nothing to say, so it's something that I'm working on. [laughs]

JR: Yeah. Right. You're probably not gonna fail at doing another load of laundry.

HJ: No, I'm pretty good at that now. [laughs]

JR: Yeah. But you might fail [chuckles] at writing. It's painful! If you think about it.

HJ: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Totally.

JR: And so... that's kind of... yeah, fear. How do you get over that? How do you get over fear?

HJ: I don't know if I even know the answer to that. I guess you just have to sit down and get on with it? And one of my writing practices that I do is I generally read Doug McKelvey's "Liturgy for Those Fearing Failure" before I start writing.

JR: Oh, wow.

HJ: And... to remind myself both that I'm not doing it myself, ummm... well, to remind myself that, and it sort of takes away the pride and the complete panic. [laughs]

JR: Yeah.

HJ: Helps me get a better perspective of what it is I'm doing.

JR: Tell me about that liturgy. What do you remember from it?

HJ: It talks a lot about the fact that what you're doing is God's, through breathing life into the work you're doing. Here, I have it above my desk: "Apart from the Spirit of God breathing life into your incomplete and tainted efforts. Apart from the Father blessing and multiplying your inadequate offerings, no lasting benefit will come of your labors." So that's the sort of theme, and I just find it so helpful before I write to remind myself of all those things.

JR: Yeah... yeah, that's great. I know one thing we've talked about before is struggling with kind of impostor syndrome.

HJ: [laughs] Yeah, definitely. I'm always waiting for Pete Peterson to discover I shouldn't be writing for The Rabbit Room. [laughs]

JR: [laughs]

HJ: Any day now, the email's coming. [laughs]

JR: Well, yeah, the good news is I don't think he listens to this podcast anyway, so I think you're safe.

HJ: Oh good.

JR: For a little while longer.

HJ: That's all right. [laughs]

JR: [laughs]

HJ: Yeah, there's definitely a sense of that though. I was thinking about it

today, and I think social media is a big thing as well.

JR: Hmm!

HJ: So, as a writer, you follow other writers. Particularly as a mom, you go on, and you see these moms with kids that getting up at 4am to write, and you know, they're reading classics while their kids do crafts with homemade Play-Doh, and...

JR: [laughs]

HJ: You just feel like such an underachiever! [laughs] You sorta think, yeah, one of these days, people are gonna find out I'm not that smart or that cool.

JR: Uh huh.

HJ: [laughs]

JR: I've talked to you enough to know that you're both smart and cool, so for what that's worth... I don't know how helpful that is.

HJ: Oh, well... okay. [laughs]

JR: [laughs] So, your most recent book, *Choosing Love*, is a book for teenage girls. Is that fair to say?

HJ: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, teenage girls or girls even in their early twenties. And just sort of dealing with the whole idea of relationships, that sort of age group.

JR: Mmhmm.

HJ: Or dealing with the initial stages of relationships, I should say.

JR: [laughs]

HJ: Definitely a lifelong journey!

JR: Yeah, right. So you have daughters. Are they both teenagers? They younger than that?

HJ: Yep! Yeah, I have two teenage girls, who I wanted to have these conversations with. So I basically tricked them by writing a book that they were then forced to read.

JR: Oh, nice! Good job!

HJ: [laughs] Great way to have that conversation.

JR: I'd like to ask you, how did you get your kids to read your books? I never had any success with that.

HJ: Well... because it was a book for teenage girls, and as I went through it, they read each chapter and gave me feedback on it. And then it's designed to be sort of read for mothers and daughters or even friends together, so they can read a short chapter and then chat about the discussion questions at the end. So I asked them for their help to do that. So actually they turned out to be great editors!

JR: Uh huh.

HJ: Which was a discovery. But it meant that I actually got to talk about the subject matter with them as well, which was great. It was really good.

JR: Oh, that's great. So where did this book come from? How did you decide this was a book that you needed to write?

HJ: Basically, because of my own girls. As a teenage girl, I was pretty terrified of teenage girls, so...

JR: [laughs]

HJ: It's not something that I ever thought I would be doing. [laughs] They're just a terrifying group of people! Um... but I... I'm so sick of the lies that teenagers are being peddled when it comes to relationships and sexuality. I just wanted to have this conversation with them. I feel like we've bought into this idea that, like, the ultimate goal of love is me feeling happy and me being satisfied, and um... you're married. You know that marriage can be wonderful and satisfying, but also really, really hard. And sometimes love is about making the hard choice to put the other person first, even when you don't feel like it. It's that whole intentionality thing again. But it leads to something that's deeper and more real, and I just wanted to have those conversations with them.

The whole Biblical idea of covenant as well that's so central to the story of the Bible, but also to marriage and love... it's so rich and so beautiful. And I think sometimes as Christians, we can be guilty of saying we don't do this and we don't do that because we're Christians, rather than hey, look at this. This is beautiful, and it's rich and it's deep and it's something worth fighting for. And that's what I wanted them to know.

JR: Oh, that's great.

HJ: I also wanted them to know that being satisfied in God is the starting point, 'cause I think there's a danger if you try to get your satisfaction from someone else, you're placing a burden on them that they were never meant to carry. And so we need to be satisfied in God first, and then love someone else out of the overflow of that. So, I guess those were just the things I wanted them to know, and I figured if they were the only ones that ever read it, I would lose nothing.

JR: Yeah. Right. As you talk about this and your goals... really what you're

doing is, is in one sense, what we're always doing when we sit down to write. And that's trying to tell a truer story than the one the world is telling. And I think that's one of the — that kind of is the great gift of the writer, is not escapism, but rather, hey, let me tell you something that's truer than what you thought.

HJ: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

JR: In writing this book, you're giving your girls and others beyond your girls the, um... this... really a reality check. Here's what's ultimately true. Here's what's, you know... for all the stories that you hear floating around, here's a truer story.

HJ: Yeah. I guess that idea of there being an ultimate truth isn't very popular now, but it's something I've been thinking about a lot recently. And actually, it's the only way to counter those feelings I have nothing to say.

JR: Yeah!

HJ: Because it makes me realize actually, in myself, I don't have anything to say! They have to come from beyond me to have any meaning at all, otherwise it's just me giving you the thoughts in my mind, which isn't going to help anybody.

JR: Yeah... yeah! I love that. I love this idea that the writer's job is to look out — outward — and not so much looking in. Obviously, looking inward is part of the process, but I don't think... you know, most writers don't have the problem of not looking inward enough. [chuckles] You know?

HJ: Definitely not! [laughs]

JR: [laughs] I mean, if I knew a writer who never looked within, I would say, "Hey, you need to be a little more introspective." I just don't know any people who are insufficiently introspective who end up writing, you know?

HJ: Yeah... totally. I've been — a few years ago, I wrote a piece for The Rabbit Room on Psalm 73. I don't know if you've ever found yourself in a passage of Scripture that you just can't get out of again. It's been just stuck with me ever since. The whole idea of the Psalm is that at the start, the Psalmist is just looking out at the world around him, and he just feels like his feet are slipping. He's losing his grip on what's true, and he wants to believe God's real, but the world seems completely out of control. And then there's this beautiful turning point at the middle where he comes into the presence of God, and suddenly he sees what is real.

I love that his circumstances don't change at all, and the circumstances of the world around him don't change, but his perspective changes completely when he comes to God and allows Him to show him what's real.

JR: Oh, that's great. And again, that's the gift — that's one of the main gifts a writer offers to the world. Is saying, hey, look at this.

HJ: Yeah, and we can't do that ourselves. You can only do that when you're anchored in what is actually true. Actually, if my brain could grasp truth in its entirety, then that would make truth pretty small. That wouldn't be encouraging at all! [laughs]

JR: [laughs] Yeah. I'm just vaguely remembering a conversation we had at one point, and I'm hoping you can remember enough to sort of pick up from this point. I remember you talking about... the job... your job as a writer, or as a communicator, is to really commit to what's true, and not — not “wouldn't it be cool if this were true,” but rather being really grounded in what really is true and real that I didn't invent.

HJ: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah, so true, you can become so caught up in even the beauty of the telling. I think there's a Lewis quote about, um, any writer that can get so caught up in the beauty of the telling that they lose sight of the truth of what they're actually trying to say. That is not what he said, but that's a paraphrase. [laughs]

JR: Uh huh. [laughs]

HJ: But something, you know, that idea that you're so busy trying to make things beautiful that you lose sight of what it is that you're actually trying to say, the beauty of truth itself. I think I shared the Lewis quote that says no one who bothers about originality will ever be original.

JR: Oh, yeah...

HJ: Whereas if you try to tell the truth without caring twopence how often it's been told before, you will nine times out of ten become original without ever having noticed it. And I love that the way to be original is not to strive for originality at all.

JR: Yeah. Have you found that to be true?

HJ: Yeah. Well, I find that if I stick to — particularly for me, I tend to write out of the overflow of what I've studied in the Bible. But when I sit down — which actually has become paralyzing for me, of trying to think what can I write that's really interesting? I do just become absolutely paralyzed, and I can't think of anything interesting to write. Whereas if I find something that just grips me in the Bible and start to write about it, and I think that people have heard this a hundred times before, those are the things that people say, "Oh, I've never really noticed that before. That's so helpful!"

JR: Yeah.

HJ: And I think, really? [laughs]

JR: Yeah! [laughs]

HJ: I thought that was really just standard? So yeah... which, turns out it wasn't coming from me at all. [laughs]

JR: Yeah. Right.

HJ: I keep saying it, but don't really believe it, you know?

JR: Yeah. And, this may sound — I don't know how this is gonna sound — but you know, when you communicate with Americans, Americans love hearing, you know... your Irish accent. It's so great...

HJ: I could just read a nursery rhyme, and people would be, "Ahhh wonderful! Wonderful!" [laughs]

JR: Yeah, right! I know! It's just... I feel like there's some metaphor at work here. You're a special case, because you speak in an accent that's different from mine, and so you sound — when you speak in your voice, it sounds original to me, it sounds interesting to me. But there's something about that that's true for all of us. Whether we speak with, you know — whether we're from Northern Ireland or not — when we speak in our own voice, I mean, it's just what Lewis said. When we tell the truth in our own voice, according to the — bearing witness to what we've seen. The fact that we've seen — my combination of things I've seen is unique to me. If I just tell the truth about what I've seen, I can trust originality to take care of itself.

HJ: Yeah. Absolutely. Actually, I was laughing about that the other day. Someone said to me that when they read my book that they could hear it in my voice. And I think that they were trying to be funny, and I got so excited I almost texted you. I was like, "Jonathan Rogers would be so proud!" [laughs]

JR: [laughs] Oh great! Um, well and now people are gonna be able to hear the book in your voice, because you're — you've done the audio book.

HJ: I know, it'll be so good.

JR: No, that's exciting that you're doing an audio book. Did you learn anything about your writing from recording an audio book?

HJ: Um... to be honest, I quite often read aloud what I've written anyway?

JR: Cause you love your own voice too, I take it.

HJ: Yeah, yeah I do... no, you know, it came from a strange place. My grandmother was pretty much blind, and so when I wrote something, she always wanted to hear it, and so I always read it to her.

JR: Oh, wow... oh, that's great!

HJ: And so I got into the habit of reading it out loud. And so often when I read it out loud, a sentence that I thought worked, when I read it out loud, didn't work at all. So it's a habit I've kind of developed now.

JR: It's a great habit.

HJ: And I'm doing that just so it all flows.

JR: Are you a native of Belfast?

HJ: Yes, I am.

JR: This is also C.S. Lewis' hometown, right?

HJ: Yes, it is. He grew up about ten miles from where I live.

JR: But he lost his accent, right?

HJ: Yeahhh... [laughs] he did. He became very English.

JR: Do you see anything about his life and work that you say, aha! I see

Belfast there.

HJ: Um... geographically, lots of the stuff you read in the Narnia stories is very... you can see it in our landscape. And lots of the sort of focal points you say, yeah, that's definitely where he got that from.

JR: Uh huh.

HJ: Ummm... I'm not sure... other than that, that's quite a deep question to think on the spot! [laughs]

JR: [laughs] Okay.

HJ: There's always some little curve ball that comes in. [laughs]

JR: Uh, well... was Belfast — was it a place of trouble and strife in his, when he was growing up there, the way it was later?

HJ: Um, noooo... probably... no, because he would've been here... he was only here til he was about nine or ten, and then he would've come home to visit, but that was pre... that would've been way before The Troubles and everything.

JR: Uh huh.

HJ: So he would've been well in England by that stage.

JR: I see. So your... uh... you've got a lot going on in your life besides writing. And you mentioned that you, um... you... aren't always regular in your habits for writing. But... cause you put things off.

HJ: [laughs]

JR: Consider yourself scolded.

HJ: I feel very scolded.

JR: [laughs] But what can you tell us about the habits that you do have? Or maybe when you are being productive, what do those habits look like?

HJ: Umm... it's something I've been thinking a lot about recently, actually. I think particularly in the light of last year. I guess one of my big habits would be that I kind of — if there's something on my mind that I want to write, I sit down and write it. But if there's nothing in my mind that I'm thinking that needs to be written, then I don't. And I was having a bit of a mental blank whenever I had that deadline to meet, and yet when I sat down I did get there. And so I... I've heard you say too many times about just sitting down. But I think there's a tendency to think there's too much to be done in life, you know? There's too many things that I need to attend to that if I sat down at my desk for an hour, I could use that time so much more productively.

JR: Yeah.

HJ: And I was thinking actually I speak quite a lot about studying the Bible and sort of helping people to learn to study the Bible, and one of the things I'm always saying is the discipline of studying the Bible has to be intentional. Because if you wait to feel like studying, it's never gonna happen, but if you intentionally choose to show up, then you get these incredible moments when God meets you there. And yet I haven't been applying that same thing to writing if I'm honest.

And so I am intending to sort of put disciplines in place this coming year and see what happens. Maybe we should do this podcast again in a year to see what happens, if I'm intentional for a year!

JR: [laughs]

HJ: Maybe it's gonna be my most productive year ever.

JR: Yeah, I was gonna say, you might — you may have written War and Peace by then.

HJ: [laughs] Yeah! Maybe! But I know it is a feeling — um, yeah, it's one of those things you kind of have to ask yourself. Am I just gonna write when something comes into my mind, or is this something I want to do intentionally and continually?

JR: You used the word “failing.” That’s a lot of moral baggage in the word “failing.”

HJ: [laughs]

JR: Ummm... do you view it in those terms? As a moral — truly as a failing?

HJ: Oh, goodness! [laughs] Yeah, I suppose I do. I’ve never really thought about it in those terms, but I suppose there is an aspect of feeling if it is this is what God’s called me to do and I’m not doing it then... yeah, I guess there is an aspect of struggling with that. I was just reading Andrew Peterson’s *Adorning the Dark*. And I don’t know if you’ve read the, umm... like, the acknowledgments at the start, and he talks about Jaime and how Jaime’s art is their family. And I was just so encouraged, you know, as a wife and mom by that. Because maybe if you know Jaime it’s so true. But for me that was so encouraging as well. Like, my only art isn’t writing.

JR: That’s right.

HJ: My art as well is my kids and my home and hospitality and... so I’m not failing at everything! [laughs]

JR: Yeah! No, I feel like that — I think that’s a really important thing to bear in mind. Even if writing is part of your calling, it’s not the whole of

anybody's calling

HJ: Yeah.

JR: It's part of a larger life. And um... uh, you know, Stephen King talks about putting your desk in a corner, you know, to remind yourself that your life's not here to support art. It's art is there to support your life.

HJ: And I guess... yeah, and it's easy to put a lot of pressure on yourself too. And I keep trying to remind myself that God doesn't love me because I write. I write because he loves me, and you know, he's not going to be disappointed in me if I don't.

JR: Yep. Yep. And yet, when you actually sit down and write, it feels like you're participating in some joyful thing, you know?

HJ: Yeah, it's not that I lose something, but I miss out on something that I wouldn't have if I didn't take the time to show up and be present.

JR: Yeah. [pause] Well good, I'm glad we've sorted this out, Heidi.

HJ: Haha! Heidi is a failure, but she's gonna do better next year. [laughs]

JR: [laughs] No, but I'm glad we've worked through from failure to... the language of failure to the language of joy.

HJ: Yeah. Yep. Literally.

JR: And so if you think in terms of this is my calling, I'm not doing it, so I'm failing, um... there's a limit to how helpful that can be. Whereas if this is part of my calling and I step into it, then I've got — there's some joy to be had there that I don't wanna miss out on.

HJ: And I guess if it's your calling and you step into it and nothing great

happens, well, you've still done it? [laughs]

JR: That's right! Yeah.

HJ: In that sense, you've succeeded if you've done what God's asked you to do, whatever happens.

JR: Yeah, it's the, uh... basically... sowing seeds is our job. The harvest isn't our business.

HJ: [pause] Yeah, that's another wise word from my granny. She used to say, "God said well done good and faithful servant, not good and successful servant." [laughs]

JR: Oh, wow.

HJ: I always liked that.

JR: Same granny that you read to?

HJ: Yep, yep! She had a big influence.

JR: Wow. That's great. Um... any other words of wisdom from your grandmother that you can share with us?

HJ: Oh, not off the top of my head.

JR: Oh, okay.

HJ: She was a very wise woman.

JR: Yeah. Um, alright. So I, uh... I always end these interviews with the question, "Who are the writers who make you want to write?"

HJ: [pause] The writers who make me want to write? Um... it's very cliché, but I have to say that C.S. Lewis has been my big, big influence.

JR: Mmhm.

HJ: Um, I just love the, I love how he... I don't wanna say "simple" but... so profound, and yet so simple, the way he writes?

JR: Yeah...

HJ: I just love it.

JR: And—

HJ: I love how his affection is just so informed by what he understands of the Bible as well. Um, it's just... I just love it. You know, not necessarily overtly, but just... just so informed by those themes of truth. So yeah.

JR: Yeah. What are your, um... what are your favorite C.S. Lewis books?

HJ: [laughs] All of them?

JR: All of them, yeah right.

HJ: Actually you know, I've just—

JR: So fiction? Non-fiction?

HJ: Yeah, well I've just been re-reading the Narnia Chronicles, which I haven't read for years and years and years. And actually as an older person, they became more rich instead of less so.

JR: Yeah, yeah.

HJ: Which I think is just great. Absolutely great. Sitting, sobbing my heart out, and the girls are going, “What’s the matter?” And I’m, “Nothing! I’m fine! I’m fine!” [laughs]

JR: [laughs] Uh, what about his, um... oh shoot, what’s the one that retells Cupid and Psyche? Til We Have Faces?

HJ: Oh, yes. Yes.

JR: Are you a fan of that one too?

HJ: Yeah. I like that one too. It’s good. Yeah, I love — there’s a bit in that which gets me every single time, about when, um... oh, my goodness, mental block. Orual? Is kneeling by the river looking for the castle that Psyche is said to be living in. Um, just for — and she doesn’t believe it’s there — and just for a moment the fog lifts and she sees the castle in all its beauty. And then it’s gone, but that glimpse is enough to change her entire perspective.

JR: Ohhhh... that’s great.

HJ: And I just love that image of even what God can do by just lifting the veil for a minute and giving us a glimpse of what’s true. And we maybe can’t see it again after that, but that glimpse changes the way we see things.

JR: That’s great. Between Screwtape and Great Divorce, which one do you like better?

HJ: Screwtape.

JR: Really.

HJ: Screwtape, yeah. I took my girls to see a stage production of it last

year.

JR: Oh, I bet that was fun.

HJ: Oh man, it was so good. It was so good.

JR: Yeah. Alright so, C.S. Lewis. Anybody else who you read them and think I wanna go sit down and write something now?

HJ: Um, actually, I've got really into Wendell Berry recently? Which again is quite cliché. But we live in a small town, and my husband's lived here his entire life.

JR: Wow.

HJ: He pretty much, um... he can't walk two feet without meeting somebody he knows, so I kind of feel like I live in Port William. And for a long time I found that quite claustrophobic, but... since I've been reading that, it's really helped me to see what an incredible gift that is and to live as part of a close-knit community like that, even though it does mean everybody knows what you're doing.

JR: Yeah.

HJ: But yeah! I've been thinking a lot about that, and that whole idea of just writing about what's in front of you as well.

JR: Yeah. Oh, I love that... I love that truth. That just giving a record of what's in front of you is a worthy endeavor. I sat next to a little girl at a concert. It was like a school concert, uh.... or more of a recital where the kids would get up and do their various things. And she had a little notebook, and she was just writing down everything that happened. And... and so it'd be like, you know she'd write, "The boy stood up, but then he forgot his, um — his guitar strap, so he went back to his seat and got it."

HJ: [laughs]

JR: “But now he has it on, and he’s about to play a song.” And it was just so fun to watch her just... you know, be — have this totally unself-conscious belief that just by writing down what I see in front of me, that’s a worthy endeavor.

HJ: That’s so great.

JR: And I thought that is so gorgeous! I just loved it.

HJ: That’s brilliant.

JR: And she’s going to, you know, three years from now look back on it and think oh, that was so dumb. But in twenty years when she looks back, she’s gonna love that she has it, you know?

HJ: Yeah. That’s so good.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: Yeah. Well, Heidi. It’s always — as I’ve said before, it’s always a pleasure to talk to you.

HJ: Yeah, it’s good to talk.

JR: And so I hope we can talk again soon. Thanks for being on The Habit.

HJ: Thank you!

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University

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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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(THEME MUSIC OUT)

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