**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hey friends, Jonathan Rogers here. I know a lot of you love Flannery O’Connor, and I think a lot of you love writing. So you’ll be glad to know that on June 4th I’m starting a six week online course called Writing with Flannery O’Connor. Each week, we’re gonna read one of O’Connor’s short stories and one of her essays on writing. On Thursdays I’ll give a live lecture. There’s gonna be writing exercises, online discussion, and lots of opportunities to connect with other writers. Find out more at thehabit.co/flannery

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

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

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** One of the things I love about Dr. Karen Swallow Prior is the way she makes literature and the life of the mind feel more accessible for people who don’t think of themselves as academics. That’s what she’s done in college classrooms, as a public intellectual, and as the author of books such as *On Reading Well* and *Booked*.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Dr. Prior taught at Liberty University for over 20 years, and she’s about to start as research professor of English and Christianity and culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She’s also the editor of a series of beautiful editions of literary classics from B&H Publishers. It’s always a pleasure to speak with Karen Swallow Prior.

Karen Swallow Prior, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast. You are my first repeat offender, actually. I’ve never had a guest on twice— well, that’s not true. I had— Doug McKelvey came on as a sub-guest with Tish Harrison Warren. So.

**KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR:** Well, I’m very honored. Honored to be on one, definitely honored to be on twice!

**JR:** Well, good. Um, alright! So you have— you are putting out new editions of — I have *Sense and Sensibility* and *Heart of Darkness* — are those the only two out?

**KSP:** Those are the only two out so far, right. We have three different installments with two each, eventually.

**JR:** Okay. And that’s with B&H. And what’s the name of— does the whole series have a name?

**KSP:** You know, I keep getting asked that. I mean, we’re just calling it a Guide and Reflection. The series doesn’t really have a— that’s the name that’s on the cover. It’s just a six volume series of classic works that I’m editing and introducing. We just need a catchy name for it. (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, what… why do we need more editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Heart of Darkness* and… is *Frankenstein* on the list too?

**KSP:** *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, those will be the next two. And most likely *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

**JR:** Excellent.

**KSP:** Yeahhhhh that’s a great question! Why do we need more editions of these classics? You know, you can’t walk into any bookstore and not see out on the display tables their own volumes — you know, the store’s volumes of different publishers’ volumes of the classics. Whether that’s a cheap paperback, which is fine, or a gilded page volume of the classics.

**JR:** Yeah.

**KSP:** There are countless volumes of these classics, but there are none that I know of that have all the features of this series. Number 1, um, of course being beautifully bound.

**JR:** They are gorgeous.

**KSP:** And there are other series out there that are beautifully bound. But in terms of the introductions that I’ve written, they are written specifically for Christian readers, and that doesn’t exist with these kind of volumes. And additionally, not just Christian readers, but I’ve written the introductions in such a way that they will hopefully instructive to returning readers who know and love these works, but even more than that to first time readers. And so I give a lot of introductory material along with some more in-depth context. And the other thing that I didn’t realize until I had already started this project that would be important to do, based on some reader feedback that I had, is that I don’t include any spoilers in the introductions.

**JR:** Ahhhhhh!

**KSP:** You know, I teach a lot of these novels in my classes, and before these existed I would just assign, you know, the Oxford World Classics edition or Penguin or whatever, and sometimes I would forget to tell my students not to read the introductions. You know, because most of them are reading these for the first time, and even though what makes a classic work of literature a classic is that it can be reread and you do want to reread it, there’s nothing that can replace that first time experience of reading and discovering that story. And so I want readers who are first-timers to have the delight of the story as it unfolds. And so I don’t include any spoilers in the introductions, and the reflection questions after each section are where I kind of grapple with the reader about things that have happened and interpreting events and images and themes and so forth.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**KSP:** So I don’t think anyone has ever done this before — all of these things — so that’s why this series needs to be out there.

**JR:** Okay. Um, I was looking at the introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*, and um… and you… I think on the first page you say, hey, one thing you need to know about Jane Austen’s novels is they’re comedies.

**KSP:** (chuckles)

**JR:** That struck me, I guess because… just a reminders sometimes even… sometimes an introduction can do something as basic as saying hey… y’all, this is… it’s okay to find this funny. And I don’t think you simply meant comedy in terms of “it’s funny,” but in a larger sense…

**KSP:** But it *is* funny. (laughs)

**JR:** It IS funny! And um, I think sometimes people approach, you know, the classics on the assumption that I’m supposed to take this really seriously, and I just lose interest in that. I was really thankful on page 1 of the introduction you said, hey, this is a comedy.

**KSP:** (chuckles)

**JR:** And more specifically a satire.

**KSP:** Yeah, you know, it’s funny because I have encountered so many people who have been introduced to Austen earlier in life, often in high school, and never understood that it was a comedy. I myself had that experience. I read *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time in high school. I was great at English, great at reading, great at literature, loved all the novels. I did not understand that it was a comedy. I didn’t get it. I thought it was the most boring book I had ever read.

**JR:** (laughs)

**KSP:** Um, you know, and some of that probably has to do with intellectual maturity that doesn’t come until later, but I have encountered many people since then who did not know it’s supposed to be funny. And if you don’t know it’s supposed to be funny, you’re missing just about everything and it is the most boring book in the world.

**JR:** Yeah.

**KSP:** So all of Austen’s works are comedies. Um, and genre is so important. This semester I finished teaching this course called Literature of the Bible, which examines the Bible in terms of all of the genres that are represented by it’s 66 books and the genres within them. Genre or form makes all the difference in anything we read — or even film! Or other works of art. If we understand what sort of categories it fits in, what rules it’s adhering by or not, um, then that makes all the difference in how to take it. And so, I think that’s one of the most important things we have to understand about any literary work, is, like, what is this, not just what is it saying, but first what is it so we can then understand what it is saying.

**JR:** Mmhm. I feel like I spend half my time — when I teach Flannery O’Connor, I spend half my time convincing people that this is actually really funny stuff. I mean, it’s funny until the serial killer shows up.

**KSP:** (laughs)

**JR:** But, it’s still kinda funny, even then. And um… the, you know… the comedy… that vision of the world that um, you know, the idea that for all the sorrows and calamities of the world, ultimately, those calamities don’t have the last word. And that comic vision, um, is… I mean, it’s central to the way we— the Christian vision is a comic vision.

**KSP:** Exactly.

**JR:** What was it — I can’t remember how Chesterton puts it — but basically, for the pagan the world is a place where you try to wring out whatever joy you can, because the cosmos around it is bleak and meaningless, and for the Christian, joy is the great secret. You know. Because it’s the cosmos that’s joyful, and the world is comparatively sad. But anyway, I… I think it’s as you said. To understand — I guess even understanding what genre we live in! Because it looks like we live in a tragedy so much of the time.

**KSP:** Right! No, exactly. And both can coexist with one another, but it’s a matter of what is the larger external frame, as you were just talking about, right?

**JR:** You know Buechner’s book, the subtitle is “The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and…” something else. *Telling the Truth*?

**KSP:** Ohhhh I don’t know that book! I’m gonna look it up.

**JR:** Oh man, it’s great book. It’s so good. *Telling the Truth*, colon, *The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairytale*. Or I may have those three things in the wrong order. But it’s a great book. And it’s really about, as you said, it’s about genre, and it’s about the fact that the gospel — ti’s not a tragedy instead of a comedy. It’s all those things, because life is all those things.

**KSP:** Right. I will be looking that book up.

**JR:** Well, do it. It’s really done a lot to shape my way of thinking about comedy. Um, so… have you seen the new *Emma* movie?

**KSP:** I did! I just, during this time of pandem— actually, I was supposed to go see it in Los Angeles with a friend of mine on a trip, and that trip got canceled. That was my first trip that got canceled, first of many speaking events. So my husband and I watched it when it was released on streaming and it was— it did not disappoint. I was very…

**JR:** Oh, I loved it.

**KSP:** It was beautiful.

**JR:** Yeah! And I heard somebody say that watching that movie, it was the first time that they really understood that Jane Austen is comedy and is funny. And I really appreciated the light touch of that movie. Again, reminding us that this is… this is, you know, this is comedy. Yeah. So anyway! Thank you for the reminder that Jane Austen is comedy.

**KSP:** You know, and her touch is so light, and I think that’s what makes it a little bit hard. Because she loves her characters… well, you know, to varying degrees.

**JR:** Yeah, right. (laughs)

**KSP:** But you know, she delights in them. So the satire that she offers of all of her characters in her world, it’s not, you know, it’s not bitter satire. It’s loving satire, the kind that can come only when you’ve observed your object so closely and so well and paid so much attention them that you can actually not only see their foibles and flaws, but you can see what’s endearing about them as well. She does love her characters well.

**JR:** Yeah, I… that’s funny. Cause when I was reading in your introduction where you said it’s not comedy, but it’s a specific kind of comedy, it’s satire… I so appreciate satire with bitterness and looking down at the object of your satire, and it really is a different way of um… it goes down a lot more easily, right? Jane Austen’s kind of satire.

**KSP:** Right… yeah.

**JR:** Well, I wanted to read something that you said in *Heart of Darkness*, which I think is, again, pretty… when I think about your work and what you bring to the world as a writer, as a speaker, as a teacher, I um… this sounds like the kind of thing you would say, Karen.

“While some readers might be tempted to see the moral and epistemological ambiguities that the text of *Heart of Darkness* wrestles with as affirmation of the idea that there is no such thing as truth, more careful readers will see that the weight of these questions consists in the assumption that there is moral truth, right and wrong, good and evil.” Um… and I love that insight, right? That we want, um… a simplified… I think so often we want our stories to simplify the world for us and get rid of moral ambiguities, and that’s not what really stories are there to do.

**KSP:** Right, and so often we mistake — especially you know, as 21st century American evangelicals. Um, you know, really modern Christians in the modern world, which has kind of flattened our perspective and view of the world and uh many things. But we so often… we don’t even distinguish between portrayal and endorsement. So a book or film that is dark and wrestles with deep, dark, hard questions, isn’t necessarily endorsing those things, right? It’s asking us to look at them and to wrestle with them.

So, *Heart of Darkness* is notoriously a dark book that deals with the depths of human depravity and is not a pleasant read, yet it is illuminating because it points to these things. And even though the author is, as I say in the introduction, wasn’t a believer and he didn’t have an answer to the darkness at the center of all our hearts, clearly he is acknowledging that we need something outside of ourselves. We need an external source of light, because we don’t have it. And ultimately that’s optimistic, right? It’s pointing us to the right answer.

**JR:** Tell me more about that. Ultimately Conrad’s vision is optimistic?

**KSP:** Um, well it’s not… one of the things I talk about in the introduction is he is a little bit before nihilism, the movement which really despairs of having any, you know, there’s just nothing, this is all that this is. Conrad is more existing in existentialism, which is a search for meaning, finds it only in ourselves, but yet, he doesn’t even affirm that in the novel. So he doesn’t answer the question, but he’s asking the right question.

And I guess for me as a teacher, um, to me that is more than half of the battle. So I see when someone is really asking the right question and wrestling with the right things, I would see that as optimistic, even if that student or that person or that author isn’t quite recognizing that yet.

**JR:** Uh huh. How are you defining optimism in that case?

**KSP:** Oh, I sort of guess really, in black and white terms, is there an answer, or is there not an answer? Um, and so… or maybe in more current terms, you know, is there such a thing as truth, or is there not such a thing as truth? I think Conrad would say there is such a thing as truth, umm… and… it’s very, in his world and in his vision of the world, it’s very hard to see and find, but he wants it. He wants it.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah yeah yeah.

**KSP:** We live in a world, I think, right now, that doesn’t really want the truth. Conrad wasn’t quite there yet.

**JR:** Yeah…

**KSP:** We want what makes us feel good. But that’s a whole other story.

**JR:** We’re used to the idea that we create our own reality.

**KSP:** Right.

**JR:** Rather than understanding… trying to understand what reality is so I can align myself with it.

**KSP:** Exactly.

**JR:** So when you talk about these books that portray darkness without endorsing darkness, can you think of… do you have examples of books that actually do endorse darkness?

**KSP:** Hmmm….

**JR:** A kind of book that makes me — like when I read — like, *Heart of Darkness* for instance, doesn’t make me go, boy, I sure would like to go be dark!

**KSP:** Mmm. Mmhm.

**JR:** It makes me think well, I’m glad this darkness doesn’t have the final word. But… what are stor— and, do you have anything on tap that’s…?

**KSP:** Yeah, obviously there are stories out there that I know about that I’ve chosen not to read. And I have pretty, you know, it takes a lot for me to not read a book (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**KSP:** And so I’m sure there are some out there that I’m not that familiar with. But I would say the first one that comes to mind that I think fits this description that you’ve just given, that I’ve read and I think is really excellent literature despite the fact that it, um, that it sees and endorses only darkness, is Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*.

**JR:** Hmm. I’ve not read that.

**KSP:** Yeah, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is his best known novel, and it’s one that I’ll be including in the series. It’s one of my favorites. *Jude the Obscure* is actually— was Hardy’s last novel that he ever wrote, because the public furor was so prolonged and severe that he quit writing novels. His vision was so dark and despairing.

Um, it’s… *Jude the Obscure* — again, it’s a late 19th century novel, I mean, so obviously, I think what we might think of as dark today can be much darker than even Hardy. But um, in… so basically, in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy questions the entire existence of the church, religion, Christianity, and marriage, the institution of marriage itself. And even the, you know… the optimism or hope of even human life. It contains one of the darkest, saddest, most tragic scenes in all of literature that I’ve read, with a young boy’s suicide. It’s very despairing and dark.

And Hardy’s whole life was a rejection of Christianity, having grown up within a nominally Christian culture. And so his works are all tragic, tragic in the classical sense, because the characters that he creates meet up against forces of nature and fate and their own natures that they cannot overcome. So that’s really obviously tragic. Yet along the way, you know, one could argue that Hardy’s novels — especially *Jude the Obscure* — does not offer the kind of catharsis that Aristotle would be looking for in his great works of tragedy.

**JR:** Yeah, I guess I was… I’m trying to come up with an example of a story that makes me… you know. What you just described — I haven’t read that book — but it doesn’t… the way you just described it, I don’t think I’d read that book and think, huh, I wanna try that dark vision of life and try that on for size.

**KSP:** Hmmm…

**JR:** And… I know, as you said, I know there are, I’m sure there are movies that make it seem like some sort of nihilism is a pleasant way to live.

**KSP:** Mmm.

**JR:** Or rank materialism or something like that. But I… yeah.

**KSP:** Oh yeah, to mean, to make evil attractive, or that kind of thing.

**JR:** Yeah. That kind of thing.

**KSP:** *Twilight*? I don’t know.

**JR:** I haven’t had the pleasure.

**KSP:** (laughs) I haven’t read it either, but… (laughs) From what I know, I think it makes— it probably makes a self-destructive kind of worldview attractive to its readers and viewers.

**JR:** Yeah! Right. Um, okay. So, another project you’re in the middle of — not in the middle of, you’ve completed, though I’m not sure the book’s out yet — is an edition of C.S. Lewis’ poems *Souls in Bondage*. Is that out yet?

**KSP:** It’s *Spirits in Bondage*. Yes.

**JR:** Oh, *Spirits in Bondage*. Right.

**KSP:** Yes, *Spirits in Bondage*. Yes… no, it actually is out. It slipped out quietly in the night of our pandemic. (laughs)

**JR:** Oh, okay.

**KSP:** Ummm, this is with Lexham Press. It is another republication of an earlier work by Lewis, and it is his first published work. It’s a collection of poetry. It’s basically the work that… that… caused Lewis to… turn to writing prose. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**KSP:** Um, to put it bluntly. Um, but yet! I mean, so of course anyone who loves poetry or admires Lewis should certainly, would certainly want to read this collection. What’s neat about it is seeing a young Lewis — he was only 20 or so, when this volume was published, 21, and obviously already had a great literary understanding and some talent and so forth, but this was before he was a Christian. So we do see him struggle in these poems with some of these ideas that we just talked about — with despair, and with nihilism, with unbelief. Yet at the same time, we can see in the images and questions that he’s asking a number of things that ended up becoming themes in his work even after becoming a Christian.

**JR:** That sounds so interesting. I wrote a book called *The World According to Narnia* that came out in 2005… you know. And I wrote it in a little bit of a hurry. And there was a… at some point I had occasion to quote one of Lewis’ poems, the one about the dragon sitting on the pile of gold. I don’t know if you’ve ever run across that. But I quoted it — or I thought I was quoting it — and the editor writes back and says, “Where did you get these words from?” And I said, ehhhh it’s Lewis’ poem! Well, I had misquote— completely misquoted the poem. Like I said, I was in some kind of a hurry.

But I… I hate to sound braggy. But I think my version was better.

**KSP:** (laughs) That may have been! That may have been what you were doing there. Improving a little.

**JR:** I thought of that when you said that set him on… that proved to him he had a gift for prose. But I would love to have a look at those.

**KSP:** Well, I can probably arrange to have a copy sent to you… (laughs)

**JR:** Well, thank you.

**KSP:** The perks of being a podcaster.

**JR:** That’s right.

**KSP:** And again, this also is — I think I’m seeing a pattern in my life here — this book also is a beautifully bound edition. I’m actually looking at it. It’s this gorgeous, gorgeous…

**JR:** Oh, look at that!

**KSP:** It’s thin… Lexham is known for its beautiful books.

**JR:** Mmhm. Well, excellent. Um, okay. So, um… (pause) You said something before we started recording that I wanna hear more about, and that is… you just sort of casually mentioned that you’re, you said, I’m not an expert on Lewis, and not even that much of a fan.”

**KSP:** (laughs)

**JR:** What does *that* mean?

**KSP:** (laughs) Oh boy… I’ve stepped into it, I think.

**JR:** Yeah, right!

**KSP:** No, I… it’s a weird thing, because, um… (laughs) Because I am a Christian, and I am an academic in the field of literature. But my area of expertise is, you know, 18th century British literature. Uhhh, so writers like Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope, and Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, who were *all* Christians. You know, and devout Christians. Yet no one reads these guys.

And so then, you know… entering this sort of evangelical culture later in life… it’s just weird because when people find out that I’m a Christian and an English professor, they’ll say, “Oh, I love C.S. Lewis too!”

**JR:** (laughs)

**KSP:** (laughs) And I’m like, I don’t… (laughs) There’s a whole big world of great writers, even Christian ones… again, C.S. Lewis is wonderful, but I will often have students in my classes want to do research on Lewis or Tolkien, and they’re surprised to find that there isn’t a lot of scholarship out there on them, and it’s because these are not major figures in British letters. Um, and it’s not… so you know, there’s nothing wrong with them, but they’re a little bit on a side path to most academic circles, in most academic circles.

**JR:** Yeah.

**KSP:** So, um… yeah. But a lot of Christians just don’t, they don’t know there’s a whole world of wonderful literature for Christians and by Christians out there beyond Lewis and Tolkien. So it does become a little pet peeve of mine, and I’m… yeah. So.

**JR:** Well, I’m glad to give you the opportunity to air your pet peeve.

**KSP:** (laughs) Thank you. Yes, and so I… and there’s the fandom aspect is, I guess there’s a lot of writers I admire and respect and read, but then there’s this whole other level of being a fan. Even with Austen, I don’t consider myself a fan. Like, I don’t remember all these details about her life and her dresses and tea.

**JR:** You don’t write fanfic? Fan fiction?

**KSP:** No, and I don’t dress up in Regency era gowns. (laughs)

**JR:** Well, I feel like you’re missing some opportunities.

**KSP:** (laughs) Probably so.

**JR:** Yeah. Uh, well Karen, as always… you’ve answered this question before, but in case anything has changed since last year, who are the writers who make you wanna write?

**KSP:** Oh wow… you know, I read more, so that question can change. I recently read my first novel by Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* Um, and I… she makes me wanna write.

Now, a lot of people are Marilynne Robinson fans. I’m not as big a fan as other people, but I will say her book, her novel *Housekeeping*, is one of the most exquisite novels I’ve ever read, and that makes me want to write.

**JR:** Yeah.

**KSP:** And I notice it’s often the agrarian writers that appeal to me, so they’re inspiring to me.

**JR:** Uh huh. Excellent. Well, Karen, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast today. And I hope things go well as you make a career transition to North Carolina.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** And um… thank you for the work you do. It’s making a difference, and it means a lot to me personally.

**KSP:** Well, thank you so much. Thanks for the honor of having me on twice!

**JR:** Yeah, alright. See you soon!

**KSP:** Bye 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. 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.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)