

Ingvil: Hello, everyone, and welcome to this Halloween special podcast from the monster network. We in the network are, as you know, fond of Halloween as we are of all things monstrous.

And today we, that is me, Ingvil Hellstrand. I am associate professor at the University of Stavanger in Norway, and with me I have...

Donna: I'm Donna McCormack and I'm a chancellor's fellow at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland

Ingvil: We are also part of the monster network, and we have this Halloween tradition of doing something fun, and also bringing out some of the weird and wonderful stuff in the world.

And so today we will be talking about Becky Chambers wonderful book called *The Galaxy and the Ground Within*. It's actually the last part of the wayfarer series. But we've chosen this book, yes, why Donna did we choose this particular book?

Donna: Yeah, I mean I would say, even though it's the last one in the series, it does stand alone, so you can just read it as a standalone novel.

Why did we choose it? Because it's a feel-good novel? But it's science fiction *and* feel good, and it's not just trying to make you feel good without addressing important social and political issues. It's got all of those really complex and difficult and divisive things, and it's hard. But while doing that, it does it in a really kind of open, supportive and sometimes argumentative way.

Ingvil: Yeah, and I think, because I got it wrong - or the other - way around when I started to read these books. So I read this first, I think it was attracted to its title, *The Galaxy and the Ground within*, because it says something about how there is always this larger infrastructure if you will, or worldliness.

And then there's also the very personal and everyday stuff that is going on, and I think this book for me especially brings out those brings out how much these things are connected. And here I'm actually reminded of the old feminist, and still going, slogan of how the personal is always political.

So just to introduce some of the storyline: This is a standalone novel, as you say, Donna, where we have 3 different travelers in space, because it's science fiction. They are stranded on this, well it's not even a planet, is it? It's one of those hubs for transportation, and something goes wrong with all the transportation grid, and they find themselves on this little rock where a family of 2 are living and being hosts for these travelers.

So we have Pei. And we have Roveg, and we have Speaker. Those are the guests, all from different species. And we have the hosts: Ouloo, and her child, Tupo. This is the gallery. But it's interesting because with them coming from different cultures and different planets, and have different experiences with other aliens, a striking theme in the book is actually about colonialism.

Donna: Yeah. Yeah. I think one of the things that it does... I find the idea of the novel too simplistic to have..Oh, you just have these strangers who are stranded on a planet or the transport hub: it just seems so artificial.

But, actually it works so well because of the kind of historical context that she gives for each of them.

So Pei is fighting a war, and she is part of this I don't remember what the species is called....

Oh, Aeluon. They almost lost their planet. But since that catastrophic event, they've been going out and colonizing world after world after world, and this means that there's pushback against that, that

there's resistance, because they're now colonizing places where other people live. And this becomes a really big source of tension in relation to Speaker, who is Akarak?

Ingvil: it's Akarak yes

Donna: Speaker is Akarak, and this is a species that don't live very long, and they can't live in oxygenated environments. So they always wear kind of suits because the air itself is toxic. And what becomes apparent is the planets with humans on them have never actually been willing to give a planet to the Akarak. It's this kind of tension that they're trying to work out while at the same time having to coexist with each other.

And Pei and Speaker, they really don't get along, and there's this kind of real you know Speaker being on the receive an end of colonial prejudice, and the whole of the Akarak has been subject to violence. They don't have a planet where they all live, they just have their ships. And yeah, I just think it does so well to bring these issues together while still making the conversations around, well, a walk in the garden this afternoon, and if so, how is that going to work out if these two are going to start arguing?

15:10:16 If these 2 are gonna argue in. Do you know whether you wanted to?

Ingvil: Yeah, I absolutely agree. But this the conflict between the Colonizer and the colonized is also complicated, I think, by the other characters around like Roveg, who's a Quelin and very critical of his own regime. He's almost, you know, a refugee, an outcast of from his own society for being too political, and not taking his species side all the time. And I think that's also giving a position into the conflict of the colonizer around the colonized well, because he's actually he has got a privilege not to defend his species all the time. And that adds something to the complexity of the argument, I think, between Pei and Speaker.

And of course, the hosts being this species called the Laru, a very friendly and hospitable species, we are told. But they also have this: they're doing things differently than their own species. Ouluu the host has chosen to live on this rock without any of her own species, because she wants her child to sample as much as they can from different kinds of cultures.

So, I think there is this very real, violent conflict, with the very real everyday consequences of living with this conflict. But then there are also other ways of negotiating this conflict and making different choices and trying to build different kinds of lives, not around it, and not actually in some kind of opposition to it, but just not as explicit or articulate perhaps as this particular argument.

Donna: Yeah, I think that's a really important point because it made me think that actually what a lot of them do is that they listen, and that opens up what *can* be said. And what allows Speaker to say how her species have been ostracized and not allowed to have a planet, and that this is a purposeful act.

So yeah, I think with Roveg, there's that important aspect that he's über privileged, über rich, comes from a colonizing planet, but is incredibly critical of the regime. This means that he is then willing to listen to even the things he doesn't understand, or tries in different ways to see if he can understand what's being communicated. And I mean, just one last thing on that, is what you do see, though, is the as the least privileged, it is still on Speaker to explain everything. Like, no one knows anything about their history. No one even knows why they wear these suits, and in actual fact, I think it's Pei who says, "oh, it's so you can be at the same height as us, because you're really short", and Speaker is so angry, because that's like "you don't even know I can't breathe the air around us".

So she does also show how the least amount of privilege you have, the more work you have to do, and the more responsibility you have for being able to talk about these issues and explain. And then expect to get, you know, maybe someone not very happy with what you're saying and have to deal with their upset or their defensiveness.

Ingvil: Absolutely. And there's also a very physical element to this lack of privilege. I mean you mentioned Speakers suit. So this is a species that have to wear like a power suit to be able to walk. It's a species that use their arms a lot to move, but still have a power suit to be able to walk around on planets. And there is this misconception, that it is to be more like the other species, but rather it's a measure for survival.

It has very much to do with body, and interestingly, the rest of the species, they have these 5 pillars that unite the world, and that is for example that everybody can breathe the same air, everybody can eat the same food. But here the Akarak are completely off.

So there is this very sort of bodily element to these differences, and that you can't take for granted that all bodies work in the same way. Almost all the stories have an element of this questioning of the "normal body."

Donna: Yeah, I think that's also kind of the interesting part about it, because you know you could just talk about Speaker as having multiple environmental allergies. And you could talk about how environments are toxic and the dominant species won't do anything about that, so you're just expected to suffer. It is a novel that can concerns itself with disability, but in a way that it normalizes aspects of it, or maybe not normalizes it, but it has the possibility of having species that function, like you were saying Ingvil, in a specific way. So they use their arms mainly to get around so they swing from hook to hook. That's how it works for Speaker and her sister, and I think in that way it allows you to see that there are all these other possible worlds how we might exist.

And yet it still is about disability. I mean Pei, she and her species, the Aeluon, communicate through colour. Their skin changes and that communicates language or a form of communication. But she has this talk-box that then translates into words what her colours are saying and then, in addition, she has an implant that translates words into colours.

So it's this very kind of disability-oriented, so talking about deafness, multiple languages, and modes of communication, opening it up to thinking how these are valid languages, and these are valid ways of having a body, and these are, you know, possible ways in which we could exist. And that they're just as important and actually a way of surviving and thriving.

Ingvil: Yeah, and not all the species are even humanoid, so there is variation in body type. So you have, you know, bipedals, and you have the Laru, the host family, with their fur and long neck and four legs. And then you have Roveg the Quelin, more insect-like with many, many arms that function the same way as their legs.

And so just this, I mean Becky Chambers invites us into sort of accepting that all of these kinds of bodies exist in the same space, and they all have different kinds of needs. The host, the Laru, although very much part of the comedy in the book, is also the one making the largest attempts at making everybody happy. She has tailored everything: She's having colours that the Aeluons won't be stressed out about. She has different heights for things that you can grab with what you have: do you have digits, do you have toes, do you have, you know, pincers whatever. So there's this, like, difference as norm at least for her and her travelers. A hub that she's created, and I think that's

a wonderful vision of how different bodies coexist. And it's a beautiful critique of this very... You know, it is a problem in our world that we assume sameness all the time, so it's just a very moving novel to read when you think about how she manages to write this universe and not just write happy, different people living together, but actually trying to tease out some of the conflicts, and where it doesn't add up. So how can you actually move in spaces built for a Quelin? If you are an Akarak, how can you access buildings? And how can you access culture, even, when you are from a different species, when it's not tailored to you? How can we expand this tailoring, and make it more accessible for more kinds of bodies.

So that's a very wonderful thing. And funny, too: There is this element of humour and comedy that makes it sort, not unpolitical at all, but that's also a way of bringing out that different is not something that will necessarily be smooth, you know or easy to deal with. That it's actually something that has to be worked at and found solutions for.

Donna: Yeah, I think that's important because they don't really resolve anything, and it's a very temporary situation.

But it does show they have to work together. There's a crisis moment where they totally have to work together. And you know, they were able to do that, even though they're in an environment that doesn't work for them and they're trying to help the other get their needs as much as possible. So, it doesn't really at any point create a hierarchy of difference. All difference has a kind of role, it's just a way of being, it's who you are, and therefore everyone has to live with that, while trying to figure out how they're going to do it in the context of historical and contemporary violence in the context of not having an environment that you can live in.

And I guess, yeah, I guess one way which they do that is through food. I think that Becky Chambers, is obsessed with food.

Ingvil: There certainly is a lot of food and exchanges of food, and then that becomes the medium through where these things come across: Who can eat what and in what form, and how. And there is this beautiful scene between Roveg and Speaker, when, because Speaker cannot eat with everybody else on the planet or in public, because of the air not being breathable, Roveg sends a sample of food that is made to fit Speaker's size so that she can take them into the suit and then accompany Roveg in sharing a meal, and there is a lot of care actually involved in these exchanges.

You said before, Donna, that they are willing to listen, and you mentioned Roveg particularly and he is very good at it. But that there are attempts of trying to listen, because when you're stuck with strangers for short or long, they try to get to know each other, they try to be civil but then it develops into some kind of shared space, and they need to work at how to share it, because they are so different. And these small acts of care are also very important, I think, in the novel.

Donna: Yeah, and I think actually that particular scene it's not even small. It's actually monumental because no one's ever done anything like that for Speaker. Her species is so excluded from society that no one expects them to engage with anything. So it kind of is a monumental shift, and even Ouloo decides that she's going to start having foods that they can eat because she never even thought about that species.

So they all experience a shift and Speaker is seeing this happen, and then that changes how she sees other species as hostile.

And I do think food is incredibly important as a way of making a gesture of kind saying “I just want you all to have a good time. I just want you all to go along. Please take this as a sign of my friendship”. But I think it's Pei who says “not everything can be solved with a piece of cake”.

So There is this kind of “well hang on, what is hospitality?” and “no, we're never going to get past this”. And those are important things, like Speaker's arguments against colonization of planets are unsurmountable at that point in time. But that doesn't mean that there aren't these connections and these times where something shifts, be it small or big. But it does shift.

15:26:22 Yeah, I absolutely agree. And there is a moment when Speaker, that at some point is getting closer to Roveg, Speaker's species they have a word, and I don't know if I'm pronouncing it correctly in Akarak now, but eeree keeree, which it says means a moment of vulnerable understanding between strangers. And I think it's so beautiful that it is precisely Speaker's species who has this word for this vulnerable understanding, a kind of critical intimacy that happens. And Speaker has never had that with aliens before, their species being so off the grid from everybody else.

They're the ones with this ethic of meeting the person next to them with this openness and this sort of possibility for this very vulnerable understanding. I think that's really beautiful.

Donna: Yes, I agree. And also they are the species that meet once a year when they all connect their ships and open them up, and you can go and take whatever you need from another ship. You don't have to give something back, if there's a need, and the ship can help you with that, then you should take it, or they can provide it and there's just this idea of sharing rather than ownership. I think that makes sense quite special.

Ingvil: But I think also that is what Speaker impacts on the others. I mean, the Laru are very receptive to this. They have some of that “come here, join us! Let's be here on this planet together”. They are all for togetherness. I don't know if it's an ethos, or if it's a hope in the book, that this kind of vulnerable understandings and meetings where you can take what you need without cost are possible. And, as you said, Donna, without ownership, that it's like coexistence with our differences.

It makes it, you know, very hopeful in spite of... I mean there is lot of critique but, it's a hopeful novel as well.

Donna: Yeah, I think also the only other thing I was going to say in relation to that is, I mean reading it during the pandemic where you are isolated away, or reading it in the context of chronic illness where you're isolated, it still imagines the ways in which you might be connected, and it offers these very kind of queer family re-orientations. So, like Pei is releasing an egg, and she will just go and have sex in..I can't remember the name of that space, I think it's called a nursery actually. And then she will leave the new being with this nursery, and that's the way it works. There are dads who raise it, and they just raise all those children. And Speaker lives completely intimately with her sister. There are two of them, and they talk about themselves as like the other half of the whole. And that type of thing. So they are very connected, and you are everything as that unit.

And Roveg is estranged from his family, because he was exiled, and he prioritized his politics over his family.

So there were all these different ways of doing relationships, or of being together that make it seem as if almost anything is possible. Anything other than what we're seeing in reality is actually possible.

And I think during the political crises, the pandemic and everything else is kind of like, wow, okay, we can still hold on to these very kind of anti-colonial, feminist, queer, disability kinds of resistance and resilience.

Ingvil: Oh, that was beautiful. And that's precisely why, we've chosen this book for our Halloween special. I mean Halloween is a space for doing things otherwise. But it's also a space for revisiting cultures, colonial and anti-colonial, and sort of revisit our politics surrounding traditions. It's about ghosts, it's about what haunts us, it's about weird families and new families, and about friendship and so with that we wish you all a very happy Halloween from us..

Donna: And really spooky

Ingvil: And really spooky, of course, from us in the monster network. And we hope you've enjoyed the podcast. Also - read the book if you haven't done so already.

Donna: Yes, bye!

Ingvil: Bye!