

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 52
Katherine Mansfield

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage — here in Berlin and beyond...then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined by Dead Ladies Show co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hey there, Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan.

SUSAN STONE: So, in this episode we'll be hearing from the multi-talented Hinemoana Baker. Hinemoana hails from New Zealand, she is a writer and musician of Māori and Pākehā heritage, and her poetry collection, *Funkhaus*, was published by Victoria University Press in 2020.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes! And she will be presenting her reflections on the life of another New Zealand writer — Katherine Mansfield. Mansfield was a very influential modernist writer, who hung out with Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and the whole gang. She's called by some the Godmother of the Short Story in the English language, and she wrote a great many in her tragically short life.

The talk starts with a bit of music...and then a bit of Te Reo Māori, as Hinemoana makes her introduction:

[MUSIC PLAYS - 'MALADE' BY LAWRENCE ARABIA]

HINEMOANA BAKER: Thank you, thank you. [SPEAKS MĀORI LANGUAGE] I'm Hinemoana. I'm from Aotearoa, New Zealand. It's awesome to be here, one of my favorite podcasts and shows, so yeah! Thank you all for coming. And I say that in the way that you say this to people nowadays [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] which is slightly different to how we used to say it. I'm really honored to be here, presenting Katherine Mansfield.

When I first started thinking about this, I didn't think I had a lot in common with her, but as it turns out, there have been a few surprises along the way, during my research about her.

So for those who are listening at home, I'm just going to reprise the poem that we just listened to, which has been set to music by an artist called Lawrence Arabia, a New Zealand musician, on an album called *Mansfield*. The name of this poem is "Malade" and it goes:

The man in the room next to mine

Has got the same complaint as I
When I wake in the night I hear him turning
And then he coughs
And I cough
And he coughs again —
This goes on for a long time —
Until I feel we are like two roosters
Calling to each other at false dawn
From far away hidden farms

So the reason that I like this poem is that she's not actually known as a poet, Katherine Mansfield, but I'm a poet myself so I'm drawn to her poetry. And I think there's a few reasons why I like it. It's very personal, and also it kind of shows that someone who is in a very serious state of ill health (in her case, it was tuberculosis), she can still bring a kind of irony and, I guess, even humor to that situation, to her situation, which is something that I would aspire to if I could.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is the full album, and there are 12 artists on the album. The producer of the album, Charlotte Yates, has done four of these albums now. I was involved in the *Tuwhare* one, but there's also been James K. Baxter and Witi Ihimaera, all four are well-known New Zealand writers. And it's a really cool project, the musical settings for these poems, so I encourage you to have a look at those if you feel like it.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So this is Katherine Mansfield, and I've called this presentation "Born in a Storm" for a few reasons.

It's the title of one of her short stories, but also the story was set in – and she was born in – Wellington, New Zealand, and it's – no joke – the windiest city in the world. My own mum spent her childhood in Wellington and she can remember, as a six-year-old, having to hold onto a lamppost as her feet were literally swept out from under her during a southerly. This is just a normal southerly wind at Island Bay.
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

It's kind of well-known that it's a fairly windy city, and this is from *The Guardian*, "Where is the world's windiest city? Spoiler alert: it's not Chicago" – "The wind speed sometimes hits 154 miles per hour." So yeah, it's kind of famous. Even the sign that welcomes you as you fly into the airport – and even flying into the airport is quite an experience, let me tell you – it looks like the last three letters of the word "Wellington" are being swept away by the wind. Kind of cheesy. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] It divided people in the city when that sign was put up. But I think it's funny. And yeah, so this will give you some idea of the intensity of the wind there.

I can see my partner Claude going on, "We're not going there. I'm never going there." But this was the first connection that I made with her, that obviously she's from Wellington. And that was the city that was my home for 22 years before I came to New Zealand – ah, to Berlin rather.

So I call it “Born in a Storm” for that reason, but I mean, in a sense, you could say that anyone born in Wellington was born in a storm with winds like that. But I also thought that it was appropriate for this presentation because, although she was born into a lot of privilege, Katherine Mansfield, and she loved excitement and she hungered for adventure, she also injured quite a lot of pain and suffering during her life, her short life – physically, mentally, you could say spiritually as well. I guess in some ways that grief was also something I bonded with her. She writes really startlingly and vividly about Wellington.

I also call this presentation a kind of personal pandemic response to the writing of Katherine Mansfield because, frankly, everything is personal and pandemic-related for me at the moment, so you're just going to have to endure that. Sorry!

You can see from the slide, too, that she was born in Wellington but she died in France, and she was only 34 when she died. So that's very, very young.

[SHOWS SLIDE] So here she is at, I think she's about 10 or 11 in this picture here. That's her there. She's got three sisters and one brother, Leslie, who she was very, very fond of.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She's probably about 17 or 18 in this slide over here. And I mean, a mere few years after that, she was bloomin' leaving the whole country and jumping on a boat for six months and heading over to London, heading over to England. I'm quite impressed by her gumption, on that level.

She is known as a modernist writer. She's called by some, the Godmother of the Short Story in the English Language. She certainly is a very influential writer and important writer in the modernist movement. And she didn't really consider herself much of a poet, even though I do like some of her poems a lot. She did love poetry. One of the people who launched the album we were listening to said of her that even though in her short stories, she has a bit of an artifice, a bit of a shield between her and the reader – in her poems, she really lets that go. So you get a sense of her as a human being. Whereas in her short stories, she's definitely kind of allergic to what she would have called authenticity or being visible on the page. So this is a great difference between her and I, a chronic over-sharer. She actually once wrote, “Don't lower your mask until you have another mask prepared beneath.”

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So it's interesting in these days and, you know, in these times.

She's a writer, a journalist, an essayist. She was born Kathleen Beecham. She changed her name to Katherine Mansfield. She was born in 1888 to a wealthy colonial family. She was one of three daughters, but closest to her brother.

When she moved to London, as I said at 19, she's – I mean, even today it would take quite a lot of devotion to your path and determination to do something like that. And she's jumping on a ship and ending up on the other side of the world – with no job, no reputation, no friends, no partner, no internet in those days – simply because she knew she wanted to be a writer and lead the kind of life that it was impossible to live in bloomin' old provincial New Zealand at that time. So I have real admiration for

her on that level. It's not a small thing that she did at any time, let alone at the turn of the century.

The other connection I feel with her is that she was a queer writer. She was one of the Bloomsbury Group, or she was close to them. So she was close friends with household names like D. H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda. It seems like – okay, don't hold me to this – but it seems like, from what I've read, that they might've even almost gotten into, like, a polyamorous relationship with the Lawrences! Yeah, the Lawrence's were into it, but they weren't into it, Katherine and her husband, at that stage. Um...this is a whole 'nother presentation, so I'll have to come back and do that. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But anyway, there's Virginia Woolf as well, E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, even Pablo Picasso was a regular contributor to a magazine that she edited.

She was a very courageous person in this sense, as well. She had at least two strong and long-lasting relationships with women. One was a lifelong, apparently platonic marriage with this woman here, Ida Baker. [SHOWS SLIDE] She was totally devoted to Katherine Mansfield. They were devoted to each other. Right from when they met at school to her death 20 years later, Ida was her servant, her companion, her friend, confidante – her wife. She selflessly pretty much played whatever role Mansfield wanted her to. And she was the person who attended Katherine Mansfield when she was dying at Fontainebleau. And when she was being lowered into her grave, her husband at the time, John Middleton Murry (also kind of famous), got kind of flustered at the grave site, at the idea of throwing dirt onto the coffin. And so Ida Baker stepped up and threw in some of Katherine Mansfield's favorite flowers, which were marigolds.

However, it was actually another relationship with another woman that kind of piqued my interest. And that woman is Maata Mahupuku. She's from Ngati Kahungunu, which is an *iwi* in the wider upper area of the north island. I'm not from Ngati Kahungunu, so I don't speak for her or her family or her *hapū* or *iwi*, just want to make that clear. I'm really just speaking from the reading and the research that I've been able to do, that's already in the public domain.

Maata and Katherine had first met at high school in Wellington. Maata was a wealthy, young Māori woman. She was the daughter of a leading Māori *rangatira* from Wairarapa. In 1904, she herself went to Paris to attend a finishing school. And she then went from Paris to London to visit Katherine in 1906.

The two kept diaries for each other. They did both go on to marry other people, but you know, their intense connection is very well documented. I get the feeling Katherine was kind of a bit keener on it than Maata was, but you know, it's hard to know about these things. Yeah, so, this fierce bond, especially when they were younger, really kind of worried Katherine Mansfield's parents, I have to say.

And it resulted in one of the darkest episodes of Katherine's life. She'd had a few kind of disastrous affairs in London, and she ended up getting pregnant and then she married a guy who wasn't the father of the baby. And she married all in black, and she left him that same day. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So yeah, she's very kind of

dramatic, quite a passionate and dramatic person. Her mother, Amy Beecham, swooped in from New Zealand to kind of sort her out (this is the feeling I get anyway) and blamed everything on her lesbian tendencies. She whisked her away to a spa town in Bavaria called Bad Worishofen and essentially just dumped her there. And Katherine Mansfield had a miscarriage after that at the spa place in Bavaria, when she tried to lift a suitcase. She felt very alone and kind of abandoned by her family. She wrote later about the hypocrisy of family love.

This is what she wrote about Maata in one of her diaries: "I want Maata, I want her as I have had her, terribly. This is unclean, I know, but true."

So speaking about my kind of personal connection with her, I didn't really have one until I started this process, and I guess it kind of started with this trip. Claude, my partner, and I were in the south of France staying at their grandmother's little place that she bought for five bucks a hundred years ago, God bless her! We were staying in Sainte-Maxime, which is just down the road from a place called Menton. And Menton is one of the places in Europe that Katherine Mansfield lived in the hope of improving her health. She got tuberculosis in her late twenties, but she also had gonorrhea and rheumatoid arthritis.

And if you believe the podcast I was listening to a few days ago, she probably, maybe, had bipolar disorder. So yeah, there were a few things going on for her and she hoped that the general atmosphere and weather of the south of France might help those things. So I was so close to this place, and it's been turned into a writer's residency for New Zealand writers that's been running for 51 years now.

Katherine Mansfield lived up here [POINTS TO SLIDE] in the flesh part with the balcony and the writers lived down here, not so flesh, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] but still, you know, it's good. And I've never had this residency, I had the residency in Berlin, but this is the other kind of well-known New Zealand writer's residency overseas. Obviously at the moment, though, no New Zealand writers are there, but it is kind of a Holy of Holies for New Zealand writers. So I figured that I really should go and pay my respects. [SHOWS SLIDES] This is Menton on a postcard, and this is Menton when we visited, which is still pretty nice.

It's hard to impress New Zealanders with, like, beaches and nature and stuff [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], but I fell a bit in love, I have to say. I could understand why she called – she actually spoke about going there to hopefully get some healing for what she called her "wing." That's how she referred to her left lung, which was very damaged by tuberculosis.

So while I go through these slides of our sickening visit to Menton, as we sit here in the winter, I can just talk a bit about some other surprises that I found out about her. She was a performer as well as a writer, so she would get up at parties and, in order to make money when she first landed in London, she'd get up at parties and tell witty stories. I think she fancied herself a bit of an Oscar Wilde? She really had a big crush on Oscar Wilde. So that's how she used to make a bit of money. And people described her as being an amazing mimic as well. She originally wanted to be a musician, not a writer. Some people said that she was quite – maybe a slightly cruel

observer of other people. Some people called her a bit rough. Virginia Wolf said, “In truth, I am a little shocked at her commonness at first sight. Lines so hard and cheap.” Oooh, burn Virginia! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She goes on to say, “Hers was the only writing I've ever been jealous of.” [AUDIENCE MURMURS IN SURPRISE] Oh yeah. That's what we like to hear.

She was also quite a chameleon. Katherine Mansfield loved to dress up in different styles. And she had different pen names for herself when she wrote poetry, and she also called herself Katja sometimes, sometimes Katarina, sometimes other Russian names. She loved all things Russian.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is a friend of mine, Kate Camp, one of the people who took the residency in 2017 and it was because of Kate that I even had the concept of overseas writers' residencies, to be honest. So in that sense, Kate and Katherine are a little bit responsible for me being here.

I'm going to start finishing up now. But yeah, essentially the journey of discovering the things that I found in common with her is an ongoing one, I think. Not only is she queer, not only is she kind of in the situation of being an exile from New Zealand, the same way as me, and you know, mostly voluntary, but also considerably involuntary. With her it was her health, and with me, it's also kind of a disease-related situation. Also the fact that she had tuberculosis – my dad actually had tuberculosis 50 years later, and he survived it. He lost a kidney to it, but he survived it. So it's a disease that's kind of been in my awareness since I was a kid for that reason. Obviously her close connection to Wellington.

In terms of recommendations, I would recommend that you read a short story called “Bliss” as a way of starting off. It's a very Katherine Mansfield – essential Katherine Mansfield short story. But tonight I'm going to finish off with just reading another poem of hers. And it's a poem called “The Sea-Child” and it goes:

Into the world you sent her, mother,
Fashioned her body of coral and foam,
Combed a wave in her hair's warm smother,
And drove her away from home

In the dark of the night she crept to the town
And under a doorway she laid her down,
The little blue child in the foam-fringed gown.

And never a sister and never a brother
To hear her call, to answer her cry.
Her face shone out from her hair's warm smother
Like a moonkin up in the sky.

She sold her corals; she sold her foam;
Her rainbow heart like a singing shell
Broke in her body: she crept back home.

Peace, go back to the world, my daughter,
Daughter, go back to the darkling land;
There is nothing here but sad sea water,
And a handful of sifting sand.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is her grave at the cemetery and in Avon, in France. And this inscription, see is this: "But I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety."

It's a quote from Shakespeare. And I think it's a nice kind of circular way of circling back to her sense of adventure and being born in a storm. So yeah, in Māori, we usually just farewell the dead after we've spoken about them. So I'll do that.

[SPEAKS MĀORI]

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hinemoana Baker from the stage at ACUD, recorded by Simone Antonioni. We'll be back in ACUD quite soon actually, with live shows coming up on May 2nd and June 9th, so if you're in Berlin, come see us!

SUSAN STONE: Yes, please do! Now, you can read many of Katherine Mansfield's stories online, and we'll provide links to those as well as some wonderful photos of people and places in the episode notes over on our website, deadladieshow.com/podcast, as well as on our social media channels, @deadladiesshow. Katy, did you know about Katherine Mansfield before?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I had heard her name and I knew she was from New Zealand, but I didn't actually know that she traveled to Europe so much. So I learned a lot actually, yeah.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, I did as well! I mean, I knew – again – I knew her name, you know, sort of think, "Oh yes, of course. I know who this is," because of having read a lot of short stories and studied short stories. But I couldn't have named a single one, unfortunately. But then I went and I read some of the ones – and there's really a lot! – on these websites from the Katherine Mansfield Society that you can read. And there are some really great ones.

Two I would recommend are "A Dill Pickle," which just has the best name.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It's a great title.

SUSAN STONE: It is, and it's a great story. And it is, actually, if you've done the dating thing anytime in the last 200 years...I don't know, I think you'll get something out of that story, strangely. And the other one is "How Pearl Button was Kidnapped," which I had this huge déjà vu of having read before. So I must have

read it before, but it's incredibly evocative. And then some of the other fun things to read are her stories that she wrote in that time period that Hinemoana mentioned, when she was in Germany and recovering and kind of having a bit of a hard time. But she really paints the picture of staying in a sort of a spa town type of place recovering, and the Germans that are staying in these little pensions with her, and just how kind of wonderful and horrible they are – from the food to the things that they wear.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: God...

SUSAN STONE: I mean, it's, yeah, it's quite fun to read, especially if you are a non-German living in Germany!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I can imagine.

SUSAN STONE: Or if you just like to travel other places when you read. So, definitely do check those out. Yeah!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We will also provide links to the album you heard a bit of at the start of Hinemoana's talk, which puts 12 of Katherine Mansfield's poems to music.

Our music, that is to say, our theme tune, is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. And if you'd like to read our show, we have transcripts of this episode and many others available on our website. Thanks, in part, to our lovely Patreon supporters, who help us out over at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, where we thank them with special book-themed audio features.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, thank you Patreon supporters! And thank you, Katy. Thank you Katy, and thanks to Hinemoana for the heartfelt presentation.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And thanks to everybody out there listening! We'll be back again next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Bis Bald!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

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