

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 14: Helena Moncrieff on Researching her New Book, *The Fruitful City*

In this episode, we talk to professor Helena Moncrieff about her new book, *The Fruitful City*, and how writing and researching it has changed her perspective on teaching.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. Every episode, we talk to some of the faculty and staff, who are leading innovation both inside and outside the classroom.

Nathan Whitlock: This episode we talk to Helena Moncrieff, whose new book, *The Fruitful City*, is out now. We'll be talking to Helena about how researching and writing her book has changed her perspective on teaching.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, Helena.

Helena M: Thank you.

Nathan Whitlock: So congratulations on your new book, *The Fruitful City*. As a sort of in interest of disclosure, I did attend the launch for it, in a torrential downpour, and it was heavily attended and a quite a lot of fun.

Helena M: I was glad you were there, and if you want to put all that on the table, I was at your launch. So...

Nathan Whitlock: There we go.

Helena M: We do support ourselves. Humber professors like to support each other.

Nathan Whitlock: Exactly. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about it.

Helena M: One of my mentors said, "Never ask what a book is about, but rather ask what it will do." I really liked that concept because it does spring into teaching as well, but this is a book that makes you look at fruit trees that grow in our cities and wonder where they came from, who planted them, and why it is that we're not looking at them anymore or picking them. So many of us no longer know whether a fruit is okay to eat anymore. We've become so food illiterate, and in this case I'm looking at the fruit, so I'll say fruit illiterate, that we don't recognize that those tie dye sidewalks can lead us to a bounty of mulberries that are just above our heads, easy to be picked and to be included in a menu.

Nathan Whitlock: This seems like a subject. I mean, the idea of fruit food and fruit being all around us and where to find it and how to spot it. It seems like an idea that's literally sitting right there in plain view. It just needed somebody to pluck it, I guess.

Helena M: Well, that's the whole thing, is it's so simple. It's something that's right there, and I think we are always looking for the next new thing, something big to be discovered, some new way of doing things. If you look at something like the 100-Mile Diet, which couldn't be any simpler, that started a movement. This is the same kind of idea. This is a food that's growing in our neighbourhoods, in our cities. You don't have to get in a car to go to a farm to pick your own. It's right there. It seems too simple. It seems a little quaint, perhaps, or old-fashioned, but there are so many trees in our cities that are growing food, that can easily be included on our tables without requiring any kind of change in agricultural practices. You don't need a new form of botany. You don't need a degree in it. All you need to do is look up and see what's there and say, "I'm going to use what I have."

Nathan Whitlock: So how long have you had this idea for the book. Is this something you've been preoccupied with for years, or was it something that just kind of came to you very recently?

Helena M: Well, you'd know Nathan, once you're writing a book, you are preoccupied with it. That's all you could see.

Helena M: It came to me because my eldest daughter, who's now 23, was volunteering for an organization in Toronto called Not Far From the Tree. It's an urban harvest group, modeled on the original, which was in Victoria, British Columbia. They go in and they will pick fruit from a tree, where someone has a tree, and they don't want the fruit anymore.

Helena M: They send in volunteers. Again, they are not experts on trees, but they are experts on bringing communities together to do something with the fruit. So the volunteers get a third of the harvest. The homeowner gets a third of the harvest, and the other third goes to a community agency in need. So a food bank, if they're accepting fresh food, a soup kitchen, a community agency of some kind that otherwise wouldn't have access to fresh food.

Helena M: My daughter was volunteering and bringing home these bags of berries and apples and grapes, and like everybody else at the time, I asked, "Are you sure they're edible?" Which now I think, what an idiot. Of course, they are. So she was bringing that into the house. Then she went off to

university, and I missed the fruit, so I signed up with Not Far From The Tree, and as I got out there I went to find out more about the fruits that were there and the people behind them.

Helena M: Then I, of course as one does, when one is a writer, you have to write about it. So I wrote a magazine article about the organizers of these organizations, but I'd left so much on the table. I still wanted to know more about the trees themselves. Who planted them? Why did they plant them? How many people had they fed?

Helena M: What a privilege it is to be able to pluck a fruit from a tree that's been there for 100 years and taste the same thing that someone tasted 100 years ago. I think that is just magical. So I was working on a Master's program at the University of King's College in Halifax, in creative nonfiction, and I chose that as my topic. Of course, it grew into years of research, and the only thing that stops the research, of course, is the publisher's deadline. So there's lots more to mine there, for sure.

Nathan Whitlock: So having written this, essentially as a student, and in a degree program, how has that process of writing it and researching it, how has that given you a new perspective on your own teaching and how you bring these kinds of topics to your own students?

Helena M: Well, I looked at my mentors. We had professors and mentors, and I really appreciated the lens that, where you felt really connected, where there was a nugget of advice you hung onto, and I try to bring some of that into my classrooms. Because I teach writing, it's completely applicable. As a writer you're never finished learning new skills. I've been able to bring some of those back into the classroom. A new appreciation for deadlines, I think I always had that as a writer, but looking at it as a student, who has other things going on, a new appreciation for that, too.

Helena M: I certainly took this idea of, even a really small topic, what might seem like a small topic, and turning it into something bigger makes you rethink when you're assigning things, that it doesn't have to be a great big topic. It can be a small idea, but where you take it provides the brilliance. I mean, that makes the difference between a 70 and 80.

Nathan Whitlock: The book was published very recently, just a few months ago.

Helena M: That's right.

Nathan Whitlock: Does it feel at all different when you're teaching and when you're putting classes together and when you're sort of approaching your teaching, to

have that book published, to have that credit, to have that sort of solid thing that you can point to?

Helena M: It's a lovely thing to have. I hope it adds a little bit to the gravitas. Sometimes I think because most of our students are younger than I am, I'm going to say not all, because we do have quite a mix, that maybe you have the risk of looking like you're out of touch, and I think this really shows that you are doing something in the moment, that is current, that someone said, "Today, I want to buy this. This has legitimacy that your work works."

Helena M: I did have another book, probably about 15, 20 years ago now, about the insurance industry. It was a best seller, believe it or not, but not really one that my students are going to pick up, but I know at least two students have bought this book, so they can see whether they like my style of writing or not. I am still in the game and able to sell it, as I do my freelance work. So I think it adds a little bit of gravitas, but you'd have to ask them.

Nathan Whitlock: Right. I know, over the years that you've been working on this book, and we've had classes in common and I know that students have been really enthusiastic about this idea and have gone to check out the orchards and check out these locations inspired by your teaching and by your research. Have you brought groups of students out to see these spots?

Helena M: I've sent them out to see them. Some of the writing I do involves feature writing. Again, this is this idea of creating something from nothing, that you can take something very simple and weave a whole story around it. So I have sent students out to find an artifact that they have to develop a story around. One of the artifacts I send them to is the orchard.

Helena M: So again, that's where the person who just sees what's in front of them will say, "It's an apple orchard. There are trees in it. They grow apples." The student who's really intuitive and wants to dig in, and that's the beauty of bringing them along with it, is to say, "Well, what kind of apple is it? Who planted it? Why is it here in the middle of a campus?" Then you start working your way back, unwinding that thread that gets you to the psychiatric hospital, to the farmland, and then beyond that, to before we had developed anything here, before anything had been developed here, and the indigenous people used it as a meeting place and traveling place. The apple trees wouldn't have been there, but there would have been a lot of other things. So you can develop a really lovely backstory and a lovely feature, just based on holding that apple or touching the bark of an apple tree.

Nathan Whitlock: Well, thank you very much, Helena. This has been great.

Helena M: My pleasure.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre For Teaching and Learning at Humber College. Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Allison LaSorda, Darren Richards, and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast, or to let us know what you think, email [humberpress](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca), all one word, at humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca.

Nathan Whitlock: To learn more about the workshops, teaching certificates, and other support offered through The Centre for Teaching and Learning and to read issues of NEXT magazine, go to humber.ca/centreforteachingandlearning.

Nathan Whitlock: Thanks for listening. See you next time. That's not a pun.