VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION WITH MADELEINE RYAN

KEYWORDS

autistic, book, feel, people, life, world, experience, person, horse, guess, writing, understand, space, moment, performance, lots, sound, language, communicate, joy

Madeleine Ryan is an Australian writer and director. ‘A Room Called Earth,’ her first novel, is an immersive account of the embodied experience of a young neurodiverse woman, attending a party.

In this conversation we discuss the symbiotic relationship between Madeleine's own late-diagnosis, and the writing of the book, as well as sensory experience, imagination, fantasy, trust and energy, in autistic bodies.

Content Warning: This conversation includes discussion about mental health, diagnostic assessment processes, and eating disorder.

VICTORIA GRAY: Madeleine, ‘A Room Called Earth’ is your first novel, and in my experience of the book, it's an immersive account of the embodied experience of a young neurodiverse woman attending a party. I'm aware that there's an intimate relationship between your diagnosis and the writing of the book. So before we explore all of the micro-universes that you've created in the novel, it would be nice to unpack this wider context. So, that feedback loop between your protagonist, the emergence of the book, and the emergence of yourself as a late-diagnosed autistic woman.

MADELEINE RYAN: Yeah, so thank you for having me. I started writing the book and I didn't know that I was autistic, I just started writing. I kind of had been through a lot of changes in my life. I'd moved to the country, and you know, started eating plant-based, and I'd stopped taking the hormonal birth control pill, which had a huge impact on my mental, emotional, and physical health, that was quite drastic for me. So I've been through all these massive shifts, I think I deleted social media at this point, all this space had kind of been cleared. And then I heard sort of the voice of the protagonist, or the first opening lines of the book. And I, for months, sort of just let that kind of perspective keep speaking to me. And it was as that was occurring, I was sort of disciplining myself to make space for that, I was going through, sort of simultaneously, communication difficulties with my family that was sort of long standing. And I can't even remember what, I mean, it was something to do with social expectations with family, friends, or I don't even know what it was now. But it was like, I felt very differently about how to approach something, and they were like, but this is the appropriate way. And I was like, oh, like, maybe, you know, it's because I'm autistic.

So where that came from, to give that some context too, is that years before this experience, I was friends with these two super magical women, one of whom I met at acting school. And I would spend weekends kind of on their couch, eating, you know, salmon and all these beautiful things. And like, you know, chocolate, and we drank coffee, and there were like salt lamps. And it was this beautiful space, before I was plant-based, obviously. And it was during that time that I would say to them, like, wow, like, there aren't many people in my life that I can just be with for hours and hours on end communicating verbally, like nonstop seemingly, and feel, not drained, like feel kind of invigorated by the back and forth. And one day one of them, she was sort of this beautiful, Scandinavian 50 year old woman actress with very dewy, beautiful skin, she kind of put her hand on mine and said, “well, Madeleine, maybe that's because you're autistic, like we are.” And I was like, “woh,” and I had no idea what that meant. In a way it kind of meant nothing. At that point I was sort of like, oh, that's just a different way of thinking or something or I don't know, but okay, if that's what they are, then, that's cool. They're amazing. So I was like, well, that's alright. But I also didn't know how to integrate that into my, I guess, my concept of myself.

And so then fast forward to this experience with my family. And it just felt like a way to maybe contextualize whatever the communication difficulty was at that moment. And it was like, the dots joined. And then my family was like, “what, like, you could be autistic, like, what? Really?,” “Well, yeah,” “Does that mean something to you? Is that something?” And they were like, “well, yeah, that's like, that's massive, if that's a part of who you are.” And actually, it would kind of make sense. And so we decided as a family to go through the diagnostic assessment process. Which was, as you would know, I am sure grueling and ruthless and, you know, I have lots of, I

guess, reservations about how it was conducted. I mean, this was quite a few years ago now, this must have been 2017. It's probably changed a lot since then.

But at that time, it was, yeah, it was very intense. But anyway, came out of it. And, you know, I was diagnosed. And then life sort of just went back to the rhythms of life. And I kept writing, not really thinking about anything. You know, I just kept writing, I kept hearing the voice and her perspective and feeling her fabulousness as a protagonist and her contradictions and just enjoying her. And then, one day, I was sitting outside having a cup of tea, and I remember kind of looking at the trees. And I was like, so if this book is all inside her head, which it is, and I'm using the way that I perceive sensory experiences, or how I analyze social experiences, like the framework of my mind is being applied to her psyche. Is she a neurodiverse psyche, then, like me? And I was like, “Oh, my God, I think she's autistic.” And it was like, my whole body just felt warm. And like it was as if I'd been chosen, you know, that she'd chosen me. And I felt this incredible sense of liberation and like connection. And I think it probably put me back in touch with that feeling of what it was like to be told by a friend, my Scandinavian friend that I was autistic. And the kind of warmth of that environment and how liberating and joyous autism is, and can be, because certainly that diagnostic assessment process was very devoid of that humanity and that . . .

Sorry, I think my dog was just growling. He’s making a burping sound as he lay down.

VG: That’s nice . . .

MR: So yeah, it was, that that then led me to understanding her better and embracing myself. I think in lots of ways.

VG: It sounds as if we were maybe diagnosed around the same time, because I also had my diagnosis in 2017. I was 35. It was just after my 35th birthday, I think. And it also felt like I desperately wanted my diagnosis, actually. I thought it would help explain a lot of, as you mentioned, communication differences, and particularly sensory differences that I'd experienced, all the way through my life, which had most often been pathologized into a mental health condition, or eating disorder, or, you know, the list kind of goes on.

But I'd always been making artwork, particularly performances, which were, even for myself quite strange. I couldn't quite understand the need to make them because I'm not a particularly outgoing person, but really felt compelled to use my body to communicate and process, perhaps a bit like you with your protagonist. Once I had my diagnosis, I was able to look back on all of the performances I made and think about how that person was almost telling me into the future, like, this is stimming. Perhaps this is a way of stimming and that's probably where I am now too. Rethinking all of the performances I ever made and thinking about where in there is that autistic being, even though I didn't quite recognize it as such at the time.

So I'd really like to talk more about the sensory specifically, because I really experienced [your book] on an immersive embodied level. I think that's why I was so drawn to the very thick descriptions of what's going on, both inside of her head but also in her body at the same time. And when I make work or when I experience the world it's very intense on a sensory level. For

my whole life, I've always been told that I'm too sensitive or “you can't possibly hear this or see this.” And in some ways it was kind of validating to get the diagnosis. Like, “yes, you do process things differently.” “Yes, you can hear those tiny noises.” “Yes, you can smell this thing from 10 miles away,” or whatever, like an animal.

So it would be really nice to structure the conversation around some of the fragments from the book, because they're like portals, I guess, into that world. And maybe we could zoom in and out and talk about some of the wider themes that maybe affect autistic people, like sensory processing, anxiety, fear, sociality, non-human relations, imagination . . . there's lots of things that I could connect to in the book. So in the first few pages, we delve right into the body. I'm going to read a bit of the book if that's alright with you? Not too cringe?

MR: Yeah.

VG: So you said,

“I keep sensing footsteps down the hall, and it's fucking annoying. They're echoing around my ribcage. And I mean, no one ever walks in? How did I get to the point where I fear that they might? Every sinew, every strand of hair is standing on end, and my neck is moving like a magnet towards the door? Is it self-obsession, paranoia, anxiety, my inner processes can be visceral to the point of being completely illusory and absurd.”

And that just felt so familiar to me, the sense that sound can break into my body, and that the autistic body for me is like a sensor. So you feel everything. Literally, everything is brimming all of the time. And that can be exquisite. But also, I sense in your description, a kind of fear. So you mentioned maybe being annoyed by that, or having a sense of paranoia and anxiety. Even the sense that it might be illusory, or absurd.

So I wondered if we could talk a bit about your relationship to those heightened capacities for sensing. Obviously there's the joyful aspects, but I wonder if that's ever been fraught with doubt. So if a health professional or well-meaning friend or family member has maybe pathologized that experience as something that needed medicated? In my experience I was diagnosed with lots of things, you know, aggravated depression and dissociation, the list kind of goes on . . . PTSD. So I wanted to explore that a little bit with you in your life, but also in relation to the book.

MR: Totally. Well, we have so many parallels. I mean the performance thing is also a huge part of my life. I'd studied acting and did a whole lot of theater. And I think the sensory experience of that, but also the ability to mimic and to mask and to study human behavior through another lens, is all wrapped up in that love of performance. But absolutely, I've been littered with diagnostics, you know, my whole life - over sensitive, you know, manic, depressed, anxious. I think there was something called “adjustment disorder” sort of thrown at me at one point, eating disorders of all kinds, you know. And nothing really landed until the autism came in, and sort of joined all of those together and revealed to me that a very feeling being was at

my core, on every level. And yeah, I absolutely harnessed that in creating the world of the book and her psyche and her relationship to her environment.

That moment is interesting to me, because, I mean, she's kind of haunted in lots of ways, which may become apparent as the story unfolds. And I like that sense of, I guess, being … what's the … I guess haunted is the best thing, but it's like, constantly anticipating the next sensory experience or the next encounter with someone. And that being very heightened, and very at the forefront of our awareness. But she's very finely tuned and I think it can become . .. it's such a . . . it's such a fascinating experience to pick up on so much but to only be able to focus on one thing at a time. It's just like, when I think about that, and the dimensions of that, and in that moment, she's focused on that and this kind of sense of rage almost, and then confusion and then this feeling of “Yeah, well, someone might walk in, like why do I feel like someone's here?” The possibility that maybe there's a being here, or something, or there's the hint that it could be even not human or something. And it's like, oh, you know, what am I mad? I guess she's almost questioning her own sanity. But at the same time, it just reveals someone who's very, potentially, very attuned to things. And it's as if that power is kind of harnessed in a conscious way.

I think it can be extraordinary, and can be liberating, to be able to feel so much and sense so much, if you're aware of that about yourself. Or, you know, you can embrace that and not allow all the diagnostics that people are going to end up throwing at you, or pathologizing about you. If you can go, “Oh, hang on. I'm wired to sense.” Like, even if it isn't like a human, it's like energy, it's just entered, tuned in to that in my surroundings, or just within me. And to be

conscious of that. It's almost like a language that you learn, and can tell you about people and warn you about things, and help you understand changes that might need to be made in your life and in your relationships, or in these environments. Like, they're not there for no reason, whatever they are, you know, and it might make the people around you uncomfortable to express that.

Over time, I've personally probably gotten better at noticing a response in me to something, whether it's like, a person. I can feel a visceral reaction to them in action, whether it's like, “oh, it's so lovely to be around them, I feel invigorated” or if it's kind of like, “wow, like, I feel exhausted” then I'm like, why is that? If you can figure out how. What I've found, if I can listen to that, and if I use that, I then choose how to respond to the person or the situation. It can be hugely clarifying and kind of purifying. And I think she's, yeah, in that moment, you know, she is on her own in this beautiful sort of space getting ready to go to this party. And there's also this sense of like the future encroaching on her, like this out of control environment, you know, is coming knocking or something, which she's about to enter into. Her sense of performance will sort of get, I guess, unleashed in that space. But right now, she's alone. And what it means to be alone, because we're always kind of watching ourselves as well. Yeah, there's many dimensions to it. For sure.

VG: You talked a lot about energies there. And that is a word that I've used a lot, I guess, even when I was younger, to explain or describe, I suppose, why it often felt draining or overwhelming to be around more than one person at a time, because I would be picking up on a lot of energy. Then, you know, I didn't really have anything, anyway of processing that or

understanding how to even communicate or do anything with it. And that really stood out for me as well in the book. That some of this is, for me, non-optional. It's like being assailed by this stuff, these energies, these forces. In my experience of healthcare, and also the social world, it’s as if there is like a switch that I could then just, you know, just switch and kind of dial everything down. And that's not always so easy or even desirable if you want to live in that. If you want to kind of really explore, particularly as an artist, to make the choice to allow that kind of stuff to assail you. And then what do you do with that on your own terms?

So later on in the novel, you write that energies and emotions affect physical reality:

“just like sound and gravity, and electricity and music and oxygen, they breathe and expand and throb and rush, even if we cannot name or understand them.”

And that seemed really pertinent. I guess for me, one of the ways I've found to name all of those things that breathe and expand and throb and rush is through performance, through art making. And although we are often more focused in our society on linguistically explaining or describing emotions, I often think about that kind of stuff, or language that stuff, through color and shape and texture, and maybe non-linguistic sound as well. So yeah, if a mental health professional asked about, you know, what I was thinking or feeling, or a particular emotion, I'd want to say, “well, it's a bruise like color and it's right here on my body” you know, it was always a little bit abstract. I felt that I was constantly translating one set of experience into another. And that for me was very exhausting. Did you feel that you had to do any of that in the book? Was there a wrestle with words to get some of that, perhaps beyond language, visceral

sense wrestled into the form of a book or into the form of words? Because that for me in the past has always been a bit tricky, although I've really liked that challenge. You do it so well, because I really felt there was a very real particularity, I guess, around the words. And a real craft in the way that you'd communicated some of that, I would say “affective force,” of the sensory world.

So that I guess is a question about language really, in translation from one world into another world.

MR: Yeah, I think I'd like to think that the book kind of speaks lots of languages. In that way, it was certainly a process of weaving the different aspects of who she was and who I am, and the different ways of describing things that I know, because it's an interesting phenomenon to get to know what my experience is of an energy or an emotion or an environment that I'm in. And to process that for myself is a language that I've almost learned later on in my life. But the first language I learned, kind of with a ruthlessness, I think, with almost a desperation, was how to translate that to the people around me in a way that they would understand. I think, for survival, or something, which created a lot of conflict, because it isn't always accurate. And I think I've probably got a lot of frustration as a person because of that.

But at the same time, it probably enabled me to better understand others, and how they might receive things or how the reader might experience. I mean, I also fundamentally believe that autistic people, or neurodiverse people, experience the heightened sensitivities and abstractions of everybody. Like, the things that we experience really vividly, everybody is

experiencing, at a lower level. Or they're denying it, or they've got lots of layers on top, like social instincts that are making them feel like, “yeah, that's kind of not there.” But when you gently peel it back, or put it in a way that it's like, “well, you know, this environment is depleting or draining,” or, yeah, I'm not sure exactly the best example to use, but it becomes a universal language. Like if you can marry the way that our minds and bodies absorb the experiences that we're having, and then find a language to be able to say that, really simply, so that others can become aware of something inside themselves that they might not have been conscious of. Like, if you kind of can take away that sense of alien-like quality to it, it's like, the protagonist is very much matter of fact about what she's perceiving and experiencing in the moment. I mean, she questions it, but she kind of doesn't. I probably question things and you know, overanalyze things even more than she does. She's a bit more kind of concrete about it. But I think there is a way to kind of say it simply so that others can understand. Or I'd hope that. Maybe that's just my controlling nature, desperately hoping that I'll be understood, which is probably what drives me a lot in what I do. It’s like this yearning to connect, which is what she has, but it’s also learning to honor, yeah, the nuances of being a very sensitive person.

I'm sensitive almost isn't the . . . it's like a . . . it's like a heightened aliveness, you know. Because I feel like there's now all these connotations when you say sensitive, that I don't feel are always helpful. It's like, yeah, it's like being a seer or a shaman, or something. It's like you can, you know, channel things. You can pick up on things that others can't because you're just inherently more . . . it's like, “oh, well I know that persons smiling, but they're very tense.” You know, like, I remember being shown photos of people, and I probably did very badly in my interpretations of like, “oh, is this person happy? Is this person sad?” Or is this person like, you

know . . . I remember looking at them and thinking, “I know that this doctor wants me to say that this person is happy, but they look really freaked out to me.” Like, yeah, they might be smiling, and I get what a smile means, you know, I'm blessed in that I can cognitively understand what a smile means, in theory. But I know I have smiled a lot when I haven't wanted to smile. In fact, I do it almost daily, probably. So this person to me seems very forced. But for the sake of this questionnaire, if I am going to seem sane, to this doctor, I probably need to say that they're just happy. But look at all the nuances of that. It's like I've literally been shown one image, and it's like, well, I can see that they're smiling, but I can also say that they're tense, but I can also say they're kind of forcing it. But I also know what the doctor wants. It's like, how was the person meant to make room for all of that? And to slow down? It's quite, you know, it takes mastery, I think, and patience.

VG: You mentioned the word survival. And that really struck me. Because one of the things that frustrates me, or makes me feel really terrified, is that inability to get across what I'm feeling. Especially if, for example, it's something to do with sound. Sound is a real object for me. I guess I often describe it like a poltergeist. I don't know when it's coming, but it might come at any point. And it might be a sound that gets right into my core, if you like. I feel terrified by it, by certain sounds, and in order to communicate that to another person, you know, the effect that it is having, sometimes I find myself almost at the point of anger, I guess, just to try and get that across.

And similarly, in a health context, or even in employment or in friendships, there's like an impasse where there's just something that’s not getting across. But at the same time, it's not

because I want to necessarily even connect, but it's as if I'm trying to keep myself safe. And that, that is something that I think about a lot when it comes to language. I work a lot in my job with students who are autistic, and I also do peer support with autistic adults, and that comes up so much, you know, even when it comes to things like, “how do I communicate my diagnosis to somebody.” There's a lot there around safety and keeping ourselves safe. And so I did think about how this book is a precious thing too, because it encapsulates a lot of those things that we can't necessarily get out in the moment. But with the time and patience and the craft of the book, you can get that down into a form which then can kind of be stabilized a little bit, when the world is always so much in flux. So I really appreciated it.

I listened to a few other interviews that you've done, and the other interviewers have said that they'd also underlined parts of the book, and I had done that too. I thought how nice that the book is like a dialogue. I was able to sit with the book and with my partner and say, “Oh, it's like this, I'll read this to you. That's what it feels like,” or, “this really speaks to me. This person said it in this way, let me tell you.” And that will help us open a conversation out. So there was something about the book as a portal, or a tool, more than a literary object. Something really helpful to think about how we might communicate. I mean, the fact that I've chosen to take excerpts and want to read them out, I think speaks to that. I want to say those words too. It helps me to find the questions that I want to ask.

So that sense of how it communicates. How it can also be used as a gesture back, through the reading of it. Just the languaging of it [to] myself. Reading it [to] myself.

MR: Oh, wow. That's so beautiful. I'm so thrilled because, in lots of ways the process of writing it was like slowing down. Enough to imagine all the different facets of what she was experiencing as I would experience it, in lots of ways. And then making choices about how to word that and be true to that, I guess, neurodiverse experience, not just to her experience.

Sorry, my dog is like really loudly drinking water and my cat has totally been meowing. I hope she hasn't been ruining it. But anyway, he's drinking so loudly from his bowl, he's such a gremlin, anyway . . .

But I think that particularly for neurodiverse artists and people who are, you know, destined to express, it's really about slowing down to hear that language, I guess, and be able to, I mean, to find the words. And although part of me I think was drawn to performance because then I didn't have to think about the words, either. I was saying someone else's lines, or I wrote and directed like, you know, a piece that I performed, and I didn't have any dialogue. And that was so liberating. But then after that, I started writing more. And it was like I needed to find my voice as someone who, you know, yes, felt that pull to survive, or as you say, to stay safe, and to say the right thing, and to keep up and to explain. But to also be aware that the people that I'm speaking to often, I mean, this is something that really, you'd hope lots of people were doing or grappling with, how to be understood. I mean, that must be kind of universal, but it's just so heightened for people, I guess, who are on the spectrum. It just operates on this whole other level, because it's so extreme by comparison.

It's interesting to go back to that moment when she was scared someone would walk in. You mentioned sound, but I'll be doing something, it'll be really monotonous like, you know, just washing vegetables or something, and if my partner comes in the room and says something, and I wasn't like tuned into him coming in, I'll just go into complete panic. Like, my whole system will be so scared. And he gets really distressed, you know, because he's just walked in and said something, but it's like, how do I, you know? How do you find the words in that moment?

I think a huge amount of empathy for self and other is required. I would hope that people on the spectrum, like you, and like me, have kind of been put here to help gently build those bridges. To have all the big feelings, and all the sort of strong responses and to see things that others don't seem to be saying, and to kind of gently start weaving a web between us where there's greater understanding, and greater empathy, and just slowing down and not making assumptions about others. Because, you know, my partner will just walk in assuming that it's fine. But for whatever reason, that I can't even explain to this day, it's not fine for me. And it's like, okay, how do I, how does he slow down enough to sort of be okay? Slow down enough to be like, “Okay, how can we make it just so that I can just see you in my line of vision, before you speak” maybe, because I'm very visual. So maybe we try that, or something. It's like slowing down enough, and I guess, being self-aware enough. But it's also you relying on the other person to be patient enough with that, you know. It's not something that exists in isolation, it's kind of out of control, you know.

And I guess a huge part of my life has been accepting that people don't want to slow down, and people want to keep their stories intact, and their perception of things intact. And I think autistic people, or at least a lot of autistic people I've known, have had this kind of psychic like, openness. It's like, show me something and I'll be completely enamored by it and its newness. And I'll want to like integrate it because it's like, otherwise I'll be scared of it. Like if I can't see it, clearly, it's gonna fucking freak me out. So show it to me, allow me to integrate it and okay, it's like a very logical but very heightened experience. Whereas a lot of people I've known that aren't technically on the spectrum don't have that same degree of like, “I want to see the newness. I want to leap into the unknown and sort of wrestle with it.” Maybe it's an artistic thing, too. I don't know, maybe a mix. But it's asking a lot of self and other to build those bridges. But I'd love to think that the book can help with that, for sure.

VG: I guess the more books like this, the more performances, the more conversations like this that we have in the world, a more nuanced understanding of what autism is might also start to kind of blossom. So that when you speak to your GP or your neighbor, and you say, “I'm autistic,” they would get a sense of some of that nuance, and therefore, in effect, the world might come in gently to your kitchen whilst you're peeling vegetables. As opposed to going outside and being on such a high level of vigilance, I think.

And it made me think it is quite common for autistic people to have to describe being in their imagination. It’s described as a fantasy world, but it’s also real as well. And that partly, perhaps, has to do with being kind of creative, but it's also a survival mechanism, I think. I remember when I was younger, I was obsessed with writing a story, this story that I would

write. So my special interest was me writing this story, again and again and again. [People would say] “don't you want to write a different story,” and it’s is like, “No, I am enjoying writing the same story.” It was like a page long. It was about a girl on a horse who would be riding on a beach and she would explore these caves. And then I would just keep writing the same thing. And I was also obsessed with the book ‘The Little Mermaid.’ In school, we would have reading time at the end of the day, and I would bring the same book in and it never occurred to me that that was a strange thing to do, until the teacher had said, “we read that like three times already we have to move on to something new.”

So I was obviously really more connected to ‘The Little Mermaid’ and this fictional version of myself on a horse going into a cave, and needed that in order to make school bearable. There was this part in the book and it made me laugh when I read it because it reminded me of this. I'm gonna read the whole section . . .

MR: Please do. I feel lightheaded.

VG: *“My kimono is sticking to the skin at my lower back and around my waist. My hair's wet with sweat, clinging at the base of my neck and my thighs are dripping inside the spandex. In my mind's eye, I'm wearing gold armor adorned with roses, and I'm riding a winged horse and I can feel the wind on my face. And I can smell seawater in the air. And I'm wielding an enormous electric blue sword which is cutting through all the delusions and lies and galloping and galloping and slicing and slicing.”*

And that just brought me back to ‘The Little Mermaid,’ and my horse [story], and also my obsession with She-Ra. I don't know if you know She-Ra? She-Ra was the kind of female counterpart to He-Man. And she was this wonderful . . . dressed in gold. Yeah, I was so into She-Ra. And these are like friends. Little habitats that I could go to, to make myself feel connected to something when I obviously felt very disconnected to everything else around me. And it's almost like you had to write these worlds into existence. It wasn't just entertainment. It was something more than that, I recognize now.

So I want to talk a little bit about fantasy and imagination and how that doesn't necessarily go away as an autistic adult. That is something that I guess I use as a tool on a daily basis. I will allow myself to imagine things or I have to imagine things before I do them. Or I have to imagine them differently to make them bearable. Or I might embellish something to make it more like ritual, as you also talk about a lot in the book. So yeah, well, fantasy, imagination, She-Ra, galloping horses . . . all of those things, anything that you could say to that . . .

MR: I was obsessed with ‘The Little Mermaid’ and this image of riding on a horse! I mean, obviously, the protagonist in the book has her own sort of take to some degree, but that has been a huge part of my inner life, personally. And often when I'm doing physical movement I'll be seeing that in my mind's eye. It's incredibly vivid and provides me, I guess, a feeling of autonomy and like freedom and clarity and movement. It sort of cleanses me. I think I've had that for a long time. And yeah, ‘The Little Mermaid.’ I used to draw picture books of ‘The Little Mermaid’ over and over and over again, like I drew the whole story! And I would make the pictures and write what happened with Flounder and the whole thing. I was more interested in

flounder than the Prince. Yeah, I loved Flounder, the friend that you get to play with all day, that was what it was all about. And, yeah, so I guess, interestingly, the book kind of comes from that world in lots of ways. But then the protagonist in the book also has her own world that I kind of got to help channel or like create for her. And what enables her to feel liberated and invigorated in moments that are difficult or overwhelming, or even when she's just in her own space, the way that she relates to her environment, is so kind of vivid and creative and sensual. It's like, when she's completely in charge of her own space, she can kind of marry fantasy and reality in the way that she wants it in a way in her reality. It has got this kind of magical fairytale like quality to it. Even though she sort of literally lives in a very wealthy suburb in Melbourne.

I was also playing on those ideas in fairy tales of how often the protagonists are all from great wealth, whether it's Sleeping Beauty, or Cinderella, or whatever. And then they've had to kind of disconnect from that, and then reclaim themselves and figure out who they really are in relation to that in some way. And I have those running through the book, too. So it's kind of literal, but also, I guess, symbolic, and very connected to fairy tales, and whatever. Her own environment is a marriage of that. That sense of imagination and fantasy that she has within herself, she's really tried to bring to her living space. And it's enabled her to care for it and kind of feel connected to it in a very sort of vivid way. I mean, if everybody was able to do that, and didn't feel like their inner life was sort of shut off from their outside world, we could actually connect with it. It's like, the earth becomes heavenly if you can weave those things together.
I wish I'd done more horse riding in my life, to be honest, given the image I've got in my mind. You know, it's like I've got to catch up physically to that so I can really fully embody that

feeling. I've always wondered that. I'd love one day to sort of live with a horse or have a horse that I can go to as a friend, and like, connect with that feeling. Because I think those images inside us are telling us things that are valuable. Just like the sensory experiences or the feelings that we have, those images, and what you were describing that you can do with future events, like that sort of positive visualization, or to go into something and to have an image or a color or to consciously choose that, I mean, that's very powerful to me. I think the mind can be an incredibly powerful tool, and if you can do that, it inevitably affects every interaction that you have in every environment that you're in. And I think that's very exciting and a very joyous thing.

This whole concept that our inner life is divorced from the outer world, I think, is quite damaging. And the book, in lots of ways, is a study of that, because obviously, her inner life is incredibly multi-dimensional and imaginative and, you know, also very logical. But then she kind of contradicts herself. There's all these different dimensions, and then her conversations with people will be quite banal, or, like, awkward at times. And there'll be a lot of space. And I mean – there is this about every human being, but also about her – how can something so complex, and like rich, become sort of filtered down to, like, “Hey, how are you, “ “Yeah. Oh, yeah. Good,” “You,” “Yeah, good.” It's like madness to me.

I mean, language is like a huge blessing, obviously, but there's so much unspoken that is like these big oceans to me. Somehow it's almost not language to blame for that. It must be something to do with being socialized, or the way that we have certain social expectations in certain situations that's kind of strangled everybody's life force. And I think that those

imaginings, or like, the solace that you found in those images at school, must have been connecting you with all the dimensions of who you were, beyond this kind of simplified, not even simplified version, but like . . . what's the word . . . it's almost like an impoverished version of who you were that you had to kind of maintain and prop up through school, and keep it going. But in order to facilitate keeping that going, you had to have the outlet for the other things. And to think that people shut those off as they get older too is just devastating to me, whether they're on the spectrum or not. I think that that's a very important thing to be mindful of in us, and that those, those wonderlands inside us are there for a reason too. I don't think anything is a mistake, or shouldn't be there. I think that it's very revealing about who we are, and very liberating, if you can enjoy and celebrate them.

VG: I love that, because you said about horses, and suddenly you were talking about wanting to go and ride a horse. I had a horse when I was younger when I was 11 for a few years, and he was called Prince after the Artist Formerly Known As Prince! But I've always felt this really strong connection to horses in that nonverbal way, where there's a sort of deep understanding that communicates through touch, or just through presence, rather than necessarily speaking. I live now in a place where there are horses in fields just behind my house. And every time I see them, I think, wow, I really need to go horse riding again. Just to bring something of that kind of childlike self back into what can often feel like, or has felt like, in the last five, six years, quite a frightening world. And as you said, those desires aren't for nothing, they're telling you something. And even the fact that we've arrived at horses is just remarkable, because I feel really joyful now. And the whole point of this was that I didn't want it to be this professional podcast interview, but more an evolving conversation about autistic joy. That hopefully, the

conversation itself would be joyful, or it would get us to a place of joy. So we would finish with that.

And so I want to start bringing it a little bit, not to a close, but just to sort of frame a little bit more this question of joy and autistic joy. You also talk in the book about a feeling where the heart swells, and [how] that's the best way to know anything. Although no one ever tells you that, no one ever says, [as you say in the book], *"just use the expansive feeling in your chest to understand what's true, and what you want, and where to go and what really matters."*

I've definitely had that expansive feeling in my chest in our conversation, and then [how to] use that expansive feeling in your chest when you think about horse riding, for example. To allow yourself to be led by that, however strange it might seem in the context of life now, or what you are doing. Where is that autistic sense or autistic sense of joy leading you, potentially? And how much do we close that down? I was always described as very intense or witchy, or, you know, a lot of different things. And that was often quite frightening or, like a caricature of something much more about survival and my core self. Much more existential. And yeah, I'd much prefer to meet somebody and go right into what it feels like to hold a horse than be like, "Hi, how are you," I find that really, really hard.

So I wanted to talk about that expansive feeling, what that feels like for you, and when that's showed up for you in your life. For me, definitely, that's the closest to autistic joy that I could be. Maybe it's led you perhaps in the writing of the book, and, I don't know [maybe] all the diagnoses and [how] you are able, or not able, to use that. I think there are so many aspects of

society and relationships where that's blocked. We block it ourselves even, as a way of surviving. Because you realize, actually, I need to tone that down because other people will think that I am X, Y Z . . whatever it might be. So there's always a wrestling, I guess, with experiencing that world, that sense of joyful intensity and then also trying to mute or dilute it, as well.

So, yeah, a question around heart swelling . . . expansiveness in the chest . . .

MR: Well, that feeling is certainly a steering mechanism in my life which enables me to figure out what I want. It's almost like tuning into that and assessing whether that's present for me with a certain relationship, or, you know, with a certain creative venture that I'm considering investing my time and energy. And it's like, if I can feel that expansive feeling, it's like, “Okay, I am willing to go through whatever challenges or whatever difficulties arise to honor that now.” Because that's there, I can then proceed.

But if that's not there at the beginning, or during the experience, if I can be discerning about whether to invest my time and energy in it, it might be a certain, I don't know, it could be a certain routine I've got, or it could be a certain relationship with a certain person. [Maybe] it's just better to, you know, to text or to, you know, occasionally speak on the phone, because when I see them in person, I become depleted? But I do want to give time and attention to it because underneath, I do feel that warmth, or that sense of, you know, and I want to nurture that as best I can. But then in some relationships, it's like, well, that's not there, I just feel heaviness in the heart, or like, I'm being stabbed, or like, you know, I feel like my body's sort of

caving in on itself. Doing something for the wrong reasons often leads to that feeling. I mean, it's a constantly evolving thing, I guess. It's not like you can figure out at the start of something that you're always going to feel joy, but there is like, a vision or a sense that, I feel like even in writing the book, when she first started sort of speaking to me, I did feel very liberated.

And there were very challenging parts of writing it, you know, like, there's sort of a sequence, as you would know, where she's on the dance floor. I think I've spoken about this before, but that was very hard to write for some reason. I mean, I just had so many judgments about all the people around her, I was so angry at everybody. And I was sort of getting in the way. But it's not like because that was difficult I stopped writing, you know. I had to slow down, find the words and almost consciously cultivate the expansive, or reconnect with that expansive feeling of writing this book, being in this world, giving her space. The challenge is like a small part of it. It's like a little room, if we're gonna use the metaphor of a room, you know, given the title of the book. But it's like, you know, it's just one room. But the expansiveness is the whole thing for me, and I've chosen it and I've taken it on, because it has that quality, imbuing every facet of it. Then it's, as I've said, sort of trying to be discerning about where that exists in my life and where it doesn't, and then how to nurture it. It's been an incredibly helpful steering mechanism.

When I've been asked before, about, you know, what advice would you give to autistic people, or what it's like, how could I possibly begin to advise anybody about anything. And that whole idea of giving advice. I would say it's now following the joy, so that also parents know. I was very blessed in that even if my parents didn't, and still don't understand me in lots of ways, they were always wanting to be very supportive of whatever I was interested in. You know, I

wasn't shamed for that. I wasn't pushed somewhere I didn't want to go. It was like, I wanted to be an actress, or I wanted to be a fashion designer, and I was just completely committed. And they were like, “Great, we'll get you pencils.” You know, “Okay, do that, we'll give you the old typewriter,’ you know. And I think I probably certainly confused them in lots of ways at different times, but they were always very encouraging of that. And so, if we can do that for ourselves, I think that expansive feeling can become a very powerful way to make your way in the world. And to then figure out what challenges you do or don't want to take on, because are they in service of that or not?

VG: Thank you so much. I imagine that you've got new things brewing, inklings towards new rooms? I won't ask that question, because I like the idea that there's something emerging . . . Thank you so much for taking time to slow down and, you know, answer a lot of quite intense questions, perhaps. Or, you know, allowing me to take out excerpts from the book and read them. Perhaps not in the way that you heard them, but just the way I said, as portals. So yeah, thank you so much.

MR: Thank you so much for having me and yeah, may our discussion be a portal to joy and to that feeling of riding on a horse with, you know, wind in our faces and a feeling of clarity and relief. Cheers to that.

VG: Cheers. Yeah, let's end on that.

MR: Yeah, thanks, Victoria.

LINKS

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