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Episode 18 - Ender Baskan (April 2015)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Ender Baskan – **EB**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today, I'm still in Istanbul, but fantastically in Asia, I can't get my head around it. I'm joined by writer Ender Baskan. We're going to start with a reading from Ender, by way of introduction.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: So, Ender, hello. What the fuck are you doing in Istanbul?

EB: They sent me here. I've been telling people I'm doing my military service, so no one bothers me.

DT: So you've been at MauMau, the residency programme, I should reintroduce that because people may not have heard the short podcast I did about MauMau. So it's an artists' residency programme which includes a writers' programme, which you were part of, but not as we speak. How was that?

EB: It was great, unreal. I just landed in Istanbul and went straight to MauMau and had three weeks there with some really lovely and interesting writers and artists. Then I escaped.

DT: And now you're permanently on the run?

EB: Now I'm on the run.

DT: We're in a secret location, bolted doors and windows. You are from Australia, whereabouts?

EB: Melbourne.

DT: A bit of context. That's obviously a lie because you're on the run. During and after the three weeks at MauMau, did you work towards any specific outcomes?

EB: Not really. I was just here writing a novel, completing a novel, so I just used those three weeks as a chance to ground myself and meet a whole bunch of nice people and try to become part of some community.

DT: Were you seeking to become part of a community?

EB: I think I was definitely open to it and seeking it, because I'm going to be here for up to a year, maybe more, I'm not sure when I'll leave, so I guess you want to meet people with similar ideas, interested in similar things.

DT: MauMau seems like a hub and if you want to come here for creative projects, whether you're working on your own or collaboratively, it seems a great place to start and meet people.

EB: It is. I feel like I've been dropped into the middle of it, not just at MauMau, but everybody in that community, creative and artistic, has been very open and welcoming. It's lovely.

DT: I went to one exhibition opening and got 12 new Facebook friends. Amazing. Unfortunately today, because all social media has been shut down in Turkey, I can't make sure they're still my friends. They may have dropped me.

EB: Maybe they are all government spies.

DT: Probably. We'll go for a second reading, then move on to talking about the main body of work.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: It would be a good time to talk about the novel you're here to complete and how that came about.

EB: I came to Istanbul almost two years ago now, as a kind of reconciliation with Turkey. My parents were born in Turkey and left as kids. I'd been here once before with my mum, but I was quite a lot younger and it didn't really sink in, it was all a blur. I came here for six weeks, alone, and just wanted to do that 'go back to your roots' thing and I found myself parachuted right into the middle of the protests that were here. It was an interesting time and as a writer, you just want to write about it.

DT: Would you be able to tell us a bit about those protests? It's amazing how often that topic has come up when I've been talking to artists over here. It seems a huge event.

EB: It's quite interesting because everyone has a different take on it. I have my own, which I explore in my book. There was a building up of pressure over a long period of time, pressure in restlessness and discontent with the government and the way of the government over many years. It kind of came to head in the park and I think ultimately what it meant is people from all walks of life, who perhaps didn't consider themselves ever to be on the same side as another person, locked arms and roamed the streets and voice their concerns and stood up for one another, and to be here during that time was something I never experienced and never thought I would experience in Australia anyway.

I asked myself a lot of questions about my own political involvement and my own way of life. There was a lot of vitality going on in Istanbul and the ripples from that are still being felt today.

DT: Are you working towards a very definite goal with the novel?

EB: I've done a lot of writing. I just need to give it some shape. There's a lot of raw material there. It's as if I'm a ceramicist and I've materialised a whole block of clay. Now I need to make it into something. I've got a lot of things I want to say. In terms of what kind of novel, it's part reportage, part memoir, part autobiography, part criticism and essay.

DT: Is Istanbul the subject matter or the backdrop?

EB: Both. It's hard.

DT: Yesterday, I recorded a podcast with some poets and we were talking about this idea of Istanbul, that initially it might feel like your muse, but suddenly realising it's the other way round. It's unfairly balanced in favour of the city. It does what it wants and you can't purely use it as a backdrop because it's too influential. I've only been here a few days and it's oppressive and beautiful and amazing and horrible all at once.

I deliberately asked a very simple question because it can't really be answered in that way. It seems you need to talk about it in simplistic terms when you're talking about themes for novels in order to sell the idea to people. It's very difficult to explain Istanbul to people, let alone artwork that's based on it.

EB: I think I try over and over to explain Istanbul to people and each time, it's different and wrong. It's a very restless place and that's good in many ways.

DT: How does the city influence the development of the writing?

EB: Istanbul is a city which now, you can no longer stand still in and this is partly what [the] Gezi [Park protests] was about. They were clearing more and more public space and trying to convert it to private space. So everything now, you hear people talking about traffic in Istanbul and it's the bane of everyone's existence, but I think the traffic is good, it slows everyone down. The city is not just a traffic network in order to get indoors into offices and homes.

You need to be able to stand on the street and much of my book is about the concept of a literary device, the idea of the flâneur, the person who wanders the city, wanders the streets, without gawping, but gazing on the fringe of the crowd, observing, rather than being swept up in the crowd. A lot of my writing is about this push and pull, specifically about the protests.

There's a pull for me to get involved and into the protest, but I'm trying to maintain my distance so I can report so there's the flickering of reportage and memoir and criticism that I try to bring to life.

DT: It's very difficult to people-watch in Istanbul unless you're indoors and looking at them through a window. I was thinking about this yesterday, Istanbul reminds me of Northern Italian cities, but without the piazzas. There's no place to gather. I've been very shocked there are no parks, or tiny parks that wouldn't be considered parks in Britain. But good point, perhaps that's what people find oppressive, that they constantly feel they have to move.

EB: Everyone's part of the 'stream'. I think this is particularly disruptive because it's a part of Turkish or Middle Eastern, or a different idea to what we experience in Britain or Australia, which is time as a concept is different. I've got a strong sense that people feel very disrupted by the changes here. You can't loiter outside like you once would have here. You get shifted indoors to play cards or drink tea or whatever.

DT: Under threat of a huge water cannon. It's crazy over here. We're going to go for a third and final reading.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: I like it when people read stuff and I'm forced to try not to laugh, it's good. Could you tell us about any influences over your writing and development as a writer?

EB: I guess I have many. I think it starts very American, very US-centric, with a lot of early mid-20th century writers, generally from migrant backgrounds. I didn't really realise that until a lot later, but people like John Fante and Henry Miller and John Dos Pasos and then Kerouac through to Hunter Thompson and the 'new journalists'. More recently, someone like Ben Lerner, generally writing from the first person, very much grounded in place.

DT: The era was the first-person storytelling of detail, it goes back to the idea of just wandering, trying to capture everything, even if it's a futile experience, trying to see everything regardless of the speed of life around you. Final question, what would you recommend to our listeners to check out or watch or listen to? This doesn't have to be literature-based.

EB: I've just completed a book called Reality Hunger by David Shields. It's a manifesto on the novel. I know we're always talking about the novel, poetry and other literary forms, where they should go, how they can stay relevant or become relevant again.

I think he says a lot of great things. He argues for the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction to collapse and for the poet, that's a more familiar concept. For fiction and the novelists, that's still very much a topic of debate. Go and check that out. I've also just gone online and bought a bunch of books he recommends and refers to in that book and I think that's a good sign. I'm doing as he says.

DT: It's definitely important to disregard any freefall and just follow orders, I find, especially in Turkey because there's no point trying to think for yourself. You'll just end up water-cannoned or something. Or on the run, as we are.

EB: So take everything I say with a grain of salt.

DT: Thank you, Ender. We'll list any blogs, websites or places where listeners can check you out in the description of the video because they often get lost in the speech on here. I've really enjoyed chatting to you, it's been great meeting you.

End of transcript.