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MIKE LIVERMORE: Welcome to the *Free Range* podcast. I'm your host Mike Livermore with me today is literary scholar Nicholas Allen who is the Baldwin professor in the Humanities at the University of Georgia. His latest book is *Ireland, Literature, and The Coast: Sea Tangled.* Hi, Nicholas. Thanks for joining me today.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Hey, Mike. Pleasure to be with you. Thank you for having me.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So you really have this absolutely wonderful book that you've published recently. The title is *Ireland, literature, and The Coast: Seatangled.* And it's an investigation of those themes-- a critical perspective on Irish literature.

Maybe one way to get us into the subject is to interrogate the title a little bit. Seatangled is incredibly beautiful and evocative word. Also one thing that's interesting-- I don't know it comes after the colon.

And sometimes maybe the convention would be to put the cool word first and then the more descriptive words later. So I'm wondering just about that.

That word seatangled, does that relate to Ireland literature in the coast? Or what's going on with these words that we see right on the front cover of the manuscript?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Sure. And thank you for noticing that. Actually it's kind of a funny story, but it really should be called seatangled colon and then whatever it is afterwards. But they were worried in the press that, in digital searches, it would get mixed up with books about sea angling, which actually, I thought would be a good thing and might indeed boost sales.

So it might disappoint readers, I think, if you were looking for any technical merits. So that's the reason for that. But yes, so seatangled. But the word-- it's an interesting one. It pops up in Joyce. And it really came into my mind whenever Stephen is walking along the beach and thinking about his future.

So Stephen Dedalus in a portrait of the artist as a young man, and wondering what he's going to make of himself. And so he walks out to the verge of the city in Dublin as we sometimes forget.

And part of that forgetting is the reason to write the book was a great Maritime city of the 18th and 19th century. And he sees these seatangles, which are little shreds of seaweed in the water.

And so just thought about that moment, the moment of takeoff of lift. Stephen Dedalus is compared to someone who flies too high lands, of course, drowns.

But thinking about those metaphors of flight, metaphors of motion, and also I think also those ideas of remains somehow that he was looking at these bits and pieces of things and trying to put them together.

And I suppose that's been the story of so much of 20th century literature. And certainly being what I've responded to, and funny little hidden American aspect in that I've often thought as I went home in the summers to Ireland where I like to swim as much as I can. Because I live too far away from the sea here in America.

But it really reminded me the color of all that broken rock and ladder of the fall in the American Northeast. So there's a funny sense of tapestry and color and time that you carry in your imagination that maybe registers in books that might not be legible to a reader as a direct thing. But it gives it a kind of sensation and experience that I tried to include in the writing.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. It's really-- and now-- it's a beautiful image and it has all these really wonderful connotations to it now. When I just as a naive reader-- I saw that word on the front what kind of struck me was this idea of-- and again, with the Ireland literature and the coast together, that these things were entangled with each other in some kind of meaningful way.

And in some sense, it's like, well, of course, there's Ireland and literature is important to Ireland [CHUCKLE]. And Ireland is important to literature, and there's a big coast that surrounds the island.

But there's lots of non-obvious ways that these things are related to each other. So what is-- so I don't know if that notion--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

MIKE LIVERMORE: --of tangled is sensible.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. No, absolutely. And I think, it's all trying to stretch. What I was trying to do was stretch forward towards a different language of description that wasn't bounded by land and territoriality as I grew up in Belfast in the North of Ireland in a very contested place.

And although I am a citizen of the Irish Republic now. I certainly wasn't brought up in that world. And that's been very conscious of the ways in which things overlap. They seep into each other.

And how could you not read Joyce and Yates and wonder that literature tells you about holding many different kinds of realities in mind at once.

And so if you mix that kind of modernist perspective of multiplicity with the historical reality of interconnectedness, that seemed to me that wateriness perviousness had not yet quite found its way into the historical or the cultural or the literary representation of the island.

I think Ireland sometimes is forgotten in a sense that it is a place bounded by and washed over by water. Partly an inheritance, I think of its long imperial attachments where to have a national sovereignty was to have a sense of independence and freedom.

And in creating that sense of an island apart. We thought perhaps a little bit too much about looking inland and looking offshore, which I think for a long time was associated with migration, with leaving, with famine, with domination.

And trying to find a way to describe more flexible understandings of being in the world in the literature while being true also to those complex historical interactions was one of the reasons to write the book.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So the way that book proceeds is there's some kind of thematic discussion, but the core chapters of the book are close readings of authors and particular authors and other artists and particular works.

So one question that I have and I suspect others do too is when you do a project like this, it's not an anthology. This isn't intended to be a complete history of Irish literature or Irish-- which would be very long-- or even within a particular period of whatever-- 20th century or something.

And so how do you collect-- how do you decide who's in and who's out in some sense of a project like this?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: It's a great question. And would you believe that this was meant to be just a short book? That started out of a particular obsession, which was literally actually coming back to America a second time looking at the map.

We used to live in Chapel Hill and thinking that Athens was about as far away from the coast as Chapel Hill was. So we would get to sea a lot. It's not quite the same. And so that sense of missing the ozone that being too landed was something that was-- I think drove a kind of obsession.

And of course, with the changes of the world over the last five years in all of our living circumstances changed too. That was in there. And thinking to, I suppose-- starting with books and texts and moments that were lodged in my imagination.

And sometimes it might take you a couple of years to write a book. But writing of the book might be years in your head. A long time ago when I first came to America teaching James Joyce's short story-- The dead-- and it ends with a snowstorm and a student asking me-- quite rightly, does it snow a lot in Ireland?

And I thought, well, actually, it doesn't. Hardly ever snows at all. And so it made me think about water cycles and about the way in which the weather is used to represent psychologies and states of mind. And the way that might have a particular kind of Atlantic perspective.

And then I had lived for a couple of years in Galway, where I taught in the University there. And I became a great friend or at least a great admirer and a friend of a writer called Tim Robinson, who created these maps and accounts and stories in the Irish and English languages of the Western coast that I thought were just really magnificent and opened a whole portal of place and understanding and description for me that I'd never had before.

So they were the larger frames and then trying to think about a chronology. And so I started. You think late 19th century, there's a wonderful early novel by Yates that nobody ever really paid much attention to called *John Sherman,* which is about a shipping clerk who moves to London and thinking about Joyce.

And then not just wanting to write a book about the canonical things. I have always been very interested in visual arts, and I've always been very interested in literary magazines. So trying to weave together that broad context to give the narrative a kind of forward momentum while taking stops to take time with close readings.

And the poet Linda Quillinan, who actually for a brief time when I was a graduate student in Trinity College, Dublin, was the head of Department. I often think it's comical that this great genius think of the 20th and early 21st century Irish poetry-- was someone I used to go to ask for money to go to conferences--

MIKE LIVERMORE: [LAUGH]

NICHOLAS ALLEN: And she would smile at me benignly and say yes. But she was a really lovely, beautiful, powerful, incredible presence.

And so that sense of intersection between the historical works that you would come across and the canon of Irish literature and then trying to adjust and rewrite that through the perspective of these other tangled sea places was [? applauded ?] along.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. Yeah. And so as you mentioned the story of the snow and the student and what brought you into the project. I mean, one of the messages, I guess, that I took away from the project from the book is this, obviously there's a tangled and complicated relationship between all these ideas and images and how they work together.

But I'm a law professor. I tend to categorize-- [CHUCKLE] things. So the categories that I kind of came up with were that these images seem to play two kinds of roles. Things like the sea and coast and water.

That there's this role of metaphor as that we can use. The coast as a liminal space between the real and the imaginary, or a metaphor for escape, or a metaphor for colonial influence. And so there's this kind of metaphoric role that water or coasts-- the liquid can have and within the literary landscape.

And then there is kind of like the quote-unquote, "real" influence of the coast or the maritime economy or the built environment of docks and that affects what people do for a living and it affects their sensory environment, and it affects their economic reality and so on.

And both of these are present in the book as you described the present in the literature, and they're present in the readings that you offer. Was there one of these that drew you more into the subject than the other?

I mean, one question is just, is that a legitimate way of thinking about things? But then also like, is there one that drew you in? Or is it kind of both together that drew your interest in this way of thinking about this?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: No, thank you. It is a legitimate way to think it. But I would say it's also to some degree, a foundational or a preliminary one. I think I understand these interactions as being more on a spectrum. And that see different reflections at different points on that spectrum.

I often think about the word constellation when I'm writing. And really what you're trying to do are finding these points of refraction really, of hidden or buried or forgotten or neglected histories, words, thoughts, ideas.

That I think literature is almost like a kind of radio star or some kind of frequency emitter that the critic can tune into. That they might think in a kind of almost-- I don't mean to be grand and compare myself to a physicist, but physics is also a problem of language in the imagination as it is of measurement and observation.

But trying to think about these broken narratives and patterns that exist over historical time and are often represented in different kinds of cultural artifacts. And when you can make them reflect upon each other, what different impression of the world would you have afterwards?

So I suppose I don't see there's such a distance between the wheel, the harbors, the piers, the maritime forts, the great entrance to Cork harbor where you can see gun emplacements and other side that go back many centuries.

But we now take to be places of pleasure and leisure in Cork harbor that were once centers of global incarceration. I don't think those real things are detached from the imagination or from words.

And I'm glad to talk with you about the idea of seatangled and vocabulary and language. Because I think they're real and powerful things that real and powerful effects on people's experiences.

And I suppose just the last kind of closing thought about it is that the provocative part to the book-- I mean, it is an account of the past in one sense. But I suppose it also asks you, if we were to think of things like this, would we be able to categorize our present in the same way?

Would we read differently? And think even further than that a question that we don't always ask as critics of ourselves-- would we as critics write differently? And people have responded to that in different ways. People with different training and background sometimes don't appreciate that question.

Sometimes they don't like the writing. Sometimes they wonder is this a fit thing to do. Should you categorize more and make metaphor less?

But I think for myself-- and I thought this as I've gone along in my own career, such as it is that if there's a freedom to this education-- and I'm in the first generation of my family to go to University.

If there's something different in this apart from the acquiring of knowledge or the burdening of oneself with others learning, is there an individual way to express yourself within it?

Well, I think that is also connected to this question of liquidity of transition, of perviousness, of a certain kind of openness to the world that might allow us to access conditions of empathy and understanding in the literature that would set us to think again about what Ireland literature, cultural history might be.

And that seems very important in this time of environmental collapse to try and think about things differently in that way. I know our rising generations of students do so certainly we should do so too.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So That's a really interesting set of ideas. And so maybe to explore that a little bit further, we could take something that is both a concrete reality and a metaphor. [CHUCKLE]

And every point on the spectrum, something that you kind of return to and the authors and the artists in your book return to is the coast. And there's lots of different-- a coast is a physical reality.

A scientist-- an ecologist can study coastal ecosystems. It's a place of economic activity. It's a particular kind of landscape that generates sensations. That when you moved inland to Athens, you missed the coast.

Part of that is the sights and the smells and the experiences. But then there is also in several of the works that you described, there's a metaphorical characteristic to the coast. And of course, these things as you know, they're entangled.

Where you-- when you experience the physicality, that's not something that can't be read or it's not something that doesn't involve imagination. I mean, when you're standing on the coast and staring-- a real person standing on the coast staring off in the distance.

When they do that physical activity, it's triggering all kinds of associations. Literally cultural associations, all kinds of meaning that are happening. And so what are some of the ways that coast as an idea, as a physical thing, as a metaphor works its way into some of the works that you describe in the book?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: It's such an interesting question, because it's so motive and changes. And I'm thinking at one end of the 20th century, at the beginning, it's a place where people looking at because it suggests a certain kind of leaving by sea.

It has a kind o melancholy attached to it-- a far perspective. And then you get to the end of the 20th century and you have someone like Seamus Heaney coming out in the evening time, or maybe even [INAUDIBLE] looking out and thinking about planes flying out from Dublin.

And that is a kind of privilege of leaving and return that perhaps wasn't there in earlier years. Even though, it's also a kind of carbon cost that has increased exponentially in Ireland all the way across the 20th century right up to the present.

And so I would say in that sense, it's always a mutable thing in the imaginative sense. And what you're maybe trying to do, or what I was trying to do in a book like this was less to describe every single exhibition of these qualities at the coastal zone. But to think about practices.

So I mean, your question is a great one. Really what we're thinking about here are trying to describe almost genealogies of practice, or I sometimes think about it in terms of declension-- almost like a verb.

Could you give broad enough forms that shaped over time that could include all of these diversities of reality with these literary and artistic and sonic apparitions that are so important to our cultural mediation and imagination of landscapes that we often come into after they've always been formed?

You're making me think-- when I first went to Galway and people would tell me, I love the Western seaboard. It's so beautiful. It's this place-- I kept thinking, goodness, this is like a place someone described 100 years ago but everybody has left.

Yes, Yates was here. But now all I can see is a concrete car park in the rain on November morning in the dark. Like where is that world gone? And of course, it was a stupid perception of mine and partly to do with this sense of transition between two places that never managed very well.

But going out there into somewhere like Rhinestone, Tim Robinson would have these salons in his house at the end of the pier there. People would come from all over the world, but there were no more important than local people and fishermen and people who had their livelihood in the local village of that surrounds-- the people who worked in Rhinestone Borg or traveled through it.

But the sense of a community of conversation and a very particular place that had very specific experiences, but they could also have echoes with other places.

And I suppose that's the other part of my writing of work that comes back to your question about how we describe all of these multiplicities of experiences.

I'm not so interested in saying that one thing is like another. But if I am thinking about a kind of declension, if I use that word about verbs. I'm thinking about declensions in different languages in which certain words sound like each other, but they're not necessarily the same.

I'm trying to keep that open space where you're describing something without containing it seems very important to me. And again, seems like another kind of practice of self-liberation.

But also in a way of honesty that how can we write about the post-imperial or the post-colonial or the environmental or the blue humanities, if we can't find a language to describe the sensation of something without colonizing it ourselves?

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. One of the things I think is an interesting feature, and this is very different from the kind of work that I normally read-- [CHUCKLE]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

MIKE LIVERMORE: --is I think one would be hard pressed to-- and this could be wrong. So you'll correct me if I'm wrong. But I think it would be difficult to articulate an argument that runs through the brook, other than something very, very general.

And that something like this is an interesting way to read the literature or something. And it's more of-- as you were just describing, it's a series of connections, of linkages, of holding different things up to-- near each other and kind of through a particular lens.

Now, so I guess my first question is that wrong? Do you see that there is an argument that you're trying to make other than the argument of this is a valuable way to do things? I guess, or this is a useful or productive way of reading this literature.

So I guess that's one. That's just kind of almost like a method question or a question about the content of the work as you see it.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. And I think that even to say that it's a large claim to make. I don't think I've ever really been interested in-- that someone would want to read a book that you would write about other books. Because you're making an argument about the other books.

I think people would like-- for me anyway, I'm more inclined to read books that make me feel something that see something-- make a connection with books that seems to me more of a sense of a criticism as a kind of rhythm and practice that allows in the reader a space for understanding and connection that they might not otherwise have had.

Having said that, I think I've only really begun to reach that point and it's one that I continue with in self-reflection. But what I really felt when I wrote this book that was different from all the other books that I've written before was I felt like I had a knowledge and a breadth of experience.

That there's a subtlety in the book-- my friend the critic, Lucy Collins, picked up on, and actually it was the most flattering thing that anybody said about it was that it was subtle. Because actually, there were words that I use in there, encumbrance, that have a kind of historical freight that make a gesture to another kind of historical discourse.

I don't put it in a footnote. I don't make it explicit. But within the rhythm of language of the criticism, there are ways that people from other disciplines and backgrounds with formal professional knowledge can follow those cues and think, oh, like see what's being suggested here.

And then people who don't necessarily have that specific knowledge can still appreciate the breadth of language being used in description and make a wall for the kind of an implicit set of contexts or references that might make them think or see things differently anyway.

And in a way, I suppose that's a little bit like teaching in class. That you have this opportunity to expand the conversation and that if everyone didn't think the same.

But if people can broaden their horizons of perspective and understanding, then at least the decisions they make afterwards are going to be informed by different information and feeling than they had before that.

MIKE LIVERMORE: I mean, one-- as you were speaking, one thought that kind of occurred is the distinction between-- and this is a very silly one. But just to simplify things a little bit, is the idea that what you've offered is like a decoder key.

That the book is a way of reinterpreting or decoding a kind of latent characteristics in this literature. I suspect you would resist that characterization. [CHUCKLE] That there was a code that was there and that you're extracting.

Another metaphor, I guess, for the practice would be something more like-- and so this is something-- well, I'd be-- again, just curious on your thoughts of-- this is almost a meta question about literary criticism.

But in really thinking about your work, and your work in this particular book. Is that the literature serves as a kind of raw material for-- even that. Maybe we don't love that.

But just to go with it as an input into your own creative process of establishing links, and drawing connections, and building a new artifact that is related in some sense to the works that you're reading, but isn't presenting itself as a definitive reading or the correct reading or anything else, in the same way that an artist wouldn't say that they're a painting is the correct way of applying paint to a piece of canvas.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. I think in a way, these are also questions of where the self resides in the text too, both as the reader and as the writer of versions of the text that you share with other people in relation to other texts.

But to come back to the decoder. I mean, if had that Dan Brown aspect, I'd certainly have sold many more books. So I can only imagine the puzzlement of people who would pick up seatangled as the last book in the Da Vinci Code sequence.

And in a way, I think I would come back again to try and get away. And actually, I think it's a fundamental point about the book from those questions of linear sequence, that there is a path to be followed in this. That there is one single argument.

I mean, I suppose the one single argument is that we should attend to the imagery of water in literary texts. It turns out that it's actually extremely powerful way to understand built space and human experience in a late imperial and post-colonial culture.

So that's an argument in that sense. But making that visible or imaginable is not just a question of accounting for all of these different formations across time.

But if you could give a sense of their cultural presence through a drawing of the shape around them as much as you could of their filling in their colors and their backgrounds and everything else that you allow space then for readers to draw their own conclusions about books that they will have read. And then to have a kind of recognition in the text of what it is that you're trying to say.

And I think that to me seems an important way to make people-- not to make people, but to invite people to help you create something in the work of criticism that makes them think differently about literature.

And really that question about what literature is also about human perception, is about empathy, is about community, is about solidarity. And that's really the kind of impression. I think I'm trying to make whenever I write.

But I mean, I do so at all modesty as well. I mean, I don't think of it as being an artwork. I had a very peculiar and welcome experience in the spring of being invited to the Irish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale.

And they had asked me to write a little essay about the coast in Ireland that became a kind of a prose poem, and they asked me to read it at this opening vernissage.

And I looked at it this, I'm well used to speaking in front of people, but thought-- I looked up and thought, oh my God, this is the first time I've ever had to read anything. It's just me as opposed to me talking about what someone else wrote.

And just for that moment, that was a kind of, oh, that's a funny-- that's a little transition to make. So it's-- again, this was perhaps an expectant kind of critical writing. I mean critical writing has to be moving to make people read it.

And there are forms of it that follow very established procedures and gestures and genealogies and lineages. And I'm aware of those things. And in writing the way that I do, it is not a denial of their power or appropriateness.

But I just-- for myself, I have wanted to find a different space and freedom in my writing that will express a different understanding of the texts that's legible to those more formal traditions, but is not the same as them.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. I mean, I've always experienced literary criticism as itself. It's certainly-- from the outsiders perspective, it appears as a creative act. I mean, a lot of things are creative.

Science is creative in a lot of ways. Writing a mathematical proof is creative or constructing a mathematical proof is creative. But I'm not sure what exactly the distinction I'm trying to make. But it does seem to be a particular kind of creative act.

It's interesting that you would be disinclined to think of it as a work of literature itself, or maybe-- Yeah, maybe that's not quite right.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. I think this is what I'm holding myself as an Ulster Protestant. Well, we were discouraged from believing that we ever had imaginations.

MIKE LIVERMORE: [CHUCKLE] I see.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: But yeah, I do. I mean, of course, I think it's creative. Absolutely. And it's just a really interesting conversation to have about-- again, the decades of reading and thinking and conversation and exchange and collaboration that goes into writing.

And I think-- actually, I take your prompt seriously, and I agree with you in the sense that we should all of us think more about the value of the creative work that we do as critics or thinkers or people who reflect on the world as it is or appears to be in any sense.

Because there's so much conversation in the moment about universities and about value, and especially about the place of the humanities and the arts more broadly. And where are we to be more-- is confident the right word? But consciousness-- to be more conscious of ourselves as creative beings within a critical context.

That there could be a different understanding of value. And think, even if teaching of education in public institutions, especially because it's very easy to talk about creative economy and not think about English literature to think about history, to think about philosophy, to think about dance, to think about any of those things.

And so maybe not the worst thing in the world to think about better languages to describe ourselves as creative makers, as well as critical thinkers.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. It's really it's just-- the last few thing you were mentioning is there's talk of the creative economy or creatives. There's right-- that's an economic role and it's somehow-- [CHUCKLE] removed from literature and dance. And--

NICHOLAS ALLEN: I know

MIKE LIVERMORE: These are-- I mean, the core of what traditionally we kind of thought of as creative as what the definition of creative in some sense. So I don't if you have any thoughts about that as an economic proposition or what-- just curious to hear your thoughts on it.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah, I do think it is a kind of a long, but intensely recent history of capital colonization of specific terms, which are extracted from the public comments to become subjects of exploitation, and which then gives some people a kind of hesitation about their transition back into more equitable forms.

And I think at the root of much of what I do in general, and I think even in my writing. I'm thinking about those things. I'm thinking about the ways in which freedom matters. But freedom can mean many things.

And even if it's the freedom to think, feel, see, or experience another person's perhaps very different representation of the world in ways that you may or may not agree with, in ways that may or may not change your own attitudes to life, but may also equip you with responses to challenges in life that you have not yet experienced.

I think that's a very powerful thing. And I think that's what the humanities in the arts can do in general and certainly what they can do in University education. And yeah. Something I argue for a lot in many different contexts.

And I suppose what you're saying at one end of the spectrum is this kind of book that I've written, but in my day-to-day life. I also do that in different forms too. But it's important work to do. It's work that's done very well at the University of Virginia. And the work that many people around the world are thinking about I think.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Yeah. As we're thinking broadly about this kind of humanities and criticism. One of the-- and it's like a cliche almost to say that the humanities-- if someone wants to defend the humanities against whatever the attacks are.

I mean, of course, there's a big question about where those attacks come from and how they're motivated and whatever else. But just for the moment, one of the things folks will say, or a catchphrase would be that we promote critical thinking.

And that's an interesting phrase. And I think it's interesting to compare the notion of critical in that phrase as it is commonly used in say, American political discourse, with the way that you're describing.

I think many of the goals of the way you read and discuss things that you've read. Where you talk a lot about connection and you were just mentioning kind of perspective taking or learning about other folks, even if you don't agree with them.

Empathy, compassion, those kinds of skills or those kinds of experiences. And that I think is very different from what we typically associate with quote-unquote, "critical thinking," which is skepticism or analysis in a particular way, breaking things down, understanding their component parts.

So yeah. So I'd just be curious about your thoughts on the relationship between criticism as you think of it and this other notion of critical thinking that's current in our culture and just how it is that we have these two very different modalities that fall under the same word?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Sure. And I obviously, see things slightly askew being a foreigner twice in the sense of coming from the North of Ireland and going to Dublin and really feeling liberated there and then having lived in two different times in my life very happily in the American South.

But again, hearing kind of echoes of some of the disturbances that were there in my earlier life too. It's a place that often seems strangely familiar to me, and not always for the best reasons much as I love.

But I suppose you can hear criticism as deconstruction-- as the taking apart of analysis, as the breaking down, which I suppose in the language of capital is a sort of negative thing. Someone has built this car for you and now you want to tell me that it's badly engineered, badly designed.

You don't like the color. I mean, that kind of is how people project an understanding of the humanities. Look, at what we did for you. Is it never enough? Whereas in fact, you criticism is a practice of informed empathy and understanding-- a kind of an amplification, a connection, a networking.

And they are interestingly words that coincide with forms of modern life-- social media comes to mind, in which terms like that have themselves been abrogated for very particular capital and informationist purposes.

And I'm struck-- one thing we didn't talk about coastal works earlier is that this understanding of the coast as a marginal space has certainly been in Irish and also in forms of Indigenous American history.

A place that people who have been pushed to the margins-- who have suffered the very most, have been pushed out to the edges and nailed the liminal as a place of last survival before expulsion or removal.

And so in looking at the coast as a place of looking out, it's also always awareness of the deeply fractured history in which we live day-to-day in Ireland and in the United States.

And while I don't think of the humanities or literature, or criticism as a work of repair. If it is a work of awareness and a work of heightened self-consciousness, it does invite us to think questions differently of the present and as a kind of future that we like to build that might be more inclusive, that might be more representative, that might be more empathetic.

And of course, that can be very challenging idea. But there are many ways to carry out that practice. It can begin in the reading of a poem. It can begin in a student introducing a writer who comes to campus. It can begin with a graduate student creating a film or a artwork or a photograph of one fracture of their experience.

Who knows what career they're going to end up going to have? Who knows what their relationships with their family and friends will be? But you'd like to think again, and I go back to that point of being in the first generation of people who went to University.

If there was anything in this experience of life that have had, surely, some sense of self-discovery has to be critical. Because it was denied to all those generations before who lived in poverty, who lived in the extremity of having very little or nothing and having no horizon of expectation.

And I do, and I've always felt that sense of responsibility. Not to speak for anyone, but to speak as myself-- to be aware, to try and learn as I go along for all my mistakes.

And to find a space that I can think is-- I would just say, a representative of at least that they might if they couldn't understand it, at least they wouldn't think that it had let anyone down. I've always felt that.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So there's lots of different ways we could take the conversation. But I wanted to pick up on something that you mentioned just a kind of a second ago about the relationship between Ireland that you were describing, and the South where you live now, and the role that coasts have played for people who have been kicked off their land or who have faced kind of civil or difficulties.

So the book is about Irish literature. That's interesting even question to define. [CHUCKLE] There's definitional questions of how you draw a boundary around something like that if you wanted to.

But you mentioned these resonances with other cultures, with other literature's. And obviously, water is a human universal. There's no people where there's not water. There's wetter places and drier places. [CHUCKLE]

But even dry places are defined by water. It's just the lack thereof. And so I'm curious how you see your project and maybe Irish literature within this global context.

You mentioned the blue humanities, which is a movement within the humanities to think in certain ways when engaging in humanistic projects. There's the environmental humanities, which is a project within the humanities.

So maybe you could just place this work where it has resonances and how something like an idea like the blue humanities or the environmental humanities is a courier of resonance or exactly what it means when we think about these kind of cross-cutting ways of reading and criticizing and thinking?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. Well, I've been very lucky when I think about it now. And I hadn't really thought about it like this until we were talking today, Mike. But I've been very lucky to do my work and to come to whatever consciousness I have at a moment whenever two things have intersected.

So the publicly engaged humanities has been a movement now. I mean, it's always been there. But perhaps in the last 10-20 years, has become more formalized, better connected, more networked, more visible.

And at the same time, that grit and deep tradition, which goes back until at least the middle of the 20th century of the environmental humanities has grown into this awareness and appreciation of the oceans, of the rivers, of estuaries, coasts. And of what people might call the blue humanities, thinking about water and the larger scale.

And the really wonderful thing about those two fields coming up is not just that they're fascinating and interesting and full of rich questions that you could spend many lifetimes thinking about, but they also require the creation of new networks of association.

And so I feel so blessed to use that American term, which I never thought I would ever say to have been part of two social networks that have overlapped and really given me a sense of community.

That even though, I'm here in Athens, Georgia, writing about Ireland and there is a definition in the title between Ireland and Irish literature. I put a comma in there for a purpose.

But this sense of immediate interest of energy and also of community, which is something that you don't always get in the very small field of Irish literature. A certain room to breathe for people to say, oh, really? You write about that? You're write about that. Tell me more about it.

I've been to long-term environmental research stations across the United States with marine scientists. I've talked with people who have done in deep sea submersibles to try and follow the flow of oil, which has come out from pollution in the Gulf of Mexico.

And listening to their excitement about what they do, and having them be interested in something as obscure as what I do, has been a very energizing thing. And so, I suppose-- not to answer your question directly, but to give you a different sense of possibility perhaps of where all this leads.

It's very easy in these conversations about the humanities and arts, and it is a dreadful reality for people who are suffering under cuts and job losses and student numbers going down. And I don't for a second want to diminish any of that.

But there is still the energy within institutions-- public and private to put together forms of knowledge and experience and new connections and networks that I think are truly radical and have the power to change how we think about who we are and what we do.

And that's what gives me the enthusiasm and excitement about all this. I mean, in one sense, I might be writing about a very specific part about a very specific poem that perhaps not too many people who aren't specific [INAUDIBLE] about.

But those deep structures in the poem, would you say they're molecular? Would you say they're microorganisms of their cells and cultural form? And I've found so often here in America-- and it's actually one thing I find really freeing about the place and I love working in the public university system.

There's such a broad capacity of thought that if you can make these kind of neural-like connections between them, you can really change how people perceive and talk about the very largest questions that face us.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Well, just kind of following on this kind of style thinking. I wanted to maybe fold back into an earlier point of entry, which was the title of the book.

You mentioned Ireland literature and the coast that you put a comma in there for a reason. So I wanted to return to that for a second. So the title is an Irish literature in the coast . The title is Ireland literature in the coast. And so that's-- as you note, that's a meaningful distinction.

And so I guess, just the questions that immediately come to mind is I mean, is there such a thing as Irish literature? Is the claim-- maybe that's an idea that requires complication.

The idea of Ireland is obviously a very complex thing. It's a political thing. It's a cultural thing. It's a real physical thing in the world. Obviously, literature is a very complicated thing.

So yeah. So that choice about the comma and then the notion of Ireland that you're working with in the title and in the book. Yeah, I just want to invite some thoughts on that.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: I can hear all of your listeners who I've just brought around to thinking of criticism as being a positive engaging thing now rolling their eyes. As they're listening and their AirPods walking their dogs while you and talk about a comma.

But commas--

MIKE LIVERMORE: [CHUCKLE] I'm a lawyer. Lawyers have to worry about commas.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. No, this is-- Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, So you can qualify something without saying that it doesn't exist. So I wanted in the book, to give the impression that it is a set of sequences or impressions I suppose in that sense. And I don't mean this in a negative way. It's impressionistic.

It is not an account of all of Irish literature. It's not an argument for what Irish literature is or is not. I was really conscious-- I was brought up in Belfast and educated in the school where you could learn Russian, French, German, Latin, Greek, but you could not learn Irish.

And that acknowledgment of Irish language literature not being in there seemed to be important. So that's partly the Ireland comma literature and the coast. And I suppose the other qualification about it all, which is seatangled looking at where the sea or the ocean meets the coast.

I tried to keep myself relatively within a zone that didn't go too deep because thought actually oceanic studies is a whole other thing. And perhaps the only bit where I cheated in that regard was the American part.

I had a chapter in the middle, which slightly unbalanced the book in that it's about three male authors, and they gave the gender balance of the book a slightly askew sense of things. Although there are actually many female writers, women writers, written about all through the book, especially in the literary journals.

But still, in some senses, that chapter of the book I thought many times, should I have taken that out the book, would have been shorter, would have been more readable. But it was in a way a kind of bridged to my actual life in America, it seemed slightly dishonest to leave it out.

So Ireland is a set of conditions in the book. A set of imaginable places as opposed to the predicate of a national literature. And I think that that's important. And I know you've been thinking as you read the book, because we've talked about this before.

But can you make a claim for an Irish literature that you couldn't for a German literature or a English literature or a French or a German? And I'm interested to say that literature in and all about Ireland, often engages with a set of specific historical experiences and questions that require particular attention.

But that's not to say that those particular experiences and circumstances don't have echoes with other places. And it's also important to say that many Irish writers-- I mean, if you think about the end of Ulysses, Joyce is thinking about not just Dublin. He's thinking about Trieste. He's thinking about Zurich.

So there is something fundamentally global about our experiences, and perhaps global is a word that's associated with Empire and colony. And going forward, maybe a word that we might approach is planetary-- a different kind of consciousness of other things and beings in the world that the sea is populated by many kinds of creatures.

And they're thinking about the blue humanities is again, a kind of empathy that opens up to entirely different kinds of consciousness and attention that we still need new languages for.

MIKE LIVERMORE: And this puts me in mind of other critical projects that have related to literature and to national literature. And this is something you touch on in some of the chapters as well.

I'm thinking of the Yates chapter. Is nationalism and the project of nationalism and literature-- of course, that's a critical project that has existed at various points in human history is to use literature and other arts as-- it's basically to argue for a kind of national consciousness or a national volk or something like that.

And or as an expression of some underlying reality about what a National community is. And obviously that's a project with deep ideological-- and then real political consequences.

And obviously what you're talking about is very, very different. And it's really about-- there's a lot of boundary breaking and a lot of what you've been talking about today and empathy and so on.

But I'm curious if you see the project of the blue humanities and environmental humanities, I'm just curious about your thoughts vis-a-vis other kind of ideological projects, if that's what we want to refer to them as that have kind of existed within a history of literature, and especially when we clump literature into these kind of national-style kind of categories.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. Yeah, Yeah. Yeah, that's a great question. And actually-- but of course, one thing we must always remember also is that nationalism is itself a comparative project. It's always engaged with thinking about other places and things.

Although it likes to think of itself as being insular, if I can use the word. It is by necessity always in relation to something else. And so there is even in-- well, especially, in the histories of Irish nationalism. I'm talking to you from the United States.

There's a diasporas of thought and imagination have been very powerful to changes that have happened at home. It's a great question also to think about the blue humanities and to think about the Irish coastline.

Because it really provokes and challenges you at the level of reading to think about what your points of orientation are. When you are imagining a Sandy coast on Ireland's Eastern seaboard. Where is your point of comparison?

It might be to the parts of the English Kent coast, which are falling into the sea. It might be some great work by a woman called Katie Ritson, has done thinking about the sandy shores of the Baltic, which might take you to that chapter then on Erskine riddles or Erskine Childers, I should say.

And the riddle of the sands, which is in one sense a mystery novel, which actually provoked the British Navy into its arms race with the German Navy before World War I. But which led to its specific circumstances to its author becoming executed by the independent Irish state that he fought to free.

So it seems obvious, of course, that these complexities of allegiance and belonging in place cannot be explained by a National Reading that ties one place off for another.

The blue humanities-- what they might do in a way that perhaps a post-colonial reading might not do-- and this is maybe why stress in the book are what I like to think about the term lit imperial, rather than post-colonial, is to think about conditions of attachment to the world that are mediated by these metropolitan dominant forms, but they can seep around them.

They can get through and pass them. And they can do so without themselves then having to be conditioned by these reactive national histories afterwards.

So I suppose another practice of this freedom that I'm trying to think about is a freedom from the things that followed as reactions to that which had been before, which sometimes--

And again, this might be to do with my slightly misplaced Belfast childhood, has always been very skeptical or aware of one narrative being pasted on another.

And you just end up with this thick layer of impasto that doesn't help anyone. I'm much more interested in those thin washes of watercolor that might help you see through the paper than I am with painting everything over.

MIKE LIVERMORE: So one question-- and this is like super interesting. And I really like the idea of thinking of the blue humanities or environmental humanities in the context of other movements in criticism in the humanities including postcolonial criticism and others and how they build on and relate to each other.

I think that's a really super interesting question, but one of the-- just broader questions, again, maybe just to keep going in a bit of a spiral to take us back to the book and the writing.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Going to get, like, a deposition, Mike?

MIKE LIVERMORE: Exactly. [CHUCKLE] Which I've literally never done and never will do.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: No, no, yeah. Me neither, as you can tell.

MIKE LIVERMORE: [CHUCKLE] But just back to the book and the process of writing the book. One of the ways that I thought of the project as a reader was that you had kind of come up with a way of reading this literature or some portion of this literature that you could draw associations with and do some work with that wasn't maybe possible or as easy with other ways of reading.

And you collected your works and then-- I just kind of imagined you going through and doing this process. So what I'm curious about is what was surprising or unexpected as you actually did the work of writing the book?

So as you noted, something like this is probably the work of many years of thinking and writing other pieces and talking with others, and engaging with the literature and with other people doing similar work.

But then there's the process of writing where you have to choose the works that you're going to include and you've got your methodology, which is this blue humanities kind of watery method of reading. And then you do the work of writing.

So what was-- so in that process, something that you learned or about the works or about yourself or the themes of the book that you-- Yeah, that was surprising or different?

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Yeah. Thank you for that. Actually, I love that idea of making a certain sense of text accessible, [? do you know. ?] And I think that's connected really well.

Gesturing to the idea of freedom in the books, but that access that you are making legible or helping someone else make legible conditions or suggestions in the text that might otherwise remain invisible.

And I suppose one of the most enjoyable moments-- maybe, well, surprising. But I went to look for years, I have loved going to the National Gallery of Ireland. And I'm one of those people-- I've always loved going to the archive and I love going to the miscellaneous boxes-- the things that they can't categorize. The stuff that nobody else really pay as much attention to.

There is a fabulous box in the National Gallery of Ireland in the Jack Yates collection. And Jack Yates was a painter and Illustrator, the brother of the poet William Butler Yates. And perhaps the more fun and entertaining character.

MIKE LIVERMORE: [CHUCKLE]

NICHOLAS ALLEN: But there is a-- the box is called miscellaneous and when you pull it out, it is from Brian Thomas, which is a posh shop in Dublin. Still on Grafton Street. And it was his wife's box for her silk stockings,

MIKE LIVERMORE: [CHUCKLE]

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Which were long gone, but which was full of rubber bands, corks, and bits of wood which he had used as the rigging and structure of his toy boat, which he used to seal on the little stream outside his house whenever he lived in Devon.

And I thought, oh my God, that's really not bad. That is almost like a deconstructed paragraph about the blue humanities there. I mean, it's sensational. It's-- you used the word naive earlier. It's innocent. It is of the moment, it is preserved and it's all just sitting there in its own little constellation.

And trying to reassemble the thoughts and interests and enthusiasms that would lead someone like an internationally famous Illustrator and painter to have that in their wife's silk stocking box seemed to me--

If I could do that, I would be creating a kind of architecture for people to understand the past world in a way that perhaps they have not appreciated.

And then Jack Keats had collected these scrapbooks, which were-- one was a Greek language dictionary of huge big old books, such as the thing you might find in a charity shop now.

And over years, he would cut out things. He would make drawings. He would collect stamps. He used to go and buy what was then a very valuable commodity, but boxes of oranges which came with their own very delicate and beautifully drawn wrapping paper. And he would put all this together into these scrapbooks.

And they were there in the archive as jackets, as scrapbooks, and they didn't really make much relation to his paintings. So nobody really thought much about them. But every time I opened each page, I thought, my God, that's like another map of the world here.

This is like a sequence of atlases. Like how did you come across a box of oranges and a stamp from South Africa and an advertisement for the Liverpool to New York steamer? Like where did that all come from? And you collected it and you stuck it here. And obviously, you didn't stick them all totally at random.

I mean, they kind of, again, refract upon each other. So you're trying to tell the story of those scrapbooks. Was a kind of biggest writing challenge. Actually, in a way that chapter of the book is a kind of experiment in writing to try and think, oh, well, if I could do that with these scrapbooks, how then do I write about poems?

How do I write about novels? How do I capture sensation in the text? And I think that would be one thing I haven't said so far, but it's very important to me. That sense of feeling of a literary-- I mean, you read books because they give you a sense of the world.

They do that through smell, touch feeling. Criticism doesn't always do that. And I really wanted readers to think, oh, not only that I'm feeling something, but feeling something as so often in choice makes me remember something, which in this current context makes me make a comparison. And that comparison makes me think something differently. And I think that's the kind of internal circuitry that was trying to build.

MIKE LIVERMORE: Well, it's a wonderful contribution. It's a great way of experiencing all these authors. And it's a wonderful entry in the new and growing field of the blue humanities and the environmental humanities.

So thanks so much for the work, Nicholas. And thanks so much for the conversation today. It's been a real pleasure to chat with you.

NICHOLAS ALLEN: Thank you, Mike. A total pleasure for me too. I appreciate it.

MIKE LIVERMORE: And listeners, if you enjoyed this episode. Let us know. You can give us like, a rating, subscribe to the podcast and follow us on social media. It'd be great to hear from you. Till next time.

[AUDIO LOGO]