

Read on to enjoy the transcript of a Q&A between author Gail Honeyman and Cathleen McCarron, the audio narrator of *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*

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**Cathleen McCarron:**

So you've listened to the book and now it's time to hear more about how it all came about. I'm Cathleen McCarron and I narrated the audio book that you've just been listening to. With me is the fabulous writer who created the book, Gail Honeyman. Hello Gail!

**Gail Honeyman:**

Hi Cathleen. So nice to meet you.

**Cathleen:**

And to meet you. So we've never met before.

**Gail:**

No, no. You've read my words and I've heard your voice but yeah, we haven't met in person, so hello (laughs)!

**Cathleen:**

Hello. It's a real pleasure. We've exchanged some messages. Haven't we?

**Gail:**

Yes, we have, we have.

**Cathleen:**

But I don't often get to meet the author of an audio book I've done and I think maybe it's the same the other way round and the author doesn't necessarily meet the voice of the book.

**Gail:**

Yes, so this is a great opportunity to have a chat.

**Cathleen:**

Absolutely. So what was the inspiration for Eleanor Oliphant? The novel itself and the character, because that character is so unusual and distinctive?

**Gail:**

Well I guess the two are interlinked really. The inspiration for the novel came a few years ago when I read a newspaper article about loneliness and usually when you did hear about the topic it was in the context of older people and this article really struck me because it was about a younger person – a young woman who was interviewed. She was in her twenties, and she lived in a city and she had a job and so on but she said she'd often leave work on Friday night and she wouldn't speak to another human being until she went back on Monday morning. I was really struck by that because it was a young person describing that experience and it was so at odds with the usual depiction of what a young person's life is like, living in a big city in your twenties, that it's just parties all the time and that kind of thing. I'm sure for some people it is, but also for lots of people it isn't and that got me thinking how could someone find themselves living that kind of life. Not through their own choice and through no fault of their own. When I thought about it, actually it wasn't difficult at all to imagine all kinds of ways in which someone could find themselves in that set of circumstances and very slowly from there the story and the character of Eleanor evolved.

**Cathleen:**

And was it in Glasgow that you wrote it? That's your home town isn't it?

**Gail:**

Yes, that's right. Yeah.

**Cathleen:**

And that feels like it's such a presence in the book as well. The setting.

**Gail:**

I didn't really overthink that. I think I just started writing it in Glasgow, mainly for practical terms as well, because it's a city that I know well so that minimised research time, which is always good. (Laughs). If I'd wanted to set it in 18th century Peking or something, that could have lengthened the writing process somewhat. But also because of the themes that are in the book ... of kindness and warmth and the importance of human connection and I've always found Glasgow to be a city that's absolutely full of that. It's not necessarily always portrayed that way but my experience of it is that it is that kind of place so it was actually really enjoyable to show that side of the city. Yeah.

**Cathleen:**

I think that one of the most enjoyable things about narrating the book was the scenes with characters you only meet once but they're so memorable and so funny. People like the bikini wax lady ... that's Kayla isn't it?

**Gail:**

Yes, that's right.

**Cathleen:**

When she goes for her first ever bikini wax. (Laughs). And even the man when she goes to the computer shop who's so completely clueless or the doctor who is really repressed. I mean they are so funny and so individual. Are you able to say a little about that? Are they ... you know ... the inspiration for those, are they based on real life experiences or stories from friends? That kind of thing?

**Gail:**

Yeah. I'm glad you found them funny. (Laughs). I think that was part of just creating the character of Eleanor, I was thinking 'what would Eleanor do in any particular set of circumstances'? Usually everyday things ... going to a beauty salon or having her hair cut or just going to see the GP. They are very everyday things for lots of people but it was so much fun to try and see the world through her eyes. From someone who's never seen that before, experienced it before and has got such a particular and quite unusual take on everyday circumstances. So it was just so much fun to write those scenes so I'm glad to hear that you enjoyed reading them as well. (Laughs).

**Cathleen:**

Yeah, they were great fun and as I say, I think the supporting characters were so distinctive and vivid. They were really fun to voice and to find voices for. It never felt like I was having to reach to make people come alive. They were right there in the text.

**Gail:**

I think Eleanor ... part of Eleanor's characterisation is that she is very engaged with the world, so even someone that she comes across in a brief encounter in an everyday situation ... she'll be very engaged in the whole situation and that can be quite disconcerting for some of the people she interacts with I think. But hopefully that is funny.

**Cathleen:**

We've been talking about the funny side of the book but it's obviously extremely moving as well, especially as we get deeper and deeper in and you know there were times reading it when I was giggling and equally got really moved at points as well. I mean, does it affect you like that when you're writing it?

**Gail:**

Yeah, it does. The distressing scenes in the book were very distressing to write. They were very hard to write, in the same way that I made myself laugh at the scenes that I thought were funny, and I hope people did as well, I also found it very upsetting to write the darker sections of the book too. But I think that ... I don't know if it's the same for every writer but I think that part of the process is feeling all of the emotions that your characters feel as well.

**Cathleen:**

I've heard that you started writing after a milestone birthday which shall remain nameless but (laughs) what kind of spurred you to start writing then?

**Gail:**

It's fair to say the milestone birthday wasn't my twenty-first! (Laughs). It was that clichéd thing of a fortieth birthday really focussing your mind towards the things that you always wanted to do and haven't done yet and ... I'd always wanted to write and I'd always hoped that I would try and write a book but I kept putting it off. I guess I just kept thinking there's loads of time and I'll get round to it. There'll be some mythical point in my life when I've got nothing else to do and nothing else to worry about and of course that time never comes for anybody. So ... it was that really, it was just that impetus of the fortieth birthday making me think, well there's never going to be a perfect time so if you want to try and do this, you'd better try and do it.

**Cathleen:**

So now that the book is here and it's finished and it's published and it's been an absolute sensation. It's won awards, it's been on the bestseller lists, amazing reviews, amazing feedback from readers ... how do you process that? (Laughter). What's that been like?

**Gail:**

I don't know. It still doesn't seem real when you say that. I'm still ... I didn't expect any of this at all, so I'm still ... I guess I'm still processing it is the answer to that question. I don't know if it will ever sink in really.

**Cathleen:**

Have there been any really, kind of, surreal moments? Have you kind of been on a plane and seen someone reading your book? (Gail laughs). Or something like that?

**Gail:**

I've never seen anyone reading it out in the wild yet actually, so I think that will be quite an amazing moment when I see someone on the bus or on the tube reading it ... And will I be able to restrain myself from going up and tapping them on the shoulder (laughs) and saying 'I wrote that!' But I couldn't pick one surreal ... I mean, every moment has been surreal because I didn't expect any of this to happen, so it's been ... quite a journey.

**Cathleen:**

Yeah. And I've heard that Reese Witherspoon's bought the rights to make the book into a film. So how do you feel about that?

**Gail:**

I'm so excited to see what happens with it and ... my understanding is these things can take a long time to come to fruition because there are so many pieces you have to put in play to make a film happen. But it's very early days in that whole process but I'm so excited to see what happens with it and what the end result looks like. It should be just fascinating.

**Cathleen:**

Yeah. Absolutely. Can you visualise what actors you might want as Eleanor or Raymond ...

**Gail:**

Do you know what, I'd be a terrible casting director. I know everything about the characters but it's not a visual thing, so it's not that I can picture a particular actor and think he or she would be great in that role or that role. I don't see it that way at all, and also I'm in awe of actors and their skill to inhabit a character. So a character on paper, with the right casting, the actor who plays that character then becomes that character in a way you hadn't necessarily thought about as the person who created it, if that makes sense.

**Cathleen:**

Yeah.

**Gail:**

That's part of the skill of an actor, I think is to inhabit that character and bring it to life in a different way, so I'm really excited to see how that goes.

**Cathleen:**

And the final question is the one that everybody is dying to know. What's next?

**Gail:**

Um. I'm working on a new book just now. It's really different. I loved writing Eleanor Oliphant and the other characters in the book but I'm really enjoying working on something new now. Because I'm right in the middle of it I probably won't say too much about it, but it's got a female narrator and a male narrator who are related and it's between two time periods. The 1940s and the present day.

**Cathleen:**

I can't wait. I think there's a lot of people out there who won't be able to wait for that.

**Gail:**

(Laughs). I'm going as fast as I can! (Laughter).

**Cathleen:**

Well, congratulations and thank you so much for the story that you've given everybody.

**Gail:**

Thank you for narrating it so wonderfully. It's been fabulous to hear it and it's been lovely to talk to you.

**Cathleen:**

And to you. Thank you very much.