

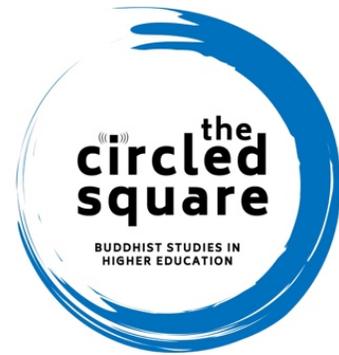
Episode 1: Vanessa Sasson, Inhabiting the Stories

File Length: 01:01:31

SPEAKERS

VS - Vanessa Sasson

SR - Sarah Richardson



FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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Vanessa Sasson: I feel like at the end of the day it's really the question is why and if you answer the why everything else is possible.

music

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Sarah Richardson: Welcome to this episode of The Circled Square the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhism in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson from the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. In this episode we sat down with Vanessa Sasson. Vanessa is a professor of religious studies in the Liberal and creative arts and humanities department at Marianopolis college Québec. Now when we spoke with Vanessa this was our very first podcast recording we ever did. So it was SO much fun. We were totally new to the game. It was snowing outside and actually the whole event was really exciting. Vanessa had also just come off of a book tour for her first novel. She's written academic books before, but this is a new kind of project she'd just written Yaśodharā, a novel about the Buddha's wife. So we ended up speaking quite a lot about how your perspective changes when you inhabit a different position in the text or on the text. So enjoy this episode with Vanessa "Inhabiting the Stories: Buddhism from the Inside."

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Sarah Richardson: Welcome.

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Sarah Richardson: So we're here speaking with Vanessa Sasson today. Vanessa is a Professor of Religious Studies and the Liberal and creative arts and humanities department at Marianopolis College in Quebec in Montreal. And she is also a research fellow for the International Institute for Studies in race reconciliation and social justice at the University of Free State in South Africa as well as adjunct professor at the Faculty of religious studies at McGill University my alma mater in Montreal. **00:01:49:17** Yeah, did my undergrad there. As a scholar her focus is on Buddhist Studies with a particular emphasis on hagiography, gender, and childhoods. And we're very excited to have Vanessa here with us today as our inaugural guest on our podcast so

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Vanessa Sasson: Thank you so much.

00:02:07:05

Sarah Richardson: Thank you so much for joining us Vanessa.

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Vanessa Sasson: I'm very glad to be here.

00:02:09:14

Sarah Richardson: And welcome to Toronto. So we, this is, as you know, a podcast that we're starting about teaching Buddhism or teaching about Buddhism in higher education.

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Sarah Richardson: And the reason we wanted to start this podcast was we're, we're so often talking almost exclusively about our research but many of us teach too, and teach in private and I mean it's not private in some ways it's very public. But in another sense, we don't get to often talk with colleagues about it. So the goal of this is to talk with our colleagues about the interesting mediations and choices and negotiations that we're making in our teaching. So that is what I hope to speak with you about today. So yeah, can you tell us a little bit about where you teach and who your students are?

00:02:57:16

Vanessa Sasson: I teach in different places but my main, my tenured position is at Marianopolis. It's a special system in Quebec that we don't have elsewhere in Canada. It's a two-year program pre-University so students do five years of high school, they finish at grade eleven, and then do two years of college and then do three years of university. So the amount of time they do their education is the same as Ontario, but it's parceled out differently.

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Sarah Richardson: So what kind of level or background do your students come in with especially as it relates to Buddhist Studies?

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Vanessa Sasson: Probably not that different from anywhere else, Marianopolis is a really, it's an excellent school. Very driven students, very ambitious, very bright kids. But they have the same romantic idealism, that just about everyone else seems to have in the west, of this expectation that everything about Buddhism is lovely and sweet. That Buddhists never go to war. That you know everything about Buddhism makes sense, that it's not even really a religion it's a philosophy. Which apparently is better, because religion is by definition negative. And so this is what makes Buddhism higher, so I come across this all the time. I come across it in university settings and college settings and public talks, it's this expectation that Buddhism somehow doesn't fit all the problematic criteria that all the other religions do. And that's why it's better. And so I feel like I spend most of my time trying to undo that, which then makes me feel really

bad. But I feel like to get to a point where we can have a critical discussion we have to kind of deal with that romantic idealism.

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Sarah Richardson: But how do you do that? How do you start to disabuse people if you...?

00:04:43:06

Vanessa Sasson: I disappoint them. There's some standard examples you can always use to just really get the point across, some awful realities. Scandals, sex scandals of monks all over the place, incidents of violence like in Sri Lanka and Japan. And so there's some easy things that you can do, it always stuns the students. But usually, I always start my classes with a discussion about knowing what your assumptions are before you start. That if we're really going to learn anything whether it's about Buddhism or anything else, you first have to know what you already think. Because if your mind is full to the brim there's no space for me to offer an alternative. So I tell them I don't need to know what your assumptions are, those are private. We all have them. We also have bigotries and prejudices and sexism we all have them. We don't need to say them out loud. I don't think that helps. **00:05:37:00** But we should know what they are and kind of almost imagine your mind as a platter and put all your thoughts kind of down on the table and say these are some of the things I expect from this topic. **00:05:48:14** And if you could start seeing them then we can start looking at, well are they really true? What can we, are there alternative arguments? And so I do a lot of discussion about looking at what your pre-established assumptions are. No education will ever happen if your mind is already full. Because otherwise I can do an entire semester and they will just find a way to reorient themselves and go back to their original confirmation. So every example I would give would just be like well that's an exception, that isn't real Buddhism, real Buddhism isn't like that.

00:06:19:26 So it doesn't give you much space to really treat the tradition in a complex manner. So I think that's really important.

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And do you do that through writing, do you ask them to write about their assumptions?

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Vanessa Sasson: No, it's through discussion.

00:06:32:00

Sarah Richardson: OK.

00:06:32:17

Vanessa Sasson: I don't because it's not something that they need to share I think it's very private. And sometimes you don't even know what you expect until something else is presented but just kind of have that conversation going a lot. And then I don't have to constantly be in a position of giving them every bad example because I don't think that's nice for the tradition either. The tradition isn't just a bunch of disappointments. It's not a romantic

ideal. It's a complex human phenomenon and we should have some kind of ability to deal with that.

00:07:01:10

Sarah Richardson: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. That point you made about so many students seeing Buddhism first now as a philosophy and not a religion, I hear that all the time. So how do you discuss that with them in a productive way? Because I find that's a really tough one to encounter.

00:07:17:27

Vanessa Sasson: Well I think the easiest way to go about it is to figure out, well, what is our definition of religion. And if we can establish that it's pretty easy from there. And also, why do we expect it to be a philosophy? What do we get out of seeing it as a philosophy? So there's a bunch of different conversations we can have that will help us unpack it. So on the one hand a religion, the word religion in English is also pretty evasive so it doesn't really help us. We don't have a clear-cut definition. It means to yoke or to bind. Right. So it could be binding anything.

00:07:49:13 So the word in English is evasive. What we can do is talk about criteria that we expect to see that would belong to a religion. And I think most people have Abrahamic criteria. So the criteria is that there is a creator god. That seems to be everybody's go to point. But if that's the only thing that makes a religion a religion, then you've just eliminated almost everybody except for the Abrahamics. So when they start to see that, then there is space to say well OK. So what else makes a religion a religion. **00:08:20:11** Is it having a place of worship? Having clergy? Having a religious calendar? Having certain rituals of initiation? Like we can start creating a baseline of things we tend to expect to be in a religion. God, or gods, isn't part of it but it's part of like a richer discussion of, expectations. Philosophies don't have those. Philosophies don't have rituals of initiation, they might, but you don't expect it. They don't have religious calendars. They don't have clergy. They don't have places of worship. They might create a place of worship but then the philosophy starts to become a religion. It's not... so once we've established some criteria of what a religion tends to include then we can look at well does Buddhism include these and when they start to realize it has a religious calendar, it has clergy, it has rituals of initiation, it has funerary rituals, all of these things we can say well then maybe it's not a philosophy. And when you go to a Buddhist country it's not just adults sitting in meditation thinking their way towards awakening. **00:09:25:06** It's this rich tapestry of experiences and you see it all the time. So that imagination starts to develop. But that's disappointing to a lot of them. They really want it to be a philosophy. So then the question is, why do we want that? And I think, I've thought about this a lot over the years, and I think "religion" is somehow primitive. "Philosophy" is higher. **00:09:55:24** We prize the mental, right(?), and sophisticated doctrine. Religion is for children, it's, it's like fairy tales it's not real. And also, I think for a lot of Westerners who are, disappointed with Abrahamic traditions, to exchange one religion for another, is not a great move, because you're going from one thing that will prove itself to be corrupt and institutionalized to another. But if you go from religion to a philosophy then you've lifted yourself in the ranks. **00:10:28:18** And so I think there's a lot of those personal needs that are happening that make it that we want it to be a philosophy. And so once you can start identifying some of those trends it's easier to have the conversation you

realize “Oh maybe that is what I wanted from it. Or I just want it to be different, right? Abrahamic religions have disappointed me. The Catholic Church has disappointed me. Whatever religion you're a part of has upset me for x, y and z reason. But Buddhism is going to be different.” And that's also our kind of our optimism as a human species we want something out there to be good. **00:10:59:09** We don't want to know that it's made a mess and we get so upset when religions made a mess. We're like, it's not allowed. And if that's how we operate we're going to be disappointed all the time. So you have to understand why we want what we want.

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah. So I want us to go to ask you to go back a little bit how did what was your formation in this field? Like how did, how did you come to the study of Buddhism and why? Why or how?

00:11:28:24

Vanessa Sasson: Well I was always interested in religion and I was also always disappointed that's for sure. I always had that kind of personal quest inside of me that I needed to understand. I needed to know my family is Jewish from the Middle East. And I remember being very disappointed and feeling like it wasn't really living up to its ideals. And when I was in my 20s, I was a terrible student and skipped all my classes, because I was bored, and finally I decided I was going to go get a business job in Japan. **00:12:02:18** And so I was very good at business and studied Japanese and I was going to move to Japan and I had a job waiting for me and I made a stop in Nepal and I wanted to see the mountains before I sold my soul to the big industry. And I had a suitcase full of suits and stockings because I was told everybody wears stockings in Japan back then, so I had all these stockings in my suitcase, and I stopped in Nepal, and I didn't get back on the plane. Really.

00:12:28:07

Sarah Richardson: Wow.

00:12:29:04

Vanessa Sasson: And so I left my suitcase in the basement of Kathmandu Guesthouse and I just hung out in Nepal for a year until they kicked me out and I fell in love with Buddhism, and I felt like I was, I had all the romantic idealism that I accused my students of, and just floated around Nepal and northern India. And then when I came home, I said I need to know what I just saw. And so I started studying. I'm still studying.

00:12:52:26

Sarah Richardson: That was a wonderful story. That's a great story.

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Vanessa Sasson: I had to go get my suitcase before I left Nepal.

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Sarah Richardson: What happened to the stockings?

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Vanessa Sasson: Oh, I threw them all out. GROSS And I've never really worn stockings since I don't wear them, it's like anathema, I can't do it.

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Sarah Richardson: So this is Kathmandu in the 90s?

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Vanessa Sasson: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

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Sarah Richardson: A different world from even now probably and so...

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Vanessa Sasson: Oh, it is so different now. Yeah, it's changed a lot.

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Sarah Richardson: Well amazing yeah. I was, I was selfishly asking because I think I similarly also started with a lot of the same illusions that I now try to...

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Vanessa Sasson: We're like how could you think such things? Even though I built my life on them.

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Sarah Richardson: ...My sweet 18-year-old students from believing.

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Sarah Richardson: But yeah. So I was wondering in your classes or in your teaching now. So you've told us you often use discussion to get people kind of more aware of the landscape of their prior beliefs and assumptions. What other do you do activities or anything in the classroom to try to kind of get students physical or moving or drawing or any other kind of active learning strategies that you found effective?

00:14:06:16

Vanessa Sasson: It's hard. I think I'm a very instinctive teacher even though I know I think about teaching a lot. There's a part of me that remains very instinctual about it. And so sometimes I find I struggle with identifying what exactly is happening. So I suspect if somebody came into my classroom, they would probably see all that kind of stuff that you're describing, but I don't realize I'm doing it, most of the time. **00:14:29:12** I just need my students engaged and my students know this that and I tell them if you're bored, I'm bored. Everybody's like I can't, and I can't have my academic career based on hours of boredom every week. So this has got to be

fun for all of us. Or I'm just going to turn into a robot. So it's is a much of an imperative for my life as it is for them in the classroom that we have to do this together. And so I need them to participate. I need them to be with me on this. It's got to be our journey together, and they, I think they just feel that, and I'm and I'm genuinely interested in hearing what they have to say. **00:15:05:18** And I think that more than anything whatever activity that you may create or not, there's a lot of emphasis today on pedagogical tools and strategies. there's a lot of effort on how to teach that is coming out, which is great. I don't think we did that 30 years ago, but I feel like at the end of the day it's really the question is why. And if you answer the why everything else is possible. I need to know why I'm teaching. They need to know why they're taking the course. And if we can answer that question, they're in. I don't even have to really convince them. **00:15:39:11** I don't need to. I mean I'm probably doing stuff with them in the classroom, but I don't have to think about it too much because we're in. So we're trying to do it as like when you do your graduate school you know your why you really want to learn this. When you're an undergraduate it's not always obvious. So I feel like we need to put more emphasis and time into answering the question why with them. And I do it with them a lot. So at every assignment I'll say this is why I want you to do the assignment this way. And I have to have reasons and I tell them if my reasons don't sound good enough you should challenge me. **00:16:13:05** There has to, I have to be able to answer the question why at every stage. Right? Why are we studying this? Why are we reading this? Why are you writing this? And if they know it and they know it's important, it's like we've all signed the contract. I find that helps more than every other kind of pedagogical trick.

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Sarah Richardson: Have you had students challenge you with the way...

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Vanessa Sasson: They'll ask. I mean I usually they've realized that I usually have an answer. And if I don't then I'll give it up. But usually it's, but I've thought about it a lot. To me this is really important right is that we have to all know why we're doing this. There has to be a reason for them to take an "Intro to Buddhism" course because if they're just taking it to fill their schedule that's the worst reason to get an education, right? **00:16:55:09** If you're writing an assignment just because your teacher wants you to, nothing will kill you faster! It's like intellectual death. But if they know that there is a reason and they're aiming for something and I'm trying to lead them somewhere they'll get on board a lot more easily.

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah. So what is your what is your why? What do you think you can do in the teaching of Buddhist studies that is of value to students who aren't maybe going on in this or anything related, but what is... what is the why?

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Vanessa Sasson: And that's the best question right. On the most basic level for the students who are just taking it because it fits their schedule or they're in a different program or whatever it is. I think that the more you learn about the world, the more engaged a global citizen you

become. And I give them examples of places in which things have gone really wrong. So one of the examples that I give, and I kind of feel bad doing this here, but, do you know about the true religion jeans?

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Sarah Richardson: No.

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Vanessa Sasson: I show them pictures.

00:18:02:21

Sarah Richardson: It's a brand?

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Vanessa Sasson: It's a brand.

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Sarah Richardson: OK. Yes.

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Vanessa Sasson: So the true religion jeans came out a couple of years ago and they have probably been around longer, I don't know. I saw students wearing them and I was shocked. On the back pocket is a picture of the laughing Buddha, Budai, right, playing a banjo. And this is their insignia. Like this is their brand image, and it's on the back pocket! So you sit on it. Some of the jeans actually had...Like a tapestry, it's not a tapestry but they've sewn into the back pocket...

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Sarah Richardson: Embroidered.

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Vanessa Sasson: Embroidered, thank you. Images of *Yab-Yums* that they would put on the back pocket that you then sit on, because they thought they were exotic cool images. This is devastating. So you're sitting on images that are either sacred, or supposed to be sacred, or pointing to something that is sacred, but isn't, it's not, consecrated, the laughing Buddha with a banjo is just ridiculous and mean, making a mockery of a tradition. And then you sit on it, and if nothing else you want to learn about this so that whatever field you go into you don't inadvertently. Cause I'm sure the people who made these jeans are not going out to hate Buddhists and do something terrible. It's just because they don't know. And to me that's heartbreaking, that with all the access to information that we have, that a really successful brand can be out there in the world doing something so harmful in what I'm assuming is not intended. And so whatever you go into, you want to participate in the world where you don't have bigotry flying out of your mouth accidentally. And we all do it. We all accidentally say something bigoted or prejudiced, and then we, but then an educated person will pull it back

and go wait a minute, **00:19:44:26** I think that was racist, or I think that was sexist. I have to think about what I just said. And you learn from it and you don't repeat it. And it's not that we don't ever have those in our minds it's that we have a different relationship to it. And what I think you have to learn whether you're taking an anthropology course or a Buddhism course, or anything is that you want to be interested in the world, you want to participate in it in a way that is helpful and constructive and not hurt people. And we inadvertently hurt people all the time because we're just not taking them seriously, we're not paying attention, we're not honoring them. And so on the most basic level you want to learn about Buddhism because it's a tradition that is practiced all over the world that has something between 500 million and a billion adherents depending who counts, and who is included in the counting, and in the process you might actually become interested. And you might actually like what you're learning. **00:20:38:04** But even if you don't like it, at least you're not out in the world doing things that are really harmful. Right. So that you go into business or you go into marketing you go into policymaking. You have a sense that Buddhists are people and some things are important to them, and you develop a curiosity the more you learn. I know that the more I study; my curiosity is not waning. I have read way more books than I did 20 years ago. I'm not done. So I have a feeling that learning is contagious, and I'd like them to be imbued with that. **00:21:10:23** I want them to get that curiosity going. On the basic level this is why I think they should learn.

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah. That's a great answer. Thank you. So in a kind of intro to Buddhism scenario or Buddhism 101 or whatever you call a kind of survey course. What, how do you do it? I mean one of the struggles we all have of course is Buddhism happened a long time ago and happens then in really different ways all over the world and is still going on now. So how, how do you how do you deal with the vastness of the topic?

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Vanessa Sasson: Well you first of all have to tell them it's really vast. And that they're just beginning a journey that if they were I mean one of the things I think is good to remind students is if you've taken an intro course into Buddhism or mechanics or anything else, you're not an expert by the time you've finished and to always have that humility that there's so many more things you have to learn. That we're just kind of scratching the surface and I'm introducing you to a really big world. And if you're excited go take the next course, right, and read another book. And if you're not, you've got some exposure and that's good. **00:22:21:19** But I don't think we can, or we should put that too much on ourselves with one course. So I find that more and more I like to be focused in my courses and use examples that give them a sense of the breadth. Without doing, you can't do everything. So the survey courses. **00:22:42:15** I had a teacher who told me a long time ago when I was a graduate student, he said that survey courses always go to junior faculty. And he thought it should be the other way around. He thought that the more like specialized courses should go to recent graduates because they're so in their topic. And that survey courses should be taught by the most senior faculty because then you're in a position to really be able to speak with the breadth. It's very difficult to do and to do well. So my, my trajectory has been to avoid the surveys even though I pretend it's a survey

course in my title. **00:23:19:22** I don't do them very much. I try to choose examples that give them a sense of it but not it's always going to be small and I'm okay with aiming for smaller.

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Sarah Richardson: Can you give us an example of like what's the kind of like certain topic that you've chosen within?

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Vanessa Sasson: Well one course that I couldn't get out of, is a world religions course that they always do. Those are really hard to teach. That's the ultimate survey course, it's impossible. So what I've done with that course is I've turned it into, I've used a specific example, and looked at it from every tradition, well not every tradition, a few traditions and perspectives. So I've focused it on death rituals. So the entire course is going from one religion to another talking about how communities deal with death, from one to the next. All they learn is that. And even then, I'm only scratching the surface, because then you start to realize how much there is to say. **00:24:16:12** But if they can see how the Jewish community interacts with death and how the Christian communities tend to react to death and Islamic communities what they prioritize and then Hinduism and Buddhism and you go, you do your survey but you're teaching one thing in that example, they see what the tradition prioritizes. They see they are going to focus more on the afterlife or on the mourning rituals, how they dispose of the dead. **00:24:39:03** So much of what's important to a community comes out in how they do that. So if I just teach that through that example, they've already learned a lot. They've learned that religions are different. They've learned that they have different interests. That's what's important, the afterlife focus of one tradition is not the focus of another. You start to realize what's so interesting is that students tend to have difficulty realizing that religions have different interests. We have this like as we always say this stock phrase, I think actually comes from Vivekananda, all religions are the same. I think he started that right. And... **00:25:18:25** I think there's a really great instinct in that and on some level I'm sure it's true but it's not the level that we operate on as academics. And what I think students have to engage with and that we have to engage them in is that religions are not all the same and that religions are not interested in all the same things. So there's some things they will all agree on. You've got to deal with your dead bodies, but I think everyone agrees on that. But how they do it and where they're going to put their energy is totally different from one community to the next. **00:25:52:17** And then you get a sense of really appreciating difference and not just putting it all under a blanket of say all religions. It's such an empty statement, it doesn't get us anywhere as scholars, right? As like humanists, it's good. But if we're going to think a little more strategically and have a bit more precision in our thinking which is what our goal is to teach then they have to see how they differ. **00:26:17:08** And we have to teach them to be able to engage with difference and not just say "I don't like that." So yeah.

00:26:24:11

Sarah Richardson: So you've just written this really wonderful book that is a work of fiction and imaginative creative work. So can you tell us a bit about your choice to do that. How did, how

did you come about to choose to after a long legacy of, of academic writing? How did you choose to start writing creative work that is based also in the...?

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Vanessa Sasson: Do you want the true answer?

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Sarah Richardson: Yeah that.

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Vanessa Sasson: I can like fluff it up but, it's probably just like a midlife crisis.

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Sarah Richardson: Those are the best.

00:26:59:18

Vanessa Sasson: It's just that, I've had so many. I'm not really sure if that's what it was, my first was when I was 11.

00:27:04:07

Sarah Richardson: Hey yeah. Lucky you. These sound like moments of awakening.

00:27:06:09

Vanessa Sasson: I keep having them. I don't know if they're awakening. Yeah, I think, I mean there's a whole there's just like your first difficult question. I think there's like a lot of ways I can answer that question. On the one hand it was there was a real question inside of me of, OK, so I've done all of this academic writing I've produced a lot of books I'm very happy with what I've been doing. I love every research project I've worked on. I feel very grateful for the privilege of scholarship. But is this all I'm good at? That's kind of the question I felt myself suddenly stumped by. **00:27:41:08** I just. Can I do anything else? Or is this, I guess there's a point at which when you're a scholar you realize there's like a pattern to this right. You do your research you know what you're looking for, make an argument and then it's like fill in the blanks and all of a sudden your academic writing looks pretty similar from one to the next because you're just filling in the blanks and then you put in your footnotes, and you do your bibliography and there's like a, it's a set system. It's a very good system. It taught me everything that I know now. So it's not no disparagement of that but, at one point it became very formulaic. And so... the question was "Is there any anything else I can do or is this it? And I'm just going to do this for the rest of my life till I die?" Which as an academic is a reasonable question to ask yourself. It's not true in other fields but in academia you could be doing the same thing for 40 years. And that's nice. But I needed to kind of spread my wings a little bit and find out if I had anything else in me. So that's one answer.

00:28:45:06

Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And did you... I mean this work has been really exciting to read for me. Did you want it to be an intervention in...? I mean I think in reading this I, I was facing it for the first time a realization of how much I was missing, how, how long I've been kind of naturalized into a system where I wasn't actually attendant to the lack of female voice for the most part in the texts I'm looking at or whatever. But so reading this for me was really exciting to have a space to imagine that again. So were you, how, how did you choose then to, yeah to intervene in that way and create something?

00:29:29:25

Vanessa Sasson: I don't know. I just know I needed to do it. So there was this, there was a need inside of me to find out what else I could do that was for sure. But it was clear to me that if there was anything else I would do I would write her. I don't know why but that was I've been focusing on the Buddha's hagiography for most of my academic life and she's there and I've ignored her and focused on him the way all of us have. And it just dawned on me one day of just she was there. I want to know what her story was, and I didn't want to study it as an, I mean I studied it academically, but I didn't want to write it academically. **00:30:11:06** I wanted, I wanted to play. I wanted to become her. I wanted to be mad at him. Like I wanted to engage in the tradition something that I tell my students all the time that I hadn't really figured out even though I said it all the time was that Buddhism reinvents itself at every stage of its journey. It's a, it's a moving religion and everywhere it goes it takes. It's like a chameleon right it just moves to Sri Lanka and it becomes Sinhalese and then it moves to China and it becomes Chinese and goes to Japan and becomes Japanese. This is what Buddhism does it takes on the colors and the tastes and the flavors of every culture it moves to. **00:30:50:00** And now it's here. So I felt like if Buddhism does this all the time and now it's here then isn't that an invitation that I get to do this. I mean if people in China two thousand years ago or eighteen hundred years ago could engage with the tradition, they'd have to be like awakened Saints they would just engage with the tradition and reinvent it and carve out anew and paint it anew and describe it anew. Then isn't that the offer. There was a little mischievousness in me of, well, if that's how the tradition operates then why can't I do it? So it was very audacious. What happens if I participate in the tradition instead of stand outside it. **00:31:31:14** What will I see and what was so interesting is that I couldn't have done it without my academic training and now my academic thinking is different. So it changed something because I climbed into it whereas before I was always standing outside it. And when you climb into a text it becomes three dimensional. So I felt like I was seeing things all around me in ways that I'd never imagined before. I saw the Buddha, **00:32:03:20** I saw scenes that were missing in the texts that never have been written, that I never noticed were missing. Right there is all kinds of things that I realized about the tradition that I don't think I ever could have seen without writing it this way. So it became a really interesting intellectual exercise at the same time.

00:32:20:11

Sarah Richardson: Can you give us an example of the scene, a scene that came to you that you realized that you'd been missing your whole life but was there, but wasn't there.

00:32:27:18

Vanessa Sasson: Yes. The scene of the Buddha and Yaśodharā when he comes back. There are so many texts that describe him returning, so after he goes and he becomes the Buddha, he comes back. Some texts have him staying in a grove and the whole community comes to see him.

00:32:44:05

Vanessa Sasson: And in those versions she's there and she goes to the Grove with the whole community and she goes to see him. But in other texts he comes to the palace and everyone goes to the courtyard to honor his arrival. And everybody's at his feet and the women go and the servants go, everybody goes except for her. She refuses. And so she looks at him from a window which she will not come down and which is her audaciousness I think, she was like "oh if he wants to see me, he can come see me by himself." So there's to me that was a very strong. I don't think I realized how powerful you could interpret that scene as, at all. **00:33:22:19** She refuses. She's not subservient and she views herself as someone different. That she's not in the same level as everyone else. Which I don't think I would've appreciated without climbing into her. So she goes back to her room and he goes to see her which is a fascinating moment right is that he's still acting like her husband as though he can still go see her, and so I'm thinking they're not they're still kind of bound in a different way because he goes to see her he doesn't go to see anyone else separately but just her. **00:33:54:03** So she has a special place. But then the scene that is described in the Mahāvastu, the MSV and a few other places, she falls at his feet or she tries to seduce him, or she brings him cakes which is another way of saying the seducing thing is a really strong thing, and that's kind of it. And there's no discussion. And then he takes his son and walks away. So I figure there is a missing scene here. He must have told her he's taking his son to the forest. **00:34:28:05** When did that conversation happen? Or did he just do it without consulting her? I don't think so. He couldn't have just taken his son without telling her. So then, that moment is missing. And I haven't seen it anywhere except for the seduction scenes but they don't. They're like two, three lines, they're not developed scenes. So how did he tell her? That fascinated me. And how, what did she say? And how did they respond? And what did it feel like? And why didn't they imagine that scene? That was, that's what really troubles me. **00:35:02:14** So were the authors of the tradition uncomfortable and didn't want to have this scene in there. Like how. What. Where's that scene?

00:35:10:24

Sarah Richardson: Why do you think other writers early in the tradition wouldn't have had had narrative space for that scene or scenes like it?

00:35:19:11

Vanessa Sasson: I mean maybe they did, and they just didn't think of doing it. But one of the thoughts that I've had going through this literature is her sadness that is described in the Buddhacarita and so many texts medieval Sinhalese texts and Newari texts they're everywhere. **00:35:37:29** She has so much pain and she's so sad when he leaves. And the literature is so poetic in its descriptions of her sadness and her loss. To me this means and this is something that I think we haven't, I haven't read about this yet but we haven't really addressed that we've

really kind of, with the rise of feminist discourse and kind of rereading traditions through women's eyes, which we really needed to do, we realize all the patriarchal elements and all the ways in which women have been lost to the tradition. But what I started feeling was, yes this is still true, but these male authors were also very sensitive to her pain because of how they describe it. **00:36:23:11** And that's something that I haven't really heard anyone discuss yet. Is this, it's quite amazing that these male authors from 2000 years ago or fifteen hundred years ago were able to write such poetic beautiful, **00:36:39:29** almost songs of anguish in her name means they understood her pain as the woman who was left behind. So I don't know that this is like a patriarchal absence. So maybe the pain was too difficult to imagine now telling her. How do you keep the Buddha a good guy and have him say "now I'm taking my son, after everything I've done to you." So maybe it was too hard to raise, or, I don't know. But I have questions that I didn't have before as a result of writing this book.

00:37:07:17

Sarah Richardson: Yeah.

00:37:08:04

Vanessa Sasson: I'm curious about Asvaghosha and I'm curious about these Sinhalese writers and what were they feeling when they imagined her loss. But they knew her loss. They're not just patriarchal, dominant jerks who didn't care about women they cared about her. So that's also a voice that I don't think I appreciated before.

00:37:31:11

Sarah Richardson: Yeah, and you start the book with that with that amazing scene retold of her or of her preparing her son and preparing to let go.

00:37:40:00

Vanessa Sasson: That's also a scene that's not in the tradition.

00:37:41:27

Sarah Richardson: But you do a beautiful job with it also of casting her not only as a victim right, she's also not only upset, she's finding incredible strength in that moment which I thought was really, I mean, what you do throughout the book then is also in spaces where we've often heard only about pain you've found other emotions too like incredible resilience.

00:38:09:14

Vanessa Sasson: She would've had to have it. She was his wife. And also what I think I came away with after writing this book was, she was with him for lifetimes. **00:38:23:13** If he is supposed to be the tradition's great being, he is the master of the universe. I mean he is the greatest. He's the Tathagata. He's like the supreme. The Cosmos explodes with enthusiasm when he's born, this is the one. **00:38:39:25** then she has to be great too. Because she's with him lifetime after lifetime after lifetime, she is beside him. So if she was irrelevant and just some background wife just there for the technicality of being married, then he could have had 5000 wives, or she would have been nobody. But she's the one who keeps returning. "Rahula-

Mata" always comes back. It's that particular person who goes lifetime, after lifetime and if she's chosen to return and to be with him at each step of this journey then she must have been great too. **00:39:13:16** So she can't just be some puddle of tears who has no personality. She had to be the great being's match. And how could it be another way?

00:39:24:05

Sarah Richardson: Can you kind of summarize the book for us for those for our listeners who haven't read it yet. So it's called *Yaśodharā: A Novel About the Buddha's Wife*. Was that always the title by the way or did you go?

00:39:36:06

Vanessa Sasson: There was no title.

00:39:37:02

Sarah Richardson: Oh yeah?

00:39:37:29

Vanessa Sasson: I had no title and so it was going off to press and he's like you have to have a title. So finally I just said it's going to be Yaśodharā and he said it's nobody's going to know what that is. So, he created the subtitle, I in my heart, that's not actually the title it's just Yaśodharā. And that's just there for explanation.

00:39:55:14

Sarah Richardson: And then what is your kind of narrative arc of the of the whole book if you had to summarize it?

00:40:01:28

Vanessa Sasson: It's her story it's her telling her life as it was being married to him. So instead of telling his life story it was telling hers. And obviously he has a big part to play. But it's from her perspective that's what she saw what she experienced as one who was left behind as the one who is also present for so much. And it was also like, I had to figure out how to make friends with the Buddha. **00:40:31:27** That was a big part of what this book was about. Was how do I know these stories and not be infuriated by him. I mean the worst father, the worst husband. He leaves when his son is born. He leaves her without so much as a goodbye. How do you study a tradition for 20-odd years and not be mad at him for that particular scene? So I needed to figure out how I could make friends with him in my imagination. And that's kind of what the book was about in the end.

00:41:01:06

Sarah Richardson: And did it work?

00:41:03:05

Vanessa Sasson: In the end it did. But the hardest scene for me to write that I rewrote about 20 times was the scene when he goes to Yaśodharā to take, to take Rāhula with him because to

have him say "now I'm taking our son" without him becoming a flaming jerk. In the first versions of it I wrote everyone who read them just said he seems like such a "edit the word". So I had to rewrite that a lot and that was like. By the time I got to that point of writing that scene I realized that was my struggle. **00:41:36:17** And when I finished writing that scene, I thought okay now, now I'm friends with him again. But you can't be mad at the tradition that you're studying for twenty years, so you have to make peace with it. So I had to figure it out.

00:41:50:17

Sarah Richardson: How did you find the color and the ways to imagine the world of fifth century B.C.E. India how did you like, did you have images that were inspiring you or how did how did you feel because the book is written with so much detail. Yeah, it's great right. It's also so great.

00:42:08:17

Vanessa Sasson: I did a trip to northern India and Bihar a couple of years ago and visited sites associated with the Buddha's his life like his birth, well birthplace I went to many years ago, but I went to Vaishali and I went to Mahabodhi, and Rajagriha to just kind of I thought I need to go see these places properly. **00:42:28:29** And I couldn't believe my naivete, I arrived in India. I've been there many times, but I hadn't been to these sites yet. And I thought, what I was thinking!? Like how would India twenty-five hundred years later have anything to do with what India looks like? It's like, would I go to Canada to a particular site and say, "oh if I see it then I will understand what it was like twenty-five hundred years ago." Like the overpopulation it was just I couldn't even imagine any of what I was looking at was really relevant to helping me imagine. **00:43:03:12** So that was kind of a funny trip in my head was realizing I can't imagine the world twenty-five hundred years ago. It's not accessible to me and we don't have much literature from twenty-five hundred years ago. So one of the things that I say in my introduction is that it's actually not based on India twenty-five hundred years ago because I can't imagine it. So it's based, the imagination comes from the poetry and the hagiographies that came later.

00:43:31:22

Vanessa Sasson: So, it's a story that's based....starts about two thousand years ago and goes till present day in terms of what I imagine which is how hagiographers before would write is that they would have the stories, nobody really had the history, we don't even know if the history is true. So it's not about any kind of historical reality, it's about the legends and the fables and the songs that were sung that tell these stories. I built my story on their stories. Just as they built their stories on other stories. I didn't build it on history because I have no access to it. But the poetry in the plays and all of the literature that we have from 2000 years ago onward there's so much sensuousness and beauty and the detail comes from there.

00:44:18:01

Sarah Richardson: What about the art. Did you look at any of the early, I mean Bharhut Stupa, the earliest things we have were like stone carvings

00:44:27:21

Vanessa Sasson: I know and everybody's almost naked in those so naked.

00:44:30:21

Sarah Richardson: Yeah. Yeah. That's yeah. So I get the feeling she's clad right.

00:44:34:05

Vanessa Sasson: She's definitely clad. So yeah some of that stuff. So the sensuousness from that art from the early period and until today is very evocative but I'm assuming that people two thousand years ago were dressed, and a lot of those early images reveal the body. But if you look very carefully there's usually very thin kind of translucent coverings. Which is so interesting is that a lot of those what seem to be naked women on those carvings at Sanchi and Bharhut and everywhere else, they're actually clothed but like, the shawl will have fallen to the side and the breasts are completely revealed or something. **00:45:15:25** So that's a really interesting phenomena as to why it's so sensual in those images. I had to kind of I can't quite have Yaśodharā naked. I think that would have been bad.

00:45:26:19

Sarah Richardson: A different book at least.

00:45:27:06

Vanessa Sasson: Yes. Not doing that book.

00:45:30:15

Sarah Richardson: you've talked about imagining Yaśodharā as really the subject here and in telling her story. But there were also a lot of other people that you invented, really created right in the space, like her mother, her incredible mother who's got all this really empowering wisdom to help, help her and develop her. So I was wondering who, who was it important for you or kind of the most pleasurable for you to create?

00:45:56:01

Vanessa Sasson: Yeah, the women I think the women are much stronger in this book than the men probably. I just imagined if she was the great beings match that she had a great mom because how else could it be. So she had to have a great mom. And then when she was a princess, she had to have a confidante. So she had to have a maid servant to talk to. So there were certain things that I had to take license with. There are references to Yaśodharā's mom in the literature but there's no story about her. Nothing. There's just kind of like a genealogical list of her names and her name is different in every text. So I had to take license in some areas to make the story full.

00:46:35:07

Sarah Richardson: Were there other people that were then a kind of struggle to.

00:46:39:09

Vanessa Sasson: Devadatta was hard to imagine because he's so vilified. And that doesn't make sense to me. So he's a he's like a caricature in the literature often. There are a few exceptions to this where he gets turned around like in the Lotus Sutra but generally, he's very vilified and he's not a three-dimensional character. So it was difficult to figure out how to engage with him. I couldn't imagine him being just like, there has to be a reason. So I do put in a reason at one point of, in this book he and Ananda are brothers it's not always the case in some texts they're brothers and some text Ananda is brothers with someone else. But **00:47:23:27** I had them as brothers and kind of opposite extremes of each other with like a dysfunctional family and I make a brief reference to it. So Ānanda is so devoted and almost like a little puppy dog too Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā. And Devadatta is super jealous and envious of them and that they have a very harsh father at the center of it. It was strange though because they don't really want to psychoanalyze them and kind of go into that kind of play of stuff. But I couldn't just leave it that he was like Ultimate Evil and Ānanda was ultimate good it's just too simplistic. **00:47:58:10** So that was tricky for me. So I just made a passing reference. If people notice it just so that I give some explanation and it humanizes both of them. But the two of them were difficult for me. They're too idealistic.

00:48:09:27

Sarah Richardson: Yeah, yeah. The texts are giving you very black and white very frameworks.

00:48:16:03

Vanessa Sasson: And Ānanda, as much like he's just like the simpleton who's so sweet and always there and never achieves awakening until like the last minute before the first council where he's like pushing it out of his brain so he can achieve that [and] attend the first council. He's like such a he's an odd character too so.

00:48:33:24

Sarah Richardson: So with this what would it what do you think is the potential role for the public academic right. I mean you've written this wonderful work and you talked also about the why of your teaching to teach students to be better global citizens. But it seems to me that this, that creative writing that's going to reach probably a much broader audience than some of our academic writing can or will, could have a lot of potential then also for creating other kinds of spaces. So what do you do you see yourself as, as doing that consciously or...?

00:49:13:14

Vanessa Sasson: I didn't do it consciously. I really did because I wanted to do it. Like it I've been getting this question a lot lately and I realized recently. I do have to be really clear that at the end of the day this was like my heart song like I really wrote this because I wanted to write it. Whatever complicated personal reasons but I really wanted to do this. I wanted to know the story in a different way. And I was really happy writing it. It wasn't for like some kind of political act or some kind of institutional rebellion or anything like that. It was. I was so happy writing this book. I have never been so happy writing than when I wrote this book. Like nothing. It was almost like a dreamy experience I would wake up in the morning and all I wanted to do was write. **00:50:00:04** It was exciting, and it was it was almost like a love affair. I had a love affair

with this book. And I've never had that experience before, and I don't know if I'll have it again. So, that's true and important. But I wonder now what's going to happen or what it can mean to others I don't know. But I didn't write it for it to mean anything to the institution. **00:50:28:00** But if it encourages people to be a bit more playful, I think that might be nice. One of the things that has been haunting me. A couple of years ago, right after Trump was elected, I was at the AAR, which is if you don't know what it is a monster conference the biggest monster conference in religious studies.

00:50:51:15

Sarah Richardson: AAR?

00:50:52:02

Vanessa Sasson: American Academy of Religion.

00:50:54:06

Sarah Richardson: Sorry. Thank you.

00:50:55:02

Vanessa Sasson: Yeah. And we, it's about 10,000 scholars from around the world that kind of flock to a city and take over the city for a couple days. And it's overwhelming and people are presenting and hobnobbing and meeting and interviewing is very big. And there's this exhibit hall and in the exhibit hall all the academic publishers come out and they have all their books of just the last two years that they've published in the field of religious studies walking through the exhibit hall is more of a friendly experience than it used to be. And I was walking through, everybody, it was in November right after Trump was elected, and everybody was on edge. And this editor came to see me, and he was completely panicked, and we started getting into this discussion and he was in a kind of state of hysteria **[00:51:50:18]** and he said, "You people are not doing your job!" And I went, "What?" And he says, "you're not doing your job!" I said "What am I not to understand. Who's my people and what are what you're saying?" And he said "the ivory tower is not doing its job. Because you guys are still just talking to each other and it's not trickling down and people are not educated about religion and people are not educated about almost anything. And look what happened." And I felt like he was putting Trump's election on my shoulders and just like you did this, you didn't do your job. **00:52:27:01** It was an odd conversation. But I have been thinking about it ever since. Of what's our job? What is it that what is on our shoulders actually? And is he right? There a moral imperative to the privilege of having all this education? **00:52:46:24** I didn't write this book, as like an answer to Trump, no connection to that at all. I wrote because I wanted to write it. But it has made me wonder. Should we be doing more of this? Every once in a while, this conversation arises in the academy and we float around, and we drop it. But maybe we need to be taking it more seriously. That we get this privilege we didn't earn this, we earn it, but we don't, and what's our responsibility with that. How much are we supposed to be doing if we get this privilege to spend our time thinking we have to share our thinking. **00:53:26:29** We have to...the problem I think with academe is it breeds such insecurity. That we get to a point where we don't believe we know anything and we can't speak about anything except for the one thing that we spent the last six years

obsessively researching on the one hand that's wonderful because it provides us with a sense of precision and sense of responsibility that we have to know what we're talking about before we talk. And that's very good. But we are probably way more educated than we realize, and we know a lot more than we realize, and maybe there's a real moral imperative that we need to find more ways to communicate.

00:54:12:02

Sarah Richardson: So you told us that your thinking has really developed since writing the book and your relationship to history. How has your teaching developed since writing the book and do you think about using creative writing or anything in classes or...?

00:54:27:15

Vanessa Sasson: Yeah, but more because I want them to climb in. So one of the things that I've started to realize is that we are very good at teaching our students how to stand outside or so we think pretend to stand outside. We never really do, and look at something from the outside was very dominant position to be in. That we also maybe want to take time to show students how to climb in and try to take on an idea and take it seriously instead of just standing over it.

00:55:02:07

Vanessa Sasson: There's obviously power dynamics there. There's a lot of value to standing outside a tradition trying to understand it but that there is value to climbing in without betraying your own morality and sense of self, without betraying what is appropriate to a tradition and its context. But, I think, it gives us a bit more intellectual flexibility. I feel like when I was writing that book the tradition became three dimensional which it wasn't before, and I didn't know it wasn't until I did that. **00:55:33:18** I had this thought recently that when the Bodhisattva was bejeweled wearing his crown and like is all decked up as the prince or even afterwards when like jewels like manifest on him as the Buddha, I always just see the jewels. Right. So I can describe. There are jewels on the Buddha's body. But when I was writing this book, I realized oh, but they were probably shiny and then I thought, so when he moved light reflected, and then wait a minute, when he moved then the jewels moved, and they probably jingled and then they swayed. And then you can hear the Buddha walking because the jewels were moving and clanging against each other. Like there's just there is a beauty and a sensuousness to that presence that I had no capacity to appreciate until I was like walking beside him and I thought his jewels are chiming. **00:56:28:12** I don't know why I find that so exciting, but I find that really exciting. I can't get over that, that detail of his jewels chiming. And that I could hear him coming around the corner.

00:56:39:15

Sarah Richardson: This rich texture of the world and then I mean I feel like it connects for me to how you've also then imagined all these people because for me and reading the book it's like oh no but of course they were always there.

00:56:51:09 - 00:56:51:24

Vanessa Sasson: Right!

00:56:51:26

Sarah Richardson: They had to be there. I mean his, his world was a landscape of a lot of other people. So just because we haven't told their stories before or heard their stories specifically doesn't it mean that they're there they were there.

Vanessa Sasson: All these things that were absent in our imagination become present when you try to imagine them. It's really fun.

00:57:08:11

Sarah Richardson: Yeah, yeah it's great. It's really exciting.

00:57:11:20

Vanessa Sasson: Well few people have been using it in their classes and people have told me that it, like you don't know anything about Buddhism and then you read this book and you suddenly understand things that were just theoretical before. So that's nice. I didn't expect that either. So I'm very surprised. I was very I was nervous; I was quite nervous.

00:57:30:29

Sarah Richardson: Well I actually realized I didn't ask how when did it start and end like further was it a fast writing process or has this been years and years project for you?

00:57:38:27

Vanessa Sasson: It took me about three years to write. But I rewrote it so many times because I don't know what I was doing. I didn't I didn't know how to write a novel. So I had a lot of steps to learn. I also something that was really funny was I told my mom at one point I was going to write a novel. And she said, "oh like with dialogue?" And I went ahhh! Dialogue! I went home, and I deleted everything I wrote, and I started again because I didn't put any dialogue because when do we do dialogue? Have you ever written a dialogue?

00:58:14:00

Sarah Richardson: No.

00:58:14:17

Vanessa Sasson: We don't do dialogue. So then I opened up novels in my library had a look to see how dialogue was like, "oh open quote dialogue comma, quote, he said, period. Got it.

00:58:28:28 I literally had so I went through a lot of stage I had to um teach myself, my academic kind of standing outside which is what I was doing I was standing away from it and just describing him. And then I had to become, and I had to speak in her voice. And that was like...mind blowing!

00:58:46:10

Sarah Richardson: Yeah.

00:58:46:27

Vanessa Sasson: First time I wrote dialogue I was like whoa. It was like the secret door that I didn't know until I got the key. Well it was a long process of teaching myself how to write literary instead of academic.

00:59:02:24

Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And also then, but to be in a really different relationship to the subject to an object like to total.

00:59:08:11

Vanessa Sasson: The desire to put footnotes. I cannot even tell you. I wanted to footnote everything. It took me a few months before I finally relaxed. And then I was writing. And then when I finished writing it, I was like I need the footnotes.

00:59:22:08

Sarah Richardson: I noticed all those notes.

00:59:23:07

Vanessa Sasson: Yeah.

00:59:25:11

Sarah Richardson: At the back, the sources for things.

00:59:25:28

Vanessa Sasson: Yeah. Yeah. So then I wanted to explain what I did and how I did what I did. So that students or whoever could read and see which text inspired which scene.

00:59:35:23

Vanessa Sasson: But I had to drop it completely. I couldn't have written it if I had the notes going the whole time. So when I finished the book then I went back and for a month I had like my whole library on my desk and I was like trying to remember everything. So I double checked everything, I was able to get my footnotes in the end.

00:59:54:12

Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And notes we have a lot of people who will still appreciate those too.

00:59:58:21

Vanessa Sasson: I left my notes there.

01:00:01:01

Sarah Richardson: Exactly. Yeah. But I can then I can imagine that. Yeah, you needed to free yourself of writing them for the creative work.

01:00:08:16

Vanessa Sasson: I had to just write. It was fun.

01:00:12:09

Sarah Richardson: Thank you so much Vanessa for...

01:00:13:29

Vanessa Sasson: That was really fun.

01:00:14:19

Sarah Richardson: ...for talking with us for a whole hour on, on tape. And yeah it was really fun. I love the book and I'm so glad.

01:00:21:16

Vanessa Sasson: Thanks.

01:00:22:03 - 01:00:23:27

Sarah Richardson: Inspired by your teaching and...

01:00:23:29 - 01:00:26:03

Vanessa Sasson: I hope you do something creative and fabulous.

01:00:26:14

Sarah Richardson: Oh I hope so too. One day I know. Actually it's exciting just to imagine the possibility of it.

01:00:35:25

Sarah Richardson: Thank you to Vanessa for sharing so much with us that day and for speaking so honestly about your teaching. We wish you very well as you continue to learn and grow as a teacher. And thank you all so much for listening and for being here with us for this conversation. For references to the resources that we discussed in this episode please check our show notes. And if you like what you heard. Please subscribe to our podcast. This has been a really interesting conversation and we'd love to hear more from you. Maybe there's something that you've shifted perspective on in your teaching. We'd love to hear from you about that. So please get in touch. Find us on Facebook. Send us an email. Let us know about your questions. A very big special thanks to our creative director Dr. Betsy Moss who's in charge of making these podcasts here in Toronto. Thank you for listening. Be well.