APL Volumes

Season 3, Episode 3: KEEP AUSTIN HISTORY WEIRD

This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MUSIC

GENN: Hello, fellow lit lovers, and welcome to Season Three of APL Volumes, coming to you from the very heart of downtown Austin, your Central Library. I'm your host, Genn Mehalik, avid reader and admin senior for the Customer Access division of APL.

This season we are turning the pages to explore the intriguing connections between books and the lives of their authors. Each episode will have a unique theme and guest. All of our guests are fellow staff members, brilliant passionate folks that I'm so lucky to work with, so I'm very excited to hear their hot takes. Whether you are a dedicated bibliophile or just looking to add a new chapter to your podcast playlist, you can go to bed at night knowing APL Volumes, Season Three, was made just for you.

This episode is all about Texas History, so what better guest than Jenna Cooper, Managing Librarian of the Austin History Center, which is just an amazing place. I highly recommend checking it out. Having once worked at Austin's O. Henry Museum, Jenna knows so much about the famed William Sydney Porter. O. Henry was his pen name.

So let's delve right in.

MUSIC

GENN: You can tell me first about your story, which I am excited to hear about. I purposely avoided reading anything. I didn't want to learn anything about O. Henry in the last month or so.

JENNA: This is like literary *Love Is Blind.*

GENN: Oh man. Have you been watching that?

JENNA: I hear about it secondhand, which is maybe even more entertaining.

GENN: There's a new one. I don't know. This is not related, but it was like really good. I like that kind of stuff.

JENNA: Yes, and I think that O. Henry himself would find reality TV very fascinating. He was very much a student of human behavior.

So I picked O. Henry, who I think is the quintessential Austin pick. I've lived in Austin for a long time. This is sort of our, I don't know, one of our famed keep Austin weirdo's is O. Henry.

But what inspired me initially, other than one of my coworkers saying that I should pitch something to y'all, is sort of the crux of the pitch that I had, which is *Lawyers, Guns and Money*, by Warren Zevon. It's because that song reminds me of O. Henry's biography. Minus the guns. That's great.

But he had a very storied life. And part of that was being indicted for embezzlement for a crime that he reportedly committed when he was a bank teller. Instead of going through due process, he ran away to Honduras, where you couldn't get extradited in the late nineteenth century.

GENN: So that was purposeful? He looked at it like, he was trying to find somewhere where he couldn't get extradited, right?

JENNA: Yes. So like the song, he was hiding in Honduras. He was a desperate man. But he actually came back to Austin because his wife was dying of tuberculosis. And, you know, I think I divorced this sort of almost surreal life experience from him as an author. But that is actually what I think propelled his literary career.

He went to prison, to a federal penitentiary, where he was the night pharmacist. And this is because he was an apprentice for a pharmacist in his youth. And that is where he had the leisure to write. He was one of the "good model prisoners" and so he was given a lot of leeway.

That's all to say that's a very brief tangential introduction to O. Henry.

GENN: I didn't want to interrupt you, but I am not talking about De Zavala today, but I did read something about him recently that I thought was crazy that you just reminded me of. And it was that he also went to prison, or jail, for a short, like two years or something? How long was O. Henry there?

JENNA: Roughly three years. But it was a five-year sentence.

GENN: And he also learned medicine and something else. Like law or something? To the point that he could practice when he got out, and didn't know anything about it when he went in.

So I was just like surprised that back then you could go into jail and come out as a doctor or something.

JENNA: I think that is a fascinating thing that you've shared. I want to know more about your author, especially what time period, because I feel like nowadays you get put into a niche so quickly. Whereas due to that lack of codified expertise you could be a writer, cartoonist, a draftsman, a ranch hand. These are O. Henry's careers.

GENN: You could be all of those things, too, which was cool.

JENNA: So you said De Zavala …

GENN: Well, I didn't actually choose, I was looking into him because I thought he had a cool interesting life. From what I know of O. Henry it was a little bit similar with just little things like going to jail, moving around a lot. I ultimately did not pick him. But I did read that while I was looking into him somewhere on the internet. Not in a particular book or anything.

JENNA: That's so fascinating. I love how this author led to another author and you see the sort of entanglement of lives crisscrossing or paralleling each other, which is beautiful, which are stories within stories.

GENN: Yeah.

JENNA: Yeah. I think, thinking about, speaking of stories, the short story, that is what we remember O. Henry best for. And it wasn't inventing the short story. That type of writing existed long before O. Henry. But he kind of lived in this golden age of pulp fiction. You know, serialized pulp fiction. And he churned out over two hundred short stories within a two-year period after his release from prison.

GENN: Wow.

JENNA: Yeah, it's incredible output. And there's nothing like being bad with money to motivate you to write excessively.

GENN: So he first escaped to Honduras and then ended up in jail? Or first went to jail and then ended up in Honduras?

JENNA: I should give you like the clearest timeline that I could possibly give you. Which is to some extent difficult with him because he didn't want anyone to know the details of his life story. So there is sort of an unreliable narrator aspect, I think.

GENN: Why do you think that was? Why wouldn't he want anyone to know the details?

JENNA: I think it was shame. It's heartbreaking, and I think it says a lot about not just the time in which he lived, but himself as a person. Whereas some people capitalized on that. His buddy in Honduras was a famed train robber named Al Jennings, who later became a politician. He was involved in Hollywood. And he milked it.

Whereas Porter went under a pseudonym, O. Henry, in part because of that shame, from what we can gather.

So he was born in 1862 in North Carolina. His father was a physician who unfortunately didn't pay much attention to his kids. He was trying to build a perpetual motion machine. And he was also very much an alcoholic.

His mother died of tuberculosis when he was very young and so he was raised by other family members. In his teens he apprenticed to be a pharmacist at the pharmacy where, interestedly, Vick's Vapor Rub was invented. Think of the life trajectories that we can take, but we don't.

I think he was just restless. So he got out of Dodge. Actually, he went to Dodge. He went to Texas. Kind of almost this quintessential GTT – gone to Texas, when your life isn't looking too great.

GENN: You think there was a sort of western frontier sort of, promise in his mind kind of thing?

JENNA: I think it was maybe this desire for novelty, and for a new place and new people to observe. You can see that with him after his prison sentence going to New York. He had never been to New York.

GENN: He's very spontaneous, right? I don't know about spontaneous. Just like an adventurer, he seems like.

JENNA: I think so. I think you can see this sort of intense need to keep his mind entertained with new threads.

GENN: Which was maybe like he was saving it all up and that's how he ended up writing all the stories back to back?

JENNA: I think, yeah, he's so interesting in that fact. I have an English degree. I almost went down that path to go to graduate school and become a professor, etc. And I spent a lot of time in the heads of the Bronte sisters and other nineteenth century authors where they will wax on and on about what writing means to them, why they write. You don't get that so much from Porter. He's a mystery.

I think it was a compulsion. I think it was a stabilizing force in his life. Definitely this desire to observe, to record these people that he witnessed and their behavior towards each other. To gather these stories from average people, in particular, was a huge motivating factor for him. I think it's a love of play that comes through.

GENN: And also that's how he made a living, right, at a certain point? Like he was submitting stories to newspapers and magazines and stuff? And then it took off, right?

JENNA: It did, yeah, in a very roundabout kind of way. I mean, perhaps not terribly roundabout, but I'll show you how. He did not really hit off as a writer to the extent that we know him today until he was out of prison.

So at that point he was, he was almost in his forties. So this was kind of a second life. Which I find fascinating as well.

So he, going back to that gone to Texas moment, he was a ranch hand to a family friend who actually became the land commissioner. So that was a privileged connection that he had. He wasn't your average cowboy, etc., who really needs the job and is usually marginalized in some way, race, class. He was coming for a lark.

He also had symptoms of tuberculosis himself, and it was thought that if you went west, you would dry out your lungs.

And so he decided after this to move to Austin. So this roughly puts us into the 1880s. He's in his twenties. And I think the prospect of being in a city, which you know Texas in the 1880s was still pretty dang rural/ But he was in a band called the Hill City Quartet. He did a manner of odd jobs which included probably his longest stint, working at the General Land Office as a draftsman. In fact his maps, which are preserved to this day, have his illustrations. He would doodle on them.

GENN: Oh, I want to see some!

JENNA: You absolutely can. If you walk to the building next to the Capitol, I think they are on display. It's a really neat place. It's one of the oldest buildings in Austin.

GENN: But that's not the O. Henry museum, is it?

JENNA: No, that's right by the convention center at 5th and Trinity. That was his home when he really kind of kickstarted his literary career. He had his own newspaper, a local newspaper called *The Rolling Stone*. And almost a tenth of the city subscribed to it. But it didn't make enough money to flourish. This was after working at the General Land Office.

So he moves to Austin, he elopes with this brilliant beautiful young woman named Athol Estes, who is a few years younger than he is. And they actually elope at Flower Hill, which is another historic home that you can come visit here in Austin. They were married discreetly by their minister, Reverand Smoot, and this is very much sort of ingrained in old Austin. The Smoots were involved in everything.

GENN: Yeah! So why was that discreetly?

JENNA: At the time it was. In a small town which Austin really was, word got around. And it was because Porter was seen as too unstable, you know. The guy flitted from job to job. He wasn't very good with money. He didn't have a family presence here in town. But he was able to win over his in-laws, kind of like he won a lot of people over.

GENN: Maybe that was also part of it. Not having that family around. It's like he didn't have a name made for him before he got here. There's no history so that's harder to trust, I think, for a lot of people. Like her family probably had a harder time trusting him.

JENNA: That's an interesting point that you bring up. I like how this is almost becoming a psychoanalytic ….

GENN: I am like that. I just tend to do that with everyone.

JENNA: Me too, me too. I know. I love it because the mind shapes the writing, as much as you can say death to the author. But I think he was a very profoundly lonely person. I truly do. And you see it particularly when he is in New York after he's gotten out of prison.

In Austin, though, I think he was surrounded by people who loved him and who knew him deeply. But you can sense that loneliness and alienation. I think even in his writing, which is very satirical, there is this …. He writes about characters who are on the margins of society. He writes about people who are incarcerated. People who conning other people. He writes about people who are experiencing homelessness. Sex workers. He writes about the proletariat and their sort of internal isolation and how the world isolates them.

GENN: Are his stories serious? Or are they more… Because I always thought, I don't know if I ever read anything by him. But I always thought people compared him to ... what's his name? I feel like we talked about a comparison between him and someone else.

JENNA: Is it Guy Maupassant?

GENN: No. it was somebody who … it's going to drive me nuts until I remember. But anyway I thought he had sort of like comedy to his writing. Is that true?

JENNA: Oh yeah, absolutely. Although I think it is worth saying, and we know this, that some of the funniest people in the world are the saddest. Right?

GENN: Yeah. A dark comedy kind of thing.

JENNA: Yeah. There is definitely a comedy element.

GENN: It's like satire more than comedy, per se.

JENNA: It's more sort of this exaggerated irony, I think. I think case in point, one of his most well-known stories is called "The Ransom of Red Chief." To kind of disambiguate this, the child is nicknamed Red Chief. This is nineteenth-century Texas. Kids were sort of, you know what they were like, giving into the mythos of the Wild West. Fashioning themselves as Native Americans or cowboys, etc. So very much an artifact of its time.

And this little boy is a terror, in that he's just rambunctious and pulls so many pranks. His parents are just up to here with him. His parents are incredibly wealthy. And these two kidnappers know it and they kidnap the kid. But the kid drives them so bonkers.

GENN: Just like Dennis the Menace.

JENNA: Dennis the Menace or *Home Alone*. And so you do see definitely tons of comedic stories. I'd say that some of the Coen brothers movies you can see an O. Henry plot. Yes, you can definitely see that in the twist ending that he is particularly known for, in a variety of genre fiction and films you can still see those echoes.

Probably his most famous work is "Gifts of the Magi." In it is a poor couple. It is Christmas time. The couple has no money to buy each other Christmas presents so the woman cuts her long hair off. Again, this is early twentieth century. She sells her hair to buy her husband a watch fob. But he has sold his watch to buy her combs for her long hair.

And there is a comedic element. It is funny. It's ironic. But at the same time it's sad that this couple is in such dire straits that they are having to sell or pawn things that are valuable to them.

GENN: I just feel that there are so many parallels that I want to interject all the time. Like how you said he writes about the people on the fringes of society and my book that I read, which is called *Beneath the Shadow of the Capitol*, have you heard of it?

JENNA: Oh, wow, yeah. It's on my list.

GENN: Yeah, it's really good actually. He is a Mexican American, born here in Austin in the 1930's. So it is fifty years after what you are talking about.

Austin was still very much like a small town, but it had a lot of city elements at that point. Government buildings. Everything takes place in what we call downtown now. But a lot of, everybody lived in this area.

It's interesting. I read this and … like, he was incredibly poor, and grew up in a little house that they built out of two by fours and plywood. There was actually space between the boards. They would have to wheat paste the newspaper on the wall on the wood to stop the cold air from coming in, in the winter.

JENNA: So he was born and raised in Austin?

GENN: Yeah.

JENNA: Do you know where?

GENN: At what hospital, do you mean?

JENNA: I bet it was Brackenridge Hospital.

GENN: Yeah.

JENNA: Yeah, that was the biggest game in town. But where was his home in Austin?

GENN: It was on Red River. It was like 1002 Red River or something. Yeah, I was trying to look up pictures and stuff of Austin at that time on the History Center site is mostly what comes up. Just wanted to see, you know, you make a picture in your mind of what you are reading. It was really cool to go back.

Like, he talks about the first time he enters a kite flying contest, which is like an annual thing and maybe is the origin of the kite flying festival we have now. I'm not sure. But like there are pictures on the History Center's website of the kite festival in 1942. It's just really cool to see all these little boys. They made their kites out of newspaper for fun. He won his, and he was so proud because they were so poor. Everybody bought butcher paper at the butcher store, or whatever the butcher, and he and his grandfather used just like newspaper that they would find in the trash. And he was embarrassed, but his grandfather told him, "It doesn't matter what it looks like. We're going to have the best." The best aerodynamics basically.

And yeah, it's just like a memoir of his childhood, growing up here. And mainly talks about the discrimination that he faced. The very first pages of the book has a picture of his birth certificate. And it says "color." And then it says "Mexican." And that was what the doctors wrote.

Which is so interesting because he was born here. But that document is the start of a life of discrimination, especially within the school systems at that time.

I wanted you to have a basis so when you say something you know why I am, "Oh, that is so cool because of this." You've said five things already that I really didn't want to interrupt you. Like his father being an alcoholic. That was also very common, especially with people who are marginalized and on the fringes of society.

His dad worked at the Driskill Hotel, but as a dishwasher. Nobody who was Mexican or Black or anything but white was allowed to work in any job that actually faced the public. So you had to be in the back. After his dad was a dishwasher for so long, he ended up assisting the head chef a lot, to the point where he made him the sous chef, basically.

So he became a cook. And the food would get complimented. And the owner of the Driskill, they would say, "We wanted to meet the person who made the food, it's so good." And the owner, because he didn't want to take his father who was Mexican into the Driskill and present him to these people who are wealthy, he would literally go outside the back door of the hotel and find a person walking on the street who was white, and say, "I'll give you ten dollars if you'll come inside and just pretend you are the chef for five minutes."

It was just stories like that. It affected their whole life.

JENNA: That sounds like such a candid emotional outpouring of a work which I find so different from what O. Henry put forward, even though I do see some uncanny parallels with family dynamics, it sounds like. Although O. Henry grew up as a middle-class white kid.

GENN: I know. It's just so interesting that he like … from what you are saying, it almost sounds like you are saying the fact that he was so lonely and maybe was like a wanderer in a way, and he was naturally like an observant person. It seems like he was a people watcher. It's almost like he used these stories about people like the person that I read about, their lives, to express his loneliness, perhaps.

JENNA: I think so, and I think that Porter, and we'll call him William Sydney Porter, O. Henry was his pen name, that had he not been privileged to be a white man and had friends who cared about him, and some family members that cared about him, I would not be surprised if he ended up experiencing homelessness himself. This is something I see time and time again.

When I worked at the O. Henry museum for several years as a collections manager, I worked with the materials of his former, and now I'm blanking and I'm going to second-guess myself, publisher, I believe, Gilman Hall. There were dozens of letters where Porter creatively asked for money.

He would draw little cartoons. It was just very charming, if not very sad and probably very frustrating.

Another thing that I suspect about Porter. I'm not a psychologist. He is deceased. I can't diagnose him. But he seemed to think that he had neurasthenia, which was a term used to describe emotional disturbance. We would call that maybe a mood disorder today?

One of his favorite books was called *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was written in the seventeenth century. It's kind of a very early treatise on mood disorders, specifically depression.

And so based on that and kind of the ebbs and flows of his life, and his alcoholism which probably led to his death at, he was almost forty-eight. By all accounts drank prolifically. Typically struggling with mental illness and substance abuse are things that go hand in hand.

So I think that maybe he was very privileged, he was very lucky, but I think that he related to people who were marginalized in some way because of the difficulty with substance abuse and probably depression.

GENN: And I think that the reason I brought up that story about his father, the person I read about, his name is Ramon Moncivais, and his father was the one who worked at the Driskill. I guess I was just trying to make the point that I think a lot of people were driven to drink by the suppression, you know, like they were hidden in their workplace, even. Not just in public.

That was kind of like a parallel to O. Henry's shame. He carried this shame. And then these people carried shame and it led them to drinking. Which led to illness, and there was like so many systemic problems basically that were working against people in these times.

JENNA: Absolutely. This cascade of issues that people didn't have really very many tools to deal with.

I think about this a lot where, tangentially related, but I think it warrants saying. We talk about how mental health is a bigger issue today than it was fifty, a hundred years ago. But it's like, well, I'm not sure we really have any metrics for that.

It's like, how many people can you find in your family tree or through research who died young because they drank a lot or smoked a lot, etc.

GENN: Yeah. And they also didn't have the medicine that we have today to diagnose things. Not just mental health. For instance, in this book a lot of his relatives, they would die, and then the doctor would say, "They probably had stomach cancer." Or they would say they did have stomach cancer, but really they didn't know. They were just kind of basing it off of the things they said before they died and the part of their body they were complaining about. Just kind of assuming what it was. But guaranteed at least in his case a lot of it was from drinking. A lot of his family died from heavily drinking.

JENNA: Yeah, that's something you can see to some extent with O. Henry's family. If they didn't die of tuberculosis, which I think his family I would say was overall middle class, but it was actually an illness you would find among people who were in cramped, crowded conditions. So it is seen as a disease that struck people who were impoverished.

GENN: Like Ramon. His house was just like two tiny little bedrooms and a kitchen. And there were ten of them living there.

And you know something that I noticed earlier. You said that he was encouraged to come west for his tuberculosis? I don't know if it was diagnosed at that time, but basically breathing problems. And Ramon's grandfather, who lived with him for most of his life, until he was about thirteen or something. Not most of his life. Most of his childhood. He was the person that he was the closest to and taught him about life.

They sat around a little bonfire every night and he taught him just like how to be resilient basically and that is was kind of like everything to Ramon. And he was actually told to move out of Texas because of breathing problems. And he went to Chicago. It seems a lot of people when to Chicago back then.

JENNA: Interesting.

GENN: So I'm just like, that's so weird. I'm wondering, he probably had a similar type of breathing problem. I wonder what it was so that fifty years later made them think to go the opposite way.

JENNA: Yeah, that's a lead that I'm going to follow. That's a rabbit hole. Thank you.

So what kind of genre did Ramon typically write in?

GENN: He actually was not a writer. He also worked a ton of jobs, mostly odd jobs. He was like a day laborer, which much of his family was. His dad was probably the only person who had a job that he worked every day for his whole life, which was at the Driskill.

And in fact, even when Ramon was being born, in 1931, which was one year after his parents married, his mom was eighteen and his dad was twenty-four. He literally left before, she was in childbirth in their home, and he was like, "I've got to go to work." And left. Which says a lot about, it is exactly how he was as a father.

But these are things like, you can't just say that someone was a bad dad or whatever. The alcoholism. The working that much. Not paying much attention to your kids. It was all because of the quality of life back then for him. For the family. For anybody who was Mexican basically or I'm assuming Black as well.

And yeah, there are some parts of the book where, it's not all sad. There are so many great stories in the book which I loved. Like him hanging out with his grandfather. The way that they repaired their roof. The way they lived. They used newspaper in their outhouse and to wallpaper their walls.

And they would go on long walks and pick up cigarette butts, because his grandfather, he was a smoker but they obviously couldn't afford to buy cigarettes. So they would pick up hundreds of cigarette butts a few times a week, break the tip off, and take out the tiny little bit of tobacco that was left. He called it like doing surgery on the cigarettes. And they would create cigarettes for his grandfather. And when his supply would start getting low, they would go again.

So just stories like that, that are very charming and sweet, because he is spending time with his grandfather, who he loves. He teaches him how to hunt pigeon and stuff like that. That's like the only meat that they ever ate. He scrounges from trashcans everything from food to books.

And that's how he kind of got into the idea of being a writer. He just always had an affinity for it. But if you read the book you'll see that from his very first day of school all the way until he graduated from high school, which is like a huge accomplishment for him, pretty much everyone he knew dropped out.

JENNA: I'm just enraptured with this story.

GENN: Yeah, I want you to read it because it is so good. I love slice-of-life stories like that where it is just a regular person. He's not famous. He wasn't a writer. He just wanted to write his life story down. It's the kind of thing, it's

published by a very small publisher. I borrowed this book from somebody because I couldn't even find it. But I know they have it at the History Center.

JENNA: Yeah, I've seen it. I wish … people think that when you go into archives that you have all this time to look at the stuff and read the stuff and you don't.

GENN: Especially if you are working, I know.

JENNA: I am eager to read this. The parallels but also the differences between the two of them are so extreme.

GENN: And that's kind of why I choose it. Because I wanted to do something very different. So when I got here and I was listening, it's like, "Wow. This is actually…." I was kind of amazed that there are so many parallels.

JENNA: One thing that really struck me, there were two things actually, but the first thing is you talk about his father was going to work while his mother was giving birth. O. Henry left his wife and daughter to go to Honduras when he was indicted. Which I think sounded like a good idea to him. "I'm just going to wait out the storm."

We don't really know much about his time there at all. But I think it is significant that he left and came back when his wife was dying. And we do have some archival material that was written by his wife. Letters and whatnot. And she is really struggling. It could have been so much worse if she had not been a middle-class white woman with a well-to-do family. But having to do all of this physical and emotional labor, taking care of a house, parenting, etc., while she was dying, was extreme.

So yeah, I thought about that situation, talking about just how people functioned.

GENN: Family dynamics.

JENNA: Exactly. Yeah, yeah. It's so different from what we expect today.

And then the other thing was I love how your author shares these candid, beautiful, painful memories. O. Henry, it's almost like he was a puppet master, creating this distance between himself and the characters in his short stories, which were drawn from life, some probably from people he cared about. But you don't see him in these stories unless you look hard. But even then you don't know.

GENN: Yeah, it's like you have to make an assumption that he's fictionalizing something that he really wants to write about.

JENNA: Yeah, I do think that you see those maybe a little more in his later works. It would have been, had he lived another ten or twenty years, would he have become a modernist? Would he have, like, you know, gone down some of these avenues that I see him curious about? Sort of these explorations of the psyche?

Not that I think that he would ever become sort of a Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner with their stream-of-consciousness writing, but I could just see glimmers of that. But he died in 1910.

It seems like both of them were truncated in literary careers in different ways, perhaps?

GENN: Yeah, it was kind of like a second life for mine, too. They both had it as a second life, writing.

JENNA: Yeah. And that's fascinating to me. I think you could say that for O. Henry before prison but after prison it becomes his whole life. And he's really unable to do anything else because of his health. He died, what was it, at the time of his death he had cirrhosis, kidney disease and cardio myopathy. At forty-eight. Almost forty-eight.

So yeah, he couldn't, like, again, if he didn't have these people who loved him. It wasn't his publisher, it was his editor, who kind of took care of him and subsidized his life. He would probably be scouring to make a living.

GENN: Yeah.

JENNA: Yeah.

GENN: There are so many good things in my book that I would never have the time to talk about just because the whole thing is full of anecdotes that I really wish I could just sit here and spout out story after story. But hopefully people will read it and y'all can see for yourself how good it is.

I know I tend to go towards nonfiction and memoirs are kind of my thing, but there is something for everyone in this book, for sure.

JENNA: Well, that's my genre too. I'm so excited. I mean, I feel like, and I can't make promises, because it's not my job at the Austin History Center, but I think his life would make for a good exhibit. To show his words juxtaposed with these images of what it was like to be Latine in Austin during the Depression, and this world that has been demolished since.

GENN: He even mentions how, as a kid he even notices how in school what they are learning is not parallel to his life as far as like Texas History which it was already being taught. He asked his grandfather about it, and he says, "Well, the white people write the textbooks."

So he just is very aware, I think, even as a young child.

But yeah, that's kind of why I think this book is important because it fills a gap that's not really talked about in Texas History. Which is the experience of a Mexican American person, you know. And a lot of the discrimination that happened in Austin as well.

JENNA: Yeah, you definitely get two very different slices of Austin with these two authors. Your author is in the twentieth century. He's Latine, he's working class. My author is the nineteenth century. He's white. He's middle class. So yeah, very, very different slices of Austin.

I almost kind of see just doing public history, just doing this patchwork quilt where they're quilt pieces of this bigger story. And your author definitely sort of, what an incredible work. That's just…

GENN: That makes you wonder if my author read O. Henry. What would he think? I don't know.

JENNA: I like that question a lot. Honestly, I think he would see stereotypes. O. Henry wrote a lot about Latine characters. He spent time in Cotulla, San Antonio, and so these would not necessarily have been friends, people in his social circles, but people he met in his daily walks, hanging out at saloons, etc.

So you do get kind of ,with every O. Henry character in some way for the most part is almost a stock character. Right? And so there are tropes. Which include racial tropes. One of his main inventions your author had to be familiar with was the Cisco Kid, who was a biracial gunslinger. Who murdered his lover out of jealousy. And so you get that sort of like trope of like the caballero. Right?

GENN: Machismo?

JENNA: Exactly. I think that he probably had read O. Henry because O. Henry was being read in schools quite frequently at that point, especially here. And he probably would have seen very quickly these are stereotypes, these are tropes. This is very much a white person viewing a community that is not theirs.

GENN: Totally. Especially with the awareness that he had. It may be added to his feelings of repression.

JENNA: Yeah, yeah. I think so. And I think it would have been ingrained in pop culture, right? O. Henry was not the inventor of the western, but he sure did help popularize it. Those western pulp serials. Even if he didn't read O. Henry, he would have seen O. Henry's influence just with movies and TV shows. Especially the character of the Cisco Kid.

GENN: This all just makes me think about how, this is also something that Ramon's grandfather teaches him, is that at the end of the day this division between races, it's like a manmade thing. We are all, when we bleed we bleed the same.

And I'm thinking, he used to pull books from the trash to give his mother, who was teaching herself how to read. He probably, if he did read O. Henry, or she did, yeah, it might have been very obviously just another thing that the white person thinks of them. And not very relative to their real life.

But then when you look at O. Henry as a person and you see his struggles, they are not the same struggles but they are struggles nonetheless. They are both struggling and it is just interesting to think about how the lesson. It's like a manmade division and at the end of the day they have very similar feelings, I'm sure. A lot of the time.

JENNA: Yeah, I think that's a big reason why O. Henry's works have stayed popular is because of this universal sentimentality. His works talk about death, disease, loss, heartache, joy. These very human elements.

And I think it is a testament to that he is more popular abroad than he is here. When I worked at the O. Henry museum, I gave tours to people from all over the world for years. And we had a number of folks from East Asia, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe who were just amazed they even made it because his works were popular there. I know in Asian countries they have been used for English language learning curriculum.

I was actually told by a couple that they had used "The Last Leaf", one of his short stories, in their wedding ceremony. A couple from South Korea.

It was almost like, I don't know, fan girl and fan boy, fan person, that sort of affect. We had a Russian visitor, a woman, middle aged. She came inside the house and said, "Excuse me, I'm so sorry." And she started crying.

He was heavily read in the former USSR. He was found to be, because of his firm stance with the working people, a more acceptable American author.

So yeah, that's what I think, you can hold two things at once, where O. Henry should be criticized for these racist stock characters, etc., like pretty average of his time, sadly. Right? He wasn't a KKK member. He was just sort of garden variety white racism.

Not to downplay the effects of that, but you could hold that, but also hold the fact that he wrote for kind of the common person whoever they were. You can hold both at the same time.

GENN: This has been a really good conversation. I really enjoyed it. I think we could talk for like several hours. Unfortunately we don't have time for that here today, but I think we will probably continue this talk on our own.

MUSIC

A huge thanks to my guest, Jenna Cooper. Swing on by the Austin History Center and brush up on your Texas trivia.

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END TRANSCRIPT