

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

With Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #38

**Interview with Novelists Christiana Ellis and Skyler White, Recorded
Live at Dragon*Con 2010**

Aired , 2010

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INTRODUCTION

This is Episode 38 of *Books and Ideas*, and I'm your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. Today's episode was recorded in September, 2010, at [Dragon*Con](#) in Atlanta, Georgia. My guests were novelists [Skyler White](#) and [Christiana Ellis](#). We talked a bit about their writing, and we also talked quite a bit about writing in general, which will be of particular interest to the aspiring writers in the audience.

If you're new to *Books and Ideas*, this is a little bit of an unusual episode in the sense that, besides being recorded live, my guests are novelists and I tend to usually interview scientists and other nonfiction writers. But I like the fact that on *Books and Ideas* I can have variety.

For show notes, including links to all the books mentioned during today's show, please visit our website at booksandideas.com. You can send me feedback at docartemis@gmail.com, or leave me voice mail at 205-202-0663. As usual, I'll be back after the interview with a few brief announcements, including more information about future podcasts.

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INTERVIEW

Ginger: Tonight I have two wonderful guests, Christiana Ellis and Skyler White. Now, before I introduce Christiana and Skyler, I want to make a couple of announcements.

First, this year I got to interview [Scott Sigler](#)—everyone wants to interview him, right?—and I wanted to remind you that his new book, *The Starter*, is available at [scottsigler.com](#), and listeners of *Books and Ideas* can get a discount by using the coupon code, “ginger.” And if you haven’t already read *The Rookie*, you can get both books and use that coupon code—“ginger.” I just got my copy in the mail right before I came over here, and I’m looking forward to reading it. It’s a great book to share with kids. If you’ve got a boy that doesn’t love to read but likes sports, it’s a good way to sneak him into reading.

One other announcement is that back in [Episode 12](#) I did a book review of a book called, *The Myth of Free Will*, edited by [Cris Evatt](#). She asked me to write an essay for the revised edition, which I did; and that came out a couple years ago. She has now done a revised and expanded edition, and I have a longer essay—like two or three pages. I hope you’ll check that out. Now, I didn’t get paid anything, and I don’t make anything if you buy the book, but it’s really cool to be in a book with prestigious people like [Daniel Dennett](#). That will be available—there’s a link to it—at [booksandideas.com](#).

OK, I’m going to guess most of you probably know Christiana. She is one of the pioneers of podcast fiction. She is also admired by her fellow podcasters for her amazing sense of humor. And I’m a big fan of her work—especially [Nina Kimberly the Merciless](#), and [Space Casey](#). Of course, *Nina Kimberly* was published last year, and it is available in paperback.

Christiana: And on Kindle.

Ginger: And on Kindle, yes. Christiana is a [Dragon*Con](#) regular, but my second guest, Skyler White, is a Dragon*Con newbie. I'd like to think that I had some influence on her decision to come this year.

Skyler: Absolutely!

Ginger: And her son was a great [Dr. Who](#).

Skyler: He's my little 11.

Ginger: I'm also really proud that Skyler listens to the [Brain Science Podcast](#), and I think it helped her with her research for her book, which is [and Falling, Fly](#), which we'll talk a little bit more about in just a minute.

So, I just want to thank both of you for coming.

Skyler: Thank you.

Christiana: Thank you.

Ginger: Now, for those of you who don't know my *Books and Ideas* podcast, since I launched it in 2006 it's kind of evolved into an interview-style show in the spirit of [Fresh Air](#) with [Terry Gross](#); but since I don't make a show five days a week, I don't have quite the diverse content that she has. In fact, Skyler is my first non-podcasting novelist; so I'm proud of that.

Christiana: Is something wrong with podcasting novelists?

Ginger: No, no; I just don't have any contacts in the novelist world.

Christiana: I'm just teasing. I'm sorry.

Ginger: No, that's why I invited you—so you could tease me.

Christiana: Well, I'll keep it up, then.

Ginger: Absolutely.

Anyway, since this is a live show there will be questions and maybe answers at the end.

Skyler: No answers at all.

Christiana: You didn't say there'd be answers required. I'm out of here.

Ginger: So, I'm going to start out with just a couple of sort of general questions. I want to give you guys a chance to just tell us a little bit about yourselves; and I'm going to let Skyler go first.

Skyler: All right. I came to writing kind of late in life—and *Falling, Fly* is my first book. It's the story of a vampire and a neuroscientist. And my connection with Ginger goes back to having listened to every single episode of the *Brain Science Podcast*, trying to kind of ground myself in the field before I started doing even deeper research on specific areas that I needed for the book. And then she did an episode in which she referenced being a [Buffy](#) fan, and I thought there's one other person in the world who's interested in neuroscience and vampires; I've got to meet this woman. So, that's why I'm here.

Ginger: How about you, Christiana.

Christiana: Well, I have kind of always written little stories, but it was only semi-recently with the advent of podcasting that I got the idea that I would

produce a self-produced audiobook of my then-unpublished novel. And I don't regret the decision, because ultimately it led directly to the small press print publication of the book and me getting to be on panels like this one right here.

Ginger: So, other than podcasting, was there something that inspired you to write?

Christiana: I think it's not so much that there was any direct event or specific person, as much as I've always just loved stories and storytelling. I read a lot. I watch a lot of TV. I also always was making up little stories, and putting on little plays, and that sort of thing. Even at the age of 10 I had a little tape recorder and I was making my own little shows. And so, it's always just been something I've done and enjoyed. As I got a little older I started to find that I thought prose and print like that was sort of the best way I could express the stories I had in my head.

Ginger: So, you said you started late in life, Skyler. What got you started? What's the definition of "late in life?"

Skyler: Well, before 40, but not a whole lot before 40. And what got me started in writing was an existential crisis—because you know you can't be a writer unless you're tortured in some significant way. I had a sort of existential crisis which brought me into being sort of an existentialist. And when you don't believe in the stories that are foundational to your culture—if you no longer believe them as being true—you suddenly realize how pervasive and how powerful story is: that all of our thinking is informed by the stories that we tell ourselves.

And I couldn't not play with that kind of power. If stories are that powerful, I want to start creating stories that are based in what I actually believe. I want to start pushing against the stories that reiterate the good and the evil, and I want to

start asking my own questions and finding my own answers. And story seemed to be the right format.

Ginger: That leads really right into letting you tell us a little bit about *and Falling, Fly* (I think there's a comma in there).

Skylar: There is—just to really screw with people. There's also a lower case “a” on the “*and*.” And between the lower case “a” and the comma, I think I've seen my title done correctly four times since the book came out.

The question that I wanted to play with in this book is the nature of feminine desire: what does it mean for a woman to want? The stories that we have existing about feminine desire are stories about [Lilith](#), and about [Eve](#), and about that being generally a very bad thing. And because I was approaching 40 and trying to come to grips with what it means to want and to be wanted—having been a cute young girl, and really enjoyed what it means for somebody to want me—I wanted to start taking apart the difference between wanting to be wanted and actually wanting things in my own right.

And so, I wanted to use the format of story to ask questions about desire. And so, I have the fallen angel of desire, which is my attempt to deal with kind of the idealized desire—the idea of desire as just an idea. But you can't really have a conversation with an idea, so she's fallen. She is not the ideal, she is the human iteration of that. Against her I put a neuroscientist whose understanding —

Ginger: And he's sexy.

Skylar: He is a sexy neuroscientist. I think science is sexy. His understanding of desire is very biochemical, but because he is completely rational —

Ginger: Until he meets her.

Skylar: Right. And he is then no longer so rational. That was one of the things I wanted to do: what do you do when you fall in love with somebody, if your world view prevents them from existing? For him, in his world view—his way of understanding reality—she simply can't be.

Ginger: For the sake of those of you who haven't read the book, she's talking about a vampire who's a fallen angel. So, he's convinced that she doesn't really exist.

Skylar: Right.

Ginger: And that she's under some kind of delusion. And one of the things I really like about the book is for most of the book you're really not sure which one is true: whether she's really a vampire or it's really —

Skylar: Or she's really ill.

Ginger: Or she's really ill. I'm sorry, I know I interrupted you, but I felt like it might help, because you're not talking to an audience of people who've already read your book.

So, I want to ask you about the name, because, as you mentioned, it's hard for anybody to get it right. Was that your idea?

Skylar: That's mine. It's the idea that by having fallen, it is possible to fly; that it's not until you fall that you're really capable of achieving any kind of significant height.

Ginger: This is your first novel.

Skylar: This my first published novel.

Ginger: Did you learn any lessons from this novel that will be informing your — Well, I know you have another one almost ready to go; so what did you learn?

Skylar: I learned that it's really hard. I think I am a more fluent writer now than I was when I wrote that book; and there are things about that book I would go back and tweak if I had it to do over again. But I learned that, for me, writing is hard. I write, at most, one book a year. It is a slow, difficult, many many iteration process. This book went through 17 drafts. I feel really efficient now, because the second book only took 13. But there are people out there that turn out five and six books a year—by which standard I am excruciatingly slow. And what I've learned is that's just the way I write, and you have to kind of honor the process; and I'm never going to be a three-book-a-year girl.

Ginger: I don't think I actually made this clear, but Skylar's writing in the genre of [dark fantasy](#); and I'm going to come back to the challenges of that in just a minute. But those of who know Christiana's writing know that she is not writing dark fantasy. So, how would you describe your work, Christiana?

Christiana: *Nina Kimberly the Merciless* is more [comedic fantasy](#)—potentially even satirical fantasy—although I do try to have genuine characters with real feelings, as opposed to just props for satire. But definitely it's supposed to be funny.

Ginger: Well, if you don't get that when you read the first page, you're in the wrong book.

Christiana: Yes. You know the entire book came from the very first line. The first line, just for anyone who hasn't read it, is, “Nina blushed; then cut the man's head off.”

Skylar: That's a great first line.

Christiana: So, I had that first line in my head completely independent of any character or story at all, and it was really only in liking that line and exploring it that the story started to come to me.

Ginger: For the sake of the one person in the audience who hasn't read *Nina Kimberly*, tell us a little bit about it.

Christiana: *Nina Kimberly the Merciless* is the teenage daughter of a fearsome barbarian warrior conqueror named Marcus the Merciless, and thus she is Nina Kimberly the Merciless. And so, she had traveled with her father's barbarian horde, conquering all sorts of places, when she was a child. But then, one time when they are invading this little out-of-the way kingdom, her father is accidentally killed, and due to a variety of circumstances the barbarian horde is not actually interested in having a seven-year-old girl be their new leader.

So, they decide to just kind of hang out and stay in this little out-of-the-way kingdom for a while. So, she has grown up to a teenager, extremely frustrated, not only that she was rejected as leader, but that they're just staying in this little place. And so, at the start of the book she has made a decision to find her own quest, because it's obviously not coming to her fast enough.

Ginger: The thing I love about this book, besides the humor, is the fact that we have this teenage girl going off on a quest, doing the kind of stuff that in most books the boys do. I mean when I was a kid I only read boy books, because I just hated those girl gothic novels, and girls never got to go on quests. Was that intentional?

Christiana: It wasn't conscious in the sense that I planned it out ahead of time that that's what I wanted to write, so much as that was the story that seemed interesting to me; that was the story I felt like telling. So, there wasn't any kind of a political pre-planning about it. It was just when I came up with the character I

was interested in her because she was proactive and wanted to go out and do these things. And so, that's why I felt motivated to write the story about her.

Ginger: So, what lessons did you learn from getting your first novel published?

Christiana: Well, one of the things that I learned is that apparently the podcasting thing worked out—at least sometimes. But also, just the process is different than what you think before you really get involved in it. It takes a lot longer. Things happen much more slowly than it seems like they would when you're not in on the picture. Things happen very slowly, and there are a lot of considerations that get made. Anyone who hasn't actually looked into it may not realize that getting one novel published does not mean that suddenly you can quit your day job and be Stephen King.

Ginger: So, you have another book coming out in November, Skyler?

Skyler: That's right: [*In Dreams begin*](#). It's a time travel in the present day, back and forth between now and Victorian Ireland, London, and Paris, centered around the occult movement and the artistic class. So, [W.B. Yeats](#) and [the Golden Dawn](#), and [Aleister Crowley](#), and [Maud Gonne](#), and that crew. And it's the consciousness, the awareness of a contemporary woman wakes up in the body of a Victorian woman. Again, it's asking questions about what it means to be. Are you your body, are you your consciousness? What would it be to have your consciousness in another body; in another body from another time, when people had a different relationship with their body?

If the first book was poking around at desire, the second book is kind of poking around at fidelity, and why is it OK to have wild fantasies about other men if you're married—to be unfaithful in mind, but faithful in body. If we're going to say that we really aren't our bodies, if who you really are is interior, then why is

that interior fidelity not what we police? And so, that was why I was doing the body shifting with that.

Ginger: You write in the dark fantasy genre. Was that a conscious choice, or just where you got put when your first book got picked up by an agent; or what happened?

Skyler: Yes, they bought the book and told me at the time, “We don’t know where we’re going to put you. We could put you in sci-fi fantasy, we could put you in literary fiction. We have no idea where we’re going to put you.” And dark fantasy was the choice, just because it’s dark and somewhat fantastic, but also the idea that fantasy readers are the most open-minded readers out there. Every other genre comes with a set of preconceived notions. Only the fantasy reader comes to books with a deliberately held-open mind.

Ginger: — where you get to make up the rules in that given book and they’ll go with them, as long as they’re consistent.

Skyler: Yes.

Ginger: Are there specific challenges of being in this genre?

Skyler: There are challenges to not being neatly in this genre. I write fantasy because I like the freedom, but I’m very interested in science. I’m very interested in relationships, so there’s a strong romantic component to the book. There’s an erotic component to the book. There’s a literary component to the book. And not fitting neatly in my genre bucket is difficult. The genre bucket, itself, is really very lovely. I just don’t fit neatly in it.

Ginger: I met another writer yesterday on a panel—[M.B. Weston](#)—who writes fantasy. But she told me that because her fantasy doesn’t have sex in it she got put in [Young Adult](#), and that wasn’t really what she was trying to write. She’s

even getting pressure to put sex into her books—because you can do that now in Young Adult. And that’s just not what she wants to write.

Skylar: YA is really hot, and they keep telling me to tone my stuff down so they can put it in YA. If they can put it in YA it will sell more copies. So, they did that to help her make money. It’s not a bad thing.

Ginger: Yes. The two of us kind of agreed that, well, that really wasn’t what we wanted to read about, but lots of people do like to read about that.

Christiana: On that note, if I may just interrupt, I’ve been thinking about this a lot just this weekend. I think what distinguishes a YA book from a non-YA book gets really confusing. And sometimes it really seems to be as simple and as arbitrary as how old is the protagonist: below 18 it’s YA, above 18 it’s not. But because it’s so big, you’ve got all sorts of books being potentially adapted, or changed, or tweaked to be more YA. It seems really interesting that what defines a book as YA is not at all an easy question to answer. It’s perhaps even harder than what defines fantasy or what defines science fiction.

Skylar: Yes, I think that’s really true.

Ginger: You were published with a mainstream publisher. What kind of support did you get?

Skylar: I got an advance, and then I make royalties. So, the advance is nice. It’s money before; and publishing is excruciatingly slow. I got gorgeous cover art. I really lucked out with the cover. They nailed it conceptually, which just thrilled me. And then I have an editor and a copy editor. I’m very fortunate in that I have an amazing editor. She’s very young, she’s very smart, and really makes the books better than they were. And then I have really good copy editing, too; which is great, because you get so close to your work it’s very hard to see certain things, and they watch for that.

Then the other support is sort of technical. They give me a set number of ARCs (which is Advanced Reading Copies; galleys of books) and they send the book out to all the major review sites—[Publishers Weekly](#), all of that stuff—so that the book gets in the hands of reviewers well in advance of it hitting the shelves. The days of the book tour and the magazine ads are mostly gone for any but the really, really top shelf writers. But I'm one of those stories that the slush pile works. I truly came in over the transom.

And it doesn't happen as much as it used to, and it doesn't happen as much as it should. But New York is still willing to take risks and try a new writer. Now, they've taken a risk; I probably have two books to prove myself as worth their time or not. Because it's so little money, they take a handful of newbie writers doing something really kind of out there, and you throw it at the wall, and you look and go, OK, this, this, and this get re-upped, and the rest of them, thanks for playing.

Ginger: Do you know what your publisher's attitude is toward podcasting?

Skyler: I don't have audio rights. When they buy your book they buy audio rights. Now, if they do an audio recording of my book I will make royalties on that, but I no longer retain the rights. So, I couldn't podcast my book.

Ginger: But that's kind of standard to give them audio rights when you get this kind of contract, right?

Skyler: Yes, absolutely.

Ginger: So, Christiana, what are you working on now?

Christiana: Well, I've got a number of things in the works. I am finishing up the second draft of a science fiction novel that's actually very different from *Nina*. It's much more complex. It's very serious; it's not comedic in tone. Twenty years

prior to the start of the novel, aliens have enslaved humanity. That's all backstory, but what happens at the beginning of the novel is that suddenly and without warning all of the aliens just vanish. They disappear literally into thin air. Nobody knows why, or if they're coming back, or what's going on.

Skyler: What a cool premise.

Christiana: Well, I hope so.

Ginger: I've been fortunate to get to read the first draft, and I think it's going to be good. It's character-driven, and that's the kind of stuff I like to read.

Christiana: And so, I am also working on a sequel to *Nina Kimberly*, and a sequel to my audiodrama, *Space Casey*.

Ginger: Yes, if you haven't listened to *Space Casey*, you need to. The thing is, when I'm listening to *Space Casey*, I'm imagining you.

Christiana: Oh, yeah?

Skyler: She looks like her.

Christiana: One of the things that I also have in the works for *Space Casey* is I'm going to self-publish an illustrated script book for the first season scripts. I've been in touch with a great Web comic artist to do the illustrations, and it's going to be designed as a coloring activity book with like mazes and word searches and stuff.

Ginger: Great. So, you're not making a living as a writer, then.

Christiana: No, I have a day job. I'm a chemical engineer. I do consulting work. It's very different; I do very different things. Except, of course, that there's

still a whole lot of time sitting in front of a computer, and so, to the outside observer it might not be that different. But at the same time, right now both writing and podcasting are just very much a hobby. They're hobbies that I enjoy, and I'm starting to get some income from them—which is great. But I definitely still need the day job right now.

Ginger: Would you keep writing if you knew you were never going to make any money?

Christiana: Oh, yes, absolutely—writing and podcasting.

Ginger: How about you?

Skylar: No, I'm not making a living, and yes, I would keep doing it, even so.

Ginger: So, advice for aspiring writers.

Christiana: Well, I think it's very common for established writers to explain all of the things that are very difficult about getting published, and about writing, and how much work it is. And all of those things are true, but the other flip side that I think doesn't get mentioned as much is that it can be just really satisfying. You do have to put in the hard work, but it's worth it. Even if you don't get something published, even if you just put it out there and you get a couple of dozen people who read it on your blog, or something like that, that can be really rewarding. And so, I think it's worth just jumping in with both feet—aware that you might fall on your butt a couple of times. But there's a joy in it that I think sometimes gets missed.

Skylar: Yes, I would agree with that. There's a value in writing that is larger than the value of being read: that just the process of writing helps you create a narrative in your life. So, advice for writers would be, write—write a lot. And then the other would be to live—to go out there and do things, and experience

stuff, and interact with people, and have relationships, and have your heart broken, and get a good messy life going, because that feeds the creative process. And then also, just as a purely practical thing, have friends who are writers. Have critique groups. Have support for the “Oh, my God, I can’t do it; this character is driving me crazy.” Other people’s eyes on your stuff is invaluable to help you grow as a writer.

Ginger: Michael, can I ask you to give some free advice, since I’ve just gotten my writers to give writing advice to aspiring fiction writers and you happened to walk in?

Christiana: He doesn’t give free advice; they’re secrets!

Ginger: Well, he’ll never come to one of my panels again.

Skylar: Think fast!

Ginger: This is Michael Stackhouse, everyone.

Michael: [Stackpole](#).

Ginger: Stackpole; sorry. I know that.

Skylar: Sookie Stackhouse.

Michael: Sookie. Believe me, I don’t mind. You know, that close name, that’s done wonders for me, OK? So, I’m really happy. Yes, more marketing like that.

I think in general the big thing that aspiring writers have to understand is that writing is a skills-based enterprise. You can read all the books about theories, you can come and listen to lectures. And [Aaron Alston](#) and I just completed three days of teaching classes here at Dragon*Con. So, you can attend all this sort of

prep stuff, but it's kind of like learning a sport by watching videotape: you will gain some knowledge, but you won't actually learn how to play. So, if you want to be a writer, the thing you have to do is sit down and write. And then learn how to edit your material, learn how to go over it.

And I think the other thing which I recommend really, really strongly is that anyone who wants to be a writer should read authors critically—and not critically in terms of a literary sense. The system that I advise is this: Take any novel that you are reading for pleasure and read it, but have a notebook with you. And at the end of each chapter take a minute, maybe two minutes, and jot down your impressions of that chapter—like “I like how this character was introduced,” or, “I hated how that chapter ended,” or, “Something wasn't right here.”

And then just keep reading through the book so you get a sense of the book as a whole. And then, when you're done, go back through with your notes and say, “Oh, I liked how this character was introduced.” Reread that passage, figure out what it is that you liked, figure out what it is that they did, and then learn how to do that for yourself; because we all learn how to write based on the things that we've read.

We pick up those techniques. And you can either pick it up by osmosis—which will be chancy—or you can actually do a little bit of work and figure out how these things are. You know, you're watching other authors in practice, you figure out how you can do the sorts of things that they do, or modify it for what needs to be done today.

And I think those are the two things that will get you started. And then next year at Dragon*Con, take Aaron's and my classes, because that will be really good for you.

Ginger: Thanks, Michael; I really appreciate it.

So, before we turn this over to questions from the audience I want to give [Swoopy](#) a small gift. Come on up, Swoopy. I happen to know that you love Pugs.

Swoopy: Who doesn't! [Inspiring Stories about Pugs](#).

Ginger: This is a book that was edited by [Kyla Duffy](#), who was on [Episode 33](#) of *Books and Ideas*. She publishes books about rescue dogs, and the proceeds go to dog rescue organizations: [happytailsbooks.com](#).

Swoopy: The Pug's name is Fanny—which is like a double bonus. Thank you very much, Ginger.

Ginger: And also, Swoopy, I've encouraged her to start her own podcast.

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This month my pick is the book, [The Lost Dogs: Michael Vick's Dogs and Their Tale of Rescue and Redemption](#), by Jim Gorant. Those of you who have been listening for a while know that a few months ago I did interview Kyla Duffy from [Happy Tails Books](#), and I've gotten really interested in dog rescue since I got my rescued German Shepherd in January of 2009.

If you're like me, you might have assumed that Michael Vick's fighting dogs were all put down, but as this book shows, most of them were actually saved. One of the great things about this book is it helps to dispel the misinformation about Pit Bulls, because they really are generally very sweet dogs and they do not deserve the reputation that they have. And I can attest to this from the fact that I take

Jake to obedience, and I've met several Pit Bulls, and they have uniformly been some of the sweetest and most affectionate dogs I've ever met.

[music]

Ginger: OK, so questions from the audience: [Kinsey](#).

Kinsey: Two quick questions: Ginger, since you're interviewing all these people with all these wonderful books, talking about writing, have you been inspired to perhaps write a novel of your own?

Ginger: No. The whole idea of writing fiction mystifies me completely. Every time I hear somebody talk about it they're always saying, "When I was a little girl I started making up these stories." I have a niece who's going to be the next [J.K. Rowling](#). But not me. I am thinking about writing a non-fiction book on podcasting for physicians and scientists, because I think that science podcasting is an entirely different ilk from, say, Geek Talk—what was that show right before me?

Christiana: [Geek Radio Daily](#).

Ginger: Geek Radio Daily?

Kinsey: So, it's the opposite of [Podcasting for Dummies](#).

Ginger: *Podcasting for Dummies* is a great book.

Christiana: Yes, it is.

Ginger: It's a great book. It's a great place to start, and I don't intend to duplicate their material.

Kinsey: And I wanted to ask Skyler White, I was looking at the cover of your book and to me it strikes me as very similar to the cover of a [Cory Doctorow](#) book called *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*. I was wondering if it was inspired in any way by that.

Skyler: I have no idea. I love Cory Doctorow. I have no input, really, into the covers of my books. The story my editor tells about this cover is that she went into the cover conference and said, “I need wings, there have to be wings; but they can’t be on her, and we can’t see her back.” And the visual artist who was there said, “Well, this book is in Ireland, right? OK, we’ll just do them in stone right behind her.”

Ginger: There are wings in there? I never got past the corset.

Skyler: In two words that I just love together, there are stone wings behind her. They look like the headstone. In the same way that you can’t imagine how fiction writers, I can’t imagine how visual artists do what they do—that visual imagination, where you see something that answers a question like that. So, I don’t know about it being in Cory Doctorow’s debt or not, but I’m certainly in hers.

Ginger: [Grant](#).

Grant: I’m a geek that I love to know specifics on how you write. Do you have a certain type of notebook that you always use, or is it always you write in Microsoft Word, or a legal-size pad? I’m just a geek who loves to hear how different writers write their ideas.

Christiana: Right now I use a program called [yWriter](#) from Spacejock software. It’s a free piece of software, and it’s really great for organizing things. Each chapter gets its own file. Actually, each scene, if you break them up that way, gets its own specific file, and you can organize and say like this is the summary of this

scene; you can say what time of day it took place. It's helpful for organizing. Especially this new sci-fi novel, it's a much more complex plot line, and so, it was very helpful to keep that organized; although prior to that I used Microsoft Word.

Also, sometimes when I'm writing scripts for things there's a program called [Celtx](#). I use that, as well, although I'm kind of still learning it. There are a few weird things that I'm still kind of trying to puzzle out. But I do occasionally write longhand in little notebooks and stuff. I usually do that when I'm stuck, because I find that changing the format up a little bit, or maybe going out to a park or something like that can sometimes help me get past, not a block, per se, but help me puzzle out something that I'm having difficulty with.

Skyler: My answer goes back to Ginger's previous question about how well we get paid. I write whenever, wherever—any little bit of time. My only kind of rules around that are I need to know I have at least an hour. A novel is 100,000 words, and it's a lot of ideas, and if I'm going to dive in I need to know that I have at least a little bit of time. And the other thing is I'm very easily distracted auditorily, so I have a track of thunderstorms that I plug into my earbuds to drown out external noise. I write longhand, I've used Word, I've used text documents—just any little bit you can get. I'm attracted to the kind of fetishistic idea of like little rituals, but I just can't accommodate it.

Grant: That's interesting about the thunderstorm, because I have a track like that, myself—although personally, I use it when I'm having difficulty sleeping. That's like my trying-to-get-to-sleep album. And so, I think using your track to help me write would probably not be helpful for me.

Skyler: It would put you right to sleep.

Grant: Right. At the same time, though, I usually will put on over-the-ear headphones. And I listen to instrumental movie soundtracks, usually, when I'm writing.

Skylar: That's cool; that's a good idea.

Female Student from Emory: First off, science is sexy. Secondly, for Skylar, you talked a lot about Lilith, but I was curious about your neuroscientist, just because sometimes when you're focusing, as you are, on the feminine side, how supportive are you of the opposite side—that you also need to support your main point; that masculine side?

Ginger: Can I interrupt? I mentioned before that her neuroscientist in this book is really sexy. And he's a man. So, in my opinion, the guy gets a pretty good rap in this book. I mean we would all like to meet this guy. Is he inspired by anybody real?

Skylar: A little. If I were going to choose, I would come down on his side over hers. I think more like he does than I do like she does. And I tried very, very hard to get the science right. You'll have to tell me how I did (she's a neuroscience student at Emory; I met her there this morning at a different panel). But I tried very hard to get the science right, because I think that is the closest thing we have to an accurate description of reality. It's not a complete description, and I think to have a complete description of reality you need story. You need things which are true but not factual.

But the thing that fascinates me is where does that which is factual and that which is true not conflict; and where they conflict, how can you resolve them. And that's why she is myth and he is science. And that's why it's erotic; because ultimately those two things come together and create something that's larger than either of them are—which is my kind of hope for reality.

Sam: Wow! I love that idea. One of my problems recently in writing a novel is that I'm, as I grow older, more and more skeptical. And I don't also want to cheapen the mystery as a concept by explaining it too much, or by essentially not even involving myself with it. So, I have a problem sometimes in that I want to take it a step further. I do write a fantasy novel, and then in that fantasy novel, even, in the backstory of my novel there are gods in the world, but they are really just people who have made themselves into higher beings.

Skylar: Oh, how cool.

Sam: Because it's important to me. If someone shows up to me and says, "Well, but you write about gods, and these people are worshiping gods in your book; and you say you're skeptical, or you're agnostic, or you're an atheist, or whatever. How could you do that?" Well, I explain that what's happening is this is part of a process that they went through as people—it just sort of evolved—and they are providing sort of oversight and protection for people.

Skylar: I love the idea of evolved gods. That's fascinating. For me, one of the things actually came from one of the podcasts Ginger did. And I'm sorry, I can't remember who it was, but you had somebody who was talking about you take eggs, you take flour, you take sugar, you mix them all together, and you bake them, and what you have at the end of that is a cake. And there are still eggs it's still made up out of, but you can't take the eggs back out of the cake—there's something in the "cakeness" that is larger than any of the ingredients. And so, for me—and I'm an atheist—where the god is is in the "cakeness." Yes, we are a bag of neurons; yes, we are made out of electrochemicals. To me, that's truly all we are. But in the way those things come together there is an "usness" that is transcendent.

Sam: And then, getting into the myth, I had a character who was in my more modern novel, she's interacting with a kind of racial memory—like the concept of

plugging into this massive mimetic structure which can be used in the sense of like a clairvoyant or a clairaudient kind of person.

Skylar: Absolutely.

Sam: But she's really tapping into something we don't even know about—maybe, perhaps; I don't know. How can you resolve that? I mean I guess your whole novel is about that—how to get into that.

Skylar: Right. And my answer is you don't have to resolve that. When somebody says, "A or B?" you can say, "Yes."

Sam: OK, good. Thank you.

Christiana: *Nina* doesn't deal a whole lot with issues of spirituality, per se, but my sci-fi novel definitely does. We have a couple of characters who are religious. We have the local resistance cell against the alien occupation has kind of devolved into a sort of religious cult status. And then there's a lot of just discussion among the characters in terms of having various beliefs and having those come into conflict.

But I kind of was trying to deliberately present situations that might be difficult to explain, but we have one character who interprets that one way and another character who interprets it a different way. And ultimately, in many cases, there is no way that either of them is ever going to satisfactorily prove to the other that they are correct, and you just kind of have to find a way to continue living in that uncertainty.

I'm intrigued to hear about the neuroscience in your book. I'm a listener of the *Brain Science Podcast*, as well, and it's something that hasn't come into my writing as much as — the amount of time I spend thinking about it is out of

proportion to the amount of time that it actually has shown up in my writing so far. I just find all of the neuroscience to be really fascinating.

And I'm currently reading [The Ego Tunnel](#), which I heard about on Ginger's [podcast](#). And it's really just interesting, the presentation of the world as it can only be a simulation of what's really happening, created by our brains. And what difference does that make? Does it make a difference; and if so, what? I think some of that stuff is fascinating.

Ginger: It's really surprised me how many people have gotten that book. I think it might be one of the most popular—maybe second only to [Eric Kandel's autobiography](#). That one's pretty hard to top.

So, don't worry, I'm going to put links to Skyler's stuff at [booksandideas.com](#). And thank both of you for coming.

Christiana: Absolutely! Thanks for having us.

Skyler: Well, thank you so much. This was wonderful.

[music]

First I want to thank Christiana and Skyler for taking time out of what is the craziness of Dragon*Con to be interviewed. You can find links to their books in the show notes at [booksandideas.com](#).

Those of you that listen to my other podcast, the [Brain Science Podcast](#), know that I recently took most of the summer off from podcasting; and I have to admit I came very close to quitting. When I started podcasting almost four years ago my long term goal was to build a business. But it has become clear to me that, despite the high quality of both of my shows, they don't generate much income. Since this means that I will have to continue to make my living as an emergency

physician, I have decided to cut back the frequency of both of my podcasts. My intention is to try to produce one podcast per month, alternating between *Books and Ideas* and the *Brain Science Podcast*. I hope that this will make it possible for me to have time to explore and work on new projects.

The main project that I'm working on for the next few weeks is moving all of my websites from WordPress to Squarespace. This is also going to cost a little bit more, so your donations continue to be appreciated.

The best way to make sure that you're visiting the current version of the website is to type "booksandideas.com" into your Web browser. When the new site is ready that should get you to the right place. I will be counting on listeners like you to explore the new sites and to send me feedback; especially if you find bad links or other problems. I'm also going to be moving the *Brain Science Podcast* and sciencepodcasters.org to Squarespace.

As always you can write to me at docartemis@gmail.com, or leave me voice mail at 205-202-0663. If anyone wants to help me with these new websites, just drop me an email.

The next episode of *Books and Ideas* will probably come out in mid December. My goal is to have a new episode that people that just get new iPods or iPhones at Christmas will be able to listen to. But don't forget, if you visit the website at booksandideas.com, you can sign up for a newsletter that will provide the complete show notes for each episode, so that you don't accidentally miss an episode on this less-frequent schedule.

Also, don't forget that *Books and Ideas* has its own [iPhone app](#) and its own [Fan page](#) on Facebook. It's also in the podcast store for BlackBerry. And if any of you get to *Books and Ideas* or the *Brain Science Podcast* through the BlackBerry interface, it would really help me a lot if you would send me a link.

Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking with you again very soon.

[music]

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[music]

Theme music for *Books and Ideas* is “The Open Door” by Beatnik Turtle. Be sure to visit their website at beatnikturtle.com.

[music]

Transcribed by [Lori Wolfson](#)

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