Welcome to this instalment of the Oxford Fantasy Podcast. My name is Alicia Smith, and today we're looking at contemporary New Zealander fantasy author, Elizabeth Knox.

We start with a scene from her 2007 novel *Dreamhunter*. A boy is exploring a graveyard at sunset. He has been trying out a divining rod, looking for water; he climbs up on a felled eucalyptus tree and looks out at the sky.

The sunset was so violent that it should have been making a noise. The light cast the shadows of the far hills upward across the sky, bristling rays of opaque blue in a huge, bright, slicing pane of orange light.

There was a noise in the churchyard. It was not the sort of noise the sun might make, or a bird inspired by the sunset. It was a moan. It might have been a human sound, only there was no human consciousness, or intelligence or character in it. It sounded as though it came from a very dark place. It was a sound of absolute despair.

The boy climbed down from the felled tree. He followed the moan, creeping softly among the tombstones.

The sun went down. The billows in the sky seemed to roll and swell as they filled with purple shadows. The light went blue.

The boy stopped. He listened. He heard the sound again, a muffled rustling, then a terrible, raw-throat moaning.

A little way off, between two tall headstones, the boy could see a pile of colour - colour still, even in the blue twilight. It was a heap of white, red, yellow, and purple flowers. The boy crept closer. He saw a fresh grave, piled high with late summer flowers and wreaths, laurels painted black and gilt. Nothing stirred, but the ground moaned again, then shrieked, thumped, scraped and rustled.

The boy stood staring, his hands spread as though he held his hazel rod, it wavering in his loose grip, and turning - turning down to what he had divined.

This section of *Dreamhunter,* also published as *The Rainbow Opera*, is describing a dream, or a nightmare – but it's not a dream as we experience them. This dream has a name – 'The Water Diviner' – and is always the same story. It has been 'caught' by one of the characters in the novel, who is a dreamhunter. It is intended to be shared with others as part of a unique entertainment industry. The dreamhunter will sleep in the same room as those he plans to share it with; when he falls asleep, so will they, and will experience the scene as he does, vivid and detailed like no ordinary dream.

I chose this scene to begin with for a couple of reasons. It introduces one of the fantasy conceits for which Knox is perhaps best known. It also indicates some of the most distinctive features and preoccupations of her work. Her novels display a minute sensory attention to setting and place. Her style is generally fairly spare and plain, though it's full of atmosphere and tension. She is concerned with alternate mental states of various kinds: often dreams, but also illness, enchantment, and possession. And she comes back again and again to the theme of return from death – whether resurrection, or something more sinister.

Knox is the author of fourteen novels, as well as three novellas and a book of essays, and has won many prizes. She also teaches a class in worldbuilding at Victoria University in Wellington. Her work spans multiple genres, from young adult fantasy, to horror, to semi-fictionalised memoir.

Her first novel to garner international attention was *The Vintner's Luck* in 1998. It broke the mould for New Zealand fiction of the time, in being set elsewhere in the world – specifically, nineteenth-century rural France. In the *Dreamhunter Duet*, which is made up of *Dreamhunter* and its sequel *Dreamquake*, Knox returned home, but with a difference, creating an alternate-history South Pacific nation, Southland. It's both like and unlike real-world New Zealand. It's also the setting for her later novel *Mortal Fire*. In her most recent novel, *The Absolute Book*, New Zealand and France both appear - but they are only brief stops along the way in a narrative which jumps from fairyland to Purgatory to the roots of the World Tree.

Knox's approach to fantasy is varied – she's written about angels, vampires, and time travel, to name a few. But three linked themes turn up again and again: land and place; the body; and memory, particularly problems with or disruptions of memory.

These themes come together in a particularly interesting way in the *Dreamhunter Duet*. I've mentioned already that it's set in an alternate history, roughly in the Edwardian period, in a country with very similar geography to real-world New Zealand. One of the big differences between Southland and the real world is the existence of the Place, with a capital P. The Place is where dreamhunters go to find dreams. Lying beyond an invisible border in an otherwise unremarkable stretch of countryside, it's an empty, barren, unchanging landscape which only a few people have the gift of entering. Dreams seem to exist at particular geographical points within it. There are all kinds of stories, immersive sensory experiences, there to be caught, shared, and sold.

The story's protagonist, Laura Hame, is the daughter of the first dreamhunter, who discovered the Place when it suddenly appeared, years before the narrative begins. But when Laura starts to enter the Place for herself, the previously stable plotlines of dreams start to swerve and change when she dreams them. They take unexpected and disturbing turns, that seem to be trying to convey a message to her.

In the Place, Knox creates a landscape literally filled with fragments of memory and experience which continue to speak and have real-world effects. Dreams in this story can be exciting, beautiful, and powerfully healing experiences. But they can also be violent instruments of power, keeping the body captive and influencing its behaviour far beyond a single night's sleep.

And the land itself emerges as a speaking voice. We learn that the telegram lines which cross the real-world space of the Place now tend to produce corrupted text. Something is speaking: one character says, 'It was the Place… the Place used the telegraph to try to talk to us'. What is it saying? One of the corruptions reads: 'RISE UP I SAID RISE UP'.

Knox's fiction is full of places where atrocity has happened in the past, and continues to reverberate in the landscape, with often supernatural effects. In these places, time, and people's memory of it, becomes disrupted. Her novel *Mortal Fire*, also set in Southland, takes place in a rural valley still affected by a mining disaster which happened several years before. Up in the hills nearby is a house which no one seems to take any notice of. Their attention is always gently - or not so gently - turned aside by distractions and illusions. But the novel's protagonist, Canny, has a kind of second sight – halfway between a magical gift and what we might see as neurodivergence. It enables her to enter the uncanny orbit of the house, where even time itself has become locked in a powerful spell of repetition and renewal.

In *The Absolute Book*, the main character Taryn is driven primarily by the series of disastrous events which began - so we think - with her sister's murder, near the former family estate at Prince's Gate, on the borders of England and Wales. The spot where Beatrice Cornick was run down and killed is returned to several times in the narrative. An crucial instance, early in the book, is when Taryn brings a man who she thinks of only as the Muleskinner. He is tacitly offering her revenge on the murderer, who is about to be released after five years on a manslaughter charge:

When they'd first arrived at the wounded oak, Taryn felt she was sleepwalking into an exceptional state of being - as if the leaves of the trees were the days and days between Beatrice and her, in the same place, almost the last place Beatrice ever was. Taryn had felt she was taking the Muleskinner not so much to the crime scene as to Beatrice herself. 'Beatrice, this is your avenger.' (p.20)

The fallout from this pact drives the whole rest of the novel's sprawling narrative. It leads to Taryn's possession by a demon, which causes memory lapses and terrifying losses of bodily control. She is only able to heal with the help of the Sidhe, the fairy 'ladies and gentlemen' of Irish mythology. But their beauty and generosity, and the beauty and abundance of the land to which they take their abducted humans, is darkened by the revelation that their eternal life is paid for by a Tithe of human souls to Hell. This takes place every century at Hell's Gate, a beautiful flowering field filled with the countless graves of people sacrificed for the Sidhe's benefit:

The graves were so close together that they had to go single file. Picking her way through them reminded Taryn of a game she and Bea would play on flagstone paths and plazas, walking on the cracks instead of avoiding them, which was a traditional game of 'Step on a crack and marry a rat'. Bea had walked a zigzag tightrope across various public spaces, shouting, 'Bring on the rats!' - her little sister bumbling after her.
'Bring on the rats,' Taryn muttered to herself until they were through the patchwork of blooming grave mounds and out onto the meadow proper, where the flowers were thinner, no doubt hundreds of windblown generations from the plants first propagated by these gracefully mourning murderers. (p.275)

The murder which shaped Taryn's life is mirrored, in the narrative, by the centuries of death at the heart of the otherworld of the Sidhe. You can see a similar dynamic in Knox's Southland novels, with their supernatural hidden spaces. Family grief and regret spreads outwards, poisoning memory, so that people become trapped in its dysfunctional cycles. This pattern becomes a symbol for wider, deeper systems of exploitation and suffering.

It's worth noting here the complexity of some of Knox's positioning of her fantasy worlds. In the Duet, Southland is not shown to have any equivalent to the real world Maori - a fact which a few reviewers have grappled with and found problematic, particularly as Knox is a non-indigenous New Zealander. On the other hand, in *Mortal Fire*, Knox depicts the existence of various Pacific settler peoples in Southland. The protagonist, Canny, has grown up in a mixed household, with a mother from the fictional Shackle Islands and a stepfather of apparently European heritage. Her full name is Akanesi, but her white teachers and peers call her Agnes. Her multivalent identity is an important, if somewhat submerged, factor in the story.

In the Duet, too, the apparent absence of indigenous people seems to have symbolic significances beyond a worldbuilding choice. The emptiness of the Place is ambiguous, with its ruined buildings and traces of paths, suggesting a history just out of reach. As we've already seen, it is an unexpectedly vocal land, one from which suppressed voices are trying to break out. Its very earth is trying to disgorge what has been buried within it.

For most dreamers in Southland, the characters in the dreams are just ciphers – background colour to the safe, controlled experience of the dream. In Laura's experience, however, they begin to exhibit a disturbing reality, becoming not revellers and friends but prisoners and victims. Here's another dream from the first book in the *Duet*. It starts out as a romance narrative, with a heroine running after her departing lover:

She had to run. She must get to him before he was gone. She must have him touch her cheek again. […] She looked to one side and noticed that someone was building a new garden wall. […] She saw labourers in shapeless, grey clothes - their trouser legs gathered at the ankles. Then she was on her feet and ready to run again. […]

The heroine ran on, leaving Laura Hame *standing on the lawn of the heroine's house […] The wind stopped blowing, and the garden was silent, but for the insects ticking like a cooling engine.*

Laura went to look at the wall the labourers were building. […] The men were making bricks. […] She watched a man stamping the drying, unfired bricks, marking each with the flat of an arrowhead. She saw that, while the clothes the men wore were grey and stained with brick dust, they too were marked with arrowheads in a darker grey. And she saw that it was shackles that gathered their dusty trouser legs at their ankles.

Knox uses the fantasy conceit of the dreams to depict the return of the subaltern. This is a term in postcolonial theory for the way in which certain social groups, displaced to the margins of a colonial society, rise up and make themselves heard, by breaking the conventional narratives of that society. It's certainly debatable whether it's appropriate for Knox to exclude from her worldbuilding the actual peoples who are evoked by such narrative devices. But they provide a deep symbolic understructure to the Duet, which gives it a depth beyond its central coming-of-age and family narratives.

Similar frameworks are at play in much of Knox's work. Knox describes herself as interested in 'stories about the 'others' of mythology, folklore, fantasy, and science fiction'. This kind of figure is everywhere in her novels: an eclectic range of vampires, angels, fairies and more. But the 'other' is never just that. Knox depicts complex, messy relationships between human and non-human characters, which bring into question the line between the two.

The Vintner's Luck, for example, traces the relationship between a French winemaker, Sobran Jodeau, and an angel, Xas. The angel agrees with the young Sobran to meet him in the same place once a year, for the rest of his life. Xas is obviously, uncomfortably inhuman, but his bond with Sobran grows and deepens throughout the latter's life. It becomes something difficult to categorise – contentious, codependent, romantic, and intense in a way the people around Sobran cannot fully understand.

In *The Absolute Book*, similarly, the society of the Sidhe is both inviting - nomadic, cultured, at one with the landscape - and disturbing, as their possessive glamour allows them to gather groups of enchanted, docile humans. It's very unlike the brutal, shattering demonic possession which Taryn experiences elsewhere in the narrative, but it's no less an exertion of control. The only exception is the half-Sidhe man Shift, to whose household Taryn becomes attached. We're told more than once that he 'counts everyone as people'.

In this novel's world of gods, angels, demons and fairies, Knox is always concerned with people, of whatever kind, and their relationships with each other – particularly their responsibilities to each

other. In the Duet, for example, an important moral crux of the narrative is Laura's creation of a sandman - inspired by the golems of Eastern European Jewish folklore. Through the story she struggles with what it means to create, command, and eventually set him free. But just as important is her close, sisterly bond with her cousin Rose, an endearingly realistic depiction which finds a tragic echo in Taryn's loss of Beatrice in *The Absolute Book*.

There's a lot more I could say in connection with the various things I've touched on in the last few minutes: the line between fantasy and horror in Knox's work, particularly body horror and the body in pain; the eclecticism of her sources and influences; her explorations of time, whether to do with personal memory and experience as in the Duet, or with more explicit focus on mathematics and physics, as in Mortal Fire. But I hope this has inspired you to explore her fiction. Also recently out in this podcast series is an interview with Knox herself by Carolyne Larrington of the Oxford English Faculty, discussing *The Absolute Book* – so do check that out.

Thanks to Emilie Lavallee for providing the extra voicing on this podcast, and thank you for listening.