



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 647, Interview with A.E. Copenhaver

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Athena.

A.E. Copenhaver: Well, hi, Mariann! Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Mariann: It's so rarely that we get to talk to anybody who has written fiction because there's not that much fiction written for us, you know. So often...I know everybody has this same problem, they're reading a book and it's really good and then the character, who they fallen in love with, starts eating a steak and all of a sudden, eh... That happens over and over. You really have to suspend a lot of animus in order to get through a novel. But that is not true with yours, of course. So before we start, without giving away any spoilers or whatever, can you just give people an idea of what and who this book is about?

A.E.: So, this book, this is called *My Days of Dark Green Euphoria*, and it follows our main character, her name is Cara Foster. She's a 30-something millennial type person who works at a nonprofit environmental animal rights organization. And she is dealing with crippling eco anxiety and climate grief, so that kind of sets readers up to think, "Oh, this is going to be really very sad and morose." But our, our character is actually quite zany and quite absurd and she's kind of a caricature of a lot of environmentally friendly folks out there. And so she ends up becoming obsessed with her boyfriend's mother, who is not at all ecologically conscientious. In fact, it's almost as if she's living in a different world. And Cara finds that attitude and that mentality, for some reason, addicting. And she ends up kind of wanting to spend all of her time with this character, named Millie, her boyfriend's mother. So, and it kind of just follows Cara's devolution into Millie's world.

And it's meant to be absurd, it's meant to be over the top. It is written as a satire, but... There are points in the story that are obviously very, very serious. They cover some serious topics, for sure.

Mariann: It is really funny that it is meant to be over the top. And it certainly is over the top...at the same time, like, it's so easy to identify with. Maybe it's

because I'm kind of over the top, myself. And Cara is a kind of difficult, a bit prickly.

I mean, she's likable, but not always totally lovable. And I'm wondering, why did you write her that way and not make her a little bit more of a perfect person that everyone would love?

A.E.: I think that perfect people that everybody loves...are kind of boring. I think that it's more fun when we can kind of show characters with all their flaws and all their foibles.

And then it's a little bit more satisfying when they do have a redeeming moment because Cara kind of takes readers on this whiplash back and forth. You know, she's kind of getting on the right track and then she kind of devolves again and then she kind of picks herself back up and then it gets bad again.

And I also think that...I'm a vegan myself, and I've been an angry enraged environmentalist. I've been the person who can't go to dinner parties with people because I'm too angry about the animals on the table. You know, I've been in that place before and I just thought that it would be more interesting to see if I can illustrate what that feels like. What that psychology feels like. When everybody else around you is kind of having a great time and everything's just hunky-dory but then inside you're quietly dying...That's what it feels like.

So I just thought that that would be more interesting.

Mariann: I feel like activists, myself included, are always working at finding ways not to be taken as self-righteous or preachy, not to put people off, so we can get our message across. And I wonder if you agree and, and it does seem to be a central struggle. Though, Cara doesn't struggle with it as hard. She doesn't seem to mind being seen as a bit crazy and, maybe the rest of us do. But, I always find it's a little hard to pull off, not appearing self-righteous when, of course, I think I'm right. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think I was right. How do you work at finding that balance between not being seen as self-righteous, but not compromising on your beliefs? Which, you know, Cara was very, very adamant about not doing.

A.E.: Yeah, that's such a great question. I think that's the constant struggle. I want to say, in my personal life, I've developed ways of being with people that work for me and work with other people. I kind of know my limits with certain folks, and I know what I can get away with. I know when I can kind of press a little bit harder.

I know when it's appropriate to sort of say, "Well, yeah, it's upsetting what happens on dairy farms. And that's one of the reasons why I don't drink milk anymore." You know, something like that, but the internal feeling is ever-present, of that kind of urgency and that desire to want to share the truth and to make people aware.

So I actually kind of enjoy the strategic communication side of activism and effective communication as activists. So that's from me, from a personal perspective. But for Cara, in the book, she's not interested in that. She's also sharing her internal monologue with people. She's, you know, there's a couple of moments where she and her best friend Renee, her coworker, talk about strategic communication and effective activism and is just kind of like, "Yeah, yeah, that's boring." You know, she's like, "we're having a crisis on the planet. There's no time for that kind of thing."

And so I wanted to be able to illustrate and show what it feels like on the inside to kind of be struggling with that constant desire to do the truth-sharing, truth-telling, but in a way that's not offensive to people. But, I mean, Cara is offensive at times she's just openly judging people and just really letting it rip, in a lot of ways.

And I think that there's value in that perspective, at times, even if it's not effective at convincing people or reaching people. I still think that there's value in that psychology and that's kind of what this book explores is...How does somebody with that perspective, how are they viewed in the world?

How are they marginalized? How are they dismissed? Because it's not the character that's the problem, it's the world. It's society. It's the way that we've set up these systems of oppression and abuse and exploitation. And then the minute you wake up and you see them, then you're the problem. You're the one who's got issues and who's crazy. So I just wanted to kind of put a stamp on that character in the literary perspective and sort of say, "There's value here. And it's important that we consider what they're saying from an ethical perspective."

Mariann: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's a great value of the book that, like, Cara may be annoying and she may have bad strategies, but she's kind of right about everything.

It's not like she's she's wrong. Everybody else is wrong. And they don't find much redeeming about Cara or they can never really get her. Most of those people still have said to me, "but she is right." They still can see that she is correct about pretty much everything. I mean, everything that she's mentioning

in here, are kind of facts. All the really upsetting moments in the book, they're based in fact. They're either something that I've witnessed myself or that I've researched and verified, or... It's all based in this reality that we live in every day. And so if people find Cara offensive, it's usually because they're pretty ensconced in the sort of dominant paradigm and they're not really interested or ready to listen to somebody pointing out these things.

Mariann: Absolutely. So why did you decide... I mean, you obviously have a lot to say and you've thought a lot about a lot of these issues. Why did you decide that fiction was the vehicle? Or were you just driven to write fiction or do you really think it's a useful tool to make points in a certain way?

A.E.: Yeah, I do. I really do. I've written non-fiction, solely nonfiction, up until this point. You know, various science communications, climate interpretation. I've worked on science teams, I'm not a scientist myself, but I've helped scientists communicate their science. And there's always this moment where I have this desire to tip into fiction, you know, I want to tip into taking the story into a creative direction that doesn't actually exist in the real world.

So I always knew that I wanted to write fiction, but it took me a long time to get around to it. It's so hard to articulate the power of fiction, of literature, of books, but it can be transformative. And fiction has this ability to kind of sit with people, even if they didn't like a book or a character or a portion of a book, it's still, it can still kind of be in their psyche.

It's like, once you've read it, you can't unread it. You can't unsee it. And there's something powerful in that. And I tried to use humor throughout this story as well, mostly through Cara, because she's kind of humorous at times, in her absurdity, to kind of soften some of the truths that she shares.

And so packaging those truths in a way, at least in this particular novel, in a way that people can kind of tip toe around a little bit. That makes it a little bit more accessible. I mean, because if Cara were this perfect sort of saintly person everyone would just kind of write her off and be like, "oh, well, she's perfect. That's unachievable. That's not realistic."

But she's not at all. She's angry. She's petty at times, she's judgmental. She's kind of prone to being a regular person. And she has all of these values that she really adheres to and wants to live out in the world. And I think that dichotomy, between her being just a regular person but also having these higher values that she's seeking, that to me is worth exploring in fiction. Because it's hard to

encapsulate that in like an essay or a story about a person. I think fiction is what allows the psychology to really come through.

Mariann: I agree, and I wish we did have more fiction. And that's one of the things that I'm pleased to see about your book, and about Ashland Creek Press, of course, who published it.

And I feel like if you write an essay, you're just setting yourself up as an authority and telling people "this is the way it is." And we all know that everybody then just shuts down. But with fiction, especially characters who are not like...if you just had a perfect character, people would do the same thing they would say, "okay, okay. Like just shut up" or put the book down or, you know, because it challenges them a little too much.

But with characters, you're not asking somebody to like Cara or to think Cara's right. You're just presenting her as a person. They can choose another hero in the book. Though I'm not sure there's anybody in the book who is exactly anybody's total hero. But it does leave a lot more up to the reader so you can kind of get those ideas through without them immediately putting them back up and saying, "go away. "

Well, and I mentioned Ashland Creek Press, which of course has published other fiction in this area. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of getting published? I'm sure there are people listening who have a novel in their head and are thinking, "well, how can that novel get out into the world?"

A.E.: Yeah! So Ashland Creek Press is a boutique independent publishing house based out of Ashland, Oregon. And it's run by Midge Raymond and John Yunker, and they are both vegan.

Mariann: They have, of course been on the podcast.

A.E.: Yes. Yeah. Midge and John and they run a contest. I think it's annually or, you know, the pandemic might've disrupted some of the timing there, but they run a contest called the Siskiyou Prize for New Environmental Literature.

So I submitted my manuscript to the Siskiyou Prize at the end of 2019. And in early 2020, April 2020 or so, I was informed that the manuscript was chosen. So I had won the Siskiyou Prize for New Environmental Literature. So I found out about Ashland Creek after I had written this manuscript and sort of was looking around for a publisher or maybe an agent or somebody who might be interested.

And I just thought, “Well, I’ll keep looking for an agent, but I’ll submit to this contest at the same time.” It sounded right up my alley, I thought the book would be a perfect fit for them. It turns out it was. And I mean, that was one of the most momentous occasions of my life because Carol J. Adams, who’s one of my longtime heroes, just a vegan queen and activist and author herself.

And she was the judge for the prize that year. So yeah, just overjoyed, so thrilled and honored to have the manuscript selected. So that’s how I got into it. That’s all I can say, this is my first novel. This is the only book that I’ve published.

So I don’t have much to compare it to, but it’s been so pleasant. It’s been so rewarding working with John and Midge.

Mariann: I can imagine.

A.E.: Yeah, it’s been fantastic.

Mariann: Yeah. And I mean, I know unlike non-fiction where you normally submit a book proposal to a publisher and they decide whether they want you to write the book... With fiction, you just pretty much write the book, right? And then, and then start submitting it.

A.E.: Yeah.

Mariann: So get working everybody, get going on that book.

A.E.: Yes, absolutely. And that’s kind of the advice that I like to share with people is that writing...there’s debate about the importance of writing to market, writing what you think is going to sell. That’s always helpful, of course, but I know from personal experience that that desire that you have on the inside of yourself to write the book that you really want to write, that’s never going to go away, whether or not it’s marketable or whether or not people are going to want to read it.

So you still have to write that book that you want to write and that you would eventually like to read and for it to exist in the world. So I say start there anyway, because that desire is never going to go away. So it’s important to write those stories that we want to see in the world.

Mariann: All right. So, once again, everybody sit down, write that book.

A.E.: Please.

Mariann: So pleasure. Pleasure is such a theme in this book and the idea of denying oneself pleasure, Cara gets a little over the top with doing that in order to do the right thing. And on the other hand, you mentioned the character Millie, the kind of courting of pleasurable experiences and simply ignoring all of the implications of their actions, which is more like the rest of the world. Is one of the points that you're trying to make, or that these characters end up making, that it's important that activists find ways to experience pleasure within the framework of not causing harm and not make activism, just kind of self deprivation all the time? And if so, how do you pull that off?

A.E.: Yeah, absolutely. That is such an important component, and I actually haven't thought about it like that, but you're so right, but I just personally have this vision of a planet that is mostly paradise.

I mean, I think that humans have the capacity to create a paradise on Earth. I don't know what that looks like, exactly. I'm not really sure how we get there, but I feel it. You know, I have days where I'm just like so happy, just so overjoyed, even knowing everything that I know about the state of the world.

So, I think it's really important that that seeking of pleasure, and not just pleasure for ourselves, but pleasure and comfort and safety for everyone. And that's really what Cara is pushing in her story as well.

It's not enough for her to be comfortable and living this kind of bougie lifestyle with her rich boyfriend in San Francisco. You know, that's not enough for her. It's a very pleasant lifestyle, but she sees the abject poverty and the abuse and the neglect that happens across the world for people and animals and ecosystems and she wants everybody to have equal access to that kind of pleasure. So yeah, I would say it's essential that activists keep that the seeking of pleasure foremost in their minds when they're going about their work, because so much of what they see is so horrific.

It's almost impossible to imagine a world that doesn't have all of that violence in it, but it's essential that we do.

Mariann: I totally agree. You have to have that vision. And also, because we're just never going to sell this if it's not enjoyable! And it so is! Like, we all know that it's just great. The food is great. The life is great.

So Millie, who you mentioned, who is the pleasure seeking character, but with no mindset of what impact she's having in the world. I imagine she was written to be an extreme example of that kind of mindset, but I kind of found that she was just pretty much like everyone. Like even perfectly nice people just completely indulging in whatever they want.

Which isn't, you know, enormous, just, you know, whatever product they want and whatever packaging they want and whatever car they want. And so do you find her to be an extreme example or just kind of like the world?

A.E.: Well, that's a great question because I set her up relative to Cara to appear extreme. Because, I mean, I think at one point, Cara has, in the midst of one of her breakdowns, she ends up going to Target with Millie.

This is a very normal thing that people engage in the world over, especially in America. But I mean, I've been there myself as well. You know, like these Target shopping adventures where you're just like, "I'm going to buy everything." And so in Cara's mind, that's this very extreme activity. So yeah, I mean, on the one hand, Millie is this extreme character, but really only extreme relative to a character like Cara.

But again, that's the psychology that you can play with in fiction that's difficult to play with in non-fiction. It just came so easily to both of these characters that it just kind of all fell into place that Millie just buying donuts and smoking cigarettes and drinking a lot of wine and going and having massages and pedicures...like that's stuff that a lot of people engage in, and there's nothing inherently wrong with it, but when you compare it to the sort of violence of the world that kind of looks a little bit indulgent, I guess.

Mariann: Yeah. She's a little bit over the top, but not really that much.

Another underlying theme of the book, I think, and this is something that's coming up all the time in activism circles of late, is the relevance of personal actions or what people sometimes see as personal sacrifices in the face of these global crises. Like, "Does it really matter what I do? Does it really matter if I go vegan? Does it really matter if I take shorter showers? So, because, you know, obviously I'm just one person..."

Now, I think most vegans have kind of resolved that, that their individual actions do matter, but it is really important that we don't stop there. Anyway, what do you think is the role of individual action? The kind of things that Cara does.

That she really deprives herself of a good deal of things in order to live a pure, pure, pure life as opposed to seeking systemic action. How do those two things fit together?

A.E.: I think the boundary for individual action crosses over into negative territory when it compromises our ability to care for ourselves.

So I think Cara is kind of in that realm, she's having a hard time taking care of herself. She's having a hard time distinguishing between what she truly wants to do and what she truly feels obligated to do, and that obligation is what gets her into kind of that like destructive behavior. So I think activists kind of have to know themselves, they have to be able to have boundaries and then they have to preserve enough energy, brain power, personal power to, I would hope, help enable some of that systemic change. Because we understand that doing our individual part is the best that we personally can do, but then we can magnify and amplify our impact by getting involved in bigger and bigger efforts.

Joining communities, joining up with different activist groups or yeah... Writing essays or stories online or doing public speaking, that sort of thing. And if you're not taking care of yourself because you're too bogged down by whether you've composted your teabags that day, that's not helpful.

That's actually not helpful to you as an individual or to the larger community. And I think that's actually kind of a fair criticism of Cara, is that she's so focused on her own individual actions, almost in a selfish, like self-conscious way that she's actually not really, aside from her day job, she's actually not engaged in any sort of community action.

You know, we kind of see Renee, her coworker and friend, doing a better job of taking care of herself, still kind of an extreme version of an activist or environmentally conscious person, but she's also able to do public speaking and go participate in conferences and conventions and things like that.

Whereas Cara is not, she's just kind of crippled with her own burden on the planet. So I think it's an important balance that each person has to find for themselves.

Mariann: I think you expressed that really well. Doing it is harder than expressing it. It's pretty hard where to draw that line and doing it as even harder so frequently.

And there are so many people right now as environmentalists kind of wake up to the idea that animal-based food is a problem. They really, really, really, so many of them, still don't want to stop eating it and are saying, "well, individual action doesn't matter. Going vegan doesn't matter." But of course, I think we all know that it does matter.

It doesn't fix everything, but it gives you a starting place. I think one of the things that drives Cara to act in ways that are irrational sometimes is that she lives in fear. I mean, she knows too much about what's happening to the planet. And I'm just wondering, how much does that line up with your personal predictions regarding climate?

You talked about how we could live in a perfect world. Are you scared that the world is going to become even much less perfect than it already is?

A.E.: Yeah. There's so many layers to that. I think the fear that Cara experiences is legitimate and valid. And I think a lot of people do feel that way. And I think this is where the title comes in the dark green euphoria.

I'm still kind of undecided about what dark green euphoria actually refers to. Is the dark green euphoria the kind of the addicting devolution into worse and worse conditions on the planet and kind of being okay with that? Or is dark green euphoria that seeking of pleasure, that kind of like keeping that memory, or that vision, of a world that we could create despite all this madness and all this violence, like, which is it?

I'm not really sure. And I don't know that Cara knows either. But I think that's kind of what I wanted to explore a little bit. Do we all just kind of throw up our hands at some point and kind of like the last days of Rome kind of like, "yeah, we're going down with the ship. Like let's just enjoy ourselves while we're here"?

And I think a lot of people feel like that as well. But I think it's, for me personally, I'm more on the dark green euphoria side of the beauty and the euphoria of the possibility of a paradise on this earth. That's kind of, I think, where I'm personally coming from. That's what keeps me going. And that's really kind of what has allowed me to overcome a lot of my own climate grief and a lot of my own eco-anxiety.

I can just keep that vision in mind. And then that is kind of what pushes me to kind of put my big girl panties on and deal with it and do my very best every day. So.

Mariann: I think you can't overestimate the value of having a vision. Like you just have to, you can't just be fighting against things. You have to be fighting for some things.

Your bio mentions, and I think you mentioned earlier, that you are a climate interpreter. I actually don't know what that is. Can you tell me?

A.E.: A climate interpreter... So the word interpreter comes from the science communication side of strategic communication. So it's basically being able to share and interpret science in an effective and productive way with non-expert people. So climate interpreter is actually, I could go to a cultural center, like a nature center, and I would be... I'm certified in climate interpretation to be able to talk to people about the climate crisis and solutions, what people can do to better understand the science and then get involved in their communities to help enact change in a productive way.

And basically the interpretation part comes from the need to help people bridge gaps in their own knowledge. So we all have gaps in our knowledge and how we understand the world and complex processes. Climate interpretation helps to fill those gaps in with, basically research backed social science, and actual climate science to help people better understand the science so that they're not as prone to falling into the, what we call the swamp, you know?

"Well, oh, well the climate has always changed, so there's nothing we can do about it." You know, falling into those kinds of unproductive modes of thought. And in fact, there's a lot of parallel between effective climate communication and effective climate interpretation to effective vegan advocacy and interpretation.

I mean, helping people understand the processes of what happens in dairies or on feedlots or in the fur industry or wherever. Helping them understand the reality of those industries without placing blame, without implicating them, and basically helping them understand the basic injustices that are happening and then empowering them with solutions that they can choose to put into action in their own lives or not.

And, um, so that's kind of what climate interpretation is. It helps people have productive conversations about the climate. Yeah.

Mariann: It sounds enormously needed because we've all seen people just hide within the complications of the science to make it a non-issue.

You mentioned veganism and that reminded me of something I wanted to ask you about. This organization that Cara works for is basically an environmental organization. But it focuses a lot on factory farming and animal issues and actual animal well-being and it incorporates undercover footage and animal suffering into its messaging. And I want to know what that organization is! Because it's been my experience that, you know, the animal rights organizations... they deal to some extent with environmental issues, but it's not their mission. And the environmental organizations still, I don't know any environmental organization that goes that seriously into, or even remotely that seriously into the issues of factory farming.

Like, is this your dream organization? Or do you think that this is happening? Well, I think there is starting to be a little bit more crossover between the environmental and animal rights movements... So, was this aspirational?

A.E.: Yeah, it was totally aspirational because just like you, I can look out and I can see these amazing environmental organizations that are doing lots of great work. And then there's very rarely any connection to the food on our plate. So Marcuson and Everett Environmental, the company that Cara and Renee work for, it's not real, it's totally made up.

It's inspired by some of these different organizations. I will say that Mercy for Animals was a big inspiration because they do all the undercover investigations. So I kind of was channeling some Mercy for Animals campaigns and work that they do, but then I linked it up with like a Nature Conservancy or a Center for Biological Diversity type program.

I think Center for Biological Diversity, they do a pretty good job of being an environmental organization that also doesn't shy away from the messaging about the food on our plate and the impact of factory farming. How basically, if you're eating meat in the US, you're eating from factory farms, it's almost unavoidable. Because what is it? 99% of animals killed in the US are from factory farms. So, I mean, it's like, it's unavoidable. So yeah, to answer your question, it's totally made up.

Mariann: Yeah, I would agree that those two organizations would be good examples of maybe ones that are getting a little closer to bringing these things together, but not quite there. Cara frequently says, or at least at some point says, that she wishes she didn't care.

And I wonder like if that's where she got her name from as well, because it struck me that Cara cares, maybe too much. But I'm just wondering, do you ever

feel that way? Do you wish that you didn't know all of these horrible things that are happening or going to happen? Or are you glad that, you know and at least can do something about them? Or maybe both?

A.E.: I'm glad that I know. I think there's always a desire and I think that's where the inspiration for the book came is this kind of desire to understand better, or at least kind of dig in, give it the college, try to dig into some of the psychology of the folks that appear not to have to care or appear to, you know, that's kind of the Millie character.

But no, it's so strange to articulate it because going vegan was like one of the greatest joys of my life. And that comes with this knowledge of all this violence. And it's just like all this horrific... All these terrible things that are happening to animals. And, you know, I include people in that as well.

Like the people who work in the factory farms and just the violence that you have to witness to get to the point where you're like, I'm not going to contribute to this anymore. Then it's just this lightness, it's this. Yeah, it's this great euphoria that comes over. It comes over you where you're kind of like, I don't have to participate in this and I feel so much better because of it.

So yeah, I would choose if I had to choose, I would choose to be Cara over Millie. But that's not to say that Millie doesn't have any value. I do appreciate Millie's ability to enjoy life and to be carefree. And I think I'll always kind of admire people like that.

Mariann: I almost wish we could have a Cara-Millie character who, because I appreciated Millie as well.

She's always seems to have a good time. And that is something that sometimes when you know too much about what's going on, you forget how to do that. Two really interesting characters in this book. Thank you so much for, for joining us to tell us about them. I think for our bonus content, for those of you are in the flock, you're going to be reading from the book so people can get a taste of it.

And I think they'll be really interested to hear these characters in... I was going to say, come alive. I guess that's not exactly life, but it's much closer to just talking about them, you'll be talking in their voice. So thank you so much for joining us today, Athena. It's really been a joy.

A.E.: Thank you, Mariann. Thank you so much. I'm so thrilled to be here. I've been a longtime fan and am so honored that you were able to have me today. Thank you.

Mariann: Aww, that's so nice to hear. Thank you.