

EPISODE 123

“**DG:** Great work, great art, so often emerges from individuals who are in community, who talk with others, who share their work, who throw out a draft, get feedback on it, refine it, revise it.”

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:28.2] AT: Welcome to The Portfolio Life Podcast with Jeff Goins. I’m your host, Andy Traub and Jeff believes that every creative should live a portfolio life, a life full of pursuing work that matters, making the difference with your art, and discovering your true voice. Jeff is committed to helping you find, develop and live out your unique world view so that you too can live a portfolio life.

Do you know why some of the world’s greatest authors needed each other? What happened when they came together every week, year after year, after year, after year? Diana Glycer knows more about the internal workings of the Inklings, a deeply accomplished group of authors that included J.J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, more than probably anyone in the world and today we’ll learn from her about the power of writing and community.

Here is Diana Glycer and Jeff Goins.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:15.4] JG: Well Diana, welcome to the show. It’s great to have you.

[00:01:18.1] DG: Thank you so much. It’s really a delight to be here.

[00:01:20.4] JG: So I was looking at the Amazon page of your most recent book, *Bandersnatch*, which I loved and I was reading this review from Michael Ward, who is the co-editor of C.S. Lewis and it says this, and I would agree with this and I think this is a great place for us to begin. “No one knows more than Diana Glycer about the internal workings of the Inklings.” And he goes

on to say, “In *Bandersnatch*, she shows us how they inspired, encouraged, refined and opposed one another in the course of producing some of the greatest literature in the last 100 years.”

So who are the Inklings? This is a group of people that I, thanks to you, have become much more fascinated with recently. Who are these people and why are they important to us today and to really the history of literature?

[00:02:08.2] DG: Great, well the Inklings are a group of writers that met regularly. The group included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, two names that are pretty familiar to some. But there was a group of 19 men and they got together once or twice a week for about 17 years and in those meetings, there was a special kind of magic that happens. They led their works in progress to one another and they stayed up late into the night giving each other critiques.

Some of those critiques are very kind and supportive and encouraging and some of them were just brutal and it is in this forge of friendship and engagement that some of the great works that we love were created. We think of the Lord of the Rings, what a genius book that is and to realize that every single chapter of that was read aloud to this group of writers who not only critique the chapter that they had just heard but then engaged in conversation reflection. What should happen next? Where’s the story going? And this whole thing unfolded within this group setting.

So the Inklings are the group of authors in Oxford in the 1930’s and the 1940’s, getting together in the evenings, well not that different I guess from what a lot of college students would do, talking about what they were working on and then supporting, helping and encouraging and challenging each other in the midst of it.

[00:03:36.6] JG: So I think one of the things that you have done, which has been pretty cool to watch and experience is you’ve brought attention to the fact that these writers whom for decades everybody knew that they knew each other and even spent time together but they didn’t know that they necessarily influenced one another and you tell a story that I love, early on in your academic studies where this is what people were telling you.

That yes, the Inklings knew each other, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien knew each other, these eventually famous authors from the 20th century knew each other but we have no idea of ascertaining whether or not they influenced each other at all or they're work and you just mentioned that they definitely did and so I am wondering if you could share a little bit more about that? What were some of the discoveries that you made in studying the Inklings for years and what exactly were you told going into that study to begin with?

[00:04:31.0] DG: Sure, that's a great question. I love that question because it really does point back to a change in the way that we think about these authors. So when they were first written about primarily in a book by a guy named Humphrey Carpenter, there was a lot of denial of influence. The Inklings themselves said, "We didn't really have that much influence on each other."

And then there is that famous statement when someone wrote to C.S. Lewis and asked, "Did any of you guys have any influence on Tolkien?" And Lewis basically just laughed and said, "No one ever influenced Tolkien. You might as well try to influence a Bandersnatch." A Bandersnatch is an honorary mythical creature invented by Lewis Carroll and appears in, among other places, in the Alice in Wonderland stories. "No one ever influenced Tolkien, you might as well influence a Bandersnatch," he said.

Well that sounds like it's kind of a last word on this whole issue of influence and it has taken at face value for decades but when I was in high school and I read that for the first time, there was something about that that just didn't seem right to me because how could these guys interact, talk with each other, go over works in progress and rough drafts of their work together and to have that happen in conversation for there not to be influenced.

And so I was really puzzled by that and decided that what I really wanted to do was to get to the bottom of it, was to figure out what did they say in these meetings and then what difference did that make in the work that they're doing? And I realized that that approach to the Inklings was a little different than what had been happening before. So in earlier studies as the group, people tried to look for influence by taking their books and putting them side by side and comparing them and looking for similarities.

So you would say something like, “Well, there’s dwarves in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and there is dwarves in *The Lord of the Rings* and so therefore, there might have been influenced.” So that’s the influence of similarity and that is an interesting way to look at influence and a lot of literary critiques consider it that way. But what got exciting for me was not looking so much at the product, that is looking at the end books that they had done.

But looking at the process and trying to figure out where in the process of these conversations did a critique or a suggestion or a question completely changed with the direction that the work was taking and it was looking at their writing process, the questions that they asked each other, the opinions that they offered, the inspiration that they got from one another that really opened up this whole topic. When we look at influence, are we looking for imitation or is influence something much bigger than that?

I think that influence really has to do with something that changes the direction that a project takes and so a suggestion that an Inklings made to another Inklings that changed the direction of it is where we really find the power of influence. One of the great examples of that I’d say again has to do with *The Lord of the Rings*. So Tolkien wasn’t influenced, well one of the stories that shows us how profoundly influenced he was has to do with his work on *The Lord of the Rings*.

When he started that book, he really didn’t have in mind a sequel to *The Hobbit*. So he wrote *The Hobbit*. It was very well received, people loved that book understandably and the publisher asked them to write another Hobbit. So he started a new book and he titled it, *The New Hobbit* right?

[00:08:04.5] JG: Pretty original.

[00:08:05.2] DG: Yeah and he wrote a few chapters of it and then he had lunch with C.S. Lewis and he sat with Lewis and he said, “I’m writing this new book because the publisher asked me to but I’m bored to death, I can’t even stand it. I don’t know what to do. I think I am done.” Chapters after chapters of the book right? So Lewis says to him, “Tolkien, the problem is that Hobbit are only interesting when they are in un-hobbit like situations.”

So it gets Tolkien thinking about this, “Hobbits are only interesting when they are in un-hobbit like situations.” So if you think about the very opening chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, what you have is you have hobbits, you have fireworks, you have birthday parties, you know all this kind of hobbit-y stuff. But until they got outside of their comfort zones, until they get outside into the danger and adventure of a larger quest, the story doesn’t have any traction.

So it’s that comment from Lewis that changes the whole direction of *The Lord of the Rings*. So Tolkien goes home that night, we have wonderful evidence of this because they kept their letters you know? And we have evidence in their diaries and if you look at the manuscripts and their multiple drafts and here’s what happens that night: Tolkien goes home after the kids are in bed, he goes to his garage where he’s got a desk set up and he’s thinking about what Lewis tells him, right? “Hobbits are normally interesting when they are in un-hobbit like situations.” He rewrites the section he’d been working on and this is the place in the story where the black riders first enter the story.

[00:09:40.1] JG: Wow.

[00:09:40.5] DG: And the whole room just takes off from there. It becomes much darker, much longer, much richer and what I love about that is Tolkien’s own description. He says, “The story has taken on a life of its own.” So because of one lunch with a buddy, the story where Tolkien was basically done and directionless, one comment opens up the vista and gives us what we now know as this long and wonderful, rich, epic story *The Lord of the Rings*. I think that is a pretty strong evidence of influence, how about you?

[00:10:15.2] JG: Yeah, absolutely and it’s so well told. I love that story. I was thinking I read about this and after I read both of your books, *The Company They Keep* and *Bandersnatch*, *The Company They Keep* is sort of the more academic version of both of them and then they’ve got advantages to both of them. bBut what I love telling people is did you know, and correct me if I am wrong about this Diana, did you know that Bilbo’s name originally was Bingo?

[00:10:40.8] DG: Bingo that’s right.

[00:10:44.0] JG: People were like, “What?”

[00:10:44.9] DG: Bingo was his name O, yeah absolutely.

[00:10:46.3] JG: Yeah was it Bingo, Otto and Frodo or something were the names of the hobbits?

[00:10:49.0] DG: Yeah.

[00:10:49.4] JG: And I was like, “Well, you know hopefully C.S. Lewis had some bearing on that.” But it actually like super interesting because it didn’t have, I don’t think Bingo had the same connotation then than it does now and what would we think of when we think of Bingo today had he not changed that? But yeah, I love that.

That’s a great story and I guess if these letters and journals existed before you made these discoveries or these books, why are people subscribing to this idea that they didn’t influence each other? Was it just that quote from Lewis? I mean why do you think people believe that they were creating these great works of literature in isolation instead of collaborating with one another?

[00:11:29.7] DG: Well I think that there is kind of a pervasive myths of the solitary genius, right? And some of these is kind of created by Hollywood and because tortured geniuses are more interesting to write movies about than sane, healthy, productive individuals who get up every day and write their 500 words, right? So if you’re a Hollywood executive, you’re going to make movies about those few exceptions that are tortured and isolated and so forth, and living these dangerous lifestyles.

But the average writer doesn’t experience they are writing a life in that way. As you know, a lot of it is that you just stood up and you do that day’s work. You get up the next day and you do that day’s work. That’s the great secret, and doing that day’s work isn’t as isolated as we tend to think. So this myth of the solitary genius, the whole idea has its roots I guess in the romantic movements and the idea of genius is something that comes as kind of a bolt from the blue.

This is alone, you get caught up by the spirit of the muse and then you write furiously from start to finish a work that is perfectly formed. But that's a really nice story. That's not how writing generally takes place. Writing generally takes place because people work on it in a slow and steady and rather methodical way and in the process of that, they involve other people. They involve other people for encouragement because gosh, the life of an artist any kind of artist, any kind of creator is fraught with discouragement.

How do you get people to just believe in it when you can't believe it yourself? You need people to correct your path. You need people to come along and say, "Well that's good, but it's not quite right." Or as Lewis and Tolkien worked together, one of the things that Tolkien tells us is that Lewis would read something that Tolkien had written and then he'd look at Tolkien and he'd say, "Better, scholar. You can do better," and then Tolkien would take it home.

And he would work harder, he would hone his craft. He would try to rise to the expectations of his immediate leaders and so the more that I have studied this and I have looked at writer's groups and creative people of all different kinds of visual artists and film makers and musicians, I find that great work, great art so often emerges from individuals who are in community, who talk with others, who share their work, who throw out a draft, get feedback on it, refine it, revise it.

Think about how musicians do that, right? They're working on a song, they play it, they gauge the audience response, they tweak it a little bit, they give it another go at a different show, they get a different response, right? Writers do that too, it's just not generally as public as what musicians do and so this myth of the solitary genius, this idea that genius is something that is first of all tortured and second is very isolated or individuals, is pervasive in our culture.

I think that is really unfortunate because it robs writers and other creatives of the possibility of writing the way that writing or creating normally takes place, which is being in a community which is the sensitivity toward audience, which is part of ongoing conversations. So I think that that's why it took so long for somebody to discover the extent, the full extent of influence among the Inklings. I think that part of it too, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this a little bit, is that we tend to be a little suspicious of people who are influenced. Like it's a sign that they're maybe

they're not smart enough or they're not talented enough to do it on their own, so they are forced to rely on someone else's help.

I remember giving a talk once and showing the wonderful way that C.S. Lewis and his wife, Joy Davidman worked together in the creation of the novel *Till We Have Faces*. So they talked about chapters together and Lewis wrote them and Joy critiqued them and on it went. After I gave that talk, a woman stood up to the audience and she was livid and she said, "C.S Lewis was a genius, he did not need any help from a girl."

[00:16:09.3] JG: Oh my gosh.

[00:16:10.1] DG: And I thought, "Wow."

[00:16:11.3] JG: Geez, what a sexist lady.

[00:16:16.3] DG: But that — and I was just stunned at that reaction. But I think that the truth in attitude that we have, that if you're really, really good that you don't need help, I don't think of it as help. I think of it as, let me put it this way: I think that writing like other creative acts are transactional. That is that the glory of being a creator is that we make something. We write a book, we paint a painting, we write a song and play it and then it's received by somebody who hears it or who reads what we've done.

And it's that transaction, that interaction between the creator and the one who receives it, the reader maybe, it's that interaction where things really get exciting, where they come alive. We can do this podcast and this is great, we talk with each other, things arise from our conversation, but the glory of an experience like this is when people will listen to it and then make comment on it and they lift off of it and then add their own insights to it. It's that transactional nature of the creative process where things really get exciting.

[00:17:31.1] JG: Yeah, I agree and it's fascinating that that woman thought that in order to be a genius you can't get help from other people.

[00:17:38.0] DG: Right.

[00:17:39.0] JG: Maybe that's not, like you can be a genius and still be influenced. I think many geniuses were, they were borrowing from their influences and then building on that body of work.

[00:17:50.1] DG: That's right. The raw material that all of us us for the creative work that we do is stuff that is already out there and if we're wise, particularly, and here's the big thing for me. tThis is kind of my "aha" for the year as I've been thinking about my own creative work is realizing that I need to build a life that's creative where the creativity is sustainable. When you think about work that's sustainable, I don't want to be a flash in the pan, I don't want to do work for a year or two and then be done.

I want to do good work year after year. I want to do better work next year than I did last year and in order to do that, I'm going to think about what makes my creative life sustainable? And one of the things that I think is absolutely essential is community, is having other people who are supporting me, asking good questions, holding me accountable, praying for me, helping me to find my path, helping me to make a good decision.

You talk so much and so wisely I think about interacting with people who are good at what we're interested in. Learning from them, not just the facts that they gather but the process that they're engaged in. We need to do a lot more as creatives to help each other, especially if we're going to make lives of significance, not just work of significance.

[0:19:13.4] JG: Yeah, I know, I totally agree. I think in another conversation you and I had, you told me that you're a part of a writers group, is that right?

[0:19:20.1] DG: Yeah it is. I have a couple of different groups. One of the things that when I talk about the Inklings, people get excited but they think that that means they have to form a critique group that you're a group that gets together specifically to read works in progress and critique it or somehow be text centered as they're getting together. I think every writer needs a group.

I actually think every innovator needs a group or possibly more than one group and the idea that is, that I think they need to think about is, "What kind of group do you need?" So I have a group

that gets together twice a month with other creatives. They are people who do all kinds of different work from painting to music, to writing dissertations, to writing fiction or nonfiction. A lot of different creative work that we do.

We get together to basically encourage each other to problem solve and to pray. This group has been meeting, our group has been meeting for more than 15 years and I couldn't do what I do if I didn't have them. But we never ever in that group read drafts out loud, that's not what we're about. But we are about an ongoing network of support for the creative work that the each other are doing. So there are different kinds of groups. One of the things I found very helpful is to do project groups or ad hoc groups.

So when I was looking on *Bandersnatch*, I had a group of students that got together with me. We got together every week during the composing of that book and we had dinner and then we sat around the living room and we read chunks out loud to each other and we revised some of the key ideas and edited the text together. But that was a temporary group that we met for 14 months and then the group was done. So this kind of ad hoc or project oriented group I think can be a really powerful idea. How do we gather people together for the purpose of a single project, not forever, not in perpetuity but to work together to get a project done? And then another person in the group has project and then we kind of go over the air and help them as whatever kind of help or support they may need.

If you think about different forms of groups, not just critic groups but the problem solving groups, you talked about mastermind groups, which I think is brilliant, just getting together, comparing notes, problem solving and helping each other. I think mentoring groups are really, really valuable. We need to think about we're passing along, what we're learning to others. So thinking about having a group, more than one group. C.S. Lewis was a member of more than one group so was Tolkien and thinking about how these various ways of gathering and connecting can help to energize the work that we do.

[0:22:12.3] JG: I love that and this is one of the things that I really loved about *Bandersnatch* was the practical elements of it, helping readers who are writers and creatives and people who want to grow in their own craft in community, giving them practical steps to form those own groups. One of the things that I hear, Diana I don't know if you encountered this, but I hear

people going, “That’s great that C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien and who else, Owen Barfield,” and there was a large group, as you mentioned, those are the two probably most famous examples of people think of.

“There’s a whole group of men that knew each other and that’s great they just happen to influence each other and all be geniuses. It’s great that you live in New York City or Nashville or LA or wherever. But I don’t have those kinds of opportunities and I don’t have — there’s anybody in my town that I can meet with in a group like that.” I’m wondering what you think about that sort of thing? I don’t know if you hear that. I hear that occasionally.

As you mentioned, I’m a big fan of getting into peer based groups where you can grow together, not trying to go it alone. But I hear that and people go, “Yeah but, I’m not around a bunch of great people. I’m the only person in my town who thinks like this or who has aspirations of doing something beyond, whatever we’re doing in a small little town in the Midwest or whatever.” How do you respond to that?

[0:23:38.7] DG: I would take you back to the start of the Inklings. So again, I think that we are mesmerized by the end of the story and we forget the beginning of the story. So we think that Lewis and Tolkien and Williams and all these geniuses like “poof”, got together in this great dynamic group but that’s not what happened. What happened is that Lewis and Tolkien were part of a group called the Coal Biters, which was a group of Oxford intellectuals who got together to translate Icelandic sagas from old Norse to English.

[0:24:14.2] JG: Like pretty standard stuff, is what you're saying? I did that at the bar last night.

[0:24:20.2] DG: You did? How’s your old Norse?

[0:24:23.2] JG: It’s a little rusty but it’s...

[0:24:26.1] DG: A little rusty, yeah, me too. So they were a present group called the Coal Biters and it completely academic group, very focused and perhaps somewhat esoteric. But what they discovered is hanging out in this group that they really resonated with each other. They really kind of liked each other, even though they were very different kinds of personalities. So after the

group disbanded, they decided, “Hey, how about we just start getting together for lunch one day a week and just hang out?”

And so they did, that’s how the Inklings, this grand, heroic, amazing group started out with two bestie professors, simply saying, “I learned from you, I like hanging out with you, you’re good for my mind, you know? How about we just start having lunch once a week and just talk about what we’re doing?” That group of two is I think the secret of how great groups get started. Call that a dyad, two people who start to make a commitment to get together and just start to speak into each other’s lives.

They get together, they start talking and it was a couple of years after that that that the group we know as the Inklings grew out of those lunch meetings and what happened was after they got to know one another better, Tolkien decided to take a risk and a lot of what I tell people is at some point somebody’s got to take a risk to take it to the next level. Somebody’s got to make this scary phone call or somebody’s got to make the scary connection or somebody’s got to take the risk in sharing a scary, impossible, outrageous idea, I’ve seeing whether or not it flies.

Tolkien put the risk of sharing a poem he had been working on. It’s a poem called *The Lay of Leithien*, it tells a story of Beren and Lúthien, an elf and a human who fall in love. It’s a wonderful poem, not very well known, it deserve to be better known. But he decides he’s been working on this poem, he’s going to share it with Lewis. Lewis reads it, Lewis loves it, but Lewis also has a critique of it and it was that kind of exchange that kicks off a new direction for these two men. Lewis starts bringing his poetry to these lunch meetings and so they go from just conversation to critique and then they start inviting people slowly.

Warren Lewis joins them, Robby Havard joins them and little by little the group grows. It grows slowly over time but the heart of it, two guys who at that point, neither one had written anything of significance. I’ve argued in *Bandersnatch* and elsewhere that I don’t think they would have written things of significant if they hadn’t had the support and the challenge and the expectation of one another. So I tell people that you can start small. Don’t think about starting some great critique group or big movement. Just find one other person who feels like they might be a resonator, who feels like they might be sort of on the same path that you are and just make it a habit to get together more often.

We have a lot of advantages nowadays with internet and emails and texting. I know the number of writing groups and writers groups that after they make these connections, they do a lot of their readings so to speak online forums or texting forums, putting stuff up on Goggle drive to critique. But then they get together from time to time, perhaps as part of an annual conference or an annual get together to kind of keep the personal connection going. So there's lots of options but I would say then that that's one thing is start small. The Inklings started small and it grew from just two people who enjoyed each other's company.

[0:28:19.2] JG: Yeah, that's great. You recommended a book to me that talks a lot about that, *The Powers of Two* by Joshua Wolf Shenk. He talks about that sort of the smallest unit of community is two people and it's a great book talking about famous examples of creative people throughout history who influenced each other and often what you find is, almost always, he says you find pairs of people. Lewis and Tolkien, Lennon and McCartney, on and on. So it's fascinating stuff.

I'm curious and I guess this is maybe a little bit conjecture but nobody knows the inklings better than you do and so you know, I read this stuff and it's aspirational for me and so I love making it more human and going, "Look, this took years, it was pretty — it started out casual and became more formal and really wasn't probably as formal as we thought." Mean, I read your accounts of the records of the meetings where like they kind of come in late and you know.

I mean they're just dudes hanging out, not to take away the specialty of it. But, as you said, without this community, you went so far as to say these men would not have created some of the most memorable works of literature of the 20th century, at least in the way that they did. We would have had Bingo the hobbit.

[0:29:36.9] DG: Right.

[0:29:38.6] JG: So what was it about the Inklings that made that group so special if you had to say and why does this group still matter to us today? Or why should it matter?

[0:29:48.6] DG: Yeah. I think that what made the group special was different for the different members because different writers or different creators, different innovators need different things. Some people just need encouragement. I use the word resonator, which is one of my favorite words to think about what a group like the Inklings that are resonators — well resonating means to vibrate at the same frequency, right?

You think about, I'm not a musician but a friend of mine explained to me once that if you look at a piano, piano strings apparently don't make very much noise. They're not very loud and so the body of the piano picks up that note and resonates it, right? Same with the violin I understand, right?

Violin's string by itself doesn't make a very loud noise, but the body of the violin takes that tone and starts to vibrate at the same frequency and that's what we hear when we hear a guitar or a violin or a piano, we hear the resonance. So what some people need is just resonators, people who say, "Fundamentally I get it, I get what you're trying to do," right? So I think it's really important for a lot of people but there's other things that we need.

We need praise for what we do. Gertrude Stein said, "When you write a book you need someone to say "yes" to it." It's very, very difficult to sustain a creative vision if you don't have anybody who says "yes" to the work and the nature of the work. WE need role models, we need people to correct us when we get off base. But I think one of the things that we need more than anything else, I would say, or probably, a word that is often used is "accountability" but I like the word "expectation".

So what the Inklings found in each other, they found designs, they found encouragement, they found resonators. But I think what they found that really made things happen with expectation to every Thursday, at 9 o'clock in the evening, C.S. Lewis was going to look around that room and say, "Well, has nobody got anything to read us?" I think that knowing that every Thursday, without fail, there would be people who would be sitting in their seats, waiting to see what new things you had done that week, changed everything. It wasn't accountability in the sense, I don't know, when I think about the word accountability, I think that somebody's going to slap your knuckles if you don't get the work done.

[0:32:16.2] JG: Right.

[0:32:16.9] DG: It's not like that. But the idea that there's somebody waiting and when you show up, they're glad to see you and when you've got something new they are eager to lead in to what is that you're up to, I think that's what is the necessary ingredient that makes ideas grow. That makes them grow into something great because we all kind of need that. Otherwise it gets lonely and we run out of gas I think. We just don't have what it takes to sustain it.

The Inklings met, week after week and they knew that there was always going to be somebody there for them, somebody eager to see what they were up to. I had studied the Inklings now for I don't know, going on 40 years. I have no specific evidence for this but here's my theory. Tolkien was a notorious procrastinator, I don't know if you can relate?

[0:33:13.0] JG: I have no idea what that's like. I don't know what you're talking about.

[0:33:17.5] DG: No idea what that's like to rearrange the living room furniture when you've got a deadline.

[0:33:19.5] JG: Yeah, I was talking to my wife today and I was talking about this new big idea I had and then you know, I was like, "I'm really worried about this," and she just sort of roll her eyes, I go, "What, what's going on?" She goes, "Look, like you are so, like this is great but this is just predictable and in six months you're going to be telling me something else and I'm going to be rolling my eyes and saying you said this." I said, "So what you're telling me is that I'm consistent in my inconsistency?" She goes, "Yeah, it's pretty predictable." So yeah, I know a little bit about that inconsistency, procrastination, a little.

[0:33:50.5] DG: Yeah, well Tolkien was famous for it and if you've been paying attention over the last 20 years, new Tolkien books keep getting released. But mostly, they're good starts but never got finished, you know? The things that he sort of drafted but never really felt comfortable enough with. He didn't consider them good enough and so he didn't send them out there.

But now, I'm really grateful for the Tolkien Estate that these works are becoming available to us to read so that's really exciting. But here's my theory based on no evidence that I can find. My

theory is that 92% of *The Lord of the Rings* was written on a Wednesday night because Tolkien knew on Thursday he's going to have to be looking at C.S. Lewis's face and Lewis was going to say, "Last week you said you'd tell us what was going to happen next in the story. What did you write?"

It's that expectation and there's a ferocious aspect to it but there's also compassionate expectation that says, "You had this great idea, you told me about this project, you said you were going to try this, how's that going for you?" And knowing that other people are out there, I think makes all the difference. It makes a difference in creative work but haven't you found that it makes a difference in just sort of these simple things? I mean, every now and then I embark on my goal to be more faithful at my running practice, you know? Get out and run a few miles and I do much better when I have someone running with me.

[0:35:25.7] JG: Absolutely.

[0:35:26.7] DG: I am much more likely to want to hit the snooze button and instead of lacing up my shoes if I know that Barbara's going to be standing there out there waiting for me to meet her and we're going to tackle those hills together. So it's the idea that companionship actualizes mere ideas and then actual things come forth, projects are born in that process of that happy expectation of those people around us.

[0:35:56.4] JG: That's so great and you're absolutely right. Every January I make a decision that I'm going to run a half marathon or marathon and I've run the national half marathon three years now and about half way through I go, "I'm going to make another decision to ask for a refund." This year I'm running with a couple of guys and so I think I actually started this and I regret starting this. I started the trend, the habit of us checking in weekly, we text each other our mileage and our pace. "I ran today and here's my mileage and here's my pace."

I regret it in a tongue and cheek way because I'm like, "If I don't run this week, A, they're going to ask me about it and B, come race day, I'm not going to be able to keep up," and I love what you called it, I'll put these two monikers together that you, the label that you gave this, which was "ferocious compassion", you know? And that's what friends do for each other. I had a friend recently tell me, "You don't know what you want," and I was like, "How dare you?"

“You don’t know what you want in your career. You want this and you want this and you can’t have both, you have to choose.” I was like, “How dare you? Of course I do, I have vision, I know where I want to go, I have a plan,” and he’s like, “Okay, what do you want?” I was like, “Well, I don’t know.” It was a painful conversation you know? Because it made me face some, you know, my own flippancy. It made me face some things that, you know, some fears that I had. I was like, “Well, you know, if I’m being honest, I’m not just pursuing this,” and really it was more writing projects because what if I do that at the cost of this other things and I fail and it would just be easier to not try.

That’s so great. I love that, this has been great Diana. You opened up, there’s this quote from Flannery O’Connor that you referenced as the epigraph for *The Company They Keep*, which I love it. I love this. It’s a little bit long but I want to read it here just because I think it’s so great and it encapsulates what we’ve been talking about here, which is this belief that we tell ourselves about creative geniuses. Like they’re special and they don’t need other people’s help and as you said, and I love this, it’s the story that we tell ourselves that can actually hold us back I think.

[0:38:08.2] DG: That’s right.

[0:38:08.8] JG: You know? So how many more potential geniuses would be out there if we would let go of this myth that you have to do it all on your own?

[0:38:16.5] DG: That’s right.

[0:38:16.6] JG: So here’s the quote that you referenced, which I never heard before, this is from Flannery O’Connor:

“There is one myth about writers that I have always felt was particularly pernicious and untruthful. The myth of the lonely writer. The myth that writing is a lonely occupation involving much suffering because supposedly, the writer exists in a state of sensitivity, which cuts him off or raises him above or casts him below the community around him. This is a

common cliché, a hangover probably from the romantic period and the idea of the artist as sufferer and rebel.

I suppose there have been enough genuinely lonely suffering novelist to make that seem unreasonable myth but there is every reason to suppose that such cases are the result of less admirable qualities in these writers. Qualities which have nothing to do with the vocation of writing itself unless the writer has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication and communication suggests talking inside community.”

I love that. What does that mean to you, personally and practically, as a creative person?

[0:39:23.3] DG: What that means to me is that I am free to feast upon all the things that I need as a creative to keep my ideals alive and to feast on friends, on fellowship, on companions, on good advice, on great books, on important role models, these are the things I crave and that I need in order to continue to do the work that I do. She nails it and there’s something very freeing about that realization that I don’t have to be on this hard journey alone, that there are others.

Whether I’m listening to a podcast, or reading a great book, or learning about an example like Lewis and Tolkien and the Inklings, or just sitting down for coffee or making a phone call to somebody because I’m discouraged and I just need someone to sort of pick me up and dust me off and throw me back into the race. We’re freed up to do this and learn and encouraged, I think, by a quote like that to be very daring and creative in the way that we surround ourselves with a kind of support that makes our creative lives strive.

[0:40:42.3] JG: I love that. Diana, thank you for your work and thank you for your friendship and thank you for this new book, *Bandersnatch*. I loved it and I know a lot of people are loving it, it’s helping debunk this myth that being creative and being in community are not diametrically opposed at all but actually quite closely related. So thank you again for your time.

[0:41:02.6] DG: Well thank you Jeff, it’s always a pleasure to talk with you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:41:12.3] AT: So who are you going to surround yourself with on your writing journey? We'd like to know. So, go to today's episode at goinswriter.com/123 or tell Jeff on Twitter @jeffgoins. We appreciate the time you take to listen to our show. I'm Andy Traub and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us today. Now, go build your portfolio.

“DG: I tell people that you can start small, you know? Don't think about starting some great critique group or big movement. Just find one other person who feels like they might be a resonator, who feels like they might be sort of on the same path that you are and just make it habit to get together more often.”

[END]