Interviewee Name: Astrid Edwards
Interviewer Name: Erin Scudder
Date of Interview: 27th of September 2022
Location: Online via Zoom
Length of Interview: 30:55 minutes

Transcript

Erin Scudder: So can we start by me asking you to please introduce yourself in any way that you'd like?

Astrid: Thank you. My name is Astrid Edwards. I am 41 years old, and - I don't know what is most relevant! I guess I, I started my career as a teacher. I taught classical Latin at a private girls school.

Erin: Wow.

Astrid: For one year and I mention that because languages and the written word and writing and storytelling has always been central to what I want to do and who I am and what I enjoy.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: I only taught for one year and then I got very distracted and became an economics and policy consultant for decade.

Erin: Wow, that's different!

Astrid: It was different, but when I was 32, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and I'd been ill for at least a year beforehand, maybe more. It's hard to tell.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: And - I guess - that was quite the life event. And at that point I re-evaluated what I wanted to do with my career and my life, and I realized I wanted to go back to kind of where I started, which was not teaching classical Latin, but working with words and storytelling and writers. So over the last nine years, I've kind of hopefully done well. I don't know how to judge these things. Transitioning into writing, the literary scene and the education sector - I teach writing at RMIT University.

Erin: Yeah. Okay. Thank you. And in terms of your practice, your creative practice as a teacher, as a writer, and in terms of the other work you do, what are some of the standout experiences that have helped you? You touched on this already, but what are some of the standout experiences that have helped you become the creative practitioner you are today?

Astrid: Ageing? I care way less than I used to about - and by care less I mean I care less about potential judgment or what other people might think, or am I doing something that will be popular? I've stopped caring, and that's purely a function of age, I think. Being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and - I was really ill for the first year, very ill - I haven't been as ill since. And that was an extremely difficult time physically, but also emotionally. I had no idea. I kind of lost my sense of ... I think I didn't, I didn't feel worthy in terms of having a career. I didn't think I was still allowed to have a career and, you know, be worth someone paying me. And I had a bit of an existential crisis.

Erin: Yes.

Astrid: So that was very much a defining moment for me. Now that I teach - so I teach at RMIT University and I teach in vocational education, which is not as prestigious as higher education, where this study is being done - but it also kind of fills that gap for people who fell out of the system, weren't in the system to start with, and the cohort of students who enroll in writing is unexpectedly different from the kind of general cohort that enroll in other vocational education courses at RMIT. There's a high degree of disability, there is high degree of mental ill health and there is a high degree of enrolling in order to write trauma.

Erin: Right.

Astrid: So it's kind of a - that's not everybody, that is a large generalisation - but I mean, we regularly count and it's somewhere between one third to one half of the student cohort every year.

Erin: Yep.

Astrid: It's significant and I bring that up because it is a genuine ... pleasure and privilege to be able to work with young writers who might have been feeling like I felt when I was diagnosed.

Erin: Wow. Yeah.

Astrid: And of course, I already had like ten years of a career where people paid me well and respected me and I wore a suit and it was all very fancy, and, you know, I had a lot of experience that a lot of people with disability haven't and it's nice to be able to give that in a classroom.

Erin: Right. So do you find - or - how do you find that that motivates you?

Astrid: Oh, I just believe in equity and I think that people with disability, people with chronic illness, are treated really badly in general.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Astrid: But significantly less badly in the arts than elsewhere. There is a marked difference.

Erin: Interesting and were there particular people or mentors involved along the way? No?

Astrid: No, not really. I kind of made it up myself. I could have done with a mentor.

Erin: Yeah. Yeah, feel that. Yeah and so you've talked about your, a couple of different paths. Teaching Latin and then what was it - an economics adviser?

Astrid: Yeah, a consultant working on climate and social policy. You know, basically, economics and policy. Economics and policy for corporate clients, state governments, all very boring.

Erin: Yeah and then you had your diagnosis and then you got into writing. So what - maybe the answer is that your diagnosis was the most formative thing, but was there anything else that was particularly - pushed you in that direction, that pushed you into the direction of what you're doing now?

Astrid: So I guess I have two answers for that. The diagnosis and that first year when I was just very ill was a life event that caused me to change what I was doing. I decided I only wanted to do things that I love and that was writing and reading but I already loved those. I really loved those before I was ill. So it wasn't that I found writing when I got sick, it was that I made the choice to only do things that I like and love and it happened to be what I have always liked and enjoyed and loved. So the catalyst was being ill but being ill is not what I want to create art about.

Erin: Yes.

Astrid: It is, to be honest, deeply boring, being ill but it was the thing that made me change my mind and focus my attention.

Erin: Yeah. Interesting and what about, have there been barriers to achieving what you've been achieving? And what of those been? If there have been?

Astrid: I have a few answers to that. I lost a lot of confidence. So I think there are a lot of internal barriers. It's taken me a while to kind of - well, it's hard to change industries, it's hard to change careers and I at the beginning didn't have very much confidence. I was - I didn't trust my own health, didn't trust my own fatigue levels or stamina, so that was a barrier, a real one, but also kind of one I placed on myself, I suppose you would say and then there's just, you know, society's expectations and judgments which are pretty bad and I say that whilst I'm being recorded, noting that I have a huge degree of privilege. I'm a white woman, I'm incredibly highly educated, so - and I don't look sick most of the time. So I have invisible disabilities and I can pass as healthy unless someone Googles me and then the cat's out of the bag but that comes with an inherent amount of privilege and - yeah, I hope that answered your question.

Erin: It does. Are you currently presenting in the spaces, like, are you present in the spaces that you want to be, or are there places where you'd like to be present or visible that you aren't currently?

Astrid: I'm really enjoying what I'm doing at the moment. I when I was a little kid in primary school, I thought I could grow up and be a reader. It turns out you can do that, but you don't get paid for it. It's not actually a profession. I am, I am trying to make it a recognised profession, and I'm doing a lot of literary judging at the moment, and I am really excited to be a judge of the Stella Prize.

Erin: I saw that, that's amazing.

Astrid: It is, it, it feels amazing. I am very proud and honoured to be able to do that. So in many ways, my answer to your question is yes, I am really happy where I am now and what I've achieved, but I also am very aware that because I've been so open about having Multiple Sclerosis, a lot of people ... I'm going to quote former model turned disability activist Tara Moss and say a lot of people call you inspirational and then don't pay you.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: And so, I get a lot of that and it's shitty. Yeah, a lot of people with mental health, a lot of people with disability get a lot of that.

Erin: Yeah. And that sort of touches on what you said before about not wanting to write about illness.

Astrid: Yeah, I think - I did once. I have a piece in the 2021 anthology from Black Ink "Growing Up Disabled in Australia" ...

Erin: I saw that as well, yes.

Astrid: ... edited by Carly Finlay, you know, with a deliberately provocative title that was toned down by the editors.

Erin: Wow.

Astrid: Something like, "Do I belong in this anthology?" Because my experience of illness came in my thirties. I had 30 years before I realised that I had an incurable progressive neurodegenerative disease. So, you know, I have so much of my identity and - came before illness.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: And I'm able to compare how people treated me before and after.

Erin: Yes.

Astrid: And on balance, it could be better.

Erin: Right.

Astrid: So I don't particularly want to -

Erin: You have that longitudinal comparison.

Astrid: Yeah. I don't particularly want to spend my life writing about illness or disability. I do desperately and deeply believe in equity and the ability of people to write what they want and so often we see among the students, particularly the younger students - but age is not the most important thing - that they want to write their experience and once someone has had the opportunity to write their experience, then they kind of might be able to move on. Again, I'm talking in generalisations, but it's, you know, people don't wake up and want to write about illness every night of their lives.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: People have an identity outside of labels or categories, and it might be their art goes there.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: But a person with a disability could want to do journalism on climate change or write poetry or fiction, nothing to do with health and so I like encouraging students to find the skills that they need to write whatever it is that they want to write.

Erin: Right - yeah, I love that. How do you think spectators or your audiences see your work and is this important to you?

Astrid: Mostly my work is written, so I have no idea. I don't know. I find that one a difficult one to answer because there's nothing for performance. I mean, I have a podcast, 240 episodes, so I guess there's listeners and audience. I can see the stats. The stats have been going up, so, you know, that's always encouraging. So that's "The Garret: Writers on Writing" and it is a podcast interviewing Australian writers about their craft and their work. There - there's probably about 20 interviews with writers who are disabled or identify as a person with mental illness and they are my favourite, I think, because it's interesting to see and listen to that aspect of someone choosing to share that with the world. And I guess kind of by way of answering your question, those episodes tend to rate really well. So I guess other people like hearing them.

Erin: How did the opportunity to host "The Garret" come about? How did -

Astrid: I made it up.

Erin: Right - amazing. I was hoping that would be the answer.

Astrid: Yeah!

Erin: Yeah, it's a double-edged thing, I guess when you have to create your own opportunities.

Astrid: Look, that's true, but I think that - you know, I tell my students that sometimes you have to create your own opportunities in order to be taken seriously. So I think that from "The Garret" - you know, all 240 episodes - not really many people say no to me anymore. And that has helped the rest of my career.

Erin: I'm going off script here, but can you tell me what inspired the name?

Astrid: Oh, yeah. So "The Garret", it's an English word, not a particularly common word. It's a little cheap attic for rent where, you know the kind of tradition of the struggling writer in the garret unable to afford to eat or write. And they just working on their poetry, you know, it's kind of writers in the garret. Because writers in Australia do not get paid very much.

Erin: Absolutely. In terms of Disability Arts as a thing, as a field - which, you know, you might have views on in itself - do you think that people, past or present, are aware of it, are aware of Disability Arts, is there a good degree of visibility?

Astrid: No.

Erin: That's a big question, isn't it? Right.

Astrid: I think it's changing and it is slowly improving. So that's not a definitive end of times "no", but no it's not great. And I think there's also an assumption and this is an assumption people make - I don't believe this - but the assumption that people make is it might not be good quality art because it's just disabled people doing it.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: And so - I really find this quite fraught because I believe in grant funding and I believe in funding, you know, on the basis of identity sometimes, whether that be gender or orientation or age or disability, etc.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: But sometimes people look down upon that in terms of the art that is produced, and that's a societal thing. That's not an industry thing. And I don't really know what structural barriers could be removed in order to change people's perceptions like that, but it is very much the case.

Erin: I was going to ask, do you think awareness or visibility of Disability Arts has increased - which is what you've just answered and you're saying, yeah, it's hard to imagine what the structural changes could be. Do you think that - is there anything that comes to mind that has made a difference or that has impeded increased awareness?

Astrid: I'm not sure if awareness is the right question. I think - so I would make the analogy to feminists who are always told they have to write about being a woman. I would make the analogy to Black or First Nations people who are told they have to write about race and racism. Disabled people, people with disability are often - it is often assumed that their work will be about disability.

Erin: Yeah. Absolutely.

Astrid: That's an assumption that doesn't help.

Erin: Yes. Yeah, I agree. Before I move on to more questions to do with identity, which I'm keen to get onto. What do you think - big picture - are the major milestones or big major happenings in Disability Arts in Australia over the time period that we're looking at (50 years)?

Astrid: I thought about this question, and to be honest, I could only think of one that made any impact on me and that was the life and work of Stella Young and basically, you know, her incredibly powerful point that many, many people have quoted since and will continue to quote, no doubt. But, you know, people disabled people aren't here for your inspiration. You know, and I think that really forceful pushback goes into kind of what I said before about disabled people don't have to make art about disability.

Erin: Yes.

Astrid: Disabled people are fully formed individuals with hopes and dreams and experiences and everything that, you know, don't have to be defined by illness or disability or the health system and I think that that was very meaningful for me.

Erin: Yeah. Here comes the yes / no question. The big one. Is, is your art or creative practice political?

Astrid: Yeah, but not because it's about disability. I want to spend the rest of my life writing about climate change.

Erin: Right. Good answer. I haven't heard that one yet. Here comes the follow up. In what ways do you think of your practice as being political or informed by - or, aspirationally speaking - how would you like to see that focus on, say, climate change exert a bigger place in your work?

Astrid: I think that writing is fundamentally political. I mean, you know, I guess if you're writing a romance or something, it's not. But pretty much any nonfiction is political if you're doing a good job and I write nonfiction, so - yes, it's political in that sense. I do think that - I find myself obsessed by the climate crisis, and that is where I am kind of shifting the focus of my work, because I think it's fundamentally important - but I also think that there is an area that is not really being looked at and that is in the disability community, but it's also in the arts community. People with disability will be really negatively affected by all of the possible and likely impacts of the climate crisis, which will further exacerbate existing inequalities.

Erin: Can you go into more detail about how you think those effects will play out for disabled people?

Astrid: Disaster management. I served on the Victorian Disability Advisory Council from 2019 to 2022. There's no brilliant plan for disabled people in an emergency.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: We are going to experience more emergencies in the future because of the climate crisis, but also, you know, many people with disability because of societal barriers, not because of inherent skill, are low income qnd then you get into, you know, in very cold periods and very hot periods, you get into energy equity and the ability to heat or cool and, you know, the ability to go outside and work or attend school or work in the heat or the cold, that's all sorts of things. Like, you know, it's not going to be pretty. Yeah. Disability is not the only area climate, the climate will affect - it will affect migrant communities, it will affect so many already marginalised communities. But that does include those with disability.

Erin: Yeah. Do you think the extent to which work is political is part of how we should define success?

Astrid: I don't understand the question.

Erin: So in the fuller version of this question, the way that political was defined was the ability to change people's minds or influence how people think. So working with that particular definition of what political means, do you think the extent to which your work can do that - change people's minds, influence how they think - is part of how we should measure success? Or are there other measures that stand out to you equally - or more - as ways in which we should measure success?

Astrid: I think - I think it is a good measure of success. I think that there's others. I don't think you should necessarily have to change someone's mind. I think that creating a feeling - positive or negative, you know, happiness, terror or whatever - I think that can be one of the points of art, one of the outcomes of art. Yeah. I think feeling is just as important.

Erin: Yeah, absolutely. Returning to the question of identity - and I'm really interested to explore this idea of invisible disability more in terms of your identity as a creative practitioner - how do you want to be identified? So, for example, do you want your bio to foreground - like in your opinion, when you're introducing yourself or others are reading about you - are words connected with disability in the foreground? Or are they kind of -

Astrid: Oh, I don't particularly care. I'm aware of the social model of disability. I'm aware of disability pride. Yeah, I agree with it all. I normally just describe myself as I have Multiple Sclerosis and sometimes I slur my words, which I - gets to what I have to tell my students straight up. So that's kind of normally how I choose to verbally introduce myself. In my written bios it normally - normally lists the advocacy work that I do. For example, you know, being on the Victorian Disability Advisory Council, previously being a national advocate for MS Australia - so I assume it's always pointed out but not said?

Erin: Right.

Astrid: I guess.

Erin: It's kind of there, but not maybe in the first line.

Astrid: I don't particularly mind how I'm described.

Erin: Does it depend on the context? Or how does it change depending on the context?

Astrid: That's a good question. I - I guess I don't write in any of my bios that I'm disabled or I have invisible disabilities. Mainly because my bio includes so much work that it's obvious that I'm in that space. I do tend to say I have Multiple Sclerosis. So, you know, there are days when I'm totally - I don't feel like I have a disability and then the days that I definitely do. So for me, it's very - it's not constant.

Erin: Yeah. Amongst people who are working as artists and are also disabled - so, in this community - do you think there's agreement in terms of how to identify or where to put that, or do you think there's more contestation?

Astrid: I don't think there's agreement. I don't think there has to be either.

Erin: Good point.

Astrid: There doesn't need to be, and I would violently push back against any requirement.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: People should be able to identify as they like.

Erin: Yeah. Yeah. What are your thoughts or what's your interpretation on the concept of disability pride?

Astrid: It's wonderful and beautiful and needed.

Erin: Yeah. How would you define it?

Astrid: Not shame.

Erin: Good answer.

Astrid: But like, the active not shame. It's not just the absence of shame, but it's not feeling shame and being liberated by that and, you know, being in public on stage with other people with disabilities is lovely.

Erin: Yeah. Do you think - what do you think are the different challenges that there might exist for those who identify intersectionally? So there's - disability factors into the picture, but maybe queerness, maybe First Nations, maybe linguistically diverse also does - what are the specific challenges you think are there?

Astrid: I can't speak to those because it's not my experience. And as I mentioned before, I have so much privilege being essentially an overeducated white woman who got sick in her early thirties. You know, I was not a child or a teenager with disability or illness. I don't experience barriers around my gender orientation or the color of my skin or my ethnicity so any structural barriers just overlap and compound. So absolutely, there are many, many forms of discrimination put on people depending on their identity and marginalisations. I would also say there's layers within the disability community as well. Invisible disability is treated differently, received differently than invisible disabilities. Mental health is addressed in different ways and perceived in different ways than physical ill health. There's layers within the disability community as well.

Erin: Yeah. I just want to go back to something you said before about the your experience of before illness and then after illness. You said - the difference in treatment

- and you feel that the treatment could be better. In what ways could it be better? Like in what ways have you found it lacking or different?

Astrid: People think I'm less competent. Which is wild. If anything, I'm more competent because I value my time and I only do things that I want to do.

Erin: Yeah. Yeah. So how do they - how does that manifest? Like are there fewer -

Astrid: I get paid a lot less.

Erin: Right? Yeah.

Astrid: Because apparently a disabled person is worth less.

Erin: Interesting. We've pretty much gotten through all the scripted questions. What do you think I should have asked that I haven't asked?

Astrid: I think it would be really useful to go through - with everyone that you interview - whether or not they feel they have to make art that speaks to disability or illness, because I think that some people will ...

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: ... start there and their practice will move on. Or I think some people will assume that's the only thing people are going to want to engage with them on and therefore they do it because of that.

Erin: I'm just writing this down because I think it's such a good question.

Astrid: Yeah, I would love to know that. Like I -

Erin: It would be good to have an archive of people's responses to that question.

Astrid: Yeah, like, I know I got my start, like I got a Wheeler Centre Hot Desk fellowship, and I really wanted to have that as a way of kind of validating my transition from kind of one industry to another.

Erin: Yep.

Astrid: And that was all about like, you know, illness trauma. Where I interviewed other people who were ill, and that's very much where my mindset was. That's very much where I was for a few years.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: But I think that was part of me thinking through my experience.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: I would never do that kind of project again because I've come to a different place.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: So it's just where someone might start. It doesn't mean that that's what they want their practice to be.

Erin: And it might be the background against which their practice happens and it definitely inflects it.

Astrid: Yeah, yeah absolutely.

Erin: What are you currently - I know you're doing the Stella Prize judging and I know that you suspended your podcast for the duration of that -

Astrid: To avoid conflicts of interest.

Erin: - but what else are you working on at the moment?

Astrid: I'm thinking of doing my PhD about publishing climate fiction.

Erin: Yeah.

Astrid: And the barriers to climate fiction.

Erin: What's the climate fiction that you've been reading, at the moment?

Astrid: All of it and there's not enough.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Astrid: Yeah. Well, I don't know, there might be a PhD coming soon, we'll see.

Erin: Yeah. That's exciting to know about. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about you or your work that you really want to be included in this archive?

Astrid: No, I'd like to thank you for doing it. I think this is really beautiful research and I would just encourage the research team to always ask questions that allow a disabled person or a person with disability to not be defined by disability or illness.

Erin: Yes. Great. Thank you.

Astrid: You're welcome.