Leaders in SHAPE: Hermione Lee

Speaker: Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA

Chair: Professor Conor Gearty FBA

As part of the Leaders in SHAPE *series, literary biographer and academic Hermione Lee joins Conor Gearty to discuss her work and latest book Tom Stoppard: A Life.*

This talk is available to watch on YouTube

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Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:01:18] Hello. Welcome to *Leaders in SHAPE*. Now, as you've just seen, my name is Conor Gearty and I am one of the Vice-Presidents of the British Academy. You've seen a bit about that just now too.

"SHAPE?" I hear you thinking to yourself, "What on earth is SHAPE?" Well, the idea is that we have this new economic emphasis on social sciences, humanities, arts and politics and environmental economics. And you get SHAPE. It's not quite a rival to STEM, but it's trying to understand the place of these disciplines in our culture. And so we're talking to people we think shape the culture. They do something in the world of SHAPE, but they shape our culture in doing so.

I am delighted to have this first 30-minute interaction with questions afterwards from the audience. Regrettably, we can't see you, one of the effects of COVID, but we're looking for your questions later. I'm delighted to have Hermione Lee. Dame Hermione. Prodigious writer of biographies. Prodigious. Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Penelope Fitzgerald.

I think the reason we're so keen to have her, and so delighted to get her, a thinker about what the field of writing biography is about, not just the deliverer of tomes, but a reflector on what they're about in an abstract way. And I missed out that she's a Dame. I think it's a Dame of the British Empire. She's been a president of a college in Oxford, also a person who's at home in, and part of, what we call our contemporary culture.

So in many ways an ideal guest, and she's just written a book. This is not a promo for the book, but there is a new book. And one of the incentives for doing this is you get to read the books, and I was really knocked out by it. It's a biography of Tom Stoppard, and so we'll talk about that. We talk about that in a minute. But first of all, Hermione, welcome to this.

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:03:36] Thank you very much.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:03:38] I wanted to ask you a basic question. Why biography? I mean, here you are. You're very good at school. You're sitting at home reading all the books, and you go to university and you study English. Why devote yourself, I suppose I could be a little mean, to other people's lives?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:04:00] Hmm. Well, I am very curious about other people's lives. So I suppose there are some base motives as well as high educational motives. But I think that in a way, I was perhaps a refugee from critical theory in the 1980s.

I very much wanted my academic life and my writing and my research and the books I wrote to use the same language throughout. I didn't want to be using a highly specialised, even arcane, language, and I didn't really buy the idea of the death of the author and the freestanding text.

I think that I was also very influenced by wonderful books in what we loosely call the Golden Age of biography. Richard Ellmans' *Joyce*, Leon Edel's *Henry James*, and Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Stratchey*. Those books were very important to me when I was beginning to be a literary person, so I think it was a combination of loving these big, exciting books about writers that I liked, and also wanting to write life stories as a way of thinking about writing. I could never write a book that wasn't a literary biography. That's all I can do.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:05:28] Picking up one of the points there, you didn't feel part of where things were. Was there a part of you that wanted to be read, as it were? And did you feel, am I putting words in your mouth, that you could have had a perfectly respectable academic career which is removed from what people understood the world to be about? Was it to research?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:05:51] I used to present a book programme in the 1980s, called Book Four, which was in the days when Channel 4 had an educational remit. And I had an amazing time over five or six years meeting a lot of writers who had books out at that time and who were willing to come and talk in the studio about their books. I think I felt very strongly that what I was doing then at York University as an academic, talking to students about books, and what I was doing on this book programme, were part of the same thing. I didn't want them to be separate enterprises.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:06:35] I see. So in some ways, you're trying to get out of the academy, you mentioned Channel 4, as well as stay within it, and perhaps that's a way we try to influence. But does it matter to you whether they're literary or political figures? I mean, Stoppard who we'll get onto in a moment; he's a bit of both, isn't he? But you're mainly literary, aren't you? That's your thing. Why that? Why not Harold Wilson? Why not take Roy Foster's *Yeates*, which was both political and literary? Why always literary?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:07:06] Well, Roy is a phenomenon, and he has this extraordinary ability to be a brilliant historian and also to write absolutely wonderfully about poetry, as in his new book about Seamus Heaney. I can't do that going across into a different world. I couldn't write a biography of an architect or a mountaineer or a gardener, although I might be interested in all those things.

I want to find out what the sources are for people's writing, and they have to be writers that I admire and like. I mean, I have to like the work in order to want to write about them. So I couldn't write about the life of the politician. I mean, I suppose I could if somebody offered me lots of money and I had another doctorate, but I wouldn't enjoy it. It wouldn't get to the heart of me. I need to have some literary involvement with the subject.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:08:10] Now, on that, I could see that because there's not a lot of gossip. You said you're interested in people. Not an awful lot of gossip in this fantastic book. There's a lot of good literary analysis. I think it's what makes it exceptional and

reminds one of so many of the plays, including ones I haven't, for example, heard of. Now, Carlyle said, "You take an open, loving heart." I got it from one of your thoughtful books on what it is to write biography, but I mean, is he really as lovely as he appears to be?

To people who haven't read it, Tom Stoppard can do no harm to anybody. There's lots of examples, but there's some lady he's living above in some apartment somewhere and he makes an incredible noise all evening writing, and she says, "Oh, it's just Tom" or something. Not even the people whom he causes noise nuisance to seem to mind. You go through his personal life and they all seem to be lovely. He writes all the time, thanking them for this, that and the other. Do you think you carried "open, loving heart" a little bit too far on this one?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:09:10] Well, I think you're giving a slightly sentimentalised account of my book, actually. The little anecdote you inaccurately referred to just then was about Tom as a very young writer, typing away frantically all night, and his landlady sweetly attributes it to the rain falling, which is rather nice, so she's the nice character in that anecdote.

I did try, as some reviewers have noticed, to get across a character who, although generous and loyal and kind and much liked and much admired, is also I think, steely, somewhat reserved, in spite of the fact that he's also very gregarious and can be quite fierce and ruthless in the interests of his own work.

So, for instance, just to correct the balance a little bit, if I may. One of the stories I was told by one of the American directors, Jack O'Brien, who's often directed his work, is of Stoppard, coming into an early rehearsal of a four-hander, and O'Brien thanked him afterwards, asking "What's it like? What do you think?" And Stoppard says, "It's fine, except that the four wrong people are in the room."

Now, that's not the remark of a softy, and I don't think the book presents him as such. On the other hand, it is true that in the theatrical profession, which is not without malice, sometimes entirely unlike the academic profession, of course, it's hard to find people who will say bad things about him.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:11:03] Now, I was thinking about it from my own point of view. I didn't say at the start, I'm a lawyer, and I hate meeting judges because they turn out to be nice human beings coping with their world. And I might have written some savage attack on a judgement or some pompous left wing critique of their whole establishment. Do you find living people tricky meeting them, thinking, "Golly, he's going to read it?" Does that affect the way you write as compared with, say, people who've died?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:11:31] It's a very important question. And of course, writing the life of a living person is both a huge advantage and also a challenge. It's a huge advantage in that if they're being helpful to you, as he was, they can provide you with materials which you wouldn't otherwise see.

It's also a huge advantage in that you can talk to him and you can also talk to people who know him. But as you've inferred and implied, talking to people who know him is obviously a precarious thing to do because they are very aware that what they say about him will be in the book and he will read it if he reads the book, which he did. He was entitled to read it in order to correct me on matters of fact, and so we did have a session in which he went through, and he didn't pull the plug on anything, but he did correct me on some matters in fact.

I was aware that all these people I was talking to, many of them major figures in their own professional lives, had an acute sense that they wanted to say what he would like to hear and that I think you have to take on board and measure that.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:12:44] That's interesting because in a way you are taking that on board. And one of the paradoxes about biography, it seems to me, thinking about this, reading the other ones as well, and your little books on it, is you both have to be objective and can't be objective. So you need to be not him, or his idoliser, or his obsessive critic, but you recognise, in one of your shorter books, that you may not be a critical theorist, but you certainly understand that there's no such thing as objectivity, that you bring yourself to it. How do you crack that? How can you be simultaneously both?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:13:21] I wonder if there's a resemblance to being a lawyer in that you marshal the facts of the case and you speak to witnesses and all of that, but you cannot make your own personality and your own judgments entirely disappear. People write biography from the vantage point of their class, their race, their education, their gender, their predilections, what they already know, so you cannot remove yourself from the picture.

What you have to try and do, I think, is weigh the evidence in the way that it resembles legal action, I suppose. You have to not trust just one witness, but make the testimony of witnesses corroborate. You have to come back to the subject, if you are lucky enough to have a living subject, with the same questions more than once to see if you will get the same answer and so on. So these are all quite familiar methods, I imagine, to a legal mind.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:14:27] They are. They're very like cross-examination and looking for evidence to substantiate and then putting your background as far back as you can while being aware it's there. But the thing is, there are multiple cultures. You know, there are a whole lot of cultures that generate in our little community, in our world, generally different kinds of biographies.

So we have, if he has one, Wayne Rooney, or we have those various people called Kardashian. We have celebrities. We have pop stars of whom I won't, and you may not, have heard. Do they have less value, in your opinion, reflecting our culture, capturing part of it than the kind of biography that is political, and that you write, which is literary? Are we able to say, "Well, actually what we do is more value", or is that pompous?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:15:17] Well, I don't think they have less value in terms of the readership. The readers will look for things that are valuable to them. Readers who are not in the least bit interested in British theatre, or in the history of Czechoslovakia, and so on, are not going to be reading a life of Tom Stoppard. I'm probably not going to be reading a life of Kardashian because it doesn't interest me, but for the people for whom, that's interesting, then it does have value.

I think the problem with value is the question of lasting importance and influence. I've taken a punt, as it were, on Tom Stoppard. I think that his work will last. And I'm not alone in thinking that. There is a danger about writing someone who's alive or recent because you have to gamble on the possibility that the value is going to last.

I mean, I think talking about cultural difference in a slightly different way, one of the things that fascinates me about him is that he's got this mixture of high culture and popular culture in his life. He loves rock music. He's not in the least bit interested in opera. You know, there's a wonderful line at one point where he says, "I bet Samuel Beckett never went on *Call my Bluff*." He's open to all kinds of cultural movements, and that's one of the things I liked about writing about him.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:16:51] I loved his letters to his mum, you know, and they're just wonderful. Weekly practically where, "I can't believe I'm going to Buckingham Palace". So there's a sort of small boy atmosphere throughout. You picked up the point about Czechoslovakia. I want to ask you about shaping culture, because after all, this is so-called leadership in SHAPE.

There's no doubt that he's a playwright who has somewhat moulded our world in both his plays and then in his political activism, which many of us misunderstood as so-called right wing, but which in retrospect looks so powerful. We will have seen the plays that he did on TV. We will have known of his friendship with Havel. There is a person who indisputably is shaping our culture, good or ill? I think good, but definitely shaping.

Now is a biography just, I think you say it, an index of its time. Does it, however, do more than reflect? Do you think it can somehow influence culture as well as reflect what it finds? Do you have that ambition?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:18:02] This is a complicated question. In a way it's a question about him and in a way, it's a question about the form. So can I quickly answer it into bits? One is about his own politics with a small "p", if you like. He came to England, in fact, as a refugee, although he didn't use that word, at the age of eight, and he says he put on Englishness like a coat and he was a conservative and he is conservative in his temperament and has been so.

He had the horror of totalitarian regimes which came with having escaped from a life in Czechoslovakia as a writer under the Communist, Stalinist regime. And so he often set his own lucky charms in his own life against that of Václev Havel, for instance. He was a great supporter of Charter 77, and all through his working life from plays like *Professional Foul*, which you referred to right through to *Leopoldstadt*, he has been a supporter of Soviet refuseniks or political prisoners of Charter 77 and so on.

So he has constantly been, as it were, arguing in his plays for freedom of thought, independence of speech, true speech against the kinds of oppressions and restrictions of a sort of totalitarianising utopian scheme of government. So you can see that in many, many plays, including *The Coast of Utopia* and so on.

So to get to the second part of your question, in writing about that, which I think is a deeply important part of his life and work, not least because he was for a while misconstrued as a kind of heartless stylist who didn't have those sorts of interests in writing about that. I do think that this particular biography, and going out from that biography as a genre, can have some kinds of social value, to use that dangerous word, even if it's not about Nelson Mandela or Gandhi or Sylvia Pankhurst.

I mean, clearly those books will have a very important kind of social impact, or group biographies of such as *In These Times*, written by Jenny Uglow, about what was happening to ordinary people in this country under the Napoleonic Wars, or the book that Carmen Callil has just written, *Oh Happy Days*, about what happened to working class poor people when they were taken to Australia in the 19th century. So there is a burning desire to write about the lives of group masses, ordinary people. With an exceptional individual, when you're writing about that, I think surely the biography does bring with it all kinds of really crucial issues of politics and society.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:21:14] What's interesting is I think what do people take away from a big, long book? And that's what's sustained and what the book produces as it were by way of a potential impact. For me, it was the glory of the subsidised theatre, the BBC. It was the chances the guy got, the backings he was given, and I had a feeling about it as an almost elegiac reminder of how it was. Then I thought, I'm just an old guy. I'm always thinking about the past being better than the present, and that there was some way in which this was a kind of a promise to fortify a time that was already past.

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:21:55] Well, I think that kind of nostalgia certainly comes in when one's writing this story. One of the things that's remarkable about his early writing life before he had leapt to fame with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is how much opportunity there was for him to write television plays. Really good television plays and radio plays, and the wealth of opportunity there was, for instance, on the radio with a producer like John Tiedemann. I'm not saying those days are gone, but there doesn't seem to be quite that largesse of opportunity any more.

The life of the theatre, of course he wrote for the West End theatres, as well as for the subsidised theatre, but certainly the history of the National Theatre chancing its arm in its very early days on a play about two minor characters from *Hamlet* by a completely unknown 29-year-old playwright. Wow! You know, that's a very exciting memory.

I think now with the appalling current fate, which is being gallantly battled against by numerous individuals, of the theatres, and what seems to me an inadequate political support for musicians and actors in the world of the arts, reading about these great plays in their productions and so on, I hope will be, if not nostalgic, then perhaps comforting in a way.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:23:27] And possibly energising. So I'm thinking about moral purpose. Would it be fair to say that an intention is to galvanise a strong feeling of support for that, and not to just accept that it goes without saying there shouldn't be any?

I'm thinking, it's not at all like your book, but a biography I've read just this year, which has an absolutely riveting moral purpose, which is the one by Mary Trump on her uncle, and the moral purpose there is to try to explain and warn. I mean, that's a dramatic example. It's a fantastic book, I thought, but would you say you have a moral purpose or is that too big a claim in the writing of biographies?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:24:12] I would feel very pretentious and ostentatious in saying such a thing. But I think that a life, and not just a life of Tom Stoppard, but a life of Virginia Woolf, or a life of Penelope Fitzgerald, to write such a life and to try and find out how the conditions of those lives got turned into art, has a valuable feeling about it to me, which is that it's about transformation.

We're all leading our lives and we're all having experiences which are difficult or challenging or painful for many people, particularly this year. The people among us who have some gift and some talent and the energy and the determination and indeed the ruthlessness to transform those experiences into works of art, that can be read by people who don't know them at all, is something that moves me very much.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:25:27] By writing Tom Stoppard, it means we don't have the next question you must have got fed up with, which is why do you only write about women writers? Now you don't. only write about women writers. Was there any kind of difference in writing about a man?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:25:45] I should say that I have written a little bit about some male writers before now. Not a big biography like this. It seems embarrassing to say this, but it didn't actually occur to me. It wasn't one of the things that occurred to me when I was asked to write his life. I didn't think, "Oh, now I'm going to write about a man" at all. I thought, "Oh, now I'm going to write about the theatre. That's a very different thing for me than writing about fiction writers," and it didn't at any point strike me as an odd thing for me to do. I didn't approach it in a different kind of way.

That's not to say that when I have written about people like Edith Wharton or Virginia Woolf or Penelope Fitzgerald or Willa Cather or Elizabeth Bowen, I haven't been very taken up with what they have to say about the condition of women and the situation of women and how they have written their women characters. So that has been and is an enormously important and interesting thing for me. But I didn't set out to choose different colour pens, as it were, when I wrote this book.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:27:03] Fascinating. Now, we're going to get to the audience. There's been a bunch of questions coming in, and I will faithfully relay them in a minute. But I can't resist two little questions at the end. One, an academic you really respect

says, “I want to do your biography. I know you’re going to tell me nothing’s happened. Lots has happened. It’s a very full life. We need this inspiration. Will you please help?” What would your answer be? Yes or no?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:27:31] No. I’m going to run a mile. I’m going to burn everything. I’m going to destroy the evidence. There’s no story to be told. Yeah, I wouldn’t mind being in a group biography with a lot of other writers that I admire at this moment in time, but I would be horrified at the thought of a book about me.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:27:53] Right. I shall leave that hanging in the air. You’re on a desert island and what’s your favourite biography? Who’s your favourite biographer? You’re not allowed, like those occasional guests on *Desert Island Discs* who like to choose any of your own books. What’s your favourite biography? Who’s your favourite biographer?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:28:16] I think I would take with me my dear friend Jenny Uglow’s book *The Lunar Men*, which is a wonderful, adventurous, original example of how biography can explore many lives at once, and the most brilliant way of writing about science in the 18th century, a point of amazing discovery and invention. And it’s a great book about English eccentricity and a particular place in England. So it’s a difficult one for me to choose because there are many others, I would also like to choose. But that would do it for me.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:28:58] And your favourite biographer is also Jenny, or somebody else entirely?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:29:03] I think it’s hard to say a favourite biographer, but I have been really influenced and shaped in a way by Michael Horowitz’s work. I thought that at the time that book on written strategy was one of the most extraordinary things I’ve ever read. And I love the jokiness and the wit and the stylishness of what he does.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:29:36] Marvellous Thank you. I love the way you slipped in shape at the end of our discussion since we’re desperately trying to make this part of a SHAPE series. Great. The first audience question, “In your wonderful book about Penelope Fitzgerald, it seems to me as if you’re not saying everything; that there are things that you did not say, maybe because you felt that it was gossip. Have I read rightly between the lines?”

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:30:13] It’s a very astute question, but actually it has to do with her and not to do with me. I put in what I could learn about her. I knew her a little bit, though I didn’t know I was going to be her biographer when I met her and interviewed

her and met her socially. She was a kind of genius, I think, and she was a very evasive and private and mischievous person, so she would lie to interviewers.

For instance, she wrote a wonderful book about Moscow before the Revolution, *The Beginning of Spring*. I don't know if you know it. And it was completely immersed in the atmosphere of Russia in that time, and people would say to her, "Oh, you must have spent a long time in Russia." Sometimes she would say, "Yes, yes, I lived there for months," and sometimes she would say, "No, I've never been there in my life." The truth was that she'd been there for a month on a package tour, and it was just how she felt on the day.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:31:20] Thank you very much. That must have been a tricky, slippery subject for you, and you met her slightly, didn't you? Briefly, before ever, you got stuck into the work, isn't that right?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:31:30] Yes, I interviewed her a few times, and she gave me a very nice review for my biography of Virginia Woolf, which I greatly cherished.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:31:40] Oh, quite early on. Here's a question. It's a more general one. You wrote your first biographies in the eighties and nineties, and has the way you write biography changed over the years? Are you consciously aware of change?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:31:57] Yes, I think I've become perhaps less stuffy and less formal in the way I write. I think I've been able to relax more in the way that I write. I also have tried over the years to write a slightly different kind of book, depending on who I'm writing about. I do somewhat take my inspiration from my subject.

So when I wrote Virginia Woolf, I was very under the spell of and influenced by how critical she was of biography and how limited she thought biography was. So I felt I couldn't write a standard cradle to grave biography about her. I wanted to take a leaf out of her book when she talks about digging out deep pools behind her characters in Mrs. Dalloway, where they're going through their linear life, but they're also stepping back in time. And so I would have these chapters, which were somewhat themed, as well as hanging on to the chronology.

When I came to Edith Wharton, for instance, she's such a material girl that I wanted to have these very richly furnished rooms so that you would go into the Italian room or the French room and so on. So I slightly change, not my style because I don't think you can, but the form of what I've done.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:33:20] What I want to pick up is the start of that. The really interesting set of remarks. You become more relaxed, and I have a vision of how our culture has changed around us, where when you start, you're a woman in quite a male environment. As I vaguely remember, it was Oxford, and there's a feeling of reticence. I'm putting words in your mouth and you must resist. But then, as you become more successful, more

established, you lighten up and you think, “Actually, I don’t have to worry any more. This is me.” So would you say that’s true or untrue? There’s a kind of journey towards a kind of genuine authenticity which is linked to your authority, and broadly your cultural power.

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:34:02] Well, I don’t think I’ve got any cultural power, actually, but I think I’m part of a literary world. That’s as far as I would take that. But I haven’t always been in Oxford. That’s one thing. I spent time in Liverpool and in York. I was in York for 20 years and so I wasn’t always, as it were, under the shadow of the Oxford tutorial, if that’s what you’re implying.

In the eighties I wanted to write a book about Elizabeth Bowen. It wasn’t a biography, although it had biographical material. It was very much a study of her work because I was in love with the work. I couldn’t get a publisher for years to publish anything about Elizabeth Bowen because she was deemed to be an unimportant minor Anglo-Irish writer.

All that has completely changed. So that change in reputation of certain writers, you know, has partly also been attributed to movements like Virago, of which I was sort of on the edge. So the way in which women writers that I’ve written about have become more read and more accepted. That’s been a very important part of my life.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:35:19] I’m going to go on to the next question, which starts with a lovely story. Here’s the story. “One of the best theatregoing experiences of my life was to find myself sitting beside Tom Stoppard at a revival of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, at the Old Vic, a few years ago. The play was 50 years old and he was taking notes in the dark throughout the performance. I had a sense he continues to tinker with his work.”

Now the excuse for telling us that lovely story, which you didn’t need, by the way. Did you, during your research, find out whether he has in fact continued to work on and change most of his performed plays? Is he constantly at it?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:36:01] That’s a great story, and in fact, it matches my experience exactly. Which is that I was very kindly allowed by David Leveaux, the director of that 50th anniversary revival of *Rosencrantz*, to sit in on quite a lot of rehearsals. So there was this extraordinary scene of a cast which largely consisted of people who had not been nearly born when that play was first put on, including Daniel Radcliffe, and they were asking him lots of questions about the play and to which he was responding very carefully and thoughtfully.

He was also still, 50 years on, slightly changing and slightly tweaking this classic text. For instance, he gave a couple more lines from Hamlet to Gertrude in that production. I mean, this didn’t get into the published 50th anniversary text, but it did get into the production.

So here is a playwright, who often says that he doesn’t think of theatre as set in stone, as a fixed art form, but as something that is fluid and open-ended and can change, still tweaking and working on a classic play. And it’s a rather moving thing. And to me, very moving also because I feel there’s a something of an analogy with biography in that I like to think of

biography as containing unfinished business, open-ended questions, and things that haven't been found out. I hate the word authorised, and I hate the word definitive because there is no such thing as a definitive life.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:37:53] When you're writing them, how demanding are you of the notional reader? You know, it's late at night, on page 458 of Stoppard, or whoever it is. How much care and attention do you do think you legitimately demand of the reader?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:38:14] I have an imaginary reader who is a multi-headed plural being. With a book like this, I know there will be readers who are completely gripped by what there is about the plays, who have come to it because they love the plays or love particular plays, and they will go off and straight for that chapter. I know that. I've had people write me saying I got it, and I immediately read the chapter on *The Invention of Love* and now I'm going to read the rest of the book.

So that's a certain kind of reader. You said at the beginning there wasn't any gossip in this book. I rather bristled at that because I thought there was. You will know about his life by the time you finish reading this book, and there will be readers for whom that actually the political, the social, the personal, part is the bit they really love.

Then again, there are readers who are deeply interested in the story of someone who turned himself into an Englishman. So for a very rich and various life like this, there are going to be different kinds of readers. And one of the reasons the book is a long book is that I had a huge amount of material which no one else would have. It's a very big and prolific and complex life, and I felt I owed it to this multi-headed reader to do all the different sides of this life.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:39:45] You may have answered our last question. I'm not sure, but you're identifying certain aspects of Stoppard which made him an appealing subject. The last question is broad but well-intentioned. Why did you pick a playwright to write about, and why Stoppard as opposed to, say, Caryl Churchill? So did you have a beauty parade of potential subjects?

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:40:06] I hope that someone does write a really good life of Caryl Churchill. That would be a really fabulous book to read. Maybe someone's working on it now. I was asked to do this and I said yes. And after I said yes, I thought, Gosh! Six years later. I thought, well, that was quite a challenge, but I hadn't thought of doing it. It came to me as a surprise, and I'm very glad that I said yes. It's been a most extraordinary adventure writing this book.

Professor Conor Gearty FBA [00:40:41] Well, it's been I think adventure would be far too dramatic and lovely, but it's been most enjoyable interacting with you, Hermione. Thank you so much for making yourself available and answering so clearly. And also you have a disconcerting pre-interview or knack of stopping. Our working assumption with interviewees

is that they never stop. But you do stop and of course that can catch our interviewers. So that was wonderful. And thank you for the discipline.

Now we're going to sign off. Before we do, let me plug the next one of these, because the idea is to build up a corpus of work about SHAPE and leaders and SHAPE. We've got this guy, Imran Rasul, who's an economist, and we have a lot to talk about when it comes to economists shaping our culture.

And for now, thank you very much you anonymous persons out there for having taken the time to join this or if you're watching the podcast for joining the podcast and have a very good evening if it's evening, or day of its today. Thank you very much.

Professor Dame Hermione Lee FBA [00:41:55] Thank you.

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