Sharon[1]: We have lots of questions but we may not get through them all, and if we don't, we'll pick the ones that we think are more important, if that's okay?

Simon[2]: Yeah, sure.

Sharon: I'm going to start with an easy one, I hope. Why did you choose to write about this subject?

Simon: It's probably a number of reasons really that sort of came together. I am actually a biologist, or at least I was a biologist, and particularly interested in genetics and so I have an obvious interest in that. But specifically this came from a visit to the Czech Republic in I think it was 1993, so shortly after it had thrown off the shackles. I drove, because I live in Italy, and my wife and I went by car, and the natural thing driving from Italy is to actually arrive via Vienna into the eastern part of the Czech Republic which is Brno, and so we went to Brno, and that was the first city in the Czech Republic that I'd ever visited.

And of course to a biologist, a geneticist, Brno means Mendel, because that's where he lived and worked. So I went as a tourist to visit the abbey, and the thing that struck me in all sorts of ways, but one of the things was that there's a sort of myth about Mendel that he was a monk. I don't think I was at that time but I have been a Catholic so I do know a bit about monks, and he's never been a monk, he was a friar, really an Augustinian canon.

The other thing was that you got this impression that he was sort of isolated and shut off in a monastery somewhere on a hillside and nobody took any notice of him, because that's the sort of classic trope, that's the myth in terms of the history of science. In fact, you discover when you go there that the abbey is right in the city and Mendel was very much involved in the life of the city. And the city was an important one, it's an industrial city, was in the 19th Century, a very vibrant city, it still is. It's a wonderful city actually about the size of Sheffield incidentally, and has a lot in common in manufacturing. So there was this sort of sense of the general story that gets out is wrong. But that was a personal, that wasn't a basis for a novel.

I think I'd had three novels published by then, and obviously any novelist at any time you can guarantee is always scratching around looking for a subject. It did later occur to me that there was the basis of a novel here in some way. I was interested in him, I was interested

[1] Interviewer 1
[2] Respondent

in the period, but actually dear old Gregor, his life story would be phenomenally dull and it turned into a novel on its own. So I made practical decisions over the months subsequent to that, that if it was to be a novel it was obviously going to be partly about him, but it was going to be about genetics because he's the person who unleashed it all. It's a long time ago, it's a quarter of a century ago, and believe it or not I haven't re-read it for this interview. [Laughingly]

I do mention that he unleashed or lit a few, a slowly burning bomb. The physicists in the 1920s and 30s lit a slightly quicker fuse to a very much more disastrous bomb. But on the other hand, the genetics' bomb could be a disaster, it is a longer-term disaster. So that interested me as an aspect of his work, and what he would have made of it would have interested me very much. That's where the origins came.

When I had this idea, I mentioned it to an ex-pupil of mine who was at that time reading for a PhD in a British university, because I'd already got the idea of achondroplasia, and she said, "Ooh, achondroplasia, there's been something in the literature about that quite recently." She went back to England and through the post about a month later I received a package of about four offprints from the work that localised the achondroplasia gene, which was actually done in the early 1990s. So it was actually of its time at the time, and the two things came together really.

Sharon: That leads really neatly into Sara's question, I think.

Sara[3]: Yeah. I was interested in how much background research you did, I guess thinking about what was going on at that time in relation to science? But also I was thinking about, because there's a bit where you do talk about you've got some law in it as well which obviously I'm interested in. So I guess I was thinking about that science and law, and did you do any research in terms of what was going on like public debate and things like that?

Simon: Yes, certainly I did. From the technical point-of-view, I was by then very out-of-date. The thing is that I actually finished my Degree just about the time that so-called genetic engineering started, and therefore my knowledge of it was I had a 1960s/very beginning of the 70s knowledge at an undergraduate level. So in terms of the general public, fairly advanced level. However, that was 20 years earlier and an awful lot had happened in that period.

I was in a position where I was teaching biology at the time, I taught for years at secondary school level, and it was a wonderful spur to me from a sort of non-writing point-of-view to actually find out properly,

[3] Interviewer 2

because it was just coming into A-Level or the equivalent curricula, the whole business of recombinant DNA technology. It was a great spur for me to find out about that, which I did, and I bought some wonderfully heavy tomes.

I've actually abandoned it now somewhere in a laboratory somewhere, but I actually bought the two volume edition of Mendelian Inheritance in Man, which is a catalogue of genetics, it's every single mutation known. The thing started off in the 1960s and it was a slim volume, and I've actually seen a photograph of the original editor with the volumes year-by-year as a graph, as a bar chart, and they start off something sort of, can you see my hand? It's not in the picture.

Sara: Oh yeah.

Simon: A nice little slim volume, and they get bigger and bigger and bigger, until eventually it breaks into two volumes. And these are two 19th Century family sized Bible sort of volumes that I purchased. It opened up this extraordinary world of modern molecular genetics, which I think I bought the last printed edition, because they abandoned printing it and it's now entirely online and open. From the wonderful world of the better aspects of science, it is open to the public. You can't actually edit things unless you have special access, you can't add a gene that you've discovered unless you have special access, but you can read the whole thing online, Mendelian Inheritance in Man.

It was that sort of thing that I got into, which I found fascinating from a biological point-of-view. You can probably see the effects in the book, because although I could relate to everything, I found it immensely exciting to discover these things. And I got that, I hope, into some of Benedict Lambert's mindset, quite apart from the [inaudible - 0:10:52].

The legal and ethical side of things, yes I did do quite a bit of reading about that just so that I could get my bearings within the debate that was going on. An awful lot of it ill-informed of course, because as we know people study the law. [Laughs] That was very interesting. It was interesting. I was young enough to be interested in it as well still then.

That actually has an effect, some of the other questions that you put down here, on things like what's the role of footnotes and chapter titles? And I would say names. It is full of jokes, but the average reader might well not get but can probably guess at in some cases. I mean the footnotes are just a joke because they're a joke about academic writing.

Sharon: [Laughs]

Simon: And of course novelists never put in footnotes. So I thought, 'This is ...' because I enjoyed the language. I can remember to this day reading one of those achondroplasia articles/offprints and it said this particular area is a mutational hotspot, and I thought, 'Yeah, I like that, it's borrowing a term but using it in a very specific sense.' And there's an awful lot of that, use of language, it's the jargon of science which intrigued me, and therefore all the names.

Actually I was glancing at part of it and when Benedict joins the Institute, the Director is James Histone. Well of course Histone proteins are the proteins that wraparound the DNA to make the chromosome, and they are the directors of genetic transcription, they open up and close up bits of the genome as its needed, and so James Histone is the Director. And these are obviously their jokes. Don't forget, the whole thing is actually being narrated by Benedict, which is an important point.

Sharon: Yes.

Simon: Not by me, I have absolutely no responsibility. [Laughter]

Sara: Can I just say something? I know we're sort of nipping out of order. The chapter titles, because that's something that I noticed and I've written them all out, but I haven't looked to see. I wasn't sure if they were following the scientific process or something like that, or it was just that you'd used, you know, because obviously they are words used in science. So I didn't know if they were doing more than that?

Simon: All the time, yes. I think just as they seemed appropriate. I think. I'm just glancing at them myself here trying to work it out. Dominant. Nonsense. I mean it's wonderful because all these mean something. Transformation, it means something so much in genetics. The only time I ever did anything as an undergraduate was a transformation of bacteria, which at the time was quite startling for an undergraduate course to be doing a genetic transformation. Mismatch. They're brilliant, they do work. It's not my merit, I've stolen them all, but they really do fit into a suppression. I mean it just goes on and on.

Obviously I'm a novelist above everything, and as a lover of language to find all these wonderful phrases that fit so well into their context scientifically, but also into the context of the novel. So I just sort of peppered them, peppered the narrative with them.

Sara: I was just going to say, Sharon, could I just ask our Question 3 which is about-?

Sharon: Yes.

Sara: **You're talking about whether it is important for you or to you to be accurate in your representation of the science really. Because of your background, did you make sure that what you were saying was scientifically correct, I'll say?**

Simon: Absolutely. Nothing in the science is warped. I had this by chance, not that long ago actually. Mendel's got a good life as a book, I mean it's not often that you get a writer talking to people about a book that's 25 years old. Being fiction, I mean. It's quite pleasing.

I have been involved with a programme at Bremen University on science in literature, not sci-fi but science in fiction. This is very much a cross-department thing, they had geneticists, they had people from the English Department of Bremen and [Oldenburg 0:17:00] University. A very disturbing experience to find people cracking jokes in English when they are clearly not English and they can do it like that, you know!

One day was about Mendel's Dwarf in the conference, and one of the geneticists was given the task of reading it to give his view from the genetics' point-of-view, and to my utter shame he said, "I only found one error." [Laughter] He said, "It's not in the body of the book, it's right at the beginning. In the dedication it says to the memory of my father who gave me half my genes and much else besides." As soon as he started reading it out, I knew what he was going to say. [Laughter]

Of course fathers do not contribute half your genes, they contribute only a Y chromosome if you're a male. Whereas the mother gives you an X chromosome which is full of genes. The Y chromosome has effectively none except for male determining. The mother contributes all the mitochondrial DNA. Of course I just put that down without thinking when I was doing the dedication. I thought about every single other bit about the book.

Sharon: **I think that's a bit mean, because you didn't really mean that as well, did you. This is the thing about language, isn't it, and literature and all those things. Obviously I feel like the literature side of it adds a value to this as well, it adds something else doesn't it, I suppose. I guess that's the question there about what role do you think...? Why write a novel about these things? What role do novels have in these debates?**

Simon: I'm a novelist. I might have come across as a geneticist just now but I'm a novelist. This is the only book that I've written that has been centred on science or biology or whatever, although it might creep in in places. That's because the science is obviously part of my intellectual existence, and I think it's very important. I was actually turned down by my university when I wanted to transfer to English.

Sharon: Oh gosh.

Simon: Because there was no evidence that I had good enough language. I could speak English and I could write English, but they were talking about real language because the course is massively Anglo-Saxon. You can probably guess the university, and the date! [Laughingly]

I'm a novelist and I enjoy the language, I love the language, and I think that the novel has a huge amount to contribute to life. Debates about the end of the novel, although given the rise of the internet recently one does begin to wonder, but up until that point the story about the death of the novel I thought was a certain degree of nonsense because it has importance. The use of fiction, it gives you a freedom, and it enables you to I think get in amongst people, in amongst people's personalities, characteristics, the breeding of empathy through it. I think that's really important, it gives a completely different perspective on things from a non-novelistic point-of-view. So I find it very important.

But then as I say, I'm a novelist, I'm scratching around for things to write novels about, and there's a great degree of practicality, what's the next novel going to be about? Or am I now an ex-novelist? Because if the next idea doesn't come, and I've done that one, and that's been so throughout my career in fact, which has led to a rather curious mixture of subjects. What's the next thing that's going to interest me enough to write a novel of that?

Sharon: Yeah, that's really interesting. What about form then? You say that this is all from Benedict's perspective, but there was one footnote I think where it said something like "Benedict was wrong about such-and-such" and I was thinking who said that?

Simon: That's good. Who is talking now? [Laughs]

Sharon: I've got it now, page 120. "Ben was wrong with the publication of the human genome." I guess I wondered whether you were doing a bit of a postmodern thing with it maybe?

Simon: Oh certainly there's a bit of that. I mean I enjoy writers who play around with the structure.

Sharon: Yeah. I was thinking about French Lieutenant's Woman and that kind of thing.

Simon: Yes. No, no, absolutely. I have been an admirer of John Fowles and indeed others. I'm just wondering whether at what point that was an addition? That's 2001. There's a specific reference.

Sharon: Ah, right.

Simon: This book was published in 1997.

Sharon: Ah. I'm using a different edition, I hadn't realised. Right.

Simon: You're using this one?

Sharon: Yes, I am. We need to go back and look at them.

Simon: You see, this was published later because this is my current publisher who re-published it in 2011. I think that was actually a revision done when it was going into Abacus paperback in 2011. I must have read it through – I can't remember this – the counting of the number of genes. Because of course one of the startling things about the human genome is the fact that you discover we've only got 25,000 genes. What?! Surely we've got hundreds of thousands of genes? No more than about 23,000 genes in the whole human genome. I added that later, yes.

Sharon: I liked it anyway. I thought it was more of the playful stuff. I think it really works with the playful postmodern kind of voice in it as well.

Simon: Yes. I'm not unhappy with that at all, it's interesting, but I can't remember having added it, which I clearly did. [Laughs]

Sharon: Do you want to ask something, Sara?

Sara: I was just going to say, because our next question is about how would you characterise the novel genre? I just thought that was interesting before when you talked about being at a conference and you were saying it was science in fiction and not science fiction. Obviously I'm not anything to do with English Lit, but I was wondering how do you characterise this novel genre then? Where would you place it?

Simon: Well that's the sort of question that publishers ask themselves all the time, and it's the sort of question that actually is hated by writers/novelists. Well certainly hated by this novelist, because I have always loathed the idea of being pigeonholed, and I started in more recent novels there's been that tendency, because I'd written a novel that is clearly pigeonholeable as a Second World War thriller, which is The Girl Who Fell from the Sky. Then its sequel Tightrope, which is again that's a post-war, and people can write things like "Like John le Carré at his best" and that sort of thing, and I dislike that. My publisher actually loves it, he'd like me to do another one of those.

I don't like the idea of being pigeonholed, and I don't like the idea of what genre is it? I often have said it's the sort that doesn't sell well,

literary fiction. Here you say the novel is very literary, and I immediately thought, 'What does that mean, very literary? Does it mean I use long words?' I actually write as I can. The whole damn thing is artifice, and yet in another sense there's no artifice about it. The practical side of writing, I try and get words into order in a way that makes sense and feels right to me. And if that comes out as literary then I suppose it's my background. I don't know. [Laughs]

Sharon: What I meant by that was that there's lots of literary illusions actually, and I was quite taken by them. Whereas there was lots of scientific illusions, also I thought there's quite some competing... So it is a very literary novel, I think, and not just big long words or anything like that, it's very erudite, I think, and shows your knowledge and learning and things you've read and that kind of stuff. That's how I would... That's why it's literary fiction, isn't it, I suppose as well. [Laughs]

Simon: Fair enough. I'm happy with that. I like ideas, I like knowledge. I've got a real butterfly mind, or flypaper mind. I'm interested in a huge variety of things, and always have been, and therefore I drag them in. They come in sometimes kicking and screaming, and sometimes they get edited out before you ever see them because you think, 'Oh come on, that's an unnecessary allusion to something.' It is the way I write, it's the way I think.

I do think of stories and I suppose writing in a context which is ill-defined but somewhere there in my mind. The writers I admire I think are... I'm very badly read in that I haven't read systematically, because I didn't get accepted onto that English Degree course, [laughter] which is probably a damn good thing. But I'm quite widely read, I read lots of stuff and I have writers whom I admire enormously, none more than Nabokov, who is a classic example of a novelist who was also a scientist.

Sharon: Yeah.

Simon: Although he's a somewhat dodgy scientist at times. And very allusive writing, he's all the time bringing in ideas and mixing things and forms. I don't do imitation work, but there's an influence on me clearly. Well clearly to me, maybe not to the outside.

I might say that one of the things that started me off on this book, on Mendel's Dwarf, was Julian Barnes's Flaubert's Parrot, which I enjoyed it, and it was very Nabokovian in many ways, this strange narrator with his obsession for Flaubert. And trying to tell a story that people hadn't got right about Flaubert, but actually telling a story about this rather peculiar self. So that was part of it, but it's not a major influence, it was one of the ideas that was in my mind at the time.

Sara: **That's quite a nice link if we want to talk a little bit more about Benedict, our questions about him. Is that okay? I didn't mean to interrupt you, sorry.**

Simon: Yeah, absolutely.

Sara: **I suppose it's about the character. Also, I'm really interested in about how you found writing about somebody with achondroplasia? Because I thought you wrote that exceptionally well. I found some of it quite uncomfortable and challenging, not in a negative way, but I just thought you captured some experiences of disability absolutely spot on. I am disabled but I don't have achondroplasia, but there's some bits I just thought, 'Oh my goodness, you've absolutely nailed that experience.' It really spoke to me on that level. I think I was quite upset by it when we had a discussion about it in our group because I thought I saw things that perhaps others didn't. So I just wondered if you wanted to say anything about that really?**

Simon: Yes, very happy to. The first thing is of course the thing people always seem to ignore about novel writing is that you do need imagination. There is such a thing as imagination. And the whole business about being a novelist is that you must be able to demonstrate genuine empathy, not empathy as a sort of catchphrase word that's being used all the time, half the time when you mean sympathy, it's very important.

Now obviously I had to use my imagination. I chose achondroplasia for very specific reasons, I wanted something that was massive, that was completely genetic, and that actually brought me down to something like that because achondroplasia is – in fact I think somebody says it in the book – a dominant gene and it has 100% penetrance, which means if you've got it you demonstrate the phenotype. It's merciless.

I also have a friend who is achondroplastic, and I've known her for many, many years. She actually lives in Sheffield and has been part of Sheffield University, her husband was at Sheffield University. A long-term friend of mine and a very brave woman. That's why Benedict says that you have no choice. [Laughingly] [Inaudible - 0:36:15] and it's an awful position to be in, and I can see that. That's where Benedict came from, the fact that the condition was useful, the fact that I did have personal but indirect experience of it.

The book was reviewed when it came out in The Guardian by Tom Shakespeare and Tom Shakespeare was critical. I made a huge mistake, it was my first major success. I haven't had many major or very major successes, but this was the first book that people did take notice of, and it was my first book to be published in the United States

and that sort of thing. It was widely reviewed, and I was naïve that I actually asked my agent, "Should I reply to this?" and he saw it from the point-of-view of just let it be, he'd seen so many reviews positive and negative, and I think he missed the point.

My objection was that one of the things that Tom Shakespeare said is that this is not how dwarfs think, or this is not like it is. However noble Mr Shakespeare is, and I am a great admirer of Tom Shakespeare in many ways, he is only himself, and Benedict Lambert is Benedict Lambert, that's how Benedict Lambert thinks whether he likes it or not. That's it, it's a matter of your idea of the man.

There are plenty of books written about people who don't suffer from achondroplasia who think peculiarly, for heaven sakes, and I think that Benedict is fair enough, I can see that I would feel pretty fed up at times had I been in his position. It's a very, very bad practical joke played by nature. This feeds into [inaudible - 0:39:03] as a biologist, nature is not funny, nature is not lovely, nature is not beautiful, nature is absolutely merciless.

I go for a walk every morning down to the lake. I live near a large volcanic lake here in Italy and I walk in the morning, and there were at one stage little extracts from poems had been put up on little lecterns along the lakefront, and there was a piece from that Indian poet, Tajore, is that-?

Sharon: Yeah.

Simon: I think a Nobel Prize winner. I don't know the poetry at all. There was this quote, and it was all about the beauty and the balance of nature, a nice poetic thought, and I almost felt like defacing it as a biologist.

Sara: [Laughs]

Simon: It's not. [Laughs] Nature is very, very merciless and unpleasant. What is it, my manner is the tearing off of heads, which I think is Ted Hughes on the Hawk in the Rain or something like that. My manner is the tearing off of heads, that's nature. And the genetics' side of nature is merciless, it is merciless, and I felt quite angry on the part of Benedict. He was lovely to write as, I could get things off my chest. [Laughter]

Sharon: What did your friend think of it?

Simon: Well it's interesting, because I'd lost contact. I knew her well at school, I knew her at university, and then I came abroad actually, I spent most of my time in Italy, and she got married actually and she went off and did various things to universities, Cambridge, Birmingham and then Sheffield, and we lost touch. I got back in touch with her quite a time

after the book was published and I was quite nervous, and she hadn't read it. She said, "Oh yes, I'd heard about it," but she didn't connect the names for some reason, and she said, "It's probably that I pushed it out of my mind, I didn't want to know about it." She subsequently read it and she likes it. Likes it, she admires it, she is happy with it. She didn't have negative response.

I was concerned when it became quite well-known in the States and I was about to be invited to speak at the annual conference of the Little People of America, and I was being invited by enthusiastic organisers who didn't read I could tell literary fiction. "Have you read it?" I said, "You ought to read it before we talk. I'm perfectly happy to come, but I think you need to read the book," and the sort of invitations petered out.

Sara: Oh.

Sharon: Oh. Right.

Simon: Which I think was a shame.

Sharon: Yeah.

Simon: I think because they wanted positive of course and cosy.

Sharon: Positive representations, yeah.

Simon: Yeah.

Sharon: It is a very funny book as well. Benedict I think would be a great bloke to have a pint with down the pub and he'd be very funny, but it is a very dark humour, isn't it, and a very black humour. I guess that also as an able-bodied person reading it, and this is fine, you're made kind of complicit in all the people who look at him in the way that he objects to.

I felt that was really interesting as a reader, you're deliberately going about making the majority of your readers feel uncomfortable, which is a strange thing to do as a novelist I suppose. I understand it's an angry book from his perspective, and we feel his anger and we understand it, but we're kind of complicit in the way that society treats people who are disabled, which I thought was actually very brave of you as a novelist to do that. And good. Maybe there should be more books that are angry at us.

Simon: Well, yes. We're moving into a period where anger seems to be a peculiar thing that you direct at people anonymously on Twitter and

then in public you go all, “Angry novels, the tin drum.” There’s a good place for anger in a novel. Not all novels but many novels. And not overdone. The point is, you’ve got a number of questions which I see here to do with what do I want people to take away from it, that sort of thing, almost that there is a message and there isn’t, except that I’ve got to say yes I do.

The one message that I see is we do have an awful lot lying in wait for us in the machinery of genetics. There’s nothing we can do about it very much, except now we’re beginning to, and there’s a lot of indications there, you can’t ignore them. But that wasn’t the intention of the novel.

Sharon: All right.

Simon: I actually fundamentally wanted to tell a story and create characters. And don’t forget dear old Father Gregor who’s there in the background and the contrast between the two. I mean one of them is a sexual thing, the fact that Benedict wants to get his rocks off, and Father Gregor cannot. I actually quote – I haven’t got it immediately to hand – Iltis’s biography of Gregor Mendel. Iltis knew him, Hugo Iltis was a student who studied I think at school when Mendel was teaching, and so he wrote in the 1920s, and he says – I think, I’m not sure – one sentence which is in the early... Yes I do, because I use it, “In the early days there was talk of a certain Frau Rotewange.” Just that.

He obviously knew a little bit more than he was giving away, that Mendel had had a friendship with a certain Frau Rotewange, which means red cheek. I grabbed her and dragged her kicking and screaming into the novel because I wanted to show this sort of contrast. [Laughingly] There’s a scientific contrast. Mendel knew nothing about the machinery of genetics, and Benedict Lambert is in a position where he almost begins to know everything about the machinery of genetics.

But Gregor Mendel lived in a world in which he couldn’t express himself to another woman, for all sorts of reasons, one of them being that he’d taken vows of celibacy, and Benedict spends all his time trying to make approaches to other women and has this affair with Jean Piercy.

Oh, something triggered in my mind as I was speaking and it’s gone, about them, Benedict and Gregor.

Sharon: You did say that you didn’t have her message. I’ve got your other book as well, the kind of non-fiction one on Mendel, so clearly part of what you wanted to do was to correct the historical record.

Simon: Yes. I think that serves me, I was interested in that. I’m interested in the place, and gosh yes, maybe really my role in life is to be a

representative of the Czech Tourist Board. [Laughter] I find myself continually saying what a wonderful country it is. [Laughs] I had not expected that, I mean that effect was quite peculiar because I turned up there as a minor writer, I'd written three novels and I was just interested in the... and I found this country which I had fallen for, and it has given me three novels and the Czechs love them. That's been wonderful.

Part of the message I would use, [laughs] visit the Czech Republic, but don't confine your visit to Prague, which is a wonderful city, but travel elsewhere. [Laughs]

Sara: **I think it's interesting that you said as well that there is no message, because I thought one of the themes – and this is something that Sharon and I are thinking about writing about – choice seems to play quite a big role in your... I suppose I find it fascinating how we might be reading it so differently to how you wrote it or how you expected us to read it, but we thought choice was there in lots of different ways.**

Simon: I am sure Sharon as an academic could say an awful lot about that. As I say, I have no academic knowledge of writing and literature, I only have the practical knowledge. But one of the things that I have worked out is that the act of reading is entirely different from the act of writing. Now it might seem an obvious thing to say, but in some sense you sort of think that writing is putting down the words and reading is receiving them and they're sort of mirrors of each other. But it's a completely different thing, and every single act of reading is individual. Which makes reading groups interesting, people can discuss of course within a reading group, but it means that what you've actually got is if there are eight people in the reading group you've got eight different novels even though it's the same novel, because each one gets read in a different way.

It's this curious relationship between reader and novel. It's not reader and novelist, because the novelist has created his or her version of what's on the page, but each time it's read it's a new experience. This is where theatre as a visual art wins against film, and it's the way novel is quite close to theatre actually but wins against both of those things, because you've got this completely individual, you don't have a group experience. You might discuss the novel afterwards but that's different. And film of course has this terrible limitation of being completely literal, that you put the pictures up on the wall and they move around and you see the place. You don't visualise it in your way, you're presented with it. And of course poetry as well.

Both novel writing and poetry have this extraordinarily tenuous relationship between writer, the thing itself and the reader, which fascinates me. I don't know what one does about it, I'll just try and write another novel.

Sara: **[Laughs] It's interesting for us as academics, because I think when we write we are writing hoping to get across a message or a point, and I guess we are really hoping that people are receiving it in the same way, even though we can't go... I hadn't thought about it like that. Sorry Sharon, because I'm looking at the time, is there a couple more questions you want to ask?**

Sharon: **I've got a couple. I was just going to say, I love that about literature, and if it wasn't like that I'd be out of work, wouldn't I, because otherwise we'd all know what you do and not need me at all. [Laughs]**

Simon: Absolutely, yes. [Laughs]

Sharon: **The ending of the novel then. You can kind of hide behind Benedict a bit and say you're not hearing me speaking, you're hearing Benedict speaking, but the events at the end of the novel are quite... the way that I read it. Do you think it's an optimistic or a pessimistic novel at the end, and what's it saying really there when it finishes in that way?**

Simon: This is the point which I can't even remember! [Laughter] I can remember having difficulty with the ending.

Sharon: **You do kind of leave it open really.**

Simon: Yes.

Sharon: **I wonder whether that's then the pessimistic among us read it as a pessimistic ending, and the ones that are optimistic read it... It's all a bit dreadful because he goes back into the hospital and-**

Simon: I know the last line is "watch a dwarf splashing through puddles". Isn't that right?

Sharon: **Yes, that's right.**

Simon: I've done that from memory, yes.

Sharon: **Hugo goes in, and we don't know what Hugo has done but it's something dreadful.**

Simon: Yes. It's interesting, you mentioned French Lieutenant's Woman. John Fowles has an enigmatic ending to his ultimately adolescent novel The

Magus, the sort of novel you love at the age of 18 and then can bear it at the age of 38, and its completely enigmatic ending, did she go there or didn't she? He actually said that he used to get letters, and if he got a letter which was aggressive and saying I don't like all this ambiguous stuff, tell me what happened, he'd write back and say he walked away and never saw her again, sorry! [Laughter]

Then you'd got a little old lady writing saying I'm terribly upset about her, did they get together? Please. And he'd write back to her saying don't worry, they got together. Which I think is rather nice.

Sharon: Is that what you're going to do with us?

Simon: No. My answer has been I'm afraid there are only the words on the page. That is it. I deliberately left it. Is it optimistic or positive about the future of human reproduction?

Sharon: You said the genetic bomb a couple of times, and the things that are lying in wait for us. That sounds kind of worrying.

Simon: They are, yes. Yeah. The thing is that talking about the biological side, one of the things about writing a book on genetics that uses genetics and then talking about it 25 years later or something, is that it's way out-of-date now. All that stuff, none of it's wrong, but my goodness it's no longer what happens. I am kept up-to-date by virtue of my dear daughter who did her Degree in Molecular Biology at Sheffield University. [Laughter] She is a research scientist/molecular biologist, and has been for years. I just see something that's way beyond anything that I understood for the writing of Mendel's Dwarf.

She deals on an absolutely daily basis with CRISPR. It's a little bit more to the name but CRISPR means enough, which is this genetic editing tool, a molecular tool, and that didn't exist when Mendel's Dwarf was written. This gives the ability to edit a genome very, very precisely, is quite bizarre. Yes, we are going to get people genetically made to order.

The only thing that's going to stop it is governmental control as far as I can see. That means universal agreement between governments, and there's at least one over which we have no control which is China. Putin I suspect hasn't got enough brain to understand the significance, but he'd be out of control if he did. Individuals can do things off their own back, because all you need is a genetics' laboratory, and the place is full of them, they're all over the place. It's only because you've got ethics committees and oversight that things will be kept under control.

I'm not sure who it is, whether it's Benedict who says it, I think he says it, or maybe actually that intrusive narrator, the author says it, but

what's going to happen is we're all going to end up like Barbie and Ken, because it's going to be a matter of taste and you choose. What do we all want to be? Well, if we're girls we all want to look like Barbie, and if we're boys we all want to look like Ken. If we don't, we're going to be shunned by all those Barbies and Kens that are throughout the world. [Laughingly] It's a horrific idea.

What's the alternative? The alternative is what nature has given us, which is this horrendous sort of random, which is very peculiar. So I don't know, is it optimistic or is it pessimistic? I'll tell you what it tries to do, is show the paradoxical position we're in. And I won't be around to see how it pans out because it is a long-term explosion. It's a very strange situation to be in.

The manipulation of the genetics is a very, very... we have a big revolt in Britain against GM crops. I confess, I cannot see for the life of me why, because we can do so much positive things. Everybody immediately says, "Monsanto." Okay, Monsanto is big pharma or whatever, agri-pharma, and they might do nasty things, but you can do good things as well. But you can't because you're not allowed to.

The classic example of this that I probably use in the Mendel, the genetics' one, golden rice. It's Malaysian. A molecular biologist who's got the Vitamin A gene into rice so that you can grow rice that actually has some nutritional value, which is a pretty rare state of affairs because rice is a disaster actually. Polished rice, certainly. And it comes out golden and it gives you almost your daily requirement of Vitamin A, which normal rice doesn't possess. You could have Vitamin A distributed round the poor of the world. [Laughingly] They could grow it, and the stuff they keep for seed would still have the gene. Wonderful. But it's never happened.

The guy who did it, one of the people involved who's I think in his late 80s, I interviewed some time ago, he's probably dead now, said he hopes that he would live to see this being used, but he feared he wouldn't. You can do potentially so much good and you get a lot of irrational prejudice against it, and then you've got serious dangers. Who knows? [Laughs]

Sharon: Thank you ever so much. Thank you for the time that you've spent with us, and it's very nice to meet you. I will enjoy reading more of your books as well.

Simon: Thank you. Oh good. Well you've got quite a few. [Laughs] The Glass Room.

Sharon: Yes, I've got that as well. I haven't read it, but yes. [Laughs]

Sara: **Yeah, it's been absolutely fascinating. I've really enjoyed learning a bit more about the process, because I've never really thought about the process of writing fiction, so I've learnt so much. Thank you, really appreciate your time.**

Simon: That pleases me that I've communicated something about the process of writing fiction. [Laughs] Sharon will have heard that sort of thing time and time again. [Laughs]

Sharon: **But as I say, I don't usually talk to authors so this is a whole new thing for me.**

Simon: There is the creative writing bit of it.

Sharon: **There is, yeah. I don't do that though. But they're quite different. I just decide what I think the thing is about and then write about it. I don't normally have to deal with someone who might have an opinion on it as well, so this is all quite new to me. [Laughs] So thank you.**

Simon: [Laughs] Very good.

Sara: **Brilliant.**

Simon: Okay. Well I hope it's been of use anyway.

Sharon: **Definitely.**

Sara: **It really has, thank you. Take care.**

Simon: Thanks. Bye-bye.

[CLOSE]