

Disability History Association Podcast Transcript Interview with Dr. Hannah Thompson

Caroline: My name is Caroline Lieffers, and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. It's my pleasure today to welcome Dr. Hannah Thompson. Hannah is a Reader in the school of Modern Languages Literatures and Cultures at Royal Holloway, which is located just outside of London. We're bending the rules a little bit today because Hannah's not actually a historian. She's a specialist in French literature. But we won't hold it against her. There is a lot of historical interest in her work and we are absolutely delighted to have the chance to discuss it with her today. So Hannah, thank you so much for being here, and it is a pleasure to be bending the rules with you.

Hannah: Thank you for having me.

Caroline: No problem. I'd like to start our conversation today by introducing your new book, which just came out in September of 2017. Congratulations!

Hannah: Thank you.

Caroline: It's cleverly titled *Reviewing Blindness in French Fiction, 1789 to 2013*. Great title. Beyond that, which I think gives us a general idea, can you tell us whether this book is about?

Hannah: So it's about, it's a survey of literary depictions of blindness in French fiction. But it goes beyond the kind of stereotypical negative tragedy depictions. And it really is about how quite a wide range of French fictional texts talk about blindness in quite exciting, creative, and new ways.

Caroline: That's excellent. I think exciting, creative, and new also describes your work itself, which is really great. [Hannah laughs.] Now, in your introduction, you call yourself a close reader. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you mean by that, and maybe how your own life and experiences kind of factored into your analysis in this book?

Hannah: Okay, so I'm partially blind and I use magnifying devices to read with, and I always have done. And so that means that I really only read kind of one or two words at a time. So I can't, I can't kind of skim read, and I can't kind of, like, read really quickly. But actually, and this is, you know, I used to think this is a problem because it slows me down, and my area of expertise is 19th century, 19th-century French novel, and they're very long, so it used to, it takes me days to read them. But then I realized that actually close reading, so, well, reading in detail, means that you notice things about text that other people don't. And so I've kind of turned this into a virtue. And so my—the way that I've dealt with this corpus is through very close analysis, so I quite often pick up, kind of, just how, how one image is used, or a phrase, or a sentence, and I analyze in quite a lot of detail, and maybe make links between different text that use similar language, for example. So it means that there's a lot of, kind of, detailed—it's more about the detail in the texts rather than kind of the general overview.

Caroline: That's really interesting. So one of the themes that runs through your book is that—I'm quoting you here—blindness itself is “a collection of stories.” You also use the term “metanarrative” to talk about blindness and how it, kind of appears and reappears in literature. So tell us a little bit more about what you mean by this?

Hannah: Okay, well, *The Metanarrative of Blindness* is actually a book by David Bolt that came out a couple of years ago, and David does a really good job of going through, kind of, all the negative stereotypes and myths of blindness, which you find again and again in fiction and also in

life. And so basically his argument is that, is that blindness is never, it's never, kind of, it's always filtered through narratives that it's always a story of some kind. So I've kind of taken that and looked at how the texts that I'm looking at tell different stories about blindness. So blindness is kind of, you know, it generates plot, it generates narrative, but it also kind of disrupts some of the assumptions that we make about narrative and therefore creates different kinds of stories.

Caroline: And I think actually you've hit the nail right on the head there, and that's one of the reasons that I think it's so significant that we're bringing you—a literary scholar—into this conversation that is largely about people who are interested in history, right? [Hannah: Hmm.] Because I think your work is really for anybody who works with text and language, who thinks about what blindness is kind of made to mean culturally, and how text can abstract lived experiences, right? [Hannah: Hmm.] So it's very exciting to be talking to you about that. So in the book you've, you've really managed to find a corpus of literature—and you reference a huge number of books, it's really quite impressive—that complicate these stereotypical stories and myths, right? So would you mind just going through a few of your favorite examples of writers who're kind of challenging or pushing back against stereotypes of blindness?

Hannah: Okay so I guess there are, there are writers who kind of talk about the, kind of, positive elements to do with, you know, associated with blindness. So who, for example, who kind of celebrate the way that a non-visual relationship with the world can mean that you're, that you notice things, let's say about, about the landscape or nature that you wouldn't normally, that you wouldn't notice if you weren't paying attention.

And so there, so Jean Giono is a really good example of that. And his writing's really, when he has blind characters in his work, his writing becomes really multisensory. So he doesn't really, kind of, talk about what it's like to be blind, but he changes the way he describes the landscape. It's very subtly. So he doesn't talk about what things look like; he talks about, you know, the sound of the water or the sound or the smell of the trees. So you have, the sighted reader kind of gets taken into this non-visual environment without realising it. But has, you know, and then has a, kind of, a more immersive reading experience as a result of that.

The other, my other favorite example is Lucien Descaves, who wrote an absolutely astonishing book called, well in French it's called *Les Emmurés* so it can be, can be translated as “The Trapped” or “The Walled Up.” And it's kind of a description of a blind community in France, in Paris, in the late 19th century. And he talks about, kind of, how hard it is to get a job and the, the kind of, the way that sighted people kind of, you know, discriminate against blind people either kind of knowingly or unknowingly. So they make lots of, lots of characters in the book, they make assumptions about what a blind person can do, you know—“we can't, we can't ask them to do this because they won't manage it,” that kind of thing. And both of them, so, Giono and Descaves, both kind of show just by, just by like, you know, including their characters in stories that are not just about blindness that actually, you know, blindness is not, it's not a disaster, it's not a tragedy, it doesn't, it doesn't stop people from living fulfilling lives, you know, it's just a different way of getting through life, you know, as, as we all kind of, just as we all do.

Caroline: Uh-hmm, absolutely and one of the really important concepts that you kind of develop in this book is what you call “blindness gain,” and I think you're, you're kind of getting at it in what you're describing here. So tell us a little more about where this concept comes from, what does it mean, and how is it different from what you also call the “compensation myth,” right, [Hannah: Right.] so one of these stereotypes about blindness?

Hannah: Okay, so I first encountered the notion of, well, “disability gain” in the work of Cathy Kudlick. I'm sure your listeners know her work. And she, and this is a kind of a concept that's come

from Critical Disability Studies, so scholars in the Deaf community or Deaf, Deaf Studies scholars have talked about “Deafness gain,” and then we talk about “disability gain,” and I’ve kind of talked about “blindness gain.” So it’s the idea that blindness brings something to, to experience, to human experience, which, which can benefit, kind of, is like, a benefit to everyone, so to blind people and sighted people. It’s kind of, you know, it’s like an advantage. It’s almost like blindness is an advantage. The other reason—the other thing is that, you know, traditionally when, when medics talk about blindness they talk about “sight loss.” [Caroline: Hmm] So, so blindness is always posited as kind of a negative. It’s kind of the poor relation of sight. So by using blindness gain I really wanted to kind of flip that and remind people that, you know, that’s, that’s a kind of an erroneous stance to say that sight is always preferable to blindness.

Okay, so there’s the point about the compensation myth. It’s one of the most familiar stereotypes of blindness and most people will have encountered this in some form in a, in a film or a book or, you know, a kind of, newspaper article, and it’s basically this, this idea about when you, when you lose your sight your other senses kind of magically become enhanced, you know. So people suddenly become musicians, or brilliant or, you know, or really gifted, kind of, gifted chefs, or perfume, perfume kind of testers, or whatever. And there’s no scientific basis for this at all. It’s just, it’s just, you know, what happens is that if, you know, if you’re not using sight, you, you tend to think more about your other senses. But people have used it as kind of a way of saying that sight is, you know, when you lose sight, when your sight is lacking you somehow need to compensate using your other senses. I would argue that actually that’s not the case, because sight isn’t actually in fact as essential as, as we in western society have been trained to believe. So, you know, blind people just, just operate differently, in a more kind of embodied or multisensory way. And blindness gain is trying to kind of show that, by celebrating blindness for its own sake without the need to kind of shore it up with any kind of compensation.

Caroline: I think that’s really, really nicely articulated and I think—and you should correct me if I’m wrong—but it seems like in your book you really develop the idea of “blindness gain” to describe not only what the characters actually do in their lives, you know, what they decide to do, how they engage with the world, but also about what the author allows him or herself to do creatively with language and description when there’s a blind person or blind character involved, right? [Hannah: Right]. So there’s these kind of two levels at which “blindness gain” seems to be operating in your work and I think that’s especially exciting, right, and makes your work really rich.

Hannah: Well I think that comes from the close reading as well as, that I’m always really interested in style and form as well as content. And traditionally I’ve found that quite a lot of work on disability tends to focus on the theme of disability and content, you know, how depictions of, you know, a certain disability in a set of texts. But actually my—you know, I think blindness, the presence of blindness in novels, whether or not the author is blind or sighted, has, has an impact. In the most interesting cases it has an effect on the style, what—the kind of language used, and how the writer thinks about language and, you know, how the writer communicates that to the reader, so also therefore has an impact on the, on the experience of reading.

Caroline: Oh, absolutely. And it’s so rich to think about blindness working in that way, as opposed to you know, what you’ve described as these kind of stereotypes, like “blindness as ignorance” or “blindness as naïveté,” or, you know, alternatively, “blindness as special knowledge,” “blindness as desexualizing,” right? You’re constantly engaging with those ideas in your work because of course they recur again and again in French fiction, but you also find these really interesting analytical ways of complicating that narrative, right? And I think that’s really exciting.

So I’m going to also highlight a couple of terms that you use in your book that I just think our audience is going to really enjoy learning, and they relate to what we’ve just been discussing. So,

you'll have to correct me if I mispronounce them, but one of them is "typhlophile," I think [Hannah: Uh-huh, yeah], and the other one is "typhlophobe" [Hannah: Yes]. So these, these were new terms to me. I think they're super interesting, and I would love for you to tell us about what they mean and why they're important in your work.

Hannah: Okay, so they came, they were, they were coined in, as far as, as far as I can find out, they were coined in 19th-century France. So a "typhlophile" is someone who is a supporter of blind people, so I guess we'd say maybe like an advocate [Caroline: Okay] for, for the rights of blind people, okay. And then a "typhlophobe" is the opposite, so someone who's frightened of blind people. And this is really different from the fear of blindness. So, and David Bolt talks about the fear of blindness in his work. But what I found in these French texts is that there's more, a kind of, there's more an engagement with people. So some characters and authors are very supportive of blind people. And Lucien Descaves is the best example of that. In the, in the French, in the Larousse that I used to, to research the terms, he's actually given as an example of "typhlophile." So he's very, he's, he's a sighted person who's very kind of supportive of the rights of blind people in the late 19th century. And so, I, there, there are texts which, kind of, demonstrate this, either, this kind of interest in blind people or this fear of blind people. And I think it's quite a helpful way of thinking about how writers and therefore also, well, characters and readers, position themselves in relation to blindness.

Caroline: Oh absolutely. I think those terms could work in quite a lot of historians' work as well, which is why I wanted to bring them to people's attention. Now you have a chapter in your book that I absolutely love that's about science fiction. I think this is so exciting, so different from what you might expect when you think about French literature, right? And you describe a book where these invisible aliens come to Earth, and it takes a blind person to kind of figure out what's happening. And there's another book where a character's eyes are replaced with electrosensors. It's all really fascinating. So tell us a little bit more about what makes science fiction a kind of particularly interesting genre, right, when you're studying blindness.

Hannah: Well I suppose it's because it can really break the rules. It doesn't have to, it doesn't have to kind of conform to lived experience. So either the actual lived experience of blind people or what, what people imagine the lived experience of blind people is, which are, you know, two really different things but which are often conflated. So instead it can, it can really like push the, the, it can really, you know, it can be a place where writers can, can really kind of experiment with what a world without sight would be like. So in the text about the aliens the only people that can truly kind of understand the nature of the alien presence are blind people, because they are, are not relying on their sight to see. These things are invisible, okay? So sighted people just cannot understand how they, how they exist or how they occupy a place in the world because they're too reliant on their sight. So, so sightedness becomes a limitation and it's shown very clearly in the text that it's, it's kind of equated with a lack of imagination and a kind of, you know, reliance on, you know, "seeing as believing." Whereas the blind characters in the book, or the, or the characters that embrace, sighted characters who embrace blindness as a positive thing, become a kind of experts, because they can, they can kind of, they've lived their lives, you know, imagining the world, imagining what the world looks like so, therefore they're much more open to new possibilities. And it's, it's fascinating because it shows how easily our reliance on sight, well, it shows that our reliance on sight is actually a construction. It's not a, it's not, you know, it's just, it just so happens that's the way that our, that our society has become structured. So it kind of reminds us—it's quite arbitrary actually—that sight is the sense that we, that we tend to rely on most, and it could, it could, you know, we could easily have, you know, lived, or things could have developed in a different direction.

Caroline: Yeah, that's really interesting. So just to give people the information they need, that book

is by an author named Maurice Renard, is that right?

Hannah: That's right, yeah. And it's called *The Blue Peril—Le péril bleu*. [Caroline: Wonderful] Yeah.

Caroline: Great. So if anyone wants to look it up there's the information for you. You also have a chapter on crime fiction. So, can you tell us a little bit more, just about, what's going on there and about how blindness gain operates in crime fiction?

Hannah: So again it's about, so, I was quite surprised: I found three recent novels, three or four, four recent novels in France that have blind protagonists in them. And these are not the victims of crime, which is, you know, what maybe, what one would expect if one were kind of steeped in the stereotypes. And they're not the detectives, but they kind of play this, kind of intermediary role between the sighted detectives and the solving of the case, because they, their presence in the texts alerts the sighted characters to the different ways of gathering information. So you know, in the Fred Vargas novel that I, *The Chalk Circle Man*, that I discuss, the blind character kind of notices things about the way people's voices sound and how people smell, which encourages the sighted inspector to think differently about, you know, think differently about the assumptions he makes about people. And it's kind of a way—so again, it's a way of kind of, showing that blindness gives you access. If you, if you embrace it in a positive way, it gives you access to information, which is actually, which is, you know, completely present in, you know, in our world—it's just that we're not used to seeing it, you know, we're not used to noticing it.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah. I want to kind of take even to the next question, which is, there is sometimes a gap between the lived experiences of blindness, I would imagine, and also how they're represented in fiction, right? So obviously science fiction represents a pretty big gap, detective fiction maybe less so, but do you find books in the corpus that you study that are dealing really honestly with the lived experience, and perhaps even depicting blind people—like every people, you know—with some negative characters, or characters who do bad things, or that kind of thing, and do you—

Hannah: Yeah absolutely. I mean again, so *Des aveugles*, “The Blind” or “Of the Blind,” by Hervé Guibert, is a really, really good example of this. So he, so he was, he was a sighted writer who actually volunteered to read to blind students in the French National Institute for the Blind in Paris. And he was—because of that, he was interested, he became interested in, kind of, the lives of blind people in this institution and wrote a, kind of, novel which is very, I mean, it's very sensual, it's very, it's, you know, there's a lot of kind of non-visual description, but it also, it's quite, there's some, there's elements of pornography, there's some, there's a murder. So blind characters, they're not heroes, they're not idealized, they're not kind of above the rest of humanity. They're just ordinary people with flaws and [Caroline: Yeah], who, who do, you know, are quite manipulative, they can be quite selfish, they're just, and you know. And so it's really refreshing because it basically reminds us that blind people are primarily people, and like everyone they have, you know, they're all different for a start, so you can't generalize and say this is how blind people live. And they, all the characters have, you know, their, their particular idiosyncrasies and their quirks and blind—blindness is just, is just one of many kind of features. And it's not, you know, not necessarily their defining feature, it's just a, you know, part of the, of who they are. And I found that really refreshing, because of the, sort of problem of literature, depictions of blindness in literature, is that they do tend to, you know, you only have a blind character when the whole plot is about blindness and that's obviously, that's, you know, quite often the case in the film as well, or TV series or whatever it is. And it's nice to see that there are kind of, you can have stories which are about much more than blindness. But, but also are about, you know, provide some of the most interesting, kind of, interesting depictions of blindness.

Caroline: Yeah, oh yeah, absolutely and you know when I was reading your book I was trying to mentally categorize whether you can make any generalizations, right, about how blind authors handle blindness and blindness gain versus how sighted authors handle blindness or blindness gain, and I, I was finding it actually difficult to neatly categorize, “oh, blind authors tend to be more, you know, realistic in their depiction.” It doesn't seem to work that way, right? It seems more complicated than that.

Hannah: Yeah, I mean that's, I don't have that many, there aren't that many blind authors in my corpus unfortunately because you know, they're just, you know, if you, if you weigh up the number of sighted sources and the number of blind authors who've lasted through, kind of, you know whose books have kind of, you know, been part, become part of the canon, if you like [Caroline: Yeah], it's, you know, hugely weighted in favor of sighted writers. However, the one thing I did notice, it's not so much to do with the content, but again it's more to do with the style, is that blind—and *Look* by Romain Villet is a good example of this—blind authors, because they have different ways of writing, so will write by ear, will use, you know, assistive technologies to listen back to their text [Caroline: Yeah], tend, have a more, I'd say, kind of poetic, more sensitive relationship with language. And that is also the case for Hervé Guibert in *Des aveugles*, and I think that's because he, he was aware of what a text sounds like when it's read aloud. [Caroline: Yeah.] You know, because he'd been reading aloud, he, he had a, kind of, more of a sense of the sound of texts. So I think that might be a difference. I think sighted people don't tend, sighted writers don't, don't tend to read their material out loud as much as blind writers do. I mean obviously there are exceptions like, you know, famously, Gustave Flaubert used to read his texts out loud and I always tell my students to read their essays out loud before they submit them because you can just tell if a sentence sounds wrong. [Caroline: Yeah.] But I don't think people do it instinctively, whereas if you're writing using text to speech software you have to listen to your words all the time. And I think maybe that's translated into, into the style—the kind of, the feel of the prose, but not—so I wouldn't say so much in the content, actually.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah that's a really interesting observation and again perhaps one of the, what's the word I'm looking for, like, payoffs of your close reading, right, and the way you approach a text?

Hannah: Yeah exactly. But I mean obviously the other thing to say is that you can't generalize and, and every blind person experiences blindness differently and that's why this, that's why it's kind of, in a way it's impossible to write a book about how blindness is depicted. Because once you move away from the stereotypes, blindness is intensely personal and there isn't, you can't say, you know, blindness is this and that, and, you know, that everyone has a shared—there are, you know, I guess maybe what most blind people share is, is sighted responses to them. [Caroline: Um-hmm]. Those are quite, you know people, sighted people have a, tend, you know, tend to have a certain number of stereotypical responses to blindness which, which then affect the way they talk, talk to blind people maybe, but I would say that blind people—you can't, you can't kind of say, right, this is, this is experience of blindness.

Caroline: That's a really excellent observation, and I—just as you warned us against making generalizations, I'm going to ask you if you can make a generalization. [Both laugh] Sorry, Hannah. But I, I know you didn't organize your book chronologically, even though it covers this vast terrain, right, from 1789 all the way to 2013. But I do want to—as a historian, I have to do this a little bit—I do want to push the chronological question, right? So did you notice changes over time? Have certain narratives of blindness become more or less prevalent, right? Have we as a society become more or less visual? Did—in reading this huge, across this huge corpus, did you happen to notice trends over time that you wanted to flag?

Hannah: I mean, I'd say certainly it isn't the case that as we've progressed we've got more

understanding of blindness. That is absolutely not the case. I would say in France, there was a, well, historically, there was a lot of interest in blindness in the 18th century, you know with Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*, and the kind of, the kind of philosophical—blindness was very interesting to philosophers because it gave them access to, you know, people—how does the mind work without sight? And I don't talk about this in the book really because it's been, there's a lot of material on it and that was, you know, pre-19th century. In the 19th century, I would say around, kind of, the, around the 1870s, 1880s, that's when blindness became kind of, I would say that's when it was, it was seen in its most positive light in France. So, I mean, there are historical reasons for this—you know Braille was, the alphabet was embedded by then and was becoming universal. And this is also when the library and the archive that I was using was founded, around 1886. So there was a real recognition that blindness, that it was important that blindness, that blind people understood their history, and, well—that they had a history—that they were, they were a valid community group who had a shared history. And, and you know, I would say around the time of the publication of, of Descaves's novel, so, yeah in the 1880s, that's when France was really taking quite a, I'd say, quite a positive, kind of, progressive interest in blindness. But I don't think that's, kind of, necessarily been sustained, you know, because I think, you know, Western society has become more ocularcentric in the 20th century and, you know, has an obsession with sight, and always leads people to assume that blindness is a, is a problem. [Caroline: Yeah] Because, you know, the more obsessed you are with sight the harder it is to imagine that a person without sight could function. [Caroline: Mm-hmm]

I mean, but having said that, you know, there is a lot of important work, like, historical work on blindness in France—so Zina Weygand is the, the kind of, the absolute key figure historian in this area—and then, and then Martin Jay has written on, kind of, the denigration of sight in French literature, in French thought, actually, in the 20th century. So those two works look more at the, the kind of overall, the context, if you like, the kind of, the general historical position of blindness. So again I didn't really think—feel like I needed to do that so much in my, in my book. I wanted to kind of, it's like a companion, I see my book as a kind of companion to the historical accounts of blindness, or the histories of blindness, showing how—because the point, the point of blindness is that most people, most people encounter blindness through fiction. [Caroline: Hmm] You know you, you will have read more you'll, you'll have met more blind people in fiction and film than you'll have met, than you'll have had a conversation with. So, so it's really important to understand how blindness is depicted and why, you know, why it's created in the way it is.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah. And I want to just rewind back to what you mentioned about a particular library and archive that you worked in. You know, I'm sure some of our audience are going to be historians; they're always interested in learning about new repositories. So this was the Valentin Haüy archives—is that what it's called?—library in Paris. [Hannah: That's right, yeah.] So can you tell us a bit more about, about what this library is, how you got to find it, that sort of thing?

Hannah: Well, I mean, I was, I was told about it by Zina Weygand, who, who did a lot of research there. It's a really quite extraordinary collection of, of texts. So it was started, the collection was started by Maurice de la Sizeranne in 1886 and it's basically he, he decided to collect an example of every text, every French text, that mentions blindness [Caroline: Oh my goodness]. So, yeah, it's extraordinary. So, you know, there are novels, there are lots and lots of short stories from, you know, like, popular fiction serialized in newspapers, like 19th-century serial fiction, which I don't talk about in my book because I've written about them elsewhere. But there were also, kind of, you know, scientific textbooks and, kind of, journals. And so basically for me, it was astonishing, because everything, you know, the catalogue became my bibliography. So I basically read every novel that was mentioned in the catalogue of this collection. And most of the, most of the novels they have, but the novels they didn't have I could, you know, I could find elsewhere. [Caroline: Yeah] And it's still, I mean it's, it's severely underfunded and in fact now is pretty much being run

by, you know, by volunteers [Caroline: Wow]. Which is, you know, really worrying because it's not digitized, and so a lot of these, these really rare resources, are going to, you know, people, people don't have access to them. It's also not, at the moment, it's not accessible to blind people. Which is a bit of a problem. It's a huge problem, actually [Caroline: Yup]. And that's why, that's another reason why my close reading approach was so important, because I've quoted quite a lot of novels in my book, so that, and my book is available electronically, so that blind people can actually have access to the literature which represents blindness, which I think is kind of crucial.

Caroline: Yeah. Very interesting so thank you for, for sharing that with us. Now, following up on what we were talking about as well, about perhaps becoming more ocularcentric as a society—your book is very interested in the ocularcentricism of language, and by extension this often positions blindness as a lack, right? [Hannah: Mmm] So, we use expressions all the time like “I see what you mean,” or, you know, “let's shed some light on the issue,” that, sort of, very ocularcentric kind of expressions that associate seeing with knowing, right? And I know that many of us as, you know, writers, scholars, historians, you know, anybody who really engages with words in general, are trying to find less ableist and less ocularcentric ways of expressing ourselves, right? So in all of this work on blindness and literature, did you—I'm going to use another visual term here—but did you gain any insight—ha—into how we can kind of deal with this problem that's embedded in our language?

Hannah: I mean, I think, I think it's kind of actually impossible to, to avoid. You know, our language is so, yeah, these ocularcentric references are so kind of, as you say, embedded in our language that it would become, it's quite artificial to try and avoid them. And, you know, the title of my book is purposefully *Reviewing Blindness* [Caroline: Yeah]. It's purposely kind of playing with that. I think the key is to acknowledge that this is a linguistic construct, you know, it's a shorthand, but it doesn't, it doesn't mean there's an actual link between seeing and knowing, you know. Sight, doesn't, doesn't necessarily give you privileged access to knowledge. It's just a way that, it's like a, it's like a code that we've, that we use. As long as we all understand that it's just the code, it's just a construction, you know. The danger is that people don't understand that and, and so assume that, you know, sight equals knowledge and therefore blindness equals ignorance. And clearly that's not, that's not the case. So that's kind of, but I think we just need to keep flagging it. And you know most people that write on blindness in literature have a, have a section somewhere in their book which, you know, flags this up. You know, David Bolt does it, Martin Jay does it, Georgina Kleege does it. So it, people, but I think we just need to keep seeing it, keep saying it, and keep reminding people. I mean, I don't want to, kind of, police language and I don't want to, kind of, say to people, you know, well, you can't, you can't say to me, “See you later,” because that, you know, that's, I have to live in a world with other people in it [Caroline laughs]. But you just have to understand the difference between language and actual, and reality.

Caroline: Yes, yes I like your suggestion that as long as we're keeping conscious of that, right, and continuing to flag it—that that's doing a lot of the work already, right.

Hannah: But the other thing is, that, so what I'm trying to do is reclaim blindness as a positive term rather than a negative term. [Caroline: Yeah] So, you know, I describe myself as partially blind rather than partially sighted, because I'm, I'm not, I'm not completely blind. I'm, I'm aspiring towards that, but you know, but I'm still. So, you know, that's why I talk about blindness gain rather than sight loss. [Caroline: Yeah] So I think if we, if we kind of celebrate blindness then, then we, we're less likely to make negative assumptions about blindness and say, you know, blindness, ignorance for example.

Caroline: Yeah. That's beautifully put. I really, really like that. I also want to—before I let you go back to your normal life—I want to chat with you a little bit about some of the other exciting work

that you've been doing. You are not just a French fiction expert! [Hannah laughs] You also have quite a popular blog actually that's called "Blind Spot"—another excellent title. So I'm going to encourage everyone to check it out. It's hannah-thompson.blogspot.com, or .ca, or .co.uk, depending on where you're based. So, what made you decide to start a blog?

Hannah: Well, I basically started it at the same time as I started this project. So, it was originally kind of to chart how, the development of the project, you know, to describe, kind of, what I was finding in the library in Paris. And then I kind of started writing about what it was like to get to Paris, like, so practical stuff, like how, how does a blind person find a train, you know? How, how would a blind person travel independently? And then I kind of realized that actually because I'm, I've got one foot in each camp, you know, I'm, I'm half blind, half sighted, I can, I can, you know that I have, I have a very kind of, I don't know, interesting way of looking at things, if you like. And so I kind of realized that, you know, I had a lot of things I wanted to say which weren't going to go in the book but which I wanted, you know, I actually kind of felt quite strongly needed to be said. So I basically just started, you know, I didn't, I had no idea it would, it would, kind of, you know, become as big as it's got, or have as much posts. I mean, I think it's, you know, I've probably written more words in the blog than I have in the book. [Both laugh] It's not, it's not really what I was expecting would happen but it seems to have caught people's imagination. It's, you know, put me in touch with a lot of people who, who have experienced similar things, you know, who feel frustrated about the way that blind people are treated or the assumptions people make when they see you using a white cane, for example. They make certain judgments which, which are frustrating. And I just kind of felt that it's important—a bit like with the language thing—it's important just to keep saying, you know, this is, this is happening and it shouldn't be. Or, this is happening and it's really interesting and let's think about, you know, why this is happening or maybe what we can do to, to make sure it doesn't happen or it happens in a different way.

Caroline: Oh yeah and it's really quite an intriguing blog when you get into it. And I read a few of your most recent blog posts that have been about a project relating to audio description and accessibility so, you know, talking about your trips through various museums, for example. And this is something that I think a lot of our audience, who might engage with public history for example, are going to be really interested in. So, what has been your experience in terms of, you know, what we put in quotes as like "accessibility," and it can often vary pretty widely, so—

Hannah: I mean I'd say, I'd say first of all I think it's really important to say that, I would say that in last kind of two or three years, museums have really upped their game. [Caroline: That's great] And now it's actually quite rare to go into a museum and not find something in an accessible format.

However, there are, you know, there are lots of different ways of providing accessible formats. So, I mean, so okay, so the Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg in Canada is a really good example of this. It's brilliantly accessible, there's everything, all the displays have, kind of, audio and you can, you can kind of press buttons and get the displays to talk to you. And I was really impressed with that aspect of it. But the whole logic of the museum is based on a journey from darkness to light. [Caroline: Yeah] Okay, so darkness is ignorance and light is knowledge. And so on the one hand, it's really welcoming to blind people in terms of access to the exhibits. But on the other hand, it basically still says, we think blindness is, you know, we think darkness and therefore blindness is about ignorance. [Caroline: Yeah] So it kind re-inscribes a quite, you know, extremely ocularcentric view of, of kind of knowledge as well. I mean that's, that's just one example but what I've been trying to do is think about audio description as kind of an art form in its own right rather than an added-on accessibility feature. So, you know, so if a blind person goes to the cinema and listens to the audio description track, that is as integral to their experience of the film as, say, the lighting or costumes or casting or narrative structure would be, okay. We don't tend to separate—you can't separate the two out. And so, but audio description isn't really seen as an art form. It's not

celebrated as a creative profession in the same way that, say, set design is. So I've been trying to think about ways of, of changing that. And one of the ways of changing that is, is getting people, you know, accessibility officers, to think, to think about co-curation and maybe getting blind people involved in audio description. [Caroline: Oh absolutely] And, you know, rather than having it a kind of, let's, you know, let's have the sighted people decide what, how the blind people want to access this, maybe having it, having it more as a kind of creative conversation, kind of collaboration, rather than a, yeah, rather than a service provided, I suppose.

Caroline: Absolutely, and one of my favourite entries in your blog—and I encourage everyone to read this—is your description of the audio description at a Euro [Hannah: Oh, at the football match!] Yes, is it Euro 2016, is that right? [Hannah: Yeah] Yeah, it's absolutely wonderful. [Both laugh]

Hannah: It was quite an astonishing experience, actually, and I was sitting—completely by chance—I was sitting really near where the audio describers were. So they spotted me, and they came over and met me beforehand and then, and then I met them afterwards and so I was able to, kind of like, talk to them about, about how they'd done their description. And so they got some actual like, live feedback from a fan, you know. [Caroline: Yeah] And it was, it was a completely transform—I mean, now I wouldn't get a football match—I guess soccer is what I mean [Caroline laughs]—without audio, without description because it, it completely transformed my experience.

Caroline: Oh absolutely, yeah. And I think what you just described about being able to meet with them is just the sort of conversation that you're talking about needs to happen more, so I think that's really exciting. [Hannah: Yeah]. So I, I want to thank you so much for joining us today for the podcast, for your time. It's been an absolute privilege to get to talk to you about your book and I hope I have converted some of our more historical-minded listeners to the beauty of studying literature. [Laughs]

Hannah: Yeah, I hope so too. [Laughs]

Caroline: And, and you have some beautiful, beautiful lines in your book and I just want to leave our listeners and people who are reading this in the transcribed form, with what you write, which is that “blindness is a valuable and important way of being in the world” with “powerfully creative potential.” I think that is so beautiful and I'm so glad that you wrote that for all of us to appreciate.

Hannah: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Caroline: Well, thank you so much for helping us explore these topics today and take care, and I hope we will talk to you again soon.

Hannah: Bye.