



Copyright ©2022 Criminal Productions. All rights reserved. This text may not be published online or distributed without written permission. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Episode 44: Cain's Jawbone

Air Date: March 30, 2022

[playful music]

Phoebe Judge: There's this strange book. It was first published in 1934. It's a hundred pages long and the pages are out of order.

[to John]

I read some of these hundred pages...in not the correct order, but how they're given. I had no clue what was happening. How do you even start?

John Finnemore: You're right. The first time you read it, it's like reading strange abstract poetry or...I've got it here. Shall I read you a little bit so listen—some sort of sense of what we're talking about, would that be useful?

Phoebe Judge: Absolutely.

John Finnemore: Okay. So this is a random page that starts: [reading]

I knew, of course, that if I got there in five minutes I would have double the time for my by no means suburban hops at the Café Royal, without insulting it and myself with John Montagu's arrangement for an uninterrupted session at the gaming table. I felt so much at one with Holy Mr. Herbert. Or Mr. Haddock did he call himself? But he was right about these hours, and if that was not holiness, what was? Meed kissing laces, surely he had convulsed us with. For the moment it didn't matter. Because I had decided what to do. Leda and Hebe, I gave my swan a drink, and then drew a sheet of notepaper towards me.

So yeah, it just feels like a stream of consciousness, you know, like something by Samuel Beckett or James Joyce. It's densely full of quotations, mostly of poetry, but of all sorts of things.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: John Finnemore is a comedy writer, actor, and a crossword puzzle creator. He came across the book a couple of years ago. The book was written by a man named Edward Powys Mathers, who is said to have pioneered a certain type of crossword called the cryptic crossword in the 1920s and '30s. Mathers was also a poet and a translator, and he left crime novels.

John Finnemore: And, of course, the '30s was the golden age of the whodunit, and when people Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham and Dorothy L. Sayers were all at their peak. And so, yes, this must have brought together [laughs] the two things he particularly loved. And poetry, I suppose was the first one. 'Cause as you say, it's full of these literary allusions.

Phoebe Judge: He created more than 600 puzzles, but he didn't publish them under his name. He used a pseudonym for both his puzzles and the book, Torquemada.

John Finnemore: Torquemada, the historical figure, of course, was the grand inquisitor in the Spanish Inquisition. So I suppose he's saying he's the torturer, and we're his victims. [dance music]

Phoebe Judge: Like his crossword puzzles, the book was very difficult. As it says on the book's back cover, "It's not for the faint-hearted." The title is *Cain's Jawbone* and it's part puzzle, part murder mystery. You have to figure out what order the pages are supposed to be in, and then identify six murderers and their six victims. When *Cain's Jawbone* was first published in 1934, it was announced that the first person to prove that they'd solved the puzzle and the murders would win 25 pounds. Two people ended

up submitting the correct answer, but the solution was kept a secret. And then, nothing. For almost 90 years.

I'm Phoebe Judge. And This Is Love.

John Finnemore came across the book in March 2020, just before the COVID lockdown in London, where he lives.

John Finnemore: And I have a quick look at it, and just thought, no, I've got absolutely no way. I don't know where to begin with this... it's way over my head. And just put it aside. And then of course lockdown came along, and suddenly I had plenty of time.

Phoebe Judge: He says he spread all the pages out on a spare bed and would go in about once a day and stare at them.

John Finnemore: It's quite addictive. You just want to do one more page.

Phoebe Judge: Every page looks pretty much the same, roughly the same amount of text. Each beginning with a new sentence and ending with a complete sentence. So you generally can't link pages just by connecting the beginning and the end of the sentence. But there are a few exceptions where lines of poetry are italicized and indented. So you have a visual clue. The indented lines split across two pages and John thinks the author meant they used to be a kind of freebie, a way to start.

John Finnemore: You can put those two pages together and go, right, well, at least this page must follow this page. But after that, it gets much harder. You just have to look for little things that you recognize.

Phoebe Judge: John explained that each page is so full of references that you just do your best to decode them. [percussive music] Everything could be a clue. Like in the part he read about John Montague's arrangement for an uninterrupted session at the gaming table. He says when he read that, his first thought was sandwiches.

John Finnemore: Because that was supposedly how the sandwich was invented by, ridiculously, the Earl of Montague.

Phoebe Judge: The legend says that John Montague loved gambling so much, he didn't want to get up from the table to eat and asked his servants to just put some meat between two pieces of bread and bring it to him, so he could eat with one hand and not stop what he was doing.

John Finnemore: It's now thought that that probably isn't how it started, but that's the legend, and that's where the name comes from. So, there's a little—so you just make notes like that in the margin and hope that they will connect up with other things you

discover on other the pages and allow you to put the order together, even if you don't understand what's going on.

Phoebe Judge: The name of the book, *Cain's Jawbone*, is a reference to the story in the Bible where Cain murders his brother Abel. In some versions of the story, his weapon was a donkey's jawbone. It's sometimes called the first murder weapon. The phrase "Cain's jawbone" sometimes appears in literature as a kind of shorthand. It's even in *Hamlet*. The line reads, "Cain's Jawbone that did the first murder." And in this mystery puzzle book, we get one reference to Cain in the text. It says, "Whether as a human mistake or one o' the brand o' Cain, as the Poet Laureate says—and he served in both capacities—he knew his job." When you Google that phrase, "brand o' Cane", it appears in a poem by John Masefield, who is the Poet Laureate of England for more than 30 years. And even if you're able to figure out that the poet Laureate was John Masefield, it could be a red herring and not actually help you put the pages in the right order or figure out who the six killers are. [mysterious music] You have to look up everything.

John Finnemore: Constantly looking things up with the internet, which how on earth anyone achieved it before that was a tool at their disposal, I have no idea. But there's a major thing you realize about it and you go, oh, I see. This is not quite what I thought it is. This is going on. And when you do that, it opens the way of how you're going to do the rest of it, or at least the next stage is. You think, oh, well, in that case, then my next job is to do this thing, and I can set about doing that. So that was a lovely moment because that's when I suppose it went from me picking out little references that I thought I understood or Googling things and putting a note in the side, but still not knowing what it all added up to, to going, oh, I see. That's the shape of it. Oh, this might actually be solvable, not necessarily by me, but it might be solvable. And also, it's a fun thing and it makes you respect the setter more because whenever you're doing something, a puzzle like this, or even reading a mystery novel or watching a suspense thriller, there's always that uneasy, yeah, but do I trust that the writer knows what he or she is doing? Are they going to satisfy me at the end of this or am I going to be disappointed? And there's often a moment early on where you think either yes or no. Oh no, I think this person knows what they're doing. I think there's a good chance that this is going to have a satisfying ending. And yeah, so that was that moment for me on this.

Phoebe Judge: He says that the more time you spend with it, things do begin to come together.

John Finnemore: Patterns do emerge. And they are distinct from one another, and they have different ways of speaking, and they have different objectives. And the story does make—it's quite a crazy story, but it does make sense. And the author promises

you that there is only one answer, and it is logically the only order in which these pages can be put. And when you read that sort of poetic soup that I was reading to you, you think, well, that can't be true because it's so dreamlike. But no, everything does have a meaning. And a lot of those meanings are specific ways of allowing you to put that page in place. It's a really well-designed. It's a really lovely thing.

[to John]

Phoebe Judge: One of the best parts of this all I think is that you have to do the work yourself. No, one's going to do it for you.

John Finnemore: Yep. That's absolutely true. You can't cheat with it unless you call Googling cheating. But as they say, it would be impossible without it. But Google will not provide you all the answers because it was written in the '30s. There's a lot of stuff that's location and time specific. So there's references to strange old '30s slang. And there's some things where I'm making guesses.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: He told us about a part where he thinks he figured out that when the late edition of the newspaper, *The Evening Standard*, was published in London in the 1930s, that the newspaper salesman would have shouted, "Six out!"

John Finnemore: But I can't find confirmation of that anywhere. It's nowhere on the internet. I read books from the first half of the 20th century quite often, I've never come across that particular thing because it's completely ephemeral. It's something that no one would think to write down. I may be wrong about it, but I suspect that it's just something that he knew his audience would know. And he certainly didn't expect anyone to be trying to solve it in 2020. [slick bass-heavy jazz]

Phoebe Judge: The man who wrote *Cain's Jawbone* Edward Powys Mathers, was set to get bored with standard crossword clues, sometimes called definitional clues, where you could, for example, have a clue that says "constellation part for four letters". The answer would be "star". Mathers much more interested in what is called a cryptic crossword.

John Finnemore: It's deliberately misdirecting you. So there's one, the father of electricity, and you're supposed to think of Edison, presumably, or maybe Watt. But what they want you to think of is "generator" because the generator is a father and as also produces electricity. So that's the sort of start of cryptic crosswords and that's about as cryptic as I believe they get in America. But in Britain there is a tradition of taking it one step further and producing a clue one part of which is a definition and the other part of which is a sort of little recipe of wordplay that tells you what to do with the

words and letters in order to achieve the definition. So it could be things like anagrams and any word that indicates sort of confusion or disruption. It could be an anagram indicator like “angrily” or “madly”. Or it could be taking the first letters of things, it could be reversing things, putting words into other words so that you end up with a clue that sounds like nonsense, but actually has a meaning that you can decode.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: John Finnemore actually creates some of these puzzles, probably making it more likely than most of us to be able to decode Edward Powys Mathers clues almost 90 years later. *Cain’s Jawbone* came back to life after a copy was donated to the Laurence Sterne Trust. Laurence Sterne was an 18th century experimental writer. He wrote *Tristram Shandy*. When they received *Cain’s Jawbone* the curator of the Trust, Patrick Wildgust, thought he’d try to solve it, but realized quickly it was much more difficult than he thought. But he wanted to know the solution. He told us that he first tried to locate as many copies of the book as possible, thinking there might be one in some library somewhere that had notes in it about the correct solution. He was able to locate a number of copies, but none of them had the answer. And then, he came across a bookseller’s online catalog listing both the book, and on a separate piece of paper, the answer. Patrick Wildgust purchased it right away. And then one day he was talking with a visitor at the museum and showed him the book. That visitor, John Mitchinson, runs a publishing company called Unbound. And together, they decided to try to bring *Cain’s Jawbone* back. Unbound printed the book as a sort of special item. And in keeping with the original spirit, offered a prize: one thousand pounds. And then, in September of 2020, John Finnemore sent in his answers, hoping to become winner number three.

John Finnemore: They gave you a form to submit, and it had a hundred numbers, as it were, with a space under each one. And you had to write the correct number underneath. So printed, what page 1 is real page, whatever it might be, 14. And do that for the whole thing. Then you had to fill in a little chart that said, so-and-so was killed by so-and-so. That was the second part of this admission. And the third part was a brief account of how you arrived at it, [soft banjo music] which they presumably put in just in case someone had found an old copy of the answer or something that was just transcribing it. So you had to just give them a couple of sentences about your experience in solving it.

[to John]

Phoebe Judge: Do you remember the moment when you looked at your notes and said, “I’ve got!”

John Finnemore: There was no moment where I thought, yes, that is it. I am definitely right about this whole solution. So there was no, *Aha!* I’ve got it.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: But he did get it.

[to John]

What was it like when—did you get a call? I mean, so few people have gotten the correct answer. Did they give you a phone call to tell you you've gotten it right?

John Finnemore: They did. Yes. It happened to arrive on my birthday, which was nice.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: He estimates it took him about six months to solve.

John Finnemore: Obviously it wasn't my full-time job, but on the other hand I don't know that I could have done it that much quicker, because it's the sort of puzzle where you need to give yourself a rest in between, and then something might come to you on a walk or when you wake up or when you look at it again. So I don't know how long it would take if you for some reason decided that you were just going to spend eight hours a day on it. I think it needs a lot of downtime to solve. [chuckles]

Phoebe Judge: News that John Finnemore had solved *Cain's Jawbone* got around and the publisher, Unbound, decided to print more copies so other people could give it a try. They reprinted the book in 2021. And one of those books made its way to San Francisco to the independent bookstore Green Apple Books where a 24-year-old woman named Sarah Scannell walked in one day and picked it up. She made a video about it and uploaded it to TikTok. Here's that video.

[audio from Sarah's TikTok video comes in.] [classical music]

Sarah Scannell: I found this murder mystery book from 1934 where you have to figure out the six killers and their victims, but all the pages are printed out of order. So I've decided to take this nearly impossible task as an opportunity to fulfill a lifelong dream and turn my entire bedroom wall into a murder board.

Phoebe Judge: Within days of Sarah Scannell posting to TikTok, *Cain's Jawbone* was completely sold out all over the world. You couldn't get it anywhere.

Sarah Scannell: People are *really* into it because I think a hundred pages makes it seem manageable. Like, it's just short enough.

Phoebe Judge: Sarah Scannell.

Sarah Scannell: And also, we see portrayals of murder boards and whatever in all kinds of media, whether it be, you know, *Criminal Minds* or *Homeland* or things like that.

And it just seems really fun. And you very rarely have an opportunity to do that. So I feel like people saw that. And in the beginning, I was being dramatic and I used string and stuff, and have since abandoned that 'cause it's not particularly practical. But most of my comments were like, "This looks incredible. I want to do this."

[phone dial-tone comes in]

Joey Goodman: [over the phone] Hello?

Phoebe Judge: Hi, I'm looking for Joey.

Joey Goodman: Hey, that is me.

Phoebe Judge: Thanks for doing this. I'm not going to keep you for very long, but just a few questions.

Joey Goodman: I'm at work so take your time.

Phoebe Judge: [laughs] Okay, I'll go really slow.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Joey Goodman works at Green Apple Books. [tinkering music]

Joey Goodman: The building itself is unique. It's huge. It's kind of like labyrinth themed. There's two floors and there's tons and tons of used books.

[to Joey]

Phoebe Judge: This isn't like a Barnes and Noble situation.

Joey Goodman: No, far from it.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Joey says he and a lot of his coworkers didn't know that Sarah had posted about the book on TikTok. They just knew that out of the blue there were dozens and dozens of requests for this old, obscure book. And they had to piece it together.

Joey Goodman: It's kind of like what happened that this one book suddenly is so in demand. And had tons of orders from far out of the city, too. And more people coming in asking for it. And it's like, we know you saw the TikTok, but it's like, you're too late. Sorry.

[to Joey]

Phoebe Judge: So, it completely sold out.

Joey Goodman: Yes. Yeah. Our distributor also sold out, real fast. So we had a long back order of people waiting for books. And we were like, we can't get 'em either.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: The book was also sold out on Amazon.

[to Joey]

Has any of this made you want to try to solve *Cain's Jawbone*?

Joey Goodman: Uh... [laughs] not so much.

[soft upbeat acoustic music]

Sarah Scannell: The way that this book is published, it's a paperback and it has kind of little cut lines printed on it. Like, it's not perforated or anything, but it's clearly intended for you to cut out the pages and move them around. And so after I initially bought it, I didn't do anything for like a week 'cause I was like, I don't have the physical space to be attacking this as it clearly intends me to. And then I had to rearrange some furniture in my room, and suddenly I had a very big blank wall, and I was like, perfect, let's get started. First step, just read it all once through, tear out the pages as I go, and then tape them up on the wall, and we'll go from there.

[to Sarah]

Phoebe Judge: How do you not just get 100% overwhelmed right away?

Sarah Scannell: It is hard. [chuckles] And that's the thing... is that it's not surprising that three people have ever solved this. And only one with the internet, which is incredible. But that is one of the things that I don't think I fully comprehended when I bought it, was that it is written in 1934, and it's a English book. And so I was like, I just need to get through one full reading. I'm clearly not going to understand most anything. And by midway, I actually really got the hang of like—the tone of it, and how some of the words worked and how some of the writing flowed into each other. But it was very strange. And it remains pretty difficult. At least now that I've read through it a couple of times, I have clear understandings of some recurring scenes and obviously characters. But sometimes you'll get a page that is exclusively pronouns and you're like, I have no idea who's here and what they're doing. What's happening? And I took my little notes and I moved on.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Sarah Scannell has been posting her progress. Here are some of her follow-up videos.

[audio from Sarah's TikTok videos come in]

Sarah Scannell: This section over here is all confirmed mentions of death. So it's like people who they either say like, old man what's his face died. Sure. That could be a murder. He could've just died. Or people like getting stabbed on page and you're like, oh, a murder happened. Alright. I don't know if it's supposed to be one killer to one victim, but we'll find out. The last section over here at the far end, is just like miscellaneous pages because I kinda got the vibe for what I was specifically looking for a lot of these sections, but it's very hard to read pages out of context. Sometimes you're just like, oh, they're like waxing poetic about...something? So...I don't know. They go here for now and then we'll figure it out.

Phoebe Judge: Less than two months after Sarah Scannell first posted on TikTok, the publishing company announced that it would print more copies. They told us earlier this week that so far they've reprinted 130,000 more copies of *Cain's Jawbone*. You can now find it in stores again. And if you want to try and submit your answer, there's a deadline of December 31st, 2022. The prize is 250 pounds. There's a *Cain's Jawbone* community on Reddit, helping each other, asking questions. Some of them use a special sort of secret keeping feature that lets people cover their words, and you can choose to click on them if you want to see what could be a spoiler. Sarah is aiming to solve the puzzle by the deadline of New Year's Eve. Here she is on TikTok.

[audio from Sarah's TikTok video comes in]

Sarah Scannell: I just gotta keep stressing that this is a nearly impossible task, and it will take me many months if I solve it at all. A fun update though is that I did color code the entire wall. But thank you to everyone in the comments who suggested the rainbow tabs because they're super helpful for me, just to like help my brain process everything at once, like recurring characters and events and stuff like that. Another fun... [audio fades out]

[to Phoebe]

The only thing that I'm worried about with the idea of so many people joining me in this is that the answers will get out. Because part of the mystique of this that I actually really enjoy is that nobody knows the answers. It has never been publicly made available and you have to go through the publishing company to find out the answers. I think there's probably like three people who know it, including the comedian who solved it. And so, I've kind of committed myself on TikTok to doing no spoilers, but I do fear when everyone in my comments are like, let's crowdsource this. I'm like, no, but it's not as fun that way. [dreamy music]

We're all kind of on the same footing as people who are out of this time, and I'm Googling a lot of things. Like, there's a lot of allusions to people and events and stuff like that, like, mythology, poetry, anyone can Google that as well as I can. [chuckles]

[to Sarah]

Phoebe Judge: You've got this all up in your bedroom. It actually sounds like a very relaxing thing to do before you go to sleep. But to have a little, you know, just look at it for a while and... maybe that would just do the trick. You know, they're all of these new sleep apps. Have you heard about them?

Sarah Scannell: Yeah.

Phoebe Judge: You could just do this, right? Don't you think it would work just as well?

Sarah Scannell: Oh, definitely. I think for one thing, it's infinitely better than staring at my phone for the last like half hour before I go to bed. And it's calming. It kind of centers your mind into one activity. It's, again, not looking at screens. I think it actually does definitely calm me down. And you can just do it for as long as your brain— like, you'll feel yourself getting tired. And so you can just kind of do it until you reach that point.

Phoebe Judge: Do you have any advice for people who start a puzzle and get really frustrated and... I'm not doing this. I'm putting it away.

Sarah Scannell: Mmhm.

Phoebe Judge: How do you help someone get past that little impatience and keep trying and see the fun of it.

Sarah Scannell: I mean, if this project has taught me anything, it's that some puzzles take more than a day to do. And so you finally have to get into the vibe of like, if I'm frustrated, just put it down. Just come back to it. You don't have to get it in one go, and you shouldn't get so frustrated that you're like, well, I'm never going to get this. Even if it takes weeks to get back to it, your mind will get clear, and it will be shockingly easier to hop back in.

John Finnemore: A hard puzzle is one of those things that take you away from yourself, that time distorts. A good novel can do this as well, but it's not quite the same feeling as a puzzle in a way, as they say, time distorts, and you realize—you're guilty to realize you've meant to sit down with it ten minutes and actually been there for two hours. And the way that it unfolds and gives you little rewards as you go along, and it's properly escapist in the way that television you can be—you know, these days people have one eye on their phone or there's something else going on, or even you're just thinking to yourself as even as you're watching, your worries are ticking away in the

back of your mind. The nice thing about a difficult puzzle is that you just end up, if it's good at all, you end up completely focused on it. And being so wholly wrapped up in anything is really enjoyable experience, I think, and good for us.

[to John]

Phoebe Judge: I think I'm gonna do a puzzle this weekend.

John Finnemore: Good!

Phoebe Judge: I'm going to go find a little puzzle to do. [John chuckles] I think this is not just good for our mental health, but also probably good for our long-term brain health, keeping ourselves active in that way.

John Finnemore: Yes, absolutely. I'm sure it is.

Phoebe Judge: You'll live to be 150 [chuckles] with amount of puzzles you've done. [John laughs]

John Finnemore: You haven't seen the way I eat. [both Phoebe and John laugh]

[upbeat music]

Phoebe Judge: This Is Love is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson and Libby Foster. Rob Byers is our technical director. You can find out more about the show at thisislovepodcast.com. We're on Facebook and Twitter @thisisloveshow.

This Is Love is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a part of the Vox Media Podcast Network. Discover more great shows at podcasts.voxmedia.com.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This Is Love. [music fades out]

[to Joey]

Do you still do Wordle?

Joey Goodman: No, I stopped like two weeks ago. I missed a really dumb word and I got mad, like, I'm done with this game.

Phoebe Judge: So... that's it. Like, I'm not going back. This has wasted enough of my time.

Joey Goodman: Yeah, I definitely didn't consider it time wasted. It was fun. But for a second it was part of the routine. I was like, I wake up and there's a new word. Do that first thing before leaving bed.

Phoebe Judge: I do it every morning. And I don't consider myself a puzzle person, but I do Wordle every morning and I look forward to it. And I don't want to talk to anyone until after— [crosstalk]

Joey Goodman: [crosstalk] Oh, that's funny.

Phoebe Judge: —I've finished Wordle.

Joey Goodman: Yeah, I super know what you mean. You do it first thing in the morning too?

Phoebe Judge: First thing in the morning. I have a cup of coffee, and I have a seltzer.

Joey Goodman: Nice.

Phoebe Judge: And I do Wordle. And I don't talk to anyone.

Joey Goodman: Yeah. [chuckles] Well, in that way it's a funny barometer for how you slept or something. Maybe it's like, man, my brain doesn't work at all today. You know what I mean? If you started too quick, I'm still in brain fog mode. And I'm making dumb mistakes just guessing words that are not based on what I already know.

Phoebe Judge: You can just blame it on your night's sleep. Not on your lack of vocabulary. [Joey and Phoebe laugh]

END OF EPISODE.