

SE02EP06

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we're your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: On today's episode we talk with Sonya Cronin, the program leader for our "England at War: Harry Potter, Religion, & Valor" program in London. Sonya talks about how the magic of fantasy literature is brought to life through this program, and how every day is an adventure when you're abroad. Let's jump into our conversation with Sonya now.

Z: Hi Sonya, how are you doing today?

Sonya (S): Hi! Doing well, great to be here, thank you so much!

Z: Yeah we're so excited to have you. First of all, can you just listeners?

S: Yeah, I'm Sonya Cronin I'm with the Religion Department over at Florida State University and the program that I'm doing for study abroad is called England at War and it is Harry Potter, Religion and Valor and it is the study abroad version of a course that we teach on campus called Religion and 20th Century Fantasy Literature.

H: To start us off can you talk a little bit about the development of that Religion in 20th Century Fantasy Literature course that you teach at FSU?

S: Yeah it's such a great class. I mean you know the beauty of teaching it on campus is we get 16 weeks and you know it just stretches it out. But so the class started in 2008, is when it was first launched and it was launched big. So the two professors, it was originally two professors that were going to tag team it and it ended up being one, and they taught that class in a three hundred person auditorium and it was completely packed. It was an amazing class. And from then I took over in Spring 2009 and the class is basically four British fantasy authors so it CS Lewis, Tolkien, Phillip Pullman and JK Rowling with Harry Potter and what we do is we track the development of the way that fantasy kind of went through those different authors, they all build upon each other, or at least the later ones build upon the earlier ones. And then we also look at the kind of religious and theological foundations that are inherent in all of that literature. In part because they're all British literature so they all have this particular worldview that animates all of them and so what we do is we go through the text. But it's not just say let's see what's going on in Harry Potter you can do that at a coffee shop. We do the things that that you wouldn't necessarily know to do for yourself. And so we look at Bible, we look at Augustine, we tap into Milton, we deal with fables and different types of story, different types of genre, and what our authors are doing, how they're building upon it. And in some ways a kind of moral education that they are disseminating through their literature.

Z: That's so wonderful. I was able to take that class with you, as you know of course, during my undergrad and it was just such an amazing course, one of my absolute favorites that I took at FSU. But we want to know, how does teaching that course abroad enrich the curriculum?

S: Oh it's night and day, you know. I mean on the one hand you know I'm going to highlight the on campus class because its 16 weeks and its just fun but when you do this class in London it's radically different, in part because you're living and breathing it. One of my favorite kind of punch lines, especially the Harry Potter material is that JK Rowling did not invent the world of Harry Potter, the world of Harry Potter is England. What she did was animate it. And so it's really hard to get that, especially as American, reading it from this side. We kind of imagine that all of Harry Potter was invented right? The houses, the quidditch games, the butterbeer, all of that kind of thing, and it's British life, you know? So when you go and you see a football match, when you're sitting there in pubs, when everybody kind of crawls out at 5:00 PM and goes to the pub and watches a football match, I mean this is Harry Potter, and this is also London. But to take that up a notch, I'm going to kind of jump into another topic just for a second and it's the notion of war. We changed the name of this class from, I can't even remember what it originally was, I think it was like Harry Potter and Religion in London or something like that. And we changed the name of the course to England at War: Harry Potter, Religion & Valor and the reason was because especially as we're walking around the streets of London, as we go into Oxford, as we even our weekend in Edinburgh war is all around us. World War I and World War II are so heavily in the British ethos that you can't go anywhere without it being influential. So I mean even just down the road from the FSU center you're walking down the streets and you look up at the buildings and there's artillery marks in the buildings, you know, that still go back to World War II. So there is this awareness everywhere you go that they were on the front lines in that battle. It's in Harry Potter, it's in the Lord of the Rings, it's I mean CS Lewis even brings it in to the storyline with the children having to be evacuated out of London because the bombing that's happening, right? So this is so there that to understand what was going into the literature, what was in the mind of our authors, what's just present in British culture, they didn't have to conjure it it's just living there that war affects their thought and the history of war affects their thought, it's very much a recent memory. And so as we as we're doing the class you just simply can't avoid it, it's such a big part of what goes into the literature. One of the things that we'll talk about in the course itself is this notion of the Spirit of Dunkirk. And so Dunkirk is this battle, right? Where the British soldiers were kind of left on the beaches and their caught between German troops and the sea and they're going to perish, there's nothing to be done about it. And what happens is the British government calls upon civilians and their little tug boats to go and get these British soldiers off the islands, well not the island but off the beaches, and they do, they save most of them. And this is part of Britain and it and it makes all this literature make sense. All the sudden it makes sense for the hobbits to go and try to destroy a ring because there's just nobody else to do it. We are the ones that have to do it and so we're going to go and do this. Or you know one of the things that really caught me, as a mom in particular, when I was reading Harry Potter five and The Order of Phoenix, you've got these kids that are involved in battle, like what's up with that? It's not something conjured ,this was World War II right? This is young people that that found themselves somehow on the frontlines because that was what was required of them. And frontlines doesn't necessarily mean you know in battle with a gun. But it means you know taking groceries from one place to another while all the sudden you witness a bombing. And this is reality and this is how children grew up. And so to see that in this literature may be foreign to us, it was to me, but its such a part of the British, I don't know the word that I'm looking for, consciousness that we have to handle it. So you know when you're wandering around London, everything from the zoo to the war museums to the pubs to the candies that are different than what we have here, it's just a very immersive experience.

H: So you started talking a little bit about London and the things that you can see and just being surrounded by all of these things. all the time. But can you tell us a little bit more detail about some of

those excursions that you go on during the program and how do those excursions influence how students engage with the material?

S: The excursions are sort of two-fold. We do all the fun touristy things because we're there, and we can. So we do everything that's sort of London tourism so we go to Covent Garden and you know highlight the fact that Eliza Doolittle sold flowers there. We're right down the road from Tottenham, all the sudden I can't remember the name. Tottenham street.

H: Tottenham Court Road Station.

S: Tottenham Court Road, that's right, sorry! Like Tottenham I had but I couldn't remember the rest of it. But you know that was the dream for Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady she wanted to have a flower shop on that road. So we're there and there's certain things that just kind of London that we do. We take the tubes regularly, we you know go out to eat, and we have Gelato and all that kind of stuff. But specifically related to the class, we do all the fandom type things. So we're going to go to pretty much every spot that we can find in London, and outside of London that's close by, where a movie shot was filmed right, and we'll take our photos there and do all of that kind of stuff. We go to 9 ¾, we go to Kings Cross Station, were going to do all of that. We also do some other things, we to go to the British Library we're going to visit the Magna Carta, we're going to go and see the early works of Shakespeare that are preserved there. We're going to go to the Churchill War Rooms because that kind of really puts us in that feeling, you can almost see Order of the Phoenix, just on a larger scale but in reality you know we're also dealing with not just fantasy side of it but the historical side of it. So those Churchill War Rooms become really important, we walk down Downing Street, we go to Buckingham Palace, all of the things that are very London. I'm trying to think, we go to all of the places where we think Diagon Alley could have been an inspiration, you know.

H: That sounds so fun!

S: It is, it really is. We walk the bridges, we go to the Tower of London, as we're walking through the Tower of London you see these jewels, you know. They're so, they're beautiful but there's also a gaudiness to them where you're just like this doesn't even look like it could be real because we've never seen anything like this, you know? I mean we just don't have them in our common museums so to walk through and see the jewels of royalty, it's the stuff of legends and it's sitting there right in front of our face but it also has some correspondence with the way that we understand the rings of power it also has something to do with the way that Voldemort chose his horcruxes you know he always chose something very very special. And we just don't have much correspondence for that in the US right I mean I think our national treasures and things like constitution, you know, but it's not a ring of power so to speak. It's not a necklace that the queen wore, you know?

H: It's not quite a Crown jewel.

S: Right, exactly and so there's just something about that. Walking around, taking it all in. And it changes the way you look at things and in some ways its like a window opens up in your head and all of a sudden everything that you were reading from one lens, now takes on a whole different meaning. You'll never lead about Ravenclaw's tiara again the same way right, you'll never read out the ring that Dumbledore put on his hands the same way, because they're real and they have some sort of correspondence to what's happening. So I'm sure I'm forgetting things but, oh and we go to the Harry Potter studios because

we can and we should. We haven't so far been able to get group tickets to The Cursed Child but everybody that wants to go seems to be able to grab those last minute tickets and go. So it's a thing that the students can do, even if we haven't been able to make it as a group. And that's, there's just so much more, you know. There's something every day. We hit the ground running the first day that we get there and kind of acclimate it's not, it's not so academic that you feel overwhelmed. I mean we kind of just walk around and breathe and get hot chocolates and you know go into candy stores and figure out where we are and how to find things you know, double decker buses you know that kind of thing, and then very quickly we kind of have something going on almost every single day. There's a couple of weekends that are free for the students if they want to go somewhere else. They can go to Paris, they can take a RyanAir flight and go somewhere but we do have a weekend where we go to Edinburgh and see the Harry Potter sites there and just have a lot of fun, see the castle. There's a hill called Arthur Seat that we go hiking and climb upon it you know see the vista. And then we also go to Oxford and that is just, it's a day trip but it's fantastic. We walk the very path that Lewis and Tolkein walked, where they had their conversations, where Tolkein sat and looked at trees for an unreasonably long time and they had to leave him, you know and kind of keep walking you know. So there's some great tales associated with that but we go to Christchurch, we get to see the colleges where they worked but we also get to see the dining hall that Harry Potter was filmed so it's this mix of everything that influences the actual literature with all the fan stuff that just makes this trip really fun. And we take our time you know, gift shops can not be rushed through. So you know that's one of the things, it's never like okay you have 10 minutes to get your souvenirs to get back home to America you know, we build that kinda stuff in. We go to Stonehenge which is incredible. So it's just something every day and it's an amazing trip that goes by so fast and what I tell the students is you come here as strangers and you leave as lifelong friends, like most of these people it would surprise me if somebody from the study abroad trip did not end up in your wedding. It's that kind of fast friendship that's able to make in four weeks what on a regular campus could take a year, maybe longer. So it's a really, really special time. And it's time to where teachers are able to bond with their students, it's a different atmosphere. So we're as close to the students as they are, in some ways not quite the same, but in some ways to each other. You know, we're accessible, we have fun with them, you know. So by the time it's all over and this is not the reason to go on a study abroad but this is a perk of it, I can write the best letter of recommendation for the students that go on abroad because I even know what you order for dinner.

Z: Right?

S: You know, there was one group of students on probably the first trip and everywhere we went we ordered the most boring food. They ordered Mac and cheese, they ordered pizza, they ordered you know we're in London order fish and chips! Cut what's really funny about, is they sort of had their finger on the pulse of what was the best thing to order everywhere so we were all mocking them about their mac and cheese and our fish and chips would come out and it would be terrible and their mac and cheese was amazing. But the thing about that, that's been two and a half years now, that's one of the things I remember. I can tell you what these three ordered almost every meal because of you know the type of personalities. But it's fun, we laugh together, we spend a lot of time together. We had one girl and one trip that while she was abroad her dog died and she wept for two days, it was so sad. But she had two other people that wept with her, you know, and it was very precious. You know there's just something about this bond that happens on these trips.

Z: Absolutely, yeah that's something that we do always say is that study abroad you know fosters lifelong friendships also that the city is the classroom when you study abroad and it sounds like your program really exemplifies that because it's you just do so much and the curriculum comes to life, Harry Potter and the Lord of the rings and you know the Chronicles of Narnia really come to life when you're there.

S: Yes, yes without question.

Z: That's so exciting.

S: We don't even have to work at it. All you have to do is literally step out the front door. It kind of reminds me of the Bilbo Baggins quote right, "All you have to do to go on adventure is just take that first step out your front door." And that is so true in London, we just walk out and you know I mean you can't you can't even overplay the fact that every where you go you hear a British accent. It's just beautiful. So tons of fun, tons of fun and tons of learning. You know it's not just fun, you come away and you're transformed. Your life is bigger. The world is bigger. And the literature is bigger than you could have ever imagined. It's just something different and it's not just about fantasy literature. It's about fantasy literature as it highlights what's important in life. So when we start walking around London we see the things that this literature claims is worth living and dying for. It's about friendship, it's about freedom, it's about light over darkness, it is about the kind of people that we want to be, and creating a better society, creating a better universe. So on the one hand it seems almost like it could be a cheater class you know like I'm going to London I'm gonna do this Harry Potter thing and it's gonna be so fun but what merit does it really have? I would argue it is one of the most valuable lessons, one most valuable classes you could take during your entire college experience because it sneaks up on you. You have a ton of fun but it also opens your eyes to both some moral and religious kind of underpinnings of western society, both it's good and evils. So, so both of them are at play there. And it also tells you things about friendship that you may not have been able to quite put your finger on, it puts form on things that we have dancing around in our heads but all the sudden you know what a friend is because all Sam Wise carried Frodo up that hill, you know what a friend is because even in a moment of crisis Hermione did not abandon Harry, even though her heart was breaking. And even though this is literature, it's also real. It's real life and it's the kind of people that we want to be, the kind of people that we want to find and we get immersed in it.

H: So I love that you've already given us some quotes from the literature, you've told us about some of the characters and the different ways that you're able to look at them, so we have to ask. So your course studies The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lord of the rings and Harry Potter, so which character from these works of literature do you relate most to and why?

S: Am I supposed to pick one from each?

Z: Oo yeah I don't know that's a good question.

S: So that's a really hard question right because these characters kind of get to each side of you. So if I have to pick Harry Potter, I think it might actually be Luna Lovegood.

Z: Ooo!

S: Yeah she's excentric but whimsical and we find that even in all of that eccentricity she's grounded. I think in some ways maybe, relate too or maybe aspire too yeah might be a better word. You know but in the end I keep coming back to her. I love the fact that she's not ordinary and she just owns who she is.

She's got her own particular essence. I always imagine that certain characters like this, that even if you were just sitting in a room and for whatever reason they came in as a ghost you would know who they were. They don't need their bodies, they don't need their faces. There's just such an essence of personality there that you would just know who they were as soon as they came into the room, just by virtue of their presence. And so that's what I think of when I think of Luna Lovegood, she just she distills down to perfection, you know? So I will say that she's my character.

Z: I love that, that's so good. I love that image of just the essence of someone's presence that you could really know them. And I could see that with Luna, definitely.

S: She's so who she is, you know?

Z: Yeah.

H: I love also the idea of it's an aspirational character. Like for me personally, I look at all these characters and I'm like there are so many great examples of things that we can aspire to. So I think that that's a really great note as well.

S: Yes, very much so.

Z: So our next question we just wanted to ask what advice you have for faculty who are considering teaching abroad?

S: Um, do it. If you can, do what you can to get over there, it's amazing. I think that the other piece of advice that I would say is that the rigors that we have here are different there. It's not to say that it's any less academic, or any less important, in some ways I would almost say more but the way that we would frame a class on campus just needs to be kind of let go. I think part of the study abroad experience is immersion for faculty as well. And so we go there and we grab students by the hands and we go for a walkabout basically and what our jobs are is to show them everything that we can, to go "Do you see that? That comes up in this book." Right? But it's not so much the same way that we have our outline and we have our lecture, I mean we do have some of that in order to have benchmarks and to make the things that you know that make the class real in terms of state regulations and all that kind of stuff but the realness of course is walking around the city with our students and getting to know them. And that involves as much sitting down and having an ice cream with them and kind of soaking it all in, listening to the strange horns blare in the streets, and watching the buses go by. Looking at new restaurants that we never knew before and finding out that some of them are just as terrible as the ones that we have here. You know, all of that. Mocking somebody for going to McDonald's in England, I mean I think that's just a real important thing that we must do.

H: Absolutely necessary.

S: Absolutely necessary, its part of the trip. But I think that would be the piece of advice is kind of let go of what we do on the regular campus, embrace the city and the experience and the students, and try to just have as much fun and they are because they take their cues from us too. If we're having a blast, they're going to have a blast, its contagious. I think that's just kind of what we do. In some ways were like the pep club or the cheering squad, we do highlight everything but its almost as if we're giving the tour at the Louve and were telling them about the painting but we certainly don't want to tell them about what kind of paint went into it. We don't want to get lost in the boring details, we want to tell them sweeping

histories and narratives that they will never ever forget and they'll connect you with it too you know so it's all good.

H: I think the advice for faculty is so important because we do have such talented faculty at FSU and for them to be able to take what they teach and what they are passionate about abroad just I think enhances that for everybody.

S: Yes.

H: But we also want to know what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad?

S: I think to take less than you think that you need. You don't need the entire closet and the kitchen sink. But to get there and to not put anything off. The time goes by, it goes by very, very fast and you know it takes a week to get acclimated and so if you wait until you're acclimated you've lost a week. Do your best to do everything. I understand that people are on a budget and so we have to take that into account, but there's ways to have a lot of fun even on a budget, you know. You don't have to eat out every meal but you could you can enjoy that gelato here and there and that's not the most expensive thing to go out and eat, you know. There's certain experiences that you have to have so you may even want to make a list of things that I want to do when I get to London and start immediately. Start on day one and start checking things off. If you want to go where Sherlock Holmes' house is, then go. If you want to see the swans, go see the swans. If you want to stand at Buckingham Palace, go do it but don't waste any time. Don't let the fact that you're tired keep you from doing things, go even though you're tired you can sleep when you get home. You know so it's four weeks that you're there and it just goes so fast. So do everything, do everything. Eat as many places you can and then you know if you get the opportunity to go back a second time, you do the things that were your favorite but for this trip especially if you haven't been before, do everything you possibly can do and sleep as little as you really need, you know.

Z: That's great advice. Well thank you so much for talking with us today, it's been such a pleasure. I just love hearing about your course. It makes me want to take it all over again but, this time in London.

S: Yeah, you should totally come, we would love it, we would love it. Alright thank you so much for inviting me to be here, this was a blast.

H: Thank you, thanks for sharing your time with us.

Z: Before we disembark, let's talk about teaching abroad. As Sonya mentioned, teaching abroad is a great way to bring course curriculum to life. The history, food, culture, and language enrich the experience for students and faculty as they use the city as the textbook. If you're a faculty member at FSU and are interested in teaching abroad, we have a few options for you. You can lead a curriculum-focused program at a study center or non-study center location or you can teach a broad curriculum course at one of our study centers.

H: Applications to teach abroad with IP typically open in the winter, so be sure to check our website for more information and updates. If you have any questions about teaching abroad, the application process, or have an idea for a potential program, email our Program Management team at IP-Faculty@fsu.edu.

Z: If you're enjoying our podcast, be sure to leave a review on Apple Podcasts and tell your friends about it! As always, thanks for listening and special thanks to Sonya Cronin for talking with us.

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