

Koopmans Interview

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SPEAKERS

Will Beattie, Dr. Koopmans, Ben Pykare



Will Beattie 00:06

I'm Will Beattie.



Ben Pykare 00:07

And I'm Ben Pykare.



Will Beattie 00:08

And we're two graduate students at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.



Ben Pykare 00:13

We're here to chat with students and scholars of the medieval world about what they do and how they came to do it.



Will Beattie 00:19

So who have we got today, Ben?



Ben Pykare 00:21

Well, today we're sitting down with Dr. Rachel Koopmans, Associate Professor of History at York University in Toronto. We're talking with her today about her research on the stained glass of Canterbury Cathedral, working at historical sites, as well as how to present academic research

for non-specialist audiences.



Will Beattie 00:38

Well, then, let's go and meet her in the Middle Ages.



Ben Pykare 00:41

Welcome Dr. Koopmans. Thank you for sitting down with us today.



Dr. Koopmans 00:45

Thanks so much. This is a real pleasure.



Ben Pykare 00:47

Oh, it's our it's our pleasure, our pleasure. We like to start our interviews with one question. So let's say you're in line to buy movie tickets, it's the first night of the movie, long line. You're waiting .The person in front of you starts up a conversation, and they ask you, "so what do you do for a living?" What answer would you give in that situation?



Dr. Koopmans 01:10

Well, I would say I'm a medieval historian. And then there's a little pause. And then typically, I hear "oh, wow, really?" And then they will usually ask me a question about Game of Thrones, or the English royalty or something like that?



Will Beattie 01:26

Is it just a lot of pop cultural references and stuff like that? Or do you have an opportunity in those situations to get a bit deeper into what the medieval is?



Dr. Koopmans 01:36


Yeah, it's... I guess I probably do more with my students, obviously.




Ben Pykare 01:40

Yeah.



 Dr. Koopmans 01:40

But I have especially lately seen that the term "medieval" and "violence" go together almost all the time. So if you've noticed, like with the war in Ukraine, people say, "wow, that was medieval" or "this is... this is almost medieval." And, and that's almost always in relationship to violence. So I think there's a real sense that the Middle Ages is just this incredibly violent time. And so that's something that I really do try to... try to talk about with people. And to say that a lot of their ideas about, say medieval torture, actually date to the Early Modern period. And they're actually not medieval. That's not medieval violence.

 Will Beattie 02:24

Do you think that comes from education, sort of the education system and the way that we learn, you know, historical battles, as major parts of, of medieval history? And perhaps in some, to some extent we ignore some of the more day-to-day kind of elements of the medieval world?

 Dr. Koopmans 02:39


I definitely think so. And I think so much of the kind of popular medieval history that you get is about violence, and battles and knights, and then there's just this image that is just an orgy of violence. And what scares me is, I think, that attracts some people. I think that's part of the reason why I get students in my classes, as they expect it to be all about violence. And there's kind of an attraction there.

 Ben Pykare 03:06

When you see that in a student that like, you know, maybe on the first day of class, you go "why did you take this course?" And you get an answer that you don't love. How do you kind of reintroduce the medieval to them?

 03:21

Well I know, especially in my survey classes, I really do try to do the whole Middle Ages. Like everything I can think of. So medieval music, medieval art, medieval food, medieval politics, and then the usual economy, you know, all that. And I do give them a lecture on medieval warfare or two. So that I can give them my own view of how that... how medieval warfare worked. But I really try to give them as broad a spectrum of what was going on in the Middle Ages, and to try to give them a sense that it is way more than just warfare and violence.

 Will Beattie 03:58

Yeah. So what first interested you personally in the Middle Ages?

 Dr. Koopmans 04:03

Well, I have to admit, it was probably castles. So there you go. But I remember as a child, I loved doing little craft projects, and I would make little castles for myself out of paper and clay. So that's what I first remember in terms of thinking about the Middle Ages.



Will Beattie 04:22

Right. Did you get a chance to visit any when you were younger?



Dr. Koopmans 04:25

I did not know, I did not get to go to Europe until I was 19.



Will Beattie 04:29

Okay. Yeah, sorry. Still something which I guess I am getting used to is the fact because I grew up in the UK, and I'm sort of surrounded by them. And to an extent, we just ignore them. Which is terrible. It's terrible. But yeah. So it's just interesting to sort of think about it from that perspective.



Ben Pykare 04:47

Were are your undergrad studies already leaning toward history, or was that a longer journey, kind of, settling into medieval history as a field?



04:57

Yeah, it was definitely a longer journey for me. So I was interested in history and in literature and in art. And then I really didn't know what to go to graduate school in. So yeah. And even when I applied to graduate school I actually applied to Victorian... so Victorian England was what I was thinking of studying. And medieval at the same time. And so then I had to decide even at that point, which direction are you going to go?



Ben Pykare 05:28

Just out of curiosity, what was the pull toward the Victorian era?



Dr. Koopmans 05:32

Oh, Dickens and, you know, the Brontes and all the literature I really enjoyed reading.



Ben Pykare 05:39

So from undergrad from undergrad having to then begin to narrow into "okay, I have all these interests of narrowing on medieval history." What within medieval history did you kind of find a passion for through those graduate studies?

D Dr. Koopmans 05:57

Yeah, well, I think the first thing I was really interested in was monasteries, and monks, and how medieval religion worked. And I think that came from my background, which was very much a Protestant Calvinist background, so that seemed also different and exotic to me. So I was really interested in how medieval religion worked before you got to the Protestant Reformation. So I went to Calvin College and history really started with the Reformation there. And so I was very interested in what went on before that.

B Ben Pykare 06:32

Yes.



Will Beattie 06:33

Was there anything that surprised you, when you sort of moved back into the monastic pre-Reformation period?

D Dr. Koopmans 06:40

Oh, practically everything I think.

B Ben Pykare 06:41

I think that is also as someone in... from the US education system, as well, like the medieval is quite mysterious. Like I remember, we spent time with ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome, and then kind of jumped right to the Renaissance, you know, and then like going forward. And I think it does line up with kind of a Protestant version of history, right, where, right, we have this early church period, that's kind of prioritized. And then we skip to the important stuff in the 1500s. And you're off to the races. So yeah, thank you for sharing that. That is fascinating. So when did you get to visit any of the places then in your graduate studies that you were reading about?

D Dr. Koopmans 07:27

Yes. And I will say as an undergraduate, I got to spend a semester in England when I was a sophomore. And that really piqued my interest. I remember walking around London and thinking, "how can everyone here not want to be a historian?" That's the only thing you could want to be surely if you got to live here. And...



Will Beattie 07:49

This is what I mean, you completely forget. It's even around you when you're used to it all the time. It's terrible. But it's quite strange. So you're in London, you said, Well, yeah, I suppose that's an incredible place. Lots of amazing medieval sights. Were you researching anything in particular, while you were there? Was it more of a broad survey you were doing as an undergraduate?



Dr. Koopmans 08:08

Yeah, I was actually at a little theological college in the north of London. So I took courses on the Reformation. So even then, I really didn't get to do medieval history. But we did take a field trip to St. Albans cathedral. So that was my first cathedral. And my first kind of major project here at Notre Dame was on St. Albans and, and a recluse who lived near St. Albans: Christina of Margate. And so that really, and a psalter that was... a beautiful psalter from 12th century St. Albans.



Will Beattie 08:49

And could you just define what a psalter would be for those who who might not be aware?



Dr. Koopmans 08:54

Sure, so that would be a copy of the Psalms from the Bible. But this one is full of illuminations and illustrated, well, illuminated initials as well. So just full of these fantastic illustrations throughout.



Ben Pykare 09:13

So that project you just described, I immediately am overwhelmed on your behalf of... so there's a manuscript element, there's a textual, perhaps literary element, biographical elements, perhaps hagiographical element and then there's an architectural side of things. How did all of that come together for you?



Dr. Koopmans 09:35

Well, after my undergraduate I actually didn't come to Notre Dame next. I went to Northwestern University, and did a Master's degree in English Lit. But even as I was there, I was starting to think I had made a mistake and needed to get into history and medieval history. And so I took a course on medieval art history there with Sandra Hinman and I... for my project in that class, I worked on the St. Albans Salter.





Will Beattie 10:02

Okay.



Dr. Koopmans 10:03

And so then when I got to Notre Dame, I had that kind of in my back pocket. And so I started to explore, as you say, more the hagiography side and the architecture side and started to work more on the context of that St. Albans psalter.



Will Beattie 10:20

Did that form a huge part of your study while you were at Notre Dame? Or did you then expand into other areas as well?



Dr. Koopmans 10:25

Yeah, well, I was thinking of making that my dissertation project, and then a book came out.



Ben Pykare 10:34

No!



Dr. Koopmans 10:34

And I thought, oh, no, it was Sharon Elkins book "Holy Women of 12th Century England." And that was what I was thinking of doing. So I thought, "okay, I have to find something else." I have to say I was a little naive. I think I could have carried on if I'd wanted to, but, but I really did feel like "okay, I need to find a different kind of project." And that's when I started thinking about miracle stories.



Ben Pykare 11:01


For our listeners, are there any stories you can share that you particularly enjoy? Or maybe particularly were... first stumbled across?





Dr. Koopmans 11:11


Well, there's so many of them, as you know. I guess the most famous one from the Thomas Beckett cult, which is the one I really focus on now, is about a... quite an ordinary man who... he got into a fight at a pub.





 Ben Pykare 11:27
Okay.


 Will Beattie 11:28
Good start.


 Dr. Koopmans 11:29
Good start. And he went into a neighbor's house and stole some items out of that house. Not much at all. But he said this other guy owed him a debt that he wouldn't pay. And so he took this stuff as security for the debt. Well, he got imprisoned for this. And he was eventually blinded and castrated as a punishment for this crime. But Thomas Beckett healed him of both the blinding and the castration.

 Ben Pykare 12:00
That's a miracle.

 Dr. Koopmans 12:01
So it was a miracle. And that became the most famous story for this particular cult.

 Will Beattie 12:10
And because the Thomas Becket cult, and Thomas Becket himself, they form a large part of the work you've been doing more recently as well, is that right?

 Dr. Koopmans 12:16
That's right. So when I started this, I was thinking more about miracle collections as a genre. And so that really comes out of my interest in literature and literary studies. And then I've gotten more and more engaged in the Beckett cult, because that is the cult that where we have these stained glass windows illustrating these miracle stories.

 Ben Pykare 12:40
Yes. These windows, was your first exposure to them, like, a textual description? Or did you first see pictures? How are you kind of... how did you first hear about these?

 Dr. Koopmans 12:52

Yeah, umm... I read a book about them. And it was only black and white illustrations in there. So for many years, I had never even seen them in color. You know, this is before the internet. So yeah, it was through book.

B Ben Pykare 13:10

Wonderful, wonderful. Yeah, we we've seen those old plates. I know now, right, there's a big emphasis on getting the glossy paper with those nice brightly colored prints in there. When did you get to eventually go see them in person?

D Dr. Koopmans 13:29

Well, my fourth year here, I know you guys are just you're at that stage.

B Ben Pykare 13:33

Yes, right around.

D Dr. Koopmans 13:35

I spent a year in London, I was actually the skivvy cleaning up after the Notre Dame in London program. I'm not sure if it even still exists. But I was living up the back staircase. And I would clean up after the law students who use that space as a classroom space. But it meant I had that housing in London.



Will Beattie 13:59

Right.

D Dr. Koopmans 14:00

And so I worked at the British Library, which at that point was still in the British Museum. It was the last year it was in the British Museum. And then I would commute to Canterbury from there. And so then I would work on the glass and go to the archives. So that was the year that this project really, you know, really started to come together. It was my first year really working on it as a dissertation student.

B Ben Pykare 14:24

How... as someone who's like, yeah, at that stage, like, how intimidating was that? I mean, you're going to a different country. Right, and you're asking to see things and work on, right, very important things. Can you... yeah, just tell us about how that was for you. Because I'm

intimidated.

D

Dr. Koopmans 14:44

Yeah, it was intimidating. It was. And I, but... you know people tend to be very generous and are happy to help. I do know now when I tell people at Canterbury how long I've been coming, they don't believe it. They'll say, "wait, you're here that long ago?" Because of course, they didn't pay any attention to an American Graduate Student, kind of, coming through the archive. But I would say, you know, just to go for it. You'll be surprised at how generous people are when when you go to archives and to libraries.



Will Beattie 15:21

Were there any challenges you were kind of surprised by when you were first using archives or libraries for the first time or in fact, working in a historical site like Canterbury Cathedral?

D

Dr. Koopmans 15:32

Well, every archive has its own peculiarities. So you have to learn those. I think what also was a shock, although I remember being forewarned about this, is that I'd taken a very good paleography class. But that's quite different from getting to grips with the particular stuff that you have to read. And, and kind of those early struggles of trying to read the 12th 13th century charters. Then I also had to look at quite a bit of 17th century, 16th century stuff. And that handwriting is just brutal. And I still don't feel like I've got a good handle on that. So I think it was just learning how to read those documents.

B

Ben Pykare 16:15

Yeah. And for, for our audience, yeah, like, what is that process look like? And like, "I know this language, I am looking at it." But this hands, right, this handwriting, it's just not clicking? Kind of... yeah, so what was some of your process for getting familiar with a text and being able to see how that person created this manuscript?

D

Dr. Koopmans 16:42

I think the best thing to do is start with something easy. So if you've got something that has been edited, and then you can just kind of keep checking yourself, "oh, that's what an R looks like! You're kidding. Okay, that's an R." You know, and then you can learn slowly. I also remember being told here, which was excellent advice is to make an alphabet for yourself. And so then once you can recognize an individual letter forms then it all becomes much easier. So it's kind of an initial shock. But I think that's the case with, kind of, any medieval project is that, you know, medieval, the medieval centuries are so vast. There's no way that your training can introduce you to everything before you actually hit those archives.



Will Beattie 17:29

Yeah. And I suppose a lot of it as well as that you just have to keep at. It just takes time to get your eye in, to get used to the script. And you mentioned that the you're also having to look at 16th and 17th century, sort of, scripts and, and scribal hands. Were these, with these kinds of interpretations of medieval texts, or annotations of texts being done by people in the 16th and 17th century? Or is this more, kind of, legal text or, or, you know, relating to kind of the... the ownership of the land? Like, how did those those texts will those hands relate to the medieval work?



Dr. Koopmans 18:08

Well, these were transcriptions of medieval texts that no longer existed. So this was all we had.



Will Beattie 18:15

Got it.



Dr. Koopmans 18:15

Yeah. And then I started to get interested, this was a bit later than the dissertation but interested in records of, of repairing stained glass. And so I wanted to track that as much as I could from the Middle Ages right through to today. And so then that meant a lot of different hands from a lot of different centuries.



Ben Pykare 18:36

Wow.



Will Beattie 18:37

In a recent article, you wrote "Gifts of Thomas Beckett's Clothing Made by the Monks of Canterbury Cathedral," which was published in the Journal of the British Archaeological Association, you did talk at the beginning of that article about, sort of, changes that were made to a medieval stained glass panel, I think, on the direction of a guy whose name was Bernard Rackham, who was at the time... I guess this would have been what the 1940s... he was the retired keeper of the Victoria and Albert's Department's of Ceramics and Glass. It's a long, long title.



Dr. Koopmans 19:08

Correct, yes.



Will Beattie 19:09

But it seems like that change which was done under his direction was was inaccurate, it was it was an error that was made. Which kind of changed the way that that stained glass could be interpreted or understood, because there was something there which was removed and replaced with something else. Is that something which you come across often, where you, sort of, actually find that challenges are posed by earlier scholars or restorers of these works? That you then have to grapple with a whole other dimension of kind of the the historical record.



Dr. Koopmans 19:44

Yeah, you describe that very accurately. And that is the bane of my life, really, studying stained glass. [It] is that that is one example of something that happened all the time. So you have restorers putting in stuff, sometimes with very good intentions and sometimes with malicious intentions. And then you have to try to untangle that. Figure out why they did that. Sometimes it's just laziness. Sometimes it is downright malicious. And then you have to try to unravel that to get back to what you think was the original stained glass image.



Ben Pykare 20:24

Would a malicious motive be something religious? Right, like maybe a later Protestant revision of an earlier Catholic cathedral, that kind of thing? Or was it... I'm just curious to hear malicious and I'm interested.



Dr. Koopmans 20:37

Well, I'm afraid at Canterbury, there was a very dishonest glazier, who had control of the glass for decades. And he would put in panels that he had made himself, but he would claim that they were medieval panels. And they would fool people, because he's, he was quite good. And so that is still a problem at Canterbury. In fact, when I was there, in just this past fall, I saw a guide pointing out one of his panels, and saying... and talking about it as if it's a medieval panel. So to this day, a kind of his specter, this guy is still hanging over this glass.



Ben Pykare 21:18

Did you say anything in the moment? Or after?



Dr. Koopmans 21:21

I did later.





Ben Pykare 21:22


Ok, ok.


 Dr. Koopmans 21:22
Yea, I did later.


 Will Beattie 21:25
When was this guy doing this work?


 Dr. Koopmans 21:27
Well, a lot more recently than you'd expect. So most of his work is in... from the about 1920 to 1950.

 Ben Pykare 21:37
That is later than I expected. Wow.

 Dr. Koopmans 21:40
Yeah.


 Will Beattie 21:41
Right.

 Ben Pykare 21:44
That's disappointing. Oh, man, oh, man. Yeah, then they let that occur is terrible. So as you're going back with objects, right, they have a history that is beyond their... their original situation, right? So how, kind of, do you handle this vast amount of time between the original creation and your viewing of it today? Would you compile this data and kind of imagine its original use... original use, or maybe is it part of a larger project about kind of the projects, or the the objects evolution through the centuries?


 Dr. Koopmans 22:30
Yeah, I really am trying to get at the evolution.

 Ben Pykare 22:33


Okay.

 Dr. Koopmans 22:34

At the story of these windows, kind of the term I use for it is, and other stained glass scholars use for it is "restoration history." The one handy, if awful, thing about the Canterbury glass is that we have nothing until the 19th century. So I'm not... I mean, we have some repair documents. But we have nothing about the content of it. We have no antiquarian drawings. So other sites have this kind of material that you get to process but for one reason or another, it just, it doesn't exist at Canterbury. So the story really starts with the 19th century, even though the glass that I'm working on dates to the 12th and 13th centuries.

 Will Beattie 23:15

Are there any theories for why there is that massive gap in the... in the record?

 Dr. Koopmans 23:21


Well, I mean, it's not it's not very unusual, to be honest. So most stained glass, we don't have any record of. I do think Canterbury was kind of unfortunate. So I've also done some work up in York, England. And they're there was an 18th century... actually a 17th century antiquarian, who went through all these buildings up there and wrote descriptions of stained glass. And it's this immensely rich resource.

 Ben Pykare 23:48

Yeah.

 Dr. Koopmans 23:49

And they're just lucky that this guy, John Thorpe, did that. And we don't have a person like that for Canterbury.

 Will Beattie 23:56

Right. I suppose a lot... there are a lot of historical documents that are really only preserved in transcriptions or things like that. And it's thanks to these antiquarian who took it upon themselves in the 15th, 16th century... well, 16th 17th centuries to just record what they could.

 Dr. Koopmans 24:11

Absolutely, and bless them. Yep.



Ben Pykare 24:15

So when you first approach an object, like stained glass that might be you know, physically distant from you on the ground floor, right on the ground level? How do you approach beginning studying something like this?



Dr. Koopmans 24:31

Yeah, it's hard. So you know, it's, it's... I mean, when I started on this I didn't have any of my own photos. I just had kind of black and white, not very good photos. Now you can access really good photos. And so it would be different starting now. And when I began, I was really very much kind of a historian, a literary person who is interested in how the source texts, these miracle collections that were written in the early 12th, or in the 1170s, related to this glass. So I was thinking as much about the texts as I was the glass. Yeah. But it's it's, yeah, I'll say I made a huge number of mistakes. Because I really didn't under[stand]... didn't have a way around the stained glass yet. You guys are not allowed to read the stained glass chapter in my dissertation. That is just not allowed. Because there are so many mistakes. So, so I learned, I learned a lot. Do



Will Beattie 25:33

You want to talk about any of this makes you made? Or is this a touchy subject? We can... we can...



Dr. Koopmans 25:37

No, no, no. I guess, you know, I just, I've spent the past 15 years really learning about how stained glass works. And I just didn't have a handle on that. So I didn't know, for instance, that pieces could have been swapped out in the way that you were just talking about it, Will, with the you know, with a piece missing that should have been there. So I just didn't have that on my head that that was even a possibility. So it was easy to make mistakes. I was also kind of, you know, I was a dissertating students. So I was grasping for the grand, you know, I wanted to go for these big theories and this big thesis and it really wasn't grounded well enough, I think, in the material, even though I was trying to do that. But I just wasn't there yet.



Will Beattie 26:26

What kind of advice did you get? When you were working through the dissertation with your advisor and your committee members? Was this something that you spent a lot of time working on, trying to ground it in the material, the material objects?



Dr. Koopmans 26:37

Yeah, I guess the dissertation was much more of a history. And it was much more on miracle

stories and miracle collections as a genre. And the glass was there because I wanted it to be there. I've always been interested in art and imagery. But in my book that came out of the dissertation, actually, I just took the glass out because it was getting too big. It just didn't really fit. So So yeah, I guess. How would I explain that? I guess the glass was kind of my, my thing in the dissertation. But it didn't... it wasn't kind of... it wasn't kind of at the heart of what I was trying to do in it.



Will Beattie 27:26

Right.



Ben Pykare 27:26

What was that process like of having written a dissertation that you've poured your heart and soul into, and then taking that and turning it into a book? How was how was that different? Where what was the... how long did that take?



Dr. Koopmans 27:42

Well, it was extremely painful. I'll say that. I really struggled with that process. Partly because I didn't know where the glass would fit into that. And I was trying to make it fit and it wasn't really working. And yeah, yeah, that was, that was a hard period. For me. I was also in Arizona, and I didn't like living in Arizona. And I was thinking I wanted to get out of Arizona. But I had all this pressure to get a book done for the tenure process. And it wasn't coming for me. So I think that was a hard time, hard time for me. And part of the reason I'm in Canada now is because I realized I was running out of time on the tenure clock, and that I had to get another job. So I jumped kind of just in time and gave myself a little extra time to get that book finished. There you go, there's the very honest answer.



Ben Pykare 28:40

The honest answer is because we're living, we're living the pre version of that life, trying to understand like, how did how did you do that? Because that sounds very intimidating at all. So congratulations. on making it through. It's very impressive. Another question we had was, so you're living in Canada, but a lot of your research is in the UK. So what [are] some of the challenges right of living in one country and doing research and scholarship about, or even in, another?



Dr. Koopmans 29:16

Yeah, that's a great question. It's one that I think all medievalist who live outside of Europe or wherever they're studying, need to kind of grapple with. I think, for me, it's been an especially big question because I'm working so much on a material object where I have, I have to be there, this... the work I'm doing right now just can't be done by photographs. And it's hard. I've often thought I should move to the UK. I should find a job there. I should try to move. But I do

think there is an advantage in that when I go I'm very focused and I know what I need to accomplish. And they also know at Canterbury what I'm planning to accomplish. So it kind of focuses everybody's minds. And maybe if I lived there, you know, and could pop in whenever I wanted, these things would not maybe get accomplished as fast.



Will Beattie 30:16

At this point, because you've been working with Canterbury and the staff there, is it something where you can just kind of send them an email and say, "I'm popping over for a week?" Or do you still is it still quite a kind of an official process getting, arranging to actually get access to these materials?



Dr. Koopmans 30:32

Yeah, I am at the point now where it is, although for me, usually, it's... for instance, I'm going back, I'll be back in May in June. And so you know, that's kind of on their calendars out there, that that's when I'll be back. And that, that I'll be wanting to do a lot of work at that point. And, and I need help. So it's not just me doing this work. So yeah, it's... that is certainly easier than it was when I started.



Will Beattie 30:59

And pivoting slightly towards talking about how to actually discuss research in, kind of, more of a public setting. A lot of the work that you've been doing with the stained glass of Canterbury Cathedral has been picked up by places like the BBC, and various other, kind of, public-facing organizations. And we were just wondering, what the experience was of trying to adapt your, your writing style, your way of communicating for a non-specialist audience?



Dr. Koopmans 31:32

Well, at first, it was really intimidating, especially with the TV cameras. I mean, you're worried more about what you look like than what you say, I have to say. I found that in the end, it was probably easier than what I anticipated, just after so many years of teaching, you've spent so much time thinking about how to present things to a general audience, i.e your students. So I think the one difference is that it's much faster. So obviously, these people are not going to sit there for 60 minutes, much less a whole semester to listen to you. So you have to think of a hook quickly. And you have to think of things that they'll find interesting, faster than you would in a class.



Will Beattie 32:17

Right. How do you go about doing that?



Dr. Koopmans 32:21



Dr. Koopmans 32:21

Well, kind of like I went prepared for this podcast is that it really helps if you get some sense of what they're going to ask first so that you can think it through. I remember for some of those interviews, I would... on my kind of walking commute into Canterbury, I'd be rehearsing answers all the way in. Even though I probably didn't use any of that just to get my brain into that mode.



Will Beattie 32:45

Yeah.



Ben Pykare 32:46

From earlier in our conversation, just your passion for the correct ideas about the medieval being around in the public. Would you say that... how much of your work, or how much you work do you want to be more public-facing? How compatible is that with the field? Right, like moving the scholarly conversations and kind of keeping all those balls juggling in the air? Yeah, how is that?



Dr. Koopmans 33:18

Yeah, it is, it does feel a bit like juggling. But I guess I think I'm really lucky working at a place like Canterbury Cathedral, where I can see all the tourists coming through there, you know, hundreds every day. Thousands. Before COVID, they were getting 900,000 people through there every year. And so I know good and well that if I can explain this glass better that there is an audience right there and that I can have a real impact. So I do feel really strongly about that, that my research is not just going to go into an academic publication, but that I'm going to do my very best to make sure that the kids at Canterbury get to benefit from that, the tourists. We just finished a book on... that will be on sale at the Cathedral gift shop on the stained glass. One of the windows that we worked on. I've given many, many public lectures. So yeah, I mean, it's extremely gratifying. So it's, you know, it's, it is, it's different than working for an academic audience, but it's also fun and very rewarding.



Ben Pykare 34:28

Are there, is there a commonly held belief about your field that you passionately disagree with?



Dr. Koopmans 34:37

Well, another interest I have lately is in food history. So I've gotten very interested in medieval food history, but food history as a field. And one thing that really irritates me is when people say to me, "oh, medieval food, they ate rotten meat and gruel." Right? That really bugs me. No, in fact, I suspect they would look at our highly processed, you know, pretty disgusting food and probably say "this tastes like chem..." you know, they wouldn't say chemicals, but I think they would find that taste pretty, pretty off-putting. And certainly a medieval feast, if you could go to

a real medieval feast and see, you know, see venison, cooked venison dressed up to look like a living deer. Or a poached fish set in jelly so that looks like it's swimming. I mean, they just had such a sense of fun and color and pageantry. I really think it would have been the most amazing thing and something that we just don't even try with our food anymore.



Will Beattie 35:46

So there's kind of a theatrical element to the, to the meal. Or at least at that level, the banquet level, there was a very theatrical, kind of, visual quality to it as well.



Dr. Koopmans 35:57

Absolutely. If you think of the blackbirds baked in a pie. I mean, that is something they would actually do.



Will Beattie 36:03

What about the person, just the... I don't want to say peasants, but the farmer, the the agricultural worker, just in the field. I guess they also would have had a very varied diet. Much more varied than we think of now. Not just you know, turnips, and more turnips.



Dr. Koopmans 36:19

No, in fact, um, pepper was a "necessary luxury" as Paul Friedman has put it, even for peasants. So they like to have, you know, that, that hot taste in the... in their, in their pottages. And if you can imagine they are they are living on a pottage. But that would vary depending on the season, depending on what they had to put in there. And I'm sure some of them were just foul. It would depend on the cook, I think, probably more than than the ingredients.



Will Beattie 36:50

Because a pottage is more or less just kind of a mixture, a stew sort of thing, isn't it? A mixture of various different... well, whatever you have to handle, I suppose.



Dr. Koopmans 36:58

That's right, yeah.



Will Beattie 36:58

Yeah. Interesting.

 Ben Pykare 37:01

As you're introducing undergrads to kind of this broad breadth of all that is medieval, what do you see, currently in undergrads that seems to spark the most interest?

 Dr. Koopmans 37:15

Well, I have to say, my medieval food lectures do grab them. So I would say medieval food and medieval warfare are the two lectures where I get the most. And they do... I also now do a lecture on stained glass. So, so they like, they like that. But I, I, part of the reason I like working on medieval food and food history is that I do think it's, it's something where you can get, you know, everybody eats everybody. And so I think everybody has experienced agreeing to that subject and, and very strongly held opinions. So it's easy to get discussions going. You can also get students to do some hands-on attempts to try different recipes. And so it really is a fun way to engage people in, in the medieval past that is beyond rotten meat and gruel.

 Ben Pykare 38:06

Yes.

 Will Beattie 38:07

That's nice, because I think there is still a tendency for people to think of the medieval as a very dry, dull period. Again, just the list of dates, or kings or queens to remember. It's, it's always good when you get an opportunity to kind of experience it like that through some sort of hands-on work; recreating food, or I don't know, a medieval trebuchet perhaps?

 Dr. Koopmans 38:28

Why not?

 Will Beattie 38:28

Why not? Might be a little bit ambitious, but it can be done. I'll make notes for the classes that I teach next year.

 Ben Pykare 38:37

So Dr. Koopmans, what advice would you give to those interested in entering graduate school for a humanities degree?

 Dr. Koopmans 38:45

Yes, I would... well, the first thing I have to say is don't expect a university job at the end. I mean, that is just the brutal reality. Sad, but true. However, I do think that writing skills, analytical skills, and oral presentation skills are unusual skills, and they are sellable. And so I, I think that, you know, if you're willing to look around and think of more than one option for yourself as a career, that there are very good reasons to go to school to get a graduate degree in the humanities. I would also say take charge. Undergraduate and graduate are very different in that way. You can be pretty passive as an undergraduate. But as a graduate student you really have to take an active, active role in your own learning to figure out where you're weak and then work on those... work on those skills and improve them. And also turn off your phone and live in the library as much as you can. I think that that's, that's a good way ago. I also have a book I would recommend, which is called "Getting What you Came For: the Smart Student's Guide to Getting a Masterss or a PhD." And this was a book my mother actually gave to me when I was a graduate student, but it's still in print. That shows you how good it is. And it does kind of explain what you need to do to be an active player in your education. To get what you came for, and to come out of it. You know, it's so easy to kind of get lost, especially once you get to a PhD. But to really stay focused and know what you're doing and why.



Will Beattie 40:40

And we'll put a description and links to that book in the show notes as well, for anyone that's interested. Another question I'd like to ask actually is, we are still just coming out at the end of the Coronavirus pandemic, or hopefully coming out. Did you find that that affected your work, your access to the, to the institutions like Canterbury Cathedral or libraries? How did it kind of hinder or maybe even help you?



Dr. Koopmans 41:03

Yeah, it was absolutely brutal. So I got stuck in Toronto. I was meant to spend I think three months of 2020 in Canterbury working on the glass. And I couldn't go at all. There was meant to be... it was the 800th anniversary of the translation of Thomas Beckett. So it was going to be a very big year for me, and all that got either cancelled or rescheduled. So it was terribly disappointing. And all the libraries were closed. So I had a hard time. I was not a happy camper, I will say.



Will Beattie 41:42

But were there any surprising, kind of, advantages to it? Or no, it was mainly just disappointing?




Dr. Koopmans 41:49


Well, we did actually manage to get some work done long distance.





Ben Pykare 41:55


Digitisation.


 Dr. Koopmans 41:56
There you go.


 Ben Pykare 41:57
Like, I can't come. Please digitise these.


 Dr. Koopmans 42:03
Yeah. So yes, I did get some work done. But I will be very glad when everything opens up again.

 Ben Pykare 42:10
Yes. And we are so glad that you can come here physically, to Notre Dame.

 Dr. Koopmans 42:15
Me too.

 Ben Pykare 42:15
We're incredibly grateful. Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today. Dr. Koopmans. It's it's been a pleasure chatting with you. How can our listeners find more out about you or your work?

 Dr. Koopmans 42:29
Oh, just Google "Rachel Koopmans medieval" or "Rachel Koopmans Canterbury Cathedral," and things will pop up.

 Ben Pykare 42:35
Fantastic.

 Will Beattie 42:36
Thank you very much. Thank you.

 Ben Pykare 42:38

We'll include a link to your lecture that you're about to give this evening. So that if our listeners are interested, they can hear more about this topic. Thanks again. Thank you all for listening, and we hope you'll meet with us next time in the Middle Ages.

 Will Beattie 43:09

"Meeting In the Middle Ages" is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for medievalist send them to us at "meetinginthema@gmail.com." You can follow us on Twitter at "MeetingintheMA" and Instagram at "MeetingintheMiddleAges." For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening.

 Ben Pykare 43:34

There we go.

 Dr. Koopmans 43:36

Oh, that was great. That was lots of fun.