Announcer: Featuring graduates from the Humber School for Writers who have lived extraordinary lives and who've brought those experiences into their work. This is Love and Defiance.

David Bezmozgis: I'm David Bezmozgis, Director of the Humber School for Writers. For the first episode, I'll be speaking with Jillian Stark. Humber has numerous mentors, and guests of this podcast will have been taught by any one of them. But in this case, Jillian was my student, and I'm pleased to welcome her to the show. Hi, Jillian.

Jillian Stark: Hi, David, it's a pleasure to be here.

DB: So, part of the way I identify students for the podcast is through their application letters, which read as fascinating capsule biographies. So here's how yours began. "Dear members of the writing assessment board…" Very formal. (chuckles) "I'm currently working on a project drawn from a series of letters I wrote during my time as a diplomat. The letters span a period of 30 years, starting in Poland in the early 1980's, and cover periods in central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, and a brief trip to Afghanistan. In some ways, each posting was a chance to reinvent myself. New places, new cultures, new people. For me, writing creative non-fiction provides a different kind of opportunity to reinvent myself. I use my writing to explore the meaning of the transient life and the relationship between historical events and personal experience and how this has shaped my perspective. Through a combination of personal memoir and travel writing, I would like to examine universal themes relating to transience, free will,

integrity, justice, and reconciliation. I also hope to draw on my interests in Polish and Russian writers to animate my own writing. Often, the role of the diplomat is to remain on the margins, to be objective, an outsider looking in. My goal is to move beyond the detached observer to tell a story that is more personal, and one that explores and breaks the boundaries between observer and participant." Does that still sound like what you spent your time doing?

JS: Well, surprisingly, yes.

DB: So when you were writing these letters to your parents, how old were you at the time?

JS: 25.

DB: You were 25. You were in Warsaw?

JS: I was in Warsaw.

DB: This was your first diplomatic posting?

JS: It was. I arrived there in 1982, just after martial law had been declared, and one of the things that Canada was quite involved in at the time was providing support and, perhaps not encouragement, but certainly support, to the opposition, and monitoring human rights

there. And so it was an incredible opportunity to see first-hand what was happening, and also I think to get a sense of how human rights were not just a legal concept, but in fact touched people's lives directly, and that's really where you get that intersection between the political and the personal, and to see how people had to make choices about food on the table, medicine for ailing parents, education for their child, or whether they wanted to be part of that larger movement challenging the authorities. Very tough decisions. People went to jail, people lost their lives, and to see that first-hand for a young Canadian I think was a very formative experience.

DB: What did you know before you went into the Foreign Service and before you went up to Poland? What did you know about that part of the world, what did you know about what you were getting into?

JS: I had studied Eastern European history at university, so I had some background in the region. I studied Russian language for a couple years, so I had a little bit of Slavic language, and had done some Polish training before I left. So I think I knew in theory what I might expect, but in fact the reality was quite different, certainly more intense, more nuanced, and I think one of my earliest impressions on arriving was that there were just so many grey areas, and that people made these difficult decisions every day, that nothing was straightforward, nothing was quite what it seemed to be.

DB: So, in your early twenties, I guess, you pass whatever test needed to get passed, I don't even know how someone gets into the diplomatic corps. What did you have to do at the time? Is it still the same?

JS: Pretty much. You write an exam, you go for a couple of interviews, you wait for a very long time, and then one day you get a letter in the mail.

DB: And the letter says what?

JS: The letter says, "Present yourself in Ottawa on the following date," and you get your medicals, and I suppose you go through a security clearance process, and the next thing you know, you're on board. Within a year I was on my way to Warsaw. I spent about half my career in Ottawa and then half my year abroad working in embassies. I would say, if there was an underlying theme in what I did, it was always about conflict resolution and human rights, often related to Eastern Europe, but I also worked for a while on the Middle East, which I found fascinating.

DB: Where in the Middle East?

JS: I was based in Ottawa, but I was responsible for a number of relationships with a number of countries in the Middle East, and traveled through the region. One of the things that struck me about that was the proximity, these different cultures rubbing up against each other, and the different narratives, different perceptions of history, of

geography, of the cultural touchstones. And I think that's a common theme that I've seen in a number of regions, but that was perhaps most pronounced in the Middle East.

DB: Yeah. Middle East, I think, probably parts of Europe as well.

JS: The Balkans, certainly. I worked for four years on the Balkans crisis, and indeed, you saw some of the same phenomena there.

DB: So you ended up in Warsaw. When you were writing the letters, you were writing them back home to your parents. Were they censored? Were you aware that somebody might be reading them? Or was it a diplomatic post and you didn't have to worry about it?

JS: It all went through the diplomatic post, yeah.

DB: So you could be as candid as you wanted to be?

JS: Exactly, yes. We did occasionally phone, and there, of course, you did have to be much more careful, because one assumed, certainly…in fact, they used to have a recorded announcement that your call was being monitored, which I always thought was the ultimate irony, and typically Polish, perhaps. You would book your phone call, and then you would wait for hours until the operator called you back, and of course then there might be nobody home on the other end. So using the phone was not very satisfactory.

DB: So you wrote hundreds of letters, it sounds like.

JS: Not all from Warsaw, but over the years, hundreds of letters, yeah.

DB: Over the years.

JS: I was a dutiful daughter. *(laughs)*

DB: And so maybe you can talk about, um, what you envisioned doing with the letters, and then what you ultimately ended up doing with them over the course of the time that we worked together.

JS: Mm hm. I think I had originally imagined that somehow, these letters would tell a story in and of themselves, and it would be a kind of window on what was happening in Poland at the time. But you encourage me to think about, first of all, how one might link that to the present, and how one might make that relevant, 35 years later. One of the things you encouraged me to think about quite early on was the importance of having an arc. Every line, every paragraph, every story must have an arc. The letters as they stood did not. So then I started to play around with ideas, to imagine what the story might be, and try to link it to the present and develop some characters. Actually, doing that allowed me to go much deeper, and to develop a storyline involving two fictional characters.

DB: Two, yeah, or at least one quasi-fictional character…

JS: *(laughs)* One quasi-fictional character.

DB: Based on yourself. Who's the other fictional character?

JS: Entirely fictional.

DB: And who is it, just so…readers haven't read it, so…

JS: Oh, well his name is Ulrich, and he's a German journalist.

DB: And there's a love affair between Ulrich…

JS: And the narrator.

DB: And the narrator, who's named Fiona in the manuscript.

JS: Correct.

DB: And then there's the other sort of arc in this story, which is the character of Anna. So talk a bit about that if you could.

JS: Well, uh, the character Anna is rather loosely based on someone that I knew in Poland, a friend, a neighbor, who I guess was a victim of the politics of the time, and died in fact in a rather shocking and brutal way.

DB: Was murdered.

JS: Was murdered, yes. I think that had quite a profound effect on me. It happened very shortly before I actually left Warsaw, and so I never really, at the time, knew exactly what had happened or why this had befallen her.

DB: And definitively, you still don't.

JS: Definitely, no one knows, so far as I know. So in a sense, I used that to kind of build a story around that. The book is not intended to be a verbatim account of what happened to her, because indeed I don't know. But it's really, I think, kind of symptomatic of what happened to all sorts of people in that society, and what could happen to people if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, or involved in things that were perhaps more complicated than they had imagined or believed. So that, I think, is kind of the turning point, if you like, in the story. But it is very much fictionalized, although it's based on a friend that I knew, but it could have been any number of people's stories in Poland at the time, or indeed anywhere else in the eastern bloc.

DB: Yeah. I think that gives a good sense of the building blocks of the book, so you have these various components. You have these letters you wrote to your parents, which were turned into journal entries. You wanted to connect it to the present day, and, you could say, unfortunately enough about Poland in the present day that I think does interest people, what's happening in the country right now politically. So a story about Poland in the 80's is not entirely without relevance today.

JS: Not at all, and I think a lot of what we're seeing in that part of the world is really because history was kind of put on ice, if you like, and some of that is starting to kind of break loose now 20 years after the walls came down. It actually has proved to be more timely than I had even imagined at the outset, as we see some of the things that have been happening in Poland over the last year, even in fact over the last couple of days, with the crisis with the Supreme Court.

DB: Yeah, I mean, we're recording this, yeah. We should say, by the time this comes out, it'll probably be months from now, but we're recording this in early July of 2018, when there was just a ruling about, was it the…

JS: The Supreme Court.

DB: The Supreme Court of Poland, the justices being forced out before their mandatory term and all of that sort of thing.

JS: And this is just part of, I think, a slip or a slide towards authoritarian government, where you're seeing attacks on the press and new kinds of laws that restrict individual freedom and conspiracy theories, some of the things that we're seeing across the region and elsewhere in the world.

DB: Yeah. Yeah, the ruling, which I think they've revised to some extent, about what can and cannot be said about the Holocaust in Poland, all these sorts of things.

JS: Absolutely, yes.

DB: So maybe the thing to do right now would be to read a little bit from the book, so people get a sense of what it sounds like?

JS: OK, I can do that, sure.

DB: Yeah? OK.

JS: It's been more than thirty years since I first saw Berlin. Only then, it was sliced in two. West Berlin was our bolt-hole when we needed a break. I've been back again and again, and since the wall came down, each time it is a little different. The center of gravity gradually switching from west to east, as if the roles have been reversed. All the old districts, even the once-derelict areas where the wall stood, feel smart, bold,

confident, as tourists swarm over history reconstructed. The west is more familiar, comforting even, like a friend who has grown old.

It's winter, cold, damp, just as it was the first time I came here so long ago. I'm sitting in the Literature Haus café reading and savoring my hot chocolate-rich, milky, with a whisper of dark chocolate shavings floating across its foamy surface. Deep, mustard-colored walls offer the perfect contrast to the weather, and the photographs a glimpse of the old Berlin. I look up to see a tall, angular figure paused beside my table. A lock of steel-gray hair spills over his forehead. He has an engaging face and fine, aquiline features. Bright blue eyes study me from behind tortoise-shell glasses. Something catches my eye.

"Fiona? Do you remember? We knew each other many years ago." He extends his hand across the smooth marble table. "Ulrich."

A half-smile crosses his lips. I'm taken aback, pulled out of one world into another. Remember him indeed. For years I'd wondered where he'd got to. I assumed he'd continued to write, probably bouncing around from one war zone to another. Surprising, in a way, we hadn't run into each other before. At one time, I'd wanted to forget everything about those last few months in Warsaw, but over the years the memories softened. We'd been so young, so impetuous, one minute being so sure of ourselves, the next lacking all confidence. I pull myself together and gestured to the empty chair. "How nice to see you. What a surprise. Do you live here now?" Ulrich smiles. He looks at me, assessing. "You look well. You haven't changed. I would've known you anywhere." We met in Poland in the 1980's. I was a fledgling diplomat on my

first assignment, eager to savor every moment and experience. Ulrich was a journalist, keen to make his mark.

They were exciting times, full of political turmoil. Solidarity, the independent trade union, had shocked the world, and perhaps itself too, with its success in confronting the Polish communist authorities. Even after martial law was declared, the government never really recovered its ground. The opposition, always one step ahead, poked away, making the authorities look foolish and incompetent. Living in Warsaw was like being at the theater with front-row seats, watching a drama unfold, uncertain as to what would happen next.

DB: You write a lot about the theater scene in Poland at the time.

JS: I do, uh huh.

DB: Literature.

JS: And certainly theater. When I first arrived, I started going to the theater. They had 17 live theaters in Warsaw, in a city of about a million people. So that tells you a little bit about how important it was, and even in those days, they were doing some quite interesting experimental, provocative things in the theater there. It was also a way for people to express themselves in a way that they couldn't under this kind of authoritarian rule. There was also this kind of cat-and-mouse game going on between the authorities

and the cultural world concerning how far people could push. So it was wonderful to be plunged into that, and it was also a great way to practice my Polish.

DB: Yeah. And you were reading Polish writers at the time?

JS: I was reading Polish poets, and indeed some Polish writers as well. And I would say there's kind of a, the Poles call it "Polish reportage". Kapuscinski's maybe the best-known practitioner of that kind of writing, but there are a number of other Polish writers who create stories that are both fact and fiction, and the lines are rather blurred, and it's something I think I tried to do here as well. One of the things that I particularly like about Kapuscinski's writing is it also explores this question of transience, and how people move from one culture to another, and I like to say there's kind of a grand bargain in a way. On the one hand, you never put down roots, you don't have that sense of belonging, but in return, I would say you begin to develop multiple identities, so you feel very comfortable in different worlds, different circumstances, and exploring the new and the unexpected.

DB: And, you know, you've referenced before the similarities and differences of being a writer and also a diplomat, where that idea of transience and that idea of inhabiting more than one idea at once, or being an observer, as you even wrote in your application letter. So what are the similarities and differences between being a diplomat and diplomatic writing, and doing what you've done with this book?

JS: Well, I would say diplomats are observers. They look for the details, and we're trained to find the counter-narrative, if you like, and to try to discern meaning from that. Wherever I've gone, I've always tried to connect with and absorb the culture, and look for those patterns in the details, the small ironies, to find the things happening below the surface, because I think that's what really makes a society interesting.

DB: So the qualities that make a good writer, for instance, powers of observation, empathy, are the qualities also that make a good diplomat?

JS: I would say so. And I would say that if you have an empathy for the culture that you're living in, it's a much richer experience. I think that's what makes up a life. Just going back to the whole question of empathy, yes, empathy is important, but I think diplomats and writers also look at things with a very critical eye. You're not there to be a fan club for a particular society, you're there to see what it is that's happening here, what might the unspoken narrative be, what are the impediments to getting, to achieving your own objectives to promoting Canadian interests, and Canadian interests may not necessarily be the same as the interests of the country in which you're based. They're often not, in my experience. *(laughs)* They were usually not.

DB: Right. I guess, slightly on a tangent but not entirely, what were the Canadian interests at the time in Warsaw when you were there?

JS: Advocating human rights, first and foremost.

DB: Because for political reasons, because it was the Cold War and the Western world wanted to have leverage over the east, or because there was a true commitment to civil liberties and human rights?

JS: I would argue there's a true commitment to civil liberties and human rights. It's something that has transcended different governments in Canada, and I think it's a Canadian value. People's commitment to that waxes and wanes over time, but I do believe that Canada was genuinely interested in promoting human rights. Among the Western nations we were often the most forceful, I would say, or the ones that kept coming back to the issue of human rights.

DB: So how has it been, I mean, for someone who's effectively writing your first work of fiction? What's that experience been like after a life of doing all this other kind of work?

JS: Oh, it's been wonderful. Liberating. I have to say, the Humber course has been a wonderful experience. I could not have made the leap from the kind of writing I was doing to fiction without your advice and support, and I really enjoyed the sense of being pushed to sort of challenge my own boundaries a little bit, and having that kind of timeline or deadline at the end of the week to submit I think was also good in terms of productivity.

DB: Yeah, it's an interesting thing. The way the program works, really, is pairing students with faculty members, with mentors, and it becomes a very intimate, in a lot of ways, correspondence, because you're in Vancouver and here I am in Toronto, and you're sending your manuscript to me, and I'm commenting on it and sending it back. But it's also really highly arbitrary and subjective. That's the interesting thing, thinking about it. Whatever it is that I contributed or suggested, had you had a different mentor, how different could this book have been.

JS: That's a good question, yeah. I think it was a good fit. When I had looked at the list of possible mentors, I had identified you as someone I would like to work with because I'd read your writing, and it was a style of writing I enjoyed and thought I could learn from. But you're right, it's interesting. You develop this relationship via correspondence, and you feel you almost know the other person, although in fact we didn't meet until the end of the course.

DB: No.

JS: You had a very light touch. You never told me what I should do. You usually posed questions about where is this going, do you think this really delivers what you're trying to deliver. But if I can ask you a question…

DB: Yeah, sure.

JS: What do you get out of the mentoring process, and how do you decide how to tackle a piece of work? You have a number of students. What do you do if you don't get engaged in a piece of work? Does it make a difference?

DB: Well, I think, you're teaching students usually who are at different levels of development. I have the advantage, because I run this program, I also choose my own students. We have mentors who, it's kind of a reciprocal thing, because you get to ask for who you want, but sometimes people are full up or whatever it is, and you get assigned to someone who may be your first choice, may be your second choice, may be your third choice. For me, I get to choose the student work, people who have asked for me, but also the work that seems interesting to me. But it still varies across the board.

What I get out of it mostly is the pleasure of seeing someone develop, of seeing students start to deliver work that surprises me, that I admire, so I feel like, in the best sense, it's a dialogue between equals more than a hierarchy. I felt that pretty much between the two of us, because I thought you wrote at a very high level to begin with, and the work that you brought in, the letters were fascinating and so well written. So, in the best sense, seeing somebody develop, seeing beautiful sentences emerge and feeling like you have some kind of hand in helping someone out. And I think that's why this course, this program was developed to begin with, by writers for writers.

So I guess the last question I wanted to ask you, Jillian: so you wrote these letters originally to your parents. What would they think if they knew that you had done this with the material, that it had been turned into a book? What would they say? I believe the

book should be published, but if and when the book is published, how do you think your parents would feel about that?

JS: Oh, I think they'd be delighted. I think they'd be really pleased to see that the letters have a life of their own. They would be pleased that they took the trouble to save them, and I think my mother in particular, she was a great reader, and for her there was no greater profession than that of a writer, and so I think they would be just thrilled to see these letters brought back to life and turned into a story. They both had great imaginations, so I think they'd be in.

DB: So if the book does get published, would you dedicate it to them?

JS: I would, definitely, and I would say, I think that they held me close and then set me free, and that was the greatest gift.

Announcer: On the next episode of Love and Defiance, we'll be talking with Colin Buchanan, whose novel takes us from personal heartbreak and institutionalization into the hidden heart of the deep South.