



**LOST DETECTIVES PODCAST  
EPISODE 3**

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**INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE WHITEHEAD AND CAROL ADLAM**

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Claire Whitehead [CW]: Hello everybody. I hope you're well. And welcome to this third episode of our podcast series 'Lost Detectives: Adapting Old Texts for New Media'. My name is Dr Claire Whitehead from the Department of Russian at the University of St Andrews. And I'm joined once again today by my friend, the author and illustrator Carol Adlam. And we're here to discuss Carol's adaptation of the 1876 Russian crime story, in Russian, *Sekretnoe sledstvie* (*A Secret Investigation*) by Aleksandr Shkliarevskii and Carol's adaptation of that original Russian story into a script that she has entitled *Curare* after the poison that figures very prominently in the story as the murder weapon. So, we once again in this episode discuss the original short story short or novella that is really not well known at all, either within Russia and certainly not outside of Russia and the Russian-speaking world, and the process of adaptation that Carol has undertaken, and the sorts of points of interest that both the original work, and the adaptation throw up for us in our respective fields of activity. So, I hope you'll very much enjoy this third episode entitled *Curare*. Thanks.

CW: Yes, you read it then? Yeah, absolutely. I read it sort of almost in a one-er...

Carol Adlam [CA]: Gosh.

CW: And then what I've done just today... So, and I think I said to you that I wrote my comments as I was reading it to kind of capture the things that struck me straight away and some of them are questions and some of them are comments and some of them are compliments.

CA: We'll start with compliments then always...

CW: And then I've just today just been back to my book and reread a little bit of Chapter 3 just because I thought maybe some, you know, as part of our conversation, mmm. I should probably give an idea of what the original is like. We're discussing your third adaption, second adaptation...

CA: Second and a half...

CW: Yeah, second and a half, that's right. So, the second and a half adaptation as part of the 'Lost Detectives' project and when we floated the project to the funders at the University of St Andrews, we'd sort of suggested a number of possible texts that we might have you work on. And then that we's discuss. And so what we started with in this stage of the project was Nikolai Timofeev's *Notes of an Investigator* from which you made this great adaptation, done as an edition of the Radio 4 *Today* programme. But you'd also... the half is that you'd also done an operatic libretto of it...

CA: Still in progress, yes.

CW: Called *Spade and Sand*. And then the two other authors that we thought about adapting were one of the very few female writers of 19<sup>th</sup>-century crime fiction, Aleksandra Sokolova,

who is someone I'm very interested in and increasingly doing work on. But, also this figure Aleksandr Shkliarevskii who we maybe have mentioned in a previous podcast, and I always sort of slightly laugh because even though I've been working on this project for about 15 years, I still struggle to pronounce his name.

CA: That's okay. I'm going to try and avoid saying it at all myself.

CW: Yes, we should maybe find a different name for him because it always sounds as if I don't have my teeth in correctly. But yeah. So, this guy Aleksandr Shkliarevskii, who I think, probably for non-Russian audiences is almost definitely unknown, and even, I would think for quite a large proportion of the Russian audience is fairly unknown, but a chap who, I argue in my book, *The Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction* is really deserving of a bit more attention both within Russia and outside of Russia because, to some extent, just because of the amount of stuff he wrote the genre really.

CA: Yes, he was prolific, wasn't he?

CW: Yeah, really prolific. So a guy who, I think, over the span of the kind of 1870s and into the 1880s wrote at least two dozen works of crime fiction that were very, very popular with readerships, really got very, very good numbers of readers in 1870s and 1880s Russia. But just was forgotten by posterity largely until I think the early 2000s where the Russian journalist and critical commentator, Avram Reitblat, began to repopularize him. So, amongst some of the authors that I write about in the book, Shkliarevskii is one of the few who is being republished in hard copy in Russian now. That vogue for historic crime fiction, for a Russian audience, Shkliarevskii would be someone that they maybe have heard of, whereas I think still somebody like Timofeev they haven't; but outside of Russia he's still pretty much unknown. But he's an interesting character.

He was never himself an investigator like Timofeev was but he did work as a court clerk and he clearly was sitting in police proceedings and judicial proceedings and using that experience to kind of inform his own writing. He was born and grew up in Voronezh and began writing realistic provincial kind of sketches of life and sending them into the local newspaper and getting published. But he, like so many of his generation, dreamt of going to St Petersburg and making it big as a writer. And there's this very famous letter that he wrote to Dostoevskii saying, you know, 'of all the writers that I would like to imitate, it's you above all else'. And he did in 1869, he moved to Petersburg and was taken under the wing of this guy, Anatolii Koni, who was one of, really, I guess, the foremost criminal prosecutors in Petersburg at the time. And Koni knew his writing from these provincial sketches and took him under his wing and found him employment and looked after him. So, finding work as a roving court attaché, but he was never financially successful, although his work attracted a certain readership, what's quite interesting is that, because crime fiction was never valued contemporaneously as a 'high' genre of literature – although I don't like using that term – it never got published in the big journals and so he never made any real money and so he was never financially secure. And I think always felt hard done by and I think, again, without wanting to fall into those awful, kind of, clichés of unsuccessful writers who then have a problem with alcohol, he did have a problem

with alcohol and he got increasingly ill and then stopped writing as productively. But, in the 1870s and the 1880s, he was producing a good amount of high-quality, entertaining crime fiction that was finding a readership. And I think to some extent, for that reason alone, he's worth discussing and I write about him in the book. And so, what we thought about was which one of his stories we might get you to look at.

CA: Yep.

CW: So, we went with this work that's published in 1876 called, in Russian, *Sekretnoe sledstvie* which translates as *A Secret Investigation* and I sent it to you... It's basically a story of a secret investigation... it's secret because the female victim, it's initially ruled, has died of natural causes because when they conduct the autopsy on her body they can't see any evidence of foul play and so, in that situation, there can be no judicial investigation into her death and so it all lies fallow and quiet for six months. And then the investigator, who does have some suspicions, then receives an extra piece of evidence and that convinces him that this has been an act of foul play, that the woman, Zinaida Mozharovskaia, has, in fact, been murdered. And so, he begins this investigation that is still off the books and therefore secret. So I guess it's always fascinating for me... I send you these things because I've liked them, I've written about them, I think there might be something to discuss, and I never know how they're going to land with you Carol. So, do you want to say a little bit about what you made of it?

CA: What I make of it... Well, yeah... Well, I didn't know anything about Shkliarevskii – there you go, I can't say his name, Mr X, but I did find out about him and his relationship with Dostoevskii, as you say, it would be interesting to sort of distinguish a bit more between readership of say, what you said, you were reluctant to call the 'high' genre and the sort of work that he was producing because my impression of it... my first impression was that it was again something that looks like a serialized work because it wasn't... it's not very tight in terms of structure and plotting. It seemed digressive and to rest on a series of improbable coincidences, the sort of improbable coincidence you might as a writer put forward thinking, well, my readership will have forgotten entirely what I was saying last week, so I'll just bring in another character here who will be somebody's cousin, who will have happened to have seen something else go on, you know, and so on.

There's a lot of commonalities between it and the other works that I've looked at with you and, including the kind of slightly hapless investigator who, as you say, his hands are tied by the fact there's no actual physical evidence, but also he's not the sharpest tool in the box. So, you know, there's this kind of impression of these investigators who bumble along really, and things sort of happen to them, rather than there being a sense of an active , and he does say, 'and that was the point at which my investigation begins'. He makes an active decision to pursue an investigation but only after evidence has been brought to him again. So that's a feature that I've sort of... it's quite difficult to know what to do with... thinking, 'ok, where can I start with this?'. So, we've got quite a dramatic beginning: this Zinaida Mozharovskaia is brought to the front of a hotel in a carriage dead. Ta-da! Stone-cold dead after having been put there in the carriage 10 minutes before by her friend Avdotia Kriukovskaia. So, there she is, she's dead. And, you know, so we start with the classic dead woman trope again, so that I immediately think, 'no, no, I must

do something with that'. So, I can talk more about what I did with that later. But really, the first thing I started with was two things: one is the idea of curare, the poison that is found to be at the heart of this. Yeah, it's a poison plot and there are two serial killers at work. Now, serial killer number one is the woman's best friend, female, the one who put her in the carriage, Kriukovskaia, and serial killer number two, who is pulling her strings, is a man called Kebmezhakh, a very strange individual who has got hold of curare on his travels, we hear, as a student and who is a card sharp and all-round terrible person, cad, lowlife, etc. So, I wanted to start with curare. So, I started looking into the history of curare in Russia and the second thing that caught my eye was one of these improbable coincidences is that the investigator meets an old friend, a doctor, to whom he describes this case because he happens again... the coincidence, he happens to know the dead woman but the the doctor says, 'oh, but wait, this is curare poisoning because when I was a student at the Medical Academy I saw an instance of this *Flatliners*-like experiment going on,

CW: Yes, 1870s *Flatliners* it is without Kiefer Sutherland.

CA: So, 1870s *Flatliners* is my way in, that's what I've done, in short. So, the other thing I did was that the doctor who is in love with the woman, dead in the original, he explains the reason why he fell in love with the woman is that she is a real woman, unlike the medical students, the female students he saw at the Academy, with their mannish clothes, and they're loud laughs, and, you know, terrible manners and so on. So, there's this very throwaway comment about women students at this time in the 1870s, so that took me into what I found to be a really, really interesting history, back history, at this time. Women studying in the Imperial Medical Academy, so that's really where I began. I began with curare and this idea of the *Flatliners* experiments which again is a sort of incidental moment, and a very strange little moment in a much longer piece. The *Flatliners* incidents to me fitted perfectly with this kind of flavour of sensational literature that I think this belongs to. Yeah, there's some sort of quite exciting things going on there. So, as usual, I've totally ditched the structure of the original and I've made a concerted effort...

CW: Well, yes and no, which we'll probably discuss... Yeah, okay, but I think it's, for me, it's interesting, on the few occasions... with the adaptation into the graphic novel of the Panov story *Murder During the Ball* and then the Timofeev adaptation, and a half, and then this one, I think, well, I think I'm nervous when I send you the story because there's a sort of element of, you know, are you going to judge my choice? Okay? And then you're nervous when you send the adaptation back to me, I think, and then I'm nervous when I open the adaptation because, rightly or wrongly, I feel attached to these stories somehow. I mean, clearly because I've selected them because I think, maybe sometimes for just selfish reasons, I want to see what you might do with them but also because, I think, if they're works that I've ended up writing about it's usually because I've found something of interest in terms of narrative device and that sort of thing. But it's so interesting because, for instance, that comment that you picked up on that this friend of the investigator, Mikhailovskii, makes about female medical students is not one that I remembered at all from the original story, and I guess that's because we're coming to it with different... we read for different aims and objectives.

CA: We read for different things...

CW: I do necessarily in the book select works that I think are interesting from a narrative point of view, and in the case of this story, and we'll come on to talk about that...

CA: Yeah.

CW: And then you come to it from a different point of view and pick up on curare which I do think is really interesting but, as I say, I hadn't picked up at all on the female medical student.

CA: Yeah, I mean, there's two things but also, I mean, you're right, structurally, and I am very interested in voice and I was very aware of the fact that this is a narrative told through, I think in your book you say something like 13 different characters in one way or another pick up the thread, and there are five main characters who each tell the story. And obviously, this was a feature of the literature of the time anyway, *Woman in White*, and no single narrative provides the answer. So, it's all a composite and a jigsaw puzzle that has to be put together through the interaction of these different voices. So, what I decided to do was to do it as an audio play. Again, that's partly because of the conditions we're in too and I was just thinking about possible performance and that audio would lend itself to that. But I decided to do something slightly experimental really in terms of trying to recreate, or not recreate and not replicate it, but create it in a new form, that sense of overlapping voices, and of often contradictory narratives that, between them, then form a composite, form some sort of... you get some sort of picture that emerges out of it without ever being clearly told what's going on. So, I've got this series of voices that pick up... often the last word that somebody will say is interrupted and then the next person who speaks uses that same word or a kind of an echo of it, or a repetition of it, but in a different context.

CW: And it completes the sentence...

CA: Or completes the sentence. So you get this... it felt as I was writing it a bit like a poem, actually it was a sort of narrative poem with patterns where pattern was quite important and echo was really important.

CW: Yeah, it's worth making really clear to people listening who obviously won't have necessarily access to the original Russian story and haven't yet seen the script of your adaptation. So, what Shkliarevskii does in the story is, I think, relatively conventional albeit I think perhaps a tiny bit more extreme than you see in some other stories. So, yeah, as you say we have the figure of the investigator and to pick up on something that you said earlier, you know, he's not the Edgar Allan Poe Chevalier Dupin amazing, intellectual hero who can kind put together all of these very very complex clues. He's not that at all. And in fact, actually very few Russian detectives, fictional detectives of the time are like that actually at all. What he basically does more than anything else is listen to other voices of witnesses or possible culprits and, in the original text, he just really, to a large extent, lets them talk one after the other. So, what

you have is – he bumps into his friend Mikhailovskii, Mikhailovskii tells his story and the investigator almost doesn't interrupt him. It's like Mikhailovskii becomes the narrator for a particular portion and that the investigator's voice almost entirely falls away and Mikhailovskii takes centre stage and sort of tells the story, right, becomes a secondary narrator, if you like. And then he bumps into his second cousin, Bystrov, you know, in a restaurant and he sort of tells his story. Mikhailovski has finished, Bystrov takes over and we go through and these five fairly major characters take it, they have one turn each. They speak, the investigator sums up, then the next one speaks, sums up.

CA: Presumably coinciding with the sequence of the serialization, if that's what was happening.

CW: Potentially, although, I don't know that there's any evidence again that it was serialised. It's interesting because I agree with you about the tightness, or the lack of tightness, to it but I think one of the really fantastic things about your adaptation is how you've taken that relatively conventional, right, it's my turn to talk, then I disappear, you know, this character disappears, usually, never to be seen again, the next person comes. And it's the investigator's job to listen. And I think what is important is that it's only the investigator who hears all of these testimonies. So, he's in this privileged listening position. But what you've done is take that fairly conventional 'everyone has a turn' and completely sort of reinvent it. You absolutely echo it, but you take it that step further by having them interrupt each other, talk almost over each other. So, these voices aren't kept in their own little silos, if you like, because none of these, in the original text, the only person these voices talk to is the investigator. They never talk to each other, you know, so witness 1 never talks to witness 5, but in your adaptation they are much more co-present, they're much more simultaneous to some extent.

CA: Well, they're simultaneous, but they're not co-present actually. And so that what I did do was absolutely, you're right, play with interruptions, it's a series of interruptions, but what I have done is to effectively, at the very end, you find out, or I hope it will become clear that what you've been listening to are a series of witness statements, individual witness statements after the event. So that made the narration of each piece quite difficult because they have to keep saying, 'I said', 'I said this', 'I said that', so it was like, you know, there were kind of stylistic issues around that here and there. But yes, so, in effect, I wanted them to be... yeah what you later realize is that they're individual witness statements but that together when you hear them they enact a scene as if in the present. So, I begin not with, as in the original with the woman being brought up to the theatre or wherever it was in the carriage and she's dead. I begin in the Medical Academy itself, in a lecture, which is interrupted by her being brought in. Effectively, you think this is all happening live, or is unfolding or they're sort of narrating that they're all together, but it's only at the end that you realize that they're actually just all separate witness statements.

CW: Sorry to interrupt... Can I just ask, I mean, that technique of having the voices interrupt each other, I mean, must be really quite challenging to put together?



CA: Well, er...

CW: It's one of those things that, I mean, as you read it and, I mean, I should say, you know, I read it and obviously I know the original story that it's based on, but my wife has read it who doesn't know the original story it's based on... And I thought that was, you know, kind of important to see, you know, you've read the original, I've read the original but what if we just give the draft script to somebody who doesn't know, I mean, apart from, you know, conversations over the dinner table about what work we're doing, doesn't know the original story, but we both kind of come away going, 'Oh my God, it's so clever and it's so effective'. And what's interesting about it is it injects a humour into the text that absolutely is not there in the original. Shkliarevskii is not a comedy writer. And, you know, I'm not claiming that you are either.

CA: Oh no, I think I am actually, that's what I do.

CW: The way that you make these voices intersect at the end of a line is, as you say, very like poetry. It's so effective, but it's also... I just felt like I read it with a wry smile, you know, kind of all the time because it's just like, so effective.

CA: Yeah, once you realize what's going on, that it has a sort of momentum of its own that sweeps you through and that creates... the other thing I wanted to do was in a way to create a slightly dreamlike quality as if, you know, you are drugged or something. So, which is why I set it, it begins with the narrator, the investigator, saying 'this was during the white nights in Petersburg', the two weeks or so in the summer when the sun never sets and there's just this kind of eerie light that hangs over everything. So, I think, just to go back to my process, as you said, you know, it was challenging to write and I think, actually, what happened to me was that, initially, I tried to write something that was much closer to the original in its structure. So as if it... just a straightforward play where something unfolds and that just didn't work and I struggled with it and I struggled with it and then suddenly realized that, actually, if I started from the other end, if I started from, in effect, the endpoint which would be the tying up of the investigation, something that Shkliarevskii doesn't really bother with, it would all fall into place much more. So, once I got that, once I understood that, then I could go back and write from the beginning and it was a pleasure to write it. I mean, you know, it's obviously sometimes you have to work a bit harder. But, I think, once I got the voices of each one and the humour that you mention, I think there's one character in, again in the original, a really strange character, I don't know, narrator number 3, or number 4, this old soldier and...

CW: Another name I can never pronounce because I was reading... his name is Atominenckov. Yeah, it's got too many syllables for me.

CA: Just too many syllables and yeah, absolutely. So, I probably will change this name, anyway. I'll call him Mr A...

CW: Yes... Bob...

CA: Yes, Bob, exactly. And he is again just one of these pieces in the puzzle, but he's been cheated by the baddie, Kebmezakh, of an inheritance and I looked at this and thought, 'but this is, this is today's, you know, the Nigerian prince scam... this is absolutely the "send me your bank details and I will..."'

CW: Yes, 'dearly beloved...'

CA: Exactly... So I take some pleasure in finding some way to replicate that in my work. So, I have this man who is really rather stupid as well sort of saying that he wrote to me to say 'Princess Vladimira Putina has sadly passed away leaving you her sole beneficiary. Stop.' This is a telegram, of course. 'I am her legal representative appointed by God to transfer the sum of 2.5 thousand roubles to you. Stop. First send bank details plus administration fee of 50 rubles to 419 Millionnaia Street. Stop. Balance will be transferred in full to you upon receipt. Stop. Do not delay. Stop.' And then it says, 'and then he stopped responding to me once I've sent the 50'. So it was that sort of thing.

And also, then the railway shares that... he has railroad shares, you know... Kebmezakh has been fobbing off this man. He owes him two and a half thousand. He says, 'oh, here's 50 rubles here. And oh, I've got some railroad shares'. Now, this was at the time of the railroad boom and, of course, there were all sorts of companies springing up out of nothing and producing worthless shares. So what this... what the guy who ends up with other shares to, he calls it the N-skaia, N-skaia kompaniia. And it took me a long time... I kept thinking, 'but where is Ensk?' And I was thinking, 'is it like in Omsk and Tomsk?' But, no, it's the adjectival form of 'N', the capital letter that is often used in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature to refer to an unknown city. It's the kind of....

CW: It's like Everywheresville and Nowheresville, isn't it?

CA: That's it exactly. So, I, again, turned that into the La-La railroad company from Kitezkh to Shangri-La. So, Kitezkh being the imaginary fantasy city in Russian folklore, and Shangri-La, as we all know, just another fantasy city. So, there are... I didn't turn this into a comic piece, and I didn't want to make too much... but I do find that a useful way of distinguishing this particular man's voice from the other male characters and, in fact, a couple more need some more distinguishing as well. And I think the other thing that's quite hard to see when you're just reading this is, at least how I would envisage it would be, is that the different voices or different accents even of the people would be really important to distinguish between... to really make quite sharp distinctions in this play of interruptions as it goes on. I mean, what I've also done is try and pace it, so it starts off with this quite dramatic scene in the Medical Academy where Mozharovskii who is a professor, I've turned him into a professor. So I've changed...

CW: Which he is not at all in the original.

CA: No, not in the least. He's not at all. I've made him the Professor of the Academy for reasons that will become clear. He is giving a demonstration to a group of, well, the public and to women students who are so-called 'Learned Obstetricians'. And these were real courses that

were happening. And then at the very end, I've made it much more quick and the voices interrupt each other and this is in a dramatic scene where the baddie is unmasked.

CW: Well, it's just something that you mentioned right towards the end there... And so, as we say, in the original version of the text, Mikhailovskii, the very first witness, as you say, talks about the fact that he was a student at the Medical Academy, and he remembers another student who was studying with him at the time doing a, as you say, like this flatliner experiment, where he experiments with curare. It looks as if he's died but then he can be revived and this has stayed with Mikhailovskii. And that sort of... contained within that sort of single witness statement of Mikhailovskii, although it does prove to be the key to the investigation and the key to the murder. But what you've done is, it seems to me, take it and expand it in a very, very productive way such that both Mozharovskaia and the victim, Krukovskaia, her friend, are both also students on this medical course. And, as you say, you've made Mozharovskaia's husband, an older man, the Professor. And I wondered if you can talk a little bit more about what informed that decision because it works so well. But it is absolutely an adaptation because, you know, parts of it are hinted at but you've taken it and made it much more central to the whole setting, to the characterisation and the plot of the piece.

CA: Well yeah. And partly for dramatic purposes because the text, as it stands, just doesn't have any sort of dramatic momentum that would lend itself to this. It's too diffuse, there's too much of this sort of narrative baton being handed on between people who are all fairly similar. So, I took the decision to collapse several characters into each other for a start. So, the flatliner student, the incidental student in the original, becomes Kebmezakh. And this is a key point, that he is a medical assistant, a laboratory assistant in the Academy, and he's also a disreputable character. I took this decision to set it all in one place in the Imperial Medical Academy and that was because I found out about this very interesting history that tied in with lots of other things that were going on in the 1870s. But fundamentally, the 1860s, of course, is period of reform after the death of the Tsar, Nicholas I, Alexander II comes in and you have all these reforms. One aspect of which we haven't talked about particularly is the emergence of the so-called 'women question' and so women, it becomes a point of a lot of discussion about what should happen to women, the subservience of women to husband and family, and also, what women's education should be as well. And, I think it was in the 1860s, so in 1867, you get one very important figure, Nadezhda Suslova, who graduates from the University of Zurich as a doctor of medicine. And this is a sort of sensation in the Russian intelligentsia that a woman can do this and sort of off the back of this numerous women began to practice medicine but they went abroad, they went to Switzerland and elsewhere in Continental Europe. Russian women made up the largest foreign contingent in other European cities at this time in universities, it's just a really extraordinary fact. And then, after this, in about 1869 evening classes begin for women in St Petersburg, evening medical classes. Now, this is tied in with the 'People and Land' movement and the idea of, you know, a kind of civic duty to go and educate people. So for women, it's also a kind of double thing. It's like this is a way out for them, it's a way for them to get some sort of economic independence, and it's a way to perform a civic duty as well to become trained. And so, these are classes in obstetrics, and in midwifery, so 'Learned Obstetricians' was the title given to them. So, that's where I begin. I begin with an imaginary class. Now, this is... mine is set later, mine is set about ten years later actually. So, just to fill in that period as well: women are permitted to take full medical degrees as well by the mid-1870s,

or even early 1870s, so basically these classes kind of transmogrify into something much bigger. You get hundreds of women going, I mean, by the time... they were shut down when Alexander II was assassinated in 1882, that's when these classes were shut down because right through this period, the authorities have had their eye on these women and think that they are subversive. And there's a very good historian, Barbara Engel, has written fantastic pieces about this and she says only about 10% of these women were actually involved in radical revolutionary activity. The rest were, they were unusual and they were doing something very unusual but they... were genuine. So there was a real kind of ferment around these classes, around these women and around the very idea of women studying. So, you get these kind of stereotypical ideas of women, as Shkliarevskii gives us in this incidental throwaway line about these mannish women and I think he says 'with blue eyeglasses and wearing sailors' caps'. No, that wasn't him, that was Engel actually describing women in Zurich. This is a kind of fad that Russian women would wear this sort of thing so I brought this into my piece too. But, nonetheless you get these ideas about what women are up to and the suspicion too. So, in my piece, the other thing that I do at the very end, it's revealed that Kebmezakh, this strange individual, this slightly Harold Shipman-like character who's been basically using curare to experiment on homeless women and on animals. I reveal that he has been a police informer, so he is a member of the Third Section, that is the secret police who were genuinely infiltrating... they were arresting women, they were reading their letters, they were going to their meetings. So, these women students were all caught up, whether they wanted to be or not, they were caught up in the public imagination in these nascent revolutionary movements that, indeed, then in 1882 did turn into terrorist movements, or advocating the use of terror. And there were trials too, famous trials during this period as well of... so there's the trial Vera Figner and the trial of Vera Zasulich who attempted to shoot the governor-general of Petersburg and these trials just attracted a huge amount of popular attention. And again, these women, some women students from these medical courses were involved in, they went to these trials or they were part of them, or they were kind of part of that wider body. So, that's the wider context. And that's why I decided, actually, I wanted to set this in the Imperial Medical Academy too and the other reason for that is curare itself. Curare became known as the means used for vivisection.

CW: That's right.

CA: So, what happens... again in 1865, so just off the back of this huge revolution, would you believe it, you get the establishment of the first ever Society for the Protection of Animals. And this is the RSPCA, the Russian Society for the Protection of Animals. And then, I mean, Dostoevskii and Tolstoy pick this up with their own famous... you know, Tolstoy's famous story about the horse and the kind of animal suffering. So there's an enormous again public discourse about animal suffering. Now this came out of, around this period, the unmasking of a very famous physiologist called Claude Bernard who was French and is still hailed as, you know, the father of whatever and so on. In, I can't remember the time exactly, I may get my dates slightly wrong here, but around the late 1860s earlier 1870s, basically, he was unmasked as having been running a secret laboratory, a vivisection laboratory, in using dogs, in Paris, in which he used curare as the anaesthetic. Now, the point about curare in this story and the reason why it's used as a murder weapon is that it paralyzes, but it is not an analgesic. So, if you can imagine the horror of that. In some of the reports I read as well it suggests that curare

heightens the sensation of pain. So, it doesn't diminish, it heightens it. So, when Bernard unmasked and this was in the *London Morning Post*, there was a series of letters and reports written by somebody who is working in this laboratory, basically blew the whistle on him. And out of the absolute public outrage at this horror, there emerged the anti-vivisection movement, and then the Societies for the Protection of Animals, including the Russian Society for the Protection of Animals. So, I come back to, you know, Russia. So I tried to find, well what are the connections between Russia and curare. And curare in this... curare comes from Latin America, or South America. In this story, Kebmezakh has got it on his travels to Havana, so Cuba.

CW: Yeah, wonderful.

CA: Yeah, exactly. It's great. Now Russia and Cuba at that point had no particular, as far as I can find, it's obviously completely occluded by if you do any searches on this by the Soviet history and 20<sup>th</sup>-century history and anyway, I think after the Monroe Doctrine anyway in the early 1880s, then there was no European... European countries couldn't have any kind of internal, North America said no other European continent can have anything to do this, with the South Americas. So Russia wasn't, as far as I know, diplomatically or otherwise politically particularly involved at this time. But this is clearly part of a kind of wider Grand Tour that young men would do, for instance. So this goes via London and Berlin. These two young men set off and, you know, on their travels they pick up, well he picks up however many vials of curare which sets him up for his career...

CW: For life!

CA: For life, indeed. So it's a long way round to sort of try and describe some of the background to what I was doing here. So, there's both the narrative that's about animal rights, and of course, this also emerges out of Darwin. Darwin was published in the 1870s too, so, the question of ethics, how we treat animals, whether we are part of the chain of animals, whether our own suffering is equivalent to theirs, etc. or theirs is to ours. re's Etc. All of this is around at this time. It's around in Russia, too. And the other echoes I wanted to pick up were to do with the early Soviet period and Mikhail Bulgakov who writes *The Heart of a Dog*, which is about animal experimentation, it's a satire on the engineering of the human soul and in it the Shadow Cop has created a criminal brain, sorry a dog's heart and a criminal brain put together in the dogs. Anyway, you see what I mean? And so, usually, when that's discussed the kind of references to that are... people talk about... Frankenstein of course is the obvious, this is the obvious echo. But I think there's a kind of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century echo too here. That, not that people were talking about curare specifically but these ideas about, you know, experimentation, the ethics of experimentation, women's place in this were all very much around at this time. And about the objectification of the medical subject and that's also why I begin with this scene in the lecture hall rather. Professor Mozharovskii has with him a model and it's called 'The Femme Plastique Complete', 'The Complete Disarticulated Woman', which was in fact a real model and anatomical model used for students. And these were known... these were models created by a French doctor, Doctor Azou, they replaced the sort of wax model of the Tussauds, Madame Tussauds was much earlier and her practice came, I believe, from the French Revolution, and taking victims from the guillotine and so on and using them as casts. So Azou created this new form of anatomical model where you would be able to, you know, physically lift out organ after organ, layer after layer. And so, obviously, I'm using this, this is a model of a woman and he did this, the words I use in this, he says – these words come actually from an auctioneer's

catalogue that I found of this model – and he calls it a preparation: ‘so, the preparation arrives with 14 models of the uterus which can be removed and changed in all periods of gestation with examples of ovarian and tubal pregnancy. All these elements are detachable in order to facilitate the understanding. It is the femme plastique complete, the complete disarticulated woman. But as I unpeel the truth of the female form, lifting one filming membrane from another, there is shouting from the streets’ and so on and so on. Clearly, well I hope it’s clear that I’m using this as a great big clunking metaphor at the very beginning. So women... at the beginning of these stories, the woman is laid out on the table – on the slab – and is disarticulated before, and this is also the model of the crime story.

CW: Yeah, and more broadly than that, you know, we’ve talked about it before... I mean, I think that our discussion of the adaptation of the Panov story where you speak very persuasively about your disinclination, or even perhaps refusal, to depict dead female bodies so as not to any further reinforce that trope of woman as victim, and I think that's one of the significant issues with the original text is that what Shkliarevskii depicts is one dead woman in the opening scene, and the only other woman of any significance in the story is her killer. She's not the only killer but she is responsible for the death of her supposed best friend for no other reason than petty female jealousy.

CA: That again.

CW: Yeah, I know and it continues to this day. I mean, it's not like, I mean, you know to some extent, one might be tempted to sort of write that off as some old-fashioned 19<sup>th</sup>-century, male-authored trope. But it's still very, very popular today. But I think also what's interesting, hearing you talk about it, particularly in that context of the female body laid out in a medical facility, is that broader discussion outside of crime fiction specifically where that's also the way that the female body is depicted. So, if you think probably most obviously about a work like Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* from 1862 or 63 where the central male protagonist, Bazarov, is the model of the new nihilist who doesn't believe in anything. And when he confronts this beautiful woman, Madame Odintsova, he doesn't recognize beauty is not a scientific quality, so it's something he doesn't recognize. And so, his remark upon her is: ‘wouldn't she look amazing laid out on the dissecting table’! And it's this very famous line from this very famous novel and I feel like, perhaps even unintentionally, you're picking up on that. The other thing I was thinking about is Dostoevskii's *Krotkaia (The Meek One)* where again there's this dead female body there and it's again... in those works, it's all narrated through the male point of view. And I think what you very successfully manage to do here is kind of wrest that that image back from that slightly, I don't want to disparage either Dostoevskii or Turgenev in terms of simplicity, but I think what you manage to do is resurrect that image and make it much more complex for a contemporary audience.

CA: I mean, yes, I think actually the curare element gave me an opportunity there because... So what I've done is, she's brought in in the middle of this scene, she's placed on the slab where the complete disarticulated woman model is moved aside so that she lies there. A photographer takes their picture, by the way, which I will return to in just a moment.

CW: Oh, good!

CA: And then she's carried off and then the investigator sees later on another woman in her place. And again, this is a very throwaway incident in the original where he sees the dead woman in the morgue who is an alcoholic. She's described as an alcoholic brought in off the

street, something like that. And she's dead. So I have here, the investigator thinking that what he sees is the complete disarticulated woman model later on and, in fact, it is another, it is an unnamed woman. Now, and then I come back to that right at the very end. So right through this, scene after scene in the duration of the play we don't see Zinaida Mozharovskaia at all, we just hear that she is, I think I say somewhere, yes, the investigator says 'she is semi-comatose, some crisis of the nervous system, a freak that grips her in its mandibles still now'. So, she's unconscious, she's in in the hospital unconscious being tended to by her husband and by the best friend who turns out to be the murdering best friend. And this was deliberate on my part because, at the very end, the final scene, where I have rather classically them all gathering together, but they gather around her bed. This rather, you know, a dramatic scene where Kebmezakh is there, has curare and well, various things happen but the investigator and the husband are themselves injected with curare at this point and they fall stone dead, or not dead rather, because the point about curare, the key point, is that if you receive artificial respiration within 10 to 15 minutes, you survive, you can survive, right. So, in this case, I mean, I'm using the original the respiration is described and you pump the arms up and down...

CW: Like a corkscrew...

CA: Yeah, it depends on your corkscrew! But anyway, so you have a kind of bellows effect. Yeah, so final scene, we have Zinaida in bed, unconscious, lying there comatose, we have the investigator and her husband dropped like statues to the floor. And then we have Kriukovskaia and Kebmezakh and he says to her 'finish the business now' and hands her the vial, or goes to hand her the vial of curare. But as he does this, Zinaida at long last, this dead body...

CW: The supposed victim...

CA: She rises up and she says, what does she say? Oh, I'm afraid she swears at this point, she says something terrible but anyway... you might want to birdsong this bit out but anyway: 'you \*\*\*\*\* one and all!' This is her speaking... 'not again, not again you don't... I seized the needle from the bedside table where he had put it and plunged it into his neck. He dropped, his legs curled up so spider-like and then I looked at Avdotia and said...' And this is where Avdotia speaks, the murderer speaks, 'remember your medical training' she said. Right, so the two women, they start to speak to each other in that penultimate scene. And then the very final scene is the set of voices that you realize are official recordings and you realize this because I give sort of 'Official Transcript Evidence', you know 'Appendix A interview concludes with the judicial investigator so-and-so'. And in this denouement, in the kind of official police report we learn that Mozharovskii, the professor, and Mozharovskaia Zina, they are divorced or have separated...

CW: Good!

CA: Yes, and he has retired from the Academy and, I should note, by the way, he is a lot older than her in the original. He says... this is very, you know, and we could make much more of this and I could have done. He says that he met her when she was 10 and he was 38... I know. And now Zina, in my version, she is running the Academy herself.

CW: I know, I love it.

CA: And the last section is an interview with her, with Dr Zinaida Kuznetsova, she goes back to her maiden name, and she speaks and says what happens and she says: 'and then I took command, I'd heard it all, of course, curare does not dull the senses, still less the hearing. I heard every twist and turn of my betrayal over these past weeks. My husband and my friend –

and by the way they've been having an affair – but there was work to do in that moment. Don't touch Arkadii, I said to her, he is still mine by law. And then we set about reviving the two men. We pumped their arms up and down. After some time, Arkadii came around and then the investigator the same. And Kebmezakh, some minutes passed and then I gave an order: 'Encase his torso in the artificial lung, the spirophore – this is fantastic... I said, 'it is too late for other means, the bellows mechanism will breathe forevermore on his behalf. He's in the spirophore still in that same room. I visit every day...' And then Kriukovskaia says – she's in a penal colony in Siberia – she says 'as we worked I said to her 'Zina, Zina, forgive me... I did it all for love, for love'. But she just looked at me and said..., and then Zina speaks: 'there is so much work to do'. So, several things... I wanted to kind of tie in lots of things here, I mean I'm probably just a terrible old-fashioned writer... I want retribution and so, Kebmezakh, I thought there could be nothing better than having him encased in the spirophore, which was an early version of an iron lung...

CW: Forevermore...

CA: Forevermore. And actually, I then think I will put a mention of the spirophore in the very very beginning, in the opening scene somewhere so that it's set up. And also, I think I will make his speech more laboured in some way as if to suggest that by the end he is breathing artificially. I mean all of this, there are so many... any medical person could pick this to pieces because, you know, I think you would be dead after lying, after being injected by curare and the point about Zinaida is that... my point was that she wasn't suffering from the aftereffects of curare, which you can allegedly recover from quickly enough if you're given artificial respiration, but that she was in some sort of post-traumatic condition. So, yeah, that really... I've gone way off my point, whatever my point was at the beginning...

CW: No, but what is so genuinely amazing and fascinating is the extent to which you can amplify and bring so much more into, you know, an original story that I'm fond of but undoubtedly has limitations. I don't think there's any question about that. I found it... In a sense, when I wrote about it in terms of multiple voice, I found it quite useful as a sort of control case, if you like, for a very conventional use of multiple voice. Whereas I think somebody like Dostoevskii in *Crime and Punishment* and even actually Shkliarevskii in a different story of his called 'The Tale of the Investigator' does something much more radical with multiple voice where the different threads don't come together. And so, this story, 'A Secret Investigation' is much more conventional. But what you've managed to do, I think, as you've just talked about very eloquently, is bring so many elements that were either very briefly hinted at in the original or not at all but form part of the sociohistorical context or which are part of the kind of broader literary context where you see other writers engaging in questions, you know, in discussion of the role of science in society, the women question as you talk about. I mean, most of the people that obviously... we're talking about a male author, the other two that I've mentioned are male authors, but you had that also being discussed by fairly prominent female authors of the time, particularly around the question of education, what constituted acceptable types of education and how that should still be limited. And I think what you end up with in an adaptation script that is around about, I think, just shy of 40 pages, so as I say the original novella is about 80, in the much denser pagination... you include much greater depth, and these can just be hints to these other elements of the story and the genre. And I think, for me, as somebody who knows a fair bit about Russian crime fiction, but also about Russian



literature more broadly, and Russian realism of the time and Russian politics, and the revolutionary movement and, you know, stuff about the women question, and it's speaking to all of those different elements in a very, very coherent and entertaining way. I mean, that's the other thing, I think. I do think your adaptation is probably more entertaining than the original which, as you say, is a slightly plodding... you know, it's one voice after the other and superimposed...

CA: Yeah, I mean, thank you. That's very kind of you. But I also think you know, in the times when, if you were waiting – as I will continue to speculate that it was possibly serialized – then it might have been quite exciting to wait for the next thrilling instalment...

CW: The next voice...

CA: The curare poisoner...

CW: Can I ask you... I realise probably we don't have much time left, but I wanted to ask because you promised you were going to talk about it and it was something that I had noted down when I was reading it was... I think I'm right in saying, your inclusion of the figure of a photographer who, I think, in your adaptation happens to be in the vicinity of the building and so, when the victim's body is brought into the Medical Academy, he fortuitously follows them in and starts to photograph it. Although I haven't reread the original very recently, I think there is no mention of a photographer in the original at all.

CA: No, there is.

CW: Ah, well there you are...

CA: There is a mention of a photographer... There's a scene in the morgue... the investigator goes the following day after the murder of Mozharovskaia, he goes to the morgue where he finds the husband and Kriukovskaia, the best friend, there. And the woman is laid out, Zinaida is laid out with flowers all around and the photographer has been. So we don't see a photographer...

CW: I see, yes.

CA: So it's actually a key point. There's then this very strange, to me strange anyway, a little eye-catching interchange between the investigator and the husband, where the investigator who describes her body as 'delectable' – there's quite a lot of prurient, disturbing descriptions of the female form in a kind of... And the husband gives him one of the photos that the photographer has taken. Not only that, but the investigator looks at it, and the husband says 'no, no it's fine, take it, I've had lots of copies made of a dead body'. And then he says 'and here's one from our wedding day, you know, you couldn't tell the difference between them could you because the photographer has done her up'. And yeah, so I mean this ties in with obviously this practice anyway of post-mortem cartes de visite, I don't know whether Shkliarevskii is specifically referring to this, but as it is, this is a device that then moves the story on in his original because this is the photograph that the investigator puts it in his own little photograph album...

CW: Alongside his images of his holiday on the Riviera...

CA: This is his kind of Instagram. And then he takes it with him on holiday when he goes to visit his father where he bumps into his army doctor friend, Mikhailovskii, who then in an idle moment says 'can I have a look through your snaps?' and says 'wait a minute, I know this woman', and I'm not sure if it's clear in the original whether he's looking at the photo of the dead woman or the... Anyway, the problem is that the image of the dead woman is traded

between men. I think this sums up for me a feeling overall that the way that I read these texts is so at odds with the way that they were written and their intention, if I can use that word, but, and it is entirely to do with this kind of idea of woman as a commodity and an object of desire and so on. But anyway, on the subject of photography as well. I mean, historically speaking, I mean, you're quite right, something that you just said made me think, thank you very much you've just given me an idea here because you just said, 'he just happened to be there' and, indeed, he is, your own implausible coincidence is that the photographer is in, but in fact, he could be a sort of paparazzi, a sort of ambulance chaser so just... So, I refer to him as William Carrick, or Vasilii Andreev, and he was Scottish and he was a photographer who lived and worked in Russia for many many years and was very famous and was used by the Tsar. He took all, you know, lots of photos that you might recognize from this period and he was known for taking photos of 'Petersburg types' as he called them. So, this was the idea of classes of people, sweeps and cabbies and brush boys, and goodness knows who. So, anyway, I have Carrick coming in and setting it up and, in a way, I'm sure the actual Carrick wouldn't have been hanging around on the street just waiting to take a photograph on the off chance. But photography during this period has been around now for 40 or 50 years, so it was very much in use, you get the advent of forensic photography during this period as well. So, I think it's not unreasonable to think that a photographer would be in such a scene and would be, in fact, I had to see how you would set up and what they were using then, so using ribbon of magnesium and sodium perchlorate which when you bring them together would produce the flash and a sort of explosion. So I use that moment as a, in a way, as a staged scene, as a frieze, where you would see all the characters gathered around the body here. So, I'll just read you that, if I may, just what the photographer says here. So, this is a moment where Zinaida is laid out and they are all peering at her and the investigator says 'tell us... is there any indication of violence? No bruising, vomiting, no sign of poison'. And Mozharovskii says 'I looked closely but I could see nothing on her body other than the tiniest scratch under her chin. A pin, I said, from her bonnet. But wait...' And then there's a series of them saying, each saying, 'wait', 'wait', 'wait' in different voices and different expressions. And the investigator says 'her eyes, a shade, a flash of light, I thought it moved a fraction. I see, I see', and then the photographer says 'the murderer, I whispered, as I let the flash explode. It was so quick, so white a light, I heard a gasp and saw the players petrified around the body on the slab. The husband, the professor with his head in hands, the policeman's frown, the woman's blue-black hair, the assistant hunching down. And in between them all the girl, her hair of fire, lady, gentlemen, I said, the retina is like the photographer's plate and on it lies the impression of the very last thing it sees: the guillotine, the flashing blade, the poison dart, the murderer's face, so small but then enlarged, dilates, I cried'. And this is the investigator now speaking, 'I see it now, her pupil it dilates, and now contracts, look, look!' And so they discover that she's alive and they do so because the photographer's flash has made her pupil contract. But that idea of the retina bearing the impression of the murderer, of the last thing that you see was current again in this time and, again, it brings us straight back to the antivivisection movement as well. 1877, you get a very famous experiment on rabbits, I'm afraid. done by two doctors called Franz Boll and Wilhelm Kühne and they experimented with exposing images on the retinas of rabbits just before they then, I'm afraid, killed them. Because of that experiment, I mean, Lord knows why they did it, I haven't investigated that, you know, what possible reason...

CW: And what they had against rabbits...

CA: Quite so. But, as a result of that, that idea gained popular currency and went into, I believe, went into the crime fiction of the time, so that idea of the murderer and the retina and so on. So, again, I kind of want to bring together those questions of literary genre as well as the actual historical or sort of scientific context of the time, so it's photography as both art and science. And, but also this underlying question of ethics again, ethics, women, animals. You know, it's all sort of all tied there. So, yeah, I guess I am trying to condense and kind of pack quite a lot in there...

CW: Very successfully I think. You know, I think I recognize my own privilege of knowing the original text and then being part of the process of watching you adapt it. It has to be said, in the case of this piece of adaptation, I sent you the story, you sent me the adaptation back. There was no sort of mid-process discussion about how would I feel if, as we had with the Panov story I think. But what you've demonstrated and, hopefully, I mean, certainly what you've demonstrated in the adapted script that I've read, but also hopefully what we've demonstrated in our conversation today, is just the huge potential in the process of adaptation of taking a work that really, by and large, I would think is, with the exception of ambitiously a few tens of thousands of readers in Russia, is completely unknown, you know. It still pains me to some extent that these works don't exist in English translation and that's probably for another project. But, you know, I think that the original texts are enjoyable if, even though they have their shortcomings, I think he, Shkliarevskii, is an interesting writer. I think he does manage to capture quite a lot of the flavour of the time, a lot of the thinking around crime fiction and criminality and the changes that Russia is going through in the 1870s and into the 1880s and then to bring that into discussion and into conversation with you in now 2020 with your own ideas around artistic production, but also your experience as a reader and a watcher I think of crime fiction and I think also not to be underplayed this sort of significance of a female adapter of a male-authored work where exactly some of your sensitivities and sensibilities around how female characters are depicted and the roles that they were made to occupy with rather too much frequency in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature of either victim or perpetrator. You manage to kind of update that, I think, and complicate it and what we end up with is this really fantastic adaptation entitled 'Curare' that hopefully we'll get some people to stage it and record it so that it can come to life a bit more directly. And we'll keep people informed about that. But it's been, once again, super interesting and fascinating talking about the process with you. And yeah, a complete privilege to read the work that you come up with Carol. Thanks so much.

CA: Thank you, Claire.

CW: Carol, thanks once again for such a fascinating and stimulating discussion. Whenever we do get together to record these episodes or discuss our collaboration outside of this podcast series, I always find our conversations so inspiring, so provocative and you always help me to see my work and my investigation into Russian crime fiction in new and productive ways and obviously the hope is that you the audience have also found our discussion to be of interest and to be enjoyable and I suppose that you have enjoyed learning about a new perhaps to you work of Russian crime fiction that I think is really worthy of discussion.

Just as we close this episode and, before signing off, I wanted, however, to note that at the time of the recording of this episode we weren't aware of the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition activist in Russia, that news was just breaking as we were having our

discussion. We're obviously very saddened by that event and we wish Alexei a very speedy recovery now that he is in Berlin. We're also very conscious of the backdrop of the poisonings that took place in Salisbury in the United Kingdom, of the Skripal family and the other victims of that poisoning and I think what these incidents demonstrate is that, albeit that we're discussing a work from the late 19th century, there are still sensitivities around the subject matter and we wanted really just to record that and to acknowledge that we are aware of the unfortunate timing, if you like, of our discussion with regards to events in the wider world. So, we wish Alexei Navalny all the very best and hope he's up and about very soon. But thanks once again to you for listening and we'll be back with you very soon for episode 4 of our 'Lost Detectives' series. Thanks and goodbye.