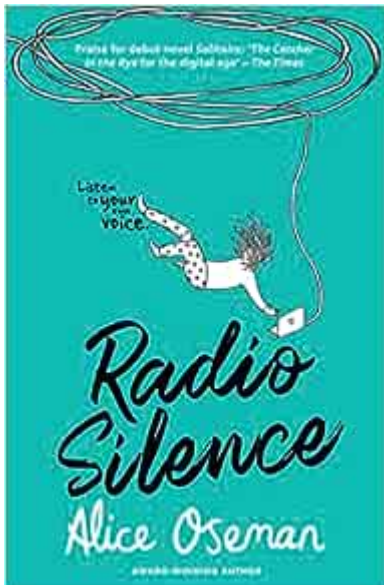


Edinburgh International Book Festival 2023 – Alice Oseman: Stopping Hearts

I arrive much earlier than I usually would for Alice Oseman's Edinburgh International Book Festival event. I know she's popular and the tickets for this have been sold out for months.

Nevertheless, I am confronted by a queue snaking up and down outside the College of Art door. Oseman has a seriously vast fanbase, and its members are clearly determined to get good seats.

Award-winning author, illustrator and now screenwriter Oseman's first book was *Solitaire*, published when she was just 20 years old. She's now 28, and in those intervening years she's written plenty more, including *Radio Silence*, *Loveless* and *I Was Born for This*. But it's for her graphic novels and Netflix series *Heartstopper* that she's best known; the story that started life in 2016 as a webcomic is now on its second Netflix series, with a third in production.



Today Oseman will be talking with author **Benjamin Dean** (*Me, My Dad and the End of the Rainbow; How to Die Famous*), and I want to say right here that Dean is a really excellent chair. He begins by asking her when she first started writing and illustrating.

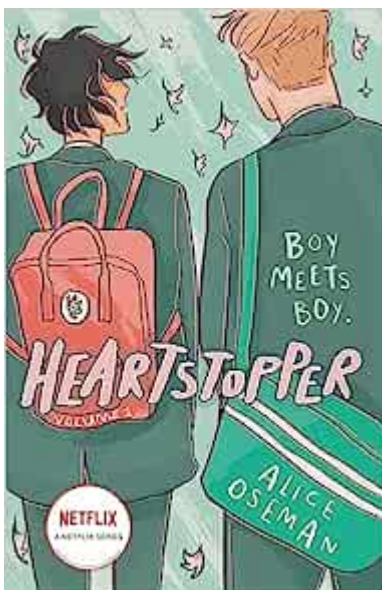
'I've been doing both since I was a tiny child. At the age of 5 or 6 I'd copy out books I'd read. My favourite series at that time was Artemis Fowl, and I loved cartoons too – Pokémon, kids' animé shows; they kickstarted my interest in drawing.'

Oseman attended an academic school and was encouraged to take sciences and history rather than art, her favourite subject. She persevered, taking the subject to A-level, but was still dissuaded from seeking a career as an artist. Her school did, however, provide her with some inspiration for *Heartstopper*; it was an all girls' school with a boys' school across the road, just like Truham & Higgs.



Solitaire is about Tori, a pessimistic teenager. Her brother Charlie also appears, as does Nick Nelson; both would go on to become lead characters in *Heartstopper*. Once she'd finished *Solitaire* Oseman began to wonder how her characters had reached the points they were at, so she started drawing a webcomic. *Heartstopper* grew slowly, but by 2017 she was thinking about publishing it as a graphic novel. Her agent didn't think there'd be any market for it – a view Oseman understands, as there was nothing like it around at the time – so she decided to try Crowdfunding. In no time at all she'd raised enough to pay for 2,000 copies

'That's when I realised a lot of people must be reading it.'



When starting a new project Oseman looks at themes, ideas she wants to explore. There are currently four volumes of *Heartstopper* books with Volume 5 to be published in December,

and each one looks at a different issue. She especially enjoyed writing the first instalment 'because it's a classic getting together story.' Volume 4 has been the hardest so far, she says, as it examines Charlie's mental health journey, something Oseman wanted to write about realistically but without making the book too dark and miserable.

Heartstopper, Dean says, generally makes readers feel light and happy, it's a 'safe home', but it does also deal with darker themes – does Oseman need to take a step back after writing these?

She replies by explaining that all of her YA novels cover difficult subjects, and she enjoys that

'I have thought a lot about this and it's a question of deciding when to show something is happening and when not to, especially in 'Heartstopper', which I don't want to become super-dark and potentially triggering.'

In reply to an audience question, Oseman agrees that she does put a little part of herself into every character – but no, she doesn't put her friends in

'They'd always find out!'

Instead she gets ideas from people she meets and things that happen in her own life. *Radio Silence* was inspired by her experiences at school and university, *Loveless* by her own sexual journey

'So much of yourself ends up in the stories.'

How does she cope, Dean asks, with the sharing that's required in her work with Netflix? Writing is a very solitary activity, and suddenly she had to start working with many different people. Oseman agrees that it's 'scary' but says she's found

people who care as much about the story as she does, such as her co-executive producer **Patrick Walters**

'Everyone involved is very committed and positive.'

When she and Walters first found out that Netflix wanted to make the series, they created a Powerpoint presentation to capture what was in the comics. Netflix liked it ('fortunately.') Neither of them expected *Heartstopper* to take off so quickly; when Series 1 ended and they found out that they were getting two more, Oseman had just three months to write Series 2

'I just had to dive in, we worked as hard as we could.'

By then there was a plethora of reviews and opinions on the programme; Oseman says she could only get on with the writing by shutting these out, otherwise she'd have been pre-occupied with trying to please everyone.

'There's a big part of me that wants everyone to love it, but realistically not all will, you just have to do your own thing.'

And much as it goes against the grain, she sometimes does just have to put her foot down and insist on certain things. She blocks out the noise as best she can, but says she finds it hard to relax and admits to spending far too much time on social media

'It's not good for you to read so much of other people's opinions!'



Casting was a major worry for Oseman; without the right actor for each part she believes the series may well have flopped. The programme's casting team had already seen thousands of hopefuls and whittled them down to a few hundred before she and Walters started auditioning. She hoped to find people who both physically resembled her idea of the characters and embodied the essence of their personalities, but of the two the latter was by far the more important. **Will Gao**, who plays Tao, is very tall, whereas Tao in the books is small

'But Will is so fabulous it doesn't matter.'

Kit Connor, who plays Nick, first auditioned for Charlie's role; Oseman knew he wasn't right for that one, but asked him to try for Nick. He had, she says, a natural earnestness that made him perfect for the role of the sensitive rugby star. **Joe Locke** had never acted professionally before, but although many of the people who auditioned for that role could capture Charlie's nervousness and vulnerability, Joe also brought an essential level of confidence to the character.

How – and why – asks an audience member, did Oseman come up with the character of Nick's friend Imogen? She wanted, she

says, to look at how Nick comes to terms with being bisexual. In the book this seems pretty straightforward, but for Netflix she wanted to slow things down, to show him as less sure. Imogen presents a problem for him; she likes Nick, does he like her? For TV, Oseman says, you have to put people through stuff just to keep things moving.

All of the cast, she says, are committed and passionate, caring not only for the show but for one another too. Oseman was in Paris with them during the filming of Series 2; what was it like, asks Dean, shooting scenes in tourist hotspots?

'Stressful!'

Working outside in those areas was, she says, one of the most difficult tasks. Getting up very early when everyone was tired and many were ill wasn't easy. When they filmed on a bridge they put out cones to stop the traffic, but people were still wandering past taking photos

'I thought "the whole of series 2 is going to be ruined!"'

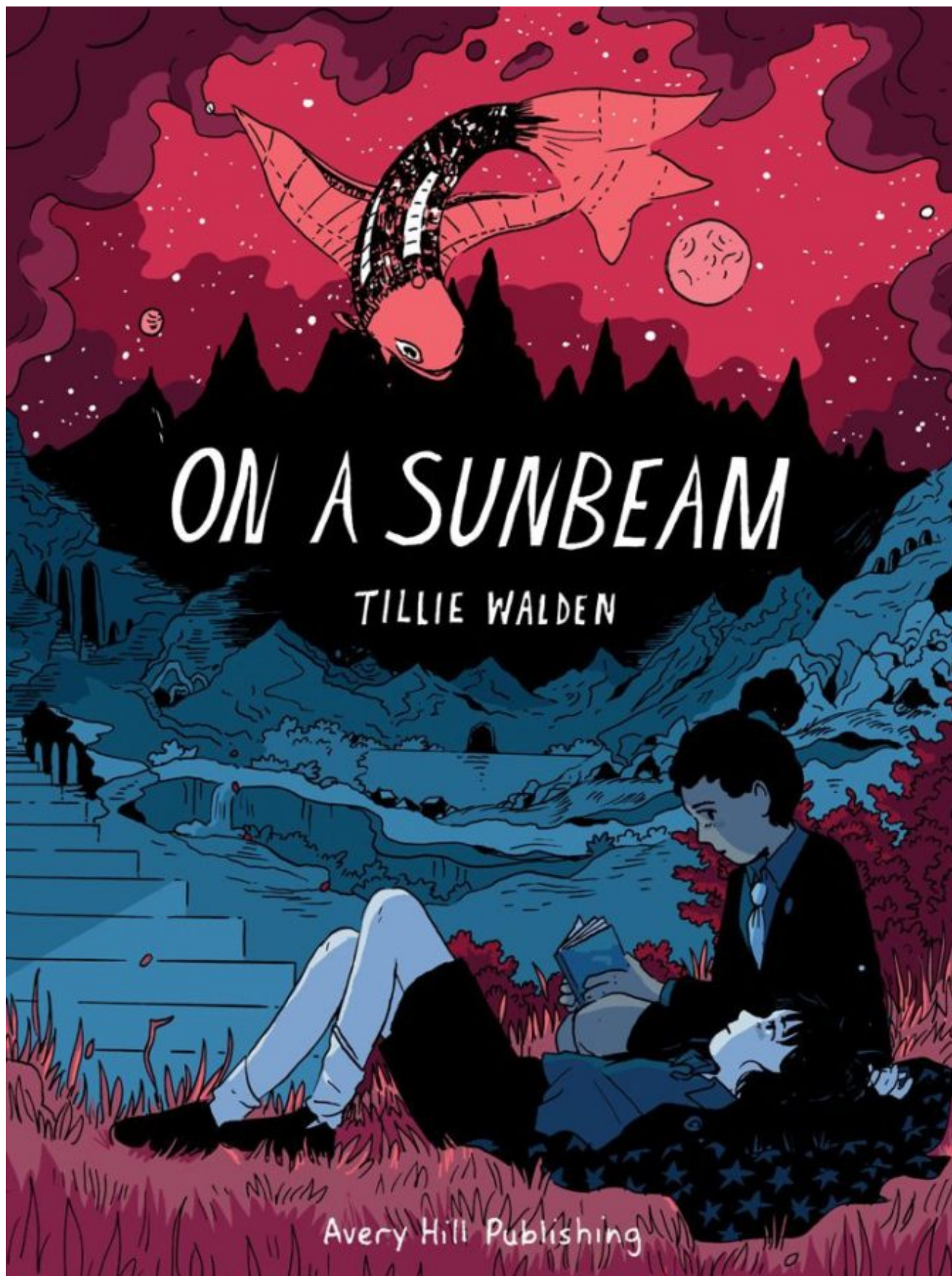
Series 2 is based on the third volume of *Heartstopper*; Oseman was particularly excited to be able to explore the Tao/Elle story more than she had in the book. She's delighted with the end result. Her favourite scene in the series comes in episode 6, when quite a few of the characters have their 'big moment.'

How, asks Dean, has *Heartstopper* changed Oseman's life?

'Completely! It was just a side passion project. Now it's my job and all I'm doing.'

Volume 5 of the books will be published in December 2023; can she tell us anything about it? Not much – she hasn't quite finished it yet – but she can say that Nick and Charlie will be taking some new steps in their relationship, Charlie will

find some confidence in certain things in his life without Nick, and Nick will be starting to think about university and realising that Charlie might not be there.



Has she any recommendations for the audience? Yes, she loves the work of the American cartoonist and graphic novelist **Tillie Walden**, and the BBC3 series *Wreck* (comedy-horror set on a cruise ship with all Queer characters) which she thinks is underrated.



What she loves most about her job is bringing people together and seeing friendships blossom, and there's certainly a lot of shared love in the room today. She loves fan art and keeps it in a folder on Instagram – 'so keep it coming!' Her greatest

wish is for *Heartstopper* to show people that, no matter how dark and terrible things seem, they can always get better

'There is always hope.'

Heartstopper Volumes 1-4 by Alice Oseman are published by Hachette Children's Group. *Solitaire, Loveless, Radio Silence, Nick and Charlie, I Was Born for This* and *This Winter* are published by Harper Collins.

Heartstopper Series 1 and *2* are available on Netflix.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues at Edinburgh College of Art until 28 August.

