



**#ThanksForTyping
Interview with Karen Christensen**

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KENNEALLY: Twitter hashtags and individual tweets often make the leap from smartphone screens to print and cable news headlines. Social media platforms increasingly dominate political and cultural conversations. Some tweets even venture further and land in unexpected territories. #ThanksForTyping, a Twitter hashtag born on a Saturday morning in 2017 at a Starbucks in Virginia, eventually led to a conference in 2019 at the University of Oxford.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. In 2017, University of Virginia professor Bruce Holsinger realized he had seen many an acknowledgment page where a male author thanked an anonymous wife for typing his book manuscript. On that Saturday at a Starbucks, Holsinger tweeted several screenshots and accompanying scornful wisecracks under the hashtag #ThanksForTyping. Immediately, the Twitter world responded in kind, finding myriad examples when otherwise invisible women, many of them authors in their own right, had typed, translated, edited, and proofread.

At the Thanks for Typing Oxford conference in March 2019, American author and publisher Karen Christensen presented a paper called “Jumped-Up Typists” concerning the lives of two secretaries who became two literary wives, Sophia Mumford, wife of the American historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford, and Valerie Eliot, second wife of T.S. Eliot. Karen Christensen is currently writing a bio-memoir on the pair. She is founder and CEO of Berkshire Publishing Group. And Karen Christensen joins me now from her office in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Karen.

CHRISTENSEN: It’s great to be with you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Well, it’s a subject that I think is an important one to share with our listeners, and we need to remind those listeners who grew up in the electronic age that until very recently, authors needed typists. They needed typists to prepare clean copies of their manuscripts.

CHRISTENSEN: That’s right. We all do it ourselves now. We have all sorts of apps and programs to help us. But until very recently, people – even people who typed



their own first drafts, they were very rough and ready, and they would hire professional typists to prepare whatever they were going to turn in to a journal or to a book publisher.

KENNEALLY: Right. But that turned out to be, in many cases, more than just typing, and I'll put air quotes around the just typing, because it really was so much more than that. It was literary support of all kinds and at all levels.

CHRISTENSEN: Oh, some of the things that came up with the hashtag #ThanksForTyping were quite extraordinary. Men would thank their wives for the years they spent in the archives or translating old English texts for them. (laughter) And then they said, and thanks for typing the manuscript.

KENNEALLY: And we do need to make a point that many of these examples of acknowledgments, they were acknowledgments simply to my wife. The woman never even got a name-check.

CHRISTENSEN: That's right. And that – it got some very snarky comments on Twitter, as you can imagine. I just was thrilled at the way, though, that that conversation online ended up developing into much deeper and much more complex and nuanced conversations amongst scholars and biographers.

KENNEALLY: Right. In fact, that's the point of our discussion today, Karen Christensen, is to look at this a little more deeply than the obvious sort of sexism that's part of the problem here and see it as a problem at the heart of a lot of the literary tradition. It's not simply that these individuals, these women, were hidden. They were taken for granted.

CHRISTENSEN: They were. But it actually is more complicated, because I think we see a greater difference, a greater distinction, between our work and our personal lives. And it would seem that for at least some women, it became quite natural. They took care of the house. They took care of the children. They took care of the typing. (laughter) But then, of course, there were some wives who made amazing contributions, and in fact over time often evolved in their own professional or artistic lives. And of course, this started long before the typewriter, which only goes back about 100 years. Milton's daughters transcribed *Paradise Lost* for their blind father. Leo Tolstoy's wife made fair copies – that is, handwritten copies – eight of them of different versions of *War and Peace*, as well as bearing 13 children. That's a level of devotion I find almost impossible to imagine.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. And your own research, Karen Christensen, has found many other examples of women who went well beyond just this kind of accompanying



activity to take on work of their own. Tell us about a couple of examples. There's a woman who wished she could be free as a bird. She ended up as an ornithologist.

CHRISTENSEN: Yes. Once you start looking for these examples, they really are everywhere. And the seemingly docile women of the past often were not anything like as contented with their lives as I think sometimes I assumed. Yes, there was a young mother in Oklahoma who had four young children and who was obviously – we can so easily relate to this – she felt trapped and invisible. She said, he taught, they studied, I did housework. I would be better off being a bird. And then she became a well-known ornithologist.

But I found this in my own research for *Too Near the Flame*. I talked to a lot of women who were typists at Faber & Faber in London. And every single one of them would say I didn't want to be stuck in the typing pool.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. It's a fair point in an essay that you have contributed to the Society of Authors in the UK that we're not trying to make a case that every woman who was in this role was herself a hidden genius. Many of them were – many of them did have literary abilities of their own. But it's important that we sort of recognize how they've been left out. It's not just to try to right wrongs, but to show that these women really deserve their place along with the others in the literary canon.

CHRISTENSEN: Indeed. And when I learned about the conference at Oxford, I couldn't have been more thrilled, because the two women I'm writing about actually began their careers, such as they were, as typists. They both became something else and lived truly fascinating and big lives thanks to the men they met and then married through their work as typists. But that was what gave them an opportunity, and they took that opportunity.

Valerie Eliot became a very famous, very ferocious literary widow, and she is the one who made what was a musical and is now becoming a movie, *Cats*, possible, and made an awful lot of money doing so.

And really, Sophia Mumford was there for her husband. He wouldn't have been the writer, the philosopher, the activist that he became – he was very important in the antiwar movement in the '60s – without her by his side.

KENNEALLY: Is it fair to say, Karen Christensen, that every writer needs someone like this, whoever that person is? You're an author yourself. We think of authors as engaged in a very solitary occupation, but after all, maybe not so solitary.



CHRISTENSEN: There's a lot of joking about how everyone needs a Véra. Véra Nabokov, the wife of the author of *Lolita*, is absolutely famous for actually not wanting the limelight, but doing everything, including saving the manuscript of *Lolita*, teaching his classes, sitting in on her husband's classes. There is talk nowadays – nowadays, professional women find that they do need support at home, and it's something that we all struggle with. How do we properly acknowledge the people who make our professional and creative lives possible?

KENNEALLY: Well, we want to acknowledge your contribution to the discussion. Karen Christensen, author and publisher, has been telling us about her experience at the University of Oxford conference, Thanks for Typing. Karen Christensen, thank you for joining us on Beyond the Book.

CHRISTENSEN: It's been delightful to be with you, Chris. Thank you.

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