Tania Hershman Talk: Taking Inspiration from Science and History

Online Certificate in Creative Non-Fiction for University of Cambridge's extra mural dept

31 Oct 2026

A queer writer of odd things, Tania Hershman's tenth book, a hybrid creative non fiction, 'It's Time: A Chronomemoir', is out now with Guillemot Press. Tania's second poetry collection, Still Life With Octopus, was published by Nine Arches Press in July 2022 and her debut hybrid novel, Go On, a "fictional-memoir-in-collage", was published by Broken Sleep Books in Nov 2022. Tania is editor of Fuel: An Anthology of Prize-Winning Flash Fictions Raising Funds to Fight Fuel Poverty (Feb 2023). Tania is also the author of a poetry collection, two poetry pamphlets and three short story collections and has a PhD in creative writing inspired by particle physics.
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Highly Irregular writing newsletter: https://taniahershman.substack.com/

Quotes from Einstein's Dreams, by Alan Lightman (1993):

"Suppose time is a circle, bending back on itself. The world repeats itself, precisely, endlessly. For the most part, people do not know they will live their lives over. Traders do not know they will make the same bargain again and again. Politicians do not know that they will shout from the same lectern and infinite number of times in the cycles of time…"

"In this world, there are two times. There is mechanical time and there is body time. The first is as rigid and metallic as a massive pendulum of iron that swings back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The second squirms and wriggles like a bluefish in a bay…."

"Hypothetically, time might be smooth or rough, prickly or silky, hard or soft. But in this world, the texture of time happens to be sticky. Portions of towns become stuck in some moment in history and do not get out. So, too, some people become stuck at some point in their lives and do not get free."

"In a world where time is a sense, like sight or like taste, a sequence of episodes may be quick or may be slow, dim or intense, salty or sweet, causal or without cause, orderly or random, depending on the prior history of the viewer. Philosophers sit in cafes on Amthausgasse and argue whether time really exists outside human perception. Who can say if an event happens fast or slow, causally or without cause, in the past or the future? Who can say if events happen at all. The philosophers sit with half-opened eyes and compare their aesthetics of time."

A Hierarchy of Arms

Tania Hershman (from *Still Life With Octopus)*

From observations, we believe
an octopus' arms to be

semi-autonomous. We cannot
be certain, we disagree. Some say

its arms act only when
authorised. Some say, *What proof*

do you have, and then
we fight. Politely,

in our own language,
in journal papers and

at conferences. One or other
of us floats one

or more outlandish theories:
the arms are separate

creatures, barely attached,
parasites. Or: the body keeps

some arms on a tight leash,
charged with movement, hiding,

foraging; the others explore,
gather data. To test this

we trap octopuses, affix
our probes. They rip them

off. At night, after they think
we've gone, we wait behind

the laboratory door,
and although none of us

ever speaks of it, we are fairly sure
we hear them laughing.

Still Life With Octopus (VI)

Tania Hershman (from *Still Life With Octopus)*

Between the octopus and her arms

is an agreement: arm will wander, touch,

explore, report some of its findings back, but

no obligation. Each arm may keep things to itself - how it felt

to stroke the metal remnant

of that hull, what it found

behind the furthest

shell. And the body, too,

has things it will never tell.

Go On by Tania Hershman

Excerpt from the beginning of 'Go On', a "fictional-memoir-in-collage" (Broken Sleep Books, 2022)

I want to talk, she says. Can you hear me?

I hear her faintly. I say, speak up, but I'm not sure that gets through. So I send a note, via the Author Intermediary provided when we're having these sorts of difficulties. I ask her: What would you like to talk about?

I say it kindly. Narrators need firm kindness; otherwise they never open up, otherwise there'd be no story at all. But we must propel. Hence: firm. It would be so easy to let a thread disintegrate. I know how to do this, to coax.

She writes back. Does it matter, she writes, if I am not sure what it is yet?

Oh no, I say, because really it doesn't. Whoever knows at the beginning what it is the beginning of? Just start somewhere, I say, and I believe I hear her sigh. I believe I hear her breathe out and pick up the start of it.

Can you hear me? she says.

Yes, I say, although she is still speaking softly. We'll work on that.

I composed. A song for sitting, a song for standing. But one day I'm not sure at all how to put a note next to another note.

This doesn't seem to be the start, she says to me, and I know that a Narrator's job now is to say:

Go On by Tania Hershman

Go on.

I am alone, she says, and I want to be, although this is…

Yes?

Although this doesn't make for a good story, she says, and now I can hear her laughing. I am supposed to not want to be, she says, and there is something different in her voice. Isn't it unusual, for the heroine – I am the heroine, right? – to want to be alone? Not to be chasing someone?

Well, I say carefully, not wanting to close anything down, there are those sorts of stories.

The romantic sort, she says.

Yes, I say, quite traditional, with the desires and the thwarting of them and so on. I can hear her really laughing now. I like to hear her laugh.

What if, she says in between the giggling, I have other desires, and those get thwarted instead?

It would keep me reading, I say, although being a Narrator is a full-time job, I don't read a lot. Other stories, you know.

Ah, she says, and I can hear her louder now. Well, I think this might work then.

Go on, I say.

I am alone with my notes, and one day, there are no notes and I am alone, and so I walk.

I walk and walk, wondering to myself what kind of woman I am, this woman who had the notes and now has no notes and is putting one foot in front of another foot, trying to find the thing.

But while I walk, I am enjoying the walking, and I am not missing my notes at all, and this is not

such an interesting story, is it?

She stops. She's not laughing.

Happiness at being alone, I say carefully. There might be something in that.

Tolstoy, she says, something about all happy families being alike. He means: 'boring'.

We know about Tolstoy. As Narrators, he's caused problems. He is severe in his ideas about writing. Russians. I can see that I have to tread carefully.

Yes, I tell her, and I hear her doing something, perhaps making herself a drink. I am hoping it is only tea. I have had those problems, too. But what a challenge, I say, to try and write about the thing they insist is boring, shouldn't be written about. I am proud of myself for this one.

Oh, she says. Yes, that's a very good point.

You know, I say, I think one of the other points they make about writing is to find your voice.

I always wondered about that, she says. Surely my voice is already my voice?

This is my comfort zone, narrative voice. I know where I am here.

Yes, I say, but you don't speak in the same way to friends as you do to, say, a student in a classroom, someone in a shop. You shift and adjust your tone, your register.

True, she says. I am not talking naturally to you, for example. I don't know you. You've been assigned.

I'm here to help, I say, but I am not who you are writing for.

Ah, she says. Now, that's the thing. What if I am writing for myself?

Go On by Tania Hershman

When we meet, the Narrators, or as many of us as can get away, in between projects or when the writers are in The Zone, as they call it, and don't need us, we discuss problems. We never get tired of talking about problems. Starting is the hardest, we tell each other. We are usually only brought in for the new ones, the ones who have never tried this before. Yes, occasionally there is an experienced one who wants to experiment and needs assistance, but much of the time, once they have two or three under their belt, they may not know how the fourth will be, but they are happy to go it alone. They know what starting is, and that they've done it.

The new ones, though, try and duck out at any opportunity. Straightjackets, we say. We've had many thoughts about innovative devices to tie them down. We have calmed each other when all we want to do is shout at our Author. A Narrator who is violent is not ideal. That's not helpful.

Endings, we say, of course. Endings are a bugger, we say, and we laugh. We laugh because there's really nothing we can do here at all. We can't put forward an ending; our guidelines are stricter about this than anything else. We can't even suggest possible avenues towards the ending. We could be struck off. It is immensely delicate.

The middle is the best part, we say to each other, opening another bag of crisps.

Go On by Tania Hershman

There is a woman walking through the cemetery. The dead are watching her. There are many of them in this cemetery; it stretches on and on. The dead sometimes take notice of who is going along the paths, the breathing walkers, and sometimes they are tired and they rest. It takes energy to observe those whose hearts are not still. Look at the way they think; they move their heads on one direction and the other, and the blood, the blood!

This woman is interesting to the dead because she is talking to them.

"Hello," she says to a gravestone, and she reads the name on it aloud. She does this again, and when there is more than one name on the stone, she reads all the names. The dead are puzzled. They are used to the squirrels, the diggers, the weeping loved ones. They have long ago stopped noticing those who come every day, sometimes twice a day, for years and years, sitting by the same plot, talking to the gone one as if the gone one was interested, every day, sometimes twice a day, for years. The gone one was flattered at first, who wouldn't be? But who wouldn't want the still-theres to move on? Who wouldn't want the breathing walkers to go, walk, breathe through their newnesses?

This woman is interesting to the dead because she is saying other things. She is saying things to them about their words.

"Why all the 'beloveds'?" the woman asks them. "And the 'went-to-sleeps', really? Is it like that?"

The dead aren't used to this, not from a complete stranger. They ask each other if anyone knows who she is, and the message is whispered down and along, down and along. It gets to the Muslim section, to the part across the road, and even as far as the Jewish graves. But no one knows.

The dead who are lying with, or above, or below, their beloveds, ask, Why is she alone? And the dead and their beloveds say, Wouldn't it be nice if...she had a husband? The very much more modern dead say, Maybe she wants... a wife? They shake their heads as she wanders past them,

reading names, looking at one date and the next. The dead don't understand *alone*. They will never be alone again and many have forgotten, those of them that knew, the joy of solitude. The ones who date back 150 years are not used to seeing a woman on her own, a woman walking on her own, seeming not to be meeting anyone, not to need anyone, doing what she pleases. The dead men are confused by this. (Many of the dead wives are not confused but envious. Not just of the life she has, but that it is hers.*)*

When she recites poetry to them, the dead feel warm for the first time for much time, although they don't know time any more. They don't know the poems, either, don't know that she wrote them herself. And that being in the cemetery is, for her, a very strange experience, and speaking her own poems makes her calm. It's not strange because someone is dead, has died, will die. It is strange because she is trying to think her way through to solving it. Nothingness.

The woman feels herself not old but not young. It is this in-between. She is one of those who thinks. She sometimes is so overwhelmed with thinking; so often, in fact, that she looks for kinds of distraction. She watches television – but not too violent, she can't take that any more. She reads, although reading makes her think, so not too much.

Is the woman talking to the dead? There is no one there to ask her what she is doing. She is a walker, a thinker, a writer and reciter of poems. She is not someone who expects… not now in this in-between. She walked through here on the first day of the year and wondered if she would make it to the last. Not because she is ill. Not because she wants not to make it to the last day. Simply a wondering. A knowing that she knows not very much at all.

Go On by Tania Hershman

The dead say to her, You don't want to be here yet. The dead wives want to shake her, tell her, Take everything! The dead wives, some who loved their dead husbands, who loved their children and their children's children's children, are sent spinning by the woman's singleness. For the first time, for all time, even though they have no time, they want it back: the moving, the flowing of, the breathing in. They want it back in her. They want in her. They want.



It's Time: A Chronomemoir by Tania Hershman

Excerpt from It's Time: A Chronomemoir (Guillemot Press, 2025)

Beginning 1

Dec 31st 2018

I know, I know, I can't start yet. It's supposed to be tomorrow, but it's so hard not to. I've been waiting ages to write this. Years. I've been keeping myself busy until the time was right, and the time will be right tomorrow. Oh the newness of it, the beginning-afresh of it, January 1st! So, stop. Don't start now. Alright. One more day. Who knows but that the beginning of it early, the pre-empting of it, might in fact make it...? (Hush now.)

JANUARY

"Hypothetically, time might be smooth or rough, prickly or silky, hard or soft. But in this world, the texture of time happens to be sticky. Portions of towns become stuck in some moment in history and do not get out. So, too, some people become stuck at some point in their lives and do not get free."

From 'Einstein's Dreams' by Alan Lightman

Beginning 2

Jan 1st, 2019

9.11am

"Nothing happens without it." I thought of that line yesterday. Do you see what I mean? I wondered, as I walked, whether I could write a book about... without using the word itself. The way George Perec wrote a novel without the letter "a". But you may have noticed that I already used the word anyway. In my pre-beginning, in my end-of-all-the-waiting-now, in my impatience. Also, leaving out the word "time" in a book on the subject is not the sort of challenge I want to set myself. I have other things in mind.

Let's start again. On this day of beginnings. January 1st 2019. How am I feeling? Mostly just a slight relief. I can put 2018 behind me and look forward. Why does a change in a number give me a sensation at all? Is today really so different or is it that I make it so? In the corner of my computer screen: "Tue" "1", "January". The "Tue" doesn't have so much of an impact, Tuesdays come regularly. We don't have a celebration as we move from Monday into it. Last night there were fireworks, although to be honest there are a lot of fireworks on days that seem to have nothing worth the fanfare.

Nothing happens without it. This sentence wouldn't happen without time. If everything existed in an instant, there would be no progress, I couldn't write one word after another, and you couldn't read it. Perhaps. Now I remember the film "Arrival", which I watched twice, and loved. In it, the aliens have a language that doesn't seem to rely on the sequence of one word after another, it's an image that appears whole. The film is about messing with time. Language, time and communication.

What is this book? Or rather: what will this book? I have no idea. I have a lot of ideas, but no plan for how they might all come together. In the years I've been thinking about writing this, I've

kept lists of time-related articles I am going to read, people I want to meet, time experiments I want to run on myself. Now I'm here, and we'll begin.

There are many many books on time, often taking a similar tack – from physics to the invention of clocks and railway timetables, presenting facts, presenting history and science. What I plan to do here is make no assumptions and start from first principles, writing my way into time, getting inside it to probe the being of a timely human. We are ticking creatures, and when our own ticking stops, we're done - although modern medicine has found a way around that if it has its machines there in time.

In time.

Time is everything: waiting, patience, duration, longing, memory, hope. Time is change, evolution, decay. Time is life, and death. Time is what makes everything relative – I am happy, then I become happier. Time is outside me, keeping me in check and giving me something to rebel against, and my organs and tissues also take time, each in their own way.

I write fiction and poetry, and it is here too, in flashbacks and time-skips as my stories unfold, and in the space between one line of poetry and the next. Film wouldn't happen without time, the illusion of parts becoming a flow. ("Twitter. It's what's happening now."). Music and rhythm. I could go on and on. I will.

Is anything out of time, outside it? I have so many questions. I want to get inside Time's head, explore every crevice, feel my way. I will walk by the river, which is different every time I go down. I will read some of what I have been collecting, meet some of the people on my list - scientists, philosophers, watchmakers, artists - and I will bring it all here. And I will follow tangents, which I know, with as much certainty as it's possible to have after 48 and a half years of ticking, will be offered to me. I will be surprised.

It’s Time: A Chronomemoir by Tania Hershman

This book will be very loosely structured as a diary, because it will be the story of me, over time. I won't be the same by the end of this book. I'm not the same by the end of this sentence. This is an enormous topic, one of the biggest in the universe. It's time.

Time is

of the essence

money

a flat circle

running out

on my side

Time was

of the essence

ripe

when

nora roberts

wishbone ash

not declared in this scope

Time will be

frozen for us

the healer lyrics

the healer

no more

change

of the essence

Google searches, Jan 1 2019

Beginning 3

We are ticking creatures. I am filled with clocks. Measuring, I am measured. Set my hands to ten and two, I season and decay. Grow me riper, I will learn what second, decade, eon may be. Plant me, I am seed.

Time and I go for a walk.

I don't know where all this 'Old Father' stuff came from, Time says.

You look younger than me, I say.

Thanks, says Time, stopping to skim a stone. Also, I'm not into parenting.

Why would you be? I say. Although, I mean, I'm sure you'd be great if you...

Too selfish, says Time, walking beside me, skipping a little. Time is lighter than I'd expected, and with a wicked sense of humour. Although flighty: sometimes, for a minute, I feel like I'm on my own.

Sorry, just had to go fix...

Oh no, not a problem, I really appreciate you taking the time... Time nudges me in the ribs. Oops, I say. Sorry, it's hard not to.

I'm a celebrity, says Time. I mean, I have a magazine and everything. Time strikes a pose. I applaud and Time seems pleased. I want to ask a question, something serious, but the moment never seems. Oh, there, I'm doing it again.

Do you feel...? I say.

Am I passing for me, you mean? says Time, becoming a wise owl for a split second, then a clock with no hands. That's a tricky one. I'm just being myself, it's hard to know if I'm in or out.

Are you changing?

Time stops. Nothing happens at all.

We carry on walking.

I like this place, Time says, not answering my question.

It's Time: A Chronomemoir by Tania Hershman

Jan 3rd

8.16 am

When you find yourself unexpectedly driving down the motorway in the dark at 6am, it is as if you have landed on another planet. The Planet of Morning People. You do not usually see this time of day. As you drive, you listen to BBC Wales. You had a slight panic before you left the place you decided, after a sleepless night, not to stay in for the full two days. You worried that your body would not do what you needed it to do, your body clock would be too confused to make the two-hour journey home. But also you knew – given strong coffee, two pre-emptive ibuprofen and half a Dairy Milk Fruit'n'Nut – that your body, which you have been operating, or been operated by, for almost 50 years, would, if pushed, do this for you.

At first, there are few cars on the semi-lit roads. You learn from the cheerful Welsh radio hosts that China claims to have landed a probe for the first time on the dark side of the moon. You listen to news that British scientists have developed a breath test for cancer. All this and not yet 7am! You marvel at what is possible. You drink more coffee.

As you merge onto the motorway, the road is filled now, with Morning People, you suppose, or with inhabitants of your planet who have no choice in the matter, who have become People of the Alarm Clock, internal rhythms adjusting to the shift. You stop for petrol. This seems like a dream, these numbers showing 7.20am, the girl who accepts your payment in the gas station, how does she do this, you wonder. You hold tight onto as much reality as possible as you merge back into traffic, eating the remainder of the Fruit'n'Nut.

The January sun is only rising now. Sunrise! you think. You do not see sunrise on a usual day. A thin, gorgeous moon. You have to force yourself not to look, and you begin to write this in your head. Driving while being a writer is dangerous. You turn the music up.

You arrive home. The cat is perhaps confused, perhaps pleased. It is 8.16 am. As you write this, your face lit by the blue of your SAD lamp – which you begin to use every year now when the clocks go back, to prevent the winter rage you realised was overtaking you – you wonder what to do now. The world is waking up. You, who only slept for four hours at most, are happy to be of an age, or of a disposition, to know for certain you will never now stay in a situation that isn't comfortable, no matter that you have paid for two nights, no matter it was a "holiday".

You are filled with coffee, Dairy Milk and the pre-emptive ibuprofen. You amaze yourself by thinking about doing yoga, now, at 8.18am. You laugh. This is unheard of!

You do yoga. On this planet, you do not recognise yourself.

https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/ways-to-change-your-life/

Ways to Change Your Life

by Margaret Grayson • January 13, 2026

I could have a baby or I could buy a banjo I could write down my dreams each morning instead of eagerly surrendering them to the abyss of unmemory I could read the labels on food packaging buy organic eggs from happy chickens force myself to care about microplastics I could be Tiktok famous (if you ask my best friends who love me more than I deserve) or I could throw my phone into the river I could subscribe to the local newspaper I could do the crossword in pen I could volunteer my time for the needy or I could finally try psychedelics I could read a book about geology I could take a nap in a public park I could learn what a mutual fund is I could pretend I believe banks will still exist by the time I'm old enough to retire I could grow candy-colored dahlias and sell them by the stem at a roadside stand I could move to Lincoln, Nebraska, because I saw a really good sunset there once I could go to grad school (again) I could spend hundreds of dollars dying my hair blonde I could swear off mirrors swear off meat swear off men I could redownload Hinge and try harder this time to be enthusiastic about the hobbies of strangers or I could spend the rest of my life writing elegies for the hand I once held on a basement dance floor I could talk to my therapist about how thinking about death makes me lightheaded instead of spending 50 minutes overanalyzing minute social interactions I could sell my soul for the low, low price of $120,000 a year and a health insurance plan or I could plant garlic in the backyard (there might still be time before the first frost) I could be less sarcastic I could be less judgmental I could call my grandparents every week I could memorize a poem I could clean out my car or I could study witchcraft for the sole purpose of putting a hex on whoever decided white cloth seats were a reasonable choice for a Subaru Forester I could hold more grudges in general I could write letters to the editor and become known as a local political gadfly I could delete the news apps and go live off-grid and learn to hunt learn to draw learn to whittle bird figurines out of willow boughs I could start a pyramid scheme I could bike across the country I could sail across the world I could learn to paraglide I could literally learn to fly I could summon some real ambition for once I could live up to the promise of my second-grade report card I could die for a noble cause I could hand make all my Christmas presents I could unspool a tidy and sensible life or I could snap its threads between my teeth I could chase my fifteen minutes I could change the world for a day or I could wait to see how the afternoon light will move across my living room wall I could wonder how long it's been since I sat and watched the earth spin.

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Bear Fragments

by CHRISTINE BYL *(Brevity, the journal of concise literary non-fiction)*

1. In the High Sierra, her first time sleeping in a tent, my friend Pilar from Barcelona is terrified. She is afraid of bears. She wipes toothpaste from the corners of her mouth, tucks her hair into the hood of her sleeping bag, and cinches it against cool alpine air. She stares at the nylon ceiling. She lies still as a log, attuned to any noise outside. All night she hears it—*rustle rustle*—a bear in the bushes, edging closer to her, closer. She freezes. Holds her breath. The noise stops. She relaxes. The noise begins, rhythmic: *rustle rustle*. At 5 a.m., exhausted, her eyes drift shut and—quiet. The sound is her eyelashes against the silky polyester of her sleeping bag. *Open, shut. Open, shut*. She blinks, stops the rustle, starts it again, stops, starts. The bear is in her bag. She sleeps.

2. A Lingit story tells of a woman who married a bear. From territory to region, village to clan to family, the story moves. Once, I heard this: if you are a woman, and a bear comes close, lift your shirt and show him your breasts. He will see you are a woman, and remember your kinship. He won't hurt you. I have never had to try.

3. Northern Rockies grizzlies mate in early summer, lumbering towards lowlands in May, meeting up in meadows of glacier lilies just pushed up through snow. For weeks, they do little more than loll and hump and goose each other, frisky or dutiful as aging lovers. The boar gives sperm in great jets. But a sow does not become pregnant then. Her body protects a fertilized egg, un-implanted, for months while she feeds, grows fat and slow on grub-moth-root-fish-beetle-seed. A bear cannot be pregnant before she is full. By late September, when food is leaving and the bear tires of gorging, the egg burrows into her uterine wall. The bear dens up. The cubs circle and twist inside of her; she breaths once, twice every few hours, her heart nearly stopped. Mid-winter, cubs are born. For months in the den, they suck the sow's milk-grub-moth-root-fish-beetle-seed while she lies on her side dreaming of glacier-lilied fields.

4. Bear a grudge bear fruit bear your burdens bear down bear out bear arms bear the cost bear scrutiny bear left at the corner bear my grief bear a child bear up under pressure bear in mind bear witness bear north.

5. In Glacier National Park, I knew a photographer. One morning in an alpine meadow Lester saw a bear across the hill, a dot on the horizon. "It looked pretty far away. I had to squint to see it," he said. Lester photographed the bear as it came closer and closer, steady and steady. He yelled, but it came up to him and stood and looked at him, and Lester fell down and played dead like you are supposed to, if a bear gets that close. The bear sniffed him and turned him over (ripped his skin open in long tears on his back) and licked him and sat on his leg (blew out his knee) and shit on his middle, a wet pile. The bear moved on. Lester can still hike, the wrecked knee fixed with metal plates. He still takes pictures in the mountains, awake to territory and perimeter. "I don't blame that bear for a thing it did," he said.

6. While his sister wasn't watching, a young boy wandered off. His village was in a mountainous area in Pakistan, and the family worried. The boy was only two. A search party looked for days

without a sign. They were about to give up when one man found footprints outside a cave. Inside, the searchers saw the boy nestled with a bear, curled close to her side, both asleep. The men entering the cave woke the bear, and they shot her and returned the boy to his family. At a hospital, he was examined. The boy had no scratches on him, not a single mark. In the boy's belly? The milk of a bear.

7. The scent of a bear is a thick, greased wind. Close, you can smell it right away. It precedes any other trace in the air: blueberry or saw exhaust, spruce needle or wood smoke. Old and sharp. It brings to mind adrenaline and rot and sex, and everything I've ever known that's wild.