

Annie Galvin (AG): Hello, and welcome to a new season of *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm Annie Galvin; I'm the associate editor at *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that's free and online.

Nicholas Dames (ND): And I'm Nicholas Dames, an English professor at Columbia and an editor-in-chief of *Public Books*. You can read the magazine at publicbooks.org.

AG: So, this is a new season of our podcast, and we're so happy that you are here listening. I hosted last season, and in those 6 episodes, we explored the Internet: the vast and sometimes very confusing environment where people increasingly live, work, form communities. And where we definitely get spied upon by corporations and governments. From our guests in season 1, we learned some lesser-known stories about who built the Internet, and what the internet is doing to us as individuals, societies, and cultures. So, if you're new to the podcast, there's lots to explore from season 1.

But Nick, this season takes a bit of a turn. Although, there's actually quite a bit of commonality between the seasons because, in a sense, they're both focused on technologies that facilitate human connection and self-expression. You'll be hosting the next 5 episodes. What will you be exploring with your guests?

ND: Well, this season is about The Novel Now, or, the Novel in the 21st century. I study novels as a professor, but I also love novels as a reader. And I'm obviously not alone in that. The Novel has been a major cultural form for at least 3 centuries, let's say. (So dominant that my students still often use the term "novel" for really any book at all-- plays, epic poetry, you name it.) But it's possible to argue that its status is being displaced a bit by—well—the internet, and all of the on-demand entertainment options and distractions that we're now presented with.

AG: Yeah. I mean, the novel is one of the great loves of my life, but I will admit that I find it harder and harder to train my attention on reading. One thing that we definitely learned from the first season is that the people who designed the internet and these platforms we use and the devices did a very good job of making them addictive and difficult to resist. That is basically their business model. And so it's interesting to be someone who still really wants to spend time with this somewhat creaky, old cultural or artistic form.

ND: But we shouldn't, though, lose sight of the fact that for much of its history, the novel was that addictive form and was talked about as the thing that was worryingly addictive and would separate you from your community, your family, keep you up late at night doing things you shouldn't. So it's interesting when you have two technologies that, in some sense, have been thought of at least as addictive, sort of butting heads with each other.

AG: I'm wondering—I mean, if you're willing to be honest about it, as a professional novel reader and novel studier, do you feel a similar, I guess, constraint on the amount of attention and time and enthusiasm that you might have for the novel these days?

ND: I mean I definitely feel that constraint. But I also feel this yearning for the opportunity to read a novel without the internet infecting that reading. So I know I'm not alone in the ways in which, when I read novels these days, I read them with my phone within reach, if not in my hand. And sometimes those two things can kind of participate with one another. You know, I'll come across something I don't know in a novel, and I can Google it. There will be a description of a particular location—you can go to Google Maps and see what it looks like. There's this multimedia dimension now that seems built into my reading which, frankly, I'd like to be without sometimes. So I think that is one of the things we're going to be exploring—not just what novels can do in that environment, but in fact how we interact with them in this environment, and how that might change the way we experience the form.

AG: Yeah, that's really good to keep in mind. So, I have a question for you, Nick, as a professor of the novel. And I know this might be a hotly debated question, in certain circles. What do you think was the first novel ever written? So, what was the first novel, and therefore how old do you think this form of the novel actually is?

ND: Wow. Can I ask you a supplementary question? So is your definition of the novel premised on it being printed—existing after the printing press? Cause I've got two answers for you, and it depends on whether that matters?

AG: Yeah. I'm a little bit rusty on my novel theory. However, one of my favorite arguments about this is from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller," which was published in 1936. And in that essay he makes a really interesting distinction between stories and novels—so, stories being narratives that are told from one humans to another, or multiple humans in a social setting. Whereas the novel, in contrast, is a form that's very much in isolation. So, it's created in isolation, and it's also consumed in isolation. So, you know, when we're reading it, we're usually sort of in our own brains, interacting with words on a page. I think that idea of the novel needing to be something that is printed has to do with its kind of special nature as our art form of isolation. What do you think about that?

ND: I'm perfectly willing to buy that argument, actually. I think there's really something to it. I was going to say that a lot of people don't believe that, and they think the tradition of the novel can go back you know something like two thousand years. There are these prose narratives in Greek and Latin that one could think of as novels. But I actually do think you're right—

AG: Well, I mean, Benjamin is right. I'm not going to take credit for that! *[laughter]*

ND: *[laughter]* Yeah, Benjamin is right. I do tend to think that the printing press matters. There are a lot of definitions of the novel. But one of them that I actually like quite a bit is that the novel is really the only major literary form, in the West at least, that postdates the printing press. That is intimately bound up with the printing press. And I think you're on to something with this

idea of isolation. It [the novel] is distanced from us in multiple ways. It's mediated by a machine, and that strange virtuality of the relation between the novelist and the reader—and the fact that both novelist and reader are isolated—I think that relationship is produced by this weird, new thing called the printing press. We all are going through a similar experience [reading a similar book] but we're all going through it alone. And this is of course what is so difficult to achieve now is that solitude, sometimes, in which to experience the form.

So, if you take that definition, if you say the printing press matters, then we might as well go with the standby answer on this, which is that the first novel is *Don Quixote*. Even if Don Quixote, in that novel, is a reader of things we could call novels. He's reading and obsessed by these romance fictions, that had been around for quite a while, that were highly stylized and conventional about chivalrous knights and the noble ladies that they served and sometimes saved from danger. So, an extremely familiar narrative form that had been around for centuries. He's obsessed with them, he tries to live them out, but in so doing, and in failing to live them out, he stakes out this new territory, which is this new form, which is essentially premised on this idea that that old thing—the prose romance—doesn't represent reality. So then, the novel starts with this gesture of saying, “Everything you used to read, that old way of doing business, is now defunct. And silly. And too rule-bound, too.” And the novel is this free space of experimentation, where almost anything goes, as long as what you do do is an attempt to describe the way things are right now.

AG: That's great. I know that is a go-to answer, but I think you made a really good case for why it should be. So, if the form is about four hundred years old, why should we still care about it? What are some of the questions that motivated us to develop this podcast series?

ND: So at *Public Books*, we started to become curious about, basically, why people still read novels—and what novels are still doing for us. We review novels, we have people who write about them extensively, but this larger question kept kind of hanging over even our own coverage. Are novels helping us become more imaginative, more ethical, more in tune with other people or the world we live in? Or are they just providing us much-needed entertainment and distraction, in ways that are distinct from what, say, TV, movies, Tik Tok, or other platforms provide us, but maybe not fundamentally all that different in the end.

AG: Well, I am obviously interested in those questions and very excited to hear these conversations. So I'm curious, can you just give our listeners a sense of how these conversations will go? So, what will a typical episode look like?

ND: We're pairing a novelist—or at least someone who has written novels—with a scholar on the novel. But we've allowed that novelist to pick a recent novel to use as a way to discuss what they think the novel can still do for us.

AG: So each episode will be about the novel in general, but also kind of focused on one 21st-century novel as a test case. I have one more question. Do listeners need to have read the books that you'll be talking about in order to follow—or get something out of—these episodes?

ND: No, I really don't think that is necessary. So today, for example, we'll be discussing J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* as a case study for how novels can provoke us to think about difficult—even really controversial—ideas. If you have read this book, then I think you'll definitely learn something from our really brilliant guests, whom I'll introduce in a moment. But if you haven't read the book, that is totally ok, too. I think, if you are curious at all about novels, and what they are still doing for us in the 21st century, then these conversations will hopefully spur you to think in new ways about this old cultural form that we love, or even point you to some new novels that will spur your thinking even further.

AG: Awesome, that is great. And I would just say to our listeners that for this season we are partnering with Harvard Book Store, which is an independent bookstore in Cambridge, MA. And so if you are interested in reading any of the books that we talk about, or books by our guests, that you can purchase them all through Harvard Book Store. We'll put a link in our show notes. You can buy books there online, just like you would through Amazon, but you would be supporting an independent bookstore. So buy novels, read novels, and I'm really excited to hear these episodes, and I'll hand the mic over to you.

ND: Thanks, Annie. Let's introduce today's guests, and then dive into our conversation about novels, ideas, even dangerous ideas, and the South African writer J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*.

Teju Cole (TC): I'm Teju Cole. I'm a novelist, photographer, and critic, and I teach at Harvard as a professor in the practice of creative writing.

Tara Menon (TM): And I'm Tara Menon, I'm currently a junior fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows, and I will be starting as an assistant professor of English at Harvard next fall.

ND: Thank you both for joining us and our chosen novel today, I should say our chosen novel, though because you were the one who actually chose it is Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, and I wonder if we can begin by having both of you say what *Elizabeth Costello* is about in just a few sentences. If you were asked to summarize the novel for someone who knew nothing about it, what would you have to say?

TC: Yeah, my first instinct is to give an impish answer, which is that *Elizabeth Costello* is about 222 pages. And I think it is impish, but there is something in it because it is suggesting that any complete work of art is a summary. And that is part of what it is doing.

ND: Right, yeah.

TC: I will say the way it presents itself is a fiction that is made up of lectures/lessons. He calls them lessons I think maybe there are eight of them.

TM: That is right, there is eight.

TC: And a short post-script. So it is a work of fiction that indulges in the essayistic mode to a much greater extent than most novels do.

ND: Does it matter for you, you know, your comment that it is 220 pages, I suppose depending on the edition you have, right, reminded me of one of the older definitions of the novel we have, which is something like prose fiction of a certain length, right? And one of my questions is, does it matter that it is in prose?

TC: Well, it matters that it is in prose because that, partly because for conventional reasons, we don't make the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in poetry. We just assume that poetry is a combination of things that have happened and things that haven't.

ND: And that is a big problem with the novel actually is that distinction, increasingly a kind of vexed border.

TC: That is right. In prose, when something has a certain quantum of made-up-ness we call it fiction. If it falls beyond that quantum of made-up-ness and still contains a made-up-ness, we call it nonfiction. So there is conventional niceties at work here. And I think *Elizabeth Costello*, the book, is interested in testing those conventions.

ND: That, that is an excellent start. Tara, do you have any thoughts on this?

TM: Well, I think I want to just for the listeners offer a sort of more prosaic, Wikipedia kind of definition of the novel.

TC: I should have done that.

TM: Which is, which is that *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel that ostensibly follows a fictional novelist called Elizabeth Costello, who is an Australian woman who the first lesson that we would traditionally call the sections of the book chapters, but Coetzee chooses the word lesson, begins. It is set in I think in 1995 and we meet Elizabeth Costello therefore when she is 66 years old. So we track this novelist as she moves around the world delivering lectures in various locations, and I think by the end, she is probably in her mid-70's, and Teju is really right to say this is a novel that resists summary, and I think that is largely because each of these lessons takes on a sort of grand philosophical subject, whether that be the lives and rights of animals, or the problem of evil, or the novel in Africa, and so we move through this novel where Elizabeth Costello is a character who serves as a sort of mouthpiece for various ideas.

ND: Tara, you mentioned the lessons, the chapters that are lessons. And one of the interests of the novel is actually that it is made up of preexisting units in some cases, right? These were not originally written necessarily for the novel itself. So the novel has this earlier life to it and I'm wondering, do you think that is something that a reader should know about this novel before they enter into it?

TM: You are right that most of them—in fact, I think six of them—existed before the publication of the novel, and the more unusual thing is that two of them, the chapters that are called “The Lives of Animals One” and “The Lives of Animals Two,” they are published as a book with four responses as well [called *The Lives of Animals*]. But to the question, do I think a reader needs to know that? No, I actually don’t. I think that the most interesting way to think and read this book is to treat it as a sort of autonomous object, and I am most interested in thinking about the book today as the eight lessons and in the form that it exists.

ND: That sounds like that might be where the novel is most fictional: in that pretense that these things did not have an independent life or a prior life to being packaged in the form in which we have it. And I wonder if that is the suspension of disbelief we have to have when we enter this [novel], if we are suspending whatever else we know about it from outside the frame?

TM: So the reason that I say that I don’t want to think about, that I sort of want to set that issue aside is that I think that it really raises the possibility of an accusation of laziness or something like that on Coetzee’s part—that he just threw this together. I think, Teju, correct me if I’m wrong, I think this is post- him winning the Nobel Prize.

TC: Yeah, it is almost coincidental with him winning it. I think maybe the book was actually published in October 2003, the same month in which he won the Nobel Prize.

TM: Yeah, so I think it sort of raises this laziness accusation, and that is I think part of a series of accusations about Coetzee and this book that I’m just deeply uninterested in. Which is the sort of issues like: he is using Elizabeth Costello as a mask for his own views, and he is sort of not brave enough to say what he really thinks about factory farming and the analogy to the Holocaust, and he is sort of hiding behind a character in order to make these controversial points. And if I am being completely frank, I just don’t care about what Coetzee thinks about factory farming or what he thinks about the problem of evil, and I kind of want to set that aside, but I’m willing to hear—

ND: No that’s, I mean, I generally would be with you on that. Although it is interesting, you have raised some questions that maybe we will get to take up about something like, potential accusations of timidity—that you are hiding something by presenting it in the form of a fiction. And then there is this somewhat related question of I don’t know, I would almost call it consumer fraud. You are trying to pass something off on the public by repackaging things that have been available elsewhere, and the accusations of bad faith that might come with that. This novel kind of, I think maybe flirts with that a bit.

TC: Yeah, and I think actually this also starts to touch on a little bit on, you know, part of the answer to the question what is the novel about? And part of what it is about is asking what we mean by a literary character in a novel. I think it is about the character-ness of characters, and accepting some of those conventions and very bluntly rejecting some of them, and there is work happening there as well.

ND: And that has a funny relationship to one of the major ethical questions of the novel, which is, how do we accord rights to other creatures? What kinds of rights do we accord to other creatures, whether animals or possibly even literary characters?

TM: Right.

ND: So, let's talk just a bit then about the genre of the novel as a way of starting. And Teju, I want to start with you because you are a writer who has worked across many different genres. You have written novels, essays, like many of us you write Tweets or for a time we wrote Tweets and criticism, particularly around photography, and you are a photographer. So, in your creative work you have ranged across many different genres and many different mediums even. But as a reader, what has your relationship been with the novel as a genre? What do you tend to turn to novels for?

TC: Relative to the novel today, I'm feeling slightly acerbic. And so I would give an answer something like, when I'm reading a novel that is not good, I'm just exasperated and I think the focus on literary culture and the novel is completely played out, and I wish people would just be a bit bolder. And when I'm reading a novel that is very good, I'm maybe a little bit disheartened because when I write my next novel, I would like it to be a novel that is very good, you know, I take it as a sort of a sort of a personal challenge.

ND: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TC: So, it is a genre I have an uneasy relationship with. I think this has everything to do with the role that it plays in the market. Who enthroned the novel as the be all and end all? I like the individual novel well enough. The enthroning of the novel and the "novelist" inside our culture, I generally find kind of irritating.

ND: It is interesting the way that has persisted, right, I mean, there is so much discourse about the death of the novel that has been going on for decades, but sometimes it can feel as if that discourse of the death of the novel is just the thing that keeps enshrining it as almost the default literary form.

TC: Yeah, perhaps so. And it is also possible that the death of the novel is something that interests people in universities, but the formula for making and selling novels was so well-established in the 19th century. This is Tara's *métier*. It is going to keep going on. Now, if people were just really making novels like Rabelais made novels or Cervantes, I don't think it would do so well in the market, but the formula arrived in the 19th century, and it just keeps going, it just keeps going. It has a place in society for how long who knows, but it seems fairly robust right now.

ND: That seems like something that, you know, Tara, you and I might occasionally forget, which is that the novel is a marketing category. But Tara, if I can turn to you for a second, I mean, you are a scholar and also a critic and so I think you are invested in the novel to some extent, but professionally invested in it—

TM: I am, I mean, as Teju was talking, I think that my role on here is sort of like whatever the Captain America equivalent is for the novel. I feel like I'm here to defend, like a novel supremacist or something, but—

ND: Can you say something about that on a personal level? Of course like myself, you probably want to defend the novel purely on the basis of what you do for a living, but personally, what is your relationship with the novel like? What do you turn to novels for? If it is not for your own work.

TM: I obviously as you say, I read novels for work, but actually I would say that most of the time in which I am reading novels, I am doing it for what we could call pleasure, and that category I think for me is quite a capacious category. Like when I say pleasure, what do I mean? And sometimes I think I mean something really basic like comfort. Like at the beginning of the pandemic, I just wanted to read Agatha Christie, like all I wanted to do was like sit in a soft chair and read Agatha Christie. And then sometimes I read for escape to go, especially now when we can't travel, sometimes I read for the sort of feeling of being completely in a different place. I find novels transporting. But I also very often and I think Costello is a really good example of this, I read novels to think better and to think harder. And I think that I am mostly a defender of the form of the novel, the genre of the novel, because I do think that novels do that better than anything else. I really believe that novels are the technology because they are fictional and because they are immersive, that allow you to think through ideas better than anything else. And I know that is a sort of, like a philosopher would sort of take major umbrage at that statement, but I think about it a lot and I do think that is true.

TC: Oh, I like that, yeah.

ND: This novel, Elizabeth Costello, seems to be one that really troubles those categories in certain ways because it, the way you were saying it, it would seem as if something like, well, we learn how to think through certain ideas by seeing the way they work in the life of a hypothetical person, and the way in which they filter into someone's everyday-ness I suppose. But of course here, sometimes what you are getting are just lectures. It is as if you have a, you know, a thinly transported university lecture, and in fact it is a university lecture, right?

TM: So, I think that my defense of that, and I think the reason that this is sort of fairly categorized as a novel rather than a series of printed out lectures, is that if we take for example the sort of most famous lesson/chapter in this book, which is “The Lives of Animals One,” which I think is called “The Philosophers and the Animals” as its subtitle. To make a very basic point, the actual lecture that Costello delivers is not the vast majority of that chapter. There are, there is a fictional framework, there is some narrative around that chapter. And I think critics of this book have, and James Wood maybe most famously, has called that fiction fitful or sort of minimal or, you know, sort of inefficient or something like that. But I would argue that actually the frame narrative that happens before, but very particularly the interruptions of the lecture in the text by, so Elizabeth Costello has a son who is at this university and he, and the son has a wife who for personal reasons hates her mother-in-law, but is also a philosopher, and there are moments in this text when the wife sort of sighs or mutters something under her breath and that is the fiction of this and those are the moments which make me think the hardest. Those are the

moments where I go back and re-read the paragraph of lecture that Costello has just delivered and think, do I side with the exasperated daughter-in-law about this idea, or do I actually feel convinced by what Costello has said, and for me, that is something that the fiction is doing rather than the philosophy.

ND: Yeah, that is a great point.

TC: You know, Tara makes a convincing point there. I think the fiction is working in these interstitial spaces. I wanted to go back to the question of pleasure for a second, reading novels for pleasure. I think these things are also sort of habitual. I think the habits of mind that Tara is talking about where there is pleasure of the kind of Agatha Christie, and then there is pleasure of the kind of sitting with a book like Elizabeth Costello, there is a pleasure of an intellectual sort, there is a pleasure of sort of like a narrative sort happening, and for whatever reason I have found for myself that novels have become part of, I wouldn't call it a healthy balanced diet, I don't know, they have become part for me of an extremely varied sort of what I would call an intellectual interaction with the world. And so I have friends, Tara among them, who read more than 30 novels a year, you know, that is just a matter of course for life for them. I don't do numbers anywhere near that. But, I listen to a lot of new music, like a lot, and I don't just mean, well, I don't just mean any particular thing. I listen to contemporary, classical, and I listen to new Nigerian pop and I stay on top of what has just been released in jazz and so on. I watch a lot of films. And when you are describing that space in which ideas can be presented and wrestled with, films do that for me very much. And not just not just ideas, but spaces in which one thinks about making. How is this made? And what does this teach me about being in the world and making? Films are huge for me. Poetry is huge. I would say novels are huge, but there is no kind of near exclusivity or anything approaching a monopoly, or even a dominant market share of, you know, of all of those things that I indulge in, I think music is probably the one that has the biggest market share and that is not really a realm of ideas, that is sensation mostly. But when it comes to like the more discursive practices, I spend as much time with movies as I spend with printed fiction.

ND: So that's really interesting, and I'm curious to hear you both say something about this, which is that one difference the novel does seem to possess, which may not be quite as true, or at least not true in the same way of either film or music, is that it really is, it colonizes your time in such a strong way. It is hard to read a novel while doing anything else.

TC: Indeed.

ND: These things take a lot of time generally to consume, so, you know, it is quite different. I have listened to 30 jazz albums, I have read 30 novels, that is a huge disproportion in terms of amount of time invested, and I wonder, it is one of the questions about the novel today just as a genre or a marketing category, how that attempt to seize great gobs of your time plays with people who live in a different media landscape than they did in the 19th century or 18th century?

TM: I have to say the figure of 30 is not quite right for me. I think I, I do read probably 60 to 70.

TC: That's what I thought, but I was trying to, you know, I was underplaying it so that, to give you the opportunity to do just that.

TM: And yeah, and it is like a, it is a sort of, in some ways an embarrassing amount of time. Again, as I said, I am here as a sort of shameless defender of the novel, but the fact that it is so all consuming of your time, I think speaks in its favor at the sort of moment that we are in now. And I count myself among the many people, who are sort of addicted to things like social media and the internet and sort of other forms that require you, that you can do as you walk to the kitchen, that you can do when you go to the bathroom, when you are walking down the street, and I can't read a novel in that way at all. It requires a sort of amount of concentration and also time to myself in a way that is really, you know, obviously when I am on Twitter and by myself in my room, but I am not by myself. And actually the novel is really sort of solitary in a way that I think is rare for us to be these days, and I think that's kind of wonderful about it. I do want to say, though, I was listening to the *New York Times Book Review* podcast, and they had the CEO of Netflix on there, and Pamela Paul, who is the editor of the Books section, said that, she asked him, do you not look books because they are competitors, because you want, all you are doing is competing for people's attention and books take away, and his answer was sort of, I don't really worry about books as taking time away. Our main competitor is videogames.

ND: That's interesting.

TM: And that for me was—

TC: Mind blowing, right, yeah.

TM: He just doesn't care. He is like, read all the novels, you aren't going to do it anyway.

TC: Yeah, yeah, it's not really get there, he's gotten it down to the essentials, which is time suck, right? He wants you binging on his shows, and he knows that the only other thing people binge like that with truly is videogames.

TM: Exactly.

TC: Well, for me, you know, I mean, the time question is very interesting because, take movies for example. I recently watched Masaki Kobayashi's *Harakiri*, a Samurai film from 1962. Beautiful, wonderful film. I had seen a 2012 [2011] version of it a few years ago, and that is also very good. The director's name is Miike. But it is not just like, you know, I sat down. This film is two hours and fifteen minutes, and that just took me two hours and fifteen minutes. What you have to remember is that these days, we pause, we stop, we go to the bathroom. In fact, I stretched this film out over two nights. And I feel like it, in a sense it almost took me two days to watch it because I stopped, I actually stopped it halfway and I was processing it before I continued -

ND: That is a very—

TC: —with that and it was truly immersive and I think, it was only two and a half hours for sure it will stay with me as powerfully as any book I read this year because of the intensity of the way

in which it was made. So, we also have to find a way of measuring the lifetimes that we experience when you watch five minutes of a really seriously good film, you know, which could be like reading an hour, spending an hour with a seriously good novel. Right? The time starts to do something else inside you as the apprehender of any sort of, any work that approaches sublimity.

ND: I am going to be impish and suggest that you actually found a way to consume that film novelistically because you let—

TM: Yes.

ND: —you let, you interrupted it, right? And that seems to me that is one of the interesting things about the novel historically is that it allows for, you know, it couldn't be consumed in a single sitting.

TC: That's right, the phrase I could not put it down is a blatant lie that many reviewers—

ND: It is, no, of course.

TC: You could put it down, you know what you did. You put it down, you had to—

ND: You have to put it down.

TC: You had to.

ND: Right, right.

TM: That was sort of part of my point, which was I had left implicit about why I think that novels are so good at sort of helping us think through problems, and for me, the other art form that I think does this very well is actually narrative television. And I think the reason that I would make the distinction between television and movies is precisely because you do have to stop with television, in the way that you have to stop with a novel, because you can't spend all day watching a TV show or all day reading a novel, assuming you have sort of a life to lead and other things to do, and it is actually for me the thinking of a novel and about a television show happens when you are not doing it as well, and then you return to it and that is what I think is so beautiful about sort of novel reading and various TV shows.

TC: That is really interesting because for me the 10-part TV series is, and you have a good point, you have to, you can't finish it in one night unless you are being crazy about it, which you can also do with a novel. The 10-part TV series is actually hobbled by the fact that it has to make its money back. It is, it is just not that deep, it just cannot really, truly be an arena for thought in the way that a good compressed film with the vision of an auteur can be, and there are very many such films. I think there are some good TV series, the ones that really reach greatness that are not sort of like having a dip around episode five are very, very few, because these things are expensive and they have to make their money back, and not only do they have to make their money back, they have to make it back in a pretty rapid cycle. Pilots, there are some good pilots.

But like over the stretch of the series, you know what, I watch those things, but I watch them for production design.

ND: Because that is—

TM: Okay, I'm going to, I think obviously we should move away from television very shortly, but I do want to make a sort of—

ND: Are you going to defend television now too?

TM: Two, two, well, two counter-arguments. I think that there are shows like *Fleabag*, which are very like tight, sort of the 10-episode, even though I think [each season] is even fewer episodes than that [6], that I think are as sort of tight and sharp as the best movies. I think *Fleabag* is something like extraordinary in television about very, you know, about grief in the first season and love in the second season. But, my real plug is for the opposite of the 10-episode television show, which is for something like *The Good Wife*, which is like a 22 episode per season, eight season show, [correction: 7 seasons], more closer to the, to a Trollope novel or a Dickens novel.

ND: Interesting.

TM: That is sort of being serialized and put out and isn't sort of like an auteur tight TV show. And honestly, I think *The Good Wife* is the most criminally underrated television show of the past decade, but that is a show that works for me like Costello does. It is a show that raises issues, it raises, and the form in fact is similar because it takes place in a legal, in a courtroom, and you have people making arguments, and you have to think about like do I think that that was a convincing argument or do I think that this was a convincing argument?

TC: I think, you know what, I think that is a really great counterpoint.

ND: I want to move back in time a bit, and Tara, you know, maybe I am going to turn to you initially here. I'm really curious how you see Elizabeth Costello falling into the tradition of the novel, rather than necessarily competing against contemporary media of various kinds, but do you see it as continuous, or how do you see it fitting in that tradition or radically discontinuous in some way?

TM: So I think that the most obvious comparisons or sort of the lineage that Costello comes out of is what we could think of as the early 20th century and mid-20th century philosophical novel, or novel of ideas. So, something like Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, but also I think novels by men and women that we mostly know as philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre or Simone de Beauvoir and I think that it is, if one had to classify Costello as a subgenre, I think we would call it a philosophical novel. But I was, I am very aware when I was thinking about this and what kind of books it is most like that those are all not novels in English. That those are all European novels, and sort of the idea that the English novel is uninterested in ideas or something like that is something you hear every once in a while, and I have, well okay, I have one sort of very strong counter-argument to that, which is I think is

that actually there is a tradition of the philosophical novel in English and it just was very short-lived and practiced by very few people, but it happened in the sort of 1790's, post French Revolution, with people like William Godwin writing a book like Caleb Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft writing *Mary: A Fiction*, and then I mean, while I was thinking about this, I think Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is maybe where I see Costello coming out of.

ND: Sure.

TM: Yeah, but I have more to say about the, like ideas in the novel, but I think that is sort of genre-wise that is where I would place it.

ND: But it does seem fair to say that ideas tend to have a bad reputation in a lot of English fiction, right? I was thinking about, you know, I think it was T.S. Eliot's famous remark about Henry James that he had a mind too fine to be violated by an idea. And that is actually a compliment interesting enough I think, right? Even if slightly backhanded, it is a way of praising the fiction as being kind of impervious to the idea, like the idea is something that you can't digest, it doesn't fit in the form of the novel, it just sits like a lump in the middle of the fiction.

TM: You know, that is a sort of common thing that one hears and sort of the philosophical novel is thought of as standing slightly outside the main strain of realistic fiction, especially in the English novel, but I think if you were to ask people to name a single exemplary, realistic fiction of the English language, a lot of people would say George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and I think of *Middlemarch* as a novel of ideas. I think that, and you know, we can say that they are digested in a way that Costello is undigested and sort of like just presented, but I think it is a sort of ludicrous idea to say that realistic fiction, both in English with somebody like Eliot or Thomas Hardy, but not in English, I mean, if *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are not about ideas, I don't know what fiction is not about ideas.

ND: Teju, do you have thoughts on this?

TC: Yeah, I mean, I think that makes sense to me. I think that Elizabeth Costello is not just a novel that is dealing with ideas, but it is also a novel that is dealing with what it means to present ideas, what Tara calls undigested, right? So, if you think about the book that is probably most frequently named it, which is *Ulysses*, right, because Elizabeth Costello has written a kind of sequel or repost to *Ulysses*, that is the big baggy novel of ideas, the big modernist novel. The children of *Ulysses* are devastated by the century they have had to live through. So, after *Ulysses*, you get Beckett and even if not directly, you get Kafka, Camus, these people who are much more representative of what we think of as the 20th century. And all of whom are correct characterized by frustration and doubt where Joyce had fecundity and wild optimism. And frustration and doubt is what Elizabeth Costello is about. So it is definitely in that lineage. It is saying, this is what you have to deal with now here at the end of the 20th century. At the very beginning of the 21st century. This is what those problems might look like. And so you have this eminent novelist who is going around the world and thinking in public about what it means to think in public. It is not as dry as it sounds because those are real problems. I think this is something that Coetzee has had to deal with his entire career, being asked to say something.

ND: Right.

TC: You are a writer, you are an author, you are a celebrated person, say something in public about such and such, and he wants to say, well read the books and why am I qualified to say something? And I think this is where the book actually makes its most persuasive and most radical moves. In showing us that whatever is said is underpinned by doubt. How does an author present both self-certainty and wrongheadedness? How does an author present a longing for the lyrical that is constantly being bothered by an argumentative spirit? She is, like she is all of these contradictions. These are the things that lead to the book being so startling and worth thinking with.

TM: When we were talking about it earlier, we mentioned the difference between the word dry to describe a novel and sort of the word spare to describe a style, and I think that one of the things that makes Costello so unusual, such a sort of anomaly in fiction that has been widely read in the Western world is that it truly is dry. That he is resistant to what, he is resistant to providing any sort of entertainment or comfort for the reader. He sort of is deeply uninterested in that element of, and when you asked me earlier why do I read novels and I listed sort of the three reasons that I do it, for like comfort and escape and a sort of intellectual reason, I think this is a novel that tests the limits of can a novel be only trying to satisfy one category. Can a novel not offer any comfort and not offer any escape and just try and make you think?

ND: Tara, the way you put it, it is obviously not just humor that falls into these categories that you think are not there. One of them strikes me and from what you are saying it is something like a, maybe this falls in the category of escape, a recognizable sense of place, that you are in a milieu that is vivid and is different from what it is, you know, what you occupy and that you can immerse yourself in, and, you know, I don't know if you think this is a fair characterization, but one of the aspects of the novel's spareness is it really withholds that sense of place from you. Elizabeth Costello is sort of itinerant, she is traveling around giving lectures in different places. Her experience of these places is often very, very thin, right? It is the experience of a visitor who is there for a few days. Certainly not immersing herself necessarily in local cultures, and doesn't seem to have much of a local culture herself to speak of anymore.

TM: Right.

ND: And can a novel get by without, without a strong sense of place?

TM: Yeah, I mean, I would say, I have two answers to that. We could sort of, the generous answer would be, this is a conscious choice to drive home the fact that if you are a successful novelist in the global economy today, your life sort of consists of conference rooms and hotel rooms and there is something deeply boring about those places and so what Coetzee is doing is sort of showing how drab and boring those places are. And that is the generous answer, and I am not actually inclined to give the generous answer because I do think that there is a real withholding, I mean, you have described it as a sense of place. I would say one of the things this novel doesn't have, or like has at a very bare minimum, is description.

ND: Right.

TM: It is like real description. And for many people, description in some ways has a bad rap in the novel I think, but in some ways, lots of people read for description. When I say I read for escape, I'm reading to be in Sri Lanka or be in Thailand and the way that I am able to go to those places in my mind is through sort of heavy description. And he just says, no.

ND: No, no, that's right.

TC: Well, you know, as far as the sparseness goes, he tells us where we are, and we are fine actually. I don't miss it that much. We are on the cruise ship, okay. We are in Waltham, that's fine. We are in Amsterdam, what else do you want to know about those things? Sometimes he will say, you know, the fall leaves were falling in Waltham, okay, good. That's all, I mean, what is there to say about Waltham really? Other than, I mean, no offense, but like other than to say is Appleton—

TM: Offended the Dutch and the good people of Waltham.

TC: That's right. Is Appleton—

TM: Like a swift sentence.

TC: Is Appleton College based on Brandeis, I mean, does it matter? And certainly though there is much, there is something here that is not just sparseness, right? V.S. Naipaul is spare, but very lush, very, very beautiful, polished surface. It is like, it is not grotesque, it is not baroque furniture, it is Shaker furniture with a very good varnish on it. Good sturdy cherrywood, pine. J.M. could say his sentences are unvarnished. It is, you've got this sturdy furniture that has been built, but he has not put in a coat of anything on it. He does have these little set pieces that stick in your mind like a burr, you know? Whether it is Paul West, you know, interrupting something or Elizabeth Costello hammering on about how well, you know, these are animals, you know, the concentration camps, well, we're surrounded by factory farming. These are ideas that once they enter your mind will never leave you as long as you live. It has burred and then laid its nasty eggs, right? So, he is a very powerful storyteller in that particular way. I will tell you a personal story about Coetzee's novels for me, which is that back when in the early 2000s, when my parents were living in Michigan for a while, when I would go over there for Thanksgiving and indeed after they moved back to Nigeria and I would go to Nigeria to go spend time in Nigeria, but I specifically remember going there for Thanksgiving between 2000 and 2010. If I was going to be around a bunch of loud Nigerians, my siblings, their spouses or whatever, I would usually take a Coetzee novel with me for those moments when I would be alone in my room in the afternoon reading something. I actually needed something radically different from the warmth and noise and demands of family. The demands to be emotionally available. I needed somebody who was A) not bullshitting me on any level. But B) somebody who was very severely withholding emotionally. Because that means that, that meant that our encounter could just sort of happen also on this level, which was a kind of like, it could happen in the ether. I found that I longed for it because it was the exact opposite of whatever was too much about being in family when I first read Elizabeth Costello, when it came out. I read it like a dog. By which I mean, I read it wishing to be pleased and wishing to learn and if the stick was thrown, I ran after the

stick. Let's skip forward as he says in chapter one. And to the present, I read it now, I read him like a cat. I read it as a fellow novelist. I read it to challenge it. And I read it with a pure skepticism and the blind spots are really glaring to me now. I'm so pleased I picked it for this conversation because again, I think it is a novel that really proposed a path that we might consider for what the novel could be doing right now. I know it has certainly been influential in my own work and continues to be. And I think it is a stiff challenge to a lot of the laziness that is happening in contemporary fiction, that continues to be. And yet the blind spots are so glaring to me, but I will come to them in a second. I want Tara to talk.

ND: Tara, do you have any wonderful stories about, I'm struck that the coalescence of your story is about the way in which you read the novel as an escape from a certain kind of intimacy, and then this metaphor of the cat, you know, the least intimate of pets, right? The most, the most alien to us in a sense, and seeking that out, it is an interesting reversal of what the novel is supposed to be for us, which is a sort of surrogate intimacy, and instead you are saying, it is a surrogate, a surrogate lack of intimacy, a surrogate alienness that I need to live with from time to time. Tara, does this resonate with you, or does this just articulate your own difficulties with this?

TM: This, I mean, there was so much that Teju said that I agreed with there, I think, but I do want to push back a little bit about something that Teju said, which is that, I think that Coetzee is being withholding throughout this novel. You know, I am sort of perfectly satisfied and really actually enjoy on one level not being given comfort, not being given escape, but instead being given like what I think of as like quite rigorous intellectual stimulation about ideas. But the thing that I really like about this novel, and the thing that, the reason I'm very glad that you chose this novel for this episode is that often when I read a novel as a critic, I feel very much in control of it. I feel a sort of like mastery about like what is happening in the novel, how it is working, what I can say about it. And I don't feel like that about this novel. I actually feel that it feels more like a fair fight in a way, that like there are, there are moves that he is making that I feel like, oh, I understand that, and then something will happen in the novel and I think, oh, I have just lost my grasp with it, I don't know, like is he doing that—

ND: Yeah, it is a slippery.

TM: —intentionally, it is slippery. And I mean, that for me is the most exciting.

TC: Yeah, but I actually, I have a theory about that, okay? 2003. 2000 when he is starting to think about this, because the last book is already with the Booker Prize winner, and then 2000, 2000, where is he? Oh, he is at the University of Chicago, he is a faculty member on the vaunted Committee for Social Thought, you know? Which even back then I was like, oh my God, University of Chicago, I was so dazzled by the Committee for Social Thought, it was like, no honestly, back then I just thought, my God, what a gathering of geniuses, and this is like, you know, I mean, never mind the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. That is one thing, but the Committee for Social Thought. Even the name itself seems as if, it sounds like a name from a novel. You know, he is a Professor on the Committee for Social Thought. And it was this, you know, handpick association of the best pure minds, you know?

ND: The politburo of intellectuals.

TC: Absolutely, right, and that's where he is, and my theory is that this is sort of what happens when you are advising graduate students at the Committee for Social Thought. This is the language. This is the slipperiness, this is the counter-argumentation, it is not just him as a famous novelist going around the world and showing up in small towns and whatever Minnesota and giving, you know, having to give talks. I think what is happening here is the grad school seminar and I think that that is respectable, I actually like it, I think that the things that happen in universities are part of life, but I'm daring to diagnose it and saying, this is his campus novel actually. You know?

ND: Yeah, that's a really interesting way to—

TC: Especially at that particular campus, especially at that particular department, it is like, I mean, isn't that like, wasn't Allan Bloom also in that, you know? Or he certainly was in the neighborhood. [clarification: Allan Bloom taught at UChicago until his death in 1992; Coetzee joined the university in 1996]

ND: Chicago, yeah, yeah.

TC: But I mean, if these people, Lear is there, you know, Wendy Doniger and, you know, these people, I mean, it is like these big minds and there is all this platonic stuff going on, and I think that is, that is where he kind of belonged and that's where, and there was something about the kind of thinking he had come up with, both as somebody who had a Ph.D. in literature, but he had also been a mathematician and he had worked on computers, so this like getting things down to their fine grain of argument, but in a disembodied way, this is a book that is surprising, but in the rearview mirror makes perfect sense for him to have written.

ND: It is, there is something about the specific kind of magic of thinking in those settings that can be so disembodied, I mean, that can, as part of the magic I suppose is how disembodied it can be that he has gotten across here.

TC: Nevertheless, can I get to the blind spots?

ND: Yeah, say a bit about these blind spots that you have been alluding to?

TC: Well, it just seems to me now that positionality matters for a creative person. We are actually not disembodied. And I think the bold move, I mean, in a funny kind of way, this is also his [unintelligible - 48:18] isn't it, I mean, he is writing the novel where the protagonist is a woman and he is a man. You know, so far so good. I don't feel like he particularly gets that wrong. He does not seek to overtly feminize her and I think that is the right move. We don't at any moment think to ourselves, this is not a woman, this is a man in drag or whatever. It is not drag, it is Elizabeth Costello. She happens to be quite similar to J.M. Coetzee in certain ways, but she is herself. But, we know that the author of this book is an African. And he does not omit Black Africa from the book. But his sense of it, it is actually kind of shockingly narrow. You know, it is actually kind of a shock. I say I read it as a cat now. And I mean, I will go on the

record and say, not only do I like Coetzee, I like John, you know, I think he is an admirable person, I think he is a very scrupulous person. Careful, but also scrupulous. And I think there are very complicated things happening in *Disgrace* around guilt and contrition and disgrace and atonement, around blackness and whiteness and in between-ness, in the new South Africa. I think political critiques, some of the political critiques of that book are justified, but I think there are also a little ungenerous readings of what he is up to there with racial politics. But in this book, there is a sour note.

ND: When you say that the understanding of Black Africa is narrow, what do you mean exactly by that?

TC: So two examples. One is in the figure of Emmanuel Egudu [ph. sp.] who is a caricature. He has plans and it is clearly shown that Elizabeth Costello is also sort of cranky towards him, but there is something so deeply dismissive of him that the Black person in the book written by somebody who has spent almost his entire life in Black Africa that the one real speaking Black part in the book is a buffoon, you know?

ND: Right.

TC: And this is somebody who is like a fellow novelist, right? There is a sense in which Emanuel Egudu is a fellow novelist to Elizabeth Costello, but since J.M. Coetzee is a novelist himself, Emmanuel Egudu, the fictional character, is also a fellow novelist to him.

ND: Right, right.

TC: And it is sort of is that it, that's who you've got? You know?

TM: Yeah.

TC: And it is just so striking to go from the novel in Africa with his pretty undercooked lines and then we go to the *Lives of Animals* and she gives this hair raising argument that is sort of like beyond the pale, but with layers and layers and layers and layers to it. So that we can take it seriously as argument. In other words, he can do it when he wants to. When he believes the character is up to it. So Egudu is I'm not, I think the word problematic is a little bit lazy, I think Egudu is unimaginative and that is a bit shocking.

TM: I think one way of putting it, one way of putting it is, and I think this is why, the chapters I really like the least are the "Novel in Africa" chapter and the "Humanities in Africa" chapter is that he is so careful to create sort of complex arguments from various perspectives, and he just doesn't do it at all in the case of Egudu and the Humanities in Africa section, which is really a section about, you know, Africa has this choice between Hellenism and Christianity, as though Africa doesn't have a sort of history and a set of traditions, you know, it, I find it sort of just like insulting, I hate the word problematic, but I just think it is sort of like careless as a decision to not do something once you have done it.

TC: That's right, there is something very seriously undercooked about two white ladies discussing whether is it Christianity for Africa or it is Hellenism, which should it be? This conversation is—

TM: And those the only options.

TC: —happening in South Africa for some reason, South Africa is not named as a county.

TM: Not named.

TC: Blanche is named blanch, white, very interesting, which I think is an interesting contrast to Melanie, which is melanated.

ND: Yeah, melanated.

TC: Yeah, melanated in *Disgrace*. So he knows what he is doing there, fine, but two old white ladies saying, and one is saying Christianity is a solution for Africa, and the other is saying, no, it is we need to get, go back to the Greeks, just pick the right Greeks, that is one point. The other is that at the dinner for the honorary degree, where a group scene, a quite complex set of arguments is being made about the humanities in Africa. The very strong implication is that everybody in the university who is having this conversation is white. That is the very strong implication, you know, we know that usually if there is a Black character who has a speaking part in a Coetzee novel, he is usually not grotesque about it, he will indicate it in some way in the text. He will slip it in there in some other way. But we are in Africa, and we have a bunch of white academics at the University of Johannesburg or whatever the base is, talking about the humanities in Africa and I know that none of them is Black also because there is nobody who actually presents a post-colonial viewpoint of these arguments, you know?

ND: Well, I was going to say that, yeah, I mean, as if the pressure, the pressure elsewhere in the novel to situate itself in no place.

TC: It is in no place.

ND: Exerts itself even in the places that should be places or that are presented, yeah.

TC: That's right, and I think a third strike, and again this is an author that I enjoy, I admire tremendously and I have learned a lot from, but reading him as a cat, the third strike would be the use of the word Africa in the novel.

TM: Right.

TC: You know, which tends to have this bizarrely generalizing function. So that it comes to feel that, you know, when he says something like, you know, the Africans are not writing novels for other Africans, and somebody is always looking over their shoulder, but what is happening here is that he, an African, is writing a novel that does not image African readers, you know?

ND: Right.

TC: Allan Bloom might be an imagined reader for this novel, but a young African reader is not an imagined audience for this novel. The reader I was in 2003 was not an imagined reader for this novel, and again I see all of these things as sort of blind spots and I, at the risk of sounding, you know, casual or glib about it, I think what can be said about blind spots is that we all have them, you know? For all that he gets right, the inability to see that Apartheid falls and it somehow develops cataracts. You know? Where Africa is concerned, it is a very strange thing. And not so strange actually.

ND: The flawed quality of this, I mean, it is a way in which I think, you know, we all probably may love certain novels because of their flawed quality. Because there is something in them that is wrong may actually endear them to us in certain ways or provide a certain intimacy we have with the object that other kinds of flawless objects might not engender, but that too might be a little glib. I want to end with a question to both of you to sort of recapitulate this a bit and, but open it out again to this question of what novels might do for us now and I guess maybe if you can, and Tara, I will ask you first, what is it that, what value does a novel still have for you and is there something about Elizabeth Costello that exemplifies that?

TM: Yeah, I mean, I think this would be, in some ways to reiterate some of the things that I have said earlier, which is I do really think that Elizabeth Costello allows us to in some ways safely get closer to dangerous ideas and examine them from different perspectives and different angles, without having to worry about one's own relationship to those ideas, that you can explore them while you are reading this and sort of figure it out for yourself. And I do think that that is something that all of the best novels do, even the ones that don't sort of so blatantly put out ideas in the form of a long speech by a single character, I think all novels or good novels allow you to think through ideas. And I also think, again to reiterate something that there is something about the practice of reading novels that allows you to retreat into yourself, to be solitary for a while in a sustained fashion. I believe that there is something sort of spiritual about novel reading, and I don't mean spiritual in a sort of like hot yoga, essential oils kind of way. I mean, that it is, I think that reading novels can be good for your soul, I think it, they can be nourishing, both in the ways that they make you think about other people, and in the ways they make you think about yourself and what you think and what you feel.

ND: Teju, do you have a sense of what this novel does that might speak to what the novel can still do for us?

TC: Yeah, you know, I think it goes back to this notion that it really does sort of drop something into your head that you can't get rid of. Several things, right? There are several passages in it, but the larger mode of it, which is about the novel as a space for moral seriousness. The novel recognizes that it has an opportunity to smuggle into the "mainstream" ideas that are at risk of remaining forever in books. So, we could take a philosopher like Cora Diamond, who has written very elegantly and very complicatedly about animal rights and about why we want to kill them for food. Few people have read Cora Diamond. Professional philosophers have read her. More people have read Peter Singer, but, vastly more have read J.M. Coetzee and to take that moral responsibility and understand that the novel, just because something is called a novel or because

it is called fiction that people will go to something looking for a story, and then you can hit them with something else, something more disconcerting. I think it is a very important part of this. For me probably the most resonant idea that after all the dust has settled inside this novel is what does it mean to believe that one is surrounded by atrocity? Full Elizabeth Costello, it means speaking up, it means risking your reputation, it means pressing on even when you are tired and old and in doubt and thinking about your own death. She is asking, if I really believe that animals have rights that ought not be infringed, and I know that animals are being killed on an industrial scale all around me, why should I not compare that to Treblinka? The novel allows us to sit with this and I think the best novels, the most interesting novels and this is certainly a very interesting novel are generative because then we can take that problematic and start to think about what else it can do. And for example, if you are speaking to a devout Christian, let's say a devout Evangelical Christian, that person literally believes that when you die, you will go to hell, you will be tormented forever in hellfire. What does it mean to think that way? What does it mean to really believe that unless you give your life to Christ, your life has not only been worthless, but that you are in for eternal torture? Another example is let's say somebody believes that to get rid of a pregnancy is identical to committing murder, you know? If somebody goes in two months into their pregnancy and they have an abortion, it is the same as if somebody walks up to somebody on a bus and plunges a knife into their throat. Now we know that in our society there are people for whom these things, they profess, are the same. Elizabeth Costello is a tool for thinking about what does it mean to live with truly radical beliefs about life and death and about what constitutes murder, and I think that it goes there because that is responsibility of the novelist who starts to take up these ideas.

ND: And the freedom of the form, right? The freedom of the form to allow that to occur.

TC: And then to find the form in which one can do that properly, yeah.

TM: Could I just add something to that? Which is that I think that, I'm so convinced by this, which is the argument that Teju is making that there is something about like what does it mean to live if you believe this sort of terrible atrocity is happening. But to add to what I was saying earlier, which is that I think the other thing that Costello is really push you to think about is this an atrocity, like to what level is this an atrocity. How bad is this thing? And I think for me, to answer your question, Nick, about why do we need the novel now, for me one of the things that recent novels have been so good at is me too questions. Which are questions that in the public discourse, in the discourse of nonfiction, have been black and white questions, like this is bad, and all things are sort of the same kind of bad, and there has been a spate of recent novels that actually let you think about how bad is X act compared to Y act. Is there a difference? Like what exactly is consent? How do we define it? And those are questions that I think, there is actually a danger in some ways of expressing them in the fixed form of a nonfiction article.

ND: Sure.

TM: That a novel is safe—

ND: Or even conversationally there is a danger.

TM: Or even conversationally. And when you are by yourself reading a novel, you get to have thoughts about, do I think that this act that has been called a #MeToo offense is the same as this other act that has been called a #MeToo offense? And that to me is tremendously valuable. Like we are lacking the ability to have those conversations in other venues right now, and the novel lets you at least have the thoughts.

TC: Absolutely, 100% agree. And yeah, yeah, absolutely, because I mean, you have said it, yeah.

ND: Well, thank you, thank you both for those answers. That was, that was really clarifying and now I have to go back and re-read the novel yet again in the light of those answers. So, thank you very much for that. And thank you for being here.

TC: It was, it was a great pleasure, it was, it was fun to have a chance to come out as a cat finally. Yeah—

ND: You have given me new terminology to talk to my students.

TC: Yeah, but I mean, but I really also enjoy the opportunity to go back and sit with this novel and think with it, and it did I think exactly what this conversation was supposed to do, which was not just think about this novel, but to think about the form of the novel and what it is it can do for us now and I just think Tara, you absolutely nailed it. It is, it is potentially one of the few places where genuine complexity can happen in a public, in a public space.

ND: Safely, safely, yeah, right, which is important as well. Yeah.

TM: Thank you for having us.

ND: No, thank you.

And that's our show! A huge thank you to Teju Cole and Tara Menon for sharing their thinking about novels and ideas. You can find links to their work at publicbooks.org slash Podcast. There, you will also find a list of further readings, curated by our guests, in case you want to read further or use this material in your classes. You can follow the show, and Public Books on Twitter—our handle is [@PublicBooks](https://twitter.com/PublicBooks)—and Facebook to learn more about the work we do. If you have thoughts about this podcast, you can tweet at hashtag—[PublicBooks101](https://twitter.com/PublicBooks101). We'd be so grateful if you would rate and review the show in Apple Podcasts and subscribe to the show there, or in Spotify, Stitcher, or Pocket Casts. And if you like the show, please tell a friend, or even a few friends!

Next time on *Public Books 101*, I talk to the novelist and nonfiction writer Elif Batuman, as well as Merve Emre, who is a scholar and cultural critic. We investigate whether novels sometimes de-politicize readers, but on the flip side, whether they can make us more aware of power dynamics that shape our lives.

So I hope you'll join me for part 2 of Public Books 101: The Novel Now, as we wonder: How do novels help us develop a consciousness of the world we live in?

CREDITS:

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[End of Recording]