

Novels and Intimacy (with Garth Greenwell and Daniel Wright)

Nicholas Dames (ND): Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm your host, Nicholas Dames. I'm an English professor at Columbia University and an editor in chief of *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that is free and online. You can read the magazine at PublicBooks.org.

In this season of our podcast, we are exploring the ongoing significance—or, some might say, the waning prominence?—of the novel as a cultural form in the 21st century.

Today, I'll be speaking with Garth Greenwell, a novelist, poet, and essayist, and Daniel Wright, who is a literature professor and cultural critic. We'll be discussing how novels help us think about sex and intimacy—in ways that differ from how films, TV shows, pornography, and visual art have represented these fundamental human experiences.

To explore how novels do this, we'll talk for a while about a wonderfully strange and formally experimental book by Barbara Browning. It's called *The Gift (or, Techniques of the Body)*. Barbara Browning is also an academic and dancer, and *The Gift* was published in 2017. Reading it made me think a lot about the borders between fiction, autobiography, and critical theory. The book also introduces questions about the ethics of writing fiction about friendships and sexual relationships that actually exist in an author's real life.

You can purchase *The Gift*, and any of the other novels we discuss, through Harvard Book Store, an independent shop in Cambridge, MA. We are partnering with them this season, and there's a link in the show notes where you can buy books and support them online.

Alright, let's dive into my conversation with Garth Greenwell and Daniel Wright about novels, sex, and human intimacy.

ND: Okay, let's begin by having you both introduce yourself. Could you please tell the listeners your name and a bit about who you are and the work that you do?

Daniel Wright (DW): I'm Daniel Wright, I'm an Associate Professor of English at the University of Toronto. Specialize in the Victorian novel and the history and theory of the novel more broadly and I'm the author of *Bad Logic: Reasoning About Desire in the Victorian Novel*.

ND: Thank you. Garth.

Garth Greenwell (GG): My name is Garth Greenwell. I am the author of two books of fiction, *What Belongs to You* and *Cleanness*.

ND: So, we decided, I should say that Garth, this was your inspiration here is we were going to talk about Barbara Browning's, *The Gift* as our sort of example novel about really the novel in this century even. Over the last 20 years. And I'm going to test you both, I think this actually is a really strenuous test. I'm going to test you as far as how you can summarize the gift. So, maybe if I can have each of you start a sentence, and maybe summary may not be quite the right way to put it, but I'm going to have you start a sentence with, *The Gift* is, and I'd like you to finish that sentence for me. So, Garth, do you want to take the first crack at that?

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GG: So I think it is pretty impossible for this book to have an encapsulating sentence and something that is interesting is that there is a kind of anxiety within the book, there are kind of these constant declarations of theme and subject matter. For me, I would say *The Gift* is a book about two things. One, circulation. Circulation of money, circulation of art, circulation of affect, maybe most interestingly, the circulation of intimacy. And then I think it is also a book about the idea of being careful and what it means to be careful of others and whether there is maybe an irresolvable tension between being careful of others and making art.

ND: That is remarkably well-done. Set a high standard, Danny, do you want to take your own crack at this?

DW: Yeah, and I think I will echo some of what Garth is getting at. *The Gift* is a novel I think about, I'm drawing a phrase from the novel itself to describe it as a novel about digitally mediated intimacies. And that is a phrase the narrator of the novel, who is a novelist herself gets an e-mail from a graduate student who wants to write a dissertation on her work, and says I'm working on digitally mediated intimacies, and I think that your work is going to help me to think about this topic, so and she picks up on this kind of double meaning that I think is really an elegant way for the novel to get out one of its big themes, which is this tension between like digital meaning, computer as digital meaning, virtual digital meaning, distant versus digital meaning, fingers, touch, closeness. So, I think that, you know, that is how I would describe this novel. A novel about the distanced intimacy made possible by the digital, the intimacy of catfishing, but also the intimacy made possible through choreographed kind of movements of the body, playing the ukulele, masturbation, foot rubs, all kinds of touch that run through the novel.

ND: So, this novel has a somewhat odd relation to its own status as a novel. And I wonder if, you know, Garth, if you want to say a bit about the extent to which, if you think there is tension in even calling this a novel?

GG: Well, I mean, I think there is a tension in the use of the word novel generally, and I think, you know, the literature of our moment right now is troubled by and excited by that tension. You know, I don't have any problem thinking of it as a novel, because the book says it is a novel and Barbara Browning says it is a novel, but you know, she does use, both in this book and in other books, she uses other kinds of descriptions for what she is doing, so she talks about blurring the boundary between her academic work as a researcher in performance studies and fiction. Obviously, essay, but also she sometimes talks about her work in terms, and especially maybe her first novel, which actually wasn't published in print, but is available as an audio book, *Who Is Mr. Waxman?*, where she says it is pretty bloggish. So, sort of blogs are another potential model for what she is doing.

ND: Danny, is there anything you would like to say about this because if we tend to think about the novel as entirely fictional, obviously there are, you know, loosely put nonfictional elements here and so is there anything you want to say about the balance between those two, or how that balance is executed here?

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DW: Yeah, I mean, if we think of this as part of the mode that we call auto-fiction these days. I was actually at a conference last week, the big MLA convention where there was a panel about this topic and one of the things that the people on that panel came around to was that there really is no such thing as auto-fiction as we describe it, and I kind of have been compelled by this argument that actually to say that a novel like this one, *The Gift*, incorporates the nonfictional is maybe a bit misleading in some way, that this is a fictional novel. But I think that this novel in particular wants to play with that as both of you have been saying, that there is a sort of particular self-awareness in this novel about the relationship between fiction and reality and the play with what is fictional and what is not fictional and the incorporation of, you know, real people as characters. But I think it is an interesting experiment to think about what if we just read this as a novel, as a fictional text and not as through this lens of auto-fiction or the real.

ND: Right. Could you just circle back for a second and offer a very brief definition of what auto-fiction usually means.

DW: I mean, I think part of why it is such an interesting label is that it gets attached to such a wide range of fiction from Garth's work to Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, this novel right there, to Sheila Heti's work, and these are really diverse and different novelists, but I think that the thing that unites them is this sort of like extra novelistic sense that what we are reading is a story drawn from autobiography, a story in which the narrator and the author are identified with each other in which we are reading a kind of fictionalization of a real life rather than an entirely fictional text.

ND: Yeah. Garth, do you have additional thoughts or feelings about auto-fiction? Do you think this is a real category and do you, I mean, and do you think it relates to your own work as a novelist?

GG: Well, so, I am of two minds. On one hand, no it is not a real category, it is just the oldest game in literature, you know, and sort of there has never been a clear... One has never been able to draw clear and unimpeachable lines between life and work. On the other hand, it does seem to me that there are, that there is a group of writers right now that are not just blurring the lines or playing with the lines of fiction/nonfiction, but are also united by an interest in incorporating into the novel very heterogeneous kinds of writing, including very essayistic writing, art critical writing, and then I also think this group of writers, if I think of people like Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, W. G. Sebald, that they are all inheriting what I think of as kind of the phenomenological, the tradition of the phenomenological novel, which you know, I would say is a tradition that goes back to Augustine's *Confessions*, but that obviously at the end of the 19th century becomes something a little more aware of itself, and that is just a novel that takes as its primary concern a kind of awareness of awareness or a sort of attention to perception itself. And the project of which is an attempt to get onto the page what consciousness feels like. Auto-fiction doesn't really have a lot of meaning for me as a term. But I am interested in writers who are engaged in a project that I think it's a very big family and it would be very hard to try to make a kind of defensible definition of that, but I do feel a kind of affinity among a sort of group of writers working right now.

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ND: So, Garth, you, I mean, you have worked in many different genres. You have written fiction, you have written I suppose what could be categorized as nonfiction, and certainly criticism, so what, if you could explain to us briefly like, do you feel like you have an investment in the novel as a form or the term in any way? Is there something that you think about doing differently in that form than in the other genres that you work in?

GG: So I don't really have an attachment to the novel as a genre or to sort of, you know, in the way that, so my initial training in literature was in poetry. I mean, for 20 years I wrote poetry and all of my scholarship was focused on poetry, and I do have a real attachment to say the question of like what is a sonnet. Like that is something I have strong feelings about. But I just don't about what is a novel. And in my own case, the sort of question of the big project of what I'm trying to do, the lines are very porous and indistinct, and it does not feel to me to be the case that like what I was doing as a poet, what I do as an essayist and a critic, what I do as a novelist, that these are radically different projects. I don't think there are. Where there is a big distinction for me as both a writer and a reader is between what seems to me like aesthetic writing and non-aesthetic writing. So writing that is invested in form as a primary category of being, and writing that seems to be more functional and writing that thinks of itself more easily as just a kind of medium for the transmission of information. That seems really meaningful to me.

ND: Yeah, almost like the interference with the transmission of information, yeah. Danny, can I, I want to hear you talk about this as well, though I know that your position is somewhat different because you are, you are an academic who, like I do, works on the novel or could be said to work on the novel, right? So I feel like you and I both have some sort of odd professional investment in this category that we need to—

DW: We get paid to care about novels.

ND: We do. And yeah, that's sort of how we get our money and maybe we have a, you know, therefore, an investment in its continued relevance, but I'm curious actually about your relationship to the novel on a more personal level, Danny. I mean, is there a difference between reading a novel for work and reading a novel for what we might call reading for pleasure?

DW: Yeah, I mean, I think that these practices for me are different in kind of what I would call like concrete and embodied ways, when I, you know, where am I reading? Do I have a pen in my hand? But I think more broadly they are sort of continuous and overlapping practices. I think particularly when it comes to teaching I think in the space of a classroom that is often where the sort of techniques of pleasure reading and the techniques of academic reading hopefully ideally come together. I mean, I think part of our training as scholars of the novel is thinking about how the novel works, thinking about what it means as a sort of cultural form, hopefully deepens our pleasure in reading novels and that is hopefully what we sort of transmit to students, or give students the capacity to do is to read for pleasure with some of the tools that academic reading provides, so, I think also, you know, for me like you, Nick, people whose training is in the 19th century novel, I think that comes into play, especially because I sort of toggle back and forth between teaching 19th century fiction and teaching contemporary fiction and usually contemporary queer and trans fiction, and so that is one way in which I think for me sort of pleasure reading and work reading often blur together, and especially in classroom settings is

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sort of historical eras. What it means to read old novels versus what it means to think about what the novel is doing now, and how those two things are connected and how we can narrate sort of histories of the present through looking back into the past.

ND: Yeah, seeing the similarity between those historical moments actually. Garth, can I ask you what it means for you to take pleasure in reading something like a novel or something novelistic? What is that pleasure for you?

GG: Yeah, so, and as I was listening to Daniel talk, I was also kind of revising, or sort of adding to my sense, or revising my sense of the distinction of the novel or the distinction of kind of narrative versus say argument and that that does seem to me a meaningful distinction, even between an essay that is invested in the aesthetic and a novel. Like investment in the scenic and the particular kinds of pressures that both seen and aesthetic sentences, you know, the peculiar technology like in my case of a kind of Jamesian phenomenological sentence, the pressure that that puts on a problem, a dilemma, a question, that allows for me for a distinct and more ample, more sort of existentially affectively and ethically engaged kind of thinking than argument or exposition. And so, I mean, that is a very deep pleasure that I get. That combination of a kind of investment in the scenic with a kind of language that is invested in its own aesthetic burden. That is a kind of pleasure that feels to me distinct to, certainly distinct to, you know, fiction and poetry and I suppose certain kinds of narrative essays, but, you know, that is important to me and importantly different from other kinds of thinking.

ND: Garth, I want to pick up something you just said and this is a way to return to Browning's novel a bit because you have mentioned I think at least twice, you have mentioned consciousness, or maybe we want to use the word inwardness. And I know that in some of our pre-correspondence about Browning you have, you made the claim to us that because of the space that this kind of form gives to the exploration of inwardness or the exploration of consciousness, it could potentially perform an intervention in the representation of sex. That this might be one of the things that the narrative imagination, if you want to put it that way, can do and I would love to hear you expand a little bit more on this idea that literature can intervene in representations of sex.

GG: So yes, so this is something I talk about a lot, sort of the role that, the role that sex can play in literature and the role that literature can play in sex, and on one hand, you know, we are in a moment in terms of the representation of sex and of sexual bodies, we're in a moment that is utterly unprecedented, just in the terms of the extent to which we are inundated by images of sex and sexualized bodies. At the same time, it seems to me that our cultural representations of sex suffer from a dearth of what I think of as embodiment, which is bodies imbued with consciousness. And as someone who is very much not anti-porn, very much the contrary, it does seem to me that much of pornography, especially much of internet pornography, especially much of the internet pornography that is engaged in a kind of arms race of cruelty and extremity, that great lengths are gone to to kind of expunge personhood from bodies. To turn bodies into kind of sentient free objects and even as the pleasure of being made an object is one of my subjects in literature, it is troubling to me that that is so dominant in representations, in especially visual representations of sex in our culture. A claim I make about literature and something pretty central to my sense of myself as someone invested in literature is that literature is our best

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technology for the communication of consciousness and that therefore what interests me in sexual representation, in literary representations of sex, is the combination of explicitness and this is something certainly I've tried to do in my own work. The combination of explicitness with this peculiar technology that I've already talked about of this kind of phenomenological sentence that in both its kind of propulsion and its recursiveness is a tool both for the production of inwardness and for the communication of inwardness. That seems to be interesting in a kind of intervention that literature can play in a cultural moment when I think we desperately need a greater sense of embodiment to accompany our greater access to images of sexualized bodies. Barbara Browning, I mean, I love this book and I love thinking about this book as a kind of, as part of that intervention because I think it is deeply thinking about the question of representing sex and intimacy, but doing so in a way different from the way that I usually talk about that. Barbara Browning is capable of writing sex explicitly. In her first book, *The Correspondence Artist*, there is a kind of remarkable scene that involves a description, a very detailed description of an imagined blow job or a proposed blow job. That description from that novel in this novel becomes the occasion for the erotic turn in the relationship that the narrator of this novel, Barbara Anderson, develops with a man named Sami whom she corresponds with through videos and messages and voicemail over the internet. So that relationship does not allow for a kind of physical explicitness or sort of explicit descriptions of sexual acts. It is a book about mediated sexuality. It is a book about online erotic life, about sexting, about sharing intimate videos. You know, the book's subtitle, which isn't on the cover but is inside is, you know, the full title of the book is *The Gift (Or, Techniques of the Body)*. Which is a reference to Marcel Mauss and an essay in which he talks about sex as a technique of the body, and I think this is a book that is interested in various ways in which we can make use, make technical use of our bodies. Obviously, like dance, performance, also sex, but Barbara Browning adds to that a really fascinating interest in the question of prosthesis. And ways in which we extend the body and sort of allow the body to be mobile. And so, you know, Sami has a prosthesis. One of his legs has been amputated, so he has a prosthetic leg, but then there is also the trans performance artist Tye, who talks about his cock as sort of a dildo as an extension of his body. There is also though fascinatingly, and then in response to that when Tye says about sort of his favorite dildo that it feels like an extension of his body, Barbara, the narrator, responds, my body is an extension of my body. And so this idea of a way for intimacy and corporeality to extend beyond the sort of boundaries of the physical body and she talks about this in terms of knitting. She says when she knits things for people, it is a way that she can feel that sort of she is in contact with them even when they are not near. And then obviously she sends these videos, some of which we can see. Another way in which this novel challenges definitions of the novel is that it is a multi-media so the videos that are tagged throughout the book are actually I think really crucial to the book as an aesthetic experience. But then there are also videos that she doesn't show us, which are hand dances that are masturbatory that she won't, that are sort of private between her and Sami, but all of these are ways to make, to sort of take seriously the idea of virtual sexuality. And what it means to have an intimacy that is mobile in ways that I think we're not accustomed to think of intimacy as being.

ND: Yeah. Danny, you have written about how Victorian novels reckon with love or desire or sex, right? And I'm interested to see what you, how you respond to how Garth described Browning's novel, because it struck me as Garth was describing it that there is something, I mean, this will normally sound pejorative and I don't mean it in a pejorative sense, but there is

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something interestingly Victorian about the depictions of sexual intimacy here, precisely because they are mediated, right? There are eroticizable objects or body parts that are often not traditionally eroticizable or not within let's say run of the mill pornography that reminded me actually quite a bit of the 19th century. I don't know if this is something that you felt about this?

DW: Yeah, I think that there is a real interesting question about what it means to write about sex without sex scenes, I mean, it is interesting in Garth's response saying like, she really can write a sex scene and it is in this other novel, but in this novel, it is about, I mean, is there a meaningful difference in talking about the novel's representation of sex, versus the novel's representation of what we might call sexuality that sort of abstraction of sex that I think is really beautifully captured in that, you know, my body is the extension of my body line from this novel. But I also think, you know, one of the stories about the novel and kind of like, why do we read novels that is as old as the form itself, is that novels give us kind of a practice ground for working out difficult problems that we are going to encounter in real life. We get to kind of like figure things out and think with novelistic characters and in fictional worlds about ethical dilemmas, as Garth was talking about before. Or all of the really, really difficult situations that we might encounter one day, but haven't yet, and it is a lot easier to kind of practice encountering those problems in the novel before we do in real life, and there is something really interesting I think, one of the maybe meta-novelistic aspects of this novel is how it encourages us to think that way about sex in the novel. Virtual sex as potentially a kind of practice for sex itself as a way of, you know, a zone of experimentation play, trying on different kind of intimacy.

ND: Right, yeah, go ahead.

GG: Yeah, so, you know, I think that is absolutely right and then I also think that Browning wants to take seriously a kind of expansion of what sex can mean. So there is a beautiful, one of the real people who is a recurring character in this book and also appears in the other of Browning's book is Lauren Berlant, and Lauren Berlant says something really wonderful.

ND: Very much a real person, we should say, right?

GG: Very much a real person and a very brilliant person, and says something about, gives, offers a definition of love as sort of the attempt to sort of be in sync with someone. Like the attempt to sort of attune your rhythm to another person's rhythms. Barbara Browning, I think sort of has talked about like making music as a form of eroticized intimacy with another person. And that as a way of being in sync that is in some ways consonant to the way of being in sync that one might say sex can be. And there is one video in particular, among the videos that accompany this book, in which Sami this character has left a very agitated voicemail. What Barbara Anderson, the character, does is make a dance to that voice, where she synchronizes her bodily movements with sort of Sami's very broken, hesitating full empathic utterance voicemail, and that I think within the world of the book is something analogous to, maybe even kind of the same as, sex. That, you know, and then also something that I think is very beautiful and gets into the book's concerns with sort of gift economies and what it means as an artist to take something from someone and then potentially offer it back to them, and then, you know, the sort of Marcel Mauss or Lewis Hyde theory of gift economies that they is an accrual of value in the act of giving, where she says, you know, I wanted him to see, because Sami clearly feels humiliated by

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his anxiety and humiliated by the breakdown of his language. And she says, I wanted him to see the dignity of it, like I wanted him to see his own dignity. That to me, I just think, you know, the question of where sex ends and other kinds of intimacies take over, but there is something very beautiful being worked out here about ways in which we relate to one another, what it means to be ethically responsible to each other. And it is kind of wonderfully given this meta-fictional, 21st century, possibly but not necessarily ironizing frame of the fact that maybe this guy doesn't even exist and maybe this is, as Daniel said, just catfishing.

ND: So on that, on that note, I want to take what you just said, Garth, and ask you a question about how the reader gets brought into that network, because the novel is called *The Gift*, but it starts with a spam e-mail, right? And there is this question throughout about the giving of entirely gratuitous things, things that you may not actually have asked for or potentially may not even want, and so the question of actually of consent is raised in a number of different ways here, right? But particularly I think how the reader of this novel finds themselves caught up in that network, because often it is quite direct and in fact, one of the very last sentences of the novel invokes a you. There is an explicit turning to the person who reads as if this novel is a gift to us, right? We're being asked to accept it. So what kind of, what kind of relationship with the reader do you think Browning wants here? How are we brought in to some of these practices that she is describing?

GG: Yeah, so, I mean, Daniel I think already mentioned sort of one of the most key phrases in the novel, which is inappropriate intimacy, and the idea that Barbara Anderson and Barbara Browning are fascinated by this question of inappropriate intimacy. In a conference talk she gave that is available on YouTube, Barbara Browning talked about this and talked about how between the writing of the novel, which the writing of the novel is dated in the novel interestingly, and it is I think like 2013, and the novel is not published until 2017 and then of course, and then this video I think she was talking in maybe 2019 about it. And she sort of said, well, obviously now the question of inappropriate intimacies like our sense of that has changed. And the sense of, you know, to what extent we are comfortable with theorizing that as a positive phenomenon versus as, you know, something that infringes upon our consent. And I admire Barbara Browning for her acknowledgement of the difficulty and complication of that and the ways in which, you know, we have to qualify our positive thinking about inappropriate intimacies and yet she continues to claim it and sort of say that actually no, this is something really essential in what it means to be human and especially what it means to engage with art. That, you know, I do feel this very much. In my own cherished experiences as a reader, they are experiences of intimacy, and then when I published a book and began to travel and talk to people about that book and over the last five years, it is so striking to sort of see the other side of that, and of course, to me the stranger who has had an intimate experience of me and that's discomfiting and also kind of miraculous and fascinating, but yeah, the way that, so I do think the book forces us into a kind of inappropriate intimacy. It presumes that we are eager to be made intimate with Barbara Browning, and it also engages us in the project of fictionality and to me, the miracle of this book is, you know, all along, Barbara Browning has been telling us what she is making up. Has been telling us elements of the book that are fictional, has been saying, you know, this is not this person's real name, etc. And she tells us that one character, Olivia, the lover of Barbara Anderson, has been entirely fictionalized. Because the real person objected. And it is very important, and in a way that I would like to worry a little bit because I feel like maybe it is a

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dodge about other kind of irresolvable, ethical difficulties in being an artist and what that does to people in your life, but it is very important to Barbara Anderson and to Barbara Browning to ask permission of people before putting them into a novel and to give them the option to edit, to change, to refuse to be part of the project and this person, the “real lover” of Barbara Anderson objects and says, take me out. And so Olivia is this fictional replacement of a real person. In the novel, like I think if I were sort of looking for problems to have with this sort of as a novel, I think one thing that I might say 20 pages from the end is like, Olivia is not much of a character, she doesn't play a real role, I don't really understand, you know, if I were sort of to do a workshop thing, I don't really understand this relationship, I feel like the novel is kind of turning away from it, and then very near the end of the book, there is an astonishing moment where Barbara and Olivia go to a Taylor Mack concert at Bard College and there is brilliant virtuosic guitarist gives a solo and it becomes the page of the novel's catharsis, and that catharsis adheres in the revelation that Barbara Anderson says, that is the real lover and she told me she could only appear in the book as a rock star, and that is what she is. And that like to me, it is one of the astonishing experiences I've had as a reader. And there is a way that it retroactively, or retrospectively, charges all of the book's meditations on fictionality and all of the books meta-fiction in general, and things that I think sometimes in other writers feel to me kind of hokey or distancing and keep me from fully engaging with the novel emotionally, it just makes it like volcanically hot and urgent. And I just like, if there were one, like I would love to learn how to do that. Like I'm so envious of that move because I do think that is like the moment where, not just that page, but the whole book leaps and becomes something I think really, really extraordinary.

ND: But it is, it is an amazing moment and I want to stick with this a bit and Danny, you and I might have a similar way of thinking about this maybe, which is, you know, when I was thinking about the Olivia character and then how, you know, how we are informed, not immediately, not at the start, but we are informed, I want to say my memory or something like halfway through. You know, by the way, this character is actually fictional for the reasons that Garth said. I thought of this sort of debate that occurs in the 19th century around the status of the admission of the fictionality of your own characters, right? And this is something that Henry James had a lot to say about, almost entirely negative, right? And writing about Anthony Trollope and Trollope was given to these moments of saying, look, I don't want you to worry, this is a story that I'm telling and this story is going to go in this direction, so don't worry that this bad thing is going to happen because I've taken care of it for you and James was, you know, got quite bothered by this and used even kind of religious language to describe this as like a sin, he said it is a betrayal of a sacred office to admit the fictionality of your work. And I wondered, you know, but the Trollopien side would be something like in fact what the reader wants is trust. Browning seems to be on both sides of this, I mean, how did you see how this plays out?

DW: I have written here in my notes on the novel Trollope. We are thinking along the same lines, Nick. Because I entirely agree with you that I think that there is something sort of weirdly and unexpectedly Trollopien about this novel. I think partly it comes, I mean, this really actually does come back to the question of the novel itself as gift for me, or as potentially like unwanted or unasked for gift, because one of the interesting things about this narrator to me is that kind of worry and insecurity that runs through the novel about the reception of the gift, which I think, you know, is part of the novel's argument about what it means to give is that there is always this

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worry that accompanies it of like, is this what you want? Is this, does this give you pleasure? And the novel, the narrator of this novel sort of frequently asks those kinds of questions of the reader. There are a lot of these moments of perhaps you are wondering at this point, or would you like to know more about how Tye paid for his MFA? And so this is not a narrator, a Jamesian narrator who is sort of like very confident about what we must and should know and about how the narrative must be constructed in order to have a kind of, I don't know, aesthetic cohesiveness. This is a narrator who is sort of always worried about whether she is giving us what we want.

ND: Yeah, it strikes me that one difference sort of important difference that might exist between the 19th century and now is that I don't know about the rest of you, but I was tempted, so I didn't know of course initially that, of the Olivia character was fictional and I believe that Barbara Anderson, the narrator, says it, she's an academic star, and she's a professor of German, right? And a translator I think in the novel, and I thought, it literally crossed my mind, oh, I should Google this person, because I'm curious who this might be, and, you know, of course the reader of Trollope can't Google any of these characters. But I can, like I can find, and she does point to the existence of some of these videos she describes online, their continued existence online. I didn't pursue that, I didn't look any of them up, but you could. And so there always is this ability, I think now we have to externally verify or, you know, whether you want to call it verification, or I don't know, extra-literary stalking, I don't know what, you know, what one would want to say about that impulse, but it is defeated by the novel in this way, which I actually thought was incredibly refreshing in a way. I don't know, was I the only one who had the impulse to move outside the novel to the internet or is that a sign of my internet poisoned mind?

GG: Well, I definitely had that impulse and I did, you know, and it is wonderful where, you know, so, another kind of inappropriate intimacy, I mean, Barbara Browning, or Barbara Anderson draw you into a kind of conspiracy along these lines. So, like it is very easy to figure out who Tye is, but then Barbara Anderson says, if you figure this out, please could you keep it to yourself because there is someone Tye doesn't want to read this book. You know, there is also, so the best friend Rebekah, it is very easy to figure out and this I think it's fine to say because they did an interview together where they talk about it, is Rebecca Miller, the filmmaker, and who was Barbara Browning's roommate at Choate and they have been best friends ever since. And there is a way that I do, so I think on one, so I think Barbara Browning expects us to sort of reach for those things, and there is a way in which the kind of novelistic performance continues in these para-texts, like the interview she does with Rebecca Miller. So yeah, but I definitely like, and also, and the idea of stalking. I mean, Barbara Browning, she calls herself a stalker at one point in this book, and then she said elsewhere, you know, she says things like, I have a lot of sympathy with stalkers, you know?

ND: There is a way in which she almost stalks Sami for a while, right?

GG: Absolutely, yeah. Yeah.

DW: I mean, I'm really glad we're talking about this Olivia moment because this discussion is giving me a sort of different way to understand my own reaction to it. I found that moment devastating, very moving in the way that Garth is describing, but sort of crushing and I think that

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part of that has to do with this, what we're talking about as this kind of like reality hunger of like looking outside of the text for what will anchor it in reality and I think even within the sort of novel itself, Olivia, as I reflected on what made me so crushed to learn that she was the only purely fictional character, is that this is the only character who the narrator has a sort of direct and embodied intimacy with that feels authentic and sincere and erotic. I mean, I think we might talk about the narrator's mother as well, it is the only other person who she sort of has a relationship of intimate touch with. So there is something, I think maybe that is the source of my devastation is we, the anchoring of the novel in reality sort of gets blurred a little bit when we learn that this character is actually sort of just barely outside of the text and sort of beyond our reach in a way that Lauren Berlant isn't, we could like, you know, send her an e-mail. So there is something about that idea of the cameo appearance and her just being barely allowed into the text as this rock star that I think has this sort of brilliant sense of what it means to be sort of just hovering on the edge of fiction and reality.

ND: And then there it might be that there is a desire of the readers that is, you know, that is invoked and frustrated in some way, right? Yeah.

GG: I was going to say, I mean, I do think there is for me something so powerful, and it is not about like the sort of biographical facticity of characters or whatnot, but it is instead about some kind of warrant of like affective reality. So the idea that, you know, there is this emotional, this sort of response to something, I too, Daniel, experienced that moment as devastating, and that, you know, there is some way in which the whole novel is a response to that devastation and there is something even deeper that I find, I'm so fascinated by this idea and it is something I want to think about a lot more, but the extent to which, so this novel is tagged to various real world things, like Occupy Wall Street, the financial collapse, you know, the need for new economies, but there is also something deeper than that, or certainly earlier than that, which is the AIDS crisis and there is a way in which, so Barbara Browning mentions in the book, sorry, Barbara Anderson, in a poem which has also been ascribed to Barbara Browning, in a poem that sort of talks about a lover dying of AIDS and being utterly devastated by that. And then later in the novel, Barbara Browning is talking about her, Barbara Anderson, excuse me, is talking about, I will say Barbara Browning does this too, she will sort of be talking about the novel and she will say, I and then correct herself and say Barbara Anderson, but Barbara Anderson is talking about her terrible memory and she says, you know, I just forget things, it is so crazy, I can't remember things, I only remember details that are not the most important details, and she ascribes that to PTSD and then she ascribes, and then she traces the PTSD back to the loss of this lover, who and then she says, but I'm also grateful to that because sometimes I think that the space cleared up when all those memories went away, created a space that allows me to be creative. And there is a way in which like, the whole genealogy of herself as an artist going back to AIDS and to the devastation of the early AIDS crisis, and she, you know, AIDS pops up elsewhere in the book, like she talks with Lauren Berlant about changes in sort of aesthetics in the wake of effective HIV therapies. She compares Pussy Riot to ACT UP, like there is a way that AIDS hovers over this novel and also over Barbara Browning's whole life as an artist and also as an academic. Her second academic book was about AIDS and sort of the symbols of AIDS and there is kind of brilliantly and devastatingly a footnote in that book in which she discloses the narrative of her relationship with this Brazilian man, who was HIV positive. And like there is a way in which that too charges the whole endeavor, with a kind of urgency of needing to survive devastation.

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And that to me sort of charges things that in another novel might annoy me, like sort of constantly pointing out, this is fictional, this is fictional, charges all of that with an emotion that I just find extraordinarily compelling.

ND: So Danny, you teach contemporary queer fiction or queer literature. Do you see, do you see AIDS in this book in ways that are familiar to you or perhaps different than what you see elsewhere?

DW: I mean, Garth's reading of this aspect of the novel is I think exactly right. I have nothing to add or correct in that reading. That is a beautiful way to think about it and I think actually it hadn't occurred to me as being the thread that it is, and that I am not very much persuaded that it is. I think that, you know, it makes me think differently too about that sort of double meaning of gift as it is poison or that sort of problem of circulation, of the circulation of pleasure is also potentially a dangerous or circulation that has to do with mortality. But I think that is a really compelling way to think about that problem, the circulation that you started by talking about, Garth, in the novel.

ND: Is this in any way related to something else about the novel that I just wanted to bring up, which is the way in which it is so steeped in not just other kinds of writing, but entirely other kinds of aesthetic milieu, right, so you have, you know, you have performance art, you have poetry, you have ukulele covers, you have dance, all, you know, there are a number of different aesthetic milieu here that are all sort of seen as continuous with one another, rather than distinct in any particular way. There is a sense in the novel which is interesting that fiction or auto-fiction or literary imagination is somehow wildly different than these other pursuits and I don't know if that has something to do with the cohesion of the arts themselves, maybe coming out of that enormous trauma in the 80's and 90's. Is that, is that a connection one would want to draw? I mean, I guess it's a way of thinking about what it means to write a novel that is so diffused in other arts actually. And relatively uninterested I think in the novel itself as one of those other arts.

GG: I mean, I would say, it's one of the things I love about this novel, so another thing that Barbara Browning is sort of committed to is keeping alive the viability of utopia as, and utopian thinking as sort of something that has aesthetic and ethical and social force. And one of her good friends and colleagues who provides the epigraph for this book is José Muñoz, who wrote *Cruising Utopia*, and there is something utopian to me, and queerly utopian in the book's vision of sociality and the way in which a kind of, there is a kind of sociality that is, it is impossible to distinguish from art making, a sociality that is art making and the exchange of art, and the way in which sort of again, I mean, to me if I had to said in one word what the book is about, I would say circulation, and there are all these instances in which Lauren Berlant will give Barbara Browning the gift of a phrase, like I think at one point Lauren Berlant says, all love is autistic. And then Barbara Anderson gives that as a gift to Sami in a message, sort of repeats that. Sami records a piece of music that he calls, all art is autistic, and then Barbara Anderson makes a dance to that piece of music, and makes a video of it and sends it back to Sami, and puts it in this novel. So they are all ways in which you sort of see this gift which, I mean, it really is Lewis Hyde I mean, in circulating a cruise and she makes the, she quotes the Hydian argument that is sort of a gift economy is like sex in the way in which, in that the more you spend the more you

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have, right? And there is something utopian in that vision of circulation, of sociality, and to me that is in part what sort of this constant circulation among arts is doing. I mean, it is kind of a vision of the way life should be, and that is another thing that I just, I really adore about this novel.

ND: So that might be a good moment to pull back for a second to our frame that is the frame of what value novels might still have for readers in the 21st century given all the options and competing media that exist, and Garth you have put this specifically related to Browning's novel as the imagination or a certain kind of utopic imagination. Now that is interesting because of course that often is not the way the novel is imaged as a form. It is often that either that it tells us the way things really are, tells us what is true, rather than what might be true, right? Or maybe even, maybe even exposes us to things we don't want to know or something like that, right? Danny, do you see that, I mean, does this resonate with you, this utopic imagination as something that the novel right now might be able to do in a way that gives it a certain service that other forms don't possess or other media don't possess?

DW: Yeah, I mean, I think it is a particularly interesting question in that this is, that utopian imagination of the novel and of the kind of theory of the gift economy that it wants to kind of lay out is about collectivity, sort of a more radical or more profound kind of collectivity, and we have such a long history of thinking of the novel as a deeply individualistic genre, and I think particularly coming back to this question about auto-fiction and the different but related question of the first person novel, which is so rooted and so limited by the sort of narrowness of the first person point of view. It is interesting then to think about how the novel might help us to imagine sort of utopian possibilities of collectivity as opposed to that kind of individualism that runs through the novel all the way back through the 19th century.

ND: So Garth, I'm curious how you would answer that question that Daniel was just addressing. What do you think novels still provide readers in the 21st century when we have so many other cultural forms or media at our fingertips, like what is the novel still do for us?

GG: Yeah, I guess I would say that there are just modes of thinking that feel to me necessary, that are only available to me in the novel. So something that I often say is that for me, you know, the motivating impulse to make art never has to do with an argument, never has to do with any point that I want to make. If I have a point I want to make, I will do something other than make art. You know, I turn to art when there is some situation or problem or quandary that utterly defeats my categories for argumentative thinking and maybe especially my categories for moral or ethical judgment. So what spurs me to make art is a sense I have in relation to a particular situation or question or problem that I am staring into an abyss and art is the instrument I have for navigating the abyss. I mean, I think that is why we make art in general and I think I turn to fiction because fiction offers me the tools that fit my hands.

ND: Yeah. I want to end, I mean, this is a wonderful place to stop, but I want to end by actually opening it out beyond Browning for a second. Is there another 21st century novel that you would love to tell people about? You would love to sort of shout from the rooftops about and recommend?

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DW: Yeah, I'm going to take this opportunity to plug an amazing Toronto-based writer, jia qing wilson-yang, her novel, *Small Beauty*.

GG: I love that book. It is wonderful.

DW: It's a wonderful book and it has been a really great pleasure to teach it a couple of times and it is published by a really great Montreal-based press called Metonymy Press. I would also just recommend sort of looking at their catalog, they are particularly focused on publishing trans fiction. I want to sing from the rooftops about it. I still think it is a sort of maybe under-read novel. It has been celebrated as trans fiction, it won the Lambda Literary Award for trans fiction several years ago. But I think, you know, queer and trans fiction can so often struggle to find an audience beyond queer and trans readership and I think this is one that really should have a wide readership. It is a beautiful and lyrical novel. It is about a mixed race trans woman who returns to her hometown in the country after the death of her cousin, with whom she is quite, has been quite close, to sort of manage his affairs and is living in the house that her cousin used to live in with her aunt. And she, while there and while sort of working through grief, she learns a lot about her own family and about the history of the town that helps her to make sense of her own sort of narrative as a trans woman and it is beautiful and as I said, it has been a great pleasure to teach it and to talk to students about it and I'd love it if a lot more people read it.

ND: That sounds great, Danny. Garth, do you have one in mind?

GG: Sure, I mean, I'd second Daniel's recommendation of that book, I agree, I think everyone should read it. And my choice, and it's funny thinking about, you know, the possibility of the utopic or what it would mean, so utopian, the sort of utopic potentiality of the novel or of literature to me has everything to do with form and very little to do with content and thinking about the usefulness of fiction is always difficult for me because I just, I really want to resist the sort of lure of the instrumental and of trying to sort of justify, you know, literature in instrumental terms, but the utopic potential in fiction has to do with allowing me to occupy what seems to me a kind of ideal way of being and an ideal way of thinking, an ideal way of attending to the world. And so the novel that gets my vote for kind of most extraordinarily novel so far in the 21st century or certainly one of the two or three, is a very sad, devastating book by Anuk Arudpragasam, called *The Story of a Brief Marriage*. Which is set in a Sri Lankan refugee camp that is being menaced both by sort of government forces and rebel forces and it is about indeed a brief marriage between a young man and a young woman in that camp, and it is just utterly devastating. And I know many people, and I think one reason that book, even though it has been celebrated by people like Colm Toibin and that book has not found a huge readership is that I know from some people that they are scared of it, that they are sort of scared to read something that they feel will be so devastating and sad, and yet my feeling on finishing it is finally one of this kind of extraordinary affirmation because of, not because anybody is going to have a happy ending, or you know, not because even we can believe that anyone is going to survive or get out of this situation, but because of the sort of way that it inhabits what seems to be like an ideal way of being a human being in an impossible situation.

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ND: I can absolutely testify to that feature of that novel, yeah, yeah. Well, thank you very much both of you for this. This has given me enormous amounts to think about and now I really do feel like I have to go back and re-read *The Gift* again.

DW: Me too.

ND: With all these insights in my head, so, thank you so much. This has been great.

DW: Oh thank you, it's been such a joy, thank you, both of you.

GG: Thanks to both of you. What a pleasure.

ND: And that's our show! A huge thank you to Garth Greenwell and Daniel Wright for sharing their thinking about novels and intimacy. You can find links to their work at Public Books Dot Org Slash Podcast, including an essay that Daniel wrote about Garth's novel *Cleanness*. At Public Books Dot Org Slash Podcast, you will also find a list of further reading, curated by our guests, in case you want to read more or use this material in your classes. 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.

Next time on *Public Books 101*, I talk to the novelist and nonfiction writer Heidi Julavits and the book-history scholar Leah Price. We are curious about how novels represent catastrophes—like pandemics—and how they orient us in historical time. So I hope you'll join me for part 4 of *Public Books 101: The Novel Now*, as we wonder: How do novels help us think about large-scale disaster?

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