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- ND Heidi Julavits and Leah Price, welcome, very nice to have you both. Thank you for being here and I would actually like you to begin by introducing yourselves.
- HJ Sure. My name is Heidi Julavits, I am a Professor at the School of the Arts at Columbia University. I teach grads and undergrads. I have written novels and I have written books of nonfiction and I am one of the founding editors of the Believer magazine.
- ND Leah?
- LP Hi, I'm Leah Price, I'm a Professor of English at Rutgers University, where I direct the Book Initiative and my most recent book is *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books*, so I'm really looking forward to talking about this one.
- ND So by this one, Leah, you mean, Ling Ma's *Severance*. It was Heidi actually who suggested that this is what we might want to use to talk about the novel, the novel in general, that is, and so I'm going to start us off with a question, which actually I think is a pretty hard question to be honest. So you may have practiced this already. But I'm going to ask you to summarize *Severance* for us, particularly having in mind people who may not know what the novel is about. So maybe one way to do this is I'm going to ask you each to start a sentence, *Severance* is...and then go wherever you want to go with that sentence, right? But Leah, do you want to take the first crack at this.
- LP Sure, why not? This is going to be one long sentence, so I will take a deep breath. *Severance* is a first person novel published just over a year before the onset of Covid-19, which is set in a post-pandemic dystopia, but around half of which takes the form of satirical flashbacks to Manhattan office life around 2011, punctuated by a cameo appearance of the real Occupy Movement, which is cut short by the imaginary counter-historical arrival of a zombifying virus from China, which sets off an Escape from New York plot, that ends with the by now pregnant protagonist, Candace, escaping a survivalist cult with which she has been holed up in a disused Chicago-land mall.
- ND That was an amazingly hyper-subordinated sentence, that was worthy of Henry James. I wouldn't want to have to diagram it. Heidi, you want to try this game too?
- HJ Yes, I'm glad that Leah went first. Mine's a little vaguer so it will make more sense now that she has been specific. *Severance* is a pandemic zombie novel, enclosing a story about contemporary corporate workplace culture and the ills of global capitalism, enclosing a story about a Chinese family's immigration to the U.S., but at its core, it is a novel about nostalgia, how nostalgia is an affliction and a drug, how nostalgia is a mind-control tool, how it can lead to ruin, and how it is also a source of salvation.
- ND Oh my goodness, okay, so we have a lot packed in there and I'm very tempted to actually talk about nostalgia right now, but I'm going to hold off on that for a second.
- HJ Let us get nostalgic about nostalgia before you start talking about nostalgia.
- ND Yeah, maybe that, right? And maybe get nostalgic about something else potentially, which is this is, you know, this is a season where we're thinking about the novel, which is

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a form, depending on how you want to quantify it which is anywhere from, you know, 400 to 2,000 years old, and I wanted to ask you both about your relations to the novel as a form. So Heidi, I'm going to start with you because you've, you know, you've worked across many genres in your career, you've been a writer of nonfiction, a writer of criticism, as you said, you are a founding editor of *The Believer*, but you've also written four novels, so, I'm going to ask you though this question as a reader, what has been your relationship with the novel as a genre as a reader? Do you, how much do you read? How do you read novels these days?

HJ Okay, well, I guess we're getting to nostalgia really quickly here, because I do, I think it is true of probably any person that you are nostalgic for a time in your life which tends to have been when you are younger, when you really had the space to lose yourself in the world of a novel. So I'm nostalgic for that capacity that I have, I don't want to say that I've lost it, but I think by some combination of being older and busier, and just a plain old adult, and then of course the novel being challenged maybe by an ever intensifying fascination with fictional real world happenings, yeah, I mean, I guess it is easier for me to talk about my relationship to this particular novel. I read this book while I had Covid. And I was trying to track back how I made the decision to read this book when I had Covid and maybe the answer would just be really obvious because I had Covid and it was about a disease not dissimilar to Covid, at least in terms of how it spread. And I think that I read this book or what I was looking for in this book was a survival story, because I think in addition to being about nostalgia, that this is a survival story, and I wanted to, I wanted advice.

ND Yeah, yeah, and I wonder if that is almost anticipatory nostalgia in a sense, you know, the slogan like one day I'll even look back on this as something worth missing, which I -

HJ Yeah, I already do.

ND You know, certainly like in March and April in New York City it would have been insane, right, but in a strange way it's already there, yeah, I agree, which is utterly perverse, so it's possible to be nostalgic for that time, and yeah, I mean, the relationship with the novel, with the form as bound up with early memories.

HJ Yes.

ND Leah, you are an English Professor and a literary critic, so like me, you are partly professionally invested in this form because it helps pay the bills I guess in some sense, right? But I'm curious about your relationship to novels on a more personal level and so, in your spare time, to the extent that you have any, what do you turn to novels for?

LP Heidi drew a distinction between reading as a young person and reading as a middle-aged person, and I think my dividing line would be more between reading while taking notes and reading hands free. So, the great thing, as you know, Nick, about being an English Professor is that any reading, anything can count as work, proverbially we can read the back of the cereal box and the lousy thing about being an English Professor is also that it

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is so hard to turn off your analytical brain. The only way that I have found to turn off my analytical brain is literally to incapacitate my hands to prevent myself from taking notes and that's why the only two places I can really read for pleasure these days are in the bathtub, where I know that my hands are too wet and soapy to grasp a pencil or pen and that I can't have any electronic device in there without getting electrocuted on the one hand and on the other hand, listening to audio books on the kind of long, solitary walks that many of us are taking during this pandemic that bear some resemblance to the long walks through New York taken by the protagonist of this novel.

ND I took read in the bathtub, although I have given a shot on taking notes and yeah, it doesn't end well. I am maybe a little more reckless than that. Heidi, can I ask you, when you read this when you were ill, first of all, just a practical question, did you read it on a screen or did you read a codex version of it?

HJ I read it, I read the actual book. The hard object. I read the object.

ND Using, yeah, yeah. Is that how you normally consume novels?

HJ Well, yes, however, I did, so many discoveries I guess we made over the pandemic. Leah is talking about listening to novels and going on walks. Maybe the pandemic was about learning to consume in new forms because I had a panic, I mean, it is funny you think about the things you panicked about not being able to have access to at the very beginning of the pandemic, and my two things were milk and books. And so, and so, I bought a Kindle immediately like as soon as things started to look kind of dire, I bought a Kindle and I started to read on the Kindle because obviously the bookstore closed down the street for a while, and so I did start to read on a Kindle, but not this book, this book I read in hard form.

ND Right, Leah, can I ask you one question about audio books since we're talking about alternate technologies? Can you give me an example of an audio book that you have read and enjoyed recently and maybe say a bit about why it was in the form of an audio book that that might have worked for you?

LP Well, unlike Heidi, I read *Severance* as an audio book and one obvious reason that it works relatively well as an audio book is that it is a first person narrative. You and I are both Victorianists, Nick, so, you may have thought more than I have about the audio book as in a way the return of the dramatic monologue of a strongly focalized, oralized, first person voice narrating and in general, although there are exceptions, I tend to listen to first person narratives and to read third person narratives, which I don't know whether anyone has hard evidence about this, but I do wonder whether that is, whether the audio book is part of what is driving a resurgence of the first person in fiction. I don't know whether you have thoughts about that, Heidi?

HJ That's so interesting. I guess maybe the first person has always kind of been a big part of my reading life, so maybe I wasn't as aware of it being more or less in favor, but I think

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what you say about the monologue, the dramatic monologue and listening to that, I think that is so fascinating.

ND Can I ask you both since we are on this question about the voice of the novel, I mean, which in your case Leah was literally a voice speaking to you, I'm curious to hear both of you try to characterize the voice of this novel so that it is first person, narrated by a young woman named Candice Chen, who is narrator and protagonist both. Now to me she seemed, I mean, interestingly kind of a muted voice. Some of the words I was thinking about in thinking about this was that she is a little recessive or maybe even a little washed out, which is also very familiar from a lot of 19th century first person narrations, but you know, she seems to, like she succeeds in her job largely because she sort of just fits in seamlessly, she doesn't, she certainly doesn't do the glamorous work at her job, and she also kind of survives a quasi-apocalypse by more or less becoming kind of invisible, right? But I don't know, that seems a little bit at odds with Leah what you are saying about the kind of intimacy that is forced with this voice, so Heidi what did you make of the voice of the novel?

HJ I mean, yeah, I guess I would say recessive to whom or washed out to whom. I feel like she very strategically kept a lot of her cards close to the vest in terms of the other characters in the novel as she made her way through her work life and her love life and then her post-apocalyptic survival life, right? But in terms of her relationship to me, I didn't feel that way at all, I felt very close to her, I felt like I was a confidant, I felt that compared to the relationship she had to everyone else in the book, I was her best friend.

ND Yeah, yeah, that's right, because there may be actually no one else in the novel who can really compete with the reader for intimacy with this voice.

HJ Yeah.

ND That is really interesting. Leah, did you feel that way? I mean, of course you had a slightly different technological relation to this because you were listening, but is that something that resonates with you?

LP I love your take on the lack of glamour going with the inaccessibility or recessiveness of Candace's voice because of course usually when we learn that the publishing, usually when we are taught by a novel that the publishing world is not as glamorous on the inside as it looks on the outside, that debunking happens in more of a let's say *Devil Wears Prada* mode, where we learn that the publishing world is a snake pit full of back biting and dirty tricks. But Candace's world, because her job consists not of being an art girl, these glamorous more editorial side jobs that Candace fantasizes about, but rather Candace's job is in logistics, Candace is associated with the more literal dirt and grime of book production, even though in some ways this looks like the conventional office novel set in midtown and Candace's office is right above Times Square, the novel also takes us to manufacturing facilities in China so that we've got a kind of comprehensive tour of both the more glamorous and the less glamorous sides of the publishing world on the one hand, and then on the other hand, I really like your idea, Nick, of Candace as the inheritor

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to what, maybe the kind of 19th century novel, 19th century historical novel protagonist that the late great literary critic Alexander Wells spoke of, using the example of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels as the uninteresting, uncharismatic protagonist, who is a witness to history without himself being a participant in that history. And so what you have said just now about that historical genealogy helps make sense of something that puzzled me about the kind of witnessing that Candace does roaming Manhattan with her smartphone, snapping photos for a blog called New York Ghost, with the ghost definitely being a figure for the kind of elusive quality of the witness that you were talking about.

ND So on this question of her possibly invisibility, elusiveness, you know, we probably need to talk about the question of race here, and that this is, among other things, among the many, many things this is, this is a novel about an Asian-American woman, and those art girls that you were talking about, Leah at the publishing firm in the novel are, if memory serves, like exclusively white. They also, if I remember correctly, vanish pretty quickly, right? Am I can't remember now if they, if they meet their fates in the pandemic that sweeps them off or if they are simply, if she simply never sees them again and we don't know what happens, but they, they vanish, right? Candace doesn't. But I wondered, Heidi, do you think, how do you think race plays into the voice that we're hearing and particularly maybe it is the sense that you are as close to her as anybody else in her world?

HJ It's interesting, I really did not find her elusive and I didn't find her invisible and I didn't find her recessive and I didn't find her, like obviously, yes, she has, she has this blog and she is observing New York and recording it as it is emptied out of people. But I find her to be very engaged, I mean, I think if I'm to think about a more sort of like recessive and accessible character, I guess maybe I think of like a Joan Didion narration or something like that, you know? And I don't know if that complicates the race question or what, but I really did not experience this narrator that way at all. I really felt that again, kind of returning to like a survival narrative, this is a novel of strategy, right? It is a novel of strategy, it is like strategizing your way through assimilation, strategizing your way through sort of faceless, corporate culture. Strategizing your way through a relationship, a pregnancy, how to raise a child, and all of that felt to me to be deeply engaged with the world in a very proactive way.

ND That is really interesting because what you said about strategy, I wonder if part of what, obviously a strategy that she has to undergo is produced by things like pandemic, but I wonder if it is tied to race in some sense because, and I'm thinking of exactly some of the questions that came up for all of us probably in March and April when you, Heidi, were reading this novel for the first time, or at least I remember finding myself really confronted by these strategic questions, almost it felt like for the first time, you know, how am I going to, what if the supply lines fail, how am I going to get milk, how am I going to get books that I want? How are we going to lead our lives from day-to-day under circumstances that are really changing and precarious and I wonder if my ability to not have to engage with those strategic questions, or a lot of them at least, for most of my

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life, has to do with my race and if there is something about assimilation because it also is a novel about assimilation that makes, you know, makes you a little bit more attuned to strategy than those who aren't? That's a kind of guess, but it's interesting, you are right, she is strategizing in every aspect of her life how she fits in and almost place, there is a question for her to, she has to think really hard about it and generally succeeds at it for the most part, right?

HJ Yeah, and I mean, maybe it is a race question, it is a gender question, I think everyone is coming from a different space of things coming easier or are given to you or etc., right? And I don't know it felt like a really, a really careful accounting of how she existed in different situations. And how she survived them.

ND Yeah, yeah, you know, one of the things that I enjoyed during the early phases of the pandemic was actually reading heist narratives for some reason, and that was because I liked, at that moment of sort of radical uncertainty, I liked narratives where people have a plan and the plan works. And that was deeply soothing to me to have, you know, a bunch of people getting together and solving a problem. So, right now, you are getting me to re-conceive this novel in terms that have to do with that kind of, that kind of anticipatory thinking and how it works in multiple contexts really. It is interesting, you know, when we talk about this novel in the ways we already have, we keep touching on different genres and I think one of the things we might want to cause and take in here is the fact that this novel takes, you know, it borrows from so many different kind of genres, and Heidi, when we talked about this earlier, you called it a genre cocktail, and it is, you know, there is a lot of ingredients in this cocktail, and so one of them is plague novel, I suppose you could say, right, or pandemic novel. Can you say a bit about how the novel handles this question, first of all, of pandemic or plague, because it, it sounds to a lot of people like Covid, but it is also not like Covid?

HJ Yeah, I don't want to be a spoiler.

LP Stop listening now if you haven't finished the novel.

ND Well, I don't think we are giving away the ending, right?

HJ No, I mean, here, I will say this, I will say this, I would say that what I found really fascinating about the way that the plague/pandemic aspect of this book was handled is that it kind of wasn't the most interesting thing that was happening in the book, right? Like it almost was, it was her present situation, but I really love how everything feels very equally weighted in the book. That in a sense like going to the, you know, the Bible factory in China, I felt like that had almost the same weight in a sense as going on a stalk, which is when they would go to houses after the disease hits and she has joined this sort of cult unwillingly or accidentally, right, so it wasn't, it isn't like a before and an after, it is more just everything has sort of the same weight, and I thought that was again another one of the really unique things about this novel.

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ND Yeah, and by other things, I mean, we could generate a list, right? This is a story of immigration, it is a comedy of office life and Leah has alluded to this before, it is, you know, I don't think I'm giving anything away in saying it is a zombie novel too, it is a road novel, you know, that she hits the road at one point. It is also, you know, very much a leaving New York novel and saying goodbye not just to New York, but sort of a time of your life where that you associate with New York that something like your 20's I guess. It is also a novel about a cult. All these, you know, all these genres are there, and I could probably add many more if I thought about it. I want to ask Heidi about this genre cocktail, this kind of mash-up. I think if you had described this to me without my having read the novel, I would have thought, this couldn't possibly work. Like this is almost like the kind of joke about like a bad pitch for a Hollywood movie, where it is just, you know, it is X plus Y plus Z, you know, those things can't possibly work in the same frame, right? But my question to you is so what does make this work? Is it the evenness of attention to them, or is it, what else might make these things coexist together?

HJ I was thinking about this question a little bit and I mean, I guess every book is its own cocktail and I maybe this gets back to the question of reading. One of my regrets as a writer and a reader is that I didn't keep a list of books from the minute I started reading of all the books that I've ever read. I'm sure everybody has that regret, but it seems to me that if you had that document or had those stats, and you could look at every single writer and see the list of books that they have read, like that is, that is your sensibility, that is the cocktail that is sort of being mixed from the time that you start reading, and when people are really tapped into that unique reading DNA that they have, I think that that's when you get a really, you get a book that feels different from other books, that really feels, oh wow, I have never read a book like this before, right? And of course you haven't because there is no other human being on the planet who has read the exact combination of books that you have read. I mean, another person who I think of who did some like cocktailing let's say would be George Saunders, right? I mean, he is somebody who also I think probably is maybe in a very distant way someone who you could see as a fore-person of this book, you know? Saunders sort of took a kind of like Cheever, like a Cheever/Carver kind of landscape and combined it with like a Barthelme and then like a sci-fi.

ND And sci-fi, yeah.

HJ Right? So I mean, and, but he is funneling it through his very unique sensibility that has been formed by reading all of these things and so, that's how I feel about this novel as well.

ND That's really, I mean, that's interesting, the way you have described this autobiographically. This is a novel by somebody who has read a lot of different genres and read them in a serious way, probably from quite young, and all of those things combine in one way or another, and, you know, in a somewhat unstable mixture, which is what makes it, what makes it interesting. Leah, can I ask you about status a little bit here, because another thing one could say about the genre mixture is that, like a sociologist of

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literature would say, well, some of these genres are, we would call high status genres, and some of them are low status genres, right, like the zombie novel element of it, and you know, the zombie novel element versus the novel of immigration. Those occupy, we think, different cultural zones. Does that matter for this novel at all?

LP I certainly think that is matters for the success of this novel because it has managed to be both a commercially successful novel, bolstered no doubt by the, you could say, lucky timing, though in so many ways it is not lucky, of appearing just over a year before the pandemic, and at the same time, it is a serious work of literary fiction. If we can come back to the Bible production plot, one of the jokes I think about the Bibles that the protagonist Candace works out outsourcing is that her company, which is a kind of intermediary between publishers in New York and manufacturing facilities in China, specializes in what you might call gimmicky books, so, art books, books with tricky production demands, and Bibles that have some kind of material gimmick like having a gemstone set into their cover that allow a public domain endlessly reprinted text to set itself apart in the marketplace. It is hard to think of a text more serious and weighty than the Bible, and yet there is something faintly ridiculous about the versions of it that Candace works on in order to carve out some space within an already crowded market.

ND Like one of them, of course that she works on is like the gemstone Bible, which is if I'm remembering correctly, has the front cover is studded with your birth stone as a gift for presumably young girls or something like that, right? And insane production problems are produced by this, not to mention deaths of laborers in China, right, so from mining, or grinding the stones for these gifts. And that, being the seriousness of the content down to the level of the object as a way to partially evacuate the seriousness is something that, yeah, that the book does. It is not the only communications technology though that occurs in the novel, or that the novel is interested one. The other one would be, would be part of this sort of thing that we're dealing with right now, right? Both teleconferencing and cell phones. So, you know, it is a key plot point when the cult that she finds herself in, takes her cell phone and destroys it and then gives it back to her as a kind of souvenir for past life, you know, it is just a brick at this point, and I, I couldn't help but wonder if this is some sort of weird reference to the competition the novel has in our lives, certainly right now. The competition of the phones we carry around with us and that occupy so much of our attention, and I wonder, but I wonder if that is strained, and I guess, Heidi, my question for you is, when you write, when you write fiction in particular, are you thinking about how novels engage with other technologies or need to distinguish themselves from other technologies? Are you thinking about that kind of competition or do you screen yourself from that when you write fiction?

HJ You know, I think what I've started to screen myself from is the stress and pressure of defining what I'm writing. I had a kind of interesting conversation once with somebody where, because I haven't written a novel in a while, I have been writing nonfiction. And that was stressing me out, like it was, I felt like I had abandoned some like, some, I had abandoned the reason I had gotten into writing in the first place, and I remember talking

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to somebody about this and he just was like, what did he say? He said something like, why are you worried about it, you are just writing. He is like, you are just producing writing, you know? And so I think that in the end the real question is how to engage with anybody through the written word, I would say, you know, not to say that all genres are equal necessarily, but I would say that the challenge is just like how to speak to somebody, you know? Like how to actually speak to somebody if you want to be heard, you know, I mean, that sounds so, so elemental, like I mean in the same way maybe that we were talking about people maybe because of race, gender, sexuality whatever, have engaged in different degrees of strategizing over the course of their lives in order to survive or thrive, maybe in a similar way like literary fiction has not had to fight so much for its credibility or its validity, and I'm not saying like death of the novel kind of talk, I'm really just saying like, written word, how do you get people to engage in the written word, and I think it has always had this, this status so that it didn't have to try so hard to survive and I think it kind of does now and I think that is really interesting. I think that that actually puts some really good pressure on people, like no one is going to just, no one is going to read what you're writing just, even just because you are XYZ famous person anymore, you know what I mean?

ND Yeah, yeah, no, it's not, it can't be taken for granted that you have this kind of status. Either you or the thing you are producing has the kind of status that is just going to get attention paid to it no matter what. Do you agree, Leah? What's your perspective on this?

LP I might approach that question via the date to which the novel is backdated, that is it comes out in I think Fall or late Summer of 2018, it is set pretty identifiably thanks to the Occupy Movement in 2011, at a time when book sales were increasing rapidly, which is not so much the case now, and people were talking a lot about the death of the book, meaning the printed book, and I think you see traces of that debate in Candace's references to, offhand references to the book as an animal. I think at one point the narrator refers to the Bibles for which her company is an intermediary as a difficult animal, it is fragile pages prone to ripping, it is book block prone to warping, and there is another point when Candace confesses being unable to actually read the words of the Bible anymore because her mind is so full of what she calls the offal, offal.

ND Yeah, offal.

LP Meaning, you know, the innards, as if the book had a stomach full of tripe and sweetbreads, except that they are the paper and the ribbon marker and the end sheets and the cover, and in some ways you could see this as a riff on the long history of Bibles being literally made out of the body of dead animals that is made out of parchment, and even after paper comes in, bound in leather, except that the Bibles that Candace works on we're told many times insistently are bound in a kind of PVC, a kind of fake leatherette that we're told is also used for H&M handbags and shoes and wallets, so that it is as if the book is damned if it does, damned if it doesn't. It is both degraded by being compared to a dead animal being butchered on the one hand, and then on the other hand, any kind of

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distinction between the book as an abstract spiritual object and a cheap handbag sold at H&M is being collapsed, so the book is just another kind of fast fashion accessory, just another disposable commodity.

ND You specify Occupy as the, at least the historical starting point of the novel. So I had the feeling that, I find myself interestingly, really interestingly confused by the historical timeline of the novel because it began to feel to me like almost every significant event of the last ten years was here in one form or another. So, it is not just Occupy, it is not just Covid, there's also a hurricane hat is very Hurricane Sandy-esque that is here, it's almost as a kind of greatest hits of the, you know, worst hits of the oughts sometimes, so it was a little hard for me, it almost felt like there was a kind of historical telescoping happening where it felt like everything in the oughts was happening at once, which happened, from my perspective, and again, maybe it was when I was reading it, happened to really make that previous decade feel just awful. If you imagine all the things happening at once, how do you think she handled time in this novel or historical novel, however, you want to put it? But I was really intrigued and also a little puzzled by the way this works.

LP For me the thing that was hard to get my head around was not that collapsing of different historical events or the novel as a kind of anthology of as you say, Nick, the greatest hits, but rather the kind of whiplash that I got from the novel's zigzagging between the biggest picture kind of historical time involving the possible extinction of the species, and then the daily-ness of office work. By my count the phrase, I went to work, comes up around a dozen times over the course of the novel and they are often very ostentatiously clustered together and since we're talking about pandemic time, I will just say that for me, the back and forth between cataclysmic historical time and routinized, boring, small bore, daily time helped make sense of an experience a lot of people are having right now I think where a lot of people who are lucky enough to be working remotely, where you get these inanely chatty reminders from Outlook saying things like, how is your week going? You've got five calendar items upcoming today. Way to go, checking three items off your to-do list. There is something about the office itself as a bulwark against the disintegration of time during a disaster.

ND Yeah, yeah, that's true. I, let me put this a slightly different way, and maybe Heidi, maybe this is something, I don't know if you think this is a useful term. Is this, is this a Trump era novel? Is this, I'm wondering how to peg its contemporary-ness, because I know that, you know, one of the reactions people had to this was how it feels so much like the present, like it was, you know, whether fortunately or unfortunately, it caught the moment and I agree with that in some way, but I also want to figure out, so what is the moment? What is the moment that she caught?

HJ I mean, I guess that is, alright, now we get to talk about nostalgia. Let's go.

ND Right, right, exactly.

HJ Let's go. Yeah, I mean I think that if we're going to call it Trumpian era novel, I would say that it is about the, it is the perils of nostalgia, it is like, and how misleading nostalgia

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can be, right? I mean, you are wanting something that already happened, but in many cases what you are desiring, it definitely wasn't the glory days for most people on the planet, and it might not have even been the glory days for you, you know? That it is this, it is the zombifying trap in a way, right? And so it felt to me very much about a critique of that way of thinking, that's what it felt like to me, and so that felt very Trump era in terms of its prescience and yeah, I mean, look, the people who I guess without ruining anything, the people who succumb to nostalgia are the ones who get sick. Nostalgia is the, is the weakness in the immune system.

ND That's a lovely way to put it. So, Leah, tell me what you think about this in relation to the idea of it being a Trump era novel, and is it nostalgia or is maybe sort of the complimentary opposite to nostalgia, would it be something like trauma, because I know many of us feel vaguely traumatized by the last several years and that too can have a, produce a feeling of repetitiveness somehow, what do you think?

LP So I'm still struggling to figure out what role the 80's play in the novel because you will both probably have been struck by that moment where Candace is wearing her mother's Contempo Casuals hand-me-downs and of course, it is a little bit to hit you on the head symbolic, contempo, what does the contemporary mean when it is 30 years out of date? But I couldn't help feeling when I read that, couldn't help wondering whether the role that the 80's played in Trump's career had something to do with that particular vintage, that particular swathe of what you have persuaded me, Heidi, is a much more generalized nostalgia.

ND That makes the contemporary seem both much more capacious in one sense, because you are suggesting that the novel is giving us a sense of the contemporary that at least goes back to the 80's, but also more terrifyingly claustrophobic because it says something, this is still the long 1980's. I mean, we still do, as of today, still have Donald Trump as our President, that is, there is no more 80's fact than that and boy that is really horrifyingly close to home. I don't want to be there anymore. That is really interesting, I'm struck by that.

LP I guess, I'm wondering whether, yeah, whether there is a kind of scaling up of the routinization and habituation and repetition compulsion of the fevered from the scale of daily life in an office to the scale of history.

ND Historical repetition, yeah.

HJ I mean, too, right, I mean, the 80's that's such an interesting, I had not made the Trump and the 80's connection, but I think that is really, really interesting. And I wonder too like this again brings back this, so not all nostalgia is created equal, right? So like we were not nostalgic for the 80's in the 90's, right? We were -

ND Anything but.

HJ Right? And I mean, I guess whatever, I will just speak from the Contempo Casuals side of things, but like I was not wearing 80's dresses until recently, and now I'm wearing 80's

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dresses again, right? That's my eBay search term, in fact, I did go on and look, try to buy a Contempo Casuals dress after reading this book. And it's like full of eBay search terms basically, if you want to just have the 80's lifestyle again, but the point is that these things, well, first of all they are cyclical, right? So like we can get over Trump, but the lesson is, he's coming back. We will be nostalgic for this era at some point, unless, I mean, this book is less very hopeful in this regard. If you just sort of like, if everyone is just sort of, they have reached their sort of like apotheosis of nostalgia, they have just burnt out their cortexes and now they are unable, they are living it all inside their bodies, but they can't enact it on the world, you know?

ND Yeah, yeah. So, it is probably characteristic that, you know, in a novel that is dystopian, we have arrived at almost a dystopian set of conclusions about it. So, we've been talking about *Severance* for a little bit, and I want to zoom out, but maybe with obviously some of these concerns in mind to think about the central question that this podcast series has been trying to grapple with, which is what the novel might still do for readers today as a form, because the form has existed for anywhere, depending on how you want to quantify it, anywhere from 400 to 2,000 years old. What can it do for us? And I mean that politically or ethically or imaginatively. Heidi, I want to start with you and see if you, do you have thoughts about what the form might do now for us, particularly given all the other media options that are available to us?

HJ Okay, I'm saying this with total seriousness and it is not a dis on the novel, it is a total, it makes it a magical, it makes it magic, it will help you sleep. No, I'm serious, I, well, first of all, it puts my children to sleep almost instantly. And I have a hard time sleeping, but if I read fiction before bedtime, I can actually kind of ease myself down in a way, not, I mean, I can't even read like whatever, essay on the New York Review of Book website, like that, that's not, it has to be fiction, and I think there is something about dissociating from your body and what is happening in your world and displacing that into another consciousness, I just feel my brain calm down. And I know that that makes the novel sound like some kind of sleeping pill or something, but it's like airplane mode for your brain, like nothing else is going to come in. You really have to focus. It's, there's so few opportunities I find these days to just be like, I am just doing this one thing and when you are reading a novel, at least one that is not on a screen that is attached to Google in any way, you are doing this one thing, and it feels meditative, and it feels soothing and calming and that again maybe sounds like not what people want novels to necessarily be, but I think that's incredibly valuable.

ND And actually I think relates to *Severance*, particularly the office parts of that novel. I mean, one of the sort of unsettling things that she wants to chart is that, at a certain moment Candace is entirely living in a 24/7 world of hypercapitalism, particularly given the time difference between her and New York and the people she is working with in China, nothing is ever stopping for her, that it is fully 24/7 and the idea that the novel works against that by pulling you out of that kind of hypermediated consciousness and giving you rest, you know, giving some definition to your days even, and asking for a

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focus that might take you out of that hypermediated consciousness, I think in some ways that it one of the interests of *Severance* is how you possibly get to that state.

HJ Well, that is actually really something interesting that you just said that it gives definition to your days. It also just places you in time and space and so for example, I will never forget where I was when I read this book. That's true of all books I read. I know exactly where I was and when it was that I read them. Like I read this book while sick in March on my fire escape, you know, I will always think of myself sitting on my fire escape reading this book, and I don't feel that way so much with things that I read, you know, if I'm just reading, like whatever, I read an article about XYZ, I read this blog, I read this that, I can't, it doesn't have a time space stamp necessarily and so it does feel just like a big bleed of time.

ND Yeah, no, I don't feel that way about anything I read on my phone for instance, you know, I can read a piece on my phone, that could happen anywhere at any point and I will never retain that information.

HJ Yeah, and I mean, and it could be again, like I always try to factor for like I didn't grow up reading that way and so therefore that is my response to this, but I actually will say that I notice it in my kids as well, so -

ND Yeah, yeah, Leah, do you have, I'm going to turn to you and I wonder if your answer to this question of what the novel might do for us now is similar or very, very different?

LP I was really surprised by your answer, Heidi, because for most of the history of the novel, it has worked against the rhythms of night and day. That is, if you think back to the original novel to *Don Quixote*, one of the ways in which you find out that Don Quixote has been crazy by reading too many romances is the fact that he turns night into day. That he stays up all night because these romances are giving him insomnia. Again, going back to the idea of reading in the bath. It is a sense of being completely contained by this imaginary universe, whereas other, most other cultural forms that I consume feel more like the pump of Purell or like the hand sanitizer wipes, where you give yourself a little dab with them, but you are not plunged fully into them the way that you are into a hot bath. But for me that kind of immersion depends on being willing to stay up all night reading something, not being able to stop. I wish that novels could conquer my insomnia, but if anything, they contribute to it.

ND I mean, but both of you have, I think that one real similarity to these answers is that both of you are I think talking about the resistance of the novel to something we would call multitasking. You cannot, I take it from both of your answers, you can't do something else. It is very, very hard to do something else, except perhaps start to fall asleep. You are not going to get text alerts, you are not going to necessarily try to cook or, you know, whatever that other thing might be that, and that single minded focus may have different physiological effects, but it is interesting the idea that that might be more and more unique in some way, and I suppose we have to think about how, what the effects of single minded focus might be I guess, yeah.

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HJ I mean, I feel so, I so feel my brain speed, I feel it after I have been scrolling and doing whatever, and then when I go to read a book, I'm like, oh my God, I mean it really just feels like the gears in my brain are grinding. It is so hard to make that shift and then when you do, I can obviously like stay there for a long time, but I do feel like that is this, to say downshifting I guess has an implication of it being, well, no, there's nothing wrong with downshifting.

ND No, it is, I mean, I would say escape, but that sounds like escapist, but a way out.

HJ I don't know, I mean, it feels so, I mean, it is escapist maybe in a different way. It is like you are escaping your own, your own, yeah, your own RPM's, like it is just not that pleasant, you know?

ND Yeah.

HJ But I like the RPM of a novel, it is just like a much like more sustainable, your engine will last a lot longer.

ND Yeah, and you know, you raised the question, Heidi, about particularly, you know, we all have children. And I'm waiting to see if let's say, you know, the generation of our children operate at higher RPM's to use your analogy than we do or if not, and that is, I mean, I feel like the jury is out for me on that one, but I'm interested to find out. Thank you guys so much for this.

LP Thank you.

ND I felt my own brain operating at the correct RPM's throughout, so, this was, this was a real pleasure and thank you for taking part.

LP Oh, it was a lot of fun. Thank you.

HJ Thank you. It was. Thank you, it was so great to meet you, Leah.

LP Likewise, happy reading.

HJ Yeah, thank you, you too.

[End of Recording]