

Novel Dialogue 3.2

Damon Galgut in Conversation with Andrew van der Vlies

Transcript

Chris Holmes

Welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in Partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas and scholarship. I'm Chris Holmes and I'm one of the hosts for season three. You'll be hearing from a few different hosts this season, including Novel Dialogue's founders Aarthi Vadde and John Plotz.

Today I have the distinct pleasure of welcoming Damon Galgut who will be in conversation with Professor Andrew van der Vlies. Damon is the author of nine books, including *The Good Doctor*, which was the winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, *In a Strange Room*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, *Arctic Summer*, which was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and most recently *The Promise*, which was the winner of the 2021 Booker Prize. And as Damon himself puts it, he has been writing books pretty much all of his life. He was born in Pretoria and currently lives in Cape Town.

Andrew van der Vlies is a South African born scholar and critic educated at Rhodes University and at the University of Oxford. His published books include *South African Textual Cultures*, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* and as editor *South African Writing in Transition*, with Rita Barnard. He is also editor of an edition of the essays of the novelist Zoë Wicomb, *Race, Nation, Translation* published by Yale University Press. Currently based in South Australia, where he is professor in the School of Humanities at the University of Adelaide, Andrew is also Extraordinary Professor at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town. He has been writing about Damon's work for many years now.

Welcome to you both to Novel Dialogue. It's such a privilege to put the two of you in conversation.

Andrew van der Vlies

Sure, thanks Chris and hi to you both. It's a great pleasure to be speaking to you again, Damon and I guess the first thing we should say is really congratulations on the well deserved Booker win. We were amongst the very many people, many readers of your books who are absolutely thrilled. So well done.

Damon Galgut

Well, thanks, Andrew. Yeah, let's get that out the way at the beginning. So yeah, that's appreciated, thank you, I'm happy to be here and chatting to you.

AVDV

So I guess an opening question, one that we can't really avoid, is just to ask how you've been managing in this very peculiar season that we're all enduring. How's it been in Cape Town? I'm thinking of you as someone I know likes to travel or has traveled a great deal and how's it been stuck in Cape Town-- although I know you made it to the UK for the Booker and how was that trip?

DG

Well, you know my lockdown homebound experience probably isn't that much different to anyone else's. I mean it's had some unusual contours in the sense that in addition to being a novelist, I did for a while co-own a small restaurant in Cape Town, which died early on in the first lockdown, so you know there were other aspects in my life that perhaps felt a little more abrasive than the novelistic side.

And traveling, that was something I did more fervently in my earlier years. I'm far more sedentary these days, and sitting at home is something writers do with a, you know, certain facility and ease. So all in all, you know, I daresay the challenges haven't been quite as overwhelming for me as they may have been for other people. The visit to the UK, on the other hand, was quite an unexpected relief. There was a sense of I don't know, a cork popping in a little bit of release from the usual confines, but you know that's faded by now.

AVDV

Yeah, I can imagine. I guess you know that this experience of sitting isolated, very extensive in forced isolation, or navigating new ways of being in community mediated by technology or not, makes me think about how many of the characters, protagonists in your books from the beginning have dealt with or faced similar kinds of displacement, alienation, which is not always to do with place, but often to do with psychological emplacement, displacement, and I wonder if the pandemic has made you think about some of the common tropes or themes or characteristics of some of the kinds of persona you've been drawn to in your writing over the years.

DG

I do think you know it's gonna give rise to a whole new genre of literature. I don't know whether we'd call it pandemic literature, because the real fascination of this era for me isn't in the pandemic so much as in the lockdowns. Because lockdown, being a highly unnatural situation for any society, does give rise to certain interesting scenarios and it seems to me that you know the most fascinating plots are going to be generated by that situation rather than, well, you know, Hollywood will pay attention to the viral aspects and I think novelists, perhaps to the kinds of you know, claustrophobic tales that lockdown might open up. The fact that spaces, public spaces like I don't know, shopping centers for example, usually heavily populated are suddenly, you know, eerily, deserted gives rise to a whole new sort of aesthetic that I expect other horror films or horror stories to take advantage of. But you know, more serious approaches might see possibilities in these sorts of settings as well.

Anything, I guess that's sort of marginal or closer to the edges of things has always been a fascination to me and I do think in multiple ways a lot of people and a lot of parts of the world have been pushed a little closer to the margins, so yeah, it's entirely possible that there will be horrors of fascination that opened up in this scenario. But what they are exactly yet I can't, you know, I can't answer any more clearly than that.

AVDV

That's really interesting, thanks. And yeah, I mean I think that the ways in which the pandemic has leveled various places that that may have thought themselves more developed or more advanced or more able to deal with public health crises has been really interesting. But as you were speaking, now I was thinking about how in South Africa, of course, there's a really, all sorts of echoes and memories of the past are activated when you start to tell people that they can't be in certain places or they shouldn't be in certain places. Which brings up all sorts of interesting debates about hyper-managed societies and the architecture of you know displacement for whatever reason.

So I guess that that might be a way of transitioning to think about *The Promise*, because of course *The Promise* does all sorts of really interesting things with time and space which are brought into radical conjuncture, but also because of the structure of the novel compartmentalized in all sorts of interesting ways, so I wondered if I could start with a question about structure, obvious question perhaps *The Promise* is a novel in four parts, each structured around a different death and each gives us a snapshot of a disintegrating family at a particular moment, 1986, 1995, 1999, the final years, sorry the final days of Zuma. And I wondered whether you could say something about how the structure developed? Whether you had had it in mind when you sat down to start the book. Why these particular moments?

DG

Yeah, I mean you know the structure or the possible structure was the very first idea that came to me and it arrived through a conversation with a friend who was actually telling me about four funerals of you know, of his own family members, that he'd been to. And you know part of my brain was listening to his story obviously, And he's a very good raconteur, and actually some of what he told me. I mean, some of the specific details you know have found their way into the book in the end. They were simply too good to discard.

But another part of my brain was aware, as it often is, of you know how this story was being told to me. And I suddenly saw, well, I say suddenly, but in fact probably the realization didn't come that day, may have been something cohered over a period of time rather than a flash, but I saw the possibilities of telling a story in four panels, and you know the very specific story that you could open up if you used funerals as your sort of governing device. And once I dwelt on that idea for a bit, I began to see various other possibilities because you know, what appealed to me, initially, was that you could give a trajectory, a historical trajectory of this particular group of people, if you know there's a period of time that elapses between each of these windows that opens and that without it being explained what you're seeing is that their circumstances are changing and that you know you could make that a bit eloquent about what was happening to their lives. But it seemed like a logical extension that if you just widen the window a little bit you could say something more along much the same principles about the larger world they were living in. In other words, about the South African society that they were part of.

I was very drawn by the notion of telling a story in these four little flashes if you like. I mean flash gives the impression of great speed and clearly this is a shutter that's opening for you know a few days around each funeral, but that far more time is elapsing between these little shutter snaps, so in a certain sense, you know the reader's imagination has to fill in the intervening time, but that it's very clear you're on some sort of trajectory.

But yeah, it was the structure first and foremost that drew me and I guess what was most attractive is that. You know books tend to, in my case anyway, emerge from whatever is preoccupying me in a deeper way in my life at that point, and I guess my preoccupation in the writing of this book is, was, the passage of time and time passing. So in a very personal way, it allowed me to you know, express stuff that's you know just part of my general mental dandruff at the moment. But then it also gave me a little bit of free rein to, you know, express some of how I feel about the changes in, you know, national life in South Africa, the kind of journey we've been on in the last four decades or so.

So yeah, in a in a nutshell, as succinctly as I can put it, that was my focus. I mean the other clear thing is, you know trajectory can go upwards, so it would have been possible with a different sort of story maybe to show that with the passage of time, the lives of these people were improving, the life of the nation

was improving. I'm aware that the trajectory painted in both cases is a downward one but it does seem to be in alignment with what I observe, unfortunately. And I guess just philosophically with what I feel about human life in general, that you know, systems tend toward entropy rather than the other way around. This all sounds terribly negative, and the truth is I had a great deal of fun writing this book. So I'm sure we may be able to get into why that is as well.

AVDV

Thank you, Damon, that's a great response. And I think what's so wonderful about the book is that it gives you such tonal variation, which is, you know precisely, reflective of how one feels about the place one is from over a long period of time, ups and downs, great joy and great sadness and I think I'm glad you ended that response with a reference to the enjoyment you had writing it because I think there are moments of great entertainment as there are moments of great distress in the book.

It struck me that there was a wonderful moment towards the end and I don't know what this podcast policy is on giving the story away, I'll try not to. But there's a moment towards the end when we discover that Anton is one of the Swart family siblings that we follow through the book is himself writing a novel, he thinks. He has a manuscript which is kind of thinly disguised autofiction it seems, and his sister finds it and is reading it on her last trip to, her last visit to the family farm and we have this wonderful reflection on how it's very difficult to figure out what genre this is, this book is. Is this a family saga or a farm novel? Is it a comedy or tragedy? These interjections take over till very soon there's no story left, just a rough scheme of what the writers still intended, and it seemed to me that there was a lovely moment of you having fun with the reader and also pointing to the way in which your structure accommodates all of these different genres as well as all sorts of other structures one might overlay on a four part, you know the seasons, for example.

DG

You say Anton's book is thinly disguised auto-fiction, but in fact, I think he's, well, we never get to, you know, see or really take in his completed novel because it's a failed novel. From his notes and his intentions it seems more like a book of wish fulfillment in a sense, the way he wishes his life would have gone. Which is, you know, indeed, what motivates the writing of a great many novels. I think people do, you know, live out their fantasy aspirations or at least give a more idealized account of their lives than the truth. But yes, of course he's using real elements of his life and I allowed him to make marginal notes to himself, doubts he's having that reflected my own in the writing of this book, because of course those are questions that apply to the promise too, is this a family saga or a farm novel? You know a farm novel being a staple part of the South African literary diet, as you'd know. Is it a tragedy, is it a comedy? I mean, I may have my own answers to these questions, but I quite like leaving it open because I'm aware that you know both are possible, in either of those cases.

But yeah, you know the real comedy, if the book, indeed, does have this, you know, element of comic relief is in the voice, I think the narrative voice, which is quite separate from the family and from the characters it's describing, and from you know, the fates they're undergoing. So it was a very welcome development when I happened upon that voice because it allowed me to put some space between myself and the rather depressing and heavy subject matter that I was focused on, and therefore you know, by extension, put that same distance between the reader and the subject matter. So to those whose lives are attuned, I think the ironic lens does provide some relief, although you know I have noticed, not everyone can hear the irony and therefore--

AVDV

Yes

DG

One thing I discovered, if you are going to be leaping around, you know so very, very fast, you cannot do it without drawing attention to the fact that you know there is a narrator behind this. So one of the usual sleights of hand that you're supposed to indulge in as a third person narrator is you're supposed to conceal the narrator from view, you're supposed to you know, let the book as it were, travel into the reader without any mediator, even though you know we all know we're suspending our disbelief. But you know the truth of the matter is all stories are told by somebody and instead of trying to you know conceal or disguise this fact, I suddenly thought, well there are probably advantages in embracing the technique that I've, you know, started playing with and heightening the reader's awareness that somebody is telling the story.

So I began to insert interjections from this narrator, some of them sardonic, and let this person, because sometimes it's a man, sometimes it's a woman, and sometimes not even quite a human presence, let this presence make its observations, and be snide, be funny which led, I think at certain moments to an extreme coldness in the text, because there are times when you know the narrative "I" is so far outside events that it's almost as one editor put it to me, "cruel." But I, you know, I took that as one extremity of narrative approach, and I tried to compensate by pegging out an opposite extremity, which followed the rule that if this narrator became so close to a particular character at certain intimate moments, that the narrative voice would actually fall into the character's head, and we would lapse into a first person at certain moments.

So I guess what it established was a, you know, a range of possible narrative voices and techniques that that became a kind of porous through which I could drum up, you know, contrasting sentiments and all of this, in a peculiar way that I haven't really tried to break down for myself too closely became a voice of vitality, if you like of life. I mean the humor I always think is a sign of life. As long as you can find the situation funny, there's still some hope so in amongst all the death decay, the downward trajectory of the country and the characters there is this sort of impish voice, providing a sort of countercurrent, and I think it's sort of what unsettles some people, but it is also what redeems what might otherwise be a book overwhelmed by, you know, a downward gravity.

AVDV

That was a great answer, thanks Damon. Absolutely fascinating to hear you talk about the ways in which the cinematic has fed into the composition, and I can absolutely see how one might think of the novel in all sorts of ways, as marked by that, all but by those lessons. I'm grateful that you offered us that information that you had an editor tell you that some of the narrative voices, attitudes or responses to characters was cruel and it seemed to me that there's a way in which, you know, extreme closeness and identification with characters and investment in the characters, you know, in a South African voice, if there is such a thing, you know it can lead to both a desire to disavow in a way that might appear cruel and at the same time or on the flip side a kind of affectionate, humorous and ironic joshing, and it seems to me that those are two sides of the same kind of sense of implication, complicity is too strong a word, but kind of complicated implication with the kind of lives that are depicted in the novel. So I thought that was really interesting.

DG

For a great many, you know, I mean, if one had to talk in very, very broad brush strokes--I'm aware, you know, this is open to all sorts of questions--but in very, very broad brush strokes I think there's sort of two books in the world, two kinds of books and one has the aim of deflecting you or deflecting reality, providing a kind of comfort or consolation. You know which is perfectly fine, I'm as capable of, you know, reading and enjoying such books as anyone else is. But then there's another sort which in a certain sense removes or aims to remove, you know, the human diffusion from things and to understand human life better by looking at things coldly and they're almost distinct traditions in a way. I guess what may be different with this book is that it tries to embrace these two contradictory approaches. But I think people are looking for the, you know, the human comfort, the intimate, emotional connection are thrown by the extreme coldness and distance that this voice sometimes, you know, morphs into and perhaps the other way round too.

AVDV

No, it's a really important observation because it, I think what it what it says to, or rather another way of of saying what you just said would be to say that the, you know, there are different kind of readers in the world: readers who want to read books that are about themselves in one way or another, or readers that want to read about other people, for reasons which may range from, in a schadenfreude too kind of, you know, exotic, you know, armchair travel or whatever. But I guess where I'm going with that is that a book from South Africa and about South Africans will appeal to or speak to readers of both kinds, who will respond to the South African-ness in a number of ways. Either it will be purely background and the book will be about human drama, which might be anywhere, right, its universal. Or they might look for very particular markers of the local and invest that with whatever politics they bring to the book.

And I suppose where I'd like to take that observation is to a question about allegory, which I've always been really interested in relation to your writing, because it seems to me that you've always been interested in both inviting, but also refusing an allegorical reading. So for example, I was just looking over my notes and I remembered that your character Frank in *The Good Doctor* says things like, "if this was an allegory, but it was only real life." And we have a wonderful moment in *The Promise* that made me laugh because there's that moment where Anton is in the military camp. He's a conscript. He's 19 and he's had a very difficult experience. I won't spoil for the reader, for listeners what it is. And he meets a fellow conscript, asks him what his name is and the guy says "Pain" and we read on the page P-A-Y-N-E and Anton's response to him is are you an allegory? And Payne doesn't understand.

So it's a moment of humor, but it's also a moment in which I think we're asked certainly to think about what so much in the novel might mean as allegory. So, and then all of the names start to pop out, you know, Amor, love, the very surname of this family, Swart, which is the Afrikaans for black, you know, and they are very much white. You know, Moody who is, you know, there's a character who's pretty moody. Simmers who simmers. Dean Devet who is, you know, the kind of plodding, legalistic character in in all sorts of ways. So I wondered if you wanted to say something about how you think about allegory, whether you think about allegory. What you think about the expectation that a reader might bring to a text, that what they're reading is somehow allegorical and maybe allegorical isn't a term that that we want to necessarily stick to, but you know, characters who represent other things more broadly.

DG

Right, yeah, I'm glad you are willing to cast aside, you know, the literal implications of allegory because of course it interests me as a literary device, but it seems to me that, you know to write a real allegory, absolutely everything has to be displaced so, you know, I think of *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an

allegorical novel, because although, you know, it's true subject is entirely South African, it's setting and characters are not recognizably so—

AVDV

Yeah

DG

--whereas I've always preferred I think to work realistic elements. But you're right, I am playing games and the games are all of the, you know, the self-conscious literary nature that second meanings of words and the sorts of suggestions that words bring up in the form of, you know a kind of subterranean echo of some sort, that's always been of interest to me. But in the case of this particular book, I guess it took a particular edge in the sense that you know it's an extension of what I was chatting about earlier, the fact that this is a story being narrated by somebody as all stories are, and that that fact has not been concealed. So, once you're not concealing it, you can draw attention to it, and there is a very self-conscious sort of strain running through the book, with which I, you know, at some of my moments of greatest fun emerge from the sort of in built in joke between the reader and me that the, you know, the characters in the book don't always know they're in a novel, but we do.

So you know moments like--I don't want to get too graphic on your podcast--but one of the ministers in the book has a scene on the toilet and then reflects himself that it's one way to know you're not a character in a book because no character in the book is ever described doing what he's doing at that particular moment. But we are reading the books. So those sorts of, you know, circular echo chambers have always appealed to me just on a level of humor. But you know, it's a fairly, the humor doesn't feel to me hugely sophisticated always, I'm having fun and it's a, you know, fun isn't always of a purely intellectual sort, I think, but I like the fact that we're all in on the joke, that this is a story that's being told, that all these words have other meanings, and you know, I found various ways to draw attention to that fact.

AVDV

I wonder whether we could ask you to say something about other traditions. Non-South African ones perhaps. But also traditions within the country that are not as legible or visible to readers from elsewhere. And I'm thinking about the presence or strand of Afrikaans in the novel. We have lots of characters who speak Afrikaans. In fact, that conversation I think that I cited earlier between Anton and Payne, happens both in English and Afrikaans, although we read it in English. And there are moments in which we have signals that what we are reading may in fact be happening in another language, and I wondered whether you wanted to say something about how Afrikaans functions in the kind of world that you've conjured in *The Promise* and also perhaps in relation to your own background, upbringing, sense of yourself as a writer and a South African.

DG

Thanks, it's an opportunity to say something on topic which you know isn't always available. It's a good departure point to say that quite a few critics have read this book as being about an Afrikaner family. In other words, the assumption is that, you know, probably all the thinking and dialogue and language expressed in the book is meant to be in Afrikaans. That's very much not what I envisaged.

AVDV

No.

DG

You know the patriarch, the father of the family, Manie is an Afrikaner, but he's married an English-speaking Jewish woman who does convert to his religion and then you know, reverts to her Judaism at the end. But I imagined her children are speaking, you know, a mixture of English and Afrikaans, which is sort of how I grew up. I, when my father and mother divorced, which happened when I was about 9 my mother fairly soon after married an Afrikaans man, and Afrikaans, you know, became a part of my upbringing and we were expected to speak it at home. It was a requirement as a subject at school as you know, I did get conscripted into the military, it was, there was fairly heavy Afrikaans usage there, but just generally speaking Afrikaans was the language you heard quite a lot in Pretoria. It's also the language, you know, that I associate both, rightly and wrongly, with Apartheid and the, you know, the administration of Apartheid. So my associations with Afrikaans are not great ones. I mean my stepfather was not a benign figure in my life and my general associations with that period are not, you know, and by extension Afrikaans are not great.

CH

Damon, I wonder if we could ask you to read a section from the novel, a short bit that's quite illustrative of the promise of the novel. It starts on the top of page 82. Would you be willing to read that for us?

DG

Yes, of course. The sequence begins with Amor, the youngest sister in conversation with her older brother, Anton.

"Her little face is lit from within by its sureness.

Amor, he says gently.

What?

Salome can't own the house. Even if Pa wanted to, he can't give it to her.

Why not? she says, puzzled.

Because, he says. It's against the law.

The law? Why?

You are not serious. But then he looks at her and sees how serious she is. Oh, dear me, he says. Do you have no idea what country you're living in?

No, she doesn't. Amor is thirteen years old, history has not yet trod on her. She has no idea what country she's living in. She has seen black people running away from the police because they're not carrying their passbooks and heard adults talking in urgent, low voices about riots in the townships and only last week at school they had to learn a drill about hiding under tables in case of attack, and still she doesn't know what country she's living in. There's a State of Emergency and people are being arrested and detained without trial and there are rumours flying around but no solid facts because there is a blackout on news and only happy, unreal stories are being reported, but she mostly believes these stories. She saw her brother's head bleeding yesterday from a rock, but still, even now, she doesn't yet know who threw the rock or why. Blame it on the lightning. She's always been a slow child.

One thing, though, perturbs her.

But why? she says. Why did you tell Pa to give Salome her house if you knew he couldn't?

He shrugs. Because, he says. I felt like it.

And it's exactly then, in the tiniest way, without even knowing it herself, that she begins to understand what country she's living in.

The next day she's dispatched, with her suitcase, back to the hostel. Just for a few months more, Pa tells her when she tries to protest. Till things settle down. She knows better than to argue, she can hear from his voice that it's useless. Even though he promised, and a Christian never goes back on his word, her needs are minor, she doesn't matter. So Lexington drives her to the school and drops her by the fishpond, and she must slowly ascend the narrow stairs to the dormitory, with its cold linoleum floors, the beds in their regulated rows, identical, and hers in the corner, unchanged.

Her brother leaves the next morning, or is it the morning after that, the early hours are all alike in the springtime. He carries his military bag and his rifle and he wears his uniform, ironed for him by Salome, though he's polished the boots himself. Nobody there to see him off. Astrid is asleep and Pa has already gone to the reptile park to work. Lexington brings the Triumph to the front steps and Anton loads his bag into the boot. Keeps his rifle with him, for the look of it, just in case.

Goodbye, house. Goodbye, Pa, though you will not answer. Dawn is welling up like a wound as they jounce down the track. Anton gets out to open and close the gate and then they head off, away from the city, on lonely roads."

CH

Thank you so much, Damon.

AVDV

Thanks Damon, that was wonderful to hear you read that. And I guess what struck me in hearing you read it was the way in which that's the strange nature of the promise or a promise itself emerges from so much of what was going on in that passage. Something which is a bargain with the future, perhaps something which is a way of postponing what one doesn't really want to deliver. It seems to me that it's such a complicated thing, the promise, right to kind of, in all sorts of ways ethical, religious, legal. And I wondered whether you might say something about when the title came to you as a kind of structuring device if it was, if it was a title that that you in fact chose when or how the idea of the promise as the thing that was going to drive the novel occurred to you, and if you could say something more about how you think about it operating as some kind of commentary both on South Africa's past and also on its future.

DG

Actually, I mean I've built in various references to different promises into the book, but of course the central promise, the one that gives the book its title is the one related to a piece of land which was supposed to be handed over and isn't. I actually arrived at that again at a sort of late point in the writing of the book. I had already settled on the device of the funerals and the, you know, the shape of the fate of this particular family, and I, in a conversation with an entirely different friend, heard an anecdote about a promise that his mother on her deathbed had exacted from his father about a piece of land very

similar setup to the one I described and how his family had for decades and decades avoided following through on that promise, even though they had all witnessed each other make it. I mean, the situation I've created is a little bit different, but anyway, it seemed like an interesting thread to stitch through the four panels of the book. It didn't, actually feel like it was necessarily, you know, the central theme of the book, it was one of many in my mind and it wasn't the title of the book until the very, very end. In fact, the title of the book was the last thing to be decided on, in conjunction with my publishers. I had a different working title entirely, so you know this aspect of the promise may not have occupied the, you know the very important position, but obviously the title nudges it into. So the debate around it may have been, you know, far, of a far lower key than the one that it has generally.

Be that as it may, obviously the question of land, who has it, who used to have it, who will have it in the future? Those are the questions that most preoccupy South African political life at this time. But in a certain sense have been at the heart of South African political life since, you know, the first settlers arrived here and took land from the people who were already occupying it.

So it's interesting to think of a promise as something you make in your individual capacity, I guess. as an agent who is willing to override the general current. I mean, I guess if I make a promise to you that I will do such and such, I'm saying to you that whatever the prevailing circumstances, however, you know, however unlikely it is, that this event will occur in the future, I am pledging that in my personal capacity I will use my agency to override all those other currents and make this thing happen. So it's interesting, I guess that for this family promises seem to hold no weight. They throw them out fairly easily and you know fail to fulfill them just as easily. Of course, the largest implied promise of the title is South Africa's promise back in '94, and I guess there is, you know, the suggestion that in the face of prevailing circumstance and against all odds, what we wanted was a certain kind of country and that of course is another broken promise, that is not the country we're living in right now. So yeah, I guess it's a very, you know, it's a big topic and this is a large enough reply to you, but I hope it gives some sort of sense of how I feel.

CH

Damon can I follow up and just ask a question about Salome, who is the major character at the center of the functional promise in the novel, and that is she is, has been working for the Swart family for much of her life and this promise of land comes and is held at arm's length. But the narrative voice, which as you say, has this ability to move from interiorities and move about this family over time doesn't make it to entering Salome or really the other black characters in the novel and I wonder if you were thinking about this as a kind of border that you didn't want to cross yourself for reasons of not wanting to ventriloquize her, or whether you were thinking about something other than that in your characterization of Salome.

DG

You know, if you write any characters, all you are by implication ventriloquizing them. That's part of the literary equipment. And there's no reason I couldn't have done so with Salome. I guess the implied question, so let's go straight to it, is was I refraining out of you know, fear of identity politics and you know this quite aggressive notion in the air that, you know, white people cannot speak for black experience and shouldn't try to. That's very much not my guiding principle in this case, and I'd like to say that clearly, because the question was put to me by some other black African writers who were perturbed, that that might have been my reason. But no, you know the founding premise of fiction is that you imagine how it feels to be somebody else and, you know, the standards by which we judge fiction is how persuasively you accomplish that task. So it's not a challenge from which I would have

retreated out of, you know, fear of work. Certainly not. We may as well abandon the writing of all novels if we're going to succumb to such logic.

No, my feeling was something else entirely, which is that this is a book whose primary focus is white South Africa, and you know the doings and thinkings of white South Africa in all their unappealing glory. So I wanted to draw attention to the fact that as part of you know the white psyche, if there is a coherent entity like that, the existence and inner lives of black people is a very peripheral concern. I mean, I grew up in this society and I know that white South Africans imaginations very, very rarely stray, strayed and these days still seldom stray, into the inner lives of their fellow black South Africans. It's part of the problem, if you like, of South Africa, is this failure of imagination.

Now of course, you know a logical rejoinder is, well, it could be seen as my task to fill in that failure of imagination and to make Salome's inner life explicit. It's a fair charge, actually, and there's a case to be made for how I could have done that. I did play with the idea of withholding any sense of her inner voice until the very end and then letting it spill out in a kind of a great flood. But I opted instead, rightly or wrongly, for the literary device of withholding her voice, creating a zone of silence and absence where she is and letting that silence and absence sit at the very heart of the book. And thereby I hoped it would become increasingly uncomfortable for readers to explain to themselves why the zone of silence and absence is in the middle of everything.

I dislike books that give you the comfort of the illusion that due attention has been paid to all characters, that all loose ends have been tied up and all questions have been answered. It doesn't resemble the real world, and it certainly doesn't resemble South Africa 27 years into democracy. A person in the real world like Salome still has no voice, still has no presence and I wanted to make that a literary problem, not just a, you know, a real life problem. So the fact that some readers have been disturbed by and bothered by it, it pleases me greatly because it means they may carry the problem around with them and find an answer in their own minds somewhere. At least that's my hope.

CH

Thank you for that incredibly thoughtful answer. I want to close us out with sort of a lighthearted moment and that is in each season of Novel Dialogue we have a signature question that we asked to our critic and novelist and this season we're asking if you could, with a snap of a finger, find yourself with a brand new, extraordinary talent, what might you choose?

DG

Well, I guess it would depend on whether, you know, this incredible new skill is supposed to be in the realm of realistic human possibility or not.

CH

You can take it in whatever direction you like.

DG

Well, I'll give two hedged replies that I mean, if it's in the realm of you know, human possibility I'd love to be a great dancer. I've always been a terrible dancer and I strongly suspect that if I had that skill I'd probably enjoy my life a great deal more, be out in the world a great deal more, and I probably never would have ended up as a writer. So that's you know, a kind of secret fantasy I guess.

If I'm allowed an unreal skill, it would probably be, you know, the power of invisibility. I can see a great many advantages and interests that would open up with that particular power, but let's not, you know, get too specific.

CH

Well, I for one am thankful that you never found the dancing bug because I'm grateful for your life as a writer.

I just want to thank you both for this wonderful conversation. Listeners will be able to find links to *The Promise* as well as the other books we've discussed here in the episode at noveldialogue.org, where you'll also find all of our previous episodes and recommended books.

We're grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to Public Books for its partnership, and we wish to thank Duke and Brandeis Universities for their support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer, Claire Ogden, our sound engineer, and James Draney, our blog editor.

Thank you very much for tuning in. This has been Novel Dialogue.