

5.2 Writing the Counter-book: Joshua Cohen with Eugene Sheppard (JP)

Transcript

John Plotz

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. Season 5 is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, and I'm John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department. As loyal listeners will recall, our podcast has always been a triangle. A host opens the gate and out rush a scholar and a novelist and the hijinks ensue.

So today, I'm honored to bring you Joshua Cohen in conversation with my colleague and beloved friend Eugene Sheppard, who is Associate Professor of Modern Jewish History and Thought here at Brandeis, an author, besides many, many articles, of a stunning 2007 book, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: the Making of a Political Philosopher*. Eugene, 13 years later, no, 15 years later, I'm still stunned by your book, and I'm glad to be zooming with you today.

Eugene Sheppard

Thanks, John.

JP

Okay, Joshua Cohen, the main attraction, is the much celebrated and yet annoyingly young author of four short story collections and by my count, six novels, I think among them, *Witz*, no, *Witz* or *Witz*, *Witz*?

Joshua Cohen

Witz.

JP

Witz, *Witz*, all right, *Book of Numbers* and *Moving Kings*, as well as the novel that sparked today's invitation, *The Netanyahu's: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*. As listeners likely already know, *The Netanyahu's* won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for

Fiction for its fictionalized portrayal of a disaster of a job-seeking visit that the famous Netanyahu clan once paid to upstate New York (well, maybe not quite upstate) long before Netanyahu became the larger-than-life figure he is now. The *Guardian* said about the novel “with its tight timeframe, loopy narrator, portrait of a Jewish American life against a semi-rural background and moments of cruel academic satire, *The Netanyahus* crossbreeds Roth's *The Ghostwriter* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.”

I mean, I think it's fair, but I also think it sells short that the way that the novel always plays with our knowledge that one of the annoying teenagers who seems to be only a minor character goes on to be Netanyahu, the past and present prime minister of an Israel, now seemingly firmly committed to the kind of ethno-nationalism that his father had been preaching way back in Eisenhower's America where the novel's set. So it's a campus comedy, yeah, and it is very, very funny, but also one that throws a sidelight on the politics of present-day Israel and also in our own Trump shadowed America.

So Joshua, welcome. It's a great honor to have you here.

JC

Oh, thank you. Thank you for the introduction. Thank you for both of you. Thank you, Eugene, for doing this.

JP

Yeah, seriously. Thank you, Eugene.

So Joshua, we're hoping you might want to begin by reading from the opening pages of the book, including by Eugene's special request, the novel's epigraph from the Zionist firebrand, Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

JC

Okay.

Well, let's do the title as well then: *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*.

And why not? Let's read the dedication: “To the Memory of Harold Bloom.”

“Eliminate the diaspora or the diaspora will eliminate you.” Speech of the Ninth of Av, 1938, Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

“My name is Ruben Blum and I’m an, yes, an historian. Soon enough, though, I guess I’ll be historical. By which I mean I’ll die and become history myself, in a rare type of transformation traditionally reserved for the purer scholars. Lawyers die and don’t become the law, doctors die and don’t turn into medicine, but biology and chemistry professors pass away and decompose into biology and chemistry, they mineralize into geology, they disperse into their science, just as surely as mathematicians become statistics. The same process holds true for us historians—in my experience, we’re the only ones in the humanities for whom this holds true—the only ones who become what we study; we age, we yellow, we go wrinkled and brittle along with our materials until our lives subside into the past, to become the very substance of time. Or maybe that’s just the Jew in me talking . . . Goys believe in the Word becoming Flesh, but Jews believe in the Flesh becoming Word, a more natural, rational incarnation . . .

“By way of further introduction, I will now quote a remark made to me by the who-shall-remain-nameless then-president of the American Historical Association, when I met him at a symposium back in my student days just after the Second World War: ‘Ah,’ he said, limply pressing my hand, ‘Blum, did you say? A Jewish historian?’

“Though the man surely intended this remark to wound me, it merely succeeded in bringing delight, and even now I find I can smile at the description. I appreciate its accidental imprecision, and the way the double entendre can function as a type of psychological test: “A Jewish historian”—when you hear that, what do you think? What image springs to mind?” The point is, the epithet as applied is both correct and incorrect. I am a Jewish historian, but I am not an historian of the Jews—or I’ve never been one, professionally.

“Instead, I’m an American historian—or I was. After half a century in the professorate, I was recently retired from my post as the Andrew William Mellon Memorial Professor of American Economic History at Corbin University in Corbindale, New York, in the occasionally rural, occasionally wild heart of Chautauqua County, just inland from Lake Erie among the apple orchards and apiaries and dairies—or, as dismissive, geographically-illiterate New York City-folk insist on calling it, ‘Upstate.’”

ES

Joshua, I have to say that the novel had me right from the go, the get-go with hitting the reader in the face with this image of mitigation of exile from Jabotinsky on the ninth of Av, the Tisha, you know, Tisha of Av, 1938, even more starkly, kind of putting that position to the diasporic Jew: saying, *we got to get rid of this existential condition, or we're all going to be killed*. That's, that's quite a way to start a humorous novel. Certainly Benzion Netanyahu as Jabotinsky's representative in America makes perfect sense, but starting off the novel with this epigraph, can you give us some insight to what you were thinking?

JC

It's a good line....

ES

It's a great line!

JC

--and it makes, it wakes people up. I read it, and I honestly, there's a perverse part of me that said, and *is that a bad thing?* When I read that line, right? I mean, so, you know, to read the line in its proper context, you have to believe that it's negative, right? And you also have to believe that elimination (and I believe it was like some version of in Hebrew, *L'hasel*, a *hisul*, liquidation and elimination) means something physical. It means that, you know, you will be murdered, right? That's absolutely the way in which Jabotinsky meant it, right?

You know, speaking for him as his elected representative on earth, I can say that that's how he meant it, right? But to read it in an assimilation context, right? In the context of people who want to still be alive, but not to be Jewish, to be called Jewish, to be identified as Jewish, to be associated with that, it would say, well, *great, I don't want to eliminate the diaspora. I want the diaspora to eliminate a part of my heritage, if you want to call it, my identity, that I don't, that I never chose, and that, and that's caused me nothing but tsurris [grief]*. They wouldn't use that word, but they, you know, and, and I was interested in that element, because that is the counterpoint between the Ruben Blum figure, you know, who is the idea of, of, of my Jewishness is being

erased, and that's not, maybe that's not a bad thing. And, and then, of course, Benzion Netanyahu, who comes out of the Jabotinsky, you know, comes out of Jabotinsky directly, and, and certainly believes in that comment in a, in a mortal sense.

ES

Ah, it's funny. I've never read that line from the, a kind of like, an acculturationist, assimilationist sense that *the Jew within me will be eliminated, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.*

JC

For some people.

ES

Right.

JC

Also frankly, you know, even for the great enemies of Jabotinsky-ism, of revisionism, it was not necessarily a bad thing, right? I mean, that is, in fact, it was the positive, you know, construction of a modern Israeli identity.

ES

Right. Although, you know, it really just kind of sets your teeth on edge, you know, just to begin with, and you're kind of bracing yourself already for Benzion's character, even though he doesn't appear for a little while, but even for these uncomfortable experiences and the opening pages.

JP

Actually, I had a question for you, Joshua, that's kind of half-formed about the different either/or's that the novel sets up. And the way that you framed it there, that notion that, you know, the assimilationism as, as a kind of soft elimination, like, or desideratum of an elimination, there's this really, I think poignant scene when the Blum family, husband and wife are walking back home at the end after this disastrous visit. And Edith talks about how belief has kind of gone away for her as a category, you know, we used to believe and she, she lists things that she believes in, which were American ideals, not Jewish ideals. She says, *but I don't have that anymore.* So I wasn't, I would love

to hear your thoughts about what that, you know, how that scene fits in, because there it seems as if the alternative is to not believe, you know, just to, to let it all go. Like in other words, not to pick up a new set of beliefs, like a Statue of Liberty style belief, but just....

JC

Yeah, I mean, I think, I think that, you know, there's another line that haunts me almost as much as the Jabotinsky line, right, is the line that's, I mean, I guess it's usually attributed to Novalis, the German poet, where he says, you know, every book must contain its counter-book. The idea that, that, you know, the book has to be its own enemy at a certain point and tear itself apart from within. And, you know, for someone who was writing a book about identity, and about, quote unquote, "identity politics," but in the, in the deepest sense, right, and using the contemporary understanding of identity politics as a sort of comparanda with past identity politics that actually, you know, had armies and created countries. I wanted to also realize how kind of unrelentingly male the book was, right, it was these two dudes who were just sort of at a certain point, you know, well, one's screaming more than the other, but they are, you know, they are representative men, let's say. And, and because I knew Judy, the daughter was going to have this last say in a way, right. I knew that I needed to prepare for that with Edith.

And she's very much, you know, she's a woman of the Depression generation, right, who grew up with New Deal Democrat politics, right. And all of these abstract nouns like hope and freedom and liberty and so on and so forth. And this idea that America was, you know, America was the, the, you know 'Or *l'Goyyim*, was the light unto the nations, right?

And, and then she finds herself, you know, far from home, you know, in the middle of the woods, chained to this guy who's chained to this job, who's just hoping to get tenure. She's underemployed at this library, right. And then she has to see her house, which is her last domain of control, her kitchen, her, her living room, right, be taken over by a madman in, you know, in her, in her conception. And, and I think at a certain point, she was trying to say, you know, enough, you know, these questions can exist on a nation-state level. They can exist, you know, between men in cafes, maybe as they historically did. But this is a home. And within a home, we don't fight like this. We don't

believe in anything beyond our love for one another, or beyond our provision for one another. So stop talking to me about Jews, and talk to me about me.

And so in many ways, it was about when politics meet the home. And so for me, that was, that was enormously, you know, important when she says, you know, after dealing with these horrible people, I feel relieved that I believe in nothing. And, and for her, you know, there's the way in which that nihilism, in a way, can be a nihilism of American consumerism of the 50s, and 60s, which is, you know, I have my, you know, my Pampers that I can throw out, and I don't need to wash diapers anymore, and I have my washing machine, and I have my dishwasher, and I have my this, and I have my that, right. But it can also be, it's a pretty highly developed stage of certain societies to be able to not have to take an ideological stance.

No? And it was for me, combating this idea, what for me was the ultimate revisionism, which was the revisionism of like, late theory of like the {Slavoj} Žižeks of this world, will tell you that, you know, everything is political, including the choice not to have a politics. And, you know, I, when I kind of first was exposed to that, having gone to school sort of under the sign of theory, right, I remember just saying, like, you know, people who don't think they have a politics: that itself is a politics. And I remember thinking to myself, well, you should meet my mom. You know, because like, she'll tell you, you know, like, you know, I'm scared of you, but my mother's not, right. And she'll tell you what she thinks about that. And, you know, and so that that was it. It was, it was in many ways, like, you know, the point of America, and of all the suffering that came before America, and our arrival in America was that so we didn't have to have a politics anymore.

ES

But don't you think the character of Edith then ends up in that position of, it's almost like a deracinated kind of position? It's thoroughly exhausted and empty. I mean, I didn't see it as being, you know, free of things necessarily. You're giving kind of a more emancipatory spin at what it means to be free of these things. But you don't see that.

JC

Absolutely. I mean, but I think, she I think she finds some liberation in deracination.

ES

Right.

JC

I met [Philip] Roth once. Never met [Saul] Bellow. Never met [Bernard] Malamud. I met Cynthia Ozick a few times, you know, exchanged, you know, letters and things. And I spent a fair amount of time with Harold [Bloom]. And, you know, we're talking about different generations there, but with time that kind of can collapse into, you know, a certain block of people, you know, the masters in a way. And I began publishing when they were packing it in and passing away. And I knew that I was going to spend the rest of my life, no matter how long it was, being compared to these people. And I had to find a way not to hate them. You know, we're going to spend the rest of our lives, you know, living in the endless obituary or eulogy for like the boomers, right? It's like there's going to be the month when Bob Dylan dies. There's going to be like the month when the Rolling Stone, when Mick Jagger dies, then when Keith Richards dies. And we're just going to be living under these, you know, under the sign of their mortality, right, forever.

And I felt that that was going to be the case with my career and the great flowering of Jewish-American literature. The point at which Jews had become assimilated enough to be able to claim, if not to fully believe, right, you know, I don't know, that they were 100% representative American authors. And because I was coming along late to the occasion, because there was necessarily an epigone quality to it, a belatedness to it, you know, it really got me thinking about Harold's anxiety of influence, right, and what this meant and what it meant that like, I had to deal with Harold personally, you know, and I said to myself, look, I'm never going to be able to get people to shut up about Roth. I'm never going to get people to shut up about Bellow, they're going to have to die. So first of all, I'm going to have to outlive them. Second of all, the only way that I could, for myself, say that I have gone through this agon, would I'm going to write a Philip Roth book, you know, I know how to do it. It's, you know, like, it's not so hard. Why is it not so hard? Because Philip Roth already did it, right.

So in a way, it was I'm going to write a book, it's going to be set in 1959. It's the year *Goodbye Columbus* was published, right. I'm going to go, I'm going to write a book in this Jewish American style, if there is one. But it's not going to be about this amazing flowering of American Jewish culture and the height of assimilation. It's going to be about the politics that the writers of those, the Jewish American writers at the time ignored, or weren't even aware of. In the same way that Jewish American writers in the 50s wrote about, you know, country clubs, and having sex, in 60s and having sex, and so on and so forth, but didn't write about the Shoah. In fact, didn't really write about the Shoah until the late 60s, early 70s, right. They weren't writing about Israel until the 70s and 80s. And, but I said to myself, okay, I'm going to write the book that, you know, a fictional mashup or amalgam of Roth and Bellow and whatever would have written in 1959, 1960, had, you know, they run into Benzion Netanyahu, you know, in Grand Central Station, and, you know, had the balls to write about it.

JP

Can I just ask, in the names you mentioned, which are incredibly useful for locating the constellations, does Hannah Arendt come in it for you at all?

JC

I was thinking about, I think Hannah Arendt, when I was, I was thinking more about like Hannah Arendt's readers, when I did, when I did Edith's parents, you know, German Upper West Side Jews, you know, got a psychology degree, late in life, intellectuals who want to go down to the village and listen to bebop and then, you know, check out a, you know, Ab-Ex painting show later on, you know, but Arendt herself. No, I mean, I think I was thinking about, you know, the, really, I was thinking about, you know, what would happen, you know, if an American Jewish author who had all of the brio, let's say, all of the wind in their sails, right, of post war triumphalism, right, and had this sense that the world was their sexual, artistic, intellectual, cultural oyster, right, what happened instead of, you know, gobbling down that oyster, they decided to be really, really anxious about the state of Israel.

And, and so in that way, I felt like I was exorcising that, if not the anxiety of influence, then the accusations of the anxiety of influence, and also issuing somewhat of a corrective, I think, to the way that those, you know, not that

they were wrong to write about what, they weren't wrong, but just there were other stories going on, right. And, and in hindsight, it's very, it's exceedingly easy for me to see that I think there's a line in the book that that, you know, at mid-century, the two largest Jewish populations, you know, in the world, were each busy becoming something else. And, and yeah, you know, there wasn't really much writing on either side, kind of about that. I mean, the Israeli writing, there was more Israeli writing about it, but it was so inflected with, you know, almost socialist, realist, didacticism, right, that it didn't really capture the pathos, let's say, of what was lost.

JP

That really helps me understand something about the way that the 2020s come into this book. And let me tell you naively what I thought, and then I think you're going to correct me. So naively, I thought that the point of what's going on in the late 50s and early 60s that you're bringing out is that there's a ideology that's kind of on the ropes, like that the Jabotinsky side of things, that way of thinking was, yeah, it was a strand of Jewish identity globally, in Israel especially, but maybe in America too. But it was, it was a strand that seemed so slender, like it had drawn so thin that it was going to snap. And now we fast-forward 60 years and not only did it not snap, it's like the rope. I mean, it is the essence of what goes on in Israel and for all I know, that's true of America.

But I think, but Joshua, this is where I want you to correct me, because you're, but you're saying it was never that slender. You're saying actually it was pretty strong, even in the 50s and 60s, that was actually really there. It's just that writers didn't notice it or didn't think it, thought it was vulgar to dwell on or something like that.

JC

Well, I think, look, I mean, this is the story of revisionism in the Jewish context is I think absolutely a return of the repressed, right? I think what it has to do with, and I don't know that I honestly, I don't know that I did a great job of communicating it in the book. It's one of the hardest things I think that I had that I wanted to communicate. And it, and there are a couple, there are two lines about it in the book, but maybe I should have come down hard on it, just it wouldn't have been historically kind of accurate, maybe, but, you know, the

revisionist, but especially the branch that really comes out of Jabotinsky personally into Ben-Zion personally, these are people who consider, who enter the most consequential decade in American, you know, sorry, in all of Jewish history, right, feeling that they have the blood of six million Jews on their hands. They feel that they failed to save the Jews of Europe. They failed to bring them out of Europe. They failed to take the land by force as the place for them to be resettled. And that the labor Zionist, that "Mapai-niks," that these Quislings in their sense, essentially sold out their core religionists in order to get the approval of the great powers for their state that would, you know, that they couldn't take, but that had to be given to them.

And it's, so when we talk about a slender thread, you know, the Jewish religion, whatever that is, right, certainly has developed a Holocaust religion or Shoah religion since. And I, the Shoah religion is the revisionist religion in many ways. And so I, so when we say a slender thread, yes, you know, Jabotinsky is, you know, dead and, you know, Ben-Zion picks up his body and, you know, dumps him in Long Island because, because they won't take him back, you know. And a lot of that world gets cleaned up. And certainly the, you know, those guys get excluded from politics in the early state and they don't, you know, there's no room for these people in the early, in the, you know, in the early governments.

But at the same time, culturally and academically and in almost every form of Jewish culture, it became a memorial culture about the Holocaust. And there was this idea that not enough was done. Now, people don't say not enough was done because it's hard to say. It's easier to blame Truman or Roosevelt or whatever, right? It's harder to blame Ben-Gurion, right? And it's harder to blame, you know, Jabotinsky because most people don't know who he is, right? And then there's the sense of, are you blaming yourself? It's that same way of the people who survived. Did they survive at the expense of someone else?

And I, so in answer to the question, I think, you know, the thread that continues is this thread of how did we let this happen? You know, I just edited it and did some translation of and put out a book of sort of like an Elias Canetti reader, right? And it's the creamsicle cover, right, it's an orange cover.

JP

Beautiful book. Yeah, I really like it. Yeah.

JC

And so, so he has a line that, that where he says, you know, the greatest embarrassment of the Jews that Jews will never get over is that there was such a myth of Jewish power, that Jews control everything, and yet they allowed themselves to be killed. And it's an embarrassment that a people will never be allowed to get over. And I associate that embarrassment with political revisionism.

ES

Yeah, I thought it was, you know, back to the Jabotinsky revisionist line, you know, Jabotinsky's body gets, it doesn't get buried in the land at first. It's closer to the areas of Corbin College. When you take us to the end, you say, well, you know, when Bibi comes along, Jabotinsky comes back and also, now there's a Jabotinsky day celebrated in Israel. And those, even though they were exiled and shut out of their early governments, now they're certainly, make up a kind of, I don't, it's tough to see how they can be led out of the government for the foreseeable.

JC

I mean, they are the government.

ES

Right.

JC

Yeah. And they will be, I think, for a while.

ES

Absolutely. And beyond anything that Benjamin Netanyahu does, I mean, this is, it's cut into the body politic from a fringe minority dissident opinion and movement to something that has taken over much of the population.

JC

Yeah. And a fringe movement that, for all of its stupidity, it actually truly knows that it's these fringe movements that have been responsible for Jewish continuity.

ES

In the kind of the core of the novel, you've got these two letters of recommendation, basically. One intended to help out Netanyahu and the other one, a kind of an unsolicited poison pill, but like brilliantly casted off.

JC

Well, they're both saying, *just take him!*

ES

Right. He's a national hero or he's like a national threat. It doesn't matter, just take him.

So where did you get this idea to use letters of recommendations as a literary device? I mean, John and I have to read letters of recommendation quite a bit. Sometimes they're more imaginative than others, but you really get a lot of substance out of these letters, especially in the Levavi letters, you give a whole kind of history of revisionism and Benzion's father. Obviously, you've been reading Adi Armon's pieces in the Haaretz over the last few years. Tell us a little bit about this academic letter of recommendation, set up—.

JC

The first person is very limiting. And you want to get out of the first person and also how do you talk about things that this guy who was born in the Bronx and then goes out into Western Chautauqua County, New York, he wasn't around for. And so I know I needed other voices. I love writing letters in other voices. I think that direct address is something that truly arrests a reader. When it's you, even if they know it's to address to another you, there is that proxy feeling of when there's that pronoun when you say, oh, me, okay, tell me about it. And so there's that.

I also always wanted to have these like East-West divides, right? Like you have the *yekke* parents, who are Edith's parents. And then, you know, you have these Pale of Settlement parents, who are Ruben's parents. So then kind of I have this Rabbi who's like very Yiddish-y and, you know, and like kind of a

shtick Rabbi from Philly, you know. And then I have this, you know, *yekke* professor who just, you know, and I come from those people on my father's side. And, you know, and when they have to explain a point to you, it's just, you know, you sit down and, you know, you need *Sitzfleisch* [patience, Yiddish/German lit. sitting-flesh] right? Like, do you have the whole day?

And, so I wanted to do that. I also thought it was really important to explain, you know, why this guy is in America. It's not enough just to have him. I think a lot of people, you know, certainly, I mean, Israelis, Israelis who don't read Adi Armon's pieces, for example, or some other, you know, or the few other things that are accurate, about Benzion Netanyahu, right? Because Bibi has been so engaged in the distortion campaign of the father of American-Israel relations and all of this nonsense, right? Distorting his father's, you know, career and elevating his father and so on. Most people just, you know, why does someone come to the United States? Well, because we have money, and it's like a good place to get a job, you know, like, right, but that wasn't the case here, right? I mean, during the most consequential decade of modern Jewish history, he's not being murdered in Europe, and he's not building his country, you know, he's in suburban Long Island, and he's in suburban Philly. And so, there is this sense that, you know, this man becomes this sort of itinerant, almost Yiddish figure, you know, with his, like, you know, hand out, you know, begging himself around on the adjunct circuit, looking for, looking for a gig. And, and it became really important to explain why that, you know, how that came to be, and letters were sort of the only way, you know, to do it.

I also think that there is this, you know, there is this, the unreliable narrator aspect of, of, you know, first person, right, the unreliability of first person, you know, is obviously a well-known, I mean, that that is first person is unreliability, right, because it's not this you know, omniscient, you know, God's eye, God's ear, right, on top, it's not supposed to be anything besides one person's experience. But one of the things that I think is really interesting, and it's slightly different from unreliability, because I think of unreliability as a *goyishe* concept almost, right. Like, there's this other thing where you think you're writing about one thing as an author, you're sure you're writing about one thing as an author, but you're actually completely sabotaging yourself, right. So it's not unreliability it's self-sabotage, right. And that to me is something that I feel very, very close to as a writer.

And so I wanted to dramatize self-sabotage in this way of, you know, sure, okay, a letter of recommendation, let's begin, you know, let's do this guy a favor, and then three sentences in, you're like, he's the worst person I've ever met, you know, and, you know, there's, I surprise myself like this all the time, right, not to say with letters, you know, where I say, you know, I just want to write a nice character. And then three sentences later, I'm just picking them apart mercilessly. And, and so, and so I've become very interested in writing as a form of sabotage or insult. And what better than a letter.

JP

So I wanted to come back to the Canetti collection that you mentioned, which first of all, I just love it. It's called, *I Want to Keep Smashing Myself Until I Am Whole*. But, you know, there was something in it, in the introduction you said that I thought, I mean, first of all, it really moved me as an account of Canetti, but I was wondering how much it resonated for you, which is you talked about Canetti coming to terms with the principle of incompleteness, like the notion of incompleteness as maybe an aesthetic aspiration, rather than as a failure. You know the—

ES

That was your, that was your take on [Leon] Feuchtwanger too, right?

JC

Yeah. I mean, I think about it more as like, as like with, you know, with both of those, you know, Feuchtwanger wanted to finish things.

JP

Yeah.

JC

You know, I mean, he was a popular novelist, right? And he wanted to finish things. And with Canetti, of course, he wanted to finish things, but he was a much better rationalizer, maybe about his own inability to bring something to completion. And I think that he really saw incompleteness as almost a guarantor of posterity. Because, you know, if you can engage people in the cooperative completion of your work, right, you were assured a place. This idea that, you know, that I left something unfinished, if someone becomes interested in it,

they become interested in my struggle for it. And in that way, I've enlisted them in my thinking.

JP

Yeah. So once again, you've kind of disabled my question, because I was actually going to pursue the parallel that imperfection is kind of antithetical to a political ideology like Jabotinsky-ist Zionism. But, but in a way, what you're saying is that there might be a payoff, a political payoff, even in imperfection, like if you can draw people into your project.

JC

I mean, what else is the concept of the Messiah?

JP

Yeah.

JC

I mean, it's the greatest political move that you could make. Just saying someone's going to come and get better. But not just not today. Yeah. Right. Right. There's hope, but not for us. Right. And I mean, that, that to me, that principle of incompleteness, which is before the idea of a, that, that political autonomy has absorbed the messianic impulses and energies. And it is, in fact, some completion of a project. Right. But that messianic promise, you know, was very good politics for a very long time.

JP

Yeah.

ES

And then once a movement and a state lays claim to that messianic purpose, then things get a little bit more complicated, I guess.

JC

Yeah. I mean, that's, there's a thing in, that there's a line in that lecture that actually took, from, and it was, you know, the great poet, but the disgraced poet, Yitzhak La'or, where, you know, he says, you know, you never want to make a poem become real.

ES

Obviously, your people around Cornell must be pretty obsessed with the book and the treatment of the local kind of population. I was wondering if you talk a little bit about how you decided to kind of build this fantasy of what Corbin College was and the people who live around there. And also, you must have heard a million anecdotes about Netanyahu at Cornell.

JC

Absolutely.

ES

If there's any of that, that you just, that you were tempted to put in the book, but you decide not to.

JC

Well, I mean, the funny thing is, is that, you know, because when everyone assumed, "everyone," the people who read it, right, they assumed that it was, you know, that it was Ithaca, that it was Cornell, right? And, which of course is where he wound up teaching until Yoni's death, until '76. But the actual, you know, weekend at the Blooms, which was like a day at the Blooms, was in New Haven. And I just didn't want to write about New Haven, because I think it's ugly and boring. You know, like, it's a little too close to New York. It feels like, you know, I mean, physically, geographically, but also just the buildings. And I just, I didn't want, I wanted this perfect American town. So I, not that Ithaca is perfect.

JP

Thanks for destroying our Southern Connecticut listenership right there.

JC

Well, I mean, does anyone like New Haven? I think you get more points the more you shit on it. But, but no, I, but I heard a lot of anecdotes from, you know, about, Benzion at Cornell, but he seems to have been fairly humorless and more, more humorless as he got older, right? So they're all just kind of anecdotes of him telling someone how dumb they are. You know, so, and it's amazing how many different stories one can collect and we're back to the

essential outline of the story. It's like, someone said one thing, and then Ben Zion said, you know how stupid that is. Right. So, you know, I heard a lot of those.

The story that Bibi tells often, and in fact, he just told it in his first English language interview since this last election to Barry Weiss the other day, which kind of amazed me because he doesn't talk about it that often was, you know, when he gets the call from his brother, Iddo, right, that Yoni is dead. And he doesn't call his father. He gets in a car in Cambridge and drives, you know, hours and hours out to Ithaca. And, you know, it's a story that he's told a few times. But every time he now tells it, it's like the opening scene of [Philip Roth's] *The Ghost Writer*, right, of like walking up the path and seeing through the window the great man pacing in his study.

And I remember the first time I read that, you know, anecdote, right. And I forget, it was in one of Bibi's books, you know, and they all kind of blur together for me. But that was actually a picture for me of Corbindale. It was, you know, the guy driving, he said through this, you know, and it's funny because Yoni was killed on July 4, 1976. And the way that Bibi has told it is with snow, which is amazing, right. It was that snowy, bicentennial summer. And, but I think that that's what, you know, Ithaca is in his mind, or that's what Boston is in his mind. It's just this snow world. And that was, that for me became the picture of Corbindale.

JP

So here we go, heading into our signature question. So, Joshua, this is something we ask every writer in season five. So in the past, we used to ask what you ate while you're writing, but we decided to aim a little higher now. So the question is, other than your actual writing supplies and your devices, what kind of surprising thing is vital to you when you sit down and write?

JC

Okay, so I prepared, I prepared this.

JP

Oh, good.

JC

I prepared this.

JP

Let listeners note that there's a visual component coming. The writer is returning to the microphone. He's returning to the microphone with—

JC

So this is from the mass grave that my great grandparents are probably in. And it was stolen, I'm not going to say by who or how. And it obviously had part of its back bashed in.

ES

Where's the mass grave? I like, I don't know, Lithuanian Polish border, like near like, like Suwałki, Poland.

JP

Oh, wow. So this is—

JC

So we talk, my friend.

JP

This is a human skull we're looking at here. Yeah.

ES

With it bashed in.

JP

Wow.

JC

Good answer to the question, right?

JP

It's an answer. It's an answer with no comeback. Yeah.

JC

No, I mean, it keeps me company. Reminds me of, reminds me of where we're going. It comes in handy if we're doing any Shakespeare around here. And, you know, I worked for a number of years as the Eastern European correspondent for the, or the European correspondent for *The Forward*. And, and they sent me around a lot of those, you know, places for a couple years. And, you know, so it reminds me of that time, and kind of spending a lot of time with the last, you know, the last living survivors who were still living in Europe. And people had also gone through, you know, the Soviet experience, you know, and, you know, for some reason, it's easier to talk to. I need to talk when I'm writing sometimes, it's easier to talk to a skull than it is to like a coffee mug.

ES

Wow.

JP

Wow.

JC

And also, and also in my, in my defense, in my defense, like, this is a much nicer place for it to be than the hole that it was in. This is prime New York City real estate.

JP

So I'm just going to wrap things up then by thanking the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from our partner, Public Books. Hannah Jorgensen is our graduate intern, Connor Hibbard, the sound engineer.

Please subscribe, rate us, and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

You might enjoy conversations from past seasons, including Chang Rae-Lee, Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, Helen Garner, Sigrid Nunez, and Caryl Phillips. And there are lots more conversations coming.

So Eugene, thank you for doing this with me.

ES

Thank you so much for having me, John.

JP

Joshua, thank you so much. It was a great conversation.

JC

Yeah, this was good. This was good.