6 Trailer: Weirding Out with Kate Marshall

Transcript

Emily Hyde

Hello and welcome back to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, the online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Emily Hyde, one of the lead hosts and producers of this podcast, and I'm here with my co-host and co-producer Chris Holmes to kick off season six.

This season we're interested in exploring the weirdness of novels. We've assembled a group of novelists who write weird fiction and critics who are interested in the weird in all of its forms. Chris?

Chris Holmes

Our regular listeners will know that each season we bring you conversations between writers and critics, but we're starting this themed season with a special mini-episode. Emily and I are lucky enough to be chatting today with Kate Marshall about the concept of the weird in literature.

We have organized six episodes this season, each of which invites a novelist who, at least from our perspective, is weirding the novel in form and content. We have booked some household names like Jeff VanderMeer, author of *Annihilation* and *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, and Lauren Groff, a favorite novelist of Barack Obama and author most recently of *The Vaster Wilds.* You'll hear from last year's Booker Prize winner, Shehan Karunatilaka, along with Phenderson Djéli Clark, whose fantasy world-building breaks all the rules in wonderfully weird ways, and Tom Comitta, whose uncategorizable *The Nature Book* contends with all four seasons, oceans, islands, jungles, outer space, grasslands, mountain ranges, and deserts.

EH

So, to help us prepare for all of that, we have asked Kate Marshall, friend of Novel Dialogue and expert on weirdness of contemporary fiction, to join us. Kate is Associate Professor of English at Notre Dame, where she teaches 20th and 21st century media, literature, and communication systems. She is the author of *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction* and the author of the forthcoming book with the incredibly fabulous title, *Novels by Aliens: Weird Tales and the 21st Century*. Look for it this fall from Chicago. She is, as much as any critic working today, engaging with the genres and technologies of our contemporary state of weird. So Kate, welcome, and thank you for being here.

Kate Marshall

Thank you. I'm glad to join you.

EH

So you have a very particular take on the weird in relation to contemporary novels, and that has to do with their interest in kind of the nonhuman or really their longing for nonhuman forms of narration, nonhuman novels, if that even makes sense. But before we get there, what made you choose the phrase *Weird Tales* in your title? You're a scholar of American literature, and that phrase goes way back at least into the early 20th century. So what's that history there?

KM

That's a great question, and it's really where I started the project. I was thinking a lot about contemporary fiction. I was looking at writers who were considering themselves part of a new weird, and I wanted to ask what the old weird was, and so I started looking.

And when I first started to ask the question about the old weird, and I even started thinking in multinational tradition, I started focusing a little bit more on the American tradition, especially because when you first start to ask what the old weird is, you land on the *Weird Tales*.

The *Weird Tales* describes a pulp magazine popular in the paratexts of modernism in the early 20th century that featured writers who were interested in cosmic horror and interested in the non-human that have problematic racial legacies like H.P. Lovecraft, but also a long-standing genre influence into the late 20th and 21st centuries.

But I didn't want to stop there, partly because the story got a little bit longer. And I asked whether the old weird, meaning the old weird of the *Weird Tales*, might have an older weird, and it certainly did. If you look at the *Weird Tales*, they're full of stories of, oh, and there's an interest in things that we would categorize also in the transition from the romance to realism in American fiction. And I started thinking about what Greil Marcus called “the old, weird America” as well and thinking about what other kinds of cultural forms inform the weird.

And the weird has a longer literary history, too. You can go back to medieval literature. You can go back to the weird sisters of Macbeth. And importantly for me, as the weird was developing into a kind of more popular form in the early 20th century, it was also doing so next to developments that I've always found very fascinating in American naturalism.

And so when I tried to think about what the literary history of the weird was and what the old weird is, it became really important to me to also locate moments in the history of realism where you see genre starting to torque in relationship to pressures of horror or ways of thinking about materiality that are a little bit strange.

And so it's just as important for me to look at Poe or Edgar Rice Burroughs, who's famous for the figure of John Carter, for example, as it is to read Stephen Crane and Frank Norris to understand how you get to the weird in the 21st century.

CH

I want to ask about aliens. Can you explain what you see as the weirdness of novels that play with alien perspectives, non-human forms of narration, and what you call extinguished worlds, those in the past, but also future extinguished worlds?

KM

When I'm talking about novels by aliens, I'm not talking about novels that are narrated by people from outer space, although I do like those kinds of novels quite a bit and read a lot of them. They come up occasionally in the book. When I'm thinking about aliens, I'm thinking about what is the perspective that with a certain degree of frequency you see in 21st century fiction that is housing an attempt to think outside of human narrative constraints.

And there are ways of talking about non-human narration that are more direct. So the narratologist David Herman, for example, thinks about animal narration, or there are examples all over the place of attempts to lodge human consciousness in something else. An example that I sometimes think of as an extreme of this would be the shift into the consciousness of the leaf that you see in Sheila Heti's *Pure Color*.

But that's not really what I'm talking about here. What I'm talking about are novelists who are often writing in the boundaries of realism or in realism-edges that have characters who long for a non-human perspective and they can long for a non-human perspective in two ways.

One, they can think about it almost in the kind of eliminative materialist sense; that they want to have a world that can be narrated after human consciousness has been obliterated. How do you narrate a world when narrative itself is a human thing? How do you narrate that world without a human perspective? And what happens to narrative if you try to do it? Or it could be a kind of perspective that is more lodging consciousness in everything. And so you have characters or narrators or narrative perspectives that want to put consciousness up above the planet or they want to lodge it in the landscape. It's something that, I often turn to a preface that Roberto Bolaño wrote of *Blood Meridian*, which is a little bit older than some of the other texts that I talk about where he talks about the narrator being silent and paradigmatic and hideous and that the narrative has room for everything but human beings. And so there's a speculation that somehow the landscape itself can narrate the novel.

And so the alien is that. It is a way of thinking about exteriority that has limits but can give us a way of understanding what these more subtle experiments and point of view or perspective are that have been really generative for writers working in what might otherwise be thought of as a more realist vein, especially in the 21st century.

EH

Weird for you is more a feeling or a longing or mood than it is a genre, although you also are interested in that long history of the weird as a genre?

KM

Absolutely. The long history of the weird of the genre is very important and that genealogy is very important. So what are the weird texts that make the weird of our moment possible? But the weird becomes a kind of a way of turning genre, what we would otherwise call genre, into something more like mood in the 21st century.

CH

Well, that's really fascinating. Are you familiar with *Seeming Human* by Megan Ward?

KM

It's a title I know, but not well.

CH

She is very interested in the idea of thinking about artificial intelligence as a way of describing not what's artificial or what seems artificial in a novel, but what we see as in some way relatable in a novel may in fact be operating in, with the same kind of artificiality. And I wonder if that can, as AI. And I wonder if that artificiality is a little bit like what you're talking about in terms of something alien.

KM

It is. There's a way that you can think about a lot of texts that are also interested in that kind of perspective and Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* is important for this. I would also point to Elvia Wilk's *Oval*, I think works with this a little bit too, that there's a way of thinking about that kind of, it's, artificiality is also a way of describing the nonhuman. It's been of interest before our current ways of engaging with generative AI, but it's something that I think is also important for how we understand what a literary engagement with that kind of language generation or understanding also of perspective and intention and consciousness would.

CH

I did want to ask about one novel that is directly about aliens, but which I think is kind of longing for a new kind of association and perspective on these things from the human side. And it's by a, I think she's Norwegian, Olga Ravn, *The Employees*. Do you know this, do you know this novel?

KM

It's one that I'm planning to read next week, mostly because it's also short. I've been doing a lot of work on novellas, but I haven't actually read it yet. It's on my shelf.

CH

I think for me, the thing that's so remarkable about it is it, I think eschews entirely any way of describing an alien form that I've encountered in written form or really in kind of popular media as well. Nothing is comparable in a way to human, either consciousness or form. And so it's just this totally disorienting, weird experience of encountering something that feels alien.

So I was, I'm interested in that kind of like, it's less about the aliens and more about that we feel alien. And that seemed closer to what you were, you were trying to do.

KM

Yeah, it sounds absolutely perfect.

EH

I wanted to ask about one kind of, you know, large sort of sub-theme that I've, I think we've touched on a little bit, but, and that's how the weird is related to the climate crisis and its representation in novels or, you know, as many argue, its inability to be adequately represented, especially in, you know, what seems like a regular realist novel. That's definitely going to be a topic that will come up with our novelists in season six.

And it sort of struck me that one of the ways that you're thinking about the weird and weird tales connects to the climate crisis is the fact that I think the etymology of the word weird kind of brings in the idea of fate. So, you know, Macbeth's weird sisters, they know what's going to happen, like they know how it's going to all go down. And I think that that's an aspect that that novels are trying to grapple with, with the climate crisis, which is like the sort of perversity of our, you know, our relationship to what we have wrought, to our fate, to a kind of a known fate that we can't actually properly address or think about or put down on paper.

So how does you know, what some people call climate fiction, but that category, nobody likes it, I think, and it's much more expansive than that sounds, but has that fit into your thinking about the weird?

KM

It's all over it. I think that if you're going to be talking about weird fiction in the 21st century, you're absolutely talking about climate crisis, you're talking about extinction, and you're talking about that era of reflexive presentation of what we call the Anthropocene. And so you have an era in which writers are contending with the fact that we know that there is a version of terraforming going on, and that comes up, sure, in science fiction all the time, and also in what can be called climate fiction.

But it's also everywhere in novels that you might not otherwise call climate fiction. And it's important to register that. And so you mentioned the weird's attachment to fate. And I think that that's, that that's an important one. The other word that I like thinking about with fate that's also attached to that earlier sense of the weird is determinism, and to weird can be to determine as well.

And that's a kind of word that I often will talk about if I'm teaching a genre class on naturalism, for example, is that these are earlier forms of fiction that give you a way to think about what kinds of determining forces are at work and also how that might change as a genre moves later on in the centuries of literary production, especially when you think of something like the environment as something that's also human generated.

But the question about whether the climate crisis is something that can be represented is most, that is most famously engaged with in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*. And I think that that's the account of the representation in fiction of the climate crisis that I see cited the most. And it's a fascinating book that provides so many great ways of understanding both literary engagements with the climate crisis, but also with ways of understanding larger geopolitical and historical formations.

There is a concern that I have, though, that Ghosh says that you can't represent it or that, not that you can't represent it, but that realist fiction of the 21st century has not represented climate fiction, because it's focused on the bourgeois individual dramas that are so popular in literary fiction. I, as a reader of 21st century literary fiction, I don't think that that's true. I think that literary fiction in the 21st century has an engagement with genre, which is where Ghosh thinks you can house engagement with the questions of scale and larger questions about geology that might shift into horror or shift into speculation.

That I think you see happening when texts that might present as realist engage with genre, with horror, with questions of scale and geology, questions that would be tied to ideas about science and the outside. I think that if you look at novels by writers that Ghosh would call literary fiction writers, these are novels that are written by prize winners, in especially the second decade of the 21st century, you

would look at Colson Whitehead, for example, whose *Zone One* is one of the best ways of thinking about scale and climate in that decade of the 21st century that I know. And that's a text that is working with genre but also has plenty of realist tendencies in it.

And I think that you could look at a lot of texts that have that kind of genre hybridity in them, and you can look at the history of literary prizes in the 21st century and find a large number of examples of texts that aren't "condemned." What, his phrase is that "genre is condemned to the outhouses of literary fiction." And I don't think that that's the story that I see in the 21st century. And I think that recognizing that story might allow us to attend to what the role of thinking about either climate crisis or more subtly about the kinds of materialities that are at question when we start to come up with concepts to dealing with it. And I think that the weird has been very good for that.

You see things like discussions of weird weather or other kinds of ways that the weird operates in culture that can be related to those issues, that having a robust idea of what the genre is, I think, can help think about what those mean today.

EH

I think that's exactly right. I mean, just the novelists that we've lined up for season six, genre is a major topic of conversation, but it's also I couldn't even characterize this group of novelists based on the genres that they write. One, at least one book, I would say just genre-less. I have no idea how to describe it.

So that, that's really helpful to thinking about how we English professors, histories of, you know, study histories of the novel, we're really grounded in the history of the realist novel and of the literary realist novel. But as you show, that has not even been the dominant, you know, consumed and read novel going all the way back to the 19th century.

And I think that's starting to be more kind of accepted and like seen on the ground in podcasts like this and, you know, in course syllabi, and prizes as well as you say.

CH

First, I want to thank Kate Marshall so much for having this conversation with us to set the, set the terms for engagement with the weird as we go forward into this very wonderfully weird season. So thank you so much, Kate.

KM

Thank you for inviting me.

CH

And thanks, as always, to Emily, my co-producer for this season. And we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. And Rebecca Otto is our social media intern.

Check out past and upcoming episodes featuring Ocean Vuong, Mariana Enríquez and Jeff VanderMeer.

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