

## **John Plotz**

Hello, and 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. Season six are weird seasons, I mean, all our seasons have been weird, but our specifically and intentionally weird season is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, and I'm your host today, John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department. So loyal listeners know that we bring you dialogues between fascinating critics and novelists, and I'm so pleased that today our critic is the newest member of the Society of Novel Studies Governing Board, Professor Sunny Yudkoff of the University of Wisconsin Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic, as well as the Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies. I'm really sorry, you have to correct me out of the pronunciation there, Sunny, did I get that right?

## **Sunny Yudkoff**

No, it's counterintuitive. It's Mosse/Weinstein.

## **JP**

Okay, Mosse/Weinstein, great. And her terrific first book, I do think I can pronounce this one correctly, *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing*, was published with Stanford University Press in 2019. Sunny, hello, welcome.

## **SY**

Thank you.

## **SH**

And our novelist who needs no introduction to listeners, but will get one anyway, because we can't resist, is Sheila Heti. So there's so many things to say about her, and I'm not going to say enough of them, but that she is a teacher of writing herself, that she was a time, for a time the interview editor at *The Believer*. She's won an amazing raft of awards, including in 2022, the Governor General's Award for her most recent novel, *Pure Color*, yay, that her previous books include *The Middle Stories* in 2001, *Ticknor* in 2005, a 2011 collaboration with Misha Glouberman, *The Chairs Are Where the People Go*. I remember him from college, by the way, Sheila. He's such a nice guy.

## **Sheila Heti**

Oh you went to Harvard with him?

## **JP**

Yeah, yeah. And a children's book called *We Need a Horse* in 2014. In 2018, *Motherhood*. And then there's her 2010 work in constructed reality, *How Should a Person Be?*. And so I'm not going to try to, you know, ruin my admiration for it by giving a summary of the directions it cover, it travels or the deep questions it uncovers, just by pushing aside little pieces of an ordinary life lived with friends and its accounts of testy exchanges and encounters. But I will say, Sheila, hearing you talk about it at our most recent SNS conference, hearing you read emails associated with it, elements of your life, it was a truly fascinating experience. It's like the best academic talk I've ever been to. So, yeah. So, Sheila, welcome and hi.

**SH**

Hi.

**SY**

So, Sunny, can I just, in the traditional Novel Dialogue style, hand it over to you and become a third wheel?

**SY**

Yeah, thanks so much, John. And it's so good to speak with you. It's so nice to speak with you today, Sheila. And to get us started, I'd love to ask if you could start by reading the opening passage of your most recent novel, *Pure Color*. And we'll go from there.

**SH**

Yeah, of course.

“After God created the heavens and the earth, he stood back to contemplate creation, like a painter standing back from the canvas.

“This is the moment we are living in—the moment of God standing back. Who knows how long it has been going on for? Since the beginning of time, no doubt. But how long is that? And for how much longer will it continue?

“You'd think it would only last a moment, this delay of God standing back before stepping forward again to finish the canvas, but it appears to be going on forever. But who knows how long or short this world of ours seems from the vanishing point of eternity?”

**SY**

Thanks, Sheila. You know, this passage opens up this wonderful novel that's parable, narrative, questions. But one of the figures that consistently returns we see is God. And there's a lot of God talk, I'd say, across all of your work. And I'm wondering if you could start the conversation today by answering the question, what is the relationship of God to your work? And the motivating, sub-question of that is, are you as author the God of your literary world?

**SH**

I guess an answer to your second question first. I would like to think that I am, but I actually have the feeling that I'm sort of less in control of it than I would think. I would imagine that God is actually somebody with perfect control over their creation. Whereas I feel like there is another element that comes into the creative act and the making of books. And it's something akin to whatever creates the narrative of our lives, which is, in both cases, not entirely within our control. Like, I get this feeling the longer I live that I'm not really the author of my life, you know? So much happens that I didn't choose. Even when I think that I'm choosing, I kind of later realize that some other force was actually pushing me here or there. And it feels like that with writing as well. So I wouldn't say that I'm probably actually the

God of my world. So when I was writing *Pure Color*, I was thinking about it a little bit that way. The author or the painter is the God of their creation.

And as to your first question, which was about just God in general, and God talk, as you say, it's just an element of, it's just a good, useful word for that unknown element in our lives that has really no other word. I don't know that God means anything specific to me in relation to religious history or the religious God. I just think that I can't think of any other word for that, that unknown force that seems to have some kind of will and some kind of sense of humor even. Yeah.

**SY**

Do you think that unknown force is male? I was struck by the use of "he" in the opening line. And I'll admit that I think if it weren't he, it might feel distracting in this scriptural tone. But in reading *How Should a Person Be?* over the summer, there's that oft quoted line, "One good thing about being a woman is that we haven't too many examples yet of what a genius looks like. It could be me." So could God be a woman or is it this unknown force in a non-gendered mode?

**SY**

I think it's non-gender, but I did spend a lot of time thinking about it with *Pure Color*, like what God's pronouns are going to be. And I settled on "he" because in this book, there is a sort of parallel between God and Mira's father and sort of the death of the father being in some sense like the death of a world, the death of a God. And also just because the opening passage is such a direct reference to the Old Testament, like Genesis story, it made sense for it to be "he" because that's the particular version of God that I was rewriting.

But I think in a different book with a different premise and a different kind of commentary, it wouldn't be "he." Like if my next book, I don't think that it's "he" for all time, I just think it had to be "he" for this book because it is sort of about the death of the father and God and the father being a bit of a God.

**JP**

I really love, Sheila, what you said about being the author, like the uncertainty about being the author of one's own work and being the author of your life. Can you say more about how you think about those different kinds of authorship or authority, I guess?

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, in both cases, you're sort of leading yourself forward with will. You have like a picture of how you want your life to be, you have a picture of how you want your book to be. And in both cases, there's a kind of always a sort of negotiation with what ends up happening, like a negotiation of one's hope, you know, to the actual result, which is the book or the actual result, which is the life. You're never the sole author of your life, and you're strangely not even the sole author of your book. And I think the other forces in a life are obvious, but like what are the other forces that come to create your book? It's the same that creates your life. It's all the people around you, the conversations that you have, the influences of all the things you're reading, and then just this other thing, which I guess for this conversation, we're calling God, which is just whatever the creative energy of the universe wants that book to be or what it wants your life to be, you know, I think like a book and the life, they're both like pieces in like this grand cosmic puzzle.

So, you know, you have this idea of what you want your life or your artwork to be, but really, you're just trying to, you're ultimately just like this small, tiny piece of this huge, much larger puzzle. So, whatever, whatever choreographs that is also choreographing what your book ends up being.

**SY**

Does that make space for the critic and reader to also be these unknown forces?

**SH**

Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think that, you know, I always read the critics of my work and other people's work. I think criticism is really interesting. And it's just another, it's one of the, it's an articulate response to something you've made. You know, I don't really think that its value is much beyond that, but it's interesting to have, why wouldn't you be curious about articulate responses to the things you've made?

**SY**

Yeah, yeah.

Do you see your own work as a mode of critique in and of itself?

**SH**

Um, I guess that could be one aspect of it. It's not the, yeah, I mean, I think that's probably, in some senses, like whatever feminism there is in the book, I think feminism is a critique. So, I think, yeah, there is a critique in it for sure.

And also, I just guess there's a critique of, like, probably every book is saying, there's a, there's a way of looking at the world that is the, that you assume is sort of the way that people look at the world. And one of the reasons, I anyway, write books is to say, well, here's another way of looking at the world, you know, so I guess that's, that could be considered critique. I don't think like critique is the biggest thing in my heart, but it is a part of it, sure.

**SY**

Maybe a different way of asking this question is one of the common threads I read in the book reviews of *Pure Color* was that this was a marked moment, here I'm sort of paraphrasing, a shift in the autofictional world of Sheila Heti, that this is a move from the personal to the parable. And I'm wondering how you understand the development, actually, of your novels or the novels commenting on the previous novels as one literary project or the separate literary project.

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, that word autofiction doesn't really mean very much to me. I think that it's a bad category. You know, I don't think that I wrote *Pure Color* in a different way from how I wrote my other books. And I think that there was in all of them an attempt to sort of take down what life felt like for me at that time. So I wouldn't put it in a different category at all. And in *Motherhood* and in *How Should a Person Be?* and *Ticknor* and *Pure Color* and *The Middle Stories*, I think they all have elements of fable and they all have elements of like a sort of self-critical storytelling. That's what fable is. And they all take from life, which I think every book does. So I don't know if there was like a, I don't think that if there was a formal difference in the books, it had anything to do with a decision about...

like a decision about there being a formal difference. I think my life was just different. And so the book had to respond to how life felt different.

**JP**

Can you say more about why autofiction is a bad category, which I definitely agree with, but I find it hard to say why. So I'd love to hear your thoughts.

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, for one thing, I think it's, it puts too much, for one thing, I think it's just like a way of looking away from the book too much. So when you call book autofiction, you sort of like released yourself from the responsibility of actually looking at what the book is doing and you're just sort of saying, well, the author's writing about their life and they made a few little changes. Like it's just kind of a lazy way of thinking about the, what the author is doing formally.

And I think all the writers that are these days grouped under autofiction, let's say like Ben Lerner and Rachel Cusk and Knausgård and so on, they're all doing really different things from each other. So I don't really know how that category is helpful in thinking about things formally. And then also, I just think the history of literature is authors melding their imagination with their lived experience. And I don't know that there's any, you know, any great leap forward in saying this is autofiction and those books in the past were fiction. I'm not sure what we're trying to like notate by saying that.

I mean, we live in a different time. We live in like a much more autobiographically curious time. So maybe that's what we're trying to mark by using the word autofiction instead of fiction. But I don't think the books are written in a different way from how novels were written in the past. I could be wrong. I'm not like a historian of the novel, but it just seems to me that way from my reading.

**SY**

Are there categories that you find more helpful in understanding the type of fiction that you want to put out in the world?

**SH**

I like the term, sometimes I like the term like experimental literature or experimental fiction for myself like Oulipo and all these modes that really are about constraints. I find myself, I find like a real affinity with that way of thinking about writing. Like, did you impose constraints upon yourself and that allows for an interesting way of being creative or making something new rather than the constraint being, I'm telling a story in the form of a novel. I like that constraint too and I think that's always there for me, but other constraints on top of that. So I think, yeah, I guess so.

But I don't know, I just, I like the word "book" most of all. I think to me that is the form that I'm writing in and the literature I like the best, I think moves between forms. Like I'm just thinking right now the book, *Sontag and Kael* by Craig Seligman and it's these, I guess there's these essays about his relationship as a thinker and as a fan to, you know, Pauline Kael and Susan Sontag and you can't really call the essays criticism and you can't really call them autobiography and you can't really call them well anything. And I just, I like that kind of freedom when I'm reading. I like to see that kind of freedom in the author. So yeah, do you know that book?

**JP**

No, I just want to say that it's like, I was so with you on the Oulipo side that I wrote down the title as Kale, K-A-L-E and I was like, oh, that's so interesting. Like Sontag on the one side and leafy green vegetables on the other.

**SH**

Yeah, yeah.

**JP**

Can I add, is it, do you, is there like, can you point, is there like a specially-Oulipo experiment that you did? Like is there a moment that feels like peak Oulipo for you?

**SH**

I guess my *Alphabetical Diaries* project, which is, which I just, which is in galleys now and like my friends are finally receiving and, yeah, I mean, I've been, I've been working on that since 2010 and it's only just coming out now, well next year, 2024. So that was like a 14-year Oulipo-esque project. Yeah, so just like taking 10 years of my diaries and sort of putting them all into an Excel spreadsheet and sorting them from A to Z by sentence, you know, the sentences are alphabetized and then that was originally 500,000 words and now the book's about 60,000 words. So it was just sort of like spending the last 14 years trying to figure out even whether, not even how to edit it, because I didn't really want to change the sentences. I wanted to keep that, I wanted to keep that the purity of what the sentences were, but whether I was allowed to edit it, to what degree I was allowed to edit it, like how much to privilege the experiment and how much to privilege like the pleasure of the reader.

I was really inspired by Kenneth Goldsmith's book, *Soliloquy*, which, do you guys know that book?

**JP**

No.

**SH**

He, it was in the 90s, he like walked around with a headset attached to a Walkman for a week, and he recorded everything that he said all day long. So the book is in seven chapters and each chapter is one of the days, and it's just a transcription of everything he said all day without any sort of stage directions. It's all just one long paragraph. So you never know when he's like talking to the dog and then talking to his wife and then talking to the person on the bus. And it's so, I think that was like this huge book in my head when I was writing this one, and he doesn't do any editing. And there was something that I love so much about the purity of it. Like it's called *Soliloquy*, which is like a very high theatrical term or playwrighting term, but it's so banal. I mean, obviously, most of what we say in a day is just garbage and full of stuttering. And I love that.

So it's like, my question with the diaries was like this love for that book *Soliloquy*, like how much do I hew to that sort of the like the gross excess and tedium, which is the truth, and how much do I, am I actually trying to make like a work of literary art in the sense of something kind of pleasurable to go through and

a little bit more refined and a little bit more formed. So I think that's why it took me 14 years because it took me that long to figure out which side my loyalty was towards.

**JP**

I really like your use of the word book in terms of the category. But does that, does the world of audiobooks change things for you or digital consumption? Like, I mean, you know, we both rushed out and bought this book, obviously, but tons of people are going to consume it as like a bunch of bits on a screen. Does that make a difference for you?

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, I don't see it as, I don't, I want to record my own audiobooks for the most part because I want it to be as close as possible to how I, if it has to be an audiobook, I want the senses to sound like they sound in my head. But to me, it's an inferior form to the actual written book. Because really, what you want is the words to be sounding in your own head, you want them to be internal, not coming at you. Or like, I don't know. I think it works for some books. And I think, you know, honestly, some of the best, I've had some really great literary experiences like listening to audiobooks. But I don't think that's the ideal form for my book.

**SY**

Do you think that we're reading differently? And so the experiment that's happening with your breakdown of a traditional narrative form, chronological or teleological in some way, is different now that we are doom scrolling, reading whatever Twitter is called now. Soundbites reading, I guess is what I would say.

**SH**

I don't know. I mean, I think I'm kind of old fashioned in a way, like I think that I, I just I don't think I think about that at all. To me, the book is always this kind of pure, beautiful creature. And I don't really think about its modification, given the age, given the internet or something. The only thing that I can say that I think for sure is that my books are short. And maybe that's something that relates to the contemporary in the sense that I mean, I don't want to read 1000-page book. And I always felt it was when I was younger, maybe there's a bit of a failure in not writing a 500-page book, you know, writing 200-page books. And now it seems like kind of a lucky accident that I like writing short books.

**JP**

Can I just pick on the angry point? So, you know, like I teach a lot of really long novels, and I'm just switching in a class from teaching a bunch of Jane Austen novels, which I think count as short to like, *Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, you know, so we're about to go long. Are you angry at 19th century novelists, too? Like, do you feel that about like people back in the day?

**SH**

No, I don't, because I do think that, I think this is like relates to the internet question. Like, I think we the pace, the pace of life and the pace of everything changes. And there's just, yeah, so no I don't feel angry at, I don't feel angry at George Elliot for writing *Middlemarch* as long as she did.

It's just some, it's just to me, it's some kind of like, blind spot about the contemporary, about contemporary life that, that feels kind of confusing to me or out of sync with it, which again is okay. Like, I think there's something beautiful about being out of sync. And I think some people really appreciate that and want that. And I think probably there's a tremendous value in stepping out of this, this world where everything happens so fast and then to something longer. I just, I don't like, I can't do that.

**JP**

Yeah.

Where do you fit something like long-form TV, which my Victorian novel students think about all the time, like in terms of things that are really long, very unique to our period and tolerated in their longness?

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, what was that? The, *The Leftovers*, I think.

**JP**

Oh yeah, sure.

**SH**

Long-form. I think that was an incredible work of art. That, I guess it was three seasons. I think that TV is a completely, long-form TV is a completely legitimate art form. Like, I think that there's a lot of greatness in it and beauty. And yeah, I mean, we, you take it in though, in a social way, at least I do, like when I watch TV, I watch with my boyfriend. So it feels like a social activity in a way that reading a novel doesn't. And I, so I don't, I wouldn't put them in the same category of art exactly. Like, I don't think theater and books are the same thing for that reason.

**SY**

One of the questions I had in reading your work is how to slow down while reading, actually. I think there's something about the voice in your work and the style of narration that almost allows it to be just, you're consuming it, you're consuming it, you're consuming it, consuming it. And what stops you are the, the length of the short vignettes. And it reminds you that you need to stop and take a breath. But maybe can you talk through a little bit about your methods of creating pacing in your work?

**SH**

Yeah, I mean, I mean, I kind of always like the idea that a book can be read in one day, that it can be, I mean, I come from theater, theater background. So I, or even in three hours, like I like the idea of a book being sort of like a theatrical experience, like you go into a space and this is what I love about Clarice Lispector, like you go into a space and you experience in sort of a sustained way. You have a sustained experience and then it's over. And you can look back on that. I remember reading one of her books over one evening and then another of her books, like at this spa in the tub, like, or whatever in the hot pool, the whole entire book. And I love that. I love that a book can be sort of, exist in just like one small space and time because I, and I remember reading, like, *Disgrace*, the Coetzee book, like one night in Paris in a hotel room. I just, I like that.



So for me, in terms of like the pacing of a novel, I don't want somebody to put it down. And I don't mean like the way that you write a suspense novel where you're like, what happened next? What happened next? And you're kind of like gobbling up the pages. But I just don't want somebody to get bored and say, well, I am a little bored or I'm a little tired of it, or I'm a little too saturated and I'll finish tomorrow because I would love it to act like a, like you're going into the theater and you have an experience and you leave the theater.

**JP**

I get why, you know, the unity of time and space is really important for a play. Like, it has to be the three hours and you have that experience. You come out. Why is it really important for you that people not stop and then like let a bit sink in and go back and let a bit, other bits sink in? I mean, there's episodic pacing to the books themselves. So like the internal time—

**SH**

--it's not really important. It's fine. Either way, it's just, I've just, some of the strongest literary experiences I've had have been reading 100 or 200 pages in one go, you know, and you're in a very specific environment when you're reading it and the rain is happening and you just were broken up with and it's just like situated in time. And so I just think that's ideal. Like it's ideal if the time that it takes to read the book is sort of sequential, like in your life, because then it becomes an experience you've undergone rather than it partaking of many different states and moods and places.

I don't think it's like, it's not something that I'm thinking about when I'm editing the book, like how can I make this so that they only read it in three hours? I'm just like thinking about it on this podcast with you now. It's really not something that I'm thinking about when I'm writing. But I think that's one of the reasons actually that I do like shorter books. The other reason I like writing shorter books is because there's so much editing you have to do to make something good. I don't know how somebody makes a thousand-page book as good as somebody would make a 200-page book. Like there's just, you have to go over every page so many times. Even after it's done, like just with the copy editing and everything, like I don't know if you can give that much attention to a thousand-page book the way you can to 150-page book.

**JP**

Willa Cather said something really similar to you. I mean, she kind of says it inside her novels about wanting, you know, that her characters will have an association. They were reading the *Aeneid* or something. And it's only with this one specific place. It's like, wow, they were up on the mesa. And so their memory of the *Aeneid* and the mesa is like overlaid on one another. And--

**SH**

Yeah.

**JP**

I totally, yeah.

**SH**

Yeah. And you don't need that exactly. I mean, I think that's smarter than what I was just saying, because like you don't need that overlaying for the whole entire book. You only really needed for some, for one scene in order for it to kind of like resonate.

**SY**

Can we zoom in on one scene?

**SH**

Sure.

**SY**

In *Pure Color*, Mira, the protagonist, becomes embodied, metamorphosed into a leaf. And I'm wondering if we can talk through that move. How do you understand turning her into a leaf? And here I'm saying, is this a work? Is this a fable that you are using, is it a fairy tale? Is it a work of horror and disembodiment? Can you talk us through that move?

**SH**

I don't really remember any more why I wrote that. So, but I think that is probably just how it felt to be in that particular phase of mourning. Grief was just, you're sort of, you're still in the world, but you're away from the world. Like, if you're in the leaf, you're not part of the social world in any way. You've sort of lost your body. You've lost your context. You've lost the people around you and the ability to talk to them. But you're still in the world, too. So maybe I'm not saying like, well, that's a, I guess that's just a, I was just, why I wrote that was probably that's just the way it felt to me to be alive right then. I was like, I just, yeah. And again, I don't really remember when I was writing that part of the book, I was speaking it into a microphone. I was taking a lot of walks, and I wrote it speaking. So maybe there's something about if I hadn't been writing while speaking at that time, I wouldn't have come up with that.

In some way, you're kind of freer when you are speaking into a microphone than when you're typing, because well, I don't know why. But yeah, that's all I remember about that period of composition.

**SY**

Do you frequently compose outdoors?

**SH**

No, this was the only time I ever did that.

**JP**

So I haven't read your children's book, but is your children's book like, does it have like that kind of leaps of imagination? Or I can't think--

**SH**

I don't think quite like that. No. Because and also because children's books are of the natural world and the animal and plant world much more than adult books. So I don't think anything. No, I don't think so.

**JP**

I was in love with this children's book called *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, do you know about it, where a guy, it's like a kid who transforms himself into a rock by accident and he's stuck as a rock and then he needs someone else to wish him out of rockness. And I dreamed about it, nightmares, horror nightmares and you know, but anyway, I just, that's what I thought of when I read the leaf part, because I just thought, yeah, it had that magic of childhood quality.

**SH**

Yeah, absolutely.

**SY**

I think, and I've told this to John, I think I had the over-reading part of the leaf, thinking about a leaf being also a leaf of paper, that you were sort of actually textualizing yourself. Not you, the narrator is textualizing themselves in this moment of becoming a leaf, becoming nature, becoming a book.

**SH**

Maybe so. I mean, who knows how the imagination works, you know?

**SY**

Yeah, it sticks out though, because I'd say that in your literary universe, there aren't that many references to the natural world. This isn't an experience of the sublime standing in front of the mountain or the waves or the crashing of, you know, the crashing of the waves and the big trees. How do you think about your work as engaging with the sublime?

**SH**

It's really not a word I think about very much, the sublime. I never think about that word.

**SY**

Is there a word that resonates with you of what you want the aesthetic experience of your reader to be?

**SH**

Um, I like something complete. I don't like, you know, like, I like something platonic, you know? I don't like the bagginess or the loquaciousness of a certain kind of novel. I don't like novels that don't have good endings. You know, I think it has to be like a perfect circle, like a real, like, geometric shape or something. I think I think about the word, I think I think about shapes more than I think about the sublime. Like, what's the shape of it? And in the sense of like a, yeah, a geometrical object.

**JP**

So do you think about the word beauty in that context? Because that just makes me think about this —

**SH**

Yeah.

**JP**

Okay.

**SH**

But it's like a mathematical beauty more than the beauty of awe and, the beauty of God or whatever the sublime means, the beauty of being overtaken by, you know, awe, I think more just like the perfection of a perfect shape.

**JP**

I want to have "overtaken by awe" be the title for this episode. That's really good.

Sheila, I've been thinking about your point about autofiction and your, you know, your hesitancy about the term autofiction. But I was thinking one thing I really love about your work is how much in the work itself you reflect on the question of like the self and the work. So like the passage I remember and I'm really sorry, I don't have the quotation, but I'm going to paraphrase from *How Should a Person Be?*, it's about like that artists, there's something about the nakedness of artists being related to how everybody else can go around clothed, like we get to be clothed because they're willing to be naked.

**SH**

Yeah.

**JP**

So, so I get that you don't like the category autofiction, but can you, it seems like you do think about that question of like the self of the artist inside the work a lot?

**SH**

I mean, I think it, as an artist, you are naked. I don't know whether it has to do with autofiction, like you're naked just by showing your taste and just by showing what you're preoccupied with and by showing what you think and the values that you're making about the world. Like I think it's not the nakedness of like this is my experience that I'm telling you about, it's just the nakedness of showing your soul or showing your insides, which every artist does, and the vulnerability of that and of just standing there beside your work and saying, this is something I think that has enough value to put it into the world, like that's a kind of nakedness too.

**JP**

The connection that I was trying to think about is that that you're doing it for the benefit of your audience, not because you get to show them you, but because you're showing them something about themselves as well. Is that right? Or is it about you? Is it about your vulnerability or is it?

**SH**

I mean, I don't know that there's much of a difference between yourself and other people. So I just think of it as showing something about people. Like, and if I'm showing something about myself, that's

yourself or if I'm showing something about yourself, that's myself. I don't think that I'm, I don't think we're so different from each other then. So it's just showing something about humanity, humans.

But I don't think like, oh, I'm so interesting. I've got to tell you something about me, you know, like, or I've had these, here I've got to tell you these amazing stories from my life. I'm not, I'm not thinking about it at all in that way. I'm this special distinguished person that, that you should be curious about. That's not what I mean. More that like, I don't mind being a fool, or I don't mind being ugly, or I don't mind being the one that, that doesn't look good.

**JP**

Right. No, I totally get that. And, but in a way, what I'm trying to think about, and this is probably like a George Eliot question too, it's about like the distinctiveness of being on view, of having something universal on view by way of you, you know, because that is a distinction in a way, but it, but your point is the distinction is that it's what's what you're showing is something that other people can have a reaction to because they know it as themselves as well.

**SH**

And it's you because you're the, I have the most information about my life. So, like, I have the, you know, going back to journalism, like I'm, I just have the most data about my life. It's not the most interesting life is just the one that I have the most information about. So it's the most efficient to write about my life, but not because it, I don't, I find, I think it's more interesting just because whatever real connections there are to be made out of a life, like I can see them because I'm within this life. I'm within this body. That's it. Like, and like, I just think it's easier to know what's true from looking from within your own body than making up and imagining some other body. That's all.

**SY**

There's an element in which you're able to navigate, um, acute distress and tenderness at the same time.

**SH**

Yeah. I mean, I think there is something a little nostalgic in *Pure Color* actually with for the world before the internet. There is like definitely nostalgia there and a kind of like the, if nostalgic, I don't really know the etymology of that word. You guys can probably tell me, but you know, there's just the lost world, right? That we'll never, you'll never get back. And that's something that I think all three of us experience because we're all, we all remember this time before and it's just gone forever. And there's something sweet about having shared that with people and sharing that memory.

**SY**

Nostalgia has origins and is that an actual pathology.

**JP**

People died of it in the 18th century. Soldiers died of heimweh, I think, wasn't it? Yeah.

**SY**

What, but I love that—

**SH**

Tell me more, tell me more.

**SY**

But I love the definition offered by the late scholar Svetlana Boym that it's longing for a return to a home that never was.

**SH**

Right. Right.

**SY**

And in the case of the time before the internet, you can say that is true because we didn't know what we had. So, it is a longing for a time that never was. Because now we can come back on that time and say, Oh, we didn't, you know, we were so disconnected and so connected in such a different way. But in the time, we're not experiencing that as special.

**JP**

I was just thinking how much this is about the old meaning of the word sentimental, like in the Schiller essay of the naive versus the sentimental type of poetry. And he uses sentimental as a highly positive word and it means evocative of loss, like the loss is built into the feeling because, you know, that you can't have it back and that's what makes it precious. You know, you're imagining it as something you can go back to, but you can't go back to it. And he means that as like the highest praise. He's like, you can go from naive into the sentimental. So maybe that's it.

So this might be a good time to turn to our weird final question in honor of our weirdness. And so the question, Sheila, which you've had some time to think about is, what is your weirdest source of writing inspiration?

**SH**

Well yeah, I've been thinking about this and I really, every time I come up with something, I think, oh, that's not that weird. That's not that weird. That's not, what's weird about that. So I'll just go with my first thought because, because of that problem, which was, like comments on articles on the internet, like the comments section. I think I get a lot of energy from the comments section of articles. I almost, I think I often don't even read the article. I just want the response. And I think that's a funny place to get inspiration. It's such a loathed form, right? Like a loathed like corner of anything is the comments. But I like the emotion in it. I like the, the id of it or something, the self-righteous.

I have this game with myself now. Like I, like, for example, in the, it's not that I only read the *New York Times*, but just as an example, like in the *New York Times*, like I'll read the headline of an article and I'll be, I'll immediately be like, what's the tone of the top comments going to be? And then I'll, I'll be like, it's, you know, like, usually it's some kind of like, self-aggrandizing, like moral, you know, outrage, or, you know, like, you just know exactly what the top comments' tones are going to be. And I, I love that game of just like learning what, what people like to feel, you know, what's, because no one who puts a comment in the comment section is like, like, you're presenting a feeling that you want to present. Or

that you are enjoying having, you're enjoying having it so much, you have to write it down and share it. And these are such despicable emotions that people are having that they want to share. And so I think that's a funny place to get inspiration, because it's really such a low, like part of ourselves that wants to condemn and criticize and like be better than and to find what was wrong with that thing. It's not a very inspiring place, but I, I get inspiration from it somehow. I get energy from it.

**JP**

Yeah, I really love that. It makes me think about, I think it both Stendhal and Henry James have these kind of sheepish introductions in which they admit the idea for this novel came from like something they overheard in a hotel lobby. And it's clearly like this humiliating thing, but they're going to just go with it and embrace it. And it's like, it's true. I just heard someone saying this at the bar.

**SH**

Right.

**JP**

But yeah, I love that. That's great.

**SH**

What answers have you, well, what, what, what answers have you gotten to?

**JP**

I don't know yet, because the season hasn't been published. And so I haven't heard though. I'm, this is, yeah.

**SH**

I'm curious.

**JP**

I am too. Yeah. It's going to be a big reveal. Yeah.

**SH**

It's a good one.

**JP**

All right. Well, so at the end of another awesome Novel Dialogue conversation, 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 expert. Please check out past and upcoming episodes with writers like Ocean Vuong, I mean, Aminatta Forna and Jeff VanderMeer. So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, first of all, Sheila and Sunny, thank you so much. It's great.

**SH**

Thanks a lot.

**JP**

And then thank you all listeners. If you did like what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts and think about telling your friends. Okay. Bye for now.