

## 7.1 Etherized: Anne Enright in Conversation with Paige Reynolds (JP)

### Transcript

#### 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 7 is directed by the wonderful Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, and I'm your host today, John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department.

Our loyal listeners know that we bring you dialogues between the most fascinating critics and novelists around. And today, our reigning critic is none other than Dr. Paige Reynolds, Holy Cross Prof. (I really like how that sounds). Editor of many fine collections, author of many wonderful articles, as well as two books, *2007 Modernism, Drama, and The Audience for Irish Spectacle*, and forthcoming this year, *The Stubborn Mode: Modernism in Irish Women's Contemporary Writing*. I got a sneak peek at that, and yeah, wow, I'm very excited. So Paige and I from lowly Massachusetts look over the waters today to our wonderful novelist. To introduce her over to you, Paige.

#### Paige Reynolds

Thanks, John. Yeah, so today, I would like to introduce Anne Enright, who's the author of eight novels, including the 2007 Booker Prize-winning *The Gathering*, which documents the intimate contours of familial and cultural trauma in the wake of childhood sexual abuse. She's also the author of short stories collected in *The Portable Virgin*, *Taking Pictures*, and *Yesterday's Weather*, as well as editor of the pitch-perfectly curated *Granta Book of Short Stories*. And is also a stunning memoirist, as seen in the candid nonfiction of her *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, and in *No Authority*, a bracing set of essays written when she served as the first laureate for Irish fiction from 2015 to 2018. Ann's most recent novel is *The Wren, the Wren*, a novel that deftly moves among the voices of Nell, a young adult who writes internet content, and her single mother, Carmel, and Carmel's father, the renowned Irish poet, Phil McDaragh, who abandons Carmel's family when she is a child after her mother falls ill from breast cancer. The novel does an amazing job of examining the legacies of family history, as well as the effects of individual choices across generations.

So Anne, when we had talked earlier, I'd asked if you would mind opening our conversation by reading something from *The Wren, the Wren*. So can I toss it over to you?

## Anne Enright

Yes, of course, Paige, my pleasure. This is a section, which was actually one of the first things that I wrote in the book. And it's from the point of view of the middle character, Carmel.

“It was not that he left when she was sick, it was the way he came back and ransacked the place. Looking, he said, for his watch, which was lost or mislaid, or perhaps their mother had hidden it to annoy him. She'd held onto it as some kind of keepsake. He went through the living room, he opened doors on the sideboard, and scrabbled along the mantelpiece, rooted along the sofa, upending the cushions entirely. See, they were tumbled about and gaping, and you could not think how to sit down again.

“‘Did you see it?’

“The watch had a creamy face and a brown leather strap. Carmel knew it from her father's broad wrist, was familiar with the warmth of it, a small, heavy thing; it was slender and solid, like a ticking coin. He unbuttoned his cuffs and unlatched the clasp. He was always leaving the watch somewhere--beside the ash tray or on the shelf in the bathroom or in the bedroom, where their mother was now listening as he went around the place, dragging stuff from under the sink in the kitchen, where no watch was ever stored.

“‘Did you take it?’

“The thing was, her father could never find anything. He could be looking right at it. He used to laugh about how silly Daddo was in this regard. Her mother used to say, ‘If it was a dog, it would bite him,’ phrase that would take Carmel many years to understand.

“When something was lost in that house, she would sing out a location, ‘It's on the landing, it's on the bookshelf,’ because their mother was the keeper of objects. She kept everything in mind. But she did not say where the watch was, and this annoyed their father. He banged about until her silence became a kind of wall he could not break through to go upstairs.

“At least that was Carmel's sense of the events on this particular afternoon. She was 12 years old. There were gaps in her memory that seemed to open up even at the time. Mostly, they were about her own movements. Did she help look for the watch? More likely, she just stood there, or she might have listened with her sister Imelda from the doorway of the front room. Even so, she could see her father wherever he went in the house. It was like a story she knew from every angle except her own. She watched him arrive at the foot of the stairs, put his hand to the banister and look up. Carmel did not remember going up after him, but that is what she must have done, because she really did remember him in the bedroom where her mother lay. She saw him, as you might see, a stranger from a distance. She also saw him in every detail.

“Her father was then 47 years old. He wore a tweed jacket of greenish brown. The pockets dragged out of shape by little books and cigarette packs, cotton hankies and keys. His hair was shiny on his pink scalp. The chewed plastic of his glasses stuck out over one ear and the back of his neck was a deep, fat red.

“This is the summer her mother had her breast cut off for a reason that could never be named. Her father ruffled through the clothes that were hanging in the wardrobe and he was crying. He pulled the little drawer of her bedside locker so hard it came all the way out and the contents emptied out on the floor. He looked down at them, her beads and bits, her appointment book, a tube of pink salve for the scar healing on her chest.

“Their mother was in bed reclining against some pillows she was propped up to facilitate drainage. Carmel had not seen the scar, whether it went up in a slit or was horizontal with the blind skin tucked into it. Most likely it was slant wise up under her armpit because the bandages went all around like a shoulder holster and she could not lift up her arm to get her nightie on. They had to rip the neck open along that side.

“Her father noticed the uselessness of the empty wooden drawer in his hand and he let it drop behind him as he leaned forward and took her by the shoulders.

“‘Where is it?’ he said.

“She looked at him. Their father was hunched low. He was begging, but when she spoke, her voice was very unyielding and cold. ‘How would I know?’ she said.

“According to her sister, Imelda, their father ruffled through the bedding while she was lying in it. He frisked her down saying, ‘Where did you put it? Where?’ But as Carmel remembered it, their father made the bed. That was all. He plumped and patted the pillows and slipped his hand under the covers to smooth the sheet. He wanted to make their sick mother more comfortable and, of course, he might also have been looking for the watch, his intentions may have been mixed.

“He stood at the end of the bed and lifted the comforter, a soft thing of faded pink that made a muffled sound as it fell to the floor. He did the same with the beige blanket, which was twisted away. You could see her mother's knee and hip outlined under the thin cotton underneath and her father groaned as he whipped this sheet high. It floated there, a rising cloth roof under which her mother's body was open to view. Carmel could not see her mother's obscured face, but the night dress was ruched up and there was a little bare leg coming out of it that twitched in the unexpected light. Her father let the sheet drop in a puddle and Imelda darted forwards in order to pull the night dress down.

“Imelda was seventeen that summer, five years older than Carmel. She was entirely grown up. Later she would say their father had drink-taken, but at the time she nodded to him and she did it in such a simple way that he bent to tuck the sheet back in after she flung it forward to drift over their mother's body. He pushed the edges in along the bottom of the mattress before finding himself abruptly incompetent to the business of making beds.

“‘You do that,’ he said, and turned away out of the room.

“They heard him go down the stairs and clatter through the hall. The front door opened and it did not close. A breeze from the garden found its way up to them and they knew he was gone. This is the last time they saw their father in the bedroom or in that mood. The next time he arrived at the house everything had already changed.”

Is that enough?

**PR**

That's fantastic, thank you. One of the things that I was curious about in that particular scene and in this book in general is the way that once these three people in that scene sort of split out into their own narrative voices, how that worked for you? Because you have Carmel in the novel who speaks from, her story sort of told from a third person point of view and then you have Nell, her daughter, who speaks from the first person.

And then I was really curious that Phil appears in his own chapter again, but also largely through his poems and through letters. So that Phil, who is this very famous Irish poet, you know, has a large public presence, even in his sort of appearances in the novel, is always kind of calling attention to himself and demanding an audience, right? That he's writing, you know, poems that have to have readers. He's writing letters that require readers. It's a rare kind of moment when you see Phil kind of self-contained, not in his form calling out to an audience.

**AE**

So interesting you said that about Phil, that you're annoyed that he's looking for attention, because Carmel is, of course, annoyed that he's looking for attention. For Carmel to write and require people to read your work in some way or think that people might be interested, is a great call on the world that she wouldn't dream of making. And that kind of attitude is kind of familiar in some ways: like *why would you do that?*

But Phil has a chapter of memoir. He has, I think, 10 poems and he has a couple, maybe a couple of letters. These are texts. So it's almost like he's dead, right? These are his texts. So they're remnants of something that have been shared and have been left behind. So for me, that presence isn't insistent. It's gone and remains only as text. Whereas the stuff with Carmel and Nell, her daughter, is much more, is alive. Those words are about living people.

And in the case of Nell, they're hugely experiential. So they're there to be experienced in the present tense, in a direct mode, in quite an intimate sort of listening space. Do you know what I mean? She's very close to your ear. So they're kind of there to be experienced.

Whereas Carmel is more, her mind, she's a literal-minded person. She's someone who, as a result of her father's, both his reputation and the rupture of his leaving has kind of closed off various parts of herself and become more kind of solid variation of the potential selves she could have been. So she kind of got down a little and is very literal minded, very anti-metaphorical, very pragmatic, very practical. If she's not looking at it, as Nell says, *I think my mother has a kind of object permanence thing going*. Because if she's not looking at it, she's not interested in it. She only, she deals with what she has to hand.

## PR

Just talk a little bit about how you imagined and came up with and inhabited Nell's subjectivity in those chapters.

## AE

At the end of the day, when I finished, you know, I don't know how long I was with Nell, I mean, how long I was with the whole book, but by the end of the time of writing, if I needed more structurally from Nell or I needed to, you know, make some kind of technical transition, fill some time in years or describe something, I just sat down and typed it. She just came to me so incredibly easily by the end of the writing process.

There can be an oddness about what a young person is. Some young people, because Nell goes, she's eight at one stage, she's nine at one stage, she's maybe newborn at another stage, and when she's writing herself as herself, she's in her late teens, early twenties. And there's some, there's some kind of questions: *how do you know what it's, what young people are like?* Okay, how can you be a young person? Which is a real absurdity to me, because of course, what we don't know about is old age, because we're not old yet, but we've all been young. So it's not a country that's cut off from the rest of the world, or humanity.

But it is a place which is frequently, considers itself, misunderstood. And that feeling of being misunderstood is part of its differentiation from the generation that preceded it. So that cry of *you don't understand*, which is the young person's cry, is, you know, isn't about not understanding. It's about something else.

And so I didn't find it hard to understand Nell. When I was writing [at one stage] I didn't know where to go. I mean, that first section, she is engaged in an obsessive and abusive relationship. Well, she's the one who's being abused, I suppose, but with Felim. And it's kind of, it's not an enclosed or coercive relationship, that might be perhaps the next step. It is consensual. And not

yet a trap, if you know what I mean. But so I was writing that, I found that really kind of personal stretch, you know, reach. And after I finished this first part of the book, I kind of thought I'd done something there, you know, or I felt tired in a very proper way. And I didn't know how to precede then for the next day.

So I was interrupted in the writing by my old friend Claire Bracken from Union College calling at the door. And I remember, you know, Claire, liking my early work, understanding something about the relationship between the organic and the machine, between the reproductive and the system. So I said, well, maybe I'll just, *ah, ah, ah, ah*. I realized that I'd already done this, done this thing before. So I gave, gave Nell a period app, called Flow. She's logging her periods. I was so happy I could have written the whole book with Nell and her period app. Because I was looking them up, they're completely absurd, you know, and everyone's typing in all their personal information into, you know, the future American state, apart from anything else, and deleting them like crazy after the Roe v. Wade ruling.

So that to me was just in a fabulous enmeshing of a system of a system or of an information system or of a machine-like information system and the organic. And I brought Nell more deliberately online. So after this Nell became more interested in, or became more apparent what the online content of their relationship was.

**PR**

It was a great depiction of just bad sex, you know, and the kind of bad sexual relationships that, as you point out, have costs—

**AE**

I have to interrogate what you mean by bad sex because—

**PR**

That's a different podcast, Anne [laughing]

**AE**

Yeah. Well, the things that people say that linger with you, and somebody, I think in the *New York Times* said that my characters are all working-class women having bad sex. And because he got one bit of it so wrong, I kind of thought, well, what does the other bit of that mean? I mean, they're not working-class, they're just Irish, which may read as working-class to you. It might mean, read uncontrolled. It might read all kinds of things about emotions and the delivery of emotions, culturally, that is about class or ethnicity. But what does *bad sex* then mean? He's like, and I wanted to say, no, the sex is very good. It's just with the wrong people. But in fact, I mean, class sex, but in fact, with Nell, what I was left with at the end, I mean, was that it was

entirely binary, so that it either worked or it was completely wrong. So it was, it, physically as it were, it worked or it was just completely not good. And so to, and not even, she says, not bad in a, in a good way anymore. So, so that her investment is completely gone from it.

**PR**

So much of the eroticism and desire in that relationship circulates around absence, you know, is I think, and, and what I found fascinating about that was how, I mean, you know, absence is always kind of the engine, you know, that, that is the engine for a lot of desire, right. But what I thought was really interesting about the way that you depicted it was the new sort of textures that digital life adds to that, you know, as you're saying, you know, the mapping out of, of your period, right, this kind of incredibly previously private embodied thing is suddenly very public and disembodied, you know, and the way in which—

**AE**

It's not either public, it's *etherized*. So we don't know what that space is. Is it a, is it a space of exposure? Is it a space of authority? We don't, we don't know what that space is yet. It's about advertising mostly so far.

**PR**

I mostly just presume that Jeff Bezos knows everything about everybody at this point.

**AE**

He's not as interested in your period as you might think. And that's the other thing is that kind of fabulous lack of interest, that diffusion. So it becomes, it exists in a, I haven't really thought it through. I'd have to really sit down to get the words right on that. But it's not made public. It's not a question of exposure. Although it can be in other cases, but not in the period app, you know.

**PR**

Yeah.

**AE**

I mean, that thing that Felim wants pictures, she, she's, he wants pictures, as is so common at that, in that age group. And she goes around trying to find an angle that would represent how she wants, how she feels about the relationship, which is not an objective kind of angle, it doesn't work for her. She wants to kind of take some kind of more interior sense and express that.

**JP**

I love the word etherized to think about that non-public circulation of information. Like it's not quite surveillance. It isn't public in the sense that you can sit down and talk back and forth around it. It's just insinuated out there. You know, the way, you can gather those bits and pieces.

**AE**

Yeah, it's *pixelated* or—

**JP**

Pixelated. Yeah.

**AE**

It's rendered perhaps, I mean, you could, you could push it, but I mean, it's rendered into some other unreadable language.

When the students who might be young or any age, but when they say, we can't have the characters going online in that way, because Patricia Lockwood did it and Sally Rooney did it. And I thought, well, actually, you know, there's more than two people in the world who are going online or online. And actually, if you take the word *going* out of it, you approach something closer to what the experience of that information is for its consumers. And again, consumer to me is a problematic word and all of that.

So what I'm doing is taking out those verbs, basically, so that there are a few instances where Nell picks up her phone and looks at it. But most of the time it's, it's just part of her thinking. So she looks at a bird, she looks at a bird online. These things are not, these are not, they're not, they're part of the flow of her consciousness put it that way. So I just took down the barriers.

**PR**

As I was reading Nell's relationship to the digital world, it felt, it felt right to me. It felt more accurate in a lot of ways than the kind of fragmentation, like fragmentations that you tend to see in the representation of digital life, the disruptions, the interruptions. There was a kind of smoothness there that I thought was really interesting.

**AE**

There is a development in the internet in the book, because the timeline moves so fast. So when you're doing animal reunion videos and things, and cochlear implants, that's the dinosaur days online. And now the search function has been replaced by a push function. So, so your phone will tell you things. So that problem of revelation in the 19th century novel (how do you get the letter slipped under the door? Or how do you stumble across the letter?) that's always a problem. Past and perhaps dead information sometimes, how do you get it into the, into the



space of the text? Anyway, so that's not a problem anymore. And by the time Nell is in New Zealand, which is some years later, some years on, her grandfather is shown to her by her phone. She doesn't even go looking. So that's one difference.

I mean, to talk about Phil, it is just chaotic and anguished and real to himself and impaled and propelled by forces that blow through him and blow him out the door. So in his youth and you know, an interest and, you know, all things that he had as a younger poet, then they become creepy, later on.

**PR**

It was interesting because I think like, you're so good about kind of documenting bad behavior and kind of the fallout of bad behavior. And, you know, because I even think about, like, you know, Gina in *The Forgotten Waltz* in the same way that I think about Phil to some degree that, there's never a moment when you can't also hold a chunk of sympathy for these characters, you know, that there's not, they're not these kind of monstrous characters that, you know, that for all of their failings, you want to sort of push away from yourself, you know, that as a reader, you're not, you're not kind of, that there is a way in which you're deeply sympathetic to the better sides of these characters, or at least I find myself reading that way.

**AE**

The reader is (well, I am, but, you know, I don't know if the reader is...), there is a kind of moment of doom when you commit to a character a bit. Because none of my characters are lovely, apart from Terry, Terry's lovely.

But that is, so when you commit to a character, you say, oh, God, you know, *I'm gonna have to like these soon*, you know what I mean? I'm gonna have to find a way that when you live with them long enough, you see, you gather that, yeah, it's not black and white, put it that way.

**PR**

So can we just like nudge the conversation? Because I think another thing that was really interesting about Nell, and was wondering as I was reading, is the degree to which her amazing characterization also came from your time in the classroom. As I mentioned to you when we first talked about this, Novel Dialogue was imagined as a format for facilitating conversations across academics and creative writers. I think a lot of times in the States, there's a kind of bigger divide, you know, it's one of the things I love about working on Irish literature is that there's a very comfortable exchange all of the time between creative writers and the academic world, right, that sort of the scholarly world and the creative world are seen to kind of work together really comfortably.

Why do you think it is or how have you experienced as a writer? What do you get out of those conversations? What do you get from being on the hall at UCD, you know, with many of my favorite scholars?

**AE**

Indeed, many of mine too. So, yeah, I mean, actually, it's relatively recent that Ireland has creative writing at all. So, and there, I wouldn't say it's tension-free because departments are full of people who need to advance, and in a system that seems to be reluctant to advance them. And so, those academic disciplines are laid out very clearly, or very mysteriously, one way or the other. And, you know, so, you need your PhD, you need to publish papers and then you have the creative writers. And so, they're actually, in many strata of the department, people would be both.

**PR**

In coming to teaching, you know, at this particular stage of your career, is there any way in which having to kind of account for the process to a classroom or to respond to student writing has changed how you think about your own writing and your own process?

**AE**

Not really, because I don't teach, I read, that's all I do. I mean, I'm very responsive. And, you know, that annoys the students, they want to be told what to do, and I refuse to tell them what to do. And I might share some anecdotes from my own experience, but mostly what I do is I read their work and I bring my attention to their work and respond to it.

So, that shift from delivering an education to expecting work. Do you know what I mean? So, you're reversing the polarities there in the classroom. In my case, very deliberately. So, I don't really chop up the course and deliver it in sort of pieces that they might digest. And so, and some of them feel that shift in polarities as being very difficult.

Perhaps more the American students, when I think about it—

**PR**

No surprise—

**AE**

—because the idea that just as we're delivering a product, but you're, you can't deliver their book, they're the only person who can write their book, you can't deliver their creativity, though you can kind of, you might say bright things to open doors. But actually, there are a few things you can do in terms of atmosphere, you can open, you can make sure they know by one way, by

one hint or another, that they can write absolutely anything they want. Okay, so you can remove their inner censor. And you can, and you work with, that's delicate work, okay, you don't want to frighten the horses. But you can, you can somehow give them permission. So, that's one thing that I'm very keen to do.

I mean, when you say does, you know, writing Nell, did that come from observing students? I would have to say not really.

**PR**

Interesting.

**AE**

There might be a kind of frustration there, that they're not delivering work about their *absolute*, many of them. But some of them are, I suppose some of them are. A lot of work about youth is just about disconnection. And so, when you said that the young writers that you're reading are interested in the fragmentation and disconnection that comes from being online and Nell isn't. That's because that's a tension that I'm also interested in. It's not just, because Nell is herself interested in connection. She's a young woman interested in connection. And I know it's not very fashionable, even among young women now to be interested in connection, but they do nothing but connect all the time. You can't stop them.

**JP**

When you think about the form that that work takes among the young, like in America, I seem to see a lot of the creative writing students going towards writing screenplays, or they want to design a video game, or they imagine, you know, writing for the movies. Do you see that as well? Do you have thoughts about that?

**Ae**

Yeah, they can do what they like. That's the other thing they don't like me saying. So, yeah, and I'll talk about narrative structure, and I'll talk about structuring, and I'll talk about process that, you know, that you can structure all you like. It's not what's going to happen when you as soon as you start typing, and then you have to look at what you're doing. That's what you're actually doing other than planning on doing. So, yeah, I mean, prose fiction is what I'm more capable of teaching. And not teaching, engaging with, and I don't really do--I mean, they possibly have a screenwriting class. Am I being a little too deliberately vague?

**PR**

But John, I also think, and I think Anne would probably agree with this, one of the things that's interesting about Ireland, in particular, for being such a small country, are the amazing venues

for prose writing, you know, that there's such a vibrant network of small independent presses and little magazines there right now, that you can write prose and you can get it before readers in a way that I don't think you can as easily in the States. So that also might help to explain the kind of commitment to prose writing, in a way that seems—

## **AE**

I think the difference is, I think the difference for those small journals is like, is that a feeling that people will read them. So, because there's no shortages of ways to publish whatever you want to do, wherever. But it's that feeling of making it somehow matter. And the circumference here in Ireland makes that somehow matter. And so, that's important to them.

But actually, the prose, I mean, there's stuff about identifying and refining the tone and the voice on the page. So, you avoid the word *voice* because it's already there. Don't go looking for something. I mean, it's like people looking for their voice and they say, oh, like as if they didn't, when it's right there in front of them is really kind of. So, that's another of my jobs. So, there it is. *Look, there it is. There's that comma there*, is how your voice is structured, you know. So, they're kind of keen on prose fiction.

What I like to do, because I come from the world of publishing more or less, is I want them to get a voice for their nonfiction, as in, they need these days, endless self-presentation, they need to be able to talk about themselves and their work in a way that's engaging and conversational and potentially intelligent as well.

So, to get to that state of carefree expression is very difficult for them. Because it's, well, you have to know what you're about. It's really hard. I was I don't know how many books in before I could start describing anything about what I was doing. It's a very close process. So, that externalization or objectification of it is really hard to do. So, and how you place yourself in the conversation, you know. And then, you know, there are really basic things which I forget to teach them, which is that if you're going to go and have a little piece about your influences, can you make them not all dead? That's fine. You know, congratulations, you love Nietzsche. That doesn't mean you're fabulously intelligent. You know what I mean? That they should engage in the current conversation, which is actually condemning them to hell, really, because that endless networking and reforming your networks and building your influence and all the rest of it is an absolute mortification to the soul of writing. It's really, really difficult.

## **PR**

But having that voice is so great. I know our time is winding up. But just to sort of point to the work that you did as the first laureate for Irish fiction, you know, and those essays and authority, in terms of being able to kind of be direct and powerful and distinctive in that voice that you're

helping students to identify. You're so right that there is a kind of sense of the very different voices that you have to inhabit given the genre that you're writing in.

But, you know, but it's so pitch perfect. And again, I know this is because you started as a journalist and you've written so many, so many opinion pieces and essays for various things like the *London Review of Books*. But you provide these students such a nice example of exactly the voice that you're trying to help them find. You know, I think that was one of the things I was curious about is, you know, the way in which you're absorbing their influence or they're absorbing your influence. And I think what you've described is, is great. You know, I mean, it's great pedagogy.

**AE**

A lot of it is, is attitude. And I think they realize that people who do well are usually working. So goofing off is not like, you know, so I said, there's something about, you know, conscientiousness or whatever that, that I hope they absorb as well.

But that voice that I found so difficult to find. And I think in maybe 1993, a friend left, lent me some collected essays of Christopher Hitchens, who turned to the right-wing in his later life.

**PR**

Yeah, I'm curious where this anecdote's going.

**AE**

Yeah, he wrote a book, he wrote an essay called "On Booze and Fags," which was about how awful, how awful drink was to a writer's career and abilities and talents--but how brilliant cigarettes are, and pipes and all the rest of it. And it was, I didn't know, you could write like that. So what he had and what I think I could identify now as something that is necessary for this kind of nonfiction is a mix of authority and carelessness. Okay, so that the tension between possession, possessing your idea, but not holding on to it too hard, say, or being in charge of your thoughts, but not being in charge of the world. Between being, you know, serious, but not solemn, all of these things are about authority and creativity, which has got a big, anti-authoritarian kind of engine going there, you know what I mean? So if they can balance those two things, then they can make their statements sing, you know, somehow make them work.

**JP**

So, and this might be a good moment to turn to the signature question that we ask all of the folks we speak with on the podcast. So the signature question for season seven is, what is the first book that you remember loving?

**AE**

I got a book when I was four years old for my birthday and it was called *Now We Are Six* by A. A. Milne and I was only four.

I mean, that was something I needed to point out to people, *I'm only four and I have a book about being six*--and I could read it. So I just love that book so much. I can see the cover still. I was looking it up online and they didn't have that edition with the blue frame on that. So, but A.A. Milne is actually a brilliant writer. When I read him to the kids, which is a great test, every sentence worked and Winnie the Pooh and all the rest, they're so well put together. It's really great. So I love that book. I loved that book.

Then I loved *Alice in Wonderland* and I loved *Alice in Wonderland* for many years. And to the disappointment of my mother who wanted me to love *Wind in the Willows* because she had loved *Wind in the Willows*, why could I not love *Wind in the Willows* was the question and I didn't find *Wind in the Willows* as interesting one way or the other apart from too much class-based, too cute maybe.

**JP**

It is cute. Yeah.

**AE**

Yeah. Mr. Toad cross-dressing was, that was the bit I remembered, the escape in the woman's clothing, the long room. That was fun. *Alice in Wonderland*, I read constantly, just over and over and over again.

**PR**

I'm so happy you say that because I talk about Veronica as kind of ambivalent and trying to be and not be *Alice in Wonderland* in *The Gathering* in my book. So now I'm feeling all saucy because there's like a person.

**AE**

Not through the looking glass, no?

**PR**

Yeah, just sort of falling into the abyss.

**AE**

Oh, the fall, the fall, it's great. Yeah, so.

**JP**

Oh, that's a great connection. Cool.

Well, as we approach the end of this novel dialogue, we want to thank, as always, the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and Duke University for continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern, Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer, Rebecca Otto does our social media. Check out past and upcoming episodes with writers like Ocean Vuong, Aminatta Forna, and Jeff VanderMeer. So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks so much for listening. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

So Paige, thank you so much. Anne, thank you. It's incredibly generous.

**PR**

Thank you both.

**AE**

That was great. Thank you.