7.2 You Write Because You Want to Feel Free: Katie Kitamura and Alexander Manshel (SW)

Transcript

Sarah Wasserman

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. I'm Sarah Wasserman, one of the hosts at Novel Dialogue. In this season, which is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, we're bringing you dialogues between the most fascinating critics and novelists around to talk about how novels work.

And to be honest, I'm probably a little too excited about today's episode, which features one of my favorite critics and one of my favorite novelists. Today, we have Alexander Manshel with us to talk with the award-winning novelist, art critic, and essayist, Katie Kitamura. Katie is the author of *Japanese for Travelers*, a non-fiction book about her travels through Japan, *Gone to the Forest*, *The Long Shot*, which to quote one reviewer, "delivers the reader into the exotic, bruising, and hypermasculine world of mixed martial arts," *A Separation*, and most recently, a novel that is one of my absolute favorites, *Intimacies*. One of the *New York Times* 10 best books of 2021, it was long-listed for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award and was a finalist for the Joyce Carol Oates Prize. People like to talk about Katie's ability to translate the untranslatable and the alchemy of her spare but deeply affecting prose. Dwight Garner said of *Intimacies* in the *New York Times* that it is "coolly written and casts a spell." I remember exactly where I was when I gobbled up *Intimacies* and have to say that for me, it wasn't coolly written as much as it was and is just cool. Katie Kitamura writes novels that are so smart and so powerful, they intimidate. Her books are at the back of the party, wearing better clothes than you and smoking cigarettes.

So welcome to the show, Katie. Thanks for being here.

Katie Kitamura

Thank you so much, Sarah. I'm thrilled.

SW

Alexander Manshel is assistant professor of English at McGill University, where he teaches 20th and 21st century American literature. He has published essays on topics ranging from literary prizes to audiobooks to literary adaptations for TV. His book, *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* came out last year with Columbia University Press. And it is an absolute must read for anyone interested in contemporary literature and the dominance of historical fiction in the contemporary canon. The scholarship is rigorous, the writing is generous, and I think it's already reshaping

how we think about contemporary fiction as a whole. So Alexander, thanks so much for being here today.

Alexander Manshel

Thanks, Sarah.

SW

And I have the lovely job of stepping into the background now and just turning things over to you.

AM

Great. Thanks, Sarah. And thank you, Katie, for being here and for taking the time to speak with us, not least because this interview has given me the opportunity and the incredible excuse to put aside all of my other work and reread your four incredible novels.

As a way of starting and introducing or reintroducing our listeners to your work, I wondered if I could ask you to read the first paragraph of your most recent novel, *Intimacies*.

KK

Of course, and Alexander, thank you so much for taking the time to be with my work to think about it. It means so much to me. I'm really grateful.

“It is never easy to move to a new country, but in truth I was happy to be away from New York. That city had become disorienting to me, after my father's death and my mother's sudden retreat to Singapore. For the first time, I understood how much my parents had anchored me to this place none of us were from. It was my father's long illness that had kept me there, and with its unhappy resolution I was suddenly free to go. I applied for the position of staff interpreter at the Court on impulse, but once I had accepted the job and moved to The Hague, I realized that I had no intention of returning to New York, I no longer knew how to be at home there.”

AM

Thank you. So this novel opens with the unnamed protagonist leaving New York and moving to the Netherlands, but all four of your novels take place elsewhere, as it were. Your first novel, *The Long Shot*, opens on that MMA fighter crossing the border from California to Mexico. Your second novel, *Gone to the Forest*, follows a father and son who own a farm in an unnamed, colonized country. Your third, *A Separation*, begins with a woman traveling from London to try and find her husband who has gone missing in Greece.

These are novels filled with exiles, expatriates, travelers, and ones that take place in temporary spaces like hotel rooms and furnished apartments. Where does this interest in being elsewhere come from and what is it you find so compelling about the possibilities of temporary homes and ersatz relationships?

KK

Thanks so much for that question. This is one of these things that you only realize kind of three books in, you suddenly think, I have never written anything that's set in the United States, for example, which is where I grew up. But of course, you know, I am the children of immigrants. My parents are Japanese. They moved to the United States in their early 20s. And then kind of contrary to the typical immigration story, they then moved back to Japan about 15 years, maybe 20 years later.

So I kind of grew up with this very firm sense that there were multiple places that I could consider a home, rather than homes simply. And I very much grew up oriented towards two different cultures at the same time. And I think that's part of probably where that interest in dislocation comes from. It's funny, I'm just coming to the end of another book. And that is the first thing that I've written in New York, in the United States. And that's been a really interesting experience.

I like the kind of hyperacuity that you have when you're in a new place, a kind of hyper awareness, you're observing, you almost have this anthropological way of moving through a city or a location when you're not from that place. And I think that fades quite quickly. Once you are from that place, you lose that ability to note the various rituals and conventions that we all operate under. And that kind of observation is a big part of how I think about the narrative voice for my characters. So I think it's a combination of a natural interest from my own biography, and then almost a stylistic one, one that I think creates a rationale for certain attributions, certain qualities in the voice itself.

AM

It seems like at least your two most recent narrators are also interested in kind of bridging the gaps between cultures or nations and languages. While your first two novels are about men who work more or less with their hands, fighters and farmers, in the most recent novels, the narrators work with, we might say with their minds, with language. *A Separation* is narrated by a literary translator who describes translation as "not unlike an act of channeling in which you write and do not write the words." Likewise, *Intimacies* is narrated by an interpreter who describes her job like this: "It was the job of the interpreter not simply to state or perform, but to repeat the unspeakable. Our daily activity hinged on the repeated description of matters that were generally subject to euphemism and elision." I

wonder how you see these various related occupations—translator, medium, interpreter—in relation to the work of the novelist and to your work as a novelist in particular?

KK

I think it's very closely related, and I think it's very, I mean, you know, having a character who's an interpreter or a character who's a translator that allows me, I think, to write about writing in a way without doing it directly. Often, when I look at the books, when I'm saying something about what it means to be an interpreter or what I'm, when I'm saying something about what it means to be an actor, which is what the central character of my new novel is, I'm really using it as an opportunity to think about how writing works for me, I think.

But I also think there's something quite specific, you know, if I want to write about writing, why not just make the central character a writer, which many, many writers obviously do. And I think that is related to my own relationship to the question of authorship, which has never been a particularly easy one for me. It took me a long time to call myself a writer, even now I probably would put something like, I don't know, professor on my immigration form as I, as I cross back into the United States. And I think in the characters and the occupations that I'm interested in, it's often people who are adjacent to the point of enunciation, so to speak, so they're not the, they're speaking the words of other people, or they're writing the words of other people, they're never authoring those words themselves. And on the one hand, of course, that's very close to what it is for me to write, you are channeling to some extent, you are entering into other imagined persona.

But at the same time, I think it's also quite specific to how I think about authorship, what it means to me. And it's, I suppose it's, it must be useful, it must be the thing that allows me, allows me to write. I think the moment where I feel that I am in control of everything, that I am the figure who is supposed to know, that becomes a kind of less interesting position for me to occupy. I'm always interested in what I don't know, I'm always going to a book. When I start writing a book, I'm much more interested in the kind of attempt to figure out what the questions are, rather than the attempt to have or produce the answers even. So I think that uncertainty is really central to what allows me to write fiction in particular.

AM

I love the way you describe it as adjacent to enunciation. There's that moment in *Intimacies* where the narrator is thinking about her relationship with this accused former president that she is interpreting for. And she says, “I realized that for him, I was pure instrument, someone without will or judgment, a consciousness-free zone into which he could escape.” And I'm wondering to what extent you see your narrators, whether translator, interpreter, or otherwise, as a kind of pure instrument. I mean, of course, they're far from

consciousness-free, but often in your novels, especially in the two most recent ones, your first-person narrators kind of ascend in certain moments to almost like a universal insight or generalization about human character that I can only, when I read it, I can only think of like a George Eliot style comment on human nature. I mean, you have these moments where you're talking about charisma or relationships, and you seem to get right to a kind of universal, a truth universally acknowledged, to go to Austen's generalization. So I wonder how you think about these narrators. Are they a kind of implied person, or are they a kind of pure instrument for you or somewhere in between?

KK

Yeah, it's interesting. I mean, writing fiction really opened up for me when I started working in first person, I think. I wrote two novels in third person, those are the first pieces of fiction I ever wrote as well. I don't have a kind of door with abandoned manuscripts. That first novel, *The Long Shot* was the first piece of fiction I ever tried to write. So to some extent, I feel like the juvenilia, although I was not young, the kind of apprenticeship works are out there in a way. And there was definitely something in that third person that I found quite restrictive. I think that sense of the, you know, this universality, this sense of authority that third person I thought seemed to have made me uncomfortable as a writer. And I noticed in particular that with style, that I was pared back and back and back more and more and more. So that, for example, if there was a sentence where a thought was maybe a little poorly expressed, I would just cut the sentence out. And I felt increasingly that I was hiding behind style, in a way, that I developed this quite terse style in order to conceal things, you know, to kind of show the, to conceal the fact that there are things that I was not really exploring.

And I think it was with first person that I had, that really writing fiction open up for me because first person is unreliable and because first person doesn't have authority really. I mean, it seems to have authority in that it's a person telling their story. But in a fundamental way, it's first person, it's the kind of subjectivity of that voice is declared from the very beginning. And I think what's interesting for me in writing is that kind of productive tension between the unreliability and uncertainty of first person and then the generalization or the universality or the assertions that are made. And those two things are actually quite, they're not incompatible, but there's a kind of little bit of friction between them. And so I think what the novels often have, especially the last two is a kind of first person voice who always purports not to know, always is circling, relying on uncertainty, who's always uses language like it seemed to me it had the appearance of I thought that it could have been or maybe it was this, but at the same time, will then make a leap to kind of assert something quite strongly.

And that's the kind of flip side of these characters for me, because I think the voice is very much a character to me, they seem quite receding a little bit, you know, they seem like they're on the sideline, they seem like they're not asserting themselves. But in fact, their voices are full of criticism and judgment. And they're kind of people who are making assessments of other people and situations all the time. And I think it is that contradiction between what the voice purports to be and what it actually is that's kind of interesting for me to write. I think if it was just a voice who was constantly, I don't know, saying, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, then it wouldn't be that interesting. But it is that kind of, you know, in that tension, there's this question of self-presentation to me, that's what the first person is really about.

SW

I was just going to follow on this thread with a question, because I was thinking when you were talking about the figure of the author, your sort of reluctance around authorship, that for me, interpretation, maybe more than translation, but is so much about the reader, that who is adjacent to the point of enunciation is also the reader. And what I really appreciate about your novels, and I think links to what you were just talking about is that I feel like they assume a smart reader, and they put the onus of interpretation so clearly and dramatically, almost frighteningly on the reader because of the nature of those narrators and the situations that they find themselves in.

And I don't know, I guess, I wouldn't necessarily want to ask you a version of Xander's question, like, is the reader the pure instrument here. But if interpretation for you is something that points outward to the reader and that you think about some of those stylistic choices you make, not just in how they communicate the story, but in what they ask the reader to do.

KK

I mean, you know, I really truly believe that a book exists in the space between the author and the reader, absolutely. And I feel like it's that space of interpretation is where the book exists. I don't believe that I as the author know what I'm writing in a way, and I don't believe that I as a reader know what the author, an author, when I'm reading a book is writing, either, because it changes all the time. You know, I use this example so often, and it's a little obvious and boring, but you know, *Portrait of a Lady* is one of my favorite novels, and I read it fairly, I mean, not annually, but I read it fairly regularly, and it changes every single time I read it. And a lot of that is because I've changed as a reader. And so I like the idea that the novel is not a stable field, that it is changing, it changes depending on context, social context, historical context, and it changes in a much more intimate way in terms

of who the reader is and where the reader is at that point in their life.

In terms of what, I assume a reader is smart. I think readers are smart. I think they're incredibly smart. I mean, I feel that I often meet readers and they find more in my books than I understood was there. I also understand that reading is a very, I think intimate and vulnerable act for me. So when I read a book, I'm opening myself up to another person completely. I'm opening myself up to another mind. And there's not many moments in your life when you really do that. And I don't take that lightly. And so I do want to take care of the reader.

I think in terms of process, when I'm initially writing, certainly the first few drafts of a novel, I don't, I have to say I don't think about the reader at all. I'm really writing for myself. It's a very private act. It's, I don't know how else to do it. When I'm editing, that's when I turn into the reader of my own work. And then I am constantly thinking about the reader. And that's a really interesting act of jumping in, jumping into the mind of somebody else who's coming to this material for the first time who doesn't know the long history of how you thought about it and trying to understand what they need in order to make sense of what you've done.

I also think if people find different things in the book, that's wonderful to me. I mean, the book that I'm writing right now, which I'm doing edits on, so my head is very much in that, but it's a book that I hope will have many, many different interpretations. It's kind of designed, almost like a media strip, but it's designed so that it can be read in multiple ways. And I hope it works. I don't know if it works, but that question of a reader's interpretation is really important to me because that's what I spend the vast majority of my time doing. I'm a reader for most hours of the day. I'm a writer for very few hours of the day. But I'm, you know, I read more, certainly I read, in my life, I've read many more hours than I've written. And in my day-to-day life now, I will still read many, many more hours than I write.

AM

I'm not surprised to hear that you reread so much Henry James. In fact, I was reading *A Separation* for the first time alongside a colleague, and we got to, we were talking about the moment where the narrator refers to someone as Infidelities James. And I say, well, I'm gonna call Henry James Infidelities James from now on.

[Kitamura laughing]

But one of the things that I admire about your work, and admire about James's work as well, is how much these novels make me think hard about the novel itself, about novel form. And one of the things that James's novels and your novels share is that they seem to be

really interested in what some scholars have called like social geometry, the way characters in a small cast can be arranged and rearranged alongside each other. And one thing I've noticed across a number of your novels is this kind of triangular relationship where one corner of the triangle is somehow missing.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Like *A Separation* is interested in part in the relationship between the narrator and her mother-in-law. And later in the relationship between the narrator and the hotel employee with whom her husband has had this brief affair, but always the husband, Christopher, is absent. Likewise in *Intimacies*, it seems to be interested in the experience of two people who share a mutual friend or a mutual lover who has thrust them into contact with one another and then walked away, leaving them alone together. So I'm wondering if you can talk a bit more about these triangular relationships, if you even see them that way, and more generally, how you think of the various shapes that organize the characters in your books.

KK

Yeah, I mean 100%. I'm really, and thank you so much. I mean, Henry James is such an important writer to me as he is to, I think, must be everybody who cares about, about fiction. But I read him, especially so much in my 20s, he was almost the entire, my entire diet as a reader. And I think those sentences still really live inside me as a kind of ideal of what you can do with language in fiction.

I mean, you're absolutely right. It's always these kind of geometrical formations that shift. I'm interested in, I guess there's two separate things I'm interested in exploring, and I'll try to remember to get to both of them. The first is the degree, is mediation, the degree to which we understand our desire through other people in a way. And that could be through the observation of other people. It could be through understanding other people's desire. But I think it's very rare that you get just a one to one, that you can directly approach the object of your desire. I think there's always a slightly circuitous route. And so I'm always interested in that in *A Separation*. The figure of the hotel employee, for example, is exactly that she, the narrator kind of comes to remember her desire for Christopher in a way through observing this other woman's desire for him and through fantasizing about what that looks like. That's one thing.

The other thing is that I love absent male characters for some reason. And one of the things that interests me is that the kind of narration of, so it was when *Intimacies* was published, I thought that people would see the primary relationship of the novel as that between the narrator and the former president. I thought that was where people would see the most amount of moral and psychological tension. But in fact, readers primarily saw the central

relationship as being between the narrator and her romantic partner who is absent. I think he's present for maybe about two scenes and then he's gone until the very, very final pages of the book. And one of the things that's so interesting, that I note in myself again and again as a reader is that I'm trained to look for a romantic relationship. I know what that looks like. I can ferret it out anywhere, even when it's not there. And so as a writer, it's not that you're playing with that expectation, but it's more that it's almost like money in the bank. You know that that's capital that you can just burn through because people know how to read for that. They create, readers create attention around that narrative and that creates a kind of propulsive drive through the novel. And then you can think about other things that may be interesting to you as well.

I would love to be able to write a really extraordinary love story. I mean, I would love to be able to write even a functioning love story. You know, I think about something like Garth Greenwell's first novel, *What Belongs to You*, which I think is a beautiful novel, but also functions as a beautiful love story. You know, the Ferrante books, I think are such an example of an elevated love triangle that is incredibly propulsive. I would love to be able to do that. I don't think I'm doing that now. I don't think I'm doing, I'm certainly not doing it in my next book, but it's something that really interests me and it's not something that I take lightly.

But I think in these books, I'm interested in how, as a reader, you fall into looking for a particular kind of narrative. And to some extent, I think that also happens to the narrator herself, especially in *A Separation*. She just finds herself, you know, a lot of the novel is really about she's enacting a role, and then eventually the role kind of subsumes her completely. And that is, of course, a role that is a love story. It doesn't start out as a love story. And then by the end of the novel, it is functioning more or less as a love story. Did that answer your question?

AM

No, absolutely. Absolutely. I am so surprised and interested to hear that so many of your readers read *Intimacies* as about that relationship between the narrator and her lover, Adrienne. Because the novel has so many scenes where she's sitting across the apartment from Adrienne's wife, or maybe ex-wife, or where she's looking at Adrienne across a party while she's standing with a kind of complicated figure who's friends, but not really friends with them, etc., etc. Each of these scenes, for me, is what the novel is about. Like, there are writers who are fantastic writers of worlds or deep developers of character. And you excel at both of those, but you are a masterful writer of scenes. And there's this moment in *Intimacies* where one of the defense attorneys at the court is talking about how in a trial, it isn't actually about the single overarching narrative, but rather about a collection of

daily moments. And I'm actually wondering, would you be willing to read this passage?

KK

Of course.

“As much as it may be our instinct to create a persuasive narrative across the days and weeks and months of the trial, we will not win unless we keep our eye on what happens on a day-to-day level. Strategy and tactics are necessary. And so as much as it is critical to focus on the big picture, as much as we may wish to focus on the story that is told outside the walls of the courtroom, we must proceed with this daily record in mind. Our victory or our loss is in that record.”

AM

So when I read this passage, I couldn't help but think about it in relation to you and your scenes. To what extent does this describe your process as a novelist, and your relation not only to plot as such, but to the individual scenes or moments that constitute it?

KK

When I first started thinking about the character in *Intimacies*, I was thinking about somebody who did not have access to the complete narrative, the person who is neither directing nor even hearing the master narrative in a sense. And again, that is possibly related to my own ambivalence about the role of authorship and authority. The sense of being the person with the complete overarching story to tell is not actually one that's very interesting to me. So with this character, I wanted to think about somebody who would have bits and pieces of the story, but not the entire narrative as it might be represented, say, in a newspaper article.

And that was, to some extent, something that sounds a little bit theoretical, but actually when I was doing my research was very true to my experience of the Court. You know, I sat in on part of the trial of Laurent Gbagbo. I was there for many hours. It was hard to understand exactly what was happening. It didn't cohere into an easily followed narrative for people who were not technical specialists in the area. It was incredibly, it moved at a glacial pace, the trial. And so that sense of fragmentation, of not being able to assemble all the pieces into a simple story, that's something that is definitely interesting to me as a writer.

The other pieces, I love writing set pieces. It's just something that I love doing. I love writing an entire chapter, you know, I don't know how many pages, but you know, five or six thousand words that is entirely in one scene. I love the choreography of how people behave in a room. I love the way people behave in different settings and contexts, the way they

react to the space of a party, as opposed to the space of a courtroom, as opposed to the space of, say, a police station, all those things really fascinate me. And I love to observe characters moving around. I mean, I studied dance for a long time and much against my will because I am reluctant to kind of attribute everything to biography. But I do think the kind of awareness of how you move people around in space and what it says about their relationships and what they're feeling, I think that is true. I think the way as a writer you put bodies in space and organize them, that says a lot about psychology and character and relationships. It also says a lot about authority, institutions, social structures and forms of discipline, all of those things. You know, it's a way of thinking about scene and character that allows you to move from the minutiae of, I'm worried that this person is ignoring me, to the larger scale things of, here's a courtroom, here are how people are, here's who's in charge, here's who is on trial, here's who is virtually invisible, all those things. To think about set pieces, to think about choreography, architecture, all those things, I think allows you to do that kind of, run that gamut from very, very small intimate details to very large social ones, which is what I think the novel excels at.

This is what the novel can do that, that other forms, well, I don't want to say that other forms can't, but you know, it's what the novel is really good at, is to think about individual experience and larger social structures.

AM

Okay, this leads sort of perfectly to a question that I thought was going to be kind of out of left field, but I want to ask you about what for me is a really surprising moment that appears about two thirds of the way through *Intimacies*. I won't ask you to read it, but this is the conversation between the narrator and her friend Alina, and Alina is talking about how she's nervous about the upcoming Brexit referendum vote, she's nervous about what it bodes, how it bodes poorly for the US election coming, and even the Dutch election the following year. And part of what the motels and resorts and conference rooms of your novels produce is at least for me, a feeling of being outside the flow of everyday time, even in moments outside the flow of history itself. Like *Gone to the Forest*, for example, is in large part about the dynamics of colonialism, but it takes place in this unnamed country in an unspecified time period, and *A Separation*, you know, Londoners are leaving for Greece, but Brexit, at least as far as I know, goes unmentioned.

All to say, historical markers like the ones in that conversation, which works to place intimacies quite precisely in 2016, seem to me at least to be a departure from your previous work, even a departure I would say from the first two thirds of that novel. So I'm wondering how you see your work in relation to history, and in particular the events of recent

history, and do you feel that your relationship to history has changed over the course of your novels, and if so, why?

KK

That's a great question. I think with *Intimacies*, I always think in a way no writer writes outside of history and no writer writes outside of context, and I think whether or not, I would say this of any writer, whether or not you refer to specific historical events or not, you can't help but write the atmosphere that you're living in, the kind of soup of your everyday life. And I think, you know, it's kind of interesting, we're seeing a lot of pandemic novels coming out. I think we'll see pandemic novels where there is a pandemic, and I think we'll see pandemic novels where there's just great levels of isolation and anxiety, and I think those are both models of how you might write a pandemic novel. I think you can write a pandemic novel where you closely observe all the details of what that period was and is, and I think you can have a pandemic novel that feels like it occupies a vacuum, and that itself is an expression of what that particular historical moment felt like.

In the case of *Intimacies*, I suppose there are two things. One is that the novel as a whole is interested in how certain institutions that appear not only to have a great deal of authority, but also a great deal of permanence in a way, slowly start to give way. I wrote the novel between 2016 and 2020, which is actually completely during the Trump administration, so it was a novel that even though it doesn't directly allude to that, was written very much with that sense of anxiety and that sense of certain institutions that we perhaps took for granted, democracy, for example, starting to look less secure.

And the EU was a big one for me. My husband is English, my children have UK passports, and in that period we literally saw, you know, when they were born, we thought, oh, this is extraordinary. They have the right to live and work in however many different countries, and we did have that wonderful sense of like, oh, you know, there are many, many different places they could live in their lives, many different places they could call home between the two of us and between their citizenship, and then of course that changed very radically, and so it was a different understanding of what it meant to be a citizen globally.

So I want, and of course the institution at the heart of the novel, the ICC, is one that I think when I started researching the novel, I should take that back, you know, it's the core in the novel is based quite closely on the International Criminal Court, but is not necessarily the ICC. But you know, when I started researching that institution, I think I had a quite idealistic understanding of what it was, and I think I really thought it had extraordinary amounts of moral and practical authority, and in fact, its jurisdiction is tremendously limited. It is a relatively new institution as well, it's, you know, to me, it's as if, you know, when I started

thinking about the book, I thought, I don't know what I thought, but it's a very, very young institution, it has all the flaws of an institution, of any institution. So I wanted to look at that in the context of this period which is ongoing where many, many international institutions are under extraordinary pressure, and are perhaps not functioning in the way that was once hoped. And even the UN is in fact a young institution.

SW

I have a quick follow-up question if I can interject it. Maybe it's a follow-up, but I feel like I'm about to ask a magician to tell me how they do their tricks, but one of the things that relates to all of the things you were just talking about is how your novels are about ethics in many ways, or how especially *Intimacies* is about ethics in part because of the International Criminal Court angle, though in a couple other ways as well, but it's not, there's no pat morality, right, you know, you really avoid telling us who are the clear enemies and who are the good guys, and I think that's an important corrective against a lot of desires we have in our current political discourse, or maybe always especially in this country, I'm not exactly sure where to land on that. But I think it's a really tough thing to accomplish in a novel, that you have written the novel that one could say, well this is a novel that at least in some ways is about ethics, but you're never telling your reader what is ethical, I mean people in the novel don't necessarily know, but in hearing you talk about the context in which this was written, obviously you were thinking about that, and you were thinking about how institutions can maybe arbitrate morality and so on.

And I'm interested in how you have thought about, this as a novel that's, you know, bound up in those questions, and I want to think about how people encounter right and wrong in various kinds of relations, but I'm not going to tell the reader exactly what's right or wrong here, and how that works for you.

KK

I mean, ethics is, it's important to me in fiction. I was doing an event with Dana Spiotta, and it was interesting, she was the first person to bring up the word in relation to my work, and she said, are you a writer of morals? And she said, because people say that I am, and I think you might be too, but it had the air of an accusation that was thrust upon her, which she didn't appreciate, and she, I think, although I can't perfectly recall and I don't want to attribute anything to her that she doesn't actually mean, but I think she was saying that it was considered unfashionable to want to write about ethics or to write about morality.

And to some extent it's a primary question for me, but I think it's very rarely, I mean, you know, writing a novel for me takes two to three years, and if I know the ethical position going in, I'm not interested in staying there for two or three years, I mean, there's nothing for me

to discover. I can't go into a, I can't write a novel where I understand, I know what the answer is, if that makes sense. So I'm always interested in thinking about ethical positions that are difficult, that are shifting, that occupy a kind of strange, strange place. In *Intimacies*, it's much more embedded in the novel, and it's much more diffuse in a way, there's many, many, many different kind of ethical obligations.

And of course I was thinking about it a lot, as well as a writer, to me the most important scene in the book is when the central character, when the narrator is interpreting for one of the victims who's giving testimony, and I struggled with that scene a lot, I thought a lot about what it meant for me as a writer to be rendering that scene. I read a lot of court transcripts, I thought a lot about what it meant for me to have read those transcripts, and then to use that in a way as material for my own fiction. Of course I thought a lot about what it meant for me to be writing in English when these original testimonies were not spoken in English, and you know the only thing I could think to do was to transmit some of those concerns directly to my character.

So my character, you know, says what does it mean for me to be speaking this testimony, what does it mean for me to use this "I," to kind of appropriate the I of this victim who is sharing her story. And so I think in a way the only way to kind of explore that terrain is actually to write directly into it. And I don't know the answers, and you know I didn't know the answer going into how I would write that scene, I still don't know really the answers to the ethical implications, but I do know that I did my best to think about them.

AM

With the time that we have left, I want to ask you a few more questions, Katie, about your career as a whole. You write in *Intimacies* about the prospect offered by a new relationship, the opportunity to be someone other than yourself, and this question is about whether that's true of new novels as well. I was teaching Flannery O'Connor short fiction the other day, and when we got to the short story "Revelation," I said that it seems like almost all of Flannery O'Connor's short stories could be called "Revelation," and reading your novels it seems like at least half of them might be called *The Long Shot*, and all of them might have the word *Intimacies* on their front cover. So I'm wondering how you see the connections between your work as a whole, and whether it is true that each new novel is an opportunity to become an entirely new novelist.

KK

It's funny, I was kind of just playing around with titles for the book that I'm finishing up now, and one of the titles that came up was *Complicity*, and I said to my husband, who's also a novelist, I said what do you think, and he said, I think that's like one you said [laughing]

that's definitely the title of a book you might write, I don't know if it's this book. And I think that's another title that you know you could probably apply to almost every single one.

I think it's interesting, writing is interesting because you, writing fiction is interesting because you confront yourself, you see the things you're obsessed with, you see the limitations of your own thinking, you see the limitations of your imagination, and so I think every time I write, it's when I sit down to start a new novel, it is really the best feeling in the world, it's like looking across an open field to the horizon, and it could go anywhere. And then as you write it the kind of scope of the work kind of moves in, and then in, and then in, and then in, and then it's just the thing itself, and then it's just a book, but the kind of possibility that you feel you have when you start, I think that's why people keep writing is because it's almost addictive that feeling that you could do anything, the stakes are very, in a way the stakes are very low, you could take any number of chances, you really feel free, and I think that's why you write. You write because you want to feel in some sector of your life, in some piece of your life free.

In terms of the themes, I do see a kind of thread of a kind of connective tissue through the books. I don't know that very many other people would, but I can kind of see how the books relate to each other, I mean one thing I think with the last two books, and then with this new book that I'm writing, they really are all speaking to each other in a very clear way. So as you noted the characters are all, it's translator, interpreter, actor, so all characters who speak the words of other people, all people who are kind of channeling other voices than their own, and then they're all characters who I think are interested in performance and what it means to perform identity in different ways.

In *A Separation* it's very explicit, she is performing a role that is not, there's a gap between the role she's performing and who she actually is. In *Intimacies*, the courtroom is essentially functioning as a kind of theater, and then the book I've just finished, it's literally very much tied up in the idea of performance. So I can see it's been really nice to work in a quite organized way, and to put these pieces alongside each other.

But I think I'm interested in power, I'm interested in passivity, you know, as a novelist and I teach fiction as you know, and in workshop we're always falling back on words like agency and action, and I'm always interested in the opposite. I'm interested in passivity, I'm interested in characters who don't have agency, because in fact the vast majority of us don't have true agency, and it's a kind of great, the big whiz is that we're made to think we have so much agency, but in fact we really don't. So I'm interested in thinking about agency, passivity. I'm interested in the narratives that we produce and reproduce in our lives to kind of function and what happens when those narratives are taken away.

But I don't have the sense of, I see sometimes in my friends, my peers, I can almost see them acquiring a skill set and becoming better writers, I mean it's really extraordinary, I think they're getting better and better, it's amazing and it's such a joy. I don't feel that way for myself, I don't feel like there are things that I know how to do that I didn't know how to do, I feel like every time I sit down I know nothing and that's just the only way I know how to proceed.

I'm very wary of, I mean to give a concrete example, when I was, I don't like, I don't want to repeat myself and I'm wary of when I know that I can do something, that to me feels like a trap. So for example as I was reaching the end of *Intimacies*, I increasingly felt that the obvious ending was for her to be sad and alone at the end, which is the same ending that I wrote for *A Separation* and I could just see that coming toward, you know, it's really like, I was lumbering towards the end, I thought am I just going to reproduce the exact same thing I did in my last book? And there's a part of me that, well I think I know how to do that because I did that and that's almost a reason to not do it.

And so I then thought well she has to get back together with this person somehow and so then I had to write my way to this quite improbable ending in a way and sometimes it's people, again that seems to have been the most controversial element of the novel is the fact that she gets back together with this man who has been absent from much of the novel. And you know there's no larger message beyond the fact that I didn't want to write the same ending that I wrote in the previous book.

AM

I think you say you see your other writer friends developing these skill sets and you're not sure, you know. I agree to disagree because I think you've written a perfect novel and then somehow you wrote an even better one to follow it up, so in my opinion.

I've just one last question for you, Katie, and I've sort of buried the lede here about one of the what I think is one of the most important aspects of all of your novels they're all around 200 pages. There's not a single tome or maximalist doorstop in the bunch. And I remember that Esquire magazine declared 2023 the year of the slim volume but that's been your preferred mode for at least the last 15 years. So I'm wondering can you talk a little bit about the length of your novels and what attracts you to compression, even brevity?

KK

Yeah I just signed a contract for my next couple of books and in the contract they always put word, the approximate length of the novel that you are contractually obliged to hand in. And always throughout my career it's always said 80,000 words and all my books are under 50,000 words and so finally this time it says 50,000 words for the next two books and I've

said to Hari I've achieved success, nobody expects me to write more than 50,000 words [laughing].

I love a big maximalist novel, I just love a big novel you know I think my favorite book that I read recently was Elsa Morante's *Lies and Sorcery* which is about 900 pages and I just thought what a leisure to just be in this world for hours and hours. I thought what an absolute delight. And as I said, my husband, he writes big, big novels I think he has very rarely written anything less than 100,000 words, which is about double what I write. Although he writes at the same pace as me, somehow he produces books at the same pace but they're about double the length of mine.

I like to keep things tight I think. For whatever reason I think my imagination is set at this kind of very particular length, and I can see, it's almost like I, it's a length where I feel like you can hold your breath for that long and get to the end. I would I would like to write something longer and I think I will at some point, but right now I feel like I can I can make the reader hold their breath for that long and I don't know how to do that at 60, 70, 80,000 words. There are many writers who can and who do. I don't know how to do that. That's something I would really like to learn to do.

I also think when I read big books, these maximalists, I feel like that is how those writers access that feeling of being free, is that they're following their impulses they're following their pleasure. Their pleasure wants to go down this road and then down that road and that is where the pleasure of those books lie. That's not where the pleasure is for me in writing you know, that's not how I find my kind of a sense of freedom in writing. And so for that reason primarily, until that changes, I don't see myself writing the 200,000 page, 200,000 words sorry. But I don't see myself writing the kind of big tome.

SW

I know we're coming up on time so I'll sort of do the job of bringing us to a close after this wonderful conversation. And every season as you may or may not know Katie, we close with a signature question to all of our guests and we ask them the same question and we change that question every season and this season is a fun one about reading. And so I'd like to ask you what is the first book you remember loving?

KK

Oh that's a great, you know I loved all the *Anne of Green Gables* books when I was little, I remember really loving those. It's interesting you know my, I have children they're seven and eleven and they're big readers. But they reread you know they reread for, there's the pleasure of rereading is so deep and comforting for them and so. And I don't reread that much anymore, I never, I don't know if you do, I never go to my bookshelf and pick a favorite

book off and just leaf through it for 20 minutes to remember what that world felt like. But my children do that all the time so I suppose the books that I remember reading in that way as a child were probably you know Anne of Green Gables.

I read a lot of Agatha Christie. And that one actually shows I think quite a lot in my fiction.

AM

Complicity.

KK

Yeah it's true. And then I had, when I was a teenager I had really unfashionable taste. I read Steinbeck over and over again, I read *East of Eden* and *Grapes of Wrath* many, many times. Theodore Dreiser, I'm probably the only person who loved *An American Tragedy* as a 12-year-old but I did and I read it over. I mean I have no, now I really don't know why but there was something about the world of those books and the kind of pressure of narrative I guess that really compelling to me. So those are the books, yeah, not one but a handful.

SW

That's an amazing range. I think we're not going to get a better answer that takes us from *Anne of Green Gables* to *An American Tragedy*. We'll have to do another episode where we figure out the connection between those two. [laughing]

Thank you so much Katie, thank you Xander. And I want to remind our listeners that you can buy Katie's books in bookstores and online. We'll have some links on the episodes webpage to that. And I guess we will all anxiously await the new novel which sounds like it will be coming before too, too long.

As always we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership and to Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern, Rebecca Otto is our social media manager, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Lauren Groff, Jeff VanderMeer, Kamila Shamsi, Ruth Ozeki and many more. And if you liked what you heard please do subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at Novel Dialogue thanks so much for tuning in keep listening and keep reading.