# ND 7.4 Not Prophecy but Inversion: Omar El Akkad and Min Hyoung Song (RB)

## Transcript

**Rebecca Ballard**

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. Novel Dialogue brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work and how we work in relation to novels: how we read, write, translate, and remember them. I'm Rebecca Ballard, one of the hosts you'll be hearing from during this seventh season of the podcast, and today we're lucky to have Omar El Akkad in conversation with Min Song.

Omar El Akkad is an author and journalist. He was born in Egypt, grew up in Qatar, moved to Canada as a teenager, and now lives in the United States. The start of his journalism career coincided with the start of the war on terror, and over the following decade he reported from Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and many other locations around the world. His work earned a National Newspaper Award for Investigative Journalism and the Goff Penny Award for Young Journalists. His fiction and nonfiction writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian, Le Monde,* and many other newspapers and magazines. His debut novel, *American War*, is an international bestseller and has been translated into 13 languages, was nominated for and won too many awards to name here and, among other accolades, was selected by the BBC as one of 100 novels that changed our world. His newest novel, *What Strange Paradise*, was released in July 2021 and received similar acclaim. Omar lives near Portland, Oregon, where he is on the faculty of the Pacific University MFA in Writing program.

Today, Omar will be in conversation with Min Song, who is the chair of the English Department at Boston College and the author of three books. The most recent is entitled *Climate Lyricism,* which won the Eco-Critical Book Prize from the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. He is also the general co-editor of the four-volume series, *Asian American Literature in Transition*, published by Cambridge University Press, and has published essays in the *LA Review of Books*, *Public Books, The Margins, The Washington Post,* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

So welcome, Omar and Min. Thank you so much for being here today.

**Min Song**

Thanks, Rebecca. I'm really happy to be here. And so excited, Omar, to have this chance to talk with you. I've been such a fan of both of your novels, and I hope not a cliché to say that the best part or one of the best things about being a professor is getting to talk to people whose work I admire so

much. I'm really looking forward to digging into your novels in some detail. But before we do that, I want to actually zoom out a little bit and just acknowledge that we're recording this podcast in late February. Gaza has been under bombardment now for five months. Tens of thousands of people have died. There's famine, or at least the risk of famine. Diseases seem to be spreading. Much of the infrastructure has been destroyed. It's a truly awful time to witness what's been happening. And I just want to kind of acknowledge that moment.

You've worked as a journalist, and your novels have also shown interest in the geopolitical conditions of that region. So I just wondered if it would be appropriate for us to begin our conversation by giving you some space to share your thoughts about the events that are happening in that part of the world as they're unfolding.

**Omar El Akkad**

Thank you very much for having me. First of all, I appreciate it. So it's an honor to be here and to be able to speak with someone of your caliber. I often go back to this interview that I read a while back with James Baldwin when he was living in Paris. And the interviewer was obsessed with this notion that it was such a fun literary adventure to be living in Paris, you know, to walk in the footsteps of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. And Baldwin trying to explain that he wasn't there for a fun literary adventure. He had to get the hell out of the United States because he couldn't live there as a Black man because he was too angry and they would have killed him.

The disconnect between the interviewer and the writer in that particular interaction has always stuck with me. And it's particularly resonant now because I can't speak to what you very eloquently just described about the horror of the last few months without being cognizant of the fact that I'm a Muslim guy named Omar living in the United States. The truth of the matter is I don't know how to properly honor that word you used, acknowledge. I don't know how to acknowledge this.

**MS**

I have also wondered, you know, because we do have some benefit of distance and we can try to understand not only the human suffering on the ground, but the you know, but the larger context in which this violence is taking place. I have wondered if there's a climate change angle that's missing in the way that people have talked about what's happening in Gaza. So I wondered if you have any thoughts on that.

**OEA**

When I started my career as a published author, I had already written three novels before my debut novel, *American War*. Those three novels were awful and I would never try to put them out into the world. They were horrible pieces of writing.

**MS**

I'm looking forward to finding them in the archive and reading them at some point.

**OEA**

If you ever see them out in the world, it'll mean that I've gotten so famous that we were just doing a cash grab at that point, which I strongly suspect is never going to happen. But *American War*, my

sort of entry into the world of being a published author, began what ended up being a kind of very subtle transition in terms of the central thing that I'm constantly thinking about, which is the idea of displacement, the notion of the twin violences of war, the violence of forced movement and the violence of forced stillness, where you're either forced to go somewhere or forced to remain where you don't want to be. And I always thought of this as a sort of one-way street in the sense of thinking very deeply about the notion of what happens when somebody is driven from their land.

And with respect to the climate change aspect, I find myself, because so much of my fiction is an extrapolation, certainly chronologically, I mean *American War* takes place about 50 years from now, I find myself thinking a little bit less about being driven from your land and a little bit more about your land being driven from you. My second novel, *What Strange Paradise*, takes place, it's a fairly contemporary novel, it takes place around 2015 and is very much concerned with the butchery of the regime in Syria and the aftereffects of that. But that is not independent of what was happening in that country in terms of climate, in terms of a massive drought, in terms of what that did to the farmland and to the farmers. That's sort of interesting to me.

What I think is more interesting to me in terms of that intersection of what is very obviously political writing from my perspective—when I say political writing, I often say, if my writing is political, it's not because I intend for my writing to intrude on the political, it's because the political has intruded on my writing. I would love to make a healthy living writing the same novel over and over again about a New England couple going through the ennui of a failing marriage. That sounds fantastic. Unfortunately, that's not the thing that is available to me by virtue of my life experience and by virtue of my interactions with the world.

But I'm very much thinking a lot of the time about the muscles, the negative muscles that we are asked to exercise over and over again with respect to the most vulnerable and how that muscle once well-developed can be applied to just about anything. And so we started out talking about the folks in Gaza and what's being done to them. If you are asked over and over again by your society, by the leadership of your society, by the most powerful human beings and institutions in your society to ignore this, to look away, to do nothing, that is a muscle that is being developed. And as we head into a century where quite possibly hundreds of millions if not billions of people are going to be forced into much worse lives as a result of climate change, it is a terrifying thing that in the privileged part of the world, that muscle already be well-developed because now you will be asked to apply it to all of those people whose islands are now underwater, whose coast land is flooded, who have had their homes destroyed by wildfire, who can no longer feed themselves.

So that to me, more so than any one aspect of climate change, is the part I keep returning to as a writer, how well-developed the muscle of forgetting, the muscle of looking away is by the time the worst of the biggest challenge we have ever faced as a species comes along. That's certainly what I'm writing about now in terms of my fiction and I think it's probably what I'm going to be writing about for the rest of my life.

**MS**

I think that muscle has been developed very powerfully in the U.S. and maybe other parts of the West as well.

**RB**

And also the muscle of not talking about petro-industry and petro-infrastructure and energy. It's all part of the same prohibition in so many ways.

**MS**

Anyway, I'm going to stop there. I want to turn to your novel. Both of which I love, just genuinely love. And I want to start with *American War* because it's such an extraordinary novel. In many ways, I like to think of *American War* as part of a wave of novels that began to take climate change seriously as a subject in the 2010s. There's, of course, other novelists who'd been doing this kind of work before that decade. But in that decade alone, you had novels by Paolo Bacigalupi, Kim Stanley Robinson, Barbara Kingsolver, Jenny Offill, and Richard Powers almost kind of rounds out that decade with the publication of *The Overstory*, which wins a Pulitzer. And I really would include your novel as a prominent member of this group of very illustrious novelists.

It's also the same decade during which the term “climate fiction” became widely used by both critics and readers alike. And it's also the decade that Amitav Ghosh first delivered his famous lectures on climate change and literature, which would eventually become *The Great Derangement*. I wonder if you agree with this characterization of *American War* as an example of climate fiction. And how do you kind of characterize this genre?

**OEA**

Yeah, I remember after *American War* came out, I finished the first draft of that thing in the summer of 2015, about three weeks before Donald Trump announced he was running for president. And so this book ends up coming out in April of 2017, four months into the Trump administration. Overwhelmingly, it shows up as like on these lists of the first books of the Trump era and the books you need to read to understand this moment. And a similar thing happened in terms of that cli-fi designation, which was just sort of coming into fashion around then. And both of those things being swept up in both of those very popular currents, were amazing for my book sales, you know, I sold more books than I deserved to as a result of both of these things that I did not at all anticipate or have in mind when I was writing.

I think for me, the central role that climate change plays in that novel is as a means of getting, of trying to interrogate a very particular kind of stubbornness, which is informed by the weight of the past. It's almost like an emotional and psychological sunk cost fallacy, which is this notion of the evidence becoming more and more overwhelming that a certain way of living, a certain way of ordering ourselves is really, really bad. But accepting that, entailing, by definition, the acceptance of a century of having done this and that being too much to bear. So this notion of, yes, it's becoming clear that the way we fuel our planet is destroying our planet. But do you mean to tell me that I now have to contend with a hundred years of this? That's, I can't do that.

And I think it's fascinating for me, particularly in the context of something like colonialism, which sort of maintains a view of the world that is relatively binary. You know, you're either wearing the boot, or you're getting your neck stepped on. And I think this is one of the reasons why there's an immense reluctance when people talk about liberation, or an ending of an occupation, or any kind of rearrangement of the world in the direction of something that's more just. There's an instinctual

sort of antibiotic reaction to it because, hey, if you're trying to take the boot off of my foot, there's only one other place I can end up. And that's with the boot on my neck. It's a very zero sum kind of asymmetry.

And climate change doesn't particularly adhere to any of that. You know, one of the worst climate change disasters in the world right now is in southern-most Louisiana, which I had been pitching stories about over and over again to my editor at my newspaper. And at the time when she finally let me go down there to do it, I had started *American War*. I started writing it, but I had no idea where the opening chapter was going to take place. And then as soon as I landed in Louisiana, I realized this is where it had to start, because in a book so deeply concerned with things the United States was doing to and in the world, it seemed fitting to start it in a place where the world was doing something to the United States. And climate change doesn't care in the slightest that it has now intruded on the borders of the most powerful nation owner. Doesn't matter.

So one of the things I find fascinating about climate change as an area for intellectual sort of interrogation is that it jars so much with our conceptions of a world in which there are winners and losers and moving anyone from one category to another entails a rearrangement and reverse immediately, which has always been a nonsensical and deeply damaging way to view the world. All of that is the stuff I'm sort of thinking about when I'm writing *American War*. And then it comes out and suddenly I'm getting weird emails from the guy who coined the phrase cli-fi. And writers who are familiar with that genre will know exactly the dude I'm talking about.

**RB**

I've actually gotten weird emails from him, too.

**MS**

There's nobody who writes on the subject who has not received that email from him.

**OEA**

It's a weird rite of passage, like a really weird rite of passage. So, it has moved copies and it has given, I think, a certain sort of pop culture media a means to talk about literature that simplify things a little bit. Beyond that, I'm not sure how much the designation has proven useful to me because I think that it's like talking about "memory fiction" or "love fiction." You could do that, but really what we're talking about is a fundamental part of the human condition. And over the course of the next century, how can you write about the human condition and not talk about the world in which that condition exists?

**MS**

I mean, I have heard people say that all fiction now is climate fiction. But also that shouldn't take away credit from people like you who were writing about it in the 2010s and so passionately and so carefully and in many ways maybe laid down markers for how we talk about this subject going forward, creating some of the conventions and some of the preoccupations, really articulating those preoccupations for us.

I remember very keenly when the novel came out, *American War*, I was really excited to read it. And I took it to the beach with me, which was probably the wrong space to read it. And I just found the novel astonishing. And it's also one of those novels that you read once and it stays with you. I've been thinking a lot about it. And in particular, the world building. I've kept thinking about the world that you create in *American War*. And I kept trying to imagine like, well, how did how did we get from the present to that world in the novel?

One thing I've been especially fascinated by is how the Middle Eastern countries have formed into a superpower in the world of the novel. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about the world building that went into *American War*. How did you imagine that superpower emerging? What series of events kind of lead up to that kind of reversal of geopolitical relationships?

**OEA**

I remember I was writing this book while we were renting a house in Southeast Portland and we had more rooms than we needed in that house. I had a little office. I was very proud of myself for finally having an office. In the back wall behind my desk, I had a big sort of wall map of the United States on which I had overlaid all of my various things. This part's underwater and the little post-it notes, you know, all of the horrible things that were happening. It didn't occur to me until much, much later that, at the time, I was still a journalist for my newspaper and I was doing a lot of web hits where I would do these video hits and I would do them from my desk.

And it didn't occur to me until much later that all these web hits, there's a map behind me that just says like “suicide bomb here.” It was just such a bad look for a dude named Omar to do that. But that was a lot of visual world building, a lot of maps, a lot of poorly placed maps. I always go back to this description by Jorge Luis Borges of all literature being tricks. And at the end of the day, no matter how clever your tricks are, they eventually get discovered. My tricks were not very clever to begin with. It was just inversion. It was a lot of inversion. It was taking things that were headed in this direction and flipping them around.

And so when it came, for example, to something like the Bouazizi Empire, which is this hopelessly optimistic vision of a sort of North African, Middle Eastern superpower, all I did was take the creation story of the United States and repurpose it. A group of people rise up against perceived tyranny and from a number of different states create one. What was interesting to me after that initial step was to then manifest all of the privileges of duplicity that come with empire and that come with the designation of superpower. So in the novel, it's not simply enough that this region of the world has reached this level of success, of geopolitical success. They are now in the business of undermining every other region's success. And that is essentially the role that the Bouazizi Empire plays during the Second Civil War, which was very much, again, an inversion of a role that, if you come from my side of the planet or in any way aware of the United States' role in the world, is not going to seem too unfamiliar.

I mean, I remember distinctly there was, there's one, I think it remained in the final draft. Those fake historical documents between the chapters, one of them is a speech that the leader of the Bouazizi Empire gives in the United States. In the original draft of *American War*, I had to change that. I had to change it slightly because the editors were worried about copyright because effectively all I did was take Obama's Cairo speech and repurpose it word for word with this leader of the Bouazizi

Empire talking about how he supports freedom and democracy in the United States. And it was so, it just fit perfectly for what I was trying to do because that's exactly what you do when you run a superpower. You go to the other side of the world and you tell them all the things you want to believe about yourself, whereas at the exact same moment, you might be funding a dictator or selling weapons to people who butcher human beings by the thousands. So at its core, it's not a particularly clever trick, it's just inversion. And it was so closely inverted that I had to actually rework it a little bit because it was, it hit the nail a little too close on the head.

**MS**

Now I'm going to have to go find my copy of the novel and find that passage. I want to reread it.

I remember an interview I heard with the novelist, Stephen Markley, whose novel *The Deluge* is also a terrific novel about climate change. He talked about how one of the things he's going to have to suffer through for the next several decades is seeing events that he depicts in the novel coming true in his own world. I think your novel is also, in a way, you have to carry the weight of this characterization of your novel as being prophetic, I think.

**OEA**

Yeah, I mean, it's interesting this idea of prophecy because I think there's a couple of things at play. First of all, if you, I think if you throw 350 pages worth of darts, you're even accidentally going to hit a bullseye every once in a while. And so I try to not put too much stock. And it's happened over the years, you know, things like the proposed introduction of new categories for hurricanes, you know, stronger hurricanes, categories six, which is in the book. Stuff like that always makes me feel really smart, but in reality, it's not. It's just, you're writing speculative fiction, you're going to speculate and every once in a while, the speculation is going to end up having some relationship with reality.

You know, what I did, there's a website that's a sea level rise visualizer. And to get that map, I actually went to it and just cranked the dial as high as it would go, which was something like 60 meters of sea level rise. And that's where you get the map of the United States, where the eastern seaboard is underwater and Florida is gone. And I fudged it right around southern Louisiana because there was a place that I needed to be above the water line. So I just put it up on stilts, just completely, completely made it up.

I had never really had much interest at all in the book as a literal act of prophecy of this is how a second civil war would go down. That was the least of my concerns. Overwhelmingly, that's how the book is read in the United States and in the West in general, is literal prophecy, you know, this is exactly where we're headed. And that to me is interesting, even though it has nothing to do with what I intended, but it's interesting in terms of yet another point of evidence as to how much the personal prism of the reader influences the work that's being read, because those folks are reading an entirely different book than the one I wrote. And that's just fascinating on a conceptual level.

**MS**

I think we could probably spend another hour just talking about *American War*, which is just such a terrific novel. And in some ways, I feel like it kind of, I don't know if this is accurate to say, but it has kind of overshadowed your second novel, *What Strange Paradise*, which is beautifully written.

And I reread that novel, I remember reading it when it first came out and then I just reread it in preparation for our discussion. And I was just blown away by some of the sentences, I mean, the language itself is just beautiful. And that first sentence, it seems to me makes direct reference to that very famous photograph of Alan Kurdi when you write “The child lies on the shore.” How much was the Syrian refugee crisis on your mind when you wrote that novel? How much of the novel is just purely driven by desire to have Kurdi wake up on that beach and continue on with his life to find safety?

**OEA**

Yeah, I started writing, I didn't start writing, but I started thinking about that book in 2012. I was in Egypt, I was on assignment there covering the aftermath of the Arab Spring. All of that is to say that I had started writing this book by the time that photo showed up. And so it was one of those very surreal moments of seeing that reflection after the fact of having written. That's not to say that a lot of that book didn't change after that photo, that photo changed me in a way that up until quite recently actually nothing, nothing had changed me in terms of interacting with the world and seeing what the world was capable of, up until quite recently, up until a few weeks ago actually, I would have said that nothing has impacted me as much. It was the thing I needed to write in that moment, and so I started writing it.

Again, this idea of inversion comes into play, I wanted to take a comforting fairy tale that Westerners have been telling their kids for the last hundred years and I wanted to invert it to tell a different kind of story. And that's how I settled on the Peter Pan motif and that's what holds that story together, but it's a very different book than *American War* and certainly people who've liked one of those two books generally don't tend to like the other.

**MS**

In my own work, I've been trying lately to try to write about migration narratives and connect it to climate change and I find it really hard actually because there's no direct immediacy. War is much easier to talk about when it comes to migration, but climate change is a much harder one because I think they're more like indirect causes than direct causes. And I wonder, I felt that you snuck discussion about climate change into a few places in the novel, in particular when Amir is remembering his father saying that the war in their unnamed country was started by drought and I thought that there was a kind of reference to that. I just wonder if you could talk a little bit about the challenges of trying to think about migration and climate change together.

**OEA**

Yeah, it's a really interesting question and I think there's a number of challenges, one of which being that at least from my experience of being a writer, I think writers and journalists in general, but certainly this is true of my case. Our acceleration is horrible, but our top speed is pretty good. We need a long runway, we need a long stretch of highway to hit the speed that we are going to end up at and we are in the early days of a particular kind of relationship of understanding and acknowledgement of something that's been happening for a long time now, not a long time geologically speaking, but a long time in terms of a singular human perspective. So that I think is

one of the challenges is the relative newness of it and the way that it has this natural conflict with our very sort of self-centered perception of the world and our place in it.

On top of that I think is the challenge of literal versus, I would go as far as to say spiritual fidelity to the subject matter. I don't care if the map at the beginning of *American War* is in any way relevant to what the United States is going to look like around 2075, it doesn't matter to me at all, in fact it almost certainly won't look like that. What matters to me is fidelity to something else entirely, which is how human beings are and how human beings should be and the chasm between those two things, which I think is what literature is for. But I think that is a challenge because so much of literature is patently unreasonable both as a craft and also in terms of the human impulses it describes, because a lot of being human is unreasonable, a lot of what we do is irrational.

To then put it within the confines of something that is going to have a very real scientific manifestation in terms of how big the wildfires are or what land gets inundated is always going to present a kind of lure to try and focus on getting that part of it right and I don't care about that part of it to be perfectly honest. I think you can tell when somebody is dealing with that part of it in bad faith. So all of those are challenges, but the best work comes from challenges. The only useful work comes from challenges, otherwise what the hell are we doing with our time?

So I don't think it's easy and I think the newness really hurts. I remember reading Faulkner on automobiles and thinking like, oh, he didn't have much time, in the time that this story is set and me feeling the same thing about the internet relatively speaking or social media or something and you can tell when that kind of newness is something the author is contending with. So all of that comes into play, but it's part of the reason to go at it, I think. I think it's possible to fail quite magnificently at something like this and you can do a lot worse as an author than to fail magnificently.

**MS**

Well, I think the novel operates on a very subtle level actually, and I was really impressed by reading it again and I noticed things that I missed the first time. I was really struck, for instance, the novel alternates between before and after and the before is entirely on the boat as they're trying to cross the Mediterranean and I don't think I paid enough attention the first time I read it to the several characters you introduced in that section who engage in, I thought, some really smart dialogue with one another. They're actually having their own kind of Plato symposium there, they're like having an active debate with one another around issues about power and human worth, about race. Someone points out very, very acutely that the Black migrants are in the ship's hold and the brown migrants get to be on deck and then speculate about the unimaginable privilege that they imagine the white Westerners have.

I can't really think of many authors who've been able to pull this off, that kind of show people like refugees or migrants, working class people, brown people, actually having very intelligent conversations amongst themselves which other people aren't so privy to. I mean, the only other person I can think of who's done it as well as you have is maybe *Teju Cole* in Open City where he has these conversations with people. Were these dialogues difficult to write, were you deliberately trying to kind of give us an insight or perspective on how the actual migrants themselves understand what's going on or maybe even based on conversations you've overheard?

**OEA**

That was very, very generous of you. Thank you.

One of the things about those scenes is that all that dialogue is happening in my head in Arabic and translating it onto the page and as a result there's a kind of stilted quality I think to the translation, for example, a lot of times these folks are calling each other brother and it just comes off weird in English but in Arabic it's like using the word “like” in the middle of a sentence where I'm like, you know, it lubricates the sentence. So in Arabic you'd say, akhi this, akhi that. So things like that are happening on the page because the work is starting out in the different language in my head.

**MS**

Can we talk a little bit about the colonel because he was by far the most sort of magnetic character in the novel. I mean, he is I guess, he serves the function of the antagonist, right? He's the plot going, he's chasing after the kids. He's also a victim, deeply traumatized character. I’d just love to hear you say more about the colonel, why you drew him the way you did, you know, you know.

**OEA**

Yeah, yeah, he's the character who sticks the most in my head of everyone in that book. He's also, I mean, a profoundly racist xenophobic human being.

**MS**

Yeah.

**OEA**

But he's damaged in a way that I find very interesting. And I often say that I don't steal entire people, I steal slivers of people. And he's made up of a lot of slivers of the men I grew up around, who quite naturally taught me my earliest lessons about what it means to be a man, lessons that later in life I sort of had a lot of trouble contextualizing in any kind of useful way, which is to say that having a firm handshake and looking people in the eye and sitting up straight, all of that stuff is well and good. But I didn't quite understand how that tied to being a decent human being. And I think of the colonel in those terms.

I had a physics teacher in high school who was obsessed with this idea that you should never memorize formula. You should be able to derive it from basic principles. And I think of the colonel as someone who has memorized certain formula of how to be a strong, powerful man in the world, but has absolutely no idea how to derive these things from fundamental principles of decency or honesty or kindness. And so what you have is this very brittle surface layer understanding of the world and how it should be. And anytime that understanding is pierced, all that's actually holding it up is violence. And so you get scenes like where he sees that girl who's struggling in the water. She's drowning and he rushes in and does the very chivalrous thing of pulling her out and resuscitating her. And then smacks her father for not showing enough decorum in the moment.

He's troubled in a way that a lot of the men I grew up around were troubled because they were told that A, B and C were fundamental load bearing beams of manhood, and that if you didn't have A, B and C, you were not, you're worthless as a man. But A, B and C were not helping them navigate the

world in any kind of emotionally or psychologically healthy way. And so they're constantly fighting that. The colonel has to deal with this in a much more intense context because he has access to guns. He's a soldier. And he's a soldier who's been put out to pasture doing this incredibly demeaning work of chasing people around the island. And so he's struggling against these things. He's obviously my sort of Captain Hook character. But he's troubled in a way that allowed me to try and make sense of the ways in which the men I grew up around were troubled.

**MS**

I love the idea that forms like masculinity need to be derived from like fundamental principles. And that's what the colonel fails to do. And that seems to me to go back to what you said earlier about stubbornness, you know, like we hold on to these forms because they're like kind of our life raft. And we don't know anything else. And yet we don't really even understand what we're holding on to. Right. It's just something that's been given to us. And that seems to be the colonel's problem. I think that's a really great way to think about his character and about how he's, you know, keeps returning to like, I think he even says at the end, you know, I'm going to take you to the, to Amir he says, I'm going to take you to the camp. We're going to do this right. We're going to do it in the right way. And he doesn't think about for a moment, what would make that way the right way other than that that was what was prescribed by the law, which clearly is flagging at the moment, doesn't really know what's going on.

There's something fantastical about *What Strange Paradise* that I don't think of *American War*, even though there's more fantastical events in *American War*, it feels very much like in the realist mode, you know, maybe that's why it sometimes gets read as prophetic. But *What Strange Paradise* feels to me, as maybe you said, like a fairy tale, that there's only kind of magical about it, even though there's not a lot of magical stuff that actually happens, it just still feels like a fairy tale, like, you know, and it strikes me too, though, that there's quite a few contemporary novels about migration that does kind of cross into the magical, you know, oh, god, what's the novel? I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, the one with the doors...

**RB**

*Exit West*.

**MS**

*Exit West*. Yeah, you know, that's another example, that's much more fantastical, right? But there's something fantastical going on here. I mean, what's the lure of the fantastical in telling stories about migration and the present?

**OEA**

Yeah, I think I think there's a sort of, there's the obvious and slightly less obvious answers to that question. The obvious being that almost everything about the idea of migration of going somewhere else lends itself to fantastical understandings of that somewhere else. But I think the other facet of it is the sort of, the element of ingrained privilege in the fantastical. I mean, the fantastical when you boil it down is often quite grim. You know, when we look at our fairy tales, and we look at their underpinnings, we look at something like *Peter Pan*, which again, *What Strange Paradise* is a very

different book, depending on the reader's understanding of *Peter Pan*, there's a lot of things in there that are sort of buried, that are references to the original story. But *Peter Pan* itself, when we, has been Disney-fied over the years, right, it's become this very upbeat story. It has sort of transformed from, it has been transported something like the boy who would never die, as opposed to the boy who never lived. You know, J. M. Barrie's older brother died at 14. He died a day short of his 14th birthday in a skating accident, I believe. And it crushed the family, his mother never recovered. But one of the things she would often say to try and comfort herself is, at least he'll never grow old. So that's your underpinning of that story, right.

And so for me, the lure of the fantastical, I think, had a lot to do with the glamorousness of the costume that it comes dressed up in. And then the real scars on the skin, once you get that costume on. To me, that was the reason I gravitated towards it. But certainly when I think back of what a lot of the grownups that I lived with that I sort of grew up around, thought about the West. And if I told you those things verbatim, I would feel like I was telling you a bit of a fairy tale.

**MS**

Maybe it's a good point to ask this question, since we're talking about maybe the distinctions between like what's real and what's fantastical. You know, you started your career as a journalist, and then you moved to writing fiction. What was that turn like, from writing journalism to fiction? What do you think are the differences between them and maybe the continuities?

**MS**

Yeah, fiction's always been my first home since I was a kid, since I first realized that you could put stories down on paper and reach into somebody's head and pull the wires around. As somebody with like no natural charisma or social skills whatsoever, to be afforded that capacity felt like a superpower. And fiction's always been my, not just my first home, but really my only home. I've moved around too much for any geography to feel like home. But also my first avenue of retreat, when the world doesn't make sense to me, I retreat into fiction. And that's why I end up writing the books I do.

Journalism was a way to pay the bills after I got out of college with a computer science degree that I did not deserve and that I will never use in my life for any reason. They gave me a mercy 50 on my final operating systems class just because they wanted to get rid of me. I'd failed it the year before and they were like, we can't have this guy keep coming back. So that was never going to happen. But I'd spent all my time at university at the student newspaper, because again, they would allow me to write. And I had enough of a portfolio to apply to an internship at the national newspaper up in Canada. I got very lucky, I got hired at the end of the summer, they gave me a 10-month contract. And then the end of that contract, they gave me a full-time job. And I was there for 10 years, it was the only real job I've ever had.

During that time, I was writing fiction the whole time in my spare time, I was writing, I wrote three novels, and then I wrote *American War*. And *American War* actually wasn't going to ever see the light of day, it was going to sit on the hard drive with the others until I had a bad day at work. I had a day where I felt like I was just rewriting press releases and I thought, to hell with this. And so I sent it to a literary agent I'd met in passing eight years earlier. And she decided to take me on and three

months later we sold it to Knopf. So I sort of won the lottery in that respect. Journalism was the education that I never got in college.

**MS**

Maybe this is a good time for me to ask like the last question I have for you, which is, what are you working on? I know you've got a new book coming, I'm super excited to hear more about it. I'll be one of the first people in line to buy it. Tell us more about what you're working on, what your project is now and where it's going.

**OEA**

Thank you for that. That's very generous of you. A couple of months ago, I was sitting on my editor in Portland and I was talking about how the moment we're in has caused me to reassess the entirety of my relationship with the West and what I think the West stands for. And I think I was boring him so much and being so, like just, harping on about this so much. And finally he just said, you know, you should write about this. And so I'm writing about it. And so that's the next book. It's the first sort of nonfiction book that I've ever published if I'm fortunate enough to publish it.

And at the same time, I am writing another novel that is very much in the sort of *American War* vein. In fact, it makes *American War* look like a controlled tight piece of writing. I mean, this is a kitchen sink thing. It takes place over the course of 150 years towards the end of our species. And it's a story about love and revolution and what happens when both of those things arrive too late to be of any use. And right now I'm in the honeymoon period where it's great because it's all new. But I can see the gears not fitting together eventually, like I can look down the line and know that this future Omar is going to curse me out as he has to try and make this thing stick together. It's got a lot of moving parts. But again, it's a world I can retreat into. And I spend most of my time there and it's easier than being in the real one. So that's always been the reason why I write.

**MS**

Amazing. Can't wait to read those. If you ever need a reader, I'm happy to do it.

**OEA**

I'll make you regret. Now we have it on tape, too, you saying that.

[laughing]

**RB**

Well, this has been such a really, a really rich and generative conversation. And I'm really grateful to both of you. I'm going to be thinking about the kind of relationship between inversion and extrapolation and speculative fiction for a while. This has really contextualized for me some of the kinds of discomforts I've been feeling and working out with my students, my science fiction students about the kind of emphasis on extrapolation and prediction as opposed to a kind of presentness and a witnessing of what is and what has been. So I thank you for that framework.

On a lighter note, one of the perks of hosting this podcast is that hosts get to jump in at the end with the very last question of the episode. Each season of Novel Dialogue has one signature question

that every novelist answers. And this season our question is, Omar, what is the first book you remember loving?

**OEA**

Oh, god. This is such an embarrassing answer because I can lie, but that wouldn't be fair. *Little Women*. Damn it. Okay, so here's the thing. I grew up in a place that had no libraries and no bookstores. And what you got was haphazard culture. Whatever somebody smuggled in on their way back from a trip overseas. And one day, somebody brings in this book that's the most exotic thing I've ever read. It's these white girls who have lives that may as well be on the moon, they're so different from mine. And I imagine that like the way a lot of white folks feel when they first read like *The Sheltering Sky* or something like that, you know, like, it was a sense of like how vast the world was.

And I'm terrified of ever going back and reading that book. I read it when I was very young. And it seemed so exotic to me. It was the most exotic thing I'd ever read. And I loved it. And I will never read it again for fear of like, messing up that first impression. Because from what I hear, it's actually not that exotic now that I live in this part of the world. Apparently, that's not, the appeal of *Little Women* is not that it's like borderline speculative fiction.

**MS**

No, that's not how people characterize that novel.

**RB**

I wouldn't call it the dominant reading. No.

**OEA**

So anyway, that was yeah, that's one of the earliest ones that comes to mind.

**RB**

That's a great answer. Thank you so much.

I'll close by thanking the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship*, Public Books* for its partnership, and Duke University for its continued support.

Hannah Jorgensen is our website manager and transcript editor. Rebecca Otto is our social media manager. And Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past and upcoming episodes with Lauren Groff, Anne Enright, Katie Kitamura, and many more. From all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.