7.6 Escape Velocity: Sarah Manguso in Conversation with Tess McNulty (EH)

Transcript

Emily Hyde

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 Emily Hyde, one of the hosts and co-producers of this season. Listeners know that on this podcast we bring together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work. And so I'm particularly, but maybe a little perversely, looking forward to this conversation between two people who are not primarily or originally novelists or novel studies scholars. So I'm excited to have Sarah Manguso and Tess McNulty on the show because both of you come at the novel and its workings from different angles from other forms of writing and storytelling.

Sarah Manguso is the author of nine books, including books of poetry, stories, aphorisms, and three memoirs that include a just brutal narrative of illness, a meditation about keeping a diary, and an elegy for a lost friend. Her most recent book is her first novel with the just excellent title, *Very Cold People*, which was named a finalist for the Pen/Jean Stein Book Award. And she will be publishing a second novel very soon with, I think, an equally brilliant title: *Liars*.

Tess McNulty is an assistant professor of digital humanities in the English department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is working on a book that is a kind of a recent cultural history of the major genres of the viral era, including gonzo self-help, the hypnotic process video, and my personal favorite, the uplifting anecdote.

So my role as host is now just to kind of step back into the wings. So Tess, I'm going to hand things over to you.

Tess McNulty

Thank you so much. And first, I have to say thank you so much, Sarah, for being here to talk with us. I'm so excited to talk to you. I've read all of your books since your first memoir, *Two Kinds of Decay*. And one thing I particularly love about your books is that if you name any of your books to me, I have about three or four just moments from them that immediately pop into my head as so vivid and so memorable. So there's lots of things I love about your work. But for me, maybe most of all, I feel like you're just a master of moments. And it's a big part of how I enjoy your work. So I'm really excited to talk to you. And I hope we have some interesting moments together.

Sarah Manguso

Oh, thank you so much, Tess. I can already tell we're going to get along because I'm an absolute disaster when I'm asked to recount a narrative arc. You know, like what was that movie about? I

can't do that, but I can pick out three really great details that I remember. So it seems as if we'll understand each other. That's great.

TM

Great. And yeah, I normally actually think in a kind of macro way, but when I read your works, it makes me think in that momentary way. And that's part of why I love it.

So the first question I want to ask you is about your very first novel, *Very Cold People*. And this question comes from the first page of the novel. So for anyone listening who doesn't know this novel, it's narrated by a young girl. Her name is Ruthie. And her family has moved to this very cold town in Massachusetts called Waitsfield. And so on the first page of the novel, Ruthie is talking about her parents. And she says, "Some people wore their difference honestly, but my parents were liars. Illegitimate Waitsfielders, their off-whiteness discovered only after the paint had dried." So I was so struck when I first read this by that stark word "liars." And then I was even more struck by it when I learned that it would be the title of your upcoming novel, which we're not going to talk much about, but is coming soon. And it also struck me as maybe not a coincidence that at the moment you had started writing fiction instead of nonfiction, this theme of lying was emerging. So I just wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about this theme of lying and its importance. And does it have anything to do with your turn to fiction? Or is it unrelated?

SM

It probably does. And I love that academics exist because they can figure this out for me. Because, you know, whatever intention I might have had, it was much more chaotic than is being described now. So yes, it is true that the word liars appears on the first page and that my next book is entitled *Liars*. But I wasn't thinking about my second novel, I was writing my first one.

That said, you know, every writer sort of has their grab bag of favorite words and concepts and lying is definitely one of mine. And that is partly because when you, well, when you're a woman and you publish a book of autobiography, you are frequently faced with sometimes well-meaning, sometimes less well-meaning questions from critics and readers about how much is actually true. You know, so like, oh, how could you possibly have remembered this accurately? Or, you know, what is in it for you if you actually lie about such and such event that you're putatively delivering as a journalist would? And on the flip side, when you publish a novel, I recently learned, if you're a woman, you are faced with the flip side of the same question, which is, isn't this book just true? Like, didn't you just write down what happened to you? So it's a way of kind of minimizing it and framing it as something less than legitimate literature.

So that's sort of like the general answer. But the more specific answer is that, you know, in writing about Waitsfield, which is, it's a composite of all of the little towns west of Boston where I grew up. There is a culture of isolation and abuse, and there's a lot of manipulation of historical truth and a lot of coerced lying. So when we were taught the history of our town, which began and ended with colonization, essentially, we were coerced into lying about what had actually happened there. And that kind of lying was a really useful tool for the people in control of maintaining this environment of abuse.

TM

And that really brings me to my second question, which is about the theme of abuse in this novel, which is a central theme. And I wanted to ask you about this in relation to one of those scenes that I found so striking. So it comes out in the course of this novel that almost every young girl we meet, including the narrator, Ruthie, has been subject to some sort of abuse in this town of Waitsfield, or sexual predation. And there's one scene where one of these girls or teenagers named Charlie is describing a situation to her friends in which she's been having a sexual relationship with the tennis coach. And she says that he's broken her ribs, which is awful. And this is the way that the scene of her saying this is narrated, so it says: “Charlie said that he had broken her ribs while on a bender. After that, she said that the story of the broken ribs had been a lie. After that, she said she thought it was a lie. But once she told it, she realized it was the truth.”

So I found that so striking because it was just so apt to me, this, especially when children have these very intense experiences, the idea that it can be sort of inchoate. And then when they put it into words, it almost feels like you're lying. But then you realize after putting it into words that no, in fact, that's the truth. But there's always this gap between the label put on the thing or the words put on the thing and the experience. And I've never seen that described in a novel. So I really appreciated that. But it also just made me wonder, how did you think about the process of unveiling these facts that have been sort of lied about in the novel and revealing them and thinking about whether we're certain of them or what we call them and things like that. So I wanted to ask you about how you thought about that.

SM

I love this question. When I was writing that passage and thinking about the way that Charlie would be affected by this, you know, sort of global situation of being female and being abused, I was thinking about legal testimony and the credence that we give to people who seem calm, people who seem to be able to, you know, provide an arc. And on the other hand, people who are emotionally overcome or overwhelmed and who are unable to tell or unable to provide a linear narration of what has happened to them.

I was beginning to read about the way that trauma informs and harms the memory and the ability to just lay down memory. And I was also thinking about the way that in 12-step groups, a huge part of one's therapy is telling one's story over and over and over again at meeting, after meeting, after meeting, because, you know, even years after traumatic experience, it can still be impossible to remember it all at the moment one wants to provide the narration. And this is just because of the way that that trauma affects memory.

I said earlier that the town Waitsfield is a composite of all of these actual towns and these characters are composites of all of the dozens and dozens of young women I knew growing up and women I knew when I was a bit older. And there were so many instances that in the moment, before I had collected so many of them that I began to understand the pattern, there were these very strange and back then, very hard for me to understand, sort of holes in stories. And, you know, I did know somebody who had been physically abused by an adult man who violently attacked her. And to this day, I assume that it was true. But every time she tried to retell the story when we were teenagers at the time, every time she tried to retell the story, it was either absolutely true or absolutely untrue. You know, she would say, you know what, I just made that all up. I don't know why I did. And then the next time we would talk about it, which wasn't the next day, it was, you know

how trauma works. So it sort of welled out at another inopportune moment. She said, you know, it's actually, it's true. I didn't think it was. But now I'm thinking, it's just, occasionally, when I'm asked, why did you make that part of that narrative in that book nonlinear? And the answer is always the same. It's that like, I made it as linear as I could. I'm just trying to be accurate here. But like, nothing is linear. Like, nothing in human memory is linear. And so the veracity, of course, like any kind of self-reportage is, it's impossible to confirm or affirm from the outside. And so we just kind of have to decide to believe each other or not. You know, speaking from Waitsfield now, we all have to, we all have to kind of judge who is trustworthy.

TM

Right. And this makes me realize there is this manner in which the truth can kind of stretch our ideas about veracity. I think if someone were critiquing this novel, who I would very much disagree with, they might say, oh, there's too many incidents or too many of these incidents accumulate. But the whole point is that the normalcy of the thing is what strikes one as unbelievable. But it's in fact a reality—

SM

And you're talking about abuse, right?

TM

Yes. Yes.

SM

You're talking about abuse of children? Yeah. You know, it wasn't until I was quite far into the project of constructing this book that I realized, oh, the abuse isn't the story. The abuse isn't, the abuse is the background. And I can provide a story against that background. But like, yeah, initially I thought, oh it'll be one lurid story of abuse. And I just found that as soon as any other, you know, a second girl is brought into the book, her abuse is just as substantial as every other girl's in the book. And so, and then I realized I was getting somewhere. That progress had been made in the way that I was thinking about how the book was constructed, how to write about Massachusetts in the first place, which was the original nut that I was trying to crack for decades. And it turned out that the story wasn't the story. The, yeah, it was the accumulation of stories that made my experience of Massachusetts so different from just sort of any other book I had written up to that point.

EH

So this might be a place I could jump in, because Sarah, you just used the word that came to my mind when I was reading *Very Cold People*, which is "accumulation." My experience of reading that book is kind of what you just described, which is at first I thought, okay, I'm reading a novel, it has a female protagonist, I am relating to that female protagonist, I happened to be living in rural New Hampshire when that book came out. So I was cold, there was a lot going on on that level! And then I think it's more than halfway through, I just realized, oh, actually this novel is operating on a completely different level, which is the level of accumulation and the accumulation of these stories of abuse, and what was being kind of amassed in the story was sexual violence against girls. And I just, and actually in my experience Ruthie, the central character kind of dropped out for me

because I was so interested in how you, how a novel, which is usually about characters and coherent social settings, how a novel includes multiplicity, accumulation, the massing of stories that aren't necessarily the central story.

So I mean, I just, I think that there's a connection too, with that idea of accumulation across a lot of your work. So you have a book, *300 Arguments*, and it's aphorisms, one of which can land in a certain way, but 300 is a different matter. And you have another book about, about the diary that you've kept for 25 years. So there's this kind of tension between the mass or the accumulation of experience and then the distillation in your work that came across as very, came across in a really sharp and almost kind of shocking way in *Very Cold People*. And I just, I just wondered towards the end of that novel, like how did you, when those stories started to amass, did that change the structure of the novel for you? Or how you were thinking about the shape of the novel or what it is that the novel itself can do with that kind of experience?

SM

Oh, I'm so glad you had that experience in New Hampshire. That's absolutely perfect. I think to respond to your question, I have to talk about the character of Winifred. So Winifred is a character who isn't alive at the same time as Ruthie and all of her friends are. Winifred is the woman who built the house that Ruthie and her parents move into. The house is almost 100 years old. It's a historic building. And this woman, Winifred died in it as a very old woman.

Initially, when I started writing this book, I thought it's going to be a period piece about Winifred. And it's going to be exactly, like it'll have characters, she'll be a protagonist, we'll follow her through the events of her life. And something will be discovered at the end of that. That's a novel. And so I wrote that part, I got about 20 odd pages in and then I became so bored because I just, I need to not really know what I'm doing in order to maintain interest in pursuing a book. And having made all of these decisions before I started writing, it solved the problem without my needing to actually write it.

So I was left with these pages. I really liked the pages. The house is in fact based on the house that my family and I moved to when I was 13. And that house is just so, it was such a haunted place, even more so than other places in New England. I mean, they're, everything is haunted in New England. Somebody died in every square inch of New England. But this house was special. And so I clung to these pages, even though I knew at the time that I was much more interested in exactly what you just said, Emily, about what it would mean to accumulate so many stories that there wasn't really a story anymore, that the stories sort of become this accumulated mass that provides a background or provides a setting, rather than a narrative.

And then at some point, I realized that Ruthie can just have imagined whatever she wants. And again, this is also like me discovering what fiction is capable of. This is my first sustained book of fiction. So I decided that Ruthie would be the one who invents Winifred. And it's exactly what Winifred needed to do, needed to be in this book. Because Ruthie, ultimately, it's an escape narrative, Ruthie gets out of Waitsfield. And in order to do so, she needed to sort of have this practice round, this internal imagined practice round. And she imagines Winifred as a woman of agency, which is not a kind of role model that she had in her actual life. And the way that she constructs this character, this woman of agency, is that she imagines Winifred sexually predating upon the young boy that lives next door. So, you know, using examples that Ruthie has around her,

she sees that you're either predator or prey. And so if you're a person with agency, you're the predator.

And so, you know, none of this disturbs her, she's just sort of like, yes, I'm using the kind of vocabulary that is accessible to me. And so, in a way, this kind of, this project of imagination elevates Ruthie out of the accumulation for a little bit, or it allows her to become singular, even though her story is part of the accumulation of terrible stories of men doing things to girls. Not just men, not just girls, but generally. She, yeah, it's almost like she sends this periscope up, this little narrative periscope of the idea of Winifred to see what it would be like to be a woman of agency. And I really do think that it's that sort of like first metaphysical escape that allows her to escape in the end.

And I do want to say that I had absolutely no idea that any of this was going to happen. And that's the only way that I can write a book ever. You know, with all absolute respect to people who write 600-page novels, you know, Hilary Mantel style, or, you know, in the style of many of my friends who write really long books, I just don't know. It's still a vast mystery to me how one can write knowing anything at all what they're about to write.

TM

I want to ask a question about this novel as an escape narrative and how Ruthie kind of escapes from Waitsfield, that has to do with the question of the theme motherhood in the novel. So another thing I found so striking about this novel was its depiction of how daughters see their mothers, and how Ruthie sees her mother, and this kind of unbelievably exacting scrutiny to which Ruthie holds her mother, which in the novel feels very dark, though when I think about it outside of the novel it kind of makes me laugh a little bit, because I recognize that.

But in the final sentences of the novel, Ruthie mentions becoming a mother herself for the first time. And it feels like part of this escape that she's able to create for herself from the town of Waitsfield. So I wondered how that emerged for you as a kind of final moment in how you were thinking about Ruthie becoming a mother.

SM

Oh wow. Yeah, I'm actually having a hard time remembering my frame of mind when I wrote the ending, what I was attracted to. So the other thing about the ending, which you did mention, but I want to just shine a little extra light on, is that the pacing of that last page accelerates violently. So we've made it through less than a decade in a couple of hundred pages. And then as Ruthie narrates, what it was like after she finally became, you know, entered her 20s, moved out of Waitsfield, went back to visit a bunch, then became a mother and had the kind of organic love that mothers have for children, ideally, all of that happens on, like, I don't know, maybe like the last 600 words, probably less than that, last 300 words of the book.

So I knew that I was interested in sort of like achieving escape velocity. And I wanted to, whoop, I just wanted it to happen very quickly, because I thought it would be boring otherwise to sort of like see her stepping out, like reaching these neat plateaus and then finally reaching her achievement. So yeah, I wanted there to be a kind of feeling of wildness about that. And even though Ruthie has been collecting data and preparing the whole book long to get out, like she doesn't do so gradually.

It just sort of happens. There's this little explosion at the end of the book. And I also wanted to, well, I didn't want to, and this is probably, this is a result of my laziness, but I didn't want to have to tell the story or even point out any of the ways in which her experience of motherhood was similar to or different from her experience of girlhood and having had the mother that she had had. And it just seemed, it just seemed like one of those wonderful shortcuts. And I just thought, you know what, I'm just gonna, I don't have to say anything. I don't have to characterize her motherhood. I don't have to characterize her child. We can just assume or hope that it's different, or fear or worry that it's not different. But it just seemed like that was the end of the book.

TM

I wonder, because we're talking to you at this sort of interesting time when this novel, *Very Cold People* came out about two years ago or so and you're about to release a new novel. I wonder if anything about your perception of *Very Cold People* has changed since you wrote and sort of released the novel does, in the rear view mirror, does anything appear very different about this novel to you? Or do you think about it differently?

SM

Oh, that's an interesting question. I don't think anyone's ever asked me that. I think that the novel seems more coherent to me now, because I have read with great appreciation enough pieces of criticism about the novel that went to it assuming a kind of central coherence. And my not very well kept secret of my writing process is that I never have a central coherence. I work, I'm a very bottom-up thinker. Tess, you mentioned in the beginning about the difference between remembering an arc or remembering a few, you know, a few bits of the mosaic. And I only ever start with a few bits of the mosaic and build up from there. And it's always so lovely to read a critical approach to something that I've written, not only assuming that I had a kind of central coherence that I was writing about, but when a critic says anything that, you know, just like, let me draw your attention to this idea that has been discussed in this book. I just think, god, yeah, that's right, this book is about something. It's not just a collection of bits and bobs that I found of general import. So yeah, I think that's the main way in which I see the book somewhat differently now.

TM

I want to ask a question inspired by your book *300 Arguments*. So it, for anyone who's listening who doesn't know this book, it is exactly what its title suggests, which is it is a series of 300, more or less short arguments, some people might call them aphorisms, though arguments is the chosen term. And they're really fun to read because it's sort of like a Rorschach test for me, like which of the arguments I immediately I'm like, yes, I'm totally on board with that one. And which of them I'm like, I have to think about that one. But one of them raised a question for me for you. And this argument is “Bad art is from no one to no one.”

So this is familiar to me as a writer of nonfiction style essays, you know, you have to be a speaker and you have to have an audience. But I wondered for you in writing something like fiction, because I think you're making good art, not bad art. Who are you writing to, do you have a “to” or an audience in mind?

SM

You're very kind. The first thing that came into my mind, when you began this very smart question, “bad art is from no one to no one.” That argument is about the, well, it's about pandering. It's about the kind of bad art that irritates me most is just hopelessly generic, and written to a generic, appreciative audience. You know, it's the kind of art made by somebody who doesn't quite understand what art is for, thinking. Oh, I'm writing for “the reader,” of which I have an incredibly generic sense. And “the reader” likes things that are generally like this. So I'll, you know.

So yeah, many of these arguments came out of little frustrations or complaints or lessons that come up in the classroom when I teach creative writing. So a lot of them are sort of like a writer complaining about teaching writing to other writers or a writer complaining about other writers. Yeah, there's a lot of writing about writing in this little book.

But the second part of your question is about, the audience that I imagine when I write, and I don't imagine an audience when I write. I just write, uh oh, and so here come all of the accusations that like women only write therapeutically. And yeah, I do, you know, if it's therapeutic to have an almost physical impulse to articulate a feeling in language, then yes, that's my therapy. It wasn't Shelley, it was one of the Romantic poets, I think it was Byron, who said, if I don't write to empty my mind at the end of each day, I would go mad. And that's how I feel. I'm not writing in order to create something beautiful. I'm not writing in order to communicate with some real or imagined person unless I'm writing a letter. I am writing in order to articulate something that I feel in my body that is uncomfortable until it is so articulated.

And I'm lucky, you know, like, I think it's really convenient to have that constant urge, impulse, it's almost like a physical urge, because there's a job that you can do, right. So it's like, I'm scratching my itch, and it makes books, and that's a job. How lucky, other people, you know, whatever bizarre, like sex thing you can be into, that's not really a job generally. And so I feel bashful when people ask like, oh, how did you, you know, it took you not very long to write this or that book, or, oh, you know, you wrote in a bunch of genres, how did you decide to do that? No decisions were made, it is all completely impulsive, it is all, I'm never thinking about what kind of book it would be good to write next. It really is just this very almost base level need to translate feelings into language. It's like inheriting a bunch of money, like it's embarrassing, like it's, I don't have writer's block, I have the opposite of writer's block, like I always have some terrible mess, or, occasionally, like amazing joy that if I don't articulate in language, I don't feel well. That's what I have.

TM

So I'm currently actually teaching a course called “Fiction and Therapy,” and I had to restrict the items on the syllabus to only fictional works in which therapy appears because—

SM

I would love to see that list.

TM

I enjoy it. So maybe I'm subject to the criticism, you know, female academics only teach therapeutic.

SM

Oh right they only talk about their periods.

TM

Something like that. But I was wondering when I was reading your work if I could put it on this syllabus and because there are scenes in some of your books that take place in it in a psych ward, I think I could next time around that that I teach the course.

SM

Yeah, there's a lot of abuse in psych wards. So if you're doing an abuse class that works too.

TM

It was going to be a question actually about your depiction of this psych ward across multiple of your books, because I think it comes up in *Two Kinds of Decay* first in a memoir form. And then it comes up again in *Very Cold People*, though there there's a much more kind of cuckoo's nest feel to the space that's sort of horrific. So I wonder about just your experience of writing that space throughout multiple of your books.

SM

Yeah, you've really noticed something. And so the first book in which I write about a psych ward is my first memoir, *The Two Kinds of Decay*, which is about an autoimmune disease that I developed when I was 21. And I was in and out of hospitals for four years. And toward the end of those four years, one of those hospitals was a psychiatric ward. And I, in writing that memoir, so my first memoir, don't know how to write a memoir. So again, I'm just writing. I'm writing what seems interesting to me. And there were several little scenes, several little things that had happened to me during the duration that I was writing about in that memoir, that were really lurid. And I knew that if I put them in the book, the pacing or the emotional amplitude of the book, I'm making a gesture in the air, but it's sort of like, you know, generally flat, and then there would be a spike. And then there would be another spike. And I didn't want the book to consist of just like two really intense, lurid moments surrounded by generally, more, more kind of less lurid moments. And, you know, I mean, when you're like, I still had to write about them, though, I didn't know this, but I did.

And so it wasn't until I realized I had to write a novel in order to sufficiently expunge my childhood and all of things that I had long been needing to write about Massachusetts. I realized that it was time to write about them. Finally, as fiction, you know, as fictionalized, the thing that I learned in writing my first memoir is that not everything goes in. And the thing that I learned about writing fiction from my first novel was that it might surprise you what needs to go in. So maybe that, maybe that's a coherent way of answering that question.

TM

In that first memoir, *Two Kinds of Decay,* I don't know if it's that the first time that you were using a form in which you often write, which is the sort of short units of text that are separated by white space. But I was struck in that book by the connection between that form and the theme. There's sort of a discussion in the book about illness and a kind of relationship to time, not knowing what's necessarily going to come next. And one thing I find interesting is that many of your books use this

form, but it strikes me as different in every single one, the way it's used, like in *300 Arguments*, it's very funny. In *Very Cold People*, it's kind of spare and ascetic and cold, like the environment. And it seems like there's almost a relationship between the form and the theme of the book in a different way each time it's used. So it did make me wonder how you originally came to that form or found it. Was it part of writing *Two Kinds of Decay*, or did you come to it earlier?

SM

That's a really generous reading. I am for better or worse, a short form writer. And I began my writing life as a poet. I, after college, I got an MFA in poetry. And I think within a semester of arriving on campus as a first-year grad student, I realized that I didn't want to write poems anymore. I only wanted to write prose blocks, but they were very short. They were, you know, maybe seven sentences long. And so I went to my advisor and said, you know, something terrible has happened. I'm no longer a poet. I realize I don't have the authority to break a line. I don't want to break a line. I don't know how, it doesn't make sense to me. I'm afraid of it. And I'm only going to write prose. And she said so? Which I've talked about before in different contexts. But like that, that one, that one word question was just this, it offered such, not just consolation, but permission to do what I needed to do and, you know, figure out what I needed to learn.

My first book is a poetry collection, but more than half of it is in prose, prose poems. My second book is a poetry collection. I think I break maybe half a dozen lines in the entire book. And then my third book, that's the one that I think really started, starts to show evidence of my learning how to be a prose writer. And that book is a story collection called *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*, and it was published in a three-book set with works by Deb Olin Unferth and Dave Eggers. And that book is 81 stories, each one about 200 words long, some of them are shorter. And it was an absolute delight to write. I really felt that like it was exactly the form that I always wanted to write in, forever and ever. And I basically have ever since, and that was 20 years ago.

TM

I love the title, *Hard to Admit and Harder to Escape*. Do you choose your titles yourself? Do you work with the others?

SM

I love writing titles. I love it. I love writing titles. I love writing frontmatter. I love writing the acknowledgments page. I love epigraphs, but I almost never use them because I'm extremely, I'm very stern about epigraphs. I think that they have to provide something that no other part of the book possibly can. And again, this is like the Yankee thrift and like almost secret oath of poverty that everybody takes growing up in New England. And it's, you know, so characteristic of everything in *Very Cold People*. But yeah, no I love writing titles. I love writing subtitles. I remember writing the subtitle for *Ongoingness*. I think I had to come up with a list of 50. And then I had the best time narrowing it down with my editor at Graywolf, Ethan Nosowsky. The subtitle of *Ongoingness* is *The End of a Diary*. And the runner-up subtitle was *The End of Beginnings and Endings*, which I still like, but I think diary is better. Concrete noun. I need a concrete noun.

TM

Yes, makes sense.

SM

Many as possible.

TM

Well, outside of this conversation, I'm very tempted to ask you to create a title for my book because I have trouble coming up with a good title for my own academic—

SM

I would love to. Oh, no, I think I'm very good at it. I might not write an appropriate one for an academic work, but yeah, no, send me your, what's it called, your abstract and send me your chapter headings. And yeah, I'll get to work.

TM

Great, perfect.

EH

So this seems like a good place to close, although I'm about to ask you a question, Sarah, that does ask you to select one out of a mass of things, which is, so at Novel Dialogue, we always end with a signature question, something that we're asking all of our guests, all of the novelists over the course of this particular season. And so for season seven, here it is. What is the first book that you remember just loving?

SM

The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin. It used design, 70s-era typography and wordplay and puzzles. And there were, there's just such a panoply of these really individuated characters. And it was written in a way that wasn't pandering to the idea of what a child should like. Like it seemed like a very grown-up book for middle grade readers. And it was a huge gateway drug to all of Ellen Raskin's work. And eventually, as an adult, I found out that she lived in a haunted house in the West Village, which when I lived in New York, I frequently visited, the outside of it. She wasn't there anymore. Perhaps she haunts it now.

EH

I just realized I have a very intense visual memory of the cover of that book that I didn't know was in my brain after all these years, but there it is.

SM

Yeah. Is it the one with Turtle in her witch's hat?

EH

Yes, that's the one.

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.

For this, the last episode in season seven of Novel Dialogue, Chris Holmes and I want to say a special thank you to both Hannah and Rebecca, who are going to be leaving us at the end of this season. Rebecca is a recent graduate of Rowan University, where she was an English major and an Honors student. And ever since graduating, she has been living and teaching and working in South Korea. She has managed the time difference between those of us working on Novel Dialogue and her life in South Korea really well. We appreciate all of her work on social media and keeping us up to date online, and we wish you the best of luck, Rebecca.

Chris Homes

Thanks so much, Rebecca.

EH

And Hannah has been with Novel Dialogue since before Chris and I even joined, so she has been a stalwart manager of the website and doing amazing work on the making the transcripts incredibly accessible. And we also will miss her and wish her absolutely the best in the future. She is a scholar of the digital humanities and fan culture, and we can't wait to see what you're going to come up with next.

CH

Yeah, Hannah, just so you know, behind the scenes, Emily and I talk constantly about what we are going to do without you, because we're not really sure. But I can tell you one thing, you will be missed, and you have made a giant impact. And your smarts, your organizational skills, your design skills, your thoughtfulness, has shaped Novel Dialogue in ways that are uncountable. But we will try our best to constantly remember the ways in which you made us better. And I hope that you will not be a stranger to the show or to us.

EH

Absolutely. So from all of us at Novel Dialogue, thank you, Hannah. Thank you, Rebecca. And please keep in touch.