11.2 Taking Apart a Metaphor: Dan Sinykin and Sarah Brouillette on the Literary Ecosystem (AV)

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Hello, I'm Aarthi Vadde, one of the founders and hosts of *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. Welcome to the next episode of our special mini-season on the literary ecosystem.

And where does this term come from, you might be wondering? Back in February of 2026, Adam Kirsch published an essay in *The Atlantic* called "Literary Ecosystem is Dying," where he discussed the closing of the *Washington Post*'s book section and the disaggregation of books coverage into different online spaces. In April 2026, my colleague at Duke, novelist Mesha Maren, organized a symposium to talk about this erosion of traditional venues for reviewing and the effects of conglomeration on the publication of risk-taking novels. Publishers, book reviewers, academics, and novelists were all in the room together, which made for some interesting and unexpected conversations, as various parts of this ecosystem collapsed into one niche, maybe we could say. But we are back, extending outwards and expanding these conversations to the podcast, yet another channel in this disaggregated, potentially dying, whatever we want to call it, literary ecosystem.

So I'm going to turn to my guests, and I have two very influential scholars of contemporary literature here with me today, Dan Sinykin and Sarah Brouillette. Dan is the Winship Distinguished Research Professor of English at Emory University and the author of the much-admired and widely-read book *Big Fiction, How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*, published from Columbia University Press. And he has also recently co-edited with Joanna Winant, *Close Reading for the 21st Century*, out from Princeton. Good to see you, Dan.

Dan Sinykin
It's great to be here.

AV
Nice. And now Sarah is professor of English at Carleton University and is the author of the to-be-much-admired and widely-read book, *Content Machines: Reading and Writing in the Platform Era*, out from Duke in the fall of 2026. And she's also written many other terrific books about the marketplaces and institutions shaping literature across the world. Thanks for being here, Sarah.

Sarah Brouillette
It's my pleasure.

AV
Okay, so we are going to start with the question we've been asking all the guests who are appearing on this mini-season: What does the term literary ecosystem mean to you? And what

role does your work, in the case of scholarship or public writing or however you're conceiving your work right now, what role does it play in the ecosystem?

SB
I'm going to be honest with you. I've heard the term "ecosystem" or "publishing ecosystem" come up many times over the years in different kinds of scholarship, and proposed as a way to understand, or a way to kind of describe all the forms of relation that are crucial to understand publishing overall. And I've always been a bit allergic to it. For me, it kind of lacks a bit in the way of determination. It kind of reminds me of Bruno Latour, like actor network theory stuff, where it's all just kind of horizontal planes of relation and everything is in mutual intersection. And I personally tend a little bit more toward hierarchized thinking.

I also think sometimes appeal to "ecosystem" has been premised on a bit of a straw man dismissal of what's considered a kind of outmoded base-superstructure analysis of cultural industries through a Marxist lens. So that you get almost two different ways of thinking, an ecosystem model or you can have a base-superstructure model. So I think it's important, like I can see using it, and thinking about it, as long as there's an effort to establish some kind of hierarchy of importance in terms of different inputs, within the system.

DS
Yeah. I would add to what Sarah said that it's also literally a naturalizing metaphor. It takes something that is human, cultural, economic production and reifies it into a metaphor for the natural world, something that's just there, kind of, you know, growing and flowing. But insofar as it's naming something, I think of it as a metaphor for the institutions of literary production, circulation and reception. And so I think of it as containing quite a lot of different institutions. I think of creative writing programs, publishers, platforms, printers, distributors, booksellers, reviews, prizes. And so I think publishing is just one institution in this whole range of institutions, that make literature into what it is. And I think what's been really heartening to see over the last 10 or 15 years is this whole subfield of whatever you want to call it, literary sociology or whatever, lots of different people coming at lots of these different institutions, and a lot of us kind of thinking together to try to build up the bigger picture, which you can only do as a scholarly community. No one person is going to be able to touch on.

Where my own work fits in, I mean, I focus on publishers, but I think characteristic of my work is thinking about publishers in relation to these other institutions. So, I think you have to think about these things in relation. And I think about, especially, I've found myself fascinated by the relationship between publishing and distribution or publishing and booksellers or publishing and creative writing.

AV
Great. Well, it wouldn't be the scholars episode if we did not refuse the term on offer! So thank you for that. In thinking about, what you might call, using different language, the relationship between these different institutions in the literary field, or a base-superstructure model of literary production. What role do you think, I suppose, given my own interest, what role do you think that social media platforms and, Sarah, what you call "content machines" play in leading to this diagnosis that the ecosystem is dying?

SB
I think that's, in a way, the fundamental question that my research has been motivated by recently. And I think that it's figuring out the precise chain of determination that's really motivated me, because I didn't feel comfortable saying "social media is causing X." I wanted to think about, "well, what's causing social media?" And I became just really interested in the dynamic of platformization and its dependence on, you know, the extraction of content with the payment of as little as possible, basically. And also its ways of intensifying and speeding up the work of creative production. And this seemed to me to provide the opportunity to make a kind of historical argument about what was distinct in some ways about our cultural moment. Because, and I'm sure, Dan, you can relate to this, when I first started talking about, you know, decline in literary value and decline in author's pay, everyone always says, "well, first of all, no, one's doing it for the money." But second of all, "writers have always been badly paid," you know?

And it was like, well, one of the key things about the way social media works is that writers have to do a lot of other kinds of work in addition to the work of writing that they weren't doing before and in a situation of diminishing return. And I'm interested in writers having to become expert on things other than writing so that they have another income stream or another form of content production that accompanies the work that they're doing as writers. And, you know, I'm also interested in some of the things that Sophie Bishop studies in her work on influencer creep, where the actual forms of the content are reflecting the social media stage. And I think one of the ways that we can see this in the literary field is, is autofiction and memoir and sort of self-writing. Because those allow for this neat back and forth between social mediation and literary mediation.

AV
Dan, do you think that conglomeration predicts the moment too that Sarah's talking about, or are these fundamentally working in different ways?

DS
Well, I'll say that when *Big Fiction*, when I finished it, I was still kind of thinking that the world of Web 2.0 (social media and internet writing) was running in a parallel universe to traditional Big Five mainstream stuff. And that's one of the big things that has changed, to my mind, in the last three or so, three or four years. These are no longer, you can no longer parse these out and separate these out. And we might talk about this more in some other ways as this conversation continues, but the thing that is most striking to me in this question of "whether or not the literary ecosystem is dying?" I would parse that question out in a couple of different ways because there are ways in which it absolutely is in a bad way. But then there's this kind of shocking, astonishing to me, just sheer fact of quantity.

So if you go back to the 1990s, about 30 years ago, there were probably around 10,000 works of fiction published in the US, annually in a given year with an ISBN. And last year, in 2025, there were probably around half a million works published with ISBNs in the US. Works of fiction published with ISBNs. Now that's going to be a dramatic undercount of the amount of fiction published because you don't have to have an ISBN to self-publish with Amazon, Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP). And you don't on Wattpad or Archive of Our Own either. And so when you talk about "are people reading and writing?" we're talking about millions of works of fiction that

are being produced or published, annually. And so that is a wild context to think of this. And now I'm so happy and lucky to be in a conversation with the two people I know who have written the smartest things about what we do to make sense of that, uh, quantity.

AV
I'll definitely keep that in the episode [laughter].

DS
So you know, at this point, maybe it makes sense to throw it back to you guys, about: how do you begin to make sense of like this? If the literary ecosystem is dying, how do you make sense of the fact that we've gone from 10,000 to millions works of published fiction annually, in the US alone?

SB
Because no one is buying those books. Or very few people are buying those books. Or they have a couple of people who stream part of them. The vast majority, especially if we're talking about self-published books on Amazon, I think is really getting at the heart of it. Like more than talking about, you know, autofiction, which is a literary mediation of these things, but a tiny, tiny part of the actual activity that's going on. But that's just it. To even talk about a literary ecosystem, a lot of people would want to make a distinction between a self-publishing Amazon ecosystem and a literary ecosystem, you know, and otherwise, on what basis are you going to critique AI slop?

How much of that textual production is just like the desperate shot in the dark of trying to produce something that people will buy, and one of hundreds that you made that day. You know what I mean? There are people who are just sitting there at their desk, doing this and doing a million other things at the same time, just to try to make some money on the internet, you know? And I think that that is really important and fascinating. It seems like it could be read as a sign of the literary ecosystem's total doom.

AV
Well, I do think that disaggregation falls somewhere between dying and living, you know? I mean, you could say it's the zombie form of literature. But when you think about this proliferation of storytelling, and some portion of it is never going to get read. It still begs the question, when it's not just like a kind of crass or even desperate money-making scheme, like when it sustains communities in the moment and over time, then we're in a place where, yes, what literature or what storytelling signifies is not lasting value. It's daily consolation or daily leisure time or even killing time, like while you're on your commute or something like that.

And so maybe one of the things that's dying here is the expert class that was able to have a profession around this culture of reading?

DS
So are you talking about academic critics? Are you talking about magazine critics?

AV

I was thinking about magazine critics and newspaper critics, just because I was thinking of the closing of *The Washington Post* as being this real moment. It felt like the nail in the coffin of book criticism in traditional venues – in newspapers where books would get flagged by people who don't necessarily read books, and who don't know about all the niches for literary discussion that exist online.

DS
Yeah. I mean, it'd be interesting to me to actually understand from inside the newspapers, like what are the metrics that they're seeing and what are the decisions that they're making when they decide to cut the book reviews? Is it because, you know, very few people are going to these pages anymore, or the people who go to these pages aren't bringing profitability to other parts of the pages, or why are they doing it? And in terms of what they do and where they go, I mean, Substack is where Ron Charles went, who was the lead book review critic at the *Post*. I think he very—I wouldn't be surprised if he's making more money. Because he has a very unique situation. He's, in book world, he's one of the most well-known names. He had his own following, and that's extremely uncommon.

Substack is—I have quite ambivalent feelings about it. It's got lots of things that I think are bad. The general vibe is one of profound ambivalence. Like a lot of people are there like, you know, "we would do this somewhere else if it were possible to do this somewhere else." But this is kind of the most viable place where you can get readers and you can post long form and it's kind of set up to be able to do this sort of thing right now.

SB
These things have been, as Dan has described, disembedded from their former professional, conglomerate, often salaried workplace, and turned into all freelance, you know, where you hire someone on the cheap to edit your Substack posts. Or use AI, there's so much AI writing on Substack, right. To speed up your production. And in that way, it reflects transformations that have gone on in other fields for, you know, 10 years ago. And now this is kind of happening. And its first appeal was to journalists, but a lot of academics have turned there too. But the thing is it's not—some of this is generational—it's not the university. And the abandonment of the university as a space of cultivation of appreciators of humane writing is just an astonishing undercurrent of this whole thing. Because why aren't people reading the book review section? Why aren't people buying literary fiction? Because the university is not producing readers of literary fiction the way that it once was. And that role is—If you're asking people to go on Substack and try to get—because a lot of people, that's the thing, is writers, creative writers do beta test work on Substack a bit. But that's creative literary writers don't want to do that. They want to save their best stuff, you know, for when their book comes out or whatever.

So George Saunders produces creative writing workshops and, you know, "here, try this prompt" and people pay a little bit rather than enrolling at Syracuse University, which, you know, costs more.

AV

Is the convergence of these two things in the online world of letters something that we think that is inevitably going to persist? So this is my way of asking you, what do you think is coming next in the environment that we all currently occupy as writers and readers?

DS
A lot of AI, a lot of AI stuff. So I guess I'll point to a couple of things that I've been noticing or interested in or hearing about. One of them is the increased presence, the dalliance, maybe we'll see what happens, of private equity in books. There's a good book by a scholar named Andrew deWaard called *Derivative Media* who has shown that private equity has really gone in intensely in film and TV since 2008. And his book lays out what that has meant for those industries.

And, you know, there's a lot less money in books. Books—it's really hard for books to sustain the kind of profit demands that they're supposed to be sustaining to be, you know, good growth opportunities for capital. They do their best. But I think that has meant that it's taken a while for private equity to come in. But private equity bought Simon & Schuster a few years ago. And I've been really interested to see what's happening there. One of the things that is happening there, they publicly, they said there's kind of two things they thought were going to grow. One was foreign markets or global markets. They thought that there was a lot of room to expand US publishing into foreign markets. And the other was In audio, which Sarah has a great chapter on audio in *Content Machines*. And in both of these realms, the AI is, is right there too. So one of the first companies that Simon & Schuster acquired as a foreign publisher was the biggest publisher—I believe it's the biggest in the Netherlands called VBK. VBK was one of the first prominent publishers globally to say that they were going to, that they already are, using AI to do translations.

So you know, it's already been happening by the time this podcast is out, it will already have been happening for quite some time that big publishing is using AI to do translations that are making it out into the world. That's just going to be increasingly the case. And that's a whole, you know, a whole part of the ecosystem of translators that is getting eliminated. Audiobook narration is another one. That is a whole art, you know, tons of people make money doing audiobook narration and that is getting squeezed out by AI as well.

So there's this kind of private equity AI—AI is an opportunity for private equity to see how there is profitability to be squeezed out of books. To use the Bourdieusian terms of "heteronymous" versus "autonomous," so on the heteronymous, or quick and dirty, kind of more commercial end of things, like AI is, you know, already ubiquitous and is just going to keep intensifying how things work there. On the autonomous side, what you're going to see increasingly is a resistance in order to differentiate. It's going to be more analog. It's going to be, I think you're increasingly going to see stuff, people not even, releasing things in print only, like maybe even refusing to do an ebook or refusing to do other formats because that's going to be, it's going to reproduce a certain sort of handmade or analog aura to the literary object, for this tiny, you know, tiny sphere of people who care about this stuff, which is increasingly a small niche.

SB
To be controversial, my concern in getting Bourdieu into this—and I do think it's really applicable and useful to think in those terms, and that that will always be characteristic of

cultural production under capitalism. But that the autonomous sphere where we'll cultivate the non-AI, it does kind of risk, I think, falling into something I've seen quite a bit already online, which is a reactionary kind of nostalgia, you know, for the time when writing was treated as it should be, like a learned skill. And the reason why I call this "reactionary nostalgia" is because I think to really understand AI writing, you need to do something like a Raymond Williams analysis of different dispositions toward writing that arise in relation to your place in the market, and your social class, and what you're trying to do with the skills you're acquiring.

And I also think, like what Dan says about the effort to use AI as a way to make things that aren't always very profitable profitable, is an important way to situate this and teach it. And I think, to me, in a way, this is a very exciting moment because we're actually at a conjuncture where precisely the stuff we know about is a way to use the university as a site of engagement in this struggle. You know, where you develop an understanding of AI as something that they're using against us, that it is really a very, to me, classic instance of what Marx was talking about of the development of the productive forces and then their transformation into something that can be used against us into a social power.

There has to be a way to think of writing and AI writing, in a way that doesn't kind of go back to this reactionary nostalgia, but that also doesn't reduce it to a work skill.

DS
I'm fascinated by everything you just said, Sarah. And just really would love to hear if you could a little bit more about this notion of reactionary nostalgia, on what I was figuring as the autonomous side, or as sort of an attempt to differentiate from AI.

SB
I guess what I mean in a way is that I've seen this kind of recourse to, well, we've all seen it, to writing as such. Taking for granted the understanding of what writing is—real writing is thinking, right? That you can't think if you're not writing it yourself or engaging in writing. And I totally understand that because that's how I've been trained as well. Right? But I also think it's not useful for understanding why AI generated text is totally okay, in many circles. It's not because people are stupid or lazy, you know, it's because they're making strategic choices.

And I, you know, I took a whole class on how to train the Claude AI to produce a dark romance novel. You know, it's not a creative writing class. It was a class on how to create—how to prompt the AI to generate the dark romance novel. It was a pretty long class. And, people were undertaking this with the understanding that they want to work in the genre. They know they have to produce a lot in order to sell. And they have to—also going back to our earlier conversation—do a lot of other work online, a lot of self-selling. So there's so much that they have to do. It's overwhelming. It's like, okay, well, "this will make that one step easier" because it's just one step. Right? The writing part is not this dark night of the soul where you dig deep into the autonomous realm. It's like one part of a larger process of trying to make something that you might be able to sell. I don't think that just celebrating the production of literary works without AI is sufficient, you know, that we also need an understanding. And this is also Bourdieu who said very similar things about the autonomous sphere, which he sometimes celebrated and sometimes critiqued. As a kind of class privilege, because to inhabit it, you know, in his analysis,

you needed to already be wealthy for the most part. But anyway, so it's, I mean, maybe there is a more direct parallel than I thought. You have to have a materialist critique of AI writing. You can't just have a celebration of the alternative, which can sometimes be premised on a kind of disdain or derision toward people who write with AI, which is not enough.

DS
I think that this is something I have found frustrating, and worry about, actually both among literary book world people and the English department or the humanities is, I think what you're just describing, Sarah, is the dominant sort of affective strategic/political orientation towards AI, is disdain, shame, and, but also a lot of misunderstanding. For the most part, what I've seen a lot of, maybe the people who are not quite as immediately vocal, a lot of just being like, "I don't want to learn anything about it. I don't know anything about it. I just don't like it." And for a long time, and still a lot of people are like, "oh, you know, AI just can't write well anyway." And now the competence—AI keeps on getting better at writing. Meanwhile, I go to the coffee shop and I'm surrounded by people who are like, "oh, let me see what Claude has to say about that."

SB
I guess another, another way to say this is that if your main concern about AI is a deterioration in quality of literary writing because— that's not even a real fear. If you know anything about literature and how it's developed historically, literary writers are not about to go out and start wholesale writing with AI, obviously. Right? But if that's your main concern is some kind of deteriorating quality of writing and the publishing industry, that is wrong. Right? And to me, the more fundamental concerns have to do with labor and the environment. They're very obvious. Right?

DS
Right. And the control of the technology by a small group of extremely rich men.

AV
I mean, what are you going to do when DeepSeek hits and the cost of all of these things goes way down? It's only going to get more built into, baked into everybody's usage. So, I don't know. I think it's actually really sort of sad that we've gone all in on denying that reality, because then it also limits the kind of writing that's going to get made. Right? It's all going to be—I think it's going to fall back into a kind of even more bourgeois realism than we already had before. It's going to—no more experiments, no more doing anything strange with the machines, just proof of human hand.

Okay. So, I want to thank you both for coming on and talking about such a wide range of forces shaping the future of literature. And let's hope that we do still have a future. I want to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the Ric Edelman College at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Our music is by Scott Selisker. If you are liking this themed season of Novel Dialogue, check out our previous themed seasons on Tech, The Weird, and Translation. And please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.