Novel Dialogue 1.2
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Orhan Pamuk speaks with Bruce Robbins

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Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. I'm John Plotz, you'll be hearing from my partner Aarthi Vadde in upcoming episodes. Today I'll be serving as third wheel for a conversation between my old friend and teacher, Bruce Robbins of Columbia University and the great Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk.

How do novelists think about talking to the scholars who study and teach their work? I once heard it called *inviting a cow to a butcher's convention*, but some novelists think otherwise, or at least can suppress the shudder.

We're so grateful that one of those generous novelists, is Orhan Pamuk, whose novels include *The Silent House*, *The White Castle*, *The Black Book*, *The New Life*, *My Name is Red*, *Snow*, *The Museum of Innocence*, *The Strangeness in My Mind,* and *The Red Haired Woman*, and many other books too numerous to detail here. He has received a host of awards and honors, and of course in 2006 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He's been rightly praised for his political acuity, his courage, his postmodern experimentation, and the complexity of his aesthetic vision, all true. And yet, I wish I could convey the thrill it was for me to first read his 1994 novel, *The New Life*, a story of switched identities and of bus journeys. I read it just as I was beginning my own first real adult job and it crystallized so many things for me about the seemingly solid, but actually all too permeable boundaries between people and also the way that the lure of the open road (I mean, I love a bus trip) is also the allure of simply for a time not being yourself.

Both Mr. Pamuk and Bruce Robbins are Professors of the Humanities at Columbia University. Bruce is himself a celebrated and profoundly influential literary scholar, author of such pathbreaking books as *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below,* and *Upward Mobility and The Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State,* as well as being a documentary filmmaker.

So with that brief inadequate introduction, may I simply stand back and say Bruce, Mr. Pamuk, have at it…..!

Bruce Robbins
Your last novel, Orhan, *A Strangeness in My Mind*, is the story of a working-class man from central Turkey who comes to Istanbul and makes a living selling yogurt and boza (a mildly fermented drink) in the street. One distinctive thing about this novel is the seriousness with which it deals with people at the bottom of society. You've said, in fact, that you deliberately excluded from the novel any middle-class characters. Was this an experiment for you, were you commenting on something the novel as a genre has not been able to do?

Orhan Pamuk
It was intentional. The art of the novel is really middle-class, or what Flaubert used to call *bourgeois* art, that is he referred to novels as bourgeois art, but it's a middle-class thing. Even when the novelist pretends that he is representing the dispossessed, it is the middle-class who's doing the talking. It is the middle class, at least, the novel addresses the middle-class readers. But this is not what I meant. In fact, I deliberately decided that in *A Strangeness in My Mind*, I'll do my best only to focus on lower classes, culturally lower classes, economically lower classes. As I was writing the book, I had a chat with my British editor at Faber and we were just talking, and he said "And what about middle-class characters? Who are the middle-class characters in it?" And I said, although I did not prepare it this way, I suddenly gave a radical answer: "There won't be any middle-class characters in my novel."

And maybe I'll give you this example, you know when I was writing or planning for *A Strangeness in My Mind*, one of my models or interesting cultural products was this famous film *The City of God,* which is about the *favelas* of Brazil or shantytowns. I visited those favelas before I wrote the novel, after I wrote the novel. In fact, after the film there was *A City of God* tour in Rio de Janeiro, meaning you know, it will take you to the places. Since my novel is essentially about--or the first beginning of the novel is--the making of the shanty towns of Istanbul, immigration to Istanbul from urban, from rural areas (I mean this is how my mind worked) I wanted to write and this whole process I researched, I talked to so many people, I had also research systems for the first half of this novel it, so lots of people were helping me. I was doing interviews with yogurt vendors, but I was also picking

up details that I would say *universal*--details that also happen, also you can find or also you can refer to, in Dharavi, this is the Arabic is the shantytown, famous shantytown of Bombay, which I've been to twice.

Why am I telling all this? Because, perhaps intellectual decisions as I wrote *A Strangeness in My Mind* and one of them was, in *The City of God,* there was a journalist a middle-class person who was living in the favela and writing about, reporting the event. In fact it's based on a huge thick book which is not successful in translation, perhaps because the film edited the book so much, but I understand the middle-class person was too apparent in the novel while he disappeared in the film. Anyway, I decided I did not want a middle-class journalist intellectual who is interpreting, who is giving meaning to whatever is happening in this shantytown. I don't like political novels which pretend to represent the lower classes, when they have a strong voice, middle-class, brave characters or reporter characters. Though, as we saw in our political novel class is this is almost impossible. Something impossible to achieve, that is, to write a novel about lower classes, which doesn't address *or* doesn't represent the middle-classes.

Bruce Robbins
So in that seminar which we taught last semester, you seemed especially interested in novelists like Turgenev and Conrad and what they did or didn't do with the poor and the socially marginal, people who would not be included among the novel's readers. and you referred to few times to our colleague Gayatri Spivak's question, *can the subaltern speak*? I wonder if you could say something more about that interest of yours, how you see that theme in the novels that you enjoy, in the history of the novel.

Orhan Pamuk
Yeah, after I wrote *A Strangeness in My Mind*, I was again busy, my mind was still busy with this problem of representing the others, lower classes and the more you think about this, the more, naturally, the more you think of what is political novel. Because that is the ambition or pretension of the political novel to represent the unrepresented, not represented. Those as you said, Karl Marx, "18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" in what he wrote about Louis Napoleon's *coup d'etat*—he said they were not represented, so others represented them. More or less, [the] political novel is unfortunately, is about those who are not represented--we novelists represent them.

And I like this subject and after *A Strangeness in My Mind* I deliberately wanted to have a political novel class not only because it is also related to what I'm right, the novel I finished now, *Nights of Plague* but it's also about let's see what happened in political novels. Then you remember, towards the end of each class I would say, "Well, we are finishing this novel. Where are the dispossessed? Where are the poor? Who's talking here?"

The most interesting political talk comes from the middle-class intellectuals. Or especially in, for example, Conrad's *Nostromo*, they disappeared in the caves, tribes, Conrad in a cynical way, tribes disappeared in mines and then not much. There's not much said about that, though these novels are highly respectable, highly classical political novels.

I'm not here to trash them, but I'm here to in in an ironical way crack their position. You crack their structures and tell something to the students. In fact, we've been teaching together almost 10 years, Bruce and this was this year, in this political class for the first time I felt that we are, you know, doing that, something beautiful in a seminar. Not only we're teaching something, but we're also discovering something, in fact, that political novel only works with a strong middle-class voice, middle-class audience. Also it's better to have a middle class interpreter who is saying "oh this is happening because of this. This is happening because it's all so complex."

Bruce Robbins
This is very nice to hear. I have to say I mean I also can't tell you how much I've enjoyed teaching that course. We did this last term. But before that, in the course we taught on the art of the novel, we always taught Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, which some would say is the greatest, one of the greatest political novels ever written. And we actually didn't find room to put that into our course on the political novel. I wonder whether you would like to say something about Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, which clearly is a novel that you have very strong feelings about and that we've taught each time.

Orhan Pamuk
What one likes about Dostoyevsky and he is unique in that: I'll have two things to say about Dostoyevsky or three things. First, he has this power to contradict himself. He is carried by his imagination, although his mind is full of ideas as we can see from his political writings. I have read *The Diary of a Writer*, you know, he was filling his newspaper and writing almost all

everything in the newspaper. And they were very interesting. And you see that Dostoyevsky has a mind full of problems actually dead or political problems. Westernization, there is freedom, political problems, the book is so busy. While he has also very strong ideas, but he is a better novelist than his strong ideas. So he begins to write an idea, illustrate an idea, something you know, some demonic novelistic impulse makes him write something that contradicts that idea.

And then you respect the guy, you like the guy. Then he has--in spite of many, many ideas that we all have in our political world, especially in non-Western world or the world that always fights with West, like on the peripheries of Europe or West--then here he begins writing in such a way that he's carried by the strength of his imagination, and dares to contradict. So you immediately understand that even his early novels, novels where the characters are there to illustrate his big ideas, he cannot stop contradicting his big ideas. Then you like the guy, and…..Anyway, this middle class intellectual, in the end he has, he is a Westernizing, a liberal guy, Dostoyevsky is supposed to hate it. But we discovered in the class that Dostoyevsky had so much tenderness to this guy who misspent his life with fancy Westernization ideas. But Dostoyevsky in spite of contradicting, although this will contradict his big ideas, he cannot help being a novelist. He cannot help, and continues, his mind operates more like a novelist rather than a person with ideas, though he is a person with ideas.

BR
I'm going to go off script for a second and say that those who know and love *Snow* as much as I do will recognize a little bit of him in Turgut Bey I think…

OP
Yes, when I was writing *Snow* deliberately, I had *The Possesse* in mind, my novel talks to that. And also you alway wants me to talk about Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Turkey. And this is a subject I like. First, there is this big Anatolian plateau and not the Mediterranean Turkey, but the central Turkey. Is that mini-Russia, a mini-central-Russia that is vast vast lands by my standards, by Turkish standards, poor villages. And then and then a local intellectual who is observing this poverty and also very traditional and very conservative and hopes for Westernization, modernization, things happen but things are happening very slow and this is a backward country--you are angry.

So there is this kind of affinity between Russian novels and my world. Also it's one of the reasons the Russian novelists were translated well into Turkish. One reason was Turkey was a member of NATO and it was required that Turkish army had Russian professors or Russian, Russian to learn, required because perhaps espionage because it's our neighbor, and enemy. And all these Russian professors that teach the Turkish Military Academy, when they retired, come to publishers, *can I translate something*?, and they're all translating Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky….And it's always funny in '60s, '70s, when these retired stiff soldiers, in the end they are soldiers, who are with drunk writers who are always making fun to their being right-wingers or spies or kicking them or making jokes with them anyway, so. I think also these Russian translators, a generation of retired Russian professors, Russian teachers to military academies in Turkey were also good translators, really, they were not too literary, too pretentions. They were writing as if they're Turkish, their translations do not read like translations.

BR
OK, let me change a little bit, the subject. I know you've just finished a novel you've been working on for years, *Nights of Plague*. Congratulations. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

OP
I can endlessly talk about that. It's a novel set in an imaginary Ottoman island in 1901 during the third plague pandemic. For the last 40 years I was dreaming of writing a novel that takes place during the plague. I've been researching, collecting material to write a novel that takes, a historical novel, that takes place Orient or in my world, in Ottoman empire during a hard, strong plague pandemic. In the end, I said, I decided that I will set it in 1901. When there is this third plague pandemic that is coming from either from India and China (and its ideological immediately, there's a lot of Orientalist representation of evil coming from India and China, which is unfortunately partly true). That third plague pandemic and also cholera pandemic at the end of 19th century came from East. And the distribution center for it was it was Hejaz, the pilgrimage place for all the Muslims of the world--and it was controlled by Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire, that Hejaz plague *karantina* organization of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of 20th century, was the biggest *karantina* organization in the world. Ottomans were arm-twisted by Western powers to

filter all these Muslims who are spreading cholera or plague to the world. These subjects are so titillating for me that is, Orientalism, modernism, and also to impose karantina to Muslims is even harder to impose karantina to Europeans.

There were karantina uprisings, people who are against karantina measures say in Italy, in Poland, in Russia. And of course the whole ideology of fatalism, these Muslims do not care about that. They are not afraid, they are fatalists. They are not like they are not educated.

All these subjects made the subject of imposition of karantina to Muslims is in fact very similar to subject of imposing modernity to Muslims. Look at the psychology of a well-meaning Muslim doctor. After the Muslims don't like him in Ottoman Empire because he's friends to Christians--more than 50% of Ottoman doctors were Orthodox, they were Christians. Muslims wanted and would go to the Sultan, *please send us Muslim doctors because you have plague a doctor comes home and wants to see your wife's body*. There is a bubo here, you don't want to show, you're all gonna die. And to impose modern medicine, more of the practice of modern karantina to these people is very hard. I cared about writing about the psychology of the person, the person who wants to modernize his country, who while the country says, *don't come*, is very conservative, *don't, we don't want you we don't want modernity*. while he thinks, just like the doctor who wants to impose karantina "well it's good for you, you know, I want you to accept this." So that well-meaning upper-class person who wants to say revolutionize, Westernize, secularize, liberalize his country is facing the same problem, he is doing something in spite of his people and this is a subject that I like.

BR
Well, it sounds wonderful. When are we going to get a chance to see it in English? Do you have any idea?

OP
Well, actually it could have just in this last 10 days Knopf had decided to publish it. Fall 2022. A bit late for me, but inevitable is just finished. Translation is just starting.

BR

Okay. So looking back on your career (I know maybe it's too soon for you to be looking back as you're just still playing with the cover and the maps and illustrations and so on…) One might say that you began your career as a realist and you went through a kind of experimental or postmodern period. And maybe you would say you've more recently returned to realism. Is that a good way to describe your career? Or maybe not so good?

OP
Yes, but that's not the whole point. Yes, if you look at it, I am now writing closer to my early novels that I am not writing in high-brow postmodernistic ironical attitude, but is more somehow. My mind is more descriptive, and is more busy with representation. But alreadyn on the other hand, for example, there are so many novelists who start, you know, *Dubliners*, James Joyce very classical. It's a short classical story. Suddenly he's writing the most experimental novel ever.

My point, no novelist continues writing, no respectable novelist who writes very old version and the same novel the same form all the time. Those who experiment in their youth then say, for example, the French novelist, Aragon, he wrote very experimental, surrealistic novels. Then towards the end of his career, he reverted back to classical Zola-esque novels, which were interesting, fun-to-read romances. I think he also wrote a very interesting novel, *Arellien*, and I think one of the best loved novels ever written, it's a very thick novel. That is a beautiful love novel that I read almost in one sitting, which was I think it's 800 pages or something. And I read that in English translation.

Anyway, for example, at the end of his career this Aragon, ho was very much interested in art, Surrealism, was friend of surrealism, is writing old-fashioned novels. I am not like him. That experimental blood is still in me. Sometimes I address. When you write sometimes I say "Okay, now I'm writing *A Strangeness in My Mind* representing those who are not represented. This process doing so much, meaning history, sociology, development of shantytowns on Istanbul, busy with this kind of thing. " It's harder to experiment yeah in depth. Also giving us again a glimpse of the idea that art of the novel is very much a middle-class art.

BR
As you know, your novels are extremely popular in translation in many languages around the world. Under the circumstances, what does it mean to be called a Turkish novelist? Do you think of yourself as a Turkish novelist? You know, of course, that you know you exist as a world novelist. Do you resist the urge of writers, of readers, to see you as representing Turkey in the eyes of the world? I mean, what's your, what's your relationship?

OP
Really damning question. First, don't ever forget that part of the novel is a very national thing. That sometimes I think that in mid-19th century humanity became (because of Industrial Revolution) humanity begins to produce so much, so much objects, so much more time, so much bibelots, so much things, so much divergence of objects that only novelist, novels, could put together, the totality of things.

Once there was a, there was an interview or a group of questionnaire by *Guardian*, the British newspaper, where they asked many writers "Do you write for only your nation, British leaders or do you write you for other?" They ask this because all of these writers were translated in many, many languages. I remember Kazuo-- Antonia Byatt, said "I write for the nation. This is my priority." Of course, self-consciously or honestly, titillating, making happy the nationalist readers. They're happy. *OK, we are first* British readers and then you would make Turkish readers happy with that too. But I respect Kazuo Ishiguro who honestly said. *I am writing for universal. I am not only….*

And I think if that is really, my answer to that is more practical really. I say I am writing, (*who do you write for, Orhan, the Turkish readers?)* I am writing my new novel for those who readers who had read my previous novel.

BR
Your love for the novel as a genre and your commitment to the novel as a genre has come through so strongly in everything you've said just now, I hesitate to ask you about politics, but I know that you have often been asked about politics and sometimes have found yourself on the front pages of newspapers because of things that you've said about politics. Do you would you prefer not to be to be asked about politics?

OP
No, I prefer to talk. I like talking about politics, but I don't like the risks.

BR
Yeah, well, right.

OP
They may take away your passport. They may have a case and they may even shoot you in the leg or even in the head, you know. So you have to be careful in my part of the world.

Also they may threaten you and there's yeah, endless emails or Twitter. And I for example two years ago, you know three years, ago with my girlfriend I wrote something and they were, I think, partly government-organized Twitter attacks, you know, not death threats, but something lesser. But makes you gives you bad stomach, you know? Yeah, we were going out to dinner, I said, *look how many we said three in 10 minutes*. You know three new Twitters coming and they're all hate speech by American standards. Now *if we returned from dinner and it's still three Twitters in a minute, darling, we're in trouble.* We return, it was not cheap, it was one in a minute and I said *OK tomorrow morning it will pass*. But it didn't pass. Tomorrow morning it was forgotten.

I am not shy about talking. I am also but there are the consequences. People, it's not aesthetic that I don't like politics. It is the problems--the irony is there are so many ironies here--At the beginning of my so-called career that all the writers of previous generations who were well-meaning leftist schoolteachers who were, who had a much much narrow vision of Turkey, for them the models was leftism or that he was not even a leftist, John Steinbeck or Maxim Gorky. They would read that, imitate these novelists.

Then I would read Proust or Nabokov with a guilty conscience and I begin writing like them. Or Thomas Mann more upper class, middle-class aesthetics and these writers that I respected, the best of them was Yaşar Kemal who was friendly. And he was a better person--they, but the previous generation of lefty writers begin to attack me. I was nervous. I was a bourgeois for them and I also did it. They said I will not talk about politics. But as I get more famous they begin to ask questions. 10 years later, I was known in Turkey, both Turkey and internationally as a political novelist. Or maybe I'm exaggerating, but a novelist who is not, who tackles politics a lot and this is this situation.

But partly even if you have high aesthetic standards, if you're a novelist it's hard to avoid. Novels represent your country. When you're a novelist you are seen as a representative of a troubled country, and then it's inevitable. Even if you, *Oh I don't like politics*, *I care, it's not aesthetic*. Tou can do it in a Proustian way, or Proust was by the way (Dreyfuss) he was a political person I respect a lot.

So you cannot snob it. You cannot be a snob and say, well, I don't like all of this. It would seem like you're a coward, and I'm also angry and this is a good opportunity. You begin to talk and then at one point you have to slow down. Because it also over-takes. People think that I wrote *Snow*, there are people who think that I wrote *Snow* about because I because I want to make a point about Armenian genocide. It's not in the book, it's something that I said outside of the book.

JP
So Mr. Pamuk, we always like to ask, what is your favorite treat, treat, understood, liberally?

OP
Yeah I am, I'm consistent in that. I am a tea and coffee drinker and I drink, enjoy coffee and tea all the time. There are no other favorite drinks. Sometimes very rarely towards if my mind is operating very well. And I need a bit of more creativity, at 6:00 o'clock I have a glass of wine, and I continue to write till dinner, but this happens rarely.

I used to smoke 2 packs of cigarettes a day and that was suicide. Then I enforced and I quit and without smoking a single cigarette I began and finished *My Name is Red* and then, and I said to myself, *if I can write a book like that without smoking a cigarette then it's OK*. Because it's hard to quit to a writer because all writers, whoever is smoking, they will immediately, *well I can't write before, if I'm not smoking.*

I'll tell you a funny story about giving yourself a treat. So I quit smoking before I begin writing *My Name is Red* after which I was divorcing, political problems, my father--died all in the same month and I begin smoking again. And then again I imposed *stop smoking*, you know so many times. But in the end I'm successful now. In one of these times I said to myself, o*h, you want*

to smoke, you know you want a smoke and then you have to tell a lie to yourself. I said, *okay, I'll, if I have a treat if something unusual happened*, if I said myself to myself after 50, okay, if, (since everyone was talking, I was not fantasizing about this, so I am also clarifying this) *If I receive the Nobel Prize after hitting a little cigar, not even a cigarette I'll light a cigar*, I said to myself. Some 15 years ago or even more than that. Yeah, and I was thinking that this will happen in 20 years.

Then it happened too early. I'm in New York and I receive the news. I immediately think about my cigarette, but it's 7:00 o'clock in the morning. I'm so happy, I don't want to smoke any cigarettes. I care about all the effort I gave to it. So I don't wanna smoke, but I planned myself to smoke this day, so what do I do? That day was a funny day for me anyway, because they put me into a car. We're driving, doing interviews, sometimes going to magazines, doing another interview for TV's, that is a surrealistic day, but in the middle of that I said *okay, I can't smoke, but I'll find a replacement* because I also had prohibited band to myself for a milder thing, fried potatoes. I thought this was as bad as cigarettes so I, so we were in a big car and I stopped the car. Just a regular diner in New York, we went inside and I said *oh a plate of fried potatoes*. Instead of my cigar or cigarette. I eat a whole plate of potatoes and that was my treat the day I received the Nobel Prize.

JP
So, when you say a plate of potatoes, was it French fries or like, hash browns?

OP
French fries yeah, French fries. I'm sorry for my English.

In *Lolita,* Nabokov says , *fries-French?* A question, is it French?

JP
As we approach the end of another novel dialogue, Aarthi and I would like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from Brandeis University, the Melon Connection PhD program, and Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Please subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts and tell your friends about us. Upcoming conversations include Martin Puchner with Christina Lacey, Kelly Rich with Teju Cole, and Elizabeth

McMahon with Helen Garner, author of *The Children's Bach*. So from all of us here at the butchers convention, thank you so much to Bruce and Mr. Pamuk and hope to talk to you all again soon.