

Novel Dialogue 1.4
Catherine Lacey speaks with Martin Puchner
March, 2021

Transcript

John Plotz

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a new podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. We sit novelists and critics down together to explore the making of novels and also what to make of them. I'm one of your hosts, John Plotz and you'll be hearing from my partner Aarthi Vadde in upcoming episodes. Today I'm joined in conversation by the novelist Catherine Lacey and the critic and scholar Martin Puchner.

So what is this podcast exactly? Years ago, at a conference, Aarthi and I heard a novelist describe the experience of talking to academics as "inviting a cow to a butchers' convention." We would have preferred a slightly different metaphor, maybe something like *inviting a cat to a high school biology lab*, but we do take the point. Still, over the years we've found that some novelists love to talk with scholars about the underpinning, the ground rules, the history of their form, and their writing. The idea of Novel Dialogue is to invite a novelist and literary critic to talk about novels from every angle: how we read them, how we write them, publish them, analyze them and remember them. Our aim, dear listeners, is to bring you lively, sophisticated dialogues that dissect the art of novel writing and consider the influence of characters, plots and stories on how we think about the world. If you like what you hear, please subscribe to Novel Dialogue on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts and spread the word to friends who may feel the same as you.

It's a great pleasure to draw the curtain up on Novel Dialogue today by welcoming my polymathic and highly sophisticated friend Martin Puchner, Professor of English and Theater at Harvard, general editor of the Norton Anthology of World Literature, and author of many prizewinning books, among them *The Written World* and an already celebrated new memoir, *The Language of Thieves: My Family's Obsession With a Secret Code the Nazis Tried to Eliminate*. Hello, Martin.

Martin Puchner

It's good to see you, John.

JP

It's very good to see you too. He's joined in our virtual studio, our "Zoomio" I guess we could say, by the brilliant novelist Catherine Lacey. Hello, Catherine, hi.

Catherine Lacey

Hey, thanks for having me.

JP

Hey, it's so great to have you. She is the author of three novels, most recently in 2020, the spooky and slippery *Pew*, which I bet we will hear a lot more about today. And her earlier works include *The Art of the Affair*, which is 2018 collection of short stories--sorry, *The Art of the Affair*, and a 2018 collection of short stories called *Certain American States*, I love that title, and two novels: *The Answers* in 2017 and 2014's *Nobody is Ever Missing*, which I love both for its portrait of a mind on edge and because it tells the story of an American in distress, decamping to New Zealand. You know, reading that in 2020 all I could think was "Take me with you. Yes, take me with you!" So it's a real honor to have you both and a pleasure to declare the novel dialogue open. So, over to you guys.

MP

OK great, great, great, John and I want to say that even though my role here is that of the critic which I'm always happy to fulfill, I don't think of myself as a like an expert on Catherine's novels. I'm a reader of them. I'm thrilled by them. I'm freaked out by them. I'm puzzled by them. I'm baffled by them. So as a as a reader, really, this is how I see my role, a reader responding to this wonderful writer.

To start as a kind of my overarching response or the response I most often have when I read you is the sense that there is something I don't know, *feral* about these fictions you write. Often characters who run away, including as John just mentioned to New Zealand (and that's of course a sign of someone really being in trouble) and or somehow dropping out of socialization, different layers of socialization being stripped away, some form of escape. Most prominently and fully perhaps in your most recent novel *Pew*, but in *Nobody is Ever Missing* as well. So there is a kind of through-line I see there. And then what I find fascinating

as a reaction to that, you have people starting to help, people starting to assist these escapees in one way or another, and help often turns into compassion, or can and then into almost a kind of need to re-socialize them in one way or another. Again, I'm primarily perhaps thinking of *Pew*, so this is just sort of a first reaction, Catherine and I want to throw this at you and see what you do with it.

CL

Well, I really like this word *feral* to sort of describe a through-line through the work. And I would actually push against what you said earlier that you're, you don't feel like you're an expert. Well, I don't feel like I mean I don't think anybody is necessarily an expert on anyone's work in some ways because there's lots of different ways to read it.

But I do think that you certainly are more an expert than, than I am because it's the weirdest, it's really, it's strange how difficult it is to read and understand your own work. At least it has been for me, especially when I think I know what something is about, or I think I know, you know what this was, a short story or a novel that I've already written, maybe years before. I feel like I'm done with it, I know, I know what that story was about. And inevitably I'm wrong about it.

If I have to look back, or if somebody brings it up, I see it differently and I realize that a reader has a very different relationship to the work than I do. And that's I think at first that's maybe one of the things that is, feels really scary about writing. Once you put it out there, somebody is going to interpret it, you know whether positively or negatively or weirdly or whatever it feels kind of frightening. Like you want to be able to control what the reader is going to see in, in a work, but I think you can't and then like the longer I do stuff, the more I'm just like, people are going to have their interpretations of things and none of them are valid or invalid necessarily.

This is partially why I really like this word *feral*, and you're sort of detecting a kind of rejection of sort of social norms as a dominant feature in all the books, and I had never really thought about that and I feel like it, that's a better way to me to describe..... There's been the through line that I've been told about, about the books is that they're about like mental illness or depression or loneliness or like you know something like this, and I think certainly that's a part of, it's a part of a lot of books I feel like, it's sort of loneliness, this tends to be a subject of almost

every novel and in one frame or another at some point. But I always felt like that was a kind of limited or just like a little bit not quite the right size of the interpretation, and I think just this word *feral*, just clicking so many things in my head. I feel like I see it every I see it all over the place now and so I really appreciate that.

MP

Great, great, you know it's very interesting to me--just to pursue this a little further--that you just mentioned as one of the misreadings or mistakes if someone gets a name wrong, because the names, again, I'm thinking primarily of *Pew* where even the name is sort of stripped away, right? A nameless person in a way washes up in, in *Pews* and in church pews and then gets adopted, and then it's called *Pew* because the need to have a name, so it's interesting to me that the name you think is a kind of hot-button issue.

CL

I've always sort of had a weird thing about names. I just, I like renamed myself a couple times when I was a kid and like, often—

MP

Oh, really?

CL

Yeah, I often have these like, I mean, I've legally changed my name. I just I feel like name, I don't know, names, there's a lot of, there's a lot of power in a name. And I think, I think we naturally like recognize that I think at a young age like you want or don't want a nickname or you do or don't like your middle name or you don't want you know there's some power in being named in sort of or choosing a name. And then, but I think in fiction in particular, there's also something kind of limiting about a name. And often I find myself gravitating more and more towards, like nameless narrators or like sort of delaying the naming a character, as long as I can, to the point where like even this novel that I'm finishing right now, the character doesn't have a name. I mean, she has to have a name like in the reality of the book somewhere, but it's never learned because it never really seemed relevant.

JP

Can I? I want to continue with this *ferality* theme, which I really like, and just, can I ask how you would connect it to a kind of American road tradition? Because there's a way in which pulling out of society is kind of like just geographically displacing, you know, I'm thinking of *Huck Finn*, but I'm actually also thinking a lot about Marilynne Robinson: *Housekeeping* or something. Like the people who leave and the people who stay. So yeah, the sites of connection and sites of difference I guess?

CL

I love *Housekeeping*, but I hadn't read it until just a few years ago. But I think my dad read *Huck Finn* out loud to me, like twice during my childhood, like he would set us all down and we had to like, you know, be read to aloud at night. I don't, I mean, I just, I mean it must, it must be, it is a kind of, you know, in some ways we we're three America-, well, not totally American, but three Americans of different stripes sort of trying to--

JP

Martin, Martin is a motorcycle-riding American. He's a total American, a California motorcycle guy.

CL

But you were born in Germany, yeah?

MP

I was born in Germany.

CL

Yes, I read the book!

MP

And I rode a motorcycle only very briefly and without a license, so I don't know whether that makes it more or less valid, but.

JP

That's super American!

CL

More American, yeah, trying to get away with something. But I mean it's funny how like yeah, I think naturally like that is, when you look at.....When I read books from other cultures, other countries you don't see that, this trying to run away, this trying to do things by yourself, this sort of war between independence and interdependence is a kind of conflict we keep on playing out now in a million different ways in America. And to the point where like to me, it just seems like, well, this is that this isn't that like a human problem. But it isn't maybe to some degree, but I think of course it is one of America's favorite problems.

MP

To, in a way, reconnect to the first topic we talked about, I was struck that that there is a very keen spatial awareness that I feel runs through a lot of your work. Especially I'm thinking especially of interior spaces, rooms, like you know, cat-sitting for an ex-boyfriend and what it feels like to reinhabit that space that you know so well. Of course, in *Pew* the pews themselves, you know what it's like to sleep in a pew and wake up and a church service is going on. I felt like, I feel that very vividly, even though, as you say, you don't visualize a lot of characters, what they look like, I think you do visualize a lot the environment in which they find themselves.

CL

Right. I think I wouldn't...(I didn't necessarily consciously know this and maybe I'm wrong about it) but I feel like part of why I tend to write fiction that is I want the reader to feel like they're looking at the space like I, even if it's a third person narrator, I want them to feel like they're *inhabiting* the character rather than watching the character. I mean, there's you know, and maybe that'll change over time, or maybe like that, that is more or less true in different books or stories, but on this topic, at least like the sort of presence of spaces.

When I was a little kid we had like a community theater in my like small hometown and I did a lot of community theater and I got really into like, you know, auditioning for stuff. And then did these school plays and then like did I went to like Shakespeare Camp, so I was like, really, into monologues and sort of, sort of pursuing that as a kid. And one of the problems that I encountered doing that was that there were sort of no monologues for children. There were only these monologues that were--go to an audition and prepare a piece or something you only could be like, you know... Like how is a 7 year old going to do

like Blanche DuBois or something like this? It kind of really can't happen and so, so I I was always, and even like Shakespeare, you know, it's like I, I did Lady Macbeth when I was a teenager and it sort of felt absurd to me. I'm like I don't even know what it's like to be married like I can't think about like murdering somebody with your husband. It's just a lot, you know.

And even though I do feel like kids can tap it, whatever, I felt like I wanted to write my own monologues, you know, 'cause I was like, wouldn't it make a lot more sense if I just came up with somebody and inhabited them and did it? And so that was like the first time I ever.... I wasn't like trying to publish them or be a playwright or write fiction, even at that time. But it was sort of a, it was a problem and I was solving it with this, and then I kind of always, I think because that was the first way that I really wrote fiction, it was sort of, to me it seems natural to sort of think about it as like a first person thing.

And when, when you're like in a sort of first person fiction space, to me at least, it makes the most sense, like I have to know what I'm looking at all times. And I feel like every, every scene, every story, every book, I have to know what the spaces look like, and I spend a lot of time like thinking more about that than about anything else. Not because I really want to describe like you know, the exact couch or whatever. That's not important, but if I know where this what this space is, then I can sort of move around in it freely.

MP

Yeah, it seems to be not so much a question of precise description or something like that, but more a kind of interest in (as I keep coming back to that one short, short story, the cat sitting for the ex-boyfriend) sort of what it feels like to inhabit the space that has a certain kind of history—and then come back to it and all of that.

CL

Yeah, only, sort of adjust your body, you know, like when you when you come home you, there's a certain way that you move in your home that's very different than the way that you move at your friend's house or at the grocery store or wherever. Like we have sort of different postures and different ways of holding ourselves. And I think also partially because I have sort of gravitated towards first person narration on the whole, to me, like syntax is a reflection of like what is

happening bodily in the person speaking, whether it's, they're speaking in your head or you know, speaking out loud. The language is the representation of what's happening in the body.

And so I need to really know, like what that body feels like and so the one way to come at it the other way. If I think about the space then sort of the space creates the character, then the character creates the body, and the body creates the voice rather than the other way out, at least that how it's been for me.

MP

Yeah, that's a great, that's a great description that totally resonates with my experience as a reader, yeah.

CL

Great.

MP

And you know, you, I think you mentioned to me that you travelled to Greece in part preparation of that which put to mind the fact that you've, you know be both met in Berlin a few years ago when we were writing there, in this weird villa on the Wannsee.

I mean, you know, you've lived in different places, and I feel like, one can sort of get a sense of that in your, in your work as well. What does, you know writing in a particular location, what does that, what does it mean to you, or is that important at all?

CL

Oh, it's important on so many levels I mean. Yeah, I wrote my first book, mainly in this, like one cafe in this one spot, like this one chair at a specific time of day, like every, every, like five days a week or something. And I mean before that....I think space only really starts to matter when you know when I really have something going.

You know it's just like I don't have like, I don't have like my little reading nook that like I have to, you know, have a little writing nook right have to come here every day and do this or that, it's, I'm not like precious about it, it becomes more, it's

like project specific. where, like, I have to, at least for me, I had to like trick my brain into sort of returning to the same space fictively when you're, you know, 'cause you're not in the same space. It takes me, you know, three years to write a book. I'm not the same person at the beginning that I was at the end, so how can I make a space that's static that I return to so that the voice of the book can be consistent? And sometimes you know there's like different types of books, so, like *The Answers*, for instance, I feel like there's like three different spaces that the character is inhabiting. I wasn't so regimented to say I'm going to write this part here and this part here and this part here, but it did kind of, I think, naturally sort of work out that way that, an order should like finish.

Where the character is in this one part of the book, I had to sort of have a space that was consistent. Yeah, but travel has been really important too, but part of that is just collecting sets, you know if you think about the, a novel or a story sort of being a kind of play in your head at the beginning at least. If I know like, I know what it's like now on this island in Greece, where like, how, what it feels like to sort of walk through these little paths in between the little stucco houses on this island, you know? And I just even if I looked at pictures of it a million times, I didn't know what it felt like to sort of navigate through those spaces. There's no way I would ever write anything in that space, you know. I mean, sometimes it's, like it's so silly. You know, 'cause you know, you don't need to go to Berlin to write a novel set in Berlin. And I always thought, these stupid novelists always like making up these trips they have to take and research like, *oh, I have to go to Greece for research*, just like *no you don't. You probably don't*.

But it's better if you do. I have found like I, I'm not going to write some-, I'm just not going to write something unless I've been there, unless I've been in the space that I want it, that I want it to happen in. Or I can mush two things together, but...

MP

And so, the obvious follow-up question, what have you been doing during the lockdown?

CL

Just sitting here, I mean, thank goodness I had--

MP

But I mean has it hampered this spatial plotting of the place of your writing?

CL

I mean, to some degree, yes, because I do like being able to physically relocate to like go to a space and sort of go to a mode and now just just being at home, I had never, I've never written at home for this long. I usually would use public spaces in one degree or another, but also, I also think that you know whatever, whatever a writer, especially like a younger writer thinks is necessary to them doing their work, whether it's I have to have, you know it has to happen between these two hours or it has to happen, you know I have to have this kind of pen or this kind of paper. I only do longhand first right, only write in the computer. Whatever you think it's not true.

None of, none of them, none of these things that you have to have or ever really true and so. Yeah, I think, you know now I'm a person that just writes at home every morning from this hour to that hour. And I do have, there's, I mean, this is the first time I've ever lived in somewhere that like I had a room that I didn't sleep in and make dinner in and live with another person in. So like there's more than, there's enough space in this house for the first time ever that I can go upstairs or downstairs. This corner or that corner and so I have found that I do, I was doing like, it's like it's hard to fully remember what was I doing, but I was doing one kind of work in this room that I'm talking to you from. And then when it was time to work on something different, I think it was a screenplay, when I was working on the screenplay, I was like I just went to a different room so I didn't confuse spaces, but it wasn't like I, I just did, I just naturally did it and it wasn't a premeditated thing.

JP

That's what I think cats do. I think it's like, oh, *I've got important work to go do in the window, I better go over there.*

CL

Yes! Yes! Well my dog he gets like a little dental treat every morning and he takes it and he goes to the same spot on the rug where he doesn't really do anything else on that rug, just has a dental treat and he works on that, and then it's time for him to move on.

JP

But I think in Russia isn't the place where the icon sits in an old Russian house called "the beautiful corner" and I always think you know with cats, cats have a beautiful corner and then they have a business corner, and yeah. I mean, that's the pandemic.

CL

Yeah! We're all house cats now, everyone's a house cat, whether you want to be or not.

JP

As we sort of round the corner here, can I just ask a final sort of novel studies question, just to ask you both basically? What fiction you're, you're reading now and you know how it's, whether it's having any effect on how you think about you know, novels, novel writing, or the novel, I guess?

CL

I was like, couldn't write, I couldn't read fiction for a little while I was having trouble with it, but then I got, I went on this sprint like lately and I've just read, or I just reread, *The Babysitter at Rest*, which is, it's like six, it's like five or six stories, but it kind of works as a novel, but it kind of doesn't by a writer named Jen George. I loved it, so weird, it's from this small press called The Dorothy Project which does, I think all, it's like they do like maybe 10 books a year or something and they're all women and there's a lot of books in translation they do and, that one was really wonderful and then also a book that's coming out. I think in January called *The Copenhagen Trilogy*. And now I'm, I'm blanking on the woman's name. She's like a very, important, I'm going to look it up, I'm sorry.

JP

No, it's OK.

CL

Maybe, Martin you can answer and then I will bounce back with mine.

MP

You know, I've been reading a lot, you know, in the last half year and John, I think on some other podcasts we talked in the early days where I, I just, pure escapism. I read a lot of P.G. Wodehouse as I think other people did as well. Then I had, you know, I caught up on Murakami and that was another form of escapism so, I didn't go through a, you know, Boccaccio, Camus, *Plague* phase. I wanted to actually not think about plagues, you know, then I read Catherine Lacey.

CL

Oh

JP

Alright, OK then.

CL

Tove Ditlevsen, I don't know. Yeah, she was a very important mid-20th century writer. Why am I blanking on the country? My brain is short circuiting, I'm sorry.

JP

Well, Copenhagen might be Danish.

CL

Yes yes yes! I was like Denmark and Danish sort of just mesh together.

JP

You got a little breakfast-treat confused.

CL

Yeah, there are three novels that are kind of all autobiographical, and just very dark, very wintry, but her language is so elegant and you just can't believe what she's going through and but the way that she just moves between you know, divorce to abortion to this, to that, it just bounces right on. It's like, it's not upbeat, but there's something really clean and elegant about the language that is, I don't really know how to describe it. Very icy.

JP

That's great. So you guys, the final question that we like to ask everybody on this podcast is just basically can you talk about like a treat for you or a way that you

know, something you do when you're in the midst of writing? Either you know to just reward yourself or break a, break a spell, or, I don't know like anything you want to share like that.

CL

I wish I had more of a kind of, I think I'm a little too ascetic or something, but, I mean I, I drink a whole French press every morning, just for me.

JP

That's awesome.

CL

But no I wish I had, I wish I had like a better, taking a walk. I mean it's simple, simple joys right now. I think a walk, because a walk with nothing with you and no destination to me is just total luxury, and completely necessary to finishing anything. I feel like every time I've had, been stuck on how to finish something or figure out how to, how to get out of some hole that I've dug myself into fictively, a walk is the answer every single time.

JP

So then you and Dickens do have one thing in common...

CL

Yeah me and like I think 90% of all writers forever that have two feet and walk around.

JP

Yeah well, so OK as we come to the end then of another Novel Dialogue, I'll just say that you know we would really like to thank you guys so much, this is great. And I want to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and also acknowledge support from Brandeis University, the Mellon Connected PhD program and from Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer, Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. And there are upcoming dialogues which we hope you will also tune in for, which include Bruce Robbins speaking with Orhan Pamuk, Kelly Rich with Teju Cole and Elizabeth McMahon with Helen Garner, author of *The Children's Bach* and a truly amazing novel about addiction, *Monkey Grip*. So you know, you guys, thank you once again and from

all of us here at the butchers' convention, thank you for listening, and talk to you again soon.