

Aarthi Vadde and John Plotz Season 1 Wrap Up

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to season one of Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. I'm Aarthi Vadde.

John Plotz

And I'm John Plotz and Aarthi, we've lived together virtually for this whole season, but now we're actually in a virtual room together. It's great, and so we're going to look back.

AV

Yeah.

JP

This is sort of episode nine of our eight episode season. We're going to look back at an amazing season of conversation, so drawing them together, but maybe also teasing them apart a bit.

AV

Exactly.

JP

So I'm going to just jump in Aarthi and ask you what role in this very varied and interesting set of conversations, what role do you think humor or lightness played in the conversations?

AV

Some of my favorite takeaways were when novelists joked about their process like George Saunders comparing novel building to piling yurts or novel writing to yurt building. And I just thought, wow in one sentence he summarized what would, you know, in really kind of technical terms make a lot of sense. But that's the takeaway, you know. A novel is sort of like a yurt, and that's true.

JP

Yeah, so we had this tactical decision to put kind of a comical question at the end 'cause we asked people about their favorite treat and that was really something that got people to open up. But we put it at the end so you know there were a couple of conversations, like for example the conversation between Bruce Robbins and Orhan Pamuk that were pretty high-toned throughout, and then when he got to talking about French fries, he really opened up around French fries. So it's interesting.

I completely agree with what you're saying that the humor was kind of a crack that allowed us to kind of let some light in. But maybe we needed a stand up moment at the beginning.

AV

It's possible. I wonder if, it's a tough balance, right? Because that signature question, the novelist has been talking for a while at that point and they are, I think, ready to be silly. You know, they've already

proven themselves serious, and they're just ready to be silly. But if we could get them sillier earlier, that could be interesting,

JP

Yeah, no, you're totally right. Because it's the opposite of an emcee warming up a crowd with some jokes, because then the message is Oh well, you know, relax and enjoy the show but in a way the conversation is not, I don't think the novelists treated as relaxed, they treat it as engaged. You know that they're talking about their lifeblood basically, you know.

AV

And you know, I think novelists are being called on more to do this of late, like you had asked me at one point I think, are novelists better on the page than you know, in the studio and I was thinking about that too. And I thought, and this is after a season so I had some time to reflect after talking to, you know, many different novelists. And I wonder if that was our critical insularity, showing a little bit, like thinking novelists are better on the page, because when we meet them in real life, they don't always want to talk in the same idiom and on the same terms that critics want to talk about amongst themselves?

And so I'm reflecting on that and thinking. My instinctual answer was maybe, yeah, they're better on the page. But then I thought, well after this this whole arc of the season, I'm thinking more about what my expectations were from novelists in conversation as you know, when I was thinking purely as the critic, talking to other critics.

JP

Yeah, I think that's a great point, and I actually really liked, Aarthi, I meant to say this to you earlier. I really liked the question you asked George Saunders about the making of his audio book, which I guess was a kind of composite like cast of thousands production.

AV

Yeah 166, He knew the exact number.

JP

166 that's amazing, yeah, because right because, it does go back to a different day. I mean, Dickens thought this about his audiences too. And Dickens spent a lot of, I mean spent like 15 years of his life just performing his books right on stage so it speaks to that way in which oral engagement has this dimension that you know, those of us who came through a literary critical upbringing that was shaped by modernism, we tend to downplay that element of the non-page aspect.

AV

We definitely had some novelist read, right, read passages from their works as part of the show and they're gorgeous readers in a lot of different cases. I mean, Helen Garner is a pleasure to listen to, and I'm wondering if when she read from her books, if you heard them the way that you read them in your mind? Or did her reading style add something for you?

JP

That's a great question. So I'm really glad that the podcast is made up of that like diegetic sound, which seems so different from the conversation that follows, but I have to admit that I was basically so sort of nervous or fixated on the process that her reading, I couldn't really sit. I should go back and listen to it now, again, now that we have them as finished pieces, because it was hard for me to take in.

But yeah, what, how do you think about that, how you're listening?

AV

I loved it. You know Madhuri Vijay read from *The Far Field* and once she read it, I heard Shalini differently actually. But I don't want to say that her voice has solidified my understanding of the character, but she activated certain aspects of the prose that I think then all of a sudden became sort of like pronounced for me. The sharpness, the sort of acerbic aspect of Shalini's personality was highlighted, but it also just the awareness right. This is a character who is writing with an awareness that's not cynicism, but that is really, really clear eyed about what she has witnessed and what she has to make sense of. I just thought her voice captured that tone.

JP

Yeah, yeah, that's really interesting. I mean, it's so, you know—I'm teaching, I'm not teaching the death of the author, which I know you alluded to in one in an email you sent me, but I'm teaching Foucault's "What is an author?" So I've been thinking about that relationship between text and author. Because Foucault makes this claim that, like our insistence on authorship and authority, is a way of damping down the possibilities of the text, not opening them up because it gives us kind of another critical yolk that you can throw around the words of the novel.

But of course what you're saying makes me think a different thing, which is just that, you know having the writer inhabit them. It's not like it provides the correct meaning of the words on the page, but at least it lets you kind of go off at a different angle in terms of what those words do when they're spoken aloud.

AV

Exactly, and I think you know if maybe you're a student, you want to give the author the final say, because you might you know associate that authority with the final word, but none of the writers we talked ever wanted to be the final word on their novels. I mean, that's such the defeat if your a writer I think. I'm not the final word, you, reader, complete my project you know. I can't exist, the work can't exist without you.

And so I think having the novelists read, but also reflect on really open and generously about what the novels were doing, and really often declining to offer interpretations, sort of ceding that to someone else was nice to have altogether in, you know, a 30-40 minute episode, right? Because you can see the author not as authority, but as guide and you know, that's a word that came up I think in Ulka and Madhuri's episode. Just guide, you know, it's a little bit of a different position.

JP

Yeah, you know, it's interesting. I really pushed Helen Garner on the quality of music, like what her relationship to music was, 'cause I was sort of looking for oh well, what are the dominant metaphors that define this and you know she has a famous novel called *The Children's Bach* and she has so many people who play piano and it was interesting. She just kind of sidestepped it. Like she didn't want, yeah, I think you're right it's it has to do with not wanting the final word. It's wanting to be responsible but not answerable, something like that, like there, but not there, to mobilize you behind their ideas, but just to make their ideas present to you and then see what happens. Like get it completed in the reading process.

AV

Right, yeah, you know, I think. And this is not to say they didn't have strong opinions, right? I mean, I talked to, you know, Kelly and Teju Cole, Kelly Rich and Teju Cole. Teju has opinions. Trust me, I mean, he feels very strongly about Bach, about Dickinson, about a whole host of writers, musicians, artists. But it doesn't mean that that voice is the one that he's going to impose on his own work, and there's something beautiful about having strong opinions about other people's work, but not wanting to somehow dominate your own work, you know.

JP

Yeah, totally.

AV

George Saunders had a kind of funny way of talking where he would say these most profound things about the effects he wanted to achieve and sometimes he would say now that's the truth, and other times he'd say and that's just a bullshit, you know, I was just trying to achieve this effect and if it had a philosophical point, I guess I'm just lucky.

JP

Yeah, right, totally, that was a revelation to me because you know, I mean I did you have to look up the word bardo when you read his novel.

AV

Oh yeah, I did not know bardo in advance.

JP

Yeah, and I think initially I actually misunderstood the bardo, like I thought it was a physical place and it took me a while to realize oh, it's a kind of purgatorial, it's really a duration of time more than anything else and I thought he would go there. You know, I once talked with Ursula Le Guin and she was very happy to talk about, you know, thinking through Daoism as it appeared in her work, but he didn't touch on that stuff at all. He mentioned he's a Buddhist, but he didn't really pursue the notion of there being ideas within that.

AV

Oh well, you know, I think that he talked about Buddhism much more in response to how he thinks about his own writing process and its relationship to meditation and the parallels he can draw between how he feels when he is in a meditative state and writing as a kind of intuitive state that also entails deep control and iteration of certain kinds of practices. And so that's where I felt that there's some really informed his idea of his own process where spirituality and Buddhism inform the novel. We didn't get, no, we didn't talk about that as much. We talked much more about historical fiction.

JP

No, but that's really helpful. And also I think you're really right, I think practice is what I was thinking of too when I was thinking about people like Robertson, and even with Helen Garner as well, that how the practice occurs is of interest to them.

AV

Right. Wouldn't you compare that too to like actors talking about their performances? They really don't want to talk about the movie, but they talk about how they got into character and decisions being made

because the effect that they achieved was for us to enjoy, but they're never a part of that effect, I mean, they don't feel it too. I mean, they don't feel it too.

JP

Yeah, totally, you know I wrote a chapter about Willa Cather and opera once for *The Song of the Lark*. And so I wanted to talk to some opera singers, and I talked to this amazing woman who told me, she's a soprano, and she told me that when she's singing badly, she can hear her voice and it sounds horrible. But when she's singing well, she doesn't actually hear anything, it's just like if she's hitting the notes right, they just disappear. It's like perfected tone and that sort of resonates, you know that notion.

AV

Yeah, absolutely. I was going to ask you too about whether having, you know done Recall This Book and you know hosted another podcast prior to the dawn of Covid, do you find that your experience of podcasts has changed in the pandemic era? I feel like mine has just exploded. I feel the podcast is the pandemic form honestly, but you have a longer history so I want to hear from you.

JP

Yeah, it's true I've been into podcasts for a while and when we started Recall This Book we were obsessed with the notion that we really had to all three get into a studio together in order to make the conversation, it was a three way conversation and we had a tiny studio at Brandeis, and when I think about it in the era of covid, you could get 0.2 people into it. You know it's just like, you know, and we always made jokes. It basically feels like kind of a womb from a science fiction movie. And we loved that. I mean, it felt incredibly warm and we also did something, Aarthi, that you and I have never done, which is such a bummer, which is we had a monthly happy hour that was associated with it--

AV

Oh, that'd be nice.

JP

--you know, so we would all go drinking together. So there was a lot of attempt to create in person, conviviality and maybe in retrospect that was a little nostalgic, you know we were using an older kind of physical presence in order to jumpstart the presence we wanted to create in the conversation. Because of course everybody listening to it was listening in exactly the same way that people listen now, but we somehow felt like we needed physicality in order to make the first thing work. And whereas you and I like have never been in a room together since 2012, you know.

AV

I think we were in an elevator for five seconds together, I don't remember what year, but I definitely ran into you in an elevator at something.

JP

That's really funny. Good, yeah.

AV

But yeah, no one would know we weren't best friends. And I honestly feel like the relationship...I'm totally for the resumption of in person events so I feel bad saying this, but I feel like we have developed a real friendship by working over zoom together and Slack together and all these different platforms and

so yeah, and I have no, you know, I don't think I would draw that much distinction between the conversations we've had, but I attribute that solely to the fact that we're often in a virtual room together just the two of us. If we were in a large you know webinar or even a seminar that would never have happened. You know it's just us right now.

JP

Yeah, no, that's a really good point and so that sort of speaks to something that we were trying to create, and I think I really feel like in retrospect the smartest thing we did about setting up the podcast is it's kind of like 2 + (1), like in other words, if we want the critic and the scholar to be talking to one another. But then there's always a potential for there to be a third wheel and just to your point of like not a webinar, so it gives it something. I don't know, it's hard to sum up, but it's kind of like an impromptu sociability, which is sometimes the two people can just go like Orhan and Bruce, just they know each other really well. So for much of that, I was just like a happy onlooker. And then sometimes it's more like, Oh no, wait, but there's a stranger here that we have to talk to as well.

AV

Right, yeah. And also, given that we were under the constraint of always being virtual, I mean you asked, was it a happy accident that the show ended up international? Yes and no right. I mean, we never once questioned the matter of distance because it wasn't something we had to worry about. Everyone was going to be in their respective homes, which suddenly opened up Scotland and Hawaii, Australia. And maybe I'm wrong, but I sort of believe that one of the, if I could even say there's a silver lining, one of the silver linings of the pandemic was that once those places were opened up, people were in isolation and ready to talk. You know, they wanted to stay on sometimes after this session was over and just like chat.

JP

Yeah totally. Yeah no I agree with that. And so then the interesting thing becomes and you know, in a way actually. Okay, so Aarthi let me introduce a final topic that we haven't discussed, which is the question of how long are episodes were or are. You know 'cause we were so sure that this sort of half hour to 45 minute length or maybe, do we have some that are 55 minutes, but we were pretty sure that we knew we wanted a kind of let's say medium sized podcast as opposed to, you know, the sort of news snippet you know New York Times Daily 12 minutes, versus the Between the Covers 3 hours. We were sure about this medium length and were we right to be so short like did we set it at the right length?

AV

So I definitely changed my mind over the season through exposing myself to so many more podcasts and realizing that many podcasts weren't as modular as I had suspected, right? I mean, and I notice this happening with TV too as it moves to Netflix and other kind of digital platforms, right? There's no need to have a 30, a 22 minute episode with eight minutes for commercials because no one is enforcing that at a broadcast level anymore. And so you can make the episode the right length through your own kind of editorial control.

And I also was watching episodes and certain series just get longer and longer. And we were debating whether that was also a kind of symptom of people alone at home or trying to retrieve some alone time and just wanting to be amongst some voices for a little longer than usual, right, kind of ambient togetherness, yeah. So I definitely have been less strict.

JP

You made another interesting point about, Aarthi, which is that you thought maybe there was a kind of a legitimization thing involved in going longer, which surprised me, but it made sense when you unpack, yeah, do you want to say, you want to make your point? I thought it was an interesting point.

AV

Oh, right, well, I think if your aspiration is to be taught in a classroom or you know, put on a syllabus then there might be more substance to being a longer show, right? And you also might think it adds heft to a new medium. If you can talk for 90 minutes about the big issues as opposed to 28.

JP

I was just thinking how ironic it is that you, as a modernist noticed the Victorian tendency of podcasts, whereas I as Victorianist actually like think about them as preeminently modernist like I think of them as like on the Willa Cather model of like you know you take the words away and you strive for economy of form like the cutting is the art.

AV

Yeah, well, I guess I'm a realist in this, but when I'm editing the podcast, I really tried to make the stitches to disappear. Like I've been aiming for transition, seamless transition and it's not easy, but I haven't been going for the "fragments shored against our ruins" style at all.

JP

Yeah no I agree with you about making these seams invisible actually, and I think it's, I've heard from a lot of our guests from Recall This Book that they really appreciate the seamlessness of, like they almost feel like they're listening to a different version of their own voice when they hear how we choose to stitch them together. So I'm in favor of that definitely, but more the point that you might get authority from the ability to simply go on and on. And of course, we're both college professors.

AV

Oh, when you put it that way, I see what you're getting at, right.

JP

But then there's another side isn't there, which goes to the question of like the warmth of the podcast that you were mentioning in the kind of coldness of our pandemic, is okay, fine on the one hand, anything that's five hours long is intimidating and it's an accomplishment to do it. But on the other hand, I think people's relationship to podcast is one of immersion. You know that they want the voice there with them and they don't, like I feel like when I edit these podcasts, I want every minute to be doing some work, but there's some level on which people listening to podcasts kind of want it not to be work, right? I mean, they want it to be something else, so.

AV

Right, I think it's close versus ambient listening, which you know is something that I feel constantly when I listen to podcasts, because my relationship to podcasts, when it's successful, is I'm doing something else. But I've become so absorbed in it that I continue doing the thing that I would have stopped otherwise, right? So it keeps me exercising longer because I want to know the rest. Or, you know, I stay out waiting in my car for it to be over, even though I should be going inside. And so that to me is the sign of an absorbing, excellently done show. And that's not to say that I'm, it captures the attention and it still allows you then, if it makes sense, to divide your attention, you know. I mean, you can do something else, but it doesn't mean that you're not fully engrossed in what you're listening to.

JP

Yeah. Gee, someone should write a book called *Semi-Detached* that's about that.

AV

Oh yeah! Well done.

JP

But yeah, no, my partner, Lisa used to drive home from work late and she'd listen to, oh god Adam Corolla, was it called Love Line or something?

AV

Love Line with Dr. Drew.

JP

Dr. Drew, yeah and she, I would look outside and I would see her sitting in her dinky Honda Civic. Just like you know, still listening, 'cause she couldn't get out. She had to hear what he was going to tell the 15 year old and.

AV

Oh, I know.

JP

Yeah, I always I really, I started listening. I mean she really, she hooked me on it.

AV

So was she your gateway into audio or did you already have other shows and it was just something you shared?

JP

No, in fact, Lisa is funny about audio because she likes the immersive immediacy, but she mocks me because I've always been a fan of like, if I said The Foley Man, does that mean anything to you like these NPR shows with the sound effects, like the two coconuts in the Monty Python that you bang two coconuts together like that. I'm a sucker for that kind of, which we don't do it all in our podcast. Obviously like our podcast is meant to go straight to people's cerebellum

AV

Yet, we don't do it yet.

JP

Yes, that would be something we could just have a kind of riffling pages soundtrack.

AV

Oh, right, the sounds of being smart.

JP

The sounds of bibliotherapy, yeah. Yeah, okay, well Aarthi this has been great. Should we do some credits now?

AV

Yeah, I think you should do them because I don't have them.

JP

Okay, I will. Okay so as we approach the end of our season of 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 connected PhD program, and Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden, who is just graduating from Brandeis University, congratulations, Claire, is our sound engineer.

Please subscribe and rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast or Stitcher, or Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. And please tell your friends about us. If you enjoyed this conversation, you should check out conversations with Martin Puchner, with Teju Cole, Helen Garner, and Orhan Pamuk, help me out here.

AV

Oh sure. Kameron Hurley.

JP

Kameron Hurley, of course, yeah.

AV

And Madhuri Vijay and Ulka Vanjaria and Gerry Canavan and Michael Johnston and George Saunders.

JP

And George Saunders, yes, so from, Aarthi, a pleasure, thank you for this conversation.

AV

Oh, this was so fun.

JP

I look forward to Season 2 very much and thanks for listening and we hope to talk to you all again soon.