Tara Menon in Conversation with Sigrid Nunez

Transcript

John Plotz
Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue which is 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 also be hearing later in the season from my partner-in-pod Aarthi Vadde.

Today I'm going to be serving as the third wheel, very lucky third wheel, for a conversation between my pal Tara Menon of Harvard Society of Fellows. Hello, Tara.

Tara Menon
Thank you for having me.

JP
Hey, so glad you could do this.

And the illustrious novelist Sigrid Nunez. Hello Sigrid, thank you so much for coming.

Sigrid Nunez
Hello and thank you for having me.

JP
Cool, and so Sigrid Nunez's seven novels include *For Rouenna*, *Salvation City,* and last year's *What Are You Going Through*.

So how do novelists think about talking to the scholars who study and teach and write about the contemporary novel? Well, one aspect of that question that struck us at Novel Dialogue is how many novelists actually live among us in the university teaching the same undergraduates we do. In fact, in her National Book Award winning *The Friend* Nunez takes us behind the scenes of what it means to be a writer surrounded not only by other writers and their pets, but also by students.

Sigrid, you're so brilliant at kind of condensing or excerpting the meaning from ordinary exchange. I think so good at seeing how the things that we say to one another relate to those deeper things that we mean and that we muse over behind the daily give and take so I'm hoping that that is going to be kind of an inflection of what this conversation today is like.

So with that over to the two of you. Let the games begin.

TM
Thank you John.

SN
Thank you.

TM

I thought that we could start, Sigrid, by you reading a passage from your novel *For Rouenna*, which was published in 2001 and to set this up for the listeners, *For Rouenna* tells the story of a female nurse who served in the American War in Vietnam and the unnamed narrator of the novel befriends the nurse long after she's returned from Vietnam and the passage that Sigrid is about to read happens shortly after the narrator has learned of her friend's suicide.

SN

Thank you. I should say one more thing about about this. Rouenna has asked the narrator at the beginning of the story if she would, she knows that the narrator is a writer. She knows that she has a big story. She served as a nurse to Vietnam, and she suggests that the narrator should write a book about her. And the narrator does not want to do that. She says that's not the way I work, and so she doesn't. And then sometime later, she discovers that Rouenna has taken her life and she remembers, among other things, this part that I'm reading takes place, I believe it's 14 weeks after Rouenna takes her life and she remembers that, among other things, she didn't really want to become too involved with the project or involved with Rouenna because she was afraid that it would somehow make some kind of trouble for her.

"And now I had trouble. Trouble working, trouble not working. Trouble breathing in and out. News of her death broke all peace of mind, brought on headaches and insomnia, and all the while that feeling of urgency growing, intensifying, cutting off oxygen, pressing on my nerves. Pain. It was a good thing I was going away. A good thing I had a lot to take care of before the move. Throwing myself into these tasks brought some relief.

"The first week, the week before classes began was sunless and brutally cold. I did not go out much. I spent most of my time cleaning and arranging things in my new apartment and office. I went at this business with a fury and when I was not at it I was restless. I did not know what to do with myself. There were moments when this restlessness waxed into anxiety and the anxiety into heart-pounding fear.

"In fact, it occurred to me one day that this banal formulation was perfectly apt. It described my situation exactly. I was living in fear and as so often happens in such cases after a while, since I was under no distinct, discernible or even nameable threat, it would have been more accurate to say that I was living in fear of fear.

"Now would have been the ideal time to be engaged in some large project. All this solitude, all these hours. As it was, I had just discarded the draft of the manuscript I had been working on for months. How the word discarded bothers me. I want to say destroyed or even more, ceremoniously burned. But when a writer says she burned her manuscript, suspect that she is not telling the truth. No one burns manuscripts anymore. Although once in a cabin in New Hampshire where I'd gone to write because I happened to have a fire going, I did burn a draft, page by slow page and nothing was ever more hypnotically satisfying.

"So this was another factor in my decision to move. Once again, I had gotten it into my head that in order to write, I needed to be somewhere else. I had brought with me the notebook in which I had written about Rouenna, and one day after I had settled in, after I had arranged everything in the apartment and office and there was nothing left to be cleaned or put away, I sat down to read what I had written.

"It was not much. At the time I had been too distraught to think or to write clearly. I was afraid to dwell on Rouenna then. So I started it again. I quickly wrote down a description of how we met and in the

following days I kept it up, writing about other things I recalled from the time we'd spent together. I did not set aside a special hour of the day for this. Instead, I went about my life, and in the midst of doing one thing or another, I would suddenly remember something and go write it down. And the more I wrote, the more I remembered, as always happens, and soon it had become a preoccupation.

“The feeling of urgency again. But something had changed. I was less anxious. The fretfulness that had troubled me all these weeks diminished and I relaxed. I slept better at night. My spirits lifted, I could breathe. January, February, March, my birthday, spring. It was around the time of my birthday that I saw that out of these notes and recollections about Ravenna, I might have begun a new book. I saw this partly because I was incapable of writing anything else, also because this writing was the only thing that could engage my full attention.

“A mother I knew once told me when you have a child, if that child is not right there with you in the same room, you are never completely present yourself. Part of you is always elsewhere. I could have told her it was the same when you were writing a book. I went about my day. I did what I had to do, but whether it was reading or running errands or teaching class, my mind was never completely on these activities. Part of me was always elsewhere.”

TM
I want to start somewhat cheerfully, I suppose, with grief and ask you why it is you think that you're so attracted as a writer to writing about grief. I know that's an odd word to use, “attracted” but it comes up almost, I would say in every single one of your books, so I wonder if we could start there.

SN
Loss is the predominant human emotion. You know, we are always losing things. You know it's not just losing those very, the most important things which is the people we love when they die. But every day you know you lose your past. You lose your, you lose, you grow older, you lose your childhood. You lose certain people in your life. Nobody keeps everybody with them as they move on and then it just seems to be, you know, because of the working of time, that you're always saying goodbye. You're always losing something. Things are always you know, ending up somewhere in you know half remembered, imperfectly remembered, but still very very important.

And then of course, at a certain point, people know begin to die and you lose more and more people. You also lose the dreams that you have, you lose, you know you lose parts of yourself in a sense so, but in my case, I think it's pronounced because of my parents. I think it's because of my immigrant parents and that they were both, well, my mother in particular was so nostalgic for the Germany that she had left behind, and that she was never going to return to in any significant way. And you know, my father had lost members of his family. He had lost everyone really. I mean, you know by the time he was married to my mother and raising us, he had no connections to the past, but he too had, you know, he didn't talk about it the way my mother did, but it was very, very clear how much his life was defined by the loss of everything that he'd known when he became an immigrant here.

So I think that has a lot to do with it, and I think the fact that my mother was so vocal about it and was so expressive about it. You know she was someone who was mourning at all times that I knew her. She was mourning this past identity of hers and this home that she lost. So I think that that's really why it's more pronounced, because it isn't something that I think about, like you know “oh I want to write about this subject.” I'm writing about people and experiences, whatever, and then it always comes in as an important part of the emotions that people are going through.

TM
I think that makes a natural transition to talk about your debut novel, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, which, what you've spoken about just now so eloquently really comes through in that novel which is a, as I understand, an autobiographical novel about both of your parents, your immigrant parents and your father, who I believe was Panamanian Chinese, is that correct?

SN
Yes

TN
And your German mother. But you know that book is a mournful book, in my view, but I wonder if I could suggest, and maybe another source of the mourning which you mentioned briefly, this idea of losing past selves and losing childhood because I think really, some of the most exquisite writing I've ever read about bodies inhabiting physical practice and movement is your writing in that book about ballet and your dream of becoming a dancer. And for me the mournfulness of that book comes through in what the narrator sees as her failure to become a dancer.

And I was wondering now, some years after you wrote that book, whether you still think about dancing as a failure in your life, or whether you think about it in a different way. And I also wondered after that if you could talk a little bit about whether you see that there's a connection at all between your dancing life and your writing life.

SN
Well I do because you're absolutely right about how important that is in that work and to me. This was just an early failure. I was quite young when I realized that this dream was not going to happen and I feel that dream was so powerful and meant so much to me that the failure really, really was critical. I mean, it really defined my life in many ways.

Now it's important to say that it was a dream, but it was also a fantasy because it wasn't going to happen. That doesn't make any difference to my you know, to my emotions, but it wasn't going to happen. I mean, I started too late to really become a ballet dancer and I wasn't interested in other kinds of dance, so it was a dream, but it was also a fantasy. Nevertheless, it was very very real to me. It was what I wanted and the fact that maybe if I had started earlier, I could have had it only made it more poignant.

So one very good thing about studying dance is that it, the discipline, learning discipline, you know that was a very important thing to learn. And you know, taking it seriously and being taken seriously was very important and it was there that you know that it first, where I first understood that this was the miracle of participating in some kind of art, was that it was a way of being a part of the world and being out of the world at the same time.

And that came to be true when I was writing. However, because of that failure and not being the real dream, that loss was always going to be there. It was not going to be made up for by writing. Writing was always going to be the thing I did because I couldn't be a dancer, and that hasn't really changed. It just isn't something that I think about day-to-day because I have my work to do and because I'm not that troubled, you know that I'd be so stuck in the past. But nevertheless, I know it's there. And so in

some ways I'm grateful for it because I think it was important and very helpful to experience such a tremendous failure early in life.

You know it certainly, there is so much failure in writing as you know, so much rejection but also just failure. You know your writing, it's your language, suddenly you can't write a sentence. You work all this time on this story and then you realize it's not even, it's never going to get it published, it's a terrible story. How did that happen? You know there's so much failure in writing. So I think that that was a good thing to understand, what it meant to fail, and that when you failed you didn't you know, you didn't just stop.

So yeah, I think that early experience and as I say I don't think about it all the time, but you brought it up, you know when you mentioned it in your email and you're bringing up now and I see it exactly. Yeah, I see that you know, you're seeing it exactly as you saw it from the beginning, both how important it was and that it was a failure.

TM
Can I ask when did writing become a dream?

SN
Well, writing was there before the dance.

TM
It was.

SN
Because writing was there very, very early as it is for so many writers and where it came from is very clear to me: it came from reading. So I was this child and when I was read to first because I couldn't read myself and then when I learned to read, reading was just an extraordinary pleasure. It made me incredibly happy. When I was reading, or being read to I didn't feel like there's something better I should be doing. And so it came very naturally to me to then think, well, this is what I want to do. I want to write fairy tales. I want to write Dr. Seuss, I want to write Peter Pan and this kind of—so I knew that I wanted to do that.

In fact, when I was, for quite a while when I was young, I just assumed that I would be a children's book writer because that's what I was reading. And then you know I wanted to do that. Then in elementary school and we're reading Dickens and I didn't think you could, I mean, nothing could be better than that, and the idea of being able to write books like that. And it was then, you know, is that then I got to high school and you know, also at that time in the public schools that I went to from elementary school all the way through high school there was creative writing. It was always there. Either there was a poetry club or there was a class or it was part of English. I mean, it was always there and whatever I wrote, I was encouraged. I, you know, I was made to feel like this was something I could do that, you know that was something that would please people and that I should, you know I should enjoy and do and so on.

And it was then when I was in high school that I decided I wanted to dance because I was living in New York City I was able to go to a place to study in a place which was extremely serious and where you saw extremely famous dancers take class. I did not take class with them, but I sat in the doorway. Many, many hours I sat in the doorway and watched professional dancers take class. And then I thought

that was what I wanted to do and then you know then I moved on. I ended up in college and I took writing workshops but there was, I really, I did feel and that was when I was going through the worst of that failure and the writing was okay, I could do that, but it was, I didn't think it could ever replace what it would have meant to be, you know to be Suzanne Farrell. It's just, you know, there was no comparison.

TM
Yeah, I have to say it's music to the ears of me and John who are Victorianists to hear you say you thought that there was nothing better than Dickens when you wrote.

JP
And Peter Pan too, don't forget. That's another place where dancing meets writing, I think.

TM
Are there several authors or an individual author who really shaped your writing when you were young. Was there a book that really transformed the way you thought about writing, the kind of book that you wanted to write?

SN
Not really, nothing in particular. They were just the books and writers that I loved. And it's interesting because, you know, when I think of some of these writers, whom I love and who have meant so much to me, for example, Virginia Woolf. You know, I've read everything, the fiction, the nonfiction, the letters, and the diaries, everything and you know and I have had the strongest feelings about her, but I don't, she's not an influence in the sense that I don't write like her. I couldn't be more different as a person, my background, everything about me. But nevertheless, she's been a kind of, you know, guiding spirit.

And I should say that when I was first writing fiction as a young adult, well in college, for example, right after college, everything I wrote for a while was bad Virginia Woolf. And I don't regret that. See that's another thing that I don't regret because I think you can learn so much from that. So, and then Elizabeth Hardwick, who was actually my teacher for a couple of semesters, and an incredibly important mentor, I don't write anything like Elizabeth Hardwick, but a very important person, and in fact her *Sleepless Nights* which is auto-fiction and which is a certain kind of book was certainly a major, major influence. Susan Sontag, who could not have been more of an influence on me, but, you know, but my work is nothing like her work either.

But there are particular books that have been, particular writers that have influenced particular books. For example, *For Rouenna* was very influenced by two writers, V.S. Naipaul and W.G. Sebald. And you know, even when I, I remember very clearly that that was what I was after, a certain kind of tone.

TM
I do think I see the Sebald in *For Rouenna* and I've been thinking about this a lot recently because I'm thinking about teaching a class on city fictions. And that you know Teju Cole is often seen as the inheritor of Sebald and how male, I've been thinking about how male writers and male narrators in particular are the ones who get to be the flaneurs of New York City. But I think that you know in *For Rouenna* the narrator has, the shoeshine man passage on the ferry is really some of my very favorite

writing about New York, but there's so much New York, right? You know in my mind that novel is two novels. It's a Vietnam novel, and then it's a New York novel.

The word that I would use I suppose to describe your novels would be something like fictional memoir. That it feels like a memoir, and you know the passage that you read from *For Rouenna* right at the beginning it feels to me very similar to the very best grief memoirs like C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* or Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* or *A Year of Magical Thinking,* that there's something I think about the intimacy of the narrative voice that it feels in some ways this tremendous compliment that everyone thinks that this is auto-fiction and that you're not making it up because it feels so intimate and real I think. But I think that if I was in your place I would feel annoyed by people calling it auto-fiction because it feels as though they think that you're not making it up and that fundamental to the job of being a novelist, but.

SN
Well I feel like I can't afford to complain because the way I present it, of course the reader is going to think that, you know. Yeah, otherwise like Annie Ernaux is another writer who you know, it's called fiction, it's called memoir, it's, you know, I'm not sure. I think, well here it's called fiction. And also it's called in France. But it's her, you know, she's another writer who you know where that tone of intimacy you're talking about, that's definitely something I want to have. Like I'm talking to, like I'm telling you something that I want you to know about my life and about how I feel about it, how I observe things.

JP
What would you say to a comparison that goes all the way back to like 18th century fiction, the way that people responded to Daniel Defoe. Like I was just thinking of that amazing fact that for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* he put his own face on the frontispiece and called it Captain Gulliver, you know like it was literally a self-portrait and I don't know does that resonate at all, like the early days of fiction where people were figuring out the truth in fiction?

SN
Well, I think it has to do with that first person. I mean, if you are, you know it's interesting though, because if you think of something like *David Copperfield*, right? It is an auto, "I was born."
I mean it is, it's supposedly David telling his story, but it's not like an autobiography. It's not like a memoir. David is off, isn't even there when much of the action is taking place, right. And we just kind of accept it.

I am also, you know I was moved by Svetlana Alexievich when you know she talked about how you know the world is different now. You know, that it was different in Chekov's time. We need a different kind of fiction from his kind of fiction and she saw it as you know, I think one word for it is docu-novel, the docu-novel. The documentary novel, documentary fiction and that you know that also for me is an interesting way to look at it. When my narrator recedes to some extent and well, particularly in *For Rouenna,* I'm there for much of the time. My narrator. My Sigrid-like narrator, writer and so on, but then it's Rouenna's story, you know, I let her whole story come out as if I knew everything that happened there just by imagining it.

And that, you know I went back to that to some extent with *The Friend* and you know, trying to imagine the dog's life and you know in *What Are You Going Through*, again, the narrator is a chorus of voices telling their stories and she orchestrates it to some extent, but it's very different from a memoir where

in general, the writer, it's about me, you know, it's something, your telling the memoir, something that happened to you, you know. Not what happened to other peope

JP
Can I, you have that passage about Alexievich in *The Friend* right? You talk about the documentary fiction and I was really struck by that because I was thinking about how it almost seems as if you're describing two different pathways because the Alexievich, she's presenting to you, these are real voices like she wants you to believe, not in the narrator, but in those other voices. But you're saying that the way your novels work is to kind of make you believe in the person, even though it's an invented person.

SN
Yes, yes. And I might be using things from people I've really listened to. But it, you know I'm always inventing it. I, you know, even with my novel *The Last of Her Kind*, which is completely different from these books. But it is in the first person. And when I was working on it and people I knew who knew me from school who had read my first book, I said, oh, you know, I'm the book I'm writing now, I'm setting it on the Barnard Columbia campus from 1968 to 72 when we were there and they were like you are not going to do that. You are not really going to do that because they were imagining just the way I talked about my parents for real. That I would be, and I said Oh no, no, no, you don't have to worry about that. I said no, none of it is real, I'm not writing about us or any of us, or you know, like you will recognize it all anyway, you know, because it—So I wanted it set there during that time, but again, this woman Ann Julie Drayton, who is, again she's, the narrator has a role. She has a life. Things happen to her, but she's telling someone else's story largely, in that book once again. So that is clearly something that really appeals to me.

But again, it's all invented except the people who read it you know who lived during that time, you know they recognize, it seems like documentary to a lot of people, readers of that book have said that it was like a documentary. And yet I was able to do that without making a single friend angry, you know or being accused of using anyone life without their permission because I wouldn't have done that to them.

I did, parents are different. Parents are different, but I wouldn't, there isn't anyone else in my life, neither my siblings or anyone ever had a relationship with, I would never use them, fictionally the way I wrote about my parents. I just wouldn't do that.

But it's something that I like, that I enjoy, you know, bringing up a movie or a book and just talking about it from the point of view of the narrator and in every case the view that I'm presenting is in fact my view. It's not something I disagree with. I'm giving it to the character, that disagree with. So this is what I meant by essay novel that you know that there's, I like having the opportunity to do this thing called literary thinking that Javier Marías, that was his idea that, you know, he said in my books there's a story, here are characters, things are happening, but I like to stop at certain places and digress or rant or meditate or reflect. And that you know there are many writers who do that. And to me it's the freedom of that is just wonderful. That I can stop and then, you know, reflect on something. And at this point I wouldn't want, I don't think I would want to write anything that did not allow me to do that.

TM
Maybe there is one question that I would like to finish with which is I see there being quite different styles in your collection of novels, and I would put *For Rouenna* and *The Last of Her Kind* sort of on one side and *The Friend* and *What Are You Going Through* on another side. And I wonder whether you see

there as being more continuities than that, if *The Friend* marks a sort of spare philosophical style and a novel, like *For Rouenna,* you know I grew up in Singapore and I felt like I could feel the heat and humidity of Vietnam when I read that novel, it's these atmospheric detailed descriptions. And so is that a conscious choice? Is that a turn away from a certain style? Or am I misreading the differences entirely?

Sn
Well, as you said before, *For Rouenna* is like two different novels. There's the Vietnam and then there's the experience of, but there's also the writing narrator, so I would say that that part of the novel, the writing narrator is closer to *The Friend* and *What Are You Going Through* but I agree there is a real change there. However, when I wrote *The Friend,* when I finished it, only when I finished it I thought, oh, you know this narrator. I've seen her before. This is the same narrator as *A Feather on the Breath of God.* It's older, and the *For Rouenna* narrator was somewhat older. Now you know, and I realized that, and whereas the other books it's different, but definitely even though it's the first person the narrator of *The Last of Her Kind* is not one of those. And then *What Are You Going Through* as soon as I started writing very early on I said, oh this is the same narrator as *The Friend.* Even though things might be different, she might be, you know, have different experiences or whatever, but her sense of beauty, her voice and her way of looking at the world is the same.
And this book I'm working on now, now I'm conscious of it from, you know, it's not a discovery of any kind. I know that that is exactly what I want.

TM
But I'm going to wrap up with the Novel Dialogue signature question which is when you're really in the midst of a writing spell do you have a particular treat that you turn to? When things are really getting tough.

SN
Well, you know, I don’t think so. You mean, like a particular treat of what kind. Of any kind?

TM
Any kind.

JP
Any kind.

SN
Not really, and the reason why is because its such a long slog. Right, it just—

TM
So you would be treating yourself over a long period of time.

JP
You don't sneak out to Film Forum or eat a particular candy bar or anything like that.

SN
But I do, I do sneak out to Film Forum, I do and I adore Film Forum and I can’t wait till they’re back. But I wouldn’t associate that as a treat with the work you know that I do anyway. But it does remind me of, I read somewhere, where Joan Didion, the way she writes how at a certain point in a day, 4 or 5 in the

afternoon, the ritual. She would have the whiskey and she would need that moment with the whiskey to go over what she'd written that day. And I thought about that, I was even doing that, and then I thought you know I could just have the whiskey! Sometimes you can just have the whiskey!

I was teaching at NYU and at the end of the semester--I had told this story at a reading that they had come to--and at the end of the semester they gave me a bottle of whiskey, good, good, whiskey, and it came in a wooden box and they had all signed it and on the outside they had wrote "sometimes you can just have the whiskey!"

JP
I think that's great. I think that's such a great answer to the question, because then, right, it's not just, it's not Pavlovian then and then sometimes it's just a treat. It's just a treat. It's not a treat for writing it's a treat. Yeah, okay, well I'm just gonna say as we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue that I and 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, Claire Ogden as our sound engineer and we hope that if you liked what you heard, you will subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. And please tell your friends about us.

Conversations from season one include Martin Puchner with Christina Lacey, Kelly Rich with Teju Cole, Elizabeth McMahon with Helen Garner, Bruce Robbins with Orhan Pamuk. So there's a real New York theme here.

So, Tara, thank you so much. Sigrid, thank you so much. It was a great conversation. I really appreciated it.

TM
Thank you, so much, Sigrid, this was really such a pleasure.
JP
Totally. And so and to all our listeners, thank you so much and hope to talk with you again soon.