Caryl Phillips in conversation with Corina Stan

Transcript

John Plotz

Hello and welcome to Season 2 of 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 one of your hosts, John Plotz and you'll be hearing the excellent Aarthi Vadde, a colleague of Corina's in other episodes throughout the fall.

So today my role is to serve as a kind of rhythm section intermittently audible behind our two leads. Our novelist is Caryl Phillips, and our scholar is the wonderful comparatist Corina Stan. Educated in Romania, Germany, France and the United States, author of the *Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in 20th century Literature* and recently of a delightful series of essays on social distance, past and present. Her current book project is *After the West: Europe, Humanism and the Literary Imagination*.

So our novelist today, Caryl Phillips probably needs no introduction, but I will tell you inadequately and trying to edit out as many adulatory adjectives as I can that as well as being a professor of English at Yale and author of three books of nonfiction and a number of celebrated plays, he's a world renowned author of, by my count, 11 novels, from his 1985, *The Final Passage* to 2018's *A View of the Empire at Sunset*.

So I'm going to leave it to Corina to unpack the full range of his fictional genius and focus on a single tiny point which is my own first semester as a lowly assistant professor, more than two decades ago, my contemporary fiction class ended with his 1991 *Cambridge* and I remember staying up late at night making a list of the words that were italicized in the book, which were, they were italicized as a way of marking their strangeness to that particular narrator whom readers see trying valiantly to make orde,r to make language to make, you might say, kind of a non-italicized sense out of the strange world into which she has been thrown. The ensuing discussion with my students, who I think were still in their own kind of italicizing phase, of being away from home for the first time, and probably I was in my italicizing phase of being a professor for the first time, it remains vividly present to me and I think it's a small token of what Caryl Phillips's work has done and will go on doing for

those who read it, the kind of imaginative doors that it opens. So that's the end of my rhythm section solo and I will say Corina and Caryl over to you guys.

Corina Stan
Hi, thank you very much, John for the lovely introduction and also for having us and also thank you for Caryl Phillips for engaging in this conversation with me.

So I would like to take us back to the beginning when you decided to become a writer. I know that you traveled to the US for the first time at 20 after living in the UK since the age of four months. You took the Greyhound to California and spent a long afternoon reading Richard Wright's *Native Son*. And in *The European Tribe* you describe that experience in the following terms, and I hope it's all right that I will give a brief quote from that book. You say

"I felt as if an explosion had taken place inside my hand. *Native Son* provided not so much a model, but a possibility of how I might be able to express the conundrum of my own existence."

I would love to hear more about this. What was this conundrum you are referring to and what aspects of Wright's work seemed to offer a possibility of expressing it?

Caryl Phillips
It sounds a little pompous now. Another conundrum. I'm not sure I was thinking quite that clinically, although it probably sounded nice and grand, to me, a few years later to phrase it in that way. But you know, clearly the big problem that was going on was, it feels slightly embarrassing to say it now, was it I'd never read a book by a Black person. You know, I'd never been offered a book that was written by somebody who looked like me, even though you know you'd have thought I had a reasonably profound affinity with literature. I mean, I would study in English at Oxford at the time you know, I was a student, so you'd have thought that I would be a little bit more well-rounded in my reading and some teacher along the way would have spotted some nascent writing slash reading talent and offered me a book by a Richard Wright or a James Baldwin or a Ralph Ellison, or Chinua Achebe? But nobody had.

So you know it was both wonderful and quite daunting to realize that people who looked like me could write books and did write books. But then of course there was the subject matter of the book, which was sort of urban angst. The kind of terrible fear of life being lived in the inner city, which was my life as a working-class kid, immigrant kid in England. You know I spent most of my time reading books about, you, know Jane Austen and vicar's tea parties, you know or other kind of middle-class existence that was the norm to me. I thought that's what books had to be about. So there was a kind of double whammy, you know both the identity politics of not having read a book by a Black person, but then you know the content as well with you know, opened up all sorts of possibilities.

CS
So, Richard Wright was also important to James Baldwin, who also went to Paris, at the beginning of his stay received support from Wright who was already there. What I'm actually interested is your own, what I'm interested in is your own connection with James Baldwin. You recall in *A Life in Ten Chapters* that at 18 you were, you say, completely overwhelmed by Baldwin's brutal prose, by the sheer audacity of the first line in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. So I imagine it must have been really thrilling to meet him in person in Paul-de-Vence. So how was that and what was Baldwin like as a person?

CP
Yeah, no, I mean, you know, as I said, Wright's novel *Native Son* was the first book I've read by a Black person. I had read *Blues for Mister Charlie* which is a play. But you know, I didn't really make the, you know it was a play. I didn't really want to be a playwright. I wanted to be a novelist, so it was not only overwhelming to come across a novel by a Black person in terms of Richard Wright, but then to actually meet a writer a few years later was, you know it was very humbling and scary, in a sense, you know because you think when you meet, I'm sure every writer has a story about the first time they met a writer. And these days because of the proliferation of, you know, writers besporting themselves on university campuses, you know most likely had happened before university, but in my case you know we didn't have writers on campus. And so I wasn't going to meet a writer when I was an undergraduate.

So, I left and I was scrambling and living in London trying to scramble a living in my early 20s. Being you know, what we could somewhat, we could

aggrandize it with the phrase you know, freelance, you know, I mean, no-lance, I think, desperate. So I would do anything to make money in order to buy a bit of time to write. So one day I had this idea that, you know nobody had made a documentary, the BBC made all sorts of documentaries about American writers, but nobody had done one on Baldwin. I'd just seen one called *Norman Mailer at 60*. So I wrote to somebody at the BBC and I just said, you know, James Baldwin is going to be 60 next year, fancy doing a documentary about him? And much to my surprise, they said, sure, if you can get his permission. Which was the right thing to say, you know, throw it back into my court.

So I wrote to his publisher, a letter to his publisher in London, thinking there's no way I'm gonna hear a reply and I got a postcard from the South of France from Mr. Baldwin saying this is my phone number, call me and we'll, let's see what we can do. And you know, with the naivete of youth, of course, I picked up the phone. I called him, and he said, well, why don't you and your producer come down this weekend? And I thought, what producer? We don't really have anything yet. But you know I got hold of somebody at the BBC who was prepared to, you know, sacrifice themselves and fly to Provence for the weekend and so we went down there. We did as we were told, we called Mr. Baldwin's number and he wandered up to the village square.

And it was, yeah, it was great. I mean, it was obviously exciting, but it was obviously, you know, I was almost looking at it anthropologically. You know, how do writers behave? Do they have senses of humor? Do they drink? Do they you know, do they make fun of themselves? Are you allowed to talk about their work or do you steer clear of that? I just didn't know how it was supposed to go, but, I mean he, you know, he was like a regular guy. And relaxed me into, you know, regarding him right from the very beginning.

Almost the first thing he said is, you know, "Don't call me Mr. Baldwin. My name is Jimmy." I thought, this is kind of ridiculous, at the very least he's James. You know, I can't call him Jimmy. So that I feel very lucky and very grateful. And then over the years I mean, obviously we weren't to know that he only had four more years to live. But over the years I got to know him very well, not just in France but in the United States too. And in Britain, whenever he visited Britain so yeah it was a meeting I think I would have remembered anyway without the significance of being a fan, but it was a meeting that had great

resonance, because it was the first encounter with somebody who wrote books.

CS
So in what terms, would you describe your relationship with Baldwin's writing?

CP
Well, I like, I think that you're probably onto something when you talk about that you know a concern with dignity, but I think that's probably more deeply connected to another word which is performance, you know one performs one's race. I mean, you know, in societies which are highly racialized, and you know, I hesitate to say the obvious, racist. You are backed into a corner obviously into performing a certain sense of yourself. I mean obviously this kind of performance of identity goes way beyond race. It includes gender obviously, it includes, you know in the United States of America it begins at Ellis Island, where you change your name to something that is pronounceable. You're performing.

But Baldwin was a great one for an interest in the performative you know, a child preacher, a deep affection and love of film, and the soap box, and as his career developed. And I think I as a person who was interested in theater and who grew up in a sort of society in which you are expected to perform your identity too, as a British colonial subject, you had a somewhat toxic identity thrust upon you that you had to sometimes act out against, and so for all of these reasons, I think this notion of dignity slash performance, which is at the heart of his work was inevitably going to be a part of what I wrote.

But having said all of that, obviously I wasn't thinking that consciously of it, but perhaps that's one of the reasons why I was always attracted to his work and always felt some kind of kinship with it, and you know you you've already touched upon one other thing. You know, even when I hear the phrase you know, "the conundrum of my existence," that's such a Baldwin phrase, you know. It's got a kind of high preacher's tone to it and you know, obviously that is not a phrase I would use now. But back in the 80s, I'm sure when I was beginning writing and reading Baldwin quite assiduously some of that by some process of osmosis is going to creep into work too.

JP

Can I just jump in on that question of the performance and performative to connect it to something you said earlier about knowing that you didn't want to be a playwright, that you wanted to write novels?
Can you say more because it seems like there's a tension there
because performative and you know that people line up performative with the theater, but you always, but you didn't, that's not how you thought about it, you thought about it more in terms of fiction writing.

CP
Yes, I mean the issue about the theater. I mean, Corina and I were talking about this actually only the other day. I said the theater is incredibly dependent upon a whole industry of support which you know begins with, who owns the theater, begins with, you know, you can get a first production, but you want a second production, a third production, you want your play to live beyond the three weeks or four weeks that it was in this particular space, and this was really extremely difficult in Britain. If you were writing a play that had any Black actors in it, effectively, you had no shelf life. Now this was the same in the United States of America too. But if you are interested you know in having some kind of a shelf life and if you haven't got those connections to an institution, or a director, or a producer, what I, actually to be honest, I think of as sort of old school type connections. You know, if you don't have them, you're really witnessing your plays, unless you're very lucky, you witness your plays perform and then die, and then there's a tremendous pressure on you to write another one and write another one because you're not entering any world where there's a chance to revisit it and look again. So it for me, from very early, even though the theater actually probably was my first love, I realized it was going to be a rather uncomfortable merry go round for me if I if I went down that particular loop.

JP
Yeah, thanks.

CS
One of the reasons why I began with these questions about Wright and Baldwin is that they were both Black writers who traveled to Europe and lived there for an extended period of time, and as a European, and as John mentioned, I'm actually from Romania, so an Eastern European, that's a sort of internal other. I am really fascinated by this because both Wright and Baldwin and so many before them, defamiliarize Europe for me, so they see it from a

very different vantage point, which relativizes my perceived otherness and this is something I experienced when I read your travelogue, *The European Tribe,* the record of your journey through Europe that you took in your 20s and I recently came across Johny Pitts, the author of *Afropean,* who was inspired by your travels through Europe, about which he writes:

"Caryl wandered as a young Black man in his 20s through white Europe before the work of his generation had helped the continent even entertain the idea that there were Black people taking an active part in these societies. The work is quietly subversive," so he writes here about *The European Tribe*, "playing with the notion of an approach white people often assume when traveling in Africa: as an outsider observing a strange tribe practicing odd rituals. He normalized the Black gaze, becoming an invisible eye and instead otherized Europeans as something strange and exotic with a nudge and a wink."

I would love to hear more about this idea of otherizing Europeans, both from the perspective of writers like Wright and Baldwin, but also from your perspective.

CP
Yeah, I mean it's very interesting. Wright and Baldwin arriving in Europe in the 1940s, were effectively exchanging one world for another world. There wasn't a tremendous amount of synchronicity and you know, there's not many bridges and tunnels that have been dug culturally and you know in other ways between Europe and the United States of America. People had been there, you know, Josephine Baker, the jazz musicians that were there in the early part of the 20th century so. People had arrived but it was still an escape from America, you know. It was another world. It was almost a world where you could begin again. And Wright did talk a little bit about it being sort of non-racialized world which, or a less racialized world than the United States of America. I think he soon found out that it was racialized, but just in other ways.

So you know you could go there and to a certain extent, in a slightly romantic way, be free of some of the iniquities and the pressures of the United States of America. And some of that motivated their journey across the Atlantic into Europe. And, as you say, quite rightly, they had a different gaze, not just on Europe, but upon themselves when they were there.

I didn't feel that. I grew up in Europe at a time when there was a lot of communication and travel and you know, the even politically, you know Thatcher and Reagan as twins, you know. There was a lot more connective tissue, so for me, whether I've got on a plane and went to America, or whether I crossed the channel and went from Britain to France and then explored both East and Western Europe. I don't think I had that bump, or that division, or that rupture that I think Wright and Baldwin had. What I had was something else, which is this: I couldn't believe that people couldn't see that there was a Black presence in Europe that went back centuries, there was a Black presence in Europe, or non-white presence in Europe that was deeply present in the mid-1980s when I wrote the book. It was not just the colonial arrivals you know from Dutch Suriname or from northern Africa into France or from sub-Saharan Africa to France or the *gastarbeiter* and various other migrant laborers in Germany. There was the Moors in Spain, there was the Africans on the streets of Spanish cities. It seemed to me obvious, even when I got to Moscow and the Patrice Lumumba University, which is full of students from Africa and Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean.

It seemed to me that it was my job to try to or my, you know intention was to try to stitch some of this reality into a narrative in a way that made people see Europe in a different way. You know what Johny Pitts is saying, of course, is you know, it's flattering and nice, but no, it was perhaps in my mind rather simpler than this. I just thought, people have no idea that there was a presence, but they also had no idea how to look at themselves, which is the title of the book. You know, if you can call Africa *tribal* then I'm sorry you call Europe *tribal* too, because you're at least tribal in the same ways that you look at Africa and you say, well, they're kind of tribal, they're always fighting each other. Well, excuse me, you know I arrived in Britain less than two decades after the end of the Second World War. If that's not tribal, what on earth is tribal?

So I was also trying to do, you knows I guess some of what Johny was saying so there was, but it wasn't, I didn't find a difficulty. I guess this is what I'm saying. There was no bump for me going to Europe, rocking up in a cafe in Madrid and then sitting by myself. I didn't feel like an exotic other in a way in which Baldwin might have felt like or Wright. I just felt like, you know, deal with it. I grew up in Europe. It's not my problem, which is a sense of kind of

proprietorial ownership that I don't think either Wright or Baldwin felt, ever, really in France. They were there for different reasons.

CS
Because you said that you felt there was no bump in moving between the UK and Europe, or even you said between the UK and US, and yet it seems to me that there is a double perspective here. For example, in your novel *Dancing in the Dark* about the African American entertainer, Bert Williams, there is a moment, there are passages actually where he and his company cross the Atlantic to the UK and there is an implicit reflection on the ways they are looked at by others. Or you have in *The Nature of Blood* the black GI deployed in England at the end of World War Two. Which again invites reflection on what it's like to be Black in the US and in the UK. So it is in some ways different, isn't it right, being Black in the UK or Europe and being lack in the US? How would you articulate this difference?

CP
Yeah, no it's very good. I mean it is different. Well, I guess I should have been more specific. There wasn't as large a bump as there would be, or as large a discontinuity as there would be with Wright and Baldwin. For instance, and I don't think, I think I'm probably correct in saying this, I don't think Wright or Baldwin ever wrote about France or about life in Europe before they arrived there. I mean, they obviously did after they arrived there, but I wrote about America before I came to live in America, right, and I wrote, you know, I felt enough of a kind of connection to the place.

On arrival of course, I had fuller encounter. It's absolutely true to say that you know identity, particularly racial identity, does not work in exactly the same way in Britain as it does in the United States of America. But there was enough that I was able to feel that I recognized something, that there was enough that was going on that was familiar to me, I think. And perhaps the language certainly in the case of the United States of America, perhaps not having to learn another language, although some would question whether American English is, you know. But not having to do what Baldwin had to do and Wright had to do, you know, arrive and they had to learn a language, they had to learn to think in a language, they never went as far as Beckett, and actually wrote in that language as well.

But I didn't have some of the rupture, you know, ruptures that they had to navigate. But there were still things that I had to understand and start, still something that I struggle to understand, and you're right when you point to *Dancing in the Dark* because that was a novel specifically about, you know reinvention and performance in the United States of America that I don't think I would have written if I'd have remained in Britain.

CS
I'm going to go off script for a moment here. So let's play a game**.** I know you're very fond of sports. So if you could pick one of the following, what would you have? You would have, for example, a ticket to travel back in time to 1951 and watch live the boxing match between Randolph Turpin and Sugar Ray Robinson, that you invoke in *Foreigners* and then have dinner with Turpin. Or the capacity to teleport yourself to see live every Leeds United game in a season? Or the opportunity to play golf with, let's say Hideki Matsuyama?

CP
It would be the Leeds. It would be my, it would be the thing that spoke most clearly to my own sense of my own identity. I golf, I love golf, you're right, but you know, there's elements of golf, where it's a country club sport and I play golf in the knowledge that, you know, briefly before I get out of the car at whatever golf club, I wonder, okay, when's somebody gonna look and wonder, you know, is that my caddy for the day, so I'm always aware of, yeah golf is always going to be that kind of a sport where anybody who doesn't look like they fit in is gonna have to deal with whatever. I mean, it's kind of, I'm not sure what I'd say to you know our current Master's champion, except you know you were the first one. Yeah, I've got some understanding of what it means like to be the first one, or you know you're the only Asian guy in the room at next year's Master's dinner. Yeah, I've been there. You know, not at the Master's dinner, but I've been the only one in the room so that conversation would last about five minutes, and then he would realize how bad I was at golf and it would be just disappointing for the rest of the afternoon.

The fight with with Sugar Ray Robinson and Turpin, yeah, I was fascinated by Turpin enough to write about it and I do sort of like boxing. But one of the things I find uncomfortable about boxing, I've only ever really been to one live boxing match, one boxing fight. It's, you know, it's something about being the

sort of battle royal scene in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, you know, the idea of people paying money and putting on dinner jackets to watch two black guys hitting each other makes me kind of slightly uncomfortable too. So I think I'd avoid that even though I did find the social, you know, and I do find the social politics around boxing fascinating.

But you know just for sheer pleasure, you know, I grew up like most working class kids in England. Feeling passionate affiliation to a football team which becomes a part of your identity in a way that even now as a you know, a guy in his early 60s I can't shake. I would never want to and I feel as loyal to that aspect of my kind of class and geographical origins as I do to any kind of loyalty to like racial or gender origins, it's all it's very important to me. What the history of that team and what the you know, the way in which people are basically, it's like church. People are able to endure a tremendous amount of psychological damage in their life because of the adrenaline boost that they get just for a couple of hours on a weekend. Whether it's in a church or whether it's in a football ground, it just allows people to endure, and that's one of the things I respect about football.

CS
And some point J.M. Coetzee wrote in a review that your work is about what the West would like to forget. What do you think about this characterization?

CP
Well, I mean, I think there's some truth in that because when you grow up in a world or a society, and eventually that society you know as you travel a bit more, it becomes grand enough perhaps to say a world, in which you're constantly having to explain who you are. You know you realize that the clue to who you are and the reason that they don't have answers at their fingertips is because they've been swept under the carpet or they have been conveniently held back or even more perniciously forgotten. And so everything is a way of trying to remind people who I am and who people like me, who we are, whether it's people who don't have necessarily a singular sense of their identity because they have a couple of passports, which you know bemuses a lot of people and they don't understand, or whether it's because of my accent and they don't understand why you have a different accent or a different name.

Everything is a way of trying to answer the questions before they come up and if those questions didn't bedevil your childhood and your adolescence then perhaps you wouldn't be writing. So I mean, I often think when Graham Greene said, you know, most writers are formed by the age of 14. I always thought there was some truth in that because a lot of those anxieties that inculcated in you very early and in my own case, it's that sense of constantly having to explain who you are. And then realizing it's not necessarily ignorance you're being faced with that question. It's like a kind of willful collective amnesia that many people are trying to correct, teachers, social workers, writers, musicians you know there's lots of people trying to address that willful amnesia, which is which is often parachuted in into society.

JP
There's a thread that has been dangling here that I feel connects to an earlier conversation in Novel Dialogue that we had with Orhan Pamuk and he said something that's just been, not bothering me, but it's kind of been, I've been kind of worrying it. He said that the novel is just, it's a middle-class form by its very nature and you talked earlier, you were talking about kind of Jane Austen frock and hat aspect of like middle class existence of the novels that you were subjected to and I was trying to think about how that question of like middle class life as content relates to the question, the way that Pamuk put it, which is just like there's something inescapably bourgeois about the novel form. Like I feel like I disagree with it, but I'm not sure I have the language to say why and I just I don't know, I thought I would put it to you.

CP
Well, what my response to that would be to say that the form itself is middle class because you know you need money to buy a novel or you need to be in a society or have access to a library to get novels out. I mean, it's not like TV. It's not like comic books. They cost money and you need time to read a novel. A lot of people don't have time to sit down and sink 15 hours, however long it takes a novel. So I think as a form, as a literary form, it was born into the middle classes and I think it's always been a middle class form, so I I agree with that.

What I don't agree about is the idea that because they're about middle class people that they're somehow alien from you because vicars and middle class people, they fall in love too. They get betrayed, they feel let down. They worry about their kids. They worry about the marriage that they're in, they you know. They have a gamut of emotions that's as wide as anybody else.

So reading about a bourgeois life to me is as painful and illuminating and as joyful as reading about the lives of blue collar people or the lives of you know people from any other social strata. So I'm not, I never really was too concerned about the fact that the people I was reading about were living lives materially or otherwise or culturally or otherwise that were alien to me. Because what mattered to me was the human heart. That's what mattered. The fact that they loved, they lost, they died. They gave birth and they dreamt, and you know, that's what mattered to me.

CS
If you were to write a letter to your sons, what would it be like? Even you're, you've thought so much about how relevant past experience may or may not be. Would it be anything like Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* or Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* or Maya Angelou's *Letter to my Daughter*? Would it be lighter in tone, or what would it be like?

CP
It's a very good question and I don't feel the impulse to do it right now because they're a little young. You know, and they're not, they're still at an age where you know they haven't crossed that threshold into adolescence, where I think everything starts to charge around in the bloodstream and in the brain and become a little confusing so I wouldn't quite know what to unpick or try to unpick for them.

Would I want to do that? Probably because it comes from, you know, in the case of all of those authors, it comes from a place of love and wanting to protect the next generation. I'll give them some kind of a guideline or some map or some understanding of how they might comport themselves to perhaps make this journey through life without some of the anxiety and pain that's perhaps being visited upon you, or you and your generation. So it comes from a very good place the impulse to want to do that.

Would it actually, would it connect? Would they take it on board? Or would they, would it go in one ear and come out the other? Would they be texting as they were reading it, you know, would they be channel hopping or whatever they do these days? Would they be Instagramming as it was on one screen and they pop up on another platform, they're doing something, I don't know. I really don't know. I don't have a great deal of faith in human common sense

that we learn from the past. I don't actually think that, I think the evidence is pretty overwhelming that we can be pretty dumb as a species. I mean, we're not overly blessed upstairs where it comes to learning from the past. But that doesn't mean that we don't want to make the effort, particularly with those that we love. And our purpose is to protect them, to do it, but in general, you know what's the alternative, generally, to not trying to get people to improve from one generation to the next, in whatever ways you do it, what's the alternative? The alternative is to basically throw in the towel, to use a boxing analogy. It's just give up and I don't think any of us as teachers, as writers, educators in the broader sense, as parents, I don't think any of us want to do that. We because to give up is is to embrace a kind of darkness which you know mitigates against what we do. You know, what this podcast is about, trying to help people understand.

JP
Can I ask just a tiny follow up on that, because I agree with Corina, like when I when I think about what I love about your novels, I love the internal gaps, the sort of historical jumps and also the way that they challenge the reader to think about, do we learn from the past? Like can I look at this experience of someone, you know, 150 years ago and have it resonate? Who are the other writers that you feel like you're in conversation with. I mean, I think about, I don't know I guess I think about historical novel writers like Tolstoy or like Sir Walter Scott from the past. But also people like Sebald, you know or any of those. Who do you know who resonates for you when you you think about what you're trying to do with past and present?

CP
You know, well the, I think the writers that have over the years struck me, as, you know, struck a note which basically I recognize, I've mentioned a couple of, Eliot yeah, wrestling with the past. Sebald certainly, completely haunted by the past. I would say terrorized by the past in a kind of eloquent and lyrical way. Coetzee to a certain extent too, particularly his earlier work. Well, you know Faulkner had a huge impression upon me when I was a student first reading his work, because it's all about the difficulty slash impossibility of stitching the past to the present and if you can't stitch the past to the present you know, as we know. It's very difficult to channel away to any kind of future. But Faulkner not only had this is a sort of a thematic central beat to his work, but he also managed to engineer the structure of his novels so that they reflected that and you mentioned the italicized passages, that's

what Faulkner does when he's trying to slip time, he uses italics and he doesn't always give you very clear guidelines or very clear map through the work, you have to do a little bit of the work yourself. You have to do a little labor to understand how the past relates to the present. But that's a similar kind of labor to that which the characters are trying to do as well. So there's almost a sort of a sense that you're in this together. You know, in a novel like *Absalom, Absalom!*, you know, you can tell these two young people, well, yeah, I'm reading it as a young person too, and they're struggling. I'm struggling a little bit to know what's going on so, but you get there in the end because you know that that's the only, only by moving forward and doing that work will a more coherent picture become visible to you.

CS
By the way of struggling, and this is the signature question of this podcast. So what do you do when you're struggling with writing? What's your favorite treat? And it doesn't have to be food. It can be anything, whatever it is that you do.

CP
Well, my favorite treat is to stop writing. I think that, I don't feel obliged to write, I write because I've got something to say and I think if as soon as I haven't got anything to say, I'm quite happy to stop. You know, I don't want to get into the habit of feeling like a columnist. You know, I used to write for the newspaper, *The Guardian,* and they offered me a column. They said, well, we'll give you like a column and you know you'll file every two weeks and the contract will be fatter and more, you know more renumeration, greater security. And I said, no, I don't want a column because what's going to happen is some weeks. I'm actually going to have nothing to say. And yet I'm contractually obliged to write 2000 words.

So you know I settled for my sort of loose, rather insecure arrangement with them, whereby if I had something to say I would tell them and then they could actually keep all the power to themselves and say, well this is boring. But I prefer that because I don't ever want to become the sort of person that writes just because they're a writer. And I kind of began this peasant's pilgrimage into the heart of this profession, with the idea that I have something to say. And I sort of made a pledge to myself that when I didn't have anything to say, I'd have the good manners to shut up.

So yeah, when I'm running into trouble, yeah, I would much rather open a bottle of beer and watch a football game on the TV, soccer, on the TV. Much rather do that than write. Much rather do that. But then there are times when actually I'd much rather be at my desk. But if I'm at my desk and thinking, *beer*, then that's fine. There's always soccer on the TV these days and always beer in the fridge.

JP
Alright, well I think with that I think that's my cue to thank you both for this terrific conversation. Thanks so much guys. Thanks Corina, it's great.

CP
No, thank you both very much.

CS
Thank you.

JP
And I'll just say that Aarthi and I would like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and also acknowledge support from both Duke and Brandeis University, and tell you that since the start, Nai Kim has been our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden, our sound engineer. So please, if you enjoyed this conversation, subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts and tell your friends about us.

Novelists from season one included Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk and Helen Garner. While this season, airing throughout the fall, includes Sigrid Nunez, Jennifer Egan, and Viet Nguyen. So from all of us here at the Butchers Convention, thank you for listening and hope to talk to you again soon.