

## 7.3 What do the PDFs say about this?: Brandon Taylor and Stephanie Insley Hershinow (CH)

### Transcript

#### **Chris Holmes**

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. On this podcast, we bring scholars and novelists together to talk about how novels work, how they're written, read, studied, and remembered. I'm Chris Holmes, one of the producers for Season 7 of Novel Dialogue.

It is my very great pleasure to welcome Brandon Taylor to Novel Dialogue. Brandon is the author of the novels *The Late Americans* and *Real Life*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize, and named *New York Times Review* Editor's Choice, and a Science+Literature selected title by the National Book Foundation. His collection, *Filthy Animals*, a national bestseller, was awarded the Story Prize and shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize. He was the 2022-23 Mary Ellen von Der Hayden Fellow at the Dorothy and Louis B. Coleman Center for Scholars and Writers. Brandon's pair of what might loosely be called campus novels have revolutionized that subgenre, stretching the spaces and places of academia to represent how new forms of community can transform one of the novel's archetypal environments. His style, a brash combination of erudite and visceral, makes him one of the most recognizable voices in American fiction today.

In conversation with Brandon is one of the great young scholars of the 18th century novel, Stephanie Insley Hershinow. Stephanie is Associate Professor of English at Baruch College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She is the author of *Born Yesterday: Inexperience and the Early Realist Novel* published by John Hopkins University Press, and the editor of Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*, both from Norton. Her latest book, *How Jane Austen Works*, is forthcoming from John Hopkins in 2025.

Welcome to you both, Brandon and Stephanie.

#### **Stephaie Hershinow**

Thank you so much, Chris. Thank you for “young,” also.

Brandon, thank you so much for joining us. I am beside myself to be talking to you today, to meet you in person and I have so many questions. But I want to start off with an idea from a recent essay, craft talk that you gave and then posted on your blog, *Sweater Weather*, *Sweater Weather*, one of my favorites. Could you talk a little bit about what you've been calling "moral worldbuilding" and was moral worldbuilding an essential component of the writing and structuring of *The Late Americans* or maybe more something that's informing what you're working on now?

**BT**

Well, first of all, thank you for having me. I'm so thrilled. I'm so chuffed to be chatting with you, Stephanie, especially, longtime fan.

**SH**

Likewise, believe me.

**BT**

It feels like kismet. It was meant to be.

The moral worldbuilding, it's one of those things where I feel like I had the feeling first and only in the process of writing and making art, did I come to the term, to sort of finally put a name to this thing that's been bothering me for a very long time in fiction and in literature. The way that I think about moral world building is that it is essentially being more, I don't know, being more conscientious in the way that you're building out the moral infrastructure of the world you're creating. So it isn't just starting a story with two characters and going about your business and sort of doing a rote copy-paste of the morality or the value systems of our own world into that fictional one, but thinking very deeply about what are the systems of power in this fictional context and the story world I'm making? What are the stakes? What are the values? What do these characters care about? What is driving them and motivating them and not just them, but every other character in the world?

And the question that kind of guides my thinking in this is for every scene you're writing, for every story you set out to tell, ask yourself, is great evil possible in this world that I'm imagining? And if so, what might it look like? And it's not that you need to have your characters get punched in the face, but if you as the writer can't imagine anyone on any random street corner in the entirety of the story world you are creating getting punched in the face, then why is that?

Well, it's just like the thing that's important in that is if no one in that world can get punched in the face, if no one in that world is in any sort of real danger, then what are the stakes? Because you could send a character into a burning building, but if the reader doesn't

believe for a second that that character is in any sort of actual harm or danger, if the reader knows that they're going to be fine in the end, then how can the reader feel any sort of sense of urgency? And it applies to everything, not just to burning buildings and exploding whatever, but also to the interpersonal relationships between the characters. If irrevocable breaks in relation are not possible, then why do I care that these people are talking? Why do I care about what's going on between these characters if there isn't ever the danger of an irreconcilable rupture? And so the sort of getting punched in the face test applies to I think all levels of human relation in the story world.

**SH**

Emotionally, psychologically punched in the face, in addition to just like physical vulnerability.

**BT**

Yeah.

**SH**

Yeah. I think one of the reasons why I've really been attracted to that idea and the way you're articulating, the way you've kind of come to articulate this is I love the idea of kind of reclaiming world building for realism, and I know you're not alone in doing that. But obviously, for the most part, we associate that idea of world building with especially high fantasy, but sci-fi, this kind of quote unquote genre fiction. I know I'm getting into dangerous territory here, but I know just from your tweets and from your blog, you've been reading more novel theory lately than I do. And it is my job to read novel theory.

So I'm wondering what you're getting lately from theories of realism. I mean, you're someone whose debut is called *Real Life*. This is clearly something you've been thinking about for a long time. But I'm also always interested in how writers, how practitioners are engaging with those theoretical texts or refusing them. So yeah, I wonder if you could just say a little bit about how that's informing either what you're working on now or how that's been kind of coming out of the work that you did in *Late Americans* and *Real Life*.

**BT**

Yeah, it's somewhat strange. I sort of fell into it by accident during the pandemic. I guess in 2021, I had written two books, I published my first novel in 2020, I had a book of stories coming. I was sort of well, I had completed a draft of *The Late Americans*. So I had written quite a lot of fiction, but I realized that I actually didn't know how it worked. I felt like I didn't have any sort of grown-up, big boy, serious ideas about this thing that I was doing. It felt like I was just sort of always engaging in these nebulous things.

And I really don't like that feeling. I like to know, I'm trained as a scientist. And so I like to get to the bottom of things. And just realizing that I didn't have any serious grown-up ideas about literature that I had sort of lived my life as a reader, but kind of just passively taking it and taking it in and being like, oh, that was a good book, but not having any sort of set of vocabulary with which to sort of figure out what I meant by good or what I meant by my experience of it having been good. And so a friend of mine, Christian Lorentzen, who's a critic was like, well, you should read some criticism.

And I thought that is a great idea. What is criticism? [laughing] You mean like book reviews? And he said, no. So he's—

**SH**

Although thank you, Christian Lorentzen for the plug.

**BT**

—so he sent me, he sent me to Lionel Trilling and he gave me a reading list. He's like, okay, so you should read *The Liberal Imagination* and you should read *Love and Death in the American Novel* by Leslie Fiedler. And you should read Guy Davenport and you should read Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*. And so I went, I very dutifully went to the to the library and to the bookstore and I got these out-of-print books that no one was publishing. And I sat down and I read them for all of 2021.

And, you know, and as it happens, I'm sure many people have this experience of as you're reading, they keep referencing things and you get to a critical mass of writing question marks in the margins. And you're like, okay, I just got to go figure out what this is. So like Leslie Fiedler and Lionel Trilling were talking a lot about Freud and I didn't know anything about Freud. So I stopped and I went and I read all the canonical works of Freud. I called it my hot Freud summer.

And what I found as I began to read these different critics and Freud was that they were sort of giving language to things I had been doing by instinct in my fiction, but they were sort of giving me a way to think about it directly, that I was able to sort of actively interface with the kind of deep texture of fiction itself. And that was really helpful because then I wasn't just sort of subject to the whims of whatever my imagination was going to turn out that day. But I could begin to think in a systematic way about how fiction was put together and how it worked.

And so then, having read this criticism, I then started reading contemporary books again and seeing all these parallels. And I think the first time I really sort of started making connections like that was when I wrote about the internet novel as a kind of recapitulation

of the Gothic novel, the sort of social media novel and the internet novel as a sort of Gothic space, with some help from Edith Wharton. Because I think *The House of Mirth* is a kind of proto-social media novel, but for another day, perhaps.

**CH**

Oh wow, I want to come back to that.

**BT**

And then another essay I wrote was sort of drawing on Zola and talking about how the millennial novel is a nationalist novel, but that kind of synthetic thinking really was modeled for me by those critics and theorists. And now I've become quite theoretical and I'm deep in narratology land and Georg Lukács and Frederick Jameson. And I don't know how it happened. I don't know.

But it, you know, and usually these excursions start with a really concrete craft issue. So I teach in an MFA program and my students kept being, this is so cinematic. This is so cinematic. And I was just like, what does that mean? So I went and I read a bunch of narratology to arrive at a sort of theory of the cinematic in fiction.

**SH**

So great.

**BT**

And so that's how it happens. I'm just going about my writerly life and I come across a problem. And I'm like, I wonder what the adults think of this. I call it consulting the PDFs. And I go and I look for articles about these things. So I'm like, well, the theorists have been thinking about this weird thing for a long time. It's just that we in the mainstream are the front-facing part of the, just don't have that vocabulary. But I'm like, but that vocabulary exists and I know where to find it. I just got to go find the PDF that has it. So that's been the story of my journey into theory-land has mostly been me looking for explanations for things that I can't find by reading a book review.

**CH**

Yeah, I want to replay that for my students because I feel like what you just said, it's the utopian version of what I would hope comes out of their experiences in college, that they would want to seek out things in the way that you're talking about. I think that is intellectualism, but it has been in some way lost or blurred by the sheer kind of ocean of information that we believe we're consuming every day. But in fact, we're not really, we're just very lightly floating atop it. And what you're saying is, you know, go deep, go to

understand, see that other people have thought about these ideas before. And I think that's a profound thing that has been sadly a bit lost.

**BT**

That's my first impulse, like the minute I have a thought, I'm like, what do the PDFs think about this idea? And I go and I find and I, you know, you find, you can find people to argue with. Like it's just, that is just my first impulse with anything is like, let's go see what grown-ups think about this.

**SH**

But the other thing I really like about the way you're putting it, Brandon and Chris, I also thought about my teaching is I try to tell them, I'm not trying to replace your instincts and your intuitions about these texts. I'm trying to give you tools that let you do something more with those kinds of intuitive hunches that you have already about these things. That's what I'm hearing, too. It's like, you're already feeling this out, but you can do something more with it once you have this vocabulary and you have this kind of set of concepts.

I'm going to test out some other vocabulary on you. The literary critic Anna Kornbluh has recently praised your work for what she sees as its ambition to a certain kind of objective stance. And I'll say a little bit more about that. So she's contrasting your work to what she calls personalism, which is a category that for her includes auto fiction, autotheory, but also just a kind of widespread use of the immersive first person in contemporary fiction. And so one of the things she really values in your work is what she characterizes as a kind of critical distance through the use of the third person, free indirect discourse, this kind of mediation between the reader and the subject.

I'm just curious if you recognize that characterization of your work? Do you think of your writing as in some way positioned against what she's calling personalism or a kind of trend toward the centering of the first-person psyche or the first person voice?

**BT**

I mean, yeah, I feel like I've been waging the war against the first person my entire creative output. It makes a lot of sense to me. And like what she calls personalism to me, that feels like a slight restatement of Lukács's description of a true work of art being able to sort of recreate the totality of life by sort of recreating the dialectic and yada, yada, yada. And the stuff that she describes as personalism is a thing that he sort of out of hand dismisses as being just pure subjectivity. And all it can do is create mood and atmosphere and it has no totality in it.

I now feel like I understand why the Marxists always get so mad in the LRB when they're reviewing these first person. I feel like I now know what they're looking for. I was always like, why are they so angry all the time? Oh, because like those books don't have a totality. They're not recreating the yada, yada, yada.

And so I do feel like I've come to understand that critique a bit more. I think for me, what I'm trying to do with the third person, I mean, the reason I don't write in first person is because I just don't know how to do first person fiction. I always think, well, look, who is this person? I feel like when I write, if one were to write in first person, I just don't know the character enough to be able to sort of start in that first person voice. And I think for me, I always feel like I'm learning about my characters by watching them act, by watching them, by putting them into situations and seeing what comes out of it. One of my favorite writers is Émile Zola, for whom this was the very purpose of fiction, that sort of experimental aspect to it.

And so I think for me, I don't know that I think I'm being objective. I think that my work is highly subjectivized actually. There's always a filter, you know, I write in what I call a tight third, which is a very sort of filtered third person. And so it simulates that objectivity. And yet it is also still highly subjectivized at the same time because it is being filtered through whichever character is the focal point in that moment, but it does have access, I think, to a kind of, it's able to scoop out and sort of comment upon things broadly.

But I think because I am, I grew up in a post "God is dead" world, I think that even at my sort of most bird's eye view, I think inside, I still know that that is a deeply subjective take. So it depends on how much credit you're willing to give me, whether or not it's truly objective. But I do think that in trying, even after a pseudo-objectivity, I'm still longing for that capacity to speak in the voice of the world.

**SH**

I think you're also maybe more interested in embodiment than Anna is. Not in the same way that maybe the personalists are interested in the body and being in a body, but that's not absent from your work, in my reading

**BT**

No, I'm always saying like, we need to put people back in their bodies. I gave a craft talk called "Against Character Vapor," which is what I call these like very dripty, very vibey first person, in which nobody has a body and it's just like three spritzes of a personality in a room and there's a description of light and then a section break.

And I get it, like "we're doing the subjective, like reality is just a series of thoughts and vibes and images and we're doing collage and the fragmentary nature of like experience in a post-

war world.” But also, I need a body. I need stuff happening. I need to feel the interface between internal and external. And I think maybe that is I think why I get some cred from the Marxists because there's a sort of pseudo-dialectic that I am engaging with in a way that I think a lot of the very character vapor-y novels are not doing as much because there's just inside. There's just inside and light description. That's all.

**CH**

Vaporism as a description of that is just, it's brilliant. And I hope that—

**BT**

Because it is vapor. It's just like a little spritz.

**CH**

The spritz, the aperol spritz of contemporary literature.

[laughing]

I want to follow up on that and talk a little bit more specifically about *The Late Americans*, because you seemed to almost put that very question through that very stark and amazing first scene in the workshop, where Seamus's initial revulsion at what we've been calling personalism or what he thinks of as ostentatious trauma in his workshop classmate's poetry is kind of pressed through as the novel goes on through layers of experience and narrative perspective as we reach Fatima and Noah and Ivan. And I wonder if you could take us through how that opening workshop scene acts as a sounding board for some of the fundamental questions that you're working through in the novel.

**BT**

Yeah. I mean, I wrote that scene shortly after I sold my first novel and I was still in MFA school, which is, never sell your book while you're still in the MFA, what a nightmare. And I had a lot of questions about the commodification of experience and the commodification of trauma. And that was a time when people were doing a lot of discoursing online about trauma poems, trauma literature, like using your, your Black pain to sell, there's just a lot of hand wringing about it. And I found it all rather tiresome. And so when writing that scene, I wanted to put a lot of that on the table, because part of how I figure out what I think is I put it into a character's mouth and have people react to it and sort of think it through. So sort of simulation for my thought patterns on these things.

And so I think that scene attempts to dramatize one salty man, one very salty man's take on the poems that his classmates write, and he's got an idea about you're writing about sad



things. That's all you're doing. Why don't people like my very calm, my very formalized poetry about World War One and World War Two and Alsatian nuns like I'm writing about—

**CH**

He's writing villanelles, right?

**BT**

About Alsatian nuns. He's like, I am writing about capital-H History, the things that really matter. And you're just writing about how a man looked at you hard. Like [ugh noise]. Once the book moves on from that, the question of how do we commodify trauma and how is trauma commodified? That question lingers over the book as more and more characters are introduced and as the book itself begins to tell you about those characters' lives. And so then it introduces this meta question of what is Brandon doing? What is he trying to tell us? This book is making me feel sympathetic for this character or that character by divulging things that they've been through. And yet I've been told by the first chapter that that's maybe a kind of seedy thing to do. What is the truth at the end of the day?

And I think that hopefully that, one of the things the book hopefully dramatizes is that, yes, we can have all of these arguments. We can sort of have these aesthetic duels, but hopefully at the end of the day, it's like well, but then what really matters is like a person's experience and their experience is their experience. And the story that they have about that experience may not be capital-A Art, but it is a true thing. And what is art? Like what more is art than the sort of truthful expression of a single experience of life? And so it's sort of this irreconcilable tension, I think.

**SH**

I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about where that plays out, by which I mean, you know, Chris used campus novels to talk about your work. You've been invoked in lots of discussions about where the campus novel has been going, where it's headed, especially in the kind of rise of the adjunct protagonist, or in your case, the grad student protagonist over this kind of elbow patched, tenured, Pnin, or whoever we want to think of in terms of the campus novel.

And I want to ask you if campus novel is something that feels like a useful kind of generic category for you, as opposed to something that just gets applied to your work. And even if not what kind of appeals does that setting bring, even if you're not slotting yourself into this tradition?

**BT**

Yeah. Yeah. So I think that part of why it gets applied, so I do think that, I mean, I did not invent the campus novel, but I do think that I am responsible for like it coming back as a marketing term. Because when—

**SH**

You've elevated it, you—

**BT**

Well, so the issue is that when *Real Life* was getting published, I saw the writing on the wall with how my publisher was doing the marketing copy and how that was feeding out to all the sort of “anticipated” lists. And they were talking about this book in such a way that just seemed so not—I realized I was not going to get the Ben Lerner treatment. Let's just put it that way, that it was not going to be thought of as a sort of existential novel about the wages of loneliness in contemporary life and the alienating aspect of grad school and academia. That was not, I was not going to get credit for riffing on *The Stranger* and *To the Lighthouse* and that it was going to be called a visceral gut punch of a novel.

And so I thought, oh dear, that's not what I wrote. And I don't want that. And I thought, well, I sort of think of it as a campus novel. And so I started saying that to the, I could not stop it in the Americans, but I started saying it to the British people because the British publication was second and they picked it up and ran with it. And I think you can see on Google the sort of sharp uptick of when campus novel started coming back as a term people used.

And so I do think of *Real Life*, I thought of it as, I was writing about living on a campus and going to school on a campus and so part of why I started using, was just sort of fend off the kind of racial, the racial gut punch, viscosity label. But I used it with a lot of I think, yes, mischievousness, but a lot of pride and joy. I love campus novels. I love books set on campuses. I'm sort of on record for thinking of it as a very capacious novel. I think I wrote an essay where I called *Germinal* a campus novel.

It sort of had a utility in sort of helping me avoid the race thing to what extent a Black writer can't avoid being labeled a race writer. But I think it applies more readily to some of my work than other aspects of my work. I do think that it has been used to dismiss my work. It's become, people are like, oh, it's a campus novel, he's writing about students or professors having affairs. And I'm like, well, no, because life on a campus is actually very varied. I think people who know know. I think that the sort of everyday consumer maybe doesn't know how complex a campus is and what a great sort of dramatic structure, structural readymade it is.

But when it came to do *The Late Americans*, you know, I feel like with *Real Life*, that is a novel that is constrained in time. People know that it's constrained in time, but they don't realize the extent to which it is also deeply constrained by place. That novel is so interested in Wallace and his group of five PhD science friends, and they're very particularized as three streets in Madison, Wisconsin. And I didn't want to do that again. I felt like I had written the container novel and I wanted to write something that was much more, I think like truthful about what it is like to live in a small town that is dominated by a university, which is that, yes, you are in your class, your seminar room, and then you leave and then you're just interacting with people who grew up there, who just live there because they live there, you know.

I think with *The Late Americans*, that book kind of sprawls across the town in terms of setting. And then once I realized it was going to sprawl in terms of setting, it felt important also that it sprawl in terms of the kinds of people you interact with. And so it couldn't just be constrained by the three grad students that these people know, but the guy who works at the meatpacking plant and the woman who makes the sandwiches and the woman who teaches swimming lessons at the rec center. That the book, that the cast of characters needed also to be as porous as the boundaries of the campus itself. And so I think *Real Life* is a campus novel about how hermetically sealed campus is. And I think *The Late Americans* is a novel about the campus as this porous place where people are constantly diffusing into and out of settings.

**SH**

I mean, as you know, for me, everything is about Austen. But what I'm hearing, too, is her three or four families in a country village, like how can the novel think about constraint and think outside of constraint. You use that to produce this much bigger thing where people might say, all Austen novels are alike; we know that's not true.

**BT**

Yeah.

**SH**

Right? There's just a kind of constraint that she's playing with. Feels like something similar happening here, I think.

**BT**

Oh yeah. I mean, people were like, oh, this book is, all these books are the same. And I'm like, how can you say that? I think someone said in a review somewhere where they were

like, he just thinks that because these people have different jobs and live in a different town, that it's a different novel. And I'm like, yes.

**SH**

Actually.

**CH**

Precisely.

And what you're describing with *The Late Americans*, that the porousness also, I think deals with the temporality of the campus novel, which as you said in *Real Life* is, is hermetic both in place, but also in timeframe. Everyone's eventually going to leave this place. And so the interactions you have, the relationships you have are concentrated, super concentrated. But in *The Late Americans*, when we have, you know, for lack of a better word, like townies enter in whose lives are not at that moment scripted by this super concentrated temporality, something happens to how the novel has to kind of slow down to allow them to enter into it. And I wonder if that kind of temporality aspect is interesting to you for campus environments.

**BT**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's one of the things that, that difference in temporality is a thing that actually you can see playing out in actual life. It seems like a thing that only a novelist would think about or care about or be able to depict in a novel, but you can see it in actual life, which is. I remember going to parties in grad school that had a sort of mixed group of people and the people who are in grad school sort of turning to a guy who just like grew up in that town being like, so what are you doing for spring break? Like, what are you, are you going home for Christmas? And the guy being like, what do you mean? I work at a bookstore. What do you mean? Going home for spring? What am I doing for spring break? Well, I don't get a spring break.

I think having realized that and noticed that I wanted to depict that in the book as well. I think like that's one of the ways that, not that *Real Life* fails, but that *Real Life* is so constrained. The grad students only ever talk to other grad students and so you don't get to see that difference in texture, right? Everyone is kind of hemmed and bound by the same regime of time.

**CH**

It reminds me of, of the *Downton Abbey* moment where the Dowager Countess says, what's a weekend?

**SH**

What's a weekend? Yeah, exactly.

I'm going to pivot a little bit. I have, for whatever reason, all these genre fiction questions for you, the great realist of our time. I have personally been thinking a lot lately about romance novels.

**BT**

Oh I love.

**SH**

Thinking about teaching a class about romance novels and thinking about the kind of travesty that romance is arguably been given last kind of critical theoretical attention than other forms of genre fiction. I know that you are on record as a big romance reader, at least growing up. And obviously we're both big Austen fans. I just want to know like what reading romance, being immersed in it, taught you about the novel or just reading or desire or relationships or, what do you feel like you got out of that formative reading?

**BT**

So the first novels I read were romance novels because my family was very poor and most of my family was illiterate. And the only person who had books was my aunt, who was a nurse's aide. And so the first books I read were her nursing manuals and the \$2 romance novels she had lying around. And for a long time, I thought that was fiction. I thought that was literature. And I mean, it was literature to me. I used to love some Linda Lael Miller and some Debbie Macomber and Julianne MacLean and Johanna Lindsey and Liz Carlyle. I loved, loved, loved those novels and Beverly Jenkins of, oh, my gosh.

**SH**

Of course.

**BT**

And I loved those books. And to me, there was never any hierarchy. I didn't even know that romance novels were a thing you were supposed to feel embarrassment about. I mean, you're not, but like people wanted you to feel embarrassed about them. It just never occurred to me because I'm like, this is high literature to me. And I think, it's not even like I got something out of it. I don't even like to think of it that way because it just was the air I breathed, but one of the things, one of the ways it influences me is that I think the primacy, in my fiction the primacy is always on human relationship. It's always on what people mean

to each other or what they can and cannot say to each other. I think romance novels was one of the first places I learned how to portray the difference between what a character said and what they meant or what a character wanted to express and what they couldn't express. I remember reading *Beauty Like the Night* by Liz Carlyle. And I think that was the first time I encountered the construction, "what she wanted to say was," you know, insert thing. "What she wanted to say was" insert thing, the sort of long run on thing of this character having all this stuff she wanted to say. And then the cutting thing of her, just sort of saying nothing and turning away, you know, like that was so.

And of course, that is a thing that we recognize from Austen. That is a thing that we recognize, of course, like Anne Elliot wanting to say all of these things and not being able to. And so I just, I don't know, I learned about that. I learned about how to portray a character's inner life and how to dramatize relationships and how relationships can be a worthy subject of art. And it was only until I got into creative writing classes and was writing these little relationship stories that people were like, when are you going to write a real story. And I was like, what do you mean?

**SH**

Please explain.

**BT**

Like what can, what is a more important subject than will this person be able to express to the person that they love that they love them? That to me is like, is that not Anna Karenina?

And so yeah, for me, romance was, I do think that it is still the core of my sort of narrative and novelistic conception of the world. And also, of course, the sex. I think romance novelists have been writing sex for a long time and they know the importance of sex and they know how to do it. And so just on a technique, well, someone asked me, how did you learn how to write sex?

And I was like, I don't even know what you're saying. I just do what the romance novelists do. I don't have any great profound theory. I was just copying Kathleen Woodiwiss.

**SH**

They were breaking it down. Yeah, exactly. They gave you the roadmap.

**CH**

All you need to do is not do Ian McEwen doing sex. Then you win.

**BT**

I mean, it's amazing. I sometimes read literary sex and I'm just like, why are you trying so hard? Like Kathleen Woodiwiss gave us a perfect idiom for this.

**SH**

Right. Do we need this many similes or?

**BT**

Yeah, yeah, indeed, indeed. So what did I get from romance novels? Everything.

**SH**

I love that.

**BT**

Yeah, I really, they really taught me how to write. And yeah, I love them. I still this day, I'm a frequent Audible romance user. Love a good romance.

**SH**

Listen, likewise.

Another question about your reading life. You are irreverent, I want to say, in your work about what you just called capital H History. I'm thinking of both the Alsatian nuns and of a story like Anne of Cleves, right, where we have this graduate student who's immersed in early modern women writers. But you are a great reader of history. I know you have all of your little, you know, rabbit holes that you go down in monarchical history, all kinds of things. Do you think you would ever write historical fiction? Or do you feel committed to the depiction of the contemporary world?

**BT**

No, I, what I, yes. So I want nothing more than to write a novel about a gay Jesuit in the north of France and a handsome farmer. Like that is my goal in life is to write that novel. And I feel like everything I do is preparation for that.

**SH**

I mean, I want to read it, so.

**CH**

It's going to be a galactic bestseller.

**SH**

I was gonna say.

**BT**

I cannot wait to write that novel. I do have a project of my heart, and that is the project of my heart is a sort of novel about Jesuits, Bretton Jesuits, basically. Brittany is like a sort of side interest of mine. It's such a fascinating historical polity.

So, yeah, I do, but it's sort of more contemporary than historical. There's a novel that I sort of started while I was at the Coleman Center about a publishing dynasty that sort of starts in the 1930s and ends in the 1970s about this publishing company I discovered while I was researching museums and sort of stumbled upon this other thing. And so, yeah, I have a couple of different historical projects in mind, but the one that is the book of my heart is my Bretton Jesuit book, as I've been calling it. And one day I will have enough time to write it. But yeah, I, yeah, I can't wait.

**SH**

Oh, man. Well, we will talk again, I hope, when you're Bretton Jesuit novel.

**BT**

That would be so much fun, right?

**SH**

Like when you assume Mantel's mantle.

**CH**

So I am going to take us out with what we do each season, which is we have a signature question. I'm a very big fan of this season's signature question. And so I'm going to, and normally we just ask the novelist, but I think the three of us are going to handle it today because we have wonderful, wonderful answers.

But I want to start with Brandon. What is the first book you remember loving?

**BT**

First book I remember loving is *A is for Apple, W is for Witch*. And it came out and I looked this up. It came out in 1996 and is by an author named Catherine Dexter. And I loved that book. It is about a young girl who discovers that she has magic. And she like has to learn how to use her magic. And she accidentally turns someone into a frog who's bullying her. It's so good. It's children's book. It's one of the few children's book I actually read as a child. And the reason it sticks so much in my memory is that I loved it so much that I wrote a



pastiche of it and turned it in. And I wrote 20 handwritten pages in my childish handwriting and then bound it with a shoelace and turned it into my teacher.

Actually my parents—

**CH**

What did your teacher say?

**BT**

Oh, she gave me an A and she goes, this is so good. Good job. I'm sure it made no sense. But it was about a little boy who discovers that there's a ghost living in his family's tree and he talks to the ghost and the ghost helps him. And then he accidentally gets pulled into the tree and he is stuck there for a very long number of pages. My parents who are not very sentimental, kept that. I think one of the last times I was home, they had a box of my old child things. And there was that set of like Mead white notebook paper with the shoelace.

**SH**

Oh, wow.

**CH**

Wow.

**BT**

But I loved, I loved that book. That book is. Yeah, I love that book. It really was just, I don't know. It hits you at the right time, you know? Who can say why we loved these books? But it's just that book had such a hold on me. And it made me write my first book, I guess.

**CH**

Yeah, no, clearly. And there's material evidence of the writing.

**BT**

Yeah, materiality. It's important.

**SH**

That's right.

**CH**

Well, that's a wonderful first book. Stephanie, would you like—now Stephanie will tell you maybe that it's *Anne of Green Gables*. But she's going to tell us the true—

**SH**

I will. I'll confess here. I mean, I had all of that kind of predictable probably tween, like I read Austin, I read *Anne of Green Gables*, I read *Jane Eyre* twice a year for 10 years, I think. But the first book I really, truly loved and obsessed over it was the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which I took to bed with me and cracked the spine of and probably, you know, left pages littered all around the house. I was completely and utterly obsessed. I don't know what that means, but that's true of me.

**BT**

I love that.

**CH**

No, it's the thing I always remember is the, and it was year after year. It was the same guy, but the guy with the longest fingernail.

**SH**

I remember this too. I do think there's something about bodies. Like I remember that, you know, the tallest man and the fingernails and the heaviest, like all of these, the extremities of corporeality I want to say now. And I don't think it was just the kind of lurid fascination, but I was I was completely fascinated and feats of endurance, right? Like how long you could walk or stand or stay awake or touch a car or whatever these weird, 70s tasks were that were discussed. Yeah, really.

**CH**

It's an excellent answer.

Mine is it is, yeah, it's its own thing, which is the book that I remember loving and reading just you know, unceasingly, like not even being called away for dinner is the novelization of the movie *Gremlins*. Not the novel that was the movie was based on, but the novelization of the movie, which you can buy on eBay, and I'm almost tempted to buy it.

**SH**

You should.

**BT**

What are you doing? Order it right now. That is, man. Remember novelizations? Oh, what a time.

**CH**

Yeah, I actually I have a student whose father wrote a lot of major novelizations in the 80s and 90s as a career.

**SH**

What a gig.

**BT**

That was like high print media. The 90s, we'll never see those heights again.

**SH**

That's right.

**BT**

We'll never see. What a time, what a time to be alive.

**CH**

Well, our thanks as always to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and to *Public Books* for their continued partnership. We're thankful for Hannah Jorgensen, who is our graduate intern. Rebecca Otto, our social media manager, and Connor Hibbard, the sound engineer.

I'd encourage you to subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you find your podcasts. Some novelists from past seasons of novel dialogue include Chang-rae Lee, Teju Cole, Orham Palmuk, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, and many more conversations like this one. I want to thank you, Brandon and Stephanie, for joining me. This was such an excellent and fun and thoughtful conversation. And I'm so appreciative.

**BT**

Thanks for having me.

**SH**

Thanks, Chris.