8.1 Dirt Bag Novels: Lydia Kiesling in Conversation with Megan Ward (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 8 of *Novel Dialogue*. It is my very great pleasure to welcome Lydia Kiesling to *Novel Dialogue*. Her first novel, *The Golden State*, was a 2018 National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree and a finalist for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award. Her second novel, *Mobility*, a National Best Seller, was named a best book of 2023 by Vulture, Time, and NPR, among others. It was long-listed for the Joyce Carol Oates Prize and a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Her essays and nonfiction have been published in outlets including *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker* Online, and *The Cut*. Lydia will be joined today by Professor Megan Ward. Megan is Associate Professor of English at Oregon State University and the author of *Seeming Human: Artificial Intelligence and Victorian Realist Character*, a book that I cite multiple times in my own book and very much admire. She's currently working on a book of essays called *Chatbots in Love*, while her public-facing writing has appeared in venues such as *Wired*, *Slate*, and *The Atlantic*. Welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, Lydia and Megan.

Lydia Kiesling

Thank you.

Megan Ward

Thank you so much for having me.

CH

And in my capacity as host, I'm going to turn things over to Megan to ask the first question.

MW

Great. Thanks a lot, Chris. Well, Lydia, one of the things that attracted me to *Mobility* is that it gestures back to some of its novelistic antecedents, and I studied the Victorian novels, so, you know, this was something that I was immediately really drawn to. You know, I think it gestures in

really interesting ways, some of just a few of them are that, you know, you've repurposed a character named Bunny from Upton Sinclair's 1926 novel *Oil*, and then I see the form of the 19th-century bildungsroman, the novel of development, all over *Mobility*. But you also, you know, perform these really interesting twists on that form. Your Bunny is a woman rather than a man. She's the daughter of a diplomat rather than an oil tycoon. And unlike the typical bildungsroman, Bunny's development happens sort of almost by accident. She's buffeted by so many larger social forces. So I'm curious, like, do you see *Mobility* as a bildungsroman? And if so, could you tell us more about your experiments with the form?

LK

Well, I don't think when I set out to do it that I saw it in that frame. It's absolutely the frame that I was writing in, I think, unconsciously. When I think about the novels that sort of shaped me as a younger reader, they're often books like that, either in the sort of more, like, modern kind of 20th-century or post-war context in what I call the dirt bag novel, which is already sort of a reformulation of the bildungsroman, thinking of something like *Lucky Jim* or, you know, any of our American post-war male writers. But before that, I mean, one of the most—I was actually just talking about this with another writer, so it's top of mind, even though it was definitely not top of mind as I was starting *Mobility*. But a really formative novel for me, when I was probably 20, 19 or 20, was *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham. And I think it was 1915, maybe 1905, even, I know it's one of his earliest novels, and it's just sprawling and follows a character sort of throughout his life, various jobs. And, you know, he's having these realizations all along the way and having relationships and just sort of understanding his own place in the world. And I think that was kind of guiding what I was doing, but what I remember from the early days of writing the novel is just panic, because I think I hadn't really understood that that was a frame that I could work in or consciously plug myself into. And actually, it was when I was listening, I listened to the audiobook of *Oil* over the course of like two years, [laughter] because I would just wait until I had a long road trip to listen to it. And it's really long, it took a long time. And that, even though I actually think it's like a pretty bad novel in a lot of ways, I'm so fond of it. And I—and it kind of woke me up to the fact that there is a way that you can just talk about a character from, you know, youth to middle age. And in that, because Upton Sinclair was very consciously writing sort of like a political journey, that made a lot of sense to me in sort of how I had been thinking of Bunny already as someone who I had kind of like a political critique of in a way or was writing into, I guess, trying to figure out how to balance sort of that with like just making like a fun fictional story and enjoyable and, like, aesthetically pleasing story. And so yeah, once I, once I realized that Upton Sinclair had done like a very ham-fisted, in some ways, kind of bildungsroman, that was explicitly about like, a development of a political consciousness, then I was like, oh, I can play with that, and then I was much more consciously kind of thinking of it in those terms. That's a very long answer to your question. [laughter]

MW

No, no, there's so much there. I mean, I can see how the project of writing a novel is really different from the project of like, I will write a bildungsroman and I will do X and Y with this form

and that it, you know, hearing how it sort of emerged organically and especially about the social critique of Bunny, which I definitely want to get into. One of the things that I also sort of, along those lines, thought is interesting is how the character of Bunny, like, just really sings with these callbacks to past trends, you know, many of which, as someone who was alive during that time, like, really resonated with me, like her scents, her shoes, her wet bun. And I think, but at the same time—

CH

I hadn't heard “wet bun” in a long time.

MW

Totally. Had many wet bun. But she, at the same time, I feel like her directionlessness feels antithetical to our present moment, which is so much about individual optimization and wellness culture and productivity culture. And so we do see Bunny pulled in those directions too. And so I guess, you know, is part of your, when you're thinking about that critique of her, are you sort of thinking about those larger cultures of individualism?

LK

I do think, yeah, it's funny, because even though now you're, you're so right, everything is kind of like about self-optimization and wellness and self-improvement. That's still so in service of a kind of aimlessness that does characterize Bunny. Because first of all, just spending that much time, like on self-improvement, necessarily means that you are not spending time on anything else. And if you're not thinking really explicitly about to what end you are sort of making these tweaks to yourself, whether they're, you know, physical or mental. And you know, there are, I think, in some cases that the, like, language of kind of self-improvement and wellness has merged with more, kind of, collective ideas and there are, you know, I know that there are kind of social justice applications of some of that same kind of language and thought, but for the most part, in many cases, the kind of like, sort of, self improvement that Bunny is inundated with and most, kind of, receptive to as a consequence is on the purely kind of superficial level. And that's, I think, you know, by design, our systems kind of encourage that in a way, perhaps unconsciously sometimes, and so that's a lot of what I wanted to kind of talk about. And I, I mean, I wish—another reason that those sort of callbacks are so present and, and so strong is that I, I mean, it amazes me how I can forget so many details and things from my life, but some of those just kind of wanting, wanting a thing that you saw someone else had, or, you know, saw in a magazine, like how strong that feeling was, I can still call it back. It's a little bit more rare that I, I don't have the same version of those feelings, but they still appear, you know, I definitely see, like now it's just like, I see someone in like a large linen jumpsuit and I'm like, I want to know where you've gotten the jumpsuit. But yeah, the, like, yearning that I felt, especially in youth around some of those things is something I really wanted to kind of express and poke at a little bit.

CH

Mobility is a novel that's really interested in all kinds of questions of scale, I think. It's both a micro portrait of Bunny's development from adolescence into adult, and a macro portrait of how global commodities move and shift people, land, and culture. And also it, I think it's, I couldn't think of another novel that I had read that has Azerbaijan as a major figuration in it. But I wonder how did you want to play with these scalar perspectives, especially having said it kind of right at the beginning of third wave globalization?

LK

That is a great question. I think a lot of that, I mean, just sort of as with anything in novel writing, so much is basically accidental or the results of a lot of flailing or problem solving. And then I think, you know, it can cohere in a way that then once you kind of realize what's happening, you can direct it in more intentional ways, but I think some of that scale collision in a way—I think of it as a collision because it is the result of trying to do what initially felt like a few separate things that I wasn't sure how to put together, and, you know, sort of the first primary thing, like the primary impulse of the novel was to talk about those teenage girls, kind of, teenage years in a very, in a, with a kind of vividness that I think matches the vividness of the feelings of that time, which really, like everything kind of feels dull in comparison, I think, to some of those. And I have kids now who are like careening toward tween years, and I have to remind myself, like, how different everything feels. So that was kind of thing one. And thing two, is that I was interested in capturing the very specific kind of upbringing I had, which was as a foreign service brat, but Bunny and I share that in our story. And, you know, it's a very kind of totalizing profession. It is, it's rare that you meet someone else who grows up that way. It just has a, I mean, like any family in any job, it comes with a very specific culture. And I was really interested in that, especially, you know, I started writing this in like the Trump era, we can call it, I guess, we're still, you know, it's—everything is the Trump era now, but [laughter] it's his era, we're just living in it. And not as a like response to Trump, because these were, it was provoked by things that were happening, you know, before he was brought into office. But I think the project of kind of unlearning some of that reflexive patriotism that I had grown up with as a consequence of the work that my father did and the position we held in the world, which is very much like, you know, like evangelical in a way about America's value to the world and importance. So that was kind of another piece of it. So I basically, like, couldn't think about a teenage girl or, like, my own teenage years without the present day sort of disgust, like there was a lens of present day disgust that I was seeing all of this through. In addition to, you know, whatever personal, like, self-loathing you have about when you just look at different eras of your life, perhaps, or, like, understanding of your own mistakes. So that was kind of the first thing I was doing, but then, you know, as I kind of zoomed out to try and think, okay, well, where is this family? And how do I express some of that unlearning or present, you know, an awareness of what my friend, Namwali Serpell, who is, you know, a brilliant novelist—she used the phrase “ironic distance” as the way to kind of talk about the narrative choices in the book. And so, in order to employ that, which I knew I wanted to do very early on, I had to zoom out and look at broader sort of things and oil kind of emerged quickly. And I do have, like, oil connections on one side of my family in

different ways than Bunny does, but it's something I thought about before. But then that completely changed the scale, because oil and fossil fuels generally are such an immense narrative challenge and opportunity, and so then I became, like, completely beguiled by that as a prospect and had wanted to write, like, a much bigger book with much different characters. I was doing a lot of, like, vignettes of real life, quote unquote, oil men, and ultimately, like, I just sort of couldn't take that all the way. And also like, you know, the further away I wrote from Bunny, the more aimless I felt, because I think she, you know, she was the anchor and there was a reason for that, and she was, there's a reason that she was the primary impulse for the novel. And so there was a pretty long process of, kind of, figuring out how to reign that in and to figure out how I could, what I could bring to like an oil story that didn't basically try to make me into a writer that I'm not and to keep Bunny in there.

CH

Mm. When you said oil man, the first thing that came to mind was Daniel Day-Lewis's, like, just unhinged performance in *There Will Be Blood*, which I think, I don't know, it works here in different ways.

LK

Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, that movie is such a funny, like it's, you know, it's its own brilliant work of art that has, like, absolutely nothing to do with the novel, and so it's so interesting to, I mean, it really gives me a new appreciation for people who can, like, see a text and just take something and make their own like incredible thing out of it. Which yeah, like there's no, almost no resemblance to the original, to the source material.

MW

Well, maybe also another way of thinking about this question of scale is thinking about Bunny and what we learn…like, Bunny is an observer and the way that, you know, typically feminine subjects, especially white feminine subjects often are, like, she doesn't take herself very seriously. She is not taken very seriously. She spends a lot of time listening to men talk. And I'm curious about what that angle, you know, that sort of the political-through-the-personal angle allows you to say that maybe a more straightforwardly third person omniscient narrator wouldn't?

LK

So initially, when I started writing, I had a much more kind of jaundiced way of writing about Bunny and her family. And I think part of that was just like I was learning how to use the third person and sort of trying to figure out that ironic distance and trying to figure out, yeah, who the voice is that's telling the story. And the earliest efforts were just, like, basically unreadable because they were so caustic that it was just like what, you know, they were not subtle and they were just sort of pointless, and, like, it was almost in a comic register, but not quite. There was

something, like, deeply unfunny about it [laughter], and so—I did a sort of, I don't generally, I'm not, you know, there are a lot of writers who are like, “I wrote a whole novel and then I just, like, rewrote it in a slightly different way.” I don't have that kind of discipline, but I did rewrite the sort of opening scenes and vignettes from Baku in 1998 a lot of times because I was trying to figure out what that voice was. And part of that process was just accepting that Bunny, like, could have value not only as, like, a human and be, like, of interest even if she's not perfect, which it's funny that I would struggle with that so much, given that every single novel I've read is like an exercise in presenting, like, a flawed human being, and otherwise they would be really boring. So, but, you know, when you're doing your own thing, you, like, forget all of the other lessons you've ever learned or things that you know. So yes, both as, like, in just, terms of who she is as a person, but then also as, like, a contribution to the narrative because I think you need to have, kind of, her perspective and see her in these like observing roles partially as a way to kind of trust her or trust her enough that you can spend time with her as a character. You know, people have had wildly different readings of her and you know, some people just sort of like hate every minute they spend with her but still, but I think the fact that they can finish the book at all is—has to do with the fact that her perspective still is doing something narratively useful that it would—that if, were I to just, sort of, like, have her as a puppet doing things without so much of her, kind of, inner life, it wouldn't be able to sustain, you know, 300 pages or however long it is.

MW

Well, maybe, kind of with that, the questions about climate catastrophe, I really enjoyed your introduction, use, of the word “hyperobject,” Timothy Morton's term in the novel, which Bunny's more sophisticated sister-in-law, Sophie, defines as “something so big and sticky with so many parts that it can't be seen, something that touches so many other things.” And we see that resonate so beautifully in the ring that Bunny buys that says, “I respond to every touch.” But I thought, you know, Bunny clearly sees this as a, you know, she sees this as such a helpful term, a way to understand how opaque the oil industry is, to her, to everyone. And of course, Morton is using that term specifically to talk about the horrors of the climate catastrophe that the novel does end with. And so I guess I'm wondering, like, when you think about novel writing or character writing or any kind of aspect of writing fiction, do you think it's a way to understand and, like, explore hyperobjects? Or are we ultimately, kind of, or are you ultimately sort of showing us like, we can't really ever understand them?

LK

I mean, I should say that I actually probably have, like, a Bunny-level understanding of what that term really means, at least in, with regard to Timothy Morton's, like, intended deployment and use of it, like, you know, I've read part of that book.

CH

I'm going to start using “Bunny-level understanding” just in everyday parlance, because it's perfect.

LK

Yeah, I mean, and it's funny, because I read—there was a profile, I can't actually remember whether the profile was of Timothy Morton or of Andreas Malm, you know, who's another, like, very well-known climate and sort of left person, but very different from Timothy Morton. And there was a, I think it was a *Vulture* profile of, I guess it was of Timothy Morton. And there's like a quote from Andreas Malm that's pretty withering about the hyperobject, sort of, concept, at least as a way to think about climate, because in Malm's characterization, it's sort of like, everything is so big. And like, we just kind of can't do anything. Just let it wash over us. I'm like, very, very, very paraphrasing. But that made me laugh, because I think, especially if you're sort of doing a surface read of the concept, which is what I was doing and what I was giving to Bunny, it actually can contribute to a feeling of just like, everything there is so big, there's nothing we can do. But at the same time, I see it in, in this kind of interdisciplinary current of thought and there are other writers working in it, especially around, kind of, petroleum, like, logics that are so fascinating and so applicable to fiction writing. There's a book that was just wonderful called *Mineral Rites* and it's nonfiction, I believe the author's name is Bob Johnson and it's a scholarly work, but it's, it's sort of, like, written in a style that I don't think most people would associate with kind of, like, scholarly writing. And it really is just, like, here are the connections drawn between disparate things by fossil fuels, and it was so cool, and it just, like, as a fiction writer, I was like, that's what I want to do is like, talk about the connections between things in ways that are, you know, where you don't have to solve anything, you just sort of name them or paint a picture. And I think the fiction that I love—actually, I think maybe it has less to do with the fiction that I love and more to do with what my education was, which was as like an English and kind of Comp Lit student. And I left that education, you know, long ago. And, you know, it ended, like, I didn't do graduate, like, English studies, but in high school and college, my English classes were about understanding subtext and doing this close reading, and that is so, that's such a, like, useful way to also kind of look at the world, I think. And so that has, kind of, turned into like, the kind of fiction that I write has everything to do with the sort of books that I read and the ways that I was like trained and encouraged to read them, which is to, like, look at these details sometimes, like, very minute and sort of to draw conclusions and correlations from them about the world in which that, you know, piece of art was created, or the world that we live in now. And so I think there's something about oil and gas specifically, maybe because of its, like, its vastness, but also because of its, like, interconnection that I think lends itself really well to, like, a close reading, kind of, treatment of it, if that makes sense.

MW

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I noted all of the times that Bunny reflects on the usefulness or lack thereof of her English major. Of course, I mean, of course I did, right. And that was something that I was interested in, you know, early in adulthood, she notes the chasm between the way she had been encouraged to spend her time reading books and writing papers, and the methods by which she was now expected to earn money, which, you know, is perfect, you know, that's, that's exactly what happens. But then it actually turns out that her careful reading and

editing and writing do propel her into this career and earning money in the oil industry in ways that, you know, kind of push back against that sort of easy dunk on the English major. So I just was thinking more about her education, and she becomes an autodidact of the oil industry or tries to be, and I, and then I was thinking that, you know, I think your first novel, *Golden State* also has a, kind of, critique of academia that, you know, I'm sympathetic to as well. So just kind of thinking about, I don't know if you want to, where you want to go with that, but are, are the, you know, is this, kind of, sense of the way that education works or doesn't work, particular to those sort of seeking, somewhat tentative women at the center of those two novels? Do you see there being, like a larger appraisal at stake?

LK

Yes, it absolutely is. I think, yeah, and sort of like intersecting ways, although I hadn't really thought about them like that, that aspect in quite the same way, but that is very true. Yeah, I mean, I think in the case of Bunny, the—*Mobility*, which is not my title, my agent Claudia Ballard gave me that title, and I think is just so brilliant. Like, I was calling it really stupid stuff, like *The Helper*, like *The Collaborator*. [laughter] She was like under no, under no circumstances [laughter] shall you call it that. And she said, I think you should call it *Mobility*. And I just love that because, yeah, even though, you know, Bunny sees herself as, I think, many people who kind of graduate with like a humanities degree, into a world that does not recognize the value of the humanities, even though it absolutely depends on them in so many ways, you know, she does have that kind of tremendous, like, disconnect and, sort of, feeling of despair of just, like, what have I been prepared to do? And how does anyone do anything? But then, that is part of what gives her mobility. I mean, she has obviously, sort of, the, like, social capital of, like, a privileged upbringing and, like, going to these, like, elite institutions, but the elite institutions are not only valuable because it's like a gold star that you get or like a, you know, sort of a certificate of authenticity as, like, a valuable member of the elite class, but it is an education that you get. Basically, whether you, like, are receptive to it or not, you just cannot help but be affected by what are often just like sublime educational opportunities. And that is what allows Bunny to, kind of, move even within this industry that is hostile, like, actively hostile to someone with her, like, credentials and even sensibility, not to mention, you know, the human package that she comes in. And yeah, so that is like, you know, storytelling becomes how, becomes the way that she sort of, like, moves through that industry. And I mean, I just think about that all the time when I see—whenever I see like a Chevron ad or a BP ad, and you can, I think, especially, you know, writers or people who, like, have studied the novel instantly sort of latch on to what's happening in those ads because they're, like, so clear how they've been constructed and to what end they have been constructed. And so that's, you know, Bunny has a background that, you know, allows her to do that. I think in the case of *The Golden State,* Daphne, the protagonist there has a similar thing where she, you know, is a very educated person with a lot of intelligence and a lot of curiosity, but she comes up against sort of the professionalization of the humanities, which basically, like, is slotting that educational frame into sort of, like, a 20, 21st century, like, kind of overarching capitalist market model. And when Daphne is like—when that novel is taking place, I don't think she or I really understood how, like, deeply fucked that model is. And it just becomes more clear every year as you see these, kind of, consultants come into universities

and just gut them, and the thing that they go to first is something like the English department or the history department or creative writing or foreign language. Yeah, I mean, I think that novel, if I were to, like, rewrite *The Golden State* now, it would be less about just my own, sort of, snide, like, observations about academic hierarchies, because I think even before the, like, kind of consultants got in there, they were pretty hostile to a lot of people who enter into them, and I knew many, many PhD students who never got an academic job, are still trying to figure out, you know, how to use this incredibly, like, wonderful and also highly specialized education in the market, so to speak. And I mean, I think another thing that I have to name is that there's a lot of, there's, like, resentment in both of those characters, because I think if you do, if you have been sort of trained to see yourself, because you've gone to, like, elite academic institutions, as smart and, like worldly and sort of aware of things. And then you, when you're confronted with the realities of like an employment structure and like the job ladder, and then you end up kind of doing something perhaps like quite menial for someone who you don't necessarily think is very smart, or like someone that you have anything in common with, or—I think that, like, can engender sort of, like, this resentment. And then when you add the gender dynamic to that, which is anyone who's had, kind of, an admin role in engineering or architecture, or many, many different kinds of industries has I think felt how gender and race and sort of, like, positionality of all kinds, like, absolutely affects your experience of being in those work environments.

MW

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I've definitely been Bunny, driving to the Manpower interview, like really rocking the, like, typing portion, you know, it feels like, oh good, well, I'm glad that writing all those papers, you know, this is the measurable skill that this has given me. [laughter]

LK

Yeah, and it's called Manpower, like it could not be more on the nose.

CH

Lydia, I wanted to talk for a second about the production and publication of the novel. And this is, as far as I know, the first book from the Crooked Media Reads imprint. And listeners will probably be aware of that, as the corporate body behind the Pod Save America crew of many, many podcasts. The first time I heard of the novel was them doing a beautiful job plugging it. And I wonder, can you talk about how the novel ended up with them and maybe what you see as the value of a startup imprint of this kind of very particular kind for this specific book?

LK

Yeah, so I mean, the reason that my novel ended up with them is because I followed my editor to a new venture. So my editor for *The Golden State*, Emily Bell, published that novel at FSG, where she was under one of their imprints. And, you know, then she went—by the time *Mobility* was ready to go out on submission, she really wanted—she had been such a champion of *The*

Golden State and a wonderful partner for that book. And she had gone to Zando, which was a new kind of publishing venture that was operating on sort of, like, a partner model where I think the phrase they use is partner with influential people and institutions to kind of like put out books together. I mean, it is sort of, like, an imprint model, which is an existing sort of thing within publishing. But yeah, so she was there and she said, I want to buy this book, and what do you think about doing it under the Crooked Media label, here is why I think that would be beneficial to the book, you know, they have a huge audience, they have this sort of willingness—because especially, I think it was so early in the venture, they were really open to, like, a work of literary nonfiction in a way that they might not have been, like, down the line—I don't know, when you see how many people buy literary nonfiction. So yeah, she like—they made a compelling case that it would find a broader audience. And it certainly has, I mean, just in terms of like it, like I, you know, got my first royalty statement, not that I have earned out, but it showed that, you know, across formats, *Mobility* has sold as many copies, you know, in six months or whatever that it's taken *The Golden State* five years to sell.

CH

Wow.

LK

So that is a big difference. I mean, I think it also, it's, I don't want to read too much into like, what it means about the audience of the book, but I have noticed like, I'm trying not to go on Goodreads anymore, but there are a lot of people who, who read the book who I, I don't think were, I think were sort of expecting something that was more like, this is about politics and like, maybe weren't bringing a reading mindset of, like, there's political valence to describing the lives of people. And there are political, like, implications for thinking about how people move through the world. I think they were expecting something different. And so they were kind of like, what is this? Or, you know, they're just like, I, this is, like, about a privileged white woman who, like, doesn't do anything. It's like, yes, that, that's the book. I mean, so anyway, I don't, I don't know if that would have been the case. Like, I don't know if that's just because it's like, if you have more readers, you have more readers. And so that means like all different kinds of readers. But yeah, I mean, I don't, I, like—publishing is such a bizarre industry, and like, now my editor, Emily Bell, like, no longer works at Zando. So it's kind of just, like, I, I am trying, I try to have no expectations of the industry. But I am grateful that they were really big, you know, both Zando and Crooked were champions of the book. They let me, you know, one concern I had was like, I, if I don't have, I don't necessarily, like, agree all the time. I'm not like a Pod Save America listener, and I didn't want to sort of be published by them as a sort of indication of, like, I agree with everything that they say, and like, this is, like, their book, or, you know, that there would be any kind of like editorial mucking around, but I, you know, trusted Emily Bell, like, hugely, and knew that she would not put me in that position. So I went with it. But yeah, I mean, it's still, it does feel a little bit weird to kind of be, like, attached to a brand in that way. And I think that's still the case in, like, traditional publishing, but, like, in traditional publishing, you don't, it doesn't really matter. Like, I don't think anybody is sort of, like, looking to see, like, what is the head of

Macmillan, like, saying? And how does that reflect on my book in quite the same way as if it's like, this is a popular, like, podcast empire with a huge number of listeners, and, sort of, my book is now, like, attached to that, and to the, like, personalities behind it. It just feels, you know, you just, it's just something to think about, I guess.

MW

It seems like it also is a reflection of the changing place of literature in our media ecology, right? Like maybe once upon a time, having it come out with a particular publishing company had, you know, maybe had some more meaning attached to it than I think, than it's, you know, for the average reader, than it does now. Like maybe it had more, even just prestige, kind of, questions. And now it seems like we're in an era where, yeah, it's Crooked Media that has the, the really clear, strong public perception and not, you know, FSG. Yeah, who knows? I mean, I remember once I was in, before *The Golden State* came out, I used to always work in this coffee shop in San Francisco, where we lived at the time, and there was a retired cop who would be there every single day at the coffee shop and, like, do—and I only know this because I would eavesdrop on every single one of his conversations, and, and he was like, such a figure of mystery to me, because I knew he was a retired cop—he would, like, kind of, do childcare for a grandchild while there, which I was like, that's great. And he would sometimes read *The New Yorker*. And then once he started chatting with me and he said, you know, he asked what I was always doing in the coffee shop. And I said, oh, I have a book coming out. And he was kind of like, Oh, like, like a real book, like who's publishing it? And I told him and he was like, Oh, you're going to be fine. It's like, who is this man? Just, he was like, yes, I follow the workings of FSG. So anyway, you never— [laughter]

CH

Amazing.

MW

Well, the Season 8 *Novel Dialogue* closing question, so for every interview, is this, but it seems especially appropriate, Lydia, to close out with this question, for you, as someone who grew up living internationally. So if you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be, and why?

LK

I know it's funny, like, there's, like, a lot of rhetoric in America, especially around like, among like liberals, it's just like, Oh, if Donald Trump wins, like, I need to leave the country. So I'm kind of like, I don't, as an American, like I don't deserve to live anywhere else in the world, like I don't deserve to inflict myself on any other country. I…my dad lives in Greece and has for many, many years, and I lived there when I was a kid, and so, for kind of like, sentimental, and like, comfort reasons, that might be a place that I choose. I don't know. I mean, I want to, I used to, kind of, romanticize places that had, like, the universal programs that I'm so desperate for us to

have in the United States, but I see that many of those countries are like stave—or, you know, either falling into or, like, really trying to stave off fascism, like incredible, you know, just sort of like Fortress Europe rhetoric. So yeah, I guess I should not, like, labor under a misapprehension that if I just moved to a place where—but I guess it's just like, I would love to live somewhere where it wasn't—where they would think that it was just batshit that if you, that you could become, like, bankrupt and then imprisoned because you had to have, like, medical surgery, or that if you have a baby, you have to go back to work at, like, Subway sandwich shop five days after giving birth. Like, I—our country is just garbage, like, in its ideas around that. And I would love to live anywhere that wasn't like that. But I feel like I need to stay here to try and just like, at least protest that, this is what it's like and try to make some small, like, intervention, to the extent that that's possible.

CH

Well, I'm going to, I'm going to take us out. As always, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its generous support. Beck Daly is our production intern, and Connor Hibbard is our 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, Orhan Pamuk, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, and many more conversations like this one. Thank you again, Lydia and Megan for joining me for this rich and fun conversation.

LK

Thank you so much.

MW

Yes, this has been great. Thanks.

LK

This is like the antidote for Goodreads, so, thank you. [laughter]