8.4 All of Our Stories Were War Stories: Jamil Jan Kochai and Kalyan Nadiminti (AV)

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

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. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde of Duke University. Today, we have novelist Jamil Jan Kochai and critic Kalyan Nadiminti joining us. Jamil's most recent collection, The *Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*, in some ways picks up where his first novel, *99 Nights in Logar*, left off, with stories that crossed the border between the United States and Afghanistan. These stories are alternatively funny, terrifying, and heartbreaking, and seem to fracture collective memory by delving into the minds of Afghanis across generations. *The Haunting* was the finalist for the National Book Award and named one of *The New Yorker*'s Best Books of 2022. Welcome, Jamil. So glad to have you here.

Jamil Jan Kochai

Hey, I'm happy to be here.

AV

Great. And now Kalyan is the perfect interlocutor for Jamil. They're an assistant professor of English at Northwestern and have written eloquently on American and postcolonial literature, including the aftermath of the United States' global war on terror. They are finishing up a book on the subject that promises to change how we think about the postcolonial novel, historiography, and insurgency. Thanks for coming on, Kalyan. I'm really excited to be doing this with you.

Kalyan Nadiminti

I'm very happy to be here. Thanks for having us.

AV

Yes. And so at this point, I somewhat fade into the background and I pass the mic to you, Kalyan.

KN

Thanks so much, Aarthi. And thank you again, Jamil, for talking to us about your extremely exciting and provocative work. And I've been reading your fiction now for the last few years with a great deal of interest and admiration, particularly for your ability to create such powerful interconnected tableaus, but also, and equally, for how you create a kind of sonorous sentence. I think that's the phrase I'm looking for. So with that in mind, could you offer us a sort of very quick snippet from your work so that the readers can get a sense of your prose?

JJK

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, first of all, I just want to say how lovely it is to be on the podcast. Very, very excited to talk to you today, Kalyan. And yeah, so I'll just dive in here. So this is from the last two pages of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*. You know, the book's been out for two years now. So my apologies if this is a spoiler for people. But I think I've read so many openings that I'd love to read an ending.

"Hajji becomes relentless. He searches for you on the phone, in the streets, in unmarked white vans, in the faces of policemen, detectives in street clothes, military personnel, and his own neighbors. He searches for you at the hospital, at the bank, on his computer, his son's laptops, in webcams, phone cameras, and on the television. He searches for you in the curtains, and in the drawers of the kitchen, and in the trees in his backyard, in the electrical sockets, in the locks of the door handles, and in the filaments of the light bulbs. And even as his family protests, Hajji searches for you in shattered glass, in broken tile, in the strips of his wallpaper, the splinters of his doors, his tattered flesh, his warped nerves, and in his own beating heart, where, through it all, the voice whispering that he is loved is yours."

KN

Thank you so much. And, you know, this is such an incredible story. It's the last story in your collection. And in many ways, it takes us back to the first story through the use of the second person address. And second person address, of course, has been used by novelists like Mohsin Hamid, but very much a sort of self-help genre in that sense. But you're kind of doing something very different with it here. Could you tell us a little bit about the second person and how you're weaving it throughout the story?

JJK

It's a difficult perspective to write in. In many ways, I think it's almost a dangerous sort of perspective to write in. You know, one of the first craft books that I'd ever read coming up as a writer was *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner, which is this very traditional model of how fiction writing is supposed to function. And one of the things that he says in that book is that he talks about this idea of the vivid, continuous dream. And essentially, the narrative is supposed to do whatever it can to continue this sense of a dream. Anything that breaks this dream is a fault of the story, essentially. But the thing about the second person is because there's this direct address to the reader, the reader immediately becomes conscious of themselves as a reader,

right? And so it goes against that very idea of maintaining the illusion, the hallucination of the story. So it's very tricky, because I'm addressing the reader, but I still want to maintain that sense of the dream. And so I think that's part of the reason why this story ends up becoming very, very detail oriented. It's very image oriented. But I will say from the outset, I was very conscious of this fact that I did want the reader to be addressed. I did want the reader to be conscious of themselves as a reader, right? And in particular, I think this is really my first time directly engaging with this idea of a white readership in particular, and of an American readership.

KN

This particular moment, Jamil, that you just read out, one of the things that also strikes me is that actually the characters themselves become aware of this relay that's happening, right? Which has thus far been a kind of one way relay, where the agent is watching. There's also a way in which you move between the second person and the third person omniscient narration in this story, throughout. And I'm just curious if you could say a bit about that reversal that happens in the end, you just sort of mentioned how you kind of want the reader to become aware of themselves as a reader, right? So I'm just wondering, and also how they're surveying the family in some ways. That kind of collapse that happens with the second person, it's also very different from the sort of first person avatar, or, the second person avatar of the first person shooter, so to speak, of “Phantom Pain,” which is the first story, “Playing *Metal Gear Solid 5*.” And so there's something very different happening here with the second person, and it's weaving of the third person in as well. I'm just wondering if you could say it a little more.

JJK

Yeah, you know, I recall that as I was writing the story, the conceit of it came to me quite quickly. I understood what I wanted to accomplish in terms of perspective specifically, right? And this is all very exciting for me, because I was nailing down the point of view, I was nailing down the main characters, the setting, the tone, and oftentimes this takes a lot of work. It takes weeks and lots of vision. It was all coming to me very quickly. What began to alarm me about this story was the lack of a plot, it seemed to me. You know, I was sort of just—I had this agent watching this family, they're going about their day-to-day lives, and I was like, okay, well, what's the point here? I need something to happen. And two things sort of—you mentioned that reversal or that sort of the collapse of the surveillance, right? And that occurred to me as sort of, and it's just sort of as a plot point, but two different things happened very quickly in that moment of reversal. Where one, the surveillance agent begins to realize or is confronted by these feelings of affection that he's beginning to have for this family, whereas in the beginning, his surveillance was rooted in suspicion, it was rooted in, in many ways, this sort of very dehumanizing sense of, “I need to figure out what's wrong with this family.” And then eventually it turns into affection, it turns into something almost kind of resembling love, right? He's beginning to feel love for this family. And as quickly as that happens, I sort of collapse it very quickly afterward, when the family, and in particular the main character, Hajji, becomes aware of the surveillance itself, right? And it drives him into this madness, where he's searching for the surveiller, and in that process,

tears apart his house, and essentially tears apart his body, tears apart his mind. All while at the same time, this surveillance agent is still feeling this sense of love, and the sense of love that, as Hajji is destroying himself, seems to maybe even increase, right? And it sort of occurred unconsciously, but I think there's something here that I wanted to challenge about, not just the narrator's sense of love, the surveillance agent's feelings of love, of affection, of empathy. But what does that say about how we're thinking about empathy for readers as well? And in particular, this relationship that occurs oftentimes in American literature, where we have a largely white American readership that's reading about marginalized communities, marginalized characters.

KN

And I see bestsellers, you know, like Khaled Hosseini is the one who comes to mind, often compared with you as well. I'm just curious, these trends, do they end up forcing themselves onto the, into your writing studio? Are you grappling with them as you write these characters? I'm thinking also about how you tend to gravitate to a lot of animalistic imagery or, like, Dully himself turning into a monkey, pushing boundaries of the human in, like, “Hungry Ricky Daddy,” the story. Or even in the novel, the ways in which not just Budapest, the dog, but so many other, like, animals are sort of such a big part of, like, the donkey, for instance, which becomes a big part of “Waiting for Gulbuddin.” So, yeah, I'm just curious to hear how these trends, how you process them or percolate them in your writing.

JJK

Like, “The Tale of Dully's Reversion,” it's very much about this notion of the human, of dehumanization, of who is or is not considered a human, right? And in varying levels of exploitation, right? Like, Dully starts out, as you mentioned earlier, a very exploited PhD student. And this is something that, I think one of my most obvious inspirations for that story is Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” right? Which is one of the greatest short stories ever written, often anthologized, often taught, which is also, I think, very much engaging with this question of what is a human? And what sort of social systems, what sort of structures can dehumanize a person, right? And I was very, very explicitly, I think, engaging with that in my work in general, but with those stories with animals in particular. I think I often get complaints about the violence against animals in my work in particular, which is, I think, totally valid. Like, it's as difficult for me to write as I think it is for some readers to read. But I think the question that I'm trying to grapple with there is, why is it oftentimes violence against certain species, violence against certain people, it becomes more, I don't know what's the word, like consumable, and so I'm trying to engage with that in my writing as well in ways that I think can sometimes be very troubling.

KN

One of the things that also strikes me so much about your writing is that actually the way you kind of go about offering for us ostensibly what I guess many readers will kind of see as adjacent to the sort of representation of war on terror fiction, or working through that, you sort of

do it in a kind of sideways way. I feel like, a lot of the times we're not getting, I don't know, minute details about wars or something like that in your writing, even as you move between the kind of magical and the realist moods. I'm wondering if you could say a bit about sort of the kinds of temporalities, I guess, of war, of everyday life that your work enters. I'm thinking specifically about *99 Nights in Logar* and the kind of fragmented way in which the entire tale is told. You're sort of moving between all those different nights. And there's one moment where you say, “well, places like,” or rather Marwand says, let’s say [laughter],

“While places like Kandahar and Helmand, I heard, were getting fucked up with drone strikes and night raids, the US Army in Logar mostly carried out their secret operations in the surrounding black mountains, bombing the shit out of the burrows where the Ts and the other rebels (Pakistani double agents? Arab mercenaries? illiterate goat-men?) were supposed to be hiding with Baba Bin Laden and Mullah Omar and Carmen Sandiego, so that those of us down in the river valleys only ever heard the softest hum of gunfire, the gentlest tremble of stone” (12).

And I'm quoting this out at length to you just to, also again, keep giving the readers a sense of the sort of mellifluousness of your sentences, but also just, if you could talk a little bit about sort of how you're offering us a more intimate portrait of war, of its temporalities, that are moving between these different registers of the human that you were just gesturing to.

JJK

Yeah. Well, you know, I think that's definitely one of those things where it's very much rooted in personal experience for me, just growing up and as an Afghani-American child in the States, as the U S is going to war with Afghanistan, right, is invading and is occupying the country. I ended up having just these very different experiences of how violence was functioning on multiple levels. Right. Or, I should say, not just violence overall. Like, I think that's a different question, but war in particular, right. Where, when I was growing up as a child, all of our stories were war stories, right. So that's one register just in terms of my creative imagination. The Soviet War existed as this kind of storytelling specter in my household, right. And as a very young child, I had a very innate sense that the war was such a deep part of who my parents were, and it was so tied up in how they told stories and how they understood reality and how they existed in the world that for me almost to be able to understand and to love them, I had to understand the war. But at the same time, I'm also experiencing the war on terror as I'm entering my teenage years. And in terms of like this omnipresent sense of surveillance, these reports that we're getting back from our family members in Afghanistan about what's happening over there. And then this is all sort of multiplied by me taking these trips back to Afghanistan, right. Where for the first time I'm witnessing first time the occupation and I'm seeing the tanks for the first time and I'm hearing the distant bombs and I'm talking to my cousins who—we're sitting on the side of a road and they're whispering to me about war crimes, right.

AV

Jamil, I know the first story in *Hajji Hotak* is featuring a first person shooter game, like a *Call of Duty*-esque game.

JJK

Right. [laughter] Yeah.

AV

And having that story and the titular story as bookending the collection, it did feel like you were playing with reversals of perspective from the very beginning, since the first person shooter ends up imagining his own father inside of the game and saving his father and just essentially humanizing a character that would have been target practice in the game. And so having experienced war, I suppose in the first person, having been to Afghanistan, having talked to people who have experienced this, but also having partaken in what I imagine is most of Americans' experience of war, which is the video game version of it.

JJK

That's right. Yeah.

AV

Right. Or like, Judith Butler back in the day wrote a book called *Frames of War*, where she talked about how the Gulf War, the way it was televised, conditioned people to experience it as a game. So how would you, or, I know you've written about video games in some ways teaching you how to write, but how would you reconcile what I imagine is a game lover's perspective with your perspective as a novelist and a short story writer?

JJK

Yeah, no, that's a really, really fantastic question because, you know, I've had a very, how should I say, I've had a very ambivalent relationship with video games from the very beginning, right? You know, I can't deny the immense impact that video games have had upon both my understanding of storytelling in terms of craft and narration and plot and all these different things. But also ideologically, right. One of the—it continues to be probably my favorite game of all time, but this really impactful game for me, which I played when I was 12 years old, was *Final Fantasy VII*. Are either of you familiar with *Final Fantasy VII*?

KN

Yeah.

AV

I know it's canon.

JJK

Yeah, absolutely canon, right? [laughter] I would argue the greatest game ever made, but the first mission of *Final Fantasy VII*, and this is a game that was made in 1997, I believe. So, you know, it's a couple of years before sort of the heyday of the war on terror, right? The first mission is you are an environmental, I don't like to use “terrorist” but, in this context, I'll use how others might define it. But you're an environmental terrorist and you're blowing up this—essentially, it's like a representation of a nuclear reactor that's sucking energy out of the planet and destroying the earth. And I remember, and I'm 12 years old when I'm playing this, so this is in 2003, right? So Afghanistan has been invaded, everyone's on the search for bin Laden, 9/11, all these different things, right? And I remember feeling so strange and so guilty and I was just in awe, like, why am I playing as a—like, why is a terrorist a hero in this game? And it was so perplexing for me. But I remember that being like one of these really pivotal moments of narrative reversal of rethinking how everyone else, or how culturally, I was supposed to be thinking about quote unquote terrorism in this respect, right? So that was very important, it was very eye opening, but then that’s also being counteracted with my longtime experience with the *Call of Duty* video games, right? Which is something else that I've written about. You know, I began to engage with *Call of Duty* as a teenager. Again, this is like—you know, the violence in Afghanistan, this is 2008, 2009. The violence in Afghanistan, the insurgency there is beginning to ratchet up. There's more and more bombings. There's more and more killings. And as that's all occurring and I'm hearing about that and thinking about that, I'm also playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, right? Which is like the most popular game in the world. And historically at that time, no game had sold as well as that video game, right. And it was my first time really encountering or coming to terms with how troubled I was by the video game as a medium and its potentials, not just for storytelling, immersive storytelling, beautiful storytelling, emotional storytelling, but for propaganda, right? Like the army recruiters would come to our high school and they would set up this van and they would put a television in the van and then they would let children play *Call of Duty* during lunch. And then at the same time, recruit them into the military, and three of the friends that I used to play *Call of Duty* with ended up joining the military. I think very specifically because of these recruitment stations, right? So, that's something that I continue to grapple with, as a thinker, as a writer, and on the page in particular.

KN

That also actually reminds me, especially this question of recruitment here, reminds me that the figure of the interpreter seems to come up a fair bit, I think more in the stories than it did in the novel. But I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about this figure that has been important for a lot of postcolonial Anglophone writers, but also an Iraqi writer, Inaam Kachachi, in a book, *The American Granddaughter*, which is all about an Iraqi-American interpreter who joins the military and goes to Iraq and so on and so forth. So, and I'm curious if you could unpack a little bit for us about the specter of conscription, so to speak, right? That's part and parcel of this idea

that you can make a hundred grand in a summer if you become an interpreter, as you mentioned in the story, I think in “The Tale of Dully’s Reversion.” Yeah, so I'm just curious if you could tell us a little bit more about that drive to become incorporated into a military industrial complex, which you just described in such wonderful detail.

JJK

I think this temptation to become the native informant, the translator, the interpreter, the tool of white supremacy, the tool of imperialism, allows the imperialists to understand the native in order for them to conquer and dominate the native. And this has been a temptation, I think for me throughout my life in various manners, right? In very explicit material ways, and then also in more literary philosophical ways with what I'm trying to do with my work, right? I think oftentimes, in terms of the literary landscape, there's this immense pressure, this immense temptation, this sort of implicit understanding that if I essentially act as an informant with my work, and I pander to this white audience, and if I give in to their preconceived notions of what is happening in a war zone, or a country that they're in war with, or et cetera, et cetera. There's a lot of financial incentive of that, right? So thinking about these economic incentives to tell stories in a particular way. But even beyond that, I was also struck throughout my life, and my family members were also, by these very real recruitment tactics, right? Where my aunt, for example, was offered, like, a $150,000 contract, specifically because she spoke Pashto so well, the native language of Afghanistan, they offered her a $150,000 contract to go over and interpret for six months in Afghanistan, right? Which for her was incredibly tempting, you know, our family's a very working class family, she didn't grow up with very much money, she's in college, and so she's being specifically targeted. And God bless her, like, she felt like that wasn't—you know, she felt morally opposed to that.

KN

Your writing is sort of exemplary of what the anthropologist Anila Daulatzai calls serial war, right, which is the kind of continuum from the Soviet-Afghan War to the Afghan Civil War, to the Taliban, to the U.S. occupation. But also the longer specter of Afghanistan's, as Zarena Aslami calls it, marginal sovereignty with respect to the British. So, to me, one of the things I was really hoping to ask you is how you think the very category of the post-9/11 writer, how that kind of resonates with you.

AV

Kalyan, could you just tell us a little bit about who populates that category in your mind, the other writers you're thinking of as post-9/11?

KN

Oh, a pretty large range. So I'm thinking of obviously the usual American suspects like Don DeLillo or John Updike or Claire Messud, but also equally someone like Mohsin Hamid or, to an

extent Salman Rushdie, and there's Aria Aber writing poetry, but also recently a novel, right? And so there's kind of a vast terrain, it seems, of what constitutes the post-9/11 writer. And I think the inflection point to answer Aarthi's question, I think it's also that it's this broad category, but then you can kind of start narrowing down with the post-9/11 U.S. writer versus the post-9/11 Global South writer and so on and so forth. So for me, I mean, the way I asked this question or the way I was conceiving of it when I asked this to Jamil was that there seems to be this large umbrella category, whether it is liberalism that's sort of calling upon it or whether it's the U.S. military using it as propaganda and it's like Operation Homecoming, like the NEA Operation Homecoming project or something.

JJK

Yeah.

KN

So I was thinking of it more like this broad term where some kind of question of existential dread or the shifting of this world historical moment, where 9/11 becomes year zero or something.

JJK

Can I also like, and I kind of want to pose this as a question for both of you as well, but do you think, because I do think that 9/11, and sort of the initiation of this different phase of the war on terror, it did feel like a shifting point, not just in terms of the writing itself, but also in terms of literary discourse at large and how we talked about politics, how we talked about violence, how we talked about war. It did seem like, post-9/11, when I was in workshops, when I was in academia, it just always felt like there was this specter of the war on terror that no one was actually engaging with. And I remember very early on in my writing career, there was this short story, and in the short story, the war on Iraq was being televised throughout the story. And it had nothing to do with the plot. It was about some sort of an affair or something like that. It was very kind of like a stereotypical idea of a *New Yorker* story. But it really struck me because it was just there and it wasn't being—it was just there, and it felt like it was haunting the story. But this is how I felt throughout my time studying literature, studying creative writing, is that there's this immense thing happening that no one was talking about, no one was kind of engaging with in sort of an explicit way. And it, I don't know. And it felt different to me than what had gone on before, in terms of Cold War writing or, you know, World War II writing or whatever other category you want to use. And I was wondering what you thought about that?

KN

I mean, that's a really great question. And I think actually as the war is sort of ongoing, like at least in the first decade, there are all these connections being made to Vietnam, right. And there's a way in which the anti-war movement doesn't really take off, and it becomes this ambient noise that you're gesturing to here, right. And that's part of what the trouble is in

defining the post-9/11 writer. Like you either have people either defining it, in fiction, at least, as an event that only deeply influences a kind of U.S. domesticity, or you have the sort of ambient noise of something going on in the background for someone else out there. And it has no real reference point more than like a soundbite or something.

AV

Homeland Elegy by Ayad Akhtar is an interesting reflection on the 9/11 moment because it comes late enough, I think it comes almost a decade after, where he puts himself in New York on 9/11 and it's semi-autofictional. So you don't know if it's true or not, but as a Muslim man on the day and what it's like to feel made pariah almost immediately. And he talks about having worn a cross as a form of protection and that becomes this scene of incredible guilt and shame that they kind of work through in the novel, to wear the sign of another religion and to use it as a kind of amulet. For me, it's just so interesting to see how it really did draw a schism between white writers and brown writers. Like punctured domesticity versus all of a sudden becoming—I mean, if you weren't already criminalized, you were criminalized on this whole different level.

KN

Right.

JJK

Yeah.

AV

Yeah. So that's, I think, what the category did literarily. Like when I think of DeLillo and Updike now, I think I don't really read them anymore, but I do read these other writers who came at 9/11 from a view that was, I guess, just more aware of the political legacy of that event for people who were not thinking that America was this exceptional country, right.

KN

I think there's also a lag time, in terms of understanding what happened in those 20 years.

AV

Yeah.

KN

Well, actually 15 years, I would say. I'm thinking, I mean, obviously like, Jamil's book comes out in 2019, the first novel, *99 Nights in Logar*. But you also have former Guantanamo detainee

writers like Mohamedou Ould Slahi or Mansoor Adayfi. And they're writing only much later because their stories can't actually emerge, right. So there is this, I think, interesting—there are phases, I think, in how you might even look at what constitutes post-9/11 writing, at least in my sense of it.

AV

In my role as host, I try to lighten the mood sometimes. And I'm now going to be taking us to the signature question of the podcast for the season. And I suppose in light of your work, this question could be quite serious, but take it as lightly or as seriously as you want to. So the question of the season is, if you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

JJK

Oh, that's a really great question. I, you know, I think I write quite a bit about Logar. And so I think it would be remiss of me not to say Logar. I think it's a place that's very, very dear to me, that's dear to my parents. It's a place that, you know, I have like these deep historical connections to. There's this lovely passage from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Úrsula Iguarán, the matriarch of the large Buendía family, she says something like, “you don't belong to a place until you have someone buried in the ground in that place.” And so there's something about that as well, you know, that we've got a lot of family members, a lot of loved ones still buried in Logar. And those ties remain very, very deep and it's a beautiful place. And yeah, so I would pick my parents' village in Logar, Afghanistan.

AV

Thank you so much for joining us today, both Kalyan and Jamil. I'm going to take us out. So as we approach the end of another *Novel Dialogue*, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and acknowledge support from Rowan University. Beck Daly is our production intern, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Past episodes include conversations with Aminatta Forna, Kamila Shamsie, Ocean Vuong, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and others. So from all of us here in *Novel Dialogue*, thanks for listening, and if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.