8.5 And Soon: Lydia Millet and Emily Hyde (JP)

Transcript

John Plotz

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. Season 8 is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde (get used to that name) and I'm your host today, John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department. So, loyal listeners know that we bring you dialogues between the most fascinating scholars and novelists around. Today our scholar/critic is none other than Emily Hyde herself, descending ex cathedra for the chance to talk to a novelist we have both long admired, and, can I say, long pursued for the podcast, Lydia Millet. I'm going to leave the joy of introducing Lydia to Emily, but I will start by telling you that Emily Hyde herself is Associate Professor of English at Rowan University and currently completing what I know will be an amazing monograph, *A Way of Seeing: Modernism, Decolonization, and the Visual Book*, and the bits I've read of it I just love. Emily's actually written about one of Lydia's novels, *Mermaids in Paradise*, for the journal *Post45*, and first reached out to Lydia about the photographic illustrations in that book and how they stage the clashing temporalities—oh, that's such a good concept to think about—the clashing temporalities of environmental catastrophe. So, Emily, delighted to be in the virtual room with you. Can I hand over the reins?

Emily Hyde

Sure. Thanks, John. I am usually at this point the host who's just kind of stepping back into the shadows, but I am playing the role of critic today just because I am such a fan of Lydia Millett's work, and I say that as both a scholar and as a reader. It's really not often that you find yourself kind of pondering the metaphysical implications of a book that you're also laughing out loud as you're reading. So that is what has brought me out of the shadows and into this role for this episode. So, Lydia, thank you so much for joining us on *Novel Dialogue*.

Lydia Millet

It is fun to be here.

EH

So let me quickly try and introduce you. Lydia Millet is the author of more than a dozen novels and story collections, and most recently, a book of nonfiction. She has also worked as an editor and staff writer at the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson since 1999. I feel like I can only mention a couple of your novels right now, but it strikes me that your books would not

necessarily end up all on the same shelf together in any system that I can think of, except that of “filed under author's last name.” Some of them are fantastical, very improbable. Some are almost terrifyingly plausible, they're about real estate and families and middle age and birds. Some of those novels are incredibly satirical. Others are full-hearted and impassioned. Some, but not all, play with genre, and many feature animals, not as pets or as species in need of rescue, but as these kind of mysterious, almost ineffable creatures. And all of your books are funny, that's for sure. So let me just introduce a few that might come up in our conversation. The two most recent novels are *Dinosaurs* and *A Children's Bible*, which was shortlisted for the National Book Award. There is also the trilogy or cycle of novels that includes *How the Dead Dream*, *Ghost Lights*, and *Magnificence*. There is the devastating *My Happy Life*, which still haunts me from time to time. And then John's favorite, I think, *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*.

JP

Yes, 100%. [laughter]

EH

In which three physicists who invented the atom bomb are whisked away from the Los Alamos test site right in 1945 to appear, I think it's in a grocery store, in 2003, and they have to sort of contend with their intentions in 1945 and their legacy in 2003. And then of course, they must also embark on a slapstick quest for world peace. So that's already, right there, a range of novels. But most recently, you have published a work of nonfiction, which is titled *We Loved It All*. And I thought I'd like to just start there, even though this is the podcast *Novel Dialogue*. The book itself is partly autobiographical. It's also part bestiary. It's this collection of beasts. And it's also a work of criticism, I think, and a call to action. And a lot of the themes in that book just appear all over the rest of your fiction. So would you mind starting off with the reading, just the first two sections of *We Loved It All*?

LM

I would not mind. I will do this.

“In the beginning, we gave names to every creature that we found. The creeping things, the swimming things, the ones that walked and climbed and flew.

We gave them names, some say, so we might better know them.

Home was a garden then, a garden in the wild. Green forests stretched up the feet of mountains, and clear rivers ran from ice blue glaciers to the sea. Endless grasses on prairies rippled like water in the wind. And in the deserts, a hot breeze blew the sands of dunes, silently shifting across the deep rock.

The creatures we named roamed through the woods and fields and oceans in abundance, more animals than you could ever imagine.

We were animals too. And like the others, felt no embarrassment, seeing no need to cover our bodies.

At first, we were safe in the garden, which was an earthly paradise. We were permitted to eat the fruit of every tree that grew in it, as the story goes, with one exception, fruit of the tree of knowing good from evil.

Because even paradise has rules.

And if we'd stopped there before we reached for that fruit at the start of it all, showing no curiosity, seeking no knowledge, and content in our innocence and ignorance, we might have been allowed to stay in that beautiful garden.

Live in the beginning forever.

Between the end of my childhood and the moment I had a child of my own, there stretched a span of time like the arc of the thrown ball.

From the point when my young hand let loose the ball until my older hand caught it, I followed its curve through the air and felt impervious. It was easy to be independent and defiant, even cold. Nothing held me captive. And if any friction slowed me down, it was only the icy burn of the atmosphere.

I see it now, though I didn't see it then. It was the freedom of having nothing to risk but myself.

When you turn into a mother, you lose the power of coldness. Lose it for good, as it happens. You never get it back.

Once you have children, you know they can be hurt or even killed.

And then you're humbled forever, a beggar at the mercy of the world."

EH

Thank you. Thank you for reading that. Why do you start this book in the garden? There's quite a lot of Judeo-Christian language and storytelling in your most recent novels, but it also strikes me that a lot of your plots turn on the question of belief itself. Characters choosing to believe in mermaids, choosing to believe in the lessons of a children's Bible that's just kind of found in a summer house, choosing to believe even that three physicists from 1945 have returned. So what role right now does religion or religious belief play in your fiction?

LM

You know, I guess that's a good question. I mean, I think that my relationship to that structure of mythology is opportunistic and maybe felonious. [laughter] I mean, I love to steal from the great stories, and the Old Testament is full of great stories. And also, they're great stories and they're in the scriptures for a reason. And a lot of these myths, of course, as you know, as more highly educated people than I am, myths and myth themes are sort of repeated across cultures, right, so they are compelling, I think, almost atavistically, you know, primally. The flood story and the garden, for example, those are both sort of everywhere. And I've just always found them deeply charismatic, you know, those stories, more charismatic than, for the most part, the New Testament. But it's true. It's like, as I become, I think, the older I get, the more I wander away from, I don't want to say mainstream exactly, but the more I sort of wander away from conventional views of like human and animal subjectivity, the more I seem to write about, you

know, this incredibly powerful, monolithic religion. But I do think I do so, sort of with a vandal's casual attitude.

JP

You know, spirituality might be the wrong word, but there's a clear belief structure in your writing that seems about a commitment to nature, which probably we shouldn't call it pantheism or nature worship or anything. But, you know, that there's a dimension, which is not belief in the old church-based way, but a different kind of belief that you're exploring, I mean, a different moral grounding, which is maybe related to what you were saying about eroding the distinction between animal and human experience. So, is that a fair way to trace the idea of religion or belief in your work, too?

LM

Yeah, I think you put it better than I did. I mean, I have been fascinated by, I don't know, by the narrative features, I guess, of Christianity in particular. But I have limited general interest in Christianity, really, except as the sort of powerful political and cultural force that it is. I think that, yeah, the more I read, actually, and the longer I'm alive, the more convinced I become that human exceptionalism is sort of our original sin. And that sort of admitting to the profound sentience and consciousness of other kinds of creatures is the only way to what the Christians might call salvation.

EH

That leads me to a question I have long wanted to ask you, which is that there are a couple instances of salvation in your fiction, and it's always salvation by some other species. [laughter] There's whales that come out of the deep, there's cranes that come out of the sky. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, if it's a theme, or if it's kind of a structure of your belief?

LM

I, yeah, sure. I like that you have noticed that. I always feel like I have to actually restrain myself from ending every book that way. Because I have done it several times, in really different fictional settings. But really what I always think is, only the others can save us, only the animals can save us.

Which is sort of the opposite of what we tell ourselves often in the culture. I mean, obviously I'm not the first to follow this path, but I think that we work so hard to affirm our importance and I'm not really sure why we're so insecure as a species. I'm not really sure why we're so defensive. Like, why do we need so desperately to feel like we're number one? It's really quite odd in a way, our sort of continual cleaving to that hierarchical model of nature. And partly it's just, it is what we've been taught for some time now, but I don't know. It just, it seems not only willfully ignorant, but so unnecessary, you know? So yes, I find myself just taken away by love of a

critter that I will see in my yard, and it's just, I know maybe it sounds childish, but I'm not ashamed of that. I just, often, now, we'll see, I don't know, this morning it was a family of quail, Gambel's quail, just making their little clucking sounds and going around, and they're funny, you know, they're comical. And I just feel sort of transfixed by these sightings and just so fortunate to be surrounded by life.

EH

That makes me think that I should set John up to ask another question that he had for you, because we were thinking too, that much of what you've just said about your interest in religious storytelling and religious belief, and the kind of otherness of animals, and the feeling that you're in a world that's larger and more unknowable than you could even imagine when you're just looking at a mother quail and a couple of little quails going across your yard, that's also present in the best kind of science. You know, the best scientists are out there saying, "we don't know."

LM

Exactly.

EH

And they're okay with that. They're, you know, enticed by that, but they're not fearful of not knowing. So John, I've just set you up to ask.

LM

Yeah. And I think, yeah, you are still set up John, but if I could, I think I really noticed this, like a effusion of lay science, you know, of science writing for people like me, like the mass who actually aren't scientists, recently, really good narrative nonfiction about the world of the others, and I think it's really exciting. And it's why I've been reading so much nonfiction over the course of the past three or four years, which I never had read anything like the way I read fiction. And now I'm constantly trying to catch up to a certain ideal I have of knowing things, but I fail, of course, and I always will fail.

JP

Well, I like that version of the question much better, Emily, but I'll give you, Lydia, can I now take the setup and give you the connection to—

LM

[laughter] Yes, sorry.

JP

No, no, you didn't at all. That's great. But that really plays out one side of the binary that I think you're getting at in that novel that Emily already described about what it would mean if Oppenheimer and Fermi and Szilard were—wait, did I say his name right? Szilard?

LM

No, you did, I think. That's my understanding of it.

JP

Okay, good. If the three of them were to come back in the present and see the consequences of the atom bomb. So the one side is the positive effects of scientific knowledge as this thing that enables us to get at the behavior of those quail, the possibilities for sort of Rachel Carson's like, how do we engineer ourselves away from what we're doing? But the other side of it, which the novel really dwells on in this amazing way, is the notion that the best intentions of science can turn out to do some of the worst things that humans do. So you have this wonderful line, which I often quote to people, so, I think it's so great. It's just describing—I think this is Oppenheimer:

"He'd done his best, and finally it was nothing to what his worst had been. He could almost laugh now at the smallness of his good intentions."

So the idea that science opens these doors for us to potentially do our best—design a catalytic converter, you know, figure out a new form of green energy—but it also opens the door for us to frack or to blow things up or invent napalm. So, I don't know, I'd love to hear more about that. Seems like a tension that runs through your work, and especially in that novel, you explore the dark side of the whole scientific endeavor that you were just now talking about the light side of.

LM

Yeah. I mean, it is a conundrum so perfect as to be cliched, or a paradox so perfect as to be cliched maybe. I think, yeah, it's now showing up—of course, the nuclear threat still exists, we just have chosen to turn our faces away from it. But also, you know, in the context of climate change and mass extinction, this is something I—[thunder] wow. Okay. Wow. [laughter] This is something I discussed briefly in the book and something—Elizabeth Kolbert mentioned this in one of her books and actually explored it to some degree, but the notion of trying to geoengineer our way out of the climate crisis is exactly analogous to what I was writing about in *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* and the nuclear mistake, the nuclear error. And I think, yeah, it continues to be a bedeviling question, but I do think that there must be a better way to pursue science than the way we pursue it. I think that besides the obvious fact that we're not as emotionally evolved as we are technically evolved, you know, like all the science fiction writers used to write about it back in the day, there's also just a process and there's capitalism and everything that that implies. But I think, you look at an Elon Musk, you know, you look at a SpaceX and the motivations and the ideology behind that and it's repulsive, you know, it's profoundly repulsive and wrongheaded and doesn't seem like it can end well. I think, and I'm

probably underqualified to speak to this, but it does seem to me that the way we have married science to capitalism in particular is dangerous, you know?

JP

Well, can I—first of all, I think you're overqualified in a zillion ways, but especially as someone who is a novelist who's thought about this. So can I ask the question in a sort of novel specific way? Like a lot of people could make this point about scientists looking back at the unintended consequences and feeling shock at the result of what they—not what hath God wrought, but like, what have we wrought? But you use fiction to do it. So any thoughts about that, about what makes the novel special in terms of, I don't know, hypothetical other worlds or following out this wonderful thought experiment of, like, what if Oppenheimer got tossed into the future? Yeah, what's the fictional—yeah.

LM

Well, I mean, I think it has in common with science, a certain looseness—I shouldn't say science in general, I should say, originating science. Like when science, when science seeks to discover, or just seeks to explore a certain avenue, I'm just talking about a particular project, right? Like a particular project or set of experiments or study or whatever, is sort of open-ended in the way sometimes that it begins. Like it may have—there may be a hypothesis or there may actually not; there may just be this process of discovery that really is almost arbitrary or random, sort of fumbling-through-the-dark-in-the-labyrinth aspect to certain scientific endeavors.

Certainly the ones you're talking about with the atom bomb, there was some of that. I think that art and writing, particularly when you're not bound by realism, can be similar and can be, I don't know how to say it well, but, just sort of well-suited to speculate about science and knowledge, because precisely because they begin in the same kind of bumbling, but curious, ignorance.

And really, at least when I write, I don't have a particular goal in mind and don't know where I'll end up. Of course people write in different ways, but I always find that most exciting. And I think that much of science actually originates that way too. Not knowing, not knowing everything is crucial to wanting to remain alive. We have to, I think, be living in a world where not everything has been described. If we lived in this kind of exhausted world that no longer had many unknowns to present us with, I think that we would go mad, really. I mean, I don't, I'm not able to contemplate that kind of denuded world as one that we could have psychologically healthy beingness within. [laughter] That's kind of a tortured syntax, but you know what I'm saying, I hope.

EH

I do. I do. And that makes me think more, which I have done already in the past quite a bit, but think more about how time and temporality are often working in your fiction. And because living in an exhausted—often your books posit an exhausted world or an apocalypse happening just

outside the frame, or the sort of end times. And yet that is not a denuded, you know, set of fictions. There's so many alternatives and questions opened up within each novel, even under those circumstances. So I thought actually the easiest way to ask my question would be about the title of your recent book, *We Loved It All*. And I find it just absolutely cuts to the bone and I can't quite figure out why. So, to me, it seems incredibly inclusive. There's a “we,” we are included in this expansive love, but at the same time, the past tense is just absolutely cutting. Like we're already at the end. It's all over. It's been exhausted, to use your word from just before. So could you talk me through a little bit, how time is working for you in that title?

LM

Yes. I mean, I wished there to be a sense of longing, regret, nostalgia, like *Heimweh* in it, right, or *Sehnsucht* maybe if we're going to be all German about it. But also *Heimweh*, because, I think—and there's a passage in the book about how we've taken so much for granted as we co-evolved with the others, taken their presence for granted and how we often aren't—you know, we're beings that pride ourselves on our ability to see far, and yet often require distance to understand the shape of a thing. From really close up, we get confused oftentimes, we lose the plot when something is close to us, the way, you know, you might look at your own face in the mirror and really not be able to see it anymore because it's so familiar. And I think that quality of being, forced, almost, neurologically, to be complacent as creatures, because we can't constantly be in a state of emergency and panic, right, and we can't always be on high alert biologically, but it sort of goes too far with us.

And we're perpetually—and “we,” here, by the way, it is really complicated, I think, to talk about a “we,” the way that I did in this book, because maybe it's presumptuous, maybe it's simply incorrect, maybe it's too vague, all kinds of problems with using the “we.” But also I felt I had to use the “we,” not only in the title, but sometimes in the book, because really, I think our stories have this tragic flaw of being about the “I” and being about the self, sort of exclusively. And so I didn't want to do that in this book, even though I had to insert myself as a kind of emcee throughout it. You know, because—okay, there are so many things here that I could address, but I'm really interested in ways that we can write about the collective and it's a difficult thing to do without being boring or didactic, pompous, you know, bloviating. I still, though, really cleave to the importance of trying to tell stories that aren't these hero epics as we go forward and soon, you know.

But it's really hard and it can be really boring for the reader, also, to write about collectives. And that was something I also had to kind of contend with in the novel called *A Children's Bible* because there, too, I wanted to write about a “we” and there, too, I had to be careful not to—you know, I had to decide which individuals would be distinctive and which would be a formless mass, right? Because you have to have individuals in narrative or you just, it's just so dull. It's like there's no gossip at all, right? All there is, is, like, polemic. So anyway, back to the title. Yeah, so we wanted there to be this sense of loss and sort of devotion and nostalgia because I actually really believe in nostalgia. I sort of believe in it. I'm not against it, you know? I don't know. It seems sort of out of fashion in a way, but. And so it needed to be in the past tense to

satisfy that and there had to be a “we” because I want to write about the collective and because we are, we are a collective. And I hope it's not entirely hopeless because that was not what I intended. But it's always a fine line, isn't it? You know, to evoke care, you know, and I don't know, charisma, and just feeling, without tipping into, I don't know. Well, without tipping into the maudlin for sure. And then also without inspiring apathy, you know, without going all the way into cynicism.

EH

It seems to me that the way that you hold those two things together and kind of ride that line and try not to tip over onto either side is with humor itself. And so I also wanted to ask you about that because, I mean, humor does require distance, to write a good joke or to make a witty line requires a kind of objective distance. But at the same time, I feel like in your humor, your use of humor, I could also always feel that kind of reaching for the collective because the other thing that laughing does is bring people together, right? So that built into how humor works are these two sides of the coin that you were just describing. And one thing I noticed in this nonfiction book is a kind of a style of writing that I have also picked up in some of your recent fiction. And I feel like it is the structure of a joke. So there's a setup, and there's a setup that is quite often really earnest and beautiful, and then just a punchline, like the last line just cuts right in there—it's a deflation of everything that came before, but it doesn't erase what came before. So I'm just wondering what you think about that kind of the structure of a joke in your writing and how you think about what humor is actually doing in your fiction.

LM

Oh, these are such good questions. Also, I like that you bring that up. Not that many people have bothered to tell me if they did notice that, the balloon popping, and it's always good to have your attention drawn to what you're actually formally doing. [laughter] So, yeah, I think there is always this tension and so many different tensions—[laughter] God, that's, that's a generalization. So many different tensions exist. Isn't that insightful? But I've always been interested in the self-collective kind of tension and privacy and communion, kind of, one, more and more, in the past few books. I've tried to marry—because as you mentioned, I've written some books that are just kind of satires, right? I mean, not structurally, strictly satires, but kind of parodic, satirical, or whatever. And then I have some that are really quite earnest and quieter and a little abstract, and in the past few books, starting with *A Children's Bible*, I've really tried to try to reconcile those within one book.

JP

I was wondering if there's a distinction within humor that's helpful too, which is satire versus comedy rather than satire as comical, because, you know, like one side of comedy, like the reason Shakespeare's plays get called comedies is not because they're funny, but because they resolve like in this warm feeling. So there's this weird way in which the humor, that you totally achieve, seemingly effortlessly, although I'm sure it's not effortless, that you achieve in your

writing, can have a satirical side to it, which maybe is in *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, but also a comedic side. Which I think is what you were talking about, Emily, like, the warmth of that laughter, like, laughter as a glue or something, you know?

LM

Yeah, that's a really good distinction. I probably should have also said, well, I guess comedic and comic, I don't know, but you're right. Yeah, yes, you're exactly right. You know, when I call something I've done humor, I feel like I'm boasting, and if I call it comic, then I don't feel like, because it sounds like I'm attempting to be funny if I call something comic, and may or may not be succeeding. But I really do try to make myself laugh, it's just, again, like something a child would do. I'm just trying to make myself laugh as I write, usually. And I do think laughter is a bit like music in the way, and what Emily, you were saying is, you know, to me, I don't know about using words like high and low, but to me, music is just the best thing we've ever made. You know, I mean, I wish I were a rock star. I just think it's so extraordinary in the way that it can transport us, but it's incredibly physical, right, and it's neurological and all those other things. It's like, kinesthetic or whatever. I don't know. It's all of that stuff. And laughter is a piece of that, I think, a psychological piece of music. I don't know, John, you're making—

JP

Yeah, I'm making those annoying sounds that people do before they interrupt, I'm sorry. [laughter] But I was wondering, I really loved how you set up the tension between the kind of communal or the universal impulse that your fiction wants to get at. Like even in those first two sections of *We Loved It All*, and then also in the subjective and the personal, but I was wondering in a way, what you're describing with music or with humor and laughter, couldn't that be a way of having it all, in that you're describing a way in which, like, Darwin writes about this when he talks about animals laughing. Like that we have these things, which feel intensely personal to us, like the thrill I get when I listen to a piece of music, or when I laugh feels totally subjective. You know, it's like your description of being in the arc of the thrown ball, and just you, but it's also generally shared. Like it does actually cut across species even.

LM

Yes, that's right. That's exactly—yeah. And also I think what Emily was saying, I keep digressing, Emily, in an almost, you know, criminal way from your questions. It's completely unacceptable. [laughter] But basically I think, because humor—I do see some comics and originators of funny language who are able somehow to thread the needle and not be cruel, but generally, they're, they're able to actually be genuinely funny in a way that makes me laugh, and I'm kind of mean, you know. I mean, I do laugh easily, but not at stuff that's not funny. I guess we all would say this, but anyway, I don't—generally a comedian, you know, it's very easy for them to be very bad. Right. But usually for me, the mean ones work best and similarly, when I write or anyone does, mostly they are objectifying in order to—for comic effect. Like, that's just what humor is. It is objectifying. You have to target someone, even if it's yourself, but yeah.

So it is this, for me, this particular tension has become interesting and I don't know if I always resolve it correctly between this kind of, you know, desperate, and yeah, earnest sentiment that I have as a person, a human person just going through life and the absolute necessity of, sometimes, really, quite cruel humor. So, you know, I have both those things and I think in my work are also both those things and, yeah, it's a constant project to try to have them be threaded together correctly in a text and not—and sometimes intentionally, there's an abruptness or something that appears to be out of place and it's not a mistake on my part. But I also think that I have sometimes failed and I hope I get better at this as I get older, but I've somehow failed somehow, you know, like, technically failed to negotiate correctly between those two things. Does that make any sense?

EH

Yep, it does make sense. And I do think, I don't think we've sorted it all out right here and now, but I think there is something that you're doing with humor. Another more old-fashioned word that, you know, English professors might turn to would be wit. John is the 19th centuryist, so that's a very 19th century term, but I do think there's something that you're doing with comedy, humor, wit, that is trying to put two pieces of a puzzle back together knowing that they won't fit. And that's part of the joke, but it's also part of the kind of attempt that you're making or the kind of approach that you're making to your content.

LM

What an articulate encapsulation, much better than I could execute. Yeah.

EH

I have one more question, which is kind of off topic. So I'm just going to throw it in there a little bit, but maybe we'll see some threads connect. The second part of the reading that you did from *We Loved It All* was about becoming a parent. And you jump from the Garden of Eden to the crushing, humbling fact of being a parent. And that is something that, so again, those are two things you're trying to sort of put together in the same conversation. And one of the things that I thought was so interesting about the way that you do that in this nonfiction book, but also some of the writing that you do about parents and children in your fiction is that so much of parenting is just kind of routine. It's everyday habits. It's quite dull. And you consider that in this nonfiction book, and so I'm wondering if we could think about how it works in your fiction and maybe another fiction that you read, but you talk about the kind of pretense of normalcy in family life today. And in an age of climate catastrophe, species extinction, we're still just doing our normal routines. We're waking up and making breakfast. How do you sort of write about that? How do you put that into a work of fiction? I mean, how do you think about parenting as a kind of a problem for fiction? Because it embraces the normal and normalcy and routine and the dull and the everyday in a way that seems inadequate to our times.

LM

I mean, I guess I see it as more of a problem for existence, you know, than for fiction. I mean, honestly, I don't think I've ever thought of parenthood, in a systematic way in the context of writing fiction, but I have in my own life. It puts you in this position—maybe before you had children, you were prepared to not live in denial, maybe you were prepared to take risks, maybe you were prepared to just upend your life for the sake of an idea. Once you have children, you generally cease to be willing to do any of those things. You can also tell yourself that for the sake of these young humans that you don't wish to scar unduly, that you must normalize everything around you in the world, and that the language you use to talk about the world should be a language of reassurance. And in these ways we sin against our children, you know, and we can't help it. We can't help it, because I suppose you have to strike a balance. You have to be comforting to some degree as a parent, and you have to sometimes pretend that everything's okay, but I do think we take it too far. And that's why I say it's a problem for existence. And we entirely take it too far as parents and betray our children. In fact, by not speaking of this emergency for what it is, not speaking of this emergency as a critical life support dilemma. That's changing, I think, I think it's changing. And I think they see through our bullshit, to some degree, but it has enabled us to stave off radical transformations of all kinds for many decades when they were most needed.

EH

That to me seems like what *A Children's Bible* is really about.

JP

I was just about to say, exactly. I totally agree. Yeah.

LM

I, honestly, I could talk to you guys for hours, I really could. Especially about these distinctions between different words for funny and funniness. Because I think I've really—wit is something I love. My father was extremely witty and I actually love, I love the term wit. Wit does seem like a one-liner, you know, I just do think of Oscar Wilde or something like that. It does seem like a one-line delivery thing, but I still find it to be highly welcome when I witness it, you know?

JP

Yeah. I'm sort of bummed we didn't talk about Mark Twain, because I think he's a good example of, like, that abyss of wit, you know? It's really funny, but it also makes your heart fall out too.

LM

Oh my God, can I just say that he was the best man at my great great great uncle's wedding, and like his best friends? Yes. Yes. Yes. Okay. I had this really interesting, many greats uncle who died on the Titanic actually. He was a painter, Frank Millet, who had a wife and children that he got married to and stuff, but then ended up living with his, I mean, what did they call it then? His, I don't know, companion, this guy named Archibald Butts, in D.C. and they would throw these lavish parties, but anyway, he was like really good friends with Mark Twain. So I have a weird family connection with wit, I guess.

JP

I love that.

EH

So one genre you haven't explored, I don't think, is historical fiction, and I think you might just have it right there. [laughter]

LM

Oh my God, you have to be so patient for that. How terrible.

EH

Okay. So, signature question, and *Novel Dialogue* has long been known and possibly been mocked for, but has certainly been known for our signature questions. And for this season, we are asking everyone—Lydia, we gave you almost no warning, but here's the question. If you could live anywhere in the world for a year, where and why?

LM

I guess that I've always wanted to go—in fact, recently, I've been learning, Swahili on that Duolingo app, which, let's just say, probably not the best place to learn Swahili. But anyway, because I dream of going to help, at this particular orphan elephant rescue place, this shelter, which this one happens to be in Nairobi.

JP

At the end of another novel dialogue, we really want 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 support. Beck Daly is Novel Dialogue's production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. And we invite you, if you're interested, to check out recent episodes with Katie Kitamura, Brandon Taylor, and Lauren Groff. From all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thank you for listening. And Emily, thank you for being an amazing scholar, critic, as well as boss. And Lydia, thank you so, so much for this scintillating conversation.

LM

Yeah. Thank you, John. And thank you, Emily. This was so fun. And let's please have a glass of wine together sometime.

EH

Absolutely. Absolutely. Let's do it.