9.1 Novels are Like Elephants: Ken Liu and Rose Casey (SW)

Transcript

Sarah Wasserman

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 Sarah Wasserman, one of the hosts at *Novel Dialogue*. This podcast brings you lively conversations between critics and the most exciting novelists out there to talk about how novels get made and what they mean. I'm thrilled to bring you an episode today featuring a novelist and a critic who both have their finger on the pulse of what it means to read and write right now. Ken Liu is a writer of speculative fiction and winner of the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Awards. He is the author of *The Dandelion Dynasty*, a silk punk epic fantasy series starting with *The Grace of Kings*, as well as short story collections, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, and *The Hidden Girl and Other Stories*. He has translated many works from Chinese to English, including *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin. Before writing full-time, Ken worked as a software engineer, corporate lawyer, and litigation consultant. Ken's writing is always alive with the energy of possibility. It is filled with deep curiosity and a sense of wonder about what we might yet discover and make real through our attention, our care, and our art. I want to say just one last thing about Ken's short story, “The Paper Menagerie,” about which Rose has written, and which is the first piece of fiction to ever win three genre awards. It is among my all-time favorite pieces of contemporary writing. I recently listened to LeVar Burton. You'll know him from *Reading Rainbow*, I hope. I listened to him read it on his podcast and I cried three times. Ken's work is deeply moving, and I'm moved that he is with us today. So welcome to the show, Ken.

Ken Liu

Thank you, Sarah. It's a real pleasure to be here.

SW

And we have Rose Casey, who is assistant professor of English at West Virginia University, where she teaches courses on racial justice, gender equity, and geopolitics in contemporary world literature. Her forthcoming book, *Aesthetic Impropriety: Property Law and Postcolonial Style*, develops a new theory about how literature can contribute to legal change. I got a sneak peek at the book, and I can say that it's both an impressive scholarly text and an important statement about why literature matters in urgent practical ways. Many of our listeners will know Rose from her fierce work on the page and in the world dedicated to protecting the public

university. I'd urge everyone to read her co-authored essay about the future of public education in the *Boston Review*. Rose, thanks so much for being here today. And I'm really happy to turn it over to you now.

Rose Casey

Thank you, Sarah. It's such a pleasure to be on this podcast. I really love listening to *Novel Dialogue*. And Ken, it really is just such an honor to get a chance to talk with you about your work. So I came to your work first by reading your short story, “The Paper Menagerie,” which I absolutely adore and which I regularly assign to my students. They love it too and always have such smart and sensitive things to say about it. I regularly cry in front of them, and they confess to crying also. And the things that I love about that story, its tenderness, its commitment to the power of art and its engagement with the complexities of human emotion are some of the things that I really love about *The Dandelion Dynasty* too. So your series of four books about a wonderful complex imperial world. So I'm wondering if you can start by reflecting on scale, whether as an idea or process by talking about the move that you made between short stories and epic narratives, and perhaps how it came about, about how each genre brings with it distinct opportunities and limitations, or about how both the short story and the epic allow for world building, despite their very different lengths?

KL

This is both a really wonderful question, also very difficult to answer, because it's sort of like asking fish how they swim. I will say this, I think, for me, moving from short fiction to long, novelistic narratives was rather difficult, because it turns out that there was one thing very critical for novels that I had never learned to do as a short story writer. So this is almost comical. I think readers who are not writers may find this unbelievable, but I never learned how to plot as a short story writer. It turns out that you don't need to plot when you're writing short fiction. In fact, a lot of contemporary short fiction has no plot at all. This may be surprising, but you can go and read some of your favorite short stories, and you may be surprised at how many of them lack plot in the traditional sense. You know, something like Ursula K. Le Guin's “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” you know, probably one of the most famous short stories that a lot of people study in school, has no plot, but it's hardly unusual. It turns out that when you're writing short fiction, oftentimes it is entirely possible to sustain the reader's attention using nothing more than an idea and a very well, literarily crafted exploration of that idea. A lot of short stories are basically that short exploration. The way I sort of talk about it is it's not all that different from YouTube shorts or TikToks, if you are familiar with those mediums. Short stories often work in the same sort of place, in that, a lot of the power of short fiction comes from its embodiment in the larger network of narratives. And so it's allusions, it's tropes, it's twisting of tropes, it's subversion of expectation, it's that kind of embeddedness in a large narrative. And so when I was moving to writing novels, I had to basically learn how to plot. It turns out that the analogy I use is to describe short stories as insects and novels as elephants. And the difference between them is not merely one of scale, right? It's actually, they have entirely different body structures. Insets, if you take a mosquito, let's say, and you blow it up to the size of an elephant, it's not

going to survive. It will actually suffocate because mosquitoes don't breathe. They exchange oxygen with the atmosphere through their bodies, basically. They don't really have an internal respiratory system. So it would just, if you blow it up to that size geometrically, because of the way volume increases so much faster than surface area, it will just suffocate. And there are other issues such as, you know, the exoskeleton not being able to support such a body. So it's a body plan difference. And novels are like that. Novels require plot in a way that short stories just don't. So that was something that I had to learn. So if you sort of look at *The Dandelion Dynasty*, you'll find a very interesting fact, which is that the first book, *The Grace of Kings*, which is where I was still learning how to write a novel, it's plotted very similarly to a series of short stories. So it's a bunch of little short stories sort of all strung together. That's because I was still learning how to do this. But starting with the second book, and all the way through the last book, you'll see that the narratives become more and more plot. The plot becomes more and more, I would say, artistically interesting as a result of me just learning how to do it.

RC

That's so interesting. Thank you. It's fascinating to hear you use the analogy of mosquitoes and elephants, especially because I did not know how mosquitoes breathe, don't breathe, subsist by a kind of interactive engagement with the world around them. And thinking about scale in that sense, in terms of the many inventions that you have in *The Dandelion Dynasty*, many of them seem like they are at once scaled up versions of existing ideas, perhaps existing animals or existing technologies. And at the same time, in really imaginative reworkings, it's not just that they're larger, it's not just that they are made by humans, but that they also operate differently. Would you be able to talk a little bit about those inventions and even how you came up with them? Like, I'm fascinated in, throughout all four novels, particularly the second, third and fourth, of how you go from the tiny detail to the vast world and philosophy, various philosophies that exist within this world. And one of those movements from the tiny detail to the large-scale process seems to be occurring in those inventions.

KL

Oh, wonderful. Let me think about what I was trying to do and how to describe this. So, I was trying to do a bunch of different things, right, when I was writing these novels. One of the things I was particularly interested in is this whole idea of modernity. What is modernity and how do we end up with it? Part of the whole inspiration behind the novels is my fascination with the way elements of the past are repurposed and reused for modernity, right? So, let me just give you a very simple example, right? So, if you visit Washington, DC, one of the things that's really striking about DC is the architecture, right? So many of America's government buildings are done in a specific style and they remind us of Roman temples. You know, you go to the Supreme Court and it looks like a Roman temple. This is a very conscious thing. The founding fathers of the United States were very conscious about this callback to Rome. So, for example, the Federalist Papers were penned under Latin Roman pen names and Romanesque institutions and ideas are persistently called back in contemporary American life. So, for example, the spectacle of something like the Super Bowl, there's a conscious evocation of the

Colosseum and those Roman contests. It's interesting that the American political discourse is so infused with the Roman aesthetic, right? It's almost as though we are cosplaying as Romans, which is very strange. But this is hardly something new. I mean, you know, other cultures in the past have done something similar to this, where they cosplay as a past culture, Rome being possibly the most prominent example in the Western imagination. But I was very, very intrigued by this phenomenon, which is this consistent reaching back to the past and repurposing for the present. I mean, you know, if you, I suppose, if you bring Cicero and Caesar back today and ask them, how do they feel about America's invocation of their names in our political debates, they will be very confused because these are entirely different contexts and we're using them for entirely different purposes. What I wanted to sort of point out, though, is that this process of repurposing the past, or what I call punking the past, right? Because when you're repurposing the past and using it for constructing something new out of the past, you're really engaging a kind of punk aesthetic, which is all about reappropriation and reuse and repurposing. So, you know, I argue that America's political discourse can be sort of described as a kind of Greco-Roman punk. But you could argue that that's all of modernity. The Renaissance itself is a form of Greco-Roman punk. It is fascinating the degree to which the Renaissance, which is, you know, our sort of Western mark for the start of modernity, is a conscious effort of repurposing the classical past as it's passed down through the Arabic scholars and through medieval scriptoriums. And getting to this point where we are consciously recracking our vernacular languages to imitate classical models and taking classical artistic forms and elaborating into modern forms and sort of reaching back to that classical imagination and using them to question Christian narratives as the beginning of modern science takes root. So, having said all that, I wanted to apply this model of repurposing the past into a novel series about modernity. But what I wanted to do is to offer an alternative vision. So, rather than, say, repurposing solely a Greco-Roman past, what if we try to construct the alternative modernity in which it's the classical East Asian past that's being repurposed in this way? So, this is what I call the silk punk aesthetic, which is where you take these classical East Asian pieces and then do with them what the West did with Greco-Roman pieces in the Renaissance. So, my fantasy land, Dara, it has a classical past that's very much inspired by East Asian antiquity. But this is a society on the verge of modernity. So, we would call that the emergence of, say, their version of the Renaissance, if you will. And now, they're taking these classical past elements and they're sort of repurposing them into this moment of discovery, of rationalization, of what we would now identify as the emergence of secular humanism. Now, they don't call it that, obviously, because they don't have that Western, Greco-Roman sort of past. So, this is a very different kind of evocation of modernity. So, having said all of that preface, now let me talk about the technology. I apply all of that sort of punk aesthetic to the technology as well. So, what I call the silk punk technology aesthetic is also sort of—it draws on my own knowledge of the history of technology and the history of invention and the history of human ingenuity. So, you know, there are two things that I think are deeply interesting and fascinating to me that I think we don't emphasize enough about the evolution of technology. One is that technology actually often proceeds far ahead of science, right? Our common understanding is that science drives technology. And to a certain extent, that is true, but that's not the entire story. In a lot of eras, in a lot of areas, technologists, people who tinker, basically are able to do things without necessarily understanding the principles behind why it works. So, that's one part of it. The other part of it is

the recombination that drives technological progress. A lot of technological progress is actually a lot like linguistic progress, right? So, in language, what tends to happen is we take old words and we repurpose them for something new. You know, like “brat,” right? You know, all of a sudden “brat” is having this moment, and it's being repurposed for a new meaning. And it's this entirely new meaning that you can see how it came from its own meaning, but it's new. It's brand new. Almost all slang evolves that way. They go back and examine its etymology and how did the slang term come to mean what it does. And it's like, oh, you can see how that could have happened. But it's a punkish process. You took something old and you twist it around. That kind of linguistic innovation is actually very, very similar to technological innovation. We're often taking something that was invented for an entirely different purpose and saying, let's try this. Let's do this. You know, our own history of technology, some technological routes were just closed off. And it's not because the technologies didn't work. It's just that fashion, economics, the necessities of chance, whatever, there are some paths we just didn't walk along. So I took those paths. And then I took old inventions. And then I tried to combine them and see: can you construct alternatives to the technology we have and solve the problems that these people have using these technologies?

RC

I love that. And I love hearing you explain this techie part of your work, which is often described as fantasy and sci-fi. And it certainly has those elements. Although I think we can think about it in terms of other genres as well. The printing press actually plays a really significant role in this novel's plot. If we go back to one of the earlier discussions, it's not just an aside, it's absolutely integral to what ends up happening. But one of the things I love about it is in being programmed to type a given text, it also ends up playing a tune or, there's certainly—the typing and the text and the tune come together. And that seems like a brilliant side effect. So one of the things that I find so exciting about these inventions is this combination of whimsy and science that you pull together, right? You talked at the beginning about how short stories, you know, they can be just really an idea, an exploration of an idea. And I certainly see the exploration of ideas in your *Dandelion Dynasty*. And that's one of the things I like about it. I tend to actually personally read for ideas more than plot. So it's fascinating to realize how they can be combined in a way that I particularly enjoy. But the whimsy, the fun, the enjoyment, the sense of hope, the sense of just pleasure in imagining is so compelling and something that I think is really important in our current moment, and certainly within the university system, you know, we need to really recognize the importance of just imagining and playing and seeing what happens. But I also really appreciate your commitment to bringing together both aesthetics and usefulness. So the sense in your work that both of them are necessary. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, this idea that actually things that are beautiful and things that are useful are equally important or maybe some variation on that relationship.

KL

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, I think all fictional works are in some sense defined by the moment they were written and what their authors were trying to experience. I mean, all of us, I

think, are trying to say something about the human condition, the eternal aspect, but a lot of it is also driven by the ephemeral moment where we're experiencing real pressures. So I think part of what drove me in *The Dandelion Dynasty* is this whole fascination, and I guess, unease with our own conflicts, I would say, our own uncertainties about the purpose of education, of especially something like university education. So you'll see that education obviously plays a huge role in *The Dandelion Dynasty*, and it's something that people discuss all the time. In fact, one of the prime conflicts and set pieces in the novel is about, basically, it's a debate over education, right? There's, in *The Wall of Storms*, one of the most important scenes is the debate over education. I don't think a lot of fantasy novels do that. I am not aware of a lot of fantasy novels in which the prime battle, if you will, is over education, which is, I guess, makes it very me in that sense. But it is sort of something that we're fighting over. And we are, in fact, fighting over what is the purpose of education? Is it to be useful and specifically defined as commercially useful or something else, right? It, it troubles me a great deal that when we're talking about universities and criticizing universities, and, you know, there are actually many good reasons to criticize universities and to argue over whether universities are doing something that they should be doing, etc. But one way in which they're criticized, which to me is very strange, is this idea that they're not preparing students for corporate life, for life as useful, productive, money-making components of the machinery of capitalism. What I wanted to do is to remind people that the whole point of being human, the whole point of education, really, honestly, is to teach us how to be better, or to allow us to fully explore the playfulness that is inherent to who we are. And I would say that being able to play is one of the highest ideals of a good life. If your idea of a good life does not include the concept of play, then I'm not sure it is a good life. If your idea of heaven, for example, does not include play, then I'm not sure it's a heaven that people really want to go to. But, you know, aside from those kinds of spiritual ideas, I think play is just a very fundamentally important part of how we have progress as a species, right? A lot of the characters in *The Dandelion Dynasty* are very, very interested in playing with machines, with technology, with institutions, with ideas. In the same way that Da Vinci designed those machines, not because they were going to make money, but because it was fun to design these things. You can clearly tell, you know, the sense of whimsy that you're talking about in Da Vinci's notebooks. He was doing these things because it was fun. And in fact, if you look through the notes of great mathematicians, great philosophers, great chemists, great physicists, great computer scientists, I mean, Alan Turing had all these amazing papers in which he was exploring ideas that are just whimsical, not because they were practical per se. Which is fun. I think that the idea of whimsy, the idea of letting your imagination run is absolutely critical to what it means to be human. And I wanted my novel's vision of education to have that view. The idea of education being very practical, because we live in a capitalist society in which these things are funded by the degree to which we're willing to exchange value, you know, is also a fact. This is the world we live in. It doesn't have to be that way, but this is the choice we have made. So now we have to sort of figure out a way to navigate between these two things. How much do you need to support your imagination doing useful things, or vice versa? I don't think the two are separable, certainly not within the societies that we have constructed. The novels are concerned about this aspect of it, and what does it mean to have a valuable education. I think it reflects, you know, a real-world debate that we're going through right now. We are arguing over what it is that we're really trying to do when we give people an education. I mean, are we just giving

people a bunch of facts that they can then engineer and make money? Or are we doing something new? I think that is the fundamental argument that we're having here. Or, in fact, if we are trying to prepare people to do more, is it really the role of the university to do that? And if not the university, then who? I think these are the fundamental questions that are really animating a lot of these political debates that we're having now. We think we're arguing about something else, but fundamentally we're really arguing about how do we—what is the role of the imagination, and how do we want to cultivate it?

SW

I want to jump in here just with one thing. On your website, Ken, you have this amazing statement about Silkpunk, which we've already talked about, but you say, this is a quote, “The engineers are celebrated as great artists who transform the existing language and evolve it toward ever more beautiful forms,” which is a wonderful capsule if you want to think of usefulness and beauty as highly integrated and how engineering is artistry or writing is engineering. I think that captures it so well. But I sort of wanted to point this towards another direction and begin with a slight confession, which is to say, I generally have a hard time with science fiction. And I think maybe it's because my experience of it is often that it's very rule bound. So in building a world, there's all these rules, there's sort of often fetishized treatments of technology. And I think it's in part because it's so clear that you're invested in tinkering and play and imagination that that wasn't my experience of reading *The Dandelion Dynasty*. But I wonder if you might talk about how you think of your own place in genre and in science fiction or in speculative fiction, because you write again, you know, you write short stories that feel very different. You write these world building series. And I think that perhaps it's because of some of your deep humanism or your investment in artistry that your novels sit maybe a little uneasily next to conventional science fiction, whatever, whatever that is, that could be my own misconception.

KL

Wow, actually, you know, you bring up a really good point, which is what, you know, what is the role of genres? And, you know, what are we really trying to say when we put works into genres? So I will say that, you know, in every genre, there are readers and critics and writers who are very gatekeeping about things. So they'll say, this is core science fiction, and this is not. So I think one of the early critiques of my work was something to the effect of, you know, Ken's problem is that his sci-fi reads like fantasy, and then his fantasy reads like sci-fi. And I think this was meant to sort of say that I'm bad, but I actually sort of enjoyed that critique. I was like, that sounds lovely. So I do think that to some degree, some readers will always find my work to be not in the genre sweet spot. And that's okay, right? Because I think genres develop as subcultures and as their own languages. And so within every such subculture or language, there will be certain people who will say, this is the way ought to be and it has to be this way. And if it's not like this, then it's no good. And there are always going to be other readers who are going to say, well, that's fine. But you know, we would like to see something a little different. And there's nothing wrong with trying to do something slightly different from how it has been done before.

Whatever, you know, your views about genre, I don't actually particularly care about how readers classify my work. If they want to call my work fantasy, that's fine. If you want to call it sci-fi, that's fine. If you want to call it none of those things—

SW

To me, it's like historical fiction, which is a very strange claim to make for it. But that's my experience of it, in many ways.

KL

I think that's, yeah, I think that's entirely—

SW

Counterfactual history, maybe, you know?

KL

That's right. Because my concern, as I said from the beginning, is about modernity. What is modernity? It's the study of modernity itself is an aspect of historiography. Like, what is the story? How did we get to this moment? So obviously, a novel that explores that question is going to be very historical, but it applies all the techniques of historiography to this moment. I would say that, you know, my relation to genre labels is basically, I don't believe anybody should be gatekeeping these things. So if people want to call my work something, then that's great, because that means it's going to have a conversation with works in that genre. And that is wonderful, because it enriches readers' experience of it, and it allows me to see aspects of it that I don't see otherwise. But I, myself, don't start out with the idea that I'm going to write a novel in the science fiction field, or I'm going to write a novel in the fantasy field. In fact, that's why I invented this label Silkpunk to describe my books, because originally they—you know, for publicity purposes, I have to give the book a label. And I was like, I don't know what this is, I really don't have a good sense of it. [laughter] And so I didn't want to offend people by claiming it to be something that people don't believe it is. So I said, well, you know, there are many ways to do this. But one of the easiest things you can do is to draw a circle around your feet and say, this is a thing. So I called it Silkpunk. And then people can then place it within whatever genre classification scheme they want.

RC

Talking about genre, like Sarah, I totally see your work as historical fiction in many ways, and fascinating. There was one moment that really stuck with me in *The Veiled Throne*, where Kuni Garu's daughter, Thera, is upset because her young children, Tanto and Rokiri, have broken or given away pieces of the Dara logogram blocks that Thera had made for them, their mother had made for them. And so for Thera, these blocks are really important. They're an important

connection to her cultural identity as someone for whom writing and education and that kind of knowledge are incredibly important. But her child Tanto gets really frustrated and rightly insists this is not Dara because they are actually living in a kind of exile and they had been subject to a kind of semi-forced migration. And it just seems that you were really interested in the discussion that we were just having about justice, but also throughout *The Dandelion Dynasty* in intercultural interactions and how those operate. I'm curious about how you see ancient influences, the ancient East Asian political influences on the world of Dara and the influences of our contemporary moment in how you understand migration. There's a lot of discussion about asylum and various forms of people choosing to leave, people being forced to leave, people moving back home and then no longer quite fitting in because home is not what they remembered. It seems that there is probably a connection to that ancient historical influence as well as to the very contemporary moment. Could you talk about those a little bit for us?

KL

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So as you mentioned earlier, right, one of the sort of models, literary models that *The Dandelion Dynasty* novels follow are these classical epics, you know, whether we're talking about the Homeric epics or the *Aeneid* or even something like *Paradise Lost*. These are all epics in some sense about the story of a people, which is what we're talking about here. I'm particularly interested in the cultural narrative of what is the story of a people. So one of the themes of *The Dandelion Dynasty*, and it's something I personally believe in, is this idea that the constitution of a people is not really a document. The constitution of a people is really the story that they tell themselves about who they are and how they're different from every other people on earth, being past and present. You have to know that story. You have to know the stories that people tell themselves about who they are. So in terms of what, you know, I was trying to do here, is my effort to sort of define this idea about who gets to tell a people story, who gets to be called a member of the people, right? Because these are the questions that we have struggled with over millennia. You know, in the Bible, you have the Book of Ruth, you know, which is very much about does Ruth get to call herself a member of the people that she married into or not? Do we get to define who our people is? And if we do, under what conditions can we do so? And does it matter if the people accept you or not? These are all questions that are deeply confusing and troubling. I mean, again, the great ethics all engage with this. If you think about the *Aeneid*, it's a really fascinating story. You know, Aeneid as the descendant of Troy is told that he's going to found a new people. Why? You know, why is it a new people? Why isn't it just Troy? And how do you form this new people? He encounters the inhabitants of the land already. I mean, this is a fascinating view into Roman self-image, how the Romans see themselves. But I think it's really, really instructive. And so again, you know, if you look at America, right, we have a particularly interesting story about who we are and who gets to be called an American. In fact, that's sort of the biggest debate at this moment. I would say that these political disagreements are, in fact, disagreements and arguments over what is the story? What is the constitution? What is the, who gets to be the American people? And so *The Dandelion Dynasty* is engaged with these questions because they're both very ancient and also very relevant in the moment. I think all interesting questions are like that.

RC

I appreciate that answer so much. That's so great. Thank you.

SW

Yeah. It strikes me just in listening to that answer that so much of your work is actually about encounter. And how do we have encounters that are not just about domination? It seems a very simple point, but it's resonant throughout your work. And I imagine even in your work as a translator, right, that you're having to create and stage and put to page these encounters, without clear hierarchies, without, you know, replicating certain binaries. So that's really great. And then thinking about intercultural encounters and all of this, it seems like a good place to ask a more lighthearted question. We're not going to solve all the world's geopolitical questions and issues around justice. I wish we could, that would be a different podcast though. But every season, we do close with a signature question to all of our guests. And this season, we are inviting you to take us elsewhere. And our question is this, if you could live anywhere else in the world for a year, where would it be and why?

KL

Well, my answer will change, you know, from time to time, but at this moment, I would say it's Rome. I got a chance to visit Rome for a little bit and it was an incredible encounter. Being in Rome made me realize something that I had not really been able to internalize or articulate before, which is this: when you're visiting Rome, you get a very visceral sense of history that is not really prevalent anywhere else, right? Rome is called the eternal city, but you know, a lot of it is crafted, but a lot of it is also just simply true. You are, when you're standing in Rome, you know, I got to visit this chapel, which is incredible. It's a chapel that was built on the site of a much older Roman pagan temple, whose ruins have been literally incorporating into the walls of the church. And then under that, you can see the ruins of an older, patrician household. And under that, a commoner's house. So thousands of years of history are sort of layered together. And because the Romans built with stone, the stones are there. They are there for you to touch, for you to walk upon, for you to see, for you to realize that this is, this is real. So you go to the Roman forum, for example, right? You can see the site where purportedly Caesar was murdered. You can see the temple of Vesta. You can sort of imagine that these are literally the same paving stones that Cicero walked upon. That hits very differently, right? So, not all cultures are built with stone, right? If you don't go with stone, then your relationship to history is very different. So it did not strike me until I was in Rome, how much of the Western imagination of history is shaped by that legacy. We speak of ruins, right? Our particular vision of what history looks like is some ruins, but you don't have ruins unless you build with stone. Cultures that don't build the stone don't leave ruins. I mean, that's why when you're in East Asia, even the oldest buildings you can visit are only a few hundred years old and they have to be maintained constantly. When you're a culture that builds with wood, you have to keep on maintaining it. It's a literal manifestation of what I talked about. Every new generation has to sort of renew their commitment to it and rebuild it. And when you stop, you know, as a war comes along or

something, it's just gone. So in other parts of the world, especially in cultures that don't build with stone, you don't have physical ruins. What you have are stories that are passed down the generations. So the historical imagination outside of this Roman context would have to be very, very different. It's not ruins-based, right? Anyway, having said all of that, I think it would be fascinating to live in Rome and to sort of experience this in a deeper way to really explore the layers of historical, um, layer-ness that's literally represented in Rome itself, especially since Rome is both the center of the classical world as well as Christendom, both incredibly influential traditions in our particular version of modernity. And I think it's very—it would be very fascinating and incredibly moving to explore that historical depth in person and to really feel it. I think it would influence my work in a very significant way.

SW

Well, as the contemporary meme says, that's a good reason to be thinking about the Roman Empire however many times a day. [laughter] And I also—it also sounds like maybe we're going to see, I could imagine, a forthcoming work that's really invested in the different materials we build our societies with, and what kind of politics even, not just history, but what kind of politics that translates to. So that was great. Thank you. Thank you, Rose as well. Thank you both for being here and for such a great conversation. I just want to remind our listeners that you can buy Ken's books in bookstores and online. We'll have some links on the episode's webpage. And I also urge you to visit his website that we'll link to follow along with the many, many things he's doing and thinking about. As always, we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Sheila Heti, Ocean Vuong, Katie Kitamura, Jeff VanderMeer, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at *Novel Dialogue*, thanks so much for tuning in. Keep listening and keep reading.