10.2 Beautiful Sentences Matter: Billy-Ray Belcourt and Matt Hooley (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 really excited for today's episode, which features a conversation between a scholar and a writer who I would say are both at the top of their game right now: Billy-Ray Belcourt and Matt Hooley. Billy-Ray Belcourt is a writer and academic from the Driftpile Cree Nation. He is an associate professor in the School of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of five books, *This Wound is a World*, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, *A History of My Brief Body*, *A Minor Chorus*, and *Coexistence*. His work has received so many awards that I can't name them all here, but I want to highlight just a few. His debut book of poems, *This Wound is a World*, won the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize, making him the youngest ever winner, and it was also named by CBC Books as the Best Canadian Poetry Collection of 2017. His third book of essays and vignettes, *A History of My Brief Body*, was a number one national bestseller and a finalist for the 2020 Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction, a 2021 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Memoir and Biography, and two BC and Yukon Book Prizes. It received the Hubert Evans Prize for Non-Fiction. *A Minor Chorus*, Billy-Ray's fourth book and first novel, which I think we'll talk about at length today, was also a national bestseller, and it was just named to CBC's Canada Reads 2026 longlist, which is really exciting. The novel is a razor-sharp blend of autobiography, autofiction, theory, and oral history, but no one has said it better than one “Jaylen” on Goodreads, whose five-star review of *A Minor Chorus* reads, in its entirety, “I stopped using the 5-star rating system but I’m leaving this here because I may or may not have had the elusive ‘profound experience of art’ … this book fucks.” Welcome to the show, Billy-Ray.

We also have with us Matt Hooley, who is Assistant Professor of Native American and Indigenous Studies at Dartmouth College, where he teaches courses on Indigenous literature and visual art in the environmental humanities. His first book, *Against Extraction: Indigenous Modernisms in the Twin Cities*, which came out with Duke University Press in 2024, is a terrific book about art and literature centered in the Dakota homelands of the Twin Cities. What I especially appreciate about the book is that it is rigorously attuned to the modernisms of the Twin Cities, but it also makes far-reaching claims about the forms that oppose extractive colonialism. He's at work on two new books, *A Cultural History of Colonial Water Seizure in Turtle Island and Palestine*, as well as a short book about Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the*

Dead. Matt, thanks so much for being here today. I'm really excited and happy to turn things over to you now.

Matt Hooley

Thanks so much, Sarah. It's really a pleasure and an honor to get to talk with you and to be on the podcast and especially to be able to think with Billy-Ray. So this is definitely a highlight of the week and the term. I agree with Jaylen. Is it Jaylen? Yeah. Totally. I've been teaching it this past two weeks in a senior seminar and the students are just so, you know, to quote Jessie Buckley, they're drinking it like water. So just to say thank you for the work, you know. Given that this is a podcast about the novel, we were wondering if you wouldn't mind starting by reading some of your novel, which is thinking about the novel, and writing the novel, and then maybe we can proceed from there.

Billy-Ray Belcourt

Absolutely. Yeah. Firstly, thanks for having me. I have enjoyed previous episodes of this podcast, so it is a pleasure to be here, and of course, to chat with you, Matt. Okay, this is a short excerpt from chapter two.

“The next morning I thought of the popular Mary Oliver lines: ‘Tell me, what it is you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?’ *Become a novelist* seemed a modest if not underwhelming and irresponsible answer. But what if the act of writing a novel, I wondered, enabled one to practice a way of life that negated the brutalities of race, gender, hetero- and homonormativity, capital, and property? Rather than change the world, a novel could index a longing for something else, for a different arrangement of bodies, feelings, and environments, one in which human flourishing wasn't inhibited for the marginalized, which seemed as urgent an act of rebellion as any.

“A novel is a body of water from which I wanted frantically to drink. What would a novel attuned to rising sea levels and melting Arctic ice sheets look like? What would its structure be? I wondered. Would the words grow paler and paler as the story progressed? Until what was left was a stick figure or sentence drowning in the corner of a blank page? Was I up to the challenge of envisaging an ecological literature against premature civilizational collapse? Not now, not here.

“I began to compile a list of provocative things contemporary writers said about the novel:

“ArundhatI Roy: A novel can be as complex as a city, with lanes and by-lanes.

“Rachel Cusk: The moral problem of the novel is the presumption one can inhabit another's consciousness.

“Édouard Louis: I think a novel should be bold enough to attempt to define its own construction in a new way.

“Alexander Chee: The novel is already at the door. Waiting, but just for a little. It is the lover again, impatient again. Wanting again for you to know everything.

“My own anxieties about the novel had to do with my hunch that English is much too compromised a language to engender a portrait of Indigenous life that isn't subsumed by colonial fantasies of our disrepair. Little in my arsenal seems spacious enough to combat a centuries-old reading practice that made Indigenous peoples out to be bombs. How instead to make a novel into a bomb? How to plant a novel in the moral infrastructure of a corrupt nation? How to write sentences that go *tick, tick, tick*?”

Thank you.

MH

Amazing. Thank you so much for that. I mean, and the passage is poetic, lyrical. And I think it may or may not be laced with auto-theory. So it's in some ways also referencing this journey you've been on, this generic journey, starting as a poet. *History of My Brief Body*, essays, mischaracterized or characterized as autobiography in some case. So I'm just wondering if you could just think and talk about what was happening for you as a thinker when you started putting this together and started to think of it or call it a novel?

BRB

So I was still in grad school. I was, I believe, in that strange time period between writing a first draft of my dissertation and then moving on with the rest of my life. [laughter] So I didn't really have much in the way of a daily schedule. I remember feeling actually quite melancholic. And I decided one day to use that experience of melancholy as a starting point or something that could add up to a novel. And I think I was, of course, trained in a way to do that, being a reader, of course, of Roland Barthes and Ann Cvetkovich et cetera, who see negative affect as instigators of thought rather than as stalemates. And I had also, prior to that, been undertaking something of a self-directed study of the contemporary novel. I didn't quite get the chance to do that in my coursework. And so I think trying to fill that gap myself, but also trying to teach myself how to write a novel. And the light bulb moment was when I realized I could just channel all of my own anxieties and longings into the novel instead of trying to invent conditions for some other character or subjectivity to emerge. I could begin with my own character, my own subjectivity, and build the scaffolding of the novel that way. But then I also knew, of course, through my self-directed study, that the novel, as a technology, arrives on the shores of what we now know as North America through its imperial transits and continues to bear, you know, the resonances of the specificity of its moment of emergence in Europe, in the United Kingdom, the novel as a fetish of bourgeois sentimentality of individuality. And I knew that I couldn't write a novel about bourgeois sentimentality. [laughter] And so I just essentially trusted my instincts,

relied on my training as a scholar of Indigenous life and politics and aesthetics. And also my sense that I would need to discuss a community and to try to engender a voice that could vocalize the desires of a community rather than just one individual.

MH

That's all there. It's amazing to kind of hear you parse it out and slow it down and open it up. And I'm thinking about a kind of, well, I was going to say a binary, but it's almost like a tripartite structure here, maybe between this sort of nostalgic and bourgeois conception of the novel as a world building technology. And then these kind of two ways that I see you in the beginning of—well, of course, you're challenging that in many ways—but in the beginning of the novel, there's a couple of ways, including in this moment where there's this melancholic kind of investment in, I guess you'd say, negation. You write a negated—the novel could negate the brutalities of race, gender, heteronormativity, et cetera. So there's that, there's a negation. And also, you know, the main character decides to write a novel as a kind of turn away from the thesis, right? So there's the novel, I guess, as a kind of vehicle of fugitivity or flight or something like that. So I'm wondering, you know, what's that? I see all these things happening as a reader. Like, what are those dynamics like for you writing in that moment? Like challenging this kind of world building structure of the novel? Does it feel like negation? Does it feel like fugitivity? Are these moving back and forth? Or are there other dynamics that you were kind of more involved with?

BRB

So I was deeply aware of the fact that I was, for the lack of a better phrase, fucking with the novelistic conventions. Which on the one hand, ease some of the pressures for me around craft, because I hoped and I continue to hope that a generous reader will see that everything that's happening from the level of, like, syntax, to decisions around tense, to punctuation are related to what's happening at the level of subject matter. And that I'm not trying to be allegiant to novelistic expectations. And I understood from at least that point in my apartment at the time, back whenever that was, that I would write a novel in something like my own voice, that I was not going to be able to satisfy the novel du jour, that it would sound more like something else. And I hope that, yeah, a reader can engage with that in a conceptual way, though, of course, that's not necessarily rewarded in like the current literary landscape. And I suppose I also was thinking about the ways that indigenous writers had already been dispensing with normative conceptions of form and genre. You know, Joshua Whitehead has a great term for this, he calls it “biostory,” the ways that the embodied experience have directed indigenous writers to write in certain ways. And I also understood that I needed to think of writing as not just a textual form, but as the like total discursive output of indigenous people and communities. And so that's where the, like, pseudo-oral-historical current, or method, comes in to play. And that I think also allowed me to bring my own understanding of research methodologies to bear on the novel, because as you pointed out, Matt, the novel sort of sets up this binary of sorts between the novel and the dissertation. And that the character theorizes that those two things do different work in the world and he fetishizes, in a way, the novel as a more capacious way of contending

with the world than the dissertation. But, ironically, and though the character isn't quite alert or aware of this, he's using all of these academic discourses and methods in order to make what he considers the like preparatory work and research possible in order to write this imagined fantastical novel that will maybe, or maybe not, change his life.

MH

You know, this question of adhering to, or being obedient to the generic expectations of novelistic prodigiousness or something like that, or whatever currency. When I was teaching the novel, I was so struck by how, not only are those norms in some ways, like, totally irrelevant to many of the students, like they simply don't care—

BRB

Yeah. [laughter]

MH

—about that kind of, you know, refinement or aesthetic completion or totality, but they're also not fooled by the binary between the thesis and the novel in the beginning. They recognize instantly that neither is liberatory, you know. But there's just a way that being vulnerable about not only making a choice there for the character, but then saying how good it feels to make a choice and buying into the cruel optimism of the novel for a moment, like, that is a thing that absolutely resonates with young thinkers and writers in in the academy today. So I just, you know, it's an amazingly vulnerable gesture to me. I'm just wondering like did you see other folks doing that, or is that maybe coming from your poetry writing, or, like, where does that sort of bravery to make that move come from?

BRB

I do get asked this question now and again. Something like it, not quite as expansive as you articulated it, but—and my usual instinctive response is to say it's partly a symptom of growing up in the Facebook generation in which we posted about every aspect of our lives without shame or embarrassment and that over time that kind of hardened into an aesthetic action. But I think more critically it likely has to do, as well, with the work that I was most drawn to as a student both in my undergrad and in grad school. I remember reading Barthes's *Mourning Diary* for the first time and seeing, I think, this vulnerability in a more intense form expressed, that you're identifying that, where the grappling with technique, style, et cetera, is part of the work that Barthes is doing around grief in that book. But also, queer theory in general spoke to me in an embodied way, beyond just its sort of important theoretical work, because it revealed for me that beautiful sentences matter and that they can be critical aspects of the reading experience. And so I wanted to write beautiful sentences, I knew that quite early on, poetry, obviously, was my first way of doing that work. And when I was writing this novel, again, perhaps because of where I was in my life at the time, it was barely in a conscious decision. It was something that

felt automatic, to bring that vulnerability at the level of technique, style, aesthetic decision, you know, to bring that to bear on the narrative.

SW

I wanted to just jump in and and say, it's taking us a little bit back—it's a funny way of playing something like devil's advocate, but I have to say I found this deeply satisfying as a novel. So when I started it, I felt the thing you're describing, I felt that, okay, this is challenging the novel in all the ways that that we've discussed and it's not going to be normative or dominative as a technology, but by the end I felt satisfied in all the ways one does by a good novel. Right? I think it is plotted, there are—okay, the things we don't talk about, we don't teach anymore, but—character arcs, there is action, we go places, and I found the ending—you know, I don't maybe want to spoil it for listeners—but, it takes us to a place that I was waiting to go, in some sense, with you as the guide, reluctant to go, moved by, and so for me, it was a very satisfying experience as a novel. Which is sort of interesting then to say: what does it mean to write a novel that that works against that technology and yet satisfies some some longings we have as readers, and I wonder if—there are many different places we could take that question, but I do wonder if one place to take it is to the chorus? I know that's something you're thinking about, too, Matt, but the thing that to me felt the most against the grain of the novel form was the multiple voices here. And it's not just, oh, we have sort of multiple narrative voices or we have different people speaking but we also have the voices of other writers, the voices of theorists, the voices of your narrator which may not be the sincere or reliable voices, you know, and I'm interested in that particular thorniness, and how it works through the figure of the chorus for you. Because, again, like the novel sticks the landing for me as a novel in all kinds of ways, and then that for me is the thing that really lingered in productive ways.

BRB

Yeah, that's a great observation and a great question and I'm pleased to hear that it does land as a novel, in that there was quite a great deal of work in the revision stages to hopefully get to that point. Because, maybe this is a bit of too much insider baseball so to speak, but I remember having a conversation with an editor in the U.S. during the acquisition stage who felt that the character should more explicitly or overtly be transformed by the end. And if you have in any way done or read creative writing pedagogy, et cetera, you know that that's sort of one of the main craft norms and that it has a history and that it is often taken up as universal. So I was obviously—having the training I have, I was automatically kind of—disturbed is too strong of a word, but I was sort of turned off. And then I realized when I was revising the book that if there was going to be an experience of transformation it would likely emerge in relationship to the form itself, in that it does go from this sort of quite open, grappling, sort of formless somewhat—it seems at first somewhat formless—and then, yeah, there is a form and a narrative trajectory that emerges. But in terms of the chorus, it occurred to me quite early on that I needed to try to capture something of this, you know, plural register without writing in the second person. So the way that the character, the protagonist, engages with his community is through interviews, conversations with community members, and I wanted—it's not direct

dialogue, it's not like a direct transcription of dialogue—what it really is a synthesis, so the main narrative voice is in many ways interpreting what's being said to him, and that's what we're reading. And that was my way, I think, of trying to tap into this collective or communal mode that felt more allegiant to the reality of life in this region of the world which is Northern Alberta, and Canada, where we experience the effects of history, individually, of course, but as, you know, collective subjects.

MH

I'm wondering if there's a particular way that you're thinking about the chorus and mothering, in relation in this book. I mean there's that really beautiful section, meditation, on queer mothering and the main character's relationship with River. And then there's also the way that the main character has a relationship with his mother that's immediate in one sense but is also supplemented by—or not supplemented, that's probably the wrong word, but—nourished by a chorus of other Cree women. Yeah, like, so what's—there's something particular about a chorus that's anchored by Cree women mothering in this kind of broad social way

BRB

Yeah, I'll just read a passage from that chapter. It's very short.

"Mothering is about being with others in a context in which mutual flourishing is a shared goal. The culmination of this practice was the making of a world in which no one was imprisoned in their solitude."

And if I remember correctly, this paragraph came quite sort of late in the revision process, and as soon as I wrote it, I thought, this is probably one of the main thesis statements of the book. And then it alerted me to the fact that the book is about, in many ways, mothering. And it's perhaps a study of the ways that colonialism tries to disrupt more communal and social forms of mothering, and it has done so, and we see that expressed through some of the characters, but then perhaps, in a somewhat utopian vein, the book also is giving space for this line of continuity from the past into the present of undisrupted practices of mothering, and that those are causes for celebration and joy. And the character, as you noted, Matt, has a somewhat strained relationship with his own mother. They can't have the conversation that he thinks is necessary for the book he wants to write, and he juxtaposes that with the experiences he's had with other Cree women in his life and comes to the conclusion, of course, that he's not sort of doomed because of this silence that hovers over his relationship with his own mother.

SW

I was just listening to you to talk about the capacious vision of mothering here. I mean, it's related to this other thing that's happening in the book, very directly, which is: there are so many different forms of intimacy. And of course there's a kind of sex scene in roughly the middle of the book that I'm sure, Matt, students also have lots of thoughts about [laughter]—thumbs up, our

listeners can't see—but I was also struck by thinking about this as a romance, not to just go into all kinds of taxonomies, and not only because sex is really important in this novel, I think, politically, physically, at the level of form and craft, but also because it's a novel that does feel very much to be about love. And that's between friends, between families, between readers and books, et cetera. But I wonder if you might talk a little bit about, to use the literary term, whether the genre of romance factored into your process here, or how you thought about the place that that sex and romance would occupy in the novel. But how you figured out—I don't want the magician to reveal their tricks—but how, you've said, about making these different kinds of love and romance and intimacy resonate with each other as opposed to only being at odds. I mean, I think that's why we often taxonomize the romance novel and then put it somewhere else, because we don't think it's connected to these other types of relations that the novel is charting. So, how did you think about those different types of love together?

BRB

I think I was taking a cue from the history of queer literature understanding that I shouldn't separate out the erotic. That that wouldn't betray its status as literary fiction, but the two could be part and parcel. And I think as scholars of literature that for us is a pretty standard, taken for granted statement, but as a practitioner of fiction, I've noticed that that is not taken for granted, and that there is some resistance to writing about sex in a more explicit or detailed way. And of course we see all the time in contemporary fiction, still, where there'll be a quick sort of little illusion, or a little gesture to sex but it never happens, it's always cut away from. So I, of course, learn from queer literature that you sort of stay in the room, and you notice things, because those things also tell us about the characters and about the human condition more broadly. And the character also sets up this expectation, I think, for the reader, early on in that second chapter, where he makes the claim that his sex life and his intellectual life are in many ways connected, and that the sex felt like one sphere of living in which he could experiment with theory, and that it was where theory was made real and tactile. So yeah I wanted to put that experience at a similar level as my engagement with familial love and friendship, because I see those things as obviously nourishing each other, and that they're interrelated, and we can't think about them without thinking about the other aspects of that triangular structure. But you've also noted, too, Sarah, the part of the book that's about being in love with, or, a sort of fixation with literature and ideas, and this is something that I've continued to write about in the thing I'm working on right now, which is another novel. There's a similar voice, a similar character, who says something to the effect of, he felt sometimes that if he was ever going to have a true love, it would be probably the love for the books that he's read, and maybe one or two that he's produced himself.

MH

This reminds me in some ways of the way the book is also about mourning, which, of course, as the history of queer theory and also, like, the history of human beings has indicated, is inextricable from love and theorizing. But, you know, I was thinking about this moment in Mourning Diary that always gets me, it just always us me up, totally, and it comes after a

moment where Barthes says that he realizes that his mother had erased herself in order to facilitate his writing, like he could write because she, you know. And then he says on November 11th, solitude equals having no one at home to whom you can say, I'll be back at a specific time, or to whom you can just say, voila, I'm home now. So it's like this—it's love, which is grappling with the fact of presence and absence, but then also writing which hinges in this almost surprising way on presence and absence, like we could write when the mother has erased herself but then when she's gone there's nothing to say. I can't say anything. And this is what Barthes writes, he writes that he has nothing to say. Which I see you thinking through these same dynamics too, like what it's possible to write depending on what the condition of mourning is, or what your experience of mourning is. So, and I don't want to give away the ending, but could we just say like the book is kind of circular, or like cyclical, or like loops back on itself?

BRB

Yeah.

MH

So, I'm just wondering if you could think a little bit about, like, mourning, which I think, when we're in it, we always want it to end. But just mourning and form and how you were working with those two ideas together.

BRB

Mm-hmm. Yeah, great observations. So, the book's dedication says “for my kokum, who made all my writing possible,” so yeah, a direct echo of that line, that really beautiful line, devastating line, from Barthes. There is this subtle thing I'm doing with time, where it does loop, and it's in that, I think it's the third chapter, we're introduced to the story of Jack—yes, it is the third chapter—who's been imprisoned, and I set up these two parallel histories between the main character, the unnamed narrator, and Jack. They grow up together, they're the same age, they're cousins, and there's a moment at which their lives depart quite drastically. And the rest of the narrative that follows that chapter is essentially a kind of mourning diary. I suppose I'm taking a cue from that book, insofar as there's this sort of ongoing, kind of sporadic, vignette, diaristic style attempt at trying to remember the cousin. And I think, you know, obviously we can make a connection between like the cruel optimism of hoping that a novel can change someone's life, and also, you know, the Freudian notion of melancholy as a refusal to let go of the lost love object. And, yeah, there's a real sort of stuckness in the affective dimension of the novel that I've written here that is totally integral to how it works. Yeah, and I think even in the way it ends I'm demonstrating this sort of refusal to let go.

SW

It's amazing, this is a great place to sort of move us toward our end, because I have to tell you that when I was in graduate school and taking a seminar with Diana Fuss and we read

Mourning and Melancholia, she said—which seems like an obvious statement now but at the time was very transformative for me—she said, why don't we think of melancholia as the truly ethical position, because it's the one that is without end. You know, there's no moving on. And I think we can talk about nostalgia and melancholia with the minor—to use your title as its frame—but in so many ways, and I think that's what you're just articulating, both of you, in the question and in that answer, is that even if this is drawing on a mourning diary, that the craft and the exercise of the writing and the form are in fact much more melancholic in, particularly, that ethical—that's a very fraught way—but, ethical way. And it brings me actually directly to our signature question. So, each season we ask all of our guests the same question in closing, and this season our question is about whether or not you have a favorite teacher. And that could be a person, who comes to mind, but it could be a therapist or a place or a song or a book, but—favorites are always very difficult, I always dislike those questions—but I wonder if there's a particularly transformative teacher that you might tell us about in closing today.

BRB

That is a really lovely question and I immediately think about a professor I had in my undergrad whose name is Chloë Taylor. She's a philosopher, and she taught a class on animal studies that I took as an elective. And what was so transformative about that class for me was that she identified in me something that I wasn't quite able to fully see in myself, which was the capacity to . . . live an intellectual life, to have ideas that are interesting, and she helped sort of nourish that capacity in me in a whole host of ways, including paying for a flight to go to a conference, to go to NESA when it was in Washington D.C. I remember literally just showing up to the conference. I knew some friends and colleagues who were going, and I was like, I don't have a place to sleep, can I stay with you? Like that was literally—which, kind of is horrifying, now, to think about. But, you know, she did—I really just think about that moment so fondly. And maybe I'll just like do a little ode to feminist and queer classrooms more broadly and how in my experience, the generosity that is present in those classrooms, cultivated by the instructors, professors, et cetera.—I think really, truly changed my life. It's so cliche to say, but that is the case and I'm trying in all the ways that I can to replicate that experience in my own classrooms. And that feels to me the most important pedagogical lesson that I received from various queer and feminist instructors and professors.

SW

Thank you Billy-Ray and Matt. I want to remind our listeners that you can buy Billy-Ray's books in bookstores and online and we'll have some links to those on the episode's web page. And in conclusion, I want to say that in addition to Chloë Taylor, we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to the Ric Edelman College of Communication, Humanities & 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 Lauren Groff, Brandon Taylor, Kaveh Akbar, Ocean Vuong, 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.