11.4 Criticism and the Literary Ecosystem: Becca Rothfeld and Joanna Biggs (MM)

Transcript

Mesha Maren
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 Mesha Maron, novelist and associate professor of the practice of English at Duke University.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to our special mini-season on the literary ecosystem. This season grew out of a symposium that I hosted at Duke in March 2026, a symposium which itself grew out of a series of conversations I had with novel scholar Nancy Armstrong about the erosion of the literary ecosystem. When I say erosion, I mean the loss of book coverage in newspapers and magazines, the conglomeration of publishing houses, and the incursion of AI into publishing spaces. I organized the symposium as a countermeasure to these developments and as a space for conversation and community building. We are continuing this community building now on *Novel Dialogue*, with conversations between many of the guests from the symposium as well as a few new folks.

Today, we're talking to Becca Rothfeld, who is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and an editor at *The Point*. Previously, she was the non-fiction book critic of *The Washington Post*. Her essay collection, *All Things Are Too Small*, was published by Metropolitan Books in the U.S. and Virago in the U.K. in April 2024.

And Joanna Biggs, who is a contributing editor at *The Yale Review* and the author of *A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again*. She has written for *The London Review of Books, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The New York Times, Harper's Magazine, The Nation, The New Republic, Book Forum, Granta*, and elsewhere.

I'm going to ask you to each define for yourselves and for the listeners, what do you think of when I say literary ecosystem? What does that maybe mean to you?

Becca Rothfeld
I don't know that I have a very concrete notion of what the literary ecosystem actually is or encompasses. I mean, I think that one curiosity is that I have never felt that there is a ton of institutional support for the kind of writing that I do. And I actually think that in some ways now is a better time to be somebody who does kind of intellectually serious, or so I hope, and kind of philosophically informed writing for the public than when I began my education. Because at no point in my education, like at no point in my

undergraduate studies, and certainly at no point when I was in graduate school getting a PhD in philosophy, did I ever even read any of the kinds of things that I kind of was reading on my own that taught me that this kind of writing exists.

Like at no point in my graduate education did we read Lionel Trilling or did I hear somebody talk about *Partisan Review* or maybe there was a little bit of Susan Sontag, but there wasn't a ton of Susan Sontag, there wasn't Cynthia Ozick, there wasn't Irving Howe, none of this kind of stuff made its way into or had a home in, at least, educational institutions. And so if you were going to do the kind of writing that I ended up doing, you kind of had to teach yourself not only how to do it, but that it existed.

And so while there are many parts of the literary ecosystem that have fractured and degraded, even in this 10 years that I've been writing for a public audience, I do think one thing that has changed for the better is that there are a lot more institutions in the literary ecosystem around this idea of writing seriously and rigorously for the public. A ton have sprung up in recent years.

Joanna Biggs
I totally resonate with what Rebecca's saying, yeah, I'm not sure anyone showed me what it was, you know, when I was younger or when I was at university in England. But I do think, I suppose what I think of is, because I started out as an editor, I was at *The London Review of Books* before coming to the US, and I guess I thought of it as the magazines that existed around me. So the *TLS* had been there forever, as the *LRB*, the *New York Review*, so I thought of it in that way, I guess, which I don't know if that's the right way to think about it. But I suppose that was the thing for me.

And in that way, I share Becca's optimism: the things that were there are still there, and there are more, there are newer things. And even the things that we knew when I started out, at *n+1* is still there and still thriving. So that's how I think about it, I suppose.

MM
I love hearing that. I love any, any optimism that I can find anywhere. And both of you have touched on this just a little bit, but I'd love to have you talk more about how you came—what was your journey to doing the kind of writing that you do now? Becca, you said that it was not through maybe your academic education that you came to it. So how did you come to it? And then also, if we want to talk about, like, why is it important? Like, why do we care about literary criticism?

BR
So, I think I was always searching for the kind of mode of writing that I do now, and also the mode of reading that I, that I'm able to do now, which is, I'd like to think rigorous, but also digressive and omnivorous. It's not super specialized. But I just, I had never heard of sort of being a literary critic. So I assumed that if I wanted to be reading and thinking and leading the life of the mind, I had to do it in the academy. And so that was my plan. I was going to get a PhD in philosophy and be a philosophy professor. Which I think that at a sort of earlier time in history—speaking of changing ecosystems—it would have

been possible to do the kind of writing that I like to do in a philosophy department, you know, sort of in the mid-century, you had people like Stanley Cavell, who wrote about film, they wrote about music, they wrote about literature, and they did it in this really belletristic way. I don't think, for various reasons, concerning the kind of changing ecosystem of the university, that it's possible to do that as a professional academic, at least in a philosophy department, anymore.

But so all my professors were like, you shouldn't go straight to academia, you should try working in the real world first. And I was like, I can't imagine a job that I could possibly have in the real world that I would enjoy. And they're like, why don't you try working in a magazine? And so I got a job as assistant literary editor of *The New Republic* in 2014, sort of in the older incarnation of *The New Republic*. I was Leon Wieseltier's assistant. And it was through that job that I got my entire education in the existence of this kind of writing. I was totally unaware that there was such a thing in many magazines as the back of the book. I had grown up reading *The New Yorker*, but I had not really taken stock of how there was a back of the book and a front of the book. And I just totally wasn't aware. Most of the stuff that I read as a teenager was like Dostoevsky. I wasn't like, oh, there are people writing long essays about this that are kind of literature in their own right.

And so it was in the process of reading *The New Republic*: I fact-checked, I did copy editing of all the pieces in the back of the book. And then I managed to write one piece before that version of *The New Republic* imploded. And so immediately I was like, oh, this is great. This kind of has all of the aspects of graduate school that I'm looking for. And also people are writing in a way that people actually want to read, that I want to read. It seems like there's a connection between this kind of stylistic felicity and the intellectual felicity that's often missing in academic writing.

But I went to graduate school anyway, and I kept freelancing while I was in graduate school. And I kind of found myself freelancing more and more. And I found myself freelancing basically instead of doing the work that I was supposed to be doing for graduate school. And for much of graduate school, this was kind of a shameful secret because—this is one thing that has changed, as I was saying. When I got to graduate school, it really seemed like writing for the public was basically super stigmatized. I don't think that was quite as true in the particular department where I was because the Harvard philosophy department has a much more humanistic approach to philosophy. And there are people who are interested in literature and film. And it's not as bad as it would have been if I were in one of these more kind of strictly formal, logical departments. But still, it was not something that other people were doing or that it seemed like it was good or acceptable to do. So I kind of felt like this is something that I do secretly because I can't stop doing it. I'm doing it compulsively. And there was a job opening at *The Washington Post*. And I was like, you know what, I'm just going to apply for this. And I did. And I got the job. And so that is kind of how I became a professional critic. And I'm very, very lucky, obviously.

JB
Oh, that's so fascinating. I actually didn't know that. It's funny you should say, Becca, about the back of the book not existing. I now teach a little bit at Yale. And one of the graduate students this week asked me, what is the back of the book? Like, is that what everyone calls it? And I had to explain. I thought, oh, God, it's just a phrase that you just live with in this world.

MM
Should we break it down, what the back of the book is for listeners really quick?

JB
Yeah.

BR
Yeah. The back of the book is in a kind of general interest magazine. So not like *The London Review of Books*, the whole thing is the back of the book. Because it's just book reviews. But in a magazine like *The New Republic* or a magazine like *The New Yorker*, the back of the book is where long, critical essays live.

JB
Yeah. It's the same in England. The back of *The New Statesman*. And I, yeah, it's a shorthand. Yeah.

MM
Great. Thank you. Thanks for defining that for me.

JB
For me, it was a bit different from Becca because I left university and did a master's and wanted to do a PhD and had applied but didn't get any funding. At the same time, I was the lowest of the lower, the *LRB*. There's an editorial intern they have there. And it literally is, you know, opening the post and picking up the phone and making sure that everyone else is okay. And you start a tiny bit, just very gently learning to fact check pieces, the smallest pieces, the easiest pieces. And I was there for a year on an internship. It was paid as one of the few paid things. I didn't think I would have even done it otherwise. And I just got to stay. Someone left at the year I was there and I got to stay. And that was really my education. It was, I got into writing partly because that's what everyone did there. There was a sense that you could, you were learning editing at the same time as you were, you would write a piece or to learn how to do it, how to help other people do it.

So I always thought of it as kind of a mistake or an accident that there was just a book that needed reviewing and I filled in one day and have many years later, I'm still doing it 20 years or something. Um, but it gives me something quite special that you don't really get from editing. You don't get it from any other place. And the essay is a cool place to be. It's so experimental in the Woolfian sense. Like it's just all these different things you can have in it. And what does this stuff mean to me? Well, I'm English, so we don't

really go around making huge statements about…which is just terrible. I shouldn't have agreed to be on a podcast if I was refusing to do that. But I do think, um, there's a certain sort of quality of thinking and writing and subtlety and wit that it's possible in this space that isn't as possible in others.

MM
So I'm curious—this is to both of you and we can approach this however we'd like—but about your thoughts on meeting readers where they are versus leading or nudging them towards texts that maybe we see as worthy. I was reading recently the Barnes & Noble CEO, James Daunt said that his stores, quote, "make room for the type of book buyer who might not feel at ease in independent bookstores in which," according to him, customers are met with a, quote, sort of "scrutiny and also a sense of intellectual expectation," unquote. And I was wondering if we move from bookstores to book criticism with this in mind, we might ask, is there any value in meeting the reading public where they are? Is the act of reading in and of itself inherently a positive thing, no matter what we're reading? Or, do we see it more as our role to lead readers towards things that we see as worthy?

BR
Yeah, I have a lot of strong feelings about this. I don't think that the act of reading is inherently a positive thing. And I think one of the major dangers of the kind of collapse of the literary ecosystem is that people are just so grateful whenever anybody is reading anything, and even when they're reading it extremely badly, as long as reading is happening, people feel like they need to, they need to affirm that. And so I think that that really degrades the quality of reading, but I think there is, not only are there things that are so bad that they are not worth reading, but there are ways of approaching reading that are so bad that they kind of undercut a lot of what's valuable about reading. And I think about this a lot when I—there's a kind of book and a kind of writing that I guess I would sort of call, I would describe as intellectual poptimism, maybe, you know, there are these books that are like, you should read the great books because it's fun! Surfing with Sartre! That's the name of an actual book. I haven't read that book. So maybe it's not, it doesn't have the sort of tone that the title implies that it would have, but there's a, there's an entire genre of books and, and writings on the internet that proceed by trying to get people to read the great books or great works of philosophy or what have you by promising readers that they're really easy to read actually. And that reading them will just be like watching a TV show that you like or something.

And I think that if you're reading like that, you might as well not be reading at all in a way, because the thing—I'm not, maybe that's a bit extreme because it's always possible that you'll come to books with this attitude, sort of demanding ease and accessibility from them. And then the book itself is kind of unspoilable. It's not like you could be reading *Pride and Prejudice*. There's always the potential in a text like that, that the text will challenge you and that you'll come to enjoy being challenged by the text. But I do think that trying to convince readers to read by basically promising them that books are just like television, not only undermines all of the reasons why reading a great book is better and ultimately more satisfying than watching a bad piece of

television, but also just risks getting people to ask the sort of obvious question, which is like, okay, well, if you can't say anything in defense of this practice, besides "it's just like watching television," why shouldn't I just watch television? So I feel quite strongly that it's self-undermining to approach apologias for reading or defenses of reading or invitations to read in that way.

And I also think that if there is a fundamental ethic of public intellectualism, it is that you should approach the reader kind of as an equal and maybe as somebody who's less informed about a topic than you are, but as somebody who is curious about it and has the same intellectual capacities that you have. And so I think that once you start, I would not approach anybody that I regard as an equal by saying, it's fine that you only read romantesy. I wouldn't approach them that way. I think that that is a bad way to approach a loved one. A good way to approach a loved one is to hold them to a higher standard.

So I think that it is important to hold your audience to a higher standard. But I don't think that that is actually in conflict with meeting them where they are, because I think that almost everybody where they are has the capacity to enjoy reading difficult works of literature, reading difficult texts. And so if you, and I think in fact, if you approach them as if they do have that capacity, that is kind of what gets them to do it.

JB
Yeah. I don't know if I feel as feel quite the same way Becca does. I mean, I just keep thinking of other readers I've known who've been very omnivorous, but don't read the classics or, you know, I think for the majority of history, one, most people didn't read for a long time, but then like a lot of people would have read the railway trashy books, basically. And I'm not sure. I don't think that those people, even if they read a lot of stuff that isn't very nourishing, that they wouldn't eventually find themselves towards something better. And I don't mean to say that I think all reading is good. I think I mean that there is a pathway from that. Like, obviously when you're a kid, you don't read Dickens. You kind of just find you know, ways into more difficult books. I think it doesn't make sense for critics to say that bad books are good or that unnourishing books are nourishing. And part of our job has got to be helping people find their ways into it.

I mean, there are just—that's why university exists. Like you have to help people with context, and you have to explain where this writer's coming from. You have to break down the more difficult parts. There are, there is part of being a critic that is almost, it's like helping someone over that threshold. It is an important task to do. And I am wondering now whether, whether we just let them say: find us when you're ready. Or you know, hold out a hand to them. But, as Becca was talking, I'm just thinking of my mother, who just loved to read thrillers, and wouldn't read anything classic. And as a loved one, did I fail her by not saying—and she's dead now—should you read other things? II did often say to her, could she read other things? And she didn't actually want to. So sometimes I think let people read what they want to read and the people who are already reading will hopefully one day, you know, will find their way to something that's, that's better. I don't know if that's wishy-washy or whatever, but that's just trying to think from real experience.

BR
Yeah, I guess, sorry, if I can just say one thing, I guess I, I would say that I think—I don't know that this contradicts anything that you said or is in tension with it, it's just a way of kind of as a philosopher would say—this is a hideous word that I always use though, because I'm brainwashed as a philosopher—"precisifying" the thing that I previously said, which is I think that it's the task of a critic to show people why the difficulty of reading great books is valuable and show people that anybody can gain from, can be nourished by this difficulty, rather than trying to convince people that great books are not difficult. And so I think that there's an entire canon of: you can read the great books! fodder that takes as its premise: "actually, this stuff is not that difficult and it's just like watching television." And I think that that's just, that's a misguided approach, I guess I would say.

JB
My heart always sunk about this story that we ran in London about an editor of the *TLS* who would boast about reading a Shakespeare play, like all of Shakespeare in a year. And I thought, that doesn't seem—that seems a bit fast. That seems a bit like maybe he should stop, and I don't know. Anyway.

BR
Yeah. So it's not that a critic shouldn't try to help people or shouldn't play some kind of educational role. It's just that I think that the educational role that a critic plays should consist in saying: "the only difference between me and you is that I've had more time to kind of read this thing. Anybody can read this thing. You have the capacity to read this thing. Don't be intimidated by this thing. You should read it too. But that's not because you're going to read it and immediately find it easy. I find it hard. You'll find it hard too. You'll just find value in what's difficult about it."

JB
No, I like that. I like that. That was helpful to "precisify."

MM
I like precisifying. I'm going to nudge us just slightly towards AI, even though I think that probably many of us feel exhausted talking about AI, but I think it's a part of so many discussions these days because we sadly like cannot avoid it. And so I wanted to talk a little bit about aesthetic value judgment and AI, and I think aesthetic value judgment, we're already touching on this a bit, but it is essential to the act of literary criticism, right? But maybe asking ourselves if the role of aesthetic value judgment changes at all with AI? And in Laurent Dubreuil's essay "Metal Machine Music," he argues that the existence of AI-generated writing poses an existential aesthetic risk—that by interacting with vast amounts of bland AI-generated language, we risk losing our sense of value judgment. he says, quote, "if most of what we consume is automatically generated, we risk no longer being able to discern the differences many of us are already so intent on forgetting. This is our bland future, the consequence of intellectual downsizing," unquote. So my question is, if we combine this lack of discernment with an

apprehension around the potential elitism that we've been, we were just kind of touching on, the last question, and the historical prioritization of certain genres of writing, we enter a sort of hazy realm where the idea of judgment comes into question. So I wanted to get your takes on the role of aesthetic value judgment in literary criticism.

BR
I think this is a really good question. I don't think my thoughts are quite as worked out as I would wish that they were. And I hope in the future to actually be able to write a book about this. Possibly I didn't finish my PhD, and I think this is a great subject for a dissertation, because there's so much writing, the kind of central question in aesthetics, which is the field in which I specialized as a graduate student, is this question of aesthetic judgment. And yet there's almost no conversation between practicing critics and these kinds of theoreticians of aesthetic judgment.

But so here are just a few preliminary thoughtsI think a critic in some ways is in a good position—well, I mean, materially, a critic is in a bad position. We're getting less and less compensation. Maybe fewer and fewer people are reading, but just, metaphysically a critic is in a good position because I think that there are lots of reasons to think that aesthetic judgment is not the kind of thing that AI could ever do. I take my cues from Kant. I might not think that Kant's theory is exactly right in all of the details, but the basic idea of Kant's theory is that aesthetic judgment consists in an interaction between different faculties in a human person. So you have, a human being is constituted in a particular kind of way. And we make judgments of beauty when our faculties are kind of interacting with each other in a particular kind of way. I don't think that the details of Kant's account are, are persuasive to a modern audience. Like, you know, he thinks we have the faculty of the senses and the faculty of reason. And I don't think that we would parse it in that way.

But I think that the basic idea that what's happening when we're making an aesthetic judgment is we are reporting on the way that something affects a human sensory apparatus is correct. And I think that that's a reason why AI will never be able to make those kinds of judgments, whether it imperils our ability to engage in aesthetic evaluation is kind of another question. I'm not actually sure that I think that it imperils our ability to judge whether something is beautiful or not, or whether something is aesthetically successful in other ways or not.

But one thing that I do think that it imperils is I think criticism has a second function. Criticism has a function of—one thing we're doing when we write criticism is we're engaging in aesthetic evaluation. Another thing that we're doing is we are thinking about artifacts as kind of emanations of culture and using those artifacts to understand culture, even if we think that those artifacts are aesthetically bad. You know, so I've written reviews of a lot of books that I think are quite bad, like Jordan Peterson's book or Josh Hawley's book about manliness or whatever. And I think that it's still valuable to do criticism about those books because they teach us things about culture.

And so I think one problem if we end up doing criticism about automatically generated text is that text is maybe not evidentiary about culture in the same way that a product of a human sensibility is, because you might think that a human sensibility contains all kinds of subconscious clues to what's going on in culture, whereas just like a generated text doesn't. And so the, I think the real actual danger is that it will be less valuable to do criticism of crap. And I actually think it's really valuable to do criticism about crap when that crap is a human production.

JB
Oh, that's fascinating Becca, someone should write their dissertation—I don't know if it's you, you're busy—but someone just needs to definitely write—I'd read that book. I think of this slightly differently. I was thinking about, I heard an interview this week with a mathematician who was talking about the fact that AI had solved certain problems that existed for a long time in their field and that had solved them with surprising beauty and elegance, which is something that mathematicians value. And I was wondering how I would feel if an AI wrote a really beautiful novel, like it was just supposed to actually be good. Would I want to read it? And part of me thought, well, I'd be curious, I'd look at it, but then I guess the thing is, is even if it's beautiful, if it's not human, it's something else. It's not quite what I've been doing for my whole career and whole life and not really what I'd want to do going forward.

So the point is, it is like Becca said that they were emanation of culture and it's human culture. It's like what we've been able to do and think for such a long time. So, I suppose I worry that if the world is flooded with this is more like what I worry about when I think of the world being flooded with this AI stuff is the thinking that gets, that goes missing in that, that we don't get the chance to do the thinking that helps you create a sentence or helps you parse a sentence that the smoothing is the thing that kind of scares me. And you don't know what, what kind of processes are disappearing when that happens. I don't know.

I was kind of joking with myself thinking this over, while I was listening to Becca speak, that Sheila Heti wrote a piece for *The Yale Review*, talking about a chatbot that she interacts with online and writes with sometimes, has been fascinated by, that she kind of was trying to—ended up feeling that she is interested in writing a novel that chatbot might enjoy. And part of me thought, well, why don't we just let them do that, you know, write the novels to each other that each other can read and they can have their own ecosystem and we can maintain ours, you know? So yeah, that was kind of my weird joke with myself.

MM
I have one sort of closing question, that's just, I feel coming maybe somewhat organically out of what you all were just talking about. Becca, you just articulated this somewhat, but maybe we could dig a tiny bit deeper into, not only the, the value of literary criticism, but the value of criticizing things that we don't see as being beautiful. And I think this is the part of literary criticism that I personally struggle to explain, to people who don't, read a lot of literary criticism: is why would, why spend our time

writing, and/or reading, criticisms of things that we will, we know we're never going to maybe buy that book or, we didn't find the book to be particularly, beautiful or compelling. I personally think there's a lot of value in writing about those things, but I'll just throw it to the two of you.

BR
Yeah. I mean, I think this is one of criticism's sort of most important functions is as a barometer of culture. And I guess if you think of texts, and not just texts, sort of like artifacts more broadly, something like *The Bachelor* about which I definitely hope to write, as a kind of, reluctant *Bachelor* enthusiast, if you think of the artifacts that a culture produces as repositories of that culture's pathologies and repositories of that culture's subconscious longings and predilections, you might think that criticism is one of the best tools that we have for figuring out what a culture's unspoken assumptions are in the present. And I think that that is a really important thing that criticism does. And that's one of the reasons that many of my favorite pieces of criticism are not, are not engaged, or maybe they are, they're engaged in both aesthetic evaluation and in this kind of other, maybe more sociological pursuit. And so, yeah, I think that that's really very valuable. And, I think that that's one of the things that is very valuable about criticism.

JB
It can be challenging though. I mean, you can't have a whole magazine, only, *The LRB* about bad books or books that don't, are not worth our time or aesthetic objects of not. So, and you are asking a reader to engage, come with you on something that, you know, they will have already had prejudice about, I assume. But I do think, I'm thinking of particular examples of things of when I've, you know, there's Andrew Hagen, right? These fantastic pieces at *The LRB* where he's teasing celebrity memoirs and just like taking the temperature of all of them, seeing why there's so many, what's going on. I think that sort of thing can be a bit helpful, but it's not—and obviously there are times where you feel very passionately that a bad book is getting a huge amount of attention and it really needs to be kind of picked apart and, you know, critics are really the only one who are doing, doing that. There's an awful feeling sometimes where you don't want the feeling that you read a critic, go out to get the book, and you're like, oh, they were completely wrong. This is not good. Like, you know, you want that sense of honesty and in a piece of writing and in those magazines.

Yeah, I once, I once wrote an essay about , and it was sometimes a bit difficult to pin down exactly why she was important in the sense that you could talk about awards, you could talk about records sold, you could talk about kind of culture impact or longevity, but sometimes it's a bit of a, sometimes a mystery. And, you know, as a critic, you often have to be very humble. Madonna might not be listened to in hundreds of years of time. The last book I reviewed might not last and both being humble with, you know, something you might not understand, but being humble with popular culture and handling it with a bit of sensitivity, humility. And I mean, I ended up just saying it's a very joyful thing and that is a valuable, you know, that's valuable in our current line, but I

don't even know if that argument is, I don't know if it withstand Becca's philosophical, philosophical training.

BR
Do you have some things that people still read—like, I actually think it would be really fun to like write a book someday about people who are sort of only remembered because they are the subjects of essays that are still read. And there's a couple of these where it's like in *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling's most important book, which I love, he has this long essay about this guy named Parrington. And I keep encountering this guy, Parrington, who I probably, I now probably will read, although it sounds like I won't like him. He is mentioned in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. And, but I only know of him because he, he wrote, I guess, this study of the American novel that Trilling and Leslie Fiedler hate.

Or another example of this is one of the most important essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, this book of essays by the philosopher Stanley Cavell, is about this guy who apparently is wrong about Wittgenstein and like kind of nobody remembers this guy, but they still read this kind of review, this negative review of this guy in which Stanley Cavell lays out his positive view of Wittgenstein and whatever. So I think while it's good to have humility, maybe that's not my, I'm not the best at that. That's something I could work on, having more humility. I guess I try to think, even if I think that this thing that I'm writing about is like not an important text or not something that people will read, how can I write an essay that will stand the test of time? And of course I'm going to fail most of the time, maybe all of the time, but like what, what could a reader like 200 years from now who just wants to know what's going on in our culture, get from a review of this book that I think is crappy. It's at least what I try to ask myself.

JB
No, you totally achieved that Becca. What, your point is very funny and charming. I was just thinking, um, "The Decline of Book Reviewing" by Elizabeth Hardwick, like she's going at all these people who don't exist anymore. She's, you know, the *New York Times*, the editor of the *New York Times* book review, who no one remembers, other critics who write things no one remembers, but we all remember that piece because it led to the *New York Review of Books* and a whole era of, of an intellectual culture. So you're right, it is important to, puncture those people and just—because you don't necessarily know where it's going to lead.

MM
Thank you both so much for joining us. And here at the end of another *Novel Dialogue*, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, the Ric Edelman College at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern, Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer, and our music is by Scott Selisker.