

John Plotz: So many modern art forms are dealing with that notion, that we're living in game spaces, maybe our being isn't there, but our personality is out there. We're doing work out there, people fall in love on the internet. There's so many works now that are responding to that way in which our self is partially out there.

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book. Today we actually travel from Brandeis a few miles east to Harvard, to feature an event that occurred at the Mahindra Humanities Center in November of last year. The event was called *On Distraction*, and it is essentially a conversation between two of us who recently wrote books that are about distraction, attention, contemplation and other cognitive forms in between. The event was moderated by Robin Kelsey who is an art historian and the Dean of Arts and Humanities, and it features Marina Van Zuylen, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Bard College and author of an excellent recent book, *The Plenitude of Distraction*. I was invited to join Marina on the stage because I wrote a book recently called *Semi-Detached* which is also about distraction and absorption and the history of ways in which people have lost their minds, partially lost their minds, gazed at their navels and then looked back up and recovered their sense of balance. It was a really enjoyable conversation which we have edited down considerably for the purposes of the podcast. So, the curtain is drawn up on Marina beginning to speak about her book on distraction.

Marina Van Zuylen: Thank you so much for coming, it's unbelievable that you're all here. I wouldn't get out of bed with this cold but I'm glad you did. First of all I want to thank Robin, I want to thank Steve, I want to thank John also for writing this book.

M. Van Zuylen: So, I decided to write this book after I taught a class on promoting good idleness. Many of the students in this class confessed to me that they were on Adderall, and they were on Ritalin, and they let me on to the fact that their pills made them feel overly focused, helping them maybe get better results on their papers and their exams, but robbing them of the pleasures and intellectual enrichments of delayed gratification. They told me that they missed the open time that they thought should be associated with novels and poetry. The class turned out to be an unexpected exercise in soul-searching, about the connection between success, media, technology and the lost art of slowness. It also reminded me, while I was enrolling the students for the class, it reminded me of my first really hugely traumatic experience, which happened many, many years ago at Harvard as a freshman, when after taking some little test the first day, I was told

that my reading skills were particularly poor - how great for the self-esteem right away - and that I would have to enroll in Harvard's very special speed-reading class.

M. Van Zuylen: The first morning, about 100 of us looking very sheepish--none of us told our families--we sat in this huge amphitheater, it was the science center, and large chunks of texts were projected on a giant screen. The instructions were clear, we needed to distill what we read and answer pointed questions in order to indicate that we had grasped the argument. There was an obnoxious person next to me, this woman speed-reader who spoke so fast that I couldn't imagine for one second that she needed to take this class, and she looked at me and she said "Oh, I understand that you're a Russian Literature major. Well, this class is going to benefit you immensely because you will be able to read *The Brothers Karamazov* in the fraction of the time." I was, needless to say, horrified. Who is this person? And she came from Belgium. I mean, I came from France, so there was already this tension between us.

M. Van Zuylen: So, this horrible experience was decades before the various *slow movements* were encouraging people to linger over their foods and their futures. We had no computers back then, remember, and we would never have dreamt of something you I hope never have heard of, which is Google's "Popular Passages," a program that lets you explore a book in 10 seconds, pointing out what really is important when we read. Naturally, no literature-lover could either have designed either Google program or that atrocious speed-reading class, which actually never helped me in the least.

M. Van Zuylen: So, Darwin, as you will see, would have been the first objector to this kind of traumatic speed-reading experience. In this stunning entry from his journal, from May 1st, 1881, he bitterly concludes that extreme focus can be dangerous. In fact, more dangerous than distraction. His extreme focus on evolution, he writes, ended up shriveling his brain, shutting out his favorite poets and musicians, and impairing for good his judgment of taste. I'm going to read you a passage which is really heartbreaking and beautiful from Darwin's journal.

M. Van Zuylen: "Up to the age of 30 or beyond it, poetry of many kinds gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music, very great delight. I have tried lately to read Shakespeare and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures or music. My mind", and

pay attention to this because it's quite heartbreaking, "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact. But why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once a week." Once a week? That is really pitiful, Mr. Darwin. Once an hour.

John Plotz: Well, he hated leaving his house.

Marina Van Zuylen: He did, that's true.

M. Van Zuylen: "The loss of this taste," he adds, "is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character."

M. Van Zuylen: So, if losing one's train of thought is such a bad thing, then why didn't evolution fix it, providing us with a steel-like concentration? Could it be that distraction grants us actually a secret survivalist weapon? Unlike our primate siblings with their fierce capacity for fending off enemies, finding food, securing shelter, we are programmed, for better or for worse, for making light of our condition. As the great anthropologist Albert Piette, he should be world-famous and he's not, as Albert Piette notes, "As opposed to gorillas and chimpanzees, being human means to inhabit a presence-absence mode. To practice detached attentiveness, letting the minor and major modes coexist. This minimalism," he writes, "allows us never to get too deep into things, dipping, as we are, in activities peripheral to the situation at hand."

M. Van Zuylen: So, what can we learn from the fact that only humans can be simultaneously absent and present? Detached and connected? (Thank you.) Active and passive? Is it, I think it is, because we daydream, zone out, lose our thread of a conversation, that we can perhaps stop ourselves from being fanatics, forget the harshest blows and move on. Many of you surely remember a comment Primo Levi made in *If This Is a Man*, where he suggests that the paradoxical view that divided attention might have done more good than harm in Auschwitz. Despite his unthinkable misery, Levi felt grateful that at least on one fateful day, the wind was not blowing too hard.

M. Van Zuylen: So, what do we make of the fact that only *homo sapiens* is capable of the kind of existential detachment that tolerates an idea that goes nowhere, a thought that is never carried through? The upside of this is that we will endure far better than primates a weirdly constructive

cognitive blurriness. So, what if we can concentrate on our work all the time? I know we're worried about that. We're worried every time we look at our telephone, we're worried every time we Google *John Plotz*. Oh, that's how I recognized you, because I Googled you. So, swaying between crucial or less occurrences may well constitute strength, and not weakness. A very idiosyncratic type of intellectual creativity, one that feeds on divided attention and helps us balance the playful and the tragic.

M. Van Zuylen: You all have read that neurologists experimenting on ways people solve problems note that our best chance of getting something right, getting a solution, is to indulge in downtime. As you know, Nietzsche never had an idea without perambulating. He needed to walk aimlessly, he needed to daydream and to get lost in order to have that thought that was somewhere in the back of his mind. Indeed, putting the riddle at rest and storing it at the back of our minds rather than focusing on it *ad nauseum* liberates the circuitry of thinking. Hume's wonderful formula, "the storehouse of labor," recalibrates perfectly the dichotomy between work and play, attention and inattention. Thinking in a straight line, monitoring our every thought, is basically a losing battle, more and more, and we know it. Our innate way of relating to our surroundings and to our own thinking patterns is non-directed. Trapped by competing sensory and intellectual stimuli, we are, and it is, essentially absent-minded.

M. Van Zuylen: Tristram Shandy's meandering account of his birth is a case in point. The more Sterne's protagonist attempts to control the intricacies of his own autobiography, the more facts keep creeping in, crowding his initial narrative until it loses its shape altogether. Thank you.

John Plotz: Thank you so much, Robin, for this event, and thanks to Sarah and to Steve for organizing it. And Marina, thank you so much, that's great.

John Plotz: So, it is a really great pleasure to be here tonight and to take part in what I look forward to being just kind of an open conversation and freewheeling, but like Marina I'm going to just talk a little bit to set things up. So, the way I would frame it is that nowadays we have diagnoses like ADD or ADHD, and we have the account of social media addiction or Googleitis to anchor our discussion of distraction. There's a very robust tradition of understanding distraction as kind of free-range mental peregrination with, as Marina was saying, all its vices.

John Plotz: So, yes, new, Robin, I totally agree it is new. We have a new version of it, but then we also want to think about how much the new version of it is akin to older versions of it. So, those are recent diagnoses that

medicalize or burlesque the state, but in the early days of the church, the desert fathers were obsessed with *acedia*, which sorts of turns into sloth or *desidia* in later ages as a deadly sin, but is originally the state of restlessness and inability either to work or to pray. So that's the original Noonday Demon, is the demon that distracts you.

John Plotz: Later on, here in the shadow of William James Hall, it seems appropriate to recall a line from his 1890 *Principles of Psychology*, which actually I have to admit that I got not from Wikipedia but from Joshua Cohen's new book called *Attention*. (But maybe he got it from Wikipedia, it's totally possible). "Attention is the taking possession of the mind in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thoughts. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called," and I will just say it in English, "distraction." However, there is this account of *attention good*, *distraction bad*, and clearly both of us here are standing in front of you to discuss other ways maybe to think about distraction. I think, not necessarily to praise it, I really don't want my teenagers to see on Twitter that I'm in favor of distraction, but at least not to bury it.

John Plotz: So, I thought the best way to kick this off is to take about 15 or maybe 20 minutes to present the argument of my book, *Semi-Detached*. Marina, in terms of the amazing lapidary concision of your book, I feel about my book, I think there's a Samuel Johnson line, "I wrote a long letter because I did not have time to write a short one." I think you went ahead and wrote the short one, but I kind of wrote the long one. It is about this idea of semi-detachment, so I'm just going to talk a little about that.

John Plotz: "When you half-lose yourself in a work of art, what happens to the half that is left behind? The critical vocabulary to describe that sensation is lacking, but it's a familiar feeling nonetheless. When most carried away, audiences of even the most compelling artwork remain somewhat aware of their *actual* situation. Ideas about this kind of semi-detachment play a crucial, and I think an underexplored role in shaping a wide range of modern artworks." So, the argument of the book is, yes, this is a kind of phenomenological account of this feeling, but what I want to show is that there's a lot of artworks where the artist must be thinking about this, it's an *intentionalist* account.

John Plotz: Marina, you very rightly pointed to a key attribute of how we think about distraction, which is that the reader should be free to pick up what they want to pick, that's the kind of Roland Barthes account in

Pleasure of the Text, that the text may be there because the author put it there, but I the reader can take up or put down what I want. And I agree with that as an important way of thinking about what the conscious state in front of a work of art is, as it is in front of the world. But my argument is that these are artworks--the artworks I want to talk about--where in the inception of the artwork you already see that the person making the art must have understood that kind of doubleness as part of it. That isn't just a readerly response, it could be arbitrary, it could be to anything, but is also a response to something that you can show it to be present in the contours of the artwork itself.

John Plotz: So, I'm saying that this is *modern*, and for me it's really the last couple of hundred years that I'm interested in, but it is definitely there earlier. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the first chapter moves from an account of the young heroine, Maggie Tulliver you may remember, at play, to a description of the "benumbed arms" of the narrator who has been watching her. So, the narrator is speaking to us. "It is time the little play-fellow went in, I think, and there's a very bright fire to tempt her, the red light shines out from under the deepening gray of the sky. It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge... Ah! My arms are really benumbed. I've been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair," like this kind of chair "and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill as it looked one February afternoon, many years ago."

John Plotz: So, Eliot has an image of a doubled elbow-rest here, the bridge and the chair arm both, and I think that offers a way to think about the reading of the novel itself. Not only am I here, reading, I'm also there, absorbed, into their world. The narrator turns into a simulacrum of the reader, whose dreamlike entry into Maggie's world is bodied forth in that ellipsis-marked discovery, that the arms have been pressing onto the bridge and the armchair simultaneously.

John Plotz: So, one April morning, not very far from here, biking over the Mass Pike, listening to my iPod back where there were iPods, with traffic noise in one ear and The Carter Family in the other, I suddenly came to think about that moment in James as a fact of life, not just of art. Holding two things in my head at once, "cabin in the pines" and also the broken glass that I'd have to dodge at the end of the footbridge, suddenly struck me less as a quirk of George Eliot's armchair-doubling or elbow-doubling, and more as a record of something that had been happening to me all my life only happening in this evanescent and unsatisfactory way. Happening and then vanishing again because I lacked the vocabulary to make sense of it, to give it a

name and some attributes and in that kind of scholarly way to try to historicize it.

John Plotz: So, the title of Sherry Turkle's jeremiad a wonderful jeremiad, but Jeremiah about teenagers over networked lives, *Alone Together*, began to strike me less as an indictment of our present social condition than as a description of our perineal residence in a state of mental quasi-
abstraction. So I biked straight off that bridge and into the library, in fact Widener Library, sometimes it seems that I have not left since. So, just because it took me until the 2010s to have this realization did not mean, of course, that other people hadn't been having it before me, and one of the joys for me of Marina's book is to think about the two of us discovering different genealogies of this way that this is a thing that is new now and yet also keeps on happening in earlier times.

John Plotz: Not just under the shadow of William James but also footsteps away from 20 Quincy Street, where William and Henry lived, before the Harvard Faculty club was built on the ruins of Henry's bedroom. We might also give some thought to Henry James, here he's describing the protagonist of *The Tragic Muse*, and he picks up distraction and twists it a different way from William. So, you remember William talked about the "confused, dazed, scatter-brained state", but what Henry says is at this moment when he has met this fetching new person he's become interested in. "There was a new infusion in his consciousness, an element in his life which altered the relations of things. A new distraction in the French sense. He could recognize that as freely as possible, without being obliged to classify the agreeable resources as a new entanglement." So, I take it there that an entanglement would be kind of like what William James is talking about with attention. An entanglement would kind of anchor you to that person, but this is the agreeable possibility of it being a free relation, this infusion is a free infusion.

John Plotz: And by the way, since both the James brothers talk about this as being French I was like "Okay, well I'm going to look at the OED," and in fact if you go to 1526, "Hard it is to say one paternoster without distraction of the mind." So, in fact, it's a perfectly English, it's a long-term English phrase. The fact that people think of it as French. I don't know, Marina, maybe you have something to say about that? They don't call it Belgian, that's for sure.

John Plotz: That 16th-century usage of it, you can see there that's a sort of acedia problem, like "When I pray I find my mind slipping away", so that's really a classic distraction.

Robin Kelsey: Well, thank you. Those were wonderful introduction of the books that you've produced and I think it was clear that there's a tremendous amount of possible exchange between them. I think my experience as a teacher is that there have definitely been changed in the way that attention is mobilized by students, or not mobilized. I had an interesting experience a few years ago when I was teaching a tutorial and we read Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, and there's passages, beautiful passages, you cite the book in your book, Marina, where he's talking about boredom and my three students could not understand what Bachelard was talking about. It literally seemed like they could not understand what this experience was. And for me it was a moment of "Oh, your world is quite different from the one I grew up in, in which it is very easy for me to remember boredom of a kind that resembles what Bachelard describes", right?

Robin Kelsey: So, partly, I'm less interested in the anxiety about loss of attention than I am interested in the forms that distraction takes, the extent to which they're commodified at a much accelerated rate now. I'm thinking of Jonathan Crary's *24/7*. It's not a kind of "This has never happened before", but nonetheless, just as Buster Keaton is working with audiences to get them to understand how to handle the problems of attention in the moment when film emerges, that we are looking for models of how to handle the forms of attention and distraction that are available or not available to us right now.

John Plotz: I totally agree with that point. I remember the first time I saw people who do these poetic experiments using--is it called Shockwave, Like Flash players that you can't control?--where you go onto the internet and the poem just kind of comes at you. I think of that as an attempt to cognitively reckon with what does it mean to be immersed in this way and discover that turning on and off might seem to be easy but it's actually not that easy. I think that's right.

Marina Van Zuylen: Yeah, are we worried that we have too much focus, really? Because we're always looking for something, we're expecting something. We need the adrenaline, the high. Even getting some stupid text from someone we hate, it's still some kind of high.

Robin Kelsey: You have a wonderful expression in your book, "Pavlovian creatures of the internet".

John Plotz: Yeah.

M. Van Zuylen: Yeah, we are. It kills me that my students are so unhappy because on one level they're on their Adderall and their Ritalin and it does help

them, it makes them write maybe faster, but they're feeling, they're mourning something that they don't really know what they're mourning because it's not boredom, it's something else. I'm not sure what.

John Plotz: Can I put in a plug, do you know this new book *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh? I'm only half-way through it now so it might turn out to be wrong, but it's about somebody who cannot find that place of solitude and downtime, and so she medicates herself to achieve it which obviously has all sort of counter-productive results. But it's this notion, what's the Conrad line? "In the destructive element immerse"? You can't go out, it would be impossible to imagine: *Oh, I'll go sit on a farm for a while. But maybe I can pharmacopeia-ize my way back to that state.* It's fascinating. And that is a book that seems to me to be encountering the new qualitative situation.

Audience Question: Thank you both for really rich topics. As a philosopher I'm going to ask a philosophical question. So, let's suppose distraction is a kind of good, there's a question what kind of good is it? There's these certain instances of "I'm Hume and I'm trying to bring down Descartes and so going down the pub with my friends is a nice kind of distraction, so then I can come back and I can really show why he's wrong." That's an instrumental view of the goodness of distraction. But then it's interesting to then think about the case of art, right? What has Darwin lost, or the examples, John, that you were talking about, when we are in this distracted mode? It's less clear that that just has this instrumental value. There, it seems distraction is more of an intrinsically good state to be in. So, I just want to invite you to say a little bit more if you have thoughts about what kind of good distraction is. Is it an instrumental good? Is it intrinsic good?

John Plotz: Can I do that one first? I'm really glad you mentioned that, because Marina, when you were talking about Darwin I was thinking that there's another 19th-century example which I'm sure you were thinking of too, which is John Stuart Mill has this mental breakdown which he recuperates from by way of Coleridge. He really does kind of try to unpack that problem, whether what we needed was simply to be able to turn off the utilitarian brain, that would be the account that Bentham is good but just not all the time. You need some commercials too.

John Plotz: But he ends up coming down more on the notion that there is this other thing, I'm not sure if he uses the word "experience", I have to go back to Martin Jay's book, but I feel like the point there is that he's

trying to get at something where what he likes about Coleridge's poetry as distinct from other Romantic poetry is that it fuses thought and feeling. So, by Mill's account, there is this other thing which is that it makes you grapple with the difficulty of the fact that though I'm in my mind having this one thought and experience, somebody else out there is experiencing differently, and I can yes, somewhat apprehend it because poetry somewhat brings me into their world, but imagination doesn't take me all the way.

John Plotz: So I think, if I'm understanding your question, I think what I'm saying is not just that imagination becomes a cure-all panacea, like when we have an artistic experience it has this great utility, it gives us a secret passageway. It's actually more complicated than that, it's that the aesthetic experience, like trying to catch the eye of that Caravaggio character is at once a payoff, there's some sensual beauty, there's some apprehension, there's something that you get, and there's also a sense of distance as well. Do you know what I'm saying? The utility in a way is that it's a qualitatively different kind of utility.

Robin Kelsey: Marina, do you want to weigh in on this? Because you talk about that paradox in your book.

Marina Van Zuylen: Yeah, I mean, the presence-absence thing, I was mentioning briefly Nietzsche and how he would say "I can only really produce these thoughts when I am losing myself, when I'm not going in a straight line." So, again, I always feel a little bit disingenuous with this whole topic because of course I want to have the richest, most intense philosophical life possible despite or because of the distraction, and actually, I don't know how to put it. The presence-absence, this anthropologist who tells us that we couldn't live if we lived simply in the mode of presence, and so we have to absent ourselves from depth in order to get to a greater depth.

M. Van Zuylen: It's hard to explain but I really understand that. When you're talking with someone and you hear someone else's conversation, and you kind of are dying to listen to that other--*dichotic listening* it's called, we're all guilty of that. But it happens also when we're watching, say, *Breaking Bad*, I don't know how many people have, everyone has watched *Breaking Bad*. I never feel guilty when I'm watching *Breaking Bad* because I'm actually completely ensconced in a fictional world. I feel guilty when I feel that I am basically not together. I'm pressing this one button, I'm half-looking at one thing. For the philosopher, I think the philosopher wants a certain amount of lost time in order to find the time that will be the time that will allow them to write or to create. I think it has a connection to creativity.

Audience (Daniella Gatti): Thank you. So, I have two quick questions. One of them is just about, have any of you thought about how contemporary novels try to respond to these kind of distractions, especially internet? And the second question is more in your field, it's about that sort of weird thing where people get accused in the 19th century of basically falling into novels, being totally consumed by novels and that's really dangerous? So I just sort of wonder about that, especially because it kind of becomes gendered.

Marina Van Zuylen: John will answer your second question because he talks about that a huge amount. The first question, there are many contemporary novels now that use links, so you can read them on the internet. You can read them on your machine, or you can read them, and it's two utterly different experiences. There's a Paul LaFarge novel which I forget the title of, but it's all about following links, and I listened to it on Audible, so I missed it completely. He teaches with me and I said "I really liked your book" and he says "So what did you think of all the references to our distraction?" And of course, I didn't get any of that. John talks about the whole idea of free indirect discourse, which in some ways could be our pathology right now. We are free indirect discourse, right?

M. Van Zuylen: But the second question, I think the immersion and the danger of fiction.

John Plotz: Right, but I also take it Daniella, you're talking about *quixotism*, right? That is the way in which, sort of *Madame Bovary*, or *The Female Quixote* is an interesting 18th-century example of that, where people to whom the world of books becomes real life. Okay, I will mention *Wreck It Ralph* for the second time tonight. I think that so many modern art forms are dealing with that notion that we're living in game spaces. So, *Wreck It Ralph* literally lives inside a game but I think one of the reasons it works is the same reason that *Ready, Player One* works for us, which is that we are constantly thinking about the fact that we have avatars, we have a kind of fully developed, internet-mediated personality. Maybe our being isn't there, but our personality is out there, we're doing work out there, people fall in love on the internet. So, fine, *Second Life* itself is kind of dead as an experiment, but the notion that those kind of, the virtual worlding, I think that there's so many artworks now that are responding to that way in which our self is kind of partially out there.

M. Van Zuylen: What you said reminded me of a really wonderful experience. I taught this Don Quixote tutorial and Bard students are impossible, they do theater until midnight, so sometimes our tutorial was from 11pm to

I am because those were the only times we could all find together. We were talking about Madame Bovary and the dangers of fiction, and one of the students said to me "You know, we are Don Quixotes, because we inhabit the world of virtual reality. My brothers and I had a terrible childhood, our parents were abusive, the only place where we actually had a life was in these games," I mean, what are they? Games and...

John Plotz: Well, they're called "*MOOGs*"

M. Van Zuylen: I don't even know the terminology, but it made me stop in my tracks because I'm so old-fashioned. Reading is the only thing, and actually no. They had this beautiful, these memories. Their memories were memories of passing, doing some dangerous things that were virtual, that were not real. Their reality was miserable, their virtual reality was something that they could share, something they will remember. "Remember when", he told me. He talks to his brother about this as his childhood. So, this is such an incredible thing. I was blown away by that, and it made me feel I am so prejudiced, these kids, you guys, the youngsters have such rich life compared to stodgy me. I was just there.

John Plotz: We just had the telephone.

M. Van Zuylen: We just had the telephone.

John Plotz: And you could do the thought experiment. If movies had come after games, what would the cultural reaction to the movies be, where it's like you're being broadcast at? You're being brought into that world and given that world, whereas in the game space you're playing with and interacting with it, so maybe that would be the culturally valorized form.

M. Van Zuylen: But of course, when Don Quixote sees a puppet show and he thinks they're real and he destroys them, and then Orson Welles make the Don Quixote movie which is so great. Orson Welles makes it as Don Quixote and Sancho are at the movies, and when Don Quixote sees these characters galloping on the screen he gets up and destroys the screen, totally destroys the screen. And so, I don't know, do we live as intensely? And is it so terrible?

John Plotz: Can I just answer that question in a slightly different way though, too, Danielle? Which is that I do think there's a ton of novels nowadays that actually do bifurcate the internet persona and the lived experience. In other words, there's a kind of old-person account of

"Oh, 19 year olds are on Facebook all the time, therefore their whole being is bound up in their social transaction and their badges and all these other things", and for example, Sally Rooney, I really love both *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, and both of those are about the difference between what you appear like in that persona that's out there electronically versus the depth that you yourself possess which is inarticulate and struggling because it's personal and it's not personality, which is what gets played out out there. In other words, I think probably, just like in every generation, there's a range of artistic responses and one of them is to say "Well, there's that electronic space there, but then the real me is hidden down here and likes to be alone."

Robin Kelsey: Just take a couple more questions.

Audience Question 3: Thank you very much for both your talks. I have to confess that I was so intrigued by the Frenchness attributed to this distraction, that while you were speaking I went down an etymological rabbit hole on my *distraction-presence object* to look up [foreign language] and I learned that it has to do with separation or tearing away, and I thought "Oh, well, distraction, how does that work with extraction because extraction seems like the function or result of attention, or the opposite of distraction." If you are really attentive, then you are extracting something from the objective, which is also about separation and detachment and removal. So that was very perturbing to me, because I thought "Well, if you're present and attentive, that puts you in a dynamic of removal, or if you're distracted, and that still puts you in the state of removal, is attachment possible?"

John Plotz: There's no there, there.

Audience Question 3: Are we just doomed to a state of either being removed from the world, or always removing a part of the world from itself?

M. Van Zuylen: That's a beautiful question. I'm kind of speechless because of course there's no answer to that. There's a despair, there's always been a despair about it. I think I write about this in my book. I read yours but I didn't re-read mine.

John Plotz: I did.

M. Van Zuylen: Jonathan Edwards doing a real training program in order to not be distracted, and how he couldn't manage to do it. It's like St. Augustine trying not to eat, and the less he eats the more he's obsessed about food. If you want this perfect attentivity, attention, you're thinking

about something you desire, and you're not actually in that space of meditation. You're actually in a disembodied moment when you're focusing on the attempt.

John Plotz: The etymology that you're presenting is incredibly compelling, and the only thought I have to add to that is that from what I understand about *acedia* in the early days of the church, that's really a form of the problem, because the point is that the *acedia* comes to monks who are committed to meditating and being with the divine or considering the divine. They're not doing intellectual work, they're doing thinking in the Arendtian sense, they're just trying to think the thinking that ravel and unravels. The danger is that when you do that, you might attain something close to a divine, but demons come. The problem of *acedia* is demons coming, and the demons are really beautiful, so the problem is that you actually have succeeded in conjuring up something which you want to be a divine but might be demoniac because you've gone astray. They couldn't get out that, and as I understand it, Augustine's solution is basically con-cenobitism. In other words, you can't be monadic as a monk, you have to be cenobitic. So he has these injunctions about going and eating meals together. That's how you solve the Noonday Demon basically, is that you have lunch.

M. Van Zuylen: Yeah, you can't be alone.

John Plotz: But you give something up by doing that, because you give up the possibility of extracting because the revelation you have might actually be a grounded revelation, but it's too dangerous because it could be demoniac.

M. Van Zuylen: And it's ecstatic. Ecstasy is dangerous, as well all know all the time.

John Plotz: Lunch is safe.

Robin Kelsey: The mention of lunch and Augustine and hunger is making me hungry. So, before the beautiful demons come, I want to thank our two wonderful authors, Marina and John, for a fabulous conversation.

John Plotz: Recall This Book is normally hosted by John Plotz, Elizabeth Ferry, and various Brandeis colleagues. Our music is by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Editing and production by Anil Tripathy, Matthew Schratz and Mark Dellelo. For this collaborative episode, we're very grateful to Robin Kelsey, Sarah Razor and Steve Beale at Harvard, and to the Mahindra Humanities Center who also has a longer version of

this event on their YouTube channel, along with other various events hosted there.

John Plotz:

We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms and suggestions for future episodes, and if you enjoyed today's show please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast. You may be interested in checking out past episodes including topics like opiate addiction, minimalism, old and new media, the history of writing from Gilgamesh to computer coding with Martin Puchner, and an interview with Madeline Miller, author of *Circe*. Upcoming episodes will include a discussion about the comic novel with the amazing comic novelist Steve McCauley, a conversation with living legend of science fiction Sam Delany, and a discussion of animals, poetical and otherwise, with poet David Ferry and biologist E. O. Wilson.