John Plotz: Hi. Welcome to the bonus portion of our discussion with Helena De Bres of Wellesley. In this portion we discuss Exit Zero.

Elizabeth Ferry: So the book that I wanted to bring in has... comes from a very different place, but it also has a lot to say, both about stories and about what it means to narrate your life and what is the purpose of doing that. It's a book by an anthropologist named Christine Walley. The book is called *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago*. It's a story of her, or it's the telling of her, of Walley's experience as the daughter of a steel worker who in the 1980s, the factory that her father worked for and that everybody in her neighborhood pretty much worked for in southeast Chicago, closed. And Her father and pretty much everyone she knew were out of a job, and she had the opportunity to apply to Phillips Academy Exeter, applied and went, and became an anthropologist, wrote you know a bunch of things about more classical themes in anthropology. She wrote about a nature park in Tanzania was her first book, but was sort of persistently wanting to come back to this and sort of tell the story of her leaving, of her own class mobility, but not the mobility of her family and neighborhood and what that felt like. She does a brilliant job of telling this as a kind of particular story about the U.S., about de-industrialization, and about this tension between the kind of U.S. narrative of "getting out"-- I'm moving my fingers in a quotation-like fashion here.

John Plotz: You know there's a joke in Britain. You can always tell the anthropology department from a distance because people there go-[waggles fingers]

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, exactly. I had a friend who used to call it the Little Bunny Foo Foo.

John Plotz: Yeah, right?

Helena De Bres: What are the philosophers doing? I don't even want to know.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Tight. So, but this story about getting out and that this is kind of seen as the sort of triumphal end of the story when in fact, what happens and what is that sense of dislocation that comes about in relation to that? But she also writes really interestingly about what it's like to write an ethnography about herself and her family, both from a kind of ethical perspective and just a problem of writing. And a question about to what extent am I... *Is my family typical or not and what does that even mean?* And she has this really... Well I don't know, John, do you want to talk about "the story"?

John Plotz: Well, I was hoping you would. But I mean, like one of the things that really struck me, which Helena I think was why both Elizabeth and I proposed the pivot at this point, is that the story is ... I was going to say the poor man's ethnography but that's not quite right. It's more like her realization that when her dad answers one of her questions with a story, he's not deferring argumentation or refusing the analytic-- That *is* his analytic category. That is his strategy. And it's not ... Yeah, even now I feel bad. There's this cult concept of like "folk ethnography "or something, but it just means like different-

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, I mean it's-

John Plotz: You make meaning of the world in different ways. Citing a story that tells you about labor practices or whatever is a way of making that meaning...

Elizabeth Ferry: And she sort of reports it, and the way in which she describes it is sort of her ... She keeps coming back home. She's gone to Exeter, and then she goes to Pomona, and then she goes to graduate school. She keeps kind of trying to work through this here, and coming back and talking to her dad and sort of saying like, "Well, what was it like for the mill to close?" And wanting this kind of much more formally

analytic answer that sounds like you would get in graduate school or something.

Helena De Bres: Right, yeah.

John Plotz: Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: And she gets a story, and she's sort of repeatedly frustrated by this, but then comes to realize that this is a perfectly legible form of narratization and of discussion of the situation.

Helena De Bres: But it's complicated, right? Because in the one hand, she comes to see the story as a legitimate way of structuring your experience, and empowering in certain ways. But also, they're constraining so a lot of what she's saying in the earlier part of the book is that there are these particular kinds of narratives that people use, sort of master narratives to explain their own experience, that don't necessarily fit. And so if you're trapped within one of those kinds of stories, you're not able to speak sometimes. She said sometimes she felt that her father was not able to speak as a result of not being able to fit his experience into that sort of more standard story.

John Plotz: Totally.

Helena De Bres: So it's this idea that the story is both empowering and constraining.

John Plotz: Yeah, I think that's a great point. Because my thoughts about the book kind of went in two different directions. On the one hand, I thought of amazing books like Richard Hoggart, *Consequences of Literacy*, as sort of the same generation as Raymond Williams, like these British cultural studies types. But the way that he could tell the stories, it was much more explicit with him than with Williams, is to typify. He needed the solidarity narrative in order to make sense of it, and so that was one way it went. And then the other way I went was towards a book that I also think we're

going to talk about in a later podcast, is *Privilege*, by Shamus Khan.

Helena De Bres: Khan, yeah.

John Plotz: Do you know this book, Helena?

Helena De Bres: Yeah.

John Plotz: But it's a book about like being a student at and then teaching at a privileged prep school.

Elizabeth Ferry: Which I think is actually Exeter.

John Plotz: Which I think is Exeter, yeah, that's right.

Helena De Bres: The same one.

John Plotz: Right, good point, yeah, yeah, yeah. But one of the points that he makes, it's about availability of easy narratives, so just like a tiny little detail. He represented an awkward puzzle, because he was essentially an affluent non-white person at the school, so people didn't know how to place him. But he noticed that there's one category of like local working-class people that everyone knew how to make sense of, which is that there were a few people who worked at Exeter who were essentially mentally handicapped. Those people, everyone had a great relationship with because they kind of ... It "naturalized the difference", so it wasn't awkward. It's all about ... Yeah, it's awful, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

John Plotz: Because it's all about a narrative where you can tell a story where it makes sense that Billy who works in the kitchen and I could be like friends. (Now I'm moving my fingers, *friends*) because there's a narrative of difference there, like naturalized difference. But there are other kinds of relationships that were just incredible awkward, because nobody knew how to tell that story.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, the story, yeah. There's this book called *Stories We Live By*, by Dan McAdams, who's a psychologist. He's been writing a lot about, for years I guess, about the relationship between stories and people's perception of meaning in their lives. It's very much within the area that I'm interested in, and one interesting result of that research is that most people's life stories fit into about seven different plots. I think it's maybe seven.

John Plotz: Oh my God, it sounds like the Enneagram.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, exactly.

John Plotz: "Oh, you're a tragic romantic."

Helena De Bres: Yeah, basically. And there's a tendency, some people go towards the tragic, some towards the comic, you know?

John Plotz: Yes.

Helena De Bres: So there are these sort of very well-structured-

John Plotz: Wow.

Helena De Bres: Kinds of people.

John Plotz: Do the seven have names?

Helena De Bres: People ... I can't remember now. But you know, you can think about it as worrying, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: (Wizard…..)

Helena De Bres: It's one source of-

John Plotz: (Dwarf fighter…)

Helena De Bres: It's one source of doubt about usefulness, or the genuineness or authenticity of life storytelling, if we're really just fitting ourselves into these pre-existing culturally created-

Elizabeth Ferry: Legible, yeah.

Helena De Bres: Plots. So yeah, the sort of worry about artificiality I think comes up, and that discussion of Cusk too, and worries that Woolf has about his stories are being somehow, I don't know, not truly genuine, or being manufactured for their own narrative purposes. I'm not deeply troubled by that. I feel like you could still ... The fact that there's a certain amount of cultural determination to your story, I don't think takes it off the table as something that could generate meaning for you in a genuine way. It does raise some concerns about particular narratives that are maybe constraining or disempowering in a way which may be hard to get outside of it.

John Plotz: Yeah, and I also think there's just a point there about the comfort that we find when we're telling the story that people acknowledge. Okay, I'll share a story about something that happened to a friend of mine. So I have an African-American friend who was telling a story about her childhood in Georgia, to another academic. She said, "Anyway, so yeah, I got the name," her name, "Because my dad was a Mmm-" And the academic she was talking to said, "A minister?" And she was like, "No, a Marxist philosopher." And the woman was like, "Oh." But it was really uncomfortable, and there was like this awkward ... There was seriously like two or ... I was sitting there at the table, just with my head in my hands. There was like two or three minutes, and then finally my friend took pity on the other academic and said, "Oh, but my grandfather was a minister." And then the woman, who was an anthropologist by the way, was like-

Elizabeth Ferry: Oh, great.

John Plotz: Sorry. It was like, "Oh, of course he was." I'm like, "Of course he was." In what sense is "of course he was" the correct response?

Elizabeth Ferry: You just got done, yeah.

John Plotz: But it just, she needed to be grounded again in her story. Just like, "Give me a story to live by, the dad who's a minister." It was like, "Oh, dear," but right, yeah. But I feel like we're all the bad guy in that story, at times. We all find that.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, another thing I really loved about this *Exit Zero* book was just how she's struggling against the constraints of writing within her own discipline, right?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

Helena De Bres: So that academic writing, the form of academic writing, is not enough for her to express her experience, but she's not sure, *what is this thing I'm writing?* It's a similar question about, what is the form really that I need to express what I want to say? It's not really a memoir. It's not really a standard academic work. What is this thing? I think she does it very well. It's a different kind of thing. It seems well balanced to me, but a lot of the book is sort of struggling with that question about how to do that well.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, and I guess that holds the three together, actually. That's something that all three, both the Woolf, the Cusk and Chris Walley's book, are trying to sort of find. They're sort of in between these genres that are about the self or about the other, and trying to also kind of find their place within it.

John Plotz: Totally, yeah, and I know we need to wrap up now, but I did actually want to say another thing that I loved about this book, Elizabeth, which is just, it was a totally awesome book, was the way in which she is interested (and I think it's because of the difficulty of her own writing project) She's interested in a distinction between narratives of social mobility that are understood as like potentially collectively shared, versus narratives of individual social mobility. So on the one hand, she offers us a genre in which she can really

tell the story about her getting out and about, and then being able to look back and critically reflect.

John Plotz: But on the other hand, she reminds us that that's actually also kind of historically contingent. Because nowadays, in the last couple of decades, the narratives of social mobility are about individuals breaking away from their community. Like in the middle of the century, we had narratives of like community advancement, but we really don't have those anymore. We can look back and say, "Oh, well. There's this American story about mobility." But that mobility in the current economic reality is really different from what we have in the middle of the century when people ... when there was a genuinely growing middle class.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, and which actually was the story that steel workers believed, right?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: I mean, steel workers were examples of groups of people in communities that had a path, potentially at least, to mobility, but it was the path that was shut off for her father and for other people.

John Plotz: Oh my God, so it's like the version of this that would be, like the pop culture version of this would be from the movie *Breaking Away*, to *Exit Zero*. Because *Breaking Away,* he's going off to study in France, but it doesn't mean he's abandoning that, you know?

Elizabeth Ferry: Oh no, and there's that speech about like stonecutters built the University of Indiana, or Indiana University, yeah.

John Plotz: Right, right. We hope you enjoyed this bonus sliver of Recall This Book. Please let your friends know about the show by posting on Facebook or Tweeting, or writing a review on iTunes or wherever you normally get your podcast. We'll be back real soon.