

Helena De Bres: I think a lot of what people feel when they're writing memoir, writing about their lives, is that since they are putting together these pieces and discovering some structure. And for her, she says it's the greatest pleasure known to her to do that. It feels that there's a certain kind of order that she is discovering in writing about it. It comes together.

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. So, how do we do this? By looking at books that shaped the world we inherited.

John Plotz: Today, as usual, your hosts are me, John Plotz. Hello. And my favorite anthropologist to my left, Elizabeth Ferry. What did you think? Did you think you are my second favorite? Clifford Geertz is second and Malinowski third.... And the questions that bring us here today are subtle philosophical ones about telling and writing stories, and about how telling and writing stories about our lives has the potential to change those lives. So in other words, what difference does it make to how we live when we invent stories that explain the meanings of our lives? What about inventing life stories that are in some sense fictional? So, in order to open up this discussion, we'll range from modernist literature to a modern experiments in what's sometimes called auto-fiction, and also arrive, courtesy of my favorite anthropologist, at a brilliant recent ethnography that explores how American narratives about social mobility have changed in the past decade. Okay, so subtle philosophical, deep question, far deeper than me or Elizabeth. So it's a good thing that we have a subtle philosopher to help us explore these questions. Sitting further to Elizabeth's left is the Wellesley philosopher, Helena de Bres, author of many interesting and influential articles, including "The Many, Not The Few," "Pluralism About Global Distributive Justice," "Justice and Transnational Governance," "What's Special About the State", and here's one I haven't read, but I really want to, "Local Food, the Moral Case", and most recently an article that I think will give you some sense of why we're so excited to have her today, "Narrative And Meaning in Life".

John Plotz: And with a drum roll. I will say the book that Helena has chosen to discuss with us is...

Helena De Bres: It's "A Sketch of The Past". It's by the Virginia Woolf. You can find it in a collection of autobiographical writing that was published in the 1970s, I think, called *Moments of Being*.

Helena De Bres: So this is unfinished fragmentary memoir that Virginia Woolf wrote between 1939 and 1940 over the course of about a year or so. And she intended just to write it for a couple of days, but it took over. So a part of what's amusing about reading it is that half the time she's saying, I really should be writing my biography of Roger Fry, but I'm doing this instead. And she sort of compulsively starts writing.

Elizabeth Ferry: But I'm really bored of Roger's life.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, I'm over Roger. So she just found herself really caught up in writing this work about her life. I think it's very interesting for lots of reasons. We're going to get into those. Can't help but see it in line with my own current research interest that John was talking about.

Helena De Bres: I guess sort of a couple of different threads there. One is this question about what the connection might be between personal narration. So, storytelling about your own life, and meaning in life. Could it be that telling a story somehow makes your life more meaningful? Or does it uncover meaning that preexisted the stories? There's questions there. I think they come up in this book because part of what Woolf is doing is asking stuff. Why am I doing this? What's the value of doing this when I've been writing fiction for so long? And-

John Plotz: Actually, Helena, can I jump in on that? Because obviously as a... so one of the advantages of this podcast is that we all come to these things from our peculiar vantage point. And so, for me, as someone who's taught Woolf's fiction for so long, and I had never read this amazing piece, written almost at the end of her life.

John Plotz: I was struck by all the pieces that... like George Elliot talks about having a quarry for which she mines for fiction, and clearly what we're getting is the biographical quarry that she then turned into fiction. So, reading it, my experience of reading it, was to think about, well these are the stories that she used to make her world overall meaningful. They just happen, you know? But they're ones that happened to her.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. And she also talks explicitly about those moments she had growing up. She calls them moments of being, because that's the title of the collection, where she has the sort of empathic moments. Sometimes it's just a very simple kind of sensory event. It's not a complicated occasion. She suddenly has the sense of revelation, of some kind of order in the universe.

Helena De Bres: And there's just this really interesting passage where she continues describing and trying to understand what it is that's so significant about those moments. And she talks about the way it feels, that there's a certain kind of order that she is discovering in writing about it. It comes together.

Helena De Bres: I think a lot of what people feel when they're writing memoir, writing about their lives, is that since they're putting together these pieces and discovering some structure. And for her, she says it's the greatest pleasure known to her to do.

Elizabeth Ferry: One thing I find so fascinating about it, though, is that there are these moments of her sense of that limitation. Like, she has this one part where she describes a memory of seeing herself in the mirror and feeling badly. Ashamed, and wrong. And she tries to figure out why that might be, that maybe it has to do with

people talking about her mother's beauty, and sister's beauty, and connecting into other parts of her life.

Elizabeth Ferry: And then she says, But I don't really know why. And it makes me think if you can't even tell these things about yourself, how can you presume to have some understanding of what other people are doing.

Helena De Bres: Right. Yeah. That's one of the moments where she's talking about that. The singular difficulties of this form. She's discovering you don't... it's a very simple moment. It's her own life. There are multiple explanations for it. She can't get to the bottom of them.

Elizabeth Ferry: And she says that I have no reason to lie, and yet I don't know why.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, yeah. So there's that difficulty, and then she talks about other... the first 20 pages or so are really about these questions about the special challenges of writing a life truthfully, I suppose. The fact that there were many, many memories you could choose from, the fact that you don't really know yourself, you don't know others. You know, all these questions about the fallibility of memory, the shiftiness of the self.

John Plotz: Can I read a sentence that really struck me from early on, which is, she says "memoirs are failures because they leave out the person to whom things happened. The reasons that it's so difficult to describe any human being. So they say, this is what happened, but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened."

So that seems like one discrepancy she's dealing with is that there's the level of actuality in the world, but then there's the who underneath. But then the other thing she's dealing with is the present and the past. And I know that's two different dimensions, so that's complicated, but just to put it out there, because she's also saying that the problem of recalling the past is predicated on having a present that's still and calm enough that you can get back to that.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. Right. I think part of what's interesting about this work is that she seems to me to be at the beginning of the... I don't know. The history of the modern memoir, I think. Obviously people have been writing about their lives for a very long time. Julius Caesar did it. Autobiographical writing stretches all the way back. but memoir as we know it now has a narrower kind of connotation or meaning than autobiography. It's about the inner life a lot of the time, rather than external events. It's fragmentary, and the way that hers is.

She talks, too, sort of this question you raised about the present and the past self. She mentions how she's, as she's writing, I think I'm discovering the form for these notes. I need to include my present self alongside the past self. The I *now*, and the I *then*.

Helena De Bres: There's this distinction that gets made between the voice of innocence and the voice of experience. I think it's Silverman who put it that way, where a memoir now we expect to include that kind of mature reflective voice even in the telling of the earlier material and she's very aware of that and that's what adds this sort of depth to her story. She often starts off these entries with a little description of what she's doing, and then she goes back into the past and moves back and forth.

Elizabeth Ferry: In fact, even where she is is sometimes kind of confusing.

John Plotz: Totally.

Elizabeth Ferry: Is she talking about the past or the present.

John Plotz: Right. I mean, that was one thing that really struck me. There's actually a cyclical quality for time. I mean, I really hope that people who are listening to this are going to go ahead and read this unbelievable piece of writing, but it's about... she's really thinking about the death of her mother, which I believe was in early 1884 or something, but she's writing in 1939, and the dates align. So it's like, as she isn't... don't I have that right? As she writes in April of '39, she's thinking about April of 1884, when her mom was dying. I hope I don't have those dates wrong. There's almost a religious conception there of April brings me back to that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Exactly. I just wanted to bring up one other passage, because I think it pulls against the idea that you brought up in the introduction, which was that the past only becomes meaningful, or that your life becomes more meaningful as you tell it, because there's this extremely poignant thing about her, about writing *To The Lighthouse* and how... from when her mother died, when she was, I think, 13, to when she wrote *To The Lighthouse* when she was about 44.

Elizabeth Ferry: She was obsessed with her mother, and she couldn't stop thinking about her mother, and then she wrote it in a rush, and could no longer... and now not only who stopped thinking about her mother, but couldn't really remember her as well.

Elizabeth Ferry: And there's this very... she doesn't explicitly say, "And I'm sad about this," but it has this very sad quality. And at one point she goes on to say, "And I'd like to write about her more, but if I did, I might remember her even less." It's kind of the opposite of what...

John Plotz: Yes. I'm opposed to that. To me, that's romanticism, and I have a problem with that.

Elizabeth Ferry: You're opposed to her say-

John Plotz: I believe in it. That seems like an accurate account of her own experience. But what I like about writers like Woolf, and we haven't talked about Proust yet, but obviously one of the great things about this piece is it brings up the relationship between Woolf and Proust as two modernists who are grappling with memoir and life in a fictional form. That that's an inter-war project or something. The reason I'm opposed to it is that I feel like what somebody like Woolf does that's so great is she thinks about the ways in which experience as pure being is also always articulated through kind of memory conceptualization, having an idea about it.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, but I think those things are in the text, right?

John Plotz: Definitely. And there's a reason that people respond to... in Proust, they respond to the notion of the taste of the madeleine or something. Because the nostalgic allure of perfect recall is totally there, and Woolf and also in Proust.

Elizabeth Ferry: Sort of un-capturable.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Helena De Bres: One of the things I find really interesting about this piece is how her struggles with the artificiality of what she's doing. She often... maybe not struggles. She's just noticing as she's writing. She'll say things like, "I'm almost tempted to drag in my grandfather now." Or she'll say-

John Plotz: That's great.

Helena De Bres: To make an end here, where no end actually exists. So she feels the scene. And her tendency to make scenes out of the past she mentions, too. She says, "I know I do this in my fiction. It's the way I remember things."

John Plotz: Did she imagine this is intended for publication? Do you know?

Helena De Bres: I think that she did it at the beginning. As he moved on, it seemed that she was... she keeps saying things like, "I'm going to return to this. I'm seeing how this is going to be shaped." So maybe in the future she can-

John Plotz: Because. Oh, sorry.

Elizabeth Ferry: I feel like because right from the beginning by talking about other memoirs, it seems there's some self-consciousness about this as something that other people would read.

Helena De Bres: The tone is very non self-conscious. She just seems so intimate. She'll say things like, "I could check when I published *The Lighthouse*, but I don't feel like doing it right now."

John Plotz: It's like, we know that. 1927!

Elizabeth Ferry: That's when I put an asterisk . I'll get back to this later.

John Plotz: But you know... because I was going to say I really like... It reminded me of when Wittgenstein critiques himself. I really like what she said about her early essays, that her Common Reader essays were too Victorian, that she felt ashamed of the kind of rounded... I think she calls it the tea table quality of her writing.

And I appreciate that, because I agree with her about that. I don't like her essays at all, and that this doesn't seem like them. So that's kind of why I wondered whether she was at a different... whether this is just what her private writing is like, or whether she's actually at a different stage with this sort of writing.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. It's hard to know. I mean, yeah. Reading it, knowing that she died a few months after finishing it.

John Plotz: I know, it's painful.

Helena De Bres: That's another sort of other source of artificiality. She mentions that, when you know that later on that her brother died, and so when she's writing about her brother, she says there's this kind of now the foreboding that I feel in my voice as I write about him, and I kind of take it out, but at the time, I didn't know this was going to happen, so there's something false about the way that I'm describing it. And it's hard not to read this in that way to, knowing where she's heading.

John Plotz: So another question, because I know one of the directions we're heading here is to think about there's this recent labeling of a certain kind of fiction as auto-fiction. Meaning, we now have these authors who unashamedly say what I'm doing is writing my own life as fiction. It's just, Helena, I'd just love to get your philosophical thoughts, or your philosophy of art thoughts about just what it means that a piece like this allows us to see how much of Woolf's fiction is her own life. It is a form of life writing. Her fiction, too, is a problem of life writing.

Helena De Bres: I mean this connects to these sort of questions about gender you were raising. Some people worry about the way in which women writing auto-fiction are treated versus men writing auto-fiction, as they call it. There's this worry that when women do it, there's some kind of denigrating of the value of their work, whereas when men do, there isn't.

Because I think there's still is this greater valorization of fiction over nonfiction. Memoir as a subgenre, less so than it used to be, it's still thought if you want to really be an artist, a literary artist, you have to write a novel. And so, when women end up writing fiction that has autobiographical elements, that can be seen as a problem.

Elizabeth Ferry: Dilettantish or something.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. Whereas when you know, Knausgaard does it, it's suddenly-

John Plotz: Yes. I was going to say, it's Knausgaard. It's funny because like in both eras, we're talking about Proust and Proust is not exactly occupying like the kind of zero.... he's not occupying the dominant male status, and there's something weirdly marginalized about what Proust is doing. But when Knausgaard does it, you're right. I mean, right. He calls his book *My Struggle*. I mean, so yeah.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. I think in her case, obviously her writing predates that particular debate. I think it can be seen as a feminist act to write your memoirs and the early, you know, in that period, because so many men were doing it. It was much less common.

Helena De Bres: I guess there's a sense that as a woman your life is not interesting to write about. I'm sure Woolf did not have that view that her life was not interesting enough. But in general, there's some sense that it's a... I don't know. It's an empowering act to do it, to get your voice out there as a woman in a way, which maybe isn't so much for a guy. So do you want to move on to talking out about this-

John Plotz: About Rachel Cusk? Yeah, maybe we should.

Helena De Bres: Yeah, John has his doubts about Rachel.

John Plotz: I do.

Helena De Bres: I love her.

John Plotz: You do.

Helena De Bres: I shouldn't be calling her Rachel. You're supposed to use the surnames.

John Plotz: So we chose Rachel Cusk, who's a contemporary writer and very much one of the auto-fiction people. And she was born in '67, and she wrote a bunch of novels young. But then the things that people remember her for is this new trilogy, the Outline trilogy, Outline, Transit, and then the most recent one called Kudos, and we decided to talk about Kudos. I really feel like you should start off, Helena, because you've got the more appreciative account for us.

Helena De Bres: I think... I mean, she's a polarizing figure, so she has sort of an interesting trajectory, given our conversation today. So she started out writing fiction. She wrote several novels. A fairly traditional road. They were maybe a little bit over-written, I think people now think. It's a very, very different style from her current prose style. And she became frustrated with that form, partly for

feminist reasons. She felt that it was very gendered, didn't feel she could really stand the canon anymore.

Helena De Bres: She moved away from fiction to memoir, wrote three memoirs which were very, very honest.

John Plotz: I haven't read those.

Helena De Bres: They received some very critical reviews.

Elizabeth Ferry: And did they have to do with similar themes or topics?

Helena De Bres: No. Well, I think she's always been interested in family life, so the memoirs were about her family, about raising children, then a trip to, I think, Italy with her husband, with her family. And then her divorce. That was maybe the most controversial one.

Helena De Bres: And the reactions, then, were so extreme that she says she feels that the form malfunctioned for her and she was unable to write for three years. It's catapulted her into silence. And then she thought, well, the fiction didn't work for me, memoir didn't work for me. What can I do now?

She decided she needed to reinvent the novel, or create a new form. And I think often that's a grandiose claim, but I think she actually did in this case. So she needed a form that was not fiction and not memoir, some kind of combination. So she came up with this one.

Elizabeth Ferry: And is the term auto-fiction her term?

Helena De Bres: No, she didn't invent it, no. I think it was invented in the 1970s, actually, by some French theorist. I'm not sure if she likes that term.

John Plotz: Yes, Serge Doubrovsky. Wow, I did not know that. 1977, with his novel, *Son*.

Helena De Bres: People are a bit antsy about the terms. I'm not sure if she would claim it, but she certainly is one of the main people people discuss under that heading. So anyway.

John Plotz: Sheila Heti as another, who I really like.

Helena De Bres: I think people in general, most people think the form is very interesting. So it's the sort of sometimes called negative literature, or sort of passive narration. The narrator is really only shown via this active listening. Right? So each of these three books involve these extended monologues, really, on the part of people that the narrator, Faye, comes across.

Helena De Bres: And she has very few responses, but she's created via this structure in her as a negative space if you like. So it's a very interesting way to write a novel. I think people also appreciate her prose. It's very spear.

I think the main criticisms are ethical ones, really, of different kinds with the memoirs, and also with the fiction is, is sort of a bunch of worries. One, I think, is about the kind of cruelty that she displays in describing some of her characters. She's often very... physical descriptions in particular are quite vicious. So, part of it is, in the memoir, it was about revealing facts about her life, so about real people, being-

John Plotz: Knausgaard got caught up in that, too, didn't he? Wasn't he sued by his uncle or something?

Helena De Bres: Right. Yeah. So there's betrayal of real people, betrayal of the characters in some way, or at least unkind portrayal of them.

John Plotz: Wait, wait, wait. Sorry, Helena. Can I ask you more about that? You're talking about reviews, so the account was, I totally get the account that says it's cruel to real people to reveal this stuff about them, but you're saying it was also that he was mean to her *characters*?

Helena De Bres: It's maybe the view of humanity that's experienced by her description is sort of like... it's a kind of disgust often. Her description is ghoulish or ghastly, and snide. I read somewhere that she herself was very, very critical on her own body growing up and so she was always disgusted by herself, and so unfortunately that's come out as disgust about others.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yes. That's what I noticed in it.

Helena De Bres: So partly, I think, it's that, but then I think there might be-

Elizabeth Ferry: It reminded me a little bit of V. S. Naipaul sometimes.

Helena De Bres: Right.

John Plotz: Oh yeah.

Helena De Bres: I think the real... I mean, maybe this is what troubles you. I'm not sure, John. The real ethical concern seems to be about her worldview. It's just very dark. It's this extremely dark vision, in particular about family life. She's really given up, in the books anyway, on the possibility of a functional, egalitarian, mutually-supportive heterosexual relationship. It's just dark.

Elizabeth Ferry: Or even the presence of affection or-

Helena De Bres: Yeah, everyone's divorced, their ex-husbands treat the children horribly. The mothers are totally unsympathetic. It's just awful. I don't read it is finally being that nihilistic, but I know many people do.

John Plotz: That's really interesting. I have to say, my reaction to it. You've made me change my thinking about the coldness of her, because I'm a huge fan, as Elizabeth knows, of Doris Lessing. Yeah, and I do like Doris Lessing's coldness a lot, and I actually think Doris Lessing has an auto-fiction character who is extremely interesting. Especially novels like the *Golden Notebook*, where clearly she's just processing, quarrying her own life at a great rate. And I don't mind the intensity of detachment and coldness in her. What I feel about Cusk is that it's a response to just, what seems to me, clumsy technique. I just see her as taking a series of Polaroids, and they don't seem interestingly woven together.

It's just like, oh, and then there was this other... it's like one jerk after another. I just feel like anybody who's been at a department meeting knows that it's really easy to make other people look bad. You know? Like you can always find the unsympathetic side of other people. That's probably the easiest thing to do, is to pick other people's motives apart. And so my feeling about Rachel Cusk is that's what she's doing. She's just, yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: That feels too easy to do or something?

Helena De Bres: I feel like it's more complicated than that, though. Because I feel, maybe this is a projection, but I always feel there's empathy there. Some people get skewered, like at the beginning of *Kudos*, the guy on the plane.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's the passage I brought to discuss, yeah.

Helena De Bres: It's just kind of awful. But even that guy, there's just so many [crosstalk].

John Plotz: There's man-spreading and mansplaining and all that [crosstalk].

Elizabeth Ferry: Trying to kill his dog.

John Plotz: Certainly the men don't come across well. That's fair.

Helena De Bres: But some of them do. So in this one, the guide to the city, he seems to be on the spectrum. The younger guy. I think it comes across very sympathetically. He's the only person who really... all these characters just talking at her like she's engaging-

Elizabeth Ferry: Later the woman writer is... she's described, and she sort of describes herself in ways that are very negative, but she comes across as having a lot of humor.

Helena De Bres: Linda. Yeah. She's hilarious. Yeah. This woman who's been on tour so long, that [crosstalk 00:24:13].

Elizabeth Ferry: She's getting fat.

Helena De Bres: She's going through the stages of aging, yes.

Elizabeth Ferry: Her dress has become like her apartment.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. She's hilarious. I feel like these empathy right through, and I feel like these empathy for the characters and what they're revealing. I think there's empathy for us, or at least women having to listen to men talking about themselves. So that kind of comes through. Maybe empathy. I don't know. We have some empathy for her, making her listen. I think it relates to it but then I feel-

John Plotz: I mean just the point about having sympathy or having empathy for her. I guess we could talk about sympathy and empathy, but I actually feel like the fact that we are meant to identify with her at the center of it doesn't necessarily make me feel any warmer about it. Because then, again to go back to the department metaphor, that's like what people do when they feel really good about themselves and bad about everybody around them.

Like if I really felt like she felt, you know, if she was including herself in this account, I think I might feel differently about it. But that isn't what I feel. Again, I might be wrong, but what I feel is that this is like a scathing anatomy, which I also feel in Doris Lessing, but the thing that redeems Lessing for me is that I feel like it is immensely subtle. Like what Lessing is doing is... she doesn't give anyone a break, but she is willing to sort out and disarticulate one set of feelings from another, whereas in Cusk, I just feel like, oh, it's this same rhythm. It's just over and over again.

Elizabeth Ferry: I was kind of befuddled by it. So I'll say that, but I think as we're talking, I'm realizing that one thing I sort of liked about it maybe was that there's this implicit idea that the listener is noticing and somehow choosing by what they notice.

Elizabeth Ferry: And so the insistence comes to feel like depression or something, right? Like that there's this sort of heaviness on the part of the listener, which is making things sound shitty.

Helena De Bres: It's coloring the whole world.

Elizabeth Ferry: It's making everything seem shitty, right? That is... maybe that's what you were describing as the negative space of the subject.

Helena De Bres: Right. Yeah, because there was that sort of penetration of her voice into everything, too. Because when she's reporting [their speech, which she's doing, most of the time, but her voice is in there, just this kind of homogenizing tendency. Everyone starts sounding like her, even people who clearly shouldn't sound like her, like the register or the syntax is way too complicated for the

plane guy. And then she's back to his voice. You do get the sense that, yeah, it's very much-

John Plotz: How does that not bother you?

Helena De Bres: I love it.

John Plotz: You do?

Helena De Bres: I find it really interest--I mean, part of it, I think I just find it so funny. So much that I find very funny. And part of it is that shift between registers. I find that funny across the board. I love it when people move from something that said some kind of, I don't know, I don't want to call it a low diction...it increases her sense of her own alienation once we realize that even as she's listening, she's there listening to herself, she's trapped in this perspective. She can't get out. I find that empathy-generating rather than alienating.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Helena De Bres: Just relieved that-

Elizabeth Ferry: I think I'm liking it more as we're talking about it.

John Plotz: I think it's, yeah, it's good to think with. How would you compare it to Woolf?

Helena De Bres: That's a good question. I was thinking as, sort of leading up to this, that all three of the books that we were reading are all quite dark and if Virginia Woolf's memoir that she wrote just before she committed suicide is the lightest thing that you're reading, you've got a problem.

John Plotz: You've got a problem. Right.

Helena De Bres: There is darkness to both of them, but also I think there's searing intelligence in the background and as... even when they're talking about dark things there's something, I didn't know, exhilarating about them, about the use of this elegance of form, I guess, in response to really traumatic events. I find that kind of thing-

Elizabeth Ferry: The form didn't feel elegant to me, I would say.

Helena De Bres: But what about the sentence though? At the sentence level? I feel like the sentences are-

Elizabeth Ferry: I liked the sparseness. Yeah. There was something... maybe I just hadn't learned enough how to read it yet, but there was something. I also had the feeling that John had of sort of like... I want you to do a little more here to tell me where I am, or something like that.

John Plotz: It's interesting. We're going to do a podcast in a few weeks about John Lanchester, his new novel, *The Wall*. I feel like both it and Cusk are really influenced by Kazuo Ishiguro. There's a kind of flat affect on the level of sentence, like a refusal to interiorize, which is obviously very different from Woolf.

John Plotz: But it's interesting to think about whether that's a rejection of Woolf. I feel like you're making the case that it's more like an extension of some experiment she's already doing, has as its outcome, this sort of flat affect.

Helena De Bres: Apparently one of her early novels was a version of *Mrs Dalloway*.

John Plotz: Really?

Helena De Bres: Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Oh, wow. That's interesting. I feel like Ishiguro is different, though, because there's a refusal to interiorize, but the interiority is painfully obvious to the reader, right? I mean, it's the sort unreliable narrator who is not going to admit their complicity in Japanese imperial art, for instance.

John Plotz: Oh yeah. You're talking about *Artist of the Floating World*.

Elizabeth Ferry: *Artist of the Floating World*, yes.

John Plotz: I absolutely love that book. I agree. [crosstalk 00:29:57] I do think that as he goes forward, I think as something later, like *Never Let Me Go* or *the Sleeping Giant*, they're just like he's simplifying his world.

Elizabeth Ferry: But there's always something underneath that's more complex that's being denied, whereas this doesn't seem like that. This seems like it's all there.

John Plotz: Yeah. Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: It's all right.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, it's interesting. [crosstalk 00:30:22] We live in a behaviorist moment. It is very fashionable now to believe that there's nothing there. So yeah, I get that and I, and I admire people who can [crosstalk 00:30:32]. Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: ... is all that's there.

Helena De Bres: One thing that I think can extract the general theme of that conversation, about Woolf, too, is in these books there is this question about what stories are for, or whether it's possible to tell a story. So the narrator says at some point, maybe not in this book, but in an earlier one, that she's given up on stories. She doesn't

believe in them anymore. She just doesn't. She thinks that all narratives are false.

Helena De Bres: Some of the interlocutors also sort of have that concern about the falsity of stories and conversation. So yeah, this is question about whether it's possible.

Helena De Bres: Of course, the people she's talking to are very invested in stories. They're telling them all the time. They have just this perfect narrative structure, like the bells story. It starts with the bells, and then toys, and the bells suddenly come back and it's raining and it's this cataclysmic moment.

Helena De Bres: It very much feels like a short story.

Elizabeth Ferry: Very shaped, yeah.

Helena De Bres: Yeah. There's a kind of falsity to it. She said in some interview that I read that she thinks that after you've been through a period of great suffering, which she did going through a divorce, it seems, that it becomes impossible to really trust stories anymore. It becomes ridiculous. So then--John and Jack, and getting to do things together—she just thinks it seems massively artificial, and that's why she moved away from fiction. She needed some new kind of form. She doesn't believe in the stories. The whole thing is kind of commenting on the artificiality of stories via story time.

John Plotz: So this is a great moment to turn to our Recallable Books, which is the recommendation for further related reading on the topic, and along with the books we discussed today, and also the various digressions that we went down, there will be links to those on our website, along with other material. So maybe Elizabeth, do you want to start off with this?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, I was thinking of a book, also a kind of a genre-bending book by an anthropologist. In this case the anthropologist, Renato Rosaldo, wrote a book called *The Day of Shelley's Death*, which is a book of poems that he... it was published maybe in 2016, I'm going to say. And it's about a day in October, I believe, of 1981 when his wife, the anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo, fell to her death from a mountain in the Philippines, moments after having left the house that she and he and their two quite small children were staying.

Elizabeth Ferry: This is something that he's written about. He actually republishes an essay called "Grief and the Head Hunter's Rage" in the book, along with a lot of poems about the day. And they're quite focused on the day, and the days that follow, from a whole bunch of different perspectives, including his own and various people in the village.

Elizabeth Ferry: One gets the feeling, and I believe he says this as well, that it sort of could, he could only write about this in this kind of a way 30 years or almost 40 years, I guess. There's this sort of sense of distance and the ability to kind of begin to

approach this, to tell stories about it in an extended way, and also that it either exceeds or needs to be reduced to a poetic form of thinking about it. I highly recommend it.

John Plotz: That sounds great. And Helena?

Helena De Bres: Yeah, I'd like to recommend this book called *Memoir: An Introduction*. Maybe just *Memoir* by Thomas Couser. It's a mixture of a bunch of different things. Some of it is just a history of the genre, so memoir as we know it today, sort of setting it in an historical context. Some of it is what you might think of as literary studies. Why this genre should matter to us. Why genre matters in general. There are some philosophical sections, too. Chapters about ethical issues that arise in the course of writing about memoir to do with truth telling. What sort of true is an issue in nonfiction, what kind of truth telling responsibility do writers of nonfiction have.

John Plotz: We haven't talked about *The Moth* in all this time.

Helena De Bres: But also questions about your responsibility to those you write about in nonfiction, so that relates to what we're talking about with Rachel Cusk. So yeah, just a really nice compact discussion of what I think are some of the key conceptual and evaluative questions in this area. And it's really well written. It's just a pleasure to read.

John Plotz: That's good. Yeah, that's great. And so my recommendation is totally in response to being so blown away by Woolf's "Sketch Of The Past." It's contemporaneous, which is George Orwell's 1937 book, *Road to Wigan Pier*, which is also bound up in these problems of truth telling and facticity and actuality. So you may remember it. It's his book after *Down and Out in Paris and London*. It's a description of working class life. And in the north, you may remember it's about miners. He goes down the mine. There's this sense of the gap between his life and working class life. But what you might forget, there's an incredible break in the middle in which he says, "In order to make sense of this, you actually need to know about me." So he turns to memoir as a way of justifying the entire ethical project of getting to know these people whom he's marking as very different from him, and I find that incredibly poignant.

John Plotz: And I would also say my friend, Alex Wallach, has written an incredible book called *Or Orwell*. No, I did not stutter, *Or Orwell*, which is about the generic braveness of that kind of move. It's just really interesting for thinking about... I do think it's Rachel Cusk-like territory, that question of where yourself is present in the account you offer of the life.

John Plotz: Great. Well, Helena, thank you so much. What a pleasure.

Helena De Bres: Thank you. It was great.

John Plotz: We have to have you back. It was a great conversation.

Helena De Bres: I had a great time. I don't want to stop.

John Plotz: I will just say now that Recall This Book is hosted, *comme toujours*, by John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. Music comes from a song by Eric Chaslow and Barbara Cassidy, Fly Away. Sound editing is done by our undergraduate intern, Claire Ogden, and website design and social media are done by Matthew Schratz recently graduated from the Brandeis English department.

John Plotz: We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism, or suggestions for future episodes. Email us directly or contact us via social media or our website. Finally, and I cannot say this passionately and beseechingly enough, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.

John Plotz: You may be interested in checking out past episodes, including topics like opiate addiction, minimalism, old and new media, as well as interviews with Samuel Delaney and Madeline Miller. So from all of us at Recall This Book, thanks for listening.

John Plotz: Newsflash! There's a bonus portion to the conversation. Helena, Elizabeth and I also discussed *Exit Zero*, which is a fantastic ethnography by Christine Whalley about social mobility and the stories that people growing up in poor areas or neighborhoods tell to explain why they stay or why they go. You can find that bonus conversation exclusively on our website, recallthisbook.org, along with a host of other goodies like an essay by Elizabeth about minimalism, and links to material we discussed in the show. So head over there to check it out after the episode.