

John Plotz: Hello, and welcome to a special peripatetic edition of Recall This Book, with your light-footed host, John Plotz. The conversation you're about to hear took place in Odense, Denmark just after a conference called Love Etc. I'm sorry to report that conference was a lot less risqué than it sounds. And in my case the love was mainly for the city's incredible marzipan, and a little bit for the very cute Hans Christian Andersen house.

John Plotz: But anyway, as the conference was ending, I was lucky enough to track down two of its star participants. Rita Felski, who organized the conference and is the Niels Bohr professor of literature at the University of Southern Denmark is also a revered literary theorist, author of such influential works as *The Uses of Literature* and *Limits of Critique*. Namwali Serpell, an English professor at UC Berkeley, recently published her first novel, *The Old Drift*. And her short story "The Sack" won the 2015 Caine prize for African fiction in English.

John Plotz: So among other things, our conversation explored what happens both cognitively and emotionally when we get drawn into a work of art, begin to think *with* or think *as* somebody else. And the three of us also discussed whether Zadie Smith's recent article In defense of fiction in the *New York Review of Books* is right to find in fiction a basis for empathy between actual human beings.

Namwali S.: I think that we had an interesting conversation at lunch on the first day prompted by the ambient question of love about whether or not we teach books that we love or are we ever willing to teach books that we hate, etc. and there were varying opinions about it. I personally don't teach books that I love because I want to preserve the aesthetic expression. I don't even want to talk about *Howards End* to anybody because I know I will find a flaw in something that I once found perfect, and I want to preserve that feeling. So, there's this way in which the conversation about teaching has kind of hovered around the conference, and one book that I found I came to love after teaching it. So, I didn't like it at first but teaching attuned me to, was *Never Let Me Go*.

Namwali S.: So, it's a Contemporary Novel class, and it felt like a good novel to teach. In fact, I hadn't taught it the first time. I gave students an option of either reading that or reading Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead*. Most students chose *Never Let Me Go*. So, the next time I taught the class I taught *Never Let Me Go* and teaching it and lecturing on it, attuned me to things about it that reading it on my own or even reading about it or even reading the all glowing reviews did not do. So, it's almost the opposite of what most people think, which is that to teach something is to destroy it. And it's also something that I had thought that before but somehow that you can have an attunement process through close reading and through teaching.

Rita Felski: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's something I've been thinking a lot about too. This new book I have, it maps out three different ways of becoming attached to one's identification with its various dimensions of this idea of attunement. And the third is this idea of interpretation, meaning the classroom and research but

focusing on the classroom and as Namwali was saying, we tend to have this assumption that we or the students arrive with these attachments and then we lose the attachments by learning to interpret. And of course that can sometimes too-

John Plotz: I think that's Michael Warner's argument in "Uncritical Reading." It's a subtle argument at the beginning and then it ends up being you just have to choose between [crosstalk 00:04:02]

Rita Felski: Right. But my point is also to say that through interpretation, through academic means you often apply new attachments, obviously, not just the students, but also the teachers. I say someone is dragooned into teaching Intro to Literary Studies class and they suddenly develop a new attachment to *Stella Dallas* or something, that suddenly this film becomes interesting. Or a grad student arrives in a university, thinking of themselves a modernist and they have an amazing Chaucer class so now they become medievalist. So, interpretations also means to new attachments rather than simply continuing attachments.

John Plotz: I think since Zadie Smith, couple of weeks ago published this article about fiction in *New York Review of Books*. But then Namwali you have written this article in March, "the Banality of Empathy," which won my heart immediately because you quoted this Arendt passage, I constantly quote on representative thinking and the way that... Anyway, I think I'm going to schematize, but try not to reduce. You're interested in the way that we could think of imagination without automatically jumping to empathy or the emotive dimension or not feeling with but thinking with is what you're interested in investigating. And then one could or could not connect that to Zadie Smith's real... I'm not going to say it's a predictable novelist, defensive novels, but I mean it's a novelist's defensive move that comes out of her belonging to a realist tradition that wants, in their other lives to be available to us and fiction in the way that Catherine Gallagher says fiction has been doing since the 18th century or so.

Namwali S.: I mean, I think Zadie Smith is following the tradition from George Elliot who gets that from Adam Smith to a certain extent, but the idea of sympathy and-

John Plotz: Can you say one sentence more about that? Because I completely am with you, but just the genealogy of that.

Namwali S.: Well, I mean I don't know if Zadie Smith has written about *Middlemarch*, but I think at least I would characterize some of her novels that have the quality of the 19th-century novel that I mean *On Beauty* definitely does I think *White Teeth* was called Dickensian. So, there's clearly a novelistic influence there as well. And even to the extent that *NW* is a tribute to Woolf still the idea of inner consciousness is primary there. But it does seem to me that I think the word *empathy* doesn't appear in her essay. I think she uses the word *compassion*.

Namwali S.: And I would actually say that the reason that I find Arendt interesting to think about alongside this tradition of empathy being the primary, or at least most efficacious way that the novel intersects with ethics is less that it's about thinking with and not feeling with and more that it is about thinking and feeling *with* rather than thinking of feeling *as*. So, the idea of projecting into someone else, I see as having a kind of rapacity to it and a kind of overwhelming assumption of the other person in both senses that you are assuming you can get inside them. But also when you get inside them, you actually are eradicating the difference. The distance that Arendt finds so important to maintain in order to think and feel with other people. Does that make sense?

John Plotz: Oh yeah, totally. I'm going to give you some phrases I think, Namwali you mentioned you were struck by these phrases, but in terms of what she's doing, I agree. I heard compassion too, but she also proposes "interpersonal voyeurism, profound other fascination." And this the last one is the most science-fictional, but it's interesting, "cross epidermal reanimation", which really does sound subsumptive into what you're describing.

Namwali S.: I liked that move. So, this is this rhetorical move of saying, instead of saying cultural appropriation-

John Plotz: Cultural appropriation.

Namwali S.: ... which is this kind of calcified phrase that we bandy about, kind of like we log back and forth like a weapon between different kind of factions, right?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Namwali S.: She's like, "Well what if we called it these other things? How would we feel about it?" And I sort of wish she had kept going because those terms have built into them the creepiness and the bizarreness of the desire for empathy, which I think is very human. Maybe say the first one again.

John Plotz: "Interpersonal voyeurism"

Namwali S.: Interpersonal voyeurism. It's got a creepiness to that, but I think that's accurate. I think that's right. And she starts the essay by saying, "I used to feel weird about that, but then I realized novelists do it, and so I felt more comfortable." All of that seems fine to me, but at the end of the essay, she's saying "The fact that I do it as a novelist is ethically good," and that's when I'm like, well now we're just justifying being novelist to a point where we've lost the creepy sense that actually I think could use more investigation. The term that came up today that I really liked, that I thought could have been another substitute for the desire to be in the other or, think about the other from the inside that came up in your talk was *xenophilia*. Instead of xenophobia, it's the desire for the other, the desire for difference. And that's not something that I think we need to

eradicate as human beings, but I do think it's something we need to be careful about.

Rita Felski: It's interesting this word *empathy*. I'm not, I guess the question, being raised partly is when we are empathizing, whatever that might involve and perhaps we need to talk more about that. Does that, in fact, mean a complete mind-meld, right? Or can it be a partial empathy or partial identification and suddenly sometimes when people talk about... In fact actually this Zadie Smith's essay she sort of said, "I became Madame Bovary, I became Anna Karenina," and this may be partly a question of temperament. Maybe though it actually does vary quite a lot just as a phenomenological level between people. But I've certainly had kind of strong identifications, various kinds with characters, but I've never felt I was that character. There's always this both and yes I am that character, but I'm not that character.

John Plotz: That's why you and I both like "semi-detached: as a phrase.

Rita Felski: Yeah, "semi-detached." I'm just wondering if we press Zadie Smith on that whether she might agree with us because I do think one side one of the chapters in my books talks by identification and I disagree with the idea that identification requires or in fact there is a fact very common that we have that mind-meld. And I think that's where people disagree. Actually philosophers, so Noel Carroll's written on this says, "Identification involves the Vulcan mind-meld," from Star Trek, and it's bad thing. But then other philosophers like Gordon says, well no actually identification is aspectual identifying with one bit of a person. I identify actually... I discuss a book about gay men talking about identification in divas and they say, "Well I identify with this part of Tina Turner but not that part of Tina Turner."

Rita Felski: But I do think there is a lot, I mean perhaps that's not invariably the case. And there can be a kind of identification including empathy that is kind of all-consuming in problematic ways. But I do think we can also identify in ways that are more partial and that can include the cognitive as well as the affective. And that's perhaps in some ways more typical than this other model. I certainly agree with Namwali with the idea, I think it's now being pretty forcibly debunked (I guess people keep coming back to it because it's kind of nice justification) what we do the idea that literature makes us automatically more empathic, or why are all our meetings so unpleasant if that's the case. I don't-

John Plotz: And why can't anthropologist talk to each other....?

Rita Felski: So, I don't think that reading books makes you a better person. That seems to imply that if you're, for example, illiterate as much of the world is, you can't be a good person, which seems totally insane to me. And so that is a risk with a certain kind of assumption that you have to read George Elliot in order to learn become empathic. No, no, I wouldn't go with that at all. And the other point, it's someone like Martha Nussbaum whose work I do respect quite a lot, but it's true that again, the example that cherry-picked, right? So you become empathic

through reading George Elliott. Do you become more empathic by reading *American Psycho*? No, I don't think you do. And so it works much better-

John Plotz: That debate goes way back. That notion that you're not allowed to write evil characters it's what would create evil empathy or something. Sounds like another *Star Trek* plot.

Namwali S.: Which I mean I make the case that reading *American Psycho* does can have bearing on ethics and ethics in the kind of neutral sense. But also I make the case that it actually can have positive ethics and not just by virtue of I am not that person, but because of the experience that it puts us through. It teaches us something, I'd say, about the difficulty we have confronting genuine bad inexplicable things in life, what most people call *evil*. And in a kind of Nietzschean sense, if you have no recourse to explanation, you actually have to confront how you actually feel about it because if you can't reach for it, well the gods did it or psychology did it or whatever, and I think that's something that *American Psycho* manages through the blankness of that character.

Rita Felski: It's kind of interesting how you say about how that relates or doesn't relate to the Knausgard example because you've mentioned Knausgard saying, well what's interesting, is actually trying to empathize with the totally, the unspeakable right with Adolf Hitler. And not in a way might teach you something about how you can't just simply other the villainous person and you having to grapple with in some way, but you seem so unhappy with his line of argument there. And so how is that different to the obviously seemingly less monstrous character in the *American Psycho*-

Namwali S.: It's just as monstrous I mean there's-

Rita Felski: But a smaller scale.

Namwali S.: Right. It's true. I mean he's a serial killer, so who knows how far he'll go eventually. But I think, there's a couple of differences. One is, the end of projecting into or empathizing with the villain humanizes the villain and it helps us understand perhaps what it would mean to do these kinds of murderous things, these horrible, terrible things. But *American Psycho*, and this is one difference, is that it is fiction. So, it allows us actually to experience something that is impossible to experience in life, which is to encounter and be forced to inhabit the perspective of an impossible person. He even says, "I'm an impossible. I'm a non-contingent being." He actually is not... It's not possible for someone to be as empty as Patrick Bateman is. And he was a construct and he's sort of a vehicle through which we might experience something.

Namwali S.: So the example that I use is the *Women of Trachis* play that Bernard Williams reads as again having the same Nietzschean upshot. Where just terrible thing after terrible thing happens in the play, and there's this constant like "Who did it? How did this happen?" And it's the one great play where it's like the gods

didn't do it, and it's we can't blame it on the gods. It's clearly a construct. This didn't actually happen. It's not a historical event, but the construct itself, Williams argues, puts us in this position where we have no recourse to reason or justice or empathy or emotion that all we face is the inevitability and grotesque horror of violence.

John Plotz: I wonder if you could read the *Book of Job* that way too?

Namwali S.: I was just thinking that now yeah. Not just the *Book of Job*, but I was thinking of another recent. I lost it.

John Plotz: I mean because it provides a kind of god. God comes out and resolves things. But the resolution is considered throughout the history of Christian theology this unsatisfactory addendum.

Namwali S.: This is one of the reasons that I think the empathy model of fiction is insufficient for me, is that it relies entirely because it came from realist fiction. So, the idea that we're going to analogize ourselves to characters is built on this romantic principle. When there's so many amazing, interesting things that art can do to our experience affectively and ethically when it's not realism. And I think, Smith knows and she wrote this essay "Two paths for the novel," so she knows that there are in these affordances that are not realistic

Rita Felski: But surely, just from the other side, there is a way I completely agree with the account that, you guys have been giving that as far as I understand it, which is that the empathy works best with certain kinds of fictional forms and realistic character. That seems exactly right to me. And so I'm so interested in the way in which there are also other kinds of identification that have nothing to do with empathy. Like when you identify with Camus's Merseault, or when you identify with James Bond, there's no empathy in James Bond. You don't feel empathy with James Bond, but you can identify with James Bond.

Rita Felski: So I do think the empathy model if it works at all works only with certain kinds of fiction, but if on the one hand you could say that the connection is less than in real life. In another way you could say it's more than in real life, because you can get inside people's heads in fiction in a way you never can in real life. You become something Dorrit Cohn talks about. But how we are, we read a novel and we are mind readers. We know someone better than you will ever know someone.

John Plotz: That's why I find that argument in *Culture of the Diagram* about the invention of [inaudible 00:19:01] discord so convincing. Just I think it's [Roy][Pascal originally, but that it evolves in four different linguistic traditions between 1780 and 1810 and they're not necessarily aware of one another. That's an amazing fact in terms of how that mind-meld happens.

Namwali S.: I do think this is why it's important to recognize that this desire is so deeply human, even if it is perverse and impossible because I do think what writers are doing in free and direct, as writers is the kind of mind-reading they can't do in real life. So there's this George Eliot's story [The Lifted Veil] that's about being able to read minds and the problems with what that would result if it actually happened. And I think as a writer, I don't feel that I am my characters, but I am closer to understanding what it's like to be inside them than I ever have been with a person that I know.

Rita Felski: I'm curious because I actually I've heard quite a few authors say this and I do think, I want to take what they say at face value and think through its implication. It's kind of interesting to me, but I'm just wondering if you ever had that experience where people say that the authors say their characters do get away from them and the characters end up doing things they hadn't planned? The author hadn't planned at all. Have you found that?

Namwali S.: Yes, I have. And I also have found-

Rita Felski: How do you explain it?

Namwali S.: Well. So, I was just saying earlier in an interview I was doing here [in Odense] that writing for me feels very akin to reading. And the way that I know this is when we experience a filming adaptation and we see Lily Barton and we're like, "That's not what she looks like." But I had no idea what Lily Barton looked like when I was reading. I just had an impression. I kind of like fuzzy Lily-ness that is my understanding and that's how I see my own characters. If you were to ask me what is the hair color of the characters in my novel, I could probably only do half. Or, if I had to draw a police sketch or actually cast a person as a character in my novel, I don't have a very strong visual impression. I have this kind of like fuzzy sense of them as a person, but they do have this quality of radical otherness, of separateness from me, that I think... I don't have children myself, so I don't know if it's like that, where it's "you're me but you're not me."

Namwali S.: But I do know that characters... I've tried to change a character's name once and it just didn't work. It's like he balked. He was like, "That's not my name." I also, because I'm reading my way into creating the novel, it's like I'm writing to see what happens, sometimes, it's almost like the novel already exists and I think that the novelist that spoke today, Hannah, was saying a similar thing and already exists and you are just being led through it or transcribing it. And in that sense, the characters, I learn things about them.

Namwali S.: So, I'll write a whole dialogue between two characters and I'll do a full draft of a novel and I'll be like, "Why does he say that? Why is he saying that?" And then I'll realize, "Oh he's bisexual." It hadn't occurred to me that that's why he said that in that moment. So it's like this weird way where you're learning them. And of course, different writers, Nabokov, makes the kind of inappropriate or unconsidered pun, his characters are his galley slaves. So I know other... But

even he admits I think in other interviews that his characters are not always under his control.

John Plotz: I'm just looking how distinctive that is to novelists. Because I feel like, isn't there a famous Michelangelo line about finding the Slave sculpture inside the stone?

Namwali S.: Yes.

John Plotz: So that, I'm wondering, because it seems like I've heard a lot of novelists say this and it does seem so distinctive to novelists when they say it. And now I'm just wondering, is there... I don't know.

Namwali S.: I don't think. I mean, I think that's the concept of the Muse is exactly this. So, I feel like it's a very old tradition of thinking about writing, and poetry, and painting and it's in the canvas and you're just bringing it out. It's very much along those lines.

John Plotz: Well you guys, thank you. This has been an awesome conversation. I really appreciate it. I appreciate your time, especially at the end of the long, etcetera, etcetera conference. So thank you.

Namwali S.: Thank you.

John Plotz: So thanks for listening to this episode of *Recall This Book*. As always, thanks go to Brandeis University, to my co-host Elizabeth Ferry and to our producers, Matthew Schratz and Claire Ogden, and our music is courtesy of Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. See you next time.