

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. I'm John Plotz and my guest today is the brilliant comic novelist, author of "Object of My Affection," and significant others. And most recently "My Ex-Life," my colleague Steve McCauley joining us on RTB for the second time. So this is another installment of our Books in Dark Times series. It's actually the conversation that inspired the whole series, which as you probably by now know takes its starting point in Hannah Arendt's "Men in Dark Times," which proposes that, "Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination. And such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works" --and we'll say here and in their books-- "will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth." So at this dark moment, we really want to know what brings people like Steve and also like you, dear listener, comfort or joy. So draw up a chair and listen, and then send us your own thoughts about books for comfort or for joy at this moment.

John Plotz:

So Steve, you said the idea for this conversation--which I think is a great way to organize it--is like what you're reading now that gives you comfort or gives you joy. Is that right?

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. And I think you should talk to a bunch of people and find out what they're reading. Yeah.

John Plotz:

But you are a bunch of people. You contain multitudes.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Well, for me, you know, I, I mean because, because, to be honest, I guess it was about a week ago, I was kind of going about living my normal life and then it suddenly hit me that like this was something was happening that was very burning, you know, and it was going to disrupt the flow of, of what I was expecting my months ahead or weeks at any like, and, um, and I've been extremely anxious since, so, you know, what I've been trying to do is just think about like, well, what is there in this period of isolation and anxiety and when, um, that, that I can do that is different from what I would ordinarily do that might give me some pleasure. And earlier in the winter I began reading "Little Dorrit," and I'm not even sure why I began reading "Little Dorrit." You know, I honestly thought that I had had lost my ability to read Dickens because, you know, it requires a certain kind of patience and care, um, in reading it. And so I was just so thrilled.

John Plotz:

Wait, wait. Can you say more about that? Because I think of Dickens says so, um, you know, delightfully verbose and sort of bumbling. So I sorta think of him as like watching a show where you always know they're going to be another episode where you can catch up. So, you know what I mean? Like it doesn't feel like it doesn't feel like reading, um, you know, poetry by W.S. Merwin or something where I'm hanging on every word exactly.

Stephen McCauley:

But it doesn't feel like reading Trollope either. You know, which is very straightforward. And so while Dickens is, you know, I mean is kind of the ultimate inaccessibility in many respects, at the same time, as you point out, it is verbose and it just requires a different... I mean, to me, the real pleasure of Dickens, I mean, despite these elaborate plots and despite all of that, um, that's not the pleasure of reading Dickens. For me the pleasure was really sentence-to-sentence and the elaborate descriptions and these brilliant characters that keep recurring with, their very predictable traits, you know, that, that, that continuing on through 800 pages. And so in that respect, I don't know. I'm worried that I was not going to be able to read Dickens anymore because I don't have the concentration and attention span and so on. And I was so thrilled and it was like the best reading experience that I've had, you know, probably in like two years. It was really,

John Plotz:

That's great. So do you think, do you think this is a moment where suddenly we actually want more of our bandwidth to be filled when we read? Because I, that sort of resonates with my experience reading "Wolf Hall," which I know, I don't think you're a fan of her's actually, are you? Or...

Stephen McCauley:

Um, I mean I haven't read her, so

John Plotz:

I get, yeah, yeah. I just, I understand that you're, you're just, you're too good for certain of my pleasures. But "Wolf Hall" is one of my

real pleasures and it's like, and I thought that I was going to be, yeah, I thought it was going to be too thick for me basically. And instead I feel like the thickness of it is exactly what I want. Like, I want to be stuck inside a paragraph that I know I have to attend to really carefully because if I don't attend to it carefully, then who he is in this paragraph is going to elude me.

Stephen McCauley:

Right. So you want that forced concentration.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like I don't normally necessarily want to work when I'm reading, but this at this moment, I really do.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I find, I think that I'm, I'm both, you know, especially distracted right now because of everything that's going on. And also, especially eager to escape those distractions because I don't really want to watch yet another video of someone talking about their early symptoms of Corona virus.

John Plotz:

Oh my god Steve. Well, you're so much more serious than me. The video that I watched this morning was the two penguins in the Chicago zoo that got to explore the aquarium. I mean, in the aquarium. I was like, Oh, that's so awesome. Lucky penguins, you know?

Stephen McCauley:

Well, let's see. You're having a better, you're having a better, you know, Covid-19.

John Plotz:

No, I'm just, I'm just fiddling while the entire fricking world burns, you know? But I don't know. I'm enjoying fiddling with penguins.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Well I'm not sure that, you know, like sinking into because now I'm reading "The Last Chronicle of Barset" and um, which I haven't read before. I've, although I've tried to read it before, I'm finding that it's just given me some of that same pleasure of leaving a world I don't particularly want to be in it and entering it completely. And I think what it is is these worlds are so fully realized, you know, by the writers and imagined in such a thorough way that you really do feel as if you're entering into a different, um, sphere of experience almost.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Well that one is so amazing because the, the structure of it, um, wait, how far into it are you?

Stephen McCauley:

Not very, I mean

John Plotz:

Have you gotten to the check yet or,...

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Okay. So that's actually the first page.

John Plotz:

Okay, good. So the structure of it, just for people that haven't read it lately, it's all about somebody who seems to have forged a check or passed a bad check-- did he or didn't he. Who is involved? Like is there a cover up? That actually creates this element of serious sort of procedural suspense throughout. So, it's kind of weird because you're vibrating with the plot at the same time as, I totally agree with you, you're immersed in the delights of that world. But yeah, I mean it's so masterful because you, the kind of, I was going to say dialectic, but the, at least the kind of back and forth between the kind of, the, the real anxiety around, *Oh my God, is he going to jail?* versus the quality of discovery of this world. It's somehow keeps you in both places at once.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Well, I mean, "Little Dorrit," like most of the novel probably in terms of page length, um, page numbers is it takes place in debtor's prison in a, you know, in a very, uh, unfortunate situation. But nonetheless it is, it's so wonderfully immersive that that's what I came away with.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Okay. So "Little Dorrit" has been amazingly satisfying to you. What about, what else, what other, what other sorts of books do you think provide similar?

Stephen McCauley:

Well, you know, I'm, I just reviewed this book for the *Times Book Review* that I can't, it shouldn't because it probably won't come out for a couple of months and they hate it if you say anything. Um, but it is, I think we might agree that it is, um, uh, comic novel, um, in a way. Um, and it's very delightful and it's very well written. It's very well done. Um, and as this particular moment kinda got deeper and more serious, um, I found myself thinking, Oh, you know, these characters don't know what's about to hit them sort of thing. Of course it wasn't. And even though I found that, um, admirably distracting and uplifting in many ways, um, because it takes place in our world right now, um, you know, of this kind of, you know, 2020 for all I know that it, it, it just didn't have the same, um, feeling of satisfaction for me. Taking me out of...

John Plotz:

That's really interesting. Well, so I was actually going to ask you that about like older books, I mean, "Dangerous Liaisons." I don't know. Like I read "Moby Dick" this summer and completely, completely loved it. So do you find, do you find going way back?

Stephen McCauley:

That's what I'm, that's what I'm finding right now. And I think that, you know, really for the past couple of years just because related to meeting a lot of writers on book tour and wanting to read their work, I've been mostly reading contemporary novels and so it's been nice to have this, um, experience of just, you know, going back a little bit. Um, I'm also reading right now, um, "Brideshead Revisited" which is a different kind of thing because, um, I feel like

they, you know, reading it is almost like nostalgia for that period of my life when the Masterpiece Theater thing was on TV.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. Oh, you've really, you know, I really want to read it now because I was going to ask you about P.G. Wodehouse actually. But, um, yeah,

Stephen McCauley:

I can't get into him. I've never been, I've never been. And some friends of mine are, are saying, you know, you've got to read him. He's brilliant, brilliant. But there's just something I think maybe I've read, the only thing I've tried are the Jeeves novels and there's something about that whole class satire that I just, it just doesn't interest me somehow. Yeah. I'm sorry.

John Plotz:

No, no, it's okay. I mean, uh, I get it. You're a,

Stephen McCauley:

There's another series that my friends said, you know, you should read those. Um, do you know which one that is?

John Plotz:

It's the Lucia Mapp books.

Stephen McCauley:

No, no, no, no. Oh, no it's, I love those. I love those. I love those.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. And yet you don't like Wodehouse, dude? I think what has this like 10 times that, 10 times better. I love that. But, but you, you're having an adverse reaction to it. So you like the Bensonhurst book...what's his name?

Stephen McCauley:

E.F. Benson. No, I mean, so there's something very arch and ironic, and campy about those books. Dare I say that one would not be surprised to find out that E.F. Benson was homosexual, you know, I, I wasn't surprised to hear it as a kid and, um, maybe there's something in that sensibility that I'm connecting with a little bit more than the, than the Woodhouse one.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Stephen McCauley:

I mean, it's not frat boy. I don't mean that, but there's a little bit more of that maybe, I don't know.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah. It's a inside the beltway of that kind of English ruling class, I guess. So I do feel like it's always, I mean, there's, it's more than just a pinprick that he's using to bring them down. I mean, I feel like it is genuinely satirical rather than just kind of, you know, it's

not just, you know, it's not just gently ribbing those characters. It is actually kind of dissecting them. But I,

Stephen McCauley:

I don't mean to like to, to say anything against him because I honestly feel as if I haven't read enough to even have an opinion. All I can say is that, you know, I've tried a couple of novels, I don't even remember which ones and I just, I wasn't that engaged by the humor or, um, you know, by the milieu. So, yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Hey, if we're talking about, um, I'm just looking around at my books as we're talking, we've talked about Ronald Firbank, so I'm gonna pass on Ronald Firbank, but I was going to ask you about, um, Christina Stead.

Stephen McCauley:

Oh.

John Plotz:

What do you think of her?

Stephen McCauley:

Um, difficult genius?

John Plotz:

Yeah, "House of All Nations" I actually like much more than "The Man Who Loved Children."

Stephen McCauley:

Really? I should try that.

John Plotz:

Yeah. I find "The Man Who Loved Children" just, I mean, "difficult genius" is fair, but also there's an element of kind of, um sort of shardy jagged chilliness that reminds me of Joan Didion in ways that I sort of respect Didion, but I can't really stick with her, you know, so, yeah.

Stephen McCauley:

I can stick with Joan Didion.

John Plotz:

I can stick, I can mostly stick with Didion. And you know what I, what happened with Didion is I think she's great. I just kind of overdosed on her because I read them all at once.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. Oh well that's very challenging.

John Plotz:

Well, I dived into her and I was so in love. I think it was when I was living out in San Francisco right out of college and I dived into "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and thought, Oh Jesus, this woman is just an insane genius. "Democracy" I thought was really great.

Stephen McCauley:

I love "Democracy." I love that novel. I mean, you know, I there, there are just so many scenes and passage from that that just have, you know, stayed with me and I pull it off the shelf every once in a while and read.

John Plotz:

Oh, I should, I shouldn't really go back to that. Okay, good. I'm writing down, I'm writing. Okay. Waugh and Didion you've totally persuaded me.

Stephen McCauley:

You know, I taught, um, uh, "Play It As It Lays" once. And I think that was a mistake. Yeah. I mean I felt like students were very put off by it. And you know, there's something about the passivity of that character that, uh, is problematic I think in the current state of affairs of the world, was not, people were not connecting with. So in fact, I think, you know, if I had really thought it through I probably wouldn't.

John Plotz:

Well you like, I think that one of the types of novel that you like that I really appreciate, you've opened my eyes to like an example would be that, um, is it called "Cassandra at the Wedding"? The Dorothy Baker? Is that her name?

Stephen McCauley:

Oh yeah. Yeah. That's an amazing book.

John Plotz:

It's amazing book. But I feel like what you like is people who you have a taste for novels where people find themselves in a really rough situation, but it's not a situation that can just be kind of adventured out of, you know, like you can't just solve it. You know, I, I have sort of a sweet spot for, I dunno, almost a kind of Robert Louis Stevenson or Joseph Conrad plot where, I mean, it might be messy or awful, but like there's something that can happen that can change things. But I think you really like novels where people just find themselves, you know, at the, what do they call that, with a clutch, like at the contact point where it's just kind of [whirring sound...]

Stephen McCauley:

Like you can't, even suicide won't solve your problems.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Exactly. Right. Like that really amazing novel you just recommended to me about the woman with the impossible French boyfriend. Uh, what, uh,

Stephen McCauley:

Oh, "After Claude," yeah. She has to join a cult and even that doesn't help her out. Right. She gets abandoned by the cult even, that's how bad it is.

John Plotz:

But there's something that about like, you, you need to kind of fetishistically invent an escape and even that escape won't do it

because you're still stuck with yourself. Okay. Um, Patricia Highsmith—any comfort there?

Stephen McCauley:

In reading her in this moment? I always think of her as being, you know, her characters are so dastardly and somehow pathetic at the same time.

John Plotz:

They are. That's a good point. Well you'd think if you're going to be that dastardly, at least you shouldn't be pathetic. Like at least you should get the pleasure of being a, you know, like at least you should get the pointy mustache and the cape and the cigarette case. But no, they managed to be dastardly and yet consumed by sordid misery at the same time.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. And I think that's what makes them so much more interesting. Um, because I went to a reading the other day of someone who was sort of writing and what sounds like, I haven't read it, but it sounds like an updated, um, um, Ripley kind of situation. But it sounds like there was just so much self-awareness on the part of the, um, of the character, you know, the sensible Ripley character that it made it a little less interesting. Right? It feels like in the movie, the movie, you know, Matt Damon Ripley movie, uh, that once the sexuality came to the surface and it was like acknowledged to me, the whole thing kind of fell apart because it, it just was not that it was no longer that interesting or that, um, comprehensible to me that it, that it's almost needs to be submerged and twisted and tormented and all of that, um, to really be effective. So

John Plotz:

That's interesting cause I remember actually really enjoying that movie. It's been a while since I saw it, but I thought great. I just thought it was jealous. I thought what it brought out was this set, this mixture, like how much jealousy is involved in desire anyway. You know? I mean, I get your point about the, you know, the notion of the unspeakable or the unsayable as being what powers things, but, but I feel like, yeah, there's something about the element of aggression or hostility that can be in a lot of forms of desire or romantic attachment or friendship even, I guess.

Stephen McCauley:

Yeah. She just felt like it's sort of like, you know, it has more, it has more power in a way when it's, when it's like the hurricane before it hits land or something, churning up all that water out there and you know sucking it up into the cyclone and then, and then, you know.

John Plotz:

Right, right. I get that. Yeah. But I also, but you know, what can I say, I'm like a Victorian novel person. I kind of like novels where ultimately everything gets surfaced and then you play with the implications. Like, you know, one of the things I love about "Middlemarch" is *Oh, it looks like Dorothea is heading into a terrible marriage. Like could she really marry that old guy, Casaubon? Oh, it's page 43 and she did, let's see what happens.* You know, I really appreciate that. Um, yeah, I mean like, you know, you can spend a lot of time like guessing at the hovering coy silences and then sometimes it becomes really interesting to just head into the storm and see what happens after the stuff is spoken.

John Plotz:

All right, so Steve, a final, final word, a recommendation for another novel that you haven't gone back to for a while but you think is amazing and you want to get back to.

Stephen McCauley:

You know what I'm thinking about rereading "The Eye of the Storm" by Patrick White. And Patrick White is, have you ever read him?

John Plotz:

I have tried to read him like "A Kangaroo." I think I couldn't get into it. Yeah.

Stephen McCauley:

"Kangaroo?"

John Plotz:

Isn't that right?

Stephen McCauley:

That's DH Lawrence.

John Plotz:

Oh, okay. Well hang on. I'm going to look up the actual name, but, sorry, I have never been able to get into Patrick White. So tell me, yeah.

Stephen McCauley:

Okay. Well, I think “The Eye of the Storm” for me is, is the best one, and it's the one to read. I just think he's such an interesting writer, and there's something about this slow way that, that that novel evolves in the structure of it. With this, you know, this long scene smack in the middle of the novel in which the main character is caught in the eye of the storm and the revelations in that, it's just, it's really powerful and very funny in a nasty way.

John Plotz:

Well, Steve, thank you so much. This is hilarious and excellent conversation. I truly appreciate it. Thank you for listening to another episode of Recall This Book. Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and Elizabeth Rerry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing is by Claire Ogden in website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. We would love to hear your thoughts about books to console you during this time. And finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. You may well be interested in our earlier conversation about the comic novel with Steve McCauley, and as well as In Focus conversations with writers such as Zadie Smith, Samuel Delaney, and the filmmaker, Mike Leigh. Uh, so from all of us here at Recall this Book, thanks for listening.