

Recall This Book: Books in Dark Times

David Plotz, John Plotz

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, another installment of our Books in Dark Times series. I'm John Plotz and my guest today is David Plotz. David, I didn't even write an introduction for you because...how do you begin to introduce the inimitable David Plotz?

David Plotz:

I am, let's see. I'm taller than you.

John:

Yes, correct so far.

David:

I host a podcast for Slate called the Slate Political Gabfest that, I hope your listeners will give a chance to.

John:

And you've written two fantastic books plus perhaps also some bad books...

David:

I've not written two fantastic books. I've written two books.

John:

Before anyone blogged the Bible, you blogged the Bible.

David:

That is true.

John:

And you wrote an amazing book about sperm banks, which is frequently cited by my many friends who use sperm banks.

David:

That is good for them. And I was until earlier this month, the CEO of a company called Atlas Obscura. Which is all about the world's hidden wonders.

John:

We love Atlas Obscura.

David:

Nobody wants to visit a world's hidden wonder right today.

John:

Well, actually all the world's wonders are hidden at this exact moment. So all the better reason to go to Atlas Obscura, to check out wonders that you will never get to visit. All right, so David, you know, it's crazy that I would be sitting here talking with you about your reading because you know, since we were children, we have known what one another was reading--since we shared a bedroom for so long. So I know all about you and the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, and I think you were the first person, you were the first *child* in our house to read Charles Dickens, which I could not bring myself to do. And here I am, a Victorian literature person. Am I right? I think you loved *Tale of Two Cities* when I was a kid. I think I remember it.

David:

I don't think that's right. I think our father, Pa as I like to call him, and I read David Copperfield to each other. David Copperfield, very much younger than I remember, I think I was 10 and I loved it. And it stuck with me and, but I don't know why you weren't there. Why you wouldn't read.

John:

Well, if I was 13, you know, the answer to that, I was just off being a jerk somewhere. You know, I was probably up in my room playing D and D...with myself.

David:

That is possible.

John:

Well I remember a lot of reading aloud. I remember *The Hobbit* vividly.

David:

We did *Pride and Prejudice* aloud. Yes. But I don't know if you were there for that.

John:

Wasn't there a *Huck Finn* also? Cause I did that with my kids and when I did, I felt like it triggered a memory.

David:

I do not remember that.

John:

*Tom Sawyer*, I think it was *Tom Sawyer* actually.

David:

Have I asked you my *Huck Finn* question?

John:

You did ask me your *Huck Finn* question, but go ahead. Ask our listeners your *Huck Finn* question.

David:

Here's my question. *Huck Finn* Recall this book listeners who are, who may know the answer because you're so well read and follow what's happening. It is my suspicion that *Huck Finn* has quietly vanished from school curricula and that no one has noticed it or no one has reported on it, but that it is,

John:

Is it also school auditoria and school stadia....Condominia? yes,

David

Octopi...

John:

Don't say octopi.... That's not okay.

David:

So yes, it's vanished. It's quietly vanished. It's quietly managed to not in the way that in the 80s when people would protest it because of course it has this language that it's so difficult for people, but rather that schools have just decided, well, you know what, rather than deal with it, cause controversy or, or make people upset, we're just gonna make this book vanish. It's just my guess, cause none of my kids have read it in their schools, and I just have a theory that maybe this is a widespread thing and no one has noticed it because it's, it's hard to notice when something disappears.

John:

Yeah. Well, I really hope you're wrong, but it may be true. You know, Elizabeth, my cohost and I taught it for an anthropology and fiction class. We taught together a few years ago and definitely not everybody had read it. I think the majority of our students had read it, but then they were upperclassmen. So man, I hope you're wrong, but you might be right. So that's a good one to think about in terms of comfort books. Is that the kind of book you're reading now, DP, when you, when you're trying to de-pandemicize yourself, like, would you consider reading *Huck Finn*?

David:

Yeah. You know, I hadn't occurred to me. Dickens has occurred to me, Dickens seems to occupy that space of being fully absorbing a whole other world of being totally very entertaining. Right. And so I'm, I'm very tempted by Dickens, although I haven't read any Dickens.

John:

Yeah. And my friend Steve McCauley, who we just recorded yesterday, *Little Dorrit* was what he picked up immediately.

David:

So, yeah. I hadn't thought about *Huck Finn*. I haven't read *Huck Finn* in 35 years, so yeah, maybe I should. Yeah.

John:

But, but, okay. Well, but can you continue your point about the fully realized worlds?

David:

Yeah. Well, I don't know that that's everything that I'm looking for. That is something that is, that is very tempting. I, the books that, that so far have really called to me. One is, and I don't know why -- let me posit why--is *The Guns of August*. I'm reading Barbara Tuchman about the history of the beginning of World War One. Right. And I started it right as this all started to happen. And I think I got it because I had just seen *1917* and I had listened to this wonderful Dan Carlin podcast about World War One. So I was in a World War One Jones. Yeah. But what is appealing about this book is that it's about a set of people who are making some really terrible decisions. And the decisions that they don't quite recognize are going to destroy the world that they live in.

John:

Okay. All right. Stop right now,

David:

But it's not, it's not like the ones that we're facing, but it is from history. You can look back and see like, *Oh man, these people didn't realize that they, they locked into theories about how the world would work--* about how war would work, how people would behave that were, that were just theories. And then when, when the war came and when reality hit them, they were not able to adjust that, that theory to the reality and...something rhymes in that today, right? Yeah. I am assiduously avoiding pandemical kinds of books. So, you know, so *Station 11*, which is one of my favorite books that I've read in the past 10 years, I would not go and reread. *The Road*, I couldn't go and look at it before I get to the more pleasurable books that I'm reading or thinking about reading. I just want to mention one other book that is that really speaks to the moment, which some of you may not have the stomach to read, but I actually found very inspiring and it's a book called, *This is Chance: The Shaking of an All-American City* by John Moallem.

It is a book about the great Alaska earthquake of 1964 which was the second most powerful earthquake ever recorded. The most powerful earthquake ever recorded U.S. It destroyed the city of Fairbanks, was then a very new city. Yeah. Alaska had just become a state, and the city was basically taken down to the studs by the earthquake. And yet a very small number of people died. And it's the story of what happened during the earthquake, how the people in the city responded, how they self-organized a recovery and, and why they were so able to come together as a community and work together. And to take care of each other so well in the period after the disaster. And it's super inspiring. And it has this, it has this, this point that in disasters like this, everything in life becomes molten. Everything melts, all that is sort of solid melts and then it reforms in some other way, which is not what you expected, it's not what you knew. It's not what you were planning for, but it reforms. And that if we are there to support each other and if people feel a sense of togetherness, that this kind of disaster is, is something you can recover from.

I think he points out that a couple of things. One is that during the recovery from the earthquake, those people who didn't, who didn't lose, who didn't immediately have people who died, loved ones who died, reported high levels of happiness and satisfaction. They actually were extremely happy. They felt a sense of purpose and belonging and togetherness that that really mattered and stayed with them for the rest of their life.

It didn't last. It doesn't last for a long time, but it lasted for a short time. And on the other hand, pandemics, unlike earthquakes are distancing that pandemics separate people. Because the way you treat them is to get away from other is to get away from other people.

John:

Right. But David also, but follow up on the liquidity point was the liquidity just in the moment everything could potentially seem new briefly and then it returned to its old ways or things actually changed in the city?

David:

No things actually changed, that things crumble. They melt or they crumble. Yeah. The metaphor varies from time to time and then you rebuild and you rebuild either the metal reforms in some other way when it cools down or you rebuild and some something different. It doesn't, it is not the same thing. It is new. You are fully new, you are new, you're a new community, you are new people.

The way you, what you're doing is different. Everyone he writes about in this book, their life is fundamentally changed by this earthquake. Not necessarily they had different careers or anything like that. But that it is this moment which breaks some set of habits, some set of way you live and presents a new opportunity. And for many of people that new opportunity is worse. And for many it's much better and it's just different and you just have to accept that. And as a person who is, who is only learning to live with uncertainty now in my life, it was really interesting--as somebody who's, who's going through divorce--it was, I found it very, it spoke to me a lot because it is this, when your fundamental premises have been altered, you have to have to live anew in the world. And that's what this pandemic is going to do on a grand scale to us, too.

So I found this, this book is just made me think a lot about it and not in a despairing way, in a way that was made me think, okay, there are possibilities there are ways it's good. It's going to make us bring us together, make us richer together. So try to find those ways.

John:

I love the, I just love the structure of letting people's lives emerge so that you can glimpse them, you know, five years down the road, 10 years, right? You, you and I both love that Isabel Wilkerson book, right? *Warmth of Other Suns*.

David:

I did not read that.

John:

Oh my God, I love that so much. I know you, I know that *Common Ground* is like one of your Bibles, but to me like *Warmth of Other Suns* is like, what if you take *Common Ground*, but you put it on the move so you know that it's it's about three cities, not one city. And it's not even about three cities, but three migration paths rather than one. One world.

David:

Yeah. Huh. Anyway, maybe I'll read that.

John:

Oh my God, I love it. It is such a, it's such an uplifting book. In terms of thinking, I mean not because it makes you think, Oh, racism in America is easily overcomeable by the migration. But it does make you see that the structural racism of the United States is, you know, absolutely there, has deep historical roots and then has been continued in lots of ways. But also, there have been moments of, of melting, you know, moments where people could actually move themselves and control their own destinies. Make economic and vocational and educational and kind of existential choices that change their lives for the better.

David:

Huh. All right. I'm sure it's on my shelf here. I'm looking around for it on my shelf.

John:

Look for a book that would hurt you if it fell on your foot because it's an investment. It's like 950 pages, but

David:

Oh, maybe that's why I didn't read it.

John:

Yeah, that could well be. And you really need that because it's simply....

David:

There it is. I now found it. I started looking for books. It's right. It is right ahead of me. Straight ahead. Okay. That's pretty thick.

John:

Oh my God. Oh my God. I would love....that is a book that is a comfort book. Actually. I think I would read, I think I would reread that right now if I had it sitting on my bookshelf. Okay, so go ahead. You were going to go towards you, you were heading towards more entertaining pastures.

David:

Well, what I'm going to read for pleasure. Yeah. What I'm going to read for joy. I am, sure I am going to read some Austen, some *Emma*, some *Sense and Sensibility*.

John:

And you're going to watch *Sanditon*?

David:

I will watch *Sanditon*. We're not talking about TV. I suppose everyone else is talking about TV.

John:

Okay, fair enough.

David:

It's called *Recall This Book*. Not Screen This Show. Okay. I'm ashamed to say this, but I might reread *Harry Potter*. Because it is so comforting at the fully, again, it's this full world. I know it's going to come out great in the end. Makes me happy. It's very familiar. It is quick. It is not going to tax my brain and it's just is pleasure and I don't, I, I've spent enough time marinating.

The other books. I would read in that vein, which are much better of course are the Pullman books. Yeah. *His Dark Materials*. And I've just spent enough time with him recently that I don't want to read them again. Right. So I wouldn't do that. And the, the Narnia books aren't, I don't like very much.

John:

Oh really? Oh yeah. And you don't find *Lord of the Rings* comforting the way I do.

David:

I don't find *Lord of the Rings* comforting. I find *Lord of the Rings* thick and boring; it would make me fall asleep.

John:

But here's the funny thing David. So like this one theme that has already emerged in these conversations is the difference. Everyone seems to agree that you need something like knotty and dense and complicated that will draw you in and you know, keep your mind at work like a really good Sudoku. You know, that equivalent. But people seem to disagree on whether the point of it should be this worldly like that is that it returns you to our own, you know, the, the, the world that we all share for the renewed sense of comprehension or purpose or something or whether it's good because it kicks you out into another space.

But it seems like actually you're trying to have it both ways, right? Cause you liked *Guns of August* because it makes you, you know, dwell in this world in a different way. But you're, but you're also pushing *Harry Potter* because it it's an off ramp.

David:

Yes. I'm also looking at a book, which now that I'm looking at it, I may reread one of my favorite books. So absorbing, which is *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara.

John:

Oh my God. That's such a great book. Yeah. So why is that? So tell me why you would reread that now?

David:

So it was, I would tell people it's about getting the Battle of Gettysburg day by day, the Battle of Gettysburg told from the perspective of some of the key players. So from Robert E. Lee, his second in command James Longstreet the union major, a Colonel named Joshua Chamberlain...He became president of Bowdoin College. And it is, it's just a very intimate moment by moment account at this battle, which is this critical battle in American history. And it examines the small decisions that people made that shaped the course of the battle. And it's, it's it takes this thing that we know on a grand scale. It makes it extremely human. Extremely particular.

John:

Yeah. So we used it when we went to, when we did our history driving tour with our kids when they were very little, we used it. I mean, I don't think I had the book with me, but we used it at Little Round Top to reenact the charge down Little Round Top. And I remember our kids just screaming down the hill with fixed bayonets, at the moment they'd run out of bullets, but they decided to charge the Confederates instead. And that's the moment that turns the tide.

David:

Did they, did they win?

John:

Did my kids, did Lenny and Daria? Yeah, they won. Yeah, they did.

David:

Maybe you'll become president of Bowdoin one day. Maybe it's, that's your destiny.

John

Okay. Yeah you've set me something to aspire to. Okay. Well, DP as usual, I've learned 1,001 things from talking to you. So thank you. It's amazing. I will, let me just read the credit's really quickly. I will say *Recall This Book* is hosted by John Plotz and usually Elizabeth Ferry, with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. As you know, we always want to hear from you and especially now because we want to hear about your Books in Dark Times. So please tweet at us or email us or contact us in any number of ways. And also please do if you enjoyed this episode forwarded to others and write a review on or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

And check out our other Books In Dark Times, conversations with Alex Star, Carlo Rotella, me and Elizabeth Ferry and I think others to come.

David:

Thank you.

John:

Thank you so much David. It is, it was a joy as always.

David:

Thank you. Dr. Plotz, Professor Plotz.

John:

You mean future President of Bowdoin Plotz? To all of you, farewell.