

Recall This Book: Books in Dark Times

John Plotz, Elizabeth Ferry

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, another installment in our Books in Dark Times series. I'm John Plotz. And my guest today is nobody because it's me and Elizabeth Ferry together as cohost.

John:

So Elizabeth, welcome. And you can say welcome to me, I guess. Um, so anyway, so I'll just say the series takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt's "Men In Dark Times," which proposes that "even in the darkest times, we have a right to expect some illumination. And that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts," (no offense, Anthropology), "than from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works [books] will kindle under almost all circumstances." So, at this dark moment, the idea is you're having--

Elizabeth Ferry:

Lives and works is also the topic of Anthropology.

John:

Oh, lives and works is okay. That's fine. It's just, uh, yeah, but, all right, I'll give you that. But you guys have theories and concepts.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. So do you.

John:

Yeah, so do we. It's true. Okay. So the point of the series is that we really want to know what brings people, um, like you, dear listener, comfort or joy. And there are lots of ways which you can see on our website for you to tweet or Instagram or just generally shout out at us the books that you are thinking about. But Elizabeth, so I've had a couple of these conversations already, but I've been really looking forward to just the two of us sitting down together and talking. So can I just, can I, can we just start off with those questions? People have already kind of heard me bloviating about books I like. So the questions are, books that give you comfort and why and books that give you joy and why?

Elizabeth:

Okay. So, I mean, generally speaking, as somebody who studied English literature in school and I come from a background of English professors and, yet I didn't go into literature as my academic path, partly because I felt like reading novels in particular gave me so much comfort and so much of a kind of escape that I didn't, I felt like I might mess that up if I made it too much part of my profession.

John:

Yes. That's the theoretical principle known as *don't shit where you eat*.

Elizabeth:

That really speaks to me and, and I've been kind of indulging that in the current times. Although, you know, we call this Books in Dark Times. I, for me, they haven't been so dark yet except for like worrying about other people. So I'm hoping that in a couple of months that's not going to feel like a laughably innocent thing to call it. But we'll see. But, uh, so I guess I have two things I wanted to talk about. And the first one is the, the book that maybe surprisingly has brought me a lot of comfort was the book that lots of people I'm sure thought about reading that I had never read and, and now have read in its entirety, which is Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year."

John:

Oh, I thought you were going to say Donald J. Trump's "The Art of the Deal."
Okay, good.

Elizabeth:

Yes, there you go. Which has also come up a lot. But I have no desire to read and would not be comforting, I don't think.

John:

No. Okay. Sorry, I didn't mean to step on your line. Yes. "Journal of the Plague Year." It's been mentioned by a couple of other people already too, so, but nobody's read it in fact.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean I think a lot of people have read parts of it. It's the sort of thing that like you get assigned in college, a few 20 pages of or so and to be perfectly honest, you could read just 20 pages and you would get the idea. It's kind of repetitive. But, um, so it was written by Daniel Defoe. It was published in, sorry, I'm just looking it up. When was it published? 17 something, but it's about 1664.

John:

Yeah. The Great London plague, which preceded--

Elizabeth:

--London plague, which was the year before the great London fire. Right? And it's written it's in a sense, probably a fiction because Defoe was actually only about five years old at the time. And it's written from the perspective of an adult.

John:

Yeah. Written in 1722. So 60 years after.

Elizabeth:

Right, right. So, um, and it's written as if it were from the perspective of an adult living through the plague.

John:

But wait Elizabeth, one of the things I remember, and this is such a wonky English professor thing to remember, but I remember it being written in an oddly impersonal voice. Right. So you say it's from a perspective, but isn't it, isn't it kind of a shifting perspective? A little bit like Joseph Conrad?

Elizabeth:

Not, no, it is very documentary though, right. And it's sort of, um, so one of the things that I like about it is, is that the character, the narrator is, he keeps kind of, he can't stay inside. He's really stir-crazy. He recognizes that he's putting himself in danger. And his brother leaves town and his brother invites him to go, but he decides not to and then it's kind of too late. But he's a really documentary mind. And I think like we can see that also from "Robinson Crusoe," right? Like it has that same sort of very detailed sort of documentary, you could call it ethnographic sensibility. And, but it also has these kind of interestingly personal moments. So like there's this one part that he talks about of his, I took a few sentences that I thought were interesting, so okay. So he goes outside and then he gets freaked out, by a lot of stuff that is objectively freaky, death carts and everything.

Elizabeth:

It says, "Terrified by those frightful objects, I would retire home sometimes resolved to go out no more. And perhaps I would keep those resolutions for three or four days in which time I spent in the most serious thankfulness for my preservation and the preservation of my family, such intervals as I had, I employed in reading books and in writing down my memorandums of what occurred to me every day and out of which afterwards I took most of this work as it relates to my observations without doors, what I wrote of my private meditations, I reserved for private use and desire it may not be made public on any accounts, whatever." So one thing is this--

John:

Wait, can we just, can we just stick with "Robinson Crusoe" for a second? I mean with the connection, cause I, I do think that, I think that "Journal of the Plague Year" I mean I read it a long time ago made a huge impact on me, but I never thought about that connection of how they were in a like predicament. And there is this line about when his father, do you remember at the beginning of "Robinson Crusoe," his father does not want him to go away to sea because the failure --oh shit. I'm not gonna be able to find it right now--He said that it's basically, I think he's actually quoting Pascal or something and he says the failure, all men's misery stems from their inability to stay in their room by themselves.

Elizabeth:
Oh it's perfect.

John:
Being alone, staying in your room is what will save you. And it would've saved Robinson Crusoe from going to sea and getting shipwreck. But in the "Journal of the Plague Year" it's the same thing, right? He knows that if he just sits at home, he's much safer.

Elizabeth:
But he cannot, he can't do it. He's too, um, and it's partly that he's, he's bored, but he's also really interested. Like there's all these parts in it where he's like, I went, I couldn't stop myself and I went to look at the dead cart or I couldn't, I went to ask these people about, you know, the watchmen and so on. Um, but so what has been really interesting and weirdly comforting about the book is partly the kind of obvious thing that, it's, you know, Covid-19 is not nearly as bad as the Bubonic Plague. Um, in a lot of ways, right? Like, it's less deadly, a lot less gross and, you know, painful and horrible. Right? So there's something weirdly comforting about reading that. Um, and then there's something weirdly comforting about the common situation, some of the commonality. So that's like a way in which the difference is comforting. Right? Yeah. Thank goodness it's not the bubonic plague, right? And thank goodness it's not 1660. But then there's like, for instance, there's all this really interesting passages about the daily counts of the dead and the weekly counts of the dead and how things get, um, categorized in whether they get categorized as the plague or as something else and how different districts are kind of sometimes being

forthcoming and sometimes hiding the information. That's all really fascinating.

John:
Well that's Catherine Gallagher's whole argument about the rise of functionality in the 18th century is the rise of basically accountancy, speculation, disbelief and credit. She says that makes both fiction and fiscal practices run.

Elizabeth:
Yeah, yeah, exactly. That makes perfect. Yeah. Um, and then, um, all of this kind of debating what is the right thing to do and particularly this thing of like shutting houses. So what they would do is they would, if there was any account of a plague in a house, they would immediately shut down the house. No one in it could leave. They would assign a watchman, one watchman by day and one watchman by night who was supposed to prevent them from leaving, but also run errands for them. So they would like yell out the window and tell them to go get stuff and like throw money at them to go get stuff and bring it to them.

John:
And that is the role that is now played by surveilling people's cell phones. Right?

Elizabeth:
Exactly yes. And will be played by drones.

John:
Drones, no doubt. Yeah.

Elizabeth:
Yeah. Yeah. So that was really fascinating. And then just this whole thing about like was that the right thing to do and should they have instead removed

people to separate, you know, equivalent to what we're talking about with like setting up like gyms and other places. It's really interesting.

John:

That's amazing, right? Yeah. It's shelter in place, it's contact tracing, it's social distancing. So wait, can I come in back to the point about like whether what we're finding, like whether what is comforting is the discrepancies or the analogies? So, I had a conversation with Carlo, this guy, Carlo Rotella was talking about Icelandic sagas and I think he had kind of a double, similar doubleness to what you said. He said on the one hand, I like things that are really distant. On the other hand, the thing that's comforting to me about the sagas is that there's all of the slaughter and misery. I mean like 400 people are constantly dying because somebody set their mead hall ablaze in the middle of the night. But they handle it with kind of stoic good humor and more than aplomb and make like, you know, write a verse about their dead relatives or something. So which part of it is the, which part of it is the source of reassurance for you? Is it that *that ain't us* or is it well *that is us* and look at how--

Elizabeth:

I think it's more *that is us* in a way. Partly because I feel like, I mean I think one of the things that's so kind of disturbing for me and I think many people about sort of the current moment is there's this kind of feeling that we've sort of become so attenuated from our physicality and our kind of groundedness and you know, on the planet to the point of actually destroying ourselves in the planet and that we're sort of like cut off from some sort of sense of what it means to be human or that what it means to be human might be changing so drastically that there is no knowing what will happen. Right. I'm not saying I'm not arguing in favor of this, I'm just saying this is like an affective experience. Right? But there's something about this that makes you feel like, Oh, okay, well, you know, sucks to be human and periodically like these things happen and they're intensely physical and rooted in our, the nature of our species. And there are these patterned responses, right? Like there are these ways in which I can see that people in the 17th century were responding that look a lot like what people in the 21st century. So I feel more rooted to human history or something.

John:

Yeah, no, that's a really good point. I have a reaction to it also, which is related to...Elizabeth, you and I have talked about how we're lucky enough to have come from families where for a couple of generations back, people have had these solid middle-class jobs in America and my family, a lot of that involves being doctors. You know, my mom is a professor, my dad is, my mom was a professor, my dad was a doctor. And I think of those as similar in that they are rooted in, I mean of course they are about service and connection and education, but there are also jobs that are protected by being within this world of things that people do when they've attained kind of enough education to give them a status to do this. But being a doctor, I have, I think there are seven doctors on our block, and they're in a totally different situation from me right now because they are, each one of them is going to the hospital every day. They do not have the luxury of deciding whether they want to do a shift at the Brooklyn food pantry or not. No, their education has put them in the position where they are like putting their hands on people and you know, really....

Elizabeth:

And they're completely on call.

John:

Yeah. So you and I can do what we do very easily with Microsoft Word markup function and some video lectures--or not *easily*, but we can do it.

Elizabeth:

Right. And we can, we can be, you know, staging these conversations about books in dark times.

John:

Yeah. Yeah. And when I like when I examine a loose end that needs diagnosing, like I'm talking about somebody's sentence, but I have these friends who are talking about like a wayward cell and that's what they're looking for and that's, yeah, I think it's, it's good to be awoken to that. This is not necessarily the medium I would have chosen to--

Elizabeth:

--to be made aware of that, sure.

John:

--to be made aware of that. Yeah. I mean again it makes me think of a book. Yeah. It makes me think of "The Machine Stops" again, you know, just that point where E.M. Forster really pursues that logic of what would happen if we could follow our desire to be totally cerebral and totally creatures of our mind and our ideas and our words. And then what do you do when things start falling down? You have no idea how to fix them. You can't even get out of your hexagonal chamber cause you don't know how the door works, you know? That's a good point. Okay, so that's one of your books, but you had others, right.

Elizabeth:

So I had others. This is something, and I actually have returned to this recently. I've read a couple of the books again, partly because I was, I was looking for comfort.

John:

Oh my god is it going to be Trollope again?

Elizabeth:

It is going to be Trollope. How did you know? I've been waiting to talk about Trollope.

John:

Elizabeth, you trollop!

Elizabeth:

So like a couple of years ago, I read 47, I think out of 47 novels of Trollope in a row and um, it was a great experience. I won't say they're all equally good to say the least.

John:

You better not say that.

Elizabeth:

And I will also say that once you get in, by the time I got around number 35 or so, it was a little bit more like, okay, well now I'm going to, there was some extrinsic motivation rather than intrinsic motivation. Yes. Right.

John:

Yeah. You're just trying to *level up* at that point.

Elizabeth:

Yeah, exactly. And, uh, I think what I think gives me a particular comfort is, you know, there's these incredibly kind of gripping and you know, the stakes feel incredibly high and their people are really caught up in them and their issues that I like, for instance, the issue of whether, what one's commitment is to the, to the Church of England, right? Or how one marries or other kinds of things that are so absorbing and of such huge importance to the characters, yet I don't think they're that important. They're so gripped by these things that, and they feel like, you know, if it doesn't go their way or it doesn't go the right way, the world will end. But from my point of view, I can see that the world's continued or that the fact of it, the rise of dissenting churches or the particular facts of the role of fox hunting or other things. They went a certain way in the world went on and it was okay. And that gives me a certain comfort for the things that I am extremely anxious about.

John:

Yes. I get it. Life uninterrupted elsewhere. That makes sense to me. But also just to say that the central claim you're making here is the pleasure of Trollope in terms of the deploying a world elsewhere that can be kind of engaging enough that every cylinder is sort of working as you encounter it. Okay. So can I pivot and ask you the childhood question, which would be to think about like either either childhood books or books that you know, cause I know you've, you know, just shepherded two kids through childhood, so

books that you've rediscovered with your kids or books that you want to go back to now.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. So a couple of them come to mind. One of them we brought up and you, and you pointed out there, its incredible nativism. And I actually had gone back recently to... It did turn me into an anthropologist of mining, which was "How Green Was My Valley."

John:

Oh my God. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth:

It is. It is. It is an incredible nativist book. Also, I tried to, I tried to listen to it on tape with my kids a couple of years ago. And it's like, I mean we got, we got pretty far, but then there's this like description, which I'm sure I did not understand at the time I was reading it, but it's this like incredibly overheated sort of egocentric description of his first boner. I was like, I'm sure I do not remember this and did not know what was going on when I read it before.

John:

As long as it wasn't a nativist boner I don't object to that.

Elizabeth:

And yet it probably was even. There's something very like distasteful about the description and it's kind of like egomania but uh,

John:

Oh God, I loved the TV show too. I have such fond memories of it.

Elizabeth:

Oh, I never saw, I remember the movie and loving the movie and I remember—

John:

Oh no, I'm sorry. I'm totally wrong. It was the movie.

Elizabeth:

The movie was great. Do you remember, there's one of the things that I really stuck in my mind about it is the description when he finally gets his, sort of convinces his family to let him go to school and he gets a pencil box and there's this description of the pencil box, which is so satisfying and it's sort of about all the little compartments that everything is in and the little colors of the colored pencils.

John:

Aw.

Elizabeth:

And it really stuck in my mind and I, there's something about its like littleness and neatness but also the differences of the colors. And then he's—

John:

Portable property man. That's his ticket out of there.

Elizabeth:

Exactly. But then it's destroyed. It gets, it gets smashed by this like, you know, kid who thinks this is like a poor minor guy who, who's bullying him. And so this very traumatic moment, but the description of the, it's a little bit like, and this maybe leads me to another book that was very formative for me. Um, there's a description in "Little Women" of their Christmas presents, and they get each of them gets a different book and they're each with a different color ribbon. And I've always liked things that are like the same, but the color is different. And I that also is a description that really stuck in my mind. So those are two, you know, cause I got to that point as many people do with that age where it's like I ran out of the stuff that I knew that I really loved and as I was kind of like frantically searching for things that I thought might scratch that particularly itch.

John:

I know. And it's funny how that works because you go in directions, it's like you, you've been in a nice pond that you totally liked and then you know, there's kind of a lake out there somewhere. So like it kind of lungfish you sort of galumph yourself out in various directions. Often you just kind of hit shallow water and then turn around and go back and then randomly some direction that's probably no better than any of the other directions just leads you where you want to go.

Elizabeth:

Suddenly there's like, Oh my God, I have a new, yeah. And I used it and I still do this, I guess as evidenced by the Trollope. It's like once I find one I would just read all of them, with sometimes with uneven results.

John:

Well that's okay. Well that's another point about books in dark times maybe. Cause I think I tend to read things more unevenly. Like I like to kind of, and maybe I'm trying for something more symphonic. Like I've tried to jump from one instrument to another instrument to another instrument because I like to read different books in succession.

Elizabeth:

That's interesting. Yeah. See I think this, I mean this maybe comes back to the question about why I became, didn't become an English professor is like, for me it's like it has a very much more of a kind of thumb-sucking quality than--

John:

Right? It's like a bowl of ice cream and like why wouldn't you have another bowl?

Elizabeth:

Right, exactly. Yeah. Like there's something sort of like a little compulsive about it.

John:

No, I totally get that. And that's like, I think I, you know, I was saying this to Alex, it's like most English professors just eschew that side of things entirely and they want to claim a more kind of, um, I don't know, either scientific or theological or like a satisfying difference that ensures them that their approach to the text is not comfort. It's more like this higher kind of aesthetic list.

Elizabeth:

Or more intellectual or--

John:

Exactly. Yeah. But I actually want to try to hold onto both at once. Like that's why the question of like, is comfort and joy, like are comfort and joy the same or distinct? That seems like a really interesting question to me because yeah, I don't think it's, I don't think you're wrong to take comfort, you know, repeated comfort.

Elizabeth:

No, but you know, what you're saying also makes me feel like maybe I did make the wrong—right choice because I—it wasn't so much that I feel that there's anything wrong with that, but I didn't want to be in a situation where other people wouldn't try to make me feel that way.

John:

Right. Well, of course when I want comfort I just go out into the field, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth:

Right, exactly. When you want comfort you just start measuring heads, don't you?

John:

I do. I do actually. Yeah. I use sand. And it's a very objective measure. Remind me to tell you what I found about Newton residents as opposed to Brookline residents. It's very, it gets very revealing, I feel very confident about my research. Okay dude. Well thank you. This was great. Do you want to read the credits or should I read them?

Elizabeth:

I don't have them in front of me.

John:

Okay. Why don't I just do them? Keep it in one voice. Okay. So, um, thank you so much for listening. Recall This Book is hosted by us, John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing is by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, and suggestions for future episodes and especially in this case, we really want to hear about the books that are giving you joy. So think about emailing us at recallthisbookpod@gmail.com. And if you include an audio clip, we might include it in an upcoming podcast episode. Also you could look for us on Instagram, on Facebook, or on Twitter. And you can use the hashtag "books in dark times" to add a photo or a comment about a book you've turned to recently. So from all of us here at Recall This Book, uh, thanks for listening.

Elizabeth:

Thanks.