

Recall This Book 33  
Books In Dark Times 9  
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Ben Fountain

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 to problems and events. I'm John Plotz and our RTB virtual guest today is the great novelist Ben Fountain. He's most recently the author of a 2018 collection of essays, *Beautiful Country Burn Again*—a lot of those I first saw in *The Guardian*. But he's also the recipient of a PEN Hemingway Award for *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: Stories* of 2007 and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction for his debut novel (this is how I first came to know him) his wonderful fiction *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* from 2012. It was also made into a movie, kind of a weird movie I thought by Ang Lee. Ben, thank you so much for being here

Ben Fountain:

It's a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

JP:

Great. So this is another installment in our Books In Dark Times series, which asks what books we turn to for guidance, sustenance and encouragement at moments like this. So, as you can probably guess from the title, it takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*. And one of the things that book argues is “that even in the darkest of times we have the right to accept, expect some illumination. And that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts, then from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women and their lives and their works (So we're thinking about books especially) will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.” So the questions that I going

to start asking Ben today are the same ones that apply to you, dear listeners. We want to know what kind of works are sustaining you, what is engaging you, what is irking or prodding you to action at this strange and dark time?

So Ben, one of the, one of the things that a lot of these conversations have been about has been about that question of whether what you want in the worldbuilding of the books that you turn to: Is it the capacity to just be in that other space for awhile? Or, it sometimes seems like what people want is a capacity to recognize their own world in that book. You know, so that they could either be a, *this worldly* or *that worldly* experience.

BF:

I don't think they're mutually exclusive. I think there is, the old Venn diagram overlap there. And to the extent that you do disappear into the story eventually you come out. But if the experience of the story, that particular part of the story has been powerful enough, it's going to stay with you.

JP:

Can I say it's, it's so interesting for me to talk to you, because my formation because of, you know, like my own PhD work was so much through British writers. And so when you and I are talking, I always notice that your formation is such American writers. You think about *our country*. Is that generally true or is that just, yeah...?

BF:

I was a literature major at University of North Carolina and I was so lucky I had great professors and I made it a point to try to take courses in things that I figured I probably wouldn't read otherwise. Right. I figured that probably wouldn't read John Dryden,

JP:

I had to read him for a class, yeah.

BF:

I probably wouldn't read, you know, many of the Victorian poets. And I mean there are lots of things that I felt like I'm probably not going to read this on my own. And so I went out of my way to study those writers. Now I ended up doing my honors thesis on Allen Tate, the Fugitive Poet and novelist. I did a year's worth of work on Ezra Pound know, obviously, you know, another American, but I feel like I, you know, I have a decent undergraduate level grounding in British literature and so, I mean it's there, it's there. But I find what, what when I follow my head in my heart, it focuses on America.

JP:

And that was really my question. It wasn't meant to be a *let's compare our book list* question. I think I'm coming, you know, now in my fifties for me, like people like Mark Twain and Willa Cather are coming alive and science fiction too, in a way they hadn't before. So I'm, yeah, when I follow my heart now I'm going more towards American writers. And I was sort of wondering, yeah. It sounds like it's kind of always been the case for you, that your heart has always been somewhere in America and the American canon.

BF:

Well, yeah, when I started writing, believe me, I did not have a plan. I mean, I practiced law for five years and then quit cold turkey and started writing. But as the years have gone by, I've found that that's where my instincts lead me. Often it's, it, you know, the stories are dealing with Americans abroad or who have had formative experiences abroad. Yeah. They might still be overseas or maybe they've come home.

JP:

So Joan Didion, is she interesting to you?

BF:

Oh my God. She is, she is the master. I think she's one of the great American writers. And as far as I've been thinking about, and this was even before I tried to watch the movie that was made of it is, is *The Last Thing He Wanted*.

JP:

Oh, I don't know it. I've never read it.

BF:

Yeah recently the movie was released, it was either Netflix or Amazon or HBO. They, they adapted it for film, not very successfully, but I think *The Last Thing He Wanted* is a great American novel. And, and it deals, I mean the context is the Dirty Wars in Central America in the 90's and American involvement, right. It's just a masterpiece of tone and mood, and character and this, this really profound interiority of the two main characters that is, that is processing these larger macro geopolitical forces. It a hard thing to do. She does it very well.

JP:

Yeah. Well, cause I was thinking the [Didion] book, I know that's like that is *Democracy*, which is obviously about the far East, not, not central America, but I liked, I mean it really reminded me of Conrad and I think that point, I agree with: It's interiority all the way down, but only when you go into the interiors, what you find is like these macroscopic struggles.

BF:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. I mean, you know there's the interior life and then the public life, the external life, the social life, but they're all bound up together. And there's, there's obviously no clear, you know, dividing line. You know, it was around 2004 when, when George W. Bush got elected, I won't say he got reelected. When he got elected I came to the realization I don't understand my country. I started consciously seeking out writers who had gone straight at the problem, the mystery of what is America. Yeah. And Joan Didion was very high on that list.

JP:

Marilynne Robinson.

BF:

Absolutely. Let's see the first were: Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Gary Wills. Yeah. He's done a lot of great work. Yeah. Yeah. And then I found my way to Marilynne Robinson and she continues to be a revelation, with her books of essays. And then the things she's currently publishing in *Harper's* and the *New York Review*. Oh, she's wonderful. Well, last thing I read by her was this deep dive into the Puritans and the Puritan legacy.

JP:

I read a couple of those actually. Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

BF:

And yeah, and they're very nourishing. But they go down like I mean they go down easy. Yeah. I mean she's telling stories.

JP:

I still will pick her fiction over her nonfiction any day of the week. I mean, she's a great writer. I agree with you. But *Housekeeping* still strikes me. When you go back to that question, the way you raised it, *I don't understand my country*, like what is going on, you know, inside of us, I feel like *Housekeeping* has something, there's something there about those who stay and those who go the way that we're a country that's defined by like our tight-knit communities, but also the emphasis on being able to light out for the territories at the same time. And that makes you kind of disaffected and alienated even though it makes you free too. Oh, she's amazing.

BF:

Zadie Smith has been writing great, great stuff. Again in the magazines, you know, *New York Review of Books* and *Harper's* and, and I mean, and I mean she is looking directly at contemporary issues and so when I see something by her, yeah, I immediately grab it and yeah. I think the latest thing she had in the *New York Review of Books* was a piece on Kara Walker.

JP:

Oh yeah. Kara Walker. Yeah. "The sugar baby." She's amazing.

BF:

A great American artist. She scares the living piss out of me. I mean, appropriately.

JP:

Yeah, appropriately. She wouldn't be doing her job. I mean, her job is to scare you. Yes.

BF:

I mean, there are huge chunks of American history that, that should terrify us and terrorize us and horrify us. And Kara Walker does it like no one I've ever seen.

JP:

Well, one of the reasons I really like Arendt is her insistence that you cannot be sure that the truth will come out at any given moment. Like the flimflam can go on. You know, the hot air can stay in the balloon a long time, but you

can know that it will happen. I mean it, you know, and, and I, I really appreciate her. She's, she's pessimistic, but she's hopeful, you know, like she has a vision of what it takes to see the truth. And like you said, so much reality, you need so much.

BF:

Her clarity of vision is really extraordinary. Yeah. She does not look away. Yeah. And there is this core of, of compassion and humanity to her that, I mean, she reminds me of Camus and James Baldwin. They do not look away. They look with absolute clarity at the human condition. But there's this human core to them that just comes through in this very, you know, heartening way.

I mean, ultimately reality is stronger than all of them. I mean, and we can maintain our fantasies. You know, some of us can do it longer, some not as long. You know, there are differences in scale obviously, but, but what the current president has done in American life is, is it's truly extraordinary. And like all great demagogues, he's had us under a spell. We're in a trance ever since he came down the escalator in 2015 and sooner or later it will break. Yeah. There will be too much reality. But I, my gut is telling me that's not going to happen before November of 2020.

JP:

Ben, that's the second time you've mentioned Baldwin. I'm glad; I was trying to lead it back there, so that's great. Can you say more about why in 2004 or now that Baldwin seemed to provide an answer for you or a roadmap?

BF:

I haven't read him systematically and I should get those library of America volumes down and just read them straight through.

JP:

I keep meaning to do that with him. He's just, he goes so many directions though. So I tend to get, you know, I follow one path, like the "Letter to [My] Nephew," that's one thing. And like it's just, yeah. So it's hard to just read them straight through.

BF:

I mean his mind is so alive, it's so subtle. I mean, he's just, he's gotta be one of the top two or three or four American writers. Well, and came out of nowhere, which proves genius is everywhere. You know if it's given a chance, half a chance, 10% of a chance? You know, I remember reading *If Beale Street Could Talk* when it came out. And it came out like '76, '77 '78 right around, right. And I think I was home from college and I went, I mean, I've always been a book nerd and I would go to the public library once a week, you know, and switch out my books and it had just come out and it was this nice, hard back and they had it, you know, on display. So I got it and I read it and you know, the storyline is—gosh, I can't remember the young African-American's name.

JP:

I just saw the movie, but I can't remember anybody's name, so, yeah.

BF:

But anyway, I mean a cop in his neighborhood takes an extreme disliking to him and it's a white cop and, and our guy's black and basically he takes the fall for a brutal rape that he was nowhere near and he has an alibi for it and he still takes the fall for it. And it all comes out of this very personal animus. And I mean, I was a white kid in the suburbs, you know, in 1977 '78 and I'm reading it and it seemed like such an extreme situation. I was wondering, *does this kind of thing really happen?* For years afterwards, I walked around with that in the back of my mind. And, and every, every once in a while, a data point, I call it a



data point, an anecdote would come along and it would make me think, *yeah, that stuff really does happen*. And then of course, once we got cell phones and video—it happens all the time. I mean, it's a freaking massacre out there. And I mean, I carried that book around in my head for 40 years. .

JP:

Phonnie and Tish, by the way; Alphonso.

BF:

I didn't believe it. I didn't disbelieve it. I was suspending belief all that time. But the facts, demonstrable facts, the proof, the evidence showed that that Baldwin absolutely had it accurately. It's so interesting. 40 years.

JP:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and I'm really glad that movie came out. It's just funny cause for me, the, the books that had this kind of regulatory force for me were *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Life*. Which were, I mean, they were some of the first gay novels I read and I must've read them at the end of high school and...my mind was kind of blown. Can I just ask as a, as a way of sort of making a turn towards home here as a writer yourself, do you have thoughts about what this period brings for writing? Like either your own writing or the writing of others? Like what do you think is going to come out of our present moment?

BF:

Well, I'll talk about my own writing...

JP:

That'd be great. I was hoping you would.

BF:

I'm working on a novel set in Haiti in the early 1990s. That begins at the time of the first coup d'état under Jean Bertrand Aristide. During his first round in the presidency. And that coup d'état had very significant sponsorship by the American security state, the CIA, the defense intelligence agency. I mean, we were all over that coup d'état. And what resulted was a military, very brutal military regime for the next three and a half years. Society was on lockdown, a harsh embargo was put in place on Haiti. And life really became desperate materially and politically for those three-and-a-half years. And I was spending a lot of time there during that time. I feel like writing that novel at this particular moment in time, they do have relevance to one another. I mean, societies that are on lockdown to one extent or another. And I mean, there big differences obviously, but, but you know, just how people survive and keep themselves together in those situations—I'm finding our situation, you know, not irrelevant.

JP:

It's very interesting. How close are you to completing that novel?

BF:

I better be close because my deadline's coming up, but I'm planning to turn it in this year. As for other writers, you're seeing stuff come out in the *Sewanee Review*. They just started running a website feature called “the Corona Correspondence” where the editor there, Adam Ross, is inviting lots of different writers to write a letter from their city. Those have been nice pieces. And there's a new website called *Chronicles of Now*, where the editor is asking for short fiction ripped from the headlines and so, you know, just on a particular scale that's, that's going on, you know, I mean, writers, they take their experiences of life and you never know how it's going to get processed and come back out. And I remember what Norman Mailer said, right after 9/11, he said, probably 500 writers of talent were they're on the ground in Manhattan that day, and they might end up writing about it directly, or they may take the substance of that experience and, and have it serve some other

context, but one way or another, it will come out. I think that's true of what we're going through.

JP:

That's an interesting point. Yeah. Yeah. I heard George Saunders reading a letter or somebody reading a letter that he wrote to all of his students, you know, telling them to keep a diary. And then at the end of it, he sort of tells you all the things you should be doing to process that. And it's like, *of course me, I'm just sitting at home drinking*, but you know, that is what I *should* be doing.

BF:

Could you imagine having George Sanders as your teacher?

JP:

I cannot. Yeah. He's remarkable. Well Ben, thank you so much. It's been a great conversation and I'll just say for the credits that *Recall This Book* is hosted by John Plotz and usually by Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chaslow and Barbara Cassidy, sound editing by Claire Ogden website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you, and especially on the topic of Books in Dark Times with your comments, criticisms and suggestions, and simply just what you're reading. So finally, 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 podcast, and you might want to check out our other conversations with writers like Kim Stanley Robinson, as well as earlier conversations with such writers, Zadie Smith, Cixin Liu, and Samuel Delaney. So Ben, thank you very, very much.

BF:

John, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

JP:

Thank you all for listening.