

Recall This Book 32
Books In Dark Times 8
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Paul Saint-Amour

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. So I'm John Plotz and our RTB guest today is Paul Saint-Amour; modernist to the stars, professor of English at U. Penn, author among many other works of the brilliant *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War Encyclopedic Form*, which was Oxford university Press 2015. And he's also the world's leading exponent of the virtues of Russell Hoban's meisterwerk, *Riddley Walker*. So Paul, welcome.

Paul Saint-Amour:

Thank you, John. It's a pleasure to be here.

JP:

It is very good to be here too and to see you there. So this is another installment of our Books in Dark Times series, which asks what books we turn to for guidance or sustenance or encouragement. And Paul, maybe we can actually talk about those different words at moments like these. It takes its inspirations from Hannah Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*. In it she writes among many other things, "If it is a function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearance in which they can show in deed and word for better or for worse who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by speech that does not disclose, but sweeps that under the carpet that under the pretext of upholding old truths degrades all truths to meaningless triviality."

So I kind of switched up my Arendt quote here because I was thinking about the way that darkness for Arendt is always a political category. It's not just an epistemological one. And you know, the more I think about that book as inspiration, I think of it as an inspiration because Arendt sees darkness around us potentially all the time. So maybe that is part of our discussion too.

But in any case, Paul, you nicely agreed to do this and I sent you a few sort of questions to get us rolling, which--in the spirit of guidance, sustenance and encouragement--ask you to think about, you know, questions like, *what books are you reading right now that give you comfort* or *what books are you reading that give you joy and why?*

PS:

It's funny, when I first saw the quotation from dark times from Arendt, but also just the title Books in Dark Times that I thought maybe you were also thinking about Brecht, right? And that proverb, "In the dark times, will there still be singing? Yes. There will still be singing about the dark times."

JP:

No, I wasn't thinking about that. That's great though.

PS:

Yeah. Well, it's another one to put in your cap for, for another podcast. But you know, I think you could ask the same question about reading, you know, and the question of whether one reads about dark times in dark times is a tough one. And in addition, the question of whether it's possible to read at all at a time, like this is one that I've really been wrestling with. You know, a lot of our friends and colleagues are starting Henry James reading groups tucking into the Decameron or Proust--embarking on these very ambitious reading projects. And I have to confess, I find it difficult to wrangle my brain into immersive reading right now. And so the question of how to read in dark times at all, much less whether one can read about those dark times, you know, whether you can sort of examine the dental work of the lion as it's springing is, I think those are real questions. You know, there's so much beta chatter in our minds right now about COVID 19 and we're right now in the, I guess we're sort of in the third week of kind of increasingly severe measures, right?

JP:

Right. At the end of March as we tape this. Yes.

PS:

Exactly. And we're in this sort of weird time where on the one hand, it's a belated time in the sense that we have missed our chance at containment. We've missed the chance to really get ahead of this pandemic. On the other hand, in most places in the U.S. at least, we're still waiting for the sort of tsunami of COVID 19 cases at hospitals. And so there's this sense of kind of a terrible imminence as well as a belatedness and the air is very much charged with a kind of tension coupled with emptiness that I think is really not for me at least not conducive to immersive reading. So I just wanted to confess about that as a problem.

JP:

Yeah. Yeah. My friend Steve McCauley recommended that Patrick White book *The Eye of the Storm* and I actually haven't gone back to it to see whether it's about a literal eye of the storm, but what you just described seems like a very eye of the storm moment, right? It's like you've been through one wall of hurricane. In that it's the horror of what's going to happen--but now we're in a calm before the second wall of the typhoon strikes us. And I think that's right. I mean here in Boston it definitely feels that way. For sure. Also, Paul, you made an important distinction in terms of immersive reading: we've called this *Books in Dark Times*. Though a lot of people have taken that as "novels in dark times." But for sure the thing that we didn't call it was reading in dark times because I think there's no question that all of us are reading compulsively. But we're reading, as you said, the kind of dental work ... the imminent communiques of the catastrophe. We're reading in a kind of more chronicle-like way all the time at, you know, 250-word gulps. And I personally, I'm trying to avoid doing that. Like, to me that just feels like--as an eczema sufferer--I recognize that as the itch that the more you scratch it, the more it itches. So for me, I think the immersion isn't so much a luxury I can't allow myself as more like something prophylactic that will stop me and get me off the goddamn *Guardian* website.

PS:

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, imagine you know, swinging from having read a bunch of stories about I dunno COVID propagation in various parts of the world. And then, you know, plunging right into the *Decameron* or *journal of the Plague Year* or *Station 11* or the *End of October* and all of these

pandemic books that people are reading and all of them--For me it's too on the nose. I just can't, yeah, I thought it would be able to and I just can't do it. I can't watch *Contagion*. I can't play pandemic. None of it. Yeah. So the comfort and the joy are elsewhere.

JP:

My wife and I are having an argument. She, she wants me to watch *Contagion* with her and I said I will, but only if she'll watch "The Lady Eve" with me. And so far we're at it. We're at a standstill. We're at a zugszwang at the moment. But on the other hand, Paul, just to go back to the point you made about our colleagues: It's one thing to read the *Decameron* right now, but it's another, you also mentioned Henry James reading groups cause that, that seems kind of different like reading, reading *Journal of the Plague Year* is one way of sailing into the storm and then choosing Henry James is another way.

PS:

Absolutely. And as somebody who is not able really to do either of those things right now, I can sort of see how, you know, in a, in the middle of a pandemic, you might read pandemic fiction. Either because you might learn something practical from it or through a kind of repetition through mastery. You know, a mastery of an ongoing trauma through repetition of its presentation or just because you feel it somehow toughens you. Whereas to read *Wings of the Dove* as a group of Victorianists are now doing apparently, to have the kind of you know, receptivity for those long, late Jamesian sentences. You know, I salute anyone with, with the sort of calm calmness of mind to be able to do that right now.

JP:

Okay. Well, so then that, that's great Paul, because that you've immediately ruled yourself out of both group A and group B who are by far the preponderance of the people I've talked to. So. So tell us about your group C, what are you reading?

PS:

So, I have found myself reading a bunch of time-travel narratives which is not something that I'm new to, but they have a particular pull for me right now. And I think it started with going back to "Story of Your Life" by Ted Chiang, which is the short story on which the film *Arrival* is based. And I think I'm drawn to it for a number of reasons. One is that it's all about language and time. And how the way a language is organized has crucial ramifications for the whole structure of one's epistemology, right? So these aliens, because they don't have a kind of sequential or causal linear model of time have a completely different alternative epistemology that sees time as kind of radically simultaneous. But the reason that that story syncs up with a lot of other time-travel stories is that the thing that you think is being remembered is actually in the future. And the film does a wonderfully cinematic kind of twist on this by turning what it introduces in the idiom of flashback which is to say the story of the protagonist's daughter and her death of cancer. We don't realize until the very final scene of the film that it's a montage of scenes that are diegetically in the future from the future of the film. And I don't, I'm just, I'm obsessed all over again with those kinds of plots.

JP:

So can we dig down on the *Arrival* and "Story of Your Life" question? 'Cause that's a really interesting one. And we've talked about it on the podcast before because I have an octopus obsession. So I like the heptapods -- I mean, the obsession has to do with what alterity of consciousness looks like. And I'm obsessed with the way that science fiction either turns to bugs or octopuses or heptapods in this case to represent that kind of alterity. So I take it that you and I are picking up different ends of that story or that film, because the end I'm picking up on is related to the arrival of the Heptapod representing a kind of outside. But you're interested in the quality of language, like the discovery that there's a language which collapses time is a way that allows her, the protagonist to stage and encounter with her own life. Is that right? Like in other words, it's a kind of, it's an inward-looking plot for you. Whereas for me, it's a plot that kind of looks out into the possibility of a beyond, I guess.

PS:

Yeah, that's right. The protagonist is a linguist and because she learns to be fairly proficient, if not fluent in Heptapod B (the written version of Heptapod) She enters into a very different relationship to the temporality of

her life has a Heptapod B proficient. Which is to say that, you know, from the moment she becomes proficient until the moment of her death, she's able to see her whole life. And you know, there's on the one hand a loss of free will as we experience it. But there is a sense in which she is enacting chronology, I think is how the text puts it. Yeah. Yeah. Right. And it's fascinating to me that we want that we're interested in telling these circular stories that entail the loss of free will given I think that that a lot of our ideas about the aesthetic are premised on the idea that it's a space of free play and an experience of freedom. And yet these, these looping time travel stories are all about the surrender of the kinds of temporalities that are necessary for our experience of freewill.

JP:

So *Slaughterhouse Five* would be a kind of *urtext* for that then.

PS:

Yeah, that's a good, that's a really good example.

JP:

Though a much darker one, I think.

PS:

Yeah. And although, you know, there is this strange kind of, you know, redemptive scene of the bombs going out of Dresden back into the bellies of the bombers and being delivered back to the warehouses and all that, that, that cues Martin Amis and makes him write *Time's Arrow*. But you know, I think that these stories remind us of something about the aesthetic, which is that it's not just a space for the experience of freedom, but space for the experience of the surrender of certain kinds of freedoms and the capacity to enter into something more like *interpassivity* than interactivity with a text. In the name of the kinds of realizations that we have at the ends of let's say, great novels where you realize that the future of the narrative that is to say the end of the narrative was in a sense there all along and structuring the beginning. So, you know, in one way those time-travel novels are sort of X rays of realist plots, I think. Of the strange recursive temporalities of certain aesthetic forms.

JP:

Yeah. So any thought about why those would be of particular interest to you at this crisis moment or this *jetzzeit*?

PS:

Yeah, I've been trying to puzzle that out and I think it's, so, you know, as, as COVID 19 came along and we started having to cancel events, you know, we were going into our Google calendars and just deleting squares from the in gridded month of the future. And to me it was an object lesson in the ways that we treat the future. Not really as a temporality, not as a time to come, but as a kind of spatial image. And that's because we count on its being there and being a kind of empty homogenous time that we can spatialize and kind of plot out. And there's, there's a weird way in which having to delete most of your plans and also having to yield up the capacity to make plans to a large extent, reimbues the future with, with the kind of temporality and with an unknowability that I think we, we tend to ignore in the name of being able to plan it and there's something, you know, there's something maybe emancipatory about that and we could think about what the political possibilities that get opened up might be to that kind of reoxygenation of the future with temporality.

JP:

Another interesting example in that line, the line that goes from maybe *Slaughterhouse Five* potentially through "Story of Your Life" and *Arrival* is would be *Interstellar*. Because that's, I don't know if you've thought about that connection because that's I mean it's confected as a Hollywood picture story: I mean it has the arc, the familial arc that we can recognize. I mean that is the travel, the time travel into the past that he undertakes is all about redeeming the family unit.

PS:

It is, although I think that the cool swerve in that film has actually more to do with gender because you think it's the astronaut father's story and he actually ends up being a subsidiary player in the life of his famous physicist daughter, even though he's the one who sends her the information from the

inside of the black hole about the singularity and sort of allows her--supplies, the missing piece to her calculations. Ultimately, you know, she is at the center of that world if not of a narrative.

JP:

So I, I totally agree with that. The, my main thought about it is just that it is, it's, it's similarly recursive to the other stories we're talking about in that it wants to make that, you know, the rediscovery of your own family dynamic and your personal ambitions is like at the heart of the cool time travel aspect of it.

PS:

It brings me back to the sort of bigger question about these plots, which is, you know, are they just kind of allegories about aesthetic objects being kind of self-enclosed or do they, in addition to that, have some aperture still too, something to some colder wind, that is blowing in from elsewhere than let's say the, the interior of the family home, and I guess I would want to pull another older text into this discussion, which is Bronte's *Villette*. Which I find myself going back to also. It's my favorite Bronte novel. And one of the reasons is that, you know, it's full, the early pages of that book are full of images of storm and shipwreck, which just seemed to be the kind of code that she has (as a fanciful person) animated to use, to sort of tell the story of her life without going into particulars about what happens to her family, this disaster, what happens to her family. It's not until you reach the end of that book that you learn that, that her fiancé has very probably died in a shipwreck and that that disaster has structured her whole retelling of her life from childhood. And so, although it's not a time-travel narrative in the, in the kind of science fiction the figural universe of that book is doing the same thing that we're talking about. And I don't think it's consoling in the way that you know, a work of art that's just allegorizing the autonomous aesthetic is consoling.

JP:

So just to stick with that cold wind from elsewhere, from outside idea, which I think about a lot too. Are you a fan at all of Naomi Mitchison or Doris Lessing?

PS:

I have not read any Naomi Mitchison and I have not, I'll have to confess, gotten beyond, you know, the opening pages of the *Golden Notebook* so I'm basically a Lessing neophyte. Okay. I'll know where to start and tell me where the question comes.

JP:

Well, okay, so I'll just, I'll, I'll try to say it quickly, but I'll just say it. So the Naomi Mitchison book I love is *Memoirs of a Space Woman*, which is despite the title, not a *Star Trek* episode, it's a 1962 novel in which the space travel is imagined as essentially perpetual ethnographic expansion into a world defined by various kinds of baffling alterity some of them simple like starfish people who think in pentagonal terms rather than binary terms. That's kind of like a starter episode, but then it goes on from there in ways that I find really interesting.

And similarly, the Doris Lessing, I'm thinking of the *Canopus in Argos* series, the space fiction. This is the moment that everyone bailed on Doris Lessing. I mean, it's just like people lined up from let's see who Joan Didion, John Updike. Oh, I can't remember. There's just like, you know, dozens of people who've just accused Lessing of having gone off the deep end in the eighties when she started writing space fiction. But it's understood as -they are cold wind problems. Like the one that I really love which is actually kind of pandemic-ish actually is *The Making of the Representatives of Planet Eight*, which is where a planet discovers that they are going to, they're all going to die basically. And how do the representatives of Planet Eight understand their impending demise and how do they represent it to themselves and also to these cold-eyed space alien emissaries who are there to witness their demise basically.

I totally hear what you're saying, Paul, about the way in which a lot of these recursive speculative fiction plots are allegorical on the aesthetic, the capacities of the aesthetic itself. But what I like in both Lessing and Mitchison is that I think they do, they don't escape from the actuality of the aesthetic form as just being this kind of limited space that is hard pressed to tell any story beyond itself. But they nonetheless take that challenge of like what it would be like to step outside that as like absolutely foundational for what they try to do. That is like, they take the actuality of their aesthetic status for

granted and they nonetheless want the encounter to be something truly alien. And that I find that....

PS:

Accepting limits then, and then sort of, you know, cracking the vessel that is meant to contain. Which I, which I think Bronte does, you know, through the strange kind of figural itineraries in that book and also the counterfactual moments where she says, *you're free to imagine if you like that, you know, this interval of my life was smooth sailing*. However, there's no concealing the fact that, or the way she allows you to choose in a sense between two endings in the final pages of that book, which is really, you know quite, quite a perverse and inspiring move.

JP:

Yeah, yeah. Paul, you don't play video games, do you?

PS:

I've played a couple of recently, but you know, I've played a couple of John Blow games like *Braid* and *Witness*, but you know, I, I'm not like a multiplayer first person shooter game. I'm like, yeah, depopulated puzzle solving *Myst* type of gamer.

JP:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'm just, I mean, I'm a barely a gamer at all. I mean, I think basically chess, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and, and do you remember an arcade game called *Tempest* from the 1980s? I played *Tempest*. You just spun a dial and shot. But in this genre seminar that I'm teaching, I have a student now who's writing about, she's actually writing about the concept of *Ludo-narrative dissonance*. Does that phrase mean anything to you? Like meaning the discrepancy within games between the fact that they're ludic and narrative at the same time. So they have a story to tell, but they also have gameplay, which gives you some navigational capacity within the narrative. And one of the things that's really interesting is that there is something called the "Canon route." Do you know this? So there's a lot of

games that are essentially narrative structures. The example that she's working on is something called *Tales from the Borderlands*. And basically there's an outcome that is a desired and intended outcome within the design of the game. But you make a series of choices as you go through, but there is a canon route and if you take the canon route you can kind of go farthest and fastest.

And the thing that I've been thinking about is the relationship that has to, you know, the fact of the novel as being a genre of liberal individualism, which is predicated on that sort of choice-making that one would imagine one had when one encountered the optative logic of the novel. Like in other words, you look at *Middlemarch* and you think, okay, well there's thousands of different characters here and I can imagine what each one of them would choose. But of course it being a novel and not a game, you don't actually get to choose. You know, you just read the damn book. So the thing about these games is they actually try to kind of give you both at once. And it's really interesting. So when you talk about like that two alternatives for the ending, like *Great Expectations* is kind of like that as well, right? Like there's two different ways that the, you can understand the ending is unpacking, but you know, we now live in a world in which you have these like Ludo-narrative forms that give you, you know, choose your own adventure.

PS:

That's so funny that that concept I think is related to one that I've recently learned from my daughters, which is "plot armor."

JP:

I don't know about plot armor.

PS:

So basically if you're watching, usually it's a series and a character is clearly too important to die. When that character is put into peril, I watch my kids roll their eyes and say, "Oh, this isn't happening. That person has too much plot armor to be injured."

JP:
It's like too big to fail in a way. Right?

PS:

Right. There are too many, there are too many sort of narrative assets masked behind this character for the character to be liquidated. And in a way it takes you know, that narrative investment means that the ludic properties, which is to say, you know, could anyone die, but even a protagonist or a second string character be bumped off at this point have plot armor and it's the plot armor that prevents this, that gets in the way.

JP:

Yeah. So that's great. So can I just say that, that helps me think about, I mean, I spent a lot of time thinking about the insane greatness of how Thomas Hardy's plots work. And one of the things that I really love, if you think about a plot like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is okay, fine the novel is titled *Tess...*, so you know, it's about her, but then it's always constellating various people who are possibly could fall in this position. You know, when Angel comes to work at the dairy, there's four different milkmaids he could marry. And only one of them is Tess. And the other three have their stories also. So, in other words, the way that the naturalist logic of Hardy works is actually, it's almost kind of meta-plotting where he's making you aware of all the choices he's not taking. I think Gillian Beer calls them *ghost plots*. And I feel like ghost plots in a way is the opposite of plot armor. You know, it's like the way in which Hardy makes the very status of storytelling itself a little bit vulnerable to the exigencies of life, even though he's committed to having one person at the center.

PS:

Right. And there are the moments, you know, like the scandalous moment when the children die in *Jude*. You know, those children are supposed to be plot armored, not so much as they're protagonist, but because they're children in a novel that seems to think about generation as an important access.

JP:

Yeah. So that now every naturalist novel wants to show you that it's determinism all the way down, like in Zola or Dreiser or Norris. It's always like there's always grimness. But yeah. But Hardy also shows you that it's contingency all the way down as well. And that is, it's very unsettling.

PS:

You've been coming back to Hardy and in several of these podcasts and it does make me wonder also I think you know, Hardy is enjoying a kind of resurgence in general as an object of scholarship.

JP:

Is he? That's awesome.

PS:

Yeah, I think so. I think so. And there's something about our moment that seems to be, you know, resonating at the same frequency as Hardy, which you're probably better equipped to figure out than I am.

JP:

Well that's interesting. Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, grimness of the Gilded Age, right? I mean, I think the 1890s, 80's and 90's were another moment where people were watching widening gaps of, you know, at a, you know, having, yeah. If you think of the mid-century as representing the possibility of the emancipatory leveling that liberalism might potentially effect (like, I think you can see that in somebody like Dickens) then maybe Hardy is more like the later period where you realize that, Oh, well you know the annihilation of one kind of inequality didn't really produce a more equal space. It just allowed a different sort of inequality to establish itself.

So Paul, like since you and I both have the 1930s on our brains though you've thought about them much longer and more deeply and more intelligently than I have, maybe we could pursue that point about the egalitarian possibilities of the present moment a bit because I've been thinking about the ways in which our present era resembles the thirties in all the bad ways in the sort of Vera Brittain kind of ways. Like, you know, that you

can feel that, you know, something that happened 10 or 15 years ago, kind of broke our society and we're stumbling around waiting for the next bad thing. But on the other hand, you're making me think that the 1930s are also the Decade of the Common Man. You know, that Roosevelt embodied this impulse to say *yes, you know, enough of this jazz age lunacy. Let's try to think of us all aligned together.* Like I was just watching with my students *It Happened One Night* and I was, I noticed that, you know, the bad figures, you know, it's the rich girl who's about to marry this helicopter, this auto-gyro, pilot. And she says, *I just want to get back on the Merry-go-round.* So the image for being rich there is this ceaseless whirl of the merry-go-round or the auto-gyro. And then on the other hand, what Clark Gable stands for is all these people standing in line like you stand in line to use the shower every night you stand line to get on the bus. And that's what makes us rectilinear and common. So that's a nice maybe way of thinking about the Thirties. Does that resonate for you at all? Like is there like an upbeat story of Thirties' solidarity?

PS:

Yeah, sure. And I think that you know, a number of the counterfactual novels that imagine the premature death or political defeat of Roosevelt are imagining what would have happened if the thirties hadn't been the thirties. Right. So we're right now seeing this adaptation by David Simon of *The Plot against America* by Philip Roth. And a lot of folks have both read and watched a recent adaptation of Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*. In a sense, both of those novels in addition to kind of re-litigating the Second World War and its possible sequelae, are thinking about what would have happened if the Thirties had not been the Thirties in the U.S. in particular, right? So there's something about readers and viewers right now that is interested in the counterfactual Thirties, which is a way I think of backlighting the actual thirties without having to look very hard at them. Because people are maybe less interested in actually spending a lot of time in the thirties diegesis. You know, there's something about the 1940s war time that is a bit more, it is, that is exerting more pull as a kind of represented world.

JP:

Yeah. Okay. I buy that. That's great. And I'm looking forward to watching *Plot Against America*. I think well there's a whole 'nother Phillip Roth

discussion we could have. But I was thinking about there's something about Roth that maybe fits into that question of what happens in the 1960s when they turned back to the 1930s, like the fact that, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* really is a book, you know, of the Thirties, but really only well known in the Sixties. That you know, that in the sixties people that part of the back-to-the-land impulse of the Sixties comes out of their conception of what happened in the Thirties.

Anyway, Paul, thank you. This is great. You've prompted many thoughts and you've been strangely optimistic, which I appreciate.

PS:

I feel pessimistic but hopeful.

JP:

Yes. I guess that's right. Pessimistic but hopeful. That's good. And you managed to do that without mentioning any books out of your childhood, which is where I always go when I'm feeling down.

PS:

Well when you were talking about Le Guin and I was definitely thinking about *The Earthsea Trilogy*, which has maybe not when you had in mind you're talking. "The ones who walk away from Omelas" yes, but I have definitely been drawn back to bildungsroman and late fantasy and sci-fi bildungsroman that are also about world-building. Your point about world building and story is one that I've been mulling myself in different ways and I think partly because of the belatedness of the moment right now, there's something about the earliness of the beginning of the representation of a fictional world when it's being established and when the life of the protagonist is just setting out that has been a really important, a steadying force for me in this moment. Yeah. So I, you know, I could easily find myself reaching for, *I Capture the Castle*.

JP:

Oh my God, what a great one. *I Capture the Castle*. Yeah.

PS:

Yeah. Not Sci-Fi or fantasy. But you know, just such a, such an evocative piece of building.

JP:

Yeah. Oh, that's great. Or *Cold Comfort Farm*.

So I'm just going to say that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually Elizabeth Ferry, whose ghost is with us; with music by Eric Chaslow and Barbara Cassidy, "Fly Away"; sound editing's by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you and we especially want to hear from you about your own Books in Dark Times, which you can tweet us using the hashtag books in dark times. And you can also email us directly or contact us via social media or our website as per usual. And finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please do pass it on to others and write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast, and check out our other Books in Dark Times conversations as well as conversations with other writers, including Zadie Smith, Cixin Liu and Samuel Delaney. So Paul, thank you very, very much, always a pleasure. And thank you so much for listening.