

Recall This Book

Books in Dark Times

Vanessa Smith, May 13, 2020

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 our Recall This Book guest today is the remarkable Vanessa Smith, who is the author of among many wonderful publications, *Intimate Strangers: Friendship Exchange and Pacific Encounters* published in 2010. And Vanessa is many things at University of Sydney, including.... are you chair of your department right now, Vanessa?

Vanessa Smith:

No, I'm not. I'm supposedly on sabbatical.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. That's why she looks so incredibly relaxed. Vanessa has been many things but has been for long time a professor at Sydney though she and I met at Cambridge University--we can almost say many decades ago, I guess we can say several decades ago--we met when we were both in grad school. So Vanessa, welcome. It's awesome to have an occasion to talk to you again. So this is another installment of our Books in Dark Time series, which as you dear listener, probably know by now explicitly takes its inspiration from 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 that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts and from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works (And we mean books here when we say works) will kindle under almost all circumstances."

So at this moment we're interested in what brings people like Vanessa and like you, dear listener, comfort or joy or sustenance or engagement or illumination. So draw up a chair and listen and then please do send us your own thoughts. We'd love to know what you are reading at this dark hour. So, okay, Vanessa, as you know, we start these conversations off with a few simple questions. So can I just get the ball rolling with those questions? Meaning like, what have you been reading that gives you comfort? What have you been reading that gives you joy?

Vanessa Smith:

So comfort. So as I mentioned, I'm supposed to be on sabbatical, so I was, I had these plans for, you know, travel conferences, you know, you and I were going to meet at one of those conferences. So obviously not being able to do this is not the biggest problem that the world is facing, but there is some disappointment in all this kind of imagined travel, not coming to pass. So one of the books that's really comforted me is Marion Milner's, *Eternity's Sunrise* which is a late book of hers. And it's about, she always, she always had these titles like, you know, about not being able to do something about not being able to paint, you know, but this one is effectively about not being able to keep a traditional travel diary. So she comes up with her own kind of psychoanalytically informed version of keeping a travel diary.

So she went on this a series of trips to Greece in her sixties. And she, she tried to do that thing of sort of writing down a day-to-day account. And she said it totally went flat. And what she came to realize after a while was that she needed to wait until the travel had passed, I guess. And then she did something which she calls *collecting the beads*. So she waited for what, what she called it, like a bead of a, a kind of particularized, quite luminous memory. And then, and then the process was to kind of write down that memory. Or, you know, she could draw things as well. And then, and she also worked through souvenirs she bought, I think that was her first way in. So she would she would just look at what she bought and think, *why did I buy this odd collection of things?*

Or sometimes she'd picked up something like a feather on the ground or something like that. And then she would retrospectively construct kind of connections between these things that had--that was her special memories or her, her things.

John Plotz:

Hey, Vanessa, can I just back you up? Cause I'm in the unfortunate position of only knowing the one Marion Milner book that you wrote a wonderful article about, *A Life of One's Own*. But can you just fill in our listeners a little bit about who she is? She's such an interesting kind of transitional figure.

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah, she's well she's, you know, I guess, you know, she's my, yeah, she's my home girl.

John Plotz:

I usually say *she's my heart* in that situation, like that's how I talk about Willa Cather and Hannah Arendt.

Vanessa Smith:

Probably more appropriate than home girl for Marion Milner. So I mean, she, she lived to be 98, 99 I think she, her life span was the entire 20th century.

John Plotz:

British born is that right?

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah. And she kind of came to people's attention, I guess in the 1930s when she wrote *A Life of One's Own*. Wrote and published *A Life of One's Own*. Which you know, as you know, is this attempt to I guess self-analyze. She was very anti psychoanalytic at that point. So she came up with this method which involved just writing a journal of what made her happy.

John Plotz:

That book is tremendous on lived experience. Her description of playing ping pong (and she's not a good ping pong player or anything) her description of what it means to like have her hand telling her what to do before she thinks is remarkable. So I love her *in-moment writing*. So what you're describing with

travel, the anti-travel diary is so interesting to me because it sounds in a way antithetical to that because so removed from the original, now...

Vanessa Smith:

She's conscious of being you know, starting to be elderly and I suppose having some, some limitations, although, she really didn't accept those. She was doing, you know, dancing classes. Somebody rang her up, I think when she was in her eighties and said, *you know, we have, we have a free offer of ballroom dancing classes. Do you accept it now?* You know, she took it and went off, you know, dancing and so on. So.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So Vanessa, I, know you led into this by saying the reason you're reading it is related to kind of deferred or frustrated travel during your sabbatical. And I totally get that, but can I kind of, can we go further with the question of why it given the reality of our world, which is so much more than just, *Oh, I can't go on my sabbatical trip.* Any thoughts about why this book would be satisfying and engaging to you? You know, given the unprecedented....

Vanessa Smith:

Oh, because it's making me go back to you know, recent trips I've taken and sort of think through what was enjoyable about them. And I don't need to kind of, you know, accumulate more experience. Like I can, I can process what I already, I already had. Yeah. I fully acknowledge it's seriously not the biggest problem right now, but it's, it's just that way of, you know, you can, I mean in this time you can kind of go back to old photo albums or something and you know, you could feel quite melancholic. You know, just as you, as you regard yourself in that that kind of mode of assumed freedom and privilege and this is a way of returning to things in a more fruitful way.

John Plotz:

Yeah, no, it makes sense. And so is that when you read it, is the pleasure for you in seeing how she does it or is the pleasure for you in what it then makes you do with your own trips?

Vanessa Smith:

Always both with Milner, that's what I love so much about her. I enjoy her prose, I love her writing and I love watching what she does with, you know, a period of life that is well beyond mine. But also yeah, there's, there's a real tangible kind of takeaway to reading. You can, you can try the exercises at home.

John Plotz:

Kind of like the Jane Fonda workout video. Yeah. Okay. Sounds good.

Vanessa Smith:

The other one that's been perversely comforting. Do you know, do you know the book? I just love this book. I kind of got it as a critical thing when I was thinking about a project that never eventuated. Do you know, it's called *Tormented Hope: Nine Hypochondriac Lives*.

John Plotz:

No, I don't know *Tormented Hope*...

Vanessa Smith:

It's so good. It's so good, by Brian Dylan. And it just kinda, it just kind of gives an account of nine different hypochondriac figures. So it's like Boswell, Charles Darwin, interestingly, Glenn Gould, Andy Warhol. Yeah. I'm really, really nicely written and just, you know, kind of also helpful in these times.

John Plotz:

Tell me more about Glenn Gould, cause I'm just about to watch *32 Short Films about Glenn Gould*, because I do, I totally worship him.

Vanessa Smith:

Well, he's the last one in the book and I am rereading it now. Yeah, I mean you know all about Darwin. Florence Nightingale

John Plotz:

Lytton Strachey is really good on her hypochondria. And I was going to ask if you've read *Sanditon* lately cause you know,

Vanessa Smith:

Well I've read it in the last five years. I guess cause I had to..

John Plotz:

I remember that it's sort of about hypochondria like I mean basically the people coming to take cures. I mean, I guess in a way *Emma*, it's about hypochondria too people who enjoy their sickness. I guess it's enjoying literally enjoying your symptoms, right?

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah. Well yeah. Or somehow using them....

John Plotz:

But it's all in the form of inward attention that it just seems, I mean, I don't know. I mean it's, it's, it would be mean to call it perverse. It's like another form of inward attention that's different from the self-regard that philosophy sometimes teaches we're supposed to exercise, you know?

Vanessa Smith:

Right, right. Yeah. Yeah. Although I do think that my interest in this book in this time is a bit perverse. You wake up, you get a tiny cough because you're clearing your throat.

John Plotz:

I want *anti-chondria*.

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah, it is. It is like an antidote somehow reading these stories.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, so Vanessa, one of the topics that has emerged is the question of whether like, I thought the most interesting question for people would be whether comfort and joy were related to one another. Like you know, there were, because we're all critics, right? So there would be the notion that, I mean a lot of the people that I have been speaking with are people who are scholars. For a living, what you do is pick things apart. So I thought that people would emphasize the antithetical quality of what gives you joy versus what gives you comfort. But it hasn't exactly played out like that. It's more like it's played out around people whose satisfaction comes from finding something that allows them fully to leave their world versus people who have wanted something that allows them to like understand their own situation better.

Vanessa Smith:

Right. Okay. So I guess I fall into category two.

John Plotz:

No, in some ways category one, too, right, because there's the pleasure of her prose. What you're describing with Milner's prose is the pleasure of an immersion into the artisanship of what she's creating--but definitely more like category two, because it's enabling you to make sense of your situation.

Vanessa Smith:

I enjoy the prose of *Tormented Hope* as well. It's beautifully written, but yeah. Yeah. And the other person that I have been loving in this dark times, and you probably know her work well, but you know, she's a sort of American icon and I wasn't familiar with her at all. I just came across one of her books in a second hand shop and really like the photo of her on cover is MFK Fisher. Do you know?

John Plotz:

How to Cook a Wolf!

Vanessa Smith:

I just came across that in a second hand bookshop.

John Plotz:

What about Australian writers?

Vanessa Smith:

Well, no, I mean, you know, that way we're going to do this thing about Helen Garner. But I don't find her very comforting at all.

John Plotz:

But with *the Spare Room*, there's something very dry. I was thinking about late-life books. I was thinking about the spare room isn't that what it's called. The one about her comes to her house to die. Yeah. Cause I find that book, actually, I do find it, well, comforting might be the wrong word. I find that a bracing book, it's like a very, it's kind of rigorously honest, you know, about a total.

Vanessa Smith:

She's always rigorously honest, I think.

John Plotz:

So, so, so if you had to pick one of her books, like if you were on a desert Island, which ones should we talk about?

Vanessa Smith:

Should we talk about *Children's Bach*? Would you, is that the one you would pick? Well, obviously that's the one I've read recently. Yeah. But you find her comforting?

John Plotz:

I am beginning to think that word *comforting* isn't the right word. Like my friend Seeta, who we were, I was just talking with earlier today, she said, well, I don't know what comforting means, but I can talk about the books that sustain and engage me. And I find Garner *sustaining* because she is so bracing. She's like you know, she's like a very salt breeze in your face. You know, she kind of wakes you up. But yeah, I feel like she keeps you honest because she herself is so honest. And that makes you think harder.

Like a book, like *the Children's Bach*, which you know, when it starts I think "Oh, right, okay. Here are some people in a kind of unpleasant slash unhappy slash sordid situation." And your immediate instinct when you read that as to think, well, I mean I'm glad that's not me or that couldn't be me for the following reasons. And then she just kind of unfolds the situation and you find yourself realizing, "Oh right, well yeah, I mean if, if that were my condition, then that's probably what I would do too. And I can see why it's the wrong thing to do." You know, why it's just going to sink her deeper into this hole, you know?

Vanessa Smith:

So that's a little moment in that beginning of that book where I can't remember if it's the, the mother or the daughter character or just kind of come back into the husband's life. But one of them is kind of looking disparagingly (you know, I only read this a month and a half, like I can't even remember the names of any of the characters, so you might be able to fill those in) but one of them yeah, she's, she starting to have a sort of a, maybe I think it's the mother, she's sort of saying, Oh, she's a bit of a frump or something, or she's, she's not much kind of thing. And then it says she's, she sees this carefully darned sleeve on her jumper or something that she's been able to kind of mend something and she might have to revise that view. And it's, it's also there in like *Monkey Grip* where so many things are falling apart all the time. And this, you know, young mother, I mean it's, it's completely shocking, you know, it kind of, you know, this, this kind of kid wafting through these lives and yeah. All's everywhere and you know, mother kind of whacked out on speed and stuff, but

John Plotz:

It's the heroin novel, I mean that doesn't do it justice, but it's, it's a novel in which everyone is shooting one thing or another.

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah. Yeah. So, but even in that there are these moments where she's darning or cleaning or something where she kind of gets it together for awhile and she darns in that as well. I dunno if it is some sort of darning weaving motif going through these, there's something about, as everything unravels, she can also sew things up again.

John Plotz:

All right. Okay. I love that. Okay. So Vanessa, that's an awesome note to end on because that's a great way to think about why Garner, because everything has to be unraveled in order for the raveling to mean anything. Is that right?

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Okay. Awesome. Okay, so wait, I'm just going to say that. 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. And as you know, we always want to hear from you with comments, criticism, suggestion for future episodes, and in this case, suggestions we want to hear from you about books that you have found comforting. So please email us or tweet at #booksindarktimes. And finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever. So thank you so much for listening. And Vanessa, thank you. This was awesome.

Vanbessa Smith:

Great to talk to you.

John Plotz

Okay, see ya.