

Recall This Book 33
Books In Dark Times 10
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Martin Puchner

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 my returning guest is professor of English and theater at Harvard and comparative literature and editor of more than one Norton anthology and author of many prize winning books among them *The Written World*.

This is another installment of our Books in Dark Times series, which as you probably know by now, if you're listening to this 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 [I think there's an anti-theory move here] than from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works will kindle under almost all circumstances."

So, we are conceived in the belief that that's true, that there's kindling out there. Even at a dark moment and especially at a dark moment, we want to know what brings people like you Martin and like you dear listener, comfort and joy. So we invite you to draw up a chair and listen, and then also please, to send us your own thoughts about books that you have been turning to and at this particular moment. So, Martin, I gave you some kind of softball questions to get the ball rolling. What books are you reading that are giving you comfort and why, or giving you joy and why?

Martin Puchner:

Yeah, so I, you know, the first book I turned to a few weeks ago (and events are moving so fast that I no longer think that that's a great choice, but then it seems like a good book and a lot of people were talking about it) is *The*

Decameron by Bocaccio. And this came up because I was teaching a world literature course. And one of the texts there, we are reading was not *Decameron* but *1,001 Nights*, a frame-tale narrative with all kinds of stories within it. And so it was one of the last in-person lectures I delivered. And since I was talking about frame-tale narratives, I, of course my mind immediately went to the *Decameron*, you know, whose frame story as, as you know, and many people know is, is a plague. And so this group of aristocrats withdraw to the countryside to spend the time telling stories, all different kinds of stories to pass the time as in the outside world, the bodies are piling up. It seemed like a good thing to talk about.

JP:

It's mid 14th century. It's a time when there were a lot of plagues, I guess.

MP:

Exactly, coming from Asia as it happens. Yeah, not all plague come from Asia, but this one that did. It celebrates the power of storytelling because that's how they, you know, spent their time. Very much the way, I don't know, we spent the time of streaming Netflix and listening to podcasts...

JP:

Actually, Martin, just to, just to push the analogy to *1,001 Nights*: it's the power of storytelling--because it's what they're doing as a *pasa tiempo*, just to pass the time while waiting. But *1001 Nights* has a much stronger claim because Shahrazad actually, her stories are what keep her alive. Right? But that's, that's not true of *The Decameron*, right? There's no, there's no suggestion that there's an anti-plague quality to them?

MP:

No, that would be interesting to have the stories actually ward off the plague.

JP:

I bet there's an Italo Calvino in which the story itself could annihilate the plague.

MP:

Except perhaps only that it, you know, telling these stories, keeps them from going crazy with all, you know, sheltering at home. It's very hard.

JP:

My cohost Elizabeth Ferry was just talking about reading *Journal of the Plague Year*, which I bet is another book you thought about. And she made the point that *Journal of the Plague Year* the central character's problem is that he just will not shelter in place. Like he keeps going out, even though he knows it's dangerous. And so that's a really good point. So *The Decameron* suggests, well, here's actually a thing you can do. Like you learn how to Netflix your life on your own.

MP:

Yeah, exactly. But as I said, I, that, that seemed, you know, and this seemed like a good idea three weeks ago, but I have to say in the last week I have turned, I mean, I guess I've become like a character in Bocaccio in that I have turned to pure escapism. And so my, a drug of choice is PG Wodehouse. I read, I think the entire oeuvre even the early cricket novels, which are not impressive literature, but he's the perfect stylist and in his world, nothing bad ever happened. You know, these are novel set in a very rarefied high aristocratic world in Britain. And some also in New York, he's actually buried on Long Island. It's really strange, years ago, a friend who, you know, in suburban long Island took me by his grave. And it seems like the last place you would expect them because it's all about castles and you know London high society.

JP:

Most of them are written in America, isn't that right?

MP:

I'm not sure actually that that's the case, but he certainly spent significant time here and died here. And some of his novels are partially or entirely set in the United States.

JP:

Okay. So, so Martin, so one of the big axes we've been exploring... first of all, we've had, I think, five conversations and in four of them PG Woodhouse has come up.

MP:

No really

JP:

You're clearly, you've got your finger on the pulse of the glitterati which is great, but we've been talking about kind of an axis between, I guess, relevance and escape, I suppose. That's it. So it sounds like you started with something that's actually not very directly relevant. It's not as if you were reading a book about like pandemic or something, but you started with a book that had an immediate frame an envelope that was plagueish and then you ended up escaping. Is that fair? So it is. So do you have any thoughts about the meaning of the word comfort in the word joy in this context, basically at this point only *comfort* is giving you *joy*?

MP:

Well, comfort. I mean, there maybe a good way of putting it. And though, I mean, the thing about PG Wodehouse, it's not, it's not fluffy. It's not feel-good. It's, it's incredibly precise. The prose is incredibly precise. So it's this incredibly shiny, super well-crafted world in which if you dig language, you can enter and enjoy every sentence and the pacing of it and the turns of phrases and all of that. So it's not so much feel-good, I would say, but it's this concoction, this incredibly elaborate and artful and artificial concoction that you can enter and enjoy and it is definitely a distraction. But it's not fluffy feel-good.

JP:

Okay. So I'm going to put you, I'm gonna, I'm going to put you on the spot as as German-born literature professor. So PG Wodehouse and Thomas Mann are virtually contemporaries, but you would never have thought of reading Thomas Mann.

MP:

You know, I have to confess I didn't, but then, you know, again about two and a half to three weeks ago, when, when Steven Greenblatt wrote this piece in the *New Yorker*, which I like very much where he starts with *Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Decameron*, but then he, you know, he was in Italy and he just returned on one of the last flights.

JP:

I haven't read this.

MP:

And, and he said, really what Italy seemed to him at the time, at least three weeks ago, what Italy seemed to him like was not like Boccaccio with the piling up corpses, which of course is what Italy is now or *Journal of the Plague Year*, but Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice." It's interesting because this is set in Venice during the cholera, but that fact only forms the backdrop of the novel, which is really about this infatuation of this older man with his younger man. And so I think Steven's point was really that there was something oblivious about it, that in this novel, the main character, they should care about the cholera but they actually can't. And don't because they're obsessed with something else. So I didn't think of that, but I think it's a really it's a strong point. And again, for the time three weeks ago seemed very timely.

JP:

Now you're making me think of another novel that I really love and you and I have never discussed: Herman Hesse's last novel, *The Glass-Bead Game* or *Magister Ludens* I think it's sometimes called. Are you a fan of that book?

MP:

I think I haven't read it since I was 17 and I have to admit, I don't remember it particularly well.

JP:

So I, I mean, I totally sympathize with anyone who read Hesse at 17 and thinks he's just completely full of shit, because I know a lot of the early books are just kind of bloviating about his kind of highly filtered conception of Germanic Buddhism or something. But *Glass Bead Game* was written in Switzerland where he was in exile. Though it's sort of not exactly clear why he was an exile, but he did leave Germany during the war. And it's about this world where people just play this game rather than engage in politics, except that somehow the game itself becomes a form of replacement politics, but always an inward-looking one. So on some level, it feels like it's very directly an allegory of living in Switzerland during the war, but it's an allegory of the escape into a deeply satisfying intellectual kind of fabrication, like confection or concoction, like you said. Which nonetheless seems to have a kind of imminent hermeneutics, so that it can be satisfying on its own terms.

MP:

Mmm. You know, it's interesting that you mentioned the war. The other thing I've been reading though, not for pleasure or escape or whatever, dealing with what's going on, but for work, so to speak is that I've been rereading works by the Lost Generation. So Hemingway's *Movable Feast*, Gertrude Stein's texts about Paris, the autobiography of Alice B Toklas other texts about Paris. And, you know, especially in Gertrude Stein's case, this is something, a work that covers her time, both during World War One and World War Two. And *Movable Feast* was a part of that. And so, you know, I've been, I've been in my mind when I read these works before, you know, the world of the war and, and, and all of that entails seem incredibly foreign and incredibly in the past. And I could never imagine experiencing anything like it. And of course, what we are going through, it's nothing like World War One or World War Two, but one starts to--comparisons I found myself inevitably thinking about--what are the, what are the statistical dangers in which, you know, Hemingway or Gertrude Stein and Alice B Toklas are in? What are the forms of life disruption that this kind of convulsion brought with it? And so on and so forth. So it wasn't so much that I turned to these works, but I found that

I read them in a completely different way now than I did before. I mean, the thing, interesting thing about the Lost Generation, the way Gertrude Stein coins this term (or it's really a mechanic who says it...) is it's interesting, he describes it (and this is something we can start to think about. It's something I've been thinking about a lot) is that the after-effects of this generation coming home from the war, there are great novels about shell-shock and so on and so forth. But this phrase, the Lost Generation is more general that this is a generation that's been marked by this experience of World War One.

And, you know, it's, it's, I started to think about what will (and I had a conversation with a friend the other day who was thinking a lot) what will the young generation, on the theory that if your young experiences are that much more formative, how will this experience mark them?

JP:

So how about childhood books? Are there books you would go back to...?

MP:

For me, it's not very interesting, but certainly *Lord of the Rings* is a childhood book that was very important for me. And I suppose I might return to that, or, you know, the movies, which I actually kind of like...

JP:

But what about like really old books, Martin? Like, are you tempted to just kind of go to a different world, like the *Iliad* or *Gilgamesh*?

MP:

It's true. I've actually also, this is partially a work justification, but about two weeks ago, I started to read through a collection of ancient, ancient Egyptian literature. And, and that was actually also interesting because on the one hand, you know, these are small fragments because they are very old and, and, but they're, some of them are narratives. I mean, there are these old stories, but you, you certainly know. I mean, after, you know, 80 or 90 pages, you realize things that are not surprising, but they take on different significance, for example, the incredible importance of the Nile and the flooding of the field, such as the good thing. I mean, that's how nutrients get

into the fields, but certainly the precariousness of settled life that can be disrupted. In the course I mentioned before we had just been reading, of course, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and there, you know, nature's revenge in some senses important theme. So yeah, so, so early Egyptian literature, I felt like I needed to read that anyway and it, and I thought it would take me into a completely different world. And, and it did though there too, you think about, *the locusts are coming*, or the river is not playing along or there are other disruptions. You just become very attuned to disruption.

JP:

So is there one last one last book you want to talk about?

MP:

That too comes out of the course and it's a book I care a lot about, which is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. And it was eerie because I taught it in the very beginning of the semester. And the way I teach it is basically as a witness to the earliest forms of urbanization. The city of Uruk the King Gilgamesh is praised as the rebuilder of the city walls. Uruk happens to be one of the first cities in the world, even as long as 8,000 years ago, managing to concentrate 50,000 people in one small space. And this was made possible by intensive forms of agriculture and animal husbandry. And so this is Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* talks about this. This is the world we live in.

JP:

That's when we all ruined our digestion, you know, the seed of all future celiacs was set in cereal-eating.

MP:

But also it's the conditions under which certain illnesses, viruses jump from animals to humans. And so in a way I think that here again, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is it's not about disease. It's about a flood, which is very different, but it is sort of, you have to sort of read it against the grain or you know, before the background of this...

JP:

So in other words, if Enkidu comes out as the hero, then like, if we'd all just stayed wild men like Enkidu, we would have been fine. And he can, he talk to the animals before he, before he lays with the priestess....?

MP:

He lives with the animals and, you know probably

JP:

He's somehow in communion with them or something.

MP:

So, concentrations of humans and animals and everything that results...

JP:

Oh my God, Martin. Thank you very much. It's been a real pleasure. So I'll just say *Recall This Book* is hosted by John Plotz and usually Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, and sound editing by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. So you can leave us a comment on this post to start the conversation, or if you're inspired, you can voice record your thoughts, email them to us at recallthisbookpod@gmail.com. And we might include them in an upcoming episode. We'd also love to hear from you on our various social media accounts via Instagram, or call this book a Facebook or called his book pod at Twitter. And you could use the hashtag #books in dark times or a photo of a book you've recently turned to for comfort and joy. And then you can check out what others are currently reading. So from all of us here, Martin, thanks. Thanks a ton. And thank you for listening.