

Recall This Book 39
Books In Dark Times 12
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Carlo Rotella

John Plotz

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines, make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I'm John Plotz flying solo today, and my guest is the brilliant author and professor Carlo Rotella of Boston College author of at least six books that I know of. Is it six? Is that right? I think so. Okay. At least six.

Carlo Rotella:

It depends how you count. I co-authored a couple.

JP:

Okay. That's fair enough. Yeah, I didn't count those. Among them the amazing (and Carlo, this is how I came to know your work) *Good with Their Hands: Boxers Bluesmen and Other Characters from the Rust Belt* from 2002. And most recently--I haven't read this, but I'm really looking forward to it--*The World is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*, University of Chicago, 2019. Carlo, welcome.

CR:

Thank you.

JP:

So this is another installment in our fast-moving Books in Dark Times series (because the dark moves quickly, so we try to move quickly too) which as you probably know 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 such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts 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 and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.” At a moment like this, we really want to know what brings people like you Carlo and also like you dear listener, comfort or joy. Draw up a chair and listen, and then maybe consider sending us your own thoughts about the books you're reading by Twitter or email or any other way you'd like to reach us.

So, Carlo, the only preparation I gave you was just to send you a couple of questions, which are more or less along the lines of: what are you reading that gives you comfort these days? What are you reading that gives you joy. Can we just start there?

CR:

Sure. I mean the first thing to say is the idea is we're all supposed to have all this time to read, but I for one, haven't. Those of us learning to teach online have had a taste of what the post-industrial job market actually looks like now: which is you're on your email, 27 hours a day and figuring stuff out. And so again, I've been reading a little, I've been listening a lot to books. Cause I've been out running every day. You can still run so for now. So I've been listening a lot and I was thinking about your question and sort of where my instincts take me times like this in a couple directions. One is I that I like to listen to, I like to read old things.

JP:

Yeah, me too.

CR:

The Germania of Tacitus and Icelandic sagas. One of the reasons I think that it's I guess it's comforting in a way is that, you know, a lot of bad stuff has happened to a lot of people for a really long time. And it used to be worse in many ways. So I find myself going back to that stuff in all kinds of ways and just not so much seeking out the travails of people in the past, but rather just

reminding myself that, you know, like cockroaches we've been around for a long time. *The Germania* in particular, I really liked cause Tacitus is just kind of throwing spaghetti against the wall and seeing what sticks. And was like, well, I think this is what's going on in this place that you don't really go to very much.

JP:

Ok. So Carlo I would love to talk about Icelandic sagas. Cause I have, I have read them and love them, but I've never read *The Germania*. Can you give a lapidary account?

CR:

It's just a kind of a quick survey of this place that Romans didn't know much about, but we're, you know, were fascinated by because you know, they, they had enemies there and allies to some extent, and it's just a kind of a poetic survey. You know, what's going on other side of those rivers.

JP:

So, it's not, it's not a war, it's not an expedition?

CR:

No, it's like, this is what these people are like. Here's how they roll. Here's how they wear their hair, you know, things like that.

JP:

Right: it has Herodotus behind it, not Thucydides.

CR:

Exactly, this is what we know. But the Icelandic sagas are great for all kinds of reasons too, in that way. So that's one thing is that I find myself reading old things and just reminders of sort of what life was like in another time.

The other thing, and this is just like my pure comfort thing, this has been true since I was a teenager, which is in times like this, I find myself reading P.G. Wodehouse.

JP:

Oh my God. Yeah. Let the record show that John has a giant P.G. Wodehouse by his bed. Yeah.

CR:

And, and I think the reason for that is not only the sort of harmlessness of the world in which he operates, but also is that actually, I think when I look for comfort and joy, I actually look for *voice* not *plot*. I don't really care about plot. What I'm interested in is voice. So I want to read, you know, Charles Portis or the fantasy and science fiction writer, Jack Vance. What I want to hear is voice, literary voice, and I'm utterly uninterested in plot. Yeah. So actually watching movies, you know, everybody's supposed to be like sitting on their couch, watching movies and TV shows. It really doesn't work for me. Cause it's like, I don't want to see people with guns running back and forth.

JP:

That's interesting. Do you feel like movies don't have a voice? Some of the filmmakers I really like: I just taught, *It Happened One Night* last night and I thought, Oh yeah, this iabsolutely has a voice.

CR:

I agree with that. And I think it's not so much directors as it is genres. So I would want to watch a swashbuckler or noir or, or a musical, you know? But what I don't want is like the so-called golden age of cable TV, you know, sort of this golden age of TV we're having, which is like a lot of people with guns running around, which I'm not so interested in. I guess the other, the last thing I'll just say as like a general thing is what I'm not interested in, I have no craving for is *critique*, you know, having a craving for like stupid takes on what's wrong, you know? Yeah. You can get that at the office, you know, and I guess I just feel like, you know, the newspaper is around for that and you know, so a lot of people say at a moment like this in our business, a lot of

people say, I go to, *I go to my favorite critic* or whatever, and I just, I have no interest in that.

JP:

Yeah. I think I'm with you on that one. But wait, can we start pulling some threads and comments there just to start? Okay. So *Germania* I love what you're saying about it, but I don't, I don't know enough to respond to it, but the sagas, what I hear you saying, are you thinking about like *Njal's saga*? Would that be a good example?

CR:

Or *Egil's saga*, or I just re-listened to the *poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, all that, all that stuff, including the grim stuff, you know, like yeah. An ax time, the sword time for three years and all that.

JP:

Right. Well, what I was going to say about that, what I remember about the Icelandic ones is that there's this unbelievable sense of humor in the grimness, you know, so somebody will say to somebody else, like, *well how, how was my brother doing?* And the other person will say, *well, you know, not that well, considering I left an ax in the back of his head, the last time I saw him.*

CR:

And then drop a few lines of satiric verse. Cause like one of the best ways to score points is to have some verses ready to rock. I like that. I like how legalistic they are, you know, after you split the guy's skull then you immediately declare *I have split this guy's skull. And here's how, like I've built a loophole to get out of paying the full price that I have to* and all that. I like all that stuff. And I just love the way that it always begins with, like there was, you know, a woman named this. So there was a man named that this is who their parents were and this is where they lived and this is the farm they were on. And this is how many animals around the farm and just kind of everybody gets laid out, you know, and then, and then they, and then they go from there.

And so as much as they're fantastic tales, they're also just sort of hard-boiled social realism. And about a very hard-boiled time.

JP:

About a very hard-boiled time. I mean, cause I was gonna that's the thing I was going to ask is whether, cause I want to get back to Wodehouse cause I'm actually reading *Brideshead Revisited* right now, which ...Waugh kind of sits next to Woodhouse. Not exactly the same, but that's not a very grim time. That's like a rather jolly time. And I wonder about the connection between like books that can be very jolly about, you know, the gay Jazz Age are one kind of comfort and then books that can be funny about utter misery, the way that Icelandic sagas are. Like, that's a different kind...

CR:

Absolutely. I'd say when I'm up for facing things, Icelandic saga. When I just need to, you know, decompress when I just need, you know, essentially to like, you know, read a Calvin and Hobbes collection, you know, whatever it is, right. Then that's, that's the role of the Wodehouse really.

JP:

But so speaking of the way that the sagas work and that kind of matter of fact, laying-out the world, I have to ask you about this book, *Iceland's Bell*, do you know it? By Haldor Laxness he also wrote that one called I think it's called *Ordinary People* or something. Does that ring a bell? He's like he won the Nobel prize, but he's yeah, I dunno. I love it. It' an attempt to do a modern... I'm trying to look up the name of his other big novel, because I bet you will have heard of it. The other one is just about a sheep farm in the 1920s. I think it's called.

CR:

I think it's fair to say that I am at least a thousand years out of date on my Icelandic literature.

JP:

All right. Well, so we're going to forget about the other, which I didn't even like, but *Iceland's Bell* is a, it's like set in maybe 13th century Iceland when it's just completely ruled by Denmark and there's it's a totally abject place. And it's like, there's only one thing of value in the entire country, which is this bell that was in the cathedral and it's the saga of the recovery of the bell. But it's, I love it because it's a 20th century re-imagining of the saga.

CR:

I'm a big fan of 20th century writers who try to appropriate some of that rhythm. But here's one that you might, that might come as a bit of a curveball, which is I find that I really, I take some--I don't know what the word is. It's neither comfort nor joy, but it's related to both--I take some sort of satisfaction from reading about really terrible people. Fictional or not just behaving awfully. I just, I was listening to this investigative reporter, this pair of investigative reporters wrote a book about—it's called *Broken Faith*. And it's about the word of faith ministry in North Carolina and Jane Whaley was the worst person you could ever imagine. Just awful. And there's something, I don't know what the word is. Not joyful, not comforting, but there's something like, you're sort of like, *ah, homo sapiens, they still got it*. You know, just reading about it truly awful selfish person. And you're trying to get along with your neighbors and not be a jerk and you know, and sort of count to 10 and you know. So there's something, there's something sort of emotionally liberating about that. But this woman Jane Whaley would do things like, she would, she would do things like when two parishioners got married, she would not let them have sex and they would have to call and get permission, but they did have to go home and go to bed together. Yeah. And then she'd go like, *but don't have sex*, you know, like you're not allowed to and she would, and she just got into people's business at a level of, I guess it's what the, the, the principle, the thing that is satisfying is *unreasonableness*.

Yeah. Because we're all having to be so reasonable, you know, like don't hoard groceries, don't be curt your neighbors and you know, all that kind of thing. And it's like, I just, there's, there's something that just like, it's like, it's like taking a tremendous guitar solo, you know, to just be awful.

JP:

Have you read that Scientology book *Going Clear*, which yeah, I love, yeah. And some of the same... I actually don't usually like reading about people's suffering and it was painful to me to read about those basements and like the ways that people got into these abject, you know, credit financial indebtedness to the church, which then could only be paid off by like being locked into a basement. But, but yeah, I mean, there's something, there's something about that notion of the quiet desperation that's going on all around you or the loud desperation.

And now we're in a moment where we were, we are all genuinely desperate, you know, like this is a desperate time for the entire world. So maybe there's something about being able to look at those moments with, *Oh, look, it's so cute. There were only like 30 people who were locked in a basement*, not the entire fucking world being locked in.

CR:

And also you could make it better by just expunging, the awful person kind of like there's sort of a target, you know? And let me just point out that Jane Whaley is sort of like picture someone who said, you know, *Scientology, the problem with Scientology is those people are too understanding, too reasonable and too friendly*.

JP:

Oh my god, I have to read this book.

CR:

One of the main techniques was called *blasting*. And blasting is, is when they decide you were sinful in some way, which is anything, you know, anything at all. They, they all stand one inch away from you and scream as loud as they can drive the devils out of you for hours. But then they had this wrinkle. They were like, well, that's okay, but that's not really *blasting*. So they would just beat the hell out of you. They would just, you know, punch you in the face and knock you down. It was just like, it's like insulting a mobster in a bar and they all stop you. And it's not unrelated. I mentioned, Charles Portis the guy who wrote *True Grit, Gringos*. It's not unrelated to that. And he has great unreasonable characters and I, I value unreasonableness in the literary character, you know, I'm not much for like learning and growing and art and all that stuff and hugging it out. But I really liked selfish unreasonableness.

JP:

Do you like that in Cormac McCarthy where it kind of gets taken to an extreme, I mean, there's a mannered, baroque, unreasonableness.

CR:

Yeah, mannered baroque and reasonableness I like. Complete utter surgical lack of a sense of humor is less satisfying. I mean, I think a writer needs a little. Yeah.

JP:

And he's got nothing?

CR:

No. Well, I mean, *Blood Meridian* might a little bit, it's hard to tell. Also I have no craving to read Cormac McCarthy. So Thomas Broder, specializes in completely selfish, unreasonable character, which is what *Neighbors* is. *Neighbors* is the story of like the neighbors just sort of move in on these people's life, you know? And it got made into a fairly strange movie by Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi. So there are other writers who have that quality. And then the one who really has that quality of this, this, this fantasy and science fiction writer named Jack Vance too, sort of I've written about it. And I'm a big fan of, it's just, he's fantastically good at hostile encounters between strangers where there's no obvious reason for the hostility.

You know, you're, you're staying in an inn. It's, you know, some fantasy novel. He doesn't care about the fantasy at all, he's not interested. He just likes to have his characters travel around and running. Right. So you come into the, you come into the hotel, let's say, there's a scene like this. A guy comes into an office and the clerk ignores him. And then the next guy comes into the office and the clerk immediately serves the other guy. And the first guy says, *how come you didn't, you know, why didn't you serve me first? I was here first.* And the clerk is like, *well, that scheme has a certain naive simplicity.* And it's absolutely unmotivated nastiness.

I do like that. And in keeping with our theme for whatever the reason I want that more now. I am so much more interested in world-thinking than I am in plot and ideology. That's why P.G. Wodehouse that's why the, the, the Bertie Wooster series, which I am, I think I've seem to have started at the beginning and I'm just going to do the whole thing. Which takes you like the whole middle chunk of the 20th century, right. Even though it always feels like it's 1926, it's not right. You know, it's, it's a pretty simple world. Doesn't have a lot of moving parts and it's a world created entirely by the narrating voice. That's the whole thing.

JP:

I'm just, I'm looking at publication dates as you say that, because now I'm interested in whether, Oh yeah. So it's, it's like *Brideshead* because a lot of them are 1940s books written. Yeah. Like *Joy in the Morning* is 1947.

CR:

But the first one is like 1919, right? I like to remind myself...

JP:

it's like the Hardy boys, they're always 17 years old,

CR:

...But I like to remind myself that, that, so that first one, he was writing during the flu pandemic. Right. So, you know, this thing I'm going to for shelter from our current one, he was writing while people were dropping all around him, you know? And, and so, but that, you know what, it's sort of the same pleasure, a little bit as a comic strip that you follow, you know, I'm a big reader of the newspaper comics. I've always loved comics. And and it's a little bit that same thing. It's like, what are the moving parts that, you know, like, if you read *the Wizard of Id*, there's like the balcony where the King gives his speeches. There's the dungeon. There is where the wizard's workshop. There's not that many places. And in Bertie Wooster's world, there's like, there's his flat, wherever it is. There's a couple of country houses that he goes to. There's a couple of music halls and that's it. And there's something about the economy of a world like that. I'm just coming off of your point about reading slower. I think there's something about the economy of a world like that, that, you

know it so well that you want to linger. And I think that's another reason why reading fantasy and science fiction, or going back and reading the original Robert E. Howard *Conan* short stories. I know that world. And I've known that world since I was 12. You know, Robert E. Howard's *Conan* stories do not lack for regrettable features the way he thinks about other humans.

But they swing; the language swings, and I know that world, and I know how it works and just knowing how it works. It's like, you know, it's like a city you travel to frequently. It's like, I love walking down that street in a way or that square.

JP:

Right. So that was actually, I was going to have, I have kind of a pivot to a last set of questions, which are about childhood reading, but maybe we could just jump right in with kind of the big question, which is like, when you go back to childhood reading, is it with a sense that you're going to get back that childhood completeness of the world? Or is it that would be like the naive reading or is it more like what the sentimental reading where you're aware of the gap? Like, Oh, *I liked it in one way as a kid*, but now that I come back as an adult, I like it in a totally different way.

CR:

Well, first of all, I like to point out, we have been talking about my child in the seventies when the 1970s really got down on me, you know, when I made too many chemical mistakes, P.G. Wodehouse was there to.... So I would say I don't think so much the sentimental one is, I think it's sort of like the *feng shui* of those worlds, you know, it's, it's the, it's the familiarity of the, of the world thinking and the voice that it's sort of like Jack Vance has a character who travels with a portable hole with him, you know? So then when he's being pursued, he just climbs into the portable home. And it's a little bit like that.

Of course now what happens to that guy's instructive, which is he's being pursued by a guy named Chung The Unavoidable. Chung The Unavoidable never actually does anything except be unavoidable. And so the guy gets in this portable hole, and once he's in this portable hole and a little voice at his elbow says "I am Chung The Unavoidable." So It's a comfort, but it's not an absolute comfort. I really do. I really do think it's that, that, that that the

universe is, the universe is bigger--there's more adjunct pieces of it. And then the one we're in right now and that these pieces are to be lingered in.

JP:

Yeah. So in other words, the universe is bigger. The, the universe of any one book, doesn't have to be bigger. It's just like, you need to know that they're out there.

CR:

You need to know that there are other rooms, you know, and to come back to where we started, I think that's also true by going back and reading much older things. Going back and reading the sagas is to say that the world that we're living in is more sort of spatially expansive because there's all this other world thinking. And then it's also more expansive in time than we usually keep in the forefront of our mind. And to say like, you know it just, I guess it's a way to make it bigger so that you aren't feeling trapped. And I think people are feeling a little trapped.

JP:

Okay. Recall this Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually 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 or criticism. And most of all right now with the reading that you're doing for comfort or for joy purposes.

Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast. Check out our other books in dark time conversations and also conversations with such writers from our previous episodes of Zadie Smith, Cixin Liu and Samuel Delany. So, Carlo, thank you so much. It was a great pleasure.

CR:

Thank you.

JP:

And thank you all for listening.