Recall This Book 41
Books In Dark Times 13
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Lorraine Daston

John Plotz:

So 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 RTB virtual guest today is the eminent—indeed many of us feel the preeminent—historian of science, Lorraine Daston, who her current role is Director Emerita of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. And it's from Berlin that she's joining us today. But over the years, she's taught in many universities worldwide, and her works are too numerous to list here. But they include the utterly transformational book *Objectivity* coauthored in 2007 with Peter Gallison and an edited collection with Elizabeth Lunbeck *Histories of Scientific Observatio*n in 2011. So, Raine, welcome.

Lorraine Daston:

Thank you. Good to be here.

Plotz:

The same questions that I'm going to be asking Raine today, also apply to you dear, dear, dear listeners. So we want to know what sustains you, what engages you and what pushes and irks and prods you into action. Um, so Rainey, can I just start off with one of those sort of open-ended questions of the books that you're turning to that give you comfort or joy at this moment?

Daston:

With one exception, the books I'm turning to are either nonfiction or they're poetry. Um, the exception is at the urging of two friends, we formed a virtual reading group and we're reading Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* for the nth time together. I should probably say that all three of us have, as it happens,

spent a good deal of our adult life as Americans living abroad. So Isabel Archer's predicament and Henrietta Stackpole's predicament is extremely resonant for the three of us.

Plotz:

I'm so glad that you mentioned Henrietta Stackpole because as, as the *other* American floating abroad, I feel like she gets short shrift when people talk about that book sometimes. Cause yeah, that's great.

Daston:

Oh, absolutely. And of course, you know, in many ways she's a sidekick who's just waiting in the wings to become the heroine, especially for this day and age. So, uh, one of the first questions that my friends and I asked ourselves is *what is Isabel going to do with her life?* And Henrietta has an answer for that. She knows what she's going to do with her life. So, we're just at the point in the book where Isabel has turned down Lord Warburton's offer of marriage, more fool she, but yes. So, so that is, that is the only, the only novel that I have turned to. Otherwise I've been reading strangely, um, *The Letters of Pliny The Younger*. So I'm not quite sure how I stumbled upon these. Um, I had been teaching his uncle, *Pliny The Elder* in my class at the University of Chicago, this past term.

So Pliny the Elder of the natural history, Pliny The Elder who was an Admiral who died spectacularly in the explosion of the eruption of Vesuvius, trying to save friends on the other side of the Bay. His nephew is not such a colorful figure, but that's exactly why I said I'm cherishing this moment. He's, he's the very model of the good civil servant, the good public-minded civil servant. He spends all of his career trying to keep his head down amongst the nastier Roman emperors of the times. This is the first century of the common era. And basically keeping things running in a competent and efficient and benign manner. He stands for the virtues of honor duty and hard work. And frankly, at the moment, looking at the ruins of the state, there's something enormously consoling about reading these quite prosaic letters about, um, you know, another aqueduct built another road, things getting done, things not crumbling, things coming into being and not passing away.

Plotz:

Yeah. This is Pliny the Younger, is that right? Is that what he's called, goes by?

Daston:

Right. Exactly. This is, he’s the nephew, right.

Plotz:

Is he a naturalist as well or an observer, or is he mainly just a bureaucrat? I always thought he was also a science person…

Daston:

He's certainly an engineer. I mean, he's the archetypal Roman in that, I don't think he's frankly interested in anything theoretical. He's, he's a great lawyer. He is capable of delivering orations, good ones it sounds like, for seven hours at a stretch, he is extremely interested in how practical things work and you can see this in his descriptions of the houses he's having built in Tuscany in the foothills of the Apennines, um, or nearer to Rome. He has a very clever schemes for pumping cold water underneath the marble floor so that even on the hottest days of the summer, you have basically air conditioning. Um, and I guess he's a naturalist in that he loves cultivated land, so he has topiary decorating his Villa in Tuscany. He loves the weave of vineyards on the hills. Um, he loves, he loves the sea. So he's, he's more of an aesthetic connoisseur of nature of cultivated nature, very Roman again, not, not savage nature.

Plotz:

And then when you're describing Pliny, it does sound like you're describing also something like a flow of like, he's got a lot of stories to tell you, or he's got a picture of a world. So is there, is there a pattern there that you're talking about? Um, I don't know, uh, firehoses of words or something.

Daston:

Yes. Loquacious, right? So I think, I think that's a really interesting observation. It's a different kind of, of loquaciousness. So the Pliny is mercifully (I think it would be unbearable if it were not the case) divided up

into letters and it's the letters that have survived. And so it's granular in that respect. And it's for me, perfect bedtime reading because you can take it like sugar, a lump at a time, and they're rather small lumps before you doze off. Henry James in part because I've read this book before, although I realized, when I began reading it, the first time I read it was the first time I was in Europe as an undergraduate in college. So to some extent what I'm remarking as I reread it is the span of years that separates the person I was then, and the person I am now many decades afterwards.

And also as someone who quite unexpectedly ended up spending most of her adult life in Europe, rather wholly unexpectedly. But what I think the aspect of Henry James now, which enthralls me has nothing to do with the plot, which I think is problematic from all kinds of points of view. It's Henry James reflections upon character and upon psychology and upon, um, the, the perversity of psychology, Isabel, first and foremost. But Isabel, I realize that what makes Isabel American is not the way in which she is perceived within the English milieu, which is she's charming. She's pretty, she's fresh, she's intelligent and original. None of that. It's her unwillingness to sacrifice her freedom. So that in a sense, what you might think of as the cardinal American virtue, which is freedom as lack of restraint is personified in Isabel. Um, she has no good reason for rejecting the various proposals she received.

She certainly has nothing better to do with her time. Unlike Henrietta, who actually has a life and a job. No it's because she realizes quite correctly that the moment she makes such a decision, she will be legally, morally, and also psychologically subject to somebody else's will. And that is what she is unwilling to give up. And I suppose, um, in the current moment where our life is one where the radius of our lives has contracted so radically. So here we are in our studies, what was the last time we left our studies? I feel like Montaigne in his tower. Moreover I don't know what it's like in Boston, in Berlin, we're allowed a daily constitutional, but that's about it. And moreover the radius of time has contracted.

So we're used to planning our lives years in advance. I'm sure it's the case with you. We think of the courses were going to teach. We think of the conferences we're going to write papers for. We think of the deadlines we're going to miss. And now *next week*--what's going to happen next week? Um, so there's something about Isabel's mulish refusal to give up that freedom that,

that really resonates at the moment with me. And it must be, it must he must have in his mind, people like his sister, Alice, who is being kept on an extremely short leash. In a way that he and William frankly also would've been kept on a short leash, had they stayed at home with their, um, domineering father.

Plotz:

I really liked that point about the new definitions of freedom that we have at this moment. Like, you know, you were mentioning staying in our study. I went out to give blood a couple of days ago and I was like, who would have ever thought that a trip to Boston Children's Hospital to have a needle stuck in your arm would be, you know, like the great excitement of my day? O*h I get to go out!*

Daston:

A great adventure. Right exactly. Yes. Like unto a trip to the Alps. Right.

Plotz:

So can I ask about in terms of the, the Pliny, I mean, I want to ask you more about the poetry you mentioned, but the Pliny does it, does it have a vocational appeal to you or is it a non-vocational appeal? Does it help you conceptualize the world sort of in a work, in a working way? Like, do you find satisfaction in it because it fits together with, you know, either work that you're doing or a story that you tell about the ancient world or is it more like you like it because it's over there and elsewhere?

Daston:

It's, it's partly a resonance with work that I'm doing in that I'm currently writing a chapter of a book, an endless book, an everlasting book on the history of rules, all of them everywhere, always. And the chapter now is on laws, the difference between laws and rules and, um, there's one aspect of rules, which is a matter of our daily experience. I think it's been a matter of, of human experiences for as long as there have been explicit rules, which is that once there are rules, people tailor their behavior to meet the requirements of

the rules and nothing more than the rules. And I'm thinking a lot about the difference between that situation, with which we were all too familiar, um, in which, uh, when satisfies as it were the letter, but not the spirit of the rules, which is what it means to have an ethos and internalized ethos, which is not articulated in rules, but perhaps in a vocation.

And Pliny who is the archetypal Roman. I mean the, a great deal about the history of Roman law of the moment, because it is in the final analysis everybody's law, the model of what the rule of law could be. Pliny has--although he is a lawyer, he knows every codicil, every line of the digest, et cetera.--his own behavior is regulated by an ethos of a vocation. And I find that there's something about our algorithmic world, which has fortified to the point of suffocation, um, the opposite model, which is working to rule. So, you know, there's a, there's a kind of strike I of, I must say it's a genial kind of strike, right? I think it was invented by the Italians. It was called a white strike, I think in Italian, in which you don't stop working, you do everything exactly as exactly as the rule states which of course means the whole world grinds to a halt.

And I feel whenever I fill in an online form, I feel this, I feel exactly this kind of constricting weight that it's demanding that I behave this way. Um, and so I think one appeal of Pliny the Younger is that he's the opposite of that. And of course at the moment, because I feel, I think as many people now feel about their government, but perhaps acutely, if you're an American that there has been a concerted war against that kind of civil servant for decades now. And we are now, you know, he who sows the wind reaps the whirlwind. We are now reaping the whirlwind as a result. We have, especially in the last three or four years, lost in droves, driven away, um, that model of public servant.

Plotz:

Right. It's really interesting what you're saying. I mean, there's so many things that are interesting about what you're saying, including that letter versus spirit distinction, because that's the theological dimension of this. Like the letter of the law versus spirit of law. But just to pursue that point, there's an easy way to say that bureaucracy like that the, the civil service is defined by its adherence to the bureaucratic, which would be the narrow rule following rather than the ethos, but the deeper truth of understanding the

governmentality as having that ethos dimension in it, even though it seems to be defined by the set of the promulgated set of laws, that's a struggle. I mean, as a 19th century person, I see the 19th century state struggling with that enormously, you know, that question of wanting things to be defined by red tape. And also knowing that the definition of it actually requires right, something else, a conception of character.

Daston:

So do you think it's because, I mean, I assume that you're thinking about especially British sources because they are an empire. I mean, they're basically confronting the same problem that Pliny the Younger is, which is the administration of a far flung multicultural empire. Which means that you've got to sort of rethink custom, which is if you have been born and bred in a particular place you know how things are done, you know what you're supposed to do, you know what you're not supposed to do, you've got to make it explicit. And you've got to somehow distill it for in the case of, you know, the Romans and the first and second century of the common era for every place from Gaul, which is basically parts of the British Isles to Syria or, you know, and beyond. Britain is doing exactly the same thing in the 19th century. They've got to sort of somehow figure out how you have a set of rules that—because you have to make it explicit. People in India are not going to understand the things, which people who have been raised in Surrey, take for granted and vice versa. And yet they know it won't work, especially long distance. It won't work unless there's this internalized ethos.

Plotz:

Totally. But the only dimension that I would also add--and you're right to say I'm thinking about the British case, but I'm also thinking about, you know, the U.S. in a way as an extension of British case at that moment, because the logic of sovereignty in the U.S. States or colonies is also an extension of that common law. And the thing I would say about that in terms of the ethos is that if you look at the early 19th century, there's this amazing, um, nuanced encounter with cultural difference, which is not always successful. And it's not as if people are bending over backwards to create a kind of cultural relativism within the empire. But if you look like, for example, do you know this book called *Settler Sovereignty* by Lisa Ford? She compares--so she compares how

the legal codes of Georgia in the United States and New South Wales in Australia, how they dealt with the fact of cultural difference.

And her point is that up until like the 1830s or 1840s, there was no effort to what was called "perfected sovereignty," meaning create a sovereignty that would just have a territorial integrity that did not take into account cultural difference. So, you know, by the 1830s, which is when in Georgia, the Indian Removals hit full force. There is a, there's a conception of the law as working, you know, from the federal government and the same for everybody, which means indifferent to the fate of native people. But up until the 1830s, there is actually flexibility as to, you know, when somebody went, when an Indian murders another Indian in Georgia who, what law system prevails? When a white person murders an Indian, what law system prevails? Like those debates that's an ethos question. It's not a edict question. And, yeah, I just feel like we have, you know, we sometimes overstate the uniformity of what the Imperial project looked like, and it's, it's, it's reassuring to know that, like, when you dig into the 1810s are the 1820s or the 1830s, there are people who are trying to make different cultural norms fit together.

Daston:

I think it's very reminiscent of the Roman Imperial project as well. I mean, one thinks of perhaps the arrogance of when in Rome do as the Romans do, but the, the obverse of that is, um, when in Damascus do as the Damascus do.

Plotz:

Yeah. Well, that makes me think of Ovid's *Tristia*. You know, like those exile poems that are so much about that question of like, do you, when you change your skies, do you change your soul or not? It's a tricky question.

Daston:

Also also one thing, of course, the other thing that one learns in reading these letters is how, how, how precarious life was if you were a public person, um, either a poet, like Ovid, or an official, like Pliny which is at a moment at the emperor's displeasure, terrible things could befall you. And what's so interesting to me is how terrible, Pliny thinks banishment is. That he, he really

he'd almost rather just be beheaded or broken on the wheel or something like this--than be banished.

Plotz:

Can I just turn us towards the finish line here. Since you did you mentioned poetry early on you tempted me to follow up and ask about what poetry you've been reading.

Daston:

Yeah. One standard who is a kind of, um, emotional anchor for me is, um, and I don't know whether I'm pronouncing this correctly the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert who alas, I can only read in translation. I can only imagine how powerful he must be in the original Polish. It's just, uh, it's enough to make me want to learn Polish. And his poems I think what magnetizes me with his poems is a combination of immense learning lightly worn. I mean, the elusive range of these poems is mind-expanding. The irony the fine irony, which is always present, but also the, the poems they're never—they're never in earnest, but they're always serious. And so it's a tradition of poetry, which I really associate with Poland. Um, so Szymborska...

Plotz:

I was just thinking of Szymborska.

Daston:

But also with Akhmatova and Mandelstam, um, Joseph Brodsky, it's, it's a tradition of poetry, which still sees itself as speaking truth. So it's not the poetry of subjectivity. So I read a lot of poetry and I like lots of poets, but the, most of the poetry that I'm reading these days in English of contemporary poets is of a highly cultivated subjectivity or internal states. It is, these are not poems about people's internal states. Um, they are poems about the way the world is in some way. And the other is DH Lawrence. Lawrence's poems, especially his animal poem.s He has a lot of his poems are sort of, um, bad-tempered, um, they're jabs that someone or something he doesn't like, but he's animal poems are of a kind of incandescent intensity in which he tries to

think of himself—they're a bit like the Ted Hughes poems about animals. In which he really tries a kind of, um, what is it called, psychokinesis, in which you try to try to inhabit the soul of another being. And he tries this with, you know, fish with mosquitoes. And they're riveting. I mean you know they hold you rapt.

Plotz:

I was just looking cause I can't find them on my computer, but I was speaking with my friend, Liz Bradfield yesterday, who's a poet at Brandeis and she was praising a couple of different recent books of octopus poetry. Apparently there's been a real resurgence.

Daston:

Yes. Perhaps inspired by the terrific book by Peter Godfrey Smith about their minds.

Plotz:

Other Minds. Exactly. I think they're not actually inspired by that, but they are in the same vein. Yeah. Because they're a couple of years older, but yeah. Yes. He's one of my heroes. I think his book is amazing.

Daston:

Now talk about perspectival suppleness. I mean, one species is too small.

Plotz:

So I'm writing a book about science fiction and I, what had me early on, you know, there's a line in the first chapter of that book, which is that this is the closest to meeting an alien wherever going to come, is to try to think like an octopus basically.

Raine, can I just turn back the point you were making about the publicness of poetry reminded me of something else that Liz said, which is that I had asked her about, I basically asked her about lyric poetry versus dramatic and Epic poetry. And she said, well, there's another way of slicing up lyric subjectivity,

which is to distinguish between the *lyric* and the *bardic*. And so she was talking about poetry in the Irish or Scottish tradition, which is bardic in the sense that it is outward facing, like, it has something to say to the world about the world. And then that sounds to me like what you're describing with Herbert and Szymborska.

Daston:

No, and you know, it's more obvious in Akhmatova and Mandelstam because, um, they are speaking truth to power and paying the price for speaking truth to power. It's much more subtle with the Polish poets who are speaking about truth, which are both specific to their predicament. Um, you feel a kind of oppressiveness of political oppressiveness. But also because of, especially Zbigniew Herbert less so Szymborska because of the elusive range, which is, you know, basically all of the Western intellectual and literary tradition, also setting off cascades of associations over centuries. So, um, it's very interesting. I was raised, you know, I came of age intellectually in a moment of contextualism, extreme contextualism. And there was a great deal to be learned from that about the way in which a particular place and time creates its own mode of being. But Herbert is the antidote to that.

Plotz:

Yes. So speaking of what we were raised in, you know, as soon as you said his name, I remembered that I took an introductory as a freshman or maybe a sophomore, I took an introductory poetry class with Helen Vendler. She had us read Zbigniew Herbert poem about the Rose with a George Herbert poem about the rose. So said, we're going to do the story of two Herberts. So I take that as a kind of anti-historicist move. Uh, yeah. Um, you know, I, I just wanted to mention, are you a fan also of this young Polish novelist, Olga, I'm going to butcher her name—Tokarczuk? She wrote, uh, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*?

Daston:

Right, yes. I've actually, on the recommendation of my daughter, as a matter of fact just started that. She also is remarkable. I mean, at the moment I find, as I said at the outset, I'm finding fiction somehow indigestible at the moment.

Plotz:

Yeah.

Daston:

It's one of the many books set aside for rosier times. I can't quite explain to myself why—it's almost as a fiction feels too real. And that it, the kind of vivacity for which one reads fiction, because it presents life in, um, a heightened palette and with a kind of accelerated plot. That's just too much now life like has enough too much color, too much plot, to inject more into it.

Plotz:

Yeah. Well, you've definitely, I'm going to go back to Szymborska and I have to look at, I haven't looked at Herbert for years. But I completely agree with what you're saying about that quality of poetry. The poetry that does seem to be about the world at large, and then just, but not without forsaking the particular experience of the every day. And you know, Stanislaw Lem, the Polish SF writer.

Daston:

Oh, *Solaris*. yes. Right. Yeah.

Plotz:

I think *Solaris* is great that way. And I think it's even his funny books, like *The Futurological Congress*, uh, you know, he's a very funny writer, but he's a writer who never lets you forget that we live in a kind of, um, total conceptual universe. *And* we live in our bodies, both of those things at once. And I love that insistence. So maybe that is maybe there is some Polish specificity to that.

Daston:

As I said, next project, learn Polish.

Plotz:

Yeah, that would be great. Um, well Raine, thank you very much. And I'll just quickly say that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually by the Trollope-loving Elizabeth Ferry with music, Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy and sound editing is by Claire Ogden and website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you with comments, criticisms, and suggestions. And if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to share it with friends and to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher, wherever you get your podcasts. We're just a lowly scholarly podcast. So we rely on your word of mouth or word of click to make sure that other people can hear us. Please check out other books and dark time conversations. And also with conversations with such writers as Zadie Smith, Cixin Liu, and Samuel Delaney. So Raine, thank you very, very much.

Daston:

It was delightful. Thank you, John.

Plotz:

It was a real pleasure and thank you all for listening.