

## **Recall This Book 46:** **Children's Books with Leah Price (EF, JP)**

**John Plotz:** Hello and welcome to Recall This Book, the children's hour edition, with world famous book historian Leah Price. Hello Leah. I'm one of your hosts, John Plotz. And I am virtually flanked today by the other, intrepid anthropologist and a children's book writer herself Elizabeth ferry.

So what was your favorite book as a child? What was your favorite book to read to your own children and looking back at those books, do you think about the story or the pictures or what, maybe, especially if you answered *Pat the Bunny* or *What Do People Do All Day?* you actually think about the actual object that you held in your hands. So exploring that nexus of story and aesthetic substance, the text and the art object there's no better guide, no better Virgil than my wonderful beloved friend Leah Price. Leah was for many years an English professor at Harvard, she's a founder and director of the Rutger's Initiative for the Book and an English professor there.

She tweets actively at Leah@whatprice. And her most recent book is *What We Talk about When We Talk about books*. So the way we imagine beginning this conversation is for each of us to begin by talking about one of our favorite children's books and then toss questions at one another about how those books compare with one another in an effort to kind of get at the magical platonic mystery of the children's book. And so that's what we're going to do. And then as always, we will end with Recallable Books. And so can I just throw the floor open to you, Leah, and ask you what book you want us to start talking about?

**Leah Price:** So I wondered whether we could start talking about a book that is both one of my favorites and one of my child's favorites. It's a slim volume by an American author, Patrick McDonald called *A Perfectly Messed Up Story*. And although the audio format doesn't really give much scope for showing you the cover of this book, if I were to describe it, I would say that the typography of the book emphasizes the fact that the first two letters of *Mess* coincide with the only two letters of the first person, pronoun *me*, so that this a story about a book that gets progressively messed up by having jam smeared on it, peanut butter smushed into it, orange juice spilled on it. It gets scribbled on and so forth. And over the course of the book, we come to realize that the book's resilience in the face of all this hard usage stands for the resilience of the child, reading it, that is, the *me* who comes to learn that living

and being subject to all the wear and tear that comes with spending a longer and longer amount of time alive does not make you less worthy of being loved. It makes you more lovable.

I'm making this book sound pious and moralistic, but in fact, part of the pleasure of reading this book is the pleasure of at first looking at what appears to be a peanut-butter stain, preparing to get angry at your child for not having washed his hands before reading it. And then the joke is on you because it's not a real peanut-butter stain. It is a *trompe l'oeil* representation, two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional smear.

JP: Leah, as a book historian, isn't that like the category of association copy on some, on some level, like in other words, those books that are valued not because of the objective fact of the words on the page, but the subjective fact of the traces of original owners that attached to them?

LP: Yes and no, because what is called an association copy is usually a copy that is more valuable because of something that a famous person has written in its pages, whether that's just a previous owner's autograph on the front "paste-down" or whether it's abundant annotations in the margins of the book. But here, of course, we're not dealing with words, we're not even dealing with underlinings or doodling, we're dealing with marks made by food rather than marks made by pens or pencils. And so in a way we're also dealing with a violation of a big library taboo...

JP: It's a *disassociation* copy.

**Elizabeth Ferry:** It's a joke about the life of the book as a material object too, right? Yeah. Because it's, you believe that it's because of it's being bouncing around in the world, but actually those marks are straight from the publisher.

LP: Exactly. So in that way, maybe following up on John's point about an association copy, maybe this is a pseudo-association copy. It's the equivalent of the book whose spine a student cracks before bringing it to class to make it look as if the book has been read.

EF: I I've heard, and I also think that there's kind of two ways that people materially interact with books. There's two kinds of people. Maybe there's the people who insist on the book being well cared for, and that your evidence of,

of loving a book is that it *isn't* messed up, right? And then there are the people whose evidence of loving a book is that it *is* messed up.

JP: And those people are called children.

EF. Exactly. I got in big trouble once for having a glass of water on a book know. And I'm told that I was told that I was not sufficiently caring about the value, not the monetary value of the book, but the book value of it. I believe the book was *How Much Is That in Dollars?* by Art Buchwald.

LP: So if I can steer us to more safely impersonal topics -- I'm with John in the sense that jokey metafictional self referential books, like *A Perfectly Messed Up story*, tend to be marketed as far as I can tell to an upper middle class readership. Whereas if you go down-market from books, like *A Perfectly Messed Up Story*, or like a wonderful Mo Willems book called, *We Are in a Book*, in which an elephant and a pig realize that their days are numbered because they will exist as literary characters only until the final page. And they keep nervously flipping ahead to check how many pages are left before realizing that every page that they spent flipping ahead is one fewer page that they will have to live and so forth. These, these artsy po-mo metafictional books are quite different from a genre of book that you can find often self-published in droves called things like *Manners with a Library Book*, or *How to Take Care of your Books* in which the reader is told very straight without any of this wink, wink, nudge, nudge self-referentiality not to touch a book without washing hands, not to eat while reading, not to crush a book by putting heavy things on top of it. And I suppose you, Elizabeth, your younger self might be one target audience of this kind of book. Don't put a glass of water on top of it.

JP: It's so funny, Leah. Cause you opened to me the world of bibliotherapy in which books are used as a form of therapy. But what you just described as the other kind of bibliotherapy, which is like instructions on how to give your books therapy. Like in other words, like it's the curative training you to be the suitable compliant subject of your book rather than the book helping you, you're supposed to help the book.

LP: Yes. You were supposed to take care of the book, but you are not supposed to take care of the book by mending it, these books don't tell you how to

repair a rip with scotch tape. I think they're more about distance, boundaries, don't get too intimate with your books. Don't get too comfortable.

JP: So speaking of which, before we pivot away from your amazing book, can I ask you what your son's response is to it? Like, does he then add more peanut butter to its peanut butter and more coffee stains to its coffee-stains?

LP: I wish he were that enterprising, but he seems to prefer having his biblioclasm done for him.

JP So what lesson do you draw from that?

LP: That one of the pleasures of reading is passivity.

EF: That's interesting actually about little kids too. Like there's the kind of reading where there's this sort of pleasure of having a parent read the same thing over and over again, and there's a kind of passive dimension to that. Right. And then there's also the pleasure of, I mean the, the sort of material example I'm also thinking of is *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, right? There's the pleasure of like sticking your finger through the holes and, and, you know, feeling the edges and all of those things,

JP: *Pat the Bunny* also.

EF: Yeah. Pat the bunny. Yeah. Which does not stand the test of time,

JP: Since the central characters are named after my parents I've always found incredibly endearing.....Endearing and creepy at the same time. But actually I was thinking about a different kind of book in terms the sanctity of the, or the passivity of reading, which is *10 minutes till bedtime*, just a slow countdown of all of these little creatures getting ready to go to bed (Elizabeth, that doesn't ring a bell?) So when my mother read it to her various grandkids, you know, so my kids and nieces and nephews, we always called it *10 hours till bedtime*, because she would each page, she would launch into a long narrative disquisition about what every character was doing on that page. I don't know if that's passive or active. I mean like the listening experience for our kids was two different things at once. Like there was the formal ritual of, *Oh yeah. Now they're taking a bath now they're putting on their PJ's*. But then there was also the endless variation of, *Oh, well, which of those little characters is she going to follow down the bathtub spout tonight?*

My kids always preferred to be read a book than to be told the story. I think. How about you guys?

EF: Almost always. There, there were a couple of moments where I got the story right I mean, the story genre, right. And that went well,

LP: When my child wanted to be told a story, initially he would say, *read it*.

JP Maybe I'll use that as occasion to talk about my book really quick. I went looking for it on the shelves today. And I actually, I found Madeline. I found I found Wanda Gag. I found Curious George, but the book I was looking for is Maurice Sendak *Where the Wild Things Are*. And the thing I was going to say about that is that it's a book about, in a way it is about delightful passivity because it's about, if you guys remember it's that he, he roars has terrible roar. He gets sent off to the land where the wild things are because he won't behave. Max makes a terrible rumpus and get sent off to where the wild things are. And it's about the possibility of the journey to the land of the wild things. And then when you get sleepy and homesick and you can go back, your dinner is waiting for you and it was still warm at the end.

So in other words, it begins, it begins and ends in the same place, which is basically the bedroom or the nursery or something. And then the adventure happens in between. So, so Leah, I really love that you picked a book in which the materiality comes through on the trompe l'oeil effect. And then I feel like one opposite of that along one axis and antithesis of that would be the way that *Where the Wild Things Are* offers you a space that is just completely envisioned as dream and suspension so that when you come back, you resume your regular life, right. Where you were at the moment that you started this fantastic adventure to wild-thing land, right?

So the parenthesis gets closed.

LP: Although even there, you probably remember that the opening scene in which max is earning the epithet of wild thing. One of the reasons for his being sent to bed without supper involves his standing on top of a stack of books.

JP: You know, I'm teaching this fantasy class this year and I feel like the perennial question my students want to return to over and over again is like, well, let's say you leave this world and head off into this other world. What

exactly is it you're heading off into, like, what do you have? Like, can it be, you know, could it be genuinely other, or does it just end up being some kind of refracted version of your own world? Like you needed to go into that alternative space. But the only thing you can do while you're there is like, look back at your own world,

Like the book, you mentioned Leah, we are in a book, which I totally love what I, one thing I remember about it is like the, what they, what Elephant and Piggy realized when they realized they were in a book is that they have all this power over the reader. So in other words, it turns back into a game of them looking at the reader and making the reader say things

LP: Right. I can make the, I can make the readers say a word? No, you can make the reader say a word? I can make the reader say a word. Banana!

Oh, the reader said it again. Yeah. So maybe that takes us back to the question of the power of being read aloud to usually say in a political context, we think of the person who is speaking as powerful, the demagogue talking through the megaphone and the powerless people standing there listening. But that power dynamic may be reversed when the reader is demanding the labor of the reader.

JP: Hey, Elizabeth, tell us about your book.

EF: Well, so I had started with a different book. But now that we got into the conversation I wanted to introduce *The Disappearing Alphabet* by Richard Wilbur, because it's sort of a different take on the materiality of the book or the, of words or the relationship between the letters of words and the meaning, I guess. So it's an alphabet book; it has 26 chapters and I'll just read the first chapter. The premise is that letters might disappear and then the world would be changed. So:

What if there were no letter A?  
cows would eat *Hy* instead of hay,  
What's HY? it's an unheard-of diet  
and cows are happy not to try it.

So how does that fit into our question of, of books as objects?

JP: Well, that's like *On Beyond Zebra*, isn't it?

LP: If we're thinking about adults reading books marketed or addressed to children, it seems striking that for most of the 20th century, the concern was about children or teenagers reading books that were only suitable for adults. And this was not specific to the book industry. It was also a big question in the movie industry. That's how we have movie ratings. But sometime around the turn of the millennium, the concern seemed to shift to moral panic about adults regressing by reading books, marketed to children. So is the worry about speeding up sexual maturity or is the worry about turning back the clock on what we now call *adulthood* through the mainstreaming of young adult literature?

JP: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a great question. I don't know.

EF: I didn't know that was a moral panic. I mean, I definitely know there's, you know, moral panic around what people are reading or whether they're reading or so on, but I didn't know, there was one about, you're not supposed to read young adult books if you're an adult, because then you're too immature. You're not reading at a high enough level or something like that.

LP: It seems to have taken the baton over from the fear of Chick-Lit. Don't read like a woman don't read like a child.

EF: Yeah. which is a descendant of the disdain towards novels as a whole, right. From the 19th century.

JP: So here's an interesting demographic thing from my fantasy class, which is only 32 students. So it's a small sample size, but that they are not at all worried you know, predictably, since they're in a fantasy class, they're not worried about having juvenile tastes, but they react incredibly strongly against Narnia. And I think that the reaction against Narnia is a reaction against an adult idea, being packaged, deceptively inside a childhood frame, you know. In other words, what they are resenting, there is the allegorical Christian message, which is, you know, it's not particularly subtle and I'm not sure it's meant to be subtle, but they take it as almost, it's almost like a viral contagion. Like they resent the fact that it contains an adult conception of Christianity like packaged in an animal fable. So I don't know how that fits into your paradigm, Leah, because it's like, they're not worried about its juvenile quality. What they're worried about is its deceptively adult core.

LP: Do they feel insulted by....?

JP: Manipulated.

LP: So we're back to the question of power and agency.

JP: You, Leah, teach about quixotism, which is maybe another version of what we're talking about here, right? I mean, which is the capacity that is quixotism understood as the capacity to cast yourself into imaginary worlds as if they were real, which as a child reader is just what you do. I mean, that's where the wild things are is about, but then quickly, I mean, if you think about Don Quixote or you think about like *The Female Quixote* which I think you recommended to me, Leah, it's about being an adult who nonetheless imagines those worlds have reality.

EF:

Right. Well, that's why Quixote is a ludicrous figure. Right.

JP: And yet also lovable

EF: And yet also poignant.

JP: Yes. Poignant. Yeah. Okay. Leah, you cast the deciding vote is Quixote *poignant* or is he *lovable*?

LP: You know, I think that gets back to Elizabeth's point earlier about novel reading having originally been the suspect activity. Is identifying with a literary character, a sign of virtuous imagination, or is it a sign of craziness, laziness, pick your vice?

JP: Yeah. Well, I wish we could answer that one. That sounds like a really good time to pivot to Recallable Books. And dear listeners you'll remember, this is the moment where we say to you, if you enjoy the conversation today and you want to continue on the same vector, here are some books you might want to look at. So Leah, do you want to start us off?

LP: An oldie, but goodie: *The Child that Books Built* by Francis Spofford. This is a book that John and I have swooned over together in many different conversations. Here I will say *poignant* rather than *ludicrous* account of the author's childhood through an account of his childhood reading. And it's lent added poignancy by the fact that for me, it's made more poignant by the fact that before I had ever heard of Francis Bufford, I had read and seen in many



bibliographies of academic monographs research by a historian named Margaret Spofford. One of the pioneering experts on early modern, popular literacy, and only a couple of hundred pages into Spofford's autobiographical essay did the penny drop. I realized that the mother who flitted in and out of the pages of his book was Margaret Spofford. So, it's an extraordinarily unsentimental and yet I think deeply touching analysis of a family through the medium of recalling books.

JP Hey Elizabeth, do you have one? Yeah.

EF: So picking up on part of our conversation about the relationship between the sort of ordinary life around children and fantasy. And it's the book by E. Nesbit called *The Railway Children*, which is actually one of her not so not so fantasy based books unlike *The Phoenix in the Carpet* and *Five Children and It*, but is about a story of a family who is kind of temporarily kicked out of the middle-class because of their father. It's kind of based on the Dreyfus affair, right. Is accused of espionage and but they sort of weave this elaborate story. And then at the end of the book, the story becomes aligns itself with what's happening in their real life and which I find very satisfying and lovable and poignant.

JP: I'm going full naive. I'm going to recommend *Millions of Cats* by Wanda Gag. Wanda gag had a very short career as a children's book writer. She only wrote, she wrote this, she wrote something called *The Funny Thing*. She wrote a few other books, but *Millions of Cats* seems to me to be a perfect children's book. And it was read aloud to me: now that I look back on it, it has this creepy Malthusian message, because it's about how all of these millions of cats are going to overpopulate the earth. But fortunately they kill each other off leaving just one beautiful little frightened

EF: And eat each other, right?

JP: Yeah, well it's not really described how they eat each other, but they do, it's a little bit like *The Road* or something. It's *The Road* for cats. it's an offstage version of *The Road* or *Oryx and Crake* maybe. But the result of it is a single, a little frightened kitten that you can bring home to be plump and you know, sit in your own backyard. And as a kid with one small frightened cat, I loved this book so much and looking back at it, it still just has this totally naive power over me. Which I do worry about critically, I won't say *reappropriating* children's books, but I worry that returning to them as an adult, even just

talking about them is sometimes to ruin that feeling. So I kind of want the ability to talk about them, and yet I want the feeling to sit off in its own place. And for me, Wanda Gag is one of those writers who can do that.

Well Leah, thank you so much. You've given us so much to think about and as often happens, you've revealed the fault-lines between Elizabeth's view of the world and my view of the world. And I appreciate that revelation. And so we should thank you.

And we should say that Recall This Book is hosted by Elizabeth Ferry and John Plotz with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, sound editing by Claire Ogden and website design and social media are done by our new Mellon Connected PhD intern Nai Kim. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms or suggestion for future episodes, and you can email us directly or contact us by social media and our website.

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