

Recall This Book 56

Recall this B-side #1

June, 2021

Merve Emre on Natalia Ginzburg, *The Dry Heart* (JP)

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. Specifically, welcome to 'Recall this B-side,' a short series of conversations that we undertook as a companion piece to *B-Side Books*, which is an edited collection out from Columbia University Press this June. I'm today's host, John Plotz and my guest today is Oxford Professor Merve Emre, prolific and brilliant author of such books as *Paraliterary* and *The Personality Brokers*, now a HBO Max movie I discovered. As well as a terrific B-side about a Natalia Ginzburg novella *The Dry heart*. So Merve, hello.

Merve Emre:

Hello, thank you for having me.

JP:

Thank you so much for coming. So dear readers, dear listeners, I hear you asking what's a B-side? Well, it's a book unjustly kicked to the curb, thrown prematurely on the ash heap of history. For three years at Public Books I've been commissioning writers to sing the praises of odd volumes that slipped through the cracks, went unread and missed their appointment with posterity. So it seemed like a good idea at the time for us to invite a few of the B-side authors on to Recall this Book to talk about their choices and. What lay beneath them. Merve, tell us about your B side? Tell us about its author and why you chose it.

ME:

So, Natalia Ginzburg's *The Dry Heart* opens with what is in my mind, one of the most memorable scenes, which is with a woman coolly picking up a gun to shoot her husband and we have no idea why she has shot him. All we know is that he has told her that he is going away somewhere, laughed at her and held up a drawing of a train that he's made and she's shot him. And I think it's brilliantly grim and also a little bit comic. And I was frankly just captivated by

it as someone who has often fantasized about shooting my own husband (Who hasn't?) And sometimes other people's husbands too.

One of the things that was really intriguing to me. About Natalia Ginzburg's *The Dry Heart* was when you start a novel or a novella, as is the case with this one, when you start it by kind of giving away the ending. Where do you go from there?

And to me, that's the really fascinating formal challenge that the novella sets up for itself, and one that I think Ginzburg answers really brilliantly and in conversation with several of the luminaries of thinking about the novel and its pacing.

JP

Yeah, you had your opening line, (which is also wonderful) "when should a woman kill her husband?" Then you then go on to call it an *anti romantic novella*: that maybe that speaks to that same point you're making about the conversation it's having—

ME:

Yeah, so one of the one of the very interesting things to me about the setup of the murderer is that we have the novella narrated by an unnamed woman who has been married to a man named Alberto. Who is a who is sort of fascinated with his own suffering and is a I think, UN-ironic and somewhat bad reader of Goethe. To the point where he and his best friend have actually purchased two pistols to kill themselves together over a woman, they're clearly very sort of earnest readers of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and to me it was very interesting to see Ginzburg engaging with that question, *how does an impatient, unsentimental woman deal with a bad reader of the Romantic era?*

JP:

I think you make a point also about the novella maybe being a good place to work out that kind of suspicion of over-adhesive romanticism.

ME:

I think the novella is a perfect case study for a B-side because one of the ways that *The Dry Heart* works is by giving away the ending and then returning to it to expand on the story, tTo tell you why it is that the woman

has done this, what it is that she has had to suffer in order to come to this point, why she decides to pull the trigger when she pulls it.

And in that sense, the form of the novella that insistence on recurrence is, I think, quite similar to how we think about a B-side which is coming back to a story to see how it holds up over time, or to see when we read it or tell it again, what aspects of it become visible to us that weren't visible in the 1st or the 2nd or the 3rd reading or telling.

JP:

Yeah, that's such a great point. I mean, I've just been teaching that Michael Warner piece about uncritical reading. Do you know it?

ME:

Love that piece, yeah.

JP:

Yeah, and one thing he says is that one, the one of the problems with critical reading, is that it's always *rereading*. You know that it always assumes that the suspense has gone out of it, but your point is that this is novel, this novella actually embraces that notion of taking the suspense out of reading.

ME:

Yeah, and it sort of backs its way into suspense or it shows you that one question or one problem that can be made suspenseful is not. Who is going to die, but rather how much does a person have to endure before they decide to kill someone else? And to me that's a really wonderful way of actually switching the focus of the novella from the ostensible victim, the husband who's killed in the first paragraph to the person who we realize is the real victim of his bad behavior and his bad reading. Which is the woman who narrates.

JP:

Are you a long time Ginzburg fan or...what brings you back to this?

ME:

This is actually the first of her....well, I suppose. I had read *The Little Virtues*, the essays that are collected in *The Little Virtues*; someone had recommended them to me, in part because I had once written a piece on the personal essay as a genre, and had expressed a kind of frustration for essays

that stage, a kind of total evacuation or oversharing of the self and leaves or nothing to the imagination. And had also expressed a sort of preference for essays that reveal the self by. Through the way, the narrator engages with an object. So for instance, essays that reveal something about the narrator by how they read a work of literature, or how they view a painting, creating a kind of relationship of triangulation with the between the reader writer and the object that they are concerned with.

And when I wrote that essay, someone wrote to me and said, *I think you'll really love Natalia Ginzburg's Little Virtues*. And, I read it and I did. There is a kind of incredibly controlled tone to Ginsberg that is nonetheless, I think undergirded by a great deal of suffering. Yeah, and you see that in her essays that are autobiographical, but I think you also see it in *The Dry Heart*, which is that there's nothing at all there. There's no fat on the bones of this prose. It's incredibly tight and clean and—

JP:

Yeah, it almost feels like smoke-dried to me or something.

ME:

Yeah, yeah, it's sort of withered or something. But you know, you know that what is underneath all of that control, that intense desire for precision is an almost inarticulate suffering on the part of this narrator, and to me, that kind of that tension between the depths of suffering and the incredible calm or the incredible precision of expression has always been there.

JP:

I hadn't realized until this morning when I went on your website that among your many, many other publications you've also written about [Elena] Ferrante, so I wondered, do you want to make a Ferrante connection?

ME:

Well, I think I mean it's a natural connection to make and I was thinking about how you know what would I recommend to people who like reading Ginzburg? Ferrante is much more explicitly invested in questions of disillusion and in questions of being out of control of being formless and of recovering a kind of form from these moments, where your life seems to be falling apart where you're in shatters, where you can't seem to get a foothold in reality. I don't think Ginsburg has exactly that same set of formal investments. Yeah, but you know, I, I do think there's probably something

I think there's probably something they share in terms of a time and a place that they are representing.

JP:

I take your point. Well so can we pursue that question of like people who if you like Ginzburg, who else might you like? Did you have other thoughts?

ME:

I really like another Italian novelist named Flora Jaeggy. Have you read any of her? Her form is primarily the novella. And she has a wonderful one called *Sweet Days of Discipline*, which takes place in a girls boarding school. And is about the friendship between two of the girls. And is similarly just, you know, the the prose is just kind of crystalline and almost a kind of sociopathic cool. I would say wow. And beautiful just sort of gleaming; every sentence gleams. And she also has a really strange and memorable essay collection called *These Possible Lives*, which has three essays on three different writers, among them Keats, whose lives she's sort of re-imagining and reading their poetry alongside.

So she's probably the first person that I would go to when I think about the novella yeah and how it answers this desire for a kind of surface level control that's actually occluding something really tumultuous and heaving underneath.

JP:

That sounds fantastic, and wow, 101 pages, so that's almost like the quintessential novella.

ME:

It is perfect. The other I mean, I think I also read Ginzburg at a time when I was really into novellas, in part because my kids were very young so I could read them kind of quickly and feel some deep sense of accomplishment. But the other the other sort of story about domestic estrangement that I quite like that I think fits in here is by a woman named Rachel Ingalls called *Mrs Caliban*. And it's about a housewife who falls in love with a sort of green sea creature who appears one day.

JP:

That is a great novel, yes.

ME:

It's fantastic, that's another B-side that I would have really liked to do, actually, because it's so funny and it's so strange and it's kind of post-human comedy that is nevertheless extraordinarily human.

JP:

That that's such a good idea. Maud Ellman did David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*, which I think of as a kind of in the same world as *Mrs. Caliban*.

Merve and I hope that you will go out and read and by the dry heart. And we hope that you will buy the B-side books from Columbia University Press on June 1<sup>st</sup>. Whether you do or not, we would love to know your own thoughts about what makes for a great B-side, because I think if you're listening to this I'm sure you have a book or two or three that you would love to dredge out of the depths and becoming as Hannah Arendt said about Walter Benjamin, a diver after pearls. So Merve, thanks for diving with us today.

ME:

Thank you, thanks for pulling me up for air.

JP:

It just remains for me to tell you that recall this book is sponsored by the Mandel Humanities Center. Music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing by Clara Ogden. Website design and social media by Nai Kim. If you enjoyed today's show, please tell your friends about us, write a review or rate us on iTunes Stitcher wherever you get your podcast, which is basically the most important way that Word gets out for a modest scholarly podcast like this one. So please do check out other *Recall this B-side* episodes, among them Pardis Dibashi on a ridiculously silly Iranian novel, Caleb Crain on a novel written by a 9 year old and RtB's own Elizabeth Ferry. So from all of us here at Recall this Book, thanks for listening.