

## Audio file

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### **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, which is a short series of conversations that we are undertaking as a companion piece to B-Side Books, an edited collection out from Columbia University Press this June. OK, so hello today I am a guest-host, a ghost, a host-guest and my guest host today is none other than our own Elizabeth Ferry. So I mean you need no introduction, but maybe I will say by way of tiny introduction that among your many other hats as an anthropologist, you are interested in the ethnography of mining towns and mining communities in Latin America, though not in Brazil. So that's a maybe a connection to today's book, but I will just say that you are here to talk about your B side, which you originally published in public books in 2018 and a B side is really a very "Recall this Book" kind of thing. It is a book that was kicked to the curb, thrown prematurely onto the ash heap of history. So for three years at Public Books we have been commissioning writers to sing the praises of these odd volumes that missed their appointment with posterity. So the idea today with the June publication of B-Side Books as a volume is to invite a few of the B-side authors on to talk about their choices, and also what lay beneath them. So Elizabeth Ferry, tell us about your fabulous B-Side Book.

### **Elizabeth Ferry:**

Hey John, hey everyone yeah the book that I wrote about is and the title is an exact description of what it is -- It's called The Diary of Helena Morley and it's a translation of a diary of a girl in sort of late childhood/early adolescence in the gold and diamond mining town of Diamantina in Minas Gerais in Brazil, it's a translation of Elizabeth Bishop's and I guess that's where the B-Side aspect comes in, right? Since this is something that is kind of a sideline on her on what she's especially known for.

She lived in in Brazil for some time and was captivated by this book and produced the 1st and as far as I know the only translation of it into English, and she also has an introduction which kind of gets at some of the very poignant things that grab you about the book. So I mean one of the things that I liked about it, or what made aside from the very immediate thing, which is the depiction of this mining town at this particular moment of history, and as you said, John I. I love that I, I just think the relationship between mining and cities and towns and settlements, and the ways in which mining is kind of embedded within those is totally fascinating.

Both in you know cosmological, architectural, political, economic, all those different senses, but also the way in which it captures this voice of this this girl. And then the way in which it kind of has these ongoing lives, right? So it's sort of like the original diary.

### **JP:**

The moment of the original diary that it's talking about.

### **EF:**

The moment of its publication, the moment of Elizabeth Bishop, translating it, and then for me and I mentioned this at the end of the piece.

So [I was] reading it in the 1990s when I was doing my dissertation field work while in a mining town and actually one of the ways in which I kind of found a place in that town was by offering free English classes

to kids and a lot of the kids who took advantage of it were girls just around the same age, or maybe a little bit younger, and Helena Morley at this time. And who were the children of miners. Me reading it then and then me reading it in order to write the thing. Something about that kind of recursion is really fascinating.

**JP:**

Yeah, that's actually something you write about in the piece that really comes through to you. You [talk about the] Bishop introduction, in which she says some of the people in the diary are still alive and the successors of those who are dead and gone seemed very much cut from the same cloth. And she describes looking at these little uniform girls, carrying satchels of books, pressing their noses against the dining room windows of the new hotel, overcome with fits of giggling at seeing the foreigner eat her lunch. So in other words there's a kind of recursion there where Bishop herself feels that the diary is a window into the past. That also helps her understand the present, and you're describing for you reading it. You have the same kind of window into the past. That's also a window into the present feeling.

**EF:**

Yes, exactly and actually. I mean one of the sort of sweetest moments of my entire first time in this town was when my parents came to visit and there was 11 little girl who really liked me? You know in the way that little girls do with adult women sometimes and we had a lovely time together and so the Sunday came. My classes were on Sunday and my mother and father came to visit class and this little girl Dani was not there. And I was surprised, right? Like I thought she'd be there, and we went on, whatever, and about halfway through there was a knock on the door and I opened it and she's totally red running and she has a little bouquet of flowers that she's picked up that she wanted to give my mother during this thing she's upset because she's late and it was a great moment and she's in her school uniform and you know, she doesn't have a leather satchel. She has a Sailor Moon backpack or something, but...

**JP:**

Yeah, history can rhyme I think Seamus Heaney says, you know, so it's like that they're rhyming. So wait, Elizabeth I want to back up to the point about the other Elizabeth, Elizabeth Bishop being a this is a B side for her 'cause you're totally right. That's one of the aspects of the column we really like is that we take a book, you know by someone who might be famous for a totally different kind of writing, and we notice that they've also done this other thing. And so Bishop is a poet. Can you talk about that? Like is this? Does this feel like a poet's piece of prose or? She's a wonderful poet. I mean, she's a very self voiced poet, but, you know, kind of the Robert Lowell generation, yeah?

**EF:**

Yeah, and there's something about the way in which moments are captured in the in the text in the Diary of Helena Morley.

**JP:**

This gets into interesting questions that also have to do with recursion, which is what is the difference between translating something and then writing something that that is not in conversation with another text in another language, which is its own form of recursion, right?

**EF:**

But there's something about the specificity of the moments that feels very much like some of the Bishop poems, right? So, I'm thinking of the one I think it's called the Fish, right? You know, it's about catching a fish and has this, you know sort of deep ordinariness to it, and yet a kind of horrible miracle at the end of it, right? Like this, you know, seeing the fish caught and its scales and its mouth

**JP:**

Yeah yeah it's funny. I was thinking about the one that's called. I think Sandpiper, which is like the looking at the image of the tiny little jeweled bits of sand. But you're right, yeah, the Fish is a great example because it's so vivid and she has a wonderful line. from I think The Harbor [The Bight]. She says "all the untidy activity continues, awful but cheerful." And I feel like she's good at awful but cheerful. It's awful but miraculous or joyful at once.

**EF:**

I mean another way to think about it is also her poem Crusoe in England and the idea of displacement in that. So it's kind of imagining Robinson Crusoe back then how there's a feeling of alienation in the in the thing, but it, but it's in this sort of highly descriptive mode, so I would guess I would say that. those are the ways in which I feel that kind of Bishopness.

**JP:**

Yeah, yeah, that's great. That's the kind of in in place, but out of place. And that's such a nice way to think also about your own description of your like ethnographic time abroad, where you clearly have this, you know you have these cozy familiar relations and yet on some other level you know you're out of place like here.

**EF:**

Right yeah? And also the sort of noticing that that the noticing that Bishop does in poetry is I would describe as kind of ethnographic.

**JP:**

So, Elizabeth, you've really sort of talked through the are two big questions which is like your B side and why you chose it and also how you think about the B side concept. You've really kind of unpack that beautifully. So the third big question we like to ask is, let's say you know you've inspired people to go read the Diary of Helena Morley and they really do they love it? It's their kind of thing. So where else would you point them?

**EF:**

There's a book by Harriet Doerr called Stones for Ibarra written about a mining town in Mexico. Harriet Doerr was a was a wife of a mining engineer or some American person who was visiting there and it was written quite late in her life like very late. I think maybe 90 or something. I can't remember when she wrote it, but it was sort of after a long life of being the wife of a mining engineer. And so in a sense, there's a way in which she's, you know, you could see her as analogous either to Elizabeth Bishop in the introduction to the diary or me in my dissertation, you know moments right, as a younger version. I just find it beautifully written and just really kind of captivating.

**JP:**

That is great. Thank you so much. So, of course we both hope that you're going to go out and read the Diary of Helen Morley and some Elizabeth Bishop and Stones for Ibarra. We also hope that you will consider buying beside books from Columbia University Press. The agents are standing by waiting for

your call, but whether you do or not, we would definitely love to know your own thoughts about what makes for a great B side? I mean, I think one of the great things about the concept is that every listener has a book or two or three that they would love to dredge out of the [closet].

Yep, so Elizabeth thank you so much for being guest host today and it just remains for us to say that Recall this Book is sponsored by the Mandel Humanities Center. Music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Nai Kim

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