

Recall this Book 58

Recall this B-side #3

June, 2021

Caleb Crain on Daisy Ashford, *The Young Visitors*

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 beside books, an edited collection out from Columbia University Press this June,

So what exactly is a B side book? Well, it's a work that was unjustly kicked to the curb, thrown prematurely onto the ash heap of history. Elizabeth and I thought it would be fun to invite a few of the B-side authors on to talk about their choices and also sort of talk around their choices about what laid beneath them. Today's guest is the wonderful novelist and New Yorker writer Caleb Crane, who's also a wonderful friend, but you don't need to know that. I love both his novels, *Necessary Errors*, and *Overthrow* with a special fondness for the former, because it depicts a world that he and I both lived through, that of young American expatriates in Czechoslovakia just after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I basically just have three main questions for you, though I'm sure we'll also go down some byways. The first is just to *what is your B side and why did you choose it?*

Caleb Crain:

Sure, The B-side is *The Young Visitors* by Daisy Ashford, which is a comic novel written when the author was nine.

JP:

Which itself is comic, yeah?

CC:

Itself is comic. So it was a little bit of a stunt book. I think it was published in November 1919. I chose it just because it's actually really funny and and not funny like I feel like when you hear, oh, a child wrote a book like you think oh the humor is going to be like *haha, she misspelled the word or she said something she didn't really understand the meaning of it.*

But it's actually funny because she gets more than you realize a child can get about how society works and you're actually laughing *with* her not *at* her because actually she skewers adults in this completely thorough, ruthless, merciless way.

It's a completely implausible story about a 43-year-old man who's living with a 17-year-old girl; and they both are social climbers. The girl gets an invitation to London and then the older man, Mr Salteena, basically sort of scurries after her and tries to make himself into a gentleman, in this sort of weird educational finishing school that Daisy Ashford at age 9 imagines is located in the Crystal Palace.

I'll just read the first sentence, because I have that.

Mr. Salteena was an elderly man of 42 and was fond of asking people to stay with him. He had quite a young girl staying with him of 17 named Ethel Monticue. Mr. Salteena had dark short hair and mustache and whiskers, which were very black and twisty. He was middle-sized and he had very pale blue eyes. Then a pale brown suit, but on Sundays he had a black one and he had a topper every day as he thought it becoming.

Uh, anyway, so he's just like "an elderly man of 42." That is where you know that you you're in good hands.

JP:

Yeah, I totally agree. Do you have a fondness for books written by children....?

CC:

No, I wouldn't say that. I don't think there's any other books written by children that I've even read. But I do love novels that are kind of in a talked voice. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* for example.

JP:

Oh my God, that's such a good example, because I was thinking of *Notes from Underground*...the dark dyspeptic version of that. But *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: Wow, I'm completely with you. I'm fascinated. She's an amazing writer.

CC:

And Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*. It just sounds like somebody telling you the story rather than...You know, I love Henry James, but it doesn't sound like he's in the room telling me the story.

JP:

Right, right so wait, yeah, so back to Ashford herself. Any thoughts on like not being able to catch lightning in a bottle twice? I mean, if she could do it as a 9-year-old, why couldn't she do it as a 40-year-old or a 50-year-old or...?

CC:

Well, she wrote like five or six novels and they all ended up getting reprinted after this one was a big hit. But this is really the best one. I sort of think adult novelists are subject to the same kind of luck. Like you, you just write them; you don't actually know if they're going to be any good, or if they're gonna catch on. You know that part of it you don't control.

JP:

Yeah, did you write a novel when you were nine, Caleb, if it's not a personal question?

CC:

Not nine, no. Well, when I was actually maybe I did. How old was I? I grew up--I was born in Texas and we lived there till I was six and then we moved to California when I was like 7 or 8. It was like my whole world was destroyed. So I wrote about it. I made a little book of like our Driving Trip from Texas to California. That was kind of my way of dealing with this loss, so maybe that is where the impulse to write novels comes from with me, I don't know.

JP:

So can I ask how you think about the concept of the B-side? I was thinking of different words to describe that I was thinking about: *recovery/rediscovery/reformulation*. What does it mean to you, like what was the appeal to you of the concept?

CC:

OK so I'll confess something. So like as a reviewer, I get sent a lot of books, and often more books than I can possibly read. And you're sort of like you'll salt them away...and years later you're just like *I have to throw out these. I can't keep all these!* And some of them just pick them up and you look and you're like, *yeah, I was right.* It's clear just you just know as you pick it up that you didn't need to read it and it was fine that you didn't.

Then there are other books you pick up and you're like, *oh. I really should have read this* and years later you look at it and you just know like, do you know what?

JP:

I mean yeah, yeah, totally.

CC:

It's clearer, because all the dross has fallen away.

JP:

There's a moment inside *Jane Eyre* that I like, but I also was going to say that I just love the image of Charlotte Bronte sending it off to publishers. It would get rejected. She would cross out the address of the one publisher, write a different publisher's address and send it off again. I love the durability of that. And then the moment inside *Jane Eyre* that I also love is the moment where. *she's asked what must you do to to avoid going to hell?* And she says, *oh, I just must not die.*

In other words, she's not going to play by their rules, but she's still going to win simply by not dying. And I thought, there's just something to be said for books that don't die .

CC:

Yeah, and for authors who don't die.

JP:

I completely agree: Doris Lessing! 65 years. Ursula Le Guin.

CC:

You just keep going, yeah?

JP:

You just keep going. Ursula Le Guin went through patches of a decade or more where she wrote nothing that is worth rereading. And then something else comes out. Another Earthsea book suddenly appears in 1998. You know *what the hell?*

So Caleb, we already kind of covered this question: if folks like *The Young Visitors* what else might they like? 'cause you talked about these other great novels with voices. But do you have other thoughts like that? Like if this appeals?

CC:

Yeah, like I was thinking about that. I read a novel by Barbara Comyns a couple years ago called *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*.

JP:

Oh God, I love her. Yes yes.

CC:

It just sounds like she's talking to you.

JP:

I you know, I've been trying to get Steve McCauley to write a B-side about her.

CC:

Yeah. A comic novelist. Somebody like Jean Rhys? Not *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the early ones weird sort of depressed young women, yeah?

JP

Good Morning, Midnight or something.

CC:

Good Morning, Midnight and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. Those are also kind of talked like it's very much carried by her voice. Yeah, and it wouldn't quite work if it were in a third-person omniscient.

Yeah, and then there's this little there's this British publishing house, feminist British publishing house, Persephone books, that reprints sort of overlooked classics, and they have a couple of comic novels in their repertoire.

Most of them are fairly serious, but there's one called *Miss. Pettigrew Lives for a Day* by someone named Winifred Watson, which is just totally charming. It's not a talked novel in the same way, but it's totally that kind of British ironic humor that can't really be reproduced by other nationalities, so yeah.

JP:

So we'll put a list of all of these up, but it's funny 'cause Steve McCauley recommended *that* to me as well. I haven't read it yet, but...

CC:

Like 2 1/2 hours. I mean it's totally charming and just hilarious.

JP:

Oh my God. Well Caleb, thank you so much and I will just conclude by saying. Of course we hope that you will go off and read *The Young Visitors* and also that you'll buy B-Sides Book from Columbia University press agents are standing by but whether you do or not, we'd love to know your own thoughts about what makes for a great B side. I think every listener has a book or two or three that they would love to dredge out of the depths and become as Hannah Arendt said, a diver of pearls. So tweet at us, send us an email, let us know. We want to know we want to know your own B-Side. So Caleb thank you so much for coming on today.

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 is by our new intern, Naomi Cohen, website design and social media are by Nai Kim. If you enjoyed today's show, tell your friends about us, write a review of us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. This is the single most important way that word gets around for a modest scholarly podcast like this one.

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