

Recall this Book 59

Recall this B-Side #4

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Pardis Dabashi on *My Uncle Napoleon*

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 today to Recall this B-side, which is a short series of conversations that we undertook as a companion piece to beside books, which is an edited collection out from Columbia University Press this June. So hello, I'm today's host solo today. John Plotz and my guest is Pardis Dabashi, English professor at University of Nevada, Reno, Co. Editor of the forthcoming New Faulkner Studies and currently Iat work on a monograph with the excellent title "Losing the Plot: film and feeling in the modernist novel." So Pardis.welcome.

Pardis Dabashi:

Thank you, thanks so much, John, really.

JP:

No, it's so great. I wish I could say *Welcome back to Boston* where of course you used to live, but at least I will say, *Welcome to a Boston-based zoom room*. OK, so a little bit of introductory business. What I hear you asking is a B side? Well, basically it's a book unjustly kicked to the curb or thrown prematurely onto the ash heap of history. So for three years at Public Books I have been commissioning writers to sing the praises of odd volumes that slip through the cracks; they were ahead of their times or behind their times or just on a different schedule. It seemed like a good idea, now that that series has resulted in this book that is forthcoming to invite a few of the authors on to talk about their choices and what lay beneath them. So Pardis in that context, thanks so much on the day after Nuhruz, for suiting up to talk about one of your favorite Iranian novels. Three main questions for you, although I'm sure we'll go down some byways and tributaries; let me just start out with the obvious. What is your B-side and why did you choose it?

PD:

My B-side is called in English *My Uncle Napoleon* and in Persian *Dar-juun Napoleon*; a 1973 novel by Iraj Pezeshkzad. You ask any Iranian person and

they'll know what this novel is and if they haven't read it, they've seen the really, really, really popular television experience that came out in the 70s like, I guess why I chose it is for American and general European audiences, it is a B side in the sense that I haven't spoken to a single person. in my academic life, who has read or heard of this novel. First of all, it's one of the funniest books I've ever read in my entire life. It's hilarious, and this is, I'd say, why I chose it.

It's like a romp, that's how I would describe it and it has all the kind of like the formal features of a romp in the sense that it's deeply plotted like things are happening constantly. It is not at all interested in individual psychology or interiority, it's interested in things happening and things happening at a really high rate. It's a fast novel. So things are happening quickly and in a kind of crescendoed succession, so like, uh, you know leading up to leading up to sort of climactic moments of hilarity. So one example of this is there's this joke in in the novel that enters around a kind of like language that one of the characters use. One of the main character is is this kind of trickster figure, Asadollah Mirza, and he's the main character's uncle or cousin, and the main character is a young sort of unnamed narrator as a young boy who's fallen in love with his other cousin and basically the through line of the novel is like he's trying to. He's trying to figure out how to end up with her and his cousin Asadollah Mirza is helping him, but he's a, you know, he's a womanizer. He's a. He's a trickster figure and he uses the word "San Francisco" to mean having sex. So like the idea of like going to San Francisco is mean having sex. So like there will be a number of kind of like episodes in the novel where you know like things will a number of ridiculous things will happen and then. Like the climactic moment of the scene is like after long years, making some claim about either going to San Francisco or having gone to San Francisco. Yeah, being in San Francisco...

JP:

You're making it sound a little bit like *Tristan Shandy*, actually, because in a sense, then it is kind of a bit of a problem for the category of the B side 'cause the point about the B side is supposed to be something that. You know kind of belonged to the world at one point and then stopped belonging it. It's like here's like a book that never belonged to like the world in those terms 'cause it never belonged to the world of Paris or London or Berlin, and yet also it's it hasn't stopped being a beloved book in its own world

PD:

I have such a wonderful example about the way that this, this novel kind of like this cohesive agent. Basically they've been divorced forever and we were at the dinner for my celebrating my having received my PhD. And I think I was actually working on the B side article for you at the time. And so I was sitting at the dinner table. My dad to my right, my mom to my left and I said something....

JP:

Somehow I feel like the word San Francisco is not going to be uttered in this anecdote.

PD:

Nobody was going to San Francisco. My parents get together once every like six months or something for something having to do with either me or my brother and mum, and I said something to I was trying to like lighten the mood or whatever, so I said something like *oh, you know, like by the way like I'm reading My Uncle Napoleon*. And there was the silence and then my mom like cracked a joke. She like made a joke about a line in the novel....that my dad then like finished and they both started just cracking up. They probably hadn't talked about this novel together since the '70s, you know. And so that's my way of saying, like how much this novel is just sort of baked into the culture, you know?

JP:

Yeah, so did they do that in Farsi or in English?

PD:

It was in Persian.

JP:

Actually you're now at a fork in the road here. Because I'm about to ask you of our third question which is, you know, other books you've thought about or books you would recommend to people who are intrigued by the idea of *My Uncle Napoleon* and I feel like you're at a fork because you could either go down the Persian pathway. Or you could go down the pathway of, world literature books that I mean other books in other literatures that are like this.

PD:

Given this platform. I think one thing that I would love to enter more into mainstream conversations and literary studies in English is Sadegh Hedayat *The Blind Owl*. I know you and I have spoken about this, and there is something kind of too much about it. It's like very dark: one wonders, *Is there anything recoverable here?* But I do think that there it would be really interesting to triangulate that novel with others in the modernist tradition. To shed light on that work and to see if there's something, if there's some way that it can be brought into conversation with other texts.

JP:

Would you describe it as a novel of ideas? I'm just trying to give listeners a sense

PD:

Yes, so a novel thinking about very kind of broad questions of, mortality, and godlessness; the state of the abandoned world. And this is one of the reasons why it I don't want to say fails as a novel, so I don't think it fails is novel, but one of the reasons why it's more interesting, maybe theoretically than aesthetically

It's almost like reading a *nouvel roman* by Alain Robbe-Grillet. It's like you see the theorist at work, you know? And that's one of the reasons why. It's deeply, you know, theoretically edifying to read the *nouvel roman* and maybe theoretically edifying to read *The Blind Owl*.

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But there's something aesthetically there that you're like you're wanting. So if the new *nouvel roman* by Alain Robbe-Grillet is thinking through the history of the novel. Uhm, and you know seeing itself as an extension of the Flaubertian critique of realism. Uhm, I think there's definitely a way to think about *The Blind Owl* and *My Uncle Napoleon* as offering two very different but equally interesting contributions to that historicizing of the modern novel, where *My Uncle Napoleon* in a way is using contemporary Iranian events to look back and like really reaching back into 18th century and before. *My Uncle Napoleon* is rooted in, the humor is rooted in street theatre, Iranian street Theatre and also *commedia dell'arte*. So there's like a whole kind of comedic performative tradition that *my Uncle Napoleon* is kind of pulling into the history novel. Uhm, and it's levity is is markedly different than *The Blind Owl* which is a very, very dark, if not dour, thinking through of the role of the novel in the abandoned world, in, in, in a very, very different way. So I think that the three of them, I mean, Alain Robbe-Grillet. (I should write this paper, John!)

JP:

Yeah you should. Except you need to fit the TV show in there somewhere, yeah.

PD

I think this way this is the way my brain works anyway, and the things that I'm drawn to.

is reflected in what I'm saying here, but I think all three of these texts, or all three of these people, so that if I add position, are thinking through the history of the novel. I'm really interested.

JP:

Cool wow all right? Well, that's an excellent endorsement. And I mean I loved it. I thought it was a great novel, it was such a great discovery for me. OK, so I'm just going to say, dear listeners, course we hope that you will both read and buy *My Uncle Napoleon* and we hope that you will buy the forthcoming *B-Side Books* from Columbia University Press but whether you do or not, we would love to know your thoughts about what makes for a great B side. I think probably every one of us has a book or two or three that they would love to dredge out of the depths becoming you know, as Hannah Arendt said, a diver after pearls so Pardis thank you so much for coming on with us today, it was a great pleasure.

PD:

Yeah, thank you so much.

JP:

And I should just say quickly 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. If you enjoyed today's show, please please do tell your friends about us and write a review or rate us on iTunes or stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts and do check out our other Recall This Book episodes, which include Merve Emre on Natalia Ginzburg, The Dry Heart, and Caleb Crain on a novel written by a 9 year old. So from all of us here at Recall this Book, thanks for listening.