Recall This Book 94
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Elizabeth Kolbert (JP, GT, SS, HY)

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. I'm John Plotz, a science fiction scholar from the Brandeis English department, and since our topic today counts as science fact, I'm joined by a very special co-host, Gina Turrigiano, a brilliant Brandeis neuroscientist, (are there any other kind of Brandeis neuroscientists?) And Gina, you always pick the best episodes to host, so listeners may recall her awesome conversation with Madeline Miller about her novel *Circe* way back in February of 2019. And Gina, I'm going to turn over to you for the honor of introducing today's guest.

Gina Turrigiano: Great thanks John. Well it's absolutely wonderful to have Elizabeth Kolbert here to continue our conversation about her thought-provoking new book *Under A White Sky: the Nature of the Future*. Elizabeth is a journalist and science writer who's written three books, including the Pulitzer Prize winning *Sixth Extinction*, writes extensively for *The New Yorker* magazine on issues of climate and the environment, and her books are just engaging, thought-provoking occasionally deeply frightening, and have had a really tremendous impact on my own thinking about human impact on the planet and where we go from here. So Elizabeth welcome to *Recall this Book*.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Thanks for having me.

John Plotz: So Elizabeth we like to begin, if you want to take up the Invitation, just by inviting our guests to speak briefly about the book in question. *White Sky*, highlighting maybe what you think its key questions are or its key conclusions and then we can go from there.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, I mean the book is about human impacts on the planet in the biggest possible sense, and I hope really brings home how thoroughgoing those are, how ubiquitous those are, and how very serious they are. And what it's really looking at is: how do we, we've had this sort of control of nature attitude. It's in all of our engineering, a very gung-ho, man against nature attitude and now we are realizing, and we're bringing that same attitude, I would guess I would say to a nature that we ourselves have remade. And what happens then? What happens when we confront these, this nature that bears all of our own fingerprints, but often does not behave in ways that we like then, ultimately, even though in many ways we're responsible for that? And so I wanted to look at this sort of remade world that we have and how we're going to respond to that. You'd have to be a pretty hard-hearted reader not to come away uhm, feeling, feeling implicated first of all and feeling that there are a lot of ethical questions that are raised here. Both, , in the case of this extinction towards other species, and potentially in *Under A White Sky*, towards other humans, and the fact that we, I think that also, , one of the complexities which I do not go into very deeply in either book, but which I think that the books also implicitly raises that sometimes are, , what we would consider our obligations to other people and what we would consider the right thing to do for other species. Those are not necessarily the same things; those may be in tension. They may even contradict each other so. That is, that's the situation that we're in. As I say, being a journalist, I don't feel that it's my obligation to offer the answers. Maybe I'll leave that to the academics.

John Plotz: You talked about, growing up, I guess. Back in the 70s that era of a kind of romantic environmentalism. a notion of wilderness, which I mean, I know it goes far, far back beyond the 70s. But for me as a kid in the 70s, I remember these sort of green Earth posters we made in second and third grade. And I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about your own arc of thinking about

that, from a *save the wilderness* vision to the sort of environmental, both environmental actions and environmental possibilities you see nowadays.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, I do. I was, very much influenced as a kid by trips I made at West to the western US, which I now would realize was already a profoundly altered landscape, but to me was pretty wild, and pretty amazing and I guess you'd almost say it was a, part spiritual part aesthetic, part ethical, but we need to hold on to these places, these landscapes, the everything that depends on these landscapes. And I felt that quite strongly from a from an early age because of the distance I got. I grew up in the suburbs of New York, where there wasn't much left alive, everyone had gone through, sprayed everything with DDT, and that had been banned, but everyone's garden had no weeds and that was probably the result of pesticides and we didn't have any, when I look back on it, we didn't have really frogs… everything had just been denuded of life in some way! And that I found really disturbing, even as a kid. Then in my journalistic career I spent a long time writing about politics, so I wasn't really thinking about these questions. And when I came to think about them, the world had moved on and there were these huge questions that many, that scientists were grappling with, and they're still grappling with, and the question of what is the right approach to take? Is it to manipulate things on a whole new level or is it to try to back off as much as possible, which is something that we spoke about when I was visiting Brandeis.

That is a really, profound question and Ed Wilson, one of his last books, the one called *Half Earth* and it talks about how we should be setting aside half of the surface of the earth basically for some other species to live in, and that's come there, there's a tremendous number of problems with that. there's a lot of people living in these places that you might want to "set aside." And there's huge pressures on them. The Amazon, The Congo basin, but that is, Ed Wilson is not stupid. He certainly realized, there's climate change. There's all these things going on, but his point basically was

you want to leave as much space as possible for evolutionary processes to take place even as the whole world is changing. If you don't leave space for animals to move, species to move around for these new interactions, you're just going to get these really impoverished ecosystems, so that's another sort of approach. It's a much less interventionist approach on some level, although it's also on some level intensely interventionist, so we are, uhm, we are in a situation right now. I would think I say this without fear of contradiction. where there are no easy answers. you can't say anything, let's. Let's just do this. That would be easy. There's just no. There's just none of that that those have all been foreclosed.

Gina Turrigiano: And the other element of this that you touch on a bit in the book and also in our previous conversation is: it's not just coming up with an engineering solution on the part of scientists. It's [also] coming up with the political will to implement. I mean, I was just thinking about the American chestnuts, right, and this is a great story. It was just in the *New York Times*. But meaning about it for years now, the idea of just introducing a gene into the American chestnut that comes from other plants that are already resistant to the blight. This is so it's a simple process of moving this gene into the chestnut and it actually saves the trees. And of course, these this was a huge, fraction of American forests throughout the East. Great food source, I mean just incredibly sort of foundational basis of this rich ecosystem, right? And so it. it seems completely obvious that the right thing to do would be to introduce this into the forests with this simple genetic change. And yet there's incredible resistance to that idea, right? And it's the fear of unintended consequences, and this is a case, I think, where you could look at it, I would say as a as a scientist who thinks about these things in a fairly sophisticated way. This seems like a pretty good bet to me, like it's not such a risk. But of course something could go wrong. But then the alternative, as you say, is potentially worse, right? That we're watching, most of the major tree species in the United

States, dying off from different kinds of blights that we could potentially fix.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, I think the chestnut is a really good example. You know, I talk about it briefly in the book and I when I actually went and did that piece on Hawaii, that very first pieces for got me going on this. I went out at the half a piece about. Hawaii and they sort of 2/3 of these about Hawaii and 1/3 of the pieces about the chestnut and I went and I talked to those guys out in Syracuse. Bill Powell is really the guy who's responsible for it and it's kind of was interesting in a. This is also a bit of an aside, but they worked really, really hard on that. (Now with Crispr they could have done it in 5 minutes, but it's been a 25-year project.) They started 25 years ago when the techniques were not nearly as sophisticated and that is a case, I think the genetic engineering. Is a case where unfortunately there's been and I'm not saying you shouldn't be careful with genetic engineering because Lord knows you should be, but there's just been this weird…..There's so many things we're doing to mess up the world, and it's interesting the genetic engineering of certain things has become very hard to understand or explain. I mean, the Europeans are not eating, GMO corn. We eat it every single moment of every day. They will not accept GMO corn comes from other parts of the world so other parts of the world are not using it, so it's pretty interesting how that happened. A history should probably be written about that and that whole anti GMO, is a really interesting and problematic….

John Plotz: Elizabeth can I jump? In on that, I love that point about the counterexample. What would a good counterexample be of something that we ought to be as worried about, or more worried about than genetic engineering, but in fact has, for political reasons or ideological reasons, gone under the radar?

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, you're driving your car is

probably worse for the world than this, having this GM Chestnut out there, this, this and the thing that's almost. I mean I don't want to trash people on this podcast, but people say well we shouldn't be doing this GM chestnut. We should be crossing the chestnut with the Asian chestnut and then backcrossing it. how much non-native genetic material is going to be in that chest entries way more than is in this, so like, once again, I'm not a geneticist, I don't want to claim any great knowledge, but unfortunately there's just a lot of bad thinking going on in that front, …. this does seem pretty close to a no brainer. It's a gene from wheat, and people have in fact discovered I believe subsequently, and this is going to be a very interesting turn in the genetics debate. That that gene is actually there, it's just not turned on. And so with CRISPR, you're going to be able to turn things on that weren't turned on and then it won't even be GM, and the USDA has already just said that. So you have a lot of plant breeders out there looking for these genes that they can click on and not call the thing GM, and that's going to be huge now. Do I think that's GM? Do you think that's GM? These are all, interesting philosophical questions, but as far as food products are concerned that is already that cow has already left the barn as it were. So. The GM chestnut. Now the problem we get into the GM Chestnut. I want to say is the forest has also moved on. So it's how clear. where are you planning these things? They take 100 years to grow. you're not getting the forest back of the past. And you're not getting the creatures that depended on that chestnut back. I mean, there's probably a bunch of small things that probably insects that went extinct when the chestnut tree died out. But I, I basically agree I, I don't see why we wouldn't want uh, that chestnut out in the world? And we are going to keep as Gina also alluded to, we keep confronting this now. Our ash trees are dying now. People have I believe what they were trying to genetically modify an ash tree, I think it's very, very hard when it's a predatory insect, it's much easier. What some things might be pretty easy to engineer resistance to and some things are gonna be very, very difficult to engineer resolution.

John Plotz: Hey Gina, can I ask, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but I how would you answer the question I asked Elizabeth? 'cause I feel like I'd love to know your thoughts about this too. Like what are other things that we are easily willing to accept that we don't accept with GM. how do you understand the like world of tradeoffs?

Gina Turrigiano: Well, I mean, I think the example is of the product is sort of perfect like we accept all sorts of hybrids that are creating a new Organism. It's unpredictable how that Organism will behave. Much more devastating, I think, is that genomes are moving all over the planet all the time. Another point that Elizabeth makes in her book, and this is something that humans have facilitated greatly. I mean, it used to happen anyway, but it took much more time. It was harder for organisms to travel these great distances. Now we're bringing them all over the world on airplanes are shipping them on so all of that genetic mixing is happening all the time and it's such an enormous level that's impacting all of the ecosystems on the planet, right? So I guess a very rational thing, like introducing a gene that is already there, turning it on whatever, some of these simple modifications are way, way less problematic than the things that are happening constantly unintentionally, right? And yet by design they could have a positive impact if they were done well. And so, like. This just brings up the whole dilemma. This seems like a simple, like pretty clear answer, in the case of maybe the American chestnut or some other things. But then when you start to get to things like injecting particles into the sky to reflect the sun, we're on a whole different level of complexity where the unintended consequences are potentially even or I mean, planet devastating, right? And I don't know how you weigh those. I mean, I don't know what precedents we have for that and, and I don't think we understand the ecology and weather systems and climate systems well enough to really know exactly what those things do. We could look at volcano vents and so on, right? So I don't know. I mean, I think that

the great line in your book, Elizabeth, the question of whether dimming the [effing] Sun is a better alternative than not doing it is exactly where we may find ourselves sooner than we thought. So then the question is like how do you, how do you make, how do you make those calls, who makes those calls?

John Plotz: Before we pivot to introduce our other two speakers on this podcast, I just wanted to ask, I want to go back to Gina's point about the deeply frightening, because that's definitely been my response to your both the books of yours that I've read, which I loved them, and they scared the bejesus out of me, so I guess my question for you is like how do you, are you frightened by the things you uncover and report on? Or how do you think about it? How do you get through the day without…?

Elizabeth Kolbert: Yeah, no, they're very frightening if you're. If you're not brave about what's going on right now. you're not paying attention. And I think honestly what's really frightening even more frightening than I could have anticipated on some level was what would happen to you. Know American politics, so that we could have, it was very been pretty depressing to cover climate change for quite a while, and we recently had, some good news. The first piece. Of climate change legislation so that that's good news I want. To applaud that, but, in the. Interim we've also had. these crazy conversations around COVID, so we thought that we were going to be able to solve or deal with. I shouldn't say solve a problem as immense and complicated as climate change, where we can't even, agree on whether we should get vaccinated against a deadly virus. That's that has made even me. I thought I was pretty inured to things, but I found that very frightening, really, really frightening. I don't know. I don't know how we can. Some problems that are much more ethically and scientifically complicated than in COVID, which is was a huge problem don't get me wrong, but it was fairly straightforward problem that we understood novel

pathogen. If we can't even agree on the most basic things. Yeah, public health measures.

John Plotz: OK, well on that cheerful note, we're gonna make a generational pivot because I'm delighted to announce today that as part of *Recall this Book* we're welcoming 2 first year Brandeis students who were winners of a contest open to all the students who were reading Elizabeth your book *White Sky* because it was selected as the first-year class read as part of the Helen and Philip Brecher new student book Forum, so I'm gonna introduce first Hedy Yang, who is from Montgomery, NJ and is interested in pursuing economics and environmental study. She's at Brandeis and you might be interested to know she has a 1032-day streak going on Duolingo. And then I'm also going.

Elizabeth Kolbert: In what language Hedy?

John Plotz: To introduce Nidhi – Yeah, that's a good question, Hedy. What more than one language or just one?

Hedy Yang: No, just one I'm actually learning Esperanto, and to be honest, I haven't learned all that much. It's just like doing the lessons every day, but it's like nice to keep the streak going.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Oh that's great, OK?

John Plotz: And then our 2nd guest host is Nidhi Sriraman: from Arlington Mass, who plans to study biology, neuroscience and business at Brandeis University and her summer reading highlight was *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmes, which Nidhi, I don't know anything about that book. But that sounds cool, and I'm really glad to have both of you. And can we just invite you to take the conversation away?

Nidhi Sriraman: Yeah, absolutely about that book. That is an amazing book,

so I highly recommend to anybody who wants to read it who's interested in it. It's a great book but switching more to a literary side. I'm a big reader, so when I noted when I saw that you talked about *Frankenstein* in your book. I my interest was like. I've read that book and my question to you is basically that in the novel you in your book you mentioned the novel *Frankenstein* and you noted about how that cold and gray environment in Europe led to that story. And whenever I think of climate change in the environment, I think of one of my favorite books, *The Road* by Cormack McCarthy and he talks about this world post-apocalyptic world covered in ash and clouds and it's grey everywhere. And so I'm wondering how you think our changing environment will change the stories, we continue to say in the future. And if you think there's a type of story that will be more prominent, or if there's a new type of story that might emerge.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, that's a great question, and people have sort of been. there's just holes or there's this whole genre now that's been named climate fic, and they tend to be, pretty bleak. Uhm, sort of. Post-apocalyptic or enduring apocalyptic, stories and a lot of them. some of them take on climate directly some maybe more obliquely, but I think that, one of the interesting things I mean, I guess I would say I don't think climate change has gotten its sort of great literary treatment yet. I look forward to the great clarify novel that's to come. And I think it's a very hard. I think it's very hard story because it's such a. It's just so ubiquitous and it's so big and sprawling, it's not. It doesn't have like. Not even like nuclear Armageddon, which is an event at least. At least you get a lot of bombs going off on but. I think increasingly I guess if I had to say, I think increasingly it's going to suffuse all literature, all contemporary literature is going to increasingly have a climate change element because, we're all it's going to increasingly affect our daily lives. Going to be hard to not have that come in there so. I but I, I'm not a novelist and I know a lot of people working on different projects of trying to sort of imagine a future for

us. Uhm, in a creative way and I do think that's important that we that we do that because I think that most people aren't reading the latest, science paper. So it is important to have it. Something that people can access. Uhm, through other medium media.

Gina Turrigiano: Yeah, kind of creating possible even positive divisions for Where could we go right? I think there is a.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Yeah, yeah, absolutely I. I mean, I think that. It's hard, it's really hard, because it's such a global story, and because to create a positive vision. I can't remember, if we discussed this on the ministry for the future. It's a pretty recent book by Kim Stanley Robinson. Sci-fi qualify? Definitely, yeah, and it's quite a sprawling book because. busy climate change requires so much a huge. Some change in how we live and how we do things and how we think and he so he tried to take that on and I think it's been quite a successful book. But you have to be willing to talk about a lot of pretty heavy duty. Uh, he takes some. quantitative easy? I mean, it takes some interesting digressions there that that I guess a lot of readers followed him on. I I'm I was sort of surprised by that and impressed by that I have to say 'cause I. Wouldn't have necessarily anticipated it.

John Plotz: I actually have a footnote on that, which is that I was in in Austria and Czechoslovakia this summer and in both places I talked to sort of bureaucrats who mentioned that book that that was the first thing they wanted to talk about. So I was also surprised that people were willing to follow him down the quantitative easing rabbit hole, but I think, gift for changing scales. there's this guy Rob Nixon has this concept of slow violence, like I think it's like what you were saying, Elizabeth, things that are invisible at in the ordinary apocalyptic timescale like, uh, as you said, like a nuclear bomb. We all know what that means, but these slow processes are harder to conceptualize and.

Hedy Yang: Yeah, I feel like that's really interesting to like to think about

how almost sometimes you like take for granted the settings that many of the books that we read now take place and how that's going to be so different in the future. So I guess shifting almost from like a future perspective, and what books are going to look like in the future to more of a historical one. I guess my question to you, Elizabeth now is that I just kind of wanted to hear your thoughts. It's about like environmentalist history and as you write, like specifically in your book about Rachel Carson in particular. I mean, I'm sure we all know that Carson was very influential in bringing the environmental crisis to light in like the 50s and the 60s with her book *Silent Spring*. But you also mentioned in your book that her recommendation of using invasive, or like non-native species as pest control had pretty negative effects as we see through things like the Asian carp. So what would you say about Carson's overall legacy, and are there any other environmentalists who you feel like whose work are especially notable? whether for positive or negative reasons?

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, I think Rachel Carson's legacy is you know, super impressive. I don't think there there's hardly any, they're having any books where you say, well, that really, changed the course of history and *Silent Spring* really did for reasons that are not, entirely clear people have a little bit of a hard time figuring out why was that book such a huge hit. And one theory has it. Uhm, it was, uh, a time when people were waking up to the dangers of nuclear fallout too. So we had all these, sort of silent, a new generation of things where you, you wouldn't even see them or smell them or sense them, but they're very dangerous and that really, I think, resonated with people already concerned about nuclear fallout. And that was when we were still doing above ground nuclear testing and people were discovering that every little kid's teeth had radioactive decay products in them. So it was a monumental book and led to congressional hearings led to bans on certain pesticides. Which, I can say from personal experience, I'm pretty much as old as *Silent Spring*, exactly. In fact, they're

now Eagles back in the Berkshires, which there had not been for generations. That is a product of *Silent Spring* or getting rid of DDT, which was, it's really bad for birds. A lot of birds and it just needs a lot of insects and a lot of fish. So that's been that's been that's been huge now. There's a lot of there's controversy about it. I don't want, there is some controversy about it, we, we don't produce DDT. Some countries so do produce DDT hasn't, led to deaths from malaria that could have been prevented, so it's not. It's not a straight. I don't want to say there isn't, there aren't some other impacts that I could have focused on, but from my perspective it was a largely very, very important and very positive book. Now at the very end of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson advocates this use of biocontrol, right as a way as an alternative to pesticides and herbicides. And that was not her. she was in the person first person to come up with biocontrol, biocontrol had been practiced was being practiced even at the time, so I don't. I don't kind of blame her as it were for these biocontrol efforts gone awry. But I do think it is interesting in a way. I mean, it's pretty interesting that someone who was very keenly sensitive to the ways that we were perturbing the natural world. Does seem to have had a slight, blind spot to what the potential ramifications were of moving all these predatory insects. That was mainly what she was talking about. Uh, around the world and uh, we've seen. the carp you could argue were was taking her too literally. But there are lots and lots of examples of things that were brought in to chase around other things that have had very, very damaging impacts.

Nidhi Sriraman: I think another figure that I also noted a lot in your book was Henry David Thoreau. And so I'm just curious as to if you, why did you take inspiration from him? Because I noticed, like in three different times you talked about him and I was also wondering what you think the role represents in the environmental.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, that's a really good question. These are all really good

questions, so Thoreau is sort of, I'll call him the father of nature writing in the in the American tradition, so he is sort of the touchstone if that makes sense, and so in, purely from a literary standpoint, he just towers stands over everything and everyone is in his in his shadow and that in some level includes Cruz, Rachel Carson. Had surely read Thoreau growing up. And he, wrote a lot. There's always a Thoreau quote you can find because he he's pretty. And he was very, very deeply interested, long before most people were in what people, what our relationship was to the natural world now in a lot of ways, Thoreau is of course, very, very dated. he lived not all that far from Brandeis, it was already at very, very as people point out, when he went out to Walden, it was already a deeply changed, landscape and it was changing really fast. I mean, that's one of the reasons why he went out to Walden, it was changing so fast. The railroad was coming through, et cetera, et cetera. So he's, I've read Thoreau with students he is not, wildly popular with them anymore. It used to be something you had to do when you went to, college. Basically, you'd probably you took any class whatsoever on, the American naturalist tradition. You would have to read Thoreau. He's very dense. Uhm, he's dated. He's from the 1840s. What can I say? He's not politically acceptable in certain ways, although he was very, very ahead of his time in many, many other ways. In many ways, most ways I would say.

Nidhi Sriraman: Is there something that you would want you would tell like every student to read of Thoreau's work right now? Like is there a certain?

Elizabeth Kolbert: I would. Read the 1st couple, like the 1st 75 pages of Walden. I do think that they still speak to, still speak to us in the way that we are prisoners of a lot of it, was also he was rebelling against social conformity and the way that we are prisoners of our possessions and the way and what people think of us and certain ways of doing things. And I think that. That's still. It the language, as I say is tough. It can be very tough because he writes these,

magnificently long sentences. But I think that if people gave it the time if you have some time to read the 1st 75 pages of Walden, I would really still recommend it. It's, it's quite amazing writing and it has a lot to think about it.

Hedy Yang: Uhm, I wanted to ask. Almost like a forward-looking question in a way. I mean, I know at the end of your book it's meant to convey a sense of like we don't know what solutions should be taken. There's that sense of like uncertainty and ambiguity, but I kind of did just want to touch upon like almost like an environmental justice side of it, in a way, because many of the solutions that you explain your book, I feel like occur in First world countries or take generally pretty high levels of industrialization or technology that like not all countries have in order to put into place. But I do also recall that you mentioned your book that countries that contribute less to the crisis, which in our typically less developed countries in the global South shouldn't be responsible for fixing the crisis. So I guess what you think is the role of different countries, or like agents in solving the crisis and should countries be more focused on development or conservation?

Elizabeth Kolbert: Well, this is the great dilemma of our time, I think, or at least one of the great dilemmas of our time. Has that and, I guess if I were to give you the sort of upbeat answer, I would say well there shouldn't be. We shouldn't see a tension between those two things. There should be, they're the sustainable development goals which should be able to, everyone should have a decent standard of living without, continuing to destroy what's left of the natural environment, unfortunately, I think the reality on the ground is a lot more complicated. As you allude to, we generally see in a lot of countries, not all countries. I think some countries really have put sustainability way higher up the list of priorities than others, but we do often see countries letting sustainability and whenever the economy gets soft, it really falls to the bottom of the agenda and in all countries, and I'm talking from the US and China. Too much

smaller, poorer countries sort of gin up, crank up the economy at the expense of sustainability and think this gets us back to ministry for the future. Obviously, I should say, the huge inequities in consumption. They are completely unsustainable in my view. American levels of consumption are, if universalized around the world, we will have an unlivable planet really, really fast. So we in the USA think we need to look at it from both directions, both from how other how people around the world can have what we would consider to be a decent standard of living. But we also need to be looking very, very seriously at our own standard of living, which is probably, at the heart, the heart of the problem. And we need, people have talked about this idea of convergence. That's views of the carbon emissions. We should all be emitting the same amount of carbon we now admit. Many, many hundreds of times more than many people in different parts of the world. And if you see that as a stand in for consumption in general, we should be aiming for that now. That's a lot easier said by me sitting here in the US in my own, pretty comfortable house than it is done and I don't have the mechanism by which we could even do that. But I'm very sympathetic to countries that are trying to bring up the standard of living for their own people. But I do think it is a tragedy if that's going to come at the expense of the Amazon rainforest of the Congo basin. Those are just irreplaceable resources and that once again is being said by an American who lives in New England, where we chopped down every tree that was there, and it has since grown back. So we think of New England as kind of a woody place, but if I'd come if I were right where I'm sitting right now, 200 years ago, Thoreau's days, everything would have been cut down.

Nidhi Sriraman: All right, I have one more question, so I'm curious as to why you chose the title *Under the White Sky,* because I thought that I when I was reading, I feel like that was such a small portion of the book. Like it wasn't the Asian carp or anything a big topic so. That's my question.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Yeah, well that that is a very good question. Naming a book Is, it's not that easy. I thought a lot about what this book should be called, and in fact the French decided to call it in the French, It's called the fish in the desert, so you could have bought it, you could have named it a lot of different things. Nothing seemed to capture the whole book. Maybe it's sort of two, or many disparate parts shoved into one book, but I liked *Under A White Sky* because it seemed to encompass the whole idea that you were living, you're going to live under, even the sky, the color of the sky was not going to be the same, so I, that that was why eventually I went with it. I thought it had a kind of, uhm, ominous quality to it, but also kind of unsettling you don't know exactly what it refers to until you get pretty deep into the book. Uhm, but then it had a it was it was capacious enough. How's that to take in the book? Where is the fish in the desert? Which is fine. With me, it's sort of like, that's really doesn't seem to take in the whole book, but I had a really hard time finding a title for it. I thought about it a lot.

Gina Turrigiano: But it's a very we have this very visceral reaction to the idea of the color of the sky changing. It's a such a visible alteration of our environment whereas so many of the other things that are happening yeah are subtle and slow. But that really kind of strikes you with a little bit of horror, I guess.

Elizabeth Kolbert: Yes, that was definitely what I was what? I was what I was aiming for.

John Plotz: Yeah, I guess maybe the answer about things are only frightening when they're perceptible, so that's part of the value of writing and of wonderful journalism, is to make things perceptible. Well Elizabeth, thank you so much for taking the time for this conversation and thanks again, Nidhi and Hedy. I want to thank you for your part in this conversation. It's great to have you. Recall this Book I should say is sponsored by Brandeis and by the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery. Elizabeth Ferry

is a co-founder of the podcast and today's hosts were Gina Turrigiano from Neuroscience. Thank you so much for coming, and me, John Plotz. Elizabeth Ferry and I are very eager to hear your comments, your criticisms and your thoughts on today's discussion and on all of the topics that follow from it. So please write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcast if you enjoyed today's show, I think I'd invite you to check out related episodes on our website recallthisbook.org. So from all of us here at RtB, thank you for listening.