

# Rita Felski on her 2019 Ian Watt Lecture (5/3/19)

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

literature, book, works, critique, read, questions, thinking, aesthetic, felt, humanities, people, ways, identify, ties, students, responses, critical, world, theory, university

## SPEAKERS

Rita Felski, Casey Wayne Patterson, Margaret Cohen

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- C** Casey Wayne Patterson 00:10
- Welcome and thanks for joining us in this episode of Cafe, the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel podcast. In this installment, our host Margot Cohen is joined by guest Rita Felski. To discuss the central role of "identification" in readers' experiences of novels. Rita Felski is William R. Kenan, Jr, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and also Niels Bohr Professor at the University of Southern Denmark. This conversation was recorded on May 3, before Professor Felski delivered the center's 2019 Ian Watt lecture in the History and Theory of the Novel. We have the good fortune to showcase some really fantastic scholarship at the center, and we're thrilled to now be sharing it with you. Thank you for listening in on another of our warm and informal exchanges, as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.
- M** Margaret Cohen 01:09
- Could you tell me something about the uses of literature for you as you were growing up?
- R** Rita Felski 01:16
- Well, I guess I've always been interested in literature, I was the kind of classic nerd I suppose when I was young, I would just read constantly. At that time, we had a public

library very close by and I would get my three library tickets and three from my mom and three from my dad and go to the library, get nine books, and I would make my way through those books, spending the whole day reading. So when I was growing up reading was really crucial for me. And because I grew up in England, I started with Enid Blyton, who's not very well known here, but she's real classic, really in England and through much of the world. So I made my way through all her books. When I was older, I got into, I don't think, like Tolkien I suppose in my early teens. And then later on, I became really fixated on a lot of European literature. You know, Thomas Mann, Kafka Jean Paul Sartres, Balzac. So these really became central reference points for me when I was growing up. So reading has really always been a huge part of my life. Not surprisingly, given that I'm now a literature professor.

M

Margaret Cohen 02:16

Who did you identify with in The Lord of the Rings?

R

Rita Felski 02:18

Well, it's interesting in terms of Lord of the Rings, actually, I think that's a case where I didn't particularly identify with any specific character but I was really entranced by the extraordinary rich and detailed nature of the fictional world, you know, it was the world as a whole, I think that drew me in and I remember, you know, I must have been 13, or 14, and just coming to the end of the last volume of Lord of the Rings, and just feeling this incredible sadness was being thrown out this magical universe and back into my sad little suburban life at 49 Southern Road, Birmingham, England. So there was a real sense of loss, I think, in being no longer being able to be part of that community. I was also a, you know, I shouldn't say of course, as many people when I was eight or nine years old, a huge fan of the Narnia books, were also very important to me. So I think in those cases, I wasn't necessarily identifying with the character, but I was really being, I found myself taken up in, absorbed in, in this fictional world, which I just found so inspiring. You know, and then when I went to university, obviously, I didn't learn to talk about books in those kinds of ways. I learned to analyze them and to think about them theoretically. And that should—I want to say was also really important to me. So I was not one of those scholars who thought that theory was alienating or, or took one away from literature. For me, it was really liberating and exciting to encounter the world of literary and critical theory. So it's a very important part of my own, you know, intellectual development. You know, I'm thinking of someone like Janice Radway, you know, who's another literary scholar, and she talked about how she used to love literature. And she became, she identified with all these characters in novels and she would become absorbed in fiction. And then she went to university and she was made to feel shame about those identifications. And I never really

felt quite that sense of shame. I'm not—I really enjoyed, like reading literature, you know, as a lay reader. But then when I went to university, I also found these new intellectual vocabularies very, very exciting. And so I will certainly, as well as being infatuated with literature, or certainly for time also very much infatuated with theory.

M

Margaret Cohen 04:20

And we're imagining the reader Felski who has just left the suburban town and is going to university and I'm wondering whether there was a book that made the transition for you or a set of objects like, how did you shift from the reader who loves literature and identifies with literature to the reader who's drawn into the world of theory, that that absorption?

R

Rita Felski 04:48

Yeah, I actually don't think the differences are as large as they're often made out to be. You know, I'm just finishing a book now that's called *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. And one of the arguments in this book, actually that there are quite a lot of similarities between readers who identify with fictional characters and literary scholars who identify with famous literary theorists, you know. And in both cases, there could be a sense of a law that could be a sense of draw, there can be a sense that you're attaching to these figures, who are teaching you something who are enabling new forms of perhaps self recognition or understanding. So I don't find that distinction, actually, to be that dramatic. Sounds dramatic, it's almost made out to be.

M

Margaret Cohen 05:28

That resonates for me, I think I was asking you that question, thinking of myself, and coming from a just an impassioned love of Proust and *Remembrance of Things Past* and reading that and taking courses in Proust at Yale and then becoming swept through that into the cult of discipleship around Paul de Man.

R

Rita Felski 05:51

Oh, yeah.

M

Margaret Cohen 05:52

You know, reading these passages in Proust, and what you're saying about the absorption in a world that is not about practical things, and has got this densely inhabited quality to it, that resonates.

R

Rita Felski 06:07

Yeah, yeah, my, my training was perhaps a little bit different. As an undergraduate, I went to Cambridge University in England. And I, you know, I must say, it wasn't actually a very fruitful experience for me, because all I learned there was to do a kind of traditional close reading of literature, the kind of new critical methods that were there very much still in fashion. And while I was I was kind of reasonably competent at that, but I just felt it never really answered the questions for me about, you know, why why should we study literature? Or why does it matter? Why is it important? And then I ended up going to Australia to do my PhD. And at that point, this is purely, or half by happenstance, actually, I ended up at University of Monash in Melbourne. And it turned out at the time that in Melbourne, there were a bunch of Hungarian intellectuals, actually students of Lukacs', who'd been thrown out of Budapest, because of their controversial ways of thinking and had taken up residence in Australia. But what it meant is that I was a very dynamic group of Eastern European intellectuals working in Melbourne, who are very interested in these big questions about why does literature matter? You know, and they were mainly coming from a kind of loosely Marxist tradition, certainly not any kind of dogmatic Marxism, but they did believe that literature was very much close was very much related to questions of social transformation. And art had significant political importance. And so that was very helpful for me at that time, because it did get me thinking about these really big questions about why does literature matter which I never really, you know, found addressed in my undergraduate education in England. So those questions are still ones that very much interest me, I think we don't in literary studies who don't ask the question, enough, why? Why do these texts matter? And so central, I think for you know, art history or music, or whatever it might be, we have these very sophisticated techniques of analyzing works either formally or putting them in historical contexts. But we don't really, I think, answer enough the questions or at least raise the questions, you know, why should we care? Why does any of this matter? Ultimately.

M

Margaret Cohen 08:04

These questions are very timely. It took you a while to come to that in your own critical writing, it seems like you went through feminism, and then came to ask the questions about why literature matters. Do you think that's accurate?

R

Rita Felski 08:22

Well, I think I you know, I think I would say that actually, I've it's certainly true that I've emphasized these questions about why literature matters more explicitly in the last few years. But I think my interest in looking at literature outside of the university and why people read and how they read in every everyday life has really been an ongoing theme

for me throughout all my, my whole career. You know, I think this is partly a question of my own class background. You know, I didn't come from a family where people read books, I came from a kind of low, low middle class background. And it was very distressing for me when I went to university--not that I learned critical theories, which I very much enjoyed, but sometimes the assumptions embedded in those theories, that non academics, people who had not read Proust or Foucault or whatever, who were just reading bestsellers will therefore in some way, deficient, that always really upset me and always really angered me. So, you know, really, I think, in all, in all my writing, including my feminist writing, I've actually been pretty interested in these questions of more popular response. You know, just to give you a few examples, you know, my my dissertation, which was my first book, I look pretty closely there, you know, at popular forms of feminist fiction, or those novels that came out in the 70s and 80s, sort of when feminism was just beginning. You know, and when you had these novels that were often confessional works, women were describing their lives, or forms of a Bildungsroman where, you know, a female protagonist would would leave her husband you know, very popular books like *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French, for example. They were sometimes looked down on a bit in academic circles because it was felt they weren't sophisticated enough. Well, I took those novels seriously. And I thought they were very important actually. And then I had another book called *The Gender of Modernity*, which looks at late 19th century literature and intellectual history and so on. And then one chapter was devoted to this author called Marie Corelli, who was actually the, you know, the most famous novelist of the late 19th century, she was massively popular, not just in England, but all around [...] then the British Empire, you know, her book sold in millions. And yet she's completely disappeared without trace, no one wrote about Marie Corelli. So again, I thought it was important to look at this right and say, "Why was she so popular?" You know, why do you why why were people reading her work so avidly. So I think really, throughout my, throughout my life as an academic, as well as being interested in, you know, theory, and in the more canonical literary works, I've always had also had a strong interest in more popular works of fiction and looking seriously at those works, and trying to work out why they connect to people.

M

Margaret Cohen 10:49

So I'm going to ask you a question for our Stanford students who are very much pressured by their parents who have put so much effort and resources into helping them get to study at Stanford and come to me in comparative literature, and they say, "I want to study literature, but my parents don't think it's worthwhile." And I'm wondering what what your parents said to you, when you announced that you were going to go on to a PhD in literature?

R

Rita Felski 11:19

What I think, you know, I think that there, I just have to respond, it was a very, very different kind of context. So for example, you know, there, as you say, people are now worried about I think, in some cases wrongly worried that studying literature will not give them you know, an adequate salary or will not allow them take the kind of job they want those such massive pressures on students and people are often have, you know, if huge debts from going to college, and so on, it was a very different world where I, when I grew up, I went to college at Cambridge, not only was it free, but I got a generous stipend. So there was never any issue. I mean, it never even occurred to me to think is this is this going to lead to a job, it was not something I hadn't thought about, I didn't have any financial debt, I could simply study for the sake of sake of studying. And then when I went on to a PhD, it was true at that point, I was not sure whether I could get any kind of academic job. But I figured, well, you know, I just like reading, if I couldn't get a fellowship, to go to Australia for five years, and read books that will be worthwhile in itself, and there wasn't quite the same anxiety there is now you know, we are living under these conditions of precarity, obviously, that, that, you know, the number of academic jobs are dramatically disappearing. Those students, whether undergraduates or graduate students now have this massive sense of anxiety that was simply not around, you know, several decades ago. So I do think the conditions have changed quite dramatically.

M

Margaret Cohen 12:42

The Limits of Critique really touched a nerve. What are we doing as literary critics? And what do we have to offer scholarship, and our students, and where does politics fit in? And could you just tell me a little bit about what you were trying to accomplish? And then what the reception was?

R

Rita Felski 13:00

Yeah. So you know, the last few years, someone you know, as you mentioned, I was involved ia lot in doing feminist work. And I still, that still remains very important to me. And a lot of it involved doing critical evaluations of various kinds of works with, you know, works of fiction or works of theory. But at certain point, I began to feel that I was making the same arguments over and over again, and they were becoming less interesting. They'd certainly been important for a while. I think it's necessary, obviously, obviously, to be able to question things and to read works critically. But I didn't begin to feel that certain things were not being given sufficient attention. You know, the questions I just alluded to earlier, why literature matters, why we get hooked on certain works, what that hooking means, if it's just purely a question of pleasure, if it can involve ethical questions, political questions, not only why do we care about literature, but why do we care that we

care about literature, you know, these sort of second order questions of the importance of literature, or indeed other forms of fiction, including film in the public world?

M

Margaret Cohen 14:00

So why do we read literature? Why does it matter to us?

R

Rita Felski 14:04

Well, so in use of literature, I suggested that, you know, I tried to just point to a few, I thought, fairly common motives, or reasons why people read literature, I think they're not the only ones, but I think are some of the most important ones. I tried to identify certain aspects of response that I think are actually relevant both to popular reading and more scholarly forms of reading. And so the responses I reflected on there included the idea of recognition, which I think is a very important idea, there has not really been addressed much in literary studies, that often when we read a work of fiction, we find it pleasurable because we recognize some aspect of ourselves, which can you know, confirm our own identity, but it can also question our identity in some ways, you know, the, this phrase, the shock of recognition is not just a cliché, we can find aspects of our lives articulated in a novel or indeed a film in ways that can disconcert us then cause us to reassess what we're doing. And it can cause us to rethink our lives. So that was one motive for reading that I think is very, very important. Something else I talked about at some length was the idea of enchantment. That was something that at one time, we really couldn't talk about, you know, there was a strong sense in literary studies, that being enchanted by a work of fiction was something bad. I think you've mentioned yourself a famous figure like Brecht, who was very suspicious of enchantment. The idea was that if we became caught up in, in a play, for example, we could not therefore think critically about the Lord, largest social or political issues involved. And so I tried to develop a defense of the idea of aesthetic enchantment, and to say, there actually can be something very, very valuable about escapism, escapism is a really bad rap, I think, in the academy, and yet, sometimes escapism, you know, losing yourself in a work of fiction could actually be a very valuable thing to do. And it needs to be taken more seriously. So I looked at, you know, experiences recognition of enchantment, I consider the ways in which literature can serve as a form of knowledge. And then I looked also at experiences of shock, you know, there are certain kinds of works of fiction that disturb us, because they're openly shocking, they're disturbing. They may be very graphic in their representations of sex or violence, or they may do things, they're very provocative in aesthetic or formal terms. Again, I tried to understand the allure of that kind of aesthetic experience. So you know, so in this earlier book used to literature, I talked at some length about these different aesthetic responses. And then the feedback I got was along the lines of Yes, this is all very interesting. And it

sounds quite plausible, and you have to identify these responses, which do seem to be my responses. But this is some are not going to fly. Because, you know, you're not really doing critique, and any kind of serious scholarship needs to engage in critique. So in the response to my use of literature book, I was hearing over and over again, that a certain kind of critical thinking was really the only kind of thinking that could count as being both really rigorous and radical scholarship. And that just didn't seem right to me. So at that point, I felt it was necessary to sit down, and to look closely at what it meant to engage in practices of critique, as they have been defined in a university context, to describe them more carefully, to acknowledge their value, but also, you know, to look at their limits.

M

Margaret Cohen 17:18

And this gets us to the very energizing and controversial reaction to *The Limits of Critique*, which I think has been really helpful to people and at the same time scary, in literary studies. There have been special issues devoted to your book, and there have been a lot, there's been a lot of conversation about it, what has come out of the conversation for you that--how has that reframed the book, if it has?

R

Rita Felski 17:45

Yeah, so I mean, the book I was really one of the things I was trying to do was to get us to think about critiquing in new ways. So you know, when people talk about doing critique in the academy, they often then associate critique with certain kinds of political or philosophical questionings of literature on the one hand, or alternatively, they associated with praising literature for itself being critical, right, this becomes one of our main value schemes for defending our study of literature, we say, "Well, of course, we're going to study Hitchcock," or "of course, we're going to study Kafka," because if you read them in the right ways, we can show that they are critical, in fact, of their social milieu. And there's nothing wrong with that. But I felt that a lot was being missed. And so what I tried to do was to redescribe the idea of critique by looking at it in terms of both its moods and its methods. In other words, what I was trying to show is that critique is not just an intellectual way of thinking but involves a certain sensibility involves a certain disposition of being suspicious, skeptical, wary. And it also goes along with certain, fairly easily describable methods, interpreting in certain ways, constructing certain kinds of narratives, working with certain metaphors of texts, and so on. And so in doing that, I wanted to, as I said, in the book, not to reject critique, which has been very important to my own intellectual formation, but to bring critique down to earth, by just saying, "Well it is one tool among others," you know, sometimes we need to engage in critique, but if that's all we're going to do as literary scholars, we're gonna have a very impoverished, I think, set of tools with which to address the world. And so in terms of responses to the book, I mean, they really



varied quite dramatically, you know, so on the one hand, you know, I did start getting a lot of fan mail, which I never got before, and it was really quite heartening, actually, I would get these email messages, not just from people in literary studies, I'm getting one from say, a sociologist in Hong Kong or, you know, I think letters carried from all around the world, from people in different fields saying, "Wow, this book has been so important to me because I had got so discouraged by the prevalence of a certain kind of critical and skeptical thinking in the university and so I was going to give up my PhD or not do a PhD. And this book has given me hope, in fact, that there are other possibilities." But then as you know, other people were much more negatively inclined towards the book.



Margaret Cohen 20:04

Can you remember like the email that was the most moving?



Rita Felski 20:07

Well, you know, it's just like, I'd get emails. And occasionally I'd see remarks on Twitter, you know, the thing that said things along the lines, you know, my life can be divided into the time before and after I read *The Limits of Critique*. So those are obviously very nice comments, or, "I was going to give up University, and now I've decided to go back and do a PhD, because I haven't read the book." So those all were really wonderful comments. But you know, you know, I shouldn't say there have been a significant number of people who who take issue with the book quite strongly. In some cases, I do feel they misrepresented my arguments. Like any book, the arguments of *The limits of Critique* have their weaknesses, and I'm very happy to be challenged on those weaknesses. But in some cases, you know, I felt the that antagonists of the book, were, for example, presenting me as some kind of pure aesthete who's interested only in the beauty of flowers or whatever it might be, and that is really quite a misrepresentation. I mean, certainly, in all my scholarly work, I've been very interested in the relationship between literature and the world. I think there are other ways of thinking about the relationship between literature and the world than through the lens of critique.



21:17

Yeah, I think your work in feminist scholarship, could hardly be represented as the work of a pure aesthete.



Rita Felski 21:27

Well, in some cases, I think people had had never read anything else of mine, apart from that book. And in some cases, they had not read the book, or they just read the title. You know, one of the, in one chapter of the book, I present what I call a five part definition of critique that's slightly playful, but not entirely. And the fifth part of the definition says, critique does not tolerate rivals. And what I mean by that is that critique, you know, those who embrace critique, sometimes tend to think it's the only serious way of thinking, that anything that is not critique is a threat to critique. It's intellectually irresponsible, it must be flaky. It has no serious academic credibility. And so in some of the responses to the book, I felt in fact that that maxim was being reiterated that my what I thought was in some ways, when I wrote it, I thought was a relatively uncontroversial suggestion, which was simply the argument that "yes, we can do critique, but we can do other things as well," that cause you know, a few people to respond in these very heated ways and to say, "No, we cannot do anything else, we must continue to engage only in forms of political critique." Because if we're not doing political critique, then we're supporting a neoliberal university. And I'm afraid I just don't follow that syllogism. It makes no sense, no logic to me.

M

Margaret Cohen 22:47

I think I told you in my email that what I had thought of myself as doing but then when I read your book, I also felt very much in alignment with the descriptive aspects of it, and the interest in revaluing and also getting out of that mood of brooding suspicion and that all the critics who are caught up in a certain kind of melancholy that goes along often with the hermeneutics of suspicion. So I'm interested in what Benjamin called rescuing critique, which is a type of description, which is political to the extent that it recognizes that what you are rescuing is about to disappear. And if you do not seize it now, it will, perhaps be lost to history forever. But that is interested in revaluing, he makes an analogy to the capitalistic notions that picking up the pieces of the vessel that contain [...] attributes that have been broken and trying to piece them together, but to revalue what is about to disappear.

R

Rita Felski 23:54

Right now, that seems great. And that's actually quite relevant to some of the thinking I've done about how we might reimagine the humanities. So I edited an issue of a journal, *New Literary History*, a couple of years ago, where I had a long introduction addressing those questions. And again, I suggested there that criticizing is one of the things that we do in the humanities, and we should certainly continue to do it. But there are actually several other things that that people in the humanities do and that we perhaps should do more of. And one of those, in fact, was the idea of conserving. That's really one of the things we do

as people in humanities, we conserve stuff we conserve, preserve the texts of the past these fragile artifacts, whether you know, sculptures or paintings or pieces of literature that most people would never encounter, if they did not take some kind of humanities course, for example, and that work of conservation and preservation is an incredibly important part of what we do. And yet often that's often been, you know, minimized or not seen as important because, you know, for a while the humanities had this rhetoric of iconoclasm, you know, we've got to be new and daring and outrageous, but now it seems in fact, it's the captains of industry who are interested in rupture and innovation, and perhaps you know, we need to switch things around a bit and say, actually, in the humanities, we want to keep the old stuff, we don't want to destroy it.

M

Margaret Cohen 25:12

Well, let's talk about what you're going to be talking about with us today.

R

Rita Felski 25:15

Sure, well, what I'm going to do today is just give an overview of one of the chapters of the book that I've just finished. So the book is called *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. And what I try and do in the book is to take this idea of being hooked, which we often associate, you know, with blockbusters and bestsellers, and actually say that being hooked is actually a great metaphor for thinking about how all of us are connected to works of art, literature and art. So the argument is really to try and build an aesthetic, that is oriented towards connection and relation, rather than, for example, separation, or defamiliarization, which tended to be the kind of language that we've had in the humanities. In other words, I want to rethink the general notion of ties and the value of those ties. I want to argue that in fact, we can't go through the world without ties and bonds. And we've had a tendency, I think, in literary studies in the humanities, generally, to think of ties as being synonymous with restraints so that we want to cut ties, we want to break away from things. We want to defend our autonomy, our separateness our distance. And the point of the book is really to say that, No, on the contrary, while we can certainly be attached to things that are bad for us, that attachments, ties, hooks, are also incredibly important that they're the way we connect to things that we care about in the world. They're to do with emotion, certainly, but they're also to do with thought, they're also to do with ethics, they'll also do with politics. So I'm trying to develop a way of thinking about the relationship we have to artwork, so it's based around the importance of ties.

M

Margaret Cohen 26:51

Why do you think novelists spend so much time telling us not to be involved in ties? I'm just

thinking, for example, like Don Quixote, who has a midlife crisis and is overly attached to his books, or Emma Bovary who is overly attached.

R

Rita Felski 27:08

Right, right, right. Well, of course, those are the two classic examples rather come up over and over again, Quixote and Madame Bovary. But you know, it's interesting, especially in the case of Madame Bovary, just the one the, you know, the one I know better, I think it's actually more ambiguous case than it's sometimes made out to be. I mean, certainly, on the one hand, the novel is showing the problems of becoming completely caught up in fictional worlds. But I think there's a way in which the novel itself encourages us to identify with into attached to Emma in a whole range of ways. So that, you know, while on the one hand Flaubert is saying, here are the dangers of this kind of absorption. I also think in other ways, there's certainly actually a lot of empirical evidence that many readers have actually found themselves identifying with with Emma Bovary in ways that are actually they found very important to themselves. I mean, Emma Bovary, in fact, is a very good example of a character who's generated countless times, right, she's been adapted, she has been rewritten, she has been turned into a whole range of media and forms. So we have formed ties, you know, to Emma Bovary. And one of things I want to push back against is the idea that, you know, some of us form ties, and some of us don't, because I'm trying to think about ties in a very broad sense, you know, in other words, that one can be connected, for example, to a large social group. You know, I talked about how the film, *Thelma and Louise*, allowed individual viewers to become connected to a larger feminist community, but can also be it become attached to a single painting or a single novel, and you may feel closer to that novel or that painting than you might do to your neighbor or to a friend. So there are many kinds of ties that we formed to artworks and what I'm trying to do is to look at the variety of those ties, the aesthetic tie, the intellectual tie, the ethical tie, the political tie, and give them all, you know, due weight, rather than just focusing on some ties rather than others. So for today, I'm gonna be talking about, you know, the idea of identification, which I argue is actually rather more complicated that we've often made it out to be academics that have been very dismissive of identification, but as I suggested earlier, I think academics identify just as much as anyone else. They just identify on different grounds, perhaps, they might not identify with a character, but they identify with an author or they identify with what they see as the general intellectual project of a work, you know, Rebecca Solnit, who I gather is here at the moment, you know, writes about this very, in very interesting ways in relation to the *Lolita* you know, she talks about identifying with *Lolita*. And then someone wrote in and complained and said, you know, you shouldn't identify with *Lolita*, and Nabokov doesn't want you to identify with *Lolita*, but that that person who wrote in is clearly identifying with something right he has a strong attachment to Nabokov and what he takes to be Nabokov's literary project.

So, part of part of what I'm interested in is how these everyday aesthetic experiences of identification or for example, attunement, which is another chapter of the book are actually much more complicated and variegated and interesting than we've acknowledged them to be.

M

Margaret Cohen 30:05

Okay, so two questions. So you're a phenomenologist, along with a theorist and trained anthropologist or sociologist, in some ways, it's both a critic... Tell me about phenomenology. I just feel that runs so much through all your work and what you're doing today and *The Limits of Critique*, the analysis of the hermeneutics of suspicion. I'm curious where you know, where you got that, and you sort of you don't proclaim it like as one of your calling cards, but I feel it's a really important one.

R

Rita Felski 30:38

Anyone who's a serious phenomenologist in a philosophical sense, I think, would say I'm not a phenomenologist. You know, in other words, I don't spend time discussing Husserl, or Merleau-Ponty in any depth. I do mention a little bit Heidegger in the most recent book, but I do find phenomenology, very useful for addressing these questions about the texture of aesthetic response, because it's the way of thinking there is most attuned to the complexity, of aesthetic experience, and often the difficulty of articulating that complexity. So for example, in my chapter on attunement, you know, attunement is really this question of, why is it that we get one painting, we don't get another why we totally caught up with one novel, or we're not caught up in another we recognize, for example, a second novel is a good piece of writing, we appreciate its excellence, but it doesn't move us and doesn't touch us in the way that the first novel does. So this is where I find phenomenology quite helpful, actually. And I draw a lot on a language for example of mood and of atmosphere, and of attunement, and the German word *Stimmung*, in order to try and describe these very hard to pin down aspects of aesthetic experience. You know, there's been a lot of pushback against the idea of the ineffable. In in, in the humanities, for the last few decades, there was a sense we couldn't talk about the ineffable, because this was somehow, you know, pure mystification. But the idea that we can't, we can't adequately explain the strength and the power of our aesthetic experiences is actually a very ordinary observation. It's there's nothing kind of, you know, fancy schmancy or educated about it. You know, I draw, for example, on an Australian ethnography, a young man, a PhD student who went out and talked to two fans of popular and independent music. And they talked at some length about that, what they call their peak experiences of music, you know, they're lying in bed. I know, Bruce Springsteen comes on the radio, and they, and they, they suddenly hear they'd heard that

so many times before, but they suddenly hear it for the first time. And they have this very strong sense of conversion, that somehow a button has been pushed, trigger has been motivated. And they somehow hear that work in a powerful way. And they often say, you know, people say, it's very hard to convey that experience. So the sense that we can have these strong aesthetic experiences that are difficult to put into words, actually, I think is a very mundane and commonplace phenomenon. There's nothing elitist about and that's what I do think for example, phenomenology can be very helpful for capturing those questions. Perhaps it might just say one thing, which is where I disagree with phenomenology is there often tends to isolate then the experience of the reader or the viewer from the social world, right, it sort of cuts out the larger context, if you like, it focuses only perhaps say, on the, the novel or the film on the piece of music, and the person who experiences it. Whereas what I'm trying to do in this book is actually say, yes, there is this very strong sense of an immediate relationship to an artwork where I've had the sense of intensity, we have the sense of aesthetic power, we're enraptured, we're caught up, we're transformed. I talked at some length, for example, about Zadie Smith being converted to Joni Mitchell, and why that's an important experience. And yet, in thinking about how that happens, even though that aesthetic experience feels very powerful and immediate. And we have to acknowledge that immediacy. It's also shaped by a ton of things, you know, it may be shaped by the friend who recommended Joni Mitchell, or the review you read in the paper, or the book you happened to read in college because it was on a syllabus. So there's a lot of mediations that come together to make those aesthetic experiences possible. And so what I'm trying to do with this new book is on the one hand, to acknowledge the way in aesthetic experiences feel powerful, overwhelming, intense and important, but also to acknowledge how they're shaped by a bunch of different things.

M

Margaret Cohen 34:29

That's so enriching and so—it just brings all this experience in one's peripheral field of view into the work in a way that's very different, say from the Roland Barthes S/Z, you know, idea that artworks are citations of other artworks and there's always the already read. This is a much more humanistic and democratic and alive way of acknowledging the complexities.

R

Rita Felski 34:59

Should I say a little bit about how might I might teach this stuff to students?

M

Margaret Cohen 35:02

Yeah, please do.

R

Rita Felski 35:03

Yeah. So you know, I've been teaching this way actually for a number of years now. So I teach critical theory which continues to reign, what we know is one of my primary interests, and especially Marxist aesthetic theory, which I know very well so you know, my classes will include Adorno, or Lukacs, or Fredric Jameson, or whoever it might be. I teach a bunch of different kinds of critical theory. But increasingly, my classes, you know, after I've familiarized my students with critical theory, we do do the nastiest question, which is the question of what I call postcritique, which is, what do these critical theories miss? You know, what have they missed, and one of the things they've missed, I think, is the way in which we become caught up in artworks and come to value them. And so that's what I try and encourage my students to reflect on those kinds of questions. And often, I think there's a sense of anxiety that if we introduce these kinds of questions, without the kind of stewarding guardrail of critical theory, students will simply lapse back into, you know, confessional responses, "I hate this character," "I'm bored with this book," "I love this character," and you know, all their, all their weight, or their serious thinking will go out the window. But I actually have not found that to be the case at all, you know, that students are actually capable of putting together very, very sophisticated arguments about why works of art mattered to them. And that's really what I see my job now. And that's something that really interests me, we have very sophisticated vocabularies for questioning society, questioning literature, showing power relations at work, being suspicious, but vocabularies for talking about why artworks matter to us have been rather impoverished they've been, you know, broadly speaking, kind of romantic ideas, you know, about imagination, or feeling that are often not very well fleshed out. And so what I'm trying to teach my students is that we can actually think about, reflect on, these strong, powerful aesthetic experiences, without therefore diminishing them, that we can actually give them a respect, and nevertheless, talk about the ways in which they are made, co made both by the work which is doing something both by you who's doing something, but then also, but as you say, by this kind of penumbra of other influences, we've shaped the fact that you care about this particular film, or that you find yourself irritated or put off by this particular music. And so actually looking at the range of actors involved in making aesthetic experiences possible, can be used not to diminish the experience, but actually to enrich our understanding of it.

M

Margaret Cohen 37:27

And I guess, to enrich our sense of the communities that that we're part of, as well.



37:33

Exactly, yeah, I have a very different kinds. Yeah, exactly. You know, for example, I actually have a PhD student who started teaching some of these ideas to first years, and she just showed me, actually, some of the essays that her first year students had written, and they were just wonderfully rich. You know, so we had one student reflecting on, you know, why she can't stand, you know, a particular song by John Denver, you know, all her friends belt out with great enthusiasm. And so she was able to reflect on it in very sophisticated ways, you know, talking about how, well, you know, she was shaped by the fact that her parents are classical musicians. And so she learned a certain kind of canon, of what good music is, that was shaped also by the qualities of this John Denver song. But then she listened to another John Denver song, and she managed to find that more appealing. And she was able to reflect on how you know, her social background, the influence of a friend, or features of the actual piece of music came together to either, you know, help her to like a particular song or to dislike it. So I think we can learn to reflect on these on these matters in quite sophisticated ways. Rather than simply saying, you know, I like this song, or I hate this novel.

M

Margaret Cohen 38:39

Yeah, I'm thinking, I'm going to take your, your prompt and use them. And of course, I'm teaching now on 19th century novels about Paris, called "Realist Paris, Romantic Paris," to students in Paris. And I think enabling them to bring in contemporary Paris and all the different experiences they're having while they're abroad, and the connections will be really enhancing and I hope make these works come alive.

R

Rita Felski 39:07

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, yeah, it's very interesting, that word, "come alive." Because, you know, one of the words I use a lot in this book I'm just finishing is the idea of "actualizing," or realizing that works can only be actualized, they can only come to life in so far as we read them or listen to them or respond to them. And so our responses have to be part of the equation, we can't just pretend that the object is just sitting there. And the goal is to engage in some kind of formal analysis of its features, because those features are only relevant insofar as we're able to perceive them and respond to them. So the response of the reader or the viewer has to be part of the equation. I think, even as we also look at how that readers response is also shaped by some of these larger social factors.



M

Margaret Cohen 39:51

Did you want to just say something about conserving and why that's a more robust project than an antiquarian type of history?

R

Rita Felski 39:58

So I talked about these various things that the humanities do very well, as I just mentioned to you, I talk about conserving as being a really important point. But the the metaphor of conserving can be a bit misleading perhaps because conservation might cause us to think about preserves, you know, and jars of plums or whatever sitting in a darkened pantry, you know, the idea of being separated off from the world that the idea that humanity is cut off behind glass conserved, preserved separate from the world. But I think that will be entirely wrong, because of course, on the one hand, we conserve works of art there is we need to preserve them, we need to look after them, we need to make sure that they don't disappear. And yet again, the point would be to say that they can only come to life insofar as we respond to them. And so they come alive in new contexts, a classical sculpture or an 18th century French novel, whatever it might be, acquires very different meanings in the present than it had in the past. And that's a crucial part of their meaning for us. So along with conserving works of art, I think another thing we have to do in the humanities is actually to convey those works of art into a multiplicity of different contexts, right, we need to show why that conservation matters, we need to hook up those works are the past two concerns of the present. And that will also that involve becoming fluent in more languages that, you know, we knew to become much better I think of public speaking, we need to be better at you know, as a friend of mine, Ian Ang, once said, speaking about what we do to intellectual strangers, I think there's sometimes been a sense of defensiveness in the humanities, the the worry, which is not completely unjustified, that people outside the university are hostile to what we're doing. But I think, nevertheless, we have to be able to convey what we're doing as powerfully and persuasively as possible. And in some cases, I think, at least people are not necessarily hostile. They're just mystified. They don't know enough about what we're doing and why it matters. And so I think it's very crucial to do more along those lines. And of course, you know, many people are doing similar things. Already. There's an increasingly robust public humanities project. You know, Doris Sommer, for example, at Harvard has been doing a great deal of work in terms of public art, and so on. So there's lots of initiatives going on along those lines. And I think that can certainly be developed.

M

Margaret Cohen 42:14

Well, thank you so much. And thank you for helping us start our podcast series and try to find a voice and reach out to a broader audience with the issues that matter in literary

studies today.



Casey Wayne Patterson 42:30

Thank you again for joining us in this episode of the Center for the Study of the Novel's podcast Cafe. We would also like to thank Rita Felski for her generosity in agreeing to this conversation. Thanks to our team at the Center for the Study of the Novel: to An Truong Nguyen and Maritza Colon for their operational support. To our graduate coordinators Victoria Zurita, Cynthia Giancotti, and Casey Patterson To Erik Fredner for editing, consultation, and sound engineering, and to our host and director Margaret Cohen. The Center for the Study of the Novel is a subsidiary of the English Department at Stanford University.