

Sharon Marcus on her Ian Watt Lecture (10/30/20)

📅 Thu, 7/22 8:42PM ⌚ 46:54

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, read, books, narrative, death, life, routine, dying, novels, fiction, real, friendship, existentialism, plot, writing, contend, everyday life, female, pandemic, thought

SPEAKERS

Casey Wayne Patterson, Sharon Marcus, Margaret Cohen



Casey Wayne Patterson 00:08

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 Margaret Cohen is joined by Sharon Marcus, following the delivery of her Ian Watt Lecture titled, "Reading As If For Death." Sharon Marcus is the Orlando Harriman Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and the author of *The Drama of Celebrity*, published in 2019 with Princeton University Press. This conversation was recorded on November 4 2020, and is our first episode since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We're thrilled to have resumed recording remotely, and to be sharing this conversation with you. So thank you again for listening in as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.



Margaret Cohen 00:58

So we're going to post the lecture on the CSN website, and so since that lecture is there as content, I think it would be informative and appropriate to start with the topic of your lecture, which was incredibly moving and thought-provoking, spoke to me intellectually in terms of narrative, spoke to me about personal experiences I've had with people who are dying, and then with our larger cultural context of COVID. So in framing these questions, I was kind of debating between whether to go in through the door of narrative and different types of narrative temporality, or to go in through the personal, the experience

of living with dying, which you so straightforwardly just kind of encouraged us to consider. And I wonder if you have a preference as to which direction to start.

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Sharon Marcus 02:02

First, I'll start by saying the strange noises you're hearing are my cat, and you'll probably keep hearing them, since she seems very lively right now. I'm going to respond to that, Margaret, by saying I think that the questions of narrative and the personal questions of contending with my partner dying and the ways that inevitably made me think about my own relationship to death, my own death, not just the death of others, they're connected. So this talk was different than what I've usually written because it was more directly personal. I think everything I've ever written has been working through some kind of personal obsession or interest, or a place where my personal existence as a woman, as a lesbian, as someone who grew up in apartment houses, intersects with the larger culture. And certainly, the question of what it means to face death is--there's nothing more universal than that, although we don't all face death under the same circumstances. But, actually, let me back up. So I'll save for--I don't know if everyone listening to this will have listened to the talk first, but the talk is about a novel called *On the Beach*, where the premise is that there's been a nuclear war in the global North. It's set in Australia, when everyone in Australia is cut off from communication with the North, so the assumption is everyone in the North died as a result of a series of nuclear explosions. And they're in a situation of extreme certainty and uncertainty. The radiation is definitely coming towards them. What they can't know for certain is whether it will be lethal for everyone. There's some hope and some scientific basis for, at least, wondering whether it might dissipate as it comes along. So I feel like the novel has been talked about very rarely. When it's talked about, obviously, it's talked about in the context of fictions of nuclear war and apocalypse, but the novel's very anti-apocalyptic. It's very ordinary. It's set in, you know, suburbs near the large city of Melbourne. It's--everybody just goes about their business, waiting to see if they're going to die. And what was very striking for me when I read it is that the majority of the characters keep living exactly as they always have. Some are in denial. Some are not. But the commitment to everyday life among all of them, except one--it was very striking to me when I read it. And we usually think of everyday life as very anti-narrative, just the same thing all the time, repetition, routine, there's no development, there's no change. But what I noticed, both in the novel, but also in my life, and in my wife's life, as we were dealing with her almost certain death from a recurrence of cancer, was that part of what our same old, same old involved was almost an addiction to planning, whether it was planning what we would do the next day, or even planning what we might do in the future, if we had a future, even though we knew we probably didn't, because her chances of survival were almost zero. We pressed the oncologists about that when we first met with them at a critical juncture. They really don't like to answer the question, "how long

does someone have to live?," because there's always a certain amount of uncertainty. And they hate to tell you you're gonna die, and then you don't. But you know, maybe you, like, spent all your money or something. And they also hate to tell you that you're not going to die, and then you do, so they just tend to say they don't know. But in fact, they do know what is very likely, and when we pressed them, they said that Ellis probably had 18 months to live. So there we were living in a situation very similar to the one of the characters in *On the Beach*, except it was different because we weren't in it together, in that one of us had 18 months to live. And Ellis was in a nursing program at the time doing a mid-career, a mid-life career change, she remained committed to that program--it felt like for her, there was no living if she couldn't think about having a future. And she sought out that future in any way she could, whether it was short-term, medium-term, long-term. The longer-term future plans were clearly, kind of, delusional, but the shorter-term plans made perfect sense. It's just the pleasure in planning--it was very striking to me that, I don't think human beings can live in the present. I think that we need to be able to project ourselves into the future. And that's an aspect that I'm still thinking through. So I guess, to answer your question, more succinctly, it feels to me like we think of death as the ultimate ending, and as therefore being very much about narrative. But of course, for the dying, it's not a satisfying closure. It's the end of all narrative. And I think that people often cope with the thought of death, or the reality of the fact that they are dying, by doubling down on what we might call micro-narratives. And everyday life is all about micro-narratives. And I think it's been a real lacuna or even error in the thinking around everyday life to think of it as being opposed to narrative. Maybe it's opposed to dramatic narrative. But there are all kinds of minor, non-dramatic narratives that nonetheless have a certain--they have an arc, we want that arc.

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Margaret Cohen 07:43

One aspect of narrative that your reading of the everyday helped me reframe was some of the adventure fiction that I work on, where routine is the backbone of the training that everybody receives in order to go out onto these perilous voyages, where the outcome very often is going to be death. I'm thinking, for example, of voyages in the Northwest Passage in the 17th century, when commanders would conceal from the crew exactly where they were going, so as not to have them lose heart or defect. But there, I never thought of that as everyday life. I thought of that as remarkable and extraordinary adventures in zones that people had not gone before, and that this--or Europeans--and that this focus on routine was a way to, kind of, make sure that a certain ethos of professionalism was maintained, and that everyone was always ready to contend with dangers that might come up. So one reframing that your talk did for me of this work and adventure fiction, was to think of it as maybe more about how we get through the everyday than seems apparent from all the decor and the trapping.

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Sharon Marcus 09:09

Yeah, well, I'll respond to the few things that were very noticeable to me in the novel I read, which has a submarine captain as one of the five main characters. So there's certainly that sense of a profession that is about using routines to contend with the unknown and the unexpected. So I think one thing about the everyday is that I think we tend to exaggerate the extent to which we really enjoy adventure, and the unusual, and the unexpected. We sort of--we like reading about it, because we're not experiencing it. And in fact, we like reading about it because we don't want to experience it, I would say. But when we're actually experiencing it, it's often quite dreadful and terrifying and disruptive and disconcerting, and we don't know how to handle it. I mean, we're recording this in the middle of a pandemic. And so I think a lot of us have seen [...] I mean, this is a world historic event we're living through. It's extremely disruptive. It's full of unknowns. I don't think we're enjoying it. I don't know too many people who are enjoying it. And I think one of the things that people don't enjoy about it is it's taken away our routines. It's taken away, also, what I might call our routinized mini-adventures, I keep talking about the mini and the micro, you know, like, I'm going to try a new restaurant. Well, not anymore. I'm going to go to a new play that I haven't seen before. So all of our--I think we tend to like novelty and risk in in very small doses. And we've been deprived of that. In the novel, what happens is that the characters, I think, are using routine both to stave off despair. But they're also--one of the things that I noticed, and I'm curious about how this works as a way to think differently about maritime adventure fiction--is that--so we tend to think of routines as habits, repetition, they're static, it's all about just always doing the same thing and almost fending off any kind of surprise or novelty. But what comes through in *On the Beach* with characters who are planting gardens and building fences and just trying to maintain their environment, their very, very small, local environment, is that a lot of what, in everyday life, we might call routine--washing the dishes--it's actually repair. We're constantly restoring a world that otherwise would be turning into chaos into something stable. So the stability is not static. The stability exists only because of creative, thoughtful labor that has to look and say, Well, this is about to crack. And this is about to crack. And this is about to go down the tubes, and how do I keep it all together. And I have not really seen that perspective on routine reflected in the humanities scholarship on everyday life. It tends to be more justification of a certain--of the mental energy that gets freed up by routines, as though routines themselves don't require mental energy. And again, just speaking to our COVID context, I think we've all learned how difficult it is to stick to a routine and just how much--you know, never mind that the routines themselves are repairing other things, like, we need to be constantly working on ourselves to hold to a routine. And that to me is part of what connects to what you're saying about life onboard a ship, that the routines are in place so that when the extraordinary happens, people can revert to something, because, as we know, it's very hard to think in an emergency, to evoke an Elaine Scarry term. And you need to have prepared yourself for the expected

unexpected. But also everything that's going on on that ship is--I'm relating to this as I live out this pandemic in a 500 square foot apartment that I, kind of, though was supposed to be transitional and the transition's lasting a very long time--so to keep a small space in shipshape, it's an endless, loving labor. And I don't think it's the same thing every day. I think there's some things you do every day. But there are also things that pop up that you have to contend with. And so again, there's more narrative dynamism to something whose end product is stability and stasis than we would recognize. And I see that as something a narrative can tell us about, because one thing that narratives do is almost like accordions, they can take something that's been very compacted, like, "Oh, these people just live in a suburb and nothing really happens," and the accordion can open and you can see all the things that have to happen to create that aura of nothing happening.

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Margaret Cohen 14:25

Repair is an incredibly helpful concept, I think, and it certainly--it speaks to so much of the work on-ship which is just preserving, you know, wood and hemp from the damage of this incredibly hostile environment. So, you know, maybe one thing that resonates from COVID and what we--how learning about everyday life, that also for me does resonate with the the shipboard work is that our environment is hostile. It's like the ocean. It's got endless possibilities maybe, but it's also ready to destroy us. And that work of repair is really critical for us to just survive from day to day. And maybe I could use this to pivot to, I think, something that was running through the talk which you didn't bring out, but it's there: the heroic existentialist notion of being as defined by being towards the horizon of death, because I think of the ocean as this very grand-, kind of, scale phenomenon. And I think of the existentialists as sort of operating in this grandeur about our actions. And I wonder if the novel and your talk speaks to the idea of existence as being defined in this being towards death, and really challenges that in a very vigorous way.

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Sharon Marcus 15:51

Existentialism was on my mind when I was rereading the novel and thinking about writing more extensively about it. It's published in 1957, so it's definitely a moment when existentialism was on everyone's mind. I mean, you can have a musical like *Funny Face*, where they're evoking existential--you know, a cliché parody of existentialism. So, I think it's safe to say that Nevil Shute was probably aware of some kind of existentialism-lite, at the very least, and possibly had even read Camus or some major Sartre texts. And so I talked quite a bit in a lecture about *On the Beach* being a middlebrow book. It's commercial fiction. Shute started life as an engineer. He had a brother he lost, I think, in World War One, who he always referred to as the real artist. So he wasn't one of these, sort of, aggressively proud middlebrow authors, like, "I don't go in for that high art stuff."

He just felt he couldn't do the high art, but there was something to be said for what he could do. And he was fairly modest about the limits of his abilities. But he was also a very popular author. *On the Beach* sold 3 million copies within a few years. But he wrote many other novels that in his day were very high-selling, I think, like, call it Commonwealth fiction. He emigrated to Australia from England, so he was a very popular Australian author. And, even in Australia, I think he was not one of the literati. And he's not part of their high art canon. But he, he helped to define also Australia in literature as sometimes only an immigrant can do. And I think that he is offering a more anti-heroic version of the existential drama around death. I don't know that it is as pointed as a critique. But I think that where existentialism says, you know, everyone should assume their death and, like, live each moment as though you're going to die, and, given death, you can only find meaning by creating it yourself, refusing the transcendence of religion, but there is a very--there is a transcendence of the subject. I think Shute is saying like, "yeah, sure, why not? If you can do that, but most people can't, and won't, and don't." And, on the one hand, because the book is about nuclear apocalypse, there is--you know, the war isn't started by people in Australia who can't face up to reality. But I do think that part of what he's saying is people's inability to really think through the consequences of nuclear weapons and people's inability to really understand for themselves--"I am going to die. My life is finite."--is part of what produced nuclear war. If people were more able to really take in their own deaths, if there had been more of a mass protest about the proliferation of nuclear weapons--that is, I think, a powerfully understated way of being a, quote unquote, message of the book, and he thought of it as a book with a message. I value this novel as a literary experiment in having people facing death in ways that are really unusual, but therefore very representative. So everyone's going to die. The way he has it set up, no one is going to survive. So, in some ways, it's unrealistic because in life, we don't all die at the same time and the differences between those of us who are, like, immediately dying, and those of us who assume we're going to live for a lot longer end up being really important in every individual's experience of their own death or of a friend or family member's death. But what happens instead is the sheer commonality of death, which is a really important aspect of it, is built into the plot. And what he ends up suggesting seems to me not at all the existentialist way, which is people are just--I feel like I repeated this a few times in the talk, because it's repeated in the novel--people just keep doing what they've always done. The imminence of death does not make most of them engage in in this kind of existentialist assumption of their own mortality. But rather than only criticize their denial, as, for example, contributing to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, I think he has a certain, I'm going to call it, very humane acceptance of it. And I found that very instructive, because it is really--now I'll get a little more personal, but it's really difficult--I think a lot of people, when they're dying, do not want to recognize that they're dying, and that's very important to them. And it's very hard for the people around them. It is one thing I learned living with someone who had cancer twice, and so we had to talk about it

to all our friends and family members is--people have a lot of equanimity about other people's deaths, and almost no equanimity about their own. And I don't mean that in a critical way, it's just--well, maybe I'm slightly critical of it, because I could have done without some of the things I had to hear people say. But it's just how we are. And so I think that it's very difficult to say that someone refusing to face reality is okay. I think that there's, you know, there's almost nothing that--anybody who values truth, and realism--I mean, maybe, maybe if I were somebody who is more invested in fantasy, whether it's in literature or in life, I would be saying something different. But I certainly found it hard to accept how difficult it was for my partner to just accept what was happening. She never really did, in my opinion, at least not around--and I think that part of what I had to learn, was to accept her lack of acceptance. And to accept that all that mattered to her was till the last possible moment to hold out the hope that she would be cured, that she would live a little bit longer, and then there'd be some other treatment that might work. And the less and less likely that became, the more intense she became on thinking that. And some of the ways also that she shut out what was happening was just as--this is to return to what we were saying earlier--was to make these plans, to make plans about what she was writing, to make plans about what she was doing with her nursing program--which she eventually had to stop doing, because her health didn't allow her to do it anymore. So I feel like the existential narrative is, like, we have all got to face our deaths. And I think that the Shute narrative is: we are not all going to face our deaths. And is there a way to accept that? And build--let's call it, an everyday quotidian philosophy around that.

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Margaret Cohen 23:51

It strikes me as a very fruitful, kind of, line of thought. I feel torn. I kind of want to talk a little bit more about *On the Beach*. I want to make sure I ask you about other current projects and share with our audience something of your career, and then to follow up on this. So I was surprised in the question thread that nothing about climate fiction came up. Because it seems to me that the Shute approach to trying to make people aware of this impending catastrophe, and try to rouse them to action, really resonates with some of the ways in which people are approaching climate change. Today, I was just reading *The Overstory*, for example, which I think would be, you know, a novel about trying to, kind of, raise collective consciousness about our need to address climate change. And I wonder if the fact that Shute's strategy didn't work, in terms of sensitizing people to nuclear warfare, if that suggests that maybe we need other strategies to address climate change, and--I guess, I mean, just to cut to the chase, what can literature or narrative bring to our current climate crisis?

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Sharon Marcus 25:03

So, first of all, I would not assume that *On the Beach* didn't sensitize people. It was one of the most-read books about nuclear war. And I think the everydayness of it really brought things home to people, that this, this could happen, and this is what it would look like now. The ordinariness makes it hard to distance yourself from it. So I think that that's something to think about in terms of climate fiction. But I have to say that seeing--living through a period where people are told something as simple as, wearing a mask would reduce your chance and the chance of others of getting a disease that for many people is deadly, not just unpleasant, or it can lead to chronic illness, and people don't want to wear a mask--we would think that narrative could help people imagine the consequences of our individual and collective actions. And it can. But people's ability to then apply that in our actual lives in even the simplest ways is so limited, that I think the real question here is not so much about "what would happen in the fiction?" It's, "when does fiction get people to change, not just their minds, but their behaviors?" Can we look at examples in the past, where fiction actually got people to change their behavior? And is there anything we can learn from that, that we could apply to climate fiction? But I'm inclined to think that, at this point in our cultural lives, if anything can get people to act differently, it's not going to be only a text, it's going to have to involve visuals, sound, it's going to be short, not long, it's going to have to be able to go viral. It's not going to be a novel.

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Margaret Cohen 27:04

Well, let me use your title of your talk to pivot to, I think, what's an abiding interest in your career and ask you about that: reading (as if for death). Reading is just--it's a thread throughout a lot of your work. And I wonder if you have, like, a kind of scene of reading that that you associate with your biography, or, you know, something that kind of got you interested in reading?

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Sharon Marcus 27:28

I started reading very early. I had parents who were very invested in my intelligence, I think I would say, which, as a girl, I think was a great boon. Probably uncommon for--if I think back to my friends and their parents. So my mother got me reading early. Books were everywhere. My father was a kind of obsessive collector of mostly paperbacks, so the house was overloaded with books and I--they were grown-up things that I was maybe not always supposed to touch the grown-up books. So that was fascinating, because they were forbidden fruit. And I was taken to the library a lot. I've never really thought about this before, but if I were to think of a sort of primal reading situation, rather than a specific book or a specific scene, and how it anticipates how I've spent my life, it would be just being let loose in a relatively small public library. Both the children's section which was--it was a two story library, kind of a very, like, 50s, 60s buildings, so very horizontal. I was

allowed to pretty much do whatever I wanted in there. And I really liked looking at all the different sections. And I think there was something about a library that was small enough--it was the antithesis of a university library. I mean, it wasn't organized exactly according to the Dewey Decimal System, because there was--the recent books were their own thing, the large print books, which I found really fascinating, were their own thing. I think you could basically see the entire classification system on one floor, and I really liked wandering around. And I think that that has kind of characterized me. I mean, I just feel so lucky that we can do this in academia, that, even as I've always been very firmly situated in 19th century French and British culture, with a real interest in the novel and a real interest in gender and sexuality, I have this sense of being allowed to go anywhere, and I think it's from that library, where I could in, you know, two feet, go from books about movies to books about elephants.

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Margaret Cohen 29:48

Is Public Books your library for--?

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Sharon Marcus 29:51

That's a nice way to think about it. So, just for context, Public Books is an online magazine of arts and ideas that I co-founded with anthropologist Cate Zaloom of NYU in 2012. And, when we started it, I think what was primarily on our minds was that newspapers were starting to devote less and less space to book reviewing, that the main reviews, the main newspaper reviews, were less and less interested in reviewing academic books, or allowing academics to review anything, academic or non-academic books. And that some of the publications that did give academics more of a space to roam freely and to talk about what's being published in the moment, were very conservative. I commuted to and from Columbia University, and the subway platform had a newsstand, and given that it was the Columbia University station, there were always a lot of copies of the New York Review of Books. And if I wanted to make sure that I'd be kind of annoyed for at least two or three stops, I knew I could always go look at the cover of The New York Review of Books and be like, oh, everything is, like, a man writing about a man. And, oh, they let that one woman write about a man. I mean, and this is, like, you know, in 2010. It just felt so backward. And even some of the more exciting, newer publications would have a very limited set of authors writing for them. And so we felt there were a lot of academics who could write for a larger public and about broader topics than were being given outlets. And so we thought of Public Books as a place where people from outside the academy could go and read essays that felt like being in school again. I feel like what happens with Public Books is academics read the essays, and they're like, "Oh, that was so great, it was so breezy. It was like reading something in the New Yorker"--which it rarely is, but it feels more open

and free-flowing to them. And people who are not in the academy go into the essays and they feel like, "Oh, that was so intense. That was a real intellectual workout." And that's exactly what we wanted to have happen. We saw it as a way to help give people a chance to write for a broader public for the first time, because we offered a lot--I'm speaking in the past tense, because I actually stepped down as editor-in-chief this year to be able to focus on other things. But all of what I'm saying continues to be true for the new editors. It--we're very editorially active at public books, so we don't--I think some of these other places, they want you to know how to do this kind of writing if you're going to write for them. And that's understandable, but it does naturally limit who can publish with them, whereas we saw ourselves as working with people, going through many drafts, having a real editorial back and forth, but not just telling people, "make it more lively" or "make it..." But really showing them how to do it and going through several drafts. And I think we have brought a lot of people into this kind of writing who, not only had never done it before, but would not have felt that they could take that leap on their own even if they wanted to, and that that was great, and I think there are a lot more publications like Public Books now. It was something that a lot of--it was one of these things where several, like at almost exactly the same moment, several things sprouted up, like The Conversation, Aeon, LARB, Public Books, that were kind of similar, and it's great. Also taking advantage of the relative rapidity and lower costs of being online. Everybody thinks that when you publish online, that they can send you their piece, and it will be up the next week. Not true. And it's also not cheap. You have to maintain a website, and websites don't just create themselves. But it's definitely easier than having a print edition that you have to get out in a very different way, and with mailing costs and things like that. So I think that it is kind of a golden age right now of intellectual magazines, kind of like the 50s, and it's wonderful to have been part of that.

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Margaret Cohen 34:11

Yeah, Public Books has really been amazing to watch since 2012, when you started it and, you know, now it's just like a reference. It's got a real authority in the field, which is, I think, a tribute to what you built. Well, I want to make sure that we talk about a book which was particularly important for me, which was *Between Women*. I think it just showed me how much I had censored myself as a reader throughout my whole life from the time I read *Little Women*, you know, to not notice the relationships among women as so powerful in fiction that I love to read about women's lives, daily lives, you know, from Jane Austen on through Virginia Woolf. And it was just like, you know, the scales fell from my eyes and I thought, oh my gosh, I just sort of ignored it because it, sort of, seemed not contributing to the main, you know, biographical arc of the heroine finding her partner or her husband and, you know, getting married and establishing herself. I wonder if you could pick a novel which you would recommend to someone listening to this podcast, that would be a kind

of a great example for connecting to *Between Women*,

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Sharon Marcus 35:25

I'm gonna try and come up with two, one, sort of, like a usual suspect one and one that is more obscure. One of the things I discovered when I was thinking about the chapter in *Between Women* that's about the marriage plot was that, although a lot of the criticism that was closest to my heart focused on the marginalization of relationships between women, that in fact, those relationships aren't marginalized. I mean, they're marginalized in the sense that it's very hard to find a classic 19th century realist novel that's, that's read widely where the two women end up being the couple. But, once we set that aside as our standard of what it would mean for there to be intimacy--because I don't think that's a very realistic standard, it would require that every 19th century novel basically be a lesbian romance, and, you know, to this day, when we have many more out lesbians than there were in the 19th century, there's still not that many novels that have a lesbian romance at their center. But if instead we focus on friendship on its own terms, rather than friendship as failing to turn into a romantic sexual couple, the female friends were everywhere. A classic example would be *Jane Eyre*. And sometimes it--there's a bit of blurring between female friendship and certain kinds of extended familial relationships. But *Jane* really only resolves her romance plot with Rochester when she acquires two female cousins. So, in the plot, everybody always focuses on how St. John Rivers proposes to her and she turns him down. But the strength that she gets from having friendships with his sisters is very, very important to her. And even though they kind of like to see her marry him, they're also understanding of the fact that this isn't what will satisfy her and having--not just having the inheritance that she gets by knowing them, but the friendship with them, is, it's both circumstantially and coincidentally very important. So it turns out, when you go back and you read these classic 19th century courtship plots, it's almost always the case that female heroine who ends up happily married has a female friend. Sometimes it's stronger, like the female friend plays a pivotal role in the friendship, but it's really almost always the case. And so *Jane Eyre* is an example of where, it would be very easy to not see that because the friendships are often good friendships precisely because they lack the *Sturm und Drang* of the romance. And so it's easy to overlook that they're there and that they're providing a kind of foundation. A novel that I think deserves to be read more that also illustrates this is Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*, 1830s novel. And it is--it's a novel actually about contagion and plague and medicine. But it is also a novel about the complicated relationship between two sisters and a third woman who plays an important role in their plot. And, not surprisingly, many of these novels are by women. Men are much less interested in relationships between women than women are. I would also say that canonical novels tend to play a--by which, I guess, we could rephrase as, the novels that the culture at large, particularly in the 1950s and 60s, when our canon was being formed in

the academy, they tend to be much more taken up with novels that foreground female rivalry, because people are very invested in the idea that women are at odds with each other and competing over men, because it maintains the notion that men are the bearers of value. And so, you know, novels like *Portrait of a Lady*--I'll try to avoid a spoiler here, because it might be that people don't know how that turns out--but there's a female friendship that turns out to be not at all friendly, right? It's a pure manipulation. That said, Isabel Archer is also very good friends with Henrietta Stackpole. And though James, no real friend to the ladies, I don't think, at the end of the day, is very scathing about Henrietta Stackpole's feminism, and he makes fun of her, but it is pretty clear that, sort of, the only shot that Isabel Archer has at a happy conclusion to her romance plot is going to come from her knowing and being connected to Henrietta Stackpole. But I do think that some of our most famous novels set themselves apart from the norm by showing women being somewhat at odds with each other. So in *Emma*, for example, I think Jane Austen is--who is a satirist at heart, is sardonic about some of the chestnuts about female friendship and Emma can really only realize her friendship plot if she separates herself from the female friend that she has. And I think that's a real thread in literature, but I see it as the aberration, not the norm. It just looks like the norm because of how we form our canons.

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Margaret Cohen 40:45

Okay, I'm going to go look at Harriet Martineau. I don't know that novel.

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Sharon Marcus 40:49

It's very long, but it's really good.

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Margaret Cohen 40:52

Well, I'm looking for long novels. I find it's a good way to get through COVID and not-- like to read a novel before bed instead of checking on my phone, whether it's the COVID statistics or, last night and this morning, you know, how many votes there are outstanding in Pennsylvania and where we are, is, is really therapeutic.

S

Sharon Marcus 41:16

If people are looking for recommendations of novels to read I'm just going to say that one of my great discoveries during my pandemic reading has been Eva Ibbotson. I-B-B-O-T-S-O-N. Imagine Barbara Kim crossed with P. G. Wodehouse with just a little sprinkling of fairy tale dust. And you've got Eva Ibbotson novels--a Viennese refugee who, in real life,

who made it to England, I assume, as part of some kind of Kindertransport. She was from a, at least, partially Jewish family and then became a real British writer, but she often evokes Russia and Austria, sort of, between the wars or after the Bolshevik Revolution. And she's really interested in refugees and emigres and outcasts, but she has such a light touch, and it's just so--it's perfect. It, like, flows really easily, really helps you forget all the stuff that's happening for a brief moment. But it's not pure escapism, and she's really got a great eye for the vivid detail and looking at things just a little bit aslant. She's incapable of writing a cliched sentence, even though some of her topics are a little cliché, like romance. So if you want a balance between escapism and something really artful, I really recommend Eva Ibbotson.

M

Margaret Cohen 42:43

Thank you. You know, we're coming up to the top of the hour, to use NPR language, and we haven't yet talked about surface reading, and we haven't talked about Sarah Bernhardt and *The Drama of Celebrity*, but I'm just gonna maybe end in a personal way with one thing that I know about you, that I really appreciate, is that you, you are very interested in satire and humor. And I remember watching an Adam Sandler movie with you, in fact, at an academic conference, which seems so transgressive and at the same time very pleasurable, so I wonder if you've thought of working on humor.

S

Sharon Marcus 43:17

I've sometimes thought of teaching a class on humor, but of course, humor is very hard to analyze. I keep a shelf of books that I consider my stylistic beacons and easily 80% of them are humor like Nora Ephron. I mean, I'm not giving up any of my digits, but I might give that part of my left pinky, I'd have to talk to someone about which finger you need the most, to be able to write just one thing that was funny and fluid as what Nora Ephron wrote. I mean, there are other people on that shelf, Joan Didion is on that shelf. I love the writer, Gail Jones, who is actually quite funny, but she has a bleaker view of things. But I also think that the the humorous and the bleak often coincide. And I definitely think that it is much harder to be a comic author than to be a serious author. And, I would over all--and I don't think anyone who knows me would disagree--say that I'm a sort of pessimistic, realistic person, but I don't see my pessimism doesn't make me want to stop living or stop trying. Like look, things aren't so great. Maybe, maybe it's a cultural thing. But I, I just always prefer the the light and the bouyant and the funny. So I'll take Ella Fitzgerald over Billie Holiday any day and I know that many people would disagree with me both temperamentally and even from the point of view of musicality by just don't care, like Ella Fitzgerald, to achieve that kind of lightness--everything she sings sounds kind of fun and happy and I don't think it's because she herself was...I've read a lot about her, she wasn't a

person who had an easy, fun life or who didn't look at the full range of what's going on in the world—but to be able to contend with the grim realities that surround us and still find some humor and lightness, and it seems to me the greatest skill and achievement, whether in art or life.

M Margaret Cohen 45:24

I think that that is a path forward, if not hope. Anyway. It's just been really, really great to talk to you. I can't wait to see you in person one of these days. I'm so sorry, we haven't been able to welcome you to Stanford.

S Sharon Marcus 45:40

Well, thank you for doing this. And thank you for making this whole event feel as real and connected as possible right now.

C Casey Wayne Patterson 46:00

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 Sharon Marcus for her generosity and agreeing to this conversation. Thanks also 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.