

**Casey Wayne Patterson:** [00:00:00] Welcome and thanks for joining us in another installment of this Center for the Study of the Novel's podcast cafe. In this episode, our guest hosts Ben Libman and Mitch Therieau are joined by the acclaimed writer Percival Everett. Percival Everett is a distinguished professor of English at the University of Southern California and visited the center on May 13th 2022 to deliver a reading at our conference, addressing the turn against fictionality. This conversation was recorded directly before that reading. 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 [00:01:00] chat among ourselves.

**Ben Libman:** Hello everyone. Welcome to the CSN podcast. We have a very special episode today. My name is Ben Libman. I'm a PhD candidate in English here at Stanford.

**Mitch Therieau:** And I'm Mitch Therieau. I am also a PhD candidate here at Stanford in modern thought and literature, and I'm delighted to be here. Ben Libman: We're joined today by a novelist, a poet, a children's book writer, a critic and a painter, and, and much else besides. He's written something like 30 books as far as I'm aware. And most of those have been novels, and his name is Percival Everett. Percival, thank you so much for joining us.

**Percival Everett:** Thank you for having me.

**Ben Libman:** So we're convening today on the occasion of a conference that the CSN is putting on and at, which you'll be reading later today, and the, the theme of that conference is the turn against fictionality often [00:02:00] this turn against fictionality, as I see it sort of comes in the form of a desire to collapse author into narrator or to collapse a narrated event into supposed real event or to collapse, say, beliefs or ideas or opinions stated within the novel into the beliefs, ideas, and opinions. The novelist who wrote them, whether in the mouth of a character or in the kind of disembodied voice of a narrator. I guess my first question to you would be, what comes to your mind when you think of the turn against fictionality and how might it come to bear on your work and your career? .

**Percival Everett:** Well, the first thing that occurs to me is a mantra that you hear in film. It's one that betrays an inability of a public to read fiction and come away with meaning. And that is based on a true story. It's used to sell movies, denying a couple of things. One is that any story is true. And the [00:03:00] other is that somehow authenticity resides in factual. And so that conflation of truth and authenticity is at once dangerous but also misguided. And I think incapacitates an audience.

**Mitch Therieau:** So kind of along similar lines, I mean, Abstraction is kind of a central term in the talk that you'll be giving, and I'd be really curious to just hear how you understand this term. I mean, it seems like it's this very flexible, labile term that has so many resonances and connotations in different registers. I'm just kind of just curious to hear how you are understanding this term and, and also its role in your work.

**Percival Everett:** Well, yes, I mean, basically, one can approach abstract- the notion of abstraction, one by saying that there is something that's represented in the world and that you step by step abstract that idea/ image until it's not recognizable as that thing that it was.

The other is the [00:04:00] abstract expressionist model that you've suggested that is that it's merely an expression of feeling. Obviously it can't be pure idea because idea like language is

based on representation of something in the world. The problem I have with either notion is it, it assumes something called realism.

and this is something that I've only come to recently in my own thinking though. It seems pretty pedestrian once I thought of. And that is, there is no such thing as realistic representation. Even when we look at things in the real world, we see in two dimensions, we can't help but do that because all we see a surfaces and it's our minds that change things to three dimensions.

which is why we can trick the eye or the mind with three dimensions on film. That said, this privileging of the idea of mimesis is what drives my interest in abstraction. [00:05:00] We're already starting with abstract thinking, abstract representation. So we're doing something else. And it's not addressing reality.

It's addressing this notion we have of what reality looks like. in my work, because the constituent parts of my medium are representational: words, I really believe that I should be able to make an abstract novel. Unfortunately, I can't say what that looks like. I can't say what it would sound like. I have no idea if I can even recognize it if I make it.

But being mentally ill, I continue to try.

**Mitch Therieau:** Is there, I mean, it's so interesting the way that you put that and it occurs to me, this error of thinking that there is such a thing as, as realism that that, you know, mimetic representation is possible in some way. You know, that's like this, this analytical mistake.

But I mean, is there a way in which a writer or an artist or someone whose business it is to create [00:06:00] representations if they kind of are laboring under this illusion, do they miss out somehow on not seeing that, that this is impossible. Is there a way that this delusion can kind of tamper with one's artistic project?

**Percival Everett:** Certainly can. The idea that one might take, say, a conversation from real life, a recording and simply transcribe it and have it serve as dialogue in a story or a novel, would yield a really bad novel.

**Ben Libman:** I think I've read that novel,

**Mitch Therieau:** the Warhol novel, right?

**Percival Everett:** Yeah. And of course the job of the fiction writer, of the novelists is to create an illusion of real speech.

It is not real speech. And, and conversely, if we were to memorize. , the best dialogue you've read, and then we were to go sit on a bus and act it out to each other. People around us would think we were nuts. , because it's not real. It does it, in fact, it, it only sounds real and it only sounds real within context.

**Ben Libman:** But so is the, is the [00:07:00] abstraction you're after in some sense, more real than these realist attempts?

**Percival Everett:** So you're asking me if I know what I'm doing? And I do not. All I know is I think I should be able to do it.

**Ben Libman:** So it's, I mean, it's like I've read you in in other interviews, talk about how you look for the form that makes the most sense given what it is you want to write.

And not all forms are going to be able to sort of go the distance. And that's certainly like reading many of your books. Each of them has a kind of different generic approach to suit a different story. Do you think that this problem of abstraction is a problem of the same kind? That is you have to simply find the right form for it?

Or is it even a problem that throws form. Into question. I

**Percival Everett:** wish I could answer that. Certainly it is the case for me that I've thought on several occasions that I had achieved a step toward what it is I want to make, only to step back and realize I've failed. Now that's not uninteresting to me and I, in whatever perverse [00:08:00] way, enjoy that failure, but it doesn't get many closer.

My goal. In fact, in some ways it causes me to move in my thinking away from it, away from understanding it. When I think of my works, perhaps the one that's the most naturalistic, and I always, I use that in quotation marks. Or realistic, is the one that seems to me to have gotten closest to that abstract nature.

Though I can't say why I believe. I have a novel the water Cure, which I believe at least someone mentioned it in this way. And I was trying to attack the fourth wall, trying to attack that fourth wall only to realize that, that all that does is move the wall back . And so I didn't meet with much success there.

**Ben Libman:** So there is no outside in that sense.

**Percival Everett:** No, uh, you know, it's this, well, there's no ceiling. We find .

**Ben Libman:** Well, I, I guess it's just on these same lines, given that you do [00:09:00] paint, and I've seen a few that seemed relatively what might be called abstract, although there's certain figural elements within them. Could you not simply go there and say, well, because I work in this medium of language, I could just abscond into this other artistic medium of mine, uh, where abstraction might be more possible?

Or is that cheating? And would it be cheating to write a novel? that included visual elements like that within it?

**Percival Everett:** Yes, it would be cheating . Also I wouldn't address what I, what I want to do and that, and that is to take, my art that incorporate s that relies on representation and take it to that abstract place.

I'm not sure whether abstract or non representational or better words, I don't like non representational because I don't like describing anything negatively.

**Ben Libman:** Right. Yeah.

**Percival Everett:** which I'm always sort of amazed by the term non-fiction and really, what is that? And so they're not the same thing.

They inform each other when I go to work and for the first time I just had a show of [00:10:00]paintings of works that were based on my last novel *The Trees*. They are abstract until you know what they are, and I'm fascinated by that because then they no longer are abstract. . So what does it mean to say that they are abstract in the first place?

**Mitch Therieau:** Hmm, right. Abstraction as like something that a perception unfolds over time, since we're talking about, you know, the relationship between visual art and your writing. I mean, the, the place that my mind goes to is so much blue, and I guess I found myself wondering if some of these questions about, you know, non representational or figurality.

If those questions were kind of in the swirl of your thinking as you were, as you were writing that book in particular?

**Percival Everett:** I have to admit to something that. , we in my house, call work *Amnesia* . Once, once I'm done with a novel, I don't remember it. And so, um, I vaguely recall working on this book. Often people will ask me about particular scenes or characters and I [00:11:00] look at them dumbly, not dishonestly, but dumbly and, and don't remember that that event occurred.

I remember the painting and the desire of the artist in the book to destroy it before anyone could see it. . And that's a notion that I constantly have because I tenaciously guard my process. And weirdly, I see that process as a part of the creation of the work. So I guess I was thinking about my own relationship to visual art when I was.

and to that notion of abstraction, but also again, trying to work through my understanding of it by addressing my own desire to protect myself, I don't know if that makes sense to you.

**Mitch Therieau:** Well, it certainly makes sense because, I mean, there's a way in which the abstract expressionist model of abstraction is kind of one of these, you know, not as satisfying models of abstraction in your way of thinking about it.

And so on my reading that book kind of invites the reader down that [00:12:00] interpretation of the protagonist art to a certain degree. Mm-hmm. like, oh, these are all of these formative and traumatic experiences in these different timelines, and, oh, of course these are all going to be expressed finally in this one canvas that sums everything up. But the process of translation that, you know, those emotions would have to undergo in that model is not available to us in the narrative. And so there's a almost like a, like a ruse character, like a delightful misdirection or the the reader thinks that they know what kind of abstraction is going on, that it ends up not being that kind of abstraction that is actually taking place.

**Percival Everett:** I'm sure I'll take credit for that. ,

**Ben Libman:** appreciate that. Uh, I, I would really love to ask you about your position, uh, as a writer who's also institutionalized within a university.

**Percival Everett:** I'm glad you added in a university

**Ben Libman:** For now it's just the university. You know, I, it might be helpful for me to kind of bring up this this anecdote. When I was an [00:13:00] undergrad, I took a seminar that was co-taught by a fairly famous novelist who was, you know, also fairly well decorated. And he began the first session by telling us an anecdote whether it's true or not.

I'm, I'm unsure, about Vladimir Nabokov and his candidacy for being brought into the department of English at Harvard. And apparently so the story goes when the committee was assessing his dossier, roman Jacobson at some point stood up and said, would we hire the elephant to run the zoo? And apparently that was the winning argument.

And he didn't get hired at Harvard. Mm-hmm. , although of course he worked at Cornell very famously. And the novelist who taught my class and was telling this story sort of used it as an occasion to register his discomfort, I guess, with his position in that moment. You know, being in a kind of literary environment where we were teaching literature.

and yet also being kind of hired in the first [00:14:00] place because of his role as a major novelist. I wonder if you feel fundamental tension in your existence as both kind of academic, broadly speaking, and also a novelist and how that tension might kind of play out in your work or your process.

**Percival Everett:** No.

**Ben Libman:** you don't at all?

**Percival Everett:** No, I'm, I'm just a cowboy.

**Ben Libman:** You're just a cowboy.

**Percival Everett:** Yeah, and you sit on the top of the horse and you ride. None of this is hard. Universities are great. I get paid to hang out with smart young people, , and, that's what it comes to. We get to talk about things that I don't understand. I'm only interested in the world because I'm interested in things that I don't understand.

I mean, I suppose if I set, I'm out thinking long enough about it, I could just, like any person, I could work myself up into, into a lather and get confused and , you know, and be institutionalized, as you said. but no, it's not difficult.

**Ben Libman:** That's good. I'm glad to hear that, I wouldn't want you to have any undue difficulties because of that position.

**Percival Everett:** Well, now that [00:15:00] you've mentioned it, .

**Ben Libman:** But it's, it's interesting to me at, at least, you know, to read something like Cliff or to read, you know, those earlier moments in erasure when, when Monk is going to the nouveau roman Society conference and being accosted by the post-structuralists. You know, I, I guess I wonder where that world and that kind of vocabulary registers with you know, where does it sit in your kind of, uh, mental cosmology?

**Percival Everett:** Well, I, I have a good bullshit detector, and I'd, you know, I would never lie, and there's plenty of that to be found in academia. There's plenty of lip service paid to jargon.

There's plenty of jargon that is just jargon and there's plenty of jargon to be decoded, to find something interesting. There's a lot of carving out space for career. I don't begrudge anyone that, though it might bore me to tears, but I suppose if I worked in an advertising agency, somebody would be working on a campaign for deodorant that I didn't like.

You know, one that involves aluminum, them that kills people, ,

**Ben Libman:** that makes sense. , [00:16:00]

**Mitch Therieau:** there's no kind of real, organic linkage from what we were just talking about to this question, but as we were talking about earlier, I mean, your work makes use of elements from so many different genres and I feel like this is one of the kind of ur- narratives about recent literature that, you know, genres are these kind of mobile things that people kind of, uh, something about it's in the air, but it's also something that you've been doing for longer than people have been talking about it.

So, you know, just thinking about the elements of detective procedural and Western, and thriller and speculative elements, just like what role did to, to kind of formulate it, I guess similarly to how Ben formulated his last question, like, what role do these genres have in your artistic cosmology and what do they help you?

Oh, first of all, anytime somebody does something more than twice, it's a genre . The idea that, [00:17:00] that that literary fiction is described as one that does not fit into a genre is kind of strange. Though I can't give you the, the necessary and sufficient conditions to make that claim it's not formulaic in that way. But as soon as I say it's not formulaic in that way, I've given you a criterion. I have never made a study of, in fact, I can't read detective fiction. I've never been able to read it. I'm not drawn to it. But all of us have seen all of the tropes all around us, and so we know them, and that's available to me as a writer to exploit in the same way that humor would be.

You know, it's part of the trap of fiction. There are tricks, and that's how, and that's how magicians work. Nobody believes that that ace really turned into a king: it's that you can't see how it becomes a king.

**Ben Libman:** It's very resonant with the, talk about hocus pocus that's going on right now. , [00:18:00]do you, do you read other so called genre fictions. Like you're, you're a cowboy. Do you read westerns or watch westerns?

**Percival Everett:** I teach a course on the American Western. And I read, I do not read them, but I did read 150 of them because I wrote a parody of the Western. And so I read a lot and watched a lot, mainly because I wanted to create a language of the Western that didn't exist.

In order to do that, I had to learn it and then, and then own it, and then change it.

**Mitch Therieau:** Have you returned to Western since, or did you exhaust westerns in your media consumption diet after doing that?

**Percival Everett:** Uh, never say never , but I dunno. We'll see. Now you've put this in my head.

**Ben Libman:** I'm curious about, more broadly, I would love to hear, just out of curiosity, who the writers are that you read in order to then write, you know, who kind of gets your juices flowing.

**Percival Everett:** Well, one of my heroes is JL Austin, and not just his work on sense [00:19:00] data, sense data theory and not, and not how to do things with words, which is about performative language and elocutionary acts and all that stuff. It's more his essays like- which I will reference tonight- plea for excuses, or he gives a great argument about the difference between a mistake and an accident

And that's in a footnote.

**Ben Libman:** what is the difference?

**Percival Everett:** Oh, it's a long story, . That's a great story. And I love Bertrand Russel. , and I love Bertrand Russell in a fairly narrow way. I've always had this, this dream and desire to teach Principia Mathematica as a literary text, even though there's not a single sentence.

I think it's a beautiful work of literary logic, if you will.

**Ben Libman:** Do you love the Russell who disliked the philosophical investigations?

**Percival Everett:** I agree with the Russell who didn't like them . So, the philosophical investigations is fantastic, and you have to put another book on top of it, or we'll just float to the ceiling and, and it will give you a headache every time you open it.

[00:20:00] It's a remarkable document about not doing what you preach. But there are some great ideas and, and, and ones that I return to frequently, not the least of which is the Beatle in the box.

**Ben Libman:** Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. . So I mean, I would note from that answer that the writers who get you writing, at least the ones that you mentioned are not novelists.

**Percival Everett:** Well, it's not, nah, well, I mentioned those because one of my interviewers steered me that way.

**Ben Libman:** I apologize.

**Percival Everett:** One of the funniest novels I've ever read is, and I read it every year, is The Way of All Flesh by Samuel Butler. Um, no one talks about it. Uh, everyone talks about his novel -not everyone , six people- talk about his novel, Erewon , but I love the Way of All Flesh. I also, love the work of Chester Himes who is, not read enough, and when he is read, it's his genre work. The detective stuff that's talked about, but his. I only know of three of them, three literary novels and one posthumously published novel called Plan B that I think are remarkable.[00:21:00]

**Ben Libman:** When you think through these philosophical ideas that you're reading or that you've read, think through Wittgenstein, think through Russell. Are you finding a way to incorporate something like philosophical propositions into your novel, or is that a kind of, are those two things anathema? .

**Percival Everett:** I don't know exactly how it's happening.

I do know that there are certain basically logical questions that drive my interest in identity. Not the least of which being the remarkable understanding that A equals A is not the same as A *is* A and that gives me a headache, and that gets me working.

**Ben Libman:** Can you explain that a bit?

**Percival Everett:** No, I can't.

**Ben Libman:** Okay. I'll accept it though. Okay.

**Mitch Therieau:** It's a mystery to be pondered .

**Ben Libman:** That's right.

**Mitch Therieau:** We'd love to hear a little bit about what you're about to read.

**Percival Everett:** I have not decided. I have a problem with the idea of readings in general, and that is I wrote this down so it's available to people to read and, and I find it strange that [00:22:00] anyone wants to hear a writer read it out loud.

So I actually, given the the context of the conference, I, I think I will tell an instructive. Story and we'll see. And I can always fall back on a book sitting beside me. That's the comfort of having written a book. I can just say, oh, I'll just read this. But I have something in mind, which is always a frightening thing to hear me say.

See what happens.

**Ben Libman:** Well, Percival, thank you so much for being here with us and talking to us. Very much appreciate it.

**Percival Everett:** Thank you very much.

**Casey Wayne Patterson:** Thank you again for joining us in this episode of the Center for the Study of the Novels Podcast Cafe. We would also like to thank Percival Everett for his generosity in agreeing to this conversation. Thanks to our team at the Center for the Study of the novel to [00:23:00] Colleen Laurent and Maritza Colon for their operational support to our graduate coordinators, Allie Gamble, Alex Sherman, and Ido Keren to Casey Patterson for recording, editing 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.[00:24:00] [00:25:00] [00:26:00] [00:27:00] [00:28:00][00:29:00] [00:30:00] [00:31:00]