

Martin Puchner: You realize that for the last, I don't know, 3000 years, we have been living in the world of scribal schools....

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that looks backward to see into the future. Our idea is to assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events by looking at the books that shape the world we inherited. Today, the hosts are Elizabeth Ferry. Hello, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Ferry: Hi, John.

John Plotz: Noted anthropologist, Elizabeth Ferry, and me, John Plotz. Hello, me. And, we are joined today by Martin Puchner. Hello, Martin.

Martin Puchner: Thanks for having me.

John Plotz: Great to have you. And, you are, I will tell you, the Byron and Anita Wien Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. You're the editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, the author among many books of *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History and Civilization*, published by Penguin in 2017. Okay, so welcome, Martin, to our miniature sound insulated bar. Think of yourself as grabbing a tumbler of your favorite amber liquid, or maybe a carafe of your favorite amber liquid, and getting ready to banter. Okay?

Martin Puchner: I'm ready.

John Plotz: You feel banter ready? You look banter ready. You look banter-weight. Okay, so we're going to hear more about the specifics of your book, Martin, the *Written World*, in a few minutes, but I just want to start by noticing that this is, in effect ... That what your book does is, in effect, a meta version of what our podcast tries to do. That is, we try to isolate single books and understand how they resonate with the present world. But you actually go whole hog and you put our entire modern culture, as it were, under the shadow of books. You want to explore how the technology of writing developed over centuries and the ways that sometimes, without our even noticing or acknowledging it, its basic assumptions shape us. So, you have *meta* us and we appreciate that.

John Plotz: So, with the pleasant prospect of turning to hearing about your book shortly, Martin, we actually want to start today with Elizabeth talking about one of the oldest books out there. So, Elizabeth, turning over to you.

Elizabeth Ferry: Okay. Nice to meta you. I want to start by talking about one of the texts that Martin discusses in the earlier part of his book, which is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and I want to focus ... This is my contribution for the week. A particular translation, or actually it's known as a new rendering in English verse, by David Ferry. No relation. Just kidding. It's my dad. By my dad.

John Plotz: It's the law of the father.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's right. In a second, I'm going to read you just a few lines from it. One of the things I really appreciated about the book, *The Written World*, is the sense that it conveys of literature and writing and particular bundles of writing as contributing to a kind of transtemporal society of writing you could talk about. Maybe you could talk about it as a kind of fabric of writing. I think that my father's work, and particularly *Gilgamesh*, has been a really good example of that. I sometimes say to my father that he--in the same way in which you might find architectural salvage stores in hipster-y neighborhoods that have all kinds of little features from houses and stuff--that his specialty is poetic salvage.

Martin Puchner: I have to say, I love this rendering of your father's. I find it very moving that it's your father who did it. I would say, from my mind, it's much more than salvage, it's really complete renovation. A gut renovation of the Epic of Gilgamesh because it comes across in this version as such a readable, in some sense, familiar sound because of the iambic pentameter, so I think it's actually a great example of a complete renovation.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's great. I like the gut renovation idea. Yeah, and I think-

John Plotz: Though, I kind of want to put a footnote down to cut back to the question of sound, because one of the things I really like about what you do with the question of writing, Martin, is you make us think twice about the possibility of sonic or acoustic preservation, because things can be preserved in writing that are ... It's like the non-oral side of the language that gets saved. So, what it means to save the sound. I'm not saying you can't save the sound. You definitely can, but it is interesting because I think about writing as going to the far end of language, away from the sound.

Elizabeth Ferry: I wonder if meter would be an interesting bridge for that, right? Because, it's kind of encoded. Sound is encoded into the question of meter.

John Plotz: That's right, and I feel like there's a lot of Latin words that we know how to pronounce only because we have them in poems that tell us what the metrical rule was. It's a good point. Okay, there's so much to connect there to what your book is about, Martin, but maybe we can just pivot here and say, you know, you've written this amazing book, which there's so many things about it I would love to talk about. I'd love to talk about the stages of writing that you describe, because you have a really subtle argument that you lay out right at the beginning of this book, which is enormously accessible but also is arguing on a number of levels. And so, you have this argument where you take us through the different stages that you see writing having gone through to bring us into the modern age. I'd love to talk about that, but maybe there's also a direct connection to the Gilgamesh stuff that you want to...

Martin Puchner: Yeah, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for me, it's the beginning of my story. I tried to tell the story of literature really, which I understand is the intersection of oral storytelling and writing technologies. Since Mesopotamia is the place where the first writing system was developed, where that first crossing of oral storytelling and writing technologies happened, it makes sense that the first great written piece of literature in world literature came from that part of the world, came from Mesopotamia. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is that for me. What's so crucial about it is that from the beginning, it presents itself as a written text. That's very different from later epics like the Homeric epics that present themselves as being sung orally. The world of both Homeric epics is a world without writing with one small exception. It's really a very oral world, even though it's much later, but this much earlier text first epic, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, really is very clear about being written down, that this is a world that invented writing, that that's a great achievement of this culture. And so, really fully embraces writing in a way that's very exciting for me.

Elizabeth Ferry: I think you really get at that very inventively by telling the parallel story of how the writing was decoded in the 19th century and how that ...You know, it's sort of a trope that we have read in kids' books and so on, but the way in which you link it to these questions of the fundamental-ness of the written word, and of this as writing, is really effective, I think.

Martin Puchner: That story of the rediscovery really speaks to one feature that's so important, that writing endures, that it starts a sense of history where you can discover old texts and know that you, in some way, through writing, can speak to the future. That's very clear in one of the biggest fans of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the much later King Ashurbanipal, who finds these tablets and starts to read them and thinks of them, is so

amazed by the fact that they're so ancient "from before the Flood," he says. And then he also imagines that they will endure into the future, and they did, although they almost disappeared. They were discovered really by accident in the 19th century and deciphered. So really, it's a very atypical example, in some sense, that a piece of literature that was so important disappeared for 2000 years and then reappeared.

John Plotz: Martin, in that context, what's the significance of the fact that we have Gilgamesh in these two entirely different languages, that some of the stories are preserved in one language group and then others in a later language? Do we imagine that as telling a story about how dead languages can keep procreating even back in the early days?

Martin Puchner: Exactly, and the fact that the whole concept of a dead language was really an inadvertent byproduct of writing.

John Plotz: Of writing, yeah.

Martin Puchner: There were no dead languages before writing because if a language died, it died.

Elizabeth Ferry: There was no writing there to be called dead, right?

Martin Puchner: Exactly. What's interesting about the writing system, cuneiform writing, is that because it wasn't phonetic it could be used for different languages. That's what happened. There are these early Sumerian songs, the earliest layer of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and then the later Akkadian ones. They all used the same writing system.

John Plotz: How does that get to that question that we raised earlier, or that I was tugging on earlier about sound? So, you're saying that the sounds were not preserved?

Martin Puchner: That's right. That's the ... For me, the interesting part of the story is what happens when the alphabet emerges. The alphabet is, for us, it's such a familiar ... It's so clearly much easier than the writing system like the cuneiform system or other logographic systems where you have hundreds of signs. But, the alphabet was really a conceptual breakthrough, because all the earlier writing systems had a connection between the signs and concepts. What basically had to happen with the alphabet is that you had to sever writing from meaning. You would chop up words into meaningless sound entities and then recombine them. That's something that was first developed in Phoenicia, in today's Lebanon, and then was perfected in Greece.

The first fully sound poem, in a way, were the ones that were preserved in alphabetic languages.

Elizabeth Ferry: Although, it's interesting. It seems both potentially like a breakthrough in a progressive sense, but something is lost too, right? For instance ... And, it's not completely lost. We see this in Chinese, right, that there's different ... Same writing system, which is concept based writing system, and then people who would never be able to understand each other speaking face to face have this complete transparency through the written word.

Martin Puchner: Right. Now, in East Asia, my example for that is what's called Brush Talk, where the Japanese would send emissaries to China and they couldn't understand each other orally but they could speak by using the Chinese signs, because they both used these Chinese signs, so they could communicate that way, the way we might communicate with someone else whose language we don't speak but who uses the same Arabic numerals, right? We could negotiate with someone by writing numbers on a piece of paper because these numbers are not phonetically coded but abstract symbols.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right.

John Plotz: Except, nowadays, we do the same thing by talking into Google Translate and holding your cell phone up to each other.

Martin Puchner: True.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right.

John Plotz: So, I just want to say-

Elizabeth Ferry: Our own tablet, right?

John Plotz: It's true. It's the new kind of tablet. But, I guess, in terms of one of the other briefs of the podcast is to try to figure out where we are in 2019, where these writing technologies are. So, I hope we circle back to that question of the visibility of writing that you're describing, because in some ways one way to think about what's happening now is that we have all of this invisible writing that is all this code, which is written to tell our computers what to do. Somebody wrote it. It's in language, but then it becomes subterranean so that everything we're surrounded by has all sorts of writing in it, which is inaccessible to us.

John Plotz: Martin, can you talk a little bit more about the historical stages that you see?

Martin Puchner: Yes, and what was important for me is basically to de-familiarize our conception of how literature is produced, namely by professional authors who invent new stories, original stories, and then bring these stories to a mass audience or an audience through print or other methods of replication. What's so striking is that for the first 2000, 3000 years in the story of literature, it's a very different form. There aren't really authors. There are scribes and scribes don't invent stories, they collect them, and arrange them, and preserve them, and collate them, and frame them-

Elizabeth Ferry: Curate them.

Martin Puchner: Accumulate them. They are producing these story bundles or text bundles like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the Hebrew Bible or later story collections like the *Arabian Nights* and others.

Elizabeth Ferry: Or famous anthologies like the Norton Anthology, for instance, right?

John Plotz: It's true.

Martin Puchner: It's true.

John Plotz: But also famous anthologies like the Bible too, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Right, yeah.

John Plotz: So, I want to pick up on the word that you used, Elizabeth, "Curate," because I feel like that's a very much a word of the moment now. We live in a society in which content-creation is cheap but curating is valuable. The people who have their hands on the levers of power are not the people who produce the words originally, but the ones who distribute them. It's what Amazon chooses to serve you.

Elizabeth Ferry: Or at least they try to lay claim, right?

John Plotz: That's true.

Elizabeth Ferry: I think that's an ongoing struggle.

John Plotz: It's an ongoing struggle. That's true. So, yeah, can you talk more about that? Do you think of those scribes as doing an act of conscious curation, because it seems to me when you bundle ... You know, it could be bundling because it's a job. You're aggregating. Or, it could be bundling where you're really making meaning from the way that you bundle stories together.

Martin Puchner: I definitely think that was their main job, I would say, to make meaning through selection and combination and framing and presentation. I think you're so right that the same mode has now come back. I would say precisely because that standard modern system of production I just described, with professional authors who invent original stories, it's now with our media revolution breaking down. And to some extent, we get these older versions coming back. The primacy now placed on curation, I think, is an example of that. We, again, are moving into a world where there aren't these professional, it's not dominated by these professional authors who have complete control over their stories. There's all this kind of writing and material out there, and what really matters is how to collect and frame it and filter and present it.

John Plotz: Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah. Although, I would again maybe feel like that's ... So, if we could think of that process by which authorship is becoming democratized, then it's in the interest of certain people to say, "Oh wait, it's actually the curating that's valuable, it wasn't the writing." As soon as more people can write suddenly.

John Plotz: Oh right, so you're basically putting pressure on the question of what value means there.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

John Plotz: Because, there's a world of proliferating slash fiction or all these forms of generation.

Elizabeth Ferry: There is a dethroning of certain kinds of publishing houses or other kinds of things, right?

John Plotz: I see. So, in other words, once publication becomes democratized it loses value?

Elizabeth Ferry: And therefore, there needs to be these sort of niches. I mean, the parallel might be-

John Plotz: I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me as a member, basically?

Elizabeth Ferry: Maybe, yeah. Or, the parallel might be like, okay, as financial information becomes more widely accessible, then you need to have people who are portfolio managers, right?

John Plotz: Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: They're the ones who ... And, suddenly, the expertise is not understanding a particular company it's, "Oh, no, no. You have to understand how these things go together," which is a form of curation.

John Plotz: Right. Though, Martin, in terms of the work you did about the scribes, do you get a sense of the scribe as existing in an elevated social status? Is that a priest class?

Martin Puchner: It's not necessarily priests, but sometimes they are, but definitely elevated. It was wonderful for me to read some of these earliest fragments from scribal schools, where you get--you know, we're talking about 3000 years ago--you get students complaining about their teacher, saying, "Oh, my teacher was too hard on me. My teacher beat me. My teacher is a task master." And, you also have ... I think we, as teachers, can sympathize with that, fragments from teachers saying, "This generation of students is not taking things as seriously as we used to."

Elizabeth Ferry: "Bunch of lazy so and sos."

Martin Puchner: Exactly, and so you've got ... You realize that for the last 3000 years, we have been living in a world of scribal schools, so that's funny.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's interesting.

John Plotz: The next stage in your argument, and forgive me, Martin, if I butcher it, but you are interested in this great teacher moment. I think, you think about probably it's Socrates, right, and I imagine Buddha?

Martin Puchner: And Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus.

John Plotz: And Jesus, right. And so, there--if I understand the quirk of your argument, which I really like--is that the teacher is presented as anti-writing in some ways. There's oral charismatic presence of the teacher, and yet of course, as with the story of Socrates and Plato, we only get them because somebody writes them down.

Martin Puchner: So, for me, the interesting thing is that these teachers, these charismatic teachers, live in some of the most literate cultures of their time. They could have written and they chose not to. And, as you say, they really base everything on the primacy of the spoken word, this live interaction with their students. Of those, Socrates makes the most explicit argument against writing, that you can't control it, that you can't ask follow up questions, there's lots of scope for misinformation,

very similar to the worries we now have about internet, that there's fake news through writing, and so on and so forth. That's how they operate. It's really almost a moment, as writing takes over more and more functions of these societies, there's this moment of panic or moral worry or thinking about...

John Plotz: So, is it a backlash argument then?

Martin Puchner: I think it is, to some extent, a backlash, yes. But then, the interesting thing is, as you point out, with Plato and others, that the teachers die and for some time usually there is a tradition of oral transmission. In the case of Socrates, almost immediate turn of writing. But sooner or later these students, in a sense, betray their teachers. They use writing even though their teachers had not, and then the students write down their masters' words. So, the interesting thing, though, is these texts these students produce are very different from these older scribal texts, because I think these students try to preserve some of that live interaction, in a sense, some of that rejection of writing in these texts. So, they produce Plato's dramatic dialogues, they show the back and forth between teacher and students, they describe these situations in a way almost as if they channeled that...

Elizabeth Ferry: Or sermons. They write down sermons.

Martin Puchner: Exactly.

John Plotz: Right.

Martin Puchner: But also, in the case of Jesus, there are lots of conversations, dialogues with followers, so to me it's almost as if they channeled that resistance--that panic, that skepticism, like Luddite attitude towards writing back into writing--and produced these very vivid anecdotal, dramatic dialogic texts.

John Plotz: So then, what do you make of the covert inter-textuality of the New Testament with the Old Testament, the way in which the words of Jesus as recorded or the words of the original sages of the New Testament are also consciously looking back at the anti-type of the Hebrew Bible, the one before?

Martin Puchner: I think it's one of the most fascinating moments in literary history, because you have Jesus who doesn't write, who presents himself as the fulfillment of the Scripture, but who doesn't produce his own scripture.

John Plotz: Does Jesus himself give evidence of knowing the Hebrew scripture?

Martin Puchner: Absolutely.

John Plotz: He does? Okay.

Martin Puchner: He knows the Hebrew Bible. He's learned it. He knows how to write. There's one scene in which he writes something in the sand, but that's the only moment of writing, and then the wind blows it off and we don't know what he writes.

Elizabeth Ferry: Which is itself a criticism of writing, right?

Martin Puchner: Exactly.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Martin Puchner: Then, his followers, of course, produce texts but texts at first, as I said, tried to capture this vivid sermonizing, dialogic, charismatic figure who didn't write. But then as Christianity develops its own identity and splits off from Judaism, more and more these texts acquire the status of a new sacred scripture. The question is, how will they relate to the older scripture, and that's where you get the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*...

Elizabeth Ferry: That's interesting.

Martin Puchner: And so, over time, they acquire that status but not initially. Initially, they're just students writing about their charismatic master.

John Plotz: Could you say qualitatively that that moment of the inter-textuality between the Old and New is akin of the bundling of stories that the scribes are doing before, or is it of a different order?

Martin Puchner: I would say that you can describe what we would call the *New Testament* as itself a bundle of stories, because it's the gospels. It's Paul's letters and so on and so forth. It's a bunch of different kinds of texts. But, it seems to me the *suturing* of this new corpus of texts, back to the Old, what now is called looking backwards, from this Christian perspective, the Old Testament, that's a very unusual and unique moment. You don't have that with the texts of the other master teachers. You don't have Buddhist texts trying to reconnect themselves to the Vedas, for example. You have it, to some extent maybe, in the Confucian traditions, because there you have students of Confucius writing down his texts.

Martin Puchner: But then, interestingly, Confucius, because he becomes so important, is retroactively seen as the editor of one of the first fundamental texts

of the Chinese literary tradition, the *Classic of Song*, even though he didn't write them and he didn't edit them. But, stories circulate that he is the editor, and so that's why we call them Confucian classics. So maybe, that is something, to some extent, similar to what we have with the New Testament and the Old Testament.

John Plotz: That's really interesting. Yeah. I kind of want to pivot at this point to say that you and your book, Martin, by saying that "a second revolution in the written world is upon us." I'd love to make that the occasion for the final section of this podcast, in which we think about what it means for that new revolution to come. I mean, you already heard my point about computer code as a form of writing, but I think there's a lot of ways that we could think about this new electronic age we're in. So, can I yield the floor to you on that question?

Martin Puchner: Definitely. Basically, the motivation for my book was the experience we are living through, that we live through this fundamental revolution in writing technologies, and we feel that it has profound impact. I wanted to, in a sense, get some orientation, some guidance from the past. What were earlier moments when similar revolutions happened, of course, with print but also with paper and smaller revolutions along the way? So, that's very much what is the motivation, the prehistory of that. What was interesting for me is that I see now some of the older modes of writing and the organization of the written world coming back. We just spoke about the return of editing or of curating.

John Plotz: Powerful curators.

Martin Puchner: Exactly. But, there are others too. We started this podcast with the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is written on these clay tablets. Tablets went out of fashion, were replaced by scrolls, and the Roman invention of the codex, which we know by the book. But now, of course, for the first time they're using tablets again. In my book, I have an image of ancient scribes who are sitting cross legged looking down at the tablet in their lap. If I squint outside the door here in the library, I bet I can find someone who is sitting right in that same pose with a tablet.

John Plotz: But, that doesn't feel like a little bit of a shallow rhyme to you, though? Those tablets are so protean, whereas the point about those earlier tablets was that they were so fixed.

Martin Puchner: Yeah, but it's a question about formats. The other format that has come back, it's the scroll. The scroll was more or less replaced by the book and we are scrolling down computer screens-

John Plotz: That's interesting, yeah.

Martin Puchner: ... Including on these tablets. So, in part because computers and code, text as a contiguous line of text rather than splitting it up into pages. They can, of course-

Elizabeth Ferry: It changes our bodies and our ways of seeing.

Martin Puchner: Absolutely. So, I do think that these formats and these forms actually do matter. This is not to say that there's a lot that's new, but I've been struck by the fact that just the way our bodies relate to reading devices and forms, that there's something from the deep history of writing that's suddenly come back.

John Plotz: Now, I'm just remembering dimly from college, hearing a lecture by Peter Stallybrass in which he was saying that the invention of the codex, you know, the book with the spine, was a revolution in discontinuous access. You know, that the point is that the scroll gives you..

Elizabeth Ferry: You have to turn the page.

John Plotz: Yeah, right. No, no, not that you have to turn the page, that you can go anywhere. So, you get people jumping back and forth.

Elizabeth Ferry: I see, yeah, yeah.

John Plotz: The index, basically, evolves at the same time that the book does. But, by that logic, it seems like the electronic writing we have is like an intensification of that discontinuous access. I hear what you're saying about scrolling, but the thing to me about-

Elizabeth Ferry: A searchable index.

John Plotz: Yeah, the searchability of the way that the hyperlinked logic of reading on a screen is that you're continuously able to just jump to some other place in the text.

Martin Puchner: I think it's both. I've certainly had the experience of having to, needing to jump forward on a computer and having to scroll through, especially in some cases where you have to, where it simulates books and maybe the computer's a little slow and you have to think, "Oh my God, I wish I could just take the physical book and flip forward." I can't do it.

John Plotz: Yes, that's true.

Martin Puchner: Although, of course, with the index, you have searchability, but-

John Plotz: I'm just thinking of Ctrl+F. Ctrl+F, for me, it's a habitual movement. I want to find the next...

Elizabeth Ferry: It's your move.

John Plotz: Yeah. Tell me the next time the word papyrus shows up in this text.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right.

Martin Puchner: Definitely.

John Plotz: It's both those things. Yes, so this is the moment, I think, in the podcast when we switch to what we call *Recallable Books*. We basically ask you ... Each of us is going to say a book, given the nature of this conversation, a book that we think would be the kind of thing that somebody who enjoyed this podcast might want to go off and read. So, Martin, as our guest, can I offer you first shot?

Martin Puchner: In the spirit of this conversation, I'm not going to recommend a book, because a book, John, is from the past age of literature. We've now entered an age with fan fiction, where...

John Plotz: I know. That was very 2018 of me, I'm sorry.

Martin Puchner: ... Where everyone is an author. So, I'm going to recommend a website. Wattpad is a Canadian website. It's now in every country except China, and it started as a fan fiction site, and is primarily used originally by teenagers, often female teenagers, or people who pretend to be teenagers. It started as a fan fiction site but it's grown and exploded into a storytelling universe, and there are all kinds of stories that are being written by users, by readers, by people who don't necessarily think of themselves as authors in the Gutenberg sense and who generate stories. I'm amazed how widespread it is. I was talking about it in a graduate seminar a few weeks ago and one of the students said, "Oh yeah, my mother has two novels on Wattpad."

Elizabeth Ferry: Oh wow.

Martin Puchner: And now, some of these, because this website has grown so much, it has so many users, that the top stories get big book deals, they get Netflix tie-ins. It's become huge. The website, what's fascinating to me is, that the people running the website, they have an unbelievable data about storytelling and different kinds of stories...

John Plotz: Yeah, fascinating.

Martin Puchner: ... And the way readers interact with stories. I think there is ... It both registers how storytelling and who produces stories, and how we use them and interact with them, and how we distribute them and circulate them changes, but I think it will also, the analytics of it, will actually tell us a lot about storytelling in the future.

John Plotz: You can post in any language?

Martin Puchner: It's in many languages, yeah.

John Plotz: It is? Yeah. And are they translated? Do people read things in other languages or do they ... Do you just stick to your own language community?

Martin Puchner: That's a good question. I'm not sure about translation. Yeah, I'm not sure how that works.

John Plotz: That is fascinating. Okay, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Ferry: I'm also going to go in the fan fiction route, and also not suggest a book, but it's a particular fan fiction story, which is called *No Reservations: Narnia*, which is the Anthony Bourdain, an imagined Anthony Bourdain episode in Narnia, which kind of brings together both this-

John Plotz: Do they eat wood shrew?

Elizabeth Ferry: No, but they do dine with werewolves, you know?

John Plotz: Of course.

Elizabeth Ferry: Because, you know, he's sort of having all these ceremonial dinners and they're super bland and starchy, and then finally he meets a werewolf who takes him to the ... You know, because in Anthony Bourdain there's always the moment, the dart towards the wild, right? But, that's both an example of this collectivity that we're describing and also the creation of a world and how it might get literarily inhabited.

John Plotz: Okay, so this is great. You guys have backed me into the opposite corner, so I was going to recommend, and I still recommend, it's a great book, a book by Daniel ... I'm sorry, Dennis Tenen, called *Plain Text: The Poetics of Computation*, which is basically a book about thinking about computer code as a form of writing. But, given this

world of Wattpad and the proliferation of these stories belonging to us all, I'm going to endorse the opposite, which is something I heard about on a podcast recently, something called the Brautigan Library. Do you guys know this?

Elizabeth Ferry: As in Richard Brautigan?

John Plotz: As in Richard Brautigan. So, Richard Brautigan, in one of his novels, came up with the idea of a library in which people deposited single, unique books that were not meant to be published and reproduced, they were just meant to sit in that library. So, in other words, you bring the object itself and it sits in a room. That, then, becomes the library. It's like library as site of anti-publication. You go to a room in which the only thing you know about these books is that they only exist in this space. You guys both look intensely skeptical.

Elizabeth Ferry: No, not skeptical.

John Plotz: It's a different way of thinking about writing. It's singling out the one place in the world that this writing exists. In a sense, maybe you can actually think of it as a curation experiment, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Here's a question. Would it be ... Would it achieve-

John Plotz: But, not curation as promulgation, curation as containment.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right. Would it achieve its ... Would the Brautigan Library achieve its goal even better if there were no readers?

John Plotz: Huh, say more. You mean because if it were just going down a black hole?

Elizabeth Ferry: If we're continuing on this kind of salvage idea or-

John Plotz: It's like enter the singularity?

Elizabeth Ferry: Sort of, right? If the idea-

John Plotz: Well, that would be the potlatch version where you brought it and burned it, you know?

Elizabeth Ferry: Sort of, but then you would still be in some kind of relationship with the text, even if you brought it, but there's something about ... You know, we keep talking about how people are reading things or hearing things and then they're doing something with them. This is the going there and nothing is done with it, or that's my question,

right? If it had no readers, would that be more what it was trying to do?

John Plotz: It's a super good question. I don't know. My vision of it is that it's attractive to people because of its one-off-ness, so that's why it still feels like a curatorial project because the curation there is kind of like the mMuseum of Jurassic Technology or something. It's the thing that might have been out in the world but actually isn't. It's only here. You know, in the 19th century, a lot of museums have plaster casts of famous sculptures, so you could go and see ... So, this would be the antithesis of that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right.

John Plotz: But, yeah. I don't know. Is it authenticity porn?

Elizabeth Ferry: I don't know. Yeah.

John Plotz: It's an interesting question. It reminds me of the discussion we had with Lisa Gitelman about the allographic versus the autographic. Do you know this distinction, Martin, between ... Yeah, okay.

Martin Puchner: Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: So this is, yeah, the intensification of the autographic.

John Plotz: Meaning, right, the notion that the thing that actually lives in a place, versus the allographic being the thing that potentially lives anywhere.

John Plotz: Okay, well, I'll continue to battle for the Brautigan.

Elizabeth Ferry: I'm not against it, I'm just..

John Plotz: You just think it could be fleshed down a toilet and it would still be a Brautigan Library.

Martin Puchner: I'm against it. It's precious.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, a little bit.

Martin Puchner: I'm not sure I'm against it.

Elizabeth Ferry: No.

John Plotz: I think you're allowed to be against it.

Elizabeth Ferry: Come on, make a stand, Martin.

Martin Puchner: I did, then I took it back.

John Plotz: It sort of depends what you mean by the word *precious*, right?

Elizabeth Ferry: That's true.

John Plotz: I kind of agree, it is precious, but you know, Gollum had a point. "My precious." Okay-

Elizabeth Ferry: And we end there.

John Plotz: Yeah, it's a good ... Unless you guys want to do Gollum imitations too.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, we did do the one with the Beckett at the end so we could all do precious-

John Plotz: All do my precious. Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah.

John Plotz: All right? One, two, three.

Elizabeth Ferry: *Precious.*

John Plotz: *Precious.*

Martin Puchner: *Precious.*

John Plotz: Oh, I like that. It sounds like a musical.

John Plotz: Okay, Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with Public Books and is recorded and edited in the media lab of the Brandeis Library. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, Fly Away, a very beautiful song. Sound editing is by Aneil Tripathy in the Anthropology department, and production assistants, including website design and social media, is done by Matthew Schratz from English.

John Plotz: We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or connect to us via social media and our website, recallthisbook.org. And finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please, be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast. You may be interested in checking out past episodes, including topics like

opiate addiction, minimalism, both literary and aesthetic, as well as home design minimalism, old and new media, and also an interview with Madeline Miller, author of *Circe*, which is a retelling of some episodes of the *Odyssey* from below or from the side.

John Plotz: And upcoming episodes are likely ... We're still finalizing the second half of season one, but the likely upcoming episodes are going to include a conversation with, I think you can call him, a living legend, Samuel Delany, science fiction author. Discussion of animals, poetical and otherwise, with the poet David Ferry, who we heard a lot about today, and biologist E.O. Wilson. And also, a Recall This Book first, a collaboration with Harvard's Mahindra Humanities Center. In that live episode, you will hear me arguing about distraction with Bard professor Marina van Zuylen. I perform a Monty Python monologue about "word association football" and Marina talks about her brain scan, which is just as scary as that sounds.

John Plotz: In any case, Martin, thank you so much for coming today.

Martin Puchner: Thanks for having me. It was really fun.

John Plotz: It was very fun. Thank you all for listening.

Elizabeth Ferry: Thanks.