

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that looks backward to see into the future. Our idea is to put together scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events by looking at books that shaped the world we inherited. Our topic today is the comic novel, its past, its future, and most importantly, its present. What do we read comic novels for? Do they comfort us? Do they unsettle us? Do they make us better? Do they make us worse? Are they the predecessor of sitcoms or a classier alternative to TV? I'm sure that the answer to all those questions is probably No, but it will be revealed in the next half hour. And today, I am a solo host.

John Plotz: So hello, John Plotz, and I'm lucky to be joined by Steve McCauley. You probably know him as the author of a bevy of a raft of comic novels. They include recent favorites like *My Ex-Life*, which he had a wonderful interview about with Terry Gross on Fresh Air, *Alternatives to Sex*, and *Insignificant Others*. Perhaps like me, you've been his fan ever since *Object of My Affection*, or perhaps you came on board more recently when he started publishing his *Tales from the Yoga Studio* series under the delightful pen name of Rain Mitchell. I love every phase of Stephen McCauley's career and I'm really honored to be speaking with him today.

John Plotz: Steve, welcome. Hello.

Stephen McCauley: Thanks, John. I'm glad you're delighted with every phase of my career.

John Plotz: I am.

Stephen McCauley: I'm not delighted with any phase of my career.

John Plotz: I think it's the terminal one I'm going to like best of all, yes. I really want the Yoga series to be a very long and fruitful phase.

Stephen McCauley: Oh, okay. Yes, I think that phase has passed already, but we can get to it later.

John Plotz: Really? Okay. My wife just signed us up for a gentle yoga class. I think I definitely need something to guide me into that world. You know that I can barely touch my knees, right?

Stephen McCauley: Really?

John Plotz: Yes.

Stephen McCauley: You are doing it now.

John Plotz: Well, I am touching my knees now, but I'm just like crammed into a chair.

Stephen McCauley: That's true. That's true. That helps.

John Plotz: Steve and I put our heads together and decided we would start in a curious kind of way today, which is to start by trading favorite lines from Barbara Pym whom we have both decided is if not the queen of the comic novel, then at least one of its reigning monarchs. Okay, so Steve, can I start by asking you, why have we decided that and who is Barbara Pym exactly?

Stephen McCauley: Barbara Pym is a British novelist who had two interesting phases to her career. She was born in 1913, I believe, and she published six novels that were fairly successful. They were well received, they had a readership. Then she wrote-

John Plotz: Starting in 1950, I think.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and she very much feels like a mid-century novelist to me, her sensibility and pushing against more contemporary issues and themes in the latter half of the century. But in any case, she wrote her seventh novel, which is called *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and her publisher decided that it was not current enough, that she didn't have an audience and he turned it down. It was turned down by many publishers, and this kind of launched her into a period of darkness, both personal and professional.

John Plotz: That was like in 1963, I think, that she wrote it. I guess sort of The Beatles are big, cars are suddenly painted bright colors in England and everybody is swinging--and they thought she wasn't swinging.

Stephen McCauley: And she, indeed, was not swinging. She was writing about villages and curates and anthropologists and things that were not really of the moment, I suppose.

John Plotz: You could argue anthropologists were kind of happening.

Stephen McCauley: Well, that's true, but not her anthropologists.

John Plotz: Yes, that's true.

Stephen McCauley: But in any case. Then do you remember the year that this came out? There was a *Times Literary Supplement* in, I think, 1977 or '78, and they named... they asked a bunch of prominent writers and social critics.

John Plotz: Right. Including Philip Larkin, I think, correct?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, exactly.

John Plotz: I think that was... *Quartet in Autumn* which was the first one after that came out in '77. Maybe it was just before that?

Stephen McCauley: Yes. It was just before that, so maybe it was around '76, and they asked all these people to name the most underrated British novelist, and Philip Larkin and one other person both named Barbara Pym, which kind of inspired a lot of interest in her work. Then she finally published this novel called *Quartet in Autumn* and her career was revitalized. That was the period in which I began reading her and in which a lot of Americans that I knew discovered her, and just became tremendously fond of her whole body of work.

John Plotz: Yes. You mentioned really quickly the mid-century. In other words, the people you think about with her first phase are someone like Muriel Spark. Is that right? *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*? Would that be a good comparison for what she was writing with?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, I think that's right. I mean, I think that her name is sometimes mentioned with Muriel Spark's. I'm not sure it's quite... Muriel Spark seems much more adventuresome stylistically, and much more edgy in terms of what she does with characters, I think, than Pym.

John Plotz: Okay. That's interesting. I want to get back to that question of what the edge is, because maybe we disagree about this. But part of what I love about comic novels is it seems to me that there really is an edge there, but it's just sometimes a little bit buried. It's not necessarily there in the characters *per se*. In other words, the people's lives themselves may not be that grandiose, but the edge might be at a deeper level.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and I think it's also in the attitude toward their lives. I mean, there's this wonderful... Barbara Pym's best known novel is called *Excellent Women*, and this was her... I believe it was her second published novel.

John Plotz: Second novel, yes, 1952.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. This is the narrator talking about herself. "I suppose an unmarried woman just over 30 who lives alone and has no apparent ties must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business. And if she is also a clergyman's daughter, then one might really say that there is no hope for her." It's such a kind of

sharp-eyed look at the character looking at herself. Later, she says... she compares himself to *Jane Eyre* in what I think is a very amusing way, but I'm not sure I can find it right now. But anyway.

John Plotz: Yes. Actually, one of my favorite lines, since it seems like we've now started quoting favorite lines, one of the favorite lines that I was going to pick out from *An Unsuitable Attachment*, which, as you said, Steve, is the one that kind of got her kicked to the curb originally, but then was reissued, I think only after she died.

Stephen McCauley: After her death.

John Plotz: Also talking about a parish priest. "Although invariably kind and courteous, he had the air of seeming not to be particularly interested in human beings, a somewhat doubtful quality in a parish priest, though it had its advantages." I just love the crisscrossing of that sentence, you know? It brings you sort of to the left bank, and then back to the right bank, and then back to the left bank again. "Somewhat doubtful though it had its advantages." I think this really goes along with the point you're making about the attitude taken towards characters even though they may be in a very banal and apparently benign setting. Even those settings have their swift water and dark places.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and this quality of being able to see both sides or all sides of a person's character, I think is very much Barbara Pym.

John Plotz: But what I was going to say... so taking *Jane Eyre* or *Middlemarch* as our model, these are novels that are... they're meant to be real. They define the word realism, and yet, they're always about moral improvement, either the moral improvement of the characters who are supposed to have come to a better place in life, or implicitly because the reader is meant to be improved out of their bad habits, out of their laziness, out of their desire to sit around reading novels. By the end of the novel, there's going to have been a nudge. It's kind of the difference between the *is* and the *ought*. It opens up that space, and I do think that comic novels are so delightful because they drop that moral pretense, something like that. They're not improving you, which is kind of what I was tried to get at, whether they're better than sitcoms, you know? I mean, I just think-

Stephen McCauley: But sitcoms can be so moral. They can have a narrative of a moral.

John Plotz: They can be very moral. You're right.

Stephen McCauley: There has to be redemption at the end.

John Plotz: They're better by *not* being moral, in other words, is what you're saying?

Stephen McCauley: The comic novel.

John Plotz: Yes, the comic novel.

Stephen McCauley: Obviously, we're talking in gross generalizations here, but I think that the... one of the reasons that comic novels can be so subversive is because they're not trying to do that. And if you think about something like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos, which was published-

John Plotz: Yes, I'm glad you mentioned that.

Stephen McCauley: ... in the 1920s, and you have a character-

John Plotz: I tried to write a novel about her once, actually. I love her.

Stephen McCauley: About Anita Loos?

John Plotz: Yes, about her early days because she was in California just sending screenplays into Griffith trying to get them produced.

Stephen McCauley: And I think she actually sold them when she was about 14.

John Plotz: Yes, she's a little bit older because she lied about her age. She actually didn't start selling until she was like 21 or 22. She's from a theatrical family. It's a really interesting story. In my novel, she meets Mark Twain on the Lower East Side in 1905, which I don't think actually did happen.

Stephen McCauley: It might.

John Plotz: But the point is that I think of her as taking the mantle of Mark Twain, for sure. So sorry. Go ahead. That's a great example.

Stephen McCauley: But Lorelei Lee, the famous character in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a gold digger. She is completely amoral. She is only out to improve herself in terms of wealth, and will just corrupt as... destroy as many marriages and wreck as many homes as she possibly can. Unlike say in Edith Wharton where there's no character quite like that in Edith Wharton, but nonetheless-

John Plotz: But Lily Bart is on the rise, and then she-

Stephen McCauley: She must be punished, right?

John Plotz: Chloral will be administered. That's a great book.

Stephen McCauley: Lorelei Lee triumphs.

John Plotz: Then Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*... Sorry, go ahead. No, no. Lorelei.

Stephen McCauley: I was just going to say, after all, she is the person who coined the phrase, Anita Loos is, "Diamonds are a girl's best friend," which is pretty subversive when you-

John Plotz: Did she coin *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* also, or is that...?

Stephen McCauley: I mean, that's the title of the book.

John Plotz: Yes, but it was... yes.

Stephen McCauley: I don't know.

John Plotz: It's hers. Okay, we'll give it to her.

Stephen McCauley: We'll just give her.

John Plotz: No, it's a really good point also about sitcoms needing to trot out the big moral hammers at the end. That really does make me think about *Vanity Fair* as the one 19th century realist novel that actually sort of refuses the moral improvement path. Yes, there's a super interesting story to be told about how later novelists who love Thackeray, I think, insisted on misreading him. George Eliot loves him, Trollope loves him, Charlotte Brontë loves him, but I don't think they get that anti-moral side to him.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. It'd be hilarious to think of Charlotte Brontë as a comic novelist.

John Plotz: But loved, she dedicated... *Jane Eyre* is dedicated to Thackeray because she said that *Vanity Fair* did what she wanted *Jane Eyre* to do. So yes, it's really funny, I agree. Maybe that gets to another thing, Steve, that you were interested in talking about, which is whether the comic novel gets the respect it deserves. Maybe we could start by getting at a question that you, I know, think about, which is distinguishing the respect it gets in America versus the respect it gets in England. I mean, is that worth talking about? Who were the American comic novelists? You mentioned Anita Loos. Does Mark Twain fit in the comic novel? because I was thinking... because he himself says he does humorous writing, not comical.

Stephen McCauley: He did. I don't know. What do you think?

John Plotz: I really don't know because I take... his distinction seems really interesting to me. He says that comedy is where you basically have a gag, and that humorous writing is more like getting into a particular voice and just extending that voice. Even *Huck Finn* is humorous because you're sort of entering into the mind of Huck. I think that might be right. Though he's incredibly funny on a line-by-line basis, too, but I think he's not trying to do the same thing that comic novels are.

Stephen McCauley: But aren't there scenes in *Huck Finn* that seem sort of broadly comedic?

John Plotz: Absolutely, yes. There are.

Stephen McCauley: So maybe he was just trying to distance himself from the scourge of being labeled a comic novelist.

John Plotz: I think that makes sense because there were these comic writers before him who he was trying to push away. What about somebody like James Thurber then?

Stephen McCauley: Well, to me, he's more of a humorist. I'm not sure really what the distinction is, if I could really make it very precise, but it seems to me that what he was doing was a little different.

John Plotz: Yes. Can I give you a James Thurber line that I was thinking about whether it applies to the comic novel or not?

Stephen McCauley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

John Plotz: Thurber said, "The laughter of man is more terrible than his tears and takes more forms hollow, heartless, mirthless, maniacal." Is that too dark for you?

Stephen McCauley: No, I love it. Yeah, I think it's great.

John Plotz: He also said... here's another one that seemed to me to kind of get at what I love about comic novels. "Man has gone long enough or perhaps too long without being man enough to face the simple truth that the trouble with man is man." Which I take to mean something like you can outrun everything except yourself, that a lot of novels that we call realist including those novels that I love in the George Elliot tradition have this vision that if you can just get far enough, then you will not carry your own troubles with you. All of those things you

didn't like about yourself can somehow be just shed. Whereas the point of the comic novel is kind of like if you look behind you, your butt is still there. No matter how fast you're going, your butt will still be the same distance from your mouth as it was before.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, so there's that questions of, is this lack of redemption or...? I don't know.

John Plotz: Something about just... I don't know, just that we're earthy, like it or not. I do think it's interesting. One of Barbara Pym's novels is called *Less Than Angels*, and I kind of feel like that's right, more than dirt. We're not just dirt because then there won't be anything to say, but we're not angels either.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. The shifts in her characters are very, very subtle. I mean, we don't see big changes in her characters from the beginning to the end. I mean, they open up just a little bit and let in maybe a little bit more light or a little bit more warmth, perhaps. But they're not completely transformed by their experiences. I also think the other thing is... maybe this is a little off-topic, but that's just so fascinating to me about having read a couple of her novels recently, re-read, is the lack of what we typically think of as plot. That they are just... they are almost like these anthropological studies of a period of time within a village and observations of the people's behavior.

John Plotz: Yes. I have another line that sort of goes to that, and then I have a question to ask you, which is basically how important the sentences in the comic novel or whether anything else is as important as sentence. Okay. This is a line which is one of the young men who may or may not be involved with... it's about he's just seeing a woman he might be interested in. "The heavy scent she wore tantalized him because it was one he knew though he could not remember its name."

John Plotz: So far, that could be a sentence from any realist novel, any mystery, any romance, anything. "Though he could not remember its name, whether it was an evocative French phrase, or a downright English word like carpet or swamp." I was talking about that other sentence that kind of crisscrosses, this one to me, it's more just like it lands with a thump. You think you're gliding through a gentle forest glade, and then you smack into a concrete wall, like carpet or swamp.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. I mean, in terms of the sentence, it's like those words are just so perfectly chosen and they... not only because of what they refer to in concrete terms, but also just the sound of those words.

John Plotz: Yes, good diphthongs like swamp. It has two good diphthongs in it. My question is, for that, is whether what's satisfying in Barbara Pym is just really funny sentences, or whether it's what the funny sentences are doing.

Stephen McCauley: I think it's both, right?

John Plotz: Yes.

Stephen McCauley: Because I think that she both has this phrasing that is very well-chosen, and I'm sure does not trip off the top of the tongue as they appear to be on the page. But also that what you just read reveal something about the character or reveal something about their attitude towards himself as a British person, etc. I think it's both, and I think it has to be both or else to have the depth of comic resonance, and also just kind of human, I don't know, observation that her novels have.

John Plotz: This is a totally banal question, but do you think there's a limit to how long a comic novel can be? I can't help noticing how short they are.

Stephen McCauley: There's a limit to how long hers can be. *Vanity Fair* is pretty long novel.

John Plotz: It's true. I know. Yes.

Stephen McCauley: *Tristram Shandy*.

John Plotz: *Tristram Shandy*! Interesting. Okay. That's a gag book, though. Let me ask it another way, like James Thurber, there's many reasons that Thurber doesn't fit, but apparently, he was a sketch writer, basically. I'm just thinking there's a way in which it's... it's not easy to write 20 pages worth of funny material. I mean, I can't do it. But a lot of people have done it. If you think about the *New Yorker* is full of brilliant writers who can sustain something for 15 pages. But Barbara Pym and you and we're about to get to you, are people who can write novels that are 200 pages long, and that's... I guess I'm flipping the question of the length, but it does seem like it's rare to be able to pull it off for a novel length.

Stephen McCauley: Well, sure. I mean, anything is difficult to pull off for an extended period of time. I mean, I think that the novel that I have read most recently that just exhausted me with its comic brilliance is *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty.

John Plotz: I wish Elizabeth Ferry here because she completely agrees with you.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. Almost to the point where, okay, I just had to put the book down and say, "I give up," because it's like every sentence is so brilliant, and so witty, and so extraordinarily well constructed to both make a point which is invariably extremely subversive, and also hilariously funny although you find yourself wary of laughing at it sometimes. But it's rare to be able to sustain that for that long.

John Plotz: Yes. Do you have a thought about that? Again, this is another version of the question about carpet or swamp. I just have this image of Barbara Pym doing stand-up in some club in north of England, in Bradford.

Stephen McCauley: That'd be interesting.

John Plotz: I got a lot of great material here, but somehow it isn't just that. She strings together those... I take your point. You're saying that the sentences work because they're funny in their own terms, but they also go to revealing something about the way this character sees the world as distinct from how all the people around them see that.

Stephen McCauley: I think in the case of Pym maybe even more so than in the case of *The Sellout* is that it's all about the context of the characters and the world that she has created for them, and that's what makes it funny, is the context of their relationships with each other, what they overlook, what they refuse to discuss, and so on. To me, that's crucial. I don't think of her as being a stand-up person at all. What about Philip Roth, for instance? *Portnoy's Complaint* is basically a 300-page stand-up routine. It's a 300-page Lenny Bruce routine, only actually funnier, I think.

John Plotz: Yes. Does he count? Is that a comic novel then?

Stephen McCauley: Oh, man, I think so.

John Plotz: That's so interesting.

Stephen McCauley: You?

John Plotz: It's so terrible to admit, but I've never been able to finish that book.

Stephen McCauley: Really?

John Plotz: I like his later ones. I like *Exit Ghost*, for example. I like the ones... so it's not that I don't like him when he's being sharp and sort of one-liner-ish, but I feel like Philip Roth is better... I love *American Pastoral*, I love it. I think he's better when he turns that wit into something. I

feel like sometimes Philip Roth is stacking up razor blades. Sometimes he's just cutting and *Portnoy's Complaint* to me, it feels like flailing. I believe you that it is it, but when I read *American Pastoral*, I feel like it's actually adding up to something.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. *Portnoy's Complaint*... I think one of the great things about *Portnoy's Complaint* is that it feels and I believe this is how it was written, supposedly, was just someone sitting down and ranting for however long it took him to get out the first draft of that novel. And that, too, is an incredibly exhausting novel. The last line of the novel, last word is this kind of cry in front of the therapist. As a reader, you share that feeling like, "Ahhhhh."

John Plotz: Yes, okay. But this is great because I would have said... if we think about Barbara Pym, she's not exhausting. There's lots of things-

Stephen McCauley: No.

John Plotz: It's comforting, right?

Stephen McCauley: It's more subtle.

John Plotz: Yes, it's subtle but it's also not raw. I mean, it doesn't feel...

Stephen McCauley: Well, there's a kindness to it at the same time that... I think she is misunderstood, and sometimes I will say to people, "Have you read Barbara Pym?" They say, "Oh, is she that cozy writer with-

John Plotz: Yes, I didn't mean cozy.

Stephen McCauley: ...the book covers that look like wallpaper?" And so on, which is what they do look like. But she's not at all because she is so incisive, and because she's really quite critical, and there's a real darkness there. If it weren't for the funny twist of the carpet and the swamp, a lot of these people's lives might be considered tragic. What was your question?

John Plotz: No, the question is like whether the rawness of that kind of cry at the end of *Portnoy's Complaint* and the subtleness of Barbara Pym are on the same spectrum or not. I hear what you're saying, you're saying that it's a subtler kind of vinegar that she's dispensing, but I almost feel like it's vinegar she's made into lemonade. To me, the comic novel, it's hit the sweet-and-sour balance, right?

Stephen McCauley: Right.

John Plotz: And it's not cozy, but I think you can say that something is comforting without it being cozy. There's lots of novelists I find incredibly comforting to read.

Stephen McCauley: Yes. And in fact, I know that you're not fond of this author, but I'm equally obsessed with Anita Brookner who wrote 27 novels, I believe, and they are about... they're all basically about loneliness. About some form of loneliness, kind of lives that have not advanced in the way that the character hope that they advanced and so on and so forth. It is the opposite and she has a very bleak vision. She's witty, she's not exactly... she's certainly not comic and she sometimes is funny. But anyway, a friend and who I've turned on to her, we all say the same thing. This is like the least comforting worldview you can imagine, and yet, there's something tremendously comforting about opening up one of her books, and entering that world again. That is somehow familiar that you're in control of this beautiful... you feel as if this writer has this tremendously great grasp of language. I feel the same way with Pym.

John Plotz: Maybe witty is an indispensable part of being a comic novelist, but it's not... by itself, it doesn't make you a comic novelist. In other words, there's lots of people who are witty who aren't writing comic novels, but it's hard to imagine-

Stephen McCauley: Like Henry James maybe.

John Plotz: Yes.

Stephen McCauley: I actually think *Beast in the Jungle* is hilarious.

John Plotz: Yes. What about Mary McCarthy then because she's, to me, feels the way you're describing Anita Brookner? Do you feel comfortable-?

Stephen McCauley: I think Mary McCarthy is more-

John Plotz: It's too sardonic?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, I think it's way more sardonic.

John Plotz: Yes, it can't be a comic novel if it's that sardonic. It's funny, I'm actually-

Stephen McCauley: But I think she's... I don't know. *The Group*, that's pretty satirical.

John Plotz: Yes, it's satirical. I'm struggling with this right now because I'm trying to write about both comical science fiction and satirical science

fiction. My idea is that those two things are close to each other, and last night, Lisa just looked at me and she's like, "Why would you assume that satire and comedy are the same thing?" Yes, it's a good distinction. Okay. Well, it's true I don't like Anita Brookner, Steve, but I do really like this guy, Steve McCauley, so let's talk about him.

John Plotz: Okay. I'm just going to read the first line of *Object of My Affection*. In fact, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to read the first line and then I'm going to also... sorry, spoiler alert, but I'm going to read the last line of the novel too. I'm actually going to try not to give away all the plot details of your novel because if people haven't read it, it's so great and they should go ahead and read it. But-

Stephen McCauley: I'm never bothered by spoilers.

John Plotz: Oh, really? Okay.

Stephen McCauley: I don't read because I want to... if I know what's going to happen at the end of a book, it doesn't spoil it for me.

John Plotz: Okay. All right.

Stephen McCauley: I don't remember what happens at the end of this one.

John Plotz: Actually, one of the things that really made me mad at the movie is that they don't end up in the right ride. In the movie, they end up riding a roller-coaster, but I think it's so great that they end up riding the Octopus at the end of the book. Okay. So first couple of lines. "Nina and I have been living together in Brooklyn for over a year when she came home one afternoon, announced she was pregnant, tossed her briefcase to the floor, and flopped down on the green vinyl sofa. 'As if I don't have enough problems with my weight already,' she said. Nina's lower lip was thrust out, but I couldn't tell from her expression if she was genuinely upset, so I used my standard tactic for dealing with anything unexpected, I changed the subject. I pointed out a water stain on the hem of her dress and passed her half the sandwich. 'We're out of ketchup,' I apologized."

John Plotz: There's this sort of Bergsonian quality to humor, the humor of life is seeing us all sort of attached to as repetitive machinery where we just keep doing the same damn stuff over and over?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, that when people begin acting like mechanized dolls, that that is... there's something inherently funny in that. I mean, that's this Bergsonian idea of comedy, and that is certainly, I think, in Pym in that these characters stick so much to their limits and their views of the

world. The Cat Lady which is once throughout many of her books, that person.

John Plotz: That is such a good gag. It's like a perennially good gag. It's like in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, every time you think she's about to say something serious, it turns into a remark about horsemeat for the cat.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, exactly. I wonder if she intentionally did that with all of her books as a cat person in the references. Anyway.

John Plotz: You're saying that begins funny and ends sad? The fact of that?

Stephen McCauley: You know what? It does in life. If you don't change, then yes, I think you're headed for a kind of sadness certainly. Just in my own sense of what I want to do in my books is to have the characters face something, and then change as a result of it and understand that there are consequences for either pushing away the discussion about the pregnancy, and talking about the absence of ketchup in the house, that you do that for long enough and then you kind of have to pay for it eventually. Then things get a little bit sadder and darker. To me, that's very satisfying. It's very satisfying to write...

John Plotz: That seems to go against Northrup Frye's definition of comedy because his definition of comedy is that comedy is basically the genre where through a totally unforeseen set of circumstances, we arrive at a happy ending. In other words, if Romeo and Juliet are in the tomb, and he takes the poison, boy, that's tragedy. But if he figured out just in time not to take the poison, or the poison was sugar water, then it would be comedy. That's the Northrop Frye definition, is that it's all about the upbeat outcome. But you just gave a totally persuasive description of what you do, which is almost like the opposite, which is that it's really witty all throughout, and it's really funny all throughout, but it actually ends sadder than it began because it ends with us being able to see the limits of these people.

Stephen McCauley: Well, by that strict definition, then yes, then they're not comic novels really because they always... I mean, my books always have a bitter-sweet ending where there's something... just because I don't believe life turns out that way usually, that there's a blend of happiness and sadness. So yes, that's kind of what I think.

John Plotz: A blend not reflected in the film version of *Object of My Affection*.

Stephen McCauley: No, but they did film the ending that I wrote.

John Plotz: Really?

Stephen McCauley: And they screened it for focus groups, and everybody hated it. They put on this kind of upbeat, unambiguous ending. Unlike the French adaptations-

John Plotz: It's like the Brooklyn Heights dog-and-pony show. They're like, "And we're all together." It's not enough to have... they had to make it racially mixed. They had to make it sex positive, choice-mixed.

Stephen McCauley: Right. That's the Hollywood movie, and that creates a certain kind of satisfaction for the viewer, for sure. But I was saying that I've had these two French adaptations of my novels, too, and they make the endings even more ambiguous.

John Plotz: Interesting.

Stephen McCauley: They don't want any kind of resolution at the end of them.

John Plotz: I was thinking of a really weird analogy as I was finishing *Object of My Affection*. Again, even though you don't care about spoilers, I do, but I'll just say one of the things that's great about the novel to me is that you can't... it resists the temptation to put people into the box, which is either, "Oh, happy homosexual pair, happy heterosexual pair, or busted failed love." It actually explores the ways in which people can be different things to one another. You can have a friendship which isn't based on the set of phrases that you've been handed already.

John Plotz: Here's the crazy analogy I thought of, which is *Jude the Obscure*, which ends a lot darker than any of your books do. But this Thomas Hardy novel, which is really about what it means to want to be friends with someone but not actually be married to them, to have a relationship that is neither one thing or the other. Is that a thing for you, Steve? Is that something you're interested in? That way of-

Stephen McCauley: That's like what my most recent novel, *My Ex-Life* is. It's about a relationship that is neither one thing nor the other. It's like a previously married couple who reconnects 30 years later, and he's gay, they know it's not going to be a sexual relationship. Unlike in *Object of My Affection* where at least half the couple would like it to be, that isn't the case. Their needs are different now. Their expectations are different for relationships, and so they're trying to construct something that's more interesting. Maybe not more interesting, but maybe the word is just more doable for their particular qualities as individuals. Honestly, I think that's how a lot of relationships end up anyway. It's the companionship and that sort of thing.

John Plotz: Okay. Final comic novel twist on that is that they're... going back to that Northrop Frye idea. Northrop Frye's idea makes the basic genre of the comic novel seem kind of basic. It's about girl gets boy, girl doesn't get boy, it's courtship. It ends with the happy marriage. When it ends, it ends with the "and they lived happily ever after." That's the Northrop Frye version of what the genre is doing. But what you've been describing, not just for your own writing, but I mean, just looking back to Barbara Pym or to Anita Loos or other people we've talked about that you love-

Stephen McCauley: Other Anitas?

John Plotz: Other Anitas, yes. It seems like actually, you're actually arguing the opposite which is that the comic novel works because it allows you to see people in their *neither one thing nor the other-ness*. In other words, there's the generic solution out there, but in real life, people don't find that solution, they find some other solution.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and maybe that makes some of these novels that we've been talking about less satisfying for certain kinds of readers. The students of mine who are complaining that the books aren't funny enough, maybe that's what they are looking for. They're looking for Hollywood romcom. There are plenty of novels that would fit that bill. Just for me, they may be a little bit less interesting. I also think, though, that as a writer, and frankly, as a reader too, one of the nice things about not being a critic and not reading a whole lot of critical work of that sort is that you don't have to fit into these definitions. You don't have to try to. You can just invent whatever feels right for the characters in your particular voice.

John Plotz: Yes. Could you imagine a novel called Carpet or Swamp?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, by William S. Burroughs or someone.

John Plotz: Yes. I agree with what you're saying, Steve, but I also think it's something more than that. I think you're saying... at least I'm convinced from this conversation that what makes the comic novel so satisfying isn't just that it might or might not happen to fit into those formats, it's that it actually allows you to see life... just to see the way that life doesn't actually fit into those forms. We're handed those forms. Everyone knows the kind of Anne Hathaway princess-movie version of what you're supposed to be like when you're growing up. Then you grow up and you fall in love with somebody, or you fall out of love with somebody and you realize, "Oh, wait a second, it doesn't look like that. It looks like... it's kind of like the first cousin of that."

John Plotz: A comic novel seems to be sort of committed to saying, "Well, actually, yes, if you look at people in their quirkiness, and the fact that they have their own bodies and their own habits and their own things that they're kind of ashamed of but they keep doing them anyway," that's what we all are.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and that's kind of the beauty of it, I guess. But you know what? I think too... I mean, I recently read a comic novel that ends very happily and for me, unconvincingly, and it was one of these novels that I threw across the room because I felt like I've invested all this time in these characters and in this world, and it's not... the ending wasn't earned. The happiness of the ending wasn't earned. I would much rather have seen an unhappy ending, although it was outside of the convention that this novel was clearly working in.

John Plotz: Yes. Hey, and speaking of conventions, Steve, didn't you want to put in a plug for a Barbara Pym convention?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, Barbara Pym has maintained a long-standing kind of cult following many years after her death.

John Plotz: Well deserved.

Stephen McCauley: Yes, and the Barbara Pym Society, which you can find online, has, I think, three conventions a year, one of them in Boston on the weekend of March 22, 2019 at the Harvard Law School and people present papers about her work.

John Plotz: I love that. That sounds good.

Stephen McCauley: Would you go?

John Plotz: I don't know. I really, really have to read *Sweet Dove Died*, and I sort of now have to re-read *Less than Angels* because what you were saying about the... I was just remembering how satisfyingly, unsatisfying the ending of that novel is. But yes, if people are talking about those ones, sure. Sure I would go. Yes. I would go to a Muriel Spark Society meeting too, though. I'm also a fan of the Doris Lessing novels that you make fun of in *Object of My Affection*.

Stephen McCauley: Oh, right. Without having read, I must say.

John Plotz: Don't admit that on tape.

Stephen McCauley: I know, please.

John Plotz: Okay. Steve, this has been an awesome conversation, and as you know, we conclude with Recallable Books, which is basically a recommendation for further reading on the topic. I got to say this whole discussion has been like a set of recommendations for me. I have like 20 more books to read now. But as with all the books that we discussed today, we're going to recommend a couple of books, and then there will be links to those on our website along with other material for people who want to explore this topic further, or people who want to write in and tell us what they thought about their definition of the comic novel. Steve, can I ask you what book you're going to plug for recallable books?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, I'm going to plug a very dangerous book-

John Plotz: Oh, go ahead.

Stephen McCauley: ... that was originally published around, I think, 1974. It's called *After Claude*, and it was written by Iris Owens.

John Plotz: Oh my God, I've never heard of it.

Stephen McCauley: It was recently or maybe within the last six years, let's say, reprinted by New York Review Books. It is a very extreme novel in many ways. My definition of it is it's like a Jean Rhys novel with this killer sense of humor, which Jean Rhys novels do not have. This novel turns extremely dark and forbidding sort of two thirds of the way into it.

John Plotz: Yes. Wow, I can't wait.

Stephen McCauley: And she's a very interesting character. She used to write kind of high-toned erotica for the Olympia Press in Paris under the pen name Harriet Daimler. She's a fascinating woman. She only wrote one other novel under her real name which was Iris Owens, and this is a book that I've been giving to people for years, long before it was reprinted. Probably like 40% of them would say, "Oh my God, that book is amazing. I love that book." And at least 60% would say, "Why did you even think that this would interest me? This is a disgusting, horrible novel."

John Plotz: That sounds awesome. Okay. I'm going to plug an academic novel, which is Randall Jarrell *Pictures from an Institution*. Do you like that one?

Stephen McCauley: Yes, I love that novel.

John Plotz: I think it's amazing comedy, and I think there's... we probably don't have time to talk about it, but it's a response to Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe*, and it includes an unbelievable portrait of a novelist writing a comic novel. This woman, Gertrude, who is at the heart of... who was meant to be Mary McCarthy and is kind of at the heart of Randall Jarrell's novel. I don't know. I have so many great lines from it, but I guess the one I want to emphasize sort of has to do with this notion of being able to figure out what makes a place different from other places. And so at one point, the novel says, "The people of Benton like the rest of us, were born, fell in love, married and died, lay sleepless all night, saw the first star of evening and wished upon it, won lotteries, and wept for you, but not at Benton."

John Plotz: The idea is, *yes, fine, life is the same everywhere, but actually it's different everywhere too*. No one place is like any other place, and I think... yes, it's a novel I... Robert Lowell reviewed it when it first came out and said it's an inspired joke book, and I get that, it is a joke book, but I feel like it... what's inspired about it is so much more than it just being a joke book.

Stephen McCauley: What's funny, when I read *The Sellout*, I was thinking the only thing that I can compare it with in terms of the line-by-line intensity of the comic insight was *Pictures from the Institution*.

John Plotz: Yes, awesome. Okay. Steve, thank you so much. It's been a huge pleasure, and I'll just end by saying that *Recall This Book* is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's affiliated with Public Books, and it's recorded and edited in the Media Lab with the Brandeis Library by Plotz, Ferry, and also a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston Area and beyond. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, *Fly Away*. Sound editing is by Aneil Tripathy, production assistance from Matthew Schratz. Mark Dellelo oversees and advises on technological matters, and we appreciate the support of Brandeis generally, and specifically of the university librarian, Matthew Sheehy, and the dean, Dorothy Hodgson.

John Plotz: We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or contact us via social media or our website, which is [recallthisbook.org](http://recallthisbook.org). 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, which include topics like opioid addiction, minimalism, old and new media, and also a lovely recent interview with Madeline Miller, the author of *Circe*. Upcoming episodes will include a conversation with Samuel Delany, another science fiction author who Steve probably also hasn't read.

Stephen McCauley: I have.

John Plotz: Oh, you have. Good. All right. I love that guy. And a discussion of animals, poetical and otherwise, with the poet David Ferry and the biologist, E. O. Wilson, and also a Recall This Book first, which is a collaboration with Harvard's Mahindra Humanities Center on the topic of distraction. For all of us here, thanks for listening today.