

John Plotz: Hello and welcome to *Recall This Book...* A...what's a good word for this? An auxiliary episode. A spinoff episode. So I'm here with Elizabeth Ferry and Elizabeth-

Elizabeth Ferry: An appendage.

John Plotz: An appendage?

Elizabeth Ferry: An appendix episode.

John Plotz: An appendix.

Elizabeth Ferry: How about an appendix?

John Plotz: Okay. So this is the first time, Elizabeth, that you and I have just sat down in a room together to do this episode, which is-

Elizabeth Ferry: That's right, the two of us.

John Plotz: Weird. Just the two of us. So you will have come to this because you just listened to the Zadie Smith podcast, which is great. If you haven't for some reason, if you came to it backwards, go back and listen to Zadie Smith first and then-

Elizabeth Ferry: This will make much more sense.

John Plotz: Yes, this will make more sense, since we're basically a series of footnotes. Maybe that's what we are. But so I will just say that Elizabeth and I spent more time with Zadie Smith than just is reflected in the podcast because she actually was invited to Brandeis to spend a whole day apropos of all the freshman reading her book *Swing Time*.

John Plotz: So, she came, she spoke to us on the podcast; then she spoke to a whole bunch of faculty, who were going to lead discussions about *Swing Time*. So, that was maybe 45 people and then she spoke to an auditorium full of Brandeis undergraduates and some other folks. So, we spent some time with her kind of in-between, but we have three public events to talk about. So, we'll mainly talk about the podcast,

but we will feel free to bring in interesting things that she said in any of those events.

Elizabeth Ferry: And there was a lot of pattern.

John Plotz: Yeah, there was a lot of pattern.

Elizabeth Ferry: I don't think it will be weird.

John Plotz: Totally. I mean I think one thing that really struck us, Elizabeth, you were saying this earlier, she's just very on point. I mean, what she is thinking about right now, *those* are the topics she will raise and she'll kind of run with them.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah and they're fascinating and beautifully expressed. So it's not like, one could imagine that being like, "*Could you please stop talking about that?*" You got it. I got it. I got it.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right. She talked about that fear, as you mentioned, she talked about the fear of repeating herself, that the novelist just does write the same damn thing over and over again. She said, Nabokov is somebody who does that. In a way, what we heard her do was run into channels that she's thinking about but she thinks about them in really interesting ways, and so she was in those same channels over and over and we were delighted.

Elizabeth Ferry: And she's so... Without at all pretending that we're friends or anything, in some sort of contrived way, she's extremely available...I mean, it's sort of when people say that somebody is a good conversationalist, right? But in a way... And maybe this will speak to some of our things about authenticity and performance.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

Elizabeth Ferry: But in a way that... There's no sort of... It's not like people you meet who are kind of pretending they're your best friend or something.

John Plotz: Yeah, right. I agree with that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yet you really feel you're invited into her thinking.

John Plotz: Totally. But--

Elizabeth Ferry: She's listening to you too, right? So that is a lovely quality.

John Plotz: Right. But there was not a ton of small talk. I mean, in fact at one point she was sitting in the (I'll reveal a secret of the trade, which is that you sit around in this "green room" in advance waiting to go on in front of the undergraduates) and I was sitting in the green room with her because I was going to interview her in front of a bunch of undergraduates.

John Plotz: When I walked in, she and the Dean were sitting next to each other and she was just reading Kierkegaard. She just felt like reading Kierkegaard so that's what she's going to do. Then when she came back to the undergraduates, somebody asked a question and she's like, "Well you know, Kierkegaard has something to say about that."

Elizabeth Ferry: I was just reading him.

John Plotz: It was really charming. So, I think you put it really well. I mean, if we had to run through her obsessions, one of them would definitely be... She has a familiar but very subtle critique of authenticity. She doesn't believe in the kind of the deep core identity that we possess in some profound level. It made me think about Lionel Trilling making the distinction between *authenticity* and *sincerity*.

John Plotz: What he meant by *sincerity* is a form of that, what you call the availability. I totally get it. You are performing a little bit because you're among strangers. So there's a way you behave among strangers, but it doesn't... You're not going to lie to them. You're not going to pretend to an interest you don't feel. But on the other hand, you are going to find what

the common ground is, that we could share a conversation about.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right. Right. Yeah. It actually also reminded me of another of her ideas that she kept returning to, which was the way in which writers are not like or like other people, and also by extension, the way in which artists are like and not like other people.

John Plotz: Yes. Totally.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right. So, I mean, even the way... Both in the sense that she was talking about how novelists write the same book over and over again and then she kept returning to the same ideas over and over again. Also, the... "I'm reading Kierkegaard and then it's going to kind of naturally flow into my conversation."

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Though she also had that point about rock and rollers as people who just don't know where to quit. There are forms of art that are just like *bang, bang, bang* going forward. I kind of wanted to hear her vision of the art that tacks and takes into account involvement or attunement or something.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah. You brought that up actually in the interview, but it was one of the balls that didn't--

John Plotz: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So just to run through, let's put those big obsessions on the table. So, you mentioned one of them is about authenticity and one of them is about the way that artists are performers, especially novelists are performers, but then we're all performers in our everyday life as well. So, that's a version of the critique of authenticity that I think is quite subtle and distinctive.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yes. Also, at one point she says in the interview with you about sort of... I believe that humans are sacred and so in that sense, I believe in a soul, but I don't believe there's

some core, a soul in the sense of this core you can get down to that never changes, right?

John Plotz: Totally. I mean, of course I'm always trying to get people to plug Hannah Arendt and I feel like Zadie Smith did do that.

Elizabeth Ferry: Speaking of people who have obsessions.

John Plotz: Yeah exactly. But in this case she went one better than that because she phrased in her own way and she said this is in her mind something that seems to be a very Arendtian problem, which is figuring out who someone is, is not like saying what they are, but it's also not as simple as just finding that inimitable interiority.

John Plotz: Because in fact, *who they are* is something that goes on in their interaction with others. I got to say about... She didn't talk that much about her own fiction because she clearly doesn't like going back. But that is what I love about her fiction. You see people coming out in their interaction with others... Sides of them are revealed that they don't know.

Elizabeth Ferry: So can I ask you, as someone who is more of an expert on the British novel than me-

John Plotz: Yes. But can we talk about... Can we just name her other obsessions or do-

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, yeah. Name the obsessions.

John Plotz: Yeah, so name the obsession. So the other-

Elizabeth Ferry: Okay. Wait, before we do that. Just remind me to ask something about the British novel and this question of-

John Plotz: We'll, let's go back right to it. Yeah. So, I just want to name the other obsession. One is what I call the *golden ticket*, which is the way of thinking about access to elite institutions, especially universities. Which she talked about a lot and not the faux meritocracy, but like the hypocrisy

built into a so-called meritocratic system, that allowed only a few people to climb out of working-class education into the great free British university system.

John Plotz: So on the one hand she was saying, *now that it's gone, let's applaud what that public university system did*. That's why she quoted people like Tony Judt, and she could have mentioned Raymond Williams or other people like that. Richard Hoggart. For the way that it was a class crossing mechanism. So let's-

Elizabeth Ferry: At least for a few.

John Plotz: For a few, but then let's also not forget the bogusness of that because it allowed people, and she explicitly included herself, that people who did get that ticket to Cambridge to somehow feel special and not understand that letting in 2 out of 2000 was part of the game.

John Plotz: Then I guess the final preoccupation that she had that we didn't... She has a very strong conception of what the politics of the novel should be, but they don't necessarily look like what counts as political to the younger generation, which is very woke and focused on certain kinds of cultural issues.

John Plotz: In fact, she was a little bit sharp with the undergraduate questioners who wanted her to talk through identity categories. So, I liked the way in which she didn't want to cede the political ground. She wanted to say *no*, there's another way to think about politics that doesn't require you to go through identity and categories.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's right. So, and she actually brought it up in your interview too when she talked about sort of her affinity with *Olive Kittridge*.

John Plotz: *Olive Kittridge*. Absolutely.

Elizabeth Ferry: She said, ostensibly I have nothing in common with an old white lady from Maine. But-

John Plotz: Yeah, it broke my heart that she wouldn't take the bait on Willa Cather there, by the way.

Elizabeth Ferry: I know. That was great.

John Plotz: I was really bummed.

Elizabeth Ferry: You wanted her to give a PSA for Willa Cather.

John Plotz: Yeah. That was the public service announcement I wanted. Yeah, that's true.

Elizabeth Ferry: But anyhow, so, and this sort of idea of... She's kind of interestingly located it in *visibility*, right? The affinity is nothing that you could *see* necessarily. But at the same time, clearly having a highly sophisticated and leftist critique about structure, right? That came out in her discussion of education, it came out in her discussion of...

Elizabeth Ferry: There was a really interesting moment and with the faculty when somebody said--in talking about *Swing Time*--we've all had that experience of somebody that you grow up with who... Just things don't turn out well. Smith said, "Well, I mean, for a lot of black people, it is... That's like a whole neighborhood or a whole country. It's not just one person." I thought that was a really strong basis from which to make politics.

John Plotz: I totally agree. Just to say more about that, I thought, she's disavowing and especially towards the undergraduates, she disavowed in quite straightforward terms the notion that you would have an automatic affinity or identity with people. But--she also definitely was not at all shy about referring to herself as a black writer or talking about the experience of being a black Briton.

John Plotz: I've read articles where she talks about the way in which if there's a kind of vulnerability or a wound in the society in Britain, it's like young black men that are going to bear the

brunt of it. So, it's not like she denies that those things especially on statistical-

Elizabeth Ferry: Or that they're commonalities. That's right.

John Plotz: Right. Right. That's true.

Elizabeth Ferry: That those commonalities have specific historical reasons.

John Plotz: In a way to go back to the "golden ticket" point. She said something really that I found incredibly poignant, which is she talked about getting to Cambridge... Okay. So I already mentioned, she's sort of 2 in 2000 figure leaving her own school and getting to Cambridge and then discovering that there are these schools where three-out-of-four people are going to end up at Oxford and Cambridge.

John Plotz: She talked about how hard it is to fall out of the upper middle class. Which by the way, I think about all the time with people like Boris Johnson. There's certain people who are just born with the assurance that whatever they do, they're going to be cushioned. Most of the Tory Party are like that, but boy does Boris Johnson have it in spades.

Elizabeth Ferry: I was listening to the coverage of Woodstock, because it was the 50th anniversary of Woodstock, it was like they didn't have a permit until a month beforehand and then they didn't build a fence because they only had time either to build either a stage or a fence and then they ran out of food so the army brought them food.

Elizabeth Ferry: Then all of these things happen and it's like Jesus Christ, white privilege is... We just completely flame out and yet somehow this will become this iconic historical event that everybody remembers. Because it's okay if you don't provide for any food, because the army will come and give you food.

John Plotz: And by the way, for me, I totally... For people who haven't read Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, I completely commend

what she said about how Lessing's *fifth child* works as a great way of thinking about that because that is one of those perfect privileged childhoods that's being described and this is perfect, shiny, happy couple.

John Plotz: Then what it takes to destroy it is a fifth child who's literally satanic. That can break the family but basically nothing else could. Elizabeth, you and I, I mean we don't need to get totally self-referential, but we're both children of academics and we grew up in a situation where my kids go to the same school that you went to, and there's an understanding that we're part of that world where... It's not like you can't fall through.

Elizabeth Ferry: I feel it's natural and easy and... Yeah.

John Plotz: There's just not that many holes in that floor. Zadie Smith's point was like, "Well, one of the reasons there's not that many holes in that floor is that there's not that many holes in the ceiling for where I came from".

Elizabeth Ferry: That's really well put. What I was going to ask you was about... Was what we said a few minutes ago about these sort of two ways of being like the rock-star *charge forward*... I'm constantly self-actualized and then-

John Plotz: Yes. Which is also President Trump in her account, people who think being my best self is somehow an achievement.

Elizabeth Ferry: Which is also President Trump and her account. Right. And means not just an achievement but a full realization of the self.

John Plotz: Totally. Right.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's how the self should be. Then there's the other mode, which is this kind of relational, the self emerges through interaction and you-

John Plotz: Yeah, *involvement* was the word I tried to throw out to her, but she didn't really bite. Exactly.

Elizabeth Ferry: But you just were saying that,, and I agree that that comes out really clearly in her prose, right. That there's this sort of way in which her characters are kind of constantly emergent through their relationships. So, then what I wanted to ask you was can you give a little genealogy of the British novel that is playing with this?

John Plotz: Oh yeah. Okay. So, that's really interesting. So, in order... Yes, I can, but I would say two things about that. One is Zadie Smith, like a lot of British novelists, spends a lot of time actually praising the experimental European tradition, so she talks about Kierkegaard a lot. She actually didn't talk about Russian novels a lot.

Elizabeth Ferry: She kind of dissed the French though.

John Plotz: In front of the undergraduates, she threw the French under the bus for not being funny. She said the English are funny and I thought that was revealing because I actually do think that the sense of humor in Zadie Smith is connected to Jane Austen and it's connected to Muriel Spark, whom she praised. She praised *The Girls of Slender Means*, which Steve McCauley and I talked about on the podcast because Muriel Spark is a totally brilliant, mid-century comic novelist.

John Plotz: So there's a tradition of kind of humanistic warmth, where basically you see characters in their foibles but you nonetheless embrace them in that. I think she belongs to that, but I think she wants to locate herself.

Elizabeth Ferry: Forster definitely belongs to that.

John Plotz: Forster totally belongs to that. Right? Actually I think Zadie Smith is a lot funnier than Forester. Forster tries to be funny. He does not succeed the way Zadie Smith succeeds. I think she's left her whatever... I was going to say master, but that's not the right word. She's left her old instructor behind

in that regard. Virginia Woolf is really not funny at all. I'm going to get hate mail for that. Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Then Kingsley Amis could be in that tradition.

John Plotz: I guess.

Elizabeth Ferry: But it's a different kind of funny.

John Plotz: That's minor. Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: It's so fucking funny though.

John Plotz: It is.

Elizabeth Ferry: But it's a different kind of funny too. It's not sort of the foibles. Actually, Trollope is someone-

John Plotz: Well Trollope is, but I was going say the other person she mentions, which I think is completely fair, is she raved about Hilary Mantel and that's when she mentioned Muriel Spark. The point there would be that Hilary Mantel is someone who... Even before she was required to write a historical novel in order to become famous, she nonetheless was able to see characters in a sort of funny sideways way. I actually would put Penelope Fitzgerald in that category too.

John Plotz: But what I was going to say is that Zadie Smith definitely wants to link herself more to a European experimental novel tradition, which would be the Nouveau Roman, people like Robbe-Grillet. She mentioned this book, now I'm forgetting the name. What's it called? *The Bathroom*. Yeah. Which I don't know at all, but it's clearly an experimental Belgian novel. In her famous "Two paths for the novel," she basically says lyric realism is really boring and stodgy and the experimental novel is this richer way to go.

Elizabeth Ferry: Which is sort of odd because-

John Plotz: I agree. So I think it's odd and I mean, I'm glad Zadie Smith is not here. Maybe she won't even listen to this because I think it's odd.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, I think it's mostly odd just because she writes much more like a lyric realist.

John Plotz: I think it's not a bad thing but I think she's trying to describe something that she isn't like, that's exactly, I totally agree. Yeah. So she belongs to the state. Like she throws Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* under the bus in that essay. But honestly, that novel is not so far from the world of how Zadie Smith realizes her characters and puts them into play with one another. So I think that's interesting. So I think there's a nominal genealogy for Zadie Smith, which is real because it's the people you think about when you're writing. But then there's a kind of shadow genealogy, which you can tell includes Woolf and Fostser.

John Plotz: I think the reason that the E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf comparison continues to be made, and it resonates, is actually that they are very unusual in the English novel tradition in being great essayists as well. Foreter, like I mentioned the book on the novel, but he has a bunch of other essays as well. Virginia Woolf has a famous book of essays called the *Common Reader*. You could think about *A Room of One's Own*, essentially an argued essay, and she was very aware when she answered my first question about not going back to her own novels.

Elizabeth Ferry: And *Moments of Being*.

John Plotz: Well yeah, *Moments of Being*. Right. Which we've discussed already on the podcast. Yeah. Oh my God, it is an echo chamber.

John Plotz: But yeah, Zadie Smith herself made the point that she can go back to her essays because they're argumentative. So, she makes a distinction in her mind, which I completely get. I mean, as somebody who is only capable of writing the

argumentative stuff and not the fictional stuff, I like that a novelist also thinks of those two things as two different worlds.

Elizabeth Ferry: The novel that tries to make an argument in that kind of way is usually not a very good novel...

John Plotz: I think that comes back to something, Elizabeth, you said before, but let's unpack it a bit more which is that Zadie Smith is acute in that she sees what is the problems that people have. But to say that she's generous also means that she is...She will never *cancel* anyone. So, do you want to talk about that response to a student?

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, I mean it just, it had to do with this character, Amy, who is in *Swing Time*.

John Plotz: She's Madonna, isn't she? Yeah okay. She's Madonna. You know, global do-gooder, doesn't really think too much about what she's doing when she's doing good.

Elizabeth Ferry: Sort of constantly having a circle around her who are sort of her friends and whose job it is to be her friends and to cater to her.

John Plotz: Paid friends.

Elizabeth Ferry: Paid friends. Yes.

John Plotz: Poorly paid friends. Yes.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right. It's kind of buffoonish. It's kind of character caricature, not in a bad way, I think it's good, but some... An undergraduate asked a question about it and she sort of... Zadie Smith kind of asserted her philosophy towards her kind of humanism.

John Plotz: Yeah, fictional humanism by the way, because she was interested in them. She said fiction is the way to do... Well go ahead and say the humanism, but yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well I mean I didn't get the sense, I mean that seemed to be a point when she was actually crossing over from fiction.

John Plotz: Oh, I see. She was not just talking about characters. She was talking about people.

Elizabeth Ferry: She wasn't just talking about characters. Right? She sort of said *I'm not one of these people who can be like... "I just can't with someone"*.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She waved her hand in a, "*I can't with*". Yeah. She was a very... She's a very good mimic, actually.

Elizabeth Ferry: She's quite a good performer. There was a little bit of a generational thing in there too. It was definitely like speaking to a group of college students and finding some opportunities to assert a particular point of view about contemporary social life.

John Plotz: Yeah. So, Elizabeth, final question. What did we... what did we do wrong? What should we have asked her? Should we have pressed her? Is there something we should have pressed her on more other than making her read?

Elizabeth Ferry: I wanted to hear more about... I don't think we should've pressed her necessarily because it was getting into the weeds in various, especially in front of the... Either in the faculty or the undergraduate part. But I would've liked to hear more about novels and specificities of novels and stuff. And I actually-

John Plotz: I agree. She was terrific on Hillary Mantel. She was terrific on Muriel Spark.

Elizabeth Ferry: I just like her forthrightness about what she likes and doesn't like and why and sort of these... Even though I didn't either, maybe I didn't agree or I just didn't understand some of the genealogies that she was tracing.

Elizabeth Ferry: I just really enjoyed hearing that, and I actually wanted to bring in I actually did have a conversation with her about the way... So John and I teach a class from time to time of novels and ethnographies, and I was telling her about that, and we were sort of talking a little bit about novels and why novels are different from ethnographies and stuff. I think that sort of leads into a conversation more about what the novel can do. Actually I was just going to say that just to circle back around to what we were saying about Jane Austen and her kind of everything working out and being very systematic. I think *that* is interesting because that is characteristic with a certain kind of ethnography and particularly within a kind of structuralists tradition. Whereas somebody like George Eliott with *Middlemarch* is much more of a Malinowski kind of-

John Plotz: Teaching it next week. Very excited.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah. Good. So I think that would be interesting to talk more with her.

John Plotz: Actually, there's a thread I should have picked up on more except I was afraid of sounding too much like an English professor, but she mentioned Phillip Roth several times and that's a really interesting comparison because she clearly does identify with American fiction in ways that we could have teased out more and the Roth comparison... Because talk about somebody who writes about twins. I mean, he has the *Double Life*, the *Counterpart*, *Exit Ghost*. So many of his novels are structured on the parallel lives that either get involved or are mirrors of one another.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right.

John Plotz: I think that's what she likes about him. I mean I do think that's the affinity.

Elizabeth Ferry: And on that note.

John Plotz: Okay, on that note, so I will just say thank you for listening to this episode of *Recall This Book*.

John Plotz: As always, our music is courtesy of Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. We are grateful to Claire Ogden and Matthew Schratz for all of their editorial and technical and other production assistance.

John Plotz: And please, please, please tell your friends about this. Tell your relatives about this, tell people you don't like about it. Rate us or give us a review on iTunes or Stitcher. We get no money. We just want to get the word out. So the best way for that to happen is by word of mouth.

John Plotz: So from all of us here, Elizabeth, you and me in a room together.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's right.

John Plotz: I feel if we were Zadie Smith, we would sing, but I guess we can't sing, we'll say "so long, farewell..." Okay.

Elizabeth Ferry: And thanks.

John Plotz: Good night.