

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I'm John Plotz, and my guest today is Alex Star, brilliant editor for Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, former editor of *Lingua Franca*, founding editor of the Boston Globe ideas section, and editor of many remarkable prize winning books, including George Packer's "The Great Unwinding" and James Foreman's "Locking up Our Own." He's also a friend of mine of extremely long standing. The name of this new series for Recall This Book is Books in Dark Times, and it explicitly takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt's "Men in Dark Times" from 1968, which proposes "that even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain flickering and often weak light that some men and women in their lives and their works will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth." So at this dark moment we really want to know what brings people like Alex and like you, dear listener, comfort or joy.

John Plotz:

Basically I want to talk about your comfort food of books at a time like this, because my idea is that a lot of people now are going to be finding themselves actually able to sit down and pull something off the shelf, and more than that, wanting to pull something off the shelf.

Alex Star:

Right, right, right. No, good. So I'm a little constrained by sort of external factors, one of which is we moved into this house and we've got our bookshelves built about a few days ago. They finally were built, but we have 80 boxes of books in the basement, which I am only beginning to unpack.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. So you basically have to do the kind of ... it's like that fishing game you played as a kid where you just stick your hand in and you pull out a book.

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So sometimes it's quite a treasure in the Jack in the box or ... I don't know. What am I trying to say? But sometimes it's not.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

So it's a little arbitrary, what's come out so far, and I can't say I've deliberately selected something entirely new just because of my mood or circumstances or philosophical reflections on the present.

John Plotz:

So Alex, in other words, you're dipping into books at random now, but is there a book that you are anchored in right now?

Alex Star:

Yeah. I wanted to mention two. So one, I think is the Jill Lepore, "These Truths."

John Plotz:

Oh, yeah.

Alex Star:

That's just been a book that's been sitting on my shelf for a long time. I would say just once I got into it ... and it took me a little while, but once I got into it, sort of the skill with which she fills in broad outlines, but does it with unexpected twists and terrific quotes and vignettes, and kind of strikes certain balances in certain ways that I sort of find interesting. It's pretty absorbing.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

Yeah. I was going to quote one line, just to give an example of where she can just do something so much with so little is when she's talking about the Second Great Awakening in the twenties.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

And the kind of Christianization of America. I mean she has one great statistic that church attendance really seemed to grow from about 1 in 10 to 8 in 10 in about 15 years, which seems hard to believe, but if true, that dramatizes it pretty well.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

But it's Whitefield who said this. He said, "I would go to jail with you, but I would not go to heaven without you."

John Plotz:

I would go to jail with you, but I would not -

Alex Star:

But I would not go to heaven without you. In other words, he really genuinely believes that every single person he was speaking to at a camp meetings should go to heaven and would go to heaven with him and he would stake his own life -

John Plotz:

Right.

Alex Star:

- and the possibility of his own redemption on bringing everyone with him, absolutely everyone who was there at the camp meeting. So when you just think of the transition from this sort of Calvinist idea of limited atonement and only the saints go to heaven, to a kind of more open-minded, you participate in your own salvation and you can make it happen through your own will. Instead of just making some abstract comments about Arminianism, that quote, "I would not go to heaven without you," which sounds like a huckster-y ad man flipping one by us. It's nonetheless such incredibly brilliant rhetoric, and-

John Plotz:

Wait, are you saying that it's brilliant rhetoric? Or you're saying that it actually marks a kind of development of ethos, like a different way of conceiving -

Alex Star:

Well I think both. I think it's pretty hard to separate what was an innovation in theology from an innovation in salesmanship.

John Plotz:

So it's actually funny that you would mention that that would be the point you had mentioned, because I was going to say the thing that I've been really drawn into lately is "Wolf Hall" and the really -

Alex Star:

Oh yeah, so we're really thinking about the Reformation era.

John Plotz:

Yeah, exactly. I like it because it's Protestant theology, but it is all about hucksterism and salesmanship too, except the way that he ... that is Thomas Cromwell, the central character in "Wolf Hall", the way that he sort of saves souls isn't so much by preacherly manifestation of feeling. It's by kind of bureaucratic legerdemain and manipulation and insiderisms, but always in pursuit of this vision of bringing whatever, Wycliffeism or his vision of God. So yeah, I think the thing that feels both fascinating and comforting about that book right now is that it's a book that draws me into something where I can really feel how deep the stakes are for the person involved.

Alex Star:

Right, right.

John Plotz:

It's a book ... usually when I'm reading a novel on the side in my ordinary life, I'm looking for something that will allow me to come into it, not exactly speed through it, but just kind of enter it on my own terms and then leave again, but right now what I really want is a different kind of book.

Alex Star:

Oh, I see.

John Plotz:

I want a book that has tentacles that really kind of holds me in.

Alex Star:

Yeah, and what gives it tentacles?

John Plotz:

So for me it's the way that on the one hand we see Cromwell being an operator, and on the other hand we see him ... it begins with his relationship to his beloved patron Wolsey, who he eventually loses.

Alex Star:

Right.

John Plotz:

And then it is also about his passionate intensity about revenging Woolsey and it's about his Protestantism, which can't really ... or his non-conformist, non-Catholicism, which he can't really articulate openly, but it's deeply there, and then he's also kind of just running a bunch of games all at once because he's a master Machiavellian strategist, but what I like about it is that there's a level of master Machiavellian-ness going on at the surface, but then underneath you can feel the deep conviction and how it struggles.

Alex Star:

Right.

John Plotz:

There's all these friends of his who we just hear that they're about to die or they're going to be burned or -

Alex Star:

Yeah, well remind me. I read it a long time ago, but there's also his family members who die in a -

John Plotz:

His wife dies of the plague in one day.

Alex Star:

Yeah, that's right.

John Plotz:

The daughter goes away and she comes home. Yeah.

Alex Star:

Yeah. I felt something that was just very powerful.

John Plotz:

Oh, it's incredible.

Alex Star:

It's very poised and you sort of feel his indirect emotion there. It was extraordinary. That's what stuck in my head from the book actually the most, I think probably the wife dying.

John Plotz:

Okay. Well so Alex, on a more general level, I want to pursue this thought that you're actually able to take comfort ... because my basic question is in this situation, what books give you comfort? What books give you joy? And are those two the same thing? Because I think for me, often I would say comfort and joy are the same. When I read Ursula Le Guin or something, I find it deeply comforting and it gives me joy, but then other cases like "Brothers Karamazov," it's not comforting at all. There's nothing comforting about it, but it gives me a great amount of joy because I feel like it is thinking without banisters. It is just everywhere and it's continually eroding. You think you understand how a character is grounded and then you realize, oh, but everything you think is just because that's what the character likes to think

about himself, but he's not actually grounded on that. He's grounded on something else. So he gives me joy without giving me comfort.

Alex Star:

Right. Right.

John Plotz:

So my insight is that *you* can take comfort and joy from practically anything, which is great.

Alex Star:

But I just wanted to take the term comfort a little bit, because if we were not in the plague time, it would be very tempting to use the word comfort as a pejorative.

John Plotz:

Totally.

Alex Star:

But whereas now it seems like something we can appreciate.

John Plotz:

But the only thing I would say about that is that I think it is ... I think the professional deformation of English professors is to take comfort as a pejorative, but as somebody who teaches a science fiction and fantasy class, I'm less ... I've always been less inclined to take that as a pejorative, you know?

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah.

John Plotz:

And definitely less so at this time, but yeah, and I thought about that. Why am I trying to write a book about Ursula Le Guin? And I think the answer is it's just ... yeah, I mean I guess comfort bothers me less than it bothers a lot of people in my profession.

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

I do not understand the aesthetic as necessarily proceeding from a sense of exposure to the abyssal, the confrontation with danger. I get that aesthetic objects are remarkable sometimes in being able to do that. I mean there's Richard Serra sculptures that I approach and I am thoroughly shocked and disoriented and that's right. That's what they should do, but I just don't think that's the only test for -

Alex Star:

Well no. It can be pattern and harmony and what's Bach or or something. There's a different idea there.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Have you seen the Yo-Yo Ma Instagram? He rerecorded one of the Dvořák cello pieces. I'll send it to you. It's like Coming Home. It's based on an American spiritual, Coming Home or Going Home.

Alex Star:

Yeah. I know that, yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah, and Willa Cather, who is ... she's my heart. She writes about Dvořák a lot, and when she writes about Dvořák, what she talks about is this way that the effect of that music is to send you into some sort of reverie space.

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

That maybe it can't be very representationally grounded and it's not necessarily actually revelatory. It's just an emotional space.

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

I don't think that's so bad.

Alex Star:

No, no, no, no.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

Well let me think about comfort in somewhat different terms, because there's an element of comfort and discomfort in reading Lepore, which I think has to do ... we don't trust anyone now trying to ... here's a book that's trying to tell

the big story of American history and how do we orient ourselves toward that story.

John Plotz:

Right. Right.

Alex Star:

And so on one account, American history is a kind of providential design, working toward maximum liberty and erosion of difference between classes and we're all going to be free and show the world how to be free. That's one story. There's another story that America sort of maximizes what it means to plunder and exploit and -

John Plotz:

Yeah, that's the Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States."

Alex Star:

Yeah. And Ta-Nehisi Coates's been the more recent version of it with different emphases, and those are just two kind of meta narratives, if you will, that are out there that end up organizing a lot of historical discussion, and here's Lepore, who's not really a partisan of either of those approaches or trying to just fill them in, but really trying to kind of ... we balance them in some ways using the most recent thinking in different fields.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

So this is interesting.

John Plotz:

Please share this memory with me, that when we were record hospital together, when we did the college radio show, that Arthur Paul wrote on a record that somebody ... basically the only thing people ever said about records was this record sucks or this record rocks, and basically there was a Jill Lepore character who wrote a record. It was probably Barnaby. It was pretty good. The guitar is kind of interesting, and Arthur wrote underneath, "I don't understand. You mean it sucks and it rocks?" So you're saying Jill Lepore is saying America sucks and rock?

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's exactly what she's -

John Plotz:

That should be on a bumper sticker. America: we suck and we rock.

Alex Star:

Right, right, right. So yeah, it's that modulation for better or worse. I find comfort in that, just because I'm trying to find my balance on those issues, and so I wouldn't necessarily do it exactly the way she does, but I think she is trying hard to kind of get that right and thinking about that as you read doesn't always give me comfort, but it does help me think about what would give me comfort.

John Plotz:

So wait, here's the interesting thing. So one thing a lot of people say about comfort, and it's definitely true for me, is that it's available and it's connected with escapism. It is connected with the capacity to take you and have you go somewhere else. Thomas Hardy has a whole sort of attack on fiction that doesn't ... that's not this worldly. He says the fiction that rural people want to read about the city or city people want to read about the country. It's just an invented other place. So it seems like you're saying your conception of

comfort is very this worldly, right? Because you find Jill Lepore comforting because she helps you understand our real, actual world, right?

Alex Star:

Yeah, or orient myself in a way that neither seems to be too complacent nor too simplistically alienated, to choose my words carefully.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So that's really interesting, because when I think about somebody like Le Guin or maybe Samuel Delany, but definitely Le Guin as an example, and even Willa Cather, what I like about them is that they bring me to place where I just feel like I can get my bearings on my conception of the world generally, but by being away from this world. In other words, you're saying Jill Lepore is great because she helps you get your bearings on this world, this America that we actually share, and what I'm saying is what I like about Cather or Le Guin is that they give me a conception of a world which I recognize as possible, as conceivable, as livable in, but it doesn't feel like my world. It actually feels like some other -

Alex Star:

Right.

John Plotz:

And going there, kind of like listening to Dvořák, just kind of lets me do something else. It let's me be semi-detached, I guess I would have to say. It gives me a different ... I still feel like it's the world, but I'm aware of it being kind of away from my own world. Do you know what I mean? Whereas what you're talking about is more like an attunement or engagement.

Alex Star:

Yeah, attunement, right. No, that's a good word. Yeah. I mean obviously reading fiction can in various ways do more what you're talking about, but I

think I probably resist science fiction mostly, partly because I am not quite looking for what you're describing sometimes.

John Plotz:

So wait. I'm so glad, that that lets me ask you about this book that ... I mean, Alex, you're a genius editor, everybody should know how many great books you've edited, but as you know, the book of yours that I'm obsessed with is the Peter Godfrey-Smith book about octopuses of other minds. It's called ... yes, it's called "Other Minds," right?

Alex Star:

It is.

John Plotz:

It is, yeah. So what do you ... when you think about that book, do you think about that book as a book of engagement or attunement, or do you think about it as a book of other worldliness and escape?

Alex Star:

Ah, good question. It's definitely a book of exploration. So that somewhat splits the difference. It's attuned to something, but attuned to something you don't already know. Yeah, it's diving deeper into the water or diving deeper into history and trying to reframe just the sort of question of how three-dimensional matter kind of folds itself up into something that feels like consciousness. So it's doing all of those things at once, which is one of the things I love about it, but I would not say it is creating an entirely different world to live in. I think it is inviting us in a way that feels rigorous rather than just fanciful, to use a loaded word about what it might be to sort of have the perceptual equipment of primitive certain kinds of sea animals, have their perceptual equipment, have their tasks that they need to accomplish, have certain kinds of bodies that allow you to move through the world a certain way and put all those things together, and what might that feel like?

John Plotz:

Right.

Alex Star:

The book's not directly trying to do that over and over or anything, but implicitly that is sort of a pretty exciting experience that borders on something more literary or imaginative.

John Plotz:

Yeah. You could paraphrase the intent of the book as “what is it like to be an octopus?”

Alex Star:

For sure. Yeah.

John Plotz:

So okay, I want to pick up the word fanciful, which you knew I would balk at. So you're saying that its rigorousness makes it very this-worldly because it's an experiment which is meant to be strictly rooted in the science. It's about the fact that the neural structures and the neural pathways of octopuses and maybe squid and other cephalopods are so different from ours and yet they have a kind of consciousness, which therefore is very different from ours, but we can kind of get a sense of what that consciousness is, and so you're saying that's rigorous, which makes it this worldly or something, and you're saying the opposite of that would be fanciful.

John Plotz:

But I guess what I'm saying ... to me its rigor, its success is that it does kick you sideways into really being able to think about *distributed cognition*, like the fact that octopuses basically do in some sense think with their tentacles because they have these nerve cells that are in their tentacles and are kind of wired together but not centralized. It actually allows me to think of an other

mind that works in a different way. So for me ... so the comfort of that book, and I do find that an intensely comforting book, is that there are beings ... I almost said people. There are beings on our world who just perceive and make sense of our world in a really different way from what we do, and there's just something mentally emancipating for me.

Alex Star:

That's interesting, because some people would find it very disconcerting, especially in an ethical sense, just because if animals have such rich inner lives or how clearly we're killing them, and the oceans are killing them and everything else and that -

John Plotz:

No, no, on that level, on the political level, absolutely. In terms of what the consequences of our lively, unintended consequences as a species, which have now become intended because we see the unintended consequences and then we just ignore them, which makes them intended consequences, but yeah, no. I totally agree with that. I think my response is a little bit different, which is it has to do with the sense that if we do successfully manage to kill ourselves off, which honestly we seem to be doing a pretty good job of, that there'll be a successor species around that could do something different with this world.

Alex Star:

Yeah. Okay. No, I like that. I like that, and I assume you're also ... it sounds like the possibility of these other consciousness also becomes attractive and so far as one senses the limits and flaws of our own cognitive setup and so forth.

John Plotz:

Yeah, absolutely. It does. All right. So wait, Alex, I'm going to look at my bookshelf and yell some random names at you, because ... Conrad. Does any Conrad give you great comfort or great joy?

Alex Star:

I'll tell you what gave me great discomfort, but in a very intense way was I read "The Secret Agent" when my children were very, very small and -

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

Geesh, it's a very particular emotional memory of the part of the book where ... when the sort of mentally defective young man who ultimately is -

John Plotz:

Stevie, is that his name? Yeah.

Alex Star:

I can't remember his name, but his body's blown to smithereens and he's only identified by where he lives and then his coat, right?

John Plotz:

Yep.

Alex Star:

Is that right?

John Plotz:

Yep.

Alex Star:

But there's something about just this vulnerable boy and the way he's sort of mercilessly exploited, and the poignancy with which his sort of family and home become identified, that he's found completely devastated.

John Plotz:

Yeah. He's the one who sees the horse being beaten and he says he wants to take it to bed with him because that's his idea of comfort for anything in the world is to take it to bed.

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

There's something about that tenderness in what's obviously not a particularly tender novel. It really, really had an impact on me.

John Plotz:

Well Conrad is like that, I think. He's very ... I mean he's so difficult, but he's not difficult because he doesn't know what it would be like to be happy. I mean, he can see happiness very clearly. It's just always through several panes of glass or something. There's always that possibility, because if it weren't there, it wouldn't be so painful when it was snatched away.

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah, and I love reading him, but I do find him quite difficult. There's something about just the thick ooziness of the prose that is wonderful when you kind of just ease yourself into it, but it doesn't tend to move me along the way other Victorian writers usually do.

John Plotz:

Yeah, well because he's modern, right? I mean he's -

Alex Star:

Right. Maybe it's all the levels.

John Plotz:

I think that's why I like him. It's like Hardy. He's broken out of the old, but he hasn't quite figured out what the new is.

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah. I read a lot of Hardy a year or so ago. I can't remember if we talked about that much.

John Plotz:

Oh, no.

Alex Star:

But it was a lot of fun, and so I had this book group again, and I picked "Return of the Native," and I think that was the wrong book and it was not the one I liked the most at all. It actually seemed much weaker to me than the others I read, but I was really astounded by, first of all, how much fun "Far From the Madding Crowd" is.

John Plotz:

"Far From the Madding Crowd" is unbelievable, and the Julie Christie movie is unbelievable.

Alex Star:

It's so funny. I'm dying to see it. I was just hearing someone talk today, this morning in a video conference about ... so the movie was directed by John Schlesinger.

John Plotz:

John Schlesinger, "Midnight Cowboy."

Alex Star:

In it's time ... yeah, well it was the movie he made before Midnight Cowboy.

John Plotz:

Yep.

Alex Star:

And he almost didn't get to make Midnight Cowboy because it was such a huge bomb. So that was pretty interesting.

John Plotz:

It is a stunning movie. The scene where she goes running after him with the valentine, oh my God.

Alex Star:

Well yeah, and the sword display scene must be pretty great.

John Plotz:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alex Star:

And then I've heard that -

John Plotz:

Sergeant Day? What is his name, Sergeant -

Alex Star:

Troy. Sergeant Troy.

John Plotz:

Yeah, Sergeant Troy. And the All Saints and All Souls Church, oh my God.

Alex Star:

Yeah, and then I re-read "Mayor of Casterbridge," which I had read before, and just found it extremely affecting and it just the sort of sense of the place and -

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

There was this incredible passage about sort of two different bridges and one is where more affluent people go to commit suicide and one is where poorer people do, and just that kind of observation, which exactly as you were saying before, is what Hardy might have missed in certain kinds of other kinds of fiction, was just astounding.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

I mean the plot always gets a little creaky and takes too many turns toward the end, but in that book I found myself not minding at all.

John Plotz:

Yeah.

Alex Star:

I just got really anchored in that character.

John Plotz:

And I just have to defend "Return of the Native." I know you're right. I mean Clym Yeobright is a painful character, but I do feel like it's building up towards "Jude the Obscure," which is an almost unbearably great book.

Alex Star:

So I've been saving that, so I'm glad to hear you say that, because that's my next one.

John Plotz:

I mean I think it's amazing, but it is very easy to throw the book across the room. I do think that's what makes naturalist books great is that they are so discomfiting, and "Jude the Obscure" is fantastic because it begins in a place of great natural joy and beauty. It begins in that old rural England, but by chapter three, spoiler alert, you're already done with that. You can't return to that space, and that's the space that his other novels had sort of created, and then in Jude, it's not available anymore. Hey, have you read "The Sellout"?

Alex Star:

Yes. Yes. That was great. I loved it.

John Plotz:

It's hilarious.

Alex Star:

I absolutely loved it, yeah.

John Plotz:

But kind of brilliant too, right?

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

I mean, it isn't just funny. It's actually -

Alex Star:

No, it -

John Plotz:

I think it has this driving anger to it that makes the humor amazing.

Alex Star:

Yeah, yeah. No, I can't quite figure out how he pulled that off, but -

John Plotz:

I can't either. I mean he's so mild mannered in person. Have you seen him speak?

Alex Star:

No.

John Plotz:

I pulled up a YouTube video. He's just incredibly self-effacing. I mean he's one of these people who clearly saves all his energy for his work, and then the work, I just feel like it just leaps off the page, but yeah.

Alex Star:

Yeah, and in order to sustain that kind of almost stand up voice for that long is just sort of spectacular. I can't think of another book quite like that.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. Alex, thank you so much. This was great.

Alex Star:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Recall This Book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry and the music comes from Barbara Cassidy and Eric Chasalow. It is edited by Claire Ogden and production and publicity and website design is by Kaliska Ross, and if you enjoyed this or any of our other episodes, please do rate us or review us on Stitcher or iTunes or wherever you get your podcast, and if you enjoyed this, there's a lot more conversations about books where this came from. So please give us a visit at recallthisbook.org. So Alex, thank you very, very much and thanks for listening.