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Dana Stevens (JP, EF)

John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall this Book, where we that is me, John Plotz and my co-host, Elizabeth Ferry, hello Elizabeth, Assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. So today we are extremely lucky to be joined by Dana Stevens. Known to millions all across the ether as the host of the Slate Culture Gabfest and also its film critic. Congratulations, that's just the world greatest job. So, she is a Brooklynite who wrote her comparative literature PhD Dissertation on the poet Fernando Pessoa, who was so intimidating to me. I don't even know if I said his name right, is that? Is that how you say it? Yeah OK, alright and she's the author of the reason that we are all here together this morning, which is a magnificent new book called *Cameraman: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema and the Invention of the 20th Century*. So, Dana welcome.

Dana Stevens: Thank you for having me.

John Plotz: It's so great to have you so in true RTB style, we're going to really start off by asking you to talk about your book, and then we'll probably disagree with one another about some aspects, and then we'll head off in various spirals around its central concerns and then before ending up as per usual with the section that we call usually Recallable Books. But today we have renamed that section Recallable Films, which means that each of us can rave at the end about an unduly elected Buster Keaton short or feature. OK, so among the spirals data that I hope we spiralize around your book in no particular order. I think one, I'd love to talk about the way that vaudeville, practice and aesthetics made the leap into film and then beyond film. Maybe sort of into popular

culture generally, nowadays, even with Keaton as like a crucial vector, You know. Basically, the specialness of the 1920s. The distinctiveness of the Jazz, age, aesthetics, and industry practices that allowed Keaton to soar in ways that were unimaginable with the coming of the studio system or the advent of sound. And I was thinking one thing that would be cool to talk about would be kind of that amazing mixture that Keaton pulls off of stunts and special effects as something that's like a creature of the 1920s. And then three, I hope you want to talk about this. I loved what you did with the kind of other branching paths of early cinema that get cut off unceremoniously. So especially that amazing chapter on Mabel Normand. But more generally, your sense that for every Chaplin-esque success, there were other writers and film makers and actors with divergent visions about whom nobody has ever written a book. So, you know, like the paths not taken. I loved your way of thinking about that, so I guess with those spirals hanging before us, can I just ask you to start by telling us briefly about you know what however you want to introduce your book?

Dana Stevens:

Oh, OK. Alright, well that what you just said, it got me thinking about so many things that I hope we pursue later. In the conversation, but just to present the book, I guess most generally. I feel like I'm always laying down the law at the beginning of every conversation that I don't regard this book as a biography, and I think that could be an interesting road to go down with you two, because I'm sure you've talked to many biographers and about the concept of what a biography is or can be. I'm perfectly happy for this to be shelved with biographies, right or classed with them by booksellers, if that helps bring visibility to the book, but I think it would do a disservice to the book and to the reader who goes to it, hoping to have a comprehensive account of you know everything. Buster Keaton from his birth to his death, which you actually can find in a new book called *Buster Keaton A Film Maker's Life* by James Curtis, which just happened to come out One Week after mine but which I actually don't regard....

John Plotz: (Good thing your book is not a biography, then!)

Dana Stevens: But I mean, I honestly don't regard it as a competitor at all because they provide two completely different approaches toward you know writing a life and if you were a real you know film nerd and Buster Keaton that you would. Want to read? Both books write one to sort of get the soup-to-nuts biography Mtic uselessly well researched and one to get really more of a critical study. Cultural history. I guess you would call my book something like that. So, as you mentioned. In your lead, and there's a lot of zig zags in this book, and so for example, the second chapter of the book, which is about child abuse law and child labor law at the turn of the century, barely mentions Buster Keaton at all. So, if you're going into it to you know, read sentence after sentence about the life of Buster Keaton, you're going to find that chapter be fuddling, but to me those zig zags were necessary in order to do what I wanted to do, which was to take his life and place it in different cultural historical contexts to look at it as exemplary is the wrong word, but to look at it as a very illustrative life about its time. In other words, if you take his life span, which went from 1895 to 1966 and look at what happened in American history and world history and technology. And you know, law and social science. In so many different fields during that time, it's a wildly different world that he's born into from the one that he dies in, and so I just wanted to look at his life as a kind of lens through which to look at all of those. But then the kind of mysterious thing about his life is how did he make that transition to film so seamlessly and effortlessly, right? I mean, after a childhood on the stage. Being not just a cog in a family act, but really the star of the Family Act and the generator of most of the new material in the Family Act, right so he had already had 17 years as a successful performer on stage beginning around five and then at age 21 he goes into the movies, essentially almost by accident, just because they're there. You know the family Act breaks up and he sort of steps onto a soundstage with Roscoe

Arbuckle and decides, hey, I think I'll try this filmmaking thing and suddenly he is an extremely accomplished filmmaker. And within a few weeks to months of working with Arbuckle, he's co-directing those movies. Shortly after that, he's making his own movies. So how did that transition happen so seamlessly? I mean part of it, you know, we can just attribute to the great man theory, right? He's a great entertainer and performer. And has that kind of vision. But I think also there's history at work. There's history kind of operating through his life and his body in that way. And so, a big question that obsessed me, thinking about his childhood, which was so much fun to research, was what movies he must have seen. You know, we don't really know. He only mentions a couple in interviews, but if I could, you know go back in time and interview Buster Keaton, one of the main things I would want to ask him is tell me your cinematic memories of childhood. You know, because he must have grown up surrounded by movies, they were always showing films on vaudeville bills and all of that knowledge and savvy kind of went into his own transition into film making but yeah it was in part trying to understand that transition that made me so interested in this child.

John Plotz: Actually, Dana, can I pick up one part of that set because you tell that story of, like you know, the way that Butcher Boy got made whatever it was within six hours of his coming to the studio or something? But you also mentioned this thing about his taking the camera home. I guess there's maybe there's different apocryphal versions of that, but that notion that he's, from the beginning, it's not just that he knows how to be before the camera, but that he's interested in the camera itself, like the mechanics of it, the logic of it, and you know that's a time when people were inventing a lot of new kinds of trick stops, trick shots, or stop action. Do you fit that? Do you connect that with the vaudeville/Music Hall slash circus tradition? Like in other words, is there a lot of mechanical knowledge that goes into pulling those shows off to begin with? Or is it more just like - this is a brand-new

direction for him, like is the camera you know, do you see the camera as being part of the whole bag of tricks that fits with that older entertainment tradition? Or is it really the new thing?

Dana Stevens: I mean, you could look at it both ways, I think, in terms of spatially, it's something very different, right? I mean to use the space of a proscenium stage, versus using the space that a film camera allows you to use where it's mobile, and you can take it outside and the whole world becomes your stage, that's a really big shift, you know, that he had to make. But certainly, if he was growing up in vaudeville, he was also growing up around all kinds of mechanisms, you know, for one thing there were films themselves being projected and often as I talked about in the book in the early days of film, people were more interested in the mechanism than they were in what was being projected is sort of like today on the vaudeville bill, the kinetic graph and what we were excited about was that you were witnessing a new piece of technology, not necessarily what was being projected, so there's that.

John Plotz: The cinema of attractions yeah.

Dana Stevens: Right, so he grew up amidst that for sure. He also was always a lover of machines and tinkering with engines. Or you know, any kind of a mechanical device, so part of it was just, I think, personal to him. But then yeah, he also, I mean he grew up, his parents were good friends of Harry Houdini, you know? And then performed with him on a bill sometimes. And there's certainly all kinds of mechanical devices involved in stage magic and you know there were robots in vaudeville and things like that, so it's not as if he wouldn't have been around technology. Roscoe Arbuckle said this great thing about Keaton that I don't think this quote made it into the book, but I wish I'd put it in, where he said he lived inside the camera. You know that was his description of his friend Keaton. And I think you see that from the earliest days of him directing is that he seemed

comfortable with the camera. In a way I don't know if it was more comfortable than on stage, 'cause I never saw him perform on stage, but it was almost as if he found that his own thing, the thing that he wanted to do, as opposed to what he had been born into without ever really choosing.

John Plotz: Yeah, it really does make you appreciate. Again, I want, I meant to go back and watch the *Cameraman* that late great silent, the 1929 movie where I feel like all of that thinking about what he can do, what the camera can and can't do comes out, you know, even the notion that he has the monkey operating the camera by the end of it. You know that that.

Dana Stevens: Right?

John Plotz: It's some, you know that it, he's sort of telling a story. Cause doesn't this the character in that film is a tin type photographer, right? To begin with, he's just like someone who, yeah, so he's telling that transition moment, but from the end of the silent era, rather than from the beginning of it. Right?

Dana Stevens: Yeah, I just saw that with an audience, actually, I just showed to the Austin Film Society for a book promotion event and it was great to see how well they played. I mean *The Cameraman* is just such a crowd pleaser. You know it's a wonderful movie and it and it's one that has this melancholy to it because it's really his last moment of freedom, you know, it's his last silent film well, no, it's a second to last silent film, but it's the last one in which he really had much creative control. It's his last great movie basically so, and he was still only about 33 years old.

John Plotz: Yeah, so get maybe we can, maybe we can jump, can we jump right there to that crucial moment? Cause obviously that's something that people think about a lot with Keaton, but not just with Keaton. They think about it with a whole generation of like I guess jazz

age film making the question of the transition that some few people survived and Chaplin obviously survived, Greta Garbo. But, you know, Keaton didn't survive, what's your, what's your thinking about that moment? I mean, is it about the studios? Is it about sound itself? What's the crucial aspect of that tern?

Dana Stevens: I think for one thing, you can't really paint with a broad brush and say "then sound came in and this happened to a whole bunch of people". You know, because different things happened to different people. As you point out, some stars did manage to survive that shift and some directors did too. And others didn't for a bunch of varying reasons. And there's all kinds of myths that have sprung up about that time, including that people's voices were what ruined their careers, you know. And people say that about Clara Bow and about John Gilbert and about Keaton.

Elizabeth Ferry: That's the *Singing in the Rain* thesis.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's like that's what Hollywood itself says, yeah?

Elizabeth Ferry: It's true, yeah?

John Plotz: "I can't stand him."

Dana Stevens: As much as I love *Singing in the Rain*, one of the greatest movies ever made. I mean it clearly, you know performs all kinds of mythmaking on that period. And in many cases mythmaking that makes MGM and other big studios look come off better than they actually would. Have you know, in the case of Keaton it certainly was not his voice that ruined anything, he was able to read dialogue, his voice was suitable to his, you know, physiognomy like that alone would not have brought him down. And it wasn't even necessarily, in his case that you know tastes changed in such a way that nobody wanted to see him on screen anymore, and in fact a sad fact about those early talkies he

made at MGM that were so terrible in the early 30s, is that they were really successful at the box office, more successful than most of his silent films. So, people still wanted to go see him, you know, he was still a rich and famous movie star, but he was just not creatively challenged and not independent and so he was miserable and so it became a sort of vicious cycle where you know he drank too much. His marriage fell apart. He stopped showing up on set and his career fell apart very rapidly, but it wasn't because he was no longer popular, you know? And it wasn't because he was no longer financially successful, it had more to do, I think, with him just being ill suited character logically for what the studio system could become.

Elizabeth Ferry: Did it? Is it possible to say to draw a connection between what we were just talking about and this you know ideas of why he didn't survive that transition? I mean, I'm not a historian of the cinema, but my sense is always that there's this kind of period in early film where people are sort of playing around so much, the technology's changing so fast. There's kind of a lack of boundaries between jobs in a way that maybe as it becomes more professionalized, people are sort of slotted into being. Director, cinematographer, actor. And even though people can do multiple ones, you can't just kind of like wander about in the same way that that people did earlier. Is that potentially some part of...

Dana Stevens: It, yeah, that's definitely true. Like the division of labor became much more discreetly arranged in the studio system and their what it was to be a director was not even that clearly defined in the teens. When Keaton was moved into film, so if you look at his films through the 20s most of the time there's either somebody else credited as director completely or somebody else credited as Co-director, but the tonal homogeneousness of those movies makes it really clear that there's one particular vision behind them and it's his vision, you know. So yeah, and essentially he was also, although there aren't really credited editors in that period, he was also the editor of all of his own movies.

Elizabeth Ferry: Umm yeah.

Dana Stevens: You know he had a guy who was physically cutting the celluloid and grafting it together, but he was the person choosing the exact frame where the cut would come. So yeah, what he experienced in the 1920s was not unique to him, it was more the way that independent production worked at the time, but he had a dedicated crew that just sat around all day waiting to hear about what they should be doing next as opposed to, you know, working for a big company where they were moving from project-to-project and I think really to go back to John's question, I mean the horrible part of the transition for him was that he lost that, you know, he lost all those trusted collaborators and that kind of dedicated space and time to come up with his own ideas and became plugged into a factory style system that just didn't suit him. His way of working it out.

John Plotz: Yeah, hey Dana can we talk a little bit, I so we've all been talking as if everyone else loved and knew Buster Keaton as as much as we do. But can we talk a little bit about what is special about those films? Cause I think it's so hard, you know, when you go back to silent films, you know from the perspective of I don't know. *It Happened One Night* or something, or like you know, the era of these wonderfully witty voice filled films of the 30s. It's hard to realize the incredible sort of form of life that those silent films have. So, can you just talk about one of the ones you love? Whether it's a short or a Feature and just like I don't know, get at like what's what, what its greatness is for you.

Dana Stevens: Oh wow, I wish I had gone in armed with one particular one to think about. OK, well let me talk about a short. I guess you're right, we're talking as if everybody knows these movies, and this is something I was going to say, also, up top is that if anybody is reading my book *The Cameraman*, I feel like they should regard it as a multimedia interactive experience and watch the movie as they go along. Which is

very easy to do. They're almost all streaming for free, either on YouTube or archive.org or somewhere. Or if you do have to rent them, you know they're very easily findable. So anyway, saying that, I would say let's pick *One Week*. Have you both seen the short?

Elizabeth Ferry: *One Week*, which I yeah and I and your description of it in the book, was also really, really compelling.

Dana Stevens: Yeah, yeah, I think that's maybe my favorite of his shorts and his shorts were a really important period in his career from basically 19-, well, if you want to count the independent ones only from around 1920 to 1923. He makes all of these two reelers they're called so each reel is about 10 minutes, so they're 20-minute-long movies and they would have been to lead into a feature film, you know the equivalent of seeing it a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon or something like that. So, whatever the big drama feature was of the evening, this would be the, you know the laughing lead into it. And *One Week* was the first of his independent shorts. So, when he gets his own studio, the Buster Keaton studio in 1920, it's not the very first movie he shoots, but it's the first one he chooses to release because he knows that it's really good, and it's going to be his flagship release. And sure enough, it was very successful and kind of launched him on this career. And if you think of it as a directorial debut, which is a little bit cheating because he had so much experience already in on stage and on film, it's I think it's one of the great directorial debuts of all time. It's just a perfect little film about, the story is very simple, it's just that a young couple who's just gotten married as a wedding gift gets a home kit and build it yourself home kit in the style of a Sears home, you know, model kit and the romantic rival of the bride who wishes that he had married her sneakily rearranges the numbers on the boxes so that the house that they build is this crazy *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* monstrosity. And then the rest of the rest of the 20 Minute movie is just about you know them trying to build the house and the house almost becoming, you know, a

character itself that is attempting to foil their every attempt to settle into it. So, it becomes this beautiful metaphor for marriage for one thing, and collaboration and trying to create something with someone else and also.

Elizabeth Ferry: Modernity, right?

Dana Stevens: Oh yeah, completely yeah, because of their struggle with technology you know. And so, what I try to get into in the book is, I mean, a bunch of things. For one thing, what did a kit home mean in 1920 you know, and that's a very particular year to start fantasizing about building a kit home, I think I'm not sure this this statistic is in the book, but 1920 also happened to be in the census of that year, it was the first year that there were more Americans living in cities than in the country so. It's all awful. Cited by urban historians as this key moment, this key year in American history. And that's even all present. I think in *One Week*, not in a way that Keaton was conscious of necessarily, but he was living it, you know, so he was pulling all these things from the world around him. So, *One Week* also ends up being this sort of story about starting from nothing. You know it's this newlywed couple, but we never learned anything about their family except the invisible Uncle Mike, who sends them the home kit as a wedding gift. We don't know anything about their roots or where they came from or why they're building this house in the middle of nowhere on this lot and that, I think you're right that Elizabeth, makes it a very modern film, you know. And a film that's really about in some ways about alienation and modernity. And you know, technology and all of these things, but what it really reads as when you're watching it is just a hilariously funny comedy with incredible stunts and gags, and a set of custom-built set that does all kinds of crazy things and a beautiful love story you know with. Really, I think one of the best romantic through lines of any Keaton film guys. The female lead, Sybil Seely, is a real romantic partner and a real creative partner in the story. She's not just waiting to be won over like a Victorian

style heroine. Which could be said of some of Keaton leading ladies, but she's really a Co-builder of the crazy house.

John Plotz: Actually, that's a great like, I love a couple of things you said there. One thing is that that sense of like the continuous that the combination of stunts and gags they never stop coming. So, it has a kind of Roadrunner quality of just like in fact we could talk about the resembles to cartoons. Actually, it's kind of interesting, but like you know that the jokes are all there, but it nonetheless piles up into a narrative arc like it did. It's not just attraction, attraction, attraction. There's also a story through-line that that defines it even in just 20 minutes, but then that other thing. The point you're making about, like how you know whether there's like a love story there a romance and so a comedy in that other sense of like the happy ending where you know if the couple gets together. I feel like that's something that makes Keaton films really interesting. Where on the one hand there's just like a bunch of incredibly funny things that happen, and sometimes the same things happen in the second-half of the movie that happened in the first half of the movie, only they happen in reverse, you know, like their disasters the first time, and then their success is the second time.

Dana Stevens: Right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Is it?

John Plotz: But then there is also the idea that these are story films. How do you think about that? I mean, do you think it's just, that's just a set of props that he's putting into the film so that he can make all the stunts work. Or do you see it, do you see the films as trying to do both of those things? Like tell a story and you know, keep you laughing moment to moment.

Dana Stevens: I mean, he actually talks about that, he talked about that in

interviews at the time when he was making the transition from 2 reelers to feature films in 1923 was his first feature was that he was no longer able to do you know? I think what I can't. Ridiculous gags or absurd gags, or something like that? He realized it at a certain moment that he had to have in order to have a through line and a story. That people would watch for the length of a feature film that you know there had to be unity of character and you know all of those things. And not just a series of gags, so I think it was something he was always working on. How do I manage to explore mechanical gags and props? And all these things that I love to do, while you know, telling a through line in a real story. And he wanted. To do both of those things, I don't think that either one was a concession to the other.

Elizabeth Ferry: It's so interesting too, because in a way it's almost like in *One Week* as I remember it and other movies. It's like there's two stories because the story there's also this, you know, there's the, you know, challenge that's been set like OK there's a there's gonna be some problem, right? The weather in *Navigator*, right? And or this house. And then, you know, it's almost like: Alright, now let's see what crazy funny things I can do with this and that is itself a story, right? Like here's the possibilities. And now the expectation of the audience is, and the kind of central conflict is, you know, is the movie gonna exploit all the possibilities for a laugh that could be.

Dana Stevens: That was something else that he explicitly talked about in interviews and regarded as the big challenge of making one of his movies. Is that well, for one thing, they didn't usually have scripts. These silent movies. I mean they might have had treatments you know, and sort of lists of setups that they needed. And certainly there were meticulous planning sessions. They're all building all of the props and the sets and things like that, but they didn't really have beginning to end scripts and he wanted it that way and he used to say he says this in a few different interviews that that he wanted the middle to take care of itself. You know that they would

figure out a situation and they would find the locations and build the sets for that situation, like the house for *One Week*. Or you know, whatever it was and they would figure out the ending so that they had a satisfying one. And if you look at them, Keaton films almost always have just very satisfying endings. You know some kind of final gag that kind of tops the previous one. Or you know, this twist that you didn't see coming thing so they figured out the ending in advance and then he said we just let them. It'll take care of itself. We'd essentially meant that they would go play around on those sets or on those locations and see what they could find. Oh look, here's a ladder, you know. And he talked about, for example, you know we might build a whole elaborate set and then realize, oh, the closet is the funniest place so will fill them all, all the climax in. Yeah.

John Plotz:

So I had sort of a thought about that. Damn this is like an unformed question. Maybe you can give it a better answer than it is question, but like there's this sort of. timely versus timeless question about when you look back at old movies like Do we love them because they are of their moment or because they just like leap out and seem to exist? You know still to us, and I guess the version I was thinking about that was that Keaton seems really into the idea of parody, or I guess he called it Burlesque, you know that he's always spoofing on people who came before him. Like he's making fun of the Westerns or he's making fun of, you know, what of civil war movies, I guess. So how do you think about that parodic side of Keaton, you know, given that, we probably don't know most of the people that he's spoofing or making fun of does that, is it?

Dana Stevens:

Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, for one thing, you're right that that was something he subspecialized in, but I wouldn't say that was his approach to most of his. Movies, and even *The General*. I don't think the general is a spoof or parody of civil war movies. I think it is an actual. I think it's he's really trying to have you know historical accuracy that was part of why he was busting his budget and making his

brother-in-law and producer Joe Schanks so mad at him during making *The General*. Right? Well, I think even you know, even though it's a comedy, I don't think it's a comedy about spoofing the war as much as it is, you know, using the war really as an almost a political backdrop against which you know to work out all of these gags and scenes and stories. But you're right that he did also have this side that loved to parody pop culture of his time. So for example, *Three Ages*, which is his first feature film, is a DW Griffith parody. Really, it's making fun of, you know, the sweep of intolerance. The DW Griffith movie that was that took place throughout various ages of history. Yeah, or the *Frozen North* is a short of his that was spoofing William S Hart, the Western star, and that, that's not false hope.

John Plotz: And doesn't he spoof Lillian Gish in the middle of it as well, like he does. He does that, this thing where he turns his smile upside down which is.

Dana Stevens: That's right! In *Broken Blossoms*.

John Plotz: I think a. Little English. Too, yeah.

Dana Stevens: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, and even *One Week* is was as I talk about in the book is sort of taking off on this industrial film about home kits. And you know how they represented the future.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

Dana Stevens: For young couples, building homes and he turns that into you know well, what's the dark side of, you know, trying to build your own home from the kit. I think that also has its roots in his childhood in a way, 'cause if you read some of the reviews of his of the Family Vaudeville act with three kittens. He used to do a lot of verbal impressions. Other comedians and singers. And I think that one of the things that he would do was sort of vamped by you know, parodying entertainers of his time or doing

impressions that everyone would recognize. So that's a good question. Why have those things not dated for us? Why do we consider those movies timeless? Still, you know, I suppose part of it is that what he would be parodying was something that was somewhat timeless. I mean, melodrama, you know he loved to parody, melodrama, and there's a kind of classic.

John Plotz: Right?

Dana Stevens: Pose, I could show you some clips to show you exactly what I mean, but there's a thing he does that I love where he sort of strikes a melodramatic pose, you know, hand to forehead or something and then inevitably you know somebody opens a door and knocks him off the porch or something. But there has to be some moment where the dignity of that is pulled out from under him.

Elizabeth Ferry: It's so funny because that makes me wonder whether 'cause you know that pose, that we're, this is radio, but we're all doing here with your hand on the forehead is you know that that's very legible to me. But when you say it, I wonder if it's more legible to me, because of seeing Keaton do it, then seeing the originals that Keaton was spoofing.

Dana Stevens: Yeah, I mean I think he just again, it's his theatrical childhood, feeding into his cinematic adulthood, you know. And there was this style of acting which was sort of going out of out of style as he was growing up. Really, you know, that much more. I don't know the opposite of method acting. I guess you know that much more external pose-based kind of style of acting very sentimental. Yeah, he knew all those poses you know, and I can think of various moments in his films where you. Know like for. Example, getting down on his knee to propose, he has this very formal, you know, where he looks almost like an engraving or someone in a in a in. A book illustration you know who would be proposing, but once again, you know the proposal

is inevitably, you know it. Turns out to be ridiculous in some way.

John Plotz: Yeah, well, there's that moment where he's practicing proposing and then the woman he's going to propose to wanders onto the scene and the practice proposal turns into a real proposal.

Dana Stevens: That's right, that's right. You're correct.

John Plotz: It's like, yeah. So Dana can I circle back or spiral back to pick up the, I love the Mabel Normand chapter but just kind of so maybe you could talk a little bit about her, but just also generally I think you make some really important points in that chapter about you know all the people that we don't hear about 'cause Buster Keaton very unlikely person to be a star, even for the decade, plus that he managed it. But then of course there's all these other people who have you know, genius to burn but we don't hear anything about them because the system just wasn't quite it wasn't set-up for a woman to do that, or for a person of color to do that. So talk a bit about that?

Dana Stevens: Yeah, that chapter. Well that chapter about, it's it does end up focusing on Mabel Normand, but it was really about just women in film and the teens is. Sort of how it starts out is another big Zig zag, like the chapter that's all about child abuse and child labor. Legislation and things like that. It at first glance seems to have little to do with Buster Keaton. I think he's barely mentioned in that chapter, but to me been crucial to that moment that I was trying to narrate, which is 1917. The moment he gets into film. Because yeah, as you say it. Is the untold story in many histories of a film of the time, it's kind of the untold story and I hadn't really realized I knew who Mabel Normand was and had probably seen her in a couple things things, but I didn't realize until digging deep into this research that you know she really could have been, and essentially was for a few years, the female Chaplin. She was called that in the papers, you know, and

was then by far the most powerful and most popular woman in comedy on film. There was Mary Pickford, and drama, but there was nobody else doing comedy, who had the stature that she did. And this goes back maybe Elizabeth to what you were saying about the roles of, you know the roles behind the camera being harder to separate in those days, because in these years when Mabel Normand was kind of Co-running Keystone pictures with Mack Sennett, who at the time was her boyfriend as well as her producer. She was kind of doing everything you know she was in front of the camera. She was behind the camera. She wasn't always credited. She was probably in the editing room watching rushes, all of those things and, you know, was really a force behind the creation of not only her movies but all of Keystone's output. And the moment that I was trying to capture is, you know, the moment that that ascent sort of got cut short by the fact that I mean essentially by the fact that movies were becoming a big business, you know, and that right?

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

Dana Stevens: Because they were a big business, naturally they were going to be the affairs of men. And you know women place was going to start being shut down, and that happened almost exactly at the same time that Keaton gets into the movies so it seemed to me like this almost hidden chapter of the story that had to be explored.

Elizabeth Ferry: Right?

Dana Stevens: And the anecdote that I get into about Chaplin about the moment that you know Mabel Normand is directing Chaplin on the set in some movie, it's only I think, a few weeks at the most, maybe months into his career on film, so they had just, Keystone had just poached him off the stage very shortly before and there he was on set you know, already very full of himself and refusing to do the jokes that Normand wanted, you know, insisting on coming up with

his own gags, slowing down the shoot at one point just sitting down on the curb and refusing to work, and shutting down the set for the day and because he was so successful and so popular and already starting to get the attention of film goers like who is that one guy you know he's standing out from the crowd at Keystone. He kind of got his way and there was a slow supplanting of her power at Keystone by his and by other men, you know. And she also had her own personal problems that kind of kept her career from advancing as it could have. But at any rate, by the early 20s she was no longer directing. She was only acting in front of the camera, so she lost a huge amount of her power, you know. And by 1930 she had died an early death, and, you know, had not been really behind the camera in over a decade. And her individual story is really sad, but it's also, I think a systemic story about what was happening. In the industry, on a larger scale, yeah. Because just.

John Plotz: To jump in on the that Chaplin point you're making, I totally hear what you're saying. That I mean Chaplin is notorious for working really slowly and wanting to do his own gags and all these other things that are true. But it, you know, there are other situations in which that happened in which you know the other players were not ground down, but it does feel like because she was a woman like in that moment where Chaplin decided to throw the tantrum. You know the logical thing to do was to like ease the woman out of power because you know that had she been a man it wouldn't have played out that way and that I just feel like that story is probably there for the directors of color too, which are stories we don't know that well about. People like Michael or you know that, you can just think of all the doors that didn't open, you know as well as the one the few ones that did, yeah.

Dana Stevens: Right, yeah, I mean I don't get into black directors in the book, but I do have a whole chapter about Bert Williams who was this hugely popular black entertainer at the time

and whose life interwove with Keaton in all these interesting ways.

John Plotz: Dana, this this could go on forever because I mean it's a endlessly fascinating topic and your book is so great, but maybe we can sort of make a turn to home now, by um, you already kind of gave us a recallable film because you talked about *One Week*, but do you wanna throw another film up there as like worth recalling? Maybe it's not by Keaton may. Do you wanna shout out an Arbuckle film? Or I mean.

Dana Stevens: I was actually gonna say the one that came to mind is when I write a little bit about which is *Fatty and Mabel adrift*, it was it.

John Plotz: In the hospital.

Dana Stevens: Was an Oracle film from I think it's 1915. It might be 1916. It was from this period when he and Mabel Normand were an onscreen team. You know, they were often a romantic couple in the movies. And they're these wonderful kind of pastoral romances that are extremely silly. But really out of keeping with the normal keystone tone as well, they're moving toward a different tone. It's almost more like a Rom com, you know where it's like, oh this married couple have all these problems and you know, but they're they, sort of affectionately. And tease each other and it's a different world than the keystone one that they were moving out of. And for both Arbuckle and Normand, kind of pointing toward this future, that neither of them really ever got to. Have yeah, so one of the last movies that Arbuckle directed before he got his own studio, the Kamiki studio which I write about and started working with Keaton and became the Arbuckle. That we're more familiar with, so we can kind of see him as this very young, you know. Still under 30 at the time, this very young director trying to figure out who he wanted to be in front of and behind the camera. So it's great performances from both of them. It's really sophisticated direction for 1915 or 1916 and yeah, and it's

just, it's a lot of fun. It also includes Luke, who is the famous dog who was one of the first canine movie stars who was a, he's a very charismatic dog, so you can get a good look at Luke as well and Fatty and Mabel adrift.

John Plotz: Oh, that sounds great. Well, I went back to a bunch of the shorts that you mentioned in the book, but I didn't go back to that one so I can't wait to. And so Elizabeth can I propose we do a joint one, since I think you and I both have *Steamboat Bill Junior* in mind and I'll just say really quickly since we didn't touch on in the conversation that I love that film, which is pretty late, I think it's isn't a 28 or something. I mean, it's one of the last of the Buster Keaton films, but that it.

John Plotz: Yeah, it has some, you know, it has all of this elaborate as you write about in the book. It has this elaborate sort of artifice around, you know, theatrical sets and it has a famous scene with a house falling around him, but it also has that incredible scene where he keeps trying on different hats. So you see, Buster Keaton, not just the porkpie, but with a beret and a top hat and a bowler. And I don't know what else, and I feel like it's one of these moments where he's just, you know, running through like a self-burlesque basically which is which where the comedy works because he's just, you know, playing with all the things that you think of when you see the face of the young Buster Keaton and. Yeah, yeah, I love that he has two films which are called junior actually like that and Sherlock junior.

Elizabeth Ferry: OK.

John Plotz: I feel like there's something going on where Keaton liked having the Junior Ness, which again is a way of like talking about how he. You know, knows that he's from a long lineage and yet he's doing something a little bit different as well.

Dana Stevens: Well, I'm glad you *Steamboat Bill* because that's maybe my

favorite feature. What were you going to say?

Elizabeth Ferry: I was thinking while I was reading your book about this sort of other angle about it, and it's something that that I remember about the film and then it's sort of part of. Eaton's. Really touching quality? I mean the thing that really stands out to me about him is his sort of. Yeah, there's something so kind of innocent and touching even more in some ways than Chaplin. Something about his face, but the way in which that takes the form in that movie. Of relationships between fathers and sons. And you know you having not really known about. I mean I knew there was an act called the three kittens and that he was a child vaudeville star. But like the specific kind of interdynamics of that and the and the sort of very ambiguous emotional tone of that. Uhm, just gives like a real that sort of poignancy even more.

Dana Stevens: Oh yeah, it's I mean. I definitely think it's his most. Dramatically complex and emotionally involved story that he told in a film and there weren't many stories that he told that were about a father and his son. There are a lot of looming parental figures that kind of replicate what Joe Keaton was in his childhood. Like a big guy who throws him. Around, there's almost always.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, yeah.

Dana Stevens: Some figure like that or else it gets sublimated. Into you know a big hurricane that throws him around. Or something like that. Yeah, but Steamboat Bill Junior is actually about a real father and son working out their relationship, you know? And you're right that the end is. Very moving because it's. The usual you know set of crazy rescues and stunts and the house falling in the tornado. And I mean a really amazing crescendo of disaster at the end. But ultimately, it's all about him trying to win his father's love and respect.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, yeah. You know?

Dana Stevens: It's very, it's his most mature movie I think. And I say that in the book and that also makes it extremely sad that it was his very last independent production because it feels to me like his career was just about to move somewhere really interesting, even including with the coming of sound, you know he wouldn't have been afraid of that technology and trying to do something. With it, but yeah, Steamboat Bill Junior is really the last moment that he did everything he wanted to do in a movie without any studio interference. And it's. A beautiful home.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, yeah.

John Plotz: OK, well that's a great note to end on, so I just say as we come to the end, dear listeners, I want to say quickly. If you enjoyed this conversation, first of all, there will be many links up on the website, but also you might want to tune in in two weeks for our rebroadcast of our conversation with the Amazing Mike Lee. So Dana. Thank you so much for taking the time it was. A great pleasure.

Dana Stevens: It was such a pleasure was a great conversation.

Elizabeth Ferry: Thanks so much.