

Novel Dialogue 1.7
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Elizabeth McMahon Speaks with Helen Garner

John Plotz

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. So how do novelists react when faced with the scholars who study and teach their work? Some of them, at least, somehow manage to stifle the impulse to flee. And I think we're very lucky that this includes Helen Garner, who's noted for her nonfiction and fiction alike and is the author of a lapidary masterpiece that I've read over and over, *The Children's Bach*. Ms. Garner, hello and welcome.

Helen Garner

Thank you, thank you for inviting me.

John Plotz

Thank you so much for coming on. So I'm John Plotz and you're going to be hearing from my partner, Aarthi Vadde in upcoming episodes. But today I'm going to be serving as third wheel for a conversation between Helen Garner and Professor Elizabeth McMahon, a distinguished scholar of Australian literature at the University of New South Wales and the author of among much fine other work, the 2016 monograph *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*.

Helen Garner's novels include her prize winning 2018, *The Spare Room*, but she's been celebrated as a novelist since her 1977 *Monkey Grip*, which is, among other things, a remarkable anatomy of addiction and an unsparing yet still sympathetic portrayal of the share-house life of 1970s Melbourne, she's also the author of-- so Helen I lost count at about a dozen--but I will say at least a dozen books of nonfiction, including *The First Stone* and *This House of Grief*, as well as three screenplays, among them for Gillian Armstrong's very wonderful and I think very Garner-esque film, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*. So it's an honor to have you both here and I hand the conversation over to you.

Elizabeth McMahon

Thanks, John. One of the ways that--one of the things that we've spoken about quite a bit in your conversations about your writing and what is so incredibly clear in your writing--is the spare economy, in which scene and mood are set. And you've talked about a number of times where you were writing and then we went to cut back and cut back, cut back the work to get rid of parts of description and to be left with, I think you used the word "gaps," to create the gaps in the writing, as well as what's actually there.

And I'd like to think about that a bit, and I think that one of the ways that we could go into that is to read, if you would mind reading the section from *The Children's Bach*. 'Cause I think that it is, you know, the whole book does this and it's one of the extraordinary experiences of reading it, is that as a reader you feel completely located. But also like you're just missing something or just behind, just trying to find something all the time. So could you read that section for us?

Helen Garner

Sure, this comes about not quite halfway through, about a third of the way into the book:

"Vicki began to hang around the Fox's house in Bunker Street earlier each day. They heard her old push bike crash against the rubbish bins at breakfast time. She sprang up the concrete steps, checked her hair in the glass, and stayed an hour, ate an egg that Dexter had poached for himself, tried to make herself useful and agreeable, though she was domestically incompetent. She tipped tea leaves down the sink and blocked it. She put embers from the potbelly stove into a plastic bucket and melted it.

"But she began to know where things were. She was cheerful company. She laughed at Dexter's jokes. She played with Arthur. She laced his boots to him, though he'd been able to do it himself for years.

"Can I walk down to school with you?' she said, 'do you mind?'

"Yes,' said Arthur, with his nose in a cereal packet.

"You do mind?'

“I mean, yes, you can come.’

“When the mail arrived and Athena opened envelopes, Vicky watched and said ‘I never get any letters.’ Athena suppressed an impulse to say, ‘You can read mine.’

“Vicki loves their lavatory in the corner of the yard. Its shelves made of brick and timber stuffed with old paperbacks, broken tools, camping gear, and boxes have worn down pencils. She loved the notes they left for each other. The drawings and silly rhymes, the embarrassing singing, the vegetable garden, the fluster, under which lay a generous order. The rushes of activity followed by periods of sunny calm. Vicki was in love with the house, with the family, with the whole establishment of it.

“‘Bunker Street is her God,’ said Elizabeth. Dexter was flattered.

“‘I feel sentimental when I see you, Morty,’ he said, ‘why don't you bring this Phillip around here?’

“‘Phillip, what would I bring him here for?’

“‘He's your bloke, isn't he? Aren't you going to get married one of these days?’

“Elizabeth shouted with laughter. ‘Marry him? Forget it, he's already married and anyway, can you see me as a married woman?’

“Dexter clenched his fists and danced up and down on the spot. ‘But I want you to be happily married.’

“Elizabeth raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“‘I don't understand the way you live,’ said Dexter. ‘What are the rules? Does he, you know, betray you?’

“‘Of course he bloody betrays me,’ said Elizabeth. ‘When you've been with someone that long, what else is there to do?’

“Dexter flung out his arms and turned to Vicki, who was at the mirror by the piano. trying to tie a scarf around her head.

“I hate modern life,’ he said, ‘Modern American manners.’

“It's just love,’ said Vicki turning and twisting to get a back view of herself.

“‘Love?’ roared Dexter. ‘I've never been in love then. In love, I don't even know what it is. What's so funny?’

“‘You'll find out one day.’”

Elizabeth McMahon

What is this process of creating that and paring back in your writing?

HG

Let's see. Well, this book I think particularly, I have grown quite fond of this book, I think it's probably the best thing that I ever wrote, and sometimes I look at it and I don't remember writing it. It's as if someone else, some other person called Helen Garner wrote this book I feel that. Anyway I won't go there, but I do feel that I do like it. So if other people like it I'm really delighted.

But I think one thing I'm really good at (and I think it might be something to do with my lifelong habit of keeping a diary and a notebook) is I'm really good at keeping scraps of things and figuring out ways to fix them together. Just details, things that I write down and hear and notice in the life around me. I write, you know, things that I write down without any purpose. But they just catch my attention and I scribble them down somewhere and then one day I start thinking about story. Maybe I could write a story about some people like this, and so I write one sentence and then I'll write another and at a certain point, all these things that in a sense that I've noted and which are still floating around in my head, I can see a place where I can use them. I can see how I can attach them to each other.

For example, in here there's a scene where Athena goes wandering around the city at night and she goes into a cafe and there are some Italian men in there and the TV is on up high and she sees a skier go down at tremendous speed a snowy mountain side. And I remember (I'm just getting a shiver remembering it) I mean, I scribbled that down at the time from some café I was in and then years later I've got this character wandering into a cafe. And I think yes, here's what I can put in the skier, and the skier seems to have a meaning that it didn't

have before and some sort of significance that's (what's the word?) *bestowed* on it by this other structure that I'm building. I don't know if that makes any sense, but.

JP

Helen can I jump in on that? I love that image of the keeping of the pieces and then the meaning gets bestowed when you figure out how they fit together. Does that, there's this thing (you know I'm obsessed with Hannah Arendt) and when she says that you always have to be scared of artists because they're always looking to turn something into an artwork. In other words, so she says that's the real reification is like, you know, because when you're around them, they're always seeing how the thing fits into the meaning of art. Does that resonate for you? 'Cause in a way, what you're describing it almost seems like you experience it first and then it becomes an artwork afterwards.

HG

Oh yes. That seems much more, what Hannah Arendt said seems much more kind of conscious--

JP

Yeah.

HG

--than my experience is. So it's funny you should mention that though, because I, now that I've started publishing my diaries from way back, I'm a bit worried when I'm in a room with people that they're thinking, *I bet she's gonna write all this down. I bet she's gonna write down everything I say.* And because of the Covid lockdowns of course I haven't been with anyone for about a year, so I've forgotten that feeling.

But last night I went to dinner with three women and we were laughing and talking and it wouldn't have occurred to me to write anything down, or to be thinking *oh, I must turn that into something*, or that it is something and I just have to get home and write it down. But I always have this urge to say *listen okay, do you want to make a deal? I won't* --before we start talking, do you want me to promise not? And I think that's stupid, that would really hamstring me so I've never said that to anyone. In fact, this is the first time I've actually confessed it to another human being.

JP

Helen, you also said something about how when you look back at *The Children's Bach* it doesn't seem like, it's like another Helen Garner, who wrote that. Is that specific to *The Children's Bach* or is that how you think about your...?

HG

Yeah, no, specific to *The Children's Bach*. It's as if, when I look at other old stuff you know, from the past I can see, I can still feel myself doing it. But when I look at this, there's some detachment seems to have occurred between me and the story. I can't even articulate this feeling, but I just, I think gosh, I don't even remember thinking that, let alone saying it and that's a very exciting and wonderful feeling for me. You know it's, and I've often quoted this, but I'll quote it again. I once read an interview with a jazz saxophone player in *The New Yorker* many, many years ago. And he said "When I play badly, it's my fault. When I play well, it's got nothing to do with me." And I was blown away by that. I hadn't actually experienced it yet, but I thought, *oh god how wonderful, there must be a sort of a state that you arrive at*. And I look back and I think it's a kind of blessed state, and I think it only lasts for a very short time.

But then, so I was very surprised once when I was groaning and moaning about something else. I was trying to write, and I was lying down, you know, it was like this in front of my desk, and, well, beside my desk and there were some notebooks shoved into a shelf near me and I just looked, *I wonder what that is?* And I pulled it out. And what was the diary?

It was a diary that I'd kept during the writing of *The Children's Bach*, and it was full of the same old torture. You know, I'm saying *I can't do this. I can't make it right. How am I going to get Dexter out of the house?* and torturing myself. So plainly I wasn't in any sort of blessed state, you know, I was just slogging away at the coal-face in the usual way. So it's a great mystery to me, that book. Anyway, I'm so glad that you like it too.

EM

Oh yeah, I mean we're not alone in that I think. You know it's such an extraordinary book. One of the reasons why I asked you to read that scene too, Helen, was that it focuses on somebody from outside looking at the home that somebody else has made. And also an interloper coming in who's going to

disrupt that, people who are going to disrupt that home as well. And so this idea of homes on your work, in *The Shared House*, of course, in *Monkey Grip* and of course *The Spare Room*. But so many ways that the home is so important. And I was struck when I read an interview with you and you spoke about your father who said he had no attachment to any home at all or any house at, nothing, and what that meant for you. And can I ask about what the houses have meant for you in literal terms, in the first instance, the homes you've lived in?

HG

Well, the first thing I'll say about my father that he was a very restless person and he was always dragging my mother from house to house. So, and yeah I think I only lived in let's see 1, 2, 3, 4 houses in my childhood. It's not as if we moved every six months. But I sat down recently and made a list of all the houses, I've lived in, all the places I've lived and it came to 27. And does that seem a lot to you?

JP

Yeah, I think so.

HG

I was quite shocked and some of them I'd only stayed for maybe six months, but I just wrote down every single one, every single address and it gave me quite a shock.

EM

I'm just calculating mine. Is that what you're doing, John?

JP

Me too. I've got about, I think I'm about 10, between 10 and 13.

EM

That's about me as well.

HG

Well there you go, it's not as if we're sort of rooted in place.

JP

Right, yeah.

HG

Yeah, well. The thing that my father said you know, he said he sort of roundly declared that *he never had any sentimental attachment to any blah blah blah*. I just looked at him and I thought *that really is a weird thing to say*. I mean, he said it sort of proudly as I, because I was helping him move, him and my mother moved to a different house. But he's the sort of guy who used to go for a walk, see a house that was being auctioned at that very moment and he'd walk up to the auction and bid on it and buy a house. And then he'd go home and say okay, Mom, we're moving to Kew and Mom would be really upset and furious because she liked it where they were and he dragged her around the world in that way.

But I do find that sort of highly, sort of neurotic and just kind of some boredom and itchy feet. And so it meant that my mother, of course, was perpetually being detached from her neighbors, groups of friends, and so she ended up depressed and very lonely. And then she got Alzheimer's and then she died. And I can't help seeing it as a sort of, you can see the trail there, it was very painful to witness actually.

But see now I've been living in the same house for what? Nearly 20 years, and that's the longest I've been anywhere and I love it. I mean, you can grow things and you can see them. There's a tree and it has plums on it. You know it's--

JP

Yeah, you can watch a tree grow, I think that's amazing.

HG

Yeah.

JP

Yeah, I find that so satisfying. This is a shot in the dark, Helen, but are you a fan of Marilynne Robinson at all, who wrote *Housekeeping*?

HG

Oh very much. Yes I greatly admire her, I think she's wonderful, fabulous.

JP

I feel like she's really obsessed with homes in a really interesting way as well, that there are the people who leave and the people who stay. You know that *Housekeeping* is sort of structured around the wandering aunt, and then you know the sister who really wants to just stay in Fingerbone or whatever it's called. Do you know what I mean? Like it's like the permanent, I think of it as a very American dynamic, but maybe it's Australian too?

HG

The wandering, yes.

JP

Fixed people and the wandering people you know.

HG

Yes, I haven't quite, actually *Housekeeping*, so I did read that when it first came out. I've never read it again, but I've read *Gilead* in the whole little group of books about it.

JP

Yeah, yes.

HG

But yeah, yes. I never used to understand people who stayed in the same place. I used to think, don't you get bored, don't you want to move. Not to move country or to move city, but just to move house? And still I find if I'm walking around even in my neighborhood, I'm always thinking could I live in that house? Oh, that one's for sale, I'll go and look at it and I just love that.

One thing I absolutely adore is the smell of fresh paint. It always reminds me of when you move into some house that we've rented as a group and you think oh, yeah, we can make this nice. And so everyone gets up on a ladder and paints and you're eating a sandwich while you're painting. Oh, those were happy times back in the 70s when you could move into a house in a week and make it nice. Just white paint up every, bit of calico and there you had a new space.

And there are those dreams, I know this is in my work somewhere. Those dreams where you go into a house that felt familiar, but then in the dream you

discover a whole other wing. Oh, I didn't know that was there. Or often it's an attic. You go up some stairs and see oh there's a beautiful room up here and it's got a view and I can look out and those are very thrilling.

It's very strange really, I'm raving on, so stop me, but this is sort of linked to the theme. Someone I was married to once said that he thought that I should stop writing about households. He said, why do you keep writing about households? And I thought, oh I had, firstly, I hadn't noticed that I was writing about households 'cause I wasn't doing it on purpose. And secondly, I thought, *but why wouldn't I write about them?* 'Cause they're just so endlessly interesting.

JP

Can I ask you about another line, just about then, you also say, you're describing. I think it's Janet, the house owner there, she says "some of us fell into the gap between theory and practice." Can you say more about that? That's such a wonderful...you're talking about people who died, people who couldn't live that life, or people in the share-house.

HG

Helping the junkies. Well yes, well theory. In the 70's we had a lot of theory and we had, well feminism was the main one, but you know everybody I ever shared a house with was some sort of lefty, you know, we're always going out on demonstrations and making flags and banners and stuff. And we had high hopes. We thought that feminism was gonna change the world. And you know, I mean in a lot of ways it probably did, but there's a hell of a lot of stuff that I think will never change. Doesn't matter what politics arise.

But we hoped that we could make—this gets back to what we were talking about before, about the dynamic of people, social dynamic in a share house—We hoped and we sort of believed it was possible to make a household that wouldn't have the kind of rigid roles that our parents and our childhood had which were everybody sort of crept around when the father was home. You know that that sort of dynamic. And we hoped very much that the raising of children would be shared with men. But in those households, there would be single mothers, women who needed a household, that needed the village to help them raise their child and it is true that for many years those, I still feel deep gratitude to people I shared houses with. And especially the men because some of them were quite young and they didn't have children of their

own, but they were so good to the children. They were wonderful with our kids and I look back on those times with great fondness and tenderness.

But often their households would explode for some reason or someone would sleep with someone's boyfriend or somebody would be envious because they didn't have a job and everyone else did and just things that....The other thing we didn't have, we didn't have any psychological theory. We were ignorant of psychology and scornful of it. We thought that people, we didn't even know there was such a thing as therapy. We didn't know you could go and ask them for help if you were freaking out and your life was a mess. So we didn't have any concepts with which to examine the dynamic of our household.

JP

So it's interesting 'cause it's the gap between theory and practice, but you're saying some, you were missing some of the theory, like there were other types of theories.

HG

We had plenty of theory, large social movements. But not much about inner struggles.

EM

I think Australia, I mean here's a generalization, Helen, but I think Australia is still a psychologically ignorant country I think. Or culture. I think there's been some headway, but I don't know if that broader statement is true, but it strikes me that we are, we are that.

HG

Yes, that's true. It certainly hasn't, psychoanalytic thinking certainly hasn't sunk deep into the texture of things here. It hasn't, and there's still a lot of hostility to it, to that kind of thinking.

EM

And to the assistance it could bring, the clarity, yeah?

HG

It seems to me that people who despise psychotherapy are like well, we're all going along in a ship, right? And some people fall overboard and the psychotherapy to me is, like you know, the sort of the round thing that you throw in that floats. What's it called, a lifebelt? But there are other people on the ship who say *there's nothing the matter, you know you're just a wimp, if you can't swim out, why throw the*, and I find that sort of terrible, and it's sad, really.

EM

Brutal.

JP

Is it crazy to say that novels are a kind of psychological theory also? I mean, I've always thought that like when you were describing the dream, the dream of the extra attic, I was thinking, well, that's *Jane Eyre*, right?

HG

Yes.

JP

Like that's what, is that unsatisfying? I mean to me, like novels, they help me think about what somebody else is inner life is like that. I find fiction reliable.

HG

That's yeah, that's one of the great wonders, isn't it? Just that you can enter another person psyche and the writer's psyche. But the psyches of the characters are so endlessly fascinating. So I thought of, I find though, that there are times when I really can't sort of bear to read a novel. It's surprised me during the, we had very ferocious lockdowns for pandemic in Victoria and I was really quite shocked to find that reading was difficult for me because that's my default thing and when the chips are down, that's what I do. But I somehow, something happened, that made it, that I couldn't do it or I couldn't concentrate or I couldn't use what was available to help me navigate.

JP

What did you do instead?

HG

Oh, I don't know. Just lay 'round, lay on the bed looking at the ceiling. Oh in the first lockdown, I worked quite hard on the second volume of the diaries so that was actually work and I was quite happy with the second one. I watched a bit of TV. I started watching *The West Wing*, which I never watched the first time around. But I guess I was sad.

EM

Helen, who would you say would be writers that formed your, or informed your own, or you liked or informed your own practice of writing or informing your own fictional worlds or non-fictional worlds. Can you name any of them?

HG

This is always a very difficult question for me. As soon as someone asks me this question, I go blank and it's really weird because I've done nothing but read most of my life and starting from when I was a girl. And I don't really know how to answer that question. Somewhere in this diary I'm working on, among the third volume of the diaries I came across a remark that I'd made to the effect that I thought, I was comparing this sort of rather dry restrained English influence that has, that I've had from a lot of British reading with the sort of noisier, more rambunctious kind of American influence that I've got and I remarked something to the effect of, I think that you know whatever small thing it is I've got, it's a combination of those two things.

You know, I'd love to say *oh well Chekov is my greatest influence*, but you know I've read Chekov, I love Chekov. And I love Tolstoy. And I love certain, I'm a huge fan, for example Philip Roth, but Philip Roth, when you pick up a book by Philip Roth and there's such power in the books that it's kind of awe-striking, it's not something you could like use as a model. Oh I know who I used as a model! Raymond Carver.

EM

I was just gonna say that.

HG

Raymond Carver had a huge influence on me. It was when I read his stories first, I was just thunderstruck, I thought, *what you can do with so little and it's packed*. The page is packed and you look at and it's all white. I think he was a wonderful, fabulous writer. And I do know that a lot of it was the influence of Gordon Lish, his ferocious editor. But I reckon Gordon Lish--I

know nothing else about him except I once read a short story he wrote and it was *terrible*. Really awful story--

JP

I agree, yeah.

HG

And it was really kind of you know, sort of packed with testosterone-like gestures and I thought, *god!* But as an editor, he had this amazing light touch. And wasn't it interesting after he, after Carver died and Tess Gallagher republished some of the, she published some of the early drafts, the pre-Lish drafts of a couple of his stories? And I went to read them, and I was horrified. I thought especially the stories that they become mushy and sentimental, and I thought that's what Lish got rid of, out of it. He got rid of that sort of mush of the drunk, the drunk sentimentality he just stripped that right out.

And I did puzzle, I wondered why Tess Gallagher had done this. And I thought that perhaps she thought it was an act of loyalty or love perhaps. And then I wondered. I mean, this is a real sneaky psychoanalytic thought, I thought maybe it was actually an act of rivalry. And I mean I don't know her and I'm sure that if I met her, I would like her and we would get on, judging by her own work. But I was really struck by her having reversed that process and I wonder if anybody's written anything about that.

JP

Helen, do you know this essay that Willa Cather wrote sort of mid, mid-late career, she wrote an essay called "The Novel D meubl ," meaning "the novel stripped of furniture" and just saying that--

HG

Oh d meubl , oh no, I mean yeah.

JP

Yeah, so it's a house metaphor I guess, right. In fact, she talks about the upper room, the--

HG

I'm writing it down, d meubl .

JP

Yeah, but she talks about the notion of getting rid as the aesthetic practice of the novel, that what you want to do is create the space and then withdraw from it. You know that so that what the reader hears is not the words, but the overtones, like not the said word, but the unsaid word. It's almost like describing images, poetry, almost, you know, it's like.

HG

Yeah, well that that links up with some, or all the stuff Hemingway says in, what is called? *The Moveable Feast*. You know that rather strange little memoir that he wrote, and he says, what you cut, you cut and cut, but the reader still feels the presence of what you cut, and I'm sure that's true and that gets back to what you were saying before this, about cutting. The thing about cutting is, oh yeah, I could tell a little story.

Back in the 80s I met this German guy who used to teach creative writing. I forget where, at some university, perhaps in California. His name is Reinhardt Leiter and he read something of mine and he said there's too many adverbs in that. And it was the first time anywhere I pointed out to me this sort of heavy handedness over adverbs and that was probably the most useful thing anyone's ever said to me as a critique. And not long after that the book in question, which was *Honour & Other People's Children*, my second book, which is a bit of a mess, that was going to be reissued. And so I thought, hey, I'm gonna hack out the adverbs and I said to my husband at the time that the writer I said I'm gonna hack the adverbs out of this. And he said you can't do that. He said that will be tampering with history. I said I don't care. I'm hacking them.

So I hacked away and pretty soon I was like ankle deep in adverbs and I felt so overjoyed by that. And they were really quite, sort of, you know they weren't me writing at my best, those two stories, but I did feel very liberated by that comment, and I realized once again how little you can manage with. And how there's--I find this again and again--that sort of *fat* writing that I don't want to have, the fatness seems to issue from my anxiety and inability to trust the reader. The inability to believe that the reader is gonna go there or is with me and has brought all stuff on her own or his own experience that will furnish that room so I don't have to furnish it. Bringing in the *démeublé* concept.

EM

Can I ask about the diaries? I mean, these are the most recent books of yours that I've been reading, in the last few days as well. And I'm not a diary writer, I've read lots of other people's diaries, but yours were, as you say, these observations captured and you write of yourself or other people in the third person, the first person, all the literary world is there and I was really fascinated by that.

HG

When I burnt my diaries, I burnt all my diaries up to the point at which *Yellow Notebook* starts. And the reason why I burnt them 'cause they were just so boring. I found them boring and whingy and a bit like the kind of thing that Peter Corris had been criticizing I suppose. You know, a lot of romance and you know why doesn't he loved me and that sort of stuff. But so I burnt at all and also it was because I had looked in there to find out what I'd written on the day of the Whitlam Dismissal, the dismissal of an elected Labour government and I thought I wonder what I wrote about it and I looked in the diary and I hadn't even mentioned this. So I thought *oh my god*, I just made it far enough through to hold on.

But the point at which I sort of stopped burning was where they started to get more interesting, I thought. And they started to be not so much about my private thoughts and experiences, as just observation of the world around me and observation of people around me or things that I overheard, things like that. And then as I went on, I could see, I mean, just editing the diary for publication was quite painful process and humiliating in many ways. But I could see that I, what this was and what it amounted to was my 10,000 hours, you know how you get to be any good at something, you practice and you practice every single day and you don't do it with grinding purpose necessarily. You do it because maybe you really love playing tennis and it's the thing you love the most.

And the thing I love the most is messing around with a pen on a bit of paper. I mean that was, from when I was a girl, that's the thing I loved the most and so. And what do you write about? You write about the day, you sit down before you go to bed at night and you sort of, you use the diary to calm yourself in for sleep, or to just say okay, what happened today? What did I learn today? What did anyone say to me or what's in my mind? What's the, you know what Freud called "the day's residue" and I, when I was writing I wasn't just crudely taking notes I was actually trying to write coherently and

to make good sentences, shapely ones and to use, you know it was, and I enjoyed it. It was a pleasure. That was the one part of my day that I knew I was going to enjoy was writing in the diary and that's the same even now. And then when I started to, want to, I mean, for example when I started writing *The Children's Bach* I found all sorts of things in the diary that I could use that were chunks of material that I could as it were develop or grow. And this is where it all starts. My explanation gets a bit blurry 'cause I really don't understand this process. I just know that every now and then I write something in the diary that seems to transcend at the immediate moment. And it's got kind of potential usefulness.

JP

So Helen, at the beginning of the conversation you were talking about these scraps that came back to you for later use. Are those, would those generally be from the diary, or are they something else? Like did you have a different way of writing?

HG

Pretty much. I do have a little notebook, you know, I've just a notebook that I keep in my bag, which I notice that I hardly use it all now, I don't seem to fill them up as I used to. And they were very useful for, oh you know when you're on a bus or tram and somebody next to you starts talking and it's not often, it's not the content of what they say, but just the *way* they're shaping their sentences or the music of it, which is thrilling. And so I would tend to write those things down. And then I could use them later. Or I could adapt them. But perhaps, the notebooks more like just hearing the tune of everything that's around you. A diary is some more analytical and trying to understand what hurt you or what made you laugh? Or, it's just a sort of practice court, I suppose.

JP

George Eliot had these books. I've actually held one in my hand called *Quarry*, like the quarry, from *Middlemarch*. But I think it's different because she kept it when she already knew she was going to write a novel that maybe was going to be called Dorothea Brooke or maybe it was gonna be called Middlemarch, but it was a quarry for the novel, but that's not what you're describing, right? I mean, it's not 'cause it's not--

HG

No, I've used, in nonfiction I would use that. When I, those books that you mentioned, *Joe Cinque*, and *This House of Grief*. As soon as I start, as soon as I go to a trial, the first thing I do is go and buy myself a special notebook that's going to be about my experience in the court and so that I have these. I suppose they're kind of like working journals, they're different from, they're separate from the ordinary diary. But I write, I use them a lot and they would be, each day I write an account of basically what was my engagement with the material, I suppose you'd call it, and well, who said things to me and what I noticed about people in the court. Or what maybe a lawyer said to me on the way out the door, different from the stuff I would be putting in my little notebook when I was actually sitting there in the court. And what I found was when I come to actually write the book that those working journals are the spine of the book. And I didn't know that's what they were when I was writing them or the first time I didn't. But the second time I realized that that was how I was going to be able to use that stuff later.

JP

Like I love the way you talked about responsibility and also detachment in a couple of different senses. But one thing that hasn't come up yet that I was hoping to touch on is just is music metaphor for you. I mean *The Children's Bach* obviously, but also just like, well, you know once I started thinking about it, you see it everywhere. There's you know, like in *Cosmo*, there's a little moment when Natalie says "I like a quartet, it's like a family or a conversation" and I just feel like it does seem like it's a persistent set of metaphors for you from I don't know making sense of the world making sense of writing. So yeah, can you just talk about that a bit?

HG

Oh yeah, well. I never sort of consciously thought that but you know, music is very, I just love it. You know I go through periods where I don't really listen to it much and that was something else that happened in the lockdown. I surprised myself. But I sort of didn't want to listen to music.

But I do know, or I tried to learn the piano, when I, I never learned as a child, when I was about 40, I decided I'd try to learn the piano and I've had a couple of teachers over the subsequent years. And I've never gone anywhere, but I've sort of loved it then and I had the kind of teachers who could see that I was a particular challenge as a musician, but, but that music itself was. I remember saying to one of my teachers, she says, *oh, I think you should learn this second*

Czerny piece because you can handle that first one, I said, oh great. I said I love boring exercises. I spontaneously said and she said, Oh yes, that doesn't surprise me because it means that you've got a certain kind of relationship with the music you see, you see things in their music that other people don't. She actually said that. I was so happy.

But it's true that you know, that's why I love Bach so much because of the formal, I mean just that I got from...the person who put me onto JS Bach was Manning Clark, actually, the historian. And he used to say to me, my maiden name is Ford, he used to call me Miss Ford, he said *Miss Ford, come and listen to this* and he just put on this glorious thing and he never said anything, he didn't expect me to say anything he just said, *listen to this*. And so I don't know, I started to listen to Bach, and Bach is...Bach's keyboard music particularly is to me the absolute peak of civilization and it's you just listen to that music or try to play it. And even if you can't play, you just stagger through some little piece, it still makes you feel that there is such a thing as meaning. Or that everything isn't chaos. And just the way that he resolves the piece is so calming and beautiful.

I thought that, there's something about shaping a sentence too which can be musical. I mean, there's a, I've got a fairly strong sense of when a sentence isn't working and how if you shift the load of it to a different place, you get a balance or you get a forward surge and punctuation is important to me in that regard.

JP

What you love writing about, like in say, *Monkey Grip* or *The Children's Bach* is very unordered spaces, like you're writing about a disorderly world in this orderly way, and that feels like a tension, right? Or do you not?

HG

Yes, yes or an attempt not to be swept away in chaos or to find a sort of place to stand in chaos. Well, I find chaos actually quite frightening, and I have an urge to impose order. I think, I mean, I'm actually quite known to be rather bossy person, and I think that's what that is. I really admire people, a person who can walk into a room and when they walk in and everyone's fighting or yelling and if they walk in something happens.

JP

We always ask this one question and it's a somewhat goofy question, so you could take it in any way you want. But the question is basically what's your favorite treat while you're in the throes of writing. And it doesn't have to be food. I mean, is there something that you do or you play or you drink or you eat when the going gets really tough for you?

HG

Well, that's very interesting. Let me think. This comes to mind. I go and have a facial.

JP

Oh wow, great.

HG

Yeah, I only do that, it's the first thing that came to mind. Once I would have said I'm going to get a massage, but I suppose it's looking for, once again, a quiet thing where nobody is talking and somebody is doing nice things to me in a physical way and. Yeah, I don't know I've never said that before. Maybe that's bullshit but it was the first thing that came to mind so psychoanalytically--

JP

How long does it take? I don't know, how long does a facial last?

HG

About an hour.

JP

About an hour?

HG

Yeah, and basically they're cleaning your face. You know they're talking out of your pores all the crap that's blown in there off the street and you haven't managed to wash out by yourself. So suppose it's one of those blessing type feelings, where you think, oh now I'm clean and I can go home.

JP

So as we come to the end of another *Novel Dialogue*, Aarthi and I would like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from Brandeis University, the Mellon Connected PhD program and Duke University. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer, and Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Recent and upcoming dialogues include Kelly Rich speaking with Teju Cole, Michael Johnson speaking with George Saunders, the author of *Lincoln in the Bardo*. So from all of the Novel Dialogists, if that's how you say it, thanks for listening and hope to talk to you again soon.