

Tom Perrotta in conversation with Mark Wollaeger

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to season 2 of Novel Dialogue, a literary podcast sponsored by the Society of Novel Studies. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde. John Plotz is my co-host extraordinaire and you'll be hearing from him in upcoming episodes. At Novel Dialogue we believe that critics and novelists belong in conversation and we bring them together to talk about novels from every angle. How we read them, write them, publish them and remember them.

We are lucky to not only have two excellent guests in the studio today, but two old friends. Mark Wollaeger and Tom Perrotta met at Yale before Tom decamped from academia and stayed in touch even after he went Hollywood. Today they will be riffing on a range of topics, including turning a novel into a screenplay, show running, and moving across different culture industries, book publishing and TV producing especially.

To give you a quick intro to both our guests today, first, Mark Wollaeger is a professor of English at Vanderbilt University and an esteemed scholar of modernism. He has written two books of criticism. The first called *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* and the second entitled *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda*. So thank you for being here today, Mark.

Mark Wollaeger

Thanks, it's great to be here.

AV

Today's novelist Tom Perrotta will be giving Novel Dialogue its first brush with prestige television. He was an executive producer and screenwriter for the acclaimed HBO show *The Leftovers*, which is one of the smartest shows I've ever seen on the topics of belief, mourning and meaning making.

Of course, many of our listeners will know Tom from his early novel-turned-film *Election* featuring Tracy Flick, the character who has become a cultural icon of female ambition and a bellwether for the changing cultural politics of American life. Tom, welcome, thank you for being here today.

Tom Perrotta

Thank you so much for having me and it's such a pleasure to be talking with my old friend Mark.

AV

Yeah, I'm excited to hear this. Here's where I take a breather. I'll pop back in from time to time, but now I hand the mic to you, Mark.

MW

Alright, well thank you. Well it's great to see you again Tom and have you joined us from Hollywood? Actually, I guess you're outside of Boston.

Ever since you agreed to participate I've been rereading your books and it's been a real pleasure to dwell again in Perrotta-land. And so I want to thank you for that. As Aarthi noted, you've had tremendous

success on the screen, big and little. But I do want to start with the literature, get going on that and you remarked to me by email not that long ago that this winter you've been reading Richard Ellmann's great biography of Joyce. And I'm wondering what drew you to the Ellmann biography and what struck you most about it.

TP

Yeah, you know. One of the things that happens when I'm working on a novel and I was in the throes of a novel is I find it difficult to read fiction. You know that's a common thing among fiction writers, you start to feel like all these voices infiltrating my head or worse, why can't I write sentences like Nabokov or why can't I do a formal experiment like Joyce or maybe I should, you know, taking a whole different approach to this book. And so to avoid that, I often move toward nonfiction when I reach a certain point in my, in a novel.

And my self-help actually is often literary biography. I find that sort of inspiring in the way that almost nothing else is inspiring to me, only because I think it gives you this feeling that, you know, for every writer it was an effort and the triumph was not inevitable. I think those that that genre kind of situates you in the struggle to write. And I especially love the parts of the biography that, you know detail the writer's life before they were famous. And for Joyce, that's like, you know, a huge part of his life.

I think the thing that struck me the most was just, you know Joyce's sort of Babe Ruth pointing at the stands and saying "I'm gonna hit it there." So he basically he envisioned his career and you know for the most part made it happen exactly the way he plotted it out. And yet even with that tremendous success and that tremendous ability to sort of control the narrative of his own greatness, I think he ended, you know, in a sad place. And that part, I think that was the part, it was heartbreaking to me, but it was also, I think another way that I can use these books as sort of self-help. I think it's easy to get caught up in some idea that you can control the way the world responds to your work and you can somehow manage your reputation and then it turns out even somebody like Joyce who was a master of it, found himself at the forces of history and the forces of you know, cultural evolution that that he couldn't control.

MW

One of the things that really struck me about the Joyce biography is some of the anecdotes that get at his real weirdness, at times. Late in life, he was having one of his many operations, a friend came to see him in the hospital in a dark room, and Joyce has these pillows over each eye and a notebook by his hand and his friend came in and said, how are things Joyce? And Joyce pulls out his notebook, jots some things down, puts the notebook away and says, "Hello, Nutting," his friend's name. And of course his friend wanted to know what he put in the notebook. So Joyce just holds a notebook out and it said "carriage sponge." That's it, "carriage sponge" and the sense of this weird—

AV

Like rosebud.

MW

Yeah, except that one gets decoded in this almost anticlimactic way. Whereas this I think probably just remains completely mysterious. This one node in this really complex verbal universe that then he tried to give the world in *Finnigan's Wake* and people then did not want that, right. They did not want obscure connections and so forth.

TP

You know, I mean, it's easy to look back now and say, well, *Ulysses* pushed the model to probably its furthest frontier, you know. It still holds together as a novel, there's a narrative spine through it that I think is actually quite accessible, you know, and for all of the schematics surrounding it at all the stylistic virtuosity there's kind of an emotional core to it. *Finnegans Wake* it seemed like he wanted to just go beyond meaning and into some realm of, you know, pure music. And I think people just couldn't follow him.

MW

Yeah, well, I think it's been put as he wanted to make English into a foreign language. But I also think he wanted to reclaim English as his own in some way, you know. He wasn't going to be a Gaelic speaker or speak Irish, but English was going to become his and he was going to master it in any way possible by just infusing it with the history of language. So obviously quixotic thing, but yeah, it's hard to read because there doesn't seem to be enough principle of selection to make the going easy.

But coming back to this sense of audience though, too, with Joyce. You know Joyce had this sense, "I'm going to become the superstar" and he does. He didn't care what people thought about his writing right. He was just going to do it the way he thought it had to be written and that was it. Sort of modernist disdain for anyone who might object to the kind of difficulties he might be imposing.

Now you seem to me to have this really good sense of your audience, and I say that in part because your work is so funny. It can just become funny all of a sudden in a laugh out loud way very frequently and that seems to me to require a really acute sense of who you're writing for. These comedies seems to require that, and I'm wondering when you're writing a comic passage, do you have a really distinct sense in your mind of your audience or to what extent do you have to then test it off other readers and draft before you decide, yep, this is as funny as I think it is.

TP

You know that's one of those places where I do have a kind of confidence that if I'm finding it funny, probably other people will find it funny. Because I don't bounce things off a lot of readers before I turn it in. My wife often reads stuff in progress, and then I send it to my agent. That's really, that's really it.

I do read in public and I kind of know like, oh, this would be a good passage to read in public. Because I was going to say to you, you know, part of that sense of an audience. It's very different, you know Joyce, I don't know, Ireland was a literary world I think and there's just some sense that people understood and valued literature.

And I grew up in working class New Jersey. I grew up with, you know, my English teachers were the people who read literature. My father, I don't think ever read a piece of fiction, as far as I know. So my mother was different, my mother got a very good education in Jersey City in a public high school, she never went to college, but she could quote bits and pieces of Shakespeare, and she had memorized poems, so she was a little different in that sense. But I was sort of one of a handful of people who read, you know, that I knew growing up. And so I always had this sense that you know, I wanted to write in a way that was accessible to the people I grew up with. I didn't want to just leave them behind, and so I was always drawn to this idea of writing in a kind of, accessible, plain language.

MW

And yet, there's so much craft in your writing, there's so much wit. There are some great storytellers who don't seem to care about the level of the sentence very much. Stephen King is one of the most

brilliant storytellers. Great at beginnings and middles. Not always as good at ends. It's not that he's a bad writer in the level of sentence, he doesn't care as much. Where that's where the literary quality comes through, too, is that there's such carefully crafted sentences and what I wanted to ask you about the writing process is do you have any recollections of particular moments of bliss, where you've crafted something and you just think to yourself, I've really nailed this in such a way? And it could be that you think of a particular paragraph, a part of a book. Do you have any immediate associations with that kind of deep pleasure in the moment of composition?

TP

Yeah, of course. Often for me it's endings. That is one sort of principle that I really try to adhere to, which is, and I will say I think it's not universally adhered to. Like I really think a book has to work all the way through. I mean there's so many books, I think that that fall into this category of you know, really wonderful for some part. Like I hate to say it, but I feel like a lot of Philip Roth has like 100 pages of brilliance and then Roth, I think often the unlevel plot, he's just, the kind of plot that might carry you through a whole book and make you feel a total arc. I don't think that often that he pulls that all off.

But you know, there's sustained brilliance in the voice throughout, and that's what people read him for. But I really do like those novels that have energy all the way to the end, and so that's something that I've really tried to hold onto. And when I can get the ending, you know, I can feel that energy pushing me like all the way through to the last the last page. That's when I feel most, the only time I feel like a poet, you know it's like I'm so conscious of the book is coming to an end and I'm trying to bring it together, but hit this note that will sort of resonate in the silence of you know, just reading the last word, the last sentence.

MW

I can think of a lot of your endings which have just that quality of a certain note struck, I think of the ending of *The Leftovers* with the baby found on the doorstep and the sense of a kind of openness to a new experience. But you're just going to leave it there with a note of some optimism there. But a lot of your novels do seem to have, I guess I would say that kind of openness and irresolution, even as you're plotting has brought everything together. But then your last note, you seem to want to hit a note that hangs with the kind of openness that you associate with more modern fiction than the Victorian tight closure, right?

AV

I'll just jump in and say I felt that with the end of *Mrs. Fletcher*, I read that novel before bingeing the show and I don't want to give much away, but towards the end you realize the classic marriage plot is at stake in this novel. It rears its head late, but then there's a shadow over the marriage plot in the last paragraph that relates to new technologies, let's put it that way. And I couldn't help but think about what you were saying, Mark, in terms of Tom's work as being both popular, but literary and you know, I feel like a lot of the classic development plots of the novel can be found in your work, but definitely in ways that ripple or disrupt what we associate with the classic phase of the novel, you know a marriage and the reproduction of a family, that's not really exactly what's happening here or in, I think, in your shows.

TP

Yeah, well that, you know it's actually been a very important part of just my evolution as a novelist. Mark, probably when I knew you at the beginning I had just spent three years working on this

unpublished novel about a family that wins the lottery and it was, this was back in the day when there were many, many publishers in New York, and this book got rejected by, I have an envelope somewhere, probably in the 40s. And a number of them are really kind rejections, you know. Editors being like “I wish” you know. But the pretty consistent diagnosis was, you know, the book starts off with such energy and then it kind of, the characters kind of spin off because it's partly about how this family gets destroyed by this infusion of money, and but I couldn't, they all do, just, they leave each other and they followed these separate paths and I could never get them back together which is what the reader wants. Not so much to restore the family, but just to see how these changed people relate to one another and I think it just failed on that level of what people felt was this kind of diffusion of energy and a kind of narrative exhaustion and you know, I think I was trying to figure out like where do I go from here. And you'll see in the next couple novels, *Election* and *The Wishbones* where I put like a very clear narrative frame on the stories.

MW

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about entering into the world of adaptation? *Election* was your first instance where you were not involved in the process of making a film, but then you had increasing role afterwards. And could you talk about endings in the sort of cross media way?

TP

Yeah, and I will say it's very different between film and TV. So in film, as you say, the screenwriter, unless the screenwriter is also the director, as was the case with *Election*, the screenwriter is sort of sent home, and all sorts of things happen, you know, in production and in the editing room. Sometimes there's another writer who steps in. So in the feature film world, the screenwriter often does have very little control. In TV, the writers are really running the whole process, so there is definitely a dialogue with you know, the studio but it is a pretty good, it's a very different experience.

So like on *The Leftovers*, you know we really did tell the story the way we wanted to, that the challenge there is finding consensus in the writers room, so that's a different thing, we'll talk about it. But *Election* is the case where what you just said really holds because *Election* is both a very faithful adaptation and an entirely transformative adaptation. Meaning if you look at it beat by beat, it's clearly the story that I tell in the book. But the book is not a really sharp-edged satire in the way the film is. So there's a satirical tone that transforms this story into something else. It goes from psychological realism, I think, kind of a gentle comic. Well not gentle but not satirical, more like a realistic comedy becomes a very hard-edge satire. Even though beat by beat it's the same. So it's a tonal adaptation, I would say.

But what happened then was Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, when they adapted the book wrote the ending that I had put in the book. And that's that Mr. M, you know, because of his election shenanigans, he gets fired and he ends up working as a car salesman in town. He just stays in this town and he's just been kind of demoted from a position that he feels is meaningful and important as a teacher and I was just doing this job and he's been demoted and he's trying to rebuild his life and Tracy comes in after graduation and asks him to take her on a test drive in a car. And she really just wants to get him alone to ask him like why? Why did you do that to me? Why did you try to ruin my life? And they have a real conversation and I like it.

It's something that I think I have also gone back to in other books, a sense of these characters who are at odds somehow having this breakthrough where they can talk to each other and get past their conflicts. And it clearly is like a kind of a therapeutic model that says people can grow and they can change and they can understand their motivations. And it's a kind of, and then she takes him to her

house and she gets out her yearbook and asks him to sign. And we're left with this moment where he's standing there with a pen in his hand and this blank page in front of it. What do I write to this girl who I did this terrible thing to? And it's a good ending for that book, but when Matthew Broderick and Reese Witherspoon filmed it, it didn't work. You know, Matthew later said it was because he's like I still hate her. Meaning like the way the movie was filmed, the movie said people can't grow and change. They're both condemned to just keep being this same person that they are. That's a very like depressing, but you know, comic vision of people. It just says, you know your character is set and you will repeat your narrative.

And because of that, the ending that I wrote, which suggests that's not the case, couldn't exist, and it ended up being flipped completely after a test screening where people hated it. Paramount almost just dumped the movie straight to video because it tested so badly with this ending from my book.

MW

In the adaptation, of course, as you say, we have more satiric reductions, kind of caricatures. And so he comes across very differently. And as does Tracy Flick. And just to think about Tracy for a bit more, I mean I think everyone must envy you having created a cultural icon, a meme, right? She's got her own Wikipedia page, has a life of her own. What are your thoughts about her in the book versus in the movie and her afterlife?

TP

Yeah, well, this is another case of you know, adaptation being a just really unpredictable process for the writer, you know, I think she's an icon because Reese Witherspoon embodied her with this kind of wild energy that, I remember even being on set and everybody was just, people were excited. They're like what is she doing? You know, she's just jumping out of her skin and she just brought some, I don't think she's done it really with any other role I can think of where she just brought this kind of wild energy to it. I mean, she's obviously very charismatic actor and you know her work on that Johnny Cash biopic was remarkable. But now Tracy is just, I mean, and I think, you know, *Legally Blonde* borrowed some of that energy, but it was more lovable, you know. Whereas Tracy, you know she caught something in there that is challenging about Tracy, at least within that culture of the 90s, you know. I mean what was most remarkable about Tracy, right is, and I think the one other reason she's become iconic over these- - There were not fictional women politicians. I couldn't think of a novel that had a woman politician in it. I mean, and that's crazy. And this was written, I wrote it in like 1992 and you just to go back, you have to remember, like Hillary Clinton seemed like some exotic new creature, a first lady who seemed to be equally ambitious, equally political, wasn't content to take a kind of traditional domestic role in relationship to her husband. And so it's kind of mind boggling, like if you say this to our students, I don't think they understand just how much politics was conceived of as a male realm.

AV

It seems to me that it's been really interesting to watch audiences, often male voices, in the public sphere returned to her and see her the way women saw her, who might possibly have identified with her at a certain moment. And so I'm curious too how you feel about the way that her reputation has been rehabilitated in the wake of people no longer demonizing female ambition as wholeheartedly or with so much consensus as they did, perhaps in the 90s?

TP

What's cool about watching this Tracy get rehabilitated is that people aren't just bringing a, you know, a new cultural frame in. I think they're seeing something that was in there the whole time that they were

a little bit blind to because of the cultural frame that they were using. So it's not just the external vision that's changed, it's more like the external vision has allowed people to see the story that is actually there.

AV

Right. I wonder if Mark, you have some thoughts on this, too. Whether Tracy can be therapeutic for the culture, right? I mean, obviously we're an angry, polarized political culture right now, but you had mentioned, Tom, that you saw a therapeutic mode in your work, and that's why people can grow and change, but in the more satirical mode, does a character like Tracy Flick allow cultures to undergo a kind of therapeutic model of growth and change, or is it just too idealistic to imagine American political culture growing and changing?

TP

Well, I do think that one of the, you know, for me, kind of a remarkable thing to have a character live this long. She does prove that the culture is growing and changing. It's about as hard to know, like oh I'm a novelist, people don't, how does our work connect with the larger culture? But in this case, and because the movie turned her into an icon and then she became a kind of political shorthand, she did enter the conversation and her, and the interpretation of her does reveal changes in the culture.

MW

Sadly what it reveals also is that for every advance two steps forward, one step back, there's always this pushback, right? Because you know, the whole Donald Trump presidency was this massive turn not only against racial gains, but against gendered gains too, right. And I think there was a lot of misogyny still directed against Hillary when running against Trump, right. But as you say that doesn't mean the gains haven't been made right, and I think Tracy is kind of a, she is kind of a barometer for that to a certain extent.

But this makes me think about another sort of issue in your work which comes to the fore in *The Leftovers*, which we haven't talked about. And it's questions of belief, right, which today have become so vexed insofar as we have people clinging to certain beliefs that most of us think are simply wrong, right. But they believe them strongly. One of your considerable strengths as a novelist, I think, is your ability to think your way into these other subject positions, we would say right. In the abstinence teacher, what is it like to be a born again Christian who was a man who tried to conquer his addiction through Jesus and you do a remarkable job trying to get inside that mindset. With *The Leftovers*, which seems to be a real, I think it was almost a breakthrough in your fiction, but a shift in that then you take on the question of belief per se, right? What is, where does belief come from? What does it do for us? And you've never been an autobiographical novel, but this novel is so different, also in that it has a kind of sci-fi dimension, and so can you talk a little bit about what brought you to take on those questions of loss, belief, and coping when you did and how you did?

TP

Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned the abstinence teacher there 'cause I don't think I would have written *The Leftovers* if I hadn't spent some years you know researching Evangelical Christianity and you know reading the Bible and you know, kind of making that empathetic move from, you know, "the rapture is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard" to you know "that's a story that is kind of beautiful." And actually I think, I will add I'm not an autobiographical novelist, but in 2002 my parents were in a terrible car

accident and my father died in it and my mother almost died, but she's still here now. But I do think *The Leftovers* is a certain way for me to deal with that. I think that sudden inexplicable loss leaves you reeling. I mean I developed asthma after my father's death. I had these panic attacks that I've never had before. It was just the shock of that loss and the vulnerability I think that I experienced. You know I could suddenly see how the rapture related to that. It was as if he just floated away, you know, because it happened far from me. It was just he's here and he's gone and so I do think I went from maybe sometimes that scornful position or that satirical eye on religion, maybe comes from a very modern sense of invulnerability, you know.

You look back at human history and you look at human life in a lot of places still on Earth, people are vulnerable. They can die tomorrow. Their kids can die tomorrow. And you know, of course you're going to make bargains with the universe and I do think that you know, I started to see the potential of the rapture as a way to talk about grief and about loss, and to imagine people like you and me, people like the three of us, postmodern rationalists suddenly in a place where we have to account for something huge and irrational.

MW

I'm interested in your work then on the adaptation which many of our listeners will know, because unlike your earlier work, where you were a screenwriter, first of all not involved in *Election* and then on *Little Children* for which you were nominated for an Academy Award for Adapted Screenplay you had a lot more agency in the film. And then you stepped into the role with Lindelof, a collaborative setting, a collaborative setting in which writers are much more important as opposed to films where directors are king. But as you say, Lindelof has this kind of surreal imagination where you've got a very socially grounded, satiric perspective, as well as a wealth of generous interest in human psychology, but talk about what that was like, then negotiating back and forth as you extended--many viewers will know that their listeners will know that the first season of *The Leftovers* tracks your novel relatively closely, and then things change from there. But can you talk about that experience?

TP

Yeah, it's very interesting because of course, as I say, *Election* was pretty faithful though I think underneath that veneer of faithfulness, there were deep transformative changes. *Little Children* was also quite faithful to the book though. You know, because it was a 2 hour movie, it had to leave out a lot of parts and it also took on a darker tone maybe than the book had, but I was used to kind of you know quote unquote faithful adaptations, and I think Damon didn't really want to do that and I think we spent that whole first year kind of trying to figure each other out.

MW

It must have been so interesting then to move into the subsequent seasons where your novel is no longer source material in the same way. So you're probably feeling a little less invested in any notion of fidelity. And now you're working with Damon. How many writers were in the room?

TP

There were usually about seven or eight.

MW

Seven or eight. Okay so--

TP

And just for your, it's an interesting fact on that. It's more common now, but I would say half of the writers in the room by the end were people who had gone to graduate school for creative writing, not for film school, so there were professional screenwriters, but there were actually more than the usual complement of people who trained as fiction writers.

MW

That's really interesting, so that's something Damon Lindelof wanted to do, was that his decision?

TP

I think that to his credit, like he hired one guy off, the sample wasn't a script, but it was a short story he'd written. He really liked the story and felt like, oh, this guy has great ideas. Let's hire him. Some of the other people--

AV

Just can I ask how novels, short stories, fiction are viewed in the TV industry? Is it source material? Is it opportunities for IP, intellectual property? How do they view what you know people in English departments produce?

TP

You know it, I think that it is very much IP and I will say for the most part, I feel like books are valued out there. I think that people are much more likely to read a book and find themselves able to imagine what the film would look like than if you just get a script sometimes, because there's something obviously more imaginatively textured about a book, and I think the writer has taken a lot more care, often, with the descriptions of the world. And it's, you know, the book is longer. It also has a cultural prestige, maybe, that is separate from its maybe its actual aesthetic value, like who knows what aesthetic value is, just whatever people have granted it right.

AV

Right, and I hear you talking about the world building quite a bit, but maybe the script doesn't have the the full commitment to the world building that a finished story or novel will have. So it could be an element of finished imagination that they can now unfinish and open up.

MW

I know you're writing another novel that's you have a draft of, and so you've returned to novel writing after a bit of an absence. Do you ever see yourself in the future, though, pitching an original HBO series 'cause you had the experience as a showrunner on *Mrs. Fletcher*, adaptation of your own novel, which you seem to have enjoyed as far as I know, or does that notion of pitching an original thing just run counter to the way you work?

TP

Yeah, well, this relates to what Aarthi and I were discussing before, which is there is an element of worldbuilding when I write a novel, you know it's just that whole period of a year or two years where I'm living with this fictional world. The characters kind of become clear to me and I can just enter the world in a certain way. But I find with an original script idea I don't know where that worldbuilding comes in.

AV

So Mark, should I ask the signature question right now since we are drawing to a close?

MW

Certainly, why don't you ask it Aarthi?

AV

OK, I'll go for it. So, Tom, we ask all the writers, the novelists who appear on our show the following question. What do you do when you're having a rough day, you're in the throes of writing or editing, and it's just not going well. What do you turn to as a consolation or to just get yourself through?

TP

Yeah, you know, it's one of the things I've learned over the years is not to just sit at my desk and beat myself up so yeah I will, I just get outside. I go for a long walk or go for a bike ride and often my mind will continue to work through whatever it is that I got stuck on and it just was such a, you know, relief to realize this that it was just more effective to be outside and I didn't have to punish myself at the desk.

MW

It's also much healthier response than, say, eating chocolate. I have a friend who's a drama critic in London who wrote his first book and said he put on 20 pounds because he couldn't write without the chocolate. So going out and walking seems like a good response.

AV

So thank you both so much for appearing on our show. This was a really thrilling conversation. John and I are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledge the support of Duke University and Brandeis. Nai Kim is our production intern and designer. Claire Ogden is our sound engineer. Hannah Jorgensen is our transcript editor. Past and upcoming episodes include Michael Johnston in conversation with George Sanders. Ivan Kreilkamp with Jennifer Egan and Kate Marshall with Cristina Rivera Garza. So from all of us here in Novel Dialogue, thank you for listening and if you liked what you heard, please rate and review us at iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.