

3.4 Charles Yu in Conversation with Chris Fan Transcript

John Plotz

So hello and welcome to another installment of Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. I am John Plotz, I'm one of the many hosts you're going to be hearing in our rangy or even slightly rhizomatic season three.

So it's quite an honor today to introduce Charles Yu, a writer I've deeply admired for years. Not just because I am a science fiction fanatic, although I really am, but also because he's such a genius at playing with the expectations and misdirections built into science fiction, or really into any storytelling genre. So both of his novels *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, 2010, and the 2020 National Book Award winner *Interior Chinatown*--my wife gave it to me for Christmas and I was so psyched, it was my favorite Christmas present--are utterly fascinating in the ways that they send characters and the readers after them down predictable paths deploying known narrative conventions and then double back, showing readers how their own minds have led them into unwarranted assumptions, into the kind of self-deceptive infilling that we all do every day to make our own world seem predictable or safe, when it's anything but. So his other work includes two books of short stories, *Third Class Hero* in 2006, and *Sorry, Please, Thank You* in 2012, and episodes of *Westworld*, I just discovered and just a slew of other writing fictional and non-fictional alike. So Charlie, it's great to meet you and welcome.

Charles Yu

Thanks, thanks so much, John. It's great to be here and I'm excited to be part of this.

JP

Cool, well, we're so excited to have you. And so I am really pleased to introduce as interlocutor Chris Fan, who will be leading our conversation today, leaving me the time honored Novel Dialogue role of twerpy cousin gliding around the edges and eavesdropping.

So Chris is a man of many hats. It's not enough that he is an assistant professor at UC Irvine in English, Asian American Studies and East Asian Studies, he's also senior editor at Hyphen magazine, which he co-founded. I am a fan of his super insightful articles about contemporary science fiction, and I was delighted to learn that he's finishing up a manuscript that I think, though Chris, you can correct me is tentatively titled, *Principles of Selection: Asian American Fiction after 1965*. Did I get that right?

Chris Fan

Yes, right.

JP

Cool. So it's thinking about the fiction, and especially science fiction in that period, as an articulation of immigration policy and the U.S.-Asia political economy. I look forward to reading that, so thank you both so much for being here and welcome. I know this is not the first conversation you've had, so I'm going to simply swivel the mic towards you guys and invite you, Chris, to take it away.

CF

Great, thanks so much, John. And hello again, Charlie.

CY

Hello Professor Fan, good to see you and hear you.

CF

So I asked you to choose a passage from one of your novels to kick things off so, yes, would you mind reading for us?

CY

Sure, and this will just be a short couple of minutes or less. Is that okay?

CF

Absolutely.

JP

Great.

CY

This is a from *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and it's early on in the book. This is Chapter 3.

“The earliest memory I have of my own dad is the two of us, sitting on my bed as he reads me a book we have checked out from the local library. I am three. I don’t remember what the story is, or even the title of the book. I don’t remember what he’s wearing, or if my room’s messy. What I do remember is the way I fit between his right arm and his body, and the way his neck and the underside of his chin look in the soft yellow light of my lamp, which has a cloth lamp shade, light blue, covered by an alternating pattern of robots and spaceships.

“This is what I remember: (i) the little pocket of space he creates for me, (ii) how it is enough, (iii) the sound of his voice, (iv) the way those spaceships look, shot through from behind with light, so that every stitch in the fabric of the surface is a hole and a source, a point and an absence, a coordinate in the ship’s celestial navigation, (v) how the bed feels like a little spaceship itself.

“People rent time machines.

“They think they can change the past.

“Then they get there and find out causality doesn’t work the way they thought it did. They get stuck, stuck in places they didn’t mean to go, in places they did mean to go, in places they shouldn’t have tried to go. They get into trouble. Logical, metaphysical, etc.

“That’s where I come in. I go and get them out.

“I tell people: I have a job and I have job security.

“I have a job because I know how to fix the cooling module on the quantum decoherence engine of the TM-31. That’s the reason I have a job.

“But the reason I have job security is that people have no idea how to make themselves happy. Even with a time machine. I have job security because what the customer wants, when you get right down to it, is to relive his very worst moment, over and over and over again. Willing to pay a lot of money to do it, too.”

I think I'll stop there. I'm interested in, you know this weird universe, minor universe 31, that is, you know, science fictional. But the reason I'm interested in it is to get to a little pocket of space. So I think that's what I'm really interested in making is these small moments, often between family members and how those things can sort of stand out in our lives, in our, you know, chronological living, how a moment like that can get frozen or preserved and so it matches that as a conceptual thing of kind of what I'm always searching around for, and I think on a sentence level it's like a place where I'm having, you know, I can stop trying to be clever or stop trying to come up with some formal or conceptual game, you know, and just right from the heart and so. It doesn't always happen, doesn't happen that often, but when it does then I, that I'm like, Oh yeah, this is what I was looking for when I started this book.

CF

So you know, you mentioned that this is sort of what you're always going for, and you talked about the the science fictionality of the novel, and you know, as John said, as a fan of science fiction he really admires your work, and I think you're often described as a science fiction right? I wonder if we could talk about that a little bit, too. So I wonder how, you know, in this novel in particular, because there are I think some similar moments in *Interior Chinatown*, definitely similar moments in some of your short stories, and particularly, thinking about, the word that you used, “small,” these “small moments,” and it reminds me of one of your short stories from *Third Class Superhero* “Realism,” which is about a mother-son relationship and one of the things that she is constantly after is feeling “small feelings.” And that phrase itself I always thought was really apt and seemed to sort of crystallize an essential aspect of your work.

But I wonder if you could talk about maybe in this novel you know how science fiction or science fictionality, if there's a distinction between the two for you, how that helps you to get at these small moments and these small feelings, if indeed this scene here is one of the, an example of, you know, what the mother in “Realism” calls small feelings.

CY

Yeah, that's a deep cut. When you mentioned I was like, I haven't thought about that story in years “Realism,” I mean, so thank you. I think too, you know, on a practical level in terms of the writing. It's like if I had tried to write this, you know, without any science fiction lens, I could describe it, and maybe I could describe it equally or almost sort of in the same sort of emotional terms that would feel, I don't know what this means, but like equivalent, like I could just strip out let's say, the science fiction part of it, I don't know that, maybe it would work for this moment, but I don't know that I would have ever gotten there, you know, without. It's like I want to have that way into it so that I can be, I can borrow the vocabulary, you know, for the sentences. Those sentences are what gets me interested in starting the book and what propels me to, it keeps me going in the long slog, you know.

So I think because I'm having fun with them and I think maybe it's a little bit of distraction and there's a little bit of variety and it's just taking a little bit of the pressure off of the direct emotional experience of father and son and more of the what it's like to be a kid in that moment, you know, and that feels otherworldly, of like, I'm on, you know your bed feels bigger, you know, your dad seems huge and like and so when I remember moments like that from my own childhood they do have this kind of not quite

real quality to them because I'm, you know, I don't know how memory works, but like at this point I feel like it's probably much more of a construction than an actual recollection of any specific experience, so there's a kind of, I don't know, in my visual or whatever my internal memory of a picture of like this scene. It does feel like it's divorced from space and time.

I guess this is the second reason why science fiction matters to this moment is I'm trying to like kind of dislocate our sense of the normal here, or at least, you know, like as I'm writing this it, I don't know where that moment is, but it floats around, you know, like it might just float to me as I'm falling asleep tomorrow and then it'll float away. I might not think of it again for years. So I don't know that I can get there. Maybe you know some writers can. I can't get there unless I have the science fiction you know, as the way in.

JP

When you first started discussing the pockets of space, Charlie, I was thinking about a way in which in Novel Dialogue we like to try to figure out, you know, where the through lines are like the other writers that have influenced you, and so when you were thinking of pockets of space, I was, you know, it reminded me of a genealogy that you know, I'd love to hear your thoughts about, which goes back to you know, the Romantic period. You know, something like Wordsworth and freezing little spots of time, but maybe comes out in Proust also, you know that notion of the recollected childhood moment that is gone from you, but it also comes back, like it's always with you.

And so I guess part of my question is, you know that genealogy to writers way outside the genre of science fiction. But then the other part is I really appreciated the way you framed it as needing the genre of science fiction to give you the language to get there, like even the notion of the minor universe, I think like the minor universe sort of resonates with that notion of like the small space of you know, space apart. So I guess kind of a double question there. One, about like other writers from the past that you pull on for that idea of pockets of space and then the other, more like just inviting you to say more about that idea of how science fiction is what gives you the armature or the traction or something, to explore.

CY

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Armature is a good word. I have dim memories of taking the modern novel at Berkeley with, I think it was Professor Charles Altieri that taught that class.

JP

Oh wow.

CY

It was—

JP

Strong!

CY

--and I was out of my depth. There's a bunch of English majors and I was like I'll take this class and you know then you know, we read Henry James and we read Virginia Woolf and we read like Faulkner. And I think that was that class, it was all one class. So I don't know where I'm going with this, I think where I'm going is there was in my like head, there was those books where they were sort of the, I remember how

much sort of like amazement there was that people had I guess rendered consciousness in a way that, you know, felt modern. And I was always like what does that mean? Like you're assuming I know what modern means, you know, like everyone just keeps saying modernity or modernism. I don't know what any of this means.

So and then, I started and then I don't know where it was, but I, you know, I read Kurt Vonnegut for the first time somewhere in there.

JP

I was gonna ask you about him actually, so yeah.

CY

And I don't know exactly, I can't trace the genealogy, but somewhere in there I then retroactively realized, oh, I can access this in a way, meaning like Vonnegut, in a way that I couldn't access--I mean I could access like the people I was reading before that, but I just didn't understand what the huge like innovation or step forward was until later when I realized that it wasn't so, like what I thought of as like default, well yeah, that's just how our minds work, was, I don't know, constructed or had to be discovered in a way and created by these people, who, these novelists who said okay, here's a new kind of novel. Here's a--

CF

It leads to that other passage that I mentioned before that you had in mind for starting the conversation, which is this passage in a later chapter where the dad is, it's another father-son scene where he's trying to impart knowledge on a young Charles. And he's opening a pack of graph paper, right? And he's peeling off the cellophane, and it's this very tactile scene. And then he has a graph paper laid out in front of him and it's, and that seems followed by pages of all these small feelings. All these small moments and it's one of my favorite passages in the novel, and it's, you know, you describe how he explains the space of the graph paper and the way that he starts out this conversation, starts out this lesson where he's teaching, I guess maybe some like principles of chronodiegetics to Charles. He says, "Choose a world, any world," as he opens up this graph paper and presents it to Charles.

Can you say more about that that that sense of optimism and like why, and how graph people I guess leads to a world? Maybe do I mean, do you use graph paper to outline your novels and stories, like what is graph paper to you? How does it open up into a new world? What's your favorite brand of graph paper?

CY

No, I'm so glad you asked about it. I know, I diddled over which one to read, and I ultimately thought well if you know probably most people haven't read the book even if they're listening to this, they because most people in the world haven't read the book, so and I don't want to scare them off by reading a passage in which literally I'm talking about how ink dries on the paper. Like OK, that's not the best advertisement.

CF

But it's amazing.

CY

Thanks. And I remember, yeah, I don't remember the brand but my dad in his office would have these thick pads of graph paper that had this like just very pleasing feel, like they were pretty squishy because there's the paper was like thick and they had these very light green lines and you know, it wasn't like a perforation it was like they were, it was like I don't know if it's wax but there was like a, you just tore it off and there was a sound that it would make as it tore off a nice sheet and, but I usually wouldn't tear off because you'd want the feeling of all the sheets underneath the top one and I just, you know, as I was playing with the idea, I mean, first of all the idea of the graph paper itself is like, well, no matter what else is going on, you know, no matter if you're in a foreign country or you're trying to refinance the house because we need, you know, we're maxed out in credit cards, like whatever is going on in their life at that moment, it's like okay, we have math, you know, like this is now a universe. I draw the X axis, I draw the Y. We're in the Cartesian plane here we are.

And there are truths, you know, there are places like you can imagine an astronaut, now, this is a little universe and you know each sheet is a new fresh start too. So I mean I, he would've, you know, he taught me math and you know, I'm, as I'm talking, I'm picturing a room where we were, but actually that's that, even that memory is a kind of false construction because we didn't move to the house that I'm picturing, until I was almost done with high school, but the graph paper I remember from way back and, yeah, yeah, I think there was a--and I remember also looking in his study of like all of the graduate math books he had and just like I didn't even understand what the title meant, you know, like that's not math, it doesn't seem like math and as a kid and even older, when I was older, just opening them up and just thinking, yeah, there's just so much to know, you know, that I will never even scratch the surface of and yeah.

Also the last bit, you know so, and those books were also mixed with his other books, which was like often books about like self-actualization, and you know how to make friends and influence people or you know things like that and yeah, it was all kind of swirled up with me in terms of his office, of like here's where I'm going to make this happen, you know, here's where I'm going to make good for our family, get the promotion and I guess in some ways that was like the Colonel, you know that office was probably like the center with this book came from.

CF

So, one of the interesting aspects of this, of *How to Live Safely in a Science Fiction Universe* is that it is about, you know, about it's an immigrant story. Taiwan is never sort of explicitly mentioned, but it seems like this, where Taiwan, you know, Asian Americanness, Asianness or whatever is never mentioned, but it still feels so recognizably, for me it feels so recognizably Taiwanese-American. I think there's specific reasons for that but I just wanted to sort of flag that maybe we can pick up some of those strands in a moment when we talk about *Interior Chinatown*, but before we get there, I thought we would zoom out and talk about the real autobiographical Charles Yu a little bit more and pick up on some of these strands of influences and, you know, how you came into writing. So I mean, I wonder if you could just talk about how, like when you came into writing, why you wanted to be a writer? I mean as I understand you, you know, you went to law school. You got your JD. You practiced, but you're doing this writing, you know, on the side.

CY

I wanted to write from, you know, undergrad on. I didn't know what that meant. I didn't necessarily think I wanted to, you know, I didn't know what I pictured, but I did minor fit in creative writing at Berkeley, and so I was taking poetry workshops actually, and, but I think for various reasons, many related to sort of parental pressures or in my internalization of feeling some kind of pressure, I just felt it

wouldn't be a good path to try to pursue in any serious way. So once I graduated from undergrad I didn't think about writing again until after I had graduated from law school. And I guess the timing of that both like sort of starting work at this sort of pressurized environment and also finally saying well, now I'm going to need some kind of outlet and now I've got this kind of responsible career path, but I think more it was this pressure of feeling like oh if I don't carve out a little bit of space for myself, I'm going to feel very, this could swallow me up. I could really kind of forget what I'm doing and lose my way. And so I mean this sounds much more deliberate than it was. I think in the moment it was just, well, I want to have something and so I started to jot down ideas and that's really when I started writing fiction was when I started, you know, working as a lawyer and started to publish stories and eventually resulted in getting my first collection of stories published as a book, which was, really, you know, unexpected.

And that's, you know, when you and I met, I was still working as a lawyer. I mean, at that point I had published *How to Live Safely* and the book before, so I had two books in and had somewhere around when you and I first met in Venice, I was working at this special effects company as an in-house lawyer, and I'd probably signed the contract with Pantheon, my publisher for the next two books, which was like thrilling. And you know, not insignificant financially. It was definitely like exciting to think, well, this is a meaningful amount compared to like sort of my first two books where there was just no question, like I'm not quitting my job, you know, like we couldn't live on that.

As it would turn out that that contract that was so exciting I wouldn't finish, I wouldn't fulfill it until last year, you know. So like it's a good thing I didn't rely on that either for income because if you amortize that amount over the 10 years that it took me to write the next two books then it would have been yeah, sub-poverty wages too, so.

CF

You know, it's interesting to hear you, Charlie, talk about how you really kind of became a writer of fiction when you were working as a lawyer and it, you know, really resonates with I mean, the characters in so much of your work were always living these double lives. I'm thinking of, you know, the title to one of your short stories, "The Man Who Became Himself," which is a kind of horror story and I mean, I was wondering if, is that something that you felt as a lawyer, and did you feel like you were living a double life? Did, when you were writing fiction did you feel like you were becoming yourself in the salutary way? Or was it an escape for what you were doing? What was it about, why was it during your time as a lawyer that you started writing, that you really started writing fiction?

CY

Yeah, it's a good question and I wonder in your devious, clever way if this is the segue into *Interior Chinatown* because you have led me right into talking about what I think is a connective tissue which is as a lawyer, I absolutely felt like an impostor, you know, I definitely have chronic impostor syndrome punctuated by acute impostor syndrome at moments, often when I'm talking to professors of English. But I, yeah, I think it was partly, I was 25, you know when I started at the firm, my first job. I felt like I was playing at being a grown up. I felt like I was playing at being a lawyer.

I felt in some ways it was also I had started to feel more self-conscious about my race, I guess, because you know I had grown up in southern California and gone to Berkeley, so often in environments where, you know, there are a lot of people of Asian descent, you know, I didn't give a lot of thought to it, but in New York it was quite different, you know. I felt especially in law school it was a smaller population of you know, Asian Americans and percentage wise. And then when I got to the firm it was even smaller, you know, I really felt like you know there were no Asian American partners, you know, that I knew of.

There might have been a few somewhere else in another office, but I, or even senior associates so I felt a little bit like well, do I belong here? You know. And so in a triple sense. So like I don't think I'm a lawyer, long term, I don't, you know, I see how good some of these people are at their jobs and then also just, I don't know if this is me and then also, yeah, feeling like I stuck out a little bit because of my face, you know.

That self-consciousness I think got channeled a little bit into the fiction I think that's where it went you know. I think that's what was fueling a lot of the stories and like "The Man Who Became Himself" there like you said, I think calling it a horror story is really funny. It's like trying to just basically you know, constantly feeling like I was putting on a costume or mask. And so a lot of my stories, I think, at least at the beginning were about work or about doing a weird job and had some sense in which you could like separate yourself from your public identity. Yeah, which you know, looking back, I see how much that's really a lot of the stories so.

CF

Yeah, and it seems like a lot of your characters are workers or like versions of office workers. They often have bosses or they're being directed somehow, like in *How to Live Safely*, Charles has a boss, who's artificial intelligence named Phil who tries to be like the cool, relatable boss, but fails, a lot. I wonder, I mean how much of that office life has sort of stuck with you even in *Interior Chinatown*, you know that like these are, they're all actors and all the characters are actors. But they're working actors, right? Sometimes they're not really super successful at earning a livable wage, but they're all working. Yeah, I wonder like is *Interior Chinatown* an office novel?

CY

Yes, I think that's a really perceptive way to look at it, I think in a weird way it is an office novel. Where the job is either being Asian, being someone's idea of Asian, or being yourself, too, even with your family, you know like I wrote a story, it's called "My Last Days as Me," which was one of my first stories in which what happens in the course of the story is the guy who is Me, with a capital M, finds out that a new actor is going to take over for playing his mother, or it's actually my mother, right? So because it's, and so Me has to deal with the new "my mother" coming into work. And I don't know how long I was, how far into writing *Interior Chinatown* when I realized I'd sort of like started this story, you know, 15 years earlier. I was like huh, this is kind of a sequel without, but that, "My Last Days as Me" had no mention of race, you know, there's no ethnic dimension to that, it was just self as a kind of performance.

JP

But I was thinking about this point, about the way that police procedural or science fiction, the sort of texture of science fiction language gives you like a machinery for your stories, armature, maybe to go back to that. And I was just thinking one of the things I really love about your writing is the way that characters themselves are sort of aware of being trapped in a genre or operating in a genre, like they have this role, or maybe they'll graduate to that other role and this is not a metafictional question, like I'm not trying to ask you to channel Charles Altieri, it's more like a question about how much you think about, you know, you like that your writing is kind of enabled by these constraints of genre in some of the same ways that you see your characters yes, definitely confined by their generic roles, but also sort of enabled by them at the same way, like that those are the roles we have to live with you know so.

CY

Yes, enabled is a good word for it. I think I, you know, am paralyzed by the infinite degrees of freedom, that you start out with and so constraints is yeah, as you mentioned is, can be paradoxically or non-paradoxically freeing to say, Well, here's one given, I can start here, you know, I'm writing a time travel story. Still, I need to choose many more constraints before I can have any idea what I'm doing. And the police procedural is a sort of the culmination of that you know in terms of constraints. Literal template.

And I think the other thing that it, besides just process that it does for me that I have fun with, you know, is both in science fiction or in the world of TV cop shows, you get to import all of the furniture, all of the armature, all of the, you know, all of the good stuff from tropes, right. You get to take all the tropes and bring them in, or, and they're doing a lot of work for you, you know.

JP

Yeah, so I'm still processing the fact that you wrote for *Westworld*. So let me think out loud about that. But in a way, taking what you said and just connecting it to the lived experience that we envision the characters have in your world, I guess I just want to say the thing that's fascinating is not just that the you know, the graph paper that you're talking about, like the time machine is the template that allows you to start telling the story, but also that you show us that that's actually a dimension of the human lived experience of your characters also, like the characters also are, you know, looking for a template like they, you know, they, I mean maybe not willingly, but they're inside those same roles. You know?

CF

Yeah, you know to pick up on that, and John, you put that really beautifully you know, I wanted to ask a question about Dorothy and Ming-Chen Wu. So two of the, well, I guess, that the way I read *Interior Chinatown* has got these three main characters, it's Willis Wu and his parents, Dorothy and Ming-Chen. And this is a question that kind of links back to the passage that you opened with, Charlie, the bedtime reading passage, and that really resonant sort of second item on the list, how you know that scene of reading, that kind of bodily configuration of the father making a pocket of space for his son. how it is, how it's enough.

So there's another moment in which this idea of enoughness appears and it's in *Interior Chinatown*. It's a scene with Dorothy and Ming-Chen and this is a moment when they step out of their framework, out of the armature of stereotype, right up until this point they're called, I think they're called Asian Woman, Young Asian Woman and Asian Waiter. And this is when they're telling the story of how they met, and how they fell in love, and this is their wedding reception, and they're dancing. And there's this, really, there's a small moment, a small moment of small feelings, in which Ming-Chen whispers to Dorothy, or maybe it's Dorothy whispering to Ming-Chen, I can't quite recall, but it said "It's just us now" and right now they're not referred to as those generic names, right? They're referred to by their proper, by their names, by their actual names. Someone says "It's just us now and it's more than enough."

I was wondering, is there something about like kind of enoughness that has stuck with you through your work? Does that idea, or that small feeling, does that resonate with you? Is that perhaps one of the things that you're striving to get across to your reader, is an idea of enoughness and what might it be?

CY

I love that question. I think I had never drawn an explicit connection between those two moments, but when you juxtapose them like that, it's a meaningful connection to me and I think what you're, you know, pointing out is I think there's something about these characters, both the parents in both

novels. They are immigrants and they are coming from a place of, you know, struggle, economic, struggle to be accepted or to feel like they're very much outsiders and they have this, at least at the beginning, a very strong sense that they can improve, you know, their station, that they can. And but somewhere along the way, or maybe all, at all points it, that gets kind of conflated or mixed in with a desire to actually just accumulate things, you know, to get, to make money to, that's this, that becomes the metric you know, is for doing what they wanted, which was to build a life. But it ends up becoming, and so somewhere becoming a kind of chase and somewhere in there I think because it becomes about money, that's where it becomes never enough, because that's not, you know, that's not actually a goal that's going to satisfy them.

So I think that's underlying the psychology of, you know both Willis' parents and Charles' parents in those books is the sense that they never would have been happy in any version, probably. Not happy, they had moments of happiness, they just never would have felt like they had reached their end point. And in both cases, you have a son who I think is trying to, both for his parents and maybe for himself and then in *Interior Chinatown* even for his next generation, for his offspring to tell a version of the story or to like, when is it going to be enough? Where do we find enough?

JP

Like following up on what, the way you guys are passing this concept of the sort of enabling stereotype back and forth. This is one of the reasons for me that I just keep living with that, the Du Bois formulation of the notion of living behind the veil or the second site which is a condition that has to do with knowing that other people look at you and see you in like some narrow role they put you into, you know, a racial type and then that's what they see you are, but you know you're something else. But you also know that they're seeing you construct you that way at the same time, and his point is like that's actually a second site. And it's horrible, but it's powerful as well because you can see the gap between the role people assigned to you versus you know the role you assign yourself from inside.

CF

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think it becomes like a kind of, that double consciousness, that work of double consciousness, you know, it's work, it's, I feel like it's exhausting and I feel like in *Interior Chinatown*, really conveys a sense of the work of inhabiting a role, that might be part of the expression of love is like, you know becoming you know, being, taking on the role of a dad, right, or taking on the role of a mother or husband and doing the work to sort of wrench yourself into that role that isn't quite yourself, but is yourself right, to sort of step out of yourself and have that kind of moment of generosity, but also have that moment, have that capability to really put in the labor to become what the other person needs, or I guess what you think the other person needs. And so I don't know if it, does that sound like part of what you're trying to get at, Charlie?

CY

Yes, definitely. I think that's really well put in, you know, I think the, at second sight or double consciousness is, yeah, it, you know I really resonate with all of that.

CF

The final question that that we like to ask on Novel Dialogue which is, is there like a guilty pleasure or is there a treat that you give yourself when you're in the throes of writing or, you know, you hit writers block, or something like that? Yeah, what do you turn to?

CY

I mean, I wish I could come up with like something that makes me sound either smart or transgressive, but it's gummy bears. I mean, that's really what I turned to.

JP

Awesome

CF

Excellent.

JP

I hope you're not vegan because I have a son who loves gummy bears and he spends like all his life looking for the like, you know, pure.

CF

That's awesome

JP

How, at what rate do you consume them? Are you talking about like two or three? Or are you talking about like a whole package?

CY

No, it's two or three, but it probably adds up over the course of a day. I don't think about it too much.

CF

Have you ever had the five pound gummy bear, do you know what I'm talking about?

CY

I've never eaten it, I've seen it.

CF

You've seen—

JP

What, it's a single gummy bear that's five pounds?

CF

It is a single gummy bear, that's five pounds.

JP

Get out!

CF

We have owned it before. We've never finished it, but it does exist.

JP

Oh my god, it's the Moby Dick of gummy bears.

Well, thank you guys for a really fantastic, completely illuminating conversation and I just want to wrap up things by thanking the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship with the podcast and acknowledge support from both Duke and Brandeis University. Nai Kim was this episode's production intern and designer and Claire Ogden, the sound engineer.

Please subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast or Stitcher or Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts and tell your friends about us. So novelists that we have spoken to in past seasons include Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, Helen Garner, Sigrid Nunez, and Caryl Phillips. And there are a lot more great conversations coming your way this season.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, Charlie, Chris, thanks a lot and thank you.

CF

Thank you so much.

CY

Thank you.