

Season 4: Transition and Translation

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello, Novel Dialogue listeners. I'm Aarthi Vadde here in the studio with John Plotz, co-host, co-founder and all-purpose partner in crime. Hey, John.

John Plotz

Hey, Aarthi, thank you for that.

AV

Well, you'll remember that we launched this podcast back in 2020 and had three fabulous seasons and are about to embark on our fourth. And as we head into this fourth season, we are truly excited to welcome two new accomplices and really two new leaders into this project. And that's Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, who are taking the reins this season.

So, John, would you like to say something about Emily?

JP

Yes, well, I wish we had a foley man to do the whinnying sound as they take the reins but yeah, okay, neigh, over to you.

So, one of the season's incoming hosts, Emily Hyde, is associate professor at Rowan University, and she comes by her world lit expertise honestly, who even before her PhD from Princeton she had a two year stint teaching in the English department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

You may have seen her wonderful PMLA article on Chinua Achebe or her Public Books piece on the novelist and painter Denis Williams, because her project is interested in the intersection of the fictional and the visual. But did you know she's also been researching and writing about Doris Lessing and George Lamming? That really goes right to my heart, Emily. They're two writers I love so much.

Her knowledge is deep, her writing is lucid, and her enthusiasm is wonderfully contagious. So, Aarthi and I are really pleased to pass her the ND baton. And Aarthi, do you want to say a word about our other new host?

AV

Oh yes. Chris Holmes is a great friend of mine and a fantastic scholar of 20th and 21st century anglophone fiction. He also is a great reader of Spanish literature and we've talked at length about all sorts of writers, especially Kazuo Ishiguro, on whom he is writing a book. And he has already edited a fantastic special issue from Modern Fiction Studies called "Ishiguro after the Nobel", co-edited with one of the guests on novel dialogue, Kelly Rich, one of our first guests.

Chris, I believe we first met at a Society for Novel Studies conference, maybe the first one?

Chris Holmes

Yeah, that's right. That's right.

AV

Yeah, I think we had lunch together as Jacques Rancière gave a keynote.

CH

That's true, way back when.

AV

So, I couldn't think of a better person to co-host this show. Chris and Emily will be excellent compliments to one another.

And Chris, you're going to talk a little bit about the theme for this season, which I think we can give you full credit for kind of spearheading, and that's translation.

CH

Yeah, thanks so much, Aarthi. I'm really just so pleased and honored to have been brought on board by the two of you to help steer this ship. I think what Novel Dialogue is offering is pretty unique in the podcasting universe, and I think we've now got a great team of hosts with a huge range of expertise, and since joining the New Books Network and partnering with Public Books, we have a much larger and growing audience. And that's all thanks to the two of you, and I know Emily and I are grateful to get to play a part in it.

So, I wanted to say just quickly something about this first ever themed episode, before Emily talks a little bit about some of our exciting pairings. Along with Public Books, we decided to do things slightly differently this season. We're arranging our conversations around the theme of translation. On the most practical level, this means that you'll be hearing from translators in conversation with novelists. It also means that most of the novels in question will have begun their lives in languages other than English. But we were interested also in exploring the ways in which books and ideas travel across boundaries and borders and languages and cultures, whether via publication or, in our case, podcasts. And we felt like this was best described under this broad umbrella of translation.

If you love our original conceit of bringing critics into conversation with novelists, that is still our guiding principle. But we also think you'll love the additional layer of thinking more precisely about how novels are translated into our reading publics.

Emily, do you want to give a sneak preview of some of our upcoming shows and pairings?

Emily Hyde

Sure, and I'll just say too that one of the most interesting things, at least I think, that's ensued from our focus on translation is the fact that those roles of critic and novelist and translator are not as clearly defined as they have been in past seasons.

So, for example, we have a conversation between the very up and coming novelist, Yan Ge, and Jeremy Tiang, who translated one of her recent novels from Chinese into English. But Jeremy is himself also a novelist, and Yan is about to publish, I think, in 2023, her first collection of stories written in English. And it's called *Elsewhere*. So those roles are mutable, shall we say, in that conversation.

And then the very first episode of the season is even more complicated. We have the terrific Chilean novelist Alejandro Zambra, and he's in conversation with Megan McDowell, who translates his novels from Spanish, and she's very prolific. She's translated a lot of really important contemporary Latin American novelists. And they are sitting down with John and also with Kate Briggs, who is a translator, a critic, and the author of a book called *This Little Art*, which is kind of undefinable but brilliant about the topic of translation. And you will hear in this conversation that John asks Kate, you know what she's up to these days and she says that she is currently at work on a "novel-adjacent thing."

So, there are all kinds of overlapping roles and different projects that I've at least discovered through working through the episodes for this season. Anything else surprising coming our way, Chris?

CH

Well, I'm excited about an episode that I'm going to be lucky enough to host, and that is with the translator Sophie Hughes and the young Chilean novelist Alia Trabucco Zerán. And they decided amongst themselves that instead of talking about working with each other as translator and novelist, that they would pick a novel that they felt like had been incredibly important to literature in Spanish and then had sort of fallen out of favor but had been revived, sort of phoenix from the ashes, by being translated into a number of different languages, including English. And I just can't wait to hear their conversation about this novel. I haven't read it yet. I'm going to read it and to sort of wade into their world of thinking about things that gain in translation.

JP

There's that weird moment, that weird moment, when André, when wasn't it Gide, who rediscovered James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, which is like a novel from the 1820s that had completely gone, and he wrote an introduction to a French translation of it in the 30s, sort of claiming it as a proto-modernist novel. Not quite the same because it still existed in English, but it yeah, it's a really interesting category.

CH

Well I think we're even trying, and Emily, maybe you can say something more about this, but we're trying to not have everything anchored in English and to have ideas about translation that we can talk about that don't necessarily involve the English translation.

EH

Yeah, one of the episodes is also going to be about the novelist Claude McKay, who obviously is not in the studio recording for Novel Dialogue

CH

That would be a feat.

EH

That would be a feat. Well, we didn't manage that, but about some of his novels, which, *some* of which have been kind of recovered out of the archive and republished recently, and how those are being translated into French from English. Even novels that are partially set in France are now being translated into French. So there are all kinds of different ways and directions that that translation is working across the entire season.

CH

I don't know how I'm going to work it in, but I'm also totally fascinated with this new book that has been written about a woman's fascination with Japanese's use of onomatopoeia. And it's a book entirely about how onomatopoeia taught her to think and work in Japanese, and ultimately become a translator of Japanese novels through onomatopoeia. But I hope that gets to be a question to someone somewhere along the line this season.

EH

I love it.

JP

My introduction to the world wide web was somebody showing me a website that, or an early website which was onomatopoeia in different languages. And what I really remember was that the Japanese onomatopoetic words were so profoundly different from everything. Like even Korean would sound relatively close to English for like a snake or something, and then Japanese for, would be something, some unexpectedly other sound, so it's so true, yeah.

EH

I love that that's the first thing you did on the internet. I think I bought a pair of jeans, I remember doing that.

AV

As John and I take a step back, we couldn't be more confident increase in Chris and Emily's ability to step forward and guide us through the next phase of Novel Dialogue. Stay tuned, everyone.