

## 5.5 They're Not Metaphorical Demons: Mariana Enríquez and Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra (CH)

### Transcript

#### **Chris Holmes**

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. On this podcast, we bring scholars and novelists together to talk about how novels work, how they're written, read, studied, and remembered. I'm Chris Holmes, the co-lead host for Season 5 of Novel Dialogue. Today I'll be speaking with International Booker Prize short-lister Mariana Enríquez, along with Professor of Comparative Literature Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra.

Mariana Enríquez is an award-winning Argentine novelist and journalist based in Buenos Aires, whose work has been translated into more than 20 languages. She is the author of *Things We Lost in the Fire* and *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed*, which was short-listed for the 2021 International Booker Prize, the Kirkus Prize, the Ray Bradbury Prize for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Speculative Fiction, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Fiction. The subject of our conversation today is her most recent novel, *Our Share of Night*. This is her fourth novel and the first translated into English. It was awarded the Herralde Novel Prize in 2019, one of the major literary prizes of the Spanish-speaking world. *Our Share of Night* follows a spiritual medium, Juan, who can commune with the dead and with the world of demons, and his son, Gaspar, as they go on a road trip to outrun a secretive occult society called the Order that hopes to use Juan and Gaspar in their unholy quest for immortality. Publishers Weekly called *Our Share of Night* "a masterpiece of literary horror," and like so much of Mariana's work, it refuses the hard borders of genre in favor of fiction that claws at the still open wounds of Argentina's past. Mariana's writing thrills with its bewitching combination of visceral body horror and probing political, historical, and ethical questions.

In conversation today with Mariana is Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra. Magalí is an Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Pennsylvania State University. She specializes in Latin American and African literatures with a particular focus on large-scale comparative frameworks such as the Global South. Her first book, *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South*, was published by Northwestern University Press in 2019, and her work has appeared in a variety of academic venues and edited collections.

This happens to be our second chance of talking with Mariana after a first recording had a terrible flaw in the ultimate recorded product, and we are so pleased that Mariana has agreed to come back and talk with us again after that marvelous first interview. Welcome to you both, Mariana and Magalí.

#### **Mariana Enríquez**

Thank you.

#### **Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra**

Hi. Well, I'm going to start us off with a reference to our last conversation, which is that in our last interview, this wonderful interview that now exists in the ether, I started by asking about the scope of *Our Share of Night*. It's both a long novel, it's longer than your previous three novels combined, but it's also a big novel in terms of its imaginative range, with the narrative moving across time and space and across the perspective of several characters who often return in subsequent sections. And in my first question, I described this bigness and density of the novel as a kind of maximalism. But in your answer, you said two things that surprised me. First, you described the logic of the novel as arboreal. And second, you talked about *Our Share of Night* as having its starting point in the biography you wrote of the Argentine writer Silvina Ocampo, *La hermana menor*, or *The Younger Sister* published in 2014. So I'd like to start by asking you to talk more about those two aspects of *Our Share of Night*. First, that arboreal bigness of the novel, and second, its relationship to that project of the biography in *La hermana menor*.

**ME**

Okay, of course. Well, thank you for you two for having me again. I wanted to do it again.

Why arborism? Because the novel follows the branches that start to grow in the narrative, to use a metaphor. And I follow them until, you know, I follow them until they, to me, they grew enough. And this has, for some readers, the problem that they feel that it's a bit meandering, you know, or that you have a lot of information there that is not necessary to the plot. And maybe it's not. It's true. But I don't feel like I have to do a novel like this, with this length, with this kind of ambition, if you will, with such a tight plot. I really don't believe in that. I really do, it depends on what you want to do. But in this kind of novel, I really don't believe that it benefits from that. It can benefit for a quicker reading or something, but not the text itself. The text itself has to be a world, has to be a universe, in the world there's a lot of useless stuff. And a lot of stuff that is useful afterwards, because as I was writing the novel, I had to understand the world as I was writing it, because it's very, even the realistic parts are not contemporary to me. I didn't do a lot of investigation. I really had to follow it in an imaginative way.

And I really had to let the characters talk, because I need you to know that these are people, that these are believable people. They do magic stuff, and there's real demons, and they commute with real demons. This is not a metaphor of, you know, everything is a metaphor in a way, but they're not metaphorical demons, they're demons. So if I don't make the character believable, real, with a lot of, you know, of the realness of the things that happened, it takes a while and he, you know, doesn't make a cup of coffee good, and then he starts to reading some poetry, and then he starts to walk around, and then, you know, he kind of goes to a room and brings the demon to talk to him. For me, it was too abrupt. I didn't want that kind of feel to the novel.

**MAT**

As I'm recalling *La hermana menor*, I'm going to use a strong word, feel free to adjust the word, but the biography of Silvina Ocampo herself doesn't have this level of contempt in it, right

**ME**

No.

**MAT**

It has a kind of seriousness for its biographical subject, a seriousness and its own kinds of admiration, but the Bradford family, for example, in the novel, doesn't have that same kind of focus, right? It's all of the things that you just talked about in terms of the inspiration for writing that part of the world of *Our Share of Night*. And so I'm going to deviate a little bit and ask about the sort of responsibility of the biographer, maybe, and the freedom of the novelist as being two very different writing modes for you.

**ME**

To explain more or less, like in Argentina, like in America, when the West was won, let's say, for us, the South was won, to, you know, open the frontier in the South in Patagonia. There was a lot of people, Indigenous people living there, and they were massacred. And everyone, every person that participated in that massacre, this is late 19th century, were awarded with a massive land, which meant that they built, and these are the same families, these are still, because when you get these—Argentina's as enormous as America—so once you get this kind of enormous land, and you build your fortune there in a country that their wealth is made of exporting primary products, I mean, meat and, you know, agriculture things, you own it, you know, and that money and that ownership was given to you after and as an award for a massacre.

So that, I mean, even if three generations afterwards, their children have nothing to do with that, that's there. And I'm very interested in history and memory and, you know, and to kind of try to see where things come from, not to blame the, you know, the contemporary people that come from there because it's not their fault or their responsibility, and I don't think they even have to be accountable for it because, you know, it's where they are. But in the context of a novel that in a way is trying also to tell the history of my country, I can't ignore how this came and how this stayed, not only came, how this stayed. And it's not that far from, you know, the colonial things that appear there, it's kind of the same process. So that's not to say that the novel is about that in a very obvious way. But that is there. And even if you don't know it, you can see that this privilege was made. I don't know if that kind of money is made in any way that is not, I don't think it's possible. No.

**CH**

This actually leads me to a question about something you said in an interview with The Guardian, that you didn't want to be complicit in any kind of silence. *Our Share of Night* is a novel that raises the question of what we do with the silent voices of the dead and disappeared, particularly those disappeared during the last dictatorship or the Dirty War. Juan and the Order's cadre of mediums live at the precipice of life and death, communicating with ghosts and demons. And Juan is desperate to speak with his dead wife, Rosario. It seems to me that real history is the calling forth of ghosts whose anger and sorrow the world needs to hear. Do you see your novel as participating in both the fantasy and the historical necessity of speaking with the dead?

**ME**

Yeah. And also, I mean, myself, this is kind of important. In Argentina, I think the decision, we are a country, let's say, that is absolutely obsessed with memory, with the concept of memory, and in a very wide way. And add to that, that this is one of the few countries on the planet, I guess, with France, that still keeps psychoanalysis something that is an everyday thing. I don't do it now, but I think, and that's, you know, obsessively revisiting your memories. It's not just—

**CH**

That's fascinating.

**ME**

Yeah. And even in our everyday language, we have things like that. It's like "that's your super ego talking." It's very normal. And so, but that doesn't mean that we know ourselves that much. That means that we have so much information that we are totally confused most of the time. Same happens with obsession with memory and history. The country decided when the dictatorship ended in '76 after the disappeared, that basically there were the bodies that were taken from the society and therefore were voices that were listened. And this is a silence that is very special because it's something to have a trial where they can tell what they were trying to do, as wrong as they could be. Because some were very young. This is the 70s. This is, you know, this is all kind of organizations that were formed after the Cuban Revolution and, you know, that those days it seemed reasonable or it seemed they could work. I have a friend in Cuba that always says to me, well, you know, in print even Marx makes sense. And it's true. Like you read it, it's fucking amazing. Like, and you say, wow, and then you do it and it's kind of \*noise of dissatisfaction.\*

And so, yeah. And those voices are voices that were not heard at the moment because they didn't have a trial. They weren't, you know, they didn't have the opportunity to speak. And they were taken in the night in a ghostly way. Like it wasn't, this wasn't like your usual authoritarian violent government that kills people in the street and there's bodies everywhere. This is kidnapped in the middle of the night and taken to facilities that were in the city. And they were hidden in the city. So that led to a whole other thing of haunted buildings and places, even this one that they just found underneath, not just, a couple of years ago, but I mean, one of the latest ones that they found underneath the highway. So, at the other night, I was coming back from La Plata where I teach. And in the night, you go underneath, you know, the highway and you can see it. And there's like the white crosses and the pictures of the people that were there because there was a clandestine place there, that was, that they destroyed before they left power. So all the cities has like things there.

But the generals were taken to court. And in court, we could hear the victims, the tortures. It was like absolutely cruel. I mean, I always say they were my first horror stories and they were like, you know. Women giving birth in the back of a car and then the child taken from them and then they torture for hours and then, you know, and then I mean, and that's nothing, that she survived. But, and since then, this is the middle 80s, we've been discussing this as a society. It never ends. And the dictators also took children that were babies or very young children. I could have been taken if my parents were, you know, involved in, they knew what was going on, but they weren't involved in an organization, could be taken and given to another family, which is basically the Freudian concept of the sinister.

So everything is kind of very linked in the constant examination of memory and history, and it's quite stressing. And, but at the same time, I don't think I would be comfortable in a society that decided otherwise, you know, that decided not to talk about violence, or to think that violence may go away or to blame the person that did it and not the history and not trying to understand the roots of it.

**MAT**

Well, I'm interested actually, so the what, but also the how, of how you take up violence, specifically in *Our Share of Night*, but it's these questions and these events come back throughout so many of the short stories, for example. And I'm thinking here, you know, you've got this attention to violence, it has to do with specific histories of violence, of course, the last dictatorship, the Dirty War, the disappeared, also the deeper historical roots, the Bradford family in *Our Share of Night*, that history of the plantation or agricultural system and the Junta and its violence, its links to the British Empire, its links to British activities in West Africa, which come up in the novel as well. But also that kind of, well, so larger forms of structural violence and also interpersonal violence. I'm thinking of that very violent scene of the fight where Juan attacks his son Gaspard. And so some of that, yes, it's that interest in horror and ghost stories, that interest in the immediate history, but I'm interested in how you think about these different registers of violence.

Let's stick with *Our Share of Night*, how you think about them working with each other, and how you experience them then in reception. Right. So one thing that strikes me about all of the reviews of *Our Share of Night* in English is the violence they go to is the violence of the dictatorship. And that's what sort of focused on in part because of how a review of the novel is going to be focusing perhaps on the first part of the novel as a setup. But that's just one of the many registers, which is why I wanted to invite you to talk about how you think about the interplay of those registers.

## ME

I think the interpersonal violence is much worse, as in how I depict it. I don't mean in the big picture, but you know, it's large violence, historical violence is difficult for us, I think, to grasp in general. It's numbers. 2,000 people died, 2,700. I remember like odd actions, like I can remember Jerzy Kosiński was the name, I can't remember, but it was an artist in the 70s that did like silhouettes of how many people were dead in concentration camps in Nazi Germany per day. And it was impressive, but it was still cardboard cuts.

But I think interpersonal violence in the novel, in the context of the novel, as making the novel, not about the characters, not about who they are, because Juan is quite a violent person. And he's, because he received a lot of violence in his body, a lot of pain in his own body. And sometimes he can be a loving person, but he's very crazy, and he's very violent, and sometimes he really enjoys to hurt other people, also because he has to do it ritualistically. So to him, hurting has to, it's a very mixed thing. And in the case of Gaspar, he really, in that confrontation, he basically is trying to make a symbol in his hand to, in his arms, sorry, to protect him. But he never tells him this. And he never, I don't know, he never says to him, Hey, I have to protect you from something I have, that would be awful too. I thought about that. But I needed the, you know, because he's also, Juan is kind of disappearing at this point. He's not also dying, but he's kind of disappearing as, so he has to really use the last that he has, and the last that he has is violence.

But I think it mirrors the other violence, it kind of gives you like the microscope thing, you know, in the intimate and family relationships of the whole thing. So the whole thing is kind of easy to explain in terms of history says blah. But then when you see a dad that is kind of nice to his child 50% of the time and the other 50% of the time is violent or extremely weird with him, borderline abusive, not sexually, but I mean, in all the other things. And he grabs him and he, you know, destroys his arm. And I think that is kind of the in your face effect of the accumulated violence. And because in the end, historical violence happens one to one, there's one person that decides to throw a bomb, there's one person that decides to torture the other. I mean, in the end, this one person with the other person is one person that decides

to pull the trigger and look the other one in the eyes. And that dimension is the only dimension where you can more or less give it like the real feeling of what it is, as much as you can do in literature, that you can do that much.

Well, I'm not scared of violence, I mean, of writing violence, because there's a lot of the real violence, first is what is awful. And second, there's lots of, I mean, it would be like totally silly of my part, if I want to write a story that has elements of violence to be coy or to be timid about it, you know, when you have the things that are happening in the world, like I don't, this is the things that I don't understand. There's also many reviews that say that unnecessary violence, excuse me, like it's not real. The unnecessary violence is the real violence. This is just, you know, this is just telling you how it feels and how we are so used to it, that we are more, you know, upset about the work of fiction with violence, and not with people being killed every day. And it's not, it's like, okay, well, we have this problem really. And I know with a child this is worse, but many like most of the children that have violence are, it's violence in the household as, you know, as couples. So it's where the affection should be stronger is where violence is stronger, which is, you know.

**MAT**

I mean, that scene is terrifying precisely because, so the scene of the moment where Juan attacks Gaspar is narrated from Gaspar's perspective, right? That's what makes that scene so affecting, both the actual violence of parent to child, but his confusion at what's unfolding. And this is something that happens in several, so children are both the recipients, but also agents of violence in a lot of your stories as well. And they are, that violence is so often seen from the child's perspective. And when it's not, it's even creepier. So I'm thinking of the story, "The Neighbor's Courtyard" from *Things We Lost in the Fire*. But also something like, well, the short story, "Adela's House," the parts of it also come back in *Our Share of Night*, right? So it's children in these extreme situations who are somehow transformed by it. Also the novella, *Chicos que vuelven*, or its title in the English, I think was "a children that," "the children that disappear" or something.

**ME**

Yeah, something.

**MAT**

Something like that. Yeah. And so, and again, the sort of ways in which violence kind of deforms these children as a sort of figure that comes back over and over in the work. You're not shy about it—

**ME**

No.

**MAT**

—is the way I would ask the question.

**ME**

South America in general. And I think you see it in other places too in the south. It's a place where there's lots of children that are submitted to extreme social violence. They live in the streets. They beg

for money. They live in appalling situations, the things that they are exposed, even in the street we can't even imagine. And many of them not even survive, many of them like, you know, start doing drugs and most they don't go to school. And they want to survive. They don't really can't break this circle. So in my stories, these children that are, you know, kind of in this totally unfair situation are mad.

So as a trope in horror, the mean child is always very scary. I think it's because if a child is bad, is mean, is evil, because evil is just the word, there's two reasons for him to be evil. One: huge damage beyond everything. So he can only react with evil. So who was the one that dared to do that to someone that, you know, couldn't defend himself. And the other thing is that he was born evil, which is kind of like a demonic situation. And it kind of puts upside down all our notions of purity, innocence, violence, children, etc. So as a trope, it really works. But as a force that is a very major force, I think in our societies, there is resentment. And resentment brews very early, I think.

And I could, I can see sometimes when I go in the subway, and there's the kid that, you know, is trying to sell me some, I don't know, socks or something like that. And I say no, because I don't have cash or something. And there's hatred in his eyes, and he's six. So this is the boy I want to be absolutely cruel and mean to this woman that most of the time is me. That is the person that is saying no to his socks. And I'm not, it's not my fault, but it doesn't really matter. Because I'm not taking him to my house, giving him a bath and adopting him, right? So that kind of, you know, and you can say to me, well, but you couldn't do that. Yeah, I know, I couldn't do that. But that's the right thing to do, isn't it? So to be like, you know, in this kind of very morally complex situation where nobody is to blame about anything. So how do we fix it? This is hundreds of thousands of kids.

Since it's my genre, what I do with them is make them vengeful, awful and scary to see, you know, how people react to something that they should do. Another thing is that children don't really have a voice because they can't really speak. I mean, they can't really put in words what's going on with them. They don't understand it. They can say, they have tantrums, they feel bad, they are, you know, sometimes they have, I mean, there's no, they have not really like a construction of a discourse about what's going on with them or where they put and they think all this is normal. So yeah, so I turn them into little vengeful creatures, zombies that come back, pieces of little memory, pieces of no future. This is a very punk thing.

## **MAT**

Yeah, I wanted to pick up actually on something that's come up as we've been talking about violence, which has been talking about real historical events, their real sort of effects in the world, but also referring to those tropes of horror, right, the evil child, the demon child, the creep, twins being creepy would be another one that's come up. And I'm interested in that relationship to genre fiction. So there's horror, there's the Gothic in your work. I think there's also, I mean, crime fiction, your first story in English, "The Dirty Kid", which picks up on a lot of things thematically that we've been talking about was published in a McSweeney's volume of crime fiction from Latin America. And so I'm interested in what genre fiction, and you can interpret that term as you'd like, as broadly or as narrowly, has done for you, I think first as a reader and then what it's doing for you as a writer when you engage with the tropes of these genres. But first for you as a reader, what encountering genre fiction opened up?

## **ME**

As a reader, it was very, to be honest, it was very entertaining to me, like I had free access to anything in my parent's bookshelves, like no difference between children, nothing, I mean, I think probably they got some books off, but not many. And I remember when I started reading, especially Bradbury horror stories, they were like wow! You know, like "The October Country," those stories were like, and I remember like ghost, M.R. James and the Gothic, you know, like the way that Juan hurts Gaspar's arm, that is kind of, you know, breaking a window and making, you know, like that with the broken glass is exactly the way that Kathy in *Wuthering Heights* puts the hand through the window and then, you know, grabs in this case, he grabs the guy that I can't remember the name that but the guy that is the one, the guy that is living there for a while in Heathcliff's house. And she's like the ghost girl that does that to him and hurts him like that. And it's like, I got that as a reference. As a, you know, it's not obvious because the situation is so different. But I always wanted to put the scene somewhere.

Those basically were the things that entertained me and gave me a lot of adrenaline. And then, as I were older, I was not a reader, but it was as a spectator, right? You know, fell in love with Spielberg when he goes dark. As in, you know, very popular, let's say, but then I love Cronenberg, I love David Lynch. I love there's a very dark tradition in, I don't know why it was called magical realism in literature in South America, that is kind of José Donoso in Chile and Juan Carlos Onetti in Uruguay and Ernesto Sabato in Argentina that are like pessimistic, awful, dark, gray, old mansions, most I mean, wow. And I love that.

And I don't know why, I don't think you choose that much. And even French stuff was here very big, Ingmar Bergman and all that, *The Hour of the Wolf* and, you know, *Eyes Without a Face* and those kinds of things, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, I love the symbolists, I love the decadent poet, when I was teenager and post-teenager. So I don't think and then I became a goth and, you know, goth punk. And that kind of area, you know, Bowie, Aliester Crowley, magician kind of, you know. So rock and roll to black metal, whatever.

And I don't think you really choose that. I think it's kind of a part of your personality, part how you grew up, but many people grew up the same way and went to, I don't know, romcoms and don't give me anything dark because it really upsets me. That to me was kind of very different to me. It was like a safe space, was something that entertained me, was something that helped me have fun. I, you know, ran away from, I didn't run away, but it was just an afternoon. I escaped my house to see *Nightmare on Elm Street* when I was 13 with a couple of kids. We're in the last row, we were like, \*ooo\*. I still remember when Freddie, like, the arms go like really long and he's in the dark alley and he's like, you know, with the, with the knives, he's like, and I don't know, I, we were like screaming, like insane and having so much fun. And then we realized, wow, this is the story of a pedophile killer that was murdered by the parents of the children that he didn't manage to kill to stop him. And then he's coming back for those children in their dreams so he cannot be stopped. Like this is like a massive, massive tale of trauma and intergenerational trauma. And he's, you know, we were just screaming in the back row, like in a clandestine meeting in the cinema.

So yeah, and at that point when I realized that all this was a lot of fun, but it was talking about this kind of stuff. When I realized this dimension of horror that the first time is not very obvious, and I think that's why horror sometimes is very despised. This, I don't know if it's despised, but minimalized, like, you know, just entertainment, because it's not that obvious. It's not this, the gross out level is so in your face that for you to see the other level, you have to be a real reader of it. And not everybody is, you know, drawn to it or interested in, you know, digging a bit more into it. But when I did, I said, oh, this is my



language. This is the language I can use to talk about certain things. This fits me because it's the way I see the world. This fits me because it's the kind of narrative that I enjoy, basically. And also it, most of the time takes on the subjects that I care about: vulnerable bodies, traumatic histories, ghosts as a representation of traumatic history, death, death and desire, violence.

The moral question of going too far, that's something that really interests me in literature. I do go too far, but it's not something I don't think about. And it's something that I really want to try as a writer. I don't want to be a shy writer about that because I think that's what makes literature important. Otherwise, you're just telling a story about your grandma, and how nice she was, and it's absolutely boring. So yeah, that's what made it, like at first it was like, this moves me. This makes me feel something. And then it was like, this makes me feel something because this is what I want to talk about.

## **MAT**

*Our Share of Night* is now in every major European language. It's now in English. More of your short stories are being translated into more languages. You are clearly a reader and, well, I hate this word, but a consumer of culture for many places. And now your work is circulating into these places. So I'm curious about the experience of it for you, especially when your work is translated into languages that you yourself are a reader in, in French or in English, for example, and the experience of encountering yourself in that other language and the experience of encountering the audiences attached to that other language.

## **ME**

Well, it's quite curious because when, in Spanish, Spain and South America, it's enormous. All the countries are different and we have very different histories, but somehow there's an understanding there. When we say police violence in Latin America, we know what we're talking about, what kind of police violence it is. And even if it's different in Spain, they know what's happening here. I mean, and they also had, like Spain in many ways, with that long, long, long dictatorship of Franco has a lot of things that even if they don't want to admit it, a lot of things are very similar to what happened in Latin America. But in English or in French, I can read the translation. The translation in French to me is nearer what I wrote because French is a language that is more transparent with Spanish. And I can speak it very good because, you know, the French don't think everyone can speak it, but I can read it, like almost with no problem. And I love it.

But what happens with the audience, for example, in France, France is a country that used to have like a very hundred years ago, I guess, Guy de Maupassant and the séances, and Allan Kardec, that was a massive spiritualist, and the symbolist and the symbolist paintings were like a very, very mystical kind of thing. And they were like all the, you know, the legends of Britannia in the North and that, after I think the 60s and 50s and existentialism and Sartre and Camus and all of that was kind of lost. And now, not only the bigger writers like Oulipo or Carrère or Amélie Nothomb, or Annie Ernaux, like, but also like the normal literature is very about real stuff. It is very autofiction, it's very, you know, realistic. So they don't, it's like the tradition is all over the place. So they received this massive book because the book did very good and it was very well received. Like they were, they kind of understood that it was not magical realism anymore or the magical realism got very dark somehow and how they're very interested in colonial history because that's their obsession with memory is that. So it was like, how does it work, the colonial history in this novel, like it really resonated with them.

And I think it resonated with a lot of young people that are consuming things in English. And also a couple of years ago, they had like a wave of French, they call it French New Extremity, that is kind of French horror movies that are graphic, like, my god, they are graphic. Like the one that won Cannes a couple of years ago.

**MAT**

Ah, *Titane*.

**ME**

What is going on! Well, there was, yeah, well, there was a wave of that, there was more underground than that. And I still, to this day, I don't understand how that movie won. I don't think, I really like it, but I don't understand what I mean, this, I mean, it's totally crazy and it's hyper violent. And it's like a vision of new flesh that is kind of, maybe it's a bit more frivolous than what Cronenberg thinks about it, but visually is like, totally arresting. So I mean, tackles things that that Cronenberg doesn't that much, like the gender thing. So, it's very, very, and the girl is awful. This is a, this was amazing to me, the concept of a whole flick that was very long with the lead woman as a character that was awful in all her incarnation. She's awful. Like she, you don't ever like her as a child, she's awful. As a killer, when she grows up, it's awful. When she has sex with the car, it's awful. She's always awful.

Anyway, and that was, that was very interesting to me. And there was like a wave of that very underground cinema that people really enjoyed, but it didn't take off because it doesn't have like a massive thing. And by no means my book was massive, but you can see that there's a craving of that there, that is not being given to them with the culture that gives you a lot because in France, you know. In English, it's different because in English, there is a tradition of horror. So it's read by the very horror people in a way, like those are mostly the ones that want more plot and things. it is a bit too self, kind of congratulatory to me or too literary. And that it is because, you know, I come more from that.

And then there's the very, very, I have probably the smartest readings because there is a tradition. So you can see like a reading that Adam Thirlwell did or, you know, or I don't know, Ishiguro saying I really like it. And I know where he, I'm apart from the, from that they can use it as a blurb and everyone was excited with that. I can see why. Because I mean, even if he, he could like it or not, that's not the point, but he can see okay, there is a person here that is doing genre with a lot of literary references, not genre just, you know, in the pop kind of way that, I really like it, I really enjoy the pop kind of way. But when the people that have a lot of different references, like we can kind of see each other. I got like, also like a review blurb from Alan Moore, I was like, I told you I think. He gave me the book with the "I'm your friend Alan Moore" and I'm, you know, telling people that I met him, which is a lie. I've never met him. I never talked to him or anything.

But I mean, it's different because there you have an audience that you have very educated people in this kind of things. So it's different. But then you go to places where your language is completely, not only your language, but your history, like I went to Poland. Which is lovely country and Kraków is like a city that is absolutely amazing. And because you can see also the clash of worlds, there is not like pretty, pretty Europe is something much more real in a way. And, but the cultural differences were massive. Like I was talking about dictatorships and to them is Stalin. And to us, no. They have no idea about your country. They know it's in South America, but, you know, they don't know at all. You have to say it's in

the South, we have, you know, tropical things, but also Patagonia and, you know, it finishes in Antarctica and it's like, whoa, but it's hot or cold. Depends on where you are.

And it's kind of that I like that because it makes me first, you know, opening my mind, not just to literature that easy, but, you know, to the place where certain narratives are being produced and what kind of fears they have, what are their demons, like the social demons, what are they, you know, other kinds of things that is not like reading Olga Tokarczuk, because Olga Tokarczuk is in the system of literature, that is other thing. And then I want to understand where, you know, stories are coming from. It's not that I'm going to understand being a week in Poland, but you have an idea because they talk to you. Like I have the Pope is Argentinian, you know, and I'm in Krakow where John Paul is from. And so everything is John Paul, like literally everything is John Paul. You walk, you know, through a plaza and all the piazza is like a John Paul pictures. And then you go to, I mean, the man is Brad Pitt.

**CH**

That's the first time that comparison has ever been made.

**MAT**

Actually, I wish it were, but honestly, he does have the reputation of being the hot Pope.

**ME**

Well he was young, you know, I've seen so many things in Kraków that I can tell you when he was in his twenties and he was a young priest, the man had something. They call him Brad Pitt because he was handsome. You know, as an old man, he was like a bit Father Christmas kind of roundy, but when he was young, you know, because I've seen everything, I know everything about John Paul at this point in my life. But at one point they gave me like a calendar and the calendar was a John Paul calendar. So as a joke, because I'm not Catholic, I like the pomp of, you know, of the church, of course, I mean, and, you know, like the dresses that they have and, you know, and also and the paintings and, you know, velvet, but it's a velvet gold mine.

So I remember I did a talk, nobody asked any question, there was a lot of people, there was a festival. So this is kind of common that a lot of people go. So I didn't, I thought it was because of being, and it wasn't. But afterwards, when they came to the signing, many, especially girls, women, came to me with the book and said to me, I didn't want to say the question out loud because I'm from a small town and I just moved to Kraków and stuff. But I want to ask you, why do you have so many queer characters? Because, you know, here, you can, there's a lot of problems about, you know, diversity and we are being thrown out by, it's a very Catholic country. So they are being thrown out of their cities, in the big cities, they are more comfortable, but where they are from, they are not.

So and, I got a lot of that and I got a lot about the women and how the women, the women are, not that they are not the main protagonists in the novel, but they are strong women. So, like, you know, we were talking about cemeteries before, to me, X Cemetery has a lot kind of amateur anthropologists there. That's why Rosario is kind of like a real anthropologist because she kind of picks, like folklore stories and stuff. And they were very interested in that and how a woman, especially in the 60s, and she kind of has, because they, now they can, but their, before their mothers were like, most of the time were all working in a factory or working at home is not, were not that common in that generation. So that's how I

understood how it came, for them from a totally different place. It wasn't the dictatorship, the politics, no, no, no, no, it was the youth, the streets, the freedom of this youth, the way they're talking about their sexuality, the free they are with their sexuality, how nobody in the book really is defined themselves as anybody, they just are attracted to each other and have sex, which is kind of normal in the era that this is going on, because in the, you know, in the 70s, nobody was saying, I'm this, I'm that, I'm not identity politics, were not a thing.

It's a question that people ask me with the things that they are thinking now. But that's how I understood the whole, this is what it is. This is why the, some of these girls are grabbing the book as a talisman kind of thing. Can you sign it to me? Because, you know, because they are, by a person that is more or less their age, older, but not that much, they kind of are represented there and they're not finding that in their literature because, you know. So, yeah, that's what translation is to me. And that's how I felt about translation.

**CH**

We close each episode of this season with a signature question. And this season, we're asking what other than your actual writing supplies or devices do you need to sit down and write? What makes the act of writing actually happen for you?

**ME**

Nowadays, it's music. I have to, you know, I have to, I can, this is not film, but, you know, I have like three pairs of headphones, it depends on what, you know, so yeah—

**CH**

That's impressive.

**ME**

—there's another one here and it's kind of destroyed, you see. And I need to write with music. Now I could just put music because I'm alone, but when my husband is here, I like to put the thing so I don't hear whatever he's doing. And to me, writing begins when I find the music to put me in the mood. A writer at some point, there's a lot of work, of course, but some points you need that state where you feel that someone is dictating something. And I've seen it in other writers that they are so fast, so fast. Writing that is like, how? Like there's no words to, you know, because it's not like they're copying something, or they're listening to something, they are inventing something and it comes so fast and how, and I do it myself, it's a very mysterious thing. And you have to reach it somehow, and I reach it only with music.

**CH**

I'll close us today with the reminder that you can purchase both of our guest books online from independent bookstores and there'll be links to buy them from [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org) at our website, [noveldialogue.org](http://noveldialogue.org). Our thanks as always to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and to Public Books for their continued partnership. We are thankful for Hannah Jorgensen, who is our graduate intern, Rebecca Otto, our social media manager, and Connor Hibbard, the sound engineer. I'd encourage you to subscribe, rate us, and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever it is you

listen to podcasts. Some novelists from past seasons of novel dialogue include Chang-Rae Lee, Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, and many more conversations just like this one.

My special thanks to Mariana for returning for yet another wonderful conversation that will this time have a lasting form, but I still think of the other one as well as pairing with this one, and to Magalí for her wonderful questions. So thank you both for this conversation.