

6.2 What Would Undo the Maxim Gun? Magic: P. Djèlí Clark and andré carrington (RB)

Transcript

Rebecca Ballard

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. I'm Rebecca McWilliams Ojala Ballard, one of the hosts you'll be hearing from during the sixth season of the podcast. Novel Dialogue brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work and how we work in relation to novels: how we read, write, translate, and remember them.

Today, we're lucky to have P. Djèlí Clark in conversation with andré carrington. Djèlí, who in his other life as an academic is known as Dexter Gabriel and is an assistant professor of history at the University of Connecticut, is something of a titan in the field of speculative fiction. He's won the Locus and Nebula Awards in three different categories, short story, novella, and novel, the latter two for *Ring Shouts* and *A Master of Djinn*. And as a sidebar, I think we need a term for this achievement, something like the EGOT but for genre writing versus show biz, so I'll be brewing on that as we speak. His fiction has also been nominated for, and or won, the Hugo, British Fantasy, World Fantasy, Mythopoeic, Shirley Jackson, and Sturgeon Awards, among many others. And I'll stop listing accolades now and simply say that his work is incredibly engrossing, his speculative worlds richly detailed and his prose not only brilliant but really engaging to read.

Today, he's going to be in conversation with andré carrington, who is an associate professor of English and director of a designated emphasis in speculative fiction and cultures of science at the University of California, Riverside. He's the author of *Speculative Blackness: the Future of Race and Science Fiction*, and numerous articles and book chapters on Blackness and popular culture, comics, fandom, and queer studies.

So, welcome Djèlí and andré, thank you so much for being here today.

P. Djèlí Clark

Thank you for having me.

RB

And Andre, I'll turn it over to you.

ac

Thanks so much. Djèlí, it's a pleasure to meet you virtually. We've interacted on social media and stuff, and I want to thank you for writing thoughtfully about my work and thank you for what your work has

done to enrich my understanding of why it's so valuable to have talented, broad-ranging thinkers doing speculative fiction.

PDC

No, thank you very much. It's great to meet you as well, more than liking or forwarding or commenting on something on Twitter or on, pardon me, on X. More than simply commenting on things like that that we actually get to meet. And your book was a great read as a person who loved *Star Trek*, loved *Buffy*. You were hitting, and yes, loved *Harry Potter* before all of the incidents. You were hitting a lot of things there for me, the fan fiction and everything else. It was great to review your book. I still use it as my one accolade as saying that I'm an infrequent reviewer at *Strange Horizons*. It's the only thing I've ever reviewed.

ac

That's infrequent. That is an irregular schedule. Yeah.

So, I want to get to first and maybe most broadly, what makes it possible for you to do the creative work you do?

PDC

What makes it possible? Having an imagination, I suppose, that keeps going, which I have to thank my mother for, and my father for. My mother would take me to the library when I was a kid, allow my sister and I to check out as many books as we want, and take me twice a week. And this was when the libraries would have interest in the basement, like they'd be showing the black and white movie *Them!* or the giant ants or something, or *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. So I would see the library as not only a place to read, but also a place to engage.

My father introduced me to, I don't know how many Boris Karloff movies and Vincent Price films and all kinds of weird fiction. Just as my mom introduced me to *Trek* and *Twilight Zone*. And so I always say I have to owe it to them for keeping that idea of the fantastic, that it's not simply something for kids, that it's something that adults can enjoy. And so, it was just always, it's long been a part of my life and I think it helps me now able to create.

ac

That's so fabulous. I was thinking a lot reading and rereading some of your work in the past few weeks about how wonderful and also scary the presence of the supernatural, especially of the monsters, of the threats, and also of the means to fight them, the means to achieve a balance with forces that do harm. How exciting that stuff is, and it occurred to me as you talked about your background as a person with an active imagination, that some of that, it comes from your parents and it comes from having access to black and white stuff. And to me, I think as exciting as that stuff is right now today, there's so much horror. I love that people are like rediscovering and connecting to their spiritual practices in the Black community.

But it occurs to me, and I'll bet this is something, maybe it's conscious, maybe it's incidental, that a lot of that has to do with the presence of our ancestors in our everyday life. The presence of people who came before us in what we do today. Am I right to see that as a pattern in your writing that our ancestors,

people who came before us, are just so present in these characters' lives as something about the way you move through the world?

PDC

Yeah, in many ways. It's funny when you speak about ideas of ancestors, I think about when I still had them right, people who are now ancestors, like my grandmother, who's passed on and how she would tell me stories. So, I was born in the United States. My parents are from the Caribbean, from Trinidad, and I was sent back, which is a thing immigrant people do. What they used to do a lot. They'd send you back, so they could get their lives together, they're young parents. It's great. You have childcare and the grandparents who are in the Caribbean, and also, I had asthma when I was younger, and they thought, warmer climate, help them out, get out of Queens.

And so, my early formative years was living in an Afro-Caribbean, but also South Asian Caribbean communities, where my grandmother was a master storyteller, much like my mother. And it was when the dogs are barking at night, and my grandmother's closing up, I'd say, why are you closing everything? Well, the witches are out. Oh, the witches are out, right? Or if I pick a mango, don't eat that mango, you'll make the tree angry. Or if I go to sleep, turn around, you're sleeping like the dead. And so, it was just all of these everyday bits of the way that the supernatural and the mundane was just part of my regular life. That was just a known thing.

And then I had South Asian, often Hindu neighbors who, you know, I got invited over for festivals. I watched a lot of Hindu television before I even knew the word Bollywood. And so, I had Hindu cosmologies around me. I had all these Afro-Caribbean ideas, and so, all of this kind of melded together. Then I came to the United States, and I lived for a while in New York, but then we moved down South. And I got a whole new lot of aunties, Southern aunties, and everyone else who gave me so much folklore and background of, you know, Southern folklore.

And in many ways, it's both people who, you know, it's like I consider this this ancestral knowledge that has been passed down and passed down through these folklores. And it's run through me, I think, from the Caribbean to here in the United States and the American South, and all of that has been really influential.

ac

When you are thinking of, you know, a protagonist thinking of a hero, and, you know, I'm thinking, for example, *Black God's Drums* is the one that I finished most recently, do you think of a character like Creeper sort of trying to build them up and make them able to take on the challenge that's going to be in for them? Or do you kind of start with the, okay, well, what if this presence in this historical moment is causing trouble for Black folks, or, you know, what if this crisis arises and let's see how it plays out, and then sort of dream up a character who might be a good guide to it? How does that play out for you?

PDC

Yeah, great question. And shout out to me going to Bayou Classic every Thanksgiving in New Orleans to give me that, New Orleans background to do this, but yeah, a lot of it, I think, much more like what you were saying in the second half, more, I tend to, like, I remember how Creeper was drawn up.

So when I first started that world, that world was actually supposed to be about Ann-Marie, the airship captain. And I wanted it to be set where she's like a Sinbad almost, where she's just traveling in her airship and just having all these interactions at these different ports. And then at some point, I decided I just want to do, well instead of the air, what if I focus on one locale? And I remember I just started writing and Creeper just arrived, as I was writing, as this young figure looking out from these giant walls, these levee walls looking out, these dam walls looking out at New Orleans.

And then it became a matter of, okay, if this happens, how's she going to react? What is it, you know, if she's put in this situation, what's going to happen? And that kind of became how the story became told, right. As I started thinking of her, the story started being wrapped around her. Like, I thought, okay, she's got this information. Where would she go? What kind of people would she know?

And I was like, of course she's going to go to a bordella in New Orleans, right? Of course that's where the information is going to be. Of course, who's going to be the people who have the most information? Of course she's somehow going to know some nuns based on the real historical sisterhood in New Orleans, a free woman of color.

ac

You know, the gods are present, spirits are present, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, but they're not quite a deus ex machina. They don't, they sometimes are, but I feel like in a very, a very like traditional sense, that at a certain point they're just going to have to have, you know, like in the classical Greek context, they're going to have to lower whatever apparatus with the sun god on it is going to come in and do something and then our characters will have to deal. And we as mortals, right, as the audience are going to have to figure out, oh man, how do we deal about this?

And I feel like that is happening in *Black God's Drums*. It's happening in *The Master of Djinn* novel and those stories in that these characters fight with deities all the time. Sometimes there is a plan, right, of like, here's what the deity wants and they have will and here's how things are supposed to go. And people will really, they'll try to bargain with them, they'll try to get what they want out of them. They will try to, you know, resist and sometimes succeed. And I find that really dynamic, right? It's not moralizing, but it, but instead it's really, it's, it's not moralizing but at the same time. It's kind of educational, right? It tells them, oh, well, why, why morally do we decide this? This is what's right and this is not.

PDC

Yeah. Yeah. That's it. Like a lot of these characters are dealing with these larger forces, you know, like in *Black God's Drums*. They're, there are gods and goddesses walking around. Creeper has to live with one. So what does it mean to live with that?

And this comes from me talking to colleagues or friends that practice Ifá, practice Vodun, practice Santería. And so, and talking to them about, you know, like, I can't drink right now because that will, you know, this is my path and that will get the orisha or the spirit angry. And so I thought about what's it like doing that, but then also having your will, your desire like, I want this thing, but yeah, your god is like, I want you to do something else. Right.

And yeah, it's just, and I, and I like, I always liked the idea of the reluctant hero, right? You can go in and you can have the hero who knows exactly what they're going to do and they are straight and narrow, but I always like the heroes like, that's not what I really want to do.

ac

Yeah.

PDC

I have my own plans, and I know this thing called fate or gods or whatever pushing me this way, but I'm my own.

ac

We believe in a good and evil. We believe that there's a hero, there's a, an antagonist worth fighting against in the story. Man, the ways that we come to that are so different. Yeah. And how, how we take up, you know, the problem solving that we have to do is so different. Does, does that question of like, you know, a different, different senses of right and wrong, different senses of like, you know, evil, but not inherently evil or like heroic, but not predisposed to like a heroic destiny. How do you, how do you decide what to emphasize when you're, when you're putting conflicts between like capital G Good and capital E Evil.

PDC

Right. So much of this, I like what you were talking about. So much of this, I think is dealing with that philosophy of free will, right? Whether it, whatever the hero's journey is or what have you at some point, the hero or heroine has to have free will. And this is going to intersect and they're going to have to say, I want to walk this path or I don't. I almost just, I love stories where the hero's just like, I've blazed a whole different path. And none of you thought I was going to do this, but I've just completely done something different and all the big players have to rearrange the board, right? Because they were like, you know, because you think about it, maybe they were pushing everyone like a pawn and now like suddenly the pawn has struck back and it was like, no, this is how we're going to do things now.

And so, you know, so for instance, in *Ring Shout*, this is, this is kind of Maryse's thing where the aunts, right? And shout out to, you know, uh, Toni Morrison and Madeleine L'Engle, who, you know, I took *A Wrinkle in Time* and a bit of, a bit of Toni Morrison, like, boo, careful with those aunts. Uh, you know, they have, the foxes, they have their own goals, right? Butcher Clyde and the others have their own goals for Maryse, right? And she has to make this choice in the end, but in the end, it's her choice to make, right? And she's tempted and she has to, and, you know, I kind of leave it at the end where she has to realize she has to have her own path separate from whether they want to be this warrior fighting its evil or the dark side wants her to come over. She has to figure out her own, right?

And so I think, again, that comes back to that notion of free will where I think, and I think that's part of any kind of faith tradition or cosmology where human beings are trying to understand how they exist in the midst of all these larger forces and at what point, no matter how much faith they have, are they, are they able to exercise their own free will?

ac

I find it very fascinating that you can place in the same story, conflicting supernatural forces and stuff and conflicting believers, right? But in a world that also has nations in it and also has racism and colonialism. Can you say a bit about why that's important to keep those worldly problems in place instead of just replacing them with the supernatural?

PDC

No, it's a good question. Yeah. Oh the vampires are stand ins for, yeah I definitely didn't want to do that. And so, I mean, part of it, you know, is how the *Master of Djinn* world came along, I always tell people is somewhere between me in grad school reading Edward Said's *Orientalism* and as an adjunct showing Pontecorvo's, um, *The Battle of Algiers*, I started thinking about the power of colonialism, the power of the Maxim gun, right? The conqueror of Africa, as they called it, this weapon that's literally given early on so that, you know, British colonialists can inspire, as they say, psychic terror in the natives, right? To just, to be able to have this weapon that just mows down people.

And I would read about people in Southern Africa going out to fight some Germans or whatever, who had arrived and before that they were fairly co-equal. They had rifles, they could, you know, they could fight back. But here comes this, this weapon that as one person said, he just heard bap, bap, bap and looked around him and there was no one to left. Just him. Like what that means psychologically, as I'm thinking of that, you know, I think whenever you're in a marginalized group, you always try to do some alternate, like, man, how would, how could we have changed that? Like, what would undo that, right? What would undo these stories I hear?

And I was like, what would undo the Maxim gun? Magic. Right? Let, let's make magic undo, undoing the industrial world as we think of it, right? But at the same time, I don't want to, thinking of Said, I don't want to fully go into this Orientalist decadence and primitivism and all this. So, what if at the same time as the magic also has technological components? So it has its own industrialization, you know, if there's steampunk and so forth. And so, you know, it was me trying to balance those two ideas. You often see that push and pull there.

ac

One thing I really appreciated about *Master of Djinn* was, and this is like, it's, it's hair splitting, but it's really not. It's a thing that I hope everybody notices when they're trying to figure out, you know, who has the right idea about solving a mystery or, you know, is the hero always right or do they have somebody to question them? And that was, the relationship between Fatma and Hadia, because the minute Hadia showed up, I thought, oh, oh, she's going to be a problem, right? Like, she's going to be, is she going to be in distress? Is she going to be undermining our hero? Is she going to like have the secret to crack this whole thing open, right? And also, what's at stake in having somebody there who's going to question your hero's steps or question your detective's theory of the case?

When you, do you dream up like a character all at once and then kind of throws some of that responsibility to somebody else to question them, or do you just, do you enjoy that dynamic of having somebody to second guess, having somebody to tone things down when the hero's going a little too far into their own thing?

PDC

Yeah, no, that's a, and Hadia, it's funny, Hadia has become, I think, to me, like, a surprise favorite character of a lot of people. They like, they love Hadia. And I think part of it was that people who knew Fatma from just "A Dead Djinn in Cairo," even her cameo in *The Haunting of Tram Car 015*, there was this notion of her as, you know, if I described, you know, Fatma is that she's determined, she's driven, she knows what she's about, right? And so, you know, it's the great trope that always works of the person who's, you know, the lead detective person and the new guy.

And it's always a bit of the new person trying to be caught up to this person's experience. But I want to question that a bit. And I wanted to, who can kind of like, check Fatma, right? I wanted somebody to be able to check her once in a while, somebody who's, who's similar to her yet different, right? And to make her uncomfortable. And to show that, okay, give her, you know, you need your heroes to have flaws. They can't be Superman where they're, they're perfect. They need flaws. And so I wanted to have somebody to give flaws.

And I thought Hadia was just this perfect person who is not what people may think in their mind she is. And it also, it's not what even Fatma thinks she is, right? When it turns out she's like, I didn't know you were a ninja. Oh, man. You know, it's like, yeah, well, you didn't ask. You had this idea. And it's interesting, Hadia kind of came about, as I just wanted to have somebody, you know, I want to have somebody, I didn't want to have the lone, the lone wolf detective for a whole book. I wanted to have someone else there who's experiencing these things. I enjoyed doing that with *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* with Hamed and Onsi. I like their dynamics. I wanted something like that here.

And I guess there was a part of me that was a little put off by people who really liked Fatma from "A Dead Djinn in Cairo" and would talk about how like they liked her suits, you know, and that she wasn't in a traditional hijab. And this meant that she was like empowered. And I was like, I wasn't doing all that, I just wanted to put her in a suit. Yeah, you know, y'all are taking it a little too far. And too many of these people were not people from the region, but people on the outside of their gazes looking in.

And I said, no, I'm not trying to say that at all. And so I was like, I want somebody then who was religious who wears the hijab, who wants to go pray and she's more, more religious or what have you, she may have more traditional ideas, than Fatma, but she's also this complex person. She's also a person who has more radical progressive ideas.

ac

I thought in *Master of Djinn*, and I feel like this is true to a point in, you know, not as a major note, but certainly as a minor note, as a reference, occasionally in *Ring Shout* that people's relationships, their intimates, their partners, their sexuality, that it is a part of who they are. And, I didn't read anything, really, any of these stories, *Master of Djinn* has maybe the strongest love story in it, but none of them really read as like a romance. Do you think you have a romance in you? You know, if you would write?

PDC

I don't know.

ac

Like these types of romance?

PDC

I don't know. And I've read some, I've read, I'll tell you two things. I've read some books with both romance or some intense, intimate sex scenes. And I haven't gone down either of those routes. I tend to kind of skirt around them. And I don't know. And like, I have a friend, he says, like, you should, you should just read the romance novels. And I have read one or two, because he said, he's just good with understanding relationships.

And I do wonder, especially, let's say I were to do more in the world of "A Dead Djinn in Cairo." Like, how did, it's one thing to have the beginning of some of the relationship. What happens as that relationship matures, right? And so those are things that you have to think about, right? And I think a lot of books, a lot of movies, especially, it's easy to start off at the beginning of the relationships. Oh, that's right. That's the, that's the honeymoon, the early honeymoon phase. We're all getting to know each other back and forth. What happens when it's every day and like, I don't like the way you slurp your soup, those kind of things are, yeah, I just got to deal with your parents. You know, just that every day or I'm just tired and I have to see you again. And how do we keep that, man? So those are things that I think about. If I were to return to that.

But yeah, I've wondered myself, like, how far down that road I want to go. And I don't know, we'll see.

ac

If you get on that road, it's, it's, you know, what I learn from fan fiction is it's so humbling to be creative. Because romance writers and romance fans are so good at it. They know how to do it and how to make a whole set of expectations about what can happen, what's going to be the hook for someone, what's going to spark their interest, what's going to make them sort of look at a text and say like, Oh, it's good, but the politics around sexuality are not where I want it to be. And what on the other hand is going to make them look at a text like that and say like, Oh, I love that this kind of relationship is celebrated, is important that you really feel for somebody and their same sex partner. Like, that's really an achievement.

And what I love about, you know, knowing about fanfic and knowing about romance, but not being good at them or an adept reader as much, is seeing how satisfying it is when people are good at it. Right? They, if they appreciate what's there, that's high praise.

RB

So that feels like the genre that the institution still hasn't sort of legitimized in the sort of genre debates, right?

ac

Completely unprepared, right? And, and that is, you know, our loss as people who work at academic institutions.

I want to maybe, maybe wrap up in the neighborhood of "[The Secret Lives of] The Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington," which is just, just a pageant. I mean, it's a real, it's a banger, it hits. And what I especially valued about it was, it's proof of concept in a way of kind of how interesting it is to take an interest in history, right? To take our received history and question it. And also how enriching it is. And

also scary it is to realize how much of history is hidden from us, right? That George Washington didn't have wooden teeth. He had real human beings' teeth in his head. And they were teeth that belonged to Black people because our bodies were so disposable in whole and in part in the world he lived in. And just that fact of that being hidden from us by this fairy tale of wooden teeth, right? That's such a dangerous, scary thing. It's scarier than anything actually in the story, is that we can spend hundreds of years thinking the one thing is true. And the truth is so much scarier.

PDC

I came across it just randomly, looking at some archival work. And it was someone at the George Washington Archives who came across it. Shout out to archivists, right? Who just comes across it. And all we know, it's literally a ledger note that George Washington's cousin writes that he paid this doctor for these nine negro teeth. And it's in between some cloth, some Chinese cloth that he bought and fixing the windows in an Alexandria house. And there's something about, just like you were saying, like the scary part is something about the banality of it. Like, oh yeah, I just have paid for some nine negro teeth. And that's it. There's nothing else. There's no more. It's not spoken about more. That's all the archive is found, this one little line.

And it just made me think about the gaps in the archives, right? That we see a lot of a lot of the stories that talks about the silences within the archive. I'm thinking about Trouillot or others talking about like where the archives are not, are themselves created and constructed by human beings who have their own agendas. They're not objective, right? And so nobody's going around looking for the lives of enslaved people for posterity, at least not at that time. It could be a long time before they do, only certain people do. And so, you know, it's like, we don't know anything about this. And I think there was a way that when I was first thinking of that story, the National African American Museum History Museum had opened up and I went to the opening and they have one there. I think it's with Thomas Jefferson and all the bricks they represent.

And there was a way that all of that was in my head as I was thinking. And I'd known about it already, but somehow seeing that made me think more about these teeth and more about George Washington and what does it say for the figure who is the national figure of our country? They used to celebrate George Washington's birthday, right? This is, it used to be a national event. What does it say to this figure who, as André, as you said, who is so symbolic as the father of the country, as the beginning of the, that we know he owned enslaved people. And it's sometimes whitewashed or tried to be ignored, though we see historians tell us, right, about Ona Judge, and others who run away.

What does it mean that he owned enslaved people? And what does it mean that his dentist would purchase these teeth from enslaved, likely from enslaved people for him to use, right? And how much that opens up. That's simply enough to just sit with and wrestle by itself. And so I wanted to explore all that, but I really said, you know, the part I want to get at is, who are those nine people? Their names are lost. And I think so much of reading the lives of enslaved people is how much their voices just become lost, like, you know, drops in rain, just become lost in the, and, you know, you get like a few narratives, those narratives don't represent everyone.

And so often what you have to do as historians is you have to use someone's narrative to piece together how this one enslaved people might have lived, because you have nothing on them. And with these, we have nothing. Right? They're like those, those bricks at the, that they're using at the museum. And so I

said, I want to just imagine what each of those lives might have been like. And I'm just going to completely invent them. But I'm going to invent them based on actual historical things.

I'm going to talk about slave trade. I'm going to bring up the role of enslaved, the runaways, the role of enslaved people in the revolutionary war, fighting on both sides. So I'm going to talk about what it was, I'm going to talk about, we know like George Washington's famed cook, right? Who I bring in there. So I wanted to bring all this in here. And, you know, to make, to catch people that hook as you're talking about, I'm just going to get fantastic.

Because after all, this is what historians have to do. You have to be, you have to speculate. You don't have the answers there. You have to speculate on their lives anyway and say this may have been. So, but I'm doing literary stuff. I can speculate as much as I want. And so I still have the notes where I remember, I don't know when it struck me. I said, I need this to be like short vignettes. I need to just have short little bios on each one. Because that's what I'm trying, to reconstruct lives. And I want to relate it to George Washington where it's like, where it's causing him, you know, trauma to have these things, right? That it's almost like having a cursed object that he's holding these things he shouldn't have.

ac

People might not realize is that part of that process is fictionalizing the sources that historians draw on, right? That if we know about the historical moment in any detail, which we don't always, for enslaved people, if we know about like one line in ledger, or we know like, oh, okay, you know, Washington and Jefferson and these folks, they kept farm books, right? That's where the names of our ancestors are recorded. That's where the sales and births and deaths might be recorded. That those things are just a little bit of insight. And if you have to make up the rest, right, it's inspiring to go really far with it, right?

And it's also really grounding to say, you know, this isn't entirely speculation, right? That there really is a proclamation that says like, come on, fight for the Royalists—

PDC

The British, yeah.

ac

You know, and if Black people did it in the hopes of attaining freedom or, you know, leaving the American colonies on terms that they hoped would be favorable or be reunited with their families, that if they did it, well, then maybe non-cannibal ogres and goblins and what not, you know?

[inaudible speaking together]

ac

And I love that mixture of like, these are what real historical primary sources are like. And these are also what like, you know, magical spell books and stuff are like, right? That you can find a kind of richness and a quality that's really fanciful from the real stuff as well as the stuff that's made up.

PDC

Yeah. Yeah. And so, yeah, this is, I mean, perfect. That's exactly what I hope people took from this. And, you know, back in the day when I had time to blog before I had twins, I would often go back after my stories and, you know, I'm not David Blaine. I'm not going to not give you the secrets. Your secret is like, this is where I got it from. I want you to go find out, like, as much as you think like, you know, the truth is stranger than fiction, as much as you thought I was just making things up, there's reality here and in these things. Right. Like you said, there's, here is a Lord Dunmore's proclamation. Here is George Washington's cook who did run away, right? Here are all of these different figures that I'm creating, like the time about the slave ship about each slave had these, had as much room as a coffin.

That's an, that's an actual line from a slave trader, right? I want people to get all of these things that they, as an enslaved person, you could be sold to Barbados and then you might end up somewhere in New Grenada, that the slave trade was transnational. Did not care upon borders. It sent people hither and yon back and forth. And so I tried to, you know, grapple with as much of that in there as I could.

RB

Each season of Novel Dialogue has one signature question that every novelist answers. In this season, inspired by our kind of general exploratory theme of the weird, our question is, what is your weirdest source of writing inspiration?

PDC

My weirdest source. Wow, that's a good one. I'm trying to think, I mean, I have interesting sources. I have sources that take me down rabbit holes, but my weirdest source would have to be in *Ring Shout*. There is the nefarious character Butcher Clyde, right? Who I, who is like just, just the worst. And when you first meet him, it's in a dream realm almost, and he's singing. And he's singing this song, "The Grand Old Duke of York," right? And there's something about nefarious characters like this, singing children stories that's inherently creepy, right? Because why are you singing a children's story and the source for that.

So, I was sitting down. I was in the middle of the story. I had to look at the twins at that time. We're watching an episode of *Peppa Pig*. And on *Peppa Pig*, Danny Dog says they're doing nursery rhymes. Danny Dog says, I know a rhyme about marching. And everybody has to go outside. And the marching song is "The Grand Old Duke of York." "He had 10,000 men," a really popular British nursery rhyme. And when I heard that, I was like, that's going into this story. And so Danny Dog from Peppa Pig was my weirdest inspiration to make Butcher Clyde just a bit more creepy than one would expect. So there you have it. Inspiration can come from everywhere. Anywhere.

RB

I want to close by thanking the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership and Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our website manager and transcript editor. Rebecca Otto is our social media manager. And Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer.

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