6.3 Narrative, Database, Archive: A Discussion with Tom Comitta and Deidre Lynch (AV)

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

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. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde, coming to you from Duke University. So our loyal listeners will know that we bring you dialogues between the most fascinating critics and novelists around.

Today we have Deidre Lynch and Tom Comitta on deck to talk about Tom's wonderfully weird *The Nature Book*. Part archive, part novel, all experimental, *The Nature Book* imagines a world without humans, but one that is indelibly marked by human description. It is composed almost entirely of found language, meaning that it contains no original writing, and yet is profoundly unique in the effect it produces. Tom has mastered the technique of collaging and sewing together quotations and has rethought the novel through the internet video genre of the supercut.

Welcome to the show, Tom.

Tom Comitta

Thanks so much for having me.

AV

Yeah. Now, Deidre Lynch is the Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Literature at Harvard University and a scholar whose sentences I've often wished I could supercut into my own work. She is the author of two influential books, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*, and *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and The Business of Inner Meaning*. She has also recently co-edited a collection titled *The Unfinished Book: Oxford Twenty-Frist Century Approaches to Literature*. Deidre is a scholar of 18th century literature and book history, and like Tom, is deeply attuned to the history of the novel as form, matter, and medium.

So Deidre, it's a pleasure to have you here.

Deidre Lynch

Very excited to be here, Aarthi.

AV

Yes. This is a conversation I have been anticipating, so I will now pass the mic to you and fade into the background to cut in only from time to time.

DL

Great. Okay. Thank you. Well, cut in as often as you would like. It would be only fitting if this were a kind of tapestry interweaving a multiplicity of voices.

So, Tom, when I've been annoying my friends by talking on every possible occasion about this novel of yours that they haven't read yet, the way I've been describing *The Nature Book* is that I've been saying that you kind of turn the traditional novel inside out. So what was merely backdrop to the actions of human characters becomes the foreground. All of those descriptions, that if one's reading Charlotte Brontë or Thomas Hardy, one maybe skims a little bit descriptions of the moors or the forest or the birds in the sky or the moon rising or the wind howling, that material that one generally skims is in the foreground here, so that setting in some ways comes to take the place that character holds in the traditional novel.

But what astonished me about the reading experience of *The Nature Book* was that I figured out that that was what you were doing and yet it became a page turner for me. Could you maybe describe the story that you tell over the four parts of *The Nature Book*?

TC

And maybe I should take a step back to talk about how I made it because that really determined the story that was created. Because basically I spent a year just skimming through lots of text files and gathered 1,500 pages of nature descriptions. And that year coincided with being at this residency in Omaha at the Bemis Center where I had a lot of table space and so I printed out, cut up those 1,500 pages and then on each of these tables, I had maybe like 12 tables, there would be like a desert table or a winter table or a spring table, an ocean, so on and so forth.

And then each of those tables then I noticed this sub-pattern of really negative language and then very positive language. That was kind of the secondary thing. And so basically in the structure I just described, I basically just took those tables and gathered up all the positive language together and all the negative language together and then figured ways to kind of narratively blend them. And then even within those, you notice in the desert there's a lot of horses. So oh, there's going to be a story of horses here or oh, there's a lot of dust. Okay, now there's a horse trapped in a dust cloud.

But then there would be even more micro things like in the autumn section there's like a paragraph that's basically, I noticed a lot of books describe trees as like army barracks or castles and clouds as like a marching army. And so you put those together and there's like a mini story of like the war of the trees and the clouds, you know.

There's that wider structure I just described and then there's these four sections. The first section is the four seasons. The second is oceans, jungles, islands. The third is the outer space. And then the fourth is basically like the United States, like the Western United States. It's like prairies, mountains, deserts. And in each of those, I noticed I didn't push this on it, but there's kind of a hero's journey of many characters, but like a tonal hero's journey where there's this kind of going out, you know, journeying out. There's eventually like a very grim or difficult meditation on like life on earth. And that wasn't planned. A lot of this was like really, what I just described like was truly me trying to look at this material and ask it to kind of show me the narratives, which was sometimes channeling space because it was physically done, you know, these juxtapositions, but was generally, you know, an accumulation of when once you have enough of something, a narrative can kind of emerge.

DL

But it was a little bit, I mean, this is just occurring to me as a metaphor, but there is a way in which your discovery of the novel amidst these thousands of paper slips, and I have seen the photograph of you surrounded by what is literally your paperwork, right? All of these things that you've cut out.

TC

Right.

DL

And I think that's just astonishing. But the narrative is almost like the narrative sculptors tell about finding a sculpture inside a block of marble. You sort of found this novel through this sorting procedure. Does that kind of sync with your experience?

TC

Yeah. Yeah. And actually it also syncs with like the inspiration, you know, I was, the book was inspired by a work of art. So your sculpture reference. Yeah, my friend Kota Ezawa, this artist in the Bay Area, had made this video *City of Nature* where he had rotoscoped nature descriptions from like three, actually, sorry, I did 300 novels. He rotoscoped nature shots from about like 40 movies, Hollywood movies. And rotoscoped them, collaged them together into this pretty smooth cut where like a squirrel from one movie would jump and then a squirrel from another movie would land.

So I wondered if there was something, if this video is pointing to something, something pernicious about the process of framing and flattening the world into images. And then I wondered, yeah, like what, what a similar procedure in literature reveal about language or imaginative limits, you know, I focused on English mainly.

DL

You've described the book as an archive—

TC

Oh right.

DL

—and I was thinking about that description this morning and thinking about the ways in which like in a lot of theory of the archive or theory of the database, that's always contrasted with narrative. But I don't think of your novel as nonlinear exactly. The seasons change in the order that we're accustomed to seeing them change. Those horses that come to the fore in the fourth part are going on a journey, your birds are flying into the mountains, your rivers are going to the sea. There is a way in which this does what we expect narrative to do, meaning we move somewhere as we turn the pages. It's just that the time isn't on a human scale, right? So you also have, you also evoke at some moments like mountains kind of pushing up out of the ground.

TC

Right.

DL

So there's an incredible assortment of pieces at which you proceed, you proceed, the language proceeds, the novel proceeds, but then I would find myself encountering sentences like the opening of the third section of the first book that would begin “One morning just before dawn” and I would catch myself and I would think, oh, now we're going to get protagonist because that's how it would work in the kind of novels on, from which I learned how to be a novel reader, right?

“One morning” is the cue for the story to begin and I wonder, like, am I a bad reader in wanting repeatedly to install a human into the mix in that way or in anthropomorphizing like the animals, which I would find myself doing over and over again?

TC

Right. Yeah. Well, to make a readable book, you know, there were three versions of this before I got to the one that you've read where I really had to like one teach myself the pace. I feel like there was a pace that I was trying to figure out like slowing things down. I mean, also was I was teaching myself how to write a novel, at the time I was a poet. So there was that too.

When we're writing about nature, we're actually writing about people, like there's so many metaphors. And I think about in *The Nature Book* that it's like polluted with human references, even though I've removed direct references, they're metaphorically, they're similes and all that.

But the reason I bring up those earlier versions is that, so in this earlier version, there was just like unidentifiable, not a page turner, you know. And then so this question becomes, how do you write a text that actually humans want to read? A nature text that humans want to read? And then yeah, I studied like, you know, cliffhangers and genre novels, I read *Fiction for Dummies*, like, which was funny because as I was reading it, I was also reading *Wuthering Heights* and I'm like, Brontë's doing what they're describing in *Fiction for Dummies*.

So anyway, yeah, so it was a process of, once I figured out how to make a book that was readable, there was this balance where I was, I think that the way that you kept reading and others keep reading is that I made sure that there were sentient beings who kept coming back. Like if there was a section, there are sections where I, you know, and I hope that people kind of, that it stretches your attention span, you know, because there are long sections where there are no sentient beings. But I did realize that, you know, that yeah, we identify with them more easily. So I'm interested in this, yeah, through all these iterations, there was this identification, can we identify with the text? And I think it's those characters, those animal characters that keep you going.

AV

I'm excited about this because this episode is going to appear on a season of Novel Dialogue dedicated to the weird. And the weird is a term we're thinking about really capaciously. And one of the phrases that have become associated with the weird and the way we're thinking about it is the longing for the nonhuman. And so thinking about how your novel is stretching our attention spans in ways that are operating on geologic time, on seasonal time. And so in the form of the text, you're changing how the reader attends, pays attention.

But then you too, on the back end, thinking about how you constructed the book, seem like you were longing for some nonhuman kinds of production as well. And maybe you could push back on that. But I was thinking about your interest in constraint and your sense that you didn't want to impose yourself on the text. And so could you talk a little bit about your method again and whether there was a decision to use constraint in a way that, talk about the way that you use constraint and why it's important to you to have constraints like that.

TC

I do think it helped trick me into like, for instance, not even like the question of who the narrator is. People have asked and people don't like this, but like, I think I was so distracted that I hardly ever thought about it, you know. And I mean, the truth is, it's a multi, like it's a polyvocalic voice, you know, that is literally what it is, guided by me. But I specifically put in that note because early on when I tried to send this to agents, somebody said that it was like, I was speak—somebody had not read very closely or maybe read the afterward, but like, it's Tom speaking through nature. But like, I don't know, some scholar could come and probably tell me that, yes, you absolutely did that, but I, the constraints just at least were a way to keep me in check.

And literally, you know, there were moments where I was editing and thinking, I would love to say this one thing right here. But I wouldn't, I wouldn't just, there were no words of my own. So I couldn't do that. So I'd either have to find something that was similar or, but what, but also those moments, there was never like, I want to say, like, you know, some statement, it was more just like, I need to get from A to B. And I think I have an idea of how I can do that. I can now search through my corpus.

DL

Even though it's not Tom speaking through nature, it felt like it was our moment, mourning nature. And when I think of it as being linear, I do feel like we are headed towards apocalypse, maybe over and over and over again. And that that was the astonishing thing about it was, was realizing that you have written, you have written, you have stitched together a novel that speaks very much to this moment and to kind of our catast—, our way of like living with catastrophes one after another.

TC

Then there's only one reference to climate change in the book, because the source text cut out about 2015. And, you know, I believe it was maybe that time when Amitav Ghosh published *The Great Derangement* about how we're not talking about climate change enough in our writing. And so literally there's one reference as we're entering outer space back onto the prairie. There's one reference to the ice caps melting.

But I think that what happened was, by not pushing some climate agenda on it, but just creating this accumulation of texts, through these constraints, I created extreme weather events. There were moments when I was writing the book where I thought, you know, probably every author thinks, you know, what would an author, what will future authors think about your work? This one in particular, sometimes I thought that they'd be really angry at it because it truly is a time capsule of what is lost. What, it's even already lost now, it's already dated.

DL

One of the things that also occurred to me as I was thinking kind of narrative versus archive, was I also thought about how an archive is also like Noah's Ark. Like there is sort of a preservative function to this book. This was what it was like. And so future generations are going to kind of what, think about ice caps by kind of seeing them pictorialized. And that's both, I think, kind of a remedy and, of course, part of the problem. Because, as you said, right, about your friend's film, there is a way in which we just turn nature into pictures and make it something outside of us rather than something in which we're involved and for which we bear some responsibility.

I found, so I will go back to the identification question. So I did, I identified with the birds identified with the little beaver mother kind of making her dam at the beginning. But in a weird way, I think, and this was part of the eeriness that for me makes the books so beautiful. I was also identifying with these strange, unseen, disembodied observers who keep emerging in the language precisely because you determined that you would allow kind of some traces of the human.

So kind of sentences like “no one had ever seen a moon so large and so strangely colored,” and I'm like, who’s seeing here, who's, there's no one. And in a strange way, the structure of identification is not just with those animals moving along, but it's also with these disembodied observers who keep haunting the text like ghosts, it occurs to me just now. I feel like I was being made to feel as if I was seeing the world through a ghost's eyes at certain points.

I don't know if that's too fanciful, but that was part of what I loved about it, was that you make identification weird and eerie and interesting.

TC

And time, because the question is like when, when is this set? Is it before humans? Is it after? I mean, I guess and really, in a way, in some ways, I feel like a distant reader of this text also, you know, because I set up so many parameters that I just felt like a worker just doing my job making this.

DL

Your description of yourself as a worker brings me to a question that I've been dying to ask you, which is I know that one of your models, or at least another example comes from *Moby Dick,* right, which begins with the 80 epigraphs collected by a poor devil of a sub-librarian, right, those epigraphs that are collecting everything that has been said or thought or fancied or sung about whales. And I wanted to ask you about kind of *Moby Dick*'s language appears fairly often in. I mean, we all I think, it is a bit of a Rorschach. So Aarthi was saying she kind of picked up on the William Gibson and I found the Joyce and weirdly, the Bram Stoker and the Melville, of course. But I wanted to ask you about kind of what the example of *Moby Dick* meant for you as you were writing this novel.

TC

Yeah, I mean, it became very important. You know, I actually hadn't read *Moby Dick* until midway through writing it. And it was the process of writing the book that got me to read it. I was skimming through *Moby Dick* looking for nature language and became obsessed with it formally, you know, like and it was talking about like a distant reading, just like skimming. And I just, I just fell in love with it. And then I then read it and was blown away by it for many reasons, not just the extracts, but I should say, yeah, I mean, I throughout this project, I had wondered, you know, I, there's always precedence in some way. And so I when I found those extracts at the beginning of *Moby Dick*, it like, big light went on.

DL

I think there's always been this sense that literature is this sort of modular set of parts that you can rearrange and rearrange and create something new, as you did, not through sort of wholesale composition, but through curation and re-curation and rearranging.

The reason I really want to talk to you about Melville. So, Melville has footnotes and you have footnotes. And I mean, as kind of a geek about early novels, I read lots of novels with footnotes. I just love your footnotes, partly because for me, they really raise the question there at the edge of your text of who is speaking here. You said that kind of that was a question that you had been wondering about yourself, right? Wait, what is the narrative voice? And it's a polyphony.

But the footnotes, insofar as they're distinguished from the main text, seem to introduce like a new wrinkle into that polyphony because they are exiled to the edges. What's going on in those footnotes? I love them.

TC

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, at first they were there because some of the books I looked at had present tense language and the book was in the past tense. So I thought, I'll put all the present tense language as footnotes. So it's just a simple, formal move. But then they grew and you know they're not just that because there are some in the past tense now.

But yeah, I think that they, you know, you've brought up the word linear text a lot. And I really sometimes, I was like thinking I've written like one of the most linear texts imaginable, literally, like one thing connects to another, you know, there's, there are hardly any jump cuts from one subject matter to another. But the footnotes seemed like a way to bifurcate the narrative and give another perspective.

You know, there's a point in the desert section when we look at a mesa and then the footnote is what is going on from above the mesa. And I really wanted to get up there and get that perspective. But as you noted also earlier, like I'm trying to keep this narrative moving.

DL

So I was feeling as though I was getting everything, that this was kind of this novel that was doing kind of what we're always told in literary theory the epic does, is giving us totality. This is it. This is the whole shebang. This is the whole of history, even. The whole of space. Then the whole of history.

AV

And there's something about the way you assembled your data set. You're very particular about telling us, the three I think you use three hundred novels. You consulted some top ten lists. You consulted awards lists. You consult, I mean, you had a very responsible, comprehensive approach to assembling your database. And I think most of it is literary fiction. And of course, the story that arises out of it is set by those parameters.

So are there any other sources that you would want to make into a database besides literary fiction?

TC

Hmm, like as a different project?

AV

Yeah. Are you eyeing anything as a future database?

TC

So I have one more book to edit. But I have made a bunch of others.

AV

You did one about novel, airport novels, right? Or novels that sell well in airports.

TC

Yeah, yeah, like blockbuster fiction, bestselling fiction. Then there was a short story made out of first lines from *New Yorker* short stories that was published in BOMB in 2018. And then I did a short story of last lines from sci-fi novels. So I did do like a genre one that was in WIRED in 2020. And then, yeah, the third, sorry, sorry. Yeah, I guess the third book is the *Airport Novella*. *Airport Novella* is like a very short book that looks at four gestures that I found to be ubiquitous in these found, bestselling novels, nodding, shrugging, odd looks and gasping. So it's like four chapters. Each chapter is a basically like a dance, like a lot of nodding, a lot of shrugging, a lot of odd looks and a lot of gasping.

But the book I'm still, I'm editing right now that Coffee House is also going to put out as a novella. Each chapter is a different pattern. And so sometimes there is genre pattern. So like, like one chapter, which has been published in the Kenyon Review, like collects, I guess this isn't genre. This is still literary fiction, but it's like particularly from before like the modern era, if you call it modern, like capital M, Modern. Like 19, before like 1910 or something.

And just gathering that pattern, you know, which we've all seen where authors will excise part of a word to make it anonymous. Like it'll be like I went past the H dash [H—] bridge or instead of the word “damn it,” it's “d dash dash dash” [d—] and “it.”

And so I just collected a lot of these and it's kind of like a mad lib, mystery story about searching for a snuff box, which was, which is actually the, it's like it's the first part I wrote from this book. It's a story within a story and then kind of built the novel around it.

DL

Oh, my God. So kind of as a recovering 18th century-ist, I have to say, you know, this that there is this kind of trend in the middle of the 18th century kind of, you know, the novel rises. Okay, we have *Robinson Crusoe*, we have *Pamela,* blah, blah, blah. Suddenly we have books that retrospectively literary historians have come to call “it narratives,” because their protagonists and narrators are objects, not, or sometimes animals, but often manufactured objects. And I swear, adventures of a snuff box is kind of an actual 18—I'm going to send you a list.

TC

I would love, please.

DC

I would love to send you a list of it narratives. There's definitely adventures of a corkscrew, adventures of a hackney coach. And they're not, it's, again, they sort of thwart identification, because actually it turns out it's not that easy to identify with the life of a corkscrew. But the thing about a corkscrew is it gets lost and other people pick it up. So they're very, these inanimate object narrators are very well placed to narrate the whole of the social world.

In some ways, your novel is entirely made from recycled materials. I have no idea about its actual paper stock, whether Coffee House Press at any sort of environmentalist commitments or not. But, you know, you show us that language is recyclable. And I guess, you know, I'm really interested in kind of how you kind of connect sort of the formal imperative of only using found language to your environmentalist commitment. You said that you didn't want to press those and yet they emerged nonetheless. Can you say more about that?

TC

I was seriously questioning like the value of literature that's tackling climate change. As you know, it's 2023 and we've known this is like, widely known this is a problem for 30 years. And there was a part of me that was like, we don't need more books. We just need legislation, you know. But actually, through going on tour and having conversations and actually a conversation specifically with Elvia Wilk, who, when you talked about the weird, she wrote a book, *Death by Landscape*. And, which is really the first, actually reading that first essay in that book. I realized that she had written like the theory for my novel. Separately, because it's just about like the blending of, basically, it's talking about putting the background to the fore and challenging the foreground of the novel.

But in talking with her at this event at Columbia, I [inaudible], like we don't need more books. We, you know, we need legislation because, to, for people to come on board for all these changes that need to happen, you know, we, they need, we all need to be conditioned to new ways of thinking and experiencing the world.

DL

I feel like kind of it teaches new habits of attention that I think, in in kind of, you know, a philosopher or a sociologist or kind of a politician could do that over and over again. But you make us experience that. And I think that that's really, really, really productive and helpful. I think it also for me, I mean, I kind of I kept thinking, that, of kind of notions of the commons. Common placers are, think of themselves as gleaners. They're saying we, literature is something we all share, at exactly the moment that kind of notions of intellectual property and copyright are really getting fortified. People are copying out stuff into their own books. And even if they're not presenting themselves as authors, they're presenting themselves as people who make books, too.

And I think we kind of get an idea of literature, of a literary commons from this book, as well as sort of a notion of the wilderness as a kind of commons that we ought to be sharing more responsibly.

TC

I guess it takes to the extreme, something that I just think is inherent to writing, which is that, you know, we're constantly drawing from other things, you know.

You know, interestingly, three months after the book came out, the book seems more illegal now in the United States because of the Supreme Court decision about the Andy Warhol Foundation. I actually. Yeah. Yeah, like I actually looking at the details of it, I feel like safe-ish.

You know, to be honest, you know, I don't say this to diminish the conversation, but I, it's just so it just seems so obvious to me that we're all part of some commons and drawing from each other that I just found it to be an annoying hurdle the whole time, to have to keep convincing people that, you know, this is okay. And at the same time, it was helpful to—one person, I gave a talk at Naropa and I was like, you know, basically how can you own a word? And one person did say something I thought was helpful that, you know, actually by following fair use and making the book, making sure the book was a criticism, it wasn't just taking other people's words and doing whatever with it, that it kind of helped hone what I was doing.

I mean, it's still a criminal text and a bunch of like, like fair use is like, you're breaking copyright and there's an exception. Anybody can sue me at any time. Any of these authors can or their estates, minus the people who are in the public domain. So that, I have lived in fear for years. I kept thinking that they were going to pull the book at some point after a cease and desist.

AV

Yeah, I mean copyright law enshrines such a narrow form of originality and creativity, one that, like you said, outlaws the kinds of creativity that you are bringing to this book. And even though it's not about ecology or the environment, it does feel like it's of the same kind of culture that believes in the new as opposed to the recycled, right?

So there's this way in which intellectual property has always been invested in making a tragedy of the commons, because if it were common and it worked, you couldn’t profit from it. You couldn't privatize it. So there's a really interesting analogy there between literary commons and the physical natural commons.

DL

Yeah, I was reading all morning for the book I'm working on, on scraps, about notions of degrowth and kind of the kind of evoking of what is already there, of the preciousness of what we already have is, I think, part of the gift of *The Nature Book*. That we didn't need new language. It was all there, but look at how I'm helping you attend to it in new ways.

Okay, so this is the signature question for this season of Novel Dialogue. What has been your weirdest source of inspiration for your writing?

TC

Yeah, can I give two answers?

AV

Yes.

TC

Yeah, yeah, that would be weird, right?

AV

Yeah, break the rules.

TC

There's one, there's one that I actually thought I was like, oh, I'm not going to say this because I feel like I'll probably say it earlier when we're talking about character, but it didn't come up. And it's partially inspiration, but it's also just, it gave me vocabulary or precedent to understand maybe what I was doing.

But as I was working on *The Nature Book*, my partner and this other couple, we would watch *The Bachelor.*

AV

[Laughs] Okay.

TC

This ridiculous reality show. And particularly we watched *Bachelor in Paradise*. But actually, overall, it was *The Bachelor* that taught me the importance of cliffhangers, because they just kept moving the goal. Every episode, they would move the goalpost and it was all about the cliffhangers. Even like the commercial breaks, like everything was designed to keep you going.

And then the other weird thing is actually my father, because when I you know, full disclosure, you asked me this question earlier to think about it. And I got the question while I was at my parents' house last night. And I realized immediately, I was like, my dad, because my father is a landscape architect, but he is also a collector of the strangest collections.

For instance, he's obsessed with anything that comes in primary colors. So he would like get like a plate set from Ikea, red, yellow, blue. He stole balls from McDonald's play bins, like red, yellow, blue. He would get like the like Intel guys from the commercial back in the day. He got them in red, yellow, blue. And so getting gifts for him is very easy. I just get him like something that comes in red, yellow, blue.

But he also has a collection of butterfly earrings and a collection of, he has, his company has this like mini warehouse where they put documents. And the bathroom is covered in calendars all open to the same month.

I think growing up with that, when I discovered these kind of super cut techniques, collage techniques, I just think I got it immediately. And it was, it was like what, it was a language I already understood. And so I think that, that's yeah, I think that was.

AV

So an I hit you up for a photo of one of those things? Because I have a feeling *Bachelor* is going to be under copyright. And we usually use a picture for—

TC

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AV

Yeah, great.

TC

Yes.

AV

Fantastic.

OK, so I will take us out.

As we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership and Duke University for its continued support.

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