

6.5 Attention is Love: A Discussion with Lauren Groff and Laura McGrath (SW)

Transcript

Sarah Wasserman

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 Sarah Wasserman, one of the hosts at Novel Dialogue. This season, which is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, we're paying special attention to the weird in contemporary novels. Strange things, happenings, and perspectives. But as always on this podcast, weird or not, we bring you dialogues between the most fascinating critics and novelists around to talk about how novels work. And I'm really excited about today's episode.

Today, we have Laura McGrath with us to talk with three-time National Book Award finalist and *New York Times* bestselling author, Lauren Groff. Lauren is the author of *The Monsters of Templeton*, *Arcadia*, *Fates and Furies*, and *Matrix*, as well as the short story collections, *Delicate Edible Birds*, and *Florida*. We're recording this episode just a few days before the release of her newest novel, *The Vaster Wilds*, which tells a harrowing and beautiful tale about a servant girl escaping from the Jamestown, Virginia settlement in 1609. Reading it solidified the opinion that I had personally after reading and teaching *Matrix* that I don't think there's anyone today writing word for word better sentences about nature and solitude. Welcome to the show, Lauren. Thanks so much for being here.

Laura McGrath is a literary critic, writer, assistant professor of English at Temple University, and a National Endowment for the Humanities fellow. She is currently at work on a book called *Middlemen: Literary Agents and the Making of Contemporary American Literature*, which is under contract with Princeton University Press. Her work on contemporary fiction and the publishing industry also appears in the *Atlantic*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Public Books*. Laura, thanks so much for being here today. And since I'm really just the middleman here, I'm happy to turn things over to you now.

Laura McGrath

I really think we need to coin the word middle-woman for these situations precisely. But thank you so much, Sarah. And Lauren, thank you so much for joining us today. I cannot say how much I have enjoyed your writing over the years, and specifically how much I really enjoyed rereading through your work this summer and reading *The Vaster Wilds* in preparation for this conversation.

Lauren Groff

Thank you, Laura. And thank you, Sarah, for hosting the whole shebang. I really appreciate it.

LM

So I want to dive right in. In the letter that was addressed to readers in the ARC that I received of *The Vaster Wilds*, you called this book your most ambitious novel. And this is a really big statement, I think, for a writer like you, who I think of as just massively ambitious always. For a massively ambitious writer

to write a really ambitious novel is it's a big statement. But *The Vaster Wilds* is also in one reading, not the only reading, but in one reading, one of your quietest novels, right, a protagonist who is mostly solitary, a narrative that is driven by introspection, that's got very little present tense dialogue, and so I wonder if you could talk a little bit then about what ambition means to you.

LG

I love this question, because when it is applied to women in general, it is pretty much negative, usually, when we see, you know, Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* is ambitious. But I think for me, ambitious really means going so far beyond the things that you think that you can do, that you end up in the realm of possible failure. I think it's, you know, if a man's reach can exceed his grasp, what is the heaven for? I think that you're sort of always reaching for the heaven.

LM

One of the things that I have loved most about your writing and loved most rereading you this summer is how each of your books is really kind of a thorough, just a wholesale departure from the last in many ways, and yet there's such consistent kind of classic Groff through-lines, right, faith and spirituality, nature. What's always persistent to me, like Sarah just said, is just at the level of the sentence, your work is just so, like, finely wrought, that even though each book immerses itself in this newly textured language, it just feels very clear at all times that these sentences have just been masterfully crafted.

I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your process and how you go about immersing yourself in a new language or a new setting as you move from book to book, what that looks like for you, and how you think about readers in that process.

LG

Oh, absolutely. This is my favorite thing to talk about. I love process questions. So, a book begins almost always in some sort of research, even if it's a contemporary novel, I'm reading and reading and reading for the spark, the idea, the sympathetic voice that is somehow informing my own book, and often I don't know exactly what it is that I'm looking for until I actually find it. But each book is its own separate thing, and I do want each subsequent book to in some ways destroy the book before. I mean, that's one of my desires when I write is to turn around and blow up what a reader might have thought a Lauren Groff book would be.

And so with this book, I did a lot of primary research. I did a lot of archival research. I also did a lot of contemporary reading of academics who are responding to the primary sources. And I went back to the language of the Elizabethan era. So I went back to Shakespeare. I read all of Shakespeare all over again in order to get not only the rhythm, but the I am and the, but the flow of ideas, the flow of metaphors, which is profoundly different from the way that we use metaphors today. I think metaphor has changed so abruptly over the course of 400, 500 years that we are now. I mean, I think metaphor is the most beautiful way to see how a human being thinks and how it's thought that sort of leaps poetically from one thing to the next. And I think with technology, our leaps are somewhat smaller. So to go back into the Elizabethan era and to see the larger metaphorical, poetic, it was just so gorgeous. And I wanted to bring that to the text itself. Every book has its own method. And it takes me some years usually to define the method that I need to find in order to get the voice, the tone, and the color.

LM

Has there been one that's been most challenging to you? Is that like, that might be like telling tales on your kids or something? I don't know. Has there been a book that posed a very particular difficulty for you?

LG

Well, I mean, yeah, this book, *Vaster Wilds*, actually, it was probably my most difficult in that it took the longest to get from what I thought was a finished draft to what other people thought was a finished draft. And there were so many previous versions and so many, like, false ends that I went down, false roads that I went down. I think *Arcadia* was one of the hardest books to write, because it was about existential dread and bringing children into the age of the Anthropocene. And I was pregnant at the time that I was writing it. And so that was just really, I mean, it was in some ways a vaccination against my own anxiety. But in other ways, it was, a catharsis of that same anxiety. And balancing those two things was difficult.

So all the books posed profound problems. *Matrix* was the easiest because I had got it in a vision. But the rest of them were really hard.

LM

I'd love to, that's a question that I've had for you. I'd love to talk about the relationship between the *Vaster Wilds* and *Matrix*. And it's so interesting to hear you say that each novel should destroy the last because these two novels are so clearly in conversation with one another. And I've been trying to wrap my mind around what the nature of this conversation is, right? Like, is it call and response between *Matrix* and *Vaster Wilds*? Is it kind of this frenzied sort of conversation that you might have at a bar where everyone's just so eager to share their stories and to, you know, get to know each other? Or is it this sort of long lingering conversation that happens over years? I had never thought about one destroying the other, right? I never thought about this as like a debate, perhaps, or a refutation.

So I guess I understand, and as you just said, that *Matrix* kind of came to you in this sort of vision, while you were working on *Vaster Wilds* and that you paused the one to work on the other. I'm really interested in *Vaster Wilds*'s origin story, where you started with it. So that's kind of part one of this question. But then I'm also really interested in how the novel changed as a result of pausing and working kind of on this whole cloth vision of Marie de France in *Matrix*.

LG

Well, just to clarify things, I didn't really pause *Vaster Wilds*. It was still living and I was still working on it. I was actually working on three different books, and I think of them as a triptych. You are so right to say that they're in conversation because they are. They're intended to be a triptych as opposed to just individual, autonomous books out in the world, which I want them to be also. I don't want people to have to have read any one of the books.

But my overall vision, like the larger god's eye view, if I ever end up writing this gosh darn third book, is that I wanted to see almost like a stone skipping across the surface of water. I wanted to see about a thousand years of religion and women and the Anthropocene and the beginnings of the Anthropocene within religion and the way that we got to where we are now. So the first voice, of course, would be

Marie's in *Matrix* in the 11th-12th century, and then 1609 with my character in *Vaster Wilds*, and the third book, which I've written probably eight separate, complete drafts of, and I can't find, I can't nail it yet. It may never happen. It may just be an imaginary third one, but someday, possibly. So all of these books are talking under the surface, sort of like whale songs, right? So it's, wasn't meant to be a trilogy, obviously, because the characters are so different, and the subjects are so different, and even the style of the writing is different from one book to the next. But they're meant to thematically reverberate in a larger sense, as a larger project.

So what happened was in 2012, I was in a doctor's office, and I picked up a Smithsonian magazine, and in it, there was this article on Jamestown during the starving time, which was a horrific time, when I think 80% of the colonists died of disease, and famine, and violence, and being hung up by the thumbs because they murdered their wives. I mean, really terrible things are happening. And in that article, there was a new revelation about how a young girl, a 14-year-old girl, her bones had shown evidence of cannibalism. And I was so blown away by that, because it went against a lot of the foundational mythology of America that I had heard my entire life.

And then I remembered, over time, slowly, Mary Rowlandson and early American captivity narratives, particularly by women, because they were used by primarily men as agents of propaganda for Western expansion. And I thought, how interesting those are, because even though you know, as a 21st century reader, that these are elements of propaganda, they're also compelling in and of themselves. Once in a while, you hear the actual voice of the woman split through time, and sort of cut you really deeply. And so they're really fraught and complicated texts. And I think that they are the start of the frontier narrative that we come to rely on as universal American mythology. I mean, I think the cowboy narrative actually comes out of early American captivity narratives.

All of this said, I eventually then reread *Robinson Crusoe*, and it was with the rereading of *Robinson Crusoe* that I thought all of these things came together, and I wanted to write a female Robinson Crusoe an anti-captivity narrative.

LM

Yeah, it's so interesting. I was reading with Mary Rowlandson in the back of my mind as well. And with that in mind, I kept kind of expecting the generic trope of the moment of encounter. I kept expecting the moment in which she would be captured, or I kept expecting Robinson Crusoe meets Friday. And of course, Native Americans are very active throughout this novel. They're very present, and the girl is very aware of their presence and comes to understand their presence differently over the course of the novel.

But that was just one way in which you are engaging this genre and also just fully subverting it, really working with those expectations and turning the screw in this way of thinking about how these narratives might work told from the perspective of a young girl.

I wonder if you could talk about maybe some other ways that you're thinking about this work in conversation with some of those early American narratives. Thinking about it, as you've just said in a more female, from a more female perspective, thinking about kind of the difference in the ways in which Native Americans are being portrayed. What are some other conversations that you're having in this novel with early American frontier narratives?

LG

I mean, one of the primary ones, in addition to the ones I've already mentioned, is the relationship between human and nature, right? I mean, I think in general, those narratives see nature as enemy, just as the kidnapers were the enemies of the women. And I, you know, in this time and place that seems so sad and relentlessly wrong. So I wanted to change that. I wanted to make nature a source of conflict, but also a source of joy and beauty and wonder and delight. And there's abundance there. If only she weren't so ignorant, right? If only she had knew just a little more about the math underfoot or the ground nuts, right? Or where to find more food. She could survive very easily in the woods if she just knew a little bit more.

So, you know, I wanted to change this idea of dominance over nature that I think does animate and drive the Western or the frontier narrative now. Of course, the Western is really interesting. The frontier narrative is really interesting the way that we've allowed it to sort of succumb to like a macho, anti-woman, anti-native American, anti-nature, like capitalist enterprise. And all of those things, just by the mere fact of putting a woman at the center of the book, a young girl at the center of the book, all of those things sort of falls to the wayside.

SW

Can I just jump in with a question that links some of the things that the two of you have been talking about? And it's a question about gender. So, it's following directly on what you were talking about, Lauren. So, I am always a bit skeptical when people describe literature as quiet, because it seems like, except if they're talking about John Williams' novel, *Stoner*, what they're really talking about is a novel by a woman and about female characters, right? But my experience of reading your work is that it is so devastating. I mean, in the best way possible, because it's like there's a quiet surface tension to use your metaphor of skipping the stone, and then underneath there are powers and forces and all kinds of things roiling. And part of what I think you do so well is we never quite know when they will erupt, how they will erupt, but they're always there.

And that for me was very true in *The Vaster Wilds*. It's also true in short stories, like "Ghosts and Empties." But I wanted to ask if you feel like that is, I guess, how you experience your own writing or your own prose, what you're going for, but also how linked that is for you to the experience or to the attempt to describe the experience of being in a female body? That this question of where and when hostilities or violence erupt is linked to gender, so intimately, especially in *The Vaster Wilds*?

LG

I love when people do describe at least the surface tension of my work as quiet, because I do think that that's the kind of work that I love the most. I don't necessarily see my own work as quiet. And this is maybe the difference between a critic and the writer herself, is that I find it full of fireworks everywhere and barely repressed rage. And I think that those arrest often in the strangeness of my syntax. So I see trip wires everywhere. I see pitfalls everywhere in the surface, in the way that the sentences are made.

But maybe, I think that might be just a difference. But I do love this idea of living in the world in the female body. I think that there has to be something profound underneath that. I think about all of the other female writers that I know with surface smoothness and repressed vibrations underneath. And maybe I'm speaking to them also. Maybe I'm speaking back into literature in some way. It's Virginia

Woolf, who I think has the sort of prose that I'm aiming for. And George Eliot, who has the kind of prose that I'm aiming for. She seems much more pacific, but she's actually full of rage.

LM

See that point? I called this novel quiet, or quieter in my first question, in part because it is literally quieter. Like in terms of the people speaking to each other, the sort of conversation that we expect is or that you've come to see in something like *Fates and Furies*, where you have Lotto constantly monologuing and all of their hangers-on constantly in conversation with one another. This novel is mostly, even the conversation that we have is through the memory of the young girl at its center.

So that said, though, it's only really quieter if we take this very strictly human view, right? And so this gets us back to the idea of the weird that this podcast has been engaging this season.

LG

I really love the idea of this book being called quiet. I think it has something to do with the palette that we're working with. *Fates and Furies* is operatic, right? It is multicolored. It's like a peacock, right? I mean, it's really wild. It's intentionally larger than life. This one is set in the woods, white, right? With black trees. I mean, there's red blood, and then there's very little other color. And I think this is really very important, and I think that there's an equation of quietness and loudness with the color aspect.

I think it was John Ruskin who called color, light, suffering and joy? And that's what I'm trying to do in this book, right? And in all my books, it's sort of trying to find the color palette of the book to equate with the suffering and joy of what's happening within it. So I actually really like this idea. I think it is kind of a quiet book in some ways until it blooms into rainbows at the end.

LM

Yeah. And maybe it's that end that I'm so interested in as we think kind of beyond the limits of human subjectivity, as we think kind of beyond the limits of human character or even human speech. There's a moment at the end, if you don't mind, I'm going to do this thing, which involves reading part of your book. I will do my best to not spoil anything for readers, but in which this young girl is reflecting on what she sees around her, as she does throughout the novel, but in a new and different way now. And you write that: "The earth itself uncovered its shining face, and to her now revealed itself in a litany of wonder." And this litany continues as she looks and sees all of these things around her and begins to understand them differently.

And one of my favorite passages in the entire book is a few paragraphs down. "And the stones with their lives so slow that to all important moving creatures of animated life, they did appear unmoving. But even the stones she understood now did meet and mate, they erupt and splinter, did rub to powder, stone upon stone, and stone upon water and stone upon air, so that in the long scale of their lives, the stones saw within themselves incredible vitality."

And this seems in so many ways to be kind of the project of this book. And the project, I think, of your own investigation of thinking differently about nature, thinking about what went wrong in Genesis with our misreading of the idea of dominion. And so if this book is quiet, in some ways, even though, I, we love the idea, and I'm totally game with calling it a quiet book, but it's also only quiet if we don't see what the stones are doing, right? If we can't embrace the sort of cosmic timescale.

The literary critic Kate Marshall, in the tradition of a writer like Marilyn Robinson calls this a cosmic realism, or she might call this a sort of cosmic realism. And that was somehow or some part of what I understood this book to be engaging in the way that you, at different points throughout the novel, are really interested in exploring a nonhuman subjectivity, right? Moments when the girl imagines how the duck will feel when it wakes up and discovers that its eggs are gone, or how the bear feels about, you know, feeding its little cub, this sickly thing.

Could you tell us a little bit more about, I mean, here's my reading of it, but like, what are you invested in in these moments of nonhuman subjectivity? What are you trying to get us to? How is this kind of revising the domination narrative of Genesis that you are trying to rewrite?

LG

No, that is exactly what I was attempting to. I do think, I was maybe not subtly, but I was trying to keep the centrality of the human out of the narrative of the world, right? Because I don't know if you have friends who are geologists, but I do, and it's so lovely to be in nature with them, right? Because they will talk about time as though they're sitting on Mount Olympus with the gods, right? Time is not a human-scaled thing. We are just mere ants, right? Time is this glorious, great, beautiful tapestry in which we are just a single thread, and to see this limestone bluff and to be able to see sort of the layers and the foldings and understand time in a different way is really gorgeous.

We are so trained to see narratives as a human thing, right? Or time as something centered around being human. And I do think that opening up the perception of these great existential mysteries as something beyond the small human will be the thing that allows us, if we can, in time, to save life on this planet, save human life on this planet.

One of the other beautiful things that I learned is that there's this Japanese drilling company or endeavor that is drilling deep into the earth, and at every level that they drill, there's life. They have found life, which I find so meaningful and powerful and moving. And I think about this, and it seems to me if that is the case, then maybe humans removing ourselves from the earth as not as devastating and awful as we all think it may be, which is nihilistic maybe, but it's also really embracing of other forms of life.

LM

There was a moment in the last quarter of the novel, I guess, where I noted this phrase, the girl is hiding behind a waterfall, and she is trying to suss out what's around her. And again, this is a very terrible description so that I do not spoil for anyone what's happening toward the end of the novel.

But you use the phrase that "she sends out her attention," and that jumped out to me as a really interesting way of describing the sort of mental processes that she undergoes in this book. But it also, the more I thought on that phrase, the more it also seemed a way of describing what you are really interested in as a writer in really each of your novels, you know, sending out your attention to understand perhaps a sea monster in a lake, in Glimmerglass Lake, in the town of Templeton, or seeing the world through the perspective of a five-year-old boy. Paying attention to a wife, for instance, or in *Matrix* I was struck by Marie's downfall, in many ways, comes from her inability to pay attention to much beyond her own capacity for creation, right, that she doesn't see the field mice that the labyrinth disrupted, that she doesn't see the animals that she displaced in creating this magnificent abbey.

And so it seems like that is not only kind of your, as you're talking now, that seems like it's not only your focus as a writer, but also your process in many ways, that sending out your attention seems to be how you manage to create these just dramatically immersive worlds in your novels.

LG

Oh, attention is love, right? I actually think that the more attention you pay to something, the more you just fall in love with it, no matter what it is. You could, you could, I do this with my grad students once in a while when I teach, but you could just look at a pen for 15 to 20 minutes, and by the time you're done with the full immersion, attentive looking at a pen, you just love that object so deeply, right? I actually think that that it's very, very similar. And not, and hating is not, I think hating is the withdrawal of attention, right? The very profound desire to remove love, right? It's the absence of the black hole of attention.

So, yeah, that's, I mean, that's all that I'm trying to do when I write. I'm trying to find those pulses of love and joy and energy and trying to stay there, and even if it's a, it's a difficult thing to do. You know, that sounds so woo-ey. It is, it is my philosophy on writing. If you write it out of hatred, you're just not paying attention.

LM

I don't know. I don't think it's woo-ey. I love it so much. But maybe it is woo-ey, and also I love it so much.

LG

It is woo-ey, that's for sure.

LM

So as I look at your body of work, I feel like it could be divided in two groups, right? So on the one hand, there is *Monsters of Templeton*, *Arcadia*, and *Fates and Furies* that are all, relatively speaking, contemporary, or at least in some like recognizable U.S. culture, right? Even if it's the 60s or the 80s in *Arcadia*, it's very recognizable to your audience is something familiar. And then, and then *Matrix* and *The Vaster Wilds*. And I think it was 2012, you said you began *Vaster Wilds*. 2021 that *Matrix* was published. So I'm kind of backdating this a little bit. You're working on these novels through the Trump administration in this moment in which we seem to refuse just a vast swath of the U.S. population just refuses to think historically about anything. This is also the moment in which you are turning to historical fiction in your work, right? Moving us all the way back to the 12th century and then jumping ahead a little bit to 1609.

I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about what historical fiction is doing for you? Like, why this turn to historical fiction? Why is this meaningful now for you, for readers? What, what's motivating that, that shift, that shift that I see, you might not see that as a shift in your writing, but the shift that I see in your writing.

LG

About 10 years ago, I sat in some graduate classroom and I pronounced that I would never write historical fiction, and then I wrote two books. You know, when I was in grad school in the early 2000s,

historical fiction was seen as a lesser form of writing, partially because that is the gift of Henry James, who absolutely hated it and just sort of spread his hatred all over the rest of us. But it's also, it was seen as a conservative form, looking backwards without engaging with the present moment. And I think a lot of people's idea of what art is that it always engages with the present. And I don't disagree. I actually do think that that's what art is. And subverts a lot of the the narratives that we fall into just in a knee-jerk way.

But I started to see that historical fiction could be just a really profound tool that, for thinking, for thinking and pushing against the contemporary age. Because you can put into historical fiction things that would be obscured by the things of the modern world, right? I could write a story and I'm trying to write a story about climate change, god, women, right? All of those things now. But I also have to have computers in it. And I have to have cell phones in it. I have to have the detritus of the actual world, which in some way throws up these screens between what I really want to talk about and what I have to talk about in order to ground the reader in the world at large.

But historical fiction is one of these beautiful, beautiful things that can slide in sideways, right? A lot of the stuff that you don't think that you might be interested in. I really, I feel like it is an urgency of contemporary writers of literature to address the climate crisis. I mean, if we don't do that, we're standing on the edge of a cliff, like pretending that the cliff doesn't exist at all. And that seems like the most unrealistic thing. But how do you do that without automatically turning off a reader who's already subject to their own anxieties about the climate crisis, right?

I think that's with the problem with a lot of nonfiction books about it. People choose not to pick them up because they don't want to feel worse about what is happening in the world. But if you say, oh, you know, here's a book about nuns in the 12th century, you can still talk about these things, wherever there's a human, there is a change in the physical world, in the natural world, right? You make a fire in the woods, that fire is changing the wood. So the Anthropocene starts with a human. And so you can talk about these things slyly.

LM

I wanted to ask too, relatedly, as we're thinking about the Anthropocene, about the role of religion and spirituality in the climate crisis, but then in kind of more broadly, the way that humans and nature interact, and about your interest in faith and spirituality and religion broadly in your writing. The last two books are really committed to kind of cleaving apart the two, right, that faith or that spirituality and religion are not the same thing. But I wonder if you could talk a little bit about where this particular interest of yours comes from and maybe what sort of tradition you see yourself writing in or with.

LG

Oh yeah. Well, I don't see myself writing within a tradition. I think, I don't know. You know, I'm just writing out of personal desire. And I do, I love a lot of writers who came out of a, maybe a religious tradition. I think, I think of Tolstoy and Marilynne Robinson as people who are really deeply invested in the spiritual. And I really want to remember that god is the ineffable mystery and god is not the attempt to define the ineffable mystery, which is what religion is. Religion is just trying to put eternity in words small enough that the human intellect can encompass them. And I think that that is against the profound

beauty and vastness of whatever we want to call god. I actually think it's anti-god, which may be more radical than we want to get into in this podcast.

I was raised as a Presbyterian, and it felt like such a constrained religion to me. It felt, it felt limited, the imaginations of the people preaching at me as opposed to an expansion of soul, which I later found in literature. And then when I had my own children, I started wondering, literature just wasn't enough. It didn't, it didn't match the hugeness of life, right, the dictation of life and the protection of this life that I now have in my hands. And I started thinking about larger ideas of spirituality without, I'm not religious in any mode other than maybe whatever comes at the end of *The Vaster Wilds* is really close to what I believe of the world. And of the great eternal gorgeous mysteries that we all should be engaged with on a daily basis without limiting it to religion.

LM

Yeah I had a similar trajectory to you, although perhaps a little bit reversed in terms of like denominational forms. So I was raised kind of non-denominational evangelical. And again, I found that to be so small and so constricting. And the ritual of liturgy in the Episcopal tradition was something that kind of unleashed a larger tradition. Now I find myself outside of that and trying to figure out what that means for my daughter in a way that is very similar to what you described and we don't much need to get into.

But I was really struck through reading *Matrix* and then thinking about the rest of your novels through the lens of *Matrix* about the role that ritual plays in your writing, both for your stories, for your characters themselves, but then also for you as a writer. As I understand, you're a writer who's very committed to sort of ritualistic practices, your daily practice seems to be very, almost liturgical in some way. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the relationship between ritual and also something that is, if you could talk about the, I mean, maybe it's ritual and ambition, right? Maybe it's ritual and understanding sort of some space of the eternal. But yeah, I was wondering if you could chat a little bit about ritual.

LG

I think ritual is so beautiful because it has a dual and almost contradictory purpose. So it can limit possibilities by making the body go through a series of daily exercises that don't change. So that I'm not ever tempted to lie in bed because I just don't. That's just not in my ritual. Yeah, you know, I get up, get coffee, go to work, meditate, and then, you know, everything happens in order. And so it takes away options in a really beautiful formal way, almost like formal poetry. Sometimes when you do formal poetry, it unleashes the imagination to go in directions you never would have thought it could possibly go.

So it's both a restriction and an expansion in a very, very profound way. I have to say it comes out of, my devotion to ritual comes out of two places. One is I was, and I do athletic things every day, but I'm no longer an athlete, but I was raised an athlete, right? And that is how you just get better. You just do the same things over and over again to the point of failure. And then maybe your point of failure grows a little bit the next day. So that became really important to me to replicate that in my working life. But it's also because I do have OCD. And if I didn't have these rituals, I wouldn't write anything. So it's a part of

my brain chemistry that I have to do the same thing every single day. And that allows me the latitude to wander freely, and to fail.

It's paradoxical. But I really, I love my rituals. I get so sad. I'm about to go on tour, and I'm about to not be around my rituals. And it's going to be very hard.

LM

No, I love thinking about that in light of formal poetry. I was thinking about this rereading *Matrix* about Marie's initial lack of belief in many ways, right? She's Catholic nominally, but kind of comes to the abbey without a particularly committed belief. And yet through ritual finds not constraint that she initially thought she'd find, but that unleashes these sort of revelations, these beautiful visions.

And that strikes me as one way of kind of thinking about the interplay between these two things, that like the daily practice of sitting in the chair, drinking the coffee, writing the lines. Also, that the mundane qualities of that also kind of unleash this sort of allow access to an imaginative space that might not otherwise be available without those sorts of constraints.

LG

Yeah, absolutely. It's true.

LM

I love the way that you write women. I just, I'm so, I'm so drawn by these just complex characters that you've written. And it seems to me, as I read your writing, it seems to me that you love them in really meaningful ways. And that is so just, it's just so wonderful to read, to read these people who are complex and contradictory and their lives cannot be resolved and they shouldn't have to be. And it's just, it's so wonderful to read.

LG

Laura, thank you. I do love them. I love all my characters, even the bad ones. I love them all.

SW

So every season, we close with a signature question, which we ask to all of our guests. And this season, Lauren, is interesting because you in some ways have already answered our signature question, which is what is your, what has been your weirdest source of writing inspiration? You already told us about a Smithsonian magazine in a doctor's office and a vision. But that's the question and you can answer it however you like. What has been your weirdest source of writing inspiration?

LG

When my older son was about your son's age, Laura, about two or three, I was working on this short story and I couldn't get it. I couldn't get the form of it because until you have the form, you really don't have a story, even if you have the voice. So I was walking behind him in a park trying to see the world through his little tiny eyes, where, you know, the grass was like a savannah, like he was like pushing through it and the ducks are his size. And there are enormous and scary dinosaurs coming at him.

And I looked up in his eyes and I saw a double seesaw going like this back and forth. And I found the structure of the story in this vision at a playground through my three-year-old's eyes. And that was very strange to be struck suddenly with the formal architecture of a short story in the park.

SW

That's amazing. It's a very beautiful—

LM

I love that

SW

--it's a beautiful weird, which is quite fitting from a person writing such beautiful prose. So thank you so much, Lauren, for joining us today. Thank you, Laura, for hosting this conversation.

I just want to remind our listeners that you can buy Lauren Groff's books, including *The Vaster Wilders* in bookstores, that's brick and mortar bookstores, and online. And we'll have some links, as always, on the episode's webpage.

And as always, we are also grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership, and to Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern. Rebecca Otto is our social media manager. And Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Ocean Vuong, Jeff VanderMeer, Ruth Ozeki, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks so much for tuning in. Keep listening and keep reading.