9.5 Who Owns These Tools?: Vauhini Vara and Aarthi Vadde (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 podcast brings you lively conversations between critics and the most exciting novelists out there to talk about how novels get made and what they mean. I'm so excited for today's episode, which is part of season nine, focusing on tech. We have a critic and a novelist with us today who both think about tech in really fresh, meaningful ways. *Novel Dialogue*'s own Aarthi Vadde is here to talk with the award-winning journalist, playwright, and novelist Vauhini Vara. Vauhini began her journalism career as a technology reporter at *The Wall Street Journal* and went on to launch, edit, and write the business section of *The New Yorker*'s website. She is currently a *Businessweek* contributing editor. Her debut novel, *The Immortal King Rao* from 2022, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize, and the Center for Fiction's first novel prize. Her latest book is *Searches*, and it's available on April 8th of this year. And while any quick summary can't capture what this book really is, her website helpfully describes *Searches* as a work of journalism and memoir about how big technology companies are changing our understanding of ourselves and our communities. On a personal note, I want to say that Vauhini's books are among my recent favorites because they do something I don't see other authors doing very often. They give us a hearts-and-minds history of computing and digital technology, helping readers understand in really moving, important ways not just what computers and the internet do, but how and what they make us feel. So welcome to the show, Vauhini.

Vauhini Vara

Thank you for having me.

SW

And I'm also so happy to be joined by Aarthi Vadde, a co-founder of this podcast, and she is the E. Blake Byrne Associate Professor of English at Duke University. She is the author of *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism beyond Europe, 1914 to 2016*, which won the ACLA's 2018 Harry Levin Prize for Outstanding First Book in Comparative Literature. She is also the co-editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol F: The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, and her book in progress is called *We the Platform: Contemporary*

Literature after Web 2.0. It's just one reason why Aarthi is the perfect interlocutor for Vauhini. She thinks rigorously, but with a refreshingly open mind about how the web shapes contemporary literary culture. Aarthi, thanks so much for being here today, and I'm happy to turn over the conversation to you.

Aarthi Vadde

Thanks, Sarah. I'm so glad to be here interviewing Vauhini and just really loved *Searches*. I'm so excited to talk about it in light of *The Immortal King Rao* and to just kind of pick your brain about what's going on right now in the world. When I think of *Immortal King Rao*, I really do kind of think of it in light of the grand realist tradition. You know, there's multiple generations, a large cast of characters. We're thinking about the relationships between great social forces and individual psychologies. And in a way, we're also thinking about the relationship between large corporate forces and individual psychologies and searches. But this book put me in the mind, if anything, of something like Montaigne, you know, writing essays in the 16th century, and people reading it and not really knowing what the form was that they were reading, but enjoying the experience. And so when you are coming to a project, this is the kind of the first question I want to open with. When you're coming to a project, do you think, I feel like this should be a novel and maybe this should be short stories or a collection of essays? Or do you find that the project ultimately decides the form for you? How do you make those choices? And do you feel any special loyalty to a particular genre?

VV

I find the distinction between fiction and nonfiction to be like more and more contestable, I guess, as my career goes on. So I started as somebody who was a journalist on the one hand, writing nonfiction, and then a fiction writer on the other hand, pouring my quote-unquote "creative energy" into fiction rather than into the nonfiction, which felt like a very different form to me. And the way I defined it back then was to say, fiction is the stuff that's made up and nonfiction is the stuff that's true, right? And I now teach both fiction and nonfiction. And what I say to my students now is something else. What I say to them now is the only difference between fiction and nonfiction is that when we write nonfiction, we claim that there is a version of the truth in it, right? Which is very different from saying one is true and one is false, because as we all know, there's plenty in anyone's fiction that is in fact true, but we're just not claiming as authors that it's true. So that distinction, that sort of developing a more fluid definition of those genres, I think has been helpful to me in my career. I think it was helpful to me in writing *Searches*. I don't know that I would have been able to write this book around the time that I started my novel, *The Immortal King Rao* in 2008, because I wasn't yet thinking about genre in that in that way. So with that book, I knew I wanted to write a novel, I was studying fiction, that at the time was the only form that I knew of, that I could use to write quote-unquote "creatively," and by which I mean, with a kind of personal subjectivity, right? In this book, there's a lot that could actually be described as fiction, one could argue. There are things that aren't factually true in this book that I'm calling nonfiction, either that I'm putting on the page or other producers of

text, whether they're human or technological, are putting on the page. And yet it's called nonfiction. So I find I find that all really fascinating.

AV

Since you brought up your relationship to journalism, and the differences between fiction and nonfiction, and how on some level, they're a little bit falsely binaristic, right? Because like you said, that nonfiction, we say we have a version of the truth that we lay claim to, but there's plenty of truth in the fiction as well. When you talked about writing *King Rao*, one of the things I think I've heard you say was, you used your journalism skills to talk to people in the Dalit community in India, people in your own family, to get a sense of authenticity to the story you were telling. And in *Searches*, you do mention what you just said, which is that when you were going into Iowa, where you did your MFA, you had kind of framed it as I did one kind of writing, now I'm about to do another. But through *Searches*, and I'm sure through your own writing development, you've started to see these processes of journalistic writing and fiction writing as more interrelated. So if you could maybe talk a little bit about how you see journalism and fiction writing informing each other going forward, like, where are you now in your relationship to your two hats?

VV

Yeah, I mean, one thing that I find that I found exciting about writing *Searches*, is that it felt to me, like I had found for this book, a form that integrated many of my different identities as a writer, in a way that I hadn't realized was possible before I wrote it. I realize now in a way that I didn't when I was starting out as a journalist, that all communication, I think I can make that very sweeping claim, all communication is subjective in some form, right. And so even those newspaper articles I was writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, when I was starting out as a reporter, in which, if you asked me then, I would have said, “I am not inserting any bias into these stories, there's some objective truth to them, my own subjectivity is not playing into it, the subjectivity of my editors of *The Wall Street Journal* as an institution are not present on the page.” Of course, that's not true. Of course, that's not the reality. The reality is that my subjectivity, the subjectivity of all of my editors, of *The Wall Street Journal* as an institution, of the country in which *The Wall Street Journal* is published, in English, which is the main language in which the paper is published, all of those influenced those texts that I was writing. Realizing that helps me see that in some ways, journalism is not so different from the fiction that I was exploring when I left *The Wall Street Journal* and went to graduate school to study creative writing and fiction specifically. I don't want to overstate that because I do, you know, I believe very much in journalism. I think good journalism is fact-based, is grounded in reality. What I mean, though, is just that in creative writing classrooms, we talk a lot about kind of the role of perspective, the role of the subjectivity of the storyteller, and I understand that to be something that applies to anything I write now. I think a younger generation of journalists, younger than I am, are really pushing the boundaries of what we consider to be acceptable in terms of the subjectivity we allow into our journalism or that we allow into our public life, right, that allows people to make assessments about what our opinions might be about things. I think I

tend to be somewhat more traditional or conservative compared to some of the members of that younger generation, but I think they're pushing our profession in useful ways because if we accept that that subjectivity exists, then maybe that can transform how we think about how journalism is functioning.

AV

And do you find that *Searches* is part of that push, even though you say “when I'm publishing in a certain kind of venue, I maintain this traditionalism”? Some of the materials that you published in *The New York Times*, like your Google searches of the past decade, do reappear in edited and transfigured form in searches.

VV

I thought of them as very subjective pieces that I would describe more as quote-unquote “creative writing” than as journalism to the extent that a binary can exist. That said, something I was really concerned with and about in *Searches*, and I'd be really curious about your reading on this as a critic who writes about this stuff, but it is true that because of my journalism background and because I've in that journalism background and the integrity of journalism is important to me, in *Searches*, while I think my subjectivity, my own personal opinions appear on the page very much, I wanted them to be, I wanted the book to be fair, and I wanted this subjectivity of my own to be very grounded in facts and reporting and research and what's actually happening in the world. And the reason I'm curious about your perspective on this is that I've had a couple of interviews about the book so far, and I've heard so many different perspectives on like how people read the book and the extent to which people thought of this as like an anti-big tech book or a book that's very generous toward big tech or something else entirely.

AV

So if you ask me, I would say this book was fair.

VV

Good, good. [laughter]

AV

Yeah, I mean, I find that a lot of big tech conversations play out on social media because a lot of people affiliated with those industries need to make their voices heard in those venues. And so whether you're on X or on Blue Sky or wherever, your rhetoric is shaped by your audience. And so what I'm looking for when I read long-form serious writing about technology is people who I think are capable of speaking to different audiences. And I find that more people are making their careers by speaking to one audience in an intense way. And that drives a certain level of

polarization in the conversation. And it also makes it really hard to have nuanced conversations where you might have a moderate. So I don't know if you do come down as for, against, but I don't really think that that's the goal of this book. And when I was reading it, what really impressed me was the contextualization of what is sucking up all the air, which is large language models within this longer history of the tech industry, of Silicon Valley, of the way that these industries really changed the culture and the landscape of the Northwest of Seattle. So these are all the things that I think would be really wonderful about the book, that people can see that these conversations have been percolating since the early 2000s. You could even go back to the 90s. There's a lot of different points to return to if you truly want to understand what's happening today. It's not just the last version of the model, you know? So I guess, to that end, one of the things that struck me too about *Searches* was the role that GPT-3, I suppose, played in it, or then later ChatGPT. Um, and it might not be a bad time for you to read from *Searches* so people can know what we're talking about if they haven't already seen the book. There are many wonderful excerpts that I think you could have read from, but I felt like it might be useful for you to read from around the middle of *Searches* where you tell us what it was like to first encounter GPT-3 in OpenAI's playground space. So if you want to add anything, go ahead, or if you just want to start reading, it would be wonderful to hear you start reading about this experience you had with this earlier version of the model GPT-3.

VV

“Elsewhere, Borges had paid tribute to human experience more broadly. ‘A writer, and I believe generally all persons, must think that whatever happens to him or her is a resource,’ he told one interviewer. All things have been given to us for a purpose, and an artist must feel this more intensely. All that happens to us, including our humiliations, our misfortunes, our embarrassments, all is given to us as raw material, as clay, so that we may shape our art. Turning clay into art is hard. Writing feels to me, most of the time, like searching for the right word for a long time, then discovering it, only to get stumped again with the next word. This process can last months or longer. My novel, when I was learning about large language models, had evaded me for a decade. The thought of a corporate writing machine, with its promise to render the raw material of my experience into language on my behalf, disgusted me. It also attracted me. My curiosity, in the end, prevailed over my repulsion. I wrote to Altman,” that's Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, “asking to try out GPT-3. He put me in touch with OpenAI's Vice President of Communications at the time, a man named Steve Dowling, whom I'd previously encountered when he'd held a similar role at Apple. After some back and forth, Dowling, presumably with Altman's blessing, agreed to let me use GPT-3. Soon, I received an email inviting me to access a web app called The Playground. On it, I found a big white box in which I could begin composing text. By clicking a button, I could prompt GPT-3 to finish it. I began by offering the model a couple of words at a time, and then, as I started to understand how it functioned, entire sentences and paragraphs. At last, I decided to try to co-write some fiction with GPT-3. The narrator I introduced was the mother of a young son. My own son had recently turned five, and while my existential terror about his future was no longer as pressurized as it had been, it still whistled in the background while we went about our lives. I wrote some lines from this mother's perspective, then prompted GPT-3 to add some more. A

story began to take shape, one in which the edge between my consciousness and GPT-3's text production began to melt."

AV

Thank you for that. So what I think would do better than most other writers today is to capture that ambivalence around an emerging technology, so the repulsion and the attraction. And while I think there are probably many writers out there who just feel repulsion, I think there are a number of writers out there who feel they can't admit to anything other than repulsion.

VV

Mm, yeah.

AV

Because there is so much peer pressure around these technologies, and there is legitimate threat to livelihoods and all sorts of questionable practices around privacy and consent when we're talking about these technologies. So given that, what I think marks your work is this desire to engage technical or technological capitalism, not by trying to, I don't know, retreat to an earlier moment, but to try to recontextualize the tools we have at our disposal and help us to see them in a different way. And so one of the great parts of this book is the way it makes use of ChatGPT. You speak to it over the course of the book. It even gives you feedback on some chapters as you go along. It's almost, if not literally, symbolically constructed as your first reader.

VV

Yeah.

AV

And so I wanted you to talk more about why you chose to incorporate the outputs of large language models in the text the way you have chosen to.

VV

So believe it or not, when I first submitted this book to my editor, it included only the experimental chapters in the book. So like there was a chapter made up of my Google searches. There was a chapter made up of my Amazon reviews. And that was it. There was no other context in the book. And this was like around this time last year. It wasn't long ago. And my editor, Lisa Lucas, my first of two editors I had for this book, she said two things. One of which was, I think you know what you're doing with these pieces, but I don't know that there's enough context in the book for readers to understand what you're doing. Would you think about

adding an introduction and a conclusion, for example? And I heard that and realized it's sort of like a light bulb went off for me that made me realize that like I was not doing the work a writer needs to do of putting enough information on the page to allow a reader to properly absorb the text. The other thing she said, though, was “you know, ChatGPT is here now and it doesn't figure that much in your book. I wonder what would happen if you like fed parts of your book to ChatGPT.” And it was just a kind of minor comment she made. And my first kind of instinctive reaction was one of like, ugh, no, that sounds horrible. Of course not. I'm not going to do that. And then I realized that it was, there was a possibility that engaging ChatGPT in the book would actually allow me to show with ChatGPT what I had been able to show with other products through these experimental chapters. So in my view, in, for example, in the chapter in which I'm using my own Google searches to kind of form an essay, it says something about me, but it also says something about the product. I wondered if feeding this text to ChatGPT in some way would do the same thing. And so I started out doing it just to see what would happen. And I very quickly realized that, yes, it was true, almost sort of truer than I had imagined it to be, that ChatGPT in this discourse would reveal so many of the things about it that, that make it interesting and also make it problematic, you know? So it ends up being a kind of case study in some of the things that both proponents of these kinds of technologies and critics of these technologies talk about.

SW

Can I jump in with a question here, which is really going to be a question about humor and ChatGPT, but I'm really struck listening to Aarthi's question and your answer about, you know, repulsion and attraction. And of course, this is a book about very human, deep grief and loss, but then that grief is something that motivates or generates writing. And that for me becomes a kind of parallel track to technology. You know, it's motivating a kind of writing. It gives us something in return. Is something lost? And I think you braid those questions together in really interesting ways. But then there's this other piece, which is the book to me is very funny. And it's in part because ChatGPT does things that, you know, we don't expect in a novel maybe, or we don't expect at all. But for instance, you know, the kind of repetition of certain bullet points that ChatGPT gives you in answers, regardless of your question. And that becomes this refrain that was very funny to me. And I was also laughing aloud in the story about the story with the AI generated images. And it's a very moving story, but it's also that the images are very funny. And I wonder if you might talk a little bit about, first of all, just humor and how you think of humor in your work, but also what was funny or comical about using the tools for you in this process?

VV

I think I tend to, this is a funny word to use, but I think I tend to trust writing that is humorous in the same way that like, I find funny people trustworthy, you know? I think there's a kind of candor somehow that's tied to humor. I'm hesitating in answering the question, because so much of what a reader might read as funny in what ChatGPT produces is not writing that I produced, right? And so the challenge for me, I think, was to figure out how to respond to that. So just to, I think people have enough context to understand the setup, but basically at the

beginning of the book and then every two chapters, there's a little interstitial back and forth with ChatGPT after I have fed it the prior two chapters. And so oftentimes, yeah, it'll say these things that one might interpret as funny. I think some readers might not see humor in it, right? But some readers might. And again, this actually is an interesting way in which my journalism background came into play, I think, because I really hesitated to answer ChatGPT, especially early on in the book in a way that would like reveal my own feelings about what it had produced. And so I think, especially at first, maybe the first two thirds of those conversations with ChatGPT, I was interested in a reader reading those and wondering what I, that sort of narrator figure, was thinking, right? So in places where a reader might read what ChatGPT wrote and think this is hilarious, or this is ridiculous, or this is flat out biased or false. I kind of wanted that reader to wonder why I wasn't pushing back in some of those instances, right? And I think the fact of my withholding is potentially another sort of twist in the humor itself, right? So for a reader who's willing to go with it, there's something potentially deadpan about my kind of straight man role in those dialogues. I think it wouldn't have functioned if that continued all the way through. And in my reading of the book, there is a place where that facade, the sort of, like, narrator facade breaks, and I, as the narrator point out some of the things that I've noticed all along in the conversation. So that was all intentional on my part, but it was such a new form, right? I thought of it as writing, but it was such a different form of writing that I was kind of figuring it out as I went along, too.

AV

Yeah, I've been really interested lately in writers who have opened themselves up to other people's words or other machines' words. So we had Tom Comitta, author of *The Nature Book*, on the show, and their work was—they use the pronouns they, them—basically *The Nature Book* was all culled from other books. It was 300 novels that they put together and then edited and rewrote without a single human character to give us a view of the world without us. And I don't know if you're familiar with Sheila Heti's bot experiments—she's kind of working with these bots and exploring stories told through Alice, a bot that she made in tandem with a developer and kind of personalized. And so when I saw, I know this happened independently for both of you, but when I saw your Google searches, I was reminded of *Alphabetical Diaries*, which was sort of like a spreadsheet of diary entries from the last 10 years reorganized. And I'm not surprised that these experimental forms get pushback from editors, because obviously they're not as legible or necessarily as immediately market-friendly as, say, a beautiful realist novel or a collection of heartfelt essays in the first person. And so when you're pushing the boundaries of how you write and even how you use a machine that outputs text, do you find that you're trying to push the publishers a little farther than they want to go to? And how do you make those arguments? How do you get the experimental work out?

VV

I love that question. I mean, yeah, I think that the publishing industry is increase—I don't even have to say "I think"—the publishing industry is increasingly corporate and therefore decreasingly open to the kind of experimentation that they think will be risky in any way, but, you

know, potentially legally risky, potentially risky in that it's not going to find a large mainstream audience because it doesn't remind anybody of things that they've read in the past. It would be really nice for the sake of argument if it had been the case that, you know, I handed this book to my publisher and they were like, “Oh, what is this? This is too weird. We can't publish this book.” But in fact, to their credit, my first editor, Lisa Lucas, and then my second editor, Denise Oswald at Pantheon and all the colleagues there that I've dealt with have been super supportive of and enthusiastic about the book. And so I don't know how to fit that into the sort of like broader narrative of publishing. You know, there's a point at the book in which I make a mention of Penguin Random House’s practices around AI in a way that I hope is fair, but is not entirely glowing. Right. It raises some questions. I didn't get any pushback on any of that. And I was really glad about that. I wonder if—you know, I hope like this book and Sheila's work and others like it kind of open up publishing in general to the possibility that work like this can find an audience. And my publisher was great about it actually.

AV

That's terrific. So if I can keep you on the kind of inside-publishing track for a little bit, if I recall, I think Penguin Random House said that they wanted to adopt machine learning to help with the comp process and to help get more data on what sells. So again, more conservative, more market-oriented with respect to taking aesthetic risks. But, so they just differentiated between protecting writers from having their work trained on, that would be AI. And they differentiated between that kind of use of AI and machine learning use on behalf of the company.

VV

Right.

AV

I don't know if you have a perspective on this, but the way that publishing is responding to generative AI and to the real dangers it might pose to authors, but at the same time is not opposed to using these technologies if it will help reduce uncertainty with respect to the marketplace.

VV

Yeah. I mean, you're right. We use this term AI; this term AI can mean all kinds of different things. And of course there are certain critics who will say that AI itself is kind of a marketing term. That's meaningless, right. I think there's this tendency in the corporate world and in all kinds of spheres, but the corporate world among them, I think to see a technology taking hold and to worry that you'll be left out, right. If your competitors are using this technology and you aren't. So right, Penguin Random House, HarperCollins as well, are using internal versions of ChatGPT. Not to edit or write text in books, but to do other things. So in PRH's case, Penguin Random House's case, people who work at PRH can use it to brainstorm ideas, to summarize

content, to analyze data, to do the kinds of things you were talking about. At HarperCollins, it's similar. People are experimenting. Experimenting and with and learning about these kinds of products through these internal ChatGPT tools. Penguin Random House is at least now explicitly not allowing the use of their author's books to train AI models. HarperCollins is with author's consent and with compensation for authors.

AV

I know that sometimes I get asked this question, well, is there a right way to do it? Right. And you have this chapter kind of inspired by Audre Lorde. And I think Audre Lorde might be one of the epigraphs of the book as a whole, where you say, you know, you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. Right. And I think when Lorde initially spoke those words, she was at a feminist academic conference. She was talking about patriarchy and the issues of race and class baked into patriarchy. And of course you are talking about that quote and recontextualizing it to the place of technological capitalism. And there's this question of when you're writing, is the goal to dismantle the master's house or is the goal to, like, diagnose and understand how to inhabit this large master's house?

VV

No, I love that formulation of the question because I think it was a question I was grappling with sort of throughout the writing of the book in some ways. In some ways, even though it hasn't come up a lot yet in conversations about the book, I think of the book as being about ownership, in that one of the central questions of the book for me is who owns these tools? How can we define—what are the different definitions by which we determine who owns these tools? And so on the one hand, these tools are owned by big technology corporations. And so our use of these tools benefits those corporations. On the other hand, I wanted to ask what it means for us to—whether there's a kind of form of ownership inherent to our use of these tools. Right. And whether, yes, like whether it's possible to reappropriate these tools for ourselves and say, now I own my Google searches that Google is collecting, for example, because I've taken all this material that Google has collected about me and I've reconstituted it in an essay that has artistic meaning for me, and hopefully for readers, whose meaning exists outside of the model that Google is using to determine its value. Also, interestingly, that makes me money because I sold it to *The New York Times*. It's within this book that I sold to Pantheon.

AV

The other thing that I really admire that you talk about, because it doesn't get talked about enough probably, and it will be talked about more, is you're pretty open about talking about money. There's a long history of aesthetic thinking that suggests that art and the market are things that really shouldn't meet in an ideal world. Right. But we all know that writers must contend with the market and we all know that the author is trying to make a living, right? [laughter] So, you have managed to create a kind of uncategorizable work where there is a lot of formal experimentation and you are also open about the fact that text is a commodity and that

you need to eat, right? So, if you ever were asked, cause you might get asked and now I'm asking you, as an author, what are the labor conditions that you think you would need or that you would want to see in the world? Because when I was doing my research on artists and AI, obviously I was interested in the various strikes that happened with the Screen Actors Guild and the Writers Guild Association, but those are screenwriters. Those are actors. It's very clear that they have relationships to studios and kind of larger organizations in a way that I'm not sure that literary authors do. I mean, you have the Authors Guild, but you don't really have unions in the same way. And is this something where you have to say to yourself, well, actually, maybe we should have unions in the same way.

VV

I think I'm comfortable with the Authors Guild's position on training AI models on authors' books, authors' texts. And that position, as I understand it is, you know, if you want to do it, you need consent from authors and you need to compensate them. And the reason I feel comfortable with that is because of that inclusion of consent. Yeah, we have organizations like the Authors Guild, but we don't really—like, authors aren't unionized in the same way, right? We're independent. We've always been independent contractors, right? In a sense. And so I think that makes us a little bit less well-equipped than workers in other occupations to collectively act. And, you know, I think there are all kinds of reasons collective action would be a good thing for those of us in this field, as we face all kinds of pressures, not just from AI and the corporations behind them, but from other places as well. I also find myself really attracted to kind of alternative ownership models in publishing itself. So my first two books were published by Norton, which is independent and employee-owned. And I think also what's emerged out of this more corporate publishing atmosphere is this renaissance of independent, smaller, independent publishers that tend to publish much more interesting and risky work than the corporate publishers. I wonder about that Norton employee ownership model. I wonder about other ownership models. Like, are there models in which readers and writers together have some kind of ownership? I think the independent publisher FC2 is an example that comes to mind of a publisher that is collectively author-owned. I think collectively owned, author-run publication, is an interesting model.

SW

I did want to say, Vauhini, when you were talking just now about different models of publishing, you mentioned, readers and writers working together. And it's interesting because of the focus necessarily that *Searches* has on writing. When I was reading my good old analog copy, of course, I recognize I am not outside of any of the systems that you're describing and I am consuming a product and all of these things, but it still feels like reading in its best moments is a really personal, is a really subjective practice that is not yet fully optimizable by some of these tools.

VV

I'm so glad you brought that up because I have been thinking a lot lately—I mean, when I say lately, maybe over the past, like five or 10 years—about both the relationship between a kind of implied narrator and implied addressee of a story, but also about the relationship between an author and a reader. And I do feel strongly that an author and all of the readers kind of co-create any text. And so with this book, I think there are, you know, billions of potential versions of this book, right? Because the book means something different to different people.

AV

This brings me full circle to the relationship between *Searches* and *King Rao*. If I can retrospectively make all your life work coherent. [laughter]

VV

Please do. I would love that. [laughter]

AV

Well, communication is such a rich topic in literature and philosophy. And to me, what you've done is you've drawn a connection between communication and connection as like the reason that people on this planet are social, right? We all want to know each other more intimately, or we all want to believe that there is a connection that we can forge with another person. But then there's also communication as a technical solution to a problem. Right. So like social media platforms promised us we'd be more connected. You write about Mark Zuckerberg's quest for connection in the origins of Facebook when you were on the Facebook beat for *The Wall Street Journal.* And it seems to me just like there's this beautiful synthesis in your work between communication as this thing that happens in private between people, that's in some ways, utterly precious and elusive, and then there are all these elaborate structures we build to try to enable that thing that is intimate and utterly elusive. Right.

VV

Yeah.

AV

Yeah. And so I guess maybe I could just ask you to reflect a bit on why you think communication has been such an animating theme for you.

VV

It is an animating theme for me. It's something I think in some ways, like, the desire for connection with others and the sort of elusiveness, as you say, of that connection, that sort of purist kind of connection that one might call communion, it's something that I'm interested in in

all of my work. I think in part, because as a human being living in the world, I've been in that situation over and over, just like any of us. And I think also as a writer, I feel maybe especially attuned to the value of language specifically as the kind of main tool we have to bridge the divide and try to connect in a meaningful way. So it fascinates me like on an intellectual level, but I think also just on an emotional level, it's something that's important to me.

SW

I will now connect you to the other guests in our season by asking you a question that we're asking all our guests. We always close with a signature question. We ask everyone the same question. It's something that can be lighthearted, although people take it in all different directions. And this season, we are asking if you could spend a year anywhere, but we leave that "anywhere" up for interpretation, we mean this broadly, it could be another place, another time, another dimension. Where would that place be?

SW

Okay. This is like the most boring possible answer. But because I have been traveling for work a fair amount, if I could spend a year anywhere in the world and not leave it, I would say that place would be home here in Fort Collins where I live.

SW

I think that's a lovely answer. [laughter]

VV

My husband's going to be mad because like he wants me to say Madrid because he really likes spending time in Madrid and he wants to live there.

SW

Well, maybe after some portion of a year, just being able to be at home, then you'd feel ready to be elsewhere, but—

VV

Exactly. [laughter]

SW

Well, thank you both so much. In closing, I want to remind our listeners that you can buy Vauhini's books in bookstores and online, and we'll have some links to those on the episode's webpage. We are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books*

for its partnership, and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern and Conner Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Sheila Heti, Brandon Taylor, Kaveh Akbar, 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.