Proust Curious, Episode 1: Swann's Way

Transcript

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HW: Hello and welcome to Proust Curious, a podcast in partnership with Public Books. I'm Hannah Weaver, Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature at Columbia University and currently Fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination.

EC: And I'm Emma Claussen, I'm an Early Modernist at Trinity College Cambridge. Proust Curious is a podcast about the experience of reading À la recherche du temps perdu, all seven volumes, written between 1906 and 1922. Published between 1913 and 1927, Marcel Proust's cultural touchstone is an object of enduring fascination and, let's face it, intimidation. We're not Proust experts, but we do study literature for a living, so we feel both under- and over-qualified to tackle this. Join us as we search for lost time...

HW And remember things Proust. Today, we're starting at the beginning with Du côté de chez Swann, Swann's Way, or as the most recent translation would have it, The Swan n Way.

In this volume, we meet the narrator as a sensitive child in Combray, dreaming of becoming a writer, and hear about a love affair that his neighbor Swan had before he was born. We have cameos from hypochondriacs, courtesans, and aristocrats. We have set pieces in salons and sadistic voyeurism in bushes.

Proust evokes an entire world. Or, put more simply, a weird kid lives in his imagination, fantasizing about flowers and hawthorn bushes, and a bored guy becomes completely obsessed with a woman he doesn't even like.

HW So Emma, because this is our listeners' first time meeting us, maybe, although you may have, I guess, heard either of our past podcasts, Emma's excellent podcast, Twice Told Tales, or my former podcast, That Book.

EC Also excellent.

HW Well, thank you. If it's your first time here, you might want to know a little bit about who we are. And so we thought a good way to do that might be to answer a question each episode from the famous, or perhaps infamous, Proust questionnaire. This was a questionnaire of kind of intense questions about life, answered by Proust twice, apparently at ages 13 and 20. And it's also used as an interview device by Vanity Fair. So we'll put a link to that questionnaire in the show notes. The question this week is, if not yourself, who would you be? And before we answer, I think we need to say what Proust answered at age 13.

EC. He said, N'ayant pas à me poser la question, je préfère ne pas la résoudre. J'aurais cependant bien aimé être Pline le jeune. What he means by that, right, is I don't need to ask myself this. So I would rather not answer. However, I would quite like to have been Pliny the Younger.

HW Pliny the Younger, of course, as we all know, the nephew of Pliny the Elder, who was a lawyer, author and magistrate in the first century AD, was apparently well known for having survived a variety of emperors and reigned on good terms with many of them.

And he's best known now for his Epistolae, his collection of letters. All of that, we have to confess, is rather obscure if you're not a classicist or a great fan of Rome.

EC I guess you could say that you would have liked to have been a Roman.

HW A Roman who was in the thick of things and was also a writer?

EC Yeah.

HW Tell me, who did you choose? If not yourself, who would you be, Emma? Okay.

EC So I'm envisaging this, I don't know why, but a bit like a superhero film. One day I go to sleep as me and the next morning I wake up as the person that I would be if I weren't myself. And that person is Serena Williams.

HW I really didn't expect a sporting person. Now that you're not sporting, it's just not what I expected. Wait, so tell me everything.

EC So when I was thinking about this, I thought of a number of writers to give a kind of Proust-esque answer. People I admire from history. But then I think I actually would rather just be me reading them or reading about them. I don't really feel like I would like to be George Eliot, although I think that she is completely amazing, for example. And then I thought, what would I like? If I had to not be me, I'd like to be someone really different.
And then I thought, I would absolutely love to be really physically strong and excellent in a way that involves a totally different use of your mind. Right.

Kind of like the mixture of training and expertise and intuition that comes with being absolutely brilliant at a sport like tennis where, you know, it's so spatial and, you know, basically all kinds of skills that I don't have.

HW You already brought up some of my issues with this question, which are that, what is it supposed to mean? Like, if not yourself, who would you be? Right? The second, like someone who's contemporary, or do you just take it as Proust took it and think of someone historical, like if you were born at a different moment, who would you be? And then is it someone cool from the past? Who would you be? Like, who do you wish to be? Or just like realistically, who would you be? I didn't go for realism in my answer.

Well, I took it historically, I guess. And I think if it's the realistic one, I would probably be just like, I don't know, some, I would probably be like a servant or a governess or something, like, probably in England, because that's where most of my family is from. But funnily enough, I was like, well, if I get to be someone exciting, I would choose to be George Eliot.

You already brought up!

EC No, no! Amazing!

HW So clearly, we're all the same wavelength already. So I would be writing under a pen name, and writing beautiful novels that are greeted with ambivalence by Henry James, I guess. Right.

EC And you'd be in the 19th century, in a similar kind of period.

HW I would be in the 19th century, I guess. It's very alluring to me for unclear reasons, because I think it was probably actually fairly terrible.

EC But what is it exactly about George Eliot that means that you would be her? It's a who do I want to be, right?

HW So like, you wanted to be physically accomplished and unlike yourself. And I guess I just want to be a better and more compelling version of myself. There's all the two options for this question. I think she is a writer that I so sincerely admire, and she made it happen against a lot of odds. So she's very courageous and, and smart and talented and had a very interesting life. Like it doesn't seem like it was boring at all. And all of that is quite appealing. Although I guess, you know, she was also very charming, I gather, despite the fact that she was also reputed to be not very good looking. So her charm overwhelmed any initial impression. I would like to be so charming that my initial impression fades away in the face of this charm.

EC I do find you relentlessly charming.

HW Well, I think you're contractually obligated to say that. So I guess yeah, so we have Serena Williams and George Eliot here. Who would also be great to both have at dinner.

EC Yeah, I think they would be right. I think they'd both be great conversationalists. Yeah.

HW So let's get into the heart of the matter here. For this time, we've read the first volume of In Search of Lost Time, or Remembrance of Things Past, if we want to use the two English titles. Let's give a little bit of a plot summary of this first volume. Although let's say also before we start that I'm going to go ahead and say that plot is not the point.

EC No, no, definitely not. I mean, there's large sections that seem quite plotless.

HW Nevertheless, there are definitely settings and plots that are important. And so it can be helpful maybe to recall that narrative. Yeah. So what we're dealing with at the beginning of the book is we're spending time with a wealthy family in Combray in northern France. And this family is a haute bourgeois family. And this family is based on Proust's family, although it is not identical to Proust's family. And the narrator, though his name is Marcel, is not, in fact, Proust. This is the section where as a child, and then sort of as an adolescent (it's hard to exactly place these events on a timeline) but as a much younger person, the narrator remembers childhood visits to Combray where his sick aunt lived and they had a country house. He's desperate for his mother to come and say goodnight to him. The first 50 or so pages are devoted to this desperate wish. We hear about churches, neighbors, two walks that they like to take towards Guermantes and Meséglises.

HW And what's really important to him are how all of these scenes from the past are really fertile for his imagination and point him towards the desire to describe them and develop them as a writer.

EC And then the next part of the volume is called *Un amour de Swann*, or translated as Swann in Love. And it's about an aristocrat who is known to the narrator's family, who has invites to all the best homes. He's very wealthy. He has a broad choice of social engagements. But this is about him becoming totally enraptured with a woman called Odette de Crécy, despite thinking that she is both unattractive and unintelligent, and noting at various points that she's getting less attractive.

So why does he fall in love with Odette? Arguably, it's because he's bored, maybe a bit depressed. He's not got much to do because he's so rich that he doesn't really need to work.

And also because she becomes associated by him with two artworks. So one is a sonata that they hear together at the salon that they frequent, and the other is a Botticelli painting.

HW Swann thinks of the whole world in terms of figures from art.

EC Yeah, he kind of talks himself into being obsessed with her, because, you know, that's almost a kind of displacement of his work as an art historian, because that's sort of what he is. He's endlessly working on an essay on Vermeer, but never seems to get finished. So given that we had a George Eliot reference earlier, we could say that he's kind of a sub-art-historian Casaubon figure. He's working on a project that he's never going to complete.

HW [Casaubon] famously was working on "the key to all mythologies." So yes, he's working on some kind of key to Vermeer. Yeah.

EC And I would say, this is from our notes, that I would say that he is a bit like a Casaubon figure, but he's a lot more chic.

HW That's true. Yes. He's very sought by all the chicest of *le monde*.

EC Yeah. So Swann and Odette have a passionate affair in which he is ultimately driven wild by jealousy. So her absences and her refusals and the kind of the mystery of the life that she leads without him is ultimately also as well as the painting and the music, what makes him fall for her so incredibly strongly without basis in real attraction, although it's a different kind of real attraction, I guess. And ultimately, she falls out of love with him and he realises in great despair, so he's very unhappy, how many other affairs she's been having at the same time with both men and women as she begins to treat him more and more coldly. But the volume ends with him coming to terms with this as his own passion cools.

HW The third section is called Noms de Pays, Le Nom. So place names, the name. And in this section, we're back with the young narrator. It doesn't seem that much time has passed since we were in Combray with him. And he's really, really, really looking forward to going on vacation to Balbec in Normandy. And he's had longstanding fantasies about it as a place of pure nature. And then after Swann tells him about a church, also a pure art. But then there's a possibility that he'll visit Venice and Florence instead, and this dream overtakes the first dream. And in fact, he gets so excited and so worked up about the possibilities that he makes himself sick and is unable to leave Paris. So instead of going to these places whose names incite fantasies and associations, he stays in Paris and meets Gilberte, who is Swann and Odette's daughter. So we learn that Swann and Odette, after all of that, after the cooling of the passion on both sides, nevertheless got married.

And that marriage ties the three volumes together to some extent. So we'll return to the question of how the three volumes work together later in this episode. Emma, what did you notice in this read of this volume?

EC So I had remembered it as being really beautifully observed about people and their behavior. And I didn't disagree with that. Again, reading it this time, I do find it very humane. Because essentially, this is about people being very silly a lot of the time, you could say.

And obsessive and making mistakes. But somehow those behaviors are so tenderly actually explained and described that they end up being both sympathetic and quite beautiful. So I think I still enjoyed that aspect of it.

But this time, what I really noticed was the attention to setting, to the non-human details around the characters, especially the plants and flowers. I mean, one of the covers of an English translation is an orchid. And you can't really read An Amour de Swan without focusing on flowers, because the orchid is at the heart, it's like a symbol of their sexual relationship, right? But I hadn't really noticed all the rest.

And Combray, a lot of it is set on country paths and in gardens. And there's this amazing bit at the end about water lilies on one of the paths in the river, where they're really vibrant and almost like people themselves. So you have a lot of countryside scenes in Combray.

And then you have flowers in Un Amour de Swann. And then in Noms de pays, you have the character, the narrator… I mean, I was thinking, actually, on the Champs-Elysées, it's not so much about the the descriptions of grass, I guess, but it ends in the Bois du Boulogne.

So there are some great descriptions of trees that I might talk about. So that's something that I really noticed and enjoyed this time.

HW Do you want to share any particular passages that stood out to you on this reading?

EC In light of all these references to trees and plants and flowers, I think actually a kind of originary moment in Combray that made me notice this more and more as we went through was this really intense description of tea leaves. The tea is really important in Combray. Everyone kind of knows about dipping a madeleine in tea if they know something about Proust.

But the actual setup of the tea being made, I think, by Françoise, who's first the sick aunt's servant and then becomes the narrator's family servant. So I think in the original scene of the tea and the madeleine, it's the mother, right? So the narrator is visiting his mother later in life. She offers him this tea and that is what makes his memories emerge involuntarily and triggers the whole writing project in some ways. And I think that tea is this tea.

HW Yes. Great. Yes.

EC So his aunt is being brought her tisane, her herbal tea, and the narrator helps to make it.

"It would be my duty to shake out of the chemist's little package onto a plate the amount of lime blossom required for infusion in boiling water.

"The drying of the stems had twisted them into a fantastic trellis in whose intervals the pale flowers opened, as though a painter had arranged them there, grouping them in the most

decorative poses. The leaves, which had lost or altered their own appearance, assumed those instead of the most incongruous things imaginable, as though the transparent wings of flies or the blank sides of labels or the petals of roses had been collected and pounded or interwoven as birds weave the material for their nests. A thousand trifling little details, the charming prodigality of the chemist, details which would have been eliminated from an artificial preparation, gave me, like a book in which one is astonished to read the name of a person in whom one knows, the pleasure of finding that these were real lime blossoms, like those I had seen when coming from the train in the Avenue de la Gare, altered but only because they were not imitations but the very same blossoms which had grown old.

"And as each new character is merely a metamorphosis from something older, in these little grey balls I recognised the green buds plucked before their time, but beyond all else the rosy, moony, tender glow which lit up the blossoms among the frail forest of stems from which they hung like little golden roses, marking, as the radiance upon an old wall still marks the place of a vanished fresco, the difference between those parts of the tree which had and those which had not been in bloom; [These details] showed me that these were petals which, before their flowering time, the chemist's package had embalmed on warm evenings of spring."

HW That, I mean, it is an incredible description, the ladder, the evocation of the train station.

EC Yeah, like recognising leaves like characters in a book, being able to see them at different stages of time, as in when they were budding, when they were dried, what the water is kind of reanimating. I also found that this was so, so detailed, you could almost imagine it happening in slow motion. It's kind of psychedelic where you're looking into the cup while the narrator is looking into the cup and seeing these things come alive, but also kind of seeing a whole backstory and film of one of those nature films that sped up.

HW Yeah, oh gosh, yeah, where you see the grass come out of the ground. No, absolutely, and I feel like you're right. This is not the famous tea, but in a way it's an almost more precise, perhaps, moment of what can come out of the teacup, that time can be stretched out and, or it's simultaneously somehow paradoxically contained in one mouthful or in one dried up blossom.

It's really a fascinating and very beautiful description.

EC Yeah, yeah, and seeing the real lime trees from the train.

HW Right, coming from the Gare. So the application of the train is particularly interesting to me because in that first more famous cup of tea into which he dunks his madeleine and out of which comes all of these really fully formed sensory memories of Combray, he talks about it being a mechanical experience. He says, "and soon mechanically dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake." And it is that taste that provokes the entire novel.

And so there's this odd juxtaposition between the senses and the machine. And it's very lightly present in the passage that you chose for us too, Emma.

EC Yeah, that's so true. I also would say one more thing about this passage, which is it just gives such a sense of the narrator's attention to detail. So in this, especially Combray, but I think arguably across the whole volume, there's such a loving attention to minutia.

HW Yes, yeah, I totally agree.

EC The tiny variations in a person's feelings or the tiny details of the leaves, tiny leaves in a cup of tea. And I kind of feel like the narrator is kind of going around in a weird state of staring at things. And it's kind of out of it all the time. But almost like on drugs.

HW Yeah, yeah, that's right. Yeah, it's like just like totally fixated on somehow everything at once. It's really, the novel is really, as Proust says in Combray, and one of the experiences I think you were evoking when you talked about reading it for the first time, that books can present a kind of truth that's not actually accessible in daily life. Because we can't wander around staring at everything this intently or we would just maybe always be sort of oddly fixated in a corner. We can't both observe humans as finely as Proust does and observe tea leaves as finely as Proust does in the moments that we're going through them. We can, in reflection, perhaps do some of that or we can do it by reading Proust. Join us, do!

EC Yeah, and I think just to summarise, also, this is a strange book for that reason. And that was also something, that maybe isn't a very highfalutin comment, but that is also something I hadn't really remembered until I reread it this time. This is weird. This kid is weird. The kind of psychedelic or uncanny aspects of the book really jumped out at me this time.

HW Yeah, I think that's actually, that's kind of what I, it's similar to what I was going to say, is that I think this book is frequently just treated as a sort of mountain to climb. I love looking at one star reviews of great things. So whether it be a monument or a book, and this is something that I used to do on my former podcast. So I did it for this, for Swann's Way, just to see. And a man named Steven titled his review, Hard Work, and said, "Difficult read, needs all your concentration to complete."

Steven, true. You know, I'm not here to argue. At the same time, what people don't, I think, think of is that it's so wacky, and so deeply funny, like so funny.

I have done so much laughing rereading it. And I think there's a lot of it that I think I was already catching when I reread it more recently. But when I read it as a college student, I don't think I caught how deeply funny the narrator as a kid is.

He literally goes out and hugs hawthorn bushes at one point, because he loves them so much. I mean, that is intense. And like I already mentioned, he gets so excited about traveling that he makes himself ill.

So he's just this sort of hyperbolic figure who can't cope with how much beauty he perceives or imagines that he will get to one day perceive around him. And it just has this sort of obsessive nature that is just profoundly funny. Like Emma said, it is described in a humane way with a lot of, I think, sympathy and love.

But it's also meant, you're meant to sort of have a chuckle, I think, slightly at the narrator's expense. So I think I took him sort of seriously as a budding artist without seeing what can be funny about being a budding artist, initially. And I also just this time, I felt like I was at the best comedy roast, maybe of all time, particularly, although not exclusively.

Oh, wait, I was going to say particularly in Un amour des Swann, but now I'm double, I'm having second thoughts, because there are also some deeply funny things that his grandfather does and some ways that like, some of the figures in Combray are described that are just super funny.

EC Yeah, I love the Saturday thing. They all behave ridiculously, because they have lunch an hour early on a Saturday, and they all act like they've done this incredibly, like radical thing. But also that if no one else knows that they have lunch an hour earlier on a Saturday, then they're just complete barbarians.

HW it's also such a small town thing, that whole Saturday thing. It's so funny. And it also really evokes how hermetic in a way this town is.

EC Or is it an hour later?

HW They have lunch earlier. They have it at 11, which I love. And that even strikes me as early. And anyway, Emma brought this really beautiful passage. And I thought I would bring actually just a really funny passage to our attention.

This is a description of Dr. Cottard, who is a member of the little group that is basically a salon around this woman called Madame Verdurin. And that is the salon where Swann and Odette court. Swann is ultimately exiled from the salon. But we open *Swann in Love* with a description of Le Petit Noyau, the little clan around Madame Verdurin and the people that she has gathered. All of them are funny. The whole Le Petit Noyau is just so funny.

But I think maybe the funniest one, possibly, he's got stiff competition, but is Dr. Cottard, who is indeed a physician. He's so he's sort of like, again, an open bourgeois type, and clearly is highly educated because he's a physician. But he has a lot of trouble knowing what people mean. And he tends to take things super literally. So here is a passage where we first are introduced to these tendencies of Cottard.

"Dr. Cottard was never quite certain of the tone in which he ought to reply to any observation, or whether the speaker was jesting or in earnest. And so by way of precaution, he would embellish all his facial expressions with the offer of a conditional, a provisional smile whose expectant subtlety would exonerate him from the charge of being a simpleton, if the remark addressed to him should turn out to have been facetious. But as he must also be prepared to face the alternative, he dared not allow the smile to assert itself positively on his features. And you would see there a perpetually flickering uncertainty, and which could be deciphered the question that he never dared to ask, Do you really mean that? He was no more confident of the manner in which he ought to conduct himself in the street, or indeed in life generally, than he was in a drawing room. And he might be seen greeting passersby, carriages, and anything that occurred with a knowing smile, which absolved his subsequent behavior of all impropriety, since it proved, if it should turn out unsuited to the occasion, that he was well aware of that. And that if he had assumed a smile, the jest was a secret of his own."

I just want to talk about his need to figure out what cliches mean.

"So following the advice given him by a wise mother on his first coming up to the capital from his provincial home, he would never let pass either a figure of speech or a proper name that was new to him without an effort to secure the fullest information upon it. As regards figures of speech, he was insatiable in his thirst for knowledge, for, often imagining them to have a more definite meaning that was actually the case. He would want to know what exactly was meant by those which he most frequently heard used. Devilish pretty, blue blood, living it up, the day of reckoning, the glass of fashion, and so forth. In what particular circumstances he himself might

make use of them in conversation. Failing these, he would adorn it with puns and other plays on words which he had learned by rote."

Later on, there's a conversation where Blanche de Cassis comes up, or the word Blanche comes up, and he's like, what? You mean Blanche de Cassis, who is a medieval queen? He's just like, this is the setup for his tendency to hook on to a single word, interrupt the conversation, and send it down a total dead end byway with what seems to be both an utter lack of self-consciousness and an extreme self-consciousness of his provincialism.

EC Yeah, so he's ultra performative, but failing.

HW Right. He's really, really trying to blend in, and his attempts just make him stand out all the more. Poor Cottard, you have to pity him. I mean, he's been adopted into the Salon and is treated with the utmost approbation by Madame Verdurin, and his remarks are treated as though they are witticisms, but they are obviously, alas, buffoonery.

EC Oh yeah, they're so funny. I love this passage so much. But also, I will say, there is something slightly relatable, like who hasn't been Cottard at some point in life, not being totally sure if they're supposed to disapprove or approve, or that they totally get the joke, so doing that weird malleable smile. I feel like that's a little bit like my experience when I was in my year abroad, which is a part of a modern languages degree in the UK, where you have to go and improve your language by living in the country. And you know, humor is really hard to get when you're a language learner.

So yes, Cotard is speaking his native language, and it's quite funny that he just hasn't quite mastered it, and he's behaving like it's not his native language.

HW Yes, that's so true. Well, in a way, he's right. There's a very strong idiolect in this book, especially to aristocrats, but also to the haute bourgeoisie. So when we meet the Duchesse de Guermantes, who I think is the Princesse de Laumes when we meet her here, but she will become the Duchesse de Guermantes for aristocratic reasons that I don't understand and actually don't care to understand. But she has a lot of verbal tics that are chic, but are in fact, just as silly as Cottard's problems.

I think just language and the way people use it comes in for a lot of scrutiny here. And Proust is such a fine observer that he finds the humor and how people go awry with their language use. As a non-native speaker of French, who is currently spending time in France, it's a terrifying thought to think of being evaluated by a Proustian observer.

EC And there are some times when Cottard, he frustrates what narrative there is. Because I would say also, maybe I should have said this earlier, that *Swann in Love* does have much more of a plot and much more of a drive to it.

HW It does.

EC And Cottard is just in there.

HW Bumbling.

EC Misdirecting. Taking up space that nobody really wants him to have.

HW Yeah, yeah. But meanwhile, Madame Verdurin is nevertheless burying her head in her hands and pretending to have paroxysms of laughter. And doesn't her husband come up with a way to cough to make it seem like he's laughed so hard that he's having a coughing fit? So they're both just sort of imitating laughter at all times to make it seem like the people, their faithful of the little clan are the funniest and wittiest possible clan that they have developed for themselves.

EC And they also all have to have perfect harmony, don't they? So they have to completely agree with each other about who is cool and what's interesting and what's funny. And that's also why Swann gets excommunicated in the end.

HW Yes, because someone erroneously and not even maliciously says that he frequents other houses, even though he hasn't been. And that's too much for Madame Verdurin. And she must exile him because that's her way or the highway.

So Emma, you noticed the finer details of plant life on this read. And I noticed how Proust is the master of the roast. But the thing about this book that is sort of odd, more globally, and not just psychedelic plants or deeply funny observations about people, is that it does have these three parts, as we mentioned before, and their relationship is not super obvious.

Sometimes certain parts are published by themselves. So you can buy Combray separately, and you can buy Un amour de Swann separately. I don't think you can buy Nom des pays: Le nom, because it is very short and odd. It's often described, even by Proust, as sort of like a something that's dangling on to the end of this volume.

EC It's a bit like an epilogue.

HW And it is that way because of actually just the practical concerns of publishing. He meant for the first two thirds of the next volume to also be part of volume one, but it would have been too expensive to print. And so it's really a lead-in to the next volume and doesn't hugely go with this volume. But now it's sort of stuck here because of the publishing tradition at this point.

But they're frequently excerpted. They're seen as maybe we don't need to read the whole thing, which is, I guess, just sort of the deal with Proust in general. We maybe don't need to read the whole thing. It's kind of, I would say, the general approach to Proust.

EC Yes, we do!

HW Yes, we do, A. But B, what can we make of this kind of hodgepodge of parts?

EC Well, I think that you can read them separately and get great pleasure just from reading *Combray* or just from reading *Un amour de Swann*. If any listeners want to do that, no shame in doing so. However, reading them all together and reading them as we have done quite close together, relatively quickly. What's fun about doing that is you can actually notice all the subtle interweavings.

So there's this section about the relationship between the narrator's grandfather and Swann in *Un amour de Swann*, right? And that is referenced in the first part. And I think that is quite compelling in a way to try and see a through line.

HW Right.

Un amour de Swann, that section is often taken as sort of a microcosm of the book or that Swann is sort of an alter ego for the narrator, an adult alter ego of the narrator. And not a microcosm in terms of plot. But just that a microcosm in terms of thematic concerns, I think with obsession, longing, the difference between the fantasy you construct of something and the reality of it. But that still doesn't explain its placement sort of among these memories of youth.

Not to use one of my favorite words, but it's really an interpolation into the story. Dear listeners, I wrote a book on interpolation. Interpolation is the insertion of foreign material into a preexisting text. And this actually was that in terms of Proust's writing process. So I'm not just saying that it feels like that, but he wrote a draft of the book that did not include *Un amour de Swann* and later on came back and belatedly added it in, which is indeed exactly what an interpolation is.

And so another thing that it really does is it gives a depth of time, right? Like you were saying about the grandfather's relationship, it grounds things further back in time and even beyond the narrator's possible memories. So there's sort of a suggestion that we're going to be reading from the narrator's point of view for by far the bulk of the book, as we've discussed, he's sort of insanely perceptive. There's every reason to treat him as a faithful narrator. And yet there are limits to that perception and those limits are time. And the time that has not been lived is in some way, perhaps only recoverable through storytelling.

EC Yeah. I was also just thinking that there is this moment when the narrator's voice appears in an amour de Swan and he says about Swann, "I began to take an interest in his character because of the similarities, which in wholly different respects, it offered to my own."

HW Mm-hmm. But it's almost like a typological relationship, right? It's like Swann is the type and the narrator is the anti-type. So Swann is the first instance that foreshadows and in some ways already enacts certain behaviors and qualities and events. And then the narrator comes to fulfill the promise of the first one and to do those things, but more fully. I mean, famously, this is John the Baptist and Jesus for those who aren't hip with exegetical lingo.

That's where the word typology comes from, but it does seem to have a sort of typological temporal logic also at work.

EC Yeah. And the narrator gets frustrated with Swan as well, doesn't he? When he meets him in Combray and doesn't understand why he's so insincere.

HW Yes. Right.

EC And wonders what exactly it would take to make him be sincere. And then he's a paradigm of sincerity, in some ways.

So I think that there are a lot of satisfactions to be had from reading all of this together. And you also get a sense, I do think, I mean, I'm repeating what you've already said, but it's a sense of the depth of that world and of all these kinds of behaviors and all these interlocking social groups like the Verdurin salon and the people in Combray and the parents and children in Paris.

HW Right.

EC Just seeing how they all kind of behave and treat one another and all the minute, again with the minutia, all the minute reasons why they do and don't get along.

In conclusion for this part of the discussion, I think we could say also that it's about, it is about character, but it's about this world that Proust is creating that we're seeing from so many different angles through these core figures.

HW Yeah. And I think that's one of the great appeals of reading the book, right? You really do feel like you're in a world. You feel like you're swimming in a world. It's just so fully imagined. It's one of the, just the really great pleasures of reading Proust. So if you're listening and you're like, I don't know, do give it a shot.

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HW Let's declare the winners and losers of this volume. This is going to be a recurring feature. We will choose a winner and choose a loser for each volume and justify ourselves briefly.

Emma, who is your winner?

EC Right. So my winner is somebody who, my winner that I'm awarding today, the badge of winning this one is somebody who doesn't appear in it very long. And actually the narrator describes her in this incredibly ambivalent way, almost as a kind of person who seems to be truly evil, but not quite.

I'd say my winner is Vinteuil's daughter, Mademoiselle Vinteuil.

HW No, please, please elaborate, but allow me to say, sorry, I have to go out of turn. Allow me to say that my loser was Vinteuil and I think it's related to what you're about to say.

EC We have the same loser.

HW Okay. So tell us about Vinteuil 's daughter as the winner, please. For our listeners that don't have this on the tip of their tongue. Who is Vinteuil?

EC So Vinteuil is the local music teacher, but he's also a composer who the narrator meets in Combray, but at the end of his sad little life. So he dies during the narrative of Combray due to despair at the behaviour.

Well, partly it's attributed to despair at the behaviour of his daughter, who has created a great scandal through having a relationship with a woman openly. He is also the composer of the sonata that was the theme song for Odette and Swan, but without Swan ever knowing that the man that he in fact knew was indeed the composer of the Yes. So we might come on to that as to why Vinteuil is the loser.

But yes, I have picked his daughter as the winner. Because firstly, when she's first introduced, it's as this incredibly robust and strong person. And part of the joke is that Vinteuil is so solicitous of her health and her comfort, but actually she's the narrator says something like she's fine in all weathers.

And then she has this relationship. She does not hide it. And she also once her father has died, she is kind of, I mean, I'm over reading here and maybe she comes back in later volumes and I've just forgotten.

But she knows she's mistress of her own fate. She's living with this woman that she loves and clearly desires very much because the narrator spies on them. There's this incredible scene of voyeurism.

Yes. And I'd read that, or I think it's possible to read that as her kind of escaping the norms of this incredibly claustrophobic and panoptically surveillance world. And the narrator's kind of projecting that maybe she feels bad about her terrible scandalous behaviour, but she's still, you know, I think that you could say that she is the winner because she's living the life that she wants to live and she's free of having her dad, even though that's obviously a shame.

HW Just staring around her. Yeah. Attempting, doing his best to shame her.

EC The other winner that I considered was a non-human winner, which was his phrase.

HW Yeah, I guess it does, you know, it does seem to always pierce through whatever else is going on around it. But I have to say that I don't think the phrase can be a winner, ultimately, because it doesn't seem to have done anything for Vinteuil.

EC Or Swann, yeah.

HW Or Swann. Yeah, it actually seems to be sort of like a harbinger. Harbinger? How do you say that word? Anyway, of doom in some way or of unrealised dreams is more accurate. It seems to be strongly associated with fantasy and not reality for both the composer and Swann.

EC Yeah, agreed. So that's why I went for his daughter instead.

HW See, I wrote in my notes, there's only one winner, right? And it's Odette. So, so, I mean, it's super obvious, but I feel like at the same time, I feel like almost you could make an argument for, you've convinced me on Vinteuil ‘s daughter, I have to confess, but you could make an argument for almost anyone in this book being the loser.

EC Yeah, I thought the same thing.

HW But having Odette be the loser would be hard to sustain, because it seems like actually she just really, really comes out ahead, like in any, by any measure. She's still incredibly chic by the end of the book. The narrator regrets, the adult narrator regrets no longer being able to see her with her chic little hats in the Bois de Boulogne.

She's married to a very wealthy man. She has a daughter who seems to be thriving. She's just seemingly like has come out really on top.

And in fact, there's this amazing parentheses that I just want to read. I think this is very, this parentheses really reminded me of To the Lighthouse, the Virginia Woolf novel and how everything important happens in parentheses. It's towards the end of Un amour de Swan.

And it's talking about how Odette will never really let him drop because she needs his money. Swan could sometimes get her to see him basically because she knows that she needs his money. And recapitulating all his advantages, his social position, his wealth from which she stood too often in need of assistance not to shrink from the prospect of a definite rupture.

Parentheses, having even so people said an ulterior plan of getting him to marry her and parentheses, his friendship with Charles, which it was true, has never won, etc. It actually doesn't matter the greater contents, just the fact that this marriage plot is sort of put in a parentheses and you're encouraged to overlook it because it's a parenthetical. And then it ends up coming true by the end of the book, which I recall being flabbergasted by at age 18.

I was like, what? He fell out of love with her? How could it be that he married this terrible woman? And yet, yeah, so she seems to me to be the winner. And another candidate, I guess, for winner would be Gilberte, who is just reenacting her mother's fascination on young narrator without necessarily even knowing that she's doing that.

EC These women are the winners, like Mademoiselle Vinteuil, Odette and Gilbert in different ways. And I completely agree about Odette. I also think that the way that at first she in the narrative of *Un amour de Swann*, how she has to pander to Swann quite a lot and pretend and conceal. And in the end, she ends up being able to be much more honest with him because he forces that out of her. I think that's kind of a win as well for her.

She ends up being able to be pretty free about who she sees and what she does and to still get her desired outcome.

HW Yes, exactly. Yes. Ultimately, all her cards are on the table, and yet she still ends up with him.

EC Yeah. And also it's a great victory narrative as well, because she's so underestimated by Swann at the start as somebody who just doesn't even matter if she thinks anything or not, because she's just this object in some ways to him.

HW Well, yeah, she's just the painting, the Botticelli painting. Yeah. Indeed.

EC Yeah. And then she comes to life. It's almost creepy.

HW Is this actually a horror story? You know, is she like a monster?

EC The painting comes to life and takes over his...

HW When art comes to life, it's a problem.

EC Yeah. Yeah. It takes all your money.

HW It takes all your money. When art comes to life, it takes all your money.

We both said that the loser was poor Vinteuil. Do we want to elaborate or should we just let... Have we said enough? I think that the thing that clinched it for me is when they're talking about the phrase or his sonata in *Un amour de Swann.* And Swann says, oh, I knew someone called Vinteuil in Combray.

And then Madame Verdurin says, oh, perhaps that's the man, perhaps that's the composer of this sonata. And, "oh no, Swann bursts out laughing. If you had ever seen him for a moment, you wouldn't put the question."

HW I really do think that's perfect. That's a perfect reason.

EC Everyone thinks he's a loser.

HW Everyone thinks he's a loser.

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HW Emma, to wrap things up today, I think we should spend a little time with the last sentence of the book. And it will become clear why.

EC First of all, I think this is an iconic sentence. It's very, very beautiful. And it's very evocative.

And it's also very misleading. This is the last sentence in French.
Les lieux que nous avons connus n'appartiennent pas qu'au monde de l'espace où nous les situons pour plus de facilité. Ils n'étaient qu'une mince tranche au milieu d'impressions continguës qui formaient notre vie d'alors; le souvenir d'une certaine image n'est que le regret d'un certain instant; et les maisons, les routes, les avenues, sont fugitives, hélas, comme les années.

HW Oh, so good, right?

"The places we have known (translates [Scott] Moncrieff), do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. They were only a thin slice held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time. The memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment. And houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years."

So what's interesting about this last sentence is that I think, especially that alas is really mournful and really coupled with the word fugitive, makes it seem like these things are both fleeing and fleeting, that there's no chance of ever recapturing past time. So we're in search of it, right? And this is seems to be sort of a nihilist perspective that it's not actually discoverable. But Proust wrote in a letter to his friend Jacques Rivière in February 1914, that taking this last sentence as the final word of the project would be a grave error.

He wrote, "it's only at the end of the book, once the life lessons have been understood, that my philosophy will be revealed. The idea I express at the end of the first volume is the opposite of my conclusion. It is a step, apparently subjective and amateurish, towards the most objective and devout of conclusions. If one were to infer from it that my philosophy is one of disenchanted skepticism, that would be just as though an opera goer, having seen that at the end of act one Parsifal understands nothing about the ceremony and is sent away by Gurnemantz, concluded that Wagner wanted to say that simplicity of heart leads nowhere."

So it's so Proust to be like, obviously no one would think that about Parsifal. But regardless, I think the crucial thing is "the idea I express at the end of the first volume is the opposite of my conclusion."

And I find that especially fascinating, Emma, because so many people do just read the first volume. And it ends on this note. And it is such a beautifully crafted sentence, right? It's just, those words really resonate.

That I think that certainly, unwittingly, Proust has left a lot of people with this false conclusion. I think he thought that people would have more stamina than they do. Sorry, what do you think, Emma?

EC It's just got a really tempting link with the title. So it seems to be we're in search of lost time. Oh, but wait, we can never get it back.

HW In this final sentence, it's a feudal quest. And actually, the advocation of Parsifal is interesting because that's a feudal quest also.

EC Right. So I can see why it's been taken in that way. I also would say that in *Nom des pays*, which is that kind of epilogue section that this is taken from, there's so much mapping. He talks about how he has a little plan of Paris. There's this great moment where he misses Gilberte on the Champs-Elysees, because there's so many different paths that she could walk down to get there. And he missed the one that she came by. So he's doing this kind of mental mapping of where she could be. He's obsessed with the road that she lives on.

So I also wonder if this sentence should be taken more as a kind of conclusion to that volume or that part of the volume about remembering a place and the experiences that were had there.

HW Yeah. In a sense, it is fundamentally true, I guess, that you're not going to run into Odette de Crecy in the Bois de Boulogne anymore. So that avenue will never be the same that it was again, I guess. Although again, I think I might be being misled and into the wrong conclusion here.

EC Yeah. I mean, I guess it's also just the point that maybe might be a nice point to end on, which is that this is not the end.

HW Yes, right. This is not the end, right?

EC So this is the end of one phase of trying to completely pin down this family and these people and this place at a particular moment. But that has already been kind of been being drained of its contemporaneity throughout the narrative, because there's all these references to it not being there anymore.

HW Right, right. And that'll be something that I think we need to grapple with. If this is the opposite of his conclusion, and yet there are constant references to these things' disappearance, how to reconcile those two opposing impulses, the idea of disappearance and the idea of permanence? I think that reckoning is a big part of Proust's project. So we too will continue to reckon.

EC Yeah.

HW I think that's it. Right, Emma? Yeah.

EC Thank you so much, Hannah.

HW Oh, it's been a pleasure. That is it for this episode of Proust Curious, and we hope that we've piqued your curiosity. If you like the podcast, please tell a friend about it. Proust Curious is hosted by Emma Claussen and Hannah Weaver and produced by Michael Goldsmith. You can

reach us at proustcurious@gmail.com. Join us next time for volume two, À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs, or In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower.

Ooh, flowers, Emma. I think you'll have a good time.

EC Can't wait.

All right. Thanks for listening.

HW Thanks for listening.

See you next time.

EC Au revoir.

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