“In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower” Proust Curious Ep. 2

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EC: Hello and welcome to Proust Curious, a podcast in partnership with Public Books. I'm Emma Claussen and I'm an Early Modernist at Trinity College, Cambridge.

HW: And I'm Hannah Weaver, an Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature at Columbia University and currently a Fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination. 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.

EC: We're not Proust experts, but we do study literature for a living. So we feel both under and overqualified to tackle this. Join us as we search for lost time…

HW:…And remember things Proust.

EC: Today, we're talking about the second volume in the series, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, translated slightly obliquely by Scott Moncrieff as Within a Budding Grove, and by Christopher Prendergast as In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower.

HW: In this volume, we see the narrator in later adolescence, maybe, realizing a number of the ambitions he held in volume one, namely going to the theater, meeting his favorite writer, and going on vacation to the seaside. He falls out of love with his first major crush, Gilberte, and meets his next one, Albertine. In between, he encounters social worlds beyond those of his childhood, and though he meets more artists and gains a greater understanding of culture, he continually fails to write anything himself.

EC: Or, put more simply, in this volume, the narrator gets obsessed with people and inches his way towards being with them, or being like them. This is really, really a volume of the crush.

HW: It's so true. The book of the crush.

EC: It is the book of the crush. The narrator crushes on a lot of people and things. He's crushing on the sea, he's crushing on trees that he sees near the sea.

HW: That's true. He wants to crush on churches, but they keep disappointing him. I guess so do his crushes, so actually maybe that's just...

EC: Yeah, so we could call it the volume of having crushes and being crushed.

HW: The volume of crushing. But Emma, before we talk in more detail about the volume, it's time for our question from the famous Proust questionnaire, which was answered by Proust twice, at ages 13 and 20, and used as an interview device by Vanity Fair. We'll put a link to the questionnaire in the show notes in case you want to see it.

EC: So our question this week is, what is your favorite virtue?

HW: And Proust only answered this one once when he was 13. And his answer was, *Toutes celles qui ne sont pas particulières à une secte, les universelles*, which is to say, all those that are not particular to one sect, the universal ones.

EC: Right, so *laicité*.

HW: Emma, what do you think? What's your favorite virtue?

EC: My favorite virtue is going to make me sound a bit intense. I don't exactly know how to phrase it, but my favorite virtue is like follow through. It's showing up, it's doing what you said you were going to do.

Okay, so maybe it could be summed up as reliability. And I think, as an Aristotelian might say, any virtue can tip into vice, if you take it too far.

HW: Aristotle is making a cameo.

EC: Erudition, that's erudition.

HW: That's that PhD energy.

EC: Another virtue that can become a vice. Reliability, if you really have a very narrow definition of it, and you expect it in one way from all people at all times, then you just end up being a dick. You know, you have to be flexible as well. Different people have different standards, different demands on their time. Also, by trying to be reliable, sometimes I really push myself into a deep, deep pit of exhaustion. So it's mixed, honestly.

HW: It's a good virtue, though. The thing about virtues is, you know, I looked up a list of virtues to prepare for this assignment, and it's impossible to argue with any of them. It's like, ah, respect, I hate respect. The only one on the list I found that is perhaps questionable is fear, which I can only assume means fear of God, because otherwise it makes zero sense. But it's still an outlier. All the rest of them are like, 'helpfulness'. It's hard to argue with a lot of these.

EC: There's other ones that are mixed, like beauty, I guess,

HW: It could be a virtue. Inner and outer and all that.

EC: Yeah, but overall I went for this one because I thought, you know, I would share with our listeners (Hi, if you're out there) my character foibles.

HW: I think the whole point is so our listeners can feel like they know us. They can have parasocial relationships with us as they're walking their dog or what have you.

EC: What is your favorite virtue, Hannah?

HW: My favorite virtue is perhaps equally telling and also a foible, and it is humility, because there is nothing more insufferable than self-aggrandizement.

EC: Yeah, I mean, that's inarguable.

HW: I'm just going to leave it there, apparently.

EC: I'll just add that, you know, in academia, I mean, maybe in lots of different walks of life, but in academia, it's really important to hold on to that one.

HW: Yeah, no, it's true. I think just in general, I think I'm so much more impressed and charmed by someone who is accomplished yet humble than I am by someone who is accomplished, yet shouting it from the rooftops, not to mention those who are mediocre and yet proclaiming their accomplishments. But that is all making me sound rather judgmental, which is certainly not a virtue. So perhaps we should stop there and turn to the real subject of the day.

EC: What happens in the second volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*?

HW: Well, in brief, this volume is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. In the first, the narrator, still in Paris, finally infiltrates the family life of his big crush, Gilberte Swann, whose parents are Odette de Crécy and Swann. In the second part, the narrator goes with his grandmother to the Norman seaside town, where he meets a parade of characters central to the project as a whole. Emma, what did you think about volume two? What did you notice?

EC: So parts of it I completely loved. But in the interest of honesty, and because we have emphasized so much up to this point that we are doing this for pleasure, I have to say that some parts did drag for me as well. There's a moment near the beginning of the second part where the narrator is feeling a bit doleful. And he says, 'oh, you know, those who love and those who experience pleasure are not the same people'. And I think there were moments where I was like, well, I think overall I love this, but I'm not *loving* it. Especially part one, about which I think it is worth saying that it was initially meant to be the end of volume one.

It's kind of the completion of the story of Odette and Swann in that phase. Some of the internal reflections in that part, there were parts of them that I found really brilliant. And parts where I thought maybe you had to be there.

Like when he meets Bergotte, his favorite writer, and there's a long extended analysis of Bergotte's style and how his style came to be his specific one. I'm sure that is incredibly studied. It's really ripe for analysis.

But to read, maybe you have to be a fan of the writer who this is modeled on, or to be thinking about this really as a literary critic to write about, to be really engrossed in it. I don't know. Maybe that's me being a philistine.

Maybe it's to do with how and when I read the first part, which was pretty slowly during a really busy and stressful time. I read most of the second part when I had flu, but I enjoyed that a lot more.

HW: Oh gosh, poor Emma.

EC: Poor me. As for the narrator, as it did for him, the move to the seaside did me a lot of good. I really loved the second part.

So yeah, I do think thinking about pleasure means talking about things you don't like as well as those you do. So how did you find it?

HW: Yeah, I agree about pleasure. And I agree with you about the volume as a whole. The infinite paragraphs on the sensations produced by avoiding Gilberte after he decides to never see her again, after a truly baffling slight.

I revisited this today, and it was no clearer on a second reading.

EC: Yeah, they have an awkward tea on a rainy day.

HW: They have an awkward tea on a rainy day. Gilbert would have preferred to go dancing, and she's retained by her mother. And they have this awkward tea, and it seems like the narrator realizes that she doesn't in fact love him in the same way that he loves her.

But that realization causes him to decide never to see her again. Which is very sudden, because up until then, there was no real warning sign. And then he perseverates about it for a zillion pages.

I'm exaggerating, but that's how it felt to me. It was very boggy.

EC: Boggy is absolutely the right word. And in some ways, he's waiting for her to call him back. So he's doing a very human thing of feeling a bit wounded and wanting the other person to get in touch first, which she doesn't do.

HW: The weird thing is that it's revealed that she has been in touch all along. In the modern term, she's been texting, but he really wanted a long chatty phone call. He's going on and on about how they don't talk to each other. And then all of a sudden it's like, of course I did get letters from her every day. But they were not the sort of emotional, confessional letters that he wished for.

EC: Yeah, he's been incredibly perverse.

HW: Anyway. Yes, but I do. What was interesting for me is that this is, this is one of the volumes that I've read, I think several times at this point. And so certain things, it felt like seeing an old friend. They're especially vivid images, these moments where when he gets to Balbec, his bedroom has glass-fronted bookcases and the sea is reflected on them in this really beautiful passage that I, for some reason, have truly never forgotten. That first night in Balbec, he's nervous that he wouldn't be able to get his grandmother in the middle of the night, get her attention. And so they practice knocking on the wall to make sure they can hear each other. His friend Robert de Saint-Loup shows up and his first sight of Saint-Loup, his monocle is flitting in front of him. This little point of light that sort of bounces off of him.

And also, just a side note, I mean, how old is Saint-Loup here? Like maybe 20? Just the idea that a 20 year old is marching around with a monocle is just such a place in time. I feel like when you see portraits, et cetera, of people with monocles, they tend to be older. Monocles to me seemed like something of middle age and older. And so to picture a quite young man, the monocle was very vivid.

EC: Yeah, with such dynamism. He's striding in, following this monocle leading the way.

HW: Yes, that's right. The monocle is bouncing in front of him. What did you notice in particular in this volume, in terms of themes or passages that really caught your eye?

EC: Yeah, so I was thinking a lot about ritual and repetition and novelty when I was reading this. I mean, there's a number of moments when, because the narrator spends the second volume really in quite an ecstatic state. He's happy.

And towards the end he keeps saying, yeah, I'm living, I live a new life. So there is this kind of interplay between repetitious, kind of repeated variations on a theme and kind of novelty and discovery. And that is to do with his kind of sense of self.

He's got more morose passages where he talks about [how] his 'self' has died. One version of himself dies, with Gilberte, which is very melodramatic, but okay. But then, you know, starting again.

And that is not just about personal one-on-one relationships, but it's about the world and society because he is learning how things work. And at one point there's a really interesting and quite dark passage about a social kaleidoscope. So this is one of those moments where the narrative voice feels very much like the older narrator or kind of different voice to the naive child or growing adolescent.

Though I will say, sorry, this is a digression, but I love how Proust is managing the tone because you can hear the voice of an older and an aging person across these two parts. But here the voice is more about somebody reflecting on their past life. And he's thinking about how the people… and it's all about hindsight really.

And he's thinking about how the people who are obsessed with their social formations and habits, actually, and who think that they are unchanging, don't realize that they will change and are subject to shocking change that they can't necessarily predict. And this is quite a threatening episode because it's kind of structured around a discussion of antisemitism. So the narrator says, the people who lived in such an atmosphere imagined that the impossibility of ever inviting an opportunist and still more a horrid radical to their parties was something that would endure forever like oil lamps and horse-drawn omnibuses. But like a kaleidoscope, which is every now and then given a turn, society arranges successively in different orders elements which one would have supposed to be immovable and composes a fresh pattern.

So then he talks about how, he's saying that at the time that he's thinking about, Jewish people are quite integrated and powerful in society. But then things change with the Dreyfus affair, which was the prosecution of a Jewish military officer supposedly for treason, although he was eventually exonerated, but it created a scandal and society kind of divided into pro and anti-Dreyfus people.

So then he says, the Dreyfus case brought about another, so another one of these changes at a period rather later than that, in which I began to go to my dance ones. And the kaleidoscope scattered once again, its little scraps of color. I found that very striking.

And I think that's a kind of motif across the two volumes. So we talked about how they're quite separate, but I think we see kind of kaleidoscopic shifts happening in different ways. I mean, I don't want to put you on the spot here, Hannah, but I happened to hear Hannah give a really brilliant account of kind of using the kaleidoscope herself as a kind of heuristic for thinking about cultural change.

So I wonder if you have anything more to say about this volume of kaleidoscope, or if you notice any kind of similar things here.

HW: I've been working on a project where I'm thinking about the kaleidoscope as sort of almost a metaphor for literary history. But what Proust is really talking about is the kaleidoscopic way that interpersonal relationships can change. And he's really clever in how he uses the kaleidoscope, because the idea here is that something external twists the optics and the crystals get shaken up and fall around.

And that is what happens with the Dreyfus affair he's suggesting, is that that sequence has shifted the crystals who then separate and re-congregate in different motifs. I think that although he doesn't use the word kaleidoscope throughout the novel in the same way that he does in this particular passage, he's definitely thinking about elements rearranging and optics. Those are really crucial metaphors for him in this entire volume.

This happens with individuals for him and also with his crushes. So when he is in the process of getting to know Albertine, he reflects on the changeful nature of people. And here is the revised Moncrieff translation.

The good and bad qualities which a person presents to us, exposed to view on the surface of his or her face, rearrange themselves in a totally different order if we approach them from another angle. Just as, in a town, buildings that appear strung irregularly along a single line from another aspect retire into a graduated distance and the relative heights are altered. He goes on a little bit.

But thus it can be only after one has recognized, not without having had to feel one's way, the optical illusions of one's first impression that one can arrive at an exact knowledge of another person, supposing such knowledge to ever be possible. But it is not. For while our original impression of him undergoes correction, the person himself, not being an inanimate object, changes in himself.

We think that we have caught him, he moves. And when we imagine that at last we are seeing him clearly, it is only the old impressions which we had already formed of him that we have succeeded in making clearer when they no longer represent him.

And I think that this passage kind of develops the motif. It's much later in the novel than your passage, Emma, and brings into play that there are two sides of this process. There's the side of re-evaluation within oneself. So in other words, there's the side of, to refer back to your passage, there's the side of the salon deciding who they are going to include. And there's the side of the object of their evaluation, which itself is going through a process of internal, a continual process of internal re-evaluation. In other words, any human object of study is so mutable as to be unlearnable in a way, unseizable. And I love the idea that all of our perceptions of people are optical illusions.

I just think it's both disheartening and true.

EC: Yeah, I love the way you've accounted for this. I'm really struck by these double movements of the social world, the salon, the broader French society, twisting like a kaleidoscopic image at the same time as the elements within it are also twisting or shifting.

HW: A few times in this volume, and I won't read any of the citations, but another preferred image for him is that of the photographic negative, that when you're experiencing something, what you're doing is akin to what the camera does when it makes a negative, but it's only later in developing that negative and then making a print that you can understand what it is that you experience. Because as anyone our age knows, looking at a photographic negative can be sort of baffling, even though it does in fact contain all the visual information that the photograph will. It takes the time and process of development to have that come out.

So that's obviously a different figure in that a negative is fixed and it's just a matter of projecting light through it in such a way that it is transferred onto a different paper. But there's still this idea of inversion that I think is shared between the figure of the negative and the figure of the kaleidoscope. The idea that the first thing is not the last thing.

I don't know. This is reminding me of a line from *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, which says, "A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne, and ȝeldez neuer lyke, / Þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden." And just for those of you who don't speak an obscure dialect of Middle English, I'll translate: "A year yearns [or runs] swiftly by, and never yields the same; / the early part rarely promises the end, ll. 498–9

EC: Oh, it's beautiful.

HW: It is really.

EC: And you read that beautifully as well.

HW: Oh, thank you. It's one of the most striking images in the poem, but it's not like Proust is the first one to say, things don't turn out the way they start, needless to say. But the way he gives these optical images for it, I think [is] really striking.

EC: Yeah. And I just want to add quickly that that's also one of the ways he's constantly describing and redescribing love as well in this volume. And I think probably throughout the whole of the thing, all of *A la Recherche* and the negative, the photo negative, it's also a way that he describes love.

So the beloved when he's, I think it's when he's thinking about why he likes Albertine as opposed to Andrée, who's the other girl in the group who he's actually much more similar to. And he's thinking about how the person that, I mean, there's this dramatic «we» that arrives in the, notre/nous that arrives towards the end of the second half, as if we all having these experiences, which I slightly demur from. But yeah, I think he says something like, we people find in their loved one, a projection, a negative, a kind of the other self, which again is not a totally original image either, but it kind of becomes more original when you can think about it in light of the other ways that he's using that idea of the negative as this kind of deferred discovery.

HW: Yeah. Yeah. There's something really temporal about a negative, really. I mean, there's the moment of taking the photograph. There's the moment of having the negative, which is there's already a process between those two. And then there's the moment of making the negative into the final image.

Which is that, that process itself is not a fixed process, right? There's actually a lot of human choice that goes into making the final image at the time that Proust is still today, but at the time that Proust is writing in particular, I found towards the end, I almost started to feel like there was a pattern. Like he would tell a little bit of a specific thing that happened.

The narrator would process it very clearly from the narrator's voice. And then it would zoom out and make some sort of globalization, some sort of capacious statement about what that is all about or how we handle love, et cetera, et cetera. And it was really this sort of recurring cycle of like actual events, personal processing extrapolation that I found fascinating.

Also once I noticed it, then I couldn't kind of unsee it. So even though I was enjoying it, it did also kind of turn into, it started to feel like a bit of a tick. I don't know what you thought, Emma.

EC: I think that that happens earlier in a way that I've been enjoying in a more impersonal way. So there'll be some detail about the narrative and the characters and then a kind of step back about what people are like in general, not in the first person or not in the first person plural in that way.

HW: No, no. You're right. The ‘nous’ is new, the «nous» is a new addition towards the end.

EC: It felt a bit aggressive to me.

HW: But another factor of this whole like repetition, repetition with a difference, the sort of slow alteration of things that is sometimes possible and sometimes less possible chimes with the, another major theme of this volume, which is habit.

EC: So yeah, there's this kind of tussle between habit and novelty and the narrator seeks novelty, but then finds it quite challenging. So when he arrives at Balbec, initially he really struggles with this disruption to his routine and his habits. In volume one, we found him in, we first encounter him in his Combray bedroom. There's also quite a lot of thought about his Balbec bedroom here. And when he arrives in it, it's like a kind of horror show:

“Space there was none for me in my bedroom, mine in name only at Balbec. It was full of things which did not know me, which flung back at me the distrustful glance I cast at them. And without taking any heed of my existence, showed that I was interrupting the humdrum course of theirs.”

So what I love about that is that the furniture is quite alive. I think that's something that we also see. I'm starting to notice throughout. This is great moment where Odette passes him or sits on somehow, some kind of footstool and it's kind of vibrating with her essence.

So I guess habit for Proust is about objects kind of becoming permeated with the everyday of the characters.

HW: It's about the objects turning into some sort of assemblage with the character, like working together with the character in concert. And these new objects aren't ready to do that yet.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. So Habit is something that he's kind of trying to, that is comforting. And eventually he becomes very comfortable in the bedroom, but also [it’s] something that he needs to disrupt. He's trying to escape. It functions so interestingly. I mean, I was also noticing how habit is literally the word for clothing as well. So it's a kind of way he, or a way people kind of protect themselves or present themselves.

Habit is referred to I think quite positively when he goes to visit Elstir's studio. He talks about how he has worked so hard to become this great painter, not only because he wanted to be known, but also because he really worked hard – it’s kind of a laborious habit that has created these beautiful *tableaux* because, you know, we talked about photography - there’s quite a nice running juxtaposition of photography and painting in this, in this part as well. So, habit is [also] about work.

One of the most poignant moments where he talks about habit is also in this conversation that he has with his grandmother. Do you remember that bit where he says, ‘Oh, I could never live without you’.

HW: Yeah. And then, and they're, they both have this moment of mutual realization that it's indeed very probable that he will have to live without her.

EC: Yeah.

HW: At some point. And they have to sort of cool down from it.

EC: Yeah. They are having this love affair basically in the first bit, which is very sweet. But then he tries to comfort her by saying, 'Oh, but you know what a creature of habit I am. I'm habituated to you now, but once I'm habituated to another life and I don't see you for months or even longer, dot, dot, dot, I'll be okay'.

HW: Right. He tries to reassure her, but it's obviously a very tragic moment. The other thing about Habit in terms of the project as a whole that I just want to mention briefly is that Proust is very clear that Habit is the memory killer, as it were, that things that happen many times that are part of your Habit. And this is, this is true in my experience, just sort of fade away. You don't remember any of their contours with as much distinctness as you remember things that you have, in fact, somewhat forgotten and that end up getting recalled - so things that were outside of your Habit that, that you sort of excluded from your daily routine or from your reflections. Those are the things that end up being most vivid later on. And that feels true to me. I feel like it's, uh, it's not my daily «train-train», as Proust says, the humdrum course of my daily life that feels most vivid and present to me, even though it is most of the time, indeed, my present.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. But actually I'm just thinking as you're speaking that in some ways, I wonder if the last passage that I wanted to talk about, which comes right from the end of part two, does some work to try and reconcile, kind of, habit and singularity.

HW: Tell me more.

EC: We've talked about how in this volume, the narrator meets a lot of people. The final meeting is with this group of girls, this *bande de filles* (also the name of a film by Céline Sciamma), that he sees from a distance.

EC: They are kind of birthed from the sea. I mean, they are compared very explicitly with the sea nymphs, the nereids, but they're also, you know, cycling and golfing and very like bicycling, you know, kind of.

HW: They're very sporty.

Yeah. A composite of like the modern fin de siècle women and these eternal nymph creatures. He becomes obsessed with them. It takes a long time for him to get to know them, or it feels as though it does. And eventually he makes friends with them. It's probably his happiest time in Balbec.

And that prompts a lot of reflection on the kind of everyday banality of habitual interaction versus the kind of ecstatic imaginings that he was having prior to knowing them better about these girls. And he reflects on that right at the end, just before this kind of peremptory ending where the narrator says, and the weather got bad and it was time to leave Balbec and off we went. And he says,

'The supernatural creatures, which for a little time they had been to me still introduced, even without any intention on my part, a miraculous element into the most commonplace dealings that I might have with them, or rather prevented such dealings from ever becoming commonplace at all. My desire had sought so ardently to learn the significance of the eyes, which now knew and smiled to see me, but whose glances on the first day had crossed mine, like rays from another universe. It had distributed so generously, so carefully, so minutely, color and fragrance over the carnation surfaces of these girls who now, outstretched on the clifftop, were simply offering me sandwiches or guessing riddles, that often in the afternoon while I lay there

among them, like those painters who seek to match the grandeur of antiquity in modern life, give to a woman cutting her toenail, the nobility of the Spinario, or like Rubens make goddesses out of women whom they know, to people some mythological scene, at those lovely forms, dark and fair, so dissimilar in types scattered around me in the grass, I would gaze without emptying them perhaps of all the mediocre contents with which my everyday experience had filled them. And at the same time, without expressly recalling their heavenly origin, as if like young Hercules or young Telemachus, I had been set to play amid a band of nymphs.'

I know – It's so funny.

HW: It's so much - I mean, it's spectacular.

EC: I do think that it's an attempt to reconcile the habit and the dream.

HW: No, I think you're right.

EC: And what I just love about it as well is this layering of images. So in Volume One, Odette, the main woman is one painting, right? She's Botticelli. That is her power. What is interesting about Albertine and the girls is that they are a kind of composite of so many different images. They're photographs, they're kind of – actually a watercolor of Odette is in the mix. They're part of a landscape scene… the way that he first meets Albertine at the painter's studio, she's kind of, she's painted. She's kind of a creation that occurs. It's so overlaid with different kinds of artistic images. And this kind of composite is working at that level in terms of the art image and the character, but also in all the various motifs that we've had about kind of encounters and habits and pleasure and boredom. And I think there's this attempt to marry the everyday with the kind of enchanted aspect of the landscape at Balbec, which is how these kind of nymph like supernatural girls can also be kind of just stretching out on a clifftop and with the kind of banality of someone cutting their toenails.

EC: Right. And they're somehow full boats of mediocrity and a latent divinity. Cause he says that he thinks about their heavenly origin, but without expressly recalling it.

So it seems to be just sort of *sottovoce*. Yeah. And yet since it's, since it's there, nevertheless, this habit can't seem to form, or it can't seem to do its work of making you forget what is around you and how it all works. He also describes them really in a really painterly way in the citation you just read 'so generously, so carefully, so minutely color and fragrance had been laid over the carnation surfaces of these girls'. Laying color over something is a very obviously painterly gesture. What's so fascinating here is there's, he clearly is interacting with them almost as an aesthetic object, like the painting of a woman cutting her toenails, like the Rubens Medici portraits.

Anyway. So he, he's, he's treating them as an aesthetic experience akin to seeing one of Elstir's paintings, to use terms from the novel. But he contrasts this at another point with the demands placed upon him by male friendship, that homosocial relationships, because they're actual relationships, as opposed to just a self having an aesthetic experience, can be very draining to one's creativity. So that's, he's talking about Saint-Loup and the difference between his relationship with Saint-Loup and the band of girls.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. The reference to him not writing in the second volume, I think is in relation to Saint-Loup and he's wondering whether it's right that he's spending so much time with his friend when he could be sitting down to write, which obviously he's not going to do.

HW: Who sits down to write on their beach vacation? I mean, some people, I'm sure some people do, but I do think it's a sort of improbable setting for really getting down to business.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. So this kind of extravagant objectification of women here and they, you know, they're not just art objects in the text, they are kind of creatures. They're kind of zoologically described. They are akin to flowers and plants. So they're kind of a botanical scattering as well as a colour palette and a composite of images and a marriage of the miraculous and the real. You know, I'm reading this wondering on a more prosaic level, like why I don't find this annoying.

HW: No, it's true. It's a, it is all, it's all so hyperbolic really. I mean, and, and usually that level of sustained hyperbole does get really quite tedious. But I think for me, I think what keeps it from being annoying, but this is just me is how unexpected so much of it is, right? Like the woman cutting her toenails is so unexpected. That's just such an unexpected evocation that I'm, I just, it keeps me under its spell.

So I guess I'm saying actually that novelty, the continued novelty is keeping my attention. And if it, if it were just a sustained sort of histrionic, but not particularly vivid or not particularly novel description, I think we would be annoyed. And I don't think this would be a book that was still read.

Yeah. Honestly, I think it, I think that's the difference between this being absolute, just tedious long windedness, and being the book that is so beloved by so many today.

EC: On that note, we can come back to the title and the young girls in flower, *les jeunes filles en fleur*. And that is such a cultural cliché. The association with flowers, between flowers and women in literature is incredibly burdensome, when you try and think about it on its own.

And yet I do think that Proust does something, I think it's worth saying, he does something really interesting with that in this text, because it's so specifically botanical. We've got the names of flowers. We've got the faces of the girls that are like flowers. So he's kind of set himself this literary challenge that reminds me of some of the writers that I work on in the 16th century, who are working in this kind of imitative tradition, trying to create really interesting variations on a theme. And he absolutely does that.

HW: In other words, like the kaleidoscope, right? He's reconfiguring the elements of literary tradition to make a new image.

EC: Right, And that's why it's so intellectually satisfying.

HW: You have the satisfaction of putting these moments together that are so far across the volume and seeing how things, honestly seeing Proust's architecture.

EC: Yeah. And that is a pre-modern version of literary merit, in some respects. I mean, I'm sure it's a modern or modernist one, postmodern as well in, in different iterations. Again, in that kind of literary kaleidoscope that we're dealing with, but it is through the slight variations in habit that you find kind of pleasure and beauty, actually in early modern poetry, certainly. Yeah. The final thing I would also say is that I think I kind of wrestle with the question of how misogynistic I think this is, or isn't, this like extensive objectification of, of, of women.

HW: For me, I think at the end of the day, I think they're all secretly men. Yeah. I have a hard time. That's a topic for another episode, but I mean, their names are Gilbert, Albert, and Andrew. Like *really*. So I just, I have trouble thinking that I'm not, but that being said, he does make the women. He does. He does literally objectify them to be able to contemplate them.

EC: As women!

HW: All that is true. Yes. I guess I am not sort of put off.

EC: No, me neither.

HW: Iit doesn't feel misogynist to me.

EC: I think they are specific. They have interiority. There's a lot of humor to the way that he treats this process. I think it's the kind of the narrator being both charming and silly. Yes. Right. That also leavens this situation.

HW: Yeah, I think that's right.

GW: Perhaps it's time to talk about the winners and losers of the volume. Emma, what do you think? Oh yeah.

EC: I'm excited for this part of it.

EC: Who is your winner of volume two of *A la Recherche,* Hannah?

HW: I found the winner difficult to pick, but for the different reason than in volume one, I felt like basically almost everyone was a loser. That is not the case this time. I felt like there were too many contenders for being the potential winner of this volume. Not least of whom is the narrator himself, who really seems to have a great time in Balbec and learn a lot and make good friends. I don't know.

EC: He was such a dork before and now he's kind of cool.

HW: Right. He's starting to get in with, with the cool people, but also developing his aesthetic sense, which is a real *raison d'être* for him.

So that all seems great. I think my sincere, but boring choices is Elstir, the painter who just comes out on top. It just seems like he has sort of the full-throated admiration of the narrator and of the others whom he encounters. He's still on the make. He's not super famous yet, but we're told that he's about to be. He offers a clear-eyed evaluation of his own former silliness at one point. So he was previously a silly painter who featured in the first volume under a sort of nickname, Monsieur Biche, and he owns that and is like, listen, we all make mistakes. We all have to grow up. I don't know. Who is your winner, Emma? My winner is not particularly exciting or convincing, so I'd rather hear about yours.

EC: No, but I'm really happy that you spoke about that speech that he makes when the narrator outs him as Monsieur Biche. And he's like, look, it's part of life. You can't regret it.

HW: Yeah, that's right.

EC: And there's this description of his struggle between his pride and his desire to be pedagogical with this young guy he's kind of mentoring.
And he's like, look, you know, you don't have to be embarrassed by your embarrassing past. I found it soothing. Yeah, he's a great contender for winner. But my winner was the grandmother.

HW: Ah, yes. She's in the mix, too. Go ahead. Why is she your winner?

EC: Well, I don't know if I'm judging on the same criteria, but I just think she's so wonderfully drawn. She comes across as such a perspicacious and interesting person. I already thought about her as a potential winner in Volume 1 because I just love the description of her relationship to the garden in the house in Combray and how she's really annoyed with all this fussiness and she likes a natural garden. And I think that her aesthetic certainly seems to be a kind of secret aesthetic kind of manifesto for the novels themselves. She's so lovely with the narrator. They have some really, really nice moments together, like that knocking on the wall. You know, she doesn't entirely win in the sense that there's this point where the narrator starts to ditch her and he also ruins a moment where she's going to have her photo taken by Saint-Loup because he's jealous. And that's a bit sad. So she's not a triumphant character necessarily. But for me, she's the undoubted winner because she just comes across as such an interesting mind as well as a nice character. So the scenes with her are very affecting, but I love how she has this obsession with Sévigné.

HW: Yeah, she's constantly quoting Sévigné.

EC: Yeah, she bonds with Charlus over Sévigné's letters. She loves Charlus and Saint-Loup. She really comes into her own in Balbec as well. She's having a kind of parallel journey to the narrator. They both have more freedom than they've had previously in Paris or Combray because neither of them are so restrained by the parental generation. I think it's a really nice account of what a grandparent, grandchild relationship can be. But I also think that the way she comes across as a person is subtly drawn, but really evocative. And so I think she's my winner because I love her.

HW: I think that's a great way to choose a winner. Do you want to say your loser first? Since I took the first winner.

EC: I've got much more conflict about my loser. I'm sure we have the same one. I suspect we do.

HW: I'm predicting we do. But who's your loser?

EC: Is it Bloch? It's Bloch. Oh, he's such a loser in this volume. But I have a huge emotional conflict about it because, again, it's so embedded in the anti-Semitism of the moment. So Bloch is the only prominent Jewish character at this point in the narrator's generation. He's really marginalized in society. And it is because of that, as well as because of his unfortunately terrible personality.

HW: It's true. And actually, some of the most overtly, offensively anti-Semitic moments in this volume come from Bloch himself, who mimics, quote-unquote, Jewish speech in a very offensive way and uses derogatory terms. And I think that that is just sort of an attempt to fit in on his part because he sort of terminally doesn't fit in. The scene that really cemented for me that he was the loser was when Robert de Saint-Loup has to go back to his regiment in Doncières which that's also like a whole, it's very Jane Austen, right? Like, what's the regiment up to? Like, it's a sort of off...
Anyway.

EC: I hope we talk more about Saint-Loup in future episodes because I do really like him, but we just haven't had time to get into it.

HW: Well, same with Charlus. I mean, a lot of it. I mean, Albertine - all the main characters we haven't gotten into yet, but we'll come back to them. But Saint-Loup invites him to come see him in Doncières at his regiment, but he invites him as follows. If you ever happen to be passing through Doncières any afternoon when I'm off duty, you might ask for me at the barracks, but I

hardly ever am off duty. I mean, this is an invitation that's not an invitation, right? And the narrator is like, 'Oh God, Saint-Loup is so rude. Like, that's such a... That's not… Like, Bloch's feelings are going to be so hurt.' But instead, Bloch takes it as... He takes it very literally and is like, 'Saint-Loup wants me to come visit. I must drop everything. And in fact, we should go in two days' time, if only we could'. And the narrator is just horribly embarrassed. But it's true. I mean, this is a very obvious social cue that Bloch does not pick up on.

EC: Yeah. What I had picked out is, I found the scene where the narrator and Saint-Loup go to dinner at Bloch's house and meet his father and his sisters and uncles. It's just so, so sad. It skips along narratively, but it's so painful because...they're all really cringe, this whole family. But also partly because they're not comfortable because they've got these two people that they're trying to impress in their midst. Right. These two people who are not Jewish, right? And they're very conscious of the situation.

HW: And Saint-Loup is a Marquis, right? Yeah. So they're dealing with a noble person and a friend who's definitely more cemented in society than they are.

EC: So they're not sure how to be... They're not sure whether to use their familiar tropes. But then they use a lot of them, a lot of their set pieces to try and impress. It's just unbearable. Anyway, during that scene, the narrator comments, I think, and this feels also more like the hindsight narrator says, 'Unfortunately, a gaffe was very much far from something that Bloch would try and avoid'.

HW: Oh. Oh, poor Bloch. He really is the loser of this volume.

EC: He speaks in such a precious and absurd way as well, which he did in volume one. But I think because the narrator is less sympathetic to him now, so it just feels more awkward and sad.

HW: Yeah, yeah. Like he said, he'll say what is like, Saint-Loup with a shining helm or whatever. He's always using Homeric epithets for everyone, which I mean, that's not...

HW: Trying to think of what your Homeric epithet would be is distracting me. But I think maybe we should...

EC: Tell me later.

HW: Yes, I'll tell you later. I'll tell you next time. I think it's probably time to wrap up. Where are we now? Like what... If we zoom out, where are we now and where are we going? Let's give our listeners a bit of a sense.

EC: Well, I think I have not read any more of this after this volume. So this, I mean, this really is... We're going into untarted territory now. But I think we've met a lot of the really important characters. We've met Charlus, we've met Saint-Loup, we've met Elstir, we've met Albertine. There's quite a lot of foreshadowing about appearance and disappearance in a later volume. It's called *Albertine Disparue*, I think. Yes, it is, yeah. So, or Albertine Disappeared. So, and we kind of got to the end of the narrator's childhood, I think, as well.

HW: Yeah, it does feel like he's entering a new social life, one that includes the nobility. And we learned in the course of this volume that he is independently wealthy. So it seems like that is one way to...

If you have the right connections and you have enough money, you can fraternize with the nobility, even if you are not. So I think we're getting the sense that he, socially speaking, is

upwardly mobile and that that is going to be where we go. And the next volume is called T*he Guermantes Way*. The Guermantes are the noble family who ancestrally hold the land where Combray is. And we've met several of them via Swann so far. So it seems clear that we're about to go into sort of a glittering social place. But these are... Now we're getting into the volumes that I've only read long ago and in translation and I have forgotten much of. So I'm really excited to keep reading, Emma.

EC: I'm really excited. I actually started reading the first few pages last night of the next volume.

HW: I love this for you. My copy is upstairs in my office. I'll take it home with me and I'll start this weekend.

EC: I missed Saint-Loup because he loses the narrator's attention at the end of Volume Two because he's so obsessed with these girls. So I wanted to check that we meet him again soon because I wanted more. Well, I think that's it for this episode of Proust Curious.

We hope 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.

HW: You can reach us at proustcurious@gmail.com. Join us next time for Volume 3, *Du Côté de Chez Guermantes*, 'The Guermantes Way'. Au revoir!

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa