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

HW: We are 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...

EC: ... and remember things Proust.

Today, we're talking about the third volume of the *Recherche*, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, that is, *The Guermantes Way*. In this volume, the young adult narrator returns to Paris, develops a crushing obsession with his new neighbor, Madame de Guermantes, visits his friend Saint-Loup at the army barracks, loses his grandmother, gets over Madame de Guermantes, and enters high society by attending *salons* and dinners. But he's still not writing. At this point, he's barely even planning to do so. He says at one point that friendships are distracting him from his invisible vocation, though it will all eventually lead to what we are reading now.

HW: Put more simply, the narrator hangs out with the cool kids.

EC: So cool.

HW: So cool. But, Emma, before we talk in more detail about the volume, it's time for our weekly question from the famous Proust questionnaire, which was answered by Proust twice at ages 13 and 20 and is now used as an interview device by Vanity Fair magazine. We'll put a link to the questionnaire in the show notes. This week, our question is, 'where would you like to live?'

EC: Proust's answers were: *'Au pays de l'Idéal ou plutôt de mon idéal.'*, that is, 'the country of the Ideal or rather of my ideal'.

HW: And his other answer from when he was 20 was, *'Celui où certaines choses que je voudrais se réaliseraient comme par un enchantement et où les tendresses seraient toujours partagées.'* 'The one where certain things that I desire would happen as if by magic and where tenderness would always be shared'.

Sweet. How does your answer stack up, Emma? Where would you like to live?

EC: I mean, honestly, I would just like to live in Paris.

HW: Well, in that way, I guess you're sort of like the narrator.

EC: Exactly. Because, you know, he has all these dreams, but actually he's kind of happy where he is, and he just wants to get to know his friends and neighbors in the place where he lives. So maybe he does mean Paris. Maybe that is his ideal.

HW: Yeah, it's just that's where all the promising friends and neighbors are located.

EC: What about you? Where would you like to live?

HW: My answer is, I guess, a little bit more vague. I would like to live where my friends live. In a place where I can walk around easily and afford seasonal vegetables. So, actually, Paris is pretty good for all these things. So perhaps we can just meet in Paris.

EC: Yeah, we can be friends who live there.

HW: But let's move on to the topic of the day, Emma. How did you find Volume 3? What did you notice in this volume?

EC: This was new ground for us, wasn't it? We were a bit more familiar with Volumes 1 and 2, and this was, yeah, this whole volume was completely, completely new for me. I really enjoyed it.

How did you find Volume 3, Hannah?

HW: I found it to be such a satisfying and almost addictive reading experience. There are these incredible social set pieces, which I think, for me, are the real delights of Proust. I really enjoyed them in Volume 1, as well, in particular. So, in the first part of this volume, we get a scene at the Villeparisis salon, and then a dinner at the Guermantes House in the latter part of the volume. And each of these scenes brings together so many of the characters we've gotten to know or that we've heard of along the way.

And the dialogue is very witty, but also super plausible. And it's so fine grained. One of my favorite things that happened in this volume, which I don't think we'll talk about at length, is when Madame de Villeparisis, who was Proust's friend in Balbec in Volume 2, and in this volume is a memoirist who has her own *salon*, she fakes falling asleep to convince a *gauche* guest to leave. I can't even imagine, pretending to nod off in my own home while I'm hosting a party, just so that one guy will leave. It's perfection.

EC: It's so funny. And also, because he's so *gauche*, he's just like, «hello?», «sorry?».

HW: Which is what would happen. That's the sort of accuracy of this volume that really was so pleasurable to read.

EC: Yeah, yeah. And there's such a cast of characters. We have to try and hold back from talking about them all. But I do love that little historian who speaks too quietly in the first and last.

HW: He's sort of imperceptible.

EC: And at one point he says something and the narrator is like, yeah, only I heard him. Yeah, it's really funny. But there are so many characters that sometimes, I have to confess, I got a little bit confused as to where we'd met them before or who exactly was who.

HW: Of course.

EC: Sometimes I was googling them. And when I was looking up some of the characters, just to make sure that I was fully tracking what was happening, I saw that these scenes have been described as Dickensian, which I guess speaks to the social portrait aspect, the very lengthy comic dialogue and description.

But I don't think that adjective fully captures it. Do you?

HW: No, not at all. No, I really don't. I'm not a fan of that adjective for these scenes.

EC: No, because they're really the subtle evocation of a world in motion, but also overlaid by all these asides that give us a sense of the narrator's process as he's thinking about it and then writing about it later. So a voice who knows he's guiding us through it all. By the way, we talked before about how the narrator was charming as a kid in volume one, especially maybe a bit more in volume two. I'd say he's getting older now. I'd say he's less delightful at this point. But he's still compelling. I think the narrative voice is also something that really, I agree, is kind of addictive in this volume.

HW: Yeah, I'd say it's the narrator's behavior here, which really verges, I'm not even sure verges, just is stalkerish at times. There's a whole long period where he goes out and lies in wait for Madame de Guermantes on her morning ‘sortie’. He knows where she likes to go of a morning and plants himself along her route.

EC: And at one point he realizes that she's not loving it.

HW: And yet he can't help himself. But so that sort of behavior is, of course, rather alienating.

But the ironic perspectives that the later narrator is bringing to these memories and the flashing insight into what is ridiculous, or sad, about what he's seeing, just made the volume a delicious treat. And what's more, there's an interesting structural thing I observed here. In some ways, this volume had a similar structure to volume two.

It's in two major parts, the first of which centers around a love obsession, and the second of which shows the narrator's world expanding and opening. But it is also structured around these dialogue heavy set pieces that now we've mentioned a few times, that are foreshadowed at the beginning, when they all the major players are gathered in different seats at the theater. And of course, the Duchesse de Guermantes has her own box.

And it's clear that the real show is mostly the audience, that the show is not the art, but the spectators, which is what we then get over the course of the volume. We see the show of those spectators unfold before us.

EC: Can we also have a moment for her amazing dress that she's wearing in the box?

It's a really good description.

HW: It's a description of her. Correct me if I've conflated her with the other incredible toilette of the Princesse de Guermantes, which I don't think I have.

But hers is sequined like armor, right? The Duchesse and the Princesse, it's like a fantastical, feathered, very much softer creation. Anyway, the contrast and delightful *toilette*. Yes, indeed.

EC: Yeah, there's just some great fashion. And there's all this stuff about shoe color anyway.

HW: A tragic scene that centers on shoe color. You wouldn't think this is possible, but indeed.

EC: But speaking of overall structure, I think of the broader, like, *À la Recherche*, I think one of the things I also found satisfying about reading this volume was (maybe also because I'm now progressing in my Proust knowledge) was noticing connections to earlier volumes.

For example, Saint-Loup's lover, Rachel, turns out to be the sex worker that the narrator visited, just to talk to, when he was pining over Gilbert in volume two. The *femme en rose*, the woman in pink from volume one, who's associated with a scandal, is revealed as actually having been Odette, who's now Madame Swann. Everything feels so delicately layered and you are kind of getting rewards by having your memory, which obviously is a key feature, jogged as you keep reading.

HW: Right, your memory jogged, but also replaced in a sense. Because these re-interpretations are really, these re-identifications, perhaps, are really jarring and have a huge effect on the previous memory, as accurate as that one may have been.

EC: Yeah, indeed. And sometimes that's, the 'jarringness' is replicated in the narrative because in that moment where Odette is revealed as the *femme en rose*, the narrator says, okay, this is a digression. You'll see why it's worth it. While also introducing another character who doesn't come back really, but then is going to be significant later. So everything is just so carefully built, which is part of what makes these books a world that you can get immersed in. I don't know, I think you

agree that world building is more associated with genre fiction, but I can't think of a better phrase than that to describe what Proust is doing.

HW: No, I completely agree. It really does. And it also has that sort of dreamy, absorptive quality that the best genre fiction has too.

I mean, certainly not all, but where you just feel like it's truly going through a portal to another place. In this case, it almost feels like a portal to another time. No, no shock there, given the title of the book we're working on.

Is it world building or is it, oh gosh, I hate myself, time building?

EC: Well, that's a great segue into a more kind of academic way of thinking about, thinking about this text, because the inter-volume references are also part of how Proust is drawing attention to the writing process, to writing itself, to what would be called in those more academic terms, I guess, metatextuality. So, the writers attend the *salon*, the characters discuss literature.

Although this isn't heavy handed, I really must emphasize to any people listening to this and considering reading, it's funny. There's a moment where they're trying to one of the characters references, I think, *Salammbô* and the difference between a writer's letters in his novels and they can't remember the name of Flaubert to discuss this. So, like, is it 'Paulbert'? Is it 'Fulbert'? You know, so they're discussing it, not always expertly. Also the narrator in his kind of asides, he comments on the role of literature and writers in that world. And that is something that I really especially enjoyed this time too. I found it so skillfully interwoven with the dialogue, with the long social scenes, and also in the more reflective passages. So, you mentioned, for example, that Madame de Villeparisis is a memoirist and that's recurrently mentioned. So, there's a sense in which the live action is already being written as it's also being described by the narrator, if you see what I mean. And there's all these kinds of juxtapositions of what the scene looks like in the memoir, as opposed to it actually is.

HW: And as opposed to how it's being represented for us in the narrator's retelling.

Because as artful as it is, and as real as it feels, it's of course still a representation. And who's to say that his version is more accurate or less accurate than Villeparisis'?

EC: Yeah, I love that.

It feels really as though you're having, as you're reading it, you're having a conversation with Proust where he's saying, what do you think about how stories work? Right? Right. And another example that I'll just mention very briefly is, so these are constantly interwoven in different ways into different parts of the book. So in the very sad section where the grandmother is ill and dying, there's also an excursus into Bergotte, who's the writer that we've met before, into his career. He's very successful now. He's also ill, actually. So it's like his body of work is successful as his physical body is dying. And the narrator is kind of moving away from being such a huge fan of his work. And he

says he's found a new writer that he really likes, but he writes these really complicated long sentences. And so when he's reading, he can only get to the end of one in about 1000 of them, but it's really great and worth it when you do. So all these self-referential, metatextual elements of the book are just so enjoyable. So yeah, I loved it.

And yet, especially as I kept reading, getting into the second half, the more I was struck by the mood being kind of bleak, or of these social scenes as being kind of depressing. I mean, there's also another thing we don't really have time to go into in detail. There's the shadow of war with the military maneuvers and the, oh God, Norpois and the German Faffenheim, isn't he?

And them complaining about the English. So, I think there's a kind of shadow over this text as well as there being kind of interplay between funny, comic, almost, I don't know, joyous might be too far, and then kind of melancholic aspect.

HW: Yeah, I thought this volume was deeply funny and really touching and sad, kind of an equal measure. And sometimes those two moments converge, really. There was a lot of dwelling in this volume on '*l'esprit des Guermantes'*, which is sort of the wit of the Guermantes, which they themselves deny existing.

A thing as non-existent as the squared circle, according to the Duchess, who regarded herself as the sole Guermantes to possess it. So, she thinks that the real, I mean, the Guermantes by birth are not possessors of the Guermantes wit. But it is known in society that this family is supposed to be particularly *spirituelle*, which means witty or clever, or I don't know, that's one of the sort of untranslatable French words, right?

But in practice, that wit is often superficial and cutting. And while it may make you smile, it also really is one of the things that reveals the emptiness of the worldly set.

EC: Right, right. So, if we think of it as the Guermantes vibe, it is clever and funny and pleasurable to encounter, but also contains within itself that bleakness that we're mentioning.

HW: Yeah, there's a great scene toward the end of this volume where Swann, although he's not a Guermantes, he's strongly associated with this Guermantes wit and is said to possess it. Swann and Monsieur de Guermantes, the Duke, are having a conversation because Monsieur de Guermantes has persuaded himself that a painting he owns is an unrecognized Velázquez. And so he asks his friend Swann, who's a known art *connoisseur*, about the painting, about his opinion. So, here's what he says.

> «But you're a dilettante, a master of the subject. To whom do you attribute it? You're enough of an expert to have some idea. What would you put it down as?»
> Swann hesitated for a moment before the picture, which obviously he thought atrocious. «A bad joke», he replied with a smile at the Duke, who could not check an impulsive movement of rage.'

Yeah, the Duke, he's irascible.

He's irascible. But this scene, even though it's clear, I mean, that's very funny. That's apparently, by the way, a witticism that Proust actually heard in Society and then transcribed into his book, yeah, according to the notes to my volume, which I was charmed by.

He's like, I'll keep that. Yeah, he's like, that's a good one. But even though that is clearly a funny response, what would you put it down as?

I would put it down as a bad joke that's obviously making fun of Monsieur de Guermantes ambitions, revealing Swann's greater knowledge of the subject at hand. It's kind of punching up, as it were, because Monsieur de Guermantes cannot really be hurt by the fact that this painting is worthless because he's so insanely rich. But even though it's definitely a somewhat trenchant witticism, the scene is nevertheless quite bleak because Swann has shown up at the Guermantes house very visibly ill.

The narrator says that he's horribly changed. And it seems that he has come not only to talk to Madame de Guermantes about some article that he's written recently, but also to announce to these who are putatively some of his better friends that he is dying. But rather than inquire into his health when he shows up looking so unwell, Monsieur de Guermantes immediately corners him for his own selfish purposes of authenticating something that is, in fact, inauthentic.

And I find that just sort of that current runs throughout this whole scene, which has several very funny moments, but funny in the sort of gallows humor or bleak mode.

EC: Yeah. So the whole idea of the joke is put into play in this bit when Madame de Guermantes hears the news and she says, ‘are you joking?’

HW: Right. That's right. ‘You will outlive us all’, she says, which is, of course, a very flippant thing to say to someone who's visibly deeply unwell and whose doctors have given him not long to live.

And rather than stay in and perhaps spend time with her ill friend, she and Monsieur de Guermantes must, they say, rush off. And yet, when Monsieur de Guermantes perceives that she is wearing black shoes with her red dress, he sends her back in to change into red shoes, even though they were theoretically in such a rush.

EC: There's time for that. I think so there's two, I mean, Swann doesn't actually die here, but he's dying and it's very affecting this. So there's two major character dying scenes, I guess. And the other one is the grandmother's. And I think in both, it's interesting how other characters are in a rush around them to do something social. The doctor that the narrator takes the grandmother to see when she's had her episode in the park is rushing to go out to dinner as well.

And there's a sense that there's no time to die. There's no time for the dying. There are all these kinds of reflections here.

HW: It's also the relative importance of people, right? Because who is the grandmother to that doctor? And in that case, it's true. Who is the grandmother to that doctor? That doctor is someone who sees dying people presumably regularly as part of his professional life. But for that same rush to come back in a scene where it's between friends, where there should be a different attitude, that sort of repetition with a difference points it up all the more, the feeling that there's no time for death when there's so much gaiety to be had.

EC: And the living can't cope or can't confront it. I mean, the narrator is fully there the whole time that his grandmother is experiencing her final illness.

But at the same time, he's kind of detached. It's a very disturbing and sad part of the book, but...
HW: ... it felt somehow clinical. Am I wrong? It felt really analytical and clinical. In fact, I was afraid that I would find it almost unbearable to read. But I didn't because there was this sort of detachment. Whereas on the other hand, there's an earlier scene where the narrator is visiting his friend at his army barracks and calls his grandmother on the phone. Of course, the telephone is a new technology at this time and unreliable and subject to the whims of the women that work the switchboard, which is evoked at length and very beautifully and funnily. But they lose the connection, which is not so unexpected in these early days of telephone, nor is it so unexpected today. But now we know what to do, sort of. And the scene where they've lost connection between Paris and a nearby town, I found it more moving than the scene of her death, really. Emma, would you like to read this passage?

EC: Yeah. This is the moment that they've lost connection. And it's also very moving because they are becoming more disconnected with each other as people as well. The narrator almost, I don't know, this is over reading, but once she is visibly sick, he kind of almost takes it as a betrayal, do you think? Because in the beginning of the second part, he says, she'd left me before she'd even left. And it's also to do with him growing up.

HW: He gets back from Doncières and sees her when she doesn't see him yet and observes that she looks like a stranger, just like any old woman. So yeah, I do think there is a growing detachment.

EC: Yeah, there's all these forms of distance and detachment that are replicated in her dying. And I suppose that you could say that is the pivotal moment for that. So, their loss of connection is so symbolic as well as being really affecting in the moment. The narrator writes:

> ‘My grandmother could no longer hear me. She was no longer in communication with me. We had ceased to stand face to face, to be audible to one another. I continued to call her, sounding the empty night in which I felt that her appeals also must be straying. It seemed as though it were already a beloved ghost that I had allowed to lose herself in the ghostly world. And standing alone before the instrument, I went on vainly repeating, grandmother, grandmother, as Orpheus left alone, repeats the name of his dead wife.’

Ah, so sad. And you think about them knocking and having their special communications in volume two.

HW: Right. But even during their time in Balbec, they draw further apart. So, they start from this place of knocking and then he discovers the world and then here he is visiting one of the people he had befriended in Balbec and away from her.

I also find it really interesting that he compares himself to Orpheus and puts his grandmother in the place of a lover. And I think part of what's happening here is the move from family to lovers. Orpheus left alone.

It's just, there is something really moving about it.

EC: 'I continued to call her in the empty night. Her appeals also must be straying.' So the idea that she'd be calling back and he just can't hear her.

HW: And I mean, what makes it even more poignant is that doubtless he was right. You know, doubtless, she was at her telephone calling to him, but their voices just couldn't reach each other. Oh, it's very moving.

EC: I suppose it's also because the telephone is a less typical thing to use in that moment. But this is a kind of, it could be so banal.

You lose phone connection all the time. It's like, 'hello? Hello?'

How many times do you overhear someone on the train? You're just like, 'no, don't make phone calls on the train'.

HW: 'Sorry, I'm in the train'.

EC: But out of that, in this particular historical moment of the telephone, but also through his way of writing, through his way of thinking about these everyday things made it so sad and so beautiful.

HW: I do think, I mean, that's not to reduce our reading experience to one pithy statement, but a lot of this book is about really ordinary things and looked at in an extraordinary way.

EC: With like death underwriting the whole thing.

HW: Always subtended by death. As are we all, Emma, really.

EC: Indeed. And yet laughing.

HW: That's exactly it. The bleak laughter of volume three. We're just replicating it. Truly.

But you know, but that's not all. It's not just bleakness and laughter in this volume. There's also this third mode, which I feel like I can't quite find the right word for it, but it's sort of a mode of aesthetic contemplation.

Do you know what I'm talking about, Emma?

EC: Yeah, definitely. If we're agreeing on the same thing, there are these descriptive moments that are really pleasurable also because there's a sense that the narrator is taking pleasure in observation.

HW: And also that he's describing something relatively commonplace in completely unexpected metaphorical language and just sort of fascinating, almost synesthetic juxtapositions of different sights and sounds and sensations from one realm to another. I mean, some of my favorite examples of this are, he has a tendency, I've picked out a couple examples for us to look at, but I would say it already had started in previous volumes. He loves to describe people as aquatic beings.

We had already talked about the nymphs, right, in our last episode. But there seems to be a real fascination with society as a sort of aquarium or a play of water deities, I guess.

EC: Which, can I just say, remember that he's an investor in a water company.

HW: Indeed, I had forgotten. So he's independently rich. Because of his water investments, that's right. But he's also, you know, poetically invested in the water company, evidently. One of these happens really early in this volume when he's at the opera in that sort of theatrical scene that we had already mentioned at the Opéra Comique, where he sees La Berma again and re-evaluates her, much to his surprise. But honestly, to me, his re-evaluation of La Berma, this is my perspective, is forgettable compared to the way that he sees the stalls full of high society above him, or what do we call them, the boxes full of high society above him.

I'll read just a short excerpt so that you can see how they turn into watery kingdoms.

> ‘On this side of them began the orchestra stalls, abode of mortals forever separated from the transparent shadowy realm to which at points here and there served as boundaries on its brimming surface, the limpid mirroring eyes of the water nymphs. For the folding seats on its shore, the forms of the monsters in the stalls were painted upon the surface of those eyes in simple obedience to the laws of optics and according to their angle of incidence. As happens with those two sections of external reality to which, knowing that they do not possess any soul, however rudimentary, that can be considered as analogous to our own, we should think ourselves mad if we addressed a smile or a glance of recognition, namely minerals and people to whom we have not been introduced.’

Emma, can you paraphrase a little bit what he's saying? Because I think this is really a spectacular joke, but I'm afraid that the length of that sentence may have lost our listeners.

EC: Effectively, he's saying that the theatre is a seascape. And then there are kind of creatures on the shoreline who are kind of mirrored.

HW: Yes, on the eyes.

EC: On the eyes. But it would be a mistake to recognize them.

HW: Well, it would be a mistake to recognize them as the real beings because they are in fact mirror images and not real beings. And so then he makes this joke that you wouldn't introduce yourself basically to a mirror image because it doesn't have a soul. You'd be like a lunatic if you were to introduce yourself to a mirror image.

And the things that do not have any souls here are minerals and people to whom we have not been introduced. But it's deeply complicated. It's like actually really quite as you're in the sort of fugue state of the sentence, it's easy enough to sort of follow one proposition to the next.

But then to summarize it actually becomes fiendishly complicated, even though the delight of the joke, I think, is apparent for me almost immediately. But then to actually think of the underwater optical troubles that are also optical troubles that have to do with literal eyes.

It's all really rather confusing.

EC: So, so far we have talked about the social, we've talked about the emotional, we've talked about the literary. But this is also a really political volume, which treats extensively important current events. I mean, I've mentioned the shadow of war, the war in Europe, there's kind of shadows of the colonies as well. And in this volume, anti-Semitism, which is a recurring theme of the *Recherche* and that we've mentioned already, becomes much more prominent.

And this is the result of repeated and in-depth discussion of the Dreyfus affair. And also who is *Dreyfusard* or *anti-Dreyfusard*, like pro or against Dreyfus among the narrator's acquaintances and in these *salons*, this social aristocratic worlds, because it becomes an enormous question of belonging, both within friend groups and in Paris and in France. So, Hannah, what was the Dreyfus affair? We have mentioned it before, but let's go into a bit more detail now.

HW: Yeah, we mentioned it briefly in our last episode, but the Dreyfus affair was really the emblematic drama of the Third Republic. The Third Republic dated from 1871 to 1940.

And it remains both a critical example of government malfeasance and a touchstone in the history of European anti-Semitism. Here's the sort of TLDR version, although there are many twists and turns that are not fully covered here. In 1894, the Alsatian Jew Alfred Dreyfus, who was a captain in the French army, was wrongly condemned to a lifetime of forced labor and exile for the crime of having turned over military secrets to the German army.

Now, Ferdinand Walsin-Esterhazy, another French officer, was the real traitor. But although he was brought to trial, he was acquitted on January 11th, 1898. Two days later, Émile Zola published *J'accuse*, an open letter to the president of the Republic, which alleged that governmental collusion had led to Esterhazy's acquittal.

Though this article provoked anti-Semitic and anti-Dreyfus demonstrations, it also more justly caused a new civil trial to begin for Dreyfus. And in 1899, he was released. And in 1906, he was finally officially pardoned. Weirdly, he used his freedom to serve once more in the French army, which is not the decision I would have made.

EC: Yeah, he served in the First World War.

HW: So, very sort of impressive commitment to the *patrie* there from Alfred. But this, I mean, a wrongful conviction that is ultimately overturned is sort of a tragicomedy in the sort of most literary historical sense. But his conviction and eventual acquittal really had an outsized effect on French society. It was a situation that involved one man, but it really involved the whole country because of the amount of discourse it generated.

EC: Yeah. It became team Dreyfus, team anti-Dreyfus. You really, really see that in this volume. It's, I guess, a case study in the kind of polarization that can happen when it gets infected by conspiracy theories, mistrust of government. But it feels really like a kind of paradigm for some of what we continue to live through.

HW: Yeah. Especially right now.

EC: Yeah. Yeah. So, Proust was *Dreyfusard*. He was a defender of Dreyfus's innocence, i.e. he was on what people love to refer to as the right side of history.

HW: He was in this case.

EC: And yet, this volume mainly showcases the *anti-Dreyfusard*. So, really a real variation of anti-Dreyfus characters, some of whom are so anti-Dreyfus they're also against the other *anti-Dreyfusards* for not being *anti-Dreyfusard* enough. And the narrator doesn't really show his cards that clearly.

He's just like, I asked this person about the Dreyfus affair and we discussed it for a bit. I mean, his friend Saint-Loup is probably the most, Saint-Loup and Swann are the *Dreyfusards*.

HW: Well, and Bloch, but Bloch is not really.

EC: Oh yeah, of course, Bloch. He doesn't really have a choice in the matter.

HW: Well, neither does Swann, right?

EC: Yeah, true.

HW: According to the logic that prevails at this time, which the narrator skewers. But there's one passage, I think, on his night out with St-Loup where it becomes clear that the narrator too inclines to support Dreyfus, but it's a very brief mention. And the main point is not the narrator's point of view. Instead, the Dreyfus affair becomes a lens through which certain things are revealed. One of those things is the latent antisemitism of the noble class and the bourgeoisie. But another is really about how we understand historical events and truth, which is a pretty massive theme to come up against.

EC: Also, what I was really struck by is how they're kind of addicted to this debate. Debate is kind of a funny word for it.

I guess at one point where the narrator goes home and two valets outside his house, also arguing about it. The way that this thing that affects this one man's real life, but also the makeup of a society and also the lives of a vulnerable minority population become this obsession and almost like a pleasurable gossipy obsession for everyone else.

HW: Right. I mean, it had real political consequences too, but it is just sort of the topic of the day. It's more of a conversation starter than really something where you're reflecting about the actual lived consequences for different people.

EC: Well, so what it does reveal is the intense antisemitism of the noble class and the bourgeoisie. How casually and easily those who might have never expressed it so virulently in other circumstances are able to draw on it. I mean, there's some really shocking parts in this volume, I would say, especially Charlus, but we could also think about Odette, Madame Swann, who's married to a Jewish husband. She really instrumentalises the antisemitism provoked by the Dreyfus affair to shore up her social status.

She becomes passionately anti-Dreyfus so that she can maintain her already slightly precarious position with her friends. In the previous episode, I think we talked about how Odette is a person of fashion. She changes her style quite deftly, depending on what is the trend.

When that's what flowers and crockery and clothes you have, that's one thing. But then if it's how you feel about a whole group of people, it's pretty different. I mean, there's this passage which describes this happening.

> ‘Madame Swann, seeing that I mentioned the Dreyfus case, had begun to assume and fearing that her husband's racial origin might be used against herself, had besought him never again to allude to the prisoner's innocence. When he was not present, she went further and used to profess the most ardent nationalism. In doing which, she was only following the example of Madame Verdurin, in whom a middle-class antisemitism, latent hitherto, had awakened and grown to a positive fury. Madame Swann had won by this

> attitude the privilege of membership in several of the women's leagues that were beginning to be formed in antisemitic society and has succeeded in making friends with various members of the aristocracy.'

Because that's the other thing that you see here is that it becomes such a bond between those who are Dreyfus, pro-Dreyfus and anti-Dreyfus that it can transcend previously unbreachable social barriers and Odette can make aristocratic friends thanks to becoming a raging antisemite.

HW: Hooray. Whereas before she was excluded because of having previously been a *cocotte*, now she can penetrate those circles just because of nationalism. So, again, this gets back to the kaleidoscope we discussed in the last volume, where different things come to prominence and other crystals, as it were, recede. And so here we see the sort of optics of society shifting.

It no longer matters as much that she was once of the *demimonde* and instead it matters much more that she says the things that people want to hear. Charlus, on the other hand, has a much more ... I mean, for Odette, it's so transparently instrumental that it's kind of hard to take seriously, particularly because she does have a Jewish husband, which is also an instrumental choice, right? All of this is instrumental for her.

But Charlus's opinion is just wildly virulent. Having met Bloch at Madame de Villeparisis' house or really having crossed paths with Bloch is maybe more accurate. He asks the narrator for more information after the narrator explains who this person Bloch was.

Charlus says, 'It is not a bad idea, if you wish to learn about life, to include among your friends an occasional foreigner. I replied that Bloch was French. Indeed, said Monsieur de Charlus, I took him to be a Jew.'

EC: Yeah, it's just so flagrant.

HW: It's so flagrant. Charlus, he goes on to suggest that Bloch might do an exotic performance for him to sort of demonstrate his foreignness as a spectacle.

It's a completely bizarre passage that culminates with Charlus saying he might even, 'while he was about it, deal some stout blows at his hag, or as my old nurse would say, his haggard of a mother.' So he's suggesting that Bloch beat up his mother as part of a spectacle.

EC: Yeah, he gets weirdly obsessed with Bloch's mother. And the narrator at one point is like, I think his mother actually is dead.

HW: «That would be an excellent show. It would not be unpleasing to us, eh, my young friend, since we like exotic spectacles. And to thrash that non-European creature would be giving a well-earned punishment to an old camel». As he poured out this terrible, almost insane language, Monsieur de Charlus squeezed my arm until it ached.'

EC: I mean...

HW: It is almost insane. It is fully insane.

EC: I was screaming when I read this. He travels into this bizarre fantasy of a camel. It's so horrific. And yet, I think Proust uses Charlus to say something really important about what really is at the heart of this issue, which is about nationalism and identity and who is and isn't French. And that extends, you know, because Charlus also brings in the kind of colonial viewpoint.

He says, if we bring over Senegalese and Malagasy, I hardly suppose that their hearts will be in the task of defending France, which is only natural. He's basically saying that, you know, why even prosecute Dreyfus for treason or any other person who he doesn't count as truly French.

HW: It's this bizarre turn where he's actually not anti-Dreyfus because he just doesn't consider him French at all. It's like he's so beneath Charlus's notice that it's not worth being anti-Dreyfus.

EC: Yeah. And this, in this kind of crucible of nationalism of the turn of the 20th century, you really see the precedence for what happens in later decades. And it's really, really horrifying, both from anti-Semitism and from a colonial point of view.

HW: And the second thing that the Dreyfus affair really reveals in this volume is the way that even with events as actually relatively simple, world historically speaking, as the wrongful conviction of an innocent man, the ways of accessing the truth are always only partial and are always sort of part of a larger picture, which it seems that no one really has access to while these things are going on. And that can only be fully understood in retrospect. So we end up seeing Bloch trying to get at some kernels of information that seemed to him really important to the defense of Dreyfus in Madame de Villeparisis's salon.

But the narrator comments that even if he had been able to access these, these nuggets that he's mining for from Monsieur de Norpois, 'it is seldom that these have any more value than a radiographic plate on which the layman imagines that the patient's disease is inscribed in so many words. When as a matter of fact, the plate furnishes simply one piece of material for study to be combined with a number of others, which the doctor's reasoning powers will take into consideration as a whole and upon them found his diagnosis. So to the truth in politics, when one goes to well-informed men and imagines that one is about to grasp it, eludes one.'

EC: Yeah, I think everything that we've been talking about does show Proust being extremely acute about political structures and truth and evidence. There's a kind of echo, but a version of the trial happening in this volume.

I can't help thinking as well, this is also part of the bleakness of the volume. It's not a hopeful account. I mean, why should it be given what happens later and given already the kind of layers of irony that are present in Proust's kind of retrospective account of this, given that I think when he's writing, or at least when he's writing later, in the First World War, so are many Senegalese and

Malagasy people, all going into the churn of this hideous and confusing nationalism. The way that Proust has shown all this, he's turned his kind of laser-like observation to this, and he exposes what everybody is saying and all of the hypocrisy, and that is a kind of intervention in itself.

HW:
I think that's right. I think it is really saying how, in fact, the novel is in a way the perfect form for exposing these sorts of hypocrisies and logical fallacies that riddle the cultural conversation around what was happening to Dreyfus.

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EC: So now we are at our final segment after this discussion of, I think, the longest volume of *À la Recherche*, is that right?

HW: I hope so! I loved it, but it was deeply long.

EC: And this is the time to ask who our winners and losers of the volume are. Hannah, should we do winners first?

HW: Let's do winners first. Let's start on a high note, instead of ending on a high note.

EC: Okay, who was your winner of *Le Côté de Guermantes*?

HW: My winner was Oriane aka the Duchesse de Guermantes aka Madame de Guermantes. We saw her as the Princesse des Laumes in *Swann in Love*, and now she is the Duchesse. She is my winner because she has beauty and brains. I'm not going to say further. Who is your winner, Emma?

EC: Okay, bear with me. I realize he's been a candidate at various points, but my winner of this volume is the narrator. So yes, he's still a bit of a loser for all the reasons that we still like him, even though he's a weirdo, like that bit where he cries in a stack of carpets because he's disappointed. But I noticed that in this volume, people are giving him compliments.

They're, like Albertine, who we'll talk about more in future. It's like, «oh, you've got such nice eyes. You've got such nice hair». People are like, «oh, yeah, you're so charming». Everyone seems to like him. Everyone ultimately seems to want him around. He is succeeding in penetrating these environments that he's been fascinated by since childhood. He's doing well.

HW: He's winning. They even tolerate it when he spends like hours admiring Elstirs and makes a whole dinner party late, which is just like ... the social discomfort of that and his total obliviousness. Anyway, okay, I buy it. I buy it.

EC: Yeah. He's got momentum, I feel. He's got momentum. Who is your loser, Emma?

EC: Okay, so I agonized about this because there's so many candidates. But my loser is Norpois.

HW: Norpois, yes, a good loser. Continue.

EC: Because he is so odious. And so transparently so. He's so two-faced. The way he blanks the narrator in the street, even though they know each other well. The way he's supposed to be friends with the narrator's dad, but he's not going to vote him into the academy. And then he just kind of drops off as well. So because of his connection with Villeparisis, he's part of that group. But then he's just a kind of name mentioned incidentally later on more, right?

HW: Yes, that's right.

EC: So he's also this incredibly pretentious and pompous man who is not really in high society anyway. Not that that's necessarily our value system. But yeah, those are the reasons why he is my loser of the volume.

HW: Fair, only fair.

EC: What about you? Who's your loser?

HW: My loser is – wait for it. I have a real shocker on deck – also Oriane, the winner and the loser.

EC: I thought about her as a potential loser, actually. So, when you said she was the winner, I was like, Okay.

HW: I gave a really flip answer for why she was the winner. But I guess I in the value system that the book is depicting, not necessarily the value system of the book has she's clearly the winner, right? Like, she's the queen bee.

But in the value system that the narrator and one can assume, Proust actually has, she's the loser. Because she has this salon that's absolutely sterile, where the same people come, they give up their promising careers to just stand around in dinner dress, seemingly. She has this tendency towards empty and sort of frivolous cruelty. She's constantly cheated on. Her wit is only at a surface level, like it doesn't seem that she profoundly understands any of the things that she's able to be clever about. And just in general, she ends up seeming like a hollow monster.

EC: Yeah, yeah, I strongly considered her for being the loser. For similar reasons, just because she's so mean. She's so mean. And vacuous.

HW: Exactly. Hollow monster. You got it.

EC: Yeah. Okay. That's a lesson for us all about popularity.

HW: Don't be a hollow monster. Okay. But where, where are we, Emma? How are we doing in terms of the project as a whole? We're episode three.

EC: Right.
HW: So, what's coming?
EC: Next, very excitingly, we have *Sodome et Gommorrhe*, or *Sodom and Gomorrah,* volume four, which, given the title, I think we can expect to be a thrilling read again, in another turn of a different version of the kaleidoscope.

HW: Yes, I think that's, that's what we have. And I, and I must say, still plunging further into the unknown for me.

EC: I mean, same. All of this is, is, is new to me. I think this is the kind of turning point where we'll be over halfway at some point during the next volume.

HW: Really? Yes. Because they get shorter after Sodom and Gomorrah.

EC: Yeah. So roughly halfway now.

HW: That's right. Well, that's it for this episode of Proust Curious. We hope we've piqued your curiosity. If you liked the podcast, please tell a friend about it.

EC: Proust Curious is hosted by Emma Clausen and Hannah Weaver and produced by Michael Goldsmith. You can reach us at proustcurious@gmail.com. We'd also like to thank our partner Public Books and Online Magazine of Ideas, Arts and Scholarship. Check it out at publicbooks.org. Join us next time for volume four, *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

Both: *Au revoir!*

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa