Proust Curious
Episode 4, *Sodom and Gomorrah*
Transcript

[EC]
Hello and welcome to Proust Curious. I'm Emma Claussen, an Early Modernist at Trinity College, Cambridge.

[HW]
And I'm Hannah Weaver, an Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature at Columbia University and 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 and remember things Proust.

Today, we're talking about the fourth volume of the *Recherche*, *Sodome et Gomorrhe.*

This volume starts immediately after the end of the previous one, on the same afternoon, in fact, upon which the young adult narrator makes the startling discovery that some of his acquaintances are gay. This is central to the rest of the volume, in which he attends lots of parties and returns to Belbec, where he falls in and out of love with Albertine, whom we met back in volume two, and discovers manipulative ways to deal with jealousy.

[HW]
Put more simply, this volume is about sex and obsession. But, Emma, before we talk in more detail about the volume, it's time for a question from the famous Proust Questionnaire, 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.

This week, the question is not really a question, it is a prompt. Your idea of misery? At age 13, Proust answered that it was to be separated from his mother.

What is your answer, Emma? What is your idea of misery?

[EC]
Oh, I mean, I struggled preparing for this with how vulnerable to be so I've got a comedy answer, which is that my idea of misery is an egg-based meal.

[HW]
You do famously hate eggs.

[EC]
But I guess a more earnest answer would be, you know, notwithstanding the kinds of things that cause misery from the outside, like people being cruel, or, you know, poverty, or, you know, disaster, illness, etc. I think my idea of misery is something that I've experienced, but also observed in others: when you hold back from fun and fulfillment out of maybe excessive self consciousness, self doubt, self punishment, so you don't even try and do the thing that you want to do, because you're just so embroiled in overthinking. I think that's my idea of misery. There you go.

[HW]
That does seem quite miserable. I also want to borrow your caveat of excluding real misery.

[EC]
Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

[HW]
If we're dealing in self involved misery, what is misery other than being trapped in the corner of a party with a bore, who is just going on about themselves or something you don't care about? It's kind of the opposite of yours. You're talking about feeling self-conscious. And I'm just like, that person needs to feel more self-conscious.

[EC]
Yeah, I was thinking that there is a line between, you know, being self-aware and self-conscious, etc.

[HW]
Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

[EC]
So I guess both of ours are social. They're about what it is to be with and against other people, but you just come in strong, like hell is other people.

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[EC]
Okay, so let's then talk about volume four, which I think contains both kinds of misery that we've just described, actually, self-torture and being trapped with people that they don't want to be talking to. Okay, so how did you find volume four? What did you notice on this read?

[HW]
Well, I think that perhaps more than the previous volumes, this volume really had a single overriding theme. And that theme is already indicated by the title, *Sodom and Gomorrah*. It's all about what the narrator calls the “vice” of homosexual relationships.

I just want to say it's maybe worth noting, in case you're totally new to Proust, that Proust himself was gay and had important and long relationships with some of his lovers. So talking about Proust and homosexuality is a complicated thing, because there's some personal background, but then there's also it's a lot of what he has to say is a product of his times. And he never was openly gay, his close friends and family knew, but it wasn't... So it's complicated for him. And the book is almost like a very visible grappling with this question. It comes back time and time again to the narrator's fearful, but obsessive interest in homosexuality, which swings violently in tone from condemnation to a sort of detached amusement.

The narrator spends a lot of time worrying about whether Albertine, his love interest, is a lesbian. And indeed, it is the confirmation (or what he sees as the confirmation) that she is interested in women that leads to the surprising ending of the volume where he decides to marry her.

But what struck me more than this, perhaps, was the way that even as Proust describes the most minute interactions in social situations with exquisite detail, some of the central relationships in this volume remain shadowy and nearly exempt from this kind of scrutiny.

I'm thinking about how we know very little about Albertine, her mannerisms, her predilections, her behavior, in comparison to what we know about, say, Charlus, another one of the main characters. She is primarily just an object of mistrust. He comments about the perpetual mistrust that she inspires in him. And she's very rarely sort of an acting subject who seems to be making decisions or having a full personhood. And again, until the very final pages, reflections about the future of their relationship happened in the sort of parenthetical asides that we saw back in volume one with Odette's plot to marry Swann.

[EC]
Yeah, so true. You get such detailed and precise portraits of not only other major characters like Charlus, but also minor ones like the faithful of the Verdurin Salon. You can really picture them. You could recognize them in the street almost. But yeah, what you say about Albertine is such a key observation. She's so absent. I mean, she's really defined by that.

And what you're saying reminds me a bit of one of our earlier discussions about the relationship between painting and photography in portraiture and also the status of the photo negative in representation. Since Albertine is such a negative presence and so unknowable both to the narrator and then to us.

There's an interesting moment when the narrator's mother is tentatively saying, do you want to marry this girl?

[HW]
She's like, please don't marry this girl. We should mention that Albertine is an orphan who's not particularly well off. So this would hardly be a brilliant marriage.

[EC]

Yeah, but his mother's trying really hard to be nice to her son about Albertine. The narrator says like, well, what do you think of her? And the mother quoting Sévigné rather than even saying her own opinion, quotes Sévigné saying about somebody else, "I can only describe her in negatives." So the level of mediation occurring in that response, and then this emphasis on the negativity of Albertine is so, so striking.

But on Albertine, I think my experience of reading this volume made me have to resist all of the critical discourse about her because our project here is to read without too much literary criticism, without the weight of academia on our shoulders. I found it hard to do that this time because so much of what happens in volume four is really crucial in literary and historical accounts of sexuality. And yeah, as I said, the figure of Albertine is so, so commented on. So yeah, I found that difficult this time.

[HW]
Hard to get the other voices out of your head.

[EC]
Yeah, yeah, exactly. But on the other hand, almost the opposite of that, as I was reading this, I was really feeling like a naive reader as well. And thinking back to my responses to earlier volumes, honestly feeling like, damn, I have been set up by Proust here.

[HW]
It's actually so amazing that you felt that way, right? Because you're such a sophisticated reader, you read for a living and well! And yet Proust has managed to engineer the situation in which you feel set up. How did you feel set up? Tell us more.

[EC]
Well, it's the way that things come back in the Verdurin salon comes back, or the little group. Mademoiselle Vinteuil comes back, who was my winner from the first episode, but we'll come back to that later. All of these returns made me reconsider my memories of the earlier parts of the text.

And as you're saying, that's obviously very meta because that's what the narrator is going through, right? He's revisiting things and reconsidering all the time.

[HW]
This is that figure of the kaleidoscope that we talked about in episode two, and that just kind of keeps coming back. I feel like the reconsideration, the kaleidoscope, the photo negative, optical illusions.

[EC]
Yeah, and I just don't know how to put this – thank you for calling me sophisticated, but I don't really know how to put this in a sophisticated way! I just couldn't escape the kaleidoscope.

I mean, the return to Balbec, the revisiting of the time spent with his grandmother there was like, honestly, like a punch in the face. It was brutal. I loved that first version of it. And yeah, we'll talk about that later too. But also, do you remember how when we were reading the first two volumes, I think we both, but maybe me in particular, we kept talking about the warmth of tone, how charming the narrator was.

[HW]
I mean, what's happened to that? Yeah. I mean, that's a, that's a really good question, but at the same time, I do feel like in the first, so there's this first long scene, which we're not going to pay enough attention to today, where he's going to a party that he's not sure he's been invited to, and is desperately trying to get introduced to the host of the party.

There, I felt like that tone was still alive, right? Like you felt like you were accompanying this naive young man into this very rule bound and difficult situation, difficult in terms of the politesse and how to behave, a very encoded situation that he didn't know all the codes for, basically. And there, I felt like that warmth sort of survived.

And then I agree, the book became really very cutting.

[EC]
Yeah. Thinking about the generosity with which people's quirks are described: I mean, that's not really happening in the same way.

Although you're right that there are, you know, this whole thing is about sameness and difference. Again, that sounds so banal.

[HW]
But you know that the best books explore the banal and make them not banal, right? But summarizing them, you're going to sound like you've missed something. But I don't think you have. I think that's exactly right. It is about sameness and difference.

[EC]
Absolutely. Actually, as you were saying that, I also thought that maybe in some of the passages right at the end of the book, when the narrator is reflecting on what kind of true kindness, true generosity are, that then some of the earlier warmth does come back a little bit.

[HW]
Yeah, actually, I loved the end of the book. And maybe it's because I did feel some of that warmth seeping back in after a long time of cloud, and I felt rays of sun coming back.

[EC]
Yeah, I also loved the end. That's when I texted you saying like, I'm going to miss Proust so much when we're done.

[HW]
The next season will just be called “Pining for Proust.”

[EC]
Anyway, so overall, what I noticed was all the revisiting, actual and metaphorical. And Proust obviously knows that he's doing this. So haunting is a kind of motif of this volume.

And it's made explicit at the end when the narrator thinks about ghostliness. He refers to Swann as a kind of connoisseur of phantoms. And then says, “of phantoms pursued, forgotten, sought anew, these Balbec roads were full.”

So yeah, there's this interplay between previous and current lives. And there's a really compelling moment when the narrator takes a step back, talks about how many times in life your old life dies, as it were, such that we are constantly living in our own afterlife, if not *the* afterlife.

And there's also some interesting discussions about what happens when you actually do die, which we don't have time to get into now. So this question of constantly living in new lives that are afterlives and life being a series of losses in that way. It's quite a Montaignian motif. I work a lot on Montaigne. This is a way of thinking about where that kind of sweet weirdo kid has gone. You know, he's kind of died, but he's still there in his afterlife.

So shall we get into it?

[HW]
Yeah, I think we really have to talk about sex and sexuality. We can't avoid it, nor should we want to. I think it's what this volume is about.

And it's not as though the other, the previous volumes haven't addressed this theme. But up until this point, there's been an almost comic failure on the narrator's part to notice what we would now call queerness, except for when he spies on Mademoiselle Vinteuil in volume one, which we mentioned, he's like hiding in a bush and spying on this woman and her female lover, which he perceives as scandalous because it had created a scandal in Combray, the small town where he spent his childhood. And then in volume three, the hindsight version of the narrator says, proleptically says, listen, there's a situation here that involves homosexuality, but I'm not going to get into it yet.

So you kind of know it's coming.

[EC]
Yeah, it's heavily signaled.

[HW]
So yeah, there have been mentions previously.

But finally, at the very opening of this volume, the very first pages, there's this bravura scene that occupies the entire first chapter, which is dozens of pages long. And what we see is the narrator watching Charlus, the baron with whom he has had sort of fraught and repeated social interactions up until now. Charlus meets the tailor whose shop is in the courtyard of the building where the narrator's family lives, which is also where the Guermantes family lives.

He meets this tailor, Jupien, and the two of them sort of eye each other up and speedily proceed to a sexual encounter. So this young adult narrator, maybe 18, 20ish, it's unclear how old he is, but he's certainly not a fully fledged adult, sees all of this happen. And he thinks it's kind of funny.

But he also comments, “this scene was not positively comic. It was stamped with a strangeness, or if you like a naturalness, the beauty of which steadily increased.” And finally he gets it.

“Until then,” he says, “because I had not understood, I had not seen.”
After that, there's this insane long multi-page sentence that describes what homosexuality is according to the narrator or Proust in, again, the 19-teens or early 1920s. And this is a category. It's also perhaps a sequence of emotions. And a lot of the ways he describes homosexuality or queerness in this passage feel a little bit of that moment to me, at least as I read. But it's a fascinating passage in terms of the history of gender and sexuality. I think if that's a topic that interests you, I would recommend reading this excerpt, even if you leave the rest of Proust aside for now. What do you think, Emma?

[EC]
Yeah, I completely agree. I think it makes a lot of later criticism and a lot of later French literature makes sense in a new way. But it's quite an extraordinary sequence.

And that long sentence about homosexuality is also, it doesn't read intuitively at all in some ways in light of modern discourse. I mean, also the narrator / Proust is also kind of hedging even in the vocabulary. He talks about “what is sometimes most ineptly referred to as homosexuality” and the vocabulary, the kind of gender dynamics.

[HW]
Well, and part of why he thinks it's inept is that he thinks that some gay men are really secretly women. So it's almost like a version of homosexuality that is sort of foundationally trans in some way that again, feels not quite those categories. Now we think of them as related, but distinct. And he seems to be collapsing them. Do correct me if you disagree, Emma.

[EC]
No, no, I think that's right. I think he's like, Oh, I finally understood. But what he's understood is that Charlus is a woman.

And later in the volume, he says, Charlus has become more and more like a woman. But also confusingly, he's a woman in a way that is like extraordinarily virile. And he almost like seems like a woman because he seems like such a virile man. It's just very counterintuitive in some respects and

complex, but also very beautifully and weirdly described as ever. So we have to see this not as any kind of blueprint or manifesto for queerness, but maybe especially compelling for the idiosyncratic framing, the pièce de résistance of which is the comparison of Charlus and Jupien's coupling with the fertilization of an orchid. So I think this has to be one of the most famous parts of the *Recherche* actually.

In this particular encounter, the narrator presents a vision of homosexuality in which it is as improbable to find a suitable mate as it is for a certain wasp to find and fertilize a certain orchid. And this is kind of happening at the same time because there's an orchid next to the narrator.

[HW]
Right. The narrator is he's watching the courtyard because he's hoping to see the wasp come and find Madame de Guermantes's orchid, which he places on the windowsill so that the wasp may fertilize it.

[EC]
Yeah, exactly. But he's distracted by Charlus and Jupien, so he never gets to see the wasp and the orchid. So he sees what he should not while failing to see what would be licit to see. So on the one hand, he spies on Charlus and Jupien, but does he actually definitely see them? I feel like he's overhearing as well.

[HW]
No, he does that amazing thing where he climbs through somewhere and perches up top a wall to peer down at them. He's clambering into a vacant room that's like a storeroom or something. And then he peers down from above at them. So it's really extremely voyeuristic. He has found a hidden spot from which to spy on them.

[EC]
But he's also hearing them, right? And saying that they're making these extraordinary sounds. So it's really sensory.

[HW]
Indeed. So he's seeing and hearing that while failing to see the wasp and the orchid. And he makes this kind of acerbic comment on that relationship between the wasp and the orchid and Charlus and Jupien.

He says, “this is simply a comparison of providential chances, whatever they may be, without the slightest scientific claim to establish a relation between certain botanical laws and what is sometimes most ineptly termed homosexuality.”

So that's the bit that I briefly quoted just now. So he's saying that it's just a comparison of providential chances. That's the key. This is unlikely, and yet it happens. And that is something that is described at length.

Should we have a look at a bit of it, Hannah?

[HW]
Let's see how exactly this works. So the narrator describes [it] as follows.

“Like so many creatures of the animal and vegetable kingdoms, like the plant, which would produce vanilla, but because in its structure, the male organ is divided by a partition from the female remains sterile unless the hummingbirds or certain tiny bees convey the pollen from one to the other, or man fertilizes them by artificial means, Monsieur de Charlus (and here the word fertilize must be understood in a moral sense, since in the physical sense, the union of male with male is and must be sterile, but it is no small matter that a person may encounter the sole pleasure which he is capable of enjoying, and that every creature here below can impart to some other his music or his fragrance or his flame) Monsieur de Charlus was one of those men who may be called exceptional, because however many they may be, the satisfaction so easy in others of their sexual requirements depends upon the coincidence of too many conditions and of conditions too difficult to ensure.”

[EC]
A rare and exceptional situation is being described. Hearing you read it, I was like, gosh, it's so parenthetical and so many subordinate clauses. I mean, I know that's the characteristic of Proust in general, but the way that they work here is very interesting to follow. I like how he says, in parenthesis, it is no small matter that a person may encounter the sole pleasure which he is capable of enjoying.

[HW]
I agree. That's buried in several sub clauses, literally within a parenthesis, and I do think that's the heart of it here. He's actually not so interested, I think, in the fertilization. He's more interested in the pleasure that's available and that can, through this series of providential chances, be achieved.

[EC]
We know that orchids also have a larger kind of symbolic sexual significance in Proust, don't they?

[HW]
In Proust and in life. [laughter] Yes, but indeed, we did see orchids in volume one, where the cattleya, which is a type of orchid, was the gateway into Odette and Swann's sexual relationship.

[EC]
Yes, so in some ways, this is kind of an extraordinary, exceptional moment where something new is being introduced, but there's also a kind of repetition.

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[EC]
We have talked about how homosexuality is extremely important for Proust in his life and in his writing, and indeed in this volume, and the discussion of and revelation of different kinds of queer

relationships are a kind of key thing here. But the narrator, for various reasons, seems to be the only straight one, really.

[HW]
See, I think emphasis on the "seems," seeing as his girlfriend's name is Albertine, like Albert. But yes, okay.

[EC]
Indeed. And we get a lot of information about his apparently, at least superficially heterosexual desires, you know, when we've been encountering those since the beginning. And now he's an adult, and they're becoming a little less about fantasy and a little more about activity. He's really excited about meeting all these girls in Balbec. He's not totally fixed on Albertine, even though he does become fixated on her later on.

[HW]
Yes.

[EC]
So the first time we see her in this volume, he manipulates her into coming to visit him late at night, because he's been at this party that you mentioned before, the Princesse de Guermantes, turning down all these other invitations of what to do later, because he's like, Albertine is coming. She's coming to see me.

[HW]
Right. I'll get to hook up later. I have a booty call later, is basically the vibe.

[EC]
Yeah, yeah. So that's where he's at, at the beginning. And then I found this scene when he's basically bullied her into coming to see him. She finally arrives, he's really happy. Is he happy? He's really satisfied, at least. And then I found this scene really funny and really weird in the way that it describes their sexual relationship. And so I am making us talk about this.

[HW]
It is an amazing scene. Would you read it to us? The slightly odd scene that you're obsessed with?

[EC]
So when she's finally there, and the narrator's like, okay, well, I just wanted to get straight to the physical because I thought that would be best. But this isn't actually described. What happens is the following.

He says, "I asked Albertine if she would like something to drink. I seem to see oranges over there and water, she said, that will be perfect. I was thus able to taste together with her kisses, that refreshing coolness, which has seemed to me to be superior to them at the Princesse de Guermantes. And the orange squeezed into the water seemed to yield to me as I drank the secret

life of its ripening growth, its beneficent action upon certain states of that human body, which belongs to so different a kingdom, its powerlessness to make that body live, but on the other hand, the process of irrigation by which it was able to benefit it, countless mysteries unveiled by the fruit to my sensory perception, but not at all to my intelligence."

[HW]
"The process of irrigation." I'm sorry. That's gross.

[EC]
I absolutely love it. I just find this so funny. And then she just, as soon as this has been said, I'll just, you just go. So this is it, right? The drinking of the orange juice is the interaction that they have. And I will say that like juice as sex comes back much later on when, at the Verdurin, when Charlus says like, actually I'll have the strawberry juice.

[HW]
Oh yeah, that's right. That's right.

[EC]
There's something going on with this, but I wanted to bring this because as I said, I found it funny. I think it is characteristic, not of the whole volume at all, but of the surprising metaphors or associations that Proust and the narrator make.

[HW]
Well, between the botanical and the sexual, right. It seems to just be coming back again.

[EC]
Yeah, absolutely. And then it's something about the end of the sentence, "countless mysteries unveiled by the fruit to my sensory perception, but not at all to my intelligence." And that actually does seem really crucial to the representation of sexuality in this text.

[HW]
And it also seems crucial to the representation of Albertine, no? Like she's a very sensory creature, but is totally ungraspable in terms of any kind of like, she seems sort of, again, only defined by negatives. Yeah.

Except for the ways in which her presence is registered by the senses, like here, the fact that her kisses taste like orange juice, but we don't have any sense of like what she's like.

[EC]
No, no, exactly. And that dichotomy that's being presented between like the senses and the intelligence, you know, and this kind of the thirst for knowledge, if you'll permit me. Yes.

Through the way that the narrator deals with his desires and relationships is interesting to me. So I think this is both weird and fun, but also characteristic. And he's kind of saying, I don't really know what's going on, but I liked it.

[HW]
Yeah, he does remain fairly naive in a lot of ways about sexuality, despite being increasingly interested in it and increasingly attempting to analyze the data that he receives as he goes through his daily life.

[EC]
You know, we also find him absolutely unable to compute or preempt the possibility of bisexuality. So he said that he's really worried that Albertine is a lesbian, but when he thinks she's interested sexually in St-Loup, he's like, Oh, it's fine. She can't also be interested in women. You know, so his naivety that we've discussed many times, you know, does, does remain.

So the narrator's primal or instinctive desires are very present in this volume, and they're often framed as kind of appetite. But there is a long section in the kind of early middle of the book where that is cauterized and it is cauterized by grief very explicitly. So, and it's compared again to appetite.

So the narrator says grief had destroyed in me the possibility of desire as completely as a high fever takes away one's appetite.

[HW]
Yeah, this is the grief for his grandmother, which listeners you may recall that when we discussed the death of his grandmother in episode three about volume three, we noticed that it was like oddly underdeveloped, that it felt like he, the narrator observed the scenes of her death, but that the emotional content was somehow missing. And here we find it. And we have a retrospective explanation of that sensation from reading volume three.

So he arrives in Balbec. He's exhausted from the trip. He goes up to his room and he suddenly realizes that his grandmother is dead.

And this passage starts with a five word sentence. Now in Proust, the sentences are often pages and pages long. So to have a five word fragmentary sentence is already a pretty strong beginning to this passage.

And that sentence is “Bouleversement de toute ma personne,” or as the revised [Scott] Moncrieff would have it, “upheaval of my entire being.”

And the sentence itself is an upheaval because it's so short. And so really formally it's reflecting what's going on. And he suddenly very physically through an anodyne action, again, like the eating of the madeleine through something totally quotidian, which in this case is taking off his boot, realizes that he will never be with his grandmother again physically. Emma, could you maybe read us the rest of the passage?

[EC]
Yeah. And I'll give a little bit of context as well. I mean, this is incredibly moving.

And it's just, yeah, I also will quickly say that it also just transforms the previous time in Balbec because we do learn that she was really unwell the whole time and concealing that from the narrator, just as the text conceals that from us. So this relationship and this time that they have together, which seems so lovely and easy, actually turns out to have been really difficult for her.

But anyway, let's talk about where he suddenly remembers and re-encounters her at the same time as realizing that she's actually gone. So he starts to remove his boots and he remembers his grandmother removing them on his first stay when he was also really exhausted and dispirited. And I think we talked in episode two about how he found travel really difficult and a new place really difficult. So she's there at that point to help him cope.

The rhyme between the two physical actions of him removing his boots, his grandmother having removed them in the past, allows him to think of her as she was when she was alive, rather than just as a mere name, who he doesn't miss that much. So the grief finally hits him and he is devastated. And this passage is just so incredible and it's so sad. Here it is.
“I had just perceived in my memory, stooping over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother as she had been on that first evening of our arrival. The face, not of that grandmother whom I had been astonished and remorseful at having so little missed, and who had nothing in common with her save her name, but of my real grandmother, of whom, for the first time since the afternoon of her stroke in the Champs-Elysées, I now recaptured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection. This reality does not exist for us so long as it has not been recreated by our thought. Otherwise, men who have been engaged in a titanic conflict, all of them be great epic poets. And thus, in my wild desire to fling myself into her arms, it was only at that moment, more than a year after her burial, because of that anachronism, which so often prevents the calendar of facts from corresponding to the calendar of feelings, that I became conscious that she was dead.”

[HW]
Oh, that idea of an anachronism, or the two calendars, and just the brilliance of the way the form of the novel puts us on those two calendars. We too have passed the time of reading, at the very least, between the death of the grandmother and the grief for the grandmother.

[EC]
Yeah, the calendar of facts and the calendar of feelings, it was quite, quite unforgettable.

[HW]
What also kills me here is the difference between the name and the reality, right?

[EC]
Yeah.

[HW]
That he doesn't miss her name, but he misses his “real grandmother.” And that's just such a simple phrase, and not baroque at all, “my real grandmother,” but somehow just such a gut punch, really.

[EC]
Yeah, I've never encountered something like this, I don't think, that so accurately represents grief. And the way that you can't really choose the moment that you're visited by the really visceral memory of the person, and the kind of the physicality of the sensation that they had once really existed in the world.

[HW]
Later on in the passage, the narrator goes on, devastatingly, “I knew that I might wait hour after hour, that she would never again be by my side. I had only just discovered this, because I had only just on feeling her for the first time alive, real, making my heart swell to breaking point on finding her at last, learned that I had lost her forever.”

That finding, of course, being her taking off his boot the other time. So, he realizes there's this contradiction between the survival of his grandmother within the ongoing experience of her affection, as it has become internalized. So, yes, it's in memory, but it's kind of more than memory, right? It can be almost reenacted by physical forms. But that very reenaction drives home her disappearance. And he goes on to say that period of affection is only this brief window. And outside of that period, they are strangers. Before his birth, they have no relationship. And after her death, they, in some sort of fundamental way, have no relationship.

[EC]
Yeah. And I think that's something that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren can particularly express, the brief window of coexistence. I mean, it is true about grief in a larger sense as well, depending, because calendars just don't operate on a kind of mechanical, kind of expected... you know, there's no set timeline for anything. But I do think that there is something particular about the fact that this is his grandmother here and a connection with a much, much earlier time and the kind of expectation that he's going to have to live a long time without her, which they do talk about in Balbec before.

We find here so many of the key questions of the project, you know, you've got the involuntary memory of the grandmother, the question of anachronism, the question of different kinds of timelines, and then the fact that he's feeling at his most alive himself.

[HW]
He's feeling at his most alive himself in a sense because he is fully feeling this human emotion, right? Like he's really going through it. And as horrible as those moments are, they are moments where you are most keenly aware of, perhaps, what it means to be a human who is alive.

[EC]

Yeah. And then carrying her life in him, in some ways makes him feel extra conscious of his physical existence.

[HW]
Yeah, that's right.

[EC]
That's right.

[HW]
And we see also his mother really struggling with her grief because she accompanies him to Balbec. And we see that she is sort of transforming in some ways into her mother, but obviously that's also like a conscious or unconscious mimicry, almost like a simulacrum, like you were talking earlier about haunting.

She seems very haunted by the loss of her mother.

[EC]
Yeah.

[HW]
So even as we see both of them working through their grief, we do also see that intermittence and sort of alternation that you signaled before, Emma. He is eventually able to feel desire again. He's eventually able to crawl out of his grief enough to feel desire.

And it's striking that the first time we see that resurface, what he wants most is Albertine's laughter.

[EC]
So he's kind of been withdrawn from life, from social life, from his ordinary life. And I think in some ways the structure of this episode reflects that. So most of the text is about that other life.

And then this is kind of very intense, isolated passage about grief. And then one day, he says, “I decided to send word to Albertine that I would see her presently.” I should say she's been trying to see him all the time, but he's been rejecting invitations.

So he said he decided he would see her presently. This was because “on a morning of intense and premature heat, the myriad cries of children at play, of bathers despotting themselves, of news vendors had traced for me in lines of fire, in wheeling interlacing flashes, the scorching beach, which the little waves came up one by one to sprinkle with their coolness. Then the symphony concert had begun, mingled with the lapping of the surf, through which the violins hummed like a swarm of bees that had strayed out over the sea. At once, I had longed to hear Albertine's laughter.”

[HW]

So it's this great expansion into the world. And what he immediately longs to add to that world is the sound of Albertine's laughter. And I just find that so striking that it's not an orange juice make-out session, but that it's in fact a sound that's not even necessarily sexual that he's really looking for.

[EC]
Yeah, she's really defined by her laughter, isn't she? But that's also a figure for how much he doesn't understand her.

[HW]
Yeah, right.

[EC]
Because laughter is the sound that he doesn't totally know how to read and that makes him interested and uncomfortable. Their relationship is very complex.

[HW]
It's partially complex because it's so inscrutable, just like her laughter. We've mentioned this already, but part of the problem is that the relationship seems less one of love than of jealousy.

[EC]
But the jealousy is also the thing that sustains his obsessive attention to Albertine. It's why she becomes the one out of all these other girls and women who we've been hearing about in some ways. Although we have already seen him be jealous or a bit possessive of Gilberte, and the reason that he gets over her is also kind of bizarre and inscrutable, as we have discussed in Episode 2.

[HW]
Yes. He's constantly inventing ways to keep her with him. And, you know, being quite devious and unpleasant. And manipulative. He invents a fiancée whom he breaks things off with it. He's not above any ruse, basically, to keep her against her will, very clearly against her will. She'll clearly have other plans that she's excited about, and he manages to cage her. And indeed, I mean, the next volume is called *The Prisoner*. So I think we can anticipate who *La Prisonnière*, the female prisoner, shall be.

No great genius to put that together. But what's so interesting is that he's certainly jealous of her. It's not so clear whether he loves her or indeed likes her very much. It kind of reminds me of Swann and Odette, right? That's the reenactment of their figura, right? I talked about how they were kind of in a typological relationship, and here we see the fulfillment of the prefiguration that they had offered.

[EC]
And that's especially resonant because, I mean, Swann, I think, has died by this point, actually. But just before he dies, he goes to that party that we talked about that happens at the beginning. And they have a conversation about jealousy.

So he's kind of like handing on the baton. Right. But it's not only jealousy, is it?

There is a kind of intertwining between jealousy and love. And those are two concepts that Proust is thinking about a lot. I mean, also in the relationship between Charlus and Morel that we don't have time to talk about. But Charlus is also very much in love towards the end of this volume.

[HW]
And it's equally manipulative. The model that the narrator is getting is that if you're infatuated with someone, the move is to manipulate them into being with you as much as possible.

[EC]
Yeah. So there's this kind of intertwining or kind of double motivation of jealousy and actual love. I don't know if actual love, is that fair to call it that? But anyway, that is represented in the following passage, for example.

“I was perhaps in love with Albertine, but I did not dare to let her see my love so that though it existed in me, it could only be an abstract truth of no value until it has been tested by experience. As it was, it seemed to me unrealizable and outside the plane of life.” (That's love on the one hand.) “As for my jealousy, it urged me to leave Albertine as little as possible, although I knew that it would not be completely cured until I had parted from her forever.”

[HW]
I find it so interesting here that love is abstract, but could potentially be tested by experience and also something that must remain hidden. So he thinks that he's successfully keeping something as it were in the realm of shadows, only maybe ever to be projected into this realm. So odd.

I'm using Platonic language here because I find it deeply weird. But then jealousy, on the other hand, is just like super glue. I find it truly strange that he would attempt to hide something that could be, I would say, the only possible motive for jealousy. Why would you be jealous of the person you're hooking up with unless you're kind of in love with them? Clearly, I don't get it.

So as we've seen here, love and jealousy are two different things. And they're sort of in an ambivalent relationship. They're almost like two poles that pull against each other.

[EC]
Yeah. And fundamentally, this is a relationship defined by ambivalence, as Proust makes clear in quite a beautiful passage that I'll only quote very briefly. But it's where the narrator is imagining Albertine kind of down the coast, and the same wind is brushing their faces.

And he compares them to being like two children, “as in those games in which two children find themselves momentarily out of sight and a shot of one another, and yet, while far apart, remain together.”

So there is this interplay of distance that is kind of part of the stimulation of their relationship, but also the way that they then are kind of seeking to come back together. And jealousy is a kind of motor for that.

[HW]
Right. And the sense in which they're involved in the same game. They're both players in the same game with similar motivations or goals.

[EC]
A game that sometimes is funny, sometimes is touching, doesn't always seem to be very fun. No, it doesn't always seem to be very fun for anyone. For either participant.

[HW]
Well, Emma, even though we've hit the big themes today of, I don't know, sex, death, the irretrievable passage of time. I think we can both agree that this was also sort of a funny and silly book.

[EC]
Yeah, for long stretches, right? So we said that this is all about sex and desire and death. But there are very long sections that are not about this at all.

They're about essentially how to say hi to people at a gathering. Funny character sketches like these two bellhop or hotel staff that are referred to as tomato one and tomato two, for example, who I loved. Shame they didn't get more of a hearing.

And then we also find, as we have discussed about previous volumes, all the usual interesting and observations on art, literature and fashion. This really funny scene with the compliments about how Chopin, the composer, is out, but then he's in and everyone's confused and just trying to say the right thing and be cool. All of that is still there.

And I think actually the way that the very sex, death and time are interwoven between those is another really intellectually compelling part of this read.

[HW]
Yes. Yeah, I would agree. This volume, this volume was totally, extremely varied.

[EC]
Yeah.

[HW]
And that was part of the like, at times, maybe a little bit jarring. But but also, I would say one of the pleasures of this volume in particular.

[EC]

Yeah, I would summarize that it was hard work, but made me think so much very, very stimulating. Yeah.

[HW]
Emma, I think it's time for our winners and losers.

[EC]
Yeah, absolutely. Emma, who was your winner? I got a kind of comedy winner.

My winner, again, for episode four was Mademoiselle Vinteuil.

[HW]
Okay. Fine. Explain yourself.

[EC]
Her big lesbian energy.

[HW]
Her big lesbian energy being what convinces the narrator to marry Albert.

[EC]
Yeah, yeah, exactly. Let me just quote incredibly briefly and we'll move on. “The words that friend is Mademoiselle Vinteuil had been the open sesame, which I should have been incapable of discovering by myself that had made Albertine penetrate to the depths of my lacerated heart.”

[HW]
Oh my god.

[EC]
I know. We don't even meet her in this, but she's just so powerful. And her presence, the memory of her from volume one is so powerful that she wins in the impact that she has on our characters.

[HW]
She's very powerful for someone that we never actually interact with.

Yeah, exactly so far. So far, so far. She wins for me.

What about you?

[HW]
I wrote “nobody?” and I think we can leave it there.

[EC]
Yeah, yeah, I think that's the strong other answer.

[HW]
Who was the loser for you?

[EC]
Oh my goodness. Okay, so my loser was Cottard.

[HW]
Okay, fair. But do you want to say briefly why? Again, he's the physician who was a dope in the first volume and is back to make ignorant comments about breasts in this volume.

[EC]
Yeah, it's because of that, you know, we learned that his favorite joke is about, you know, one of the characters, the sculptor says, Oh, I know her. And Cottard rushes in to be like, Do you mean you know her biblically?

[HW]
He is the worst.

[EC]
He's the worst. He's making all these like, gross, lewd, old man jokes.

[HW]
Yeah, well, and what's more, his business is not thriving on the coast. It's true. He's losing.

[EC]
He's such a loser. And just one more thing about why he's a loser. At one point, Charlus thinks – he's wrong, but he thinks that Cottard is sexually interested in him. And he is so revolted that we get like three pages on how terrible it is to be desired by somebody that you find repulsive. So Cottard is my loser.

Who was your loser?

[HW]
My loser is a bit more sincere., I'm sorry. I mean, Cottard is a loser, it's a great pick. My loser was his mother.

[EC]
Oh, yeah.

[HW]
It seems like she's losing on all fronts. She's really struggling with grief about her mother. And meanwhile, her son is getting involved with and now planning to marry someone whom she doesn't like.

[EC]
Yeah, and their relationship is quite close, but also marked by alienation. So yeah, she's a very sad figure in this.

[HW]
Yeah, I just feel like she feels almost like a thwarted ghost just drifting around.

[EC]
She truly does.

[HW]
And not part of the action, but hurt by the action.

[EC]
Yeah, that's a very true observation and also a different kind of definition of loser. She is fundamentally marked by loss.

[HW]
Oh, right. That's true, too. Yeah. So it's a very literal loser in this case.

[EC]
And where are we then as we wrap up in terms of this project as a whole?

[HW]
Well, actually, there's something important to say here. This was the last volume that was published while Proust was still alive. So though he had sort of quote unquote finished before he died, he was an obsessive reviser and auto interpolator going back and adding and adding and adding.

And that's why the first four volumes are deeply long. We can agree for all that we've loved them. They've been really quite long.

The next three were published posthumously. And so they were in a state of enough completion that they could be published, but they didn't kind of have that fast as they say in French, the stuffing of him going back and adding and refining and adding and refining. So we're kind of falling into the last three volumes being much shorter and much less revised.

[EC]
Yeah, it's gonna be interesting. I also think we're going to get more of the miserable Albertine.

[HW]
More of Albertine's misery. Indeed, the next volume, *The Prisoner*, the following *Albertine disparue* or *Albertine Disappeared*.

[EC]
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.

[HW]
Proust Curious is hosted by Emma Claussen and Hannah Weaver and produced by Michael Goldsmith. You can reach us at proustcurious at gmail.com. Join us next time for volume five, *La Prisonniere.*

[Both]
Au revoir!