

PC 5 - V1 (1)

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

EC: And I'm Emma Claussen, 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'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...

EC: ... and remember things Proust.

Today we're talking about the fifth volume of *À la Recherche*, *La Prisonnière*, whose English title is *The Captive*. The titular captive is mostly, but not exclusively, the narrator's love interest slash girlfriend slash something, Albertine.

The narrator has prevailed upon her to live with him in Paris, keeping this a secret from most of his acquaintances and referring to her as his prisoner. Other than popping to his neighbor, Madame de Guermantes, to acquire the best fashions for his captive, and a visit to the Verdurin, the narrator mostly stays at home in a state of languor. He obsessively analyzes his feelings about Albertine and tries both to keep her with him and away from her lovers and to know all the details of her life. Of course, this knowledge continually eludes him and, at the end of the volume, she packs her bags and leaves without saying goodbye.

HW: Put more simply, a man tries to trap a woman in his home and wonders whether that's love.

EC: Indeed. Before we talk in more detail about the volume, it's time for the part of our podcast where we ask 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. So, what is today's question, Hannah?

HW: It's more of a prompt, really. But this time it is *le don de la nature que je voudrais avoir*, which is to say the gift of nature or maybe natural talent that I would like to have.

And Proust answered, very *à propos* for our volume today, *la volonté et des séductions*, willpower and seduction. What about you, Emma? Is it willpower and seduction for you?

EC: Well, who doesn't want to have those gifts? Although I slightly wonder whether they're not learned behaviors, right? I mean, maybe that's also a natural gift. I'm not going to nitpick.

I think that the gift that I would most like to have is a bit more boring, actually, and it is the gift of being able to fall asleep easily, which is also very relevant.

HW: Aha, that is! Oh, that's a good one.

EC: Yeah. And especially on airplanes.

HW: That would be really great. My mother, it's like the white noise of the airplane puts her instantly to sleep. She's usually asleep before the wheels go up. It's wild.

EC: That's awesome. Good for her. She has the gift. The gift that I desire. What about you, Hannah? What gift would you like to have?

HW: This is also very *à propos*. I guess, is there a possible gift of nature that's not *à propos*? I'm starting to wonder. Mine is memory. I wish I had a better memory.

EC: Oh, really?

HW: Yeah. I feel like my memory is deeply mediocre. And if only I could remember things better, I would be a better scholar, friend and person. So I wish I had a better memory.

I suppose I could attempt to train it or something.

EC: Yeah, the memory arts.

HW: Yeah, I don't know that, I don't see myself building a memory palace. Alas.

Let's talk about the book at hand. How did you find volume five? What did you notice this time?

EC: I anticipated that I'd be less into this one, partly because of conversations I had beforehand with people who'd read it, because I've not read it.

And they were like, oh, it's kind of boring. He's just obsessing about Albertine, the earlier volumes where he's younger are much more fun. So I was like, expecting this to be hard work. But I'm actually a huge fan. I found this, perhaps worryingly, really interesting and really, really fun to read. What did I notice? I noticed the kind of slight, slight shift in style, perhaps because you reminded us last time that this is the first of the volumes that Proust didn't live to revise. So the style feels a little different to me a bit more aphoristic, you know, sometimes with greater and lesser success, sometimes it overlaps into *cliché*, actually. And then also, it's quite a signaled, like move to more reflective and internal style. So, we spend pages and pages and pages more than previously, I think, just with his thoughts.

Yeah, just thoughts. And that is because he is staying at home for most of this.

HW: Yeah, he's just sort of languishing, not to bring up one of your keywords.

EC: Yeah, God, don't start talking to me about languishing. For listeners, I've been working on the theme of languishing in Renaissance writing, and especially Renaissance poetry for several years now, which actually I was thinking of a lot reading this volume as well. The kind of mode of Petrarchan or sub-Petrarchan desire where you always need to be languishing after something inaccessible is very much present in this book.

So yeah, five stars. It reminded me of this like hit novel from a few years ago that I think you've read as well called *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Because the narrator's like, you know, he lies to Albertine that his doctor has prescribed him bed rest.

And you know, that's a book in which this young, hot, rich woman in New York goes through some life things. I think she had her parents die and leave her money. And she kind of quits the rat race and enters a kind of narcotic trance for a certain amount of time.

And, you know, narcotics are involved in this volume too, to a certain extent, like different kinds of sleeping remedies that the narrator tries out. So why is he staying at home? He's staying at home because he is too stressed to go out with Albertine because he's so hypervigilant about what she's doing, what she's thinking, who she's noticing. And then he says, 'but even if one lives under the equivalent of a bell jar, associations of ideas, memories continue to act upon us'.

So that's the signal for what this volume is going to be like, which also, you know, you got that reference to the bell jar. I mean, in French it's *cloche pneumatique*, so it's not quite the same thing, but there's also a kind of literary reference there.

HW: Yeah, there is something really hermetic about this volume.

And I also like the citation you just gave us about being under a bell jar, because the idea that you are enclosed and yet it is glass and somewhat permeable seems to be really opposite to what's happening in this novel. And one of the things that comes in to him as he's lying in bed, which just seems to be what he's often doing, are sounds from the street. And that was something that I really noticed and also really remembered. I had read this volume before, but only once and quite long ago at this point, gosh, nearly 20 years ago. But the one image that I really remembered was this image of the street vendors crying out and him hearing them from inside the room. So, the premise of this scene, which is sort of a borderline a set piece, right? It's like it goes on over several pages and he develops several themes.

But the premise is that the chance of the itinerant food merchants outside his window recall ecclesiastical or medieval France because they're vaguely liturgical. And he compares them to the drone of the priest in a pulpit and compares them to plain chant. He also says that their tone seems to enclose some sort of mystery, like the mystery at the heart of the medieval story of Melisande as it was rendered in opera by Debussy, who in turn was adapting a play by the Belgian playwright Maeterlinck.

So it's very out of remove from the Middle Ages, but nevertheless, it is a medieval story. So it's the sort of interesting medieval romance slash liturgy that's happening, not in a sort of high drama way, but rather just because of the manner in which street vendors are attempting to sell their wares. So I pulled a quote for you, Emma.

'The old clothes man intoned old clothes, any old clothes, old clothes'. That's me attempting to render an ellipsis in the text 'with the same pause between the final syllables as if he had been intoning in plain chant per omnia saecula saeculorum'. And I actually was listening to recordings of plain chant to make sure I understood what he was talking about. It's really a pause of no sound. It's just sort of an extension of the previous sound and sort of holding the note as it were.

EC: Oh my gosh, it's so good.

HW: It's so good. It's going back to some of what we've talked about in previous episodes and in our library chat, which is a video you can find on YouTube, listeners, of this comparison of his daily life to forms of art from the distant past.

EC: Yeah. The thing that I also want to say about this, which I also loved this street vendor scene, it's just beautiful and really fun, is that although this is a volume about kind of about misery, really, about unhappy love, there are all these quite joyous and fun and funny scenes in it. So when he's listening to these street vendors, he's really enjoying it. He's enjoying it because he enjoys it.

He's enjoying being able to do this kind of thinking with the sound and music. When he first mentions listening to street sounds, he says 'but it was above all in myself, I heard with the rapture, a new sound emitted by the violin within'. So that really says that he's having a great time at various points in this otherwise quite saturnine text.

HW: Right. But that gets right back to that idea of the bell jar, that things are penetrating and affecting what is within the jar, even as the jar stays somehow closed. It's fascinating.

Should we move on to discuss some of the sort of major themes or points of interest that we found in this volume?

EC: Absolutely. And the street vendor scene is actually a good jumping off point for the first one that we wanted to talk about. Because effectively, what's happening is he's in bed. It's kind of between sleep and waking. And I don't know if you ever have this, Hannah. I mean, I'm not sure you're one for a lie in. Occasionally, I am partial. And sometimes I have the radio on and I'll tune in and out of what they're saying on the radio. And that's what he's doing in the street vendor scene. Sometimes he's like, oh, damn, I missed this bit because I was asleep.

HW: Yes. Right. Right. Yeah.

EC: And in fact, sleep and the kind of interplay between sleep and waking, different kinds of sleep is huge, huge in this year of rest and relaxation.

HW: Right. But it's not only his sleep, which is part of what is so interesting, because I do feel like sleep is normally something that is deeply personal. And maybe you can reflect upon your own sleep and sleep practices, but it's hard to access the sleep of another. But not for him.

EC: We should say that he's been kind of obsessively, intermittently analyzing his own sleep. Yeah. Throughout all of the volumes, including in the really well-known opening, when he has to go to bed and it's very stressful for him because the narrator is not somebody who sleeps easily.

HW: But also in the in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, there's a huge set piece about sleep and memory.

EC: Absolutely. And a really nice scene in Doncières, in Guermantes, at which point Proust says 'no life really can be written without sleep'. So that's how major of a thing sleep is in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. But sleep is particular, as you say, in volume five, because of all the scenes of Albertine asleep.

HW: He explicitly says that sleeping Albertine is his favorite Albertine to spend time with. But as compared to like Albertine hanging out, he prefers it when she's sleeping. It's kind of similar to the reason he stays indoors. Albertine awake is a source of stress for him. But Albertine asleep is just sort of an artistic object of contemplation and can be removed into a different realm. He compares her repeatedly to a plant. Here's a quick citation, 'as though by falling asleep, she had become a plant'. And then he goes on to say 'she was animated now only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me'. So again, it's this idea that you can possess or control a plant in a way that you maybe can't an animal.

EC: And we know that he does love plants. We know that he loves plants. That's right. Actually, weirdly, that connection between him like embracing hawthorn bushes back in volume one, and, and his desire – because it is quite sexual, right? This this contemplation of sleeping Albertine and yeah, listeners should know that it's quite disturbing in some ways, the way that he

manipulates her sleeping body. So he kind of, he kind of oscillates between finding her incredibly, like physically compelling while she's asleep, but then also seeing her as this kind of degree zero of life, I guess.

HW: Yeah, that's right.

EC: He gets really obsessed with her breathing. At one point, you're saying that that contains the whole life of the charming captive. And I thought that was interesting when he said the whole life, because at another point, yeah, we'll get onto this later, but he gives all these like fleeting definitions of love. And he says, 'love is a desire for the whole'. So, in some ways, it is where a kind of wholeness is temporarily achieved.

HW: Right? But that's also interesting, because if love is the desire for the whole, then love is like an awareness of (and this is very platonic, but) an awareness of the lack, right, of the whole, and here he is somehow having the whole, which maybe means that it is not in fact, a scene of love, but a scene of possession, which we'll talk about the entanglement of love and possession and in this volume at length later on.

EC: Yeah, I think this problem that you're evoking comes across in a complicated way in the quotation about sleep that I wanted to bring, because in this one, he's watching her breathe, which he loves to see her breathe, and says his jealousy has subsided, but somehow it's a kind of really ecstatic moment for him. So it's one of those times when he's not jealous, which normally is what means that he's in love, and yet he's experiencing something else. I'll just read it.

It's another, obviously, as you must be expecting, listeners, a weird one. 'My jealousy subsided, for I felt that Albertine had become a creature that breathes and is nothing else besides, as was indicated by the regular suspiration in which is expressed that pure physiological function which, wholly fluid, has the solidity neither of speech nor of silence, and in its ignorance of all evil, drawn seemingly rather from a hollowed reed than from a human being, that breath, truly paradisiacal to me, who at such moments felt Albertine to be withdrawn from everything, not only physically but morally, was the pure song of the angels, and yet...?'

Yeah, so I could have stopped there, but I just wanted to do one more sentence. Yes, please do. To show that that's a really, another really fleeting moment, 'and yet in that breathing, I thought to myself of a sudden that perhaps many names of people born on the stream of memory must be revolving?'

So, he has this like ecstatic moment where he's like, she almost doesn't exist. She's just the pure breathing song of angels, and then he's like, oh, but maybe there is actually something going on. He can't, he can't hold on to this moment.

HW: Dreaming of people, dreaming of names that are almost coming out of her mouth. So his jealousy sort of revives in that last sentence.

EC: Yeah, so you rephrase that there has to be a lack for there to be love in the Proustian and in many other visions of it. And maybe the lack here is almost everything about her. She's nothing except her breathing, a hollowed reed.

HW: Which is an insane thing to desire. And it does seem like he actively desires this, as we've said, you want to desire an empty vessel.

EC: Yeah. And he says it elsewhere as well, like the pleasure of feeling her simply being alive. That's kind of Albertine's bare life, the hollowed reed, which reminds me of the definition, I think, of man in Pascal, which is a thinking reed, right?

HW: A thinking reed, goodness, you're telling me? But what it renders, Albertine, I think somewhat incontrovertibly, but also very mysteriously, is replaceable. Because if all you need is a creature breathing, or if the creature breathing is what allows you that sense that you're touching the angels, and allows you to let go of your jealousy, then it could be anyone, no?

EC: Yeah, so it's puzzling.

HW: But that's also the getting back to what we were talking about last episode about Albertine being really kind of a cipher, and so elusive that she doesn't seem to really have qualities, or the qualities that she has, don't quite hang together or form a sense of a coherent character or person. Yeah, he talks about that in relation to her face as well, she's got all these different facial traits that kind of don't all fit together.

EC: It's like a kind of abstract painting.

HW: Right, these layers of different sorts of reliefs, that's an extended description that he goes into, that's sort of like, her hair is on one plane while her cheek is on another, but it's a very odd way of thinking about a being in space. Yeah, this whole question of, is Albertine replaceable? Like, to what extent is their relationship one that is founded on love? And if it is founded on love, what does Proust mean by love? Or how does he conceive of it? This is another thing that worried us.

EC: Yeah, I think at various points, we slightly disagreed, didn't we?

HW: I think we did. We got into a bit of an argument in our document. Which is always fun.

EC: About whether or not he loves her, which is kind of absurd.

HW: Well, I think you're on team, he does love her and I'm on team, he has no idea what's happening. No, I'm overstating it.

But anyway, Emma, defend your case.

EC: I mean, look, I'm just going with what he says, that he keeps referring to his love for her.

HW: But he also explicitly says that he's not in love with her.

EC: Yeah, okay. But that doesn't mean that he's not, he doesn't think that he's in love with her at times. And...

HW: Oh, I agree with that.

EC: Okay. Also, I do think that the kind of the denial posture actually doesn't preclude love at all. I think that's part of it, right? Yeah. Part of loving is saying, 'actually, no, I'd be fine without them'. 'I don't love them at all'. 'Oh, I'm so over them'.

HW: Right.

EC: That's how it starts. I think one of the first times he introduces the question of whether or not he loves her slash asserts that he doesn't love her anymore is with this unbelievably layered negative sentence that in English is, 'it was not, of course, as I was well aware that I was the least bit in love with Albertine'. But in French, it's 'Ce n'est pas certes, je le savais, que j'aimasse Albertine le moins du monde'. I think the French with the subjunctive in the centre, and the subjunctive is grammatical mood that we also do have in English, but it's just less signaled and less kind of extensively codified is a mood of doubt and negation. I think that governing the sentence so explicitly actually undermines in some way the certainty that he is trying to express with, 'Ce n'est pas certes, je le savais'. Even *certes* actually can be a kind of admission of something not being certain.

HW: It's often just a concessory word.

EC: Exactly. So, it looks like an affirmation, but it's not necessarily. It just is so infused with doubt this sentence. It's not just that he doesn't know whether he loves her, he doesn't know whether he doesn't love her.

HW: Love and doubt are really twinned in this book. It seems to be a big part of his, if we're going to say, philosophy of love. For him, a lot of that is reaching outside of love to other ideas like doubt, jealousy, possession, etc. I don't think love just exists as a solo object in this book.

EC: No, I agree with that. Also, that reminds me of something that one of my colleagues wrote in an article on the figure of Albertine, that we'll link to in the show notes. I think it's called *In Search of Albertine* by Victoria Baena, and she talks about how love for the narrator is a kind of epistemological drive. So it's all about not knowing, not knowing about her life, not knowing how he feels, not knowing how she feels or what love is.

HW: Yeah, and that's really thought provoking, right? It provokes curiosity.

EC: So he's not sure he loves her. He swings all the time between wanting to break up and wanting to keep her. So there is this kind of endless alternation that at one point he refers to as amphibian love. Which is wonderful. And I wonder if that's the thing that he escapes when she's asleep, because then it's wholly fluid, the breath, but also has the solidity neither of speech nor of silence. So it's sort of escaping this binary that when they're awake, he's absolutely trapped in.

HW: And also just to get back to the other citations too, and even bringing in the hollowed reed, it also goes into that space of plants, right? Because plants, they also are neither talking nor silent, really, because they rustle quite a bit. And it takes him away from this animate place into a different sort of space. And I think he finds it a relief to be on land with her. And I think the plants that he evokes are all land plants. He doesn't talk about seaweed or anything like that. And so, I think the watery part is the stressful part.

EC: Yeah. And at one point he says Albertine is basically like she contains the sea.

HW: Yes, right. That behind her, as though she's some sort of screen, you can perceive the sea of Balbec. In general, these aquatic moments throughout the *Recherche* have been just a totally delightful, *leitmotif* that have been coming up, like the swimming figures at the opera back in volume two. Just in general, he often depicts society as an aquatic *milieu*. And he seems to find it a useful metaphor for interaction in a way.

EC: Yeah. And for the half immersion that you have as a reader, where you're in, where it's all about flow, but then there are these moments, and increasingly in volume five, where you get

pulled out of it, because there are these kind of meta moments where the narrator's like, oh, of course, I'm writing this.

HW: Right, yes. And also, I think that sort of half awareness, I want to follow that for just a second, because I feel like one of the curious things is becoming, as it were, 'curiouser and curiouser' in this reading experience is how many of the vital, like seemingly essential pieces of information or experiences are either not in the book or occur with a huge delay. I'm thinking about how little we know about Albertine, how she's a cypher. I'm thinking about how when the grandmother died in volume three, it took us a thousand pages to get to the narrator actually thinking about her death and facing it. I'm thinking about how Albertine is trapped in his house, and we have no idea how that came to be. Like, why did anyone let this happen? Because they are, no, seriously, they are both young people who have sort of responsible adults around them, who they seem to rely on for a lot of advice and financial support. And yet, somehow, he has imprisoned her, and that occurs between the volumes in a sort of blank space that is just presumed, completed, without us ever getting to interact with it.

EC: Yeah, she is totally controlled and surveilled, and he kind of emotionally manipulates her into choosing her own captivity at various points. So the extent to which she is a prisoner is also kind of unstable, I think.

HW: Yeah, I think, well, I think that's right. And I think the question of what it means to be imprisoned or like who is the jailer and who is the jailed, who is in control here is something that is obviously is a central preoccupation of this novel. And at one point, there's this amazing passage towards the end of the book where he talks about how he had always thought that when he came into his inheritance, he would start collecting art, and says, 'but wait, why collect art? I have the best art of all. It's Albertine.' And then there's this huge long passage that we've already referred to where he analyzes her body as though it were a work of art in this very sort of detached mode of aesthetic appreciation. But then after this pages-long, beautiful, insane description of her, he reverses course. 'But no, Albertine was for me, not at all a work of art'. And the reason that he changes his mind is that collecting is possessing. And I quote 'one only loves that in which one pursues the inaccessible. One only loves what one does not possess. And very soon I began to realize once more that I did not possess Albertine'.

EC: Yeah. And that's all in relation to Swan, isn't it?

HW: Right, yes. Because Swan did, he often, as we saw, rendered women into works of art.

EC: Yeah. And he was also a collector. Yeah. I absolutely loved that passage. It was so sweeping and kind of stimulating, but it's kind of complicated, isn't it? But he's saying 'I don't possess her. And yet she is my prisoner. And I haven't been able to collect her because I am not the kind of, I don't have the kind of aesthetic appreciation or practice that Swan did'. And then it starts to make me think that all this reflection on captivity, on possession, on collection is then also about writing and about capturing Albertine within his art or on the page in a different kind of way.

HW: Which is something that he refuses to do, right? Albertine is never as captured on the page as, say, Charlus, of whom we have really a quite in-depth idea of his character, right? Albertine is much more elusive.

EC: Yeah. And yet that has been captivating, right? Not only for us, the narrator, but for us, for all the writers subsequently who have imagined Albertine, imagined her perspective, have seen her as a kind of totemic figure of what art is and isn't, I think.

HW: Yes, right. Albertine, in fact, by being imperfectly captured, captures us in turn. And it seems like that is also what happens in the dynamic between these two characters within the novel. The narrator also just self-describes as a prisoner at various points and seems to see himself as very constrained because of the presence of Albertine, even though it is also sort of objectively true that she is imprisoned by him. But it's not just a simple case of captor and captive. They're both keeping each other in chains in certain ways. Yeah, and again, in a meta way because he's trying to write her. Did you like those bits at the end where she reveals some truths about her past behavior and he's like, oh my God, a novel that I spent a thousand years writing is burning!

HW: Yes, I did. His novel is his memory, right? Because he hasn't actually been writing. But then we know that it's also somehow the novel that we're... It's really a wonderfully complex situation.

EC: Yeah, and then kind of funny, right? Because then another little crumb of information drops and he's like, the final parts of that old novel just turn to ashes. Or like when he wishes he could just get away from her and meet other girls, he's like, oh, I just really long for other women and other sketched novels. So then that's also Albertine as a sketch, as a kind of half-finished portrait.

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HW: Are these the only characters, Emma, do you think that are dealing with this dynamic of imprisonment, possession, love?

EC: Oh, absolutely not.

HW: Who else comes to mind?

EC: I mean, obviously Charlotte and Morel. Morel is a kind of amazing character.

HW: He is. He is and we haven't given him enough airtime, sorry, listeners, but he is incredible.

EC: He is totally grotesque. He is the, wait, what's their relationship? The nephew of a now dead servant of the narrator's family.

HW: I think he's the son of the narrator's uncle's valet.

EC: Oh, he's the son.

HW: So, he's the son of a former servant in the narrator's family.

EC: And now he is a successful musician. He is seeking to conceal his less bourgeois background. There's an amazing passage in the middle of this volume that we haven't really got time to talk about in full where he plays Vinteuil's music at the Verdurin's Salon. And he's clearly very talented. He's considered to be kind of an up and coming violinist. And he, as a young, handsome, I think he's described at one point as like, 'handsome, brutal and stupid' or something.

HW: I don't remember that, but I believe you. It sounds right.

EC: Something like that. And then there's this like triptych that's just like kind of devastating and hilarious. So, he's a young, handsome, talented man. And he catches the eye of the Baron de Charlus. Who is...?

HW: Charlus we met for the first time, actually in the first volume where he was keeping Odette company. And the reason that Swan let that happen is that Charlus is, whether he likes it or not, an openly gay person who most people who cross his path realize that he is gay, even though he does make some attempts to conceal it that we may come back to. He is an older, very aristocratic person. He's the brother of the Duc de Guermantes and very proud of his noble lineage, but also very attracted to people of the working class and the bourgeois. He seems to enjoy lording it over his sexual conquests. We talked about him at length last episode because of his encounter with the tailor Jupien in the courtyard of the home where the narrator is living. And in the last volume, he picked up Morel at a train station, basically just sort of astonished by his good looks. And he is now keeping Morel, in the financial sense, not in the way that the narrator is keeping Albertine, but he's helping Morel pay his bills.

He's trying to set Morel up with Jupien's niece so that they have a sort of respectable marriage that can be a cover for him to continue what seems to be, but this is another thing that is never really made clear, it seems to not in fact be a sexual relationship, but rather just a relationship of control and infatuation.

EC: Yeah, I wasn't sure about that. Kind of like Charlus setting himself up as an alternative patriarch in a kind of chosen, but still very policed family.

HW: Yeah, I think that seems right. And I think Morel as part of the deal has to put up with a lot of affection, but I'm not quite sure that it is sexual. But actually the fact that we can't be sure is part of the intrigue of this relationship.

EC: Charlus is kind of captivated by Morel. Morel is also kind of captured, kept, kind of a version of a prisoner of Charlus. And I think that since the previous volume, Charlus and Morel have been a kind of double of the narrator and Albertine. So they're in a kind of similar, but not identical relation of captivity.

HW: Right. Notably, a huge difference is that Charlus wants Morel to be out and about and to become well-known for his talents and actually is also attempting to set him up with...

EC: Yeah, with the niece.

HW: With the niece and just with other... He's almost attempting to supply Morel with victims almost.

EC: And he's like thrilled by this rape fantasy that Morel expresses at one point. Which is not delightful. They're this kind of interesting variation on the theme or a double. But I think that their relationship is also part of a broader theme of being trapped or imprisoned or somehow not known, which is, I mean, I hesitate to use this word because it's not Proust's word, but like the idea of the closet, right? So the fact that even though Charlus comes pretty close, that you can't live openly or in a kind of institutionalized way with same-sex desire, which is also Albertine's problem in some ways.

I think that's another kind of form of closure that you have in this. There has been actually a briefly mentioned, analyzed, for example, by the critic Eve Sedgwick, who writes the epistemology of the closet with a chapter on Proust. And I think a lot of the dynamics of like

secrecy, revelation, lies, hiding, confession can be understood through that lens as well. But I mean, part of Sedgwick's argument is that sexuality in general, not just homosexuality, is conditioned by a kind of secrecy and revelation mode. And there's something very resonant of that in a moment when the narrator describes how Charlus had these moments of irritable retraction in which he sought to conceal his true life, but these lasted by a short time compared with the hours of continual progression in which he allowed it to betray itself, flaunted it with an irritating complacency, the need to confide being stronger in him than the fear of disclosure. And I think it is *La Prisonnière* that Sedgwick is really interested in.

But yeah, that's a book that I've read actually more because she writes about Racine. But I thought back to that. When reading this and thinking about that as another kind of way of people being trapped.

HW: Yeah, like the narrator, in a way, it's a sort of inward turning that being trapped, just like the narrator has decided that he will stay in mostly and have this bell jar life. And it seems there that Charlus is grappling with the desire to live an outward turning life, but constrained by society to keep some parts of himself, at least semi-hidden.

EC: Absolutely. But I think we also need to think about this in practical terms. Who is imprisoned? Who is not free? There's financial imprisonment, to make that really explicit. So why is Albertine there? She's kind of being strung along by the narrator who's saying, oh, he might marry her, which would be transformative for her.

HW: Not only, she's bourgeois, but barely, by the skin of her teeth, because she's an orphan who's been taken in by her aunt, who is not that well off, seemingly. She seems to move in the right circles, but doesn't have money to spare. And so for Albertine to make a brilliant marriage with this rich young man would change her entire life. But at the same time, Albertine seems to be very attracted to women. And so, it's a devil's bargain to some extent. And also, I mean, the narrator's being totally horrible.

EC: He's being awful. Occasionally he's like, 'oh, I feel a bit bad'. But like, not enough, Marcel. Not enough. Like he's keeping her in dresses, isn't he, as well? Because at one point he's like, 'I was really worried that she might leave me'. But then I remembered that we were due to do the, do a kind of trying on dresses. We're due to try on dresses at Fortuny in eight days. Fortuny being this fashion house.

HW: I know she'll wait for that. But he also, he talks of her as a wild beast tamed, a rosebush to which I had acted as the prop, the framework, the trellis of its life. And I think this citation is fascinating because we see that he realizes that he has curbed her. But also a rosebush and its trellis, one of those things is living and producing at least flowers and potentially beauty. While the trellis is surrounded by this rosebush, sort of suffocated by it in a way, it guides it, but it is lifeless and inert.

Yeah, that's so true. In a sense, there's a little bit of a tone of pride slash lamentation and talking of her as a tamed beast or a trellis rose. There's also a sense in which it shows again that ambivalence about who exactly is imprisoned.

EC: Yeah, and she is an artist, isn't she? Yeah, she's a painter, just like Morel is a musician. So they're actually doing the art.

HW: Right, they're doing the thing, that the narrator can't quite bring himself to do.

EC: Yeah, because he's just focused on her. Do you not think at some, like variously, I thought at some point, like, he should just get a job.

HW: But, you know, I don't disagree. But at the same time, was that even on the table for him? Do you know what I'm saying? Like, he's just independently rich. But then again, I think about the real Proust, which I know the narrator is not the author. I understand that fully. However, at the same time, his family was a well-off bourgeois family and his brother did become a doctor. It's not impossible that someone would take up a profession as a wealthy bourgeois man. You're saying he should get a job, but I feel like just as the woman in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* couldn't hold down a job, like, I'm not at all sure he could hold down a job.

EC: No, you're absolutely right. He's sick. He's very sickly as well.

HW: Yeah, he is sickly. You know, Emma, before we finish talking about this question of captivity and the dynamic between them, we have to talk about Albertine as a goddess of time. We just have to. I'm obsessed with this. So we have to talk about this.

An absolute highlight. And then perhaps we'll move on to winners and losers after that. I'll set the scene and read this citation. Maybe you can get us started on what on earth this could possibly mean, or what it means for the project. The narrator towards the end of the book says that he can hold Albertine on his knees and caress her, but, quote, 'I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity and that she's not a marvelous captive like a genie in a bottle, but rather, quote, urging me with cruel and fruitless insistence in quest of the past. She resembled, if anything, a mighty goddess of time.'

EC: I mean, this is so compelling. And also so hyperbolic.

HW: I think it's so overwrought. Really, it is. There's something so overwrought about this novel. But somehow that doesn't dispel its charm.

EC: Before we get really get into it, I think this is the final reference I'm going to make to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, which is that that is also a comic, a comic and kind of hyperbolic text. As well as one about kind of sleep and wealth and... Withdrawal. Withdrawal, absolutely.

So, Albertine is the goddess of time whose body is a sealed envelope that inwardly reaches to infinity, but that infinity is the past! And so this sparks for him his quest, right?

HW: Yeah, to go in search of lost time.

EC: To capture the past. She is his inspiration. But why is she in particular his inspiration? Is it because he's trying to... Is it to do with that novel that gets burned, where he's trying to figure out where she's been and with whom and what that life represents?

HW: He's trying to understand her past movements almost in like the most basic, least philosophical way. And that jealous impulse ends up turning into an obsession with the past.

EC: Yeah, and I guess it's also that he wants to know what her life is. He refers to that on multiple occasions. Like, what is her life? I think that the weird pure breath scenes are part of that as well. Like, what is her life? What is therefore life? Life being a kind of sequence of past scenes and sentiments.

HW: But also it's something that's completely sealed off from everyone else, that all we can access of anyone else is the sealed envelope. And then inside there's the infinity, which I agree with you is the past, but it's not only the past, it's just, it's the personhood. It's the being...

EC: Like subjectivity.

HW: Subjectivity is the being in time of someone else. Which is elusive. Just like Albertine.

EC: Oh my gosh. Yes, Hannah.

HW: Oh, this is so cool. Not what I'm saying, but just the text. The text is like, you really, it's really... It's just incredible because I feel like you could take any random sentence and if you stop to really think deeply about the parallels that are being drawn, the connections that are being made, all of a sudden you realize that everything is so complex in this novel and it's also really a hall of mirrors, like complex and reflective of something else constantly.

EC: Yeah, absolutely. And then also, like often so idiosyncratic. And also quite like concrete at the same time. He's got this image, he's put his hand on her knee, he's caressing her, but that touch reaches a sealed envelope of a person.

So this kind of resisting, this idea that in any way you can actually connect, either kind of conceptually or physically.

HW: Right, because a sealed envelope is sort of a symbol of non-communication, right?

EC: Oh, and then she leaves him a letter at the end.

HW: Oh yeah, that's right. Which we haven't gotten to read yet because it's dangling.

EC: Yeah, so we're left with a sealed envelope at the end of the volume.

HW: Emma!

EC: Incredible. It is time to reveal, to award and deny our winners and losers of *La Prisonnière*. I found this tough this time, Hannah. How did you find it?

HW: I mean, as usual, I think the thing is, I think that we've learned is that this novel has no winners. Or that the winners are tongue in cheek, or oblique, or like a little bit not center stage perhaps. But do you want to tell me your winner?

EC: I want you to tell me your winner because I'm going to decide mine based on yours. I'm sorry to do that to you. And to like, also to withhold some information in an Albertinesque way.

HW: Okay, I think that I'm going to do my most serious of the three options. Maybe I'll tell you my runners-up without defending them just in case. So my runners-up and maybe one of them is yours and you'll defend them, is the fashion house Fortuny, which comes out really ahead in this book. The chauffeur who seems to do whatever the F he wants at all times. But I'll give my real winner is in a stunning reversal from episode one, Vinteuil.

EC: Oh, amazing.

HW: He's the composer of the sonata that Swan and Odette had loved. And there's a big salon scene in this volume where what they have done is gather to listen to the music of Vinteuil. I say

he's the winner because his daughter's partner, her scandalously lesbian partner, has gone through his works, his notebooks posthumously and transcribed all his music, which is now becoming the talk of the town and has kind of made him an instant classic. Now that they have more of his work to go on besides just the sonata. He's kind of had his posthumous revindication and for that, he is my winner.

EC: Case very well made. And I agree. I did briefly consider him, but I like the chauffeur and Fortuny getting a mention too.

HW: Well, those are my tongue-in-cheek answers. I was trying to be a little bit better this time because I feel like I've given a few tongue-in-cheek answers in a row.

EC: Okay. I will say my tongue-in-cheek answer first for my winner. So my tongue-in-cheek winner is Morel's *mèche*, Morel's lock of hair.

HW: I was thinking in English and I was like, what mesh? But no, the *mèche* in French, which is a lock of hair. It is a real, it's like this sexy lock that falls over his forehead while he's playing his violin. Incredible, Emma.

EC: He's absolutely ravished by it.

HW: Yes. He keeps talking about it. 'Did you see the *mèche*?'

EC: Yeah. And it's like, that's why Morel is like the rock star that classical music used to be able to have.

But my more serious winner with regret is Madame Verdurin. Just because I think she's awful, but I think we need to talk about her act of willful vengeance against Charlus.

HW: Yeah. She decides that Charlus has been unspeakably rude to her, which he has. But she decides to alienate him from her little group, but of course not entirely.

EC: And to get Morel to basically dump him and break his little heart.

HW: Right. Which of course makes him very ill. And when he reemerges, he's kind of over it.

EC: But yeah, I think because she's so thwarted, she's so humiliated. He's organized this party at her house and all these noble ladies are just snubbing her like crazy. And page after page, it's like Madame Verdurin was ignored. Madame Verdurin was ignored. And then she orchestrates this scene out of her, like, what Proust calls her social jealousy. And also called narcissism, where she just wants to be the center of everything. And she doesn't want any of the people who attend her salon to be more in relation with each other than with her. So, she enacts this set piece break between Morel and Charlus, organized around a lie. And it absolutely comes off. She plays it perfectly. It's very horrible, but she does win ultimately in the battle that Charlus doesn't really know he's in.

HW: Yes, it's true. Okay. She's a winner. She won the battle.

EC: But horribly, horribly so. Which is why I prefer like Morel's hair to beat the winner. Morel's hair causes less ambivalence in us all.

EC: Yeah. But I like your winners better.

HW: Oh, I don't know. You made a good case.

EC: Shall I say who my loser was? For me, the loser of this volume is Françoise. She is the now very elderly family servant who is saying that it's kind of insane that they are allowed to do this. They're allowed to live unmarried and just spend all the narrator's money and just keep going. And who is facilitating that but Françoise, very, very bitterly. She hates Albertine. She hates that they're in this situation. She's also quite marginalized in this volume in a way that she isn't in others.

She's just kind of here and there serving them, facilitating their... She thinks they're having like wild sex all the time. So she thinks she's facilitating their orgies. Which they're very much not. And she's also a captive, right? Because she's stuck with them. She doesn't want to be. She's totally financially dependent on this family. She has to do everything that she's told. And she doesn't even really get the kind of... I mean, some of her language, some of her relationship with her daughter, those things do remain in this volume. But they don't get the kind of more loving attention that they've had earlier on. So for me, emotionally and narratively, Françoise is the loser here.

HW: Compelling, compelling case. I think you will agree that my loser is also a loser. Like, you know what I mean? I didn't choose someone.

EC: Well, there's so many options for a loser.

HW: There are so many options. For me, it is Saniette.

EC: Great candidate.

HW: And by extension, the other dead. So let me explain to our listeners who Saniette is in case they don't know. Because I don't think we've mentioned him before. He is one of the little group around the Verdurins. But his role in the group is just to be bullied horribly by Monsieur Verdurin. So basically, any words that come out of his mouth are ridiculed. He has become sort of a trembling leaf of a man because he's so used to being just absolutely harassed at every turn. And at this party with the Verdurin, once again, Monsieur Verdurin is terrible to him. And he runs out of the party, collapses and ultimately dies. He doesn't die that night, but basically, this party causes his demise. But all of this is told in a very almost like waving it off sort of way. It's not considered to be really a problem. And indeed, a lot of people have died in this volume. But it all happens off screen. And without a lot of reflection, Madame Verdurin is famously hard-hearted towards those of her...

EC: Impervious to death.

HW: Impervious to death. Because after all, it means that they're out of her little clan. And so if they're not there, they're not there. For her, it's sort of an on-off switch. And the reason for being off seems fairly indifferent to her. But Saniette is not the only one of the little clan who has died. The Princesse Sherbatoff has also died. Madame de Villeparisis has died. She wasn't really part of the little clan, but she's referred to as dead.

EC: Bergotte.

HW: Bergotte dies. Cottard dies and is resurrected. Clearly, Proust was just deciding what to do about that character. And traces of both fates are left in this volume. But when his death is

referred to, it is just very offhand. I mean, just, people are dying like flies. And none of it gets the notice it deserves. So, the dead, especially Saniette, are the losers.

EC: Excellent losers. Sad, but very well told. Yeah, Saniette, oh my goodness, what a figure of objection.

HW: All these deaths are part of where we are in the project, right, Emma?

EC: We are drawing towards the end now. A lot of characters have died. Things feel relatively in flux, socially and narratively. And Albertine has now disappeared, paving the way for the next volume. The penultimate one, *Albertine Disparue*, or *The Fugitive* in English.

HW: Yes. We'll have to see. I mean, I think we both know some spoilers here, but we'll have to see where she goes and what happens to her. Well, I think that's it for this episode of *Proust Curious*. We hope we've piqued your curiosity.

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EC: *Proust Curious* is hosted by Emma Clausen and Hannah Weaver and produced by Michael Goldsmith. You can reach us at proustcurious at gmail.com.

HW: We'd also like to thank our partner, *Public Books*, an online magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship. Check it out at publicbooks.org. Join us next time for Volume 6, *Albertine Disparue*, also known as *La Fugitive. Au revoir*.

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa