

Proust Curious 8: *Beyond the Recherche*

HW: Hello and welcome to *Proust Curious*, a podcast in partnership with *Public Books*. I'm Hannah Weaver, an assistant professor of medieval literature at Columbia University and formerly a fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination.

EC: And I'm Emma Claussen, an early modernist at Trinity College, Cambridge. *Proust Curious* is, or has been, a podcast about the experience of reading *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, all seven volumes. But we've now done that. So today we're offering a final bonus episode and something a little different. So, join us as we search for lost time ...

HW: ... and remember things Proust-related.

So *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* has its place in literary culture partly because it has influenced generations of writers. If you've not read Proust, you might have read about him. So today we're thinking about some of those works just in time to inspire holiday gifts for the Proust lovers in your life. That's only somewhat tongue in cheek. It could be useful for that. But let me just mention to Emma, before we get started, that we're still not dealing with the raft of academic work on Proust, which is intimidatingly varied and deep and we're still not talking about it.

EC: No, nor are we talking about that many books about Proust because there are a lot. We're talking about a few, including the one that inspired our entire podcast project, which is called *Proust, roman familial*, by Laure Murat. Hannah had just read this. We just read this when we met in Paris a year ago and that got us talking about Proust and launched the reading project.

HW: It launched our whole friendship, really.

EC: Thanks, Laure Murat, for your wonderful book and also for saying that after all, the *Recherche* is just seven paperbacks and not that difficult to read.

HW: We felt so humiliated by that contention that we had to do this.

EC: Yeah, so that inspired us to leap into reading and spend what has turned out to be a fun, but also quite exhausting year of Proust and Proust-adjacent activity.

HW: Indeed. So put more simply, Proust wrote a lot and then others wrote even more.

EC: But before we dive into this final episode of *Proust Curious*, it's time to answer one last 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. Today, it's also a kind of prompt more than a question and it is, '*ce que j'apprécie le plus chez mes amis*', so 'what I most appreciate about my friends'.

HW: And when Proust answered, I'm roughly translating, 'I appreciate if they're tender for me', 'if their being is exquisite enough to make their tenderness extremely valuable.

EC: I mean, wow.

HW: Wow. I've never ranked my friends in terms of their exquisiteness.

EC: As a repressed British person, the word tenderness is difficult for me, full stop.

HW: Tenderness is hard. Yeah, that's hard for Americans too.

EC: Okay. But I think what he's saying is, you know, when you really like someone, if they like you as well, that's awesome.

HW: Yeah, that's true. That's true. If you have kind of a friend crush on someone, and it seems reciprocated, that can be very exciting.

EC: Indeed. So what's your answer to this one, Hannah? What do you appreciate the most in your friends?

HW: I appreciate it in my friends, when they also know what is funny about something without me needing to explain it. When I can send a screen cap of something, and they know exactly why I sent it without me any further commentary. That is a real joy to feel that level of connection with someone. What about you, Emma? What do you appreciate the most in your friends?

EC: Yeah, that's very true about shared humour. I think a lot of my answers to the Proust questionnaire in this whole series have really been about what I appreciate about my friends.

HW: Oh, that's true.

EC: Like about what my favourite virtues are, and my idea of misery, right? So I guess what I appreciate in my friends is like showing up for me or for themselves as well. And you being courageous, helping me be courageous. But you know, by now, I'm one for a sentimental answer. So I'd also say that what I really appreciate in my friends is when they really understand me, but also leave me alone about it. You know?

HW: It's a real Goldilocks situation here.

EC: Yeah, yeah, because you know, it's great to be seen. But it's also great to be seen tactfully. That's what I'd say.

HW: That's a very British answer, if I can be honest.

EC: Yes, send help.

HW: Being seen tactfully. Well that's something for me to aspire to, hitting that balance.

There's so many sort of para-Proust books, even excluding the academic ones, that you can't help but start to see categories. So, there are some that have to do with Proust's biography, written by people that knew him, like most famously, Céleste Albaret, who was his longtime servant and companion, and helped meet in terms of actually getting the *Recherche* written down.

She wrote a memoir called *Monsieur Proust*, about her experience living with and helping him, etc. And there are also then scholars and researchers who excavate aspects of his biography that might have inspired what's in the novel. So I've been reading this really great example of this genre by Caroline Weber, which is called *Proust's Duchesses*, and it digs up the biography of the three women who were sort of amalgamated into the *Duchesse de Guermantes* in the novel. It is a wonderful book. I would highly recommend it. It is also...

EC: Yeah, I've not read it.

HW: It's an absolute tome. It is deeply long, but deeply engaging. So I regret that I haven't finished it enough to tell everyone all about it, but I would recommend it. I think it was a finalist for the Pulitzer. It's hardly obscure. So there are these sort of like biographical Proustiana. And then what are some other categories, Emma?

EC: Well, I'd say that translations of Proust are a whole other category of Proust writing. I mean, it's not really books about Proust, but they do get a lot of critical attention, I'd say, perhaps more than other translations, even of classics. Oh, I agree. So in English, you've got the writer Lydia Davis, for instance.

HW: She just translated *Swann's Way*.

EC: Yeah, but this has been going since the first or the early years of publication of Proust. So Walter Benjamin translated some of the early volumes into German, which is really interesting. I didn't know that until recently. Or in Italian, Natalia Ginzburg translated Proust.

HW: Who is herself a great novelist.

EC: Yeah, yeah. So she wrote a book that I've just read called *Family Lexicon, Lessico Familiare*. So this book references Proust a few times and also treats quite a few themes that Proust has dealt with about an earlier period in a different city. So the nature of family and idiolects and Jewish history as well. So there's an overlap then between translations of Proust and creative writing by all kinds of really well-known writers like Davis, Benjamin, Ginzburg.

HW: Then there are books that either are themselves fetish objects around Proust or that recount stories of people having a fetish for Proust. So there are things that are very important for scholars, but the entirety of Proust's correspondence has been published. Or you can now see facsimiles. I think you can buy facsimiles of all the manuscripts of the *Recherche*. That sort of intense attention to everything that ever had anything to do with Proust. This is not a book, but you can also go to the Musée Carnavalet and visit Proust's bedroom, basically, in Paris. That's the Museum of the History of Paris. And his bedroom has pride of place in the history of Paris, which is sort of a wild premise all by itself. I read, it's the opposite of the Weber book in a way, because it's a very slender volume that talks about one such obsessive collector, a man called Jacques Guérin, who is a perfume maker and very wealthy from that. And also obsessively collected everything he could acquire from Proust's brother's estate after he passed. And sort of the thing he wanted the most was the fur overcoat that Proust had famously, basically, lived in once he retreated into his cork-lined room. And he finally was able to get his hands on it. And now it's on display at the Musée Carnavalet. So if you want to see Proust's overcoat, you can. And a lot of those items in that bedroom were donated by this man, Jacques Guérin. And Lorenza Foschini, in this very stylish short book, recounts the story of his obsession, basically.

EC: Yeah, I've not read this book, but I think I did read that it's thanks to Guérin that we have a lot of Proust's archive, because his family wanted to get rid of it.

HW: Yes, a lot of it was going to the trash heaper, like the junk seller. And he sort of single-handedly rescued much of it from disappearance.

EC: Yeah, there's something of the relic to all this, a kind of veneration of the saintly objects.

HW: Yeah. Do you have any of this? Are you someone that wishes you had, I don't know, an autograph by your favourite author or something?

EC: No.

HW: No, me neither. I'm not at all. I don't get this impulse at all. I am thankful to this obsessive, because truly we would have lost a lot of historical information if it weren't for him. But at the same time, I don't have that impulse at all. So it was interesting to sort of visit that psychic place that is not my place.

EC: I do like going to writer's houses.

HW: Ah, yes, that I do like.

EC: And seeing what they saw, seeing their views from their windows, that kind of thing. Like I really want to go to the model for Balbec at some point, in Normandy.

HW: Yes, I mean, it's on, girlfriend.

EC: So we've talked about collection, archive, biography, translation. But when I mentioned Ginzburg, for example, I was also touching on another category of Proust book. That's not too inelegant to call it that, which is writing that engages in similar themes in conversation with Proust. And we're about to talk about one of those. But also a major category is Proust as a kind of life guide. Proust as a writer who has really understood what it is to exist and who can help us, whoever we are, with our feelings about existing. So there is quite a frequent trope in writing about Proust, which is that you find yourself in this book, you recognise the suffering heart of humanity, etc, etc. And I have always found that a little bit off putting, if I'm completely honest. I think something we've not really talked about that much in this podcast, but there's a lot of reasons not to read Proust. Surprisingly. But what I mean is, all this talk about how he has truly expressed the human condition, how he is the best writer ever, it's all a bit pressurizing. And also, I feel a little inherently repulsed by all claims of universality, because it's really easy to read anything and not see yourself in it. However, I would say that the book that we're going to talk about first, Laure Murat's book about Proust is absolutely the best and most moving account of understanding life through Proust that I've come across.

HW: Yes, I agree. So what is this book, you might be asking yourself? Laure Murat is currently a professor at UCLA. But in terms of her book, it's more important that she is descended on both sides from French aristocracy, her father's side, Napoleonic aristocracy, the other side, pre-revolution and pre-empire. She counts as an ancestor, Louis XIII. Her birth certificate names her as a princess, which I think is like, as an American, I'm like, what? But that being said, although that's the milieu she was born into, as a gay woman, she had long been estranged from her family, although it seems like to varying degrees before her parents died. But an understanding of the rarefied but hollow class in which she grew up proved elusive until she found it refracted through Proust's novel and indeed his own life.

EC: I couldn't believe her story when I read it. I also couldn't believe that her name effectively is princess. The aristocracy, even though I'm English and the British aristocracy is a storied thing itself, I kind of don't believe that they're real, which comes up in interesting ways in her book where she describes the aristocracy as this kind of world of fantasy in pure forms. But we should say before we really dive in that this book is currently only available in French. It should appear with Penguin in the next year or so as a *Proust a family romance*. So hopefully if you aren't going to read it in French, you can read it then. And we'll put a link to all the other British and American publishers of the books we're discussing in the show notes.

HW: But we really can't recommend it highly enough. So if you don't read French, do keep an eye out for the Penguin publication in English.

EC: So since this is the kind of origin of our whole podcast project, why did we love this book so much and find it so inspiring? What got you about it, Hannah?

HW: Well, I mean, in part, it was just that Murat is a beautiful writer. And so I just don't want to pass unnoticed that part of it is the way she constructs her memoir and moving between the personal, the novel, and then the archive really, because she herself is, unlike us, an expert on Proust and has done her own original archival research, which she brings to bear on the novel. But in terms of our conversation today, I think that one thing that Murat really broke open for me was the relationship between Proust's novel and indeed Proust's life and class. And I actually think that we didn't talk about that all that much during our series. And I personally feel that I didn't want to talk about it because I felt like I would just end up parroting Murat because she's so compelling on the topic. So we can just share a few of her insights rather than trying to fold them into our larger conversations.

EC: Yeah, I do agree on all counts. I think she makes Proust really accessible in this book and enables a kind of overcoming of all kinds of mental blocks. And one of the mental blocks I did have about Proust was this idea that she totally debunks, which is that it's just a love affair with the aristocracy. It totally valorises that class above all others, that it's a book that is very ultimately snobby. And that made me not want to read it. But she makes it clear that that's not the case. She actually says that it's a full takedown of the aristocratic class and a real kind of an anatomy or autopsy of a very corrupt and dysfunctional class structure.

HW: And I think that a lot of the reason that that impression sort of floats around is that if you only read the first volume, you would have every reason to think that. It's really in later volumes that the hollowness at the centre of the aristocracy comes to light. And basically, Murat ends up reading aristocracy as a form that is perceptible through the lens of Proust.

She writes, and this is my translation. She writes, 'the text filled in the emptiness. The novel took on the nothingness and futility of a world that thought it had the keys to the kingdom. Literature brought firmness, density and thickness to the place where an inconsequential pantomime and a sequence of *chic* scenes with no meat or interest used to rule. Proust's development gave me back a view over the entire landscape. His steps back and his putting things in perspective gave me the impression of being an orbiting astronaut who sees autonomous Earth detach itself in intercosmic space and who will be changed by the site forever.'

EC: So good. That's what we were saying, which is that Proust takes this critical approach to the aristocracy as well as showing them as an aesthetic object.

HW: I think what she's partially saying here is that she had noticed that it felt like the people around her were in some way acting something out, but she didn't really understand what that something was until she saw it thickly represented in Proust's novel, and that she was able then to take this huge

step back and almost be like an astronaut looking back at Earth and seeing the whole globe, as opposed to being distracted by the particularities of the exact people around her.

EC: And Proust really was describing her world. He had connections with various people who knew or were members of her family. There's this amazing passage where she explains why the duchess of Guermantes must in fact be her aunt.

HW: Can you imagine being in that position and reading the novel and feeling like it really is a family story for her.

EC: Yeah, it's amazing. And I love that chapter as well, where she describes what it was like being in her family's *chateau* when her grandfather died there. The *chateau de Luynes*, I guess.

HW: Yeah, and the sort of like ugly furniture and thick walls. In a storm while the ceiling is sort of collapsing because it's impossible to take care of a *chateau* unless you have all the rents that are needed to keep it up and the sort of semi-enslaved people to keep it up.

EC: A bit like some of Proust, there's a fairytale aspect to that chapter. And what she says is that Proust's book replaces the chateau as a place where she can live, but where she can live as a full person, unlike under the aristocratic bell jar that she had to grow up in.

HW: Yeah, I think it enables her to reorient and really find her own orientation.

EC: Yeah, socially and sexually. She gives us a really compelling and accessible, as I've said already, understanding of Proust in this book.

HW: But she's also very clear then about what Proust gives her. So Proust has given her a way to rethink sexuality. Proust has given her a way to escape and process at the same time her aristocratic upbringing. There's this chapter that I can't get into now that I found it really interesting. So I highly, highly recommend, once again, this book about how Proust gave her a way of understanding reality because she'd kind of grown up in a way where she felt like the material and the spiritual were totally at odds with one another. And Proust's sensory but still spiritual account of existence enabled her to see their integration. I think that relates to some of the stuff that we talked about in earlier episodes. I think that's really interesting. And then she has this really moving final chapter about Proust and consolation that I'm not sure I fully appreciated until I reread it after we'd finished the whole project. Because throughout, I was thinking about Proust as both sad and reassuring, life affirming and upsetting. She talks about how Proust offered her consolation, although he seems to refuse the whole concept of it. And that is through, rather than trying to mend or somehow obfuscate pain or grief, he turns it into a project. Which, for me, brought the word *Recherche* in the title into relief for almost the first time. I've been so fixated on lost time that I wasn't really thinking about the searching. But actually, she concludes with this account of what it is to want to know something and how that

seeking, that searching, and the action of it can be its own consolation, a form of libido that she calls *libido sciendi*.

And she says that's how Proust saved her. And I read that, and I was like, 'oh!'.

HW: It's not just searching, right? It's also like researching. That the desire for knowledge can be its own consolation.

EC: And perhaps we particularly appreciate that as academic researchers.

HW: But regardless, I think there is sort of an idea out there that people do research because they're avoiding their emotions or avoiding their, you know, it's easier to look at facts and excavate historical realities than it is to really go through grief or something like that. But actually, she's showing that in Proust, those two are not incompatible and that therefore, for her, they're also not incompatible.

EC: So it's not just academics, after all, or in the formal sense, who seek knowledge. And in a second, we're going to turn to another writer who's searching, in her own way, for lost time, partly as a response to huge devastation.

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HW: This next book that you just mentioned, *Emma*, is an essayistic memoir by the tremendous Russian poet Maria Stepanova called *In Memory of Memory*. It has been translated by the glorious poet in her own right, Sasha Dugdale, into English. And Maria Stepanova is also fluent in English and collaborated with Dugdale on this translation.

So what is it? Basically, in this book, Stepanova goes in search of her family history or maybe lost time through ekphrases of ephemera from her ordinary bourgeois Jewish family, intensive study of painting and photography, transcription of century-old letters and visits to far flung towns of the former Soviet Union and current European cities. Unlike Proust, Stepanova concludes that lost time can never be meaningfully recovered, and in fact, might best be left to its own devices. *Emma*, how is this book for you?

EC: I mean, I want to thank you for telling me to read it. Just like with the *Murat*, it is an incredible read, very intense, very evocative. It took me quite a long time to read it and I read it in quite a staccato way because I kept stopping to be like 'oh my God'.

HW: Well, I think some of that is that Maria Stepanova is like, she's mostly a poet, right? And so I do think that her prose is like densely poetic and rewards the sort of close attention that you might normally give to a poem.

EC: Yeah, it's really moving. I read it in a state of, I guess I'll just say heightened emotion, and very beautiful. It's an account of Jewish, Russian and Ukrainian history in the 20th century. So history that is both of annihilation and survival. It's also a history of being a person with a family, recovering the ordinary of the past, thinking so deeply about who we remember, how we remember, why we remember them. I'd like to read a brief quotation that's from her own reading of Sebald because she does engage with many, many, like Proust, many, many different writers throughout this book. She writes: 'There is no miracle. Everything we see before us, including ourselves will disappear and it won't take long. So there is no choice. Any object or fate or person deserves to be remembered, to flicker once again in the light before all is finally dark.' So she's thinking so carefully about the act of memory, remembering who gets memorialized. I mean, it's also quite funny as well as being really poetic and moving. Like when she goes to the Holocaust museum in Washington and the person that she speaks to in the archive is like, 'oh, those are people that are doing little trips to figure out their family history and writing books about it these days'. And she just says, 'yeah, and there's going to be one more'.

HW: Yes. I think that this is another thing she shares with Proust really is that she's addressing these very serious topics and thinking really carefully, and also leaving room for humour. Like we talked about way back in episode one, how funny Proust is. And I think that's something that Stepanova shares. But in the quote you just read, we see too, that there's this idea of disappearance, that there is a sort of irrecoverability of memory that is certainly at odds with the memory that Proust presents to us, particularly in the seventh volume, which we discussed in our episode from yesterday. So maybe we should talk more about her different view of memory and why she might have such a different view from Proust.

EC: Yeah. Because she's writing in dialogue with Proust. Absolutely.

HW: Explicitly so. She refers to him often and even in places where she doesn't say his name. Those of us who have just read the *Recherche* will recognize Proustian references peppering her pages. So she sees, I mean, at one point she explains how different writers and artists and just people in the 20th century might attempt a sort of Proustian project of involuntary memory where the past comes surging back. But she sees this as sort of doomed to failure. So I quote, 'what began as an attempt to resurrect the old world with the power of words, to make a glass of *tilleul* tea and use it as an elixir of life, hit against a living wall of the drowned and the lost, against the simple impossibility of remembering and calling the dead by their names.'

EC: Yeah. This is part of a chapter of this text, which has a very interesting and varied structure. But this is a chapter that feels a bit like a historical essay about how memory arts and memory technologies have changed from between the 19th and 21st centuries.

HW: What she's really pointing up is that sort of involuntary memory that Proust describes really only works for your own memories of things that you yourself have experienced. And that's a massive constraint, particularly when you're dealing with the catastrophes that are the 20th century.

EC: In some ways, Stepanova's book is a sequel, if you can call it that, to Proust.

HW: Yeah, I love that idea.

EC: I was thinking the whole time we were reading the *Recherche* about everything that was coming next. It felt like a dark horizon, especially when we were reading about the Dreyfus affair, reading about the war, reading the references to colonised peoples in Paris during the war. And in hindsight, you think about everything that's coming next, all the structures and memories and archives about to be lost and made. And Stepanova somehow manages to think about all of that, while simultaneously having a deeply ethical approach to the question of how to even begin to confront an irrecoverable past.

HW: Yeah, she has a sort of worry that the dead cannot consent. They can't consent to being investigated, that to exhume them and their lives may be something they never would have wished. And she compares actually the past to a colonised territory, or a potential colonised territory. I'll quote again, if that's okay. 'The past lies before us, like a huge planet waiting to be colonised. First, the raiding parties, and then the slow modification process. The present is so certain that it owns the past, just as both "th'Indias" were owned. The present knows as much about the past as Donne did "th'Indias", and barely notices the ghosts that float back and forth, ignoring state boundaries'. So what I love about this passage is that it implies that the past is not only unwillingly subjugated to the whims of the present, but moreover, that it might change, that the past might be sort of terraformed by the interests of the present.

And we see here some of Stepanova's humour, the idea that John Donne, the early modern English poet, talks about India as a colony, right, that can be owned by Britain, and that the present is just as settler in its impulse as Britain was *vis-a-vis* India. I mean, it's funny to use Donne's contraction 'th'India' in this way. It's funny to cite John Donne in this passage. I just, I find her very, very clever, and clever in a deeply erudite and intellectual way that makes me want to keep up and laugh with her, if I just can manage it. Even as we're discussing something really ethically serious, like whether we have the right to study the past in the way that a lot of writers have attempted to, both memoirists and scholars.

EC: So she's looking back after a century of past recovery, memory industry, and thinking about how that, it might actually in some ways be unfair on the dead. That whole passage is incredible. When she says, 'culture treats the past as a state, treats its mineral wealth, mining it for all its worth. This parasitical relationship with the dead is a profitable industry'. It's exactly what you're talking

about. It's so acerbic. And on point about so many problems with culture and exploitation and indeed colonization. So, a lot of the things that are unacknowledged or in progress in Proust, including a kind of manipulative relationship to the dead that is explicit and perhaps ironized in the volume six on Albertine. A lot of that is being scrutinized by Stepanova.

HW: Also, I think that she pulls it off, right? She manages a book that is about the dead and is about the past while doing so in a way that's ethically harmonious with her doubts about it. So I really do, again, not to just be exhorting you all this whole episode, but I really do once more, highly recommend this book. It would make a great gift for any smart person in your life.

EC: Any serious melancholic that you happen to know.

HW: Or anyone who appreciates the integration of ethical considerations and wit.

EC: Absolutely.

HW: Emma, let's end on a bit of a lighter note. We've just talked about two books that we both read and really, really deeply admired for their intellectual projects and for what they revealed, not only about Proust and his project, but also about the writers. I mean, we talked about two memoirs, so we really were engaging with Murat and Stepanova in their representation in their memoirs as much as we are engaging with Proust. But there's all of this whole category that we already mentioned that you at least are sceptical of, and I share your scepticism, of seeing Proust as sort of like a self-help book, maybe?

EC: Yeah. The most famous of those is by the writer Alain de Botton, who wrote the bestselling *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, which includes such chapters as «how to love life today».

HW: Okay. How to love life today. Yes. Continue.

EC: Sorry. «How to suffer successfully», «how to express your emotions», «how to open your eyes», «how to be happy in love», etc.

HW: Yikes. I just want to say that this book was really big when I was in college, so quite some time ago. But I do think that it was such a bestseller, and it was very aimed at people who are Proust curious, but may have never read Proust. I think the target audience much exceeded those who have actually sat down and read the *Recherche*. So, I mentioned this just because I think that this is a book that a lot of people who are curious about Proust but have never read Proust will have nevertheless read this book.

EC: Or come across in some way.

HW: Or come across it. And so I think that his self-help-ish interpretations of Proust have in some ways, I think, distorted what Proust is actually like. I mean, the idea that you might be able to find out anything about being happy in love from Proust is quite silly, if we can be honest.

EC: Yeah. I wish I could remember it more clearly. I have listened to this whole book on audiobook, and I enjoyed parts of it. And it does take a kind of tongue-in-cheek approach to the self-help question. But the idea that Proust could tell you what to do, and really, you read the *Recherche* to know what not to do, I think, especially in love, like don't kidnap your girlfriend.

HW: But I also think it's just an interesting premise that, and I think he, again, I think he takes this premise with his tongue in his cheek. So, I'm not trying to malign de Botton's project.

EC: But there is something to it as well, isn't there?

HW: Yeah, well, it is. As we saw, I think Proust did change Laure Murat's life, but not in the sort of self-help categories that we're used to. And de Botton is trying to draw those sort of genres of self-help book and make them map onto Proust's sprawling novel.

EC: The idea of Proust's life-changing has also been treated in a recent novel in French, but which has been translated into English with Gallic books. So it's called *Clara lit Proust*, or *Clara Reads Proust*. And we've both read this this year, haven't we?

HW: Yeah, it's by Stéphane Carlier. So we both read this. And yes, this also takes as a premise that an encounter with a *Recherche* could change the outcome of your entire life.

EC: Yeah. So Clara, the eponymous Clara, is a hairdresser in her early 20s, living in some kind of provincial French town, I think. And she's okay, but she's a bit bored in life. She's a bit detached from everything. She has a really handsome boyfriend, but that's all we find out about him is he's handsome. She doesn't really like him very much. She is pretty much at a loose end. And then one day, an unknown handsome stranger comes into her hair salon. Obviously, by the way, the salon is meant to be a kind of pastiche of the salons that we see in Proust. So this hot guy comes in, gets his hair cut, and leaves on her countertop a copy, I think, of the first volume, of *Du Côté de chez Swann*. And she takes the book home because the guy is hot. She's like, 'I wonder what such an attractive man'. I think he even says something to her like, 'I think you're not like the other girls, Clara'. She takes this book home and forgets about it until she watches some movie or TV show with Jacob Elordi in it. And she's like, Jacob Elordi is hot. Remember that hot guy in the salon who read that book? I wonder what that book was actually about. So then she starts reading and it changes her life. She reads the whole thing. She makes new friends. She gets a whole new career out of reading Proust.

HW: Reading it out loud, we should say. Yeah. She starts to perform it in public readings and becomes an artist or like an actor or something. It's a little bit unclear.

EC: Some would say that it's a bit like starting a podcast.

HW: At any rate, so it's a transformative experience. And in a way, it's kind of actually a protreptic experience. Protrepsis is the sort of bodying forth of a transformation that the text presents to you. But anyway, the book, obviously, as we know, the *Recherche* is in part about a writer figuring out how to write. And she figures out how to do art by reading the book. So her journey echoes that of the narrator in the *Recherche*.

EC: And she breaks up with her boring boyfriend.

HW: She breaks up with her boring boyfriend. She meets like a hot musician guy. It's very lighthearted, as our report has probably led you to believe. But I think that just the basic premise that Proust could lead you to change your life is a funny one. And here's where I'm going to be embarrassing and say, I think Proust changed my life. Even though I'm like, I'm kind of dunking on these ideas of Proust as a self-help guide. I do think that there's something about the reading experience that's so overwhelming, because it's just so, there's so much. I mean, Emma, this has dominated our year. Let's be honest. I mean, there's other stuff in our lives, but this has been a major factor in our, it just has been in terms of sheer number of hours and amount of thought we've put into it. And actually it was, I will tell an embarrassing story that Emma has heard before, but I first read Proust in translation as an undergraduate and reading it in translation made me feel acutely that I wish I could be reading it in French. And that is the whole reason that I ever started studying French and I now have a PhD in French. It's my whole career. So I guess there is something about this sort of deluge-like reading experience that after the flood, things have changed. Do you think this reading of Proust has changed our life, Emma? I think it changed our friendship.

EC: I mean, what an intense and beautiful way to get to know someone.

HW: Let's do a really intense, almost year-long collaborative project, my new acquaintance.

EC: Look, okay, for our listeners, Hannah and I didn't know each other. We hung out a few times when I was in New York for a couple of months. And then we met again in Paris about a year ago. I actually had a migraine. So my memory of it is a little bit sparkly.

HW: Perfect.

EC: And then we decided to do this and we have, first across the Channel and then across the Atlantic, spent a ton of time together. And so it has been life-changing for me, at least, in that respect.

HW: At least on the scale of our friendship, it has been transformative.

EC: And I'm so glad. Which sounds insincere. I find it really hard to be emotionally sincere.

HW: I feel that you're glad. Because I'm glad. So I'm just assuming that my tenderness is reflected in you as Proust would have it.

EC: Oh, you said tenderness.

HW: I said tenderness. You're welcome.

All right, Emma, I think to wrap up, we used to do our winners and losers, but that's not really applicable this time. So I think a nice way to end might be to tell our listeners what we're going to read next, now that we finally stopped searching for lost time and remembering things not only Proust, but Proust related. Now that we're escaping, but now after the flood, what do we read?

EC: What are you going to be reading now, Hannah?

HW: I, the next thing on my list is the Deborah Levy book, *August Blue*, which is, I will confess, a sort of random choice among her books. I just have been meaning to read any of her books. And I heard good things about this one. And so I think that's next. I also do want to finish the Caroline Weber book on *Proust's Duchess*, which is not a really good answer to this question, because it's not really what's next. But it's just to say that that book is actually really fun to read. And I plan to finish it.

EC: I do want to read that too. In fact, you reminded me that I was given for my birthday, a Deborah Levy book called *Things I Don't Want to Know*. So in fact, that is also what I hopefully will have time to read now.

But my other answer, aside from all the books that my students are reading, and that therefore I am also reading, rereading, I should say, in case any of my students are listening. The other thing that I have and I'm excited to read is, and this is a very basic, but perhaps predictable answer, is the new Sally Rooney novel, which is called *Intermezzo*, which at the time of recording has recently been released.

HW: Yes, I haven't read it yet either.

EC: It's about men this time, is the headline.

HW: And now for some men.

EC: I really am genuinely looking forward to that. I am a Sally Rooney fan.

HW: As are we all. All right. Well, I think that's it for this episode.

And in fact, for the entire miniseries that has been *Proust Curious*, we hope we've piqued your curiosity. If you liked the podcast, please tell a friend about it and leave us a rating and review so that others can find us more easily.

EC: *Proust Curious* has been hosted by Emma Claussen and Hannah Weaver, and produced by Michael Goldstein. You can reach us at proustcurious@gmail.com. We'd also like to thank our partner, *Public Books*, an online magazine of ideas, arts and scholarship. Check it out at publicbooks.org.

HW: And thank you so much for listening. It's really been a pleasure to spend this time with you. Thank you. *Au revoir*.

EC: *Au revoir*.

Transcript edited by Duarte Benard da Costa