Episode 2: Novels & Political Consciousness (with Elif Batuman & Merve Emre)

Nicholas Dames (ND):

Hello, and welcome back to *Public Books 101*, a podcast that turns a scholarly eye to a world worth studying. I'm your host, Nicholas Dames. I'm an English professor at Columbia University and an editor in chief of *Public Books*, which is a magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship that is free and online. You can read the magazine at Public Books Dot Org.

In this season of our podcast, we are exploring the ongoing significance—or, some might say, the waning prominence?—of the novel as a cultural form in the 21st century. In each episode, I sit down with fiction writers and scholars to try to figure out what novels, which have been around for at least 400 years, are still doing for us in the age of the internet, social media, and streaming entertainment.

Today, I'll be speaking with Elif Batuman, who is a novelist and nonfiction writer, and Merve Emre, a literature professor and cultural critic. We'll be discussing one of the novel's unique properties as an artistic form. Specifically: its ability to help us explore how consciousness works. By opening a window into characters' minds, novels help readers understand how *other* people experience the world, and how power operates in our own lives.

As a case study of how novels do this, we'll be touching on *Convenience Store Woman*, which is a short book by the Japanese writer Sakaya Murata. *Convenience Store Woman* was first published in Japan in 2016, and then translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori in 2018.

I also want to add that this season we are partnering with Harvard Book Store, an independent shop in Cambridge, MA. We love indie bookstores at *Public Books*, and maybe you do, too. So we hope you'll consider buying *Convenience Store Woman*, or any of the other books we discuss this season, through Harvard Book Store's convenient online shop. There's a link in our show notes where you can purchase books easily.

We'll touch on that book as a way to explore broader questions about novels and political consciousness. So let's dive into my conversation with Elif Batuman and Merve Emre.

ND Okay, so let's begin by having you introduce yourself. So could you tell us and to your listeners, your name and a bit about who you are and the work that you do. Elif, would you like to begin

EB Sure, my name is Elif Batuman and I am a writer. I wrote two books, one is called *The Possessed* and it is nonfiction, comical, interconnected essays about Russian literature. And another is an autobiographical novel called *The Idiot*, and I have also done journalism and criticism. I spent a very long time in a Ph.D. program in comparative literature and what else? I'm working a sequel to *The Idiot* now, which is called Either/Or.

ME I'm Merve Emre, I'm an Associate Professor of English at the University of Oxford. I am also a nonfiction writer. I recently wrote a book on the strange secret history of

personality testing called *The Personality Brokers*, and I am also a literary critic and currently coming to you from the Visenshaf Koleg [ph. sp.] in Berlin.

ND Where it is much later than it is here, so, thank you for—

ME Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

ND —staying up, or at least having the energy to do this right now. So, Elif, you wanted to, you suggested that we talk about *Convenience Store Woman*, and I was wondering if you could take a stab, I'm going to have both of you do this, but I'm going to have you go first, Elif, if you could stab about summarizing it in, in just a few sentences. What is this novel about?

EB Okay, the sentence I came up with was, it is an examination of unspoken social and economic norms in post-deregulation Japan from the perspective of Keiko, an extremely literal, possibly Autistic woman, who in her 20's thought that she found the key to living a normal life via a part-time job at a convenience store, but now in her 30's that doesn't work anymore and her life falls apart, and she is sort of reading the tea leaves of what she is supposed to be doing, and thus it is a book about the horror of being a woman in your 30's.

ND And that is a fantastic sentence, I wonder if you have anything else you want to add to that?

ME I was going to say that whereas most novels that are about living under like capitalism tell you the story of how a person becomes a worker. I actually think this novel tells you the opposite story, which is what if the baseline condition is that everyone is a worker and what they are actually horrified of is becoming a person. And so what I found sort of fascinating about *Convenience Store Woman* is that it tells the story of a woman who has become so identified or identifies herself so much as a convenience store worker that the possibility of becoming any more individuated as a person launches her into this kind of world of horror so that she has no choice but to go back to the convenience store.

ND I want to hold onto that idea for a second, because both of you work with novels, I mean, the novel is an object of labor for both of you. So, speaking of work and being a person, now, you know, Elif, as a writer, you have worked across many genres, you have written a novel as you just said, as well as nonfiction and literary criticism, journalism. But as a reader, and I mean here, you could, you know, whether as a reader for professional reasons or just as a reader in your spare time, is there anything you would want to say about the history of your relationship to the novel? Has it changed over time?

EB My theory now about the effect that novels had on my life is that they depoliticized me and led me into a path of hetero-normative misery, but I have realized this through a course of therapy, and I actually, I feel like the novel for me is like all coping mechanisms that one comes to at a very early age, is that it is your salvation and it makes it able for you to live and then it, you know, proceeds to deform the rest of your life, so that is something that I have been thinking about a lot. I'm trying to write a book now

excavating the ways that I think that I was depoliticized largely through my love of novels, which is something that happened in my late teens and early 20's and I'm struggling with the right form to do that. At first I thought it was going to actually be a novel, and then that started to seem crazy, so I thought it would be some kind of polemic and now I have actually gone around back to it's going to be, I mean, it's going to be kind of both, but if I have sort to come back around to the novel.

ND Could you say a little bit more about what you mean by depoliticized?

EB Yeah, I think that when I was a kid, I was probably like Merve, I would actually love to talk about this at some actual hotel bar in the future, but I mean, I think of Turkish culture as being sort of an outsider, in between kind of culture and my relation to it was I sort of had an outsider relationship to Turkish culture, where I was going back and forth a lot and just seeing a lot of, I don't know, like I guess what the kids call code switching, like just things that seemed completely normal and intellectual in one place seemed just bonkers in another, and nobody had heard of the same stuff and the celebrities were all different and the rules were all different and, but I don't know, everything was up for grabs and I also grew up in a very sort of stressed family with a lot of family stress and secrets and I found novels to be the only mode of description that was talking about the things that I actually thought were interesting, which was like, what goes on inside a house and what are the relationships between the people there? Like compared to what I saw in the news or in a history book, all of that stuff just seemed completely bogus to me, and I really, the novels that I was attracted to were often the ones that described the disenfranchisement of women, or the bullshit that women and children had to go through. All the unfairness and all the hypocrisy that people sort of metabolize and assimilate and how there are still these moments of beauty and of interpersonal complexity and richness, and novels made life seem worth living to me. They made life seem beautiful, like my favorite, the ones that got me hooked that like a main line were for me *Eugene Onegin* and Anna Karenina, which are really books about very unhappy women, but they are so beautiful, and then you start to think, well was Tatiana right to write that letter to Eugene Onegin, I mean, if she hadn't, then we wouldn't have the book, that was kind of the line when I was in grad school, to well, if that didn't happen, we wouldn't have the book, we wouldn't have this great work of literature that we constantly talk about. So it is really like Tatiana took one for the team for like the whole Russian novel since that was the book that kicked it off. Anyway, I feel like, you know, there is that famous quote that Nabokov said that was the inspiration for *Lolita* that it was about the first painting ever painted by an animal, and it was the Jardin des Plantes, who painted the bars and it is the poor animal painting the bars in its cage. I feel like that's like every novel. And that there, well, not every novel, but all my favorite novels. And that a lot of what they were doing was like, but look at these bars, aren't they interesting, aren't they beautiful? Like look how the light falls, this wouldn't have happened if there weren't bars, Anyway, I just feel like the novel led to anesthetize my own kind of imprisonment, which was sort of natural for a child because you are in prison when you are a child, but I sort of preserved that mechanism into my early adulthood and like well into my 30's and I didn't really

understand the extent to which I was free and the extent to which I could use writing and ideally now I hope the novel, now that I am in my 40's, you know, hopefully I will figure it out before I die how the novel can be an instrument of freedom as well.

ND Merve, do you want to, do you want anything to, I mean, it's such a great account of what de-politicization. Do you want to add anything to that, or does it look different from your perspective?

ME Well, it does look a little bit different. I mean, and if I take what you said about the in between-ness of Turkish culture really resonated with me. I mean, I was raised by two physician immigrants.

EB Me too.

ME Yeah.

EB They were born in—

ME I assumed you were. I was born in, I was born in Adana, yeah, were you also born in Adana? Yeah.

EB I was born here, but I spent every summer in Adana, yeah.

ME I actually have this theory that you and I are like, like might be the same person. But, you know, so when we came to the U.S., I was 4 when we moved to Brooklyn and I was very much raised with this, you know, with this narrative, this immigrant narrative of we came here to allow our children access to opportunities that we didn't have and those opportunities were always framed as very sort of professional, managerial opportunities. You were going to be a doctor, you were going to be a lawyer, maybe you would go into business, but they didn't even really know what that was. And—

EB Management, right?

ME I remember. Yeah, management, well, I worked as a manager, my first job out of college was as a management consultant, and I remember when I told my parents that I was going to go get a Ph.D. in literature, my mother like wept at my feet. And for me, it was interesting because studying literature and studying the novel more specifically did feel like an act of asserting the value of something that to my parents was useless, and valueless, and that did feel interestingly, I mean, maybe narcissistically political to me. That I got to study something that within my parents value schematics was completely, was completely worthless. And I think that often when I think about what the novel means to me, it is very much with that dialogue about value going on in the back of my, in the back of my mind, and I think for me what was interesting was that the novel in some ways, or the novels that I fell in love with were novels that had a sort of finely tuned political sensibility and a lot of the time that sensibility was directed against or was interested in sort of excavating the prisons or the cages that men put women into or enabled women to put themselves into. And I think this is, you know, one of the other novels that we were thinking about talking about, or the series of novels that we were

thinking about was the Neapolitan quartet. And so that to me is a sort of perfect example of a series of novels that actually helped me see something about the kind of everyday, the way that everyday politics could scale up to something like a larger political imagination of gender. And so I think that my trajectory, maybe just because it starts as defending what seemed valueless to my parents, always felt somewhat resistant even if it couldn't be completely resistant.

ND This is the moment that I have to say that, this is funny for me because I am half Greek, so you know, this is a, I don't know whether that gives me proximity or a whole lot of distance. But a lot of both of you said resonated with me, also as another, you know, child of immigrants. So, I thought a good way to start with *Convenience Store Woman* would be to talk about the novel's tone a bit. Merve, do you think you could take a stab at describing the tone of the novel?

ME Well, I mean, to me when I started reading it, I thought that it had this incredible anthropological tone, so what would happen if you took a person and you just plopped them down in the middle of a completely unfamiliar place, with totally unfamiliar people whose habits were utterly extraordinary. And so to me at the beginning, the novel had that kind of flatness of tone or of observation that you see in some anthropological or sociological writing. But that then ends up being punctured by these moments I think of incredible humor, where all of a sudden, you have a narrator who has done the kind of mechanistic work of learning how to live in this world of ordinary people and then the mechanism slips. And you see something of the person underneath, who is ironically or paradoxically a kind of non-person, or someone who isn't valued as a person. And so I would say that it does have this kind of dark anthropological humor, and that I think the, I think that gets used in really interesting ways to be at moment sort of faux naïve, and at moments very sinister.

ND Yeah, yeah.

ME And that so much of this tension is the back and forth between that faux naiveté and the recognition of how that naiveté can be used to actually wound the people around her.

ND Yeah.

EB I really like the anthropological tone, like but anthropological writing like wishes it was like this. Like to me, it was—

ME Right.

EB It almost felt, I mean, at first you think like this person is Autistic or they have some kind of problem picking up cues, like they are so literal. I actually didn't experience it as an oscillation, I felt like it was a good faith attempt to, I do see how you can see it that way, and you can see it as like knowing or cunning or sinister, but like I kind of took it to be, I mean, because we are all anthropologists, right? Like we all arrive and then on day one, we have to start parsing all of these things and we get all of these, we get all of this input about things that we are doing that are shameful or wrong, and we're very, most of us are

very good at parsing those and she just isn't. like she gets them eventually, she understands that she is causing distress to people, but there is a delay, and that like everything is in that delay, and to me the scene that really made it is very early in the novel, she is on a playground and there is a dead bird and all the other kids are like, oh poor Mr. Birdie is dead and like are we going to have a birdie funeral and she is like, oh boy, when are we going to cook it and make yakitori, and the reason for that is like, because her father is always saying, oh, yakitori is the most tasty thing, and like yakitori just means like grilled bird, like it is usually chicken, but it means bird, and so like, you can just imagine like someone being like, someone is constantly telling me grilled bird is wonderful, here's a dead bird, why don't we make this wonderful thing out of it, and everyone is horrified and they are all like crying and screaming, and in a way, yeah, it is dark that she wants to like cook this bird, but in the other, I mean, it is like exposing the horror that we don't allow ourselves to see. As someone who tries and fails to maintain a vegan diet for all of the days of the week, this is like a form of bad faith that I think about a lot, and like, it, she is just questioning all of the rules that we take for granted.

ME What I think is, what I think is so good in that scene that you point out is not only that she doesn't quite understand why there is this like sentimental outpouring over the bird when people eat birds all the time, but that they are also, this is the detail I love, that they are also murdering flowers, she says, right? They are murdering flowers in order to construct this grave for the bird, and so in like indulging their sentiment, they are actually doing more harm to other species that they refuse to recognize, but that she can see. And so it's interesting, right? Like to think about how, to think about how like if you are somebody who isn't socialized into the codes of behavior, or the codes of emotion that all the other characters seem to be socialized into, the way you can actually see like other kinds of moral or ethical transgressions taking place.

ND Elif, could you say a bit about the setting of the novel? The konbini, or the convenience store, what it means to set something there, because nothing happens in there, right? Other than the things that happen all the time, I mean, it is a space of complete repetition, but I wonder if there is anything you would want to say about what it means to set a novel in a space like that, and it almost, with some, you know, some excursions to apartments, it pretty much takes place in a convenience store.

EB So I started reading about the history of convenience stores in Japan and I was like, you know, because when you go to, and you can tell from the book that it is like, it is a very American kind of concept the convenience store, and yet it is super specific and cultural, the way that it is there, you know, the thing that they shout at you when you come in and the, all the different flavors of, you know, Japanese foods that we wouldn't have here. But yeah, so this article that I read about the history of the konbini was that the convenience stores started 70 years ago in America and 30 years ago in Japan, like they, and in the mid-70's, they opened the first 7-Eleven which was through some kind of cooperation with the U.S. So it really is this imported form. And you know, I was just thinking about, I don't know, but there is always some kind of mediation going on

between the American and somehow like foreign kind of mass capitalism that was important there, and the way that it has been internalized and assimilated so much into daily life.

ND Um-hmm, yeah.

ME But this reminded me actually that I spent a New Year's in a convenience store in Japan, which I had completely forgotten about when I started reading this novel, but I was, in 2009, I was in Kyoto for New Year's and it was so cold outside, we were at a festival outside a temple in Kyoto, and there was a convenience store right there and we were so cold waiting it to turn midnight that we went into the convenience store and actually ended up totally missing the midnight festivities because we were so, we were so sort of amazed by the layout of the store. And I can even now remember like how incredibly bright the lights were and that there was this kind of amazing juxtaposition and maybe this is a form of estrangement that this novel at least makes me think of, but like the amazingly estranging experience of going from this, from this dark temple fire, where it was, you know, lit up by fire, where there were these festivities happening, parades, into the convenience store, which even on New Year's was completely bright, light just flooding every corner, completely organized and people were still working as if nothing was happening outside of it. One of the things that is really interesting about this novel is that it seems to ask you like, how much change is necessary in order for a novel to exist? Because everyone in this novel, every character, the narrator, they are always pointing to how little changes, and this is a question that was just coming up in my mind as I was thinking of, you know, being in that convenience store in Kyoto as the year was changing outside. And this novel set in a convenience store where nothing seems to change. Like how much change do you have to have in order for the novel to function as a form. And could you have a novel in which nothing changes? What would that look like?

ND Yeah, this is, it is almost like a kind of, Ablomov question, but flipped weirdly, it is not about refusal to work, it is about nothing but work, you know, what would plot look like if it consists of nothing but the cycle of your, you know, your job schedule or something like that?

EB I remember [unintelligible - 20:53] under that is about the outdating of what seemed like eternal transcendental norms, and I feel like that is what happens in this book is that she goes there and she finds these seemingly eternal, this eternal, you know, a manual that she can follow and rules and nothing is ever going to change, but then actually sinisterly the handle of the knife and the blade of the knife have been replaced so many times people keep getting fired. The goods on the shelves are all different. It is actually a mirage. And by the time she gets to her 30's, she is like Don Quixote, right, it is like this way of life that made perfect sense for her in her 20's that everyone accepted as normal that she has a part-time job at a convenience store. Now that she is in her 30's, she is like, just by doing the same thing, she is like, becomes some freak of society who has to be rejected. I thought that was kind of like [unintelligible - 21:37] novels too.

ND That's a good way to put it, yeah. Merve, I want to stick with work a second, but torque that question a slightly different way. There was a sentence that hit me in the novel where, so the narrator, Keiko, talks about all the women of her generation and she says they are now what she calls hooking up with society either through employment or marriage. And I just wondered if there was something you wanted to say about that, that locution, hooking up with society and the treatment of heterosexuality and work as related or maybe even identical phenomena and maybe related through casualization.

ME So I think you are right that there is a relationship here between productivity and heterosexual reproductively in particular. I don't know or I wondered whether hooking up gets at precisely what the nature of that relationship is, because one of the interesting things is that Keiko is somebody who is supposed to doing a job that is only a temporary job, but she transforms it into a permanent one.

ND Right.

ME And a permanent one that by the end actually offers this like feeling of transcendence, and so the temporary becomes the transcendent, and maybe was that is pointing to is that increasingly hooking up is all we have. Interestingly, that is, like that is what productivity, that is what the organization of economic life is devolving into. And so like that soon will be, will bring with it the same transcendence or will have to create the same sense of transcendence that something more stable, something more "fulfilling" would previously have. But it is, you know, I was curious to know what you guys thought about the sort of, the repulsion she feels towards sex, because it is not just a kind of quiet asexuality, right? She talks about it. She is horrified by it. There is a kind of grotesqueness to it.

ND The novel that kept coming in my head was weirdly *Jude the Obscure*, insofar as there is like the horror of sex is, you know, it functions as a lure into kinds of social integration that are fundamentally, you know, soul destroying or warping, but the difference of course in *Jude the Obscure*, you know, it is drenched in a kind of erotics. It wants you to feel that lure, whereas *Convenience Store Woman* gives you no lure to latch onto, if anything it is really the reverse. It is, you know, there is nothing other than I don't know the erotics of shelf arranging. The erotics of making sure that, which, you know, sort of appeal to me actually.

EB Yeah, that's where the joy is.

ND Yeah, yeah, it really is and in some way that I could get.

EB I guess insofar as I saw a connection between the heterosexuality and work, I just saw them as both being compulsory and that it was, I was really thinking about compulsory heterosexuality, I, so the book that I'm writing now was sort of inspired by in part by some criticism that I got for *The Idiot*, including from *The New York Times* where like people were upset that they didn't have sex at the end. And it was actually in *The New York Times* review, the guy was like, this made me think of this like, of this criticism that

Martin Amis once said about Jane Austen that the thing that would have made *Pride and Prejudice* a better book would be if there was a 30 page sex scene between [*correction*: 20-page], you know, I forget, Ms. Bennet and whatever his name is. And I was thinking back, you know, at first my reaction to that was like what a strange take, how odd, but then the more I thought about it, and it definitely wasn't only that review or it was like readers came up to me, like one girl came up to me at a party and was like really angry, she was like, I was just waiting the whole time for them to consummate their relationship, and I was like, ha ha, like oh you are so kind to have read it, like I thought that she was like making pleasantries, and she wasn't, like her face was just like really angry, and as I was thinking back, I was like, so maybe it was about, it was based on my college experiences as a freshman in 1995 to 1996, and I didn't write about anything that happened after that, where what happened was in 1996 to 1997 I had like a huge meltdown. I did have sex for the first time, after that I got assaulted, and you know, and a lot of stuff happened for me to kind of hook up culture, which began to seem really mandatory, like it was made very clear to me by my friends and by the friends of the actual guy who I did not have sex with as a freshman that the whole adventure with him had somehow been a failure, that the meaning of it was in having sex. And I, you know, and I wasn't like, you know, I was very susceptible to romance like to, you know, it's just the, all of the mechanics that I knew about like, you know, genital intercourse were just really gross to me. So what I, you know, then later when I got older and read Marcuse about like the, you know, putting all the, taking eros out of, in order to enable people putting their eros into the workplace, the just as the day is fragmented into the workday and leisure, so is the human body divided between the genitals, which are for pleasure and everything else which is for work, and it just started to make me think that how much de-eroticization of life in general do we put up with by having it all sort of like pushed onto genital heterosexual intercourse. In my case, I felt like that really happened, and I just saw her as someone who was like, it just didn't work on her, I don't know, and I see now, I'm now the, my partner now who I have been living with for three or four years is a woman who always identified as a lesbian, which I just never like, when we talk about childhood and our adolescence, there are so many kind of like myths about men and so many ideas of patriarchy that they just didn't work on her, like they just didn't attach, and I keep asking myself like what was it about me, what was it about my family dynamics and I just found a picture of someone on whom they didn't make sense at all and she wasn't, you know, she wasn't interested in trying it. She was really like content with herself with the eros that she could get, which was the eros of shelf arrangement, I found that very kind of moving and interesting and almost I mean, like it is super dark, but I almost feel like there is some sort of like utopian potential in it.

ME I think it is amazing though that, and quite funny that for that, the repulsion that she feels towards sex for her sexual marginalization, when she looks at the very end, when she goes back to the convenience store and she looks into the store's window, what she thinks of in that final moment is her, is her nephew, right? She thinks of a baby. And it left me sort of wondering like what does the baby of the woman in the convenience store look like? What is the, what is the, I mean, is the mirage or the imagined reflection of the baby

just there as like a deferral or a kind of vague shadow, a ghostly shadow of what she will never have, or is it pointing toward, is it pointing toward her and the convenience store having, being able to generate something together in the future? Like the ending was sort of interestingly ambiguous for me in that way.

ND Elif, your novel *The Idiot* was both a reference to and itself a bildungsroman in a way, a novel of formation, and I did want to ask you as somebody who has obviously thought a lot about this, if you thought that is a useful category for *Convenience Store Woman*? Is this in any way a bildungsroman, or is this a novel that just can't be in that category partly because, you know, the central character is already formed, and no future formation can really occur? But I'm curious your thoughts about that.

EB Yeah, I thought that are really interesting, I think that is a really interesting question, and I was thinking about it with *The Idiot* too, which is, it is a novel of affection that she is at college, but I understood this more kind of like talking to book groups and talking to readers. The person in *The Idiot* is already quite odd, you know, and she is already that way when the book starts. It leaves out childhood and I have been thinking a lot more about formation. I don't know, the take that I have on the novel now is that like the world is completely crazy in ways that we are increasingly realizing, and that that craziness is really, I mean, I think that the case study for this is the Trump presidency that there is this craziness that is created in private families that is privatized and that we refuse to treat as political, and it creates these horrific political outcomes. And that kind of pipeline from childhood and family to large political outcomes is just something that is sort of like second wave feminists were able to do that to some extent with the lives of women, like, you know, to make what seemed like private seem public, but that hasn't really been done for childhood yet and I kind of think that that is the next frontier and that is something that the novel has always been doing, and it is, you know, the novels were doing that before Freud articulated the importance of early childhood development, and you know, Freud was a big novel reader so probably it came from there. And so there is some bildung that is, seems like it is like, it is left out of *Convenience Store Woman*, and in her next novel, *Earthlings*, she goes into it a lot more explicitly. There is a lot more about the person's childhood, but I do think that, like the reasons that bildungsroman is such an enduring form is that insofar as the novel is there for defamiliarizing, it is for exposing the norms that we follow and conventions that we follow for being as arbitrary and culturally constructed a contingent as they are, that is, you know, one way to sort of expose that is going to the time before they were formed, and you know, the starting point, you can choose whichever one you want. But I do think, maybe it is not an exhaustive bildungsroman because it doesn't show how she got all of the ideas and it doesn't, you know, start all the way back, but I do think that it is fair to say that that is what it is doing. It shows how she got some ideas. It showed those ideas being outdated and it showed her kind of trying to figure out what to do and how to form a new set of ideas to go forward, and then ultimately going back on the old ideas.

ND Yeah.

ME Oh, well, I was going to say, that's actually the way I sort of read it as a midlife crisis novel. It was like, you know, that the convenience store, the rhythms of the convenience store as an institution are sort of like the rhythms of a marriage. They are like, they are soothing, you know where everything goes, you know what your day-to-day routine is going to be.

EB It is an adultery novel.

ME It is an adultery novel, no, that is exactly what I think it is. I think it is an adultery novel where she ends up back with the, with the partner that she, that she cheated on. And the Shiraha character, you know, for all of his, for all of his bluster, he is just the kind of, he is like the temporary side piece that then gets, that then gets discarded and there is that wonderful moment at the end where she goes, like my animal self, my convenience store worker self, which I think is so, it is so deeply funny that sort of that coding of the animal self as the institutional self.

ND Yeah, boy, that's a good point. Shiraha is just as ridiculous and unsatisfactory as any of the men in Madame Bovary as far as —

ME Right.

ND — you know, a possible option, yeah. Yeah.

[ad break]

ND Yeah, that's right. Right, right. So, you know, we have been talking about *Convenience Store Woman* for a while, and I want to, I want to sort of zoom back out and think about the central question that this podcast series is trying to engage, which is what value the novel still has right now and how this kind of centuries old form might still benefit readers in any of the ways that we might think that could happen, and so Elif I want to start with you and ask what you think this novel does provide for a reader right now?

EB I guess the framework in which I thought about it was like what is a novel that is doing something that people could not get through any other form than the novel, and for me personally at the time that I read this, I read it in 2018, and you know, part of the reason was that it is quite short and it is fun and it is a page turner, and you know, I think lots of different people will enjoy it and can enjoy it and it is quite accessible, but at the time that I read it, I was reading a lot about the deregulation, economic deregulation in Japan and the rise of this retail class of incidental workers and I was also reading "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," and I was also reading *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, and I was kind of taking in all of these different ideas, but this novel really made, gave them an affective reality that I could really enter into, and I just felt like that is something that is so valuable that the novel can do is that, I mean, this is going to sound super cliché, but it can bring ideas to life. I think that there is a bigger gap than we necessarily think or know between the things that we know abstractly or intellectually and the things that feel true to us and that the novel is a way of kind of like illustrating them, illustrating the abstract truths that we may think that we already know into a kind

of like visceral or affective reality that makes us realize that we didn't actually know them so well to begin with.

ND Yeah. Just to press you on that for a second, I mean, this idea of bringing ideas to life, can you say more about how that happens because one thing that strikes me is that it could happen in two ways. One would be to, almost like the anthropological way, to show you something that you didn't know about or some form of life you weren't aware about. And the other would be, which almost sounded like what you were saying, is that in fact it is to show you in a slightly de-familiarized way, something you actually already know and are not acknowledging or taking for granted in some way, you know, something that you are familiar with, but haven't quite let percolate.

EB Yeah, I was talking more about the second one, although the first one is also totally true also. If you think of the novel as having a de-familiarizing purpose, yeah, one way to do it is to show you the experience of someone who is in a very different situation and make you realize that, oh, we're not so different after all, and how can I translate from that into my life and the one that I think about more, I guess, because I feel like a person who has internalized a lot of Western imperialistic norms is the, you know, the one who is showing the one real universal civilization and which we all as readers now, so yeah, the one that we know.

ND Yeah, yeah. Merve, do you have thoughts about what this novel does right now and, you know, something you would be able to say to somebody who hadn't read it and you might to get interested in it?

ME I was thinking about easy it would be to read this novel as a fairly straightforward manifestation of certain arguments about what work does to us or what the condition of personhood is under like capitalism, and I was thinking about what it would mean, or how this novel shows what people or what character would look like if we were to take those arguments very, very, very literally and that part of the humor of this novel, and I think one of the things that I like about it is that it is a comedic novel and I think that those are in really sort of short supply these days, it is just a deeply funny novel and I think part of its humor comes from showing that the theoretical world mapped by arguments about what capitalism does to the individual doesn't actually match the world that we live in, right, this isn't the world that we live in, and that's the comedy that this novel produces is the gap between the world we recognize as ours and what the world of the novel is and what the voice of its narrator sounds like. And so I think in that sort of odd and maybe like backwards way, it does allow us to see something like the residual nature of character, the residual nature of selfhood that we aren't living in this world, that there is still the capacity for a kind of selfhood, however compromised, because people don't walk around looking and speaking like this because our animal selves are not our convenience store worker selves. And I think maybe to Elif's point earlier, like that there is something that utopian about this novel, maybe that is, that kind of distance that the novel measures between its world and ours through its comedy, through its estrangement

of a kind of theory of the person under late capitalism is precisely what is utopian about it. That we're not, we're not there yet, you know?

ND But damn close.

ME We're not there yet, we're close, yeah, we're close, but we're not, but like what is funny about it is that we're not fully there.

EB I love the point about how funny it is because that does seem like the most important thing about the book and I have been thinking lately about humor as a way of questioning. To me, the funniest scene in the book is when she, she decides that this guy is going to become her boyfriend and so she keeps him in the bathtub in like suits and eating garbage and he just sits in there and plays on his phone and the first thing that she does is call her sister, and she is like, there is a man in my apartment, and then instead of being scared the sister is like, oh my God, that's so wonderful and like everyone is acting like this is the most fantastic thing that happened to her and to me what was really funny and kind of utopian about that is like I really had that experience. I mean, I was there was a time in my 30's where I was, I was married, it was kind of a green card marriage, but it was also kind of real, like I married my boyfriend so that he could leave his exploitative job that was like holding his visa over his head, and we weren't living together, but like sometimes people would be like, talk to me as if I wasn't married and I would be like, oh no, actually like I am married. And like I just experienced so many times this huge relief that would radiate from people. I remember one of my editors in particular, and he is like, oh, you are married, oh my goodness, tell me about your husband? And I just remember like, it all, like it, not to say anything bad about my former husband because he was great, like he wasn't, you know, living in the bathtub and eating dog food, but he, he could have been, nobody, and I, and this made me think like a lot of this is my own personal issues, which are sort of like related to patriarchy but aren't identical with it, so I don't want to like blend them together too much, but like, I always had this idea that like my relationships with men were somehow doomed and that they were all, you know, going to be doomed, but they were also like intensely meaningful and the only really meaningful thing, and like, oh men, you can't live with them, you can't live without them, and then there was just something about that image of that guy in the bathtub where it is like, oh my God, if you got rid of him, you could take a bath in your bathtub and enjoy yourself, but it just, it seemed to liberating and kind of wonderful to me.

ND Yeah.

ME You know, I mean, one of the things that raises about the question of, you know, of the novel as a form is like what would the novel look like if we just did get rid of sex, if we got rid of relationships, heterosexual, homosexual, queer, whatever. Right? Like what would happen to the novel if you took very literally her shock or if you inhabited her shock that I couldn't believe they were putting gossip about store workers before a promotion in which chicken skewers that usually sold at 130 yen were to be put on sale at

the special price of 110 yen. What on earth had happened to them, right? That to me is the funniest moment.

EB But that is an incredible scene.

ME Yeah, it is wonderful, like she cannot believe that what they are interested in are the love lives of these people that they don't even know, and isn't that like why we read so many novels, because we are interested in the like romantic fates of people that we don't even, of these made up characters that we don't even know. Like what would happen to the novel if that were no longer a structuring principle of it in any way, shape or form?

EB Well, I mean, I think it is kind of hydraulic, like it would go somewhere else. Like, to me what was so moving about that scene that you describe is she thought that this store manager, she has seen the different store managers come and go and this is number eight and he is the best one because he is the one she can really talk to about like oh the weather is hot today, so we have to move the barley tea so it is in the front, and she really has these conversations with him that she finds fulfilling and she thinks that they are on the same level, and then when he finds out she has a man at home, he is like, oh, you should leave your job immediately so you can get married, and I guess you are going to want to have kids now, and she is like, wait, so that whole thing that we had wasn't real? And like so and it's the same structure, like it is the same kind of interpersonal, you know, it is just that is the, that is the romance maybe that she has with the manager. So I have been thinking a lot about like, oh, if we don't separate, if we don't do the Marcuse thing like if we just want to like diffuse eros into everything like what is it, what is it going to do to the novel and at first I thought we couldn't have it, but now I feel like the novel is going to survive and that in some way it was like made for that to happen, but I don't have a great —

ME Well, I think, I think you would get more comic novels. So I think you would get more novels like this one. I think you would get more novels like Helen DeWitt's Lightening Rods. I think you would get more novels like Fran Ross' Oreo, right and that, to me at least, is a very sort of cheering prospect.

ND Boy, that sounds nice, that sounds nice, like the end of pathos for a while at least. Yeah. So, I want to end with a question for both of you actually. And that is if either of you has a kind of unpopular or contrarian or controversial opinion about a novel that you want to share? We'll say this is a space in which you could offer that opinion.

ME Yeah, novels are too long and too many things happen in them.

ND Which can't be said of this novel, right?

ME And, yeah, and poetry is just shapes, so, you know. No, I'm just kidding. Let me think, let me think, Elif, do you have a contrarian opinion about a novel?

EB I mean, it is not going to be contrarian with you guys, but like when I was growing up, there was the one about like great art can't be political and like characters have to be, like

you can't make any, because then it is lecturing, like I think that a lot of the, what was presented to me as like aesthetics and politics are fundamentally opposed was like taking like really bad political novels as a model and was actually taking a kind of political novels that were sort of fetishizing power in the same way, and taking, taking them to be, because they weren't actually political novels. But then I was thinking, I don't know, I started to write notes about this, and I don't know this may be completely incoherent, but I was, I was just thinking again about Rene Girard and the unity of novelistic conclusions, which was an essay that like made me so upset when I was a grad student, where he is like, like basically the thing that I took away from that was like, at the end of every novel there is a part where the person realizes like that party I wanted to go to was stupid and then like, they turn their back on everything they did and like it happens usually on their deathbed where Don Quixote is like, oh, I don't want to be a knight anymore or the Red and the Black, he is like, oh, I don't want to be like Napoleon, I'm just going to sit in the sun until I die, and Rene Girard is like, oh, this is this like great moment of like Christian realization, renunciation and part of me was very convinced by that, but then another part just found it really like kind of anti-human and life negating and sort of like not true to what the experience of reading the novel is, because when you are reading the novel, you are not reading it for the end where they are like, oh, everything that I did was wrong. You are reading it for the whole beginning where they are doing all this stuff that turns out to be wrong later. Like Proust is a great example of this, right, like he like does all these things that are like stupid and that are a waste of time and at the end, he is like, oh thank goodness I wasted my time because these are the novels that, you know, these are the materials for my great novel. And there is kind of a model of the novel that I feel like was presented to me in graduate school as like that we have to turn ourselves into works of art and like the narrator in Proust is just like this fully realized person, but then like what does he do with that realization because by then he is so old like all he can do is just like write his book and die? I was thinking about Ferrante, like when you read those books and that like at the end, she has wasted a lot of time, but she doesn't try to redeem, like I was just thinking about like, remember when you were talking about sex, like all those descriptions of sex with her husband, like how awful they were, like she didn't get anything from that. It was like, it was just, none of it should have happened -

ME But, but, but, but, at the end, the person who the word waste attaches to is Nino, she looks at him, and she goes, so much wasted labor, or something like that. So much wasted, so much wasted work, you know, so much wasted work on this man.

EB Yeah, completely. And is there a way that we could like recognize waste, also recognize the moments of, like with Nino, there is also like parts of the Nino plot are really like sexy and fun and exciting to read, and that, you know, is there a way that we could sort of like acknowledge that and like keep that, I don't know, not really into Marie Kondo, can we just say that like, you know, this thing, it sparked joy in its time, it served its purpose, and like now we can let it go, and it doesn't have to be like, you know, this, okay, I guess I'm just going to like lie down and die now?

ND Yeah, yeah.

ME Yeah, that's like a healthy approach to most of your exes and maybe most novels too. This thing sparked joy in its time, now we shall, we shall let it go. But I mean, I, I think, well, I don't know if it is a controversial opinion about a novel, Nick, but I do find, and maybe you can help me think about why I feel this way. I actually kind of hate it when people talk about THE novel as if it were some kind of, you know, overwhelming, homogenous construct out in the world, because I don't think I could talk about something like *Convenience Store Woman* and say, what's the novel that just won the Booker -

ND *Shuggie Bain*, yeah.

ME Shuggie Bain, yeah, like I don't think I could talk about those two novels in the same breath and tell you anything about THE novel as a form, and I wonder why, and I didn't used to feel that way, and I wonder if that is because I think that there is a kind of faux cultural aggrandizement of the novel at a time when it is increasingly a minor cultural form and that speaking about it in that way doesn't do enough to recognize that. And one of the things that I like about this novel in particular, and maybe the reason why I increasingly read a lot of novellas is because I think that there is some virtue right now in defending the minor.

ND Yeah, yeah.

ME And in defending, I mean, I don't think I was entirely joking. I was quoting a friend when I said that novels are too long and there are too many things going on in them, but I think maybe what is so brilliant about this novel is that it is not long and it is sort of asking like what is the, what is the bare minimum of action or of change that has to happen in order to be able to call something a novel or to make it recognizable within, within the form? And that to me actually goes very much against the invocation of THE novel as a major and homogenous cultural force.

ND Yeah, I think, I can hear that voice that speaks of THE novel and it seems to come out of like 1965, you know, and this kind of competition for mastering it and as old as that voice sounds though, there is this way in which it is trying to distinguish THE novel from other media in a way that maybe wouldn't have been the case in 1965 in quite the same way. I mean, we've been talking about, about time wasted and of course there is a lot of technologies for time wastage that we probably have all been engaged in in recent months, and maybe the novel is one of them, you know, maybe it is just another, another way to pass the time or kill time or escape into a different kind of time, but is there anything that is different about that form of time killing than I don't know, scrolling through my phone anxiously at 10:00 p.m., or getting lost in some sort of TV serial, you know, just, you know, night on end, or are those distinctions kind of meaningless?

EB I kind of like the, I don't know, I totally get that it is pompous and annoying when people talk about THE novel. At the same time, I do like to think about like the Neapolitan

novels and *Convenience Store Woman* as being the same or part of the same thing, like I think it can be fun to think of very, like, you know, because one has more extraneous characters and things happening in the Neapolitan novels, but I still really like, right? It is just sometimes it is fun to think of two really different subjectivities as colleagues, as being in a collegial relationship and I guess to me the thing that is interesting about the novel as like compared to scrolling through a phone or reading a magazine or watching a TV show is that it is really, you get to see one subjectivity at play, you know, if you are scrolling through Twitter, everyone is contradicting everyone else. If you watch TV, each episode is written by someone different, it is directed by someone different, you are always having to do this kind of like, you know, a lot of weight is carried by the fact that the actors faces are the same and it kind of lets you gloss over the fact that they are like contradicting themselves, and of course, like, you know, novels contradict themselves all the time, but there is some kind of standard is held there by the fact that someone, some really conscientious person who was, you know, by this point not doing it for money, like someone who was really doing it because they thought it was important because writing a novel is horrible and poorly paid and it is really like not anything that anyone would do if they didn't really care about it, I don't know, that's why I like novels I guess.

ND Yeah, alright, Merve can I, can I just go back to what you said there for a second, because it sounded like you, again, I'm going to have to use the phrase, it sounds like you are defending the novel, but in an interesting way. You are defending, there is something kind of optimistic about what you just said in that the fall of the novel into minorness, like it is a minor art form, might be a good thing for it.

ME It was always a minor art form, wasn't it? I mean, that is part of the, and maybe this just goes back to how I started like talking about my, my own arrival to the novel as a defense of its valuelessness or uselessness rather within my parents sort of scheme of values, but what Elif said just helped me understand something or helped me frame something that I was going to say, which was that I always fall asleep watching Netflix or scrolling through my phone, and I actually never fall asleep reading a novel. And I wonder if that does have something to do with voice? I do think it has something to do, Elif, with what you are saying about the ability to feel like you are experiencing or coming into contact with a highly sort of concentrated utterance, a highly particularized, a highly concentrated mode of expression and that you are not sort of being crowded or thronged by the dizziness of, you know, multiple avatars, multiple actors, multiple screenwriters, multiple directors, but that there is something that feels sort of singular and unique and that you get called by that, you know, I guess what I'm saying is that if I'm thinking about why I fell asleep in front of those other media forms and not in front of the novel is because the novel seems to be offering a kind of, like a pillow talk that is directed specifically at me.

ND Yeah.

EB Or honesty, it is the closest thing to your experience, like your experiences is that you are this like, you know, this thronging vortex of different subjectivities, your experiences, like there is you in a box and you are going through the world and like constantly

processing all of this stuff and it is quite [unintelligible - 55:12] so there is, you know, it is wonderful to me, it is very relieving to see someone else doing it in a novel and to get to participate in it. Although Merve, when you were talking about not falling asleep, I just thought this is a very polite person, who feels there is like, so it is like looking like falling asleep in the middle of someone talking to you as opposed to falling asleep -

ME No, but that, but that is how I feel. That is, see, I fall asleep when my husband is talking to me all the time, so I'm not, I'm not, I'm not polite in that way. I'm not polite in that way. But I don't fall asleep when the novel is speaking, is speaking to me, but I also disagree with what you said, but it is so interesting because I do sort of think of myself as having sort of multiple and different subjectivities that I can never quite figure out how to adjudicate between, and then the comfort of coming into contact, or the consolation, I don't know if consolation is the right word, but the comfort certainly of coming into contact with a form that can hold all of those things together in a single frame.

BE Yes.

ME Right?

BE Yes, that's right.

ME And that's what I want to hear. That's the voice that I want, that I want to hear, because I don't think, for me at least, other media forms don't do it in the same way.

ND Thank you very much both of you. This has been, this has been absolutely fascinating and I look forward to going home and not looking at my phone, that's just my, that's my resolution for tonight.

And that's our show. A huge thank you to Elif Batuman and Merve Emre for sharing their thoughts about novels and consciousness. You can find links to their work at publicbooks Dot Org Slash Podcast, including essays that Merve has written for Public Books. At Public Books Dot Org Slash Podcast, you will also find a list of further readings, put together by our guests, in case you want to read further or use this material in your classes. We'd be so grateful if you would rate and review the show in Apple Podcasts and subscribe to the show there, or in Spotify, Stitcher, or Pocket Casts.

And next time on *Public Books 101*, I talk to the novelist, poet, and essayist Garth Greenwell, as well as Daniel Wright, who is a scholar and cultural critic. We investigate how novels help us think about intimacy, sex, and how humans relate to each another.

So I hope you'll join me for part 3 of Public Books 101: The Novel Now, as we wonder: How do novels help us think more expansively about intimacy?