

[00:00:00] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Erin James, who has selected the opening chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* entitled "A Fable for Tomorrow."

Erin James is professor of English at the University of Idaho and the current past president of the International Society for the Study of Narrative. Erin has done important and influential work in econarratology, especially on narratives about the climate crisis. I'll single out just two of her many publications.

Her 2015 book, the *Story World Accord Eco Narratology, and Post-Colonial Narratives* won the Narrative Society's Perkins Prize for best book and narrative studies. Her 2022 book *Narrative in the Anthropocene* asks what narrative can teach us about the current geological epoch, which is marked by the effects of human activity on the planet, and what can that epoch teach us about narrative.

It's a rich study, one that my co-editors and I are proud to have as part of the theory and interpretation of narrative series at the Ohio State University Press. Erin, I know that after you read "A Fable for Tomorrow," you'll wanna say something about why you chose it. Was there anything in particular that you'd like our listeners to pay attention to as you read?

[00:01:37] **Erin James:** Thanks so much for inviting me to be on the podcast, Jim. I always tend to approach narrative from the perspective of world building and ask what kind of world does this story immerse me in as I work to comprehend it? And I think that framework lends itself particularly well to this text. So that's the kind of question that I would encourage folks to have in mind as they listen.

[00:01:56] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, great. Now here's Erin James reading Rachel Carson's opening to *Silent Spring*, "A Fable for Tomorrow."

[00:02:06] **Erin James:** There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms with fields of green and hillsides of orchards, where in spring white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields in autumn, oak, and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines.

Foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields half hidden in the mists of the autumn warnings. Along the roads, **Laurel by Burnham and Alder**, great ferns and wildflowers, delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter, the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seedheads of the dried weeds rising above the snow.

The countryside was in fact famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life. And when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring in autumn, people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay.

So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses San Clair wells and built their barns. Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community. Mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens, the cattle and sheep sickened and died everywhere was a shadow of death.

The farmers spoke of much illness among their families in town. The doctors have become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There have been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among adults, but even among children who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example, where had they gone? Many people spoke of them puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were more than. They trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with a dawn, chorus of robins, cat birds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices, there was now no sound. Only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh. On the farms, the hens brooded, but no chickens hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs. The litters were small, and the young survived only a few days. The apple trees were coming into bloom, but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.

The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with brown and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These two were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless. Anglers no longer visited them for all the fish had died. In the gutters and under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches. Some weeks

before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and lawns, the fields and streams. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in the stricken world. The people had done it to themselves. This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world.

I know of no community that has experienced all the misfortunes I described. Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know. What has already silenced the voices of spring and countless towns in America? This book is an attempt to explain.

[00:05:45] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, thanks Erin. So it's a short narrative but it does give us a lot to talk about, I think. And there's, you know, a bunch of narratological things we wanna get into.

But maybe before we do that, you could say a little about why you chose it for today's discussion and do something to place it in its historical context and something about its reception, why it's think it's still so important, those kinds of things.

[00:06:10] **Erin James:** Sure. Yeah. So *Silent Spring* was first published in 1962, but it was the culmination of years and years of work and research that Carson had done as a, practicing scientist.

And when this book came out, she was already a well-known scientist and popular science writer having published *Under the Sea Wind* in 1941, the *Sea Around Us* in 1951, which was a National Book Award winner and the *Edge of the Sea* in 1955. This book, though, *Silent Spring*, is really credited by many as kick-starting the modern American environmental movement.

And that's partly because of the immediate link that people draw between this book and changes to government policy

[00:06:49] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:06:49] **Erin James:** On environmental issues. So in the wake of the publication of *Silent Spring*, Carson was invited to testify before President Kennedy's Science Advisory Commission in 1963, and then, return to Washington later that year to make policy recommendations to the Senate and

the government eventually bans DDT in 1972. Of course, pesticide uses that, if you haven't caught on by the fable yet, is the focus of this book. I think it's also really interesting because *Silent Spring* is over 300 pages long, and everything but this tiny two page fable is nonfiction.

[00:07:22] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:07:22] **Erin James:** But when people talk about *Silent Spring*, they tend to talk about the fable. This was true in the immediate kind of reception of the book as well. One of the most interesting responses, I think, is the chemical company Monsanto, who kind of tried to fight fire with fire by targeting Carson's fable with their own fictional story called the Desolate Year.

They rushed publication of their in-house magazine and sent 5,000 galley sheets of this story to newspapers and book review editors around the country to try to circulate a different narrative. And we can get into what that narrative is. It's filled with bugs and insects.

[00:08:01] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah,

[00:08:01] **Erin James:** It's really gross. Um, And even like typographically on the page, there are all these like little creatures.

[00:08:08] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:08:08] **Erin James:** Kind of crawling around on the pages', reading that story. But, but I do think that this is a particularly interesting story just because of it's fictionally, right? The fact that it's fiction and it's preceding this big hefty work of nonfiction, but this small, potent fiction fable is what people tend to think about and remember about *Silent Spring*.

[00:08:27] **Jim Phelan:** Right? Right. So I think there, I mean, there's two pieces of that that's probably worth, there's posing over for now, and we can do more as we go. There's, a narrative itself. Right, so that you encapsulate something in a story. We talk about narrative as a way of knowing, and so here's a way of putting together something **that's easily fallible and** people can connect with.

But also change over time. We think about narrative doing that, right? But then there's the idea, okay, when the narratives can be fictional or nonfictional, they can also play with that distinction, but, for our purposes, we can think about

fictional or non-fictional. And so here, the option that she takes is to make it, fictional.

And yet at the same time, I think there's an interest in this fiction being one that the audience can readily see as possibly nonfictional, right? Mm-hmm. So the relationship between the fictionality and, a kind of referentiality is different than in other kinds of fiction, right? Mm-hmm. You you wanna say something small about that?

[00:09:35] **Erin James:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure we'll kind of get into this as we unpack the story more, but I really see this as a prescient story. Okay. In that it is kind of putting onto the page, many trends that we see in writing about the environment these days, right? And there's this emphasis on scientifically accurate fiction.

Mm-hmm. Which sounds kind of, you know, oxymoronic. Right, right, right. But it's, the speculative imagination of a future world that is based upon best possible scientific models.

[00:10:05] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Right. Right.

[00:10:06] **Erin James:** Of a particular scenario. And you, you can see Carson doing that, right? She's taking incidents and disasters that have happened already.

[00:10:13] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:10:14] **Erin James:** And kind of pushing them to their extreme

[00:10:16] **Jim Phelan:** Right

[00:10:16] **Erin James:** To say if we do not change the way that we behave in the world that we're reading

[00:10:21] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:10:21] **Erin James:** Then we will create for ourselves and be kind of subjected to this future that I'm spinning out for you in this fictional story.

[00:10:29] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And in that sense, I mean, I think the, you can maybe start to segue to talk about time, right?

Because in the title we have a Fable for Tomorrow, and you're talking about this as a kind of prediction, right? And yet, the text is retrospective, right? It's a past tense thing, so maybe that's a good entry into the way she's handling time here. This, in a way, paradoxical, it's a fable for tomorrow, but I'm gonna tell it from a retrospective perspective.

[00:11:01] **Erin James:** Yeah, the opening line, "There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings." For me, this is a really clear riff on the once upon a time in a land, you know far, far away kind of fairytale. Mm-hmm. you know, fable telling. Yeah. So there's this immediate invitation to ask readers to cast themselves back into this time of innocence, right?

[00:11:23] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:11:24] **Erin James:** In a time of,

[00:11:24] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:11:25] **Erin James:** Stability and a time of calm.

[00:11:27] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:11:28] **Erin James:** And we get it, you know, towards the bottom of the second paragraph again where the text says, "So it had been from the days many, many years ago when the first settlers raise their homes," right? So, right. So there's this emphasis, it's kind of counterintuitive in terms of how narratives tend to work. There's an emphasis on stability, right?

[00:11:45] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:11:45] **Erin James:** She's at pains to kind of make the stability very clear.

[00:11:49] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:11:49] **Erin James:** And spends almost half the narrative doing that before she introduces some sort of destabilizing context or, or plot, really. Right?

[00:11:56] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And there's the stability. I mean, it's interesting. You know, her word is harmony, right? So it's not like nothing changes, right? Because we have the seasons, right? Mm-hmm. But there's

harmony. And then that harmony is the stability. As you were saying, like we think about narrative as starting when there's some kind of a disruption, right, or instability.

[00:12:16] **Erin James:** Mm-hmm.

[00:12:16] **Jim Phelan:** But yeah, as you say, she spends a lot of time establishing the state before, the disruption occurs and there's also, that sense of a kind of iterative thing, right. So we do have the seasons, but you know, that go again and again. Many years are encompassed in the two paragraphs, right? Or, or a long

[00:12:36] **Erin James:** Yeah,

[00:12:36] **Jim Phelan:** a long stretch of time, right.

[00:12:39] **Erin James:** For sure. Right. I'm always struck by even the seasons that would mark kind of change and

[00:12:45] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:12:45] **Erin James:** You know, some sort of death,

[00:12:47] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:12:47] **Erin James:** Yeah. And even in a natural cycle, here are representatives being very safe. Right? So I'm always struck by this line "In autumn oak, and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines." Like even the fire in this Yeah, yeah. In this world is like totally beautiful and safe and non-threatening, right?

[00:13:06] **Jim Phelan:** Yep. Yep.

[00:13:07] **Erin James:** There's no animals are fighting and nothing, nothing too bad is happening. Um, everything is very fluffy and beautiful and, and in bloom.

[00:13:17] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Even in winter, the roadside were places of beauty where countless birds came to feed. So we have life and, and beauty and Yeah. Right. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah. Okay. So, but then, we get the disruption right. Then a strange black crept over the area. So one of the things that's interesting about that I think is the way in which there's no source for this blight, right? We kind of get two things at once, right?

We get the instability, all right? The blight comes, but then we also have this tension, what I would call tension of unequal knowledge, right? Of, well, where's it come from? Right. So anyway, do, do you wanna comment on that or?

[00:13:57] **Erin James:** Sure. Yeah. You know, it's, it strikes me that in your typical fairytale, like the evil is coming from the wicked stepmother.

[00:14:04] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right.

[00:14:04] **Erin James:** Or some, some very clear agent. Right. But here it's ephemeral. It feels ephemeral. It just kind of like seeps in. It really kind of strikes me, this question of agency I think is very, very interesting. When I read this again, I think back about how much emphasis Carson places on just padding out the world in those first two paragraphs, right?

And how little role any human character plays in that world,

Right?

We have, you know, anglers and people who come to watch the birds, but we don't have like Bob and Mary or Tyrone, we don't have any specific Yeah.

[00:14:44] **Jim Phelan:** Individuals, specific people specified Yeah. Characters with Exactly particular particularizing traits.

Yeah. Yeah.

[00:14:50] **Erin James:** Right. And, and also the blight, right, is not connected to any one character, whether it is human or anthropomorphized.

[00:14:58] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:14:58] **Erin James:** You know, kind of natural character. And so there's this kind of, again almost a, an inversion of what typically happens in a

narrative. Mm-hmm. It, it makes me think a lot of a, a statement that Bill McKibbin has made mm-hmm.

About contemporary climate change fiction. Right. So in this early short story collection of climate stories called I'm With The Bears.

[00:15:21] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:15:22] **Erin James:** He has this very short introduction where he talks about how. Stories about environmental disaster require a real departure for most literary work. And he says that instead of being consumed with the relationship between people, these stories must take on the relationship between people and everything else.

And then he has this great line that I really like. He says, “On a stable planet, nature provided a background against which the human drama took place. On the unstable planet that we're creating, the background becomes the highest drama.”

[00:15:50] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:15:51] **Erin James:** And I think that's such an interesting way to read Carson's story.

[00:15:55] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, it's really nice.

[00:15:57] **Erin James:** What would normally just be humming along nicely in the background is what we're really focused on and the human characters that are like moving about in this world and having their being are really inconsequential. Right. Yeah.

[00:16:08] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And so, yeah, maybe we could talk a little bit more even about that, right? And so in that third paragraph, when the blight gets introduced we do get you know, farmers and doctors and children but they don't have the kind of, well, we talk a little bit about their agency and, and sort of what they do and how they're responding and all this, right?

[00:16:31] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:16:31] **Jim Phelan:** And again.

[00:16:32] **Erin James:** Yeah, they're just confused again

[00:16:33] **Jim Phelan:** In, in terms of, uh, you know, like McKibbon right? They're not moving things along, right?

[00:16:39] **Erin James:** No. Right. The farmers are confused, right?

[00:16:42] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:16:43] **Erin James:** The doctors are puzzled.

[00:16:44] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. The children that are dying are dying in a very passive way.

[00:16:49] **Erin James:** Right?

[00:16:49] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:16:49] **Erin James:** Right, they're playing and then they would be stricken suddenly and die within a few hours.

[00:16:53] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right, right.

[00:16:54] **Erin James:** There's things are happening to these characters, right.

[00:16:58] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, exactly.

[00:16:59] **Erin James:** But they are not, at least at this junction in the story, they are not kind of causing any of this.

[00:17:05] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right, right.

[00:17:05] **Erin James:** It's all a kind of mystery about, about what is happening, right?

[00:17:10] **Jim Phelan:** Right. It's also then interesting and so, I mean, you know, you can think about the death of children, right? So that as a way of having almost guaranteed affective response to the blight and its effects, right? But, and you could imagine, you know, of Carson sort of continuing with that, right. But that's not where she, that's not what she does really, right. She continues with and keeps the emphasis on the natural world.

[00:17:37] **Erin James:** Exactly. Exactly. Children dying, children being at play and dying within hours is horrific stuff.

Right, right, right.

But we get this, this half a sentence in which, you know, the narrator's talking about that, and then immediately, What about the birds? Yeah. Where are the birds gone? And then many people spoke of them puzzled and disturbed, and we're back to an emphasis on the silence. This is not the spring with no children or the spring in which the children died, right. It's the silence spring in which the birds, right. The birds died and the birds went away. Yeah. So, right. It's really striking when you, when you realize, like how little emphasis this, this text places on these human characters, right?

[00:18:19] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right. Right. And the other thing I think that happens in that, in that paragraph is the narrowing of the focus to spring, right. and then

[00:18:29] **Erin James:** Right.

[00:18:29] **Jim Phelan:** You know, that continues. So.

[00:18:32] **Erin James:** Right.

[00:18:32] **Jim Phelan:** Lots of reasons why that makes sense, given what we're saying and what she seems to be up to, right. So spring is the season for life, rebirth, you know, all this stuff, right. ,

[00:18:41] **Erin James:** Right, right. And the birds become the ultimate symbol of that.

Yeah.

Kind of the, quote unquote natural cycle falling apart. Right?

Yeah. Right.

Um, that this is a spring without voices.

[00:18:51] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right. Yeah. And then at the end of that paragraph, she also brings in something that she's gonna continue, which is the use of the word no, right?

[00:19:01] **Erin James:** Mm-hmm.

[00:19:02] **Jim Phelan:** So you know, on the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices. There was now no sound.

[00:19:15] **Erin James:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:19:16] **Jim Phelan:** Only silence. And we get the link to the title. And then in the next, paragraph: no chicks hatched. Right. Farmers un...

[00:19:24] **Erin James:** No bees drones.

[00:19:25] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

[00:19:26] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:19:27] **Jim Phelan:** Uh, no pollination, no fruit, you know?

[00:19:30] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:19:31] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:19:31] **Erin James:** No, anglers are no longer visiting the, the streams 'cause the fisher are dead. Right,

[00:19:36] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:19:36] **Erin James:** So, right. Yeah.

[00:19:38] **Jim Phelan:** And then even when we get to the last paragraph of the fictional part, right? We give the know again, but it's d different you know, links with different things, right? No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in the stricken world. And then, the zinger.

[00:19:57] **Erin James:** The kicker,

[00:19:57] **Jim Phelan:** The zinger. Right. The kicker,

[00:19:59] **Erin James:** right. I hear the call is coming from inside the house, right?

[00:20:03] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah,

[00:20:03] **Erin James:** yeah,

[00:20:04] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:20:05] **Erin James:** The people had done it to themselves.

[00:20:07] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah,

[00:20:07] **Erin James:** yeah. And it's, yeah.

[00:20:09] **Jim Phelan:** So it's a kind of the resolution of okay, where did the blight come from, right? Well, you, you know, the people had done it to themselves.

[00:20:20] **Erin James:** Yeah. In a typical fairytale, the kind of confused villagers or farmers who are dealing with the evil blight that the wicked stepmother has kind of cast upon the town, right? They don't have much agency. And I think Carson's kind of working with that rift, but then at the end, that confusion or puzzlement that assumption that like, we really can't do anything about this. This is out of our hands, is totally turned on its head, right?

[00:20:48] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:20:48] **Erin James:** Where the confusion becomes the real menace, right?

[00:20:51] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:20:51] **Erin James:** And the puzzlement becomes the real menace and the lack of, or the assumption of the lack of, agency becomes the real evil.

[00:20:59] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right. Right, right, right. And you know, another sort of, I think, pick up what you're saying about playing with the tropes of the fairytale, you know, another would be that there would be a hero, right?

[00:21:10] **Erin James:** Exactly.

[00:21:10] **Jim Phelan:** To come.

[00:21:11] **Erin James:** Exactly.

[00:21:11] **Jim Phelan:** There's no hero. And in fact, you know, we've met the enemy and it's us. Right. I mean, that, that, yeah. That, that, yeah.

[00:21:17] **Erin James:** So there's only us. Yeah. There's only us. And so yeah. We, we have to, well, I mean, this, this leads us to the, the transition.

[00:21:26] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:21:26] **Erin James:** In the, yeah.

[00:21:27] **Jim Phelan:** Let's go

[00:21:27] **Erin James:** In the kind of nonfictional part.

[00:21:30] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:21:30] **Erin James:** Of the, the very last bit of the story, which is to say like, I really feel like Carson's slapping us on the wrist here, right, to say, don't be so lethargic.

[00:21:41] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:21:41] **Erin James:** And ambivalent and foolish to think that you have nothing to do with this, right.

[00:21:45] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:21:45] **Erin James:** So, this particular town doesn't actually exist, but you might be living in it

[00:21:51] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:21:51] **Erin James:** If you don't act to change the world that you are reading this text in, right.

[00:21:57] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:21:58] **Erin James:** And I think that she really drives it home from switching narratorial stance.

[00:22:04] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:22:04] **Erin James:** We've been working in a third person, a writer in that kind of fictional fable. And then we get the kicker of, I know of no community that has experienced all the misfortunes I described. Yeah. So she's saying, Hey, reality check, like now it's me talking to you.

[00:22:20] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:22:20] **Erin James:** Right?

[00:22:21] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:22:21] **Erin James:** The scientist talking to the reader, and I'm telling you as as a prophet, right?

[00:22:25] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:22:26] **Erin James:** That this is going to be very, very bad.

[00:22:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:22:28] **Erin James:** And the kind of way that she continues to play with pronouns, right?

[00:22:33] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:22:33] **Erin James:** A, a grim specter has crept upon us,

[00:22:36] **Jim Phelan:** us

[00:22:36] **Erin James:** right?

[00:22:37] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:22:37] **Erin James:** Yeah. And this, this imagine tragedy may easily become a stark reality. We all shall know, like

[00:22:43] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:22:43] **Erin James:** You are in this with me, dear reader.

[00:22:46] **Jim Phelan:** Right. We are the people, we are the people of who had done this to themselves, right?

[00:22:52] **Erin James:** Like, wake up, right?

[00:22:53] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:22:53] **Erin James:** The reason that there are no fish in the stream is because of something that you are actively doing, right? And so let's come alive and come out of our stupor.

[00:23:01] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right? Right. Right. And then, you know, and you could imagine that she could end there, right. But she goes one more, two more senses, one with a question and one with a explanation.

[00:23:13] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:23:13] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Yeah. So, you know, what do you make about that?

[00:23:17] **Erin James:** I mean, , it really strikes me. I've got the book open in front of me here.

[00:23:20] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:23:20] **Erin James:** And on the very next page, we have the chapter heading for number, chapter number two, and the, the chapter title is The Obligation to Endure, right? Yeah. Yeah. So there's this, real powerful push there to say, you have to read this, you have to educate yourself.

[00:23:36] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:23:36] **Erin James:** You have to stop being confused or ambivalent, right?

[00:23:39] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:23:39] **Erin James:** You have an obligation to do something and this is why you now have to swallow this 300 page dose of medicine, right? That I'm about to give you. And I think she's creating this horrific alternate world

[00:23:52] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:23:52] **Erin James:** For you to live in, to kind of snap you into then pushing on and reading the rest of the science that she's gonna lay out for you.

[00:23:58] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right. And I think too, in terms of, you know, what she's doing with the pronouns, like the question is, there's no view explicitly there, but it's a directed, you know, as view the reader. Right. What has happened.

[00:24:12] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:24:12] **Jim Phelan:** Right. And this book is an attempt to explain, so I'll break the we a little bit into what I know in you, and I'm gonna try to bring you along with me, right? And then that,

[00:24:23] **Erin James:** yeah,

[00:24:23] **Jim Phelan:** it, that's what she does. That

[00:24:24] **Erin James:** sets up a really clear power dynamic too, right?

[00:24:27] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:24:27] **Erin James:** Of I know,

[00:24:28] **Jim Phelan:** yeah.

[00:24:29] **Erin James:** I know how to fix this and you don't, so you must listen to me. Right,

[00:24:32] **Jim Phelan:** right, right.

[00:24:33] **Erin James:** It's like I am, I am the guide here.

[00:24:35] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:24:35] **Erin James:** It's ironic, you said earlier there's no hero to the fairytale, right. **But there is a bit of a width** of kind of hero in this last,

[00:24:42] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:24:42] **Erin James:** Rhetorical question where she's saying like, I'm the one who's gonna, who's gonna, the, the

[00:24:46] **Jim Phelan:** truth teller, right. The, the, the truth teller as hero in a way.

[00:24:49] **Erin James:** Right? Yeah, exactly. Yeah,

[00:24:51] **Jim Phelan:** exactly. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. All right. Well that's great. I know that you also wanna talk some about you know, how this is related to contemporary narratives about climate, environment and so on. So go ahead. Why don't you start that?

[00:25:10] **Erin James:** Yeah, sure. So I've already kind of tipped my hat to this
Yeah.

With the McKibbin quote, right? Yeah. And there's a, a, a kind of very robust debate that's happening within the environmental humanities about the role that narrative has played in producing and facilitating the climate crisis.

Mm-hmm.

Right? That we, you know, we tell each other the wrong kinds of stories and that, you know leads us to live in the world in ways that are destructive and violent. And then also the potential for the right kind of story to change the narrative. And thus, You know, help.

[00:25:44] **Jim Phelan:** Right

[00:25:45] **Erin James:** There are lots of different takes on this and people who are more optimistic and less optimistic about the role of narrative. But what I find really interesting here is just that it's like the idea that to kind of push people or scare them almost

[00:26:00] **Jim Phelan:** Mm.

[00:26:00] **Erin James:** Into caring about the environment. The most efficient way and effective way to do that is to spin out a fictional world for them that is based upon accurate scientific modeling.

[00:26:12] **Jim Phelan:** Right? Yeah. Right, right.

[00:26:13] **Erin James:** And I think that is a really important part of contemporary climate change fiction. I'll give you like one clear example would be McSweeney's Magazine released a special issue in 2019 called 2040 AD, which is like their climate change story issue,

[00:26:30] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh.

[00:26:31] **Erin James:** And this issue involves McSweeney's pairing different writers with scientists from the National Resource Defense Council, right. And also asking them to think about a specific location in the world, right. Okay. So you have, you know, san a story set in San Francisco, a story set in Turkey, et cetera, et cetera. And the pair of the writer and the scientist would collaborate, right?

[00:26:52] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:26:52] **Erin James:** And the writer would kind of try to download all of the science and then spin out this fictional world that is based upon what the science is claiming will happen, right. Or is is kind of modeling will happen.

[00:27:04] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:27:05] **Erin James:** There's a kind of interesting introduction to that, where the National Resource Defense Council Chief Program Officer, whose name is Susan Casey Lefkowitz, kind of says like, you know, data can persuade, but it takes stories to move us, right?

[00:27:20] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:27:20] **Erin James:** And she talks about writers, particularly fiction writers as being indispensable partners, right?

[00:27:27] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:27:27] **Erin James:** In a goal that they share with climate advocates, moving people to think and act differently, right? So,

[00:27:33] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:27:33] **Erin James:** This idea that, yeah, it's the job of a writer to get their head around the science and then

[00:27:40] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:27:41] **Erin James:** Present that science in such a way to make people care about it.

[00:27:44] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right, right. And there, I think, you know, we get into at least aspect of narrative, which is the way in which it can engage our emotions, right? the affective dimension. Right. And so

[00:27:54] **Erin James:** Exactly.

[00:27:55] **Jim Phelan:** We talked briefly about that in the course, and especially with the way she handles the death of children, but, this other thing, right. So that's one thing that data won't do. Right.

[00:28:03] **Erin James:** Exactly. Exactly.

[00:28:04] **Jim Phelan:** You know, evoke your emotions in the same way, right.

[00:28:07] **Erin James:** We talk about the crisis in the humanities all the time, right?

[00:28:09] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:28:09] **Erin James:** But when I talk to some of my science colleagues, particularly people who are working on, on climate, they talk about a kind of a crisis in science in which they've accumulated so much data, right?

[00:28:21] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:28:22] **Erin James:** To kind of illuminate what is happening and it's just not, it's not shifting public opinion, right? It's not shifting policy sufficiently. And so hence the turn to narrative, right?

[00:28:32] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:28:32] **Erin James:** And the turn towards,

[00:28:33] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:28:34] **Erin James:** These kind of fictional tools in particular,

[00:28:37] **Jim Phelan:** Right?

[00:28:37] **Erin James:** That are emotionally potent.

[00:28:40] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right, right.

And the other thing too is, you know, and we get that a little bit, and we were talking about like the people had done it to themselves, right? There's sort of good guys and bad guys, right? I mean, there's, there's this kind of ethical and political dimension to, a well told, story, right, and fiction can do that as well.

[00:28:59] **Erin James:** I think this is another way that Carson's story is anticipatory.

[00:29:03] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:29:04] **Erin James:** So another big debate in the environmental humanities right now is this idea of the Anthropocene, right?

[00:29:10] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:29:10] **Erin James:** The Anthropocene as a geologic epic suggests that humans as a species, right

[00:29:16] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:29:17] **Erin James:** Have registered our presence in a geologic strata. And so you hear geologists talk about this, human species, right?

[00:29:26] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:29:27] **Erin James:** Rightly so. There are lots of sociologists and humanities scholars who are saying like, well, well, hold on. It's not all humans, right. That there are some who are doing more to to register their presence than others.

[00:29:39] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:29:39] **Erin James:** That nuance is missing from Carson's story, right.

[00:29:42] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:29:42] **Erin James:** That the fact that, I mean, the story's set in America, right? Yeah. So there is some specificity there, but the fact that none of the characters are really all that fleshed out, right?

[00:29:52] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:29:53] **Erin James:** The fact that the pronouns us and we are so capacious at the end.

[00:29:58] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:29:58] **Erin James:** Yeah. Suggests that all of us have the same obligation

[00:30:03] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:30:03] **Erin James:** To change our ways of living.

[00:30:06] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:30:06] **Erin James:** When other scholars would argue, like chemical company CEOs probably have more of an obligation than the farmers who are being kind of, you know strong armed into using these chemicals on their crops, right?

[00:30:18] **Jim Phelan:** Sure. Yeah.

[00:30:18] **Erin James:** So, that's also kind of an interesting tension that you see in Carson's story that is still playing out in contemporary climate change fiction.

[00:30:26] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And there too, I think we can get at, you know, the idea that any one narrative is only gonna do some things, right, that to some degree we need a multiplicity of narratives and even, you know, we can put narratives in contest or narratives compete with each other, right? They talk back to each other and so on, and yeah.

[00:30:51] **Erin James:** I mean, I think Carson's narrative works really well for people who are prone to pro-environmental, uh, stances. Right? In which, like, the losing the birds would be a shocking, a shocking idea, but you know, it might not.

[00:31:03] **Jim Phelan:** Right? And so what, yeah. So what Monsanto is doing is contesting it with the bugs. All right, you're gonna have, you know, bugs everywhere. Right. So yeah.

[00:31:12] **Erin James:** In a really grossly specific way of lots of descriptions of creepy crawlies and like, you know, that is an emotionally potent narrative in its own

[00:31:22] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:31:23] **Erin James:** It's in its own capacity.

[00:31:24] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, yeah. And so, I mean, there's a way in which then, you know, the narratives will take their stances and then, you know, we as readers and viewers need to think about, oh, what do we think about those stances and how do we

work, you know, to in, in the space, uh, where these narratives are in contest and

[00:31:47] **Erin James:** Right. This is why rhetorical narrative theories actually a really useful framework for thinking about environmental literature and particularly fictional stories of climate disaster or environmental disaster. There's a clear dynamic between author and reader in these texts, right?

[00:32:02] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:32:03] **Erin James:** Where the authorial intent is very, very clear.

[00:32:06] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh

[00:32:07] **Erin James:** And the obligation of the reader is very, very clear, right. And so, you know, what do we do with that, right? And, and, and kind of Yeah. How does it read to various people and

[00:32:17] **Jim Phelan:** yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right, right. And, and you know, that gets maybe a little bit into some of the, you know, questions about the aesthetic dimension of climate change fiction in the sense that we could say that there's a kind of bias or suspicion or whatever skepticism about things that are clearly didactic.

[00:32:39] **Erin James:** Yes.

[00:32:39] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:32:40] **Erin James:** Yes.

[00:32:40] **Jim Phelan:** So on the one hand we say, okay clear stance taking And, readers invited to take these positions, field these kinds of things, et cetera, make these kinds of judgements, et cetera. But there's a, branch anyway of thinking in literary studies about, well that's that's aesthetically weak or deficient **or something.**

[00:33:00] **Erin James:** Yeah, and I mean, there's definitely Amitav Ghosh, **has famously made the argument** that climate change fiction is aesthetically weak, right? It's like it's not particularly good. My least favorite examples of climate change fiction are the ones in which I feel the text is yelling at me.

[00:33:15] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Right? Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:33:15] **Erin James:** Is pummeling me.

[00:33:17] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Right.

[00:33:17] **Erin James:** To say shame on you, either shame on you, or like, get up and do something.

Mm-hmm. And those kind of tend to be the ones that paint in very, very broad strokes here. I typically associate those texts with the ones that are leaning most heavily into like accurate scientific representations of climate disasters, right?

[00:33:36] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:33:36] **Erin James:** That is trying to be as mimetic as possible, right?

[00:33:41] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:33:41] **Erin James:** In a prophetic way, as a means of sh of shock, right? Um, and then usually overlaid with some sort of like this book is an attempt to explain to you why you need to do something differently in the context that you're reading in.

[00:33:54] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And so what would be at the other end of the spectrum? Right? That's sort of a

[00:34:00] **Erin James:** Yeah.

[00:34:00] **Jim Phelan:** Where you respond more.

[00:34:02] **Erin James:** I just like the really weird stuff.

[00:34:04] **Jim Phelan:** Okay.

[00:34:06] **Erin James:** Because I'm a narrative scholar and someone who's interested in form and narrative resources mm-hmm. I'm much more interested in the kind of text that will task a reader with doing kind of cognitive and imaginative gymnastics

[00:34:20] **Jim Phelan:** Okay.

[00:34:20] **Erin James:** Of living in a world of instability, right?

[00:34:22] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:34:23] **Erin James:** So the kind of famous example that people know well would be like the work of Jeff VanderMeer, right?

[00:34:28] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:34:28] **Erin James:** And the kind of new weird fiction, , would be one clear example of that. And I tend to respond to that.

[00:34:33] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:34:33] **Erin James:** More in that those texts are kind of creating a, a world for me

[00:34:39] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:34:39] **Erin James:** That is inherently based on instability and difficulty with predicting things.

[00:34:46] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. Uhhuh

[00:34:46] **Erin James:** Kind of humming normally in the background, right? Yeah. And I find that so much more interesting than just reading

[00:34:51] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:34:52] **Erin James:** 300 pages about hurricanes.

[00:34:54] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:34:55] **Erin James:** You know?

[00:34:55] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Okay. Yeah.

[00:34:55] **Erin James:** Well, that's interesting too, but,

[00:34:57] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think in, you know, in a way it circles back a little bit to what we started with, available to tomorrow in terms of like degrees of fictionally in the sense of

[00:35:06] **Erin James:** mm-hmm.

[00:35:06] **Jim Phelan:** The relation between the actual and the fictional and the way in which you want there to be something rooted in the actual, but you don't want to simply have that actual sort of simply fictionalized and turn into a sermon. Um,

[00:35:22] **Erin James:** Right. And, you know, another debate that's happening amongst environmental humanity, scholars that are interested in affect, right, is recognizing that scaring people is usually not a very efficient way

[00:35:35] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh

[00:35:35] **Erin James:** of getting, of getting, of getting them to change their behavior.

[00:35:38] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:35:38] **Erin James:** That it can just be completely overwhelming. There's actually new sociological research out that suggests that this is actually a way to facilitate and spread climate denial right's kind of head in the sand.

[00:35:49] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:35:50] **Erin James:** Like, this is overwhelming. I'm just not gonna...

[00:35:51] **Jim Phelan:** I can't think about it. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:35:52] **Erin James:** I cannot deal with it. Right. Yeah. So you then see, you know, what about humorous climate change fiction, right?

[00:35:59] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:35:59] **Erin James:** Or what about, what about climate fiction that's not just based upon terrifying,

[00:36:04] **Jim Phelan:** The scary

[00:36:05] **Erin James:** People with their, their children are gonna die.

[00:36:07] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:08] **Erin James:** This also though, reminds me of this like much more kind of base level, complicated relationship between climate change and fiction, which is at the heart of these debates about denial and acceptance, right? So, you know, there's one stance which is climate change is a fiction.

[00:36:25] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:36:26] **Erin James:** And whatever version of the, of the fiction that would be. And then there's the other stance which says, you know, we actually need imagined representations of the future to understand

[00:36:39] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:36:39] **Erin James:** What is happening.

[00:36:40] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[00:36:40] **Erin James:** I'm not, I'm not implying here that science modeling and climate modeling is a practice of fiction. Right.

[00:36:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:36:47] **Erin James:** I think it's much more complicated than that. But this idea that there is some fictionality that underlies scientific modeling.

Right, right.

Even I'm thinking about one of the latest reports from the intergovernmental panel on Climate Change. They lay out like what the world will look like at 1 degree centigrade temperature rise, 1.5, 2, and so there are these different versions of alternate possible futures that we have to kind of navigate to understand why we need to do something right now. Right?

[00:37:16] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:37:17] **Erin James:** So that kind of speculative nature of, of climate modeling

[00:37:21] **Jim Phelan:** Right,

[00:37:21] **Erin James:** I think is so interesting.

[00:37:23] **Jim Phelan:** Right? Right. Yeah. And, and so again, like we have the model, which is predictive. and to some degree we could say there's an element of fictionality because we haven't gotten there yet. And then, but at the same time, it's gotta be grounded in the actual. Right.

[00:37:38] **Erin James:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:37:39] **Jim Phelan:** It's for it to be plausible and, and to have that kind of effect of, all right, well, we need to change what we're doing.

[00:37:45] **Erin James:** Yep.

[00:37:45] **Jim Phelan:** One of the other things that's interesting about the work you're doing and the discussion we had today is the way in which it's sort of pointing to kind of the uses of narrative theory or the uses of narrative analysis, right.

Um, and. A kind of maybe move and thin narrative studies itself, I mean, not the only move, but certainly an important move to think about **applied neurological analysis**.

[00:38:10] **Erin James:** Yeah. Yeah. I think this is such an interesting case study

[00:38:14] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:38:15] **Erin James:** For that type of work. I know there are many people who are thinking about applied **narratology** and in particular the use of narrative in science communication, right.

[00:38:23] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. Yeah.

[00:38:23] **Erin James:** This is a kind of rich field both within narrative studies and within science communication studies.

[00:38:29] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:38:30] **Erin James:** When I started doing interdisciplinary work with some of my science colleagues at the University of Idaho and beyond one of the things that I just was fascinated by to begin with is I would say, oh, I study narrative. And they're like, oh, I know how to do narrative, right? I've taken a workshop on how to use narrative in my science writing, and I'd say like, what does that mean to you? And it means something completely different to them than it would to me, and in my mind.

[00:38:54] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:38:54] **Erin James:** It often means something pretty limited, quite outdated, right?

[00:38:59] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh

[00:38:59] **Erin James:** A very kind of small way and unambitious way really of thinking about narratives

[00:39:06] **Jim Phelan:** and sort of like event centered this happened, event this happened, event

[00:39:09] **Erin James:** Absolutely. Event centered, right? It's like, to the point where, Some workshops for science communication using narrative and science communication are so prescriptive as to say like, well, in the first sentence you would do this, and the second sentence of your abstract or essay, you would do this.

And then the third sentence, you would do this and you would use these types of words to create this particular event sequence. Right,

[00:39:29] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right.

[00:39:29] **Erin James:** But no discussion of cognition or, you know, emotion or affect.

[00:39:36] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:39:36] **Erin James:** No, really no attention to playing with this change in narrative voice.

[00:39:42] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Yeah.

[00:39:43] **Erin James:** Okay. Um, or any narrative resource really.

[00:39:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:39:46] **Erin James:** Other than this basic event sequence.

[00:39:48] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:39:49] **Erin James:** So I, I do think this is such a kind of ripe conversation for narrative scholars to enter into,

[00:39:56] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:39:57] **Erin James:** Right?

[00:39:57] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:39:58] **Erin James:** And I think people would welcome us. Mm-hmm. And they have been welcoming us into that.

[00:40:03] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. That's great. Yeah.

[00:40:03] **Erin James:** Into that conversation. So yeah, I see it as a really, really important step. And often when I'm making the case for why my colleagues would benefit from having more robust conversations with me, I'll like trot out Rachel Carson

[00:40:16] **Jim Phelan:** Uhhuh. Yeah.

[00:40:17] **Erin James:** And they'll be like, oh,

[00:40:19] **Jim Phelan:** I remember that. Yeah. That's, So, okay. All right, well that might be a good note to end on, but, uh, if there's anything further, anything that we didn't get to that you were hoping that we touch on?

[00:40:32] **Erin James:** I don't think so. I just wanna thank you again for inviting me and indulging my kind of Chat about climate change and Rachel Carson, this was delightful.

[00:40:40] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, I really enjoyed it. It was a real pleasure and it, it's great to have you on the podcast. Thank you. So, so thank you. All right, so again, thanks to Erin and thanks to our listeners. And I just say, I, as always, I appreciate your feedback and which you can send to us at the email address projectnarrative@osu.edu.

Or on our Facebook page or our you can send it to our Twitter account or X account, whatever we're gonna call it. We're still there [@pnohiostate](https://twitter.com/pnohiostate). And I will just end by saying you can find 20 plus additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. Thank you again.