[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 a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Rita Charon, who has selected George Saunders story, Puppy, from his 2013 collection, Puppy.

[00:00:23] 10th of December. Rita Charon is Bernard Schoenberg Professor of Social Medicine and Professor and Founding Chair of the Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics at Columbia University. Rita also inaugurated and teaches in the Master of Science in Narrative Medicine graduate program at Columbia.

[00:00:45] Indeed, Rita's work in narrative medicine has been transforming the practice of medicine and the study of narrative for more than 20 years. Her best known books are Narrative Medicine, Honoring the Stories of Illness, [00:01:00] 2007, and Principles and Practices of Narrative Medicine, 2017, which Rita co authored with seven colleagues at Columbia, Sayantani Dasgupta, Nellie Herman, Craig Irvine, Eric R.

[00:01:14] Marcus, Edgar Rivera Colon, Daniel Spencer, and Maura Spiegel. Principles and Practices won the Perkins Prize for the best book in narrative studies given by the International Society for the Study of Narrative. In 2018, the National Endowment for the Humanities invited Rita to give the annual Jefferson Lecture, which is, in the words of the endowment, the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities.

[00:01:48] Uh, Rita, is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners before you read this owner's a story?

[00:01:53] **Rita Charon:** Uh, well, thanks. Uh, thanks at the very beginning for this opportunity to talk with you all, [00:02:00] um, about this particular story by George Saunders and things that it, um, leads to, uh, and I wish Jim that we could say that we've transformed the practice of medicine.

[00:02:10] Uh, that is, that is the hope. Right.

[00:02:13] **Jim Phelan:** It's an ongoing, ongoing project.

[00:02:16] **Rita Charon:** That is the hope, and we certainly have our sights, um, high. Um, the one thing I do want to say before I start reading this is, uh, to point out George Saunders close relationship with David Foster Wallace. And indeed, it was the work of Wallace that led me to Saunders to begin with.

[00:02:38] Um, and I want you all to keep in mind Um, Wallace's project related to the, um, uh, related to the, the, the postmodern irony, the detachment, the observer status of, uh, increasingly, uh, at least Americans. [00:03:00] Um, Wallace looks so much at television and media as the sources of this detachment and this neutrality to the point that the reader becomes the bemused observer off the scene, kind of laughing at the characters, but also David Foster Wallace has what George Saunders, I think, has even Brought to another level, which is besides the irony, the tremendous tenderness, the tremendous desire to be human.

[00:03:35] Remember, uh, uh, Wallace says, the idea is to be a fucking human being. Yeah, right. And, and, um, I'm going to read you one sentence that wall that Saunders says about David Foster Wallace in his memorial, and then we'll go to puppy. Okay, this, this was this. This was, in fact, on the death of of Wallace. He says.

[00:03:59] [00:04:00] Dave's prose had the effect of stripping the reader's clothes away and leaving him naked with super sensitized skin susceptible to the weather. Something about the prose itself was inducing a special variety of openness that I might call terrified tenderness. A sudden new awareness of what a fix we're in on this earth.

[00:04:29] Stuck in these bodies with these minds.

[00:04:32] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. That's, that's an excellent framing, I

[00:04:34] **Rita Charon:** think. That's the project of Saunders. Okay. So I'm going to read you

[00:04:39] **Jim Phelan:** Puppy. Yes, right. Go, go,

[00:04:42] **Rita Charon:** go for it. All right, here we go. Puppy. Twice already Marie had pointed out the brilliance of the autumnal sun on the perfect field of corn.

[00:04:56] Because the brilliance of the autumnal sun on the perfect [00:05:00] field of corn put her in mind of a haunted house, not a haunted house she had ever actually seen, but the mythical one that sometimes appeared in her mind with adjacent graveyard and a cat on the fence. Whenever she saw the brilliance of the autumnal sun on the perfect, etc, etc.

[00:05:22] And she wanted to make sure that if the kids had a corresponding mythical haunted house that appeared in their minds whenever they saw the brilliance of the et cetera, et cetera, it would come up now, so that all they could experience, so that they could all experience it together. Like friends. Like college friends.

[00:05:43] On a mad trip. Saint Pot. Ha ha ha. But no, when she, a third time, said, Wow, guys, check that out. Abby said, Okay, Ma, we get it. It's corn. And Josh [00:06:00] said, Not now, Mom. I'm leavening my loaves. Tap L, tap L. Which was fine with her. She had no problem with that. Noble Baker being preferable to Brastuffer, the game he had asked for.

[00:06:17] Well, who could say? Maybe they didn't even have any mythical vignettes in their heads. Or maybe the mythical vignettes they had in their heads were totally different from the ones she had in her head. Which was the beauty of it. Because, after all, they were their own little people. You were just a caretaker.

[00:06:40] They didn't have to feel what you felt. They just had to be supported in feeling what they felt. Still, wow, that cornfield was such a classic. Whenever I see a field like that, guys, she says, I somehow think of a haunted house. Slicing knife, [00:07:00] slicing knife, Josh shouted. You nimrod machine, I chose that.

[00:07:06] Speaking of Halloween, she remembered last year when their cornstalk column had tipped their shopping cart over. Gosh, how they had laughed at that. Oh, family laughter was golden. She had none of that in her childhood. Dad being so dour and mom so ashamed. If mom and dad's cart had tipped, dad would have given the cart a despairing kick, and mom would have stridden purposefully away to reapply her lipstick, distancing herself from dad, while she, Marie, would have nervously taken that horrid plastic army man she'd named Brady into her mouth.

[00:07:51] Well, in this family, laughter was encouraged. Last night when Josh had goosed her with his Game Boy, she shot a spray of [00:08:00] toothpaste across the mirror and it all cracked up, rolling around on the floor with hoochie. And Josh had said, such nostalgia in his voice, Mom. Remember when Gucci was a puppy? Which was when Abby had burst into tears because, being only five, she had no memory of Gucci as a puppy.

[00:08:23] Hence, this family mission. And as far as Robert, oh, God bless Robert, there was a man. He would have no problem whatsoever with this family mission. She loved the way he had of saying, Ho, ho! Whenever she brought home something new and unexpected. Ho, ho, Robert had said, coming home from, to find the iguana.

[00:08:50] Ho, ho, he had said, coming home to find the ferret, trying to get into the iguana cage. We appear to be the [00:09:00] happy operators of a menagerie. She loved him for his playfulness. You could bring a hippo home. You'd put it on a credit card. Both the ferret and the iguana had gone on credit cards. And he'd just say, Ho, ho!

[00:09:17] And ask what the creature ate, and what hours it slept, and what the heck they were gonna name the little bugger. In the back seat, Josh made the git, git, git sound he always made when his baker was in baking mode. Trying to get his loaves into the oven while fighting off various hungry denizens, such as a fox with a distended stomach, a fae robin that would improbably carry the loaf away, speared on its beak, whenever it had succeeded in dropping a clonking rock on your baker, all of which Marie had learned over the summer by studying the [00:10:00] Noble Baker Manual while Josh slept.

[00:10:05] And it had helped. It really had. Josh was less withdrawn lately, and when she came up behind him now while he was playing and said like, Wow, honey, I didn't know you could do pumpernickel. Or, Sweetie, try serrated blade, it cuts quicker. Try, try it while doing latch the window. He would reach back with his non controlling hand and swat at her affectionately, and yesterday they'd shared a good laugh.

[00:10:34] When he had accidentally knocked off her glasses. So her mother could go right ahead and claim that she was spoiling the kids. These were not spoiled kids. They were well loved kids. At least she'd never left one of them standing in a blizzard for two hours after a junior high dance. At least she had never drunkenly snapped at one of them.[00:11:00]

[00:11:00] I hardly consider you college material. At least she'd never locked one of them in a closet. I While entertaining a literal ditch digger in the parlor. Oh God, what a beautiful world. The autumn colors, that glinting river, that lead colored cloud pointing down like a rounded arrow at that half remodeled McDonald's standing above I 90 like a castle.

[00:11:32] This time it would be different. She was sure of it. The kids would care for this pet themselves, since a puppy wasn't scaly and didn't bite. Ho, ho, Robert had said the first time the iguana bit him. I see you have an opinion on the matter. Thank you, Lord, she thought as the Lexus flew through the cornfield.

[00:11:54] You have given me so much. Struggles, and the strength to [00:12:00] overcome them. Grace, and new chances every day to spread that grace around. And in her mind she sang out. As she sometimes did when feeling that the world was good and she had at last found her place in it. Ho, ho. Ho, ho.

[00:12:23] Callie pulled back the blinds. Yes! Awesome! It was still solved so perfect. There was plenty for him to do back there. A yard could be a whole world, like her yard when she was a kid. had been a whole world. From the three holes in her wood fence, she'd been able to see Exxon, hole one, and accident corner, hole two, and hole three was actually two holes, that if you line them upright, your eyes would do this weird crossing thing, [00:13:00] and you could play, oh my god, I am so high, by staggering away with your eyes crossed, going, peace man.

[00:13:11] When Bo got older, it would be different. Then he'd need his freedom. But now he just needed not to get killed. Once, they found him way over on Testament. And that was across I 90. How had he crossed I 90? She knew how. Darted. That's how he crossed streets. Once, the total stranger called him from Hightown Plaza.

[00:13:39] Even Dr. Brile had said, Callie, this boy is gonna end up dead. If you don't get this under control, is he taking his medication?

[00:13:52] Well, sometimes he was and sometimes he wasn't. The meds made him grind his teeth, and his fist would suddenly [00:14:00] pound down. He'd broken plates that way, and once a glass tabletop, and got four stitches on his wrist. Today, he didn't need the medication because he was safe in the yard, because she'd fixed it so perfect.

[00:14:16] He was out there practicing pitching by filling his Yankee helmet with pebbles and winging them at the tree. He looked up and saw her and did the thing where he blew a kiss. Sweet little man. Now all she had to worry about was the pup. She hoped the lady who'd called would actually show up. It was a nice pup.

[00:14:39] White with brown around one eye. If the lady showed up, she'd definitely want it. And if she took it, Jimmy was off the hook. He'd hated doing it that time with the kittens. But if no one took the pup, he'd do it, he'd have to. [00:15:00] Because his feeling was, when you said you were gonna do a thing and didn't do it, that was how kids got into drugs.

[00:15:09] Plus, he'd been raised on a farm. Or near a farm, anyway. And anybody raised on a farm knew that you had to do what you had to do. In terms of sick animals or extra animals. The pup being not sick, just extra. That time with the kittens. Jesse and Molly had called him a murderer, getting Beau all worked up.

[00:15:35] And Jimmy had yelled, Look, you kids, I was raised on a farm, and you gotta do what you gotta do. Then, he cried in bed, saying how the kittens had mewed in the bag, all the way to the pond, and how he wished he'd never been raised on a farm. And she almost said, You mean near a farm. [00:16:00] His dad had run a car wash outside Corton.

[00:16:03] But sometimes when she got too smart ass, he would do this hard pinching thing on her arm while waltzing her around the bedroom as if the place where he was pinching her were like her handle, going, I'm not sure I totally heard what you just said to me. So that time after the kittens, she'd only said, Oh honey, you did what you had to do.

[00:16:30] And he said, I guess I did, but it's sure not easy raising kids the right way. And then, because she hadn't made his life harder by being a smartass, there making plans. Like, why not sell this place and move to Arizona? Buy a car wash. Why not buy the kids hooked on phonics? Why not plant tomatoes? And then, they'd got to wrestling around.[00:17:00]

[00:17:00] She had no idea why she remembered this. He had done this thing of, while holding her close, bursting this sudden laugh, despair snort into her hair like a sneeze, or like he was about to start crying, which had made her feel special, him trusting her that way. So, what she would love for tonight was getting the pups sold.

[00:17:29] Putting the kids to bed early, and then, Jimmy seeing her as all organized in terms of the pup, they could mess around and afterwards lie there making plans. And he could do that laugh snort thing in her hair again. Why that laugh snort meant so much to her, she had no freaking idea. It was just one of the weird things about the wonder that was her.

[00:17:58] Ha ha [00:18:00] ha. Outside, Bo hopped to his feet, suddenly curious. Because, there we go, the lady who'd called had just pulled up. Yup, and in a nice car too, which meant too bad she had put cheap in the ad.

[00:18:20] A Abby Squeal. I love it, Mommy. I want it. As the puppy looked up dimly from its shoebox, and the lady of the house went trudging away, one, two, three, four, plucked up four, Dog turds from the rug. Well, wow, what a super field trip for the kids, Marie thought. Ha, ha, ha. The filth, the mildew smell, the dry aquarium holding the single encyclopedia volume.

[00:18:55] The pasta part, pasta pot on the bookshelf [00:19:00] with an inflatable candy cane inexplicably sticking out of it. The end. Although some might have been disgusted by the spare tire on the dining room table, by the way the glum mother dog, the presumed in house pooper, was dragging its rear over the pile of clothing in the corner in a sitting position, splay legged, a moronic look of pleasure on her face, Marie realized, resisting the urge to rush to the sink and wash her hands, In part because the sink had a basketball in it.

[00:19:38] That this, that what this really was, was deeply sad. Please do not touch anything. Please do not touch. She said to Josh and Abby, but just in her head, wanting to give the children a chance to observe her being [00:20:00] democratic and accepting. And afterwards they could all wash up at the half remodeled McDonald's.

[00:20:07] As long as they just please, please, kept their hands out of their mouths, and God forbid they should rub their eyes. The phone rang, and the lady of the house plodded into the kitchen, placing the daintily held, paper towel wrapped turds on the counter. Mommy, I want it, Abby said. I will definitely walk him like twice a day, Josh said.

[00:20:33] Don't say like, Marie said. I will definitely walk him twice a day, Josh said. Okay, then. All right. They would adopt a white trash dog. Ha ha. They could name it Zeke, buy it a little corncob pipe and a straw hat. She imagined the puppy, having crap down the rug, looking up at her, going, can't help it, but no.

[00:20:59] Had she come from [00:21:00] a perfect place? Everything was transmutable. She imagined the puppy grown up, entertaining some friends, speaking to them in a British accent. My family of origin was, uh, rather not, shall we say, of the most respectable. Ha ha. Wow. The mind was amazing. Always cranking out these. Marie stepped to the window and, anthropologically, pulling the blind aside, was shocked, so shocked, that she dropped the blind, shook her head as if trying to wake herself.

[00:21:38] Shocked to see a young boy. Just a few years younger than Josh, harnessed and chained to a tree via some sort of doohickey by which she pulled the blind back again, sure she could not have seen what she thought she had. When the boy ran, the chain spooled [00:22:00] down. He was running now, looking back at her, showing off.

[00:22:05] When he reached the end of the chain, he jerked It jerked and he dropped as if shocked. He rose to a sitting position, railed against the chain, whipped it back and forth, crawled to a bowl of water, and lifting it to his lips took a drink, a drink from a dog's bowl. Joss joined her at the window. She let him look.

[00:22:35] He should know that the world was not all lessons and iguanas and Nintendo. It was also this muddy, simple boy. tethered like an animal. She remembered coming out of the closet to find her mother's scattered lingerie and the ditchdigger's metal hanger full of orange flags. She remembered waiting outside the junior high in the bitter [00:23:00] cold, the snow falling harder as she counted over and over to 200, promising herself each time when she reached 200 she would begin the long walk back.

[00:23:12] God, she would have killed. For just one righteous adult, to confront her mother, shake her, and say you idiot, this is your child, your child, your... So, what were you guys thinking of naming him? The woman said, coming out of the kitchen. The cruelty and ignorance just radiated from her fat face with its little smear of lipstick.

[00:23:41] I'm afraid we won't be taking him after all, Marie said coldly. Such an uproar from Abby. But Josh, she would have to praise him later, maybe buy him the Italian Loaves Expansion Pack. Hissed something to Abby, and then they were moving out through [00:24:00] the trashed kitchen, past some kind of crankshaft on a cookie sheet, past a partial red pepper afloat in a can of green paint.

[00:24:10] While the lady of the house scuttled after them saying wait, wait, they could have it for free. Please take it. She, she really wanted them to have it. No, Marie said it would not be possible for them to take it at this time. Her feeling being that one really shouldn't possess something if one wasn't up to properly caring for it.

[00:24:36] Oh, the woman said slumping into the doorway. The scrambling pup on one shoulder. Out in the Lexus, Abby began to cry softly, saying, Really? That was the perfect pup for me. And it was a nice pup. But Marie was not going to contribute to a situation like this, even in the smallest way. [00:25:00] Simply was not going to do it.

[00:25:03] The boy came to the fence. If only she could have said to him with a single look, Life will not necessarily always be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me. But secret looks, looks that conveyed a world of meaning, with their subtle blah blah blah, that was all bullshit.

[00:25:34] What was not bullshit was a call to child welfare. Where she knew Linda Burling, a very no nonsense lady, who would snatch this poor kid away so fast it would make that fat mother's thick head spin.

[00:25:54] Callie shouted, Bo, back in a sec! And swiping the corn [00:26:00] out of the way with her non puff arm, walked until there was nothing but corns and sty. It was so small, it didn't move when she set it down. Just sniffed and tumped over. Well, what did it matter? Drowned in a bag or starved in the coin? This way Jimmy wouldn't have to do it.

[00:26:24] He had enough to worry about. The boy she'd first met with hair to his waist was now this old man shrunk with worry. As far as the money, she had sixty hidden away. She'd give him twenty of that and go, The people who bought the pup were super nice. Don't look back. Don't look back. She said in her head as she raced away through the corn.

[00:26:51] Then she was walking along Tealback Road like a sports walker, like some lady who walked every night to get slim. Except [00:27:00] she was nowhere near slim, she knew that. And she also knew, when sports walking, you did not wear jeans and unlaced hiking boots. Ha ha. She wasn't stupid, she just made bad choices. She remembered Sister Carol, saying, Callie.

[00:27:18] You are bright enough, but you incline toward that which does not benefit you. Yeah, well, sister, you got that right, she said to the nun in her mind. But what the hell? What the heck? When things got easier money wise, she'd get some decent tennis shoes, and start walking and get slim, and start night school.

[00:27:39] Slimmer. Maybe medical technology. She was never gonna be really slim. Jimmy liked her the way she was, and she liked him the way he was. Which maybe, that's what love was. Liking someone, how he was. And doing things to help him get [00:28:00] even better. Like, right now, she was helping Jimmy by making his life easier by killing something.

[00:28:09] So he, no. All she was doing was walking, walking away from, pushing the words killing puppy out of her mind. She put in her head. The words, beautiful sunny day. Wow, I'm loving this beautiful sunny day so much. What had she just said? That had been good. Love was liking someone how he was, and doing things to help him get better.

[00:28:46] Like, Beau wasn't perfect, but she loved him how he was, and tried to help him get better. If they could keep him safe, maybe he'd mellow out as he got older. If he [00:29:00] mellowed out, maybe he could someday have a family. Like, there he was now in the yard, sitting quietly, looking at flowers, tapping with his bat, happy enough.

[00:29:13] He looked up, waved the bat at her, gave her that smile. Yesterday, he'd been stuck in the house, all miserable. He'd ended the day screaming in bed, so frustrated. Today, he was looking at flowers. Who was it that thought up that idea? The idea that had made today better than yesterday. Who loved him enough to think that up.

[00:29:42] Who loved him more than anyone else in the world loved him. Her. She did.

[00:29:54] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, Rita, thanks very much. Um, there's a lot to get into, uh, with the story, [00:30:00] uh, including, I think we want to come back to, uh, the way you framed it. But maybe, uh, before we do that, we could start to look a little more closely at, you know, some of the elements of the story and how they work together. Um, one good place that I'd like to start, anyway, is with the title, right?

[00:30:21] There is a cute puppy in the story, um, but the focus is on the humans. Um, so why do you think Saunders, you know, chose to call it Puppy? What kind of work does that title start to do?

[00:30:37] **Rita Charon:** Mm hmm. Um, you know, this is a story that gets darker and darker as you look at it. Um, and I'm, uh, I'm, I'm sorry that I didn't, um, Indicate the typography of the story as it went ahead.

[00:30:52] You have to, you have to read it to see. But there are, there are meaningful, um, um, [00:31:00] um, Section breaks. Faces in, in text. Lots of stuff is italicized. Uh, and all of it has, has, has implications. Uh, so yes, there is a puppy. So

[00:31:11] **Jim Phelan:** just quickly, maybe we just, and I think you did mark this with your pauses, right? So there's like four sections.

[00:31:18] And, uh, so the first is Marie, the second is Callie, the third is Marie, the fourth is Callie, their perspectives.

[00:31:27] **Rita Charon:** Yeah. But, and, and the voice has changed dramatically from one to the next. But in terms of the title, Puppy, yeah, there is a little puppy that is, um, um, left in a cornfield at the end, allegedly to die.

[00:31:42] Um, Beau is treated like a dog. Okay. Bo drinks out of a dog's bowl, so that's a second dog.

[00:31:53] **Jim Phelan:** Bo is tied up like a dog in a yard.

[00:31:56] **Rita Charon:** Tied up like a dog in a yard. Robert says the house is a [00:32:00] menagerie. So, this whole thing is kind of, it's almost post human, you know? With animals taking over. It struck me that the story is the obituary of a puppy.

[00:32:14] Okay. Right? And remember that the dog is not sick. The dog is extra. Yes. So, keep that in mind as we talk about the class distinctions. About who's extra in this world we live in. Who, who qualifies as extra?

[00:32:37] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. All right. Yes. Okay. Good. Um. So, maybe we'll pick up on the idea of the four sections and their shifting perspectives.

[00:32:46] Um, you know, um, so in each, each, uh, woman, each mother, you know, gets two, um, But, [00:33:00] and then, you know, one of the, I think one of the effects of the shifting is that it sort of shifts our, uh, sympathies, allegiances, et cetera. So maybe we just start with that and we can sort of get into it a little bit more.

[00:33:15] **Rita Charon:** Um, you know, I hope you could tell how sonic this, this story is.

[00:33:22] That the whole thing really is performative. It's a drama. It's not a monologue inside their heads. It's a dialogue trialogue. Because the Marie of the present is talking seamlessly with the Marie of the past, and she's looking also seamlessly at the, at the Marie of the future, and Callie does that too.

[00:33:46] Right,

[00:33:47] **Jim Phelan:** and you can also see, in terms of the sonic, right, that, um, in Marie's case in particular, right, we get, um, Robert's voice comes in, uh, uh, ho ho, ho ho, right, and, and... [00:34:00] Uh, so there, there's that sense of, uh, kind of Bakhtinian, uh, swirling of voices, uh, even as we're, we're shifting from perspective to perspective.

[00:34:10] **Rita Charon:** Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And, and they even kind of borrow one another's, you know, Marie starts with the ha ha ha, but Cal, by the end is a ha ha. Yeah, right. So, so there is this, this really confusing, um, interior. Drama, and the reader becomes the one sitting in the dark in theater. We become hyperactive as readers of this story.

[00:34:41] To the point that you say, George, George, enough already, I get it.

[00:34:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. Right. But also, right, I mean that we, Saunders makes it possible for us. Yes. To see the, these sections, but they never connect, right? Even when they're together, right? [00:35:00] The gaps between them are, are sort of, you know, obvious, right?

[00:35:04] But in a sense, then Saunders is inviting his audience to sort of think about those gaps and what causes them, et cetera. Why can't they connect, et cetera? Yes,

[00:35:14] **Rita Charon:** yes. And the whole tragedy of the story is that they cannot. Yeah. And, and when Maria is in Callie's house, she goes, what a super field trip for these kids.

[00:35:28] Like, here, let's go see what it means to be poor. Yeah. You know, they drove a Lexus, remember? Yeah. So, so here they're on display and here's this fat, stupid woman letting the dog shit on the floor. Yeah. The whole thing is dripping with this profound. Judging, condescending, uh, and, and the reader, meanwhile, is being appealed to by both these women.

[00:35:58] Right. Right. Aren't [00:36:00] I great? Look, I fixed that. It's a perfect solution, says Callie. Yeah. Of course, we don't know that she's tied her kid to the tree yet. Right away, right,

[00:36:09] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:36:09] **Rita Charon:** But Marie says the same thing. Look, look how wonderful, I'm happy to be exactly in the world where I am. Yes, right. And what am I supposed to do?

[00:36:20] I'm trying not to judge them, but I'm furious at them

[00:36:23] **Jim Phelan:** both. Yeah. Right? And I mean, you know, just to pick up on what you're saying, the, the Marie's judgment of Callie are, you know, so over the top in a way, right? And I mean, the condescension is just, you know. It's sort of dripping from every thought, right?

[00:36:42] What about Callie in relationship to Marie? What kind of judgments does she make? Do we get much of that, um, would you say?

[00:36:50] **Rita Charon:** You know, we don't get as much. She needs some dough. Yeah. Yeah. She just needs money. Right. One line says, when she sees the Lexus, Yeah. Ah, [00:37:00] shouldn't have put the word cheap in the ad.

[00:37:01] Yeah. She's just trying to get whatever she can out of this lady. Right. But more than the money. is the freedom from having to kill the puppy. Yeah.

[00:37:12] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right. Because she's willing to give him away. Right. Yeah.

[00:37:16] **Rita Charon:** Right. Yeah. Right. So, so her moral stance, Callie's, is, is, is, um, uh, elevated. She doesn't want to kill this little puppy.

[00:37:28] Right. She can't have Jimmy do it because Jimmy is, um, an old man bent by worry. Yeah. And so, she takes it upon herself in a martyr kind of way. Well, then I'll be the one to do the deed. So, uh, uh, uh, Jim, can we think of that as a noble action?

[00:37:52] **Jim Phelan:** The, well, I mean, I think, you know, it is complicated because, uh, I mean, her, we could get a little bit in, maybe into the [00:38:00] relationships with the husbands.

[00:38:01] Yeah. Right. Um. So, you know, Callie has this, um, vision of what she'd like to have happen, you know, that night and so on. And I think you're right. I mean, that she is sort of trying to, um, save, um, him, you know, it is out of concern for him. But we get that detail about how. He treats her when she says something he doesn't like, right?

[00:38:30] There's the pinching of the arm and leading her around. There's a kind of, you know, this undercurrent of abuse there. That's, you know, that I think, you know, so what are, you know, is there some kind of self protection involved in, in, in what Callie decides to do with the puppy?

[00:38:49] **Rita Charon:** Yes. And, and remember that there's a similar kind of abuse for Marie.

[00:38:54] When her kid. Who is being pacified by his Nintendo [00:39:00] game, right? This leavening of leaves, of loaves, this whole business is one of these very elaborate video games that she has bought him to pacify him.

[00:39:10] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And she's learned how it works, she's stayed up to read all about it and everything,

[00:39:15] **Rita Charon:** yeah.

[00:39:15] But he just swats at her, you know, accidentally, uh, uh, um, uh. You know, pushing off her glasses and she goes, Oh, right. The undercurrents. Let's talk about the class undercurrents and what Saunders is trying to make us look at. Because Saunders, uh, David Foster Wallace rails against the culture. He rails against television and media.

[00:39:43] Saunders rails against the, the, the unfairness. He rails against the way we live today.

[00:39:54] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, so in that regard, right, we might, we might draw out some of the parallels then, [00:40:00] right? So we have these two mothers, we have problem children, uh... Certainly, you know, Bo, um, we get elaborated about that with, um, Josh.

[00:40:11] It's sort of more hinted at about, you know, he needs to be pacified. He can, you know, lash out with his arms and things like that. And she's very concerned with him and, you know, all that. But there's a way in which, um, that difference, right, the, the sort of the, the clarity of, um, Bo and the problems he presents, uh, as opposed to the more of the hinting at, uh, with Josh does seem to be, um, I think Soner's like invite, given the emphasis on differences in class invites us to extend that to, to the, you know, the way in which these kids get treated.

[00:40:57] Yes. Uh, you want to maybe say a little bit more about [00:41:00] that? Well,

[00:41:01] **Rita Charon:** um, you know, Saunders writes about American working class, lower than working class, the losers. Many of his characters are the losers. Um, and, and David Rando has been writing about the American working class as, as one of the major, uh, um, emphases of, of, of Saunders.

[00:41:24] Uh huh. And the losers, now I'm going to go back to the puppy. Um, are the extras. Yeah. The, the people he writes about are the extras. And I'm, I'm thinking in terms of, uh, Bowman and his Liquid Times that the, we have now the dispossessed. He talks about refugees. He talks about, uh, people seeking asylum.

[00:41:52] These are extras. Yeah. Nobody wants them. And they end up in refugee camps forever. [00:42:00] You're watching the news. You see, you see in Gaza, people are living in refugee camps that they've lived in for 20 years. Right. They are never going to be anything but extra. There's no room for them. And this is what Saunders is after.

[00:42:16] All those people who used to be toll takers at the, at the Midtown Tunnel. What are they doing now? Nothing. Yeah. Why do we, why, why is AI such a big deal now so that they can lay people off? And what are those who are going to do nothing? So now this, this takes on a really murderous. Uh, uh, dimension, doesn't it?

[00:42:41] Mm hmm. Yeah. That wants us to think about. Yeah.

[00:42:46] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. So, and it's not just Beau, it's the whole family. It's, it's Callie and Jimmy and the other two kids. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:42:55] **Rita Charon:** That's right. Yeah. That's right. And, and, and that's when you say, okay, okay, I got it. [00:43:00] I got it. Give me a break, because it becomes so terribly dark, but he's looking at the America that we're living

[00:43:08] **Jim Phelan:** in.

[00:43:08] Right. And there, I think, you know, the idea of perspective taking, which we've been talking about, right? To come back to that, that spy trying to, you know, have his reader, Um, and by his trying to sort of give the perspective of Callie and then have us sort of go enter into her perspective, right, that then in itself we might say is one way of countering that, these, you know, this view of them as extras, right?

[00:43:40] Yes,

[00:43:41] **Rita Charon:** exactly. Yeah. And, and the whole, um, you know, people who are working in affect studies. Are very interested in what Saunders is doing. Mm-Hmm. And that's Keen and, and, um, Rosemary Smith and even Rita Fels at some points in her, in her work. Sure. Um, and [00:44:00] as I'm. I read this story, the best way I could, the best way I could keep track of what was going on was to write exactly every moment to moment where I was affectively myself.

[00:44:13] And it went from a fury at the stupidness of, of Callie to profound sadness when Marie finally says, it was nothing but very, very sad. And, and, and so when I say. They appeal to me. I'm on the spot as the reader. George is putting me on the spot. Right. And the more active I am affectively, I think, the more I get this story.

[00:44:41] Yeah. And the more the story works on me. Yeah. So that's his goal. Yeah. Reach out to me, the reader, and wake me up.

[00:44:52] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah, and I think from that perspective, it might also, you know, might make sense to sort of compare the, um, [00:45:00] endings of each, right? So, so where we end with Marie, and then take a look at where we end with Callie, right?

[00:45:06] So, Marie, um, you know, all right, so she decides, you know, are we going to have anything to do with this, or this situation where the... You know, um, Beau is tied up, um, and she has to have this sort of look, right, to convey to him, okay, you know, um, but then she decides, okay, well, that's all BS, um, so it's just a subtle look.

[00:45:33] It's just BS. What's not BS is that I'm going to call my friend at child welfare,

[00:45:40] **Rita Charon:** right? Exactly.

[00:45:42] **Jim Phelan:** So, you know, what do we make of that?

[00:45:45] **Rita Charon:** Right. Well, that's where the class distinctions come in. Yeah, okay. Because, because Marie drives a Lexus, who knows what Robert does with his ho ho, but he's bringing some money, apparently.

[00:45:56] Right. And, and, so she's [00:46:00] the one with, um, cloud. She has some middle class cat clout, and she can call the lady, and she could actually make Bo be taken away into foster care.

[00:46:12] **Jim Phelan:** Right, and that seems to be her, what she wants to do.

[00:46:16] **Rita Charon:** Right? Right. And she can at least afford these Nintendo games for her child to at least keep him, she doesn't have to tie him up.

[00:46:24] Yeah, yeah. Nintendo is his chain and, and, and tree. Right. Cali? doesn't have options like that. Right. She does bring the boy, Beau, to the doctor. Um, because he's evidently, I mean, this kid is literally running into the highway. He's running into the interstate. And somehow he manages, he darts, she says. It's almost like Beau is like a little ghost.

[00:46:53] Um, we haven't talked about Bardo, but there's a lot of Bardo going [00:47:00] on in this story too. And this was written after Bardo. Um, but, but, think about what happens at the, at the doctor. Um, he says,

[00:47:18] doctor, even Dr. Brile had said, Callie, this boy is going to end up dead if you don't get this under control. Is he taking the medicine? Right. Well, he wasn't. He wasn't taking the medicine. The medicine didn't work. And if Kelly had had more resources, she would have gone back to Dr. Bryles. She would have found a better doctor to take care of her child.

[00:47:42] She would have gotten more care. Mm hmm. Evidently very unwell little boy. Right. Right. Uh, but she didn't have that wherewithal. She is an extra. She is a dispossessed. Yeah. Um, notice, of [00:48:00] course, the name of Dr. Braille. Yeah. It's pretty close to Dr. Braille. Right. Right. And we've talked about the, these, these characters being blinded by their situation.

[00:48:14] And they can't see each other. They pull the, they pull the blind. Well, there's lots of blinding going on in the story. Right. And a lot of it is related to class. Yeah,

[00:48:26] **Jim Phelan:** yeah, yeah. They can't see each other. There's the, I mean, the extras aren't seen by the larger... Culture and society, um, and so on. Right. So, uh, just maybe a little bit more on this, the way in which, alright, so this is the situation that Cali is presented with, right?

[00:48:47] The limited means, etc. Bo in this, you know, really a danger to himself, um, So, what do I do, right? And she exercises her agency, [00:49:00] um, in this way, um, and I think then Saunders asks us to see that as something that Marie is unable to see, you know, um, um, and then we, you know, if we think about the ending of the whole story, which is, you know, the ending of Callie's section, right?

[00:49:22] And she, her thoughts turned to Bo, right, and, you know, today he's looking at flowers.

[00:49:31] **Rita Charon:** He's better than he was yesterday. Yeah,

[00:49:34] **Jim Phelan:** right, and who came up with that idea, right? Um, who loved him enough to think that up, who loved him more than anyone else in the world loved him. Yes, yes. She did, yeah.

[00:49:47] **Rita Charon:** So... The blindness of the characters toward their own acts is infuriating, and, but at some point, at some [00:50:00] point, if the reader is activated enough by the pathos, you can say, but maybe they are doing their best.

[00:50:10] **Jim Phelan:** Right. Right, right. I think, I mean, my, you know, I, the way it affects me, anyway, is to see it as layered, right? It doesn't, it doesn't erase the idea that, okay, this is not, you know, a sustainable solution. Right. Um, nevertheless, right, we take in all this stuff, you know, about what, what, what's possible and what, what are the motives and things like that.

[00:50:36] **Rita Charon:** So, Jim. What that means is you have been reached by this narrative, that you have within yourself the readerly equipment, the personal equipment, to see from the perspective of the character, and not sit back from your Lexis [00:51:00] equivalent, but to see, to fleetingly even adopt it. The, the, the, um, subject position of this Callie, and of this Marie, who are both, I, I can judge them furiously, and yet, Saunders has allowed me to enter their perspective even fleetingly.

[00:51:28] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And then I think, yes. That's the best

[00:51:31] **Rita Charon:** they could do.

[00:51:33] **Jim Phelan:** And doing that right, it has real consequences for the kind of judging we do. You know, complicating our judgments, I think, in a good way. I do think, one thing I wanted to ask though is, Do you feel like, that maybe this story... Um, goes too far or it's too, I mean, you know, trying to be tender and take care of the extras and so on, [00:52:00] it doesn't quite work or it's overly sentimental in a bad way.

[00:52:03] Not that sentiment is bad, right? But that there can be bad uses of it. How would you respond to that kind of criticism of, of the story?

[00:52:14] **Rita Charon:** I, I, I think that's, I think that's the dilemma for Saunders. Um, I've heard him say in interviews or, um, you know, reading at a, at a bookstore, um, his mantra is, uh, we all should err on the side of kindness.

[00:52:31] Okay. Yeah. And this was even in his graduation speech at Syracuse that he told, tells this story about, um, a college kid who was like out of place and didn't have any friends and wore funny glasses and, and. He, he punished himself for years and years that he didn't in somehow, um, lend a kind hand to this little girl.[00:53:00]

[00:53:00] So, so he's talking about small acts of kindness, but he's also talking about these massive, culturally global acts of malice. He doesn't, he doesn't come out and say, it's capitalism and we're all Marxists and we're, he doesn't come out and talk specifically politically, the capitalist system, but that's what he is.

[00:53:32] That's what he is holding up for view. But how to, how to put together that with, to err on the side of kindness, um, you know, is up to him and his analysts.

[00:53:47] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. Well, no, that's good, I think that's a really good defense, um, you know, there's probably more that we could, you know, get into with, you know, well, what if we do a kind of critique of empathy as this kind of, you [00:54:00] know, bid for empathy is somehow misguided and so on.

[00:54:04] You

[00:54:04] **Rita Charon:** know, I don't like empathy. Because it tends to be, oh, I'm going to walk in somebody else's shoes, and it's too cheap by a mile.

[00:54:17] **Jim Phelan:** Right. But you feel like he's going beyond that. It's not, it's not cheap. Partly because... He's got a

[00:54:24] **Rita Charon:** good drive. Yeah. Yeah. Because, because he disquiets me. Yeah. Yeah. He reaches so far, he gets me by the lapels.

[00:54:33] He disquiets me. Okay. It's much more true in Bardo, of course, the whole novel of what happens after you die. Um, but that's his, his power. So if he's saying at the memorial how David Foster Wallace reaches him and makes it feel like he's stripped naked, well, Saunders has his own version. [00:55:00] Yeah,

[00:55:01] **Jim Phelan:** right, right, right, right.

[00:55:02] And for me, at least, I think, um, the fact that he's linking this to, you know, inviting us to see the links to capitalism and inequality and, you know, the class and what it means to be, you know, of the lower class in the U. S. is, that's really important for me, I think.

[00:55:23] **Rita Charon:** Absolutely. Yeah. Absolutely. He's on a mission.

[00:55:26] Yeah. Yeah. And I, I, I endorse that mission. Right, right,

[00:55:30] **Jim Phelan:** okay. All right, well, you know, one thing that we haven't, you know, we talked a little bit about Dr. Brylton, Bo with the medications and so on, but we haven't, you know, sort of talked about this as a story that we might teach in a narrative medicine course or, um, you know.

[00:55:50] Think about how, how we might harness it for some of the project of narrative medicine. I'm sure you have thoughts about that.

[00:55:59] **Rita Charon:** Well, [00:56:00] my whole interest in David Foster Wallace came about because I started to read Infinite Jest. And I, I just kind of threw out to a bunch of first year medical students, I'm just starting Infinite Jest, anybody want to join me?

[00:56:16] And I got eight or ten kids. And we met once a month, we met for over an hour each time, we would read about 200 pages per session. And this thing became their life raft. And they found among themselves, through the reading, and it was close reading, we didn't sanitize, we read the whole thing. And they came to identify one another as classmates who could see what they saw.

[00:56:45] Uh huh. And in the very end... Um, in the very end, one of them realized, Oh, medical school does not suffer from an absence of empathy. [00:57:00] Medical school suffers from an excess of irony. Mm. Okay. That was their... Interesting. So, so, I accidentally ran into David Foster Wallace as someone who could open my medical students to what was actually happening to them.

[00:57:17] Yeah. Um, so, um, you know, I, I haven't, I haven't taught puppy, uh, in the class and I don't. You know, I don't usually choose things to, to read with, with my crew just because they're about medicine. I know. Yeah. Just because there's a doctor in it doesn't appeal to me. Right. Right. Um, but to see Dr. Bryle become the, the blind one, uh, it was kind of interesting to me.

[00:57:46] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Look, any, any kind of fiction or poetry or drama or music. That can help us to be activated in this way, is what [00:58:00] we're looking for.

[00:58:00] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And that perspective taking, I think, is really, um, you know, sort of central to that in this story. And maybe one, one, one thing to. sort of end on or come back, you know, as we wind up here, um, when we were, you know, talking ahead of time, I thought you made some really, uh, perceptive observations about the sort of the bookends, the, the way in which the first section and the last section have kind of overlap with each other.

[00:58:33] And so, do you want to

[00:58:35] **Rita Charon:** say something about that? Well, uh, that's one of the things that made me wonder from the beginning, are Callie and Marie the same person? Okay. I kind of played with that. I, I, I didn't go with it. Yeah. Yeah. They were kind of mirroring one another. One's underside was the other's overside and, and, and the thing that, that turned me on is that we start with Marie and her perfect [00:59:00] son in the perfect corn.

[00:59:02] Right. Right. And, and we end at the very end. with Cali in the corn and the sun. Right, exactly. Yeah. So there's a unity there. There's a unity and that ain't an accident for, for others to put that in.

[00:59:17] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And there's a way in which it sort of tries to break down a little bit some of those class barriers that have been so evident throughout the story.

[00:59:27] **Rita Charon:** That's it. That's it. Yeah. And, and, you know, to go back to my medical students for a minute, don't forget. That the patients were taken care of, especially in urban, you know, uh, hospitals, um, were taking care of dispossessed people. Yeah. Right. The people they're seeing in the emergency room, um, who just don't have the wherewithal to get off their fentanyl habit, or don't have the wherewithal to really get the [01:00:00] care they need, um, we have to alert ourselves that we are the bulwark for these who are class wise forgotten.

[01:00:15] And dispossessed and extra. That's our

[01:00:19] **Jim Phelan:** job. Well, that's a terrific way to end. So, I just really want to thank you. Um, This is a great conversation. I appreciate the way you read the story. I really enjoyed talking about it with you. Um, so thank

[01:00:36] **Rita Charon:** you very much. talk to you about it too. This is such a wonderful, wonderful project.

[01:00:40] Thanks.

[01:00:41] **Jim Phelan:** Well, thank you. Thanks again. And I want to thank our listeners and say that we appreciate your feedback. You could send it to us at email projectnarrative@osu.edu or on our Facebook page or to our Twitter or X [01:01:00] account. It's @PNOhioState. I also want to, uh, remind you that you can find more than 20, uh, additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts.

[01:01:14] Thank you all. Good night. Okay, we're out.