**Dorothee Birke:** All the Margaret Atwoods, gone.

All the James Joyce, the Virginia Woolf, the Hardy, Lawrence, Forster. All the Carter and Rushdie. The Puig and Marques. The Klima and Levy and Calvino and Milosz. All the Spark and the Gunn and the McDermid, all the Shakespeare, all the Coleridge and Keats, the Whitman and Ginsberg, the Proust, the Eliot, the Scott, the thick books, the thin books, all the one volume obscure poets and novelists, all the known names and the lesser or unknown, lost or forgotten names, flying immeasurable in the air, settling on the ground like seeds or leaves, dropped from the trees, rotting into pieces, blown into the smithereens of meaning.

**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. In today's episode, I'll be talking with Dorothee Birke, who has selected Ali Smith's short story, "Texts for the Day," from her 1995 collection, *Free Love and Other Stories*.

But I want to give a shout out to another narrative Dorothee proposed to discuss in this episode, a novel called *The Wall*, or *Die Wand* in the original German, by Austrian novelist Marlen Haushofer. We are not doing *Die Wand*, or an excerpt from it, because I worried we wouldn't be able to pick a segment that would work well for listeners who don't already know it.

But I'm very grateful that Dorothee introduced the novel to me, and I want to recommend it to our listeners.

Dorothee Birke is professor for Anglophone Literatures at the University of Innsbruck, and her many areas of expertise include the history of the novel, reading and book culture, memory studies, and narrative theory.

Dorothee is the author of two books, Writing the *Reader: Configurations of a Cultural Practice in the English Novel*, published in 2016, and *Memory's Fragile Power: Crises of Memory, Identity, and Narrative in Contemporary British Novels*. Among Dorothee's numerous articles, I want to single out the piece she co authored with Birte Christ, Ellen McCracken and Paul Benzon called "Paratexts and Digital Narrative," which was published in the winter 2013 issue of *Narrative*. And that essay won the International Society for the Study of Narrative's annual prize for best essay in the journal. And I want to round off my introduction by noting that Dorothee is currently the second vice president of the International Society for the Study of Narrative.

So Dorothee, welcome to the Project Narrative podcast. Is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners before you read Ali Smith's text for the day?

**Dorothee Birke:** Yes, well, Jim, thank you so much for inviting me. It's truly a pleasure to be a part of this. And, yeah, I'd like to start by saying thank you to, Ines Gstrein.

She is a PhD candidate who's working with me here in Innsbruck, and she's actually the one who introduced me to this short story. She is working on short story cycles by Scottish women authors. And she called my attention to Ali Smith and the story in particular. And Ali Smith probably is now best known for her seasonal quartet.

I don't know if you've read it. This is a cycle of four novels that are dealing with kind of state of the nation in the aftermath of Brexit. but she's also written many short stories. She actually started off as a short story writer. And this particular story comes from her first collection entitled *First Love*.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay. All right. Well, good. Yes. No, that's a very helpful introduction. So now, here's Dorothee Berker reading Ali Smith's "Text for the Day."

**Dorothee Birke:** imagine melissa's collection of books spread between her bedroom and her living room. When Melissa was in bed at night, sleep, or out at work all day, or away for the night or weekend. Hundreds sitting silent on their shelves, from Eiji to Yevtushenko. She had no Zs. A substantial set of English and Scottish literature, course canon classics.

Melissa studied English at university 10 years ago. A large collection of recent American, English, and European literature. Melissa's friend Austen works in a bookshop and often lets her buy books at one third discount. Books and books, blocks of books, shifting infinitesimally in the night as the renovated tenement foundations send shivers through the building.

Books pressing together, so close that the covers of several of them stuck together. For instance, if Melissa had tried to remove Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, Penguin, to read again, she would have found it attached on one side to *Shirley*, Penguin, and on the other to a 1933 copy of *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain, Golancz.

Signed by the author and found for 50p in a public library sale. Imagine the silent books in the silent flat at night, unmoving in the dark. Melissa's name, the place she bought them, and the date, shut in each between the first page and the outer cover. Imagine the spines of the books by day in the still flat, yellowing, losing their colors, fading with the light moving around the room.

First of all, Melissa told her boyfriend Frank to piss off and get out. She was fed up of him calling her honey. It wasn't funny anymore. And the next day, instead of going to work, she stayed in bed, pulling the covers up to her neck, and when the heating had gone off and it got cold, using her hairdryer to warm herself between the duvet and the mattress, something she had always refused to do before because of global warming and the electricity bill.

After that, she got up and threw her hairdryer out of the window. It smashed on the pavement, just missing the next door neighbor's car. She threw all the windows open in the freezing cold. Then she threw her books all over the flat. That was then. Now she was fast disappearing. She was almost gone. Later, when she had been gone for quite a long time, those who were less imaginative among the friends who noticed she wasn't there anymore thought she was probably off doing something like taking time out, backpacking across the USA or something like that.

Someone else, someone at work, thought that maybe she'd landed some hot new job better than information transference and had taken it without telling her old boss so she wouldn't have to work notice. Though neither of these was really like her, like what you'd expect. Other friends and acquaintances didn't notice or know.

Most didn't think of her at all, and those who did assumed on the whole that she was still where they'd last seen her, doing what they'd last known she was doing, rather like you'd assume someone you know is doing the usual things, breathing, walking, going to the shops, eating biscuits, before you discover that he or she is dead, died a long time ago, and you never knew it.

Austen knew something was wrong, though, because she had a key to Melissa's flat. And the books, the books, the pride and joy were so peculiar in both rooms, in such a mess all over the floor or piled in haphazard order, great gaping holes in the bookcases all up the walls, and books falling on their sides askew, even a scatter of books in the bath.

Like the advert on television showing a burgled house to warn you against thieves and suggest you leave your light on at night, to pretend someone's always in, Austen thought. The light in Melissa's flat had been left on, bay aful with the curtains and windows still open. Nobody there and nothing taken.

Everything smugly intact except the books. She shut the windows in the cold and turned the heating on in the kitchen cupboard. On the table, some loose, torn pages lay beyond a milk bottle. From where Austen stood, she could see, distorted through the glass of the bottle, the word introduction. By her foot, the cover of a Kafka paperback, Penguin Modern Classics.

She made herself a cup of tea, sour milk, opened the pedal bin to drop the teabag in, and found the bin was full of the ripped out pages and the empty shell covers of several books. Down the back of the bin, more loose pages on the floor. She went through, sat on the couch, and found her feet resting unavoidably on books.

Beside her on the cushion, as if it had landed there clumsily after flight, with its wings still fanned out, lay an upside down copy of Seamus Heaney's *Seeing Things*, Faber and Faber. Right then, as Austen dipped her finger into the tea to squash a lump of milk against the side of the cup, Melissa was leaving an eight till late supermarket in the rain, gnawing something out of a packet, a paperback in her other hand, and an elderly lady wearing a rainmaid was shouting after her in a rare kind of anger, her arms in the air, calling to the boys collecting the trolleys in the wet car park to look, look what the girl had done, never in all her life. Frank phoned Austen the next evening.

He didn't particularly like Austen. She was Melissa's friend. She told me to get out, Austen, so, well, haha, I did. She went a bit mad. I'm a bit worried about her, said Frank. He was so pleased with himself for having demonstrated to Melissa how absurd her demand was by actually doing what she asked.

Hmm, funny. I'm not, I don't think. Not what? Worried. At least, I don't think so. Mad like what? Like, when you spilled the hot chocolate on the Keats and all over the couch, said Austen. Well, no, not really. It wasn't mad angry. It was because she was so calm. It was weird. Right, weird, said Austen. But that made it, , more mad.

She said these really weird things, just sitting on the floor, cool as a cucumber, talking the stuff. Hmm, said Austen. She didn't like Frank much. Hadn't liked him since the first moment they met, when he had told her she had a weird name. She's not at the flat, you know, said Frank. I know. Look, Frank, I've got to go.

Do you know where she is? Nope, I don't. But how about if she calls, I'll tell her to call you. Look, I've got something frying on the cooker. I can't get an answer and I can't get into the flat anymore. Nobody knows where she is at the office. She hasn't phoned in sick. I called to ask. Do you think I should tell the police?

Well, no, not really, but if it'll make you feel any better, said Austen absentmindedly. Later that evening, Melissa phoned Austen and Frank from a call box. It was a bad line, and her voice was faint from the middle of a sea of white noise. Austen, you shouldn't have tidied up. No, it was good of you, but yes, I went to pick up some things.

No, listen, I can't stop. I've only got 20 pence. Listen, use the flat if you like. Have the flat if you like. Enjoy it. And Austen, use the car. I'll send you, I don't know, a postcard. Her voice grew fainter. Must go. Hello, Frank? It's me, Melissa. Oh Christ, don't call me that. Yes, no, can you hear? I am, as loud as I No, there's no need.

I'm obviously not missing. I said, I'm obviously, look, I just phoned to say no I just phoned to say goodbye. Goodbye. Got that? Okay. No, no need. Goodbye. Frank put the phone down, then picked it up again and called the police. Austen realized that she'd been staring into space and put the receiver down.

She imagined the call box door swinging shut, Melissa coming out of the smell of urine into a clear frost. Melissa sat in the weak moonlight, curled like an animal. She had scaled the locked gate, swung over the spikes at the top, letting her rucksack thud onto the grass beyond the gravel, and she had landed more or less noiselessly on the other side.

Condensation blanked out the windows in the gatehouse. Invisible, silent in the dark, the cold, she made her way to the other side of the graveyard and dropped by a random grave. She leaned back against the stone. Below, the silhouette of a stone angel, she took the books out of her rucksack. Already today, she had ripped the pages out of *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Penguin, *Bliss* by Peter Carey, Faber and Faber, the novel *Today* edited by Malcolm Bradbury, Fontana. *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, Penguin. Selected dramas and lyrics of Ben Jonson, publisher Walter Scott, 24 Warwick Lane, Paternoster Row, London in 1886, a favorite. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* by Simone de Beauvoir, Penguin, another favorite.

And after an initial moment of nostalgia, nothing but relief. And finally Joyce's *Dubliners*, Penguin. *Dubliners* she had read again, enjoying it immensely, removing each page as she finished it and leaving it where it fell as she walked or sat. She had never enjoyed reading *The Dead* so much, she realized, as near to tears she tore the last page, the page about the snow, and let it fall.

Here was a place where no one would stare or comment or shout angrily. She took the first book off the pile, T*he Sunday Missile and Prayer Book*, Collins. Out came the table of movable feasts, the prefaces, the order of mass. She didn't need light to know she was tearing out first Sunday in Advent, second Sunday in Advent, third Sunday in Advent, fourth Sunday in Advent, Christmas, Easter, the whole of the year.

Thin leaves fell round her, turned in the grass between the gravestones, rustled across the gravel. The police were worried. The missing woman or someone pretending to be her had emptied her bank account. They called on Austen and Frank and at the insurance company where Melissa worked. They found Melissa's address book under her bed and contacted everybody in it.

Austen told them how she had found the flat and what Melissa had said on the phone and they took away the car and several ripped up books for forensic examination, opened the file on Austen and tapped her phone. They did the same to Frank, who also told them about his phone call, about his call to Austen, about the weird way Melissa had been acting anyway, and what she'd said the night he left.

They opened a file on each of the employees at the company where Melissa was information transferrer, which meant she spent the day typing the numbers of accounts from letters and applications into a computer so that people could be traced and monitored by number rather than name. Meanwhile, Melissa disappeared.

Sightings of her filtered back to Austen now and then via Frank, via mutual friends, even via people standing chatting in the bookshop where she worked. Sightings took on an almost mythological quality. Austen told Melissa this in the letter she packed in the box of books she sent to a poster collection point near the American border.

The postcard Melissa had sent was a color photograph, a long American car upside down in a crevasse, above on the edge of the crevasse, a house and garden intact. Melissa's spidery handwriting on the back, in ink that looked faded from the sun, said she was fine, that where she was writing the car, she could smell carnations and coffee, just like in Lawrence's mornings in Mexico, in Etruscan places, which she was reading, and pleased to send the books, whichever Austen chose, from the flat, and to send, if possible, a similar box load at the same time, annually, until there was none left.

I am re reading almost everything now, she wrote. I'm rereading Emily Dickinson in the desert here. It's great. Love, Em. Austen passed the card onto the police, packed the books. I can't help wondering, she wrote in the letter, what you do when you run out of books. There was no reply. A girl leaning against the poultry section in the supermarket reading a book ripped out the page and dropped it where she stood.

A shocked elderly lady watched her tearing her book near the freezer compartment. Speechless she watched her drop poems in several different aisles near the bakery, buy the household goods, in the checkout queue. The woman, pale with rage, followed the girl, picking up the poems she dropped. Outside the automatic doors, she stood in the rain and watched the girl leave.

Look what the girl's doing, she called to the people going in. Never in all my life have I seen something so wanton and so disgusting, so willfully destructive. When I was young, we knew the value of things. She turned, caught the eye of one of the people coming out of the doors. She waved a fistful of torn poetry.

Look, she pleaded. Her eyes were desperate. On an overnight bus to London, a man watched curious as a young woman sitting across the aisle reading a book removed each page carefully after she read it. Her clothes were disheveled. Her hair looked like it could do with a good wash. She placed each finished page neatly beside her on the empty seat.

At the end of the journey, the man let the woman get off the bus before him, picked up the pages, took them to his hotel room, And read them. He wondered who she was, where she stayed, how he could contact her so he could read the rest. A woman staying at a bus stop in a large city found a fragment of papers stuck to her heel.

It said on one side something about oaths and resurrections, something she couldn't make sense of, but on the other, words were space like poems had been at school and she read celestial recurrences The day the flowers come. And when the birds go, the woman looked up the word celestial in her husband's dictionary when she got home.

She thought the words she'd spiked her heel through were beautiful. And she folded up the piece of paper and hid it in the secret place inside the lining of her makeup drawer. She didn't tell anyone about finding them.

Austen stands in the bookshop and sells books to people, pressing the buttons on the till with the blank knowledge of an automaton, as the multicolored covers of books, hundreds of books each day, shining exciting new books, flash past her eyes and into little plastic carrier bags. She tucks the money into the correct compartments.

Barnes and Byatt are selling well at the moment, and a new biography of the Kennedy's out for Christmas. The shop she works in is pleasant, airy, tasteful, stays open late. They play classical music by day, and jazzier music in the evenings. The public likes it. People tell Austen all the time what a pleasure it is to shop there.

There's a Canadian writer's dump bin of Atwood and Monroe on one side of the doors. On the other side, there's a special display of new fiction about Eastern Europe, this month's special interest. The shelves are open and well organized, well stocked. From where Austen stands, she can see the whole range of the fiction department stretch down one long wall of the store, hundreds and hundreds of books, a mere echo of the hundreds of others before them.

Austen knows it's insufficient. It's all not enough, but she doesn't know what to do. When people want poetry, she sends them downstairs. In Melissa's now musty smelling flat, the shelves are gradually emptying. Sightings of Austen's friend are rare now. Austen scans the shop, looks at her watch, sighs. All the Margaret Atwoods, gone.

All the James Joyce, the Virginia Woolf, the Hardy, Lawrence, Forster. All the Carter and Rushdie. The Puig and Marques. The Klima and Levy and Calvino and Milosz. All the Spark and the Gunn and the McDermid, all the Shakespeare, all the Coleridge and Keats, the Whitman and Ginsberg, the Proust, the Eliot, the Scott, the thick books, the thin books, all the one volume obscure poets and novelists, all the known names and the lesser or unknown, lost or forgotten names, flying immeasurable in the air, settling on the ground like seeds or leaves, dropped from the trees, rotting into pieces, blown into the smithereens of meaning. Pages flutter across motorways or farmland. Pages break apart, dissolve in rivers or seas, snag on hedges in suburban areas, cling round their roots. Fragments litter a trail that blows into every direction, skidding across roads in foreign cities, mulching in the wet doorways of small shops, tossed by the weather across grassland and prairies.

There are poems in gutters and drains, under the rails laid for trains, pages of novels on the pavements, in the supermarkets, stuck to people's feet or the wheels of their bikes or cars. There are poems in the desert, somewhere where there are no houses, no people, only sky, wind, a wide open world. A poem about a dormant, grass covered volcano lies held down, half buried in sand, bleaching in the light and heat, like the small skull of a bird.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay. Thank you, Dorothee. So this is a very provocative story, I think. And , raising all these questions, these issues about books and literature reading , dissemination and even, , life and death. [laugh] But the story's also, notable for some of the narrative techniques that Smith uses, and maybe it makes sense to start there,

especially if we start at the beginning, where the first word is imagine, right, and so we have this kind of address from a narrator to the reader.

And we're in the present tense and so on. So what do you make of that as an initial address and as a sort of general beginning? What are your thoughts?

**Dorothee Birke:** Yes, of course. Yeah, one thing that I thought made the story quite suitable for the narrative podcast is also that the handling of the narrative voice is really interesting.

So yes, this beginning where I think, yeah, we as readers are really taking into the story and imagine yeah, asked to imagine this room without any people. Yeah. just with books so there's not really any humans at the beginning of the story, except for, us, the readers, and it's a story about reading, of course.

And I think that book ends quite nicely with the end of the story, where again, we are just, yeah. There in the desert and only what's left of the books, of the page fluttering there. Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And it's just, yeah, at the end, it's really quite interesting. The other thing that's striking about the beginning that I thought, , occurred to me, especially listening to you read it today, is that at that , imagine the silent books in the silent flat at night, right?

It's almost like I'm beginning to think, all right, we're doing all this. We're imagining the books. They're gonna do something, right? But then the word, the next word is unmoving, right? Unmoving in the dark. So we're imagining them, but , well, imagine them, them being active, being, the books becoming agents, right?

But,

**Dorothee Birke:** It's like we're asked to wish for them to do something, right? And we're also, our attention is caught to the way in which they're really hemmed in, right? They're kind of, , stuck so closely next to each other. So it's, it's almost like we're supposed to want them. them to be liberated.

Exactly, yeah, right, right. And, and then I, I think it's really interesting how, in the next few pages we almost get the sense of a crime scene, right? where the books are, , thrown all over the apartment and so on, so it's almost saying, , something horrible's happened, but then it's something Joyfully horrible, right?

So, so the tone shifts and it's like celebrating the liberation of the books. I find that's quite fun.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, yeah, there's a lot of, a lot of fun here. And just to, to stay with the technique a little bit longer, So then we shift from that address to the reader and the present tense to a more retrospective narration and the narrator's telling us, okay, , Melissa told her boyfriend Frank to piss off and get out and so on.

what do you see happening there in terms of, , narrator reader or narrator voice? and we make that shift.

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, sure. so of course, a way it becomes a more, more conventional type of narration, right? We have this heterodigetic narration but what I find quite interesting is that even though Melissa, In a sense, seems to be the protagonist of the story.

We don't really get much direct rendering of Melissa, but we only see Melissa through the eyes of other people. Basically, we get to know more about Frank and about Austen. And then directly about her. So this again, I guess brings us back to the, question who the protagonist of the story is and whether it's really a human protagonist, because from the beginning of the story, Melissa is disappearing and is, almost gone.

and, what we get a lot of are the different books even down to this little bit about the publisher, which I thought that was also interesting. Do you have thoughts on that what's happening there with always, giving the publisher, um, of the book and the brackets?

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, I think it's a way to direct us to the fact that, there's part of this commercial thing there, they're not just monuments of human magnificence, right? they're these things that are produced and , and they have to go through a bookstore, right, before they go up on Melissa's shelves and, that kind of thing.

So there's a, subtle way of, introducing the institution of literature, its ties to capitalism and things like that, and how does it circulate?

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, yeah, I absolutely agree with that. it's kind of the commercial utility of the books, right? Which is precisely what the, story is exploding and what Melissa is exploding.

And when I just, read it again just now, I noticed that the final book that she talks about Dickinson's poems, that doesn't have a publisher. So maybe that's a, sign that we're getting rid of this, this kind of a commercial utility of books and literature in this story.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

It's also, I mean, just to go pick up on the point you were making about protagonists and the handling of, Melissa and so on. And for a 1995 story, right? we have so little interiority for the character who looks like she'll be the protagonist, right?

even when we switch we're getting a report of what she did and, , after that she got up and threw her hair dryer out the window. And so on, and so reporting from the, I think she's doing from the outside, really, and then she was fast disappearing. Also, then, that was then, now she was fast disappearing, right?

So we get Also, like we're switching back suddenly to the imagined, or at least the time of the telling, right?

**Dorothee Birke:** Absolutely. Yeah, I think the story does really interesting things with time. I was especially struck by this passage towards the end where we get these three short vignettes of these, people and other instance of this, outside view.

And we get these three people who have encounters. with Melissa. Actually, the third one, another thing I noticed only just now, she doesn't even have a direct encounter with Melissa, but just page that stuck to the heel of her shoe, right? and the way this first vignette also takes up this kind of enigmatic little piece of dialogue we get at the beginning with this elderly woman.

So that's repeated so that we realize this is actually the same scene that, happened at the beginning. but I think, yeah, rather than getting us to think about the linearity of the story, it gives us a sense of, this linear timeframe dissolving as well.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. And it's our job as readers isn't so much to reconstruct, the fabula, right? What happened when, and, order of events, and so on. But more to think about Melissa disappearing even, right? So in that sequence, as you say, We start with the woman, who sees her and wants to yell at her and so on, right?

And then we have the man who sees her on the bus, but what he's really interested in is what she left behind, right? And then we have the fragments, right? And by the third one, as you say, there's no direct encounter. Melissa's not there at all.

Absolutely.

So it's a nice little progression.

**Dorothee Birke:** Absolutely. I mean, that man, yeah, that's it. That I thought that was an interesting detail that we almost set up like this little stalking story, right? And then he ends up being interested in the, book rather than in her. I thought that was quite funny. But also, we were just saying she's disappearing, but at the same time that also means that in a sense she's everywhere, right?

So, it's like, with the seeds, the leaves and so on, there's everywhere at the same time. And I think it says somewhere, right, that, there are sightings of her and they take on this mythological quality so she becomes this disseminator of literature rather than this more prosaic information transfer that she was before.

**Jim Phelan:** yeah. And in that regard, , it might make sense to think about the scene in the Cemetery, right? Where, she climbs over, she's getting in there and, actually this is the one place I think where we do get some interiority in that the description of her rereading *Dubliners* and *The Dead*, right?

She had never enjoyed reading *The Dead* so much, she realized As, near to tears, she tore the last page, the page about the snow, and let it fall. And so we have The Dead, we're in the cemetery. We're having the, pulling the pages off is the text, dying? yes, absolutely.

And we have the interiority.

**Dorothee Birke:** Absolutely. absolutely. Yeah. So yeah, the, passage is set up almost like she's burgling a place, right? So, so we have a sense that she's, breaking in somewhere. And then, yeah, it turns out to be the cemetery. And as you say reading, The Dead in the cemetery letting the pages fall like the snow that falls, at the end of that story.

Also, I think quite beautifully, lyrically rendered, right? Right,

**Jim Phelan:** right, right. The echo of the reactions to the narration.

**Dorothee Birke:** It's really lovely. I love what Smith is doing with the rhythm there. Also then in the next paragraph where she's talking about the missile book, right? And how Melissa is tearing out these pages and there's this kind of, , this enjoyment of tearing up this

**Jim Phelan:** first Sunday in Advent, second Sunday in Advent.

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, I don't know, something quite subversive about this, I find which is, I think, rather typical of Smith, actually.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, in that regard, we think about Smith being subversive and Melissa being subversive, this kind of thing, this is except for Frank and the man, this is a story that's, centers women, right Austen, Melissa we can think about Smith.

What do you make of that? If we wanted to do more with how gender is operating.

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, I definitely think gender is important, and there seems to be some kind of similarity between the containment of the books in the bookshelf , the not being free and the containment of the woman in the domestic space, right, and her breaking out of that.

 When I read it again today I had strong echoes of this Beatles song, She's Leaving Home, where the young girl leaves home and then her parents are horrified, and the last sentence of the song is she's having fun, right, because she gets to do all these things.

So there is something about female breaking out,

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** So I think that definitely there. I mean, I guess we shouldn't forget about the woman in the supermarket who is, more like Frank and the police, right. And it's kind of trying to establish these routines and how you do things.

So I don't think it's a very kind of simplistic juxtaposition of the genders there but there's definitely, definitely a sense in which, yeah, it's about women breaking out. something else that resonated with me was this postcard that she sends Melissa, the color photograph with the car and the crevasse which really reminded me of Thelma and Louise and, the way they come flying off the cliff in the car in the final scene of the movie with this sense of liberation but at the same time, of course, also a sense of destruction,

Which is also there in the story all along.

**Jim Phelan:** yeah, there's a way in which what you've called attention to, this juxtaposition of liberation and destruction going on with Melissa and maybe with the books as well, right, and the pages, right, they're getting freed from being cramped together in the apartment.

But what's happening to them? Well, they're going all, all over the world and yet, they're no longer themselves, or they're torn out. They're, different things are happening, and, it's sort of the paradox of the liberation and loss. At the same time.

**Dorothee Birke:** it's the opposite of cozy and predictable, and there is something scary about it, right?

 there's something very violent about it. but then it also reminded me of the romantic, poets, and this whole idea of organic cycle of life and death, right? And just, everything dissolving into everything. So there's always something kind of universal about this.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and then I think that raises the question too about, The kinds of books, right? Which titles we get. We talked some about Joyce and so on. But there's a canonical, right? We learned that , she was a undergraduate English major in, , Scottish and British canonical literature.

She knows a lot about So what do you make of that? I mean, what about the cultural status of the books that get attention in this story?

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, yeah. I also think in a certain sense that is also exploded that's also, I guess, part of the utility of literature is to, I don't know, in both your sense, I guess, establish distinction, right?

Right.

**Dorothee Birke:** So that's definitely something I think that the story invites us to get out of. At the same time, of course, it is mainly the canon that Melissa reads and redistributes. Although, what's noticeable, I find, is that a pretty inclusive canon, right? And female writers are very important in this canon.

Scottish writers are important. And, also, Writers from different countries. Right. So, so it's not just the, canon of English literature.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And then towards the end, when we have that paragraph about, , how much is gone, right? All the Margaret Atwood gone, all the Joyce, et cetera.

**Dorothee Birke:** They all become equal in the end, right? And they're all blown, blown across the countryside.

**Jim Phelan:** Blown into the smithereens of meaning.

Into the smithereens of meaning, yes.

Yeah. Yeah. And then from there it's like, they go even into places where there are no humans.

**Dorothee Birke:** Yes, places where there are no humans. And I don't know, maybe this is a good place to mention, too a lot of poems, of course, that are important in this text.

But I was especially pleased that I found out what this poem about the dormant grass covered volcano at the end is.

Yeah, tell us about that.

Yeah, that's a, poem by Emily Dickinson. Dickinson, wrote a lot of poems about volcanoes, I found out but the volcano for her seems to be a metaphor for female creativity, right?

So it's a sense of this, especially the grass covered volcano, right, that looks so serene but then, you know, what's, boiling inside of it, right? And what could happen if it were to erupt, so that's always a possibility in, Dickinson. And I find that's very interesting that, this is the final image of the story.

And then, a poem that Interestingly, isn't really alluded to explicitly in this story is Shelley's Ode to the West Wind. And I immediately had to think of that when she talks about this is the, blowing the leaves, the smithereens of meaning. And I was thinking of, , the drive my dead thoughts across the universe.

But also this same image with the leaves that are being blown all over and that spark. Spark this revolutionary, um,

impulse in others like, ashes and sparks. Right. so I think that's really a great connection to that. Even though Shelly is mentioned as some

other romantic poets, I think that are mentioned by name.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Good. Yeah.

Coleridge and Keats, yes.

Right, right. Also good, right? Right, right. And Keats comes in at the end there, and then Keats is also, like when their phone conversation with Austen and Frank about mad, what is it, mad, do you mean mad, like when, , you spilled the chocolate on the Keats, right?

And so, it's a kind of a traditional thing, like, , Melissa then got mad. Melissa now might not be so mad about the chocolates.

**Dorothee Birke:** Absolutely. Yeah, that's, a great point, actually. Oh yeah, that's, that's quite funny. And you know, I was just also thinking coming back to this question of, the canon that I think it's interesting that on one hand, it's a story that , , as we said, it explodes, the canon and those hierarchies and so on.

On the other hand, I also think it's a story that really appeals to people who know their literature, right? And you get to feel pleased with yourself for identifying all these, references like we're doing now, and making these connections. And it really rewards you for having read those things.

That's something that's also quite interestingly done.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right, right. And that, I think, takes us into the next thing that's worth talking about, which is the kind of meta level, right? Is the way in which, okay, here's a text about texts and text about reading that we're reading and all this kind of stuff.

So what do you see happening or any kind of, invitation from Smith to apply some of what we're seeing in the Melissa story to the story that we're reading?

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, sure. The first thing I'd like to say about that is that, this invites us, I think, to think about what we're doing as we're reading, but also using literature and books in different ways, right?

So, we reflect on that, the good ways, the maybe not so good ways. And it's just almost, I think, at the end, utopian vision of what literature could be if we liberated it, right? So the question is, of course when I'm reading this story, where am I? Smith herself is an interesting writer and in this first collection, which, by the way, isn't, it's not entitled First Love, it's Free Love, she already tries out a lot of techniques that later on she perfects where she goes beyond , a character and plot in a traditional sense, kind of, I would say, following Virginia Woolf's footsteps.

I think it's also a story that, makes us aware of going beyond the routines and conventions of literature. Right, right. And what to expect, right?

Yeah, yeah. It's definitely, yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. And some of the things we talked about with the handling of character, for example, if you're picking up on Wolf, So yeah, What's your idea of a protagonist? I'm going to challenge you to that. And yeah, you can think about that.

**Dorothee Birke:** And at the same time, it's doing it, I think, in a very gentle way, in a sense, because it's still a very, I think it's very easy to read, the story. It's not like some of Smith's latest stuff, which, becomes a bit more hard going, puzzling.

I mean, also very enjoyable. But this one, I think, it's pretty easy.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and there's a kind of, I mean, playful quality to it, even as it's serious, right? It's interesting I mean, we talked about liberation and destruction. There's also, the serious and the playful juxtaposed here and brought together in an interesting way.

**Dorothee Birke:** Absolutely.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and I do think there's also a kind of implicit thing at the meta level of watch me, perform, watch me go from that first sentence of, imagine the books and how they are, to, , This idea at the, ending, right, of this kind of liberation, right?

**Dorothee Birke:** Look what I can do, yeah, yeah, yeah, no, no, no, I agree with that.

**Jim Phelan:** But again, it's not like, look while I'm writing or anything, it's more subtle, it's more

**Dorothee Birke:** It's playful, right? It's, it's having fun doing this and see what, we can do with words on a page.

**Jim Phelan:** Okay. Well anything That you hoped we'd get to, that we haven't touched on?

**Dorothee Birke:** Mm hmm. Maybe just one thing about the bookstore.

**Jim Phelan:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** I think that, pretty interesting how, what's the end of the story , when after those three vignettes and then we go to Austen in the bookstore, and that's really juxtaposed, I think, with these three or at least, , the last instance of the vignette is really something, I think, discovering literature in a new way and treasuring it in a new way.

And then we go to the bookstore, which is not at all this, kind of utopian environment like it is in many movies or books, but it's really this is the place where the commercial happens. Right. And where Austen is there like an automaton and the cash register and how does it say tax the money into the correct compartments?

Right. So again, this idea of compartmentalization, also the bookstore that's so neatly, has the bins. It says, I think even Dumpin, somewhere dumpin of Atwood in Monroe. Right? Yeah. So, yeah. Right. Really the opposite of Yeah, the s the opposite, right? The opposite of what's happening with, with literature and this kind of dissolving movement.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Yeah. And the well organized, well stocked it's a, kind of another version of the bookshelves in Melissa's apartment.

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah, you know. Nothing surprising about it. Catering to the taste of the customers with the classical music by day. A little bit jazzier in the evening, right?

So something for everybody. And not this Surprising encounters that we get with these people who find these little bits and pieces in their daily lives without expecting them.

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Does it change the way You're going to read your next book, or your relationship to the next piece of literature you read,

right? I mean

**Dorothee Birke:** Hmm, that's of course a tall order, right?

Yeah, right.

I don't know. I mean, I guess it once again brings home to me what an interesting topic reading is.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** and also what a skillful author Smith is, and how fun she is.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** So, and I think maybe that's enough.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, that's plenty. I mean, it's sort of like, consciousness raising on those levels that's a lot.

I mean, this story, I think that it's stay with me. In the way in which it sparks all these reflections on what it is we do

**Dorothee Birke:** Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** And the things that we, , we do them too. And with so yeah,

**Dorothee Birke:** absolutely. And I mean, I think sometimes. We as narrative theorists, we are interested in reading mainly as this kind of processing of meaning, right?

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** I think what the story so nicely reminds us of is all these other levels of reading, the social, the material, the commercial,

**Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And here

**Dorothee Birke:** I think that's important.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and then maybe just one other final point that the idea that Melissa's job was information transfer, right?

And then how, that in some ways applies, and in some ways doesn't at all, too, especially because

**Dorothee Birke:** Transferring a big stuff.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right.

**Dorothee Birke:** I think Smith is so funny. Yeah.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Dorothee Birke:** I think I really appreciate about her.

**Jim Phelan:** Yeah. She's brilliant. Yeah. Okay.

Well, thank you very much, Dorothee. That was a lot of fun. And I also want to thank our listeners and say, we appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us by email at projectnarrative@osu.edu, on our Facebook page or our X/Twitter account @PNOhioState. And I'd also like to remind you that you can find more than 30 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. And if you do listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. So again, thank you, Dorothee, and thank you all for listening.

**Dorothee Birke:** Thanks for me as well. Go read some Smith now. Okay, good

**Jim Phelan:** way to end.