Suzanne Keen: [00:00:00] We buried Justina in the rain the next afternoon. The dead are not, God knows, a minority, but in Proxmire Manor, their unexalted kingdom is on the outskirts, rather like a dump, where they are transported furtively as knaves and scoundrels, and where they lie in an atmosphere of perfect neglect.

Justina's life had been exemplary, but by ending it, she seemed to have disgraced us all. The priest was a friend and a cheerful sight, but the undertaker and his helpers, hiding behind their limousines, were not. And aren't they at the root of most of our troubles with their claim that death is a violet flavored kiss?

How can a people who do not mean to understand death hope to understand love? And who will sound the alarm?

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. [00:01:00] Today, I'll be talking with Suzanne Keen, who has selected John Cheever's &quot;The Death of Justina&quot;, first published in \_Esquire\_ magazine in 1960.

Suzanne Keen is a Professor of English at Scripps College in Claremont, California. Suzanne, as many of our listeners know, has written \_the\_ book on narrative empathy, entitled \_Empathy in the Novel\_, which came out in 2007, and this book opened up a rich and wide ranging debate about the affective dimensions of reading fiction and their consequences for the lives of readers when they're not reading.

Suzanne's most recent book contribution to that critical conversation is \_Empathy and Reading: Affect, Impact, and the Co-Creating Reader, \_2022.

Suzanne has written several other great books, including \_Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction\_, 2001, \_Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination\_, 2014, [00:02:00] and the widely adopted textbook, \_Narrative Form\_, 1st Edition, 2003, 2nd Edition, 2015. And in addition to her work on the novel and narrative theory, Suzanne has published a volume of poetry, \_Milk Glass Mermaid\_, 2007, and individual poems in numerous literary magazines.

Suzanne, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. Is there anything you'd like to say to introduce Cheever's story, or anything you'd especially like our listeners to pay attention to as you read it?

Suzanne Keen: No, I think that they can catch the story as it goes, but I do want to say thank you, Jim Phelan, for being the very first person to publish any single bit of my empathy work, which you pulled out of me after hearing a conference paper at a narrative conference and put in the journal \_Narrative\_, which was, you know, my big break.

So, thank you so much for that.

JIm Phelan: Well, and it was, you know, became one of our most widely downloaded articles, so thank you.

Suzanne Keen: Withouto further ado, \_The\_\_ Death of Justina\_. [00:03:00]

So help me God, it gets more and more preposterous. It corresponds less and less to what I remember and what I expect, as if the force of life were centrifugal and threw one further and further away from one's purest memories and ambitions.

And I can barely recall the old house where I was raised, where in midwinter Parma violets bloomed in a cold frame near the kitchen door and down the long corridor, past the seven views of Rome, up two steps and down three, one entered the library, where all the books were in order, the lamps were bright, where there was a fire and a dozen bottles of good bourbon locked in a cabinet with a veneer like tortoise shell, whose silver key my father wore on his watch chain.

Fiction is art, and art is the triumph over chaos, no less, and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive. There is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken, and that the vision we serve will [00:04:00] come to nothing.

We admire decency, and we despise death, but even the mountains seem to shift in the space of a night, and perhaps the exhibitionist at the corner of Chestnut and Elm Streets is more significant than the lovely woman with the bar of sunlight in her hair, putting a fresh piece of cuddle bone in the nightingale's cage.

Just let me give you one example of chaos, and if you disbelieve me, look honestly into your own past and see if you can't find a comparable experience. On Saturday, the doctor told me to stop smoking and drinking, and I did. I won't go into the commonplace symptoms of withdrawal, but I would like to point out that standing at my window in the evening, watching the brilliant afterlight and the spread of darkness, I felt, through the lack of these humble stimulants, the force of some primitive memory in which the coming of night with its stars and its moon was apocalyptic.

I thought suddenly of the neglected graves of my three brothers on the mountainside and that death is a loneliness much [00:05:00] crueler than any loneliness hinted at in life. The soul, I thought, does not leave the body, but lingers with it through every degrading stage of decomposition and neglect, through heat, through cold, through the long winter nights when no one comes with a wreath or a plant and no one says a prayer.

This unpleasant premonition was followed by anxiety. We were going out for dinner, and I thought that the oil burner would explode in our absence and burn the house. The cook would get drunk and attack my daughter with a carving knife, or my wife and I would be killed in a collision on the main highway, leaving our children bewildered orphans with nothing in life to look forward to but sadness.

I was able to observe, along with these foolish and terrifying anxieties, a definite impairment of my discretionary poles. I felt as if I were being lowered by ropes into the atmosphere of my childhood. I told my wife, when she passed through the living room, that I had stopped smoking and drinking, but she didn't seem to care, and who would reward me for my privations?

[00:06:00] Who cared about the bitter taste in my mouth and that my head seemed to be leaving my shoulders? It seemed to me that men had honored one another with medals, statuary, and cups for much less, and that abstinence is a social matter. When I abstain from sin, it is more often a fear of scandal than a private resolve to improve on the purity of my heart.

But here was a call for abstinence without the worldly enforcement of society, and death is not the threat that scandal is. When it was time for us to go out, I was so lightheaded that I had to ask my wife to drive the car. On Sunday, I sneaked seven cigarettes in various hiding places and drank two martinis in the downstairs coat closet.

At breakfast on Monday, my English muffin stared up at me from the plate. I mean, I saw a face there in the rough, toasted surface. The moment of recognition was fleeting, but it was deep, and I wondered who it had been. Was it a friend, an aunt, a sailor, a ski instructor, a bartender, or a conductor on a train?

The smile [00:07:00] faded off the muffin, but it had been there for a second, the sense of a person, a life, a pure force of gentleness and censure, and I am convinced that the muffin had contained the presence of some spirit. As you can see, I was nervous. On Monday, my wife's old cousin Justina came to visit her.

Justina was a lively guest, although she must have been crowding 80. On Tuesday, my wife gave her a lunch party. The last guest left at three, and a few minutes later, cousin Justina, sitting on the living room sofa with a glass of good brandy, breathed her last. My wife called me at the office and I said that I would be right out.

I was clearing my desk when my boss MacPherson came in. &quot;Spare me a minute,&quot; he asked. &quot;I've been bird-dogging all over the place, trying to track you down. Pierce had to leave early and I want you to write the last Elixircol commercial.&quot;

&quot;Oh, I can't, Mac,&quot; I said. &quot;My wife just called. Cousin Justina is dead.&quot;

&quot;You write that commercial,&quot; he said. His smile was [00:08:00] satanic. &quot;Pierce had to leave early because his grandmother fell off a stepladder.&quot;

Now, I don't like fictional accounts of office life. It seems to me that if you're going to write fiction, you should write about mountain climbing and tempests at sea, and I will go over my predicament with MacPherson briefly, aggravated as it was by his refusal to respect and honor the death of dear old Justina.

It was like MacPherson. It was a good example of the way I've been treated. He is, I might say, a tall, splendidly groomed man of about 60, who changes his shirt three times a day, romances his secretary every afternoon between two and two-thirty, and makes a habit of continuously chewing gum seem hygienic and elegant.

I write his speeches for him, and it has not been a happy arrangement for me. If the speeches are successful, MacPherson takes all the credit. I can see that his presence, his tailor, and his fine voice are all a part of the performance, but it makes me angry never to be given credit for what was said. On the other hand, if the speeches [00:09:00] are unsuccessful, if his presence and his voice can't carry the hour, his threatening and sarcastic manner is surgical, and I am obliged to contain myself in the role of a man who can do no good in spite of the piles of congratulatory mail that my eloquence sometimes brings in.

I must pretend - I must, like an actor, study and improve on my pretension, to have nothing to do with his triumphs, and I must bow my head gracefully in shame when we have both failed. I am forced to appear grateful for injuries, to lie, to smile falsely, and to play out a role as inane and as unrelated to the facts as a minor prince in an operetta.

But if I speak the truth, it will be my wife and my children who will pay in hardships for my outspokenness. Now he refused to respect, or even to admit the solemn fact of a death in our family, and if I couldn't rebel, it seemed as if I could at least hint at it.

The commercial he wanted me to write was for a tonic called Elixircol, and it was to be spoken [00:10:00] on television by an actress who was neither young nor beautiful, but who had an appearance of ready abandon, and who was anyhow the mistress of one of the sponsor's uncles.

Are you growing old? I wrote. Are you falling out of love with your image in the looking glass? Does your face in the morning seem rucked and seamed with alcoholic and sexual excesses? And does the rest of you appear to be a grayish pink lump, covered all over with brindle hair? Walking in the autumn woods, do you feel that a subtle distance has come between you and the smell of wood smoke?

Have you drafted your obituary? Are you easily winded? Do you wear a girdle? Is your sense of smell fading? Is your interest in gardening waning? Is your fear of heights increasing? And are your sexual drives as ravening and intense as ever? And does your wife look more and more to you like a stranger with sunken cheeks who has wandered into your bedroom by mistake?

If this or any of this is true, you need Elixircol, the true juice of youth. The small economy size (business with the [00:11:00] bottle) costs seventy-five dollars, and the giant family bottle comes at two hundred and fifty. It's a lot of scratch, God knows, but these are inflationary times, and who can put a price on youth? If you don't have the cash, borrow it from your neighborhood loan shark or hold up the local bank. The odds are three to one that with a ten-cent water pistol and a slip of paper, you can shake ten thousand out of any faint hearted teller. Everybody's doing it. (Music up and out.)

I sent this into MacPherson via Ralphie, the messenger boy, and took the 4:16 home, traveling through a landscape of utter desolation.

Now my journey is a digression and has no real connection to Justina's death, but what followed could only have happened in my country and in my time, and since I was an American traveling across an American landscape, the trip may be part of the sum. There are some Americans who, although their fathers emigrated from the old world three centuries ago, never seem to have quite completed the voyage, and I am one of these. I stand [00:12:00] figuratively with one wet foot on Plymouth Rock, looking with some delicacy, not into a formidable and challenging wilderness, but onto a half finished civilization embracing glass towers, oil derricks, suburban continents, and abandoned movie houses, and wondering why in this most prosperous, equitable, and accomplished world, where even the cleaning women practice the Chopin preludes in their spare time, everyone should seem to be disappointed.

At Proxmire Manor, I was the only passenger to get off the random, meandering, and profitless local that carried its shabby lights off into the dusk like some game legged watchman or beetle making his appointed rounds. I went around to the front of the station to wait for my wife and to enjoy the traveler's fine sense of crisis.

Above me on the hill were my home and the homes of my friends, all lighted and smelling of fragrant wood smoke, like the temples in a sacred grove, dedicated to monogamy, feckless childhood, and domestic bliss, but so like a dream that I felt the lack of viscera with much more than poignance, the absence [00:13:00] of that inner dynamism we respond to in some European landscapes.

In short, I was disappointed. It was my country, my beloved country, and there have been mornings when I could have kissed the earth that covers its many provinces and states. There was a hint of bliss, romantic and domestic bliss. I seemed to hear the jingle bells of the sleigh that would carry me to grandmother's house, although in fact, grandmother spent the last years of her life working as a hostess on an ocean liner and was lost in the tragic sinking of the S.S. Lorelei, and I was responding to a memory that I had not experienced. But the hill of light rose like an answer to some primitive dream of homecoming. On one of the highest lawns, I saw the remains of a snowman, who still smoked a pipe and wore a scarf and a cap, but whose form was wasting away and whose anthracite eyes stared out at the view with terrifying bitterness.

I sensed some disappointing greenness of spirit in the scene, although I knew in my bones, no less, how like yesterday it was that my father left the old world to found anew, and [00:14:00] I thought of the forces that had brought stamina to the image. The cruel towns of Calabria and their cruel princes, the badlands northwest of Dublin, ghettos, despots, whorehouses, bread lines, the graves of children, intolerable hunger, corruption, persecution, and despair had generated these faint and mellow lights, and wasn't it all part of the great migration that is the life of man?

My wife's cheeks were wet with tears when I kissed her. She was distressed, of course, and really quite sad. She had been attached to Justina. She drove me home, where Justina was still sitting on the sofa. I would like to spare you the unpleasant details, but I will say that both her mouth and her eyes were wide open.

I went into the pantry to telephone Dr. Hunter; his line was busy. I poured myself a drink, the first since Sunday, and I lighted a cigarette. When I called the doctor again, he answered, and I told him what had happened. &quot;Well, I'm awfully sorry to hear about it, Moses,&quot; he said. &quot;I can't get over until after six, and there isn't much that I can [00:15:00] do.

This sort of thing has come up before, and I'll tell you all I know. You see, you live in Zone B - two-acre lots, no commercial enterprises and so forth. A couple of years ago, some stranger bought the old Plewett mansion, and it turned out that he was planning to operate it as a funeral home. We didn't have any zoning provision at the time that would protect us, and one was rushed through the village council at midnight, and they overdid it.

It seems that you not only can't have a funeral home in Zone B, you can't bury anything there, and you can't die there. Of course it's absurd, but we all make mistakes, don't we? Two things you can do, and I've had to deal with this before. You can take the old lady and put her into the car, and drive her over to Chestnut Street, where Zone C begins.

The boundary is just beyond the traffic light by the high school. As soon as you get her over to Zone C, it's all right. You can just say she died in the car. You can do that, or if this seems distasteful, you can call the Mayor and ask him to make an exception to the zoning laws. But I can't write you out a death [00:16:00] certificate until you get her out of that neighborhood, and of course no undertaker will touch her until you get a death certificate.&quot;

&quot;I don't understand,&quot; I said, and I didn't, but then the possibility that there was some truth in what he had just told me broke against or over me like a wave, exciting mostly indignation. &quot;I've never heard such a lot of damned foolishness in my life,&quot; I said. &quot;Do you mean to tell me that I can't die in one neighborhood and I can't fall in love and another and that I can't eat.&quot;

&quot;Listen, Calm down, Moses. I'm not telling you anything but the facts and I have a lot of patients waiting. I don't have the time to listen to you fulminate. If you want to move her, call me as soon as you get her over to the traffic light. Otherwise, I'd advise you to get in touch with the Mayor or someone on the Village Council.&quot;

He cut the connection. I was outraged, but this did not change the fact that Justina was still sitting on the sofa. I poured a fresh drink and lit another cigarette. Justina seemed to be waiting for me and to be changing from an inert into a demanding figure. I tried to imagine carrying her out to the station wagon, but I couldn't [00:17:00] complete the task in my imagination, and I was sure that I couldn't complete it in fact. I then called the Mayor, but this position in our village is mostly honorary and as I might have known, he was in his New York law office and was not expected home until seven. I could cover her, I thought, that would be a decent thing to do, and I went up the back stairs to the linen closet and got a sheet.

It was getting dark when I came back into the living room, but this was no merciful twilight. Dusk seemed to be playing directly into her hands, and she gained power and stature with the dark. I covered her with a sheet and turned on a lamp at the other end of the room, but the rectitude of the place with its old furniture, flowers, paintings, etc., was demolished by her monumental shape. The next thing to worry about was the children, who would be home in a few minutes. Their knowledge of death, accepting their dreams and intuitions of which I know nothing, is zero, and the bold figure in the parlor was bound to be traumatic. When I heard them coming up the walk, I went out and told them what had happened and sent them up to their rooms.

At seven, I drove over to the Mayor's. [00:18:00] He'd not come home, but he was expected at any minute, and I talked with his wife. She gave me a drink. By this time, I was chain smoking. When the Mayor came in, we went into a little office or library where he took up a position behind the desk, putting me in the low chair of a supplicant.

&quot;Of course I sympathize with you, Moses,&quot; he said, &quot;it's an awful thing to have happened, but the trouble is that we can't give you a zoning exception without a majority vote of the Village Council, and all the members of the Council happened to be out of town. Pete's in California and Jack's in Paris and Larry won't be back from Stowe until the end of the week.&quot;

I was sarcastic. &quot;Then I suppose Cousin Justina will have to gracefully decompose in my parlor until Jack comes back from Paris.&quot;

&quot;Oh no,&quot; he said, &quot;oh no, Jack won't be back from Paris for another month, but I think you might wait until Larry comes from Stowe. Then we'd have a majority, assuming of course that they would agree to your appeal.&quot;

&quot;For Christ's sake,&quot; I snarled.

&quot;Yes, yes,&quot; he said. &quot;It is difficult. But after all, you must realize that this is the world you live in, and the importance of zoning can't be overestimated. If a [00:19:00] single member of the council could give out zoning exceptions, I could give you permission right now to open a saloon in your garage, put up neon lights, hire an orchestra, and destroy the neighborhood and all the human and commercial values we've worked so hard to protect.&quot;

&quot;I don't want to open a saloon in my garage,&quot; I howled. &quot;I don't want to hire an orchestra. I just want to bury Justina.&quot;

&quot;I know, Moses, I know,&quot; he said, &quot;I understand that, but it's just that it happened in the wrong zone, and if I make an exception for you, I'll have to make an exception for everyone, and this kind of morbidity, when it gets out of hand, can be very depressing. People don't like to live in a neighborhood where this sort of thing goes on all the time.&quot;

&quot;Listen to me,&quot; I said, &quot;You give me an exception and you give it to me now or I'm going home and dig a hole in my garden and bury Justina myself.&quot;

&quot;But you can't do that, Moses. You can't bury anything in Zone B. You can't even bury a cat.&quot;

&quot;You're mistaken,&quot; I said. &quot;I can and I will. I can't function as a doctor and I can't function as an undertaker, but I can dig a hole in the ground and if you don't give me my exception, that's what I'm going to [00:20:00] do.&quot;

&quot;Come back, Moses, come back,&quot; he said, &quot;Please come back. Look, I'll give you an exception if you'll promise not to tell anyone. It's breaking the law, it's a forgery, but I'll do it if you promise to keep it a secret.&quot;

I promised to keep it a secret, he gave me the documents, and I used his telephone to make the arrangements. Justina was removed a few minutes after I got home, but that night I had the strangest dream. I dreamed that I was in a crowded supermarket.

It must have been night because the windows were dark. The ceiling was paved with fluorescent light, brilliant, cheerful, but considering our prehistoric memories, a harsh link in the chain of light that binds us to the past. Music was playing and there must have been at least a thousand shoppers pushing their wagons among the long corridors of comestibles and vittles.

Now is there, or isn't there, something about the posture we assume when we push a wagon that unsexes us? Can it be done with gallantry? I bring this up because the multitude of shoppers seen that evening as they pushed their wagons, penitential and unsexed. There were all kinds, [00:21:00] this being my beloved country.

There were Italians, Finns, Jews, Negroes, Shropshiremen, Cubans, anyone who had heeded the voice of liberty, and they were dressed with that sumptuary abandon that European caricaturists record with such bitter disgust. Yes, there were grandmothers in shorts, big butted women in knitted pants, and men wearing such an assortment of clothing that it looked as if they had dressed hurriedly in a burning building.

This, as I say, is my own country, and in my opinion, the caricaturist who vilifies the old lady in shorts vilifies himself. I am a native, and I was wearing buckskin jump boots, chino pants cut so tight that my sexual organs were discernible, and a rayon-acetate pajama top printed with representations of the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria in full sail.

The scene was strange, the strangest of a dream where we see familiar objects in an unfamiliar light. But as I looked more closely, I saw that there were some irregularities. Nothing was labeled. Nothing was identified or known. The [00:22:00] cans and boxes were all bare. The frozen food bins were full of brown parcels, but they were such odd shapes that you couldn't tell if they contained a frozen turkey or Chinese dinner.

All the goods at the vegetable and the bakery counters were concealed in brown bags, and even the books for sale had no titles. In spite of the fact that the contents of nothing was known, my companions of the dream, my thousands of bizarrely dressed compatriots, were deliberating gravely over these mysterious containers, as if the choices they made were critical.

Like any dreamer, I was omniscient, I was with them, and I was withdrawn, and stepping above the scene for a minute, I noticed the men at the checkout counters. They were brutes. Now, sometimes in a crowd, in a bar, or a street, you will see a face so full blown in its obdurate resistance to the appeals of love, reason, and decency, so lewd, so brutish, and unregenerate that you turn away.

Men like these were stationed at the only way out, and as the shoppers approached them, they tore their packages open. I still couldn't see what they contained, but in every [00:23:00] case, the customer at the site of what he had chosen showed all the symptoms of the deepest guilt, that force that brings us to our knees.

Once their choice had been opened to their shame, and they were pushed, in some cases kicked, towards the door and beyond the door, I saw dark water and heard the terrible noise of moaning and crying in the air. They waited at the door in groups to be taken away in some conveyance that I couldn't see. As I watched, thousands and thousands pushed their wagons through the market, made their careful and mysterious choices, and were reviled and taken away.

What could be the meaning of this? We buried Justina in the rain the next afternoon. The dead are not, God knows, a minority, but in Proxmire Manor, their unexalted kingdom is on the outskirts, rather like a dump, where they are transported furtively as knaves and scoundrels, and where they lie in an atmosphere of perfect neglect.

Justina's life had been exemplary, but by ending it, she seemed to have disgraced us all. The priest was a friend and a cheerful sight, but the undertaker and his [00:24:00] helpers, hiding behind their limousines, were not. And aren't they at the root of most of our troubles with their claim that death is a violet flavored kiss?

How can a people who do not mean to understand death hope to understand love? And who will sound the alarm? I went from the cemetery back to my office. The commercial was on my desk and MacPherson had written across it in grease pencil: Very funny, you broke-down bore. Do again. I was tired but unrepentant and didn't seem able to force myself into a practical posture of usefulness and obedience.

I did another commercial.

Don't lose your loved ones, I wrote, because of excessive radioactivity. Don't be a wallflower at the dance because of strontium 90 in your bones. Don't be a victim of fallout. When the tart on 36th Street gives you the big eye, does your body stride off in one direction and your imagination in another?

Does your mind follow her up the stairs and taste her wares in revolting detail while your flesh goes off to Brooks Brothers or the foreign [00:25:00] exchange desk of the Chase Manhattan Bank? Haven't you noticed the size of the ferns, the lushness of the grass, the bitterness of the string beans, and the brilliant markings on the new greens of butterflies?

You have been inhaling lethal atomic waste for the last twenty-five years and only Elixircol can save you. I gave this to Ralphie and waited perhaps ten minutes, when it was returned, marked again with grease pencil. Do, he wrote, or you'll be dead. I felt very tired. I put another piece of paper into the machine and wrote: The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing. He shall feed me in a green pasture and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort. He shall convert my soul and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me. Thou hast anointed my head with [00:26:00] oil, and my cup shall be full. Surely thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I gave this to Ralphie and went home.

JIm Phelan: Great. Thank you, Suzanne.

Suzanne Keen: You're welcome.

JIm Phelan: It's really a fascinating story. There's so much going on.

Suzanne Keen: Yeah, there's a lot. That ending always makes my hair kind of stand up. What just happened?

JIm Phelan: What just happened? Yeah, the juxtaposition of the psalm and handing it to Ralphie too, I mean, you know, just the difference in registers, is quite, you know, a striking way to end.

But, you know, one of the sort of very noticeable features of the story is this kind of juxtaposition of the story of the death of Justina and then all these other things, all these other sections, really, including the beginning, the introduction, where he's addressing in the present tense, a narratee, and then he turns to the main action. But then we get, you know, he [00:27:00] says, oh, my trip home from the office after I heard about the death of Justina isn't really part of the story, but then he gives us this long thing about all these thoughts that he has about, you know, while he's waiting for his wife and thinking about the settlement of the country and all this stuff, and then he has that dream the night after he, sort of faces down the mayor and he gets his exception, and then the ads for Elixircol. So, you know, it's a kind of unusual juxtaposition of things and it seems to be, you know, somehow central to the way that Cheever is constructing a story.

So, can you help us put it together?

Suzanne Keen: I'll do my best. I love this story. Every time I read it, I think, God, it's even more complicated than I thought it was the last time I read it. And nothing like out loud to bring that home to you, there's so much going on.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: You know, all that you've said about the story is absolutely true, and I'll just underscore a point that's implicit in what you've just been [00:28:00] saying, which is that the titular topic, the death of Justina, is really almost just an excuse for the story. It's not, it's not actually the main drive of the story. The dilemma that is posed by Justina's death in Zone B, which of course is just utterly hilarious.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: The idea that it's zoned for no dying, wouldn't that be great?

JIm Phelan: Yeah, right, we could all go there, right?

Suzanne Keen: That action is actually resolved with not as much difficulty as you might imagine.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: It's going to be the big problem of the story, it is the title of the story, but it isn't really.

But the story is, of course, about the fear of death and about the problem of mortality, like, what do we do? And that line that you referred to where he's on his way home after Justina's died, and he says, my journey is a digression and has no real connection to Justina's death. Of course, his journey is a digression, that's how he, how he feels about this chaos that is his life, he sort of announced chaos as the problem to solve. Like, that's the whole point of fiction, that [00:29:00] language is used to make something orderly out of chaos. And the story is, in fact, quite orderly, once you get outside of that first paragraph, that present tense kind of dislocated intro.

We assume it means that the narrator is going to survive the episode.

JIm Phelan: Yes.

Suzanne Keen: Not always, but normally the convention that narration means the narrator is still with us. But then once he gets into the story, it's actually quite orderly, it just goes in the order of the days that pass, not very many of them between Sunday and Wednesday.

JIm Phelan: Right, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: And then the digressions, which really interests me in the story, I think of them as, you could add meditations on the train to the list, but I think of them mainly as the ads that he writes and the dream, items that are actually completely outside the real world action of the story are the embedded texts.

JIm Phelan: And even there, like, there's this great variety, right? So the ads, the first two are sort of more similar, although I think, you know, the first one, I mean, it's interesting when the first one, he [00:30:00] says, I could at least hint at rebelling, right, for MacPherson telling me I can't go home and all that, right?

And it seemed like he's starting that way with more of a hint, but as he goes, he sort of, you know, picks up steam and momentum and so on, and he ends up with the, oh, go rob a bank, you know, of this ridiculous price, but that's all right, you can do it, everybody's doing it. S o there's an interesting move there, and then the second ad, it seems like, okay, that's more of a continuation of that, and then the third one is, you know, the psalm.

So, it's really kind of interesting there, and the dream itself is of its own piece, I think, so.

Suzanne Keen: Yeah, the dream is extraordinary, and of course, it's a dream of judgment, and I think that all the ads and the dream all unify thematically around confronting the facts of mortality, and the fact that the product is Elixircol is hilarious and appropriate.

And I guess one of the big questions for me at the end of the story, as I said, that it always makes my hair stand on end a little [00:31:00] bit when you get to the end and the third ad is the 23rd Psalm; to me it feels like he's earned it, he's earned the quotation of that, long quotation from the Psalm.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: And how easily risky that is as a move, like, to actually orient your whole story towards this quite traditional consolatory...

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: That has been operating for thousands and thousands of years and have it land. Now, I'm aware that there are probably other readers or listeners to this story who will have heard the ending as more of a dark irony.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: And tone of the story is something to grapple with, like, how do you read it? I feel like from the very start of the story, the troubles with death have been announced in a way that sort of... &quot;timor mortis conturbat me&quot;, the fear of death disturbs me or troubles me, is a unifying strand that runs through the entire thing, including the sort of comic episode of Justina's death and the inability to bury her.

That's just like, the light motifs, a little [00:32:00] comic riff.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: It comes through the whole story, and really, I read the end really as a consolation; of course, I also believe that it's going to be rejected by MacPherson.

JIm Phelan: Yes. Right, right. This won't work either. Right, right.

Suzanne Keen: I don't know what you think about that, about the tone at the end, and whether the Psalm 23 evocation is earned.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. I mean, my first inclination is to read it as another way of rebelling, right, that, okay, you know, you want something, I've been too mordant, you know, in my previous two. I'm sort of speaking as Moses now: I don't see him having the belief that, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.

I mean, I think, you know, one way to read it is that he's still in the valley of the shadow of death, and he's fearful, and this may be a less mordant way of coping, but it's still... I don't see the comfort, I guess. I don't see that we have enough [00:33:00] evidence that he's found any comfort.

Suzanne Keen: I think you're right that it's not comfort. I think it's an acknowledgement that death is actually a real thing.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: You know, there's... the mayor says people don't like to live in a neighborhood where this sort of thing goes on all the time.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: A great line, like it's true, we don't, we don't want to live in a neighborhood where all around us, like we're being reminded of the fact of death.

JIm Phelan: Right. Right.

And the cemeteries on the outskirts of town, and it's like a dump, and yeah.

Suzanne Keen: But so, the quotation of the 23rd Psalm with, you know, which links up to another little leitmotif in the story, which is the whole thing about the, you know, the Puritan ancestors and Plymouth Rock, foundation of the country and all that, you know, sitting on the hills.

This is a recitation from inside our culture that every time we hear it, everybody is going to pass through that valley. The death is not something you can zone out, you know, you are going to.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: There's an admission that there are certain forms [00:34:00] of chaos that you're not able to keep at bay.

You're going to have to admit, yeah, this is going to happen to me, and that's why when he says, my journey is a digression and has no real connection to Justina's death, well, that's technically true because his journey is... it's not a digression from his life; he has to accept that his journey is not the digression. He is on a journey that's going towards death, and I think the psalm quotation is the moment where he admits that.

JIm Phelan: Okay, okay.

Suzanne Keen: It's a, I'm not going to be able to evade this.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. So in a way, like if we think about the meditation on the country, right?

That we are... we should be happy, right? There's so much here that's, you know, positive and yet everybody is disappointed, I'm disappointed, right? There's something about moving beyond that to the acceptance of a kind of imperfection and mortality. It's such a rich story and it's not like we have to pin it down, but another possibility is that okay, well, this is a different [00:35:00] attempt to come to terms with that.

Once we admit mortality, once we admit that this is the end of the journey, I can turn here, here's one place I can turn, but you know, is it satisfactory or not?

Suzanne Keen: It's on a knife edge, isn't it? I mean, and there's, back to how I think you read the tone of the whole story, because there's a kind of wild recklessness in this persona that's our narrator in the, in the story has of, as he tells us this virtually, as soon as the actual storyline starts, he tells us that he's been told that he has to knock off the drinking and the smoking. Doesn't last very long as a resolve, it's hard, he really has one day where he manages as far as we know, to stay the hooch and the cigarettes.

He's got this kind of frenzied feeling that is already, even before anything's happened, he sees the face in the English muffin, a parody of all those moments where people see the Virgin Mary in a pancake or whatever. And he doesn't know who it is, it's some kind of communication from the great beyond.

And we think that this is just because he's [00:36:00] in withdrawal.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. Right. Right. But then again, there's you know, another kind of psychological logic to it and, although it is quite the list, right? A friend, an aunt, a sailor, a ski instructor, a bartender, a conductor on a train.

Suzanne Keen: I know him from somewhere!

JIm Phelan: Right. Yeah, and you know, that goes back to the tone and the wildness of it. The effects of the narration really range from, you know, evoking hilarity to evoking, you know, pathos and even sorrow.

Suzanne Keen: Well, absolutely. It's got this kind of swooping affective range, and when I read it just to myself, not reading out loud, there's moments that just make me burst out laughing because the line is so hilarious.

The writer and the voice, Moses, has this wonderful, bathetic moment of like, after this, like, high flown catalog, suddenly they'll be just like, in short, I was...

JIm Phelan: Disappointed, right?

Suzanne Keen: Wonderful, wonderful language, and yet, it's not completely out of [00:37:00] control.

JIm Phelan: No, right.

Suzanne Keen: As a moment of chaos, it has an order, it has wild swings, but it moves along, the episode is neatly concluded, Justina's in the ground, and as far as we know, he lives through the episode.

JIm Phelan: Right. Again, you know, we go back to the framing of it. He's giving it as an example of chaos, and you could turn to your own lives and think about this, and what art can do is maybe give a little order to it.

Suzanne Keen: That's why, other than the obvious struggle to accept mortality, which is obvious in the story as the theme, the other thing that it strikes me that the story is about, is about the easily abused powers of language, which are on show in the narrative voice, which is extraordinarily fluent, you know, he is not at a loss for words in spite of these crazy experiences that he's having, but it's not an un mitigated endorsement of the power of language. Of course, the thing we learn is that [00:38:00] the village council has ridiculous legal language and the languages evoked in the very, very first words of the story where he says, so help me God.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: You get the sense of like legal language is somehow more binding than other kinds of language because it might have actually prevented him from doing something about this corpse in his living room.

JIm Phelan: Right.

And then he has, he has to break the law according to the mayor, right.

It's against the law, but as long as you keep it quiet, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: The ways in which thoughtlessly used language can cause all sorts of ridiculous situations and harm, but also how the advertising business represents a certain kind of utter debasement of the use of languages just to sell people these patent medicines that promise youth.

And that when the person who is peddling that kind of language himself starts to utter instead these slightly out of control meditations on what Elixircol is really [00:39:00] trying to address the ads are bizarrely getting at something closer to the truth that's in the story.

JIm Phelan: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah. So, you know, maybe we can talk a little bit more about Moses as a character and maybe start with him as a writer, right? So that we have him, you know, reflecting on the story he's gonna tell us, so, therefore, he's aware of, all right, I'm going to tell you this story, I'm a writer.

We see his, he makes his living by writing, he's writing for MacPherson, he writes his speeches and he writes these ads. And so, I think, you know, we sort of see a kind of range of his capacity as a writer. He can do a lot, right? He can do the satire, he can do the meditations of all kinds, right?

Suzanne Keen: Yeah.

JIm Phelan: He can reconstruct the dialogue, you know, in a scene with the mayor and all this, you know, so, Cheever gives him a fair amount of facility, and I think that [00:40:00] is, you know, an important part of the way we respond to him. Okay, even if he's having trouble with, you know, his addiction, or at least, we don't know if it's an addiction, but the alcohol and the cigarettes, which are somehow threatening his health, he does have this other thing.

So that, I mean, that's one feature of his character, I think, that's important.

Suzanne Keen: Yeah. I mean, and I think the fact that in the very beginning, in that, sort of more untethered first paragraph that sets up the story, when he says, fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos, no less, that we have a sense of the endorsement of what telling a story is supposed to be able to do.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: And so the high ambition for the use of language in a appropriately life ordering way, it resonates, and yet, I think you do feel that this speaker is on the verge of spinning out of control. Yeah, absolutely, he's a great writer; he's a wonderful satirical [00:41:00] jester in his writing as well, and I love that moment in the middle of the dream sequence in the supermarket, the dream supermarket, which is just an amazing scene.

JIm Phelan: It really is a tour de force, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: When he says, Moses, the dreamer says, like any dreamer, I was omniscient, I was with them and I was withdrawn, you know, sort of curbing them from above.

That's the moment where he sees the brutes at the checkout who are going to be judging everybody who's coming out of the supermarket. It feels very self aware, on Moses's part, and I have to sort of say, and on Cheever's part, that the writer is injecting a moment of consciousness of the act of narrating and the formal choices that are made.

JIm Phelan: Yeah, there's some interesting, I think, metafictional touches here that we maybe get back to. Before we leave the character thing, I think we should talk a little bit about his name, right? So, you know, we have the 23rd Psalm, we have Moses, we have, you know, ideas of the promised land and America, you know, these kinds of things.

Suzanne Keen: It is, it's a [00:42:00] little confusing ethnically, and the information in the story is a little confusing ethnically. On the one hand, he says, you know, he allies himself with those who have one foot wet on Plymouth Rock, the ancestors coming 300 years earlier, and that's Cheever, the writer's background, very WASP, but then later in the story, he refers to his father as one of those immigrants, which precedes a catalog of all the reasons why people would want to emigrate.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. I mean I took that as he's claiming &quot;kin&quot;, in quotation marks, with the European immigrants in a way, right? Maybe his family came from Italy, the Calabria, but then there's also the reference to Dublin and so on.

Suzanne Keen: He is from Calabria. It's just like, Calabria is the first of the list of places that would inspire you to leave.

JIm Phelan: Okay. Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: A bunch of characteristics of places that would inspire you to leave. But we do know that there's a priest at the funeral.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Moses is a strange name for an Italian. It's not on [00:43:00] par for a WASP.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: It seems \*unintelligible\* forr a Jewish person, but it doesn't, I don't get any other cues in the story.

He's an every man, I mean, in that sense of claiming the sweep of American identities, white American identities, I guess.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. Right. Right. You know, the other thing about... Moses doesn't actually make it to the promised land. Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Again, a fascinating character and of course Cheever wrote a ton of stories that are set in this landscape, this sort of suburban.

JIm Phelan: Right, the suburban.

Suzanne Keen: Reached by train from New York where the husbands worked, one of many, many stories that Cheever wrote in that landscape.

But this one is maybe not the most phantasmagorical, but it's the one that. moves in that direction of, you know, we're in the psychic landscape more than the actual physical land.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. And I think maybe we could, you know, at least touch on the metafictional stuff. You know, so we, in the beginning, as you've quoted, fiction and art can bring order out of chaos. So that invites [00:44:00] us, I think, Cheever's audience to think about, well, okay, how is this story doing that?

But there's also, you know, in this time when you, especially as you were reading it aloud, that paragraph that begins, I was struck by, &quot;now, I don't like fictional accounts of office life&quot;, right? Well, wait a minute, I thought... are you giving me a fictional account or are you giving me, you know, non fiction?

You know, within the story, it should be non fiction. What kind of game is Cheever playing there?

Suzanne Keen: &quot;It seems to me that if you're going to write fiction, you should write about mountain climbing and tempests,&quot; all which is far from Cheever's narrative as you could possibly imagine. Like, I think he literally never writes about mountain climbing, or...

JIm Phelan: Tempests at sea, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Yeah, of course, there's these moments that are very self aware about what it is that writing is ambitious to do.

And to me, that's part of what makes that move at the end to the 23rd Psalm so, like, almost uncanny. Like, just a, a quotation of... I read a [00:45:00] sincere utterance. Whether the quotation is a sincere quotation, we could debate.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: But the feel of the 23rd Psalm's expression of feeling around recognition of mortality and the need for God's help, that seems like, well, that is an example of writing that is doing what writing should do at its most, not necessarily fiction, but what it can do.

And I think that question of whether we're supposed to take it as fictional, or as a kind of straight up account of this is something that really happened, it was chaotic, and you know, that gesture is so often made by first person narrators, like this is not a story, this is something that really happened.

JIm Phelan: Right, right. And Cheever seems to be playing with that a little, right? Maybe trying to have it both ways, even.

Suzanne Keen: Because then the language is so over the top, it eschews the plain style that often goes with that kind of assertion.

JIm Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Utterly elaborate. And, you know, the catalogs, like when reading aloud you become aware of it, it's hard to take a [00:46:00] breath.

JIm Phelan: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so maybe before we wind up, we could talk a little bit about this and sort of the tradition of the short story in England and America, at least, you know, so like, I mean, if I asked you, well, what if I took what you were saying about the last ad, the invocation of the 23rd Psalm, is this a kind of adaptation of the modernist short story or epiphany moment, what would you say to that?

Suzanne Keen: It's such an interesting question, and the way I think about that is that if you think that you can feel these little touches little, little brushes with metalepsis and moments of awareness of this work as a written work that has a writer behind it, where, you know, that the story is published in 1960, so we're just super close to the moment where that's going to be a very common move, like John Barth, and...

JIm Phelan: Right, it becomes foregrounded in the work.

Suzanne Keen: In a decade plus, the metafictional mode will be very prominent, but if you say, well, in the sort of [00:47:00] century of short stories and, at least in the American tradition, the short story is one of the great forms of the 20th century.

JIm Phelan: Right.

Suzanne Keen: I'll call up a Irish example and say, if you think of it as being more like \_Dubliners\_, it feels closer to that to me in terms of its representational aims than it does the Barthian mode.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: My feeling that there's a gesture towards sincerity is part of why I do, why I say that it's closer to Joyce.

But if this were a Joyce story, It would be more austerely narrated.

JIm Phelan: Way more.

Suzanne Keen: It would be somehow around the burial of Justina.

JIm Phelan: Oh, interesting, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: I think it would be boiled down, if Joyce had written it, but the investment in the internal landscape, which is so much, this story is all about what is it like to be inside Moses's head.

JIm Phelan: Right. Right.

Suzanne Keen: A head that is in withdrawal, a head that is very worried, traumatized, and having to please an irascible boss. Like it's that...

JIm Phelan: That modernist thing, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: To me it feels more [00:48:00] obviously in that tradition where the objects in the story are meant to sort of carry their symbolic freight relatively lightly.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: But, moments in the ads and in the dream where the phantasmagoria can kind of break out.

JIm Phelan: And the thematic can sort of, yeah. It's not sort of a explicit thematizing of an allegory or something, but there's a lot of room for thematizing of mortality and judgment and these kinds of things.

Suzanne Keen: You can feel all, you know, he's pegging all these elements onto it. And even, you know, we haven't talked as much about it, but even the vision of the American landscape that he sees from the train and is thinking about, you could add that one to the list, that meditation about what, has become of the great wilderness.

You know, that's a very post war perception.

JIm Phelan: Yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Broken down movie houses and the oil derricks and, you know, the sort of turning of the land from a dream into a site of exploitation.

JIm Phelan: Right. And, yeah, the industry takes over and yeah, all of that.

Suzanne Keen: We could talk [00:49:00] an hour about this story, there's so much.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. Well, we are coming to the end. So is there anything else that you think we should say before we say goodbye to our listeners?

Suzanne Keen: I'll just say that if any listener out there, that if this is your first encounter with John Cheever's fiction, he is a phenomenal short story writer and he wrote hundreds of them.

He wrote novels too, but his stories I think are just regarded as his masterworks and there's some truly great ones and there's some wonderful films made of some of these stories. So, I'd say &quot;The Enormous Radio&quot;, &quot; The Swimmer&quot;, there's a wonderful movie of &quot;The Swimmer&quot;. Absolutely wonderful short story writer whose fame probably peaked in the 80s.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. I remember when \_Falconer\_ came out, which is like late 70s, early 80s, I don't know the exact date, there was a lot of publicity around it, you know, the novel, right? But yeah, I think there's been a falling off since then.

Suzanne Keen: And so he's gone, he dies fairly young at 70, and Cheever suffers from some of the same problems that Moses [00:50:00] suffers from.

But he, you know, setting that aside, he is a brilliant short story writer and really epitomizes the best of what people at the time would have thought of as like the &quot;New Yorker&quot; story.

JIm Phelan: Right, yeah.

Suzanne Keen: Whenever I've encountered these stories, they are tremendous.

JIm Phelan: Okay. Well, that's a good note to end on, so thanks so much, Suzanne.

Suzanne Keen: It's been absolutely delightful.

JIm Phelan: Yeah. Great. So much fun talking about the story with you. It's such a, you know, this was the first time I read this story, so thank you for that.

Suzanne Keen: Teachable.

JIm Phelan: Teachable, yeah. Okay. And so, and I also wanna thank our listeners and say we appreciate feedback, which you can send to us at the email address projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page, or to our Twitter account, @PNOhioState.

I'd also like to remind you, you can find more than 30 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. And if you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. Thank you all. [00:51:00]