Amy Elias: The story begins with a lump of coal. Who, for the sake of argument, could think, talk, and move itself around. Like many people who dress in black, the Lump of Coal was interested in becoming an artist. The Lump of Coal dreamed of a miracle, that one day it would get to draw rough black lines on a canvas, or more likely, on a breast of chicken or salmon filet by participating in a barbecue.

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, and today I'll be talking with Amy Elias, who, with a nod to the season, has selected Lemony Snicket's short Christmas tale, The lump of Coal.

The Tale was originally published in USA magazine in December, 2004, and then published as a standalone book in 2008 with illustrations by Brett Helquist. As many of our listeners know Lenny Snicket is the pseudonym adopted by Daniel Handler, who has also written adult books published under his own name.

One of the things Amy and I will be discussing is how The Lump of Coal works as a children's book and an adult book. We'll also be discussing how hilarious we think it is. Amy Elias teaches and writes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she holds the title of UT Chancellor's Professor and Distinguished Professor of English.

Amy is also the director of UT's Denbo Center for Humanities and the Arts, a position she has held since 2017. Amy's areas of expertise include narrative theory, contemporary literature and culture studies, and humanities advocacy, as well as the arts of the present. That last phrase is taken from the name of the scholarly society that Amy founded and is now flourishing, the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, or ASAP.

And here I want to give a shout out to our mutual friend, Brian McHale, who came up with the name for the organization. Amy is the author of Supply and Desire, History and Post 1960s Fiction, which won the Perkins Prize in 2002. This prize is given by the International Society for the Study of Narrative for the best book published in a given year.

Amy has also edited or co edited several books, including Speculative Light: The Arts of Buford Delaney and James Baldwin, 2025; The Planetary Turn, Relationality and Geoesthetics in the 21st Century, 2015; and Time: A Vocabulary of the Present, 2016. Amy, welcome to the Project Narrative Podcast.

Amy Elias: Thanks, Jim. I'm really glad to be here.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Is there anything you'd like our listeners to pay special attention to as you read Lemony Snicket's The Lump of Coal?

Amy Elias: Well, I think it seems to be a very simple, short narrative, a little Christmas story. But it's also, an it narrative, right? It's a narrative of circulation which is actually how Luke Herman and Bart Vervek discuss it in this wonderful article whose title I can't remember, but it's in Poetics Today and I recommend it to everyone.

One of the only articles I found on this, book. But the novel of circulation goes back to the mid 18th century. And it's very familiar. It's the tale, for instance, that follows the fortune of an object like a coin travels from hand to hand or from person to person or something like that.

So this story definitely follows in this pattern, but what I'd ask listeners to listen for would be places where the tale structure gets complicated from the it narrative that they would normally expect by voice, by plot, by illusion or anything else. And so as a result becomes much more complicated than this little simple Christmas tale that we

Jim Phelan: Right.

Presented as. Okay, great. So now here's Amy Elias reading Lemony Snicket's The Lump of Coal.

Amy Elias: The Lump of Coal. The holiday season is a time for storytelling. And whether you are hearing the story of a candelabra staying lit for more than a week, or a baby born in a barn without proper medical supervision, these stories often feature miracles.

Miracles are like pimples, because once you start looking for them, you find more than you ever dreamed you'd see. And this holiday story features any number of miracles, depending on your point of view. The story begins with a lump of coal. Who, for the sake of argument, could think, talk, and move itself around.

Like many people who dress in black, the Lump of Coal was interested in becoming an artist. The Lump of Coal dreamed of a miracle, that one day it would get to draw rough black lines on a canvas, or more likely, on a breast of chicken, or salmon filet by participating in a barbecue. But barbecues, sadly, are for summer.

And this is a holiday story, and so it takes place in the dead of winter, when the air is gray and wet shoes line up in the hallways, shivering and crying tears of sleet. It is difficult to find a barbecue in the winter, although it is easy to find small animals scurrying through backyards and tipping things over, such as abandoned snow covered lawn chairs, frozen bird baths, and forgotten bags of charcoal.

And this is how the small, flammable hero of our story found itself tumbling out into the world. This isn't the miracle I was hoping for, said the lump of coal. But perhaps if I roll around a bit, I can find something interesting. The lump of coal rolled out of the backyard, taking care to avoid the inevitable puddles of winter, and soon found itself in the center of town.

You would think that the center of town would be bustling during the holiday season, but most shoppers were bustling around at the mall several miles away, so there was plenty of room on the sidewalk for the lump of coal. It window shopped for a while, and then to its delight, the lump of coal found itself outside an art gallery.

In the window were several paintings that looked like someone had taken a dark, crumbly substance and smeared it all over a piece of paper. I can't believe it, cried the Lump of Coal. Here is an art gallery that displays art by lumps of coal. It's a miracle. When the Lump of Coal rolled inside, however, it discovered that the art gallery was not a miracle after all.

We do not represent artists such as yourself, said the gallery owner after the Lump of Coal had introduced itself. The gallery owner had a long, oily mustache and a strange accent that the lump of coal suspected was fake. We have a wide selection of works by human beings that suit us just fine. Please go away and don't leave smudges on my artistic floor.

Disappointed, the lump of coal rolled outside. That wasn't the artistic opportunity I was hoping for, it said to itself. But if I roll around a bit more, perhaps I can find something interesting. The lump of coal whirled further down the block and stopped in front of a building where powerful smells were wafting, a phrase which here means coming from nearby even though the door was closed.

A sign on the building informed passers by that the building was named Mr. Wong's Korean Barbecue Palace and Secretarial School, which made the lump of coal gasp in delight because I forgot to tell you that for the sake of argument, the lump of coal could read. It's a miracle, cried the lump of coal, and certainly there was every reason to believe this was so.

A Korean restaurant is an excellent opportunity to enjoy an indoor barbecue. In fact, many such establishments have small barbecue pits installed in the tables, so you can do the barbecuing yourself. I have spent many pleasant evenings in Korean restaurants, taking shelter from the winter cold, warming myself by the barbecue pit at my table, and enjoying the smell of the roasted, toasted rice, tea, eggplant salad, and pickled cabbage served alongside the roasted meats and vegetables.

When the lump of coal rolled inside, however, it discovered that Mr. Wong's Korean barbecue palace and secretarial school was not a miracle after all. The air was filled with the smell of oregano, which is not a Korean spice, and the owner was wearing a pair of very ugly earrings and a rude scowl on her face.

I don't need any coal, she said. I get all my coal from a Korean restaurant supply factory. Everything in this restaurant has to be 100 percent Korean. But Wong isn't even a Korean name, the lump of coal said. And judging by the smell, I don't think you're using proper Korean spices. Please go away, said the restaurant owner, and don't leave any smudges on my Korean floor.

The lump of coal did what it was told and began to grow very despondent, a word which here means certain that a miracle would not occur after all. Perhaps the miracles only happen to human beings, it said. Or maybe miracles are only as genuine as Mr. Wong's Korean Barbecue Palace and Secretarial School.

Perhaps I should just bury myself and become a diamond after thousands of years of intense pressure. Just when the lump of coal was ready to return to its bag in the backyard, however, it ran into someone I'm sure I don't have to introduce. He was an overweight man with a long white beard dressed in a very bright red suit.

Santa Claus, cried the lump of coal. It's a miracle! I'm not a miracle, said Santa Claus, and I'm really not Santa Claus. I'm an employee of this drugstore, dressed up and giving out coupons. The real Santa Claus is at the mall. Do you have any use for me? asked the lump of coal. I'm an artist at heart, but I'm very helpful when cooking meat.

Santa Claus sighed. Well, he said, my stepson is a very disobedient boy named Jasper. His mother used to say he had an artistic temperament, but I think he's a brat. You're just the thing to put in his stocking as punishment. I guess that's better than nothing, said the lump of coal. And when Santa Claus put him in Jasper's stocking, the lump of coal found that being in a cozy sock was in fact better than nothing.

And when Jasper found the lump of coal, things became even better than better than nothing. A lump of coal, Jasper cried. I've been waiting to create some abstract art featuring rough black lines. I'd be happy to be of assistance said the lump of coal. Eek gad, cried Jasper. You can talk. It's a miracle. It was a miracle, although the miracles didn't stop there.

Jasper and the lump of coal collaborated on a number of remarkable objets d'art, which the art gallery sold for an enormous fortune. That was a miracle. Jasper and the Lump of Coal used this fortune to visit Korea, where they had always wanted to go, and when they came back, they bought the restaurant and turned it into a proper place, known as Yi Sang's Korean Barbecue Palace and Secretarial School, after the famous Korean poet, who was unfairly imprisoned for crimes he did not commit.

That was a miracle, too. In the daytime, the two friends cooked genuine Korean food, and in the evenings, they produced works of abstract art, and they never saw Santa Claus again. Although, they heard he had been fired from the drugstore for making fun of someone who was buying a certain ointment. All these things are miracles.

It is a miracle if you can find true friends. And it is a miracle if you have enough food to eat. And it is a miracle if you get to spend your days and evenings doing whatever it is you like to do. And the holiday season, like all other seasons, is a good time not only to tell stories of miracles, but to think about the miracles in your own life.

And to be grateful for them. And that's the end of this particular story.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Well, thanks, Amy. I found it pleasurable to read this story to myself, but I think it's even more enjoyable when it's read aloud by a good reader like you. And the pleasure generated by your reading, I think, provides a good place for us to start our discussion.

Let me suggest that the pleasure derives in part from our sense that the story is what we call double coded. That is, it works as an amusing but relatively straightforward and didactic Christmas story written for children, and it simultaneously works as a subversive and sophisticated story written for adults.

So and that, one way to develop this point is by noting the multiple genres it evokes. Right, you've mentioned the it narrative. What are some of the other ones that you see Handler playing with?

Amy Elias: Well, we can talk about this because this is really fun. Of course, at first, you have to talk about satire.

Handler said that this story, A Lump of Coal, is, and I love this quote, a response to the relentless cheer of Christmas in North America.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Amy Elias: Which is about right, right? So right off the bat, you have this sardonic wit at work in this text. Even in the

Jim Phelan: title, right? The choice of to say, okay, we're, my Christmas story is going to be about the lump of coal.

Oh, exactly. Yeah.

Amy Elias: There's a nice story in the Atlantic about where we get that notion about why coal symbolizes naughtiness at all. You'd think a Christmas story would be about somebody who was good or that had something to learn. To take the symbol of naughtiness and make it into the protagonist of the story for a Christmas story is really interesting.

By the way, you know that I just love that fact that the coal didn't become a bad thing until like the 19th century when it before it was great to get a lump of coal in your stocking. That was really terrific. Poor people didn't have the energy sources, but after the 19th century, it was so plentiful that to get a lump of coal just, didn't have any value.

And so it became a

Jim Phelan: It's capitalism, right? Supply and demand. there's so much of it, it's devalued and therefore it becomes this negative thing. Yeah. That's

Amy Elias: right. Exactly. So, the satire we, and I think we will talk around this during this whole broadcast is that satire is obviously on art with the gallery.

It's obviously on cultural appropriation with the Korean restaurant. It's about commercialism with Santa. I mean, I hope we hit on all of that stuff, but clearly there's a satire of these ideas, but then there's also this meta satire going on that satirizes Christmas storytelling itself, storytelling in Christmas, right?

Yeah. He's Handler said at one point that Christmas , the holiday season is the time for storytelling. And that's true on the one hand, but on the other hand, even that embeds this sort of slide, because I don't think that practicing Christians, for instance, think of the Christian story at the heart of Christmas as a storytelling event, right?

I think that's a little different. So this notion about whether story is serious or non-serious becomes part of this meta level that he's, he's dealing with. Right.

Jim Phelan: Right. Or even if you take it, say, all right, well there is this, Christians like to retell the story, and Christmas is an occasion for that.

Right. but for them, it's more than. Just a story, right? Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so he's playing with all that, right? Yeah.

Amy Elias: So that's one thing. And you just talked about satire. I think we could talk about it as a fairy tale and that's linked to this Christmas story thing. I mean, this time of year, this relentless storytelling, relentless cheer of Christmas, right?

With It's a Wonderful Life and Miracle on 34th Street. Miracle, right? These, stories, which. Yeah, this is a

Jim Phelan: story about miracles and we have a happy ending, we have, overcoming misfortune and so on, right, yeah.

Amy Elias: Yep, it's the underdog tale, right, that the Lord of Coal is traditionally put into the stockings of bad children, but so he's the underdog, but here he rises triumphant at the end of the tale.

It's a miracle! It's

Jim Phelan: a miracle! It's a miracle.

Amy Elias: It's a miracle. Yes. what other aspects of the fairy tale do you see here, Jim?

Jim Phelan: Well, I do think, just in terms of a plot structure, like we have this kind of three main incidents, right? and the first two are sort of repetitious, and the third one is different and transformative, right?

So we have, he goes to the art gallery, disappointed. He goes to Wong's Korean Barbecue and Secretariat of School, again hopeful, disappointed, meets Santa Claus, and that looks like it's not going to be much, but then it all gets transformed and, really in a very interesting way, partly because Santa Claus, characterizes Jasper as, okay, this bad child who deserves the lump of coal.

And it turns out he does deserve the lump of coal, but for very different reasons, because he's a good child, he recognizes the potential in the lump of coal, for making art, and they make it, and they're successful, and then they can transform the first two things, right?

The first two events, right? They make the art, amass a fortune, they go to Korea, they come back and they buy the Korean barbecue. It's, wow, right? I mean, it's, it's all packed into these three short incidents, right? this is narrative, right? This is, instability, complication, resolution, but total reconfiguration of the initial instabilities multiple, you know, amazing triumph.

Amy Elias: Yeah, and the reversals of fairy tales with, I think you made this point earlier in our conversations that the evil stepfather or stepmother who's always in the fairy tale, here it's Santa, right? And , I love that line. Oh, I'm not the real Santa, I'll say it is at the mall.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Yeah, because the way it works sort of in the, okay, that's the logic of the story world, but then we, and there's the satire, right? The real Santa is at the mall. Okay, where's, yes, this relentless cheer and capitalism of Christmas. We're gonna, Handler's sending that up, yeah.

Amy Elias: But he does get his comeuppance, like the bad guy, if Santa's the bad guy who sets up Jasper, the artist, as the good guy for a fall, right, he does get his comeuppance because he's fired when he makes a comment about the ointment, right? Right,

Jim Phelan: right, right.

Amy Elias: And Jasper gets his comeuppance. It's triumphant as the artist figure at the end.

Right.

Jim Phelan: And the ointment, as we talked about in our previous conversation, okay, we start with pimples and we end with ointment. And so, Reader, you make the connection. Right.

Amy Elias: Yeah. A beautiful circular structure of fairytale in some ways. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Elias: Right. We can talk about the artist too.

I mean, if you want to get very serious about this, the notion of the Kunstler Roman, right? The novel that follows the development of an artist from their youth to maturity. It's a subset of the Bildungsroman. This is the story of two artists, really. But the lump of coal here. is this artist figure, like many people who dress in black, he wanted to be an artist, right?

Yeah, right. And, I just love this conversation. The idea of what constitutes the authentic artist here is really fascinating, right? So you have this cliché of the disgruntled artist who's going to be, not in tune with the world. He gives up the world in order to make his art, right, or her art or their art.

And they do this through a process of both, monetary sacrifice and some sort of internal calling, right? Yeah,

Jim Phelan: right.

Amy Elias: You have the internal calling here. But all the way through, right, the little lump of coal says, Well, I would love to make great art, or, I'm also really good for barbecues.

Jim Phelan: Yes, right, right. I mean, I mean, that's right. That works in so many interesting ways, I think. One is that, the it and the human, right? I mean, that Okay, it, okay, yeah, I'm good at, barbecues, right? But then there's this other side that's connected. But they get conflated in this notion of art, right?

Whether I'm making streaks on a salmon or abstract art, I'm still the artist and I'm good at it, right? I'm good for it.

Amy Elias: My husband barbecues, he believes he's an artist, and he couldn't barbecue. But that's really interesting, I hadn't really thought about it because we talked about, I'm skipping ahead.

Yeah, that's fine, that's fine, yeah. But this idea that the book is illustrated, and that's what people need to understand. It's the illustrations play a really strong role in this text. And we both noted that there's a disconnect between the illustrations and the story that's told. In particular, the story that it's told repeatedly refers to the lump of coal as it.

Right. The illustrations give him a, make it a hymn it's a male figure in the sartorial kind of, he wears almost a tuxedo, but a suit and tie, black suit and tie and goes through. So this idea of the barbecue being the it, and the artist being the him, also is mirrored in this text versus illustration.

Jim Phelan: Right, the verbal and the visual, right, yeah.

one of the effects of the, visual, which is very appealing, right, that the artist is really good is to well, I could put it this way, reward the reader who attends to the idea that there's an it in the verbal as opposed to a he.

It does make, it humanizes the lump of coal in a strong way, I think the illustrations do. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Elias: But it does do weird things to the artist figure, right? So if the artist for you. Deeply individualized in Western literature, especially modernist literature, right? And the fact that What is it?

They, they name the restaurant actually after, right? They buy, they go to the restaurant and it's fake, right? And and then they do their thing and then they go to Korea and they learn all about real food and they come back and they buy the restaurant and they turn it into, and the word authentic comes back again and again and again in this story.

They turn it into an authentic restaurant named after an authentic poet artist named, Ying Song. And, For those, I'm going to give the background here. Yeah, yeah, no, I

Jim Phelan: think that's helpful. Our listeners will be glad. Yeah.

Amy Elias: For those who, I had to look it up. It's the pen name of Kim Hang Yong, who lived between 1910 and 1937.

So this is a real figure. He was a pivotal and revolutionary figure of modern Korean literature. He's linked to the avant garde of the modernist period. He experimented with language. He was influenced by Western Dadaism and Surrealism. He had a background in architecture, which, like Olipo, had a kind of effect on his work.

He got tuberculosis in 1933. And, but he did open up a coffee house, which I thought was very interesting, it was coffee houses and restaurants. So there's, there's a

Jim Phelan: double homage in that way, right? Right.

Amy Elias: and then in 1936, he was arrested on charges of thought crimes, and he died at the age of 27, soon after his release.

So that historical intrusion into this fairy tale structure is really interesting. Yeah. The notion of the authentic artist, right, that they're, naming their restaurant after. But of course, It's Yi Song's Korean restaurant at Secretarial School,

Jim Phelan: right?

Amy Elias: It's the authentic artist in the service of commercialism and, and a kind of weird pop restaurant, right?

So. Artists is being used here commercially and being drawn into the cycle of capital and into the cycle of commercial. So we'll have to come back to it because I don't know what to do with that in lots of ways. So this notion of Künstler Roman is there as a genre, but it's being complicated. What is, making fun of artists all the time in this book and

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Yeah. Yeah, and the fact that the Yi Song is imprisoned for thought crime, which I'm going to add something I'm guessing is connected to his being an artist. One way to go with that then would be to say, okay, they're doing this, right?

But, they're not. putting themselves under any sort of political threat because they're conforming so much to the capitalist success story, right? And in one sense, yes, they are more authentic than Wang, right? Not even a Korean name. And the owner is a missus or a woman, anyway, not a mister.

so they are making it more authentic, but maybe they're going too far with that name or that, that name points to a gap between what they actually do and what they may be trying to signify with the name.

Amy Elias: Yeah, and it's even worse because essentially that's their day job, right?

Yes. They have the day job. Where they work in the Korean restaurant and they make lots of money off the name of the authentic artist. And then evening they go to that snotty gallery owner's gallery and sell their paintings for a fortune, right? Which has allowed the restaurant in the first place. So that's the definition of a dilettante, right?

Someone who kind of, they're sacrificing nothing. They're completely participating in everything that you saw and probably. Right. And

Jim Phelan: again, this is something we didn't talk about, but it just made me think about it. There's also, I don't know if we're going to call it the fairy tale element or not, but there's no sense of the level of call using, itself up in the making of the abstract art, right?

Presumably it's the material of the art, the coal provides the black lines, but it's like the glump itself seems to be endlessly replenished. I don't know if I'm overthinking it with the, once I go there, but

Amy Elias: It generates this kind of conversation. If you take that seriously, if it's, you know, you don't have to, it's just a fun little story.

But if you take it seriously, like people like you and I do, right? It's, it's embedded in, in not only that, but the, the artists, Modernist art did not attempt to draw black lines on white paper. There was a huge theoretical apparatus behind that abstract art, right? Absolutely, yeah. No theoretical apparatus.

It's the same. Drawing lines on salmon fillets and drawing lines on the white paper, you just draw lines because that's what you do. So there's some sort of evacuation here of project of art, even though the tale is about the triumph of the artist that is. It's very interesting to me.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. He wants that all ways, right?

More than just both ways. It's every way. And that's part of the pleasure of it, I think, at least for, readers like us. Yeah. Well,

Amy Elias: and you asked about the satire, you know. Yeah. Yeah. Is it successful? just based on this conversation, I'd have to say, good satire is always witty and ironic.

And certainly this is, and it's successful that way. It's pleasurable. But the typical role of satire is to reveal something in order to sow the seeds of reform. Right. Right. So, it attacks institutions, it deems corrupt, it works to make vice laughable, it brings social Pressure on people who are engaged in wrongdoing, like Yeah.

Yeah. So, one might ask what the satire here is in service of. Right, right, right. What exactly. It doesn't seem to be the case that this is a short tail that wants to reform anything. I mean, it seems more be the case that the reader is just supposed to enjoy the ride, you know? Yeah. I

Jim Phelan: mean, I do think that what you said about satire, sort of preparing the way for reform. I do think some satire anyway is much more interested in the ridicule and the laughter, the poking fun at or holding up for, ridicule again, things that are wrong without going very far down the road toward, reformation or whatever, and I would tend to put this in that category.

It's a shorter tale that kind of thing. It's, it's very engaging in, what it does and then sort of leaves the rest to us.

Amy Elias: But, the previous book, I actually did read the latke who couldn't stop screaming.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Elias: And that's actually a very pointed little book, same genre, but it's basically about how the Jewish holiday gets usurped and overrun, ignored, and misinterpreted by the relentless Christmas season. And it's a story about cultural appropriation, not appropriation. Well,

Jim Phelan: dominance really, and the effect of dominance I read it quickly too. And yeah. Yeah, it's not as layered as this, but it's very, pointed and this is pointed in, its own way, I think, yeah.

So why

Amy Elias: not at Christmas? Why attack the artist would be my question. If you're going to like just do the satire, the satire ends up falling pretty heavily on commercialism here, which is really but the artist is part of that.

Jim Phelan: Right. Right. Or, or a certain conception of art and, Artistry, right, I mean that, like, going back to what you were saying about the difference between their abstract art and, what happened in art and modernism with all the theorization and so on, right?

It's the reductive version of art, I think, that he's going after, not art itself. Partly because he's using his own art, right? And one of the things that I think is maybe worth diving into a little bit more is the narration itself, right? We've talked about the plot, we've talked about the genres talked about the objects of the satire.

But now we talk a little bit more about the how. Especially with this narrator, who is a pretty strong presence, I think, you know, in the narrative itself. So, a presence that the reader is going to notice. So, where would you like to start with the narrator?

Amy Elias: Well, I mean, I think again, if we were going to make it too serious, right, we could start with the notion of the intrusive narrator tradition goes all the way back to Fielding, right. That the narrator who enters into the story and comments on it often to the detriment to the characters he's describing or narrating.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Amy Elias: And I think there's elements of that here. But it's also a frame story, right. And traditionally very much a

Jim Phelan: Right.

Amy Elias: Strange story. Yeah. the attention is on the narrator and the narrator's voice as much as it is on, or even more than it is on any character for the sake of argument.

Jim Phelan: Yes. I mean, that's really an interesting look, right? I mean, we get the frame, okay, about miracles and they're as common as pimples and so on. We get the introduced to the love of call and then the love of call for the sake of argument. Yeah. Can talk and do these things. Right. And then that's a

Amy Elias: strange, because it's, it's built into the, the story genre, right.

You don't have to say That's

Jim Phelan: fairytale. Yeah, yeah. Make

Amy Elias: markman is, of course it's a fairytale. coal can talk. That's the genre, right. So there's a split between the narrator's desire to tell a tale that makes sense, right. And his or her, whatever the narrator is, it's an inability to Lemony.

We

Jim Phelan: can call the narrator Lemony, I think. And, and think about, Handler as author and Lemony as narrator.

Amy Elias: There you go. All right. Yeah. So, Lemony cannot get into the fairy tale structure completely, right? He's got one feet in it, but he can't get both feet in it. Right,

Jim Phelan: right. And, like some of the things that, stand out for me are like oh, I forgot to tell you that for the sake of argument, the lump of coal can read or this sudden revelation that Jasper and the love of coal had always wanted to visit Korea, ,

Amy Elias: as do y'all, right?

Jim Phelan: Or, or, or, I'm gonna tell you what I think is a. When it's convenient for me, and, Handler having Lemony do that is like, hey, pay attention watch me construct this thing, right? It's going to be a little clumsy, but, there's probably a point to it.

Figure it out.

Amy Elias: Yeah. So

Jim Phelan: can we talk

Amy Elias: about the ending in that relation? Yes. And I think that, yes,

Jim Phelan: that's the other thing. Yeah, absolutely.

Amy Elias: Because that, that is just jarring to me. After all of this fun and all of these contradictions, and just sort of this slapdash journey here that this little coal is on, you get that very maudlin, I think, ending, which is typical of Christmas stories, right?

Right. Through the commercial end of them. That all these things are miracles, right? It's a miracle if you have enough to eat. It's a miracle if you have good friends. It's a miracle, if you get to do what you want to do. It's just a jarring shift in tone for one thing. Right. It's not satire.

Jim Phelan: again, I think if you think about the frame, right, so we start with okay, this is It's the season for telling stories and stories about miracles and so on and then, okay, seems to be coming back to it. In the beginning, we do get , that quick move to miracles are like pimples, right, which changes the tone and, It strikes the note, really, of, okay, we're going to have fun here.

But this one, there's no similar kind of interjection in the serious I'm going to end this now about miracles, right? Um, instead of going back to the didactic explicit didactic it's a good time not only to tell stories of miracles, but to think about the miracles in your own life and to be grateful for them.

And that's where I'm going to end. So, yeah, so how do we make sense of that in light of everything else we've been saying?

Amy Elias: Okay. The one thing you said was it's Boothian. Do you want to explain that?

Jim Phelan: I don't want to claim too much here about how I think Wayne Booth would read this ending, but I do think he would acknowledge that there's a gesture here toward saying, okay, we've had this journey together, right?

Thank you. reader and, we've had our fun, right, and but then, partly because of that, author and reader have sort of bonded. And so, here's the conclusion of the bond, right? I'll summarize it as author and you as reader will nod to it, right? But I don't think Booth would stop there, and I don't want to stop there.

But I do think it's an important kind of move, and I think it also sort of does work on the idea of this is a story for children, Christmas story for children, and here's a way we can, have it work that way, right? But I think it's only one, one move and then the bigger moves are like, well, let's question that because of everything that we've been talking about in terms of it's doing something else.

It's going beyond that, the sort of simple children's story.

Amy Elias: Right. That word grateful is really grating to me here because I get it, right? it's the Christmas story and you want to tie it up with a bow at the end. It's a Christmas story, but that's, It's a Wonderful Life. That is, all of these Christmas stories, which take essentially a privileged protagonist and show them that if their life were just a little bit different, they would be unhappier.

But they really should be grateful for the life that they have. But at no point are any of those protagonists put down a gold mine or asked to, mine lithium or, work in a apple factory and somewhere. The readers of, these Victorian Christmas stories who, for the sake of argument, should learn to see the smaller miracles in their lives and be grateful.

That's great if you have a privileged readership But this isn't I mean, it's not necessarily a bad message. I hope everybody's all I am But we're not we're

Jim Phelan: not anti gratitude here.

Amy Elias: We're not anything gratitude, right? Exactly But on the other hand, that we and that you that is employed here are, that's an enclosed privileged class of suburban or class readers typical of the Victorian Christmas tale, right?

And so even in that ending, which seems to shift registers into something very serious, something more appropriate to an, quote unquote, authentic Christmas message everything that comes before undermines it. Yeah,

Jim Phelan: yeah, yeah, right, right. And so it's it's a kind of it's maybe the the more Extravagant or let's say the satiric side of it or the limitations of what's on the surface are less marked explicitly in this final paragraph, page, et cetera.

And even here, the illustration, we have stockings hung over a fireplace with a, Christmas tree, decorated right there, right? That also seems to reinforce the overt message about gratitude and miracles and so on. But, but I think, Manbooth would like this, that he, that Handler, at least, is, trusting the audience that's been paying attention to see, okay, you can't just stop with the first level there.

Amy Elias: Right. Right. Exactly. So, emergent is a pretty complicated little, little, little, little extra.

Jim Phelan: Right. Right. Right. Right. I don't want to sort of try to, set up a hierarchy of complexity among stories that have been chosen for the podcast. But this one wouldn't be at the bottom. Put it, put it that way.

Amy Elias: And I feel, I feel very good about that. You know, it's one of the short, I was very intimidated. Your previous podcast had people like reading Proust and I'm like,

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right. But I

Amy Elias: think it's to show that narratology and narrative analysis work at all levels, and the narrative is complicated, even when it appears simplified and in popular context.

And so I think there are great lessons to be learned from simple things.

Jim Phelan: Right. If only, that narratologist can complicate anything. We can do it to anything. Right, maybe that's, the satiric, lesson of our performance today. Anything else before we end? Anything else that you were hoping we'd touch on that we didn't get to?

Amy Elias: No, I think we did a good, pretty good job on it. Ten pates. That story. And besides, I have to get to the mall to see the real thing.

Jim Phelan: Well, I don't want to get in the way of that. So, well, thanks very much, Amy.

Happy to meet you. This is really fun.

Okay, and I want to thank our listeners. And to say, you know, as always, I appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at email Projectnarrative@osu.edu.

Or on our Facebook page or to our Twitter slash X account @PNOhioState. I'll also remind you that you can find more than 30 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. If you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. Thanks again. And see you next month.

Amy Elias: Thanks, Jim. Bye bye.