

# Appendix Season: The Author

## SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

### **Hannah McGregor** 00:00

Hey listeners, we're quickly popping in to let you know about a fundraiser we're running inspired by this episode. A few weeks ago we had a thoughtful listener write in to ask that we dedicate our Author episode to an organization recently affected by JKR's transphobia. When the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Center hired a trans CEO, JKR's foundation pulled their funding from the center and JKR opened up her own single sex rape crisis service. It's a private business that claims to be quote, "a sexual violence support service for women run by women," end quote.

In contrast, the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Center support survivors of all genders aged 12 plus, who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. The Edinburgh Rape Crisis Center faces regular transphobic attacks from the press and public and a lack of funding such that they are unable to meet the huge demand for support in the city. If you want a great way to say fuck you to JKR's transphobia, please support our fundraiser and help the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Center in their life saving work. You can find a link to our fundraiser in the show notes, on Instagram, and on our website.

We originally set a goal of \$1,000. But you absolute rockstars blew that out of the water before we recorded this episode. So we set a new goal of \$5,000. And we're confident that you're gonna blow that one out of the water as well. So keep that in mind as you listen to our new episode and get progressively more angry.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)***

Hello, and welcome to Witch, Please, a fortnightly podcast about the Harry Potter world. I'm Hannah McGregor.

### **Marcelle Kosman** 02:02

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And, Hannah, I would like you to tell me what it is like living in the world as an auteur in the sorting chat.

### **Hannah McGregor** 02:14

Okay, yeah, I am an author. And that is very funny. Because when I think about the author, I do not think about me. In fact, I do not think about any of the people I know who are writers, because... doesn't writer and author feel like it means something really different? I'm getting ahead of myself.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:38

You're getting ahead of us. [*Hannah laughs*] But the short answer is yes. And we'll talk more about why in transfiguration class. But this is not the transition to transfiguration class. So, Hannah, what's it like being an author?

**Hannah McGregor** 02:50

I'm going to tell you about what I think are the two cutest things about having my current book, *A Sentimental Education* out in the world. My friend Don recently told me that his absolutely delightful mother, Donna.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:07

Oh, no. That's so cute!

**Hannah McGregor** 03:09

Don was visiting Donna recently, and told me that she is on her second read through of my book.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:16

Oh, geez.

**Hannah McGregor** 03:20

It's like, Donna, should I come and visit you and we can talk about it? And the other cutest one, cutest experience was I got a text from my friend, Hillary, who owns the little local bookstore down the street from me, saying that, she was like, Oh, I keep forgetting to ask you to sign the copies of *A Sentimental Education* that we have in stock, because there's this really cute customer in right now. And they're a huge fan, and they're buying a copy for their boyfriend. And I wish I could offer them a signed copy. And I was like, I'm not doing anything. It's just gonna come to the bookstore. So I just walked in and was like, hey, you want me to sign your book? And it was so cute. And we took a selfie. It was so cute.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:14

I love that so much.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:17

Yeah. So those are the only two readers that I care about. It's cute and fun and I gotta say, so much more fun having a book out in the world that is nice and that I feel pretty good about, because my first book was a book about rape culture in Canadian literature and a lot of really terrible men got really mad at me about it. That's my favorite thing about being an author, is not being in trouble. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

**(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)**

So, Marcelle. We're finally doing it. We are finally talking about the author. Which in this case is not us being like, you know, she whose name we do not like to speak, but literally the idea of the author, and this particular topic might just build on more previous episodes than any other topics so far, but instead of like cheekily suggesting you relisten to the entire back catalog, which like you should, you should, but, you know, I'm instead going to suggest that we be very selective in this week's revision.

**Marcelle Kosman 05:36**

Yes, I agree, Hannah. Let's start broadly. So, in our very first episode on critical animal studies, this was episode three, if you can believe it. Hannah, you beautifully broke down the relationship between ideology and discourse. And I stress beautifully because I continue to use this exact phrasing every time I have to teach my classes, very effective.

**Hannah McGregor 06:00**

Me too. **[Marcelle laughs]** Honestly, another great thing about writing, you just have to do it once, and then you can just go back.

**Marcelle Kosman 06:07**

So for folks who may not remember, ideology is our imagined relationship to the real conditions of our existence. Ideology is how we understand the world. And discourse is language that enacts power by generating knowledge. So understanding this relationship helps us to critically interrogate the very idea of an author as a construction or an invention, and not just the natural consequence of writing a book.

**Hannah McGregor 06:38**

Okay, speaking of interrogating things, in our episode on structuralism, we talked about the idea that narrative consists of a set of consistent structures, like grammatical rules, which means that we can take a story apart and identify the pieces in terms of their relationship to the story as a whole. So structuralists believe that stories mean something because of a shared relationship between the structural components of the

stories, that is their signifiers, and what those components are referring to, their signified.

Even though the relationship between signified and signifier is arbitrary and unstable, that... just go back to that episode of that part. If it feels confusing to you. So structuralism is important to our understanding of authorship because a writer can't predict if how, or when the relationship between signifier and signified might change, or how that change might affect the reception of their work.

**Marcelle Kosman** 07:43

So true. Okay, so speaking of reception, in our episode on Celebrity, we talked about how celebrities are represented, as well as the development and transformation of the media ecosystems that let those representations circulate. Drawing on Lorraine York, we talked about reluctant and exuberant styles of celebrity, and how one subject position determines which mode of celebrity they are expected to perform. So this helps us to understand how the role of “the author”, particularly if you are a popular author is itself performative.

**Hannah McGregor** 08:28

Mmmm. Yes, and we can't talk about the author without talking about books, because both are products of capitalism. **[Marcelle gasps]** So in our episode on books, we-

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:40

Books?

**Hannah McGregor** 08:41

**[Hannah laughs]** Yeah, that one. We demythologize the book as an object by looking at it as one of, if not the first, mass produced commodity, the brainchild of a publishing industry that realized it could make a lot of money by mass producing commodities cheaply, and then selling them at a considerable profit.

**Hannah McGregor** 09:00

As they do.

**Marcelle Kosman** 9:02

As they do. Moreover, investors in the book market actually anthropomorphized books so that people wouldn't just want them but would love them, collect them, and identify with them. And love for the author had a lot to do with that.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:16

Honestly, there is so much more that we could talk about. And you know what, maybe we will in OWL's? I don't know, I can't predict the future, but I really want to start yelling about authors.

**Hannah McGregor** 09:28

Okay, let's do it.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***

Well, the author might be dead, but Marcelle is alive. And she's here to explain this joke to us in transfiguration class.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:44

Ah, Hannah, I am so excited to take the lead on this episode. Can you guess why?

**Hannah McGregor** 09:50

My guess is that you have some jokes that you think are really funny about the author?

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:55

Yes, I do. ***[Hannah laughs]*** I really do. You are correct. Okay, so I dug up this presentation from my PhD coursework years, and I laughed out loud at my own presentation so much. I think it might be my finest work.

**Hannah McGregor** 10:12

Okay. I mean, I love that. What's it called?

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:15

It is called Authorship: The Dead and the Not Dead Yet.

**Hannah McGregor** 10:20

Oh, I get it. Like in Monty Python.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:23

I'm not dead yet. ***[Marcelle laughs]*** It's already so funny. Coach loves it.

**Hannah McGregor** 10:27

Oh my god, there's going to be a lot of Marcelle chortling with delight at her own jokes. ***[Marcelle laughs]*** And that is one of my favorite things.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:35

Oh, shucks, it's a good thing we're friends. Okay, so I just want to give you a taste of my untameable cheek. And again, this was for a PhD seminar on textual editing with arguably the most straight laced professor in the department. I don't think he found me very funny, but I did very well in this class. Okay, so let me tell you about this presentation, which I love. Authorship: The Dead and the Not Dead Yet, which is very funny. I can't even believe some of the things that I let myself get away with. The first slide of this presentation is an image of Roland Barthes pointing to a chalkboard with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth. And I had erased what he was pointing to and instead put my notes. *[Marcelle laughs]* It was very funny.

**Hannah McGregor** 11:32

Marcelle, I have used that same picture in courses that I have taught.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:37

Oh, we're both so funny! Oh my god. Okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 11:41

Okay, so Roland Barthes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:43

Roland Barthes. Okay, so we're gonna start with two key figures. They're both French. They're both French. They're both men. They're both dead. Hold on bats, and Michel Foucault. And the reason we're starting with them is because the Western literary tradition in English, the tradition in which you and I were educated, Hannah, tends to figure these two Frenchmen as central to the question of just what the heck an author is, anyway.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:10

Okay. So Barthes and Foucault didn't invent the idea that we can disentangle an author from a text, because a lot of literary cultures have long, complex ideas about authorship.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:24

Yes, correct. So, Barthes and Foucault introduced, for us, in our western literary tradition in English, a way of thinking about "the author" as a modern capitalist invention, and a contributor to the circulation of discourse.

**Hannah McGregor** 12:43

Ah, discourse. So what the heck does an author have to do with- is an author a discursive construction?

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:52

Yes, but we're not there yet.

**Hannah McGregor** 11:53

So sorry, not sorry at all.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:55

*[laughs]* My dude, *[Marcelle rolls the "R" in Roland loudly]* Roland Barthes published. I'm sorry, Coach.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:00

Your microphone is going to be wet by the end of this episode.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:05

So my dude Roland Barthe published "The Death of the Author" in the 1960s. In this essay, he argues that literary criticism is essentially held hostage by a desire to determine what the author intended to say. I personally think that with the exception of undergraduate essays, literary criticism has largely moved beyond the desire to discover the author within the text. But this is probably thanks in part to Barthe and Foucault's influential writings on the subject.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:39

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:40

So at the time, the sway of the author was so powerful that the critics role in reading a text was to uncover the single true interpretation of it.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:52

Okay. So instead of there being one true correct interpretation, Barthes wants there to be multiple interpretations?

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:04

He does. Yes. So imagine going to a conference on Canadian literature and giving a paper on the abundant usage of simile and metaphor in Heather Neal's novels. Everyone claps politely until the foremost Heather-ologist in the country stands up and tells you that you've read Heather O'Neill's novels wrong.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:23

Okay, is this a real story? Because this did happen to me but with Carol shield.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:28

*[laughs]* So, yeah, so, this is not a real story, but like-

**Hannah McGregor** 14:32

It happens all the time.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:33

It does. It absolutely still happens all the time.

**[A clip from *Need You Now* by Lady A plays:  
“For me it happens all the time” ]**

But it is no longer acceptable. *[Both laugh]* It is no longer appreciated or tolerated or seen as like rigorous scholarly engagement, right? So Barthe’s point is that this mode of analysis devalues and limits the reader’s capacity to find meaning in the text based on the words on the page.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:06

Okay, okay. And his solution to this problem is to track down and murder authors?

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:12

Yes, because he’s French. And that’s what they do. Yeah. No.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:15

So it’s not a guillotine based literary critical move.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:19

Not yet. No. So Barthes refers to this new criticism, not necessarily *new* criticism, but this new mode of criticism as “the death of the author”, because in reader centered criticism, the author of a text relinquishes authority over it by the very fact of having written it. So, you, Hannah McGregor have written a book. Your name is printed on the cover of that book, and it identifies you as its author, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 15:55

It does.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:57

But your authority over how I, the reader, make meaning out of the words on the page, died the minute that book left your brain and became a commodity circulating in the world.



**Hannah McGregor** 16:13

Mm hmm. Yeah, absolutely. So mentally, what feels tangled up for me right now, is the sort of structuralist dimension to Barthe's argument, which is that based on that idea, that the relationship between signified and signifier is not something that the author can control, versus the capitalist critique going on here, because we are talking about books circulating as commodities, and arguably, about authors also been commodified via the book industry. So is there a relationship there between the structural critique and the capitalist critique or anti-capitalist critique?

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:04

Yes. Mayhaps, mayhaps. The transition to Michel Foucault can help.

**Hannah McGregor** 17:10

Fun fact, guys. You know why he called it "the death of the author"?

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:15

No. Why?

**Hannah McGregor** 17:16

Because in French the death of the author is Lemoore do tour. And it is a pun, playing on l'amour doubter, which was a classic, Mallory's classic telling of the story of King Arthur. Yeah, it's a nerdy joke.

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:44

Wow. That is very nerdy. And I am impressed. It is very, it is not a reference to an orgasm.

**Hannah McGregor** 17:52

Not a reference to an orgasm. No, it has nothing to do with orgasms and everything to do with King Arthur, I guess. But that does suggest the kind of quasi mythical status of the author as a figure, right? Anyway, Barthes? All well and good. Foucault? My homeboy. Let's hear what he has to say.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:09

So Michel Foucault's response paper, "What is an Author" is what I would generously call an essay length sub tweet, in which he rejects the very premise of Barthes' "Death of the author" thesis by just fucking questioning everything.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:29

It is sub tweety.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:31

It is 100% a subtweet.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:32

It is really like oh, the death of the author? How can something die if it never existed?

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:37

What is an author?

**Hannah McGregor** 18:40

Roland, riddle me this.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:41

But the other thing is that he at no point references Barthes. He doesn't use his name. And he doesn't refer to the title of the essay in quotation marks, but he does say the title of the essay, not by accident, but like multiple times.

**Hannah McGregor** 18:57

Yeah. Yeah, it's shady as fuck. It's one of the most fun things about reading theory, is really getting to dive back into times when people were just like being real bitchy about each other.

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:10

Mm hmm, truly. Okay. All right. So, to answer your question-

**Hannah McGregor** 19:15

-about capitalism-

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:16

So Foucault agrees that what we call the author is indeed a capitalist invention, but where he departs from Barthes is in the very possibility of extricating a text from the cold dead hands of the figure that wrote it. And this is because Foucault understands the figure of the author, as originating precisely from the type of literature that defines our modern Western individualist culture. So the very literature that produced the kind of criticism where people are like, ah, but what does he mean? Is precisely the same media that invented the figure who you could be like, What did you mean?

**Hannah McGregor** 20:09

Yeah, this is a history that I know primarily from a publishing history perspective, because particularly in Europe, when they're beginning to solidify and standardize the

way that the publishing industry works, the author is a really vital figure in the development of copyright law. And copyright law is literally about the right to copy things. And so you need to have the idea that there are people who own ideas, who can then decide who has the right to copy and circulate those ideas.

And so the author does literally emerge, sort of around a discourse of intellectual property and authority over said intellectual property. And so it makes a lot of sense that hand in hand, with this notion of an authoritative figure who gets to decide where a text goes, and how much it's worth, that person would also emerge as the one who gets to decide what the text means.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:09

That's right. So the thing about like, both Barthes and Foucault's arguments is that they're not mutually exclusive. They're both talking about the same ideas, but like, from different approaches, or taking into account different systems of meaning making, and Barthes is just not as interested in the circulation of power as an ideological thing.

**Hannah McGregor** 21:35

Yeah, absolutely.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:36

He's more like, I want to be able to say whatever I want about Carol Shields, bitch.

**Hannah McGregor** 21:41

Yeah, I feel like Barthes is often more interested in the question of what art means, whereas Foucault is more interested in the question of how representation and discourse by extension, fits into the larger landscape of modernity.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:04

Mm hmm. Yeah, that's right.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:06

You often don't get the impression that Foucault was like sitting around being like, but how does one understand the function of a photograph? Whereas Barthes is like, let's talk about how a photograph makes you feel. Foucault is like, no time, we've got prisons to historicize correctly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:26

"What is a photograph" is Foucault.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:29  
[laughs] Yeah.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:32

Son of a bitch. Okay, so, as you point out, Hannah, Foucault is not interested in authorial intention, he is not interested in interpretation, he is interested in how the author as a construct functions in the circulation of discourse. And so the author of a text for Foucault is not a person, but rather the text's antecedent. So something that exists before the thing and logically precedes the thing. Okay? So, Hannah, the book, *A Sentimental Education* exists, because you wrote it.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:15  
In part, yeah.

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:16  
So as a thing- no, no, no, not in part.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:20  
Yes. In part.

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:21  
No, not in part.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:22  
Because there's always publishers!

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:25  
Hannah.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:26  
What?

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:27  
Hannah!

**Hannah McGregor** 23:28  
What?!

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:28

You are the text's antecedent. Okay? It cannot exist. You precede the book. You logically precede the book, because you wrote the book. Okay? So as a thing in our modern capitalist society, the book refers back to you and takes its meaning from you, as its author. And tell me again, how do we know who is the author of a book?

**Hannah McGregor** 24:02

The author's name is on the cover.

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:05

Yes, that's right. Okay, good. And so, because Foucault is interested in discourse, the name on the book is not the name of a person. Your name on the book might be the same as your name, but it's not a reference to you. It is the equivalent of a description.

**Hannah McGregor** 24:25

Okay. A description of what?

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:29

Put a pin in that. In our late capitalist society, I think that we can also think of that name as a kind of brand. Okay? So if Hannah McGregor wrote it, it's going to be thoroughly researched, deeply meaningful. Maybe some, maybe some whimsy.

**Hannah McGregor** 24:48

Yeah, absolutely some silliness at points.

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:50

If Malcolm Gladwell wrote it. It's hot nonsense. masquerading as popular science.

**Hannah McGregor** 24:57

Fact. That points to the unstable reference to the author because that's how we will interpret Malcolm Gladwell.

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:03

Precisely. Okay. So, when you see a new book by Hannah McGregor, or a new book by Malcolm Gladwell, you have an idea of what to expect, because the author's name is more like a brand than a person. Okay? So, Hannah, you are an author. You wrote a book. The book is called *A Sentimental Education*, you wrote it, it has your name on it. You are also the author of your journal. Of the cards and the letters that you send to your loved ones like me. Okay? What about notes and reminders that you leave yourself like a grocery list?

**Hannah McGregor** 25:46

Absolutely.

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:47

No, you are the writer of these things, Hannah. *[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]* No, you are the writer, you are the writer of these things. What distinguishes your book from your grocery list is the function that you play as the author.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:07

Okay, so you can be an author of some kinds of texts and not of others?

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:12

That's right. Yes. Yes. So way, way back at the beginning of this episode, you were like, well, like what even like, I mean, there are writers, I know of writers, but like, what's the difference between a writer and an author? This is exactly that moment.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:29

Okay. So what is the difference between a writer and an author?

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:33

*[laughs]* It is, for Foucault, how the object circulates.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:39

Yes, of course, the author function is part of the circulation of a text via the publishing industry.

**Marcelle Kosman** 26:47

Yes, the publishing industry is one huge part of it. But not the only part of it.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:53

Yes, because there's readers, and there's literary criticism, and there's education. And there's all of the other kinds of ways that texts move through the world. That's right. And I'm sure I know that the author function is so powerful, that it can pull other texts into its orbit. So if you have an adequately famous author, things that they wrote that did not originally circulate, as authored, can then get pulled into their authorial archive, and all of a sudden we're like Virginia Woolf grocery lists are now circulating under the author function of Virginia Woolf. Whereas during her lifetime, they would have just been written ephemera.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:41

Exactly, exactly. We're not going to talk about Anne Frank at length, but Anne Frank, classic example of a person, a girl, a child, who is writing a diary, but has become an author function, through the posthumous publication of her diary. Okay. So Hannah, you will definitely outlive me. But if you don't, I'm going to make a lot of money publishing all of your ephemera. Okay? **[Hannah laughs]** The Hannah McGregor collection; receipts, grocery lists, to do lists, sticky notes.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:21

I'm three months younger than you.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:27

**[laughs]** Okay, let's talk about more of these material conditions that affect the author function. Okay?

**Hannah McGregor** 28:35

Okay. So, here's one of the really key questions, I think, is how much control because you said, the author function, we can think of it as a brand. So how much control does an actual living human writer have over how their author function circulates?

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:02

So my short answer to your question is that I actually don't think that an author has all that much control over how the author function circulates, okay? Because of all these other webs of influence, and what a theorist that we're going to talk about in a second calls, "the machinery of publication and review".

Like all of these things are very powerful that I think it can create the illusion that an author has a lot of control, but I'm not sure they do. But you might be pointing to the way in which an author could, say, latch on to social media as a tool with which they might refuse their own death by continuing to circulate unmediated text.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:57

Because there was no Twitter in the era in which Foucault was writing.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:03

Can you... He would be insufferable writing on twitter.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:08

**[laughs]** Rest in peace. Foucault, you would have loved Twitter. So surely things like social media have an impact on the author function.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:18

Yes. I think they would have to. Yes. Yeah.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:20

So what are some of the other kinds of systems and structures that we have to sort of keep in mind when we're thinking about the author as a function rather than a guy?

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:30

Hmm, okay. Well, now I'm going to bring in Jane Tompkins, who is an American writer and scholar, literary critic. Let's bring her into the conversation, because she talks about in her words, how authors are brought to the attention of their audiences. Okay? So, so she explains that, and I quote, "the conditions of dissemination, interpret the work for its readers in exactly the same way as definitions of poetry, in that they flow from and support widely held, if unspoken, assumptions about the methods of distribution proper to a serious or non serious work."

**Hannah McGregor** 31:17

So. *[laughs]* So the reader's relationship to a text is shaped by the ways in which that text circulates and arrives in the reader's hands. So that would have to do with all kinds of things like literary canon, like what books were taught in school, like, you know, the fact that Shakespeare continues to be performed constantly. But other authors of the same period aren't, like how books are categorized by genre, like the kind of cover art they have. So all of this surrounding material tells us what to make of a book before we've opened the first page.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:04

Exactly, yes, exactly. So she uses the canonization of a fairly well known 19th century American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* among some other things.

**Hannah McGregor** 32:20

Yeah, I've read that, it was bad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:04

*[laughs]* So she uses him as a case study to really illustrate all of these moving parts, okay? And how these moving parts shaped the reception and popularity of an author. Okay? So, remembering that Foucault says that the author is a description and not a person. Okay? So we don't care about Nathaniel Hawthorne the man.

**Hannah McGregor** 32:48



Yeah. We're interested in Daniel Hawthorne, the description.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:51

Yes. Okay. So I'm going to quote from Tompkins here. Okay? In the 1840s, quote, "America needed a living novelist who represented both what was essentially American, and what was best," scare quotes best, "by some universal criteria of literary value," end quote, okay? So thinking backwards. Hannah, what kinds of qualities do you think would have made an author well suited for this discursive role?

**Hannah McGregor** 33:27

Yeah, Marcelle. I don't know enough about Nathaniel Hawthorne to know the answer to this.

**Marcelle Kosman** 33:31

That is fair, that is fair and acceptable. Okay. So the answer is, it would have to be- this is according to Tompkins, because I also didn't know- it would have to be somebody who wrote about American life in a humble but reverential way. It would have to be somebody who is already a fairly well known author. And it would have to be somebody who's writing could make them a kind of spokesperson for the so-called democracy or so-called democratic way of life that the northern states were pursuing at this point in time.

**Hannah McGregor** 34:04

Okay, so those are the qualities that made Nathaniel Hawthorne well suited for this discursive role, but those qualities are themselves discursive.

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:18

They are themselves discursive. And Nathaniel Hawthorne was by no means the only person who embodied these qualities, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 34:28

Okay. So why him?

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:32

Okay, great. I mean, great question. Can you guess what the crucial precondition for his enduring legacy as the poster boy for American literature was?

**Hannah McGregor** 34:43

It's gotta be, being in the right rooms. Shaking hands with the right man.

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:51

He was in the room where it happened, is what happened, okay? So this is not going to come as a surprise. The material conditions of Nathaniel Hawthorne's success are not going to come as a surprise to people who study the material conditions of culture. Right? But as you point out, these things are all already discursive. Okay? So the way that he writes about America? Discursive. Okay? So.

**Hannah McGregor** 35:24

Yeah, the idea of humility, the idea of his origins being humble, that's a discursive, you know, humility is a discursive construct.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:31

I wouldn't say, I don't know if Nathaniel Hawthorne's origins are humble, it's that the way that he writes about America...

**Hannah McGregor** 35:39

Oh, yeah, gotcha, gotcha. So he's producing texts that discursively fit the function that we're looking for at this moment.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:48

Yes. Okay. Yes. But it's not you and me who are looking for it...

**Hannah McGregor** 35:51

No, I couldn't care less.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:53

Oh, no. But the people who were looking for it were the cultural elite of New England. Okay? So Tompkins describes this network of cultural producers in New England as, and I quote, "a dynastic cultural elite, which came to identify itself with him," end quote. "Him" being Hawthorne. So remember that the Civil War is going to happen. Okay? The civil war happens, the North wins. And so the increased social capital of the New England cultural elite, is a huge factor in the way that Hawthorne's work would go on to be canonized as American literature, because of the fact that irrespective of what he was intending when he wrote the things that he was writing, the network that he was involved with, who latched on to it, they came out on top of the Civil War.

**Hannah McGregor** 37:03

So the name Nathaniel Hawthorne becomes a description of a concept of Americanness that has a huge amount of cultural power behind it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 37:17

Because it gives itself and it spreads itself. Like a disease. **[laughs]** Sorry, but okay, but So, let me give you some examples. Okay? Let me give you some examples.

**Hannah McGregor** 37:30

Okay. Okay. Okay.

**Marcelle Kosman** 37:33

In addition to the network that he was a part of, the network that came after it, so that the second generation or the subsequent generation of cultural producers continued to publish his books, posthumously. And that meant that they continued to circulate, people continued to review them, people continued to buy them. His books were published in series, like little classics. His work was called classic American literature when it was like, you know, I don't know...

**Hannah McGregor** 38:06

Like, instantly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:07

Yeah. And it continued to be included in anthologies that were used in elementary schools, high schools and universities.

**Hannah McGregor** 38:16

So if it was being included in these literary reprint series and in these anthologies, that means that American literature scholars encountering his work would encounter it sort of within this discursive frame of like Hawthorne equals American literature.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:37

Exactly. The university system in America did not even consider American literature a field of study until after the Civil War. And so the very first American literature students in universities in America, were starting their study of American literature with Hawthorne. Can I give you another example? I must. Please let me!

**Hannah McGregor** 39:10

**[laughs]** Fine, fine, if you insist.

**Marcelle Kosman** 39:13

This is, again, this is from Tompkins. So Tompkins tells us that in 1883, Yale's English students were allowed- This is Yale University, Ivy League American University. Okay? 1883- Yale's English students were allowed, for the first time, *for the first time*, to write about an American author.

The topic for their junior essays was and I quote, “Hawthorne’s imagination.” So when I say that Barthes described authorial intentions as having too much sway, this is what I’m talking about. **[Marcelle laughs]** Nathaniel Hawthorne, the person, wrote some stories. As an author, he circulates in the discourses of American literature. Materially, his long standing critical success symbolizes the social and economic class stratification that emerged out of the American Civil War, where New England’s cultural producers got to determine what was American, what was intellectual, what was moral, what was progress.

**Hannah McGregor** 40:28

Marcelle, are you familiar with the video game, Katamari Damacy?

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:33

No. **[laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 40:34

It’s this video game, where you are this little ball. And as you roll around, you gather everything you roll over. And so starting, you roll over quite small things. But as you gather them, you get bigger and bigger and bigger. And so you can roll over and gather bigger and bigger and bigger things until you’re rolling over and gathering a whole building. So it is just like the gamification of the snowball effect, but you get to like, destroy stuff. And it’s fun. But this is the image that I have, as I’m thinking about the author function. **[Marcelle laughs]** Because it does. Like when we think about a new author, it’s like, you know, a new author does not emerge into a blank space.

Authorship itself has discursive weight. And they emerge as “author” by virtue of their attachment to a text that will then have all of these, we’ve talked in the past about paratexts. Like, we’ll have all of these other paratexts, that say, the genre this author is writing in, here’s a photograph of this author, and the photograph is going to tell you something about them. Here’s the author’s bio, that’s going to tell you something about them. Here’s the presence of the author on social media, here’s the author on Goodreads or here’s an interview with them, right? All of this stuff starts adhering to them right from the beginning, even if they’re a total recluse. Still, the materiality of the book itself, attaches all of this meaning to the author’s function.

But then as the author function moves through the world, it just accrues all of this stuff, and either disappears, because lots and lots and lots of authors get lost to history. But if it keeps going, it just accrues more and more cultural weight until the actual core of like, a guy who wrote a book one time is like, so obscured by, like, hundreds of years of

cultural meaning that attaches to that person. No wonder Foucault's coming along and saying, like, how the fuck?

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:03

No, not you.

**Hannah McGregor** 43:05

Yeah, exactly. Saying like, whoa, like, how the fuck would we ever know what this person meant? We can barely know what this person means. Yeah, like, as a person? Yeah, let alone what they, an actual flesh and blood human being at some point, quote, unquote, intended to say. There's a lot of cultural grist between this text and our encounter with it, and the meaning that the author had.

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:32

That's right. And like, we didn't, we didn't talk about editors. It like when I said-

**Hannah McGregor** 43:37

I mean, I kept trying to talk about the intervention of publishing and you...got so mad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:41

No, because this is about the author, Hannah.

**Hannah McGregor** 43:46

Yeah, I know. I'm bad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:47

No, you're not. You're ungovernable.

**Hannah McGregor** 43:51

Yeah. So even even an author's very first book, you know, begins their author function on the cover begins to accrue all of this sort of discursive meaning, but the actual things that start to produce that meaning are often things that have been done by other professionals in the book industry. So it has more to do with the cover art, the paper quality, typesetting choices, genre categorizations. Like, all of this stuff, that is about how the book moves through the world, which is in dialogue with the text that the author produced, but also not actually about the author themselves except as a function.

**Marcelle Kosman** 44:39

Yeah. Tompkins talks about how, like, the intrinsic value of a text does not exist separate from the machinery that brings the text to the attention of the readers. Like, there is no.. intrinsic value is not a thing. **[Marcelle laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 45:04

There is no outside to ideology. And the author is not exempt from that.

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:12

No, not at all. I guess one other thing that I think is worth addressing. And the reason why I think Tomkins is so useful is because her using Hawthorne, as a case study, really hinges on the way that the Civil War shook out the social conditions for Hawthorne and his contemporaries, right? Because if things had gone any other way, the particular New England elite, who really benefited from the results of the Civil War, would have redefined the map. So like, there are authors who were contemporary with Hawthorne, who were as popular if not more so in certain circles. But those circles didn't financially benefit from the war itself in its conclusion.

**Hannah McGregor** 46:12

Yeah, and what I can't help but think is looking back to a 19th century example. We're looking at a historical period that is linked to the rise of a kind of sort of fixation on bourgeois individualism, but our hyper fixation on the individual and the kind of cult of personality that attaches to it only gets more intense every year, like late capitalism fucking loves fetishizing individuals. And I think we can see that really clearly in the way that we treat our authors.

**Marcelle Kosman** 46:51

Maybe we should talk about one in particular.

**Hannah McGregor** 46:53

Great idea.

**(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)**

**Marcelle Kosman** 47:03

Well, we may not give a hoot what the author intended, but power and influence make it downright impossible to separate the artist from the art. Let's get specific in OWL's.

**[Sound effect of an owl hooting]**

**Hannah McGregor** 47:16

I think maybe I just want to start by saying the quiet part out loud, which is that JK Rowling is probably the most famous living writer. She is the level of famous that makes her sometimes quite tricky to use as an example of anything. Because when somebody is this far off the edge of the bell curve it's like, is this actually exemplary of anything about how culture works? Or is this just a really wild sort of outlier? To quote, Malcolm Gladwell, I guess? **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]** Sorry, you were saying and.

**Marcelle Kosman** 48:02

And we have talked before in other episodes about how, like the Black Swan effect, right like that, that the particular conditions of the Harry Potter series' phenomenal popularity are like non reproducible. Yeah.

**Hannah McGregor** 48:21

Yeah. Non reproducible, and not representative. And yet, I think, I mean, maybe she's not symptomatic, maybe she's got more of a causal relationship, but, she's stands in for like, a particular kind of contemporary celebrity author, who is endowed with an enormous amount of cultural power, by virtue of the success of their books, and who actively and happily, uses that cultural power to try to influence the world, including the publishing world and including through sort of maintaining deliberate ongoing control of the meaning of their texts by sort of controlling their circulation and their recirculation, but also, by virtue of becoming this kind of public intellectual figure that people are like, Oh, you wrote some kids books that people really, really like, and therefore, you're qualified to have an opinion on literally everything.

And, and I do think that in that sense, she's similar to a lot of writers. Like I don't know who else has the kind of power she does. But I would say Margaret Atwood is in a very similar position. In a very different way, George RR Martin is in a similar position. We could look at Rick Reordan, I think is his name. He wrote the Percy Jackson books, and he, like very self consciously was like, Oh, my author function has a huge amount of power. And so I'm going to create a series called Rick Reordan presents that I use to uplift the voices of marginalized authors writing children's literature.

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:02

And I think too, thinking about authors using social media to engage people, like we could also think about John Green is another good example of someone who's like, I know that I'm famous. I know that people are reading my books. I'm going to go on YouTube and I'm going to explain classic American literature to readers.

**Hannah McGregor** 50:23

Or like Roxane Gay. Like, it's so hard to separate Roxane Gay's writing from her internet personality. So there is the sense that authors are more public than they have ever been, that our sort of fixation on on celebrity culture, that is so much a characteristic of late capitalism has led to the sort of celebrity-ification of authors, that there's a lot of aspects to authorship in the 21st century that are different from what they looked like in the 19th century, because the whole machine of culture is different.

But that Rowling has got to be the top example of this, of somebody who has leveraged their author function into a kind of material power that outstrips what the author kind of could do historically, in their own lifetime with the notion of their own authorship.

**Marcelle Kosman** 51:25

Yes, for sure. Where I think the unpacking of the author function in relation to Hawthorne, for example, continues to be helpful for Rowling is in terms of thinking through like, or in terms of being able to see and identify the web of other influencers who are playing a part in Rowling's continued successes, right? So like, it's true. It's true that Twitter didn't exist in the 19th century. But Rowling does still have publishers who will publish her books. She does still have reviewers who will enthusiastically review her books. She's different because she's writing popular fiction and not being like no one has yet tried to, like make a- uhm...

**Hannah McGregor** 52:31

Were you going to say nobody teaches university courses about her, because they definitely do.

**Marcelle Kosman** 52:35

Take it back. I take it back. Yeah, yeah. So yeah, people put her on syllabi. Publishers have republished editions of her work, like the illustrated editions, the adult covers, like the machinery is continuing to enable her fame and continuing to enable the influence of her author function. Right?

**Hannah McGregor** 53:03

Well, there's a really interesting thing happening with her author function right now. So one of the early moves that her publishers made to popularize the Harry Potter books was to really attach the books to a particular story of her life. And that was the story of her as an unemployed single mom, writing this first book in a cafe in Edinburgh. And that is an iconic story that is as powerful as it is selective in the details it includes.

**[Marcelle laughs]** You know, it implies a lot of things about financial hardship and bootstrapping, and the notion of the undiscovered genius, that is all really sort of, you know, a cultural construct that doesn't have a ton to do with the actual events of history.



**Marcelle Kosman** 54:01

Are you suggesting that her author's origin story is discursive, Hannah?

**Hannah McGregor** 54:07

I'm suggesting it's discursive. That's all I'm saying. *[Marcelle laughs]* But she was attached right very firmly to the books from the beginning. And we see as soon as the second book comes out, it starts to get accompanied by these letters to her by children, that, you know, again, do this particular kind of work. When the movies started to come out, there was a lot of attention to the fact that she maintained a level of creative control over the movies, because she was figured so much as this person who, like, the entirety of this world had just erupted from her head, like Athena from the skull of Zeus.

And, so we needed her to have firm control over anything else that emerged from it. You know, Warner Brothers played that game. Bloomsbury played that game. Everybody sort of really got on board with this sort of construction of her. And that is starting to change now.

**Marcelle Kosman** 55:05

Definitely.

**Hannah McGregor** 55:11

They are still, all of these powerful cultural machines, are still working very hard to extract as much value as possible out of these properties. But they have figured out that, actually, she's become a bit of a liability. And so we are watching them, I think, trying what is just like, when I put my critic hat on, what is this sort of interesting juggling act, which is trying to separate the art from the artist while the artist is still alive and tweeting very actively. Like, clearly Warner Brothers has a lot invested in us all being fans of Roland Barthes right now and being like, ah, the author is dead, like Warner Brothers would love for the author to be dead.

Then they would not have to worry about what a nightmare the author is. And she's out here on Twitter being like, say the author is dead all you want, those checks still cash. Because the author is not just a discursive construct. She is also a function of capitalism, right? Like she's also a commodity, and like, there's this very real sense that like, whether we name her or not, the money all still goes to her. It doesn't matter if she's been increasingly hidden by the machinery of culture, she is still getting the money.

**Marcelle Kosman** 56:35

She's still getting the money. And people are still listening when she says stuff, whether it's like, oh, actually Remus Lupin's middle name was Dooley. And people are like, Oh, my God, I didn't know. Dooley! Or, sex is real. And it's a binary and you hate women, because you want to say otherwise. Like, because the checks continue to cash, she continues to be able to talk, and people hear it.

**Hannah McGregor** 57:12

Like she can talk more, because she has kept her very particular voice as the author in active circulation and in active production of new meaning for these texts. Like, sort of like, keeping this kind of death grip on the meaning of the text. And like, there's no better example of this than Pottermore, right?

**Marcelle Kosman** 57:38

No, no, no. Pottermore and the goddamn tweets, like the fact that, I just, the fact that she can just tweet out things that happen to the characters, it breaks my brain. Like, that's, it defies the function of the author of a book.

**Hannah McGregor** 57:58

Oh, that's interesting. It breaks your brain because it defies the function of the author of the book. Can you say more about that?

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:03

So the author of the book, if they're going to tell you something that happens in the world of the book, they got to put it in the book. And then if the author thinks of new things that they want to add to the story of the people in the book, they have to write another book. But JK Rowling doesn't do that.

**Hannah McGregor** 58:21

Right. So it's fucked up. Because she's attempting to author through tweets. And it's like, you can't author through tweets, you write tweets, you author books, stop it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:31

Exactly, exactly. The grocery list isn't canon. But because it's JK Rowling, if she just puts Harry Potter bought grapes, it becomes fucking canon.

**Hannah McGregor** 58:44

It's so interesting to think of Pottermore as this sort of liminal space that she created to be like, this is like it's a publishing platform. And it's tied to the entire enterprise in a more official way than Twitter, right? Because like, Twitter is not a platform she owns. It's just a place where she's saying things. But Pottermore is a platform she owns and

part of its function from a business perspective, was to take total control over the audiobooks. The audiobooks, you can only buy them through Pottermore you don't buy them through another venue, right?

**Marcelle Kosman** 59:23

So it's like it's not Bloomsbury audio, it's Pottermore presents.

**Hannah McGregor** 59:27

I think Bloomsbury gets a cut but importantly, Audible doesn't. Right? Because the distributor for most audiobooks, like audiobooks, you access through a distributor in a way that is not quite the same with how you access print books, but like because it's a born digital medium, you need a digital distributor and that was her being like no, I am the digital distributor. The books belong to me. So like it is it was a literal act of taking control over the circulation of the texts back, but also taking discursive control over the circulation of the texts meaning by producing all of these, like, sure you've done your a million versions of a sorting quiz, here's the *canonical* sorting quiz.

And part of that was like, I'm going to produce more knowledge about this world in a way that maintains my authority, but the way in which she produced it, and continues to produce, it is so reminiscent of the way fanfiction and sort of fandom sites in general operate, that it has blurred this weird line of like, okay, you're the author, but you're also participating in this kind of other discursive world that has its own different set of rules and norms about authorship and the relationship between authorship and canonicity. And you're kind of breaking those rules. Because nobody in the fandom world gets to come along and be like, Well, just one version, there's one correct answer, and it's that wizards pooped in the halls.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:07

*[laughs]* And then just magicked it away.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:01:11

What? It's the second worst thing she's ever said.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:14

Yeah, God. *[sighs deeply]*

**Hannah McGregor** 1:01:18

It's interesting to look at her ongoing cultural power. I think it's also interesting and important to note that the vocal critics of Rowling and her politics are a vocal minority. The vast majority, I think of Harry Potter fans, of Harry Potter readers, either know

nothing about Rowling's transphobia, or like, kind of have heard about it and do not care. But the other thing that I think is really important to remember when we are talking about the discursive power of the author function is that, as per Foucault, when we talk about power, power is not an ephemeral or theoretical thing.

Power is material and has a material impact on actual human bodies. So, as an example, and I keep thinking about this as a key example, JK Rowling has a foundation that donates money to things, and that can also withhold money from things. And so she relatively recently withdrew all of her Foundation's funding from the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Center, because they brought on a trans CEO, and we're explicitly, are explicitly a trans inclusive rape crisis center. And that has then left that particular organization, which is really important and doing really necessary work in like, distinct position of financial precarity.

Like, we're not talking like, yes, we talk theoretically about power, but like, it's so important to bring power back to its material impacts. And remember that when we are talking about power, we are talking about the actual things that it can do in the world to actual people's bodies. So it's not like, Yeah, what a culturally powerful figure. Isn't that interesting? I mean, yes, it is. And also, what are the implications of having this level of cultural power? How can the author function become something that is so powerful, it can hurt real people?

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:03:41

Yeah. And in case one is inclined to despair. I think it is also important to remember that the winds of change, they do blow and the fact that the major cultural entities that benefit financially from Rowling's success, have been actively distancing themselves from her. I think that indicates to us that they are aware that it's in their financial interest to distance themselves from her, which means that the impact of the vocal minority of people bringing attention to the hateful rhetoric that JK Rowling circulates, spreads, are gaining traction, and that I don't want to sound like a Pollyanna, but-

**Hannah McGregor** 1:04:45

No, but it's a good reminder that screaming really loudly about things does actually have an impact sometimes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:04:53

I'm screaming really loudly about things that are real and that matter, right, like to go back to author Nathaniel Hawthorne.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:05:02

Classic Marcelle, never stops bringing up Nathaniel.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:05:05

I know, I love to talk about Nathaniel Hawthorne. Like Tomkins, analysis of his success makes it very clear that the machinery responds to social change. Right? And so, capitalism is a fucked up system, but it is a system that listens to money. And the new generations of people who are having money are saying, actually, trans women are women. Listen, if Disney is going to make a Mickey ear pin with the trans flag on it, that means that Disney is saying trans people have money and I want it. Therefore, I'm gonna start saying trans people are welcome here.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:05:59

And look forward to our future episode on Disney and homo-nationalism.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:06:03

Oh my God. It is complicated and it is fucked up. And like I said, I don't want to come across as Pollyanna. But what I do want to stress is that JK Rowling's author function power that she uses to hurt people does not need to be permanent. That's what I want to say. That's my point. Goddamit.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:06:24

It's a good point.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***

Thank you witches, for joining us for another episode of Witch, Please, if you have questions, comments, concerns or praise. Come hang out with us @ohwitchplease on Instagram or Twitter. And of course, the best place to hang out with us is [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](https://patreon.com/ohwitchplease), because that's where we put all of our exclusive perks and so much bonus content and bloopers, which I guarantee this episode will have some real juicy ones.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:07:07

Oh my god so much.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:07:09

Plus, now's a perfect time to join our Patreon because we are about to start releasing pilots for the new version of this podcast that you will get to give us feedback on, if you are a Patreon supporter. So you should do that and be there.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:07:31

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**Hannah McGregor** 1:08:22

I just found out recently that we know Eric in real life. I mean, I don't but you know, we as a team. As a team. He's a real life friend.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:08:30

Incredible. In real life.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:08:32

He's IRL. At the end of every episode, we shout out everyone who left us a five star review on Apple podcasts. So you have to review us if you want to hear Marcelle wish she had a river that she could skate away on.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:08:47

We'll never get it. I can't sing Joni Mitchell. Thanks this week to Beverly Sadai, arania yesyoumay, kcstainsby, BonesBooks99, s@r@hm@deline, lindsay.e.h., ittibittibritti, Kris in Pacifica, ameliabethb, shimmer2003, and this one's for you Marcel.

Aw, even my legal spelling. That's so cute. So cute. Thank you. We'll be back next episode to add to the appendices. But until then...

**Hannah McGregor** 1:09:42

Later, witches!