

Season 1, Episode 11: The Night Circus X Reading Ecosystems

SPEAKERS

Hannah McGregor, Marcelle Kosman, Hannah Rehak

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Marcelle Kosman 00:31

Hello and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

Hannah McGregor 00:38

And I'm Hannah McGregor, and today we are talking about one of Marcelle's all time favorite books, Erin Morgenstern's 2011 debut novel, *The Night Circus*.

Marcelle Kosman 00:50

I just think it's really important to stress here that because it's one of my favorite books, I need everybody listening to know that they need to be really nice about it because as a Pisces, I base my own value exclusively on the value of the things that I care about. So be nice.

Hannah McGregor 01:08

Yeah. Which is, like a cool, healthy way to enjoy things.

Marcelle Kosman 01:12

Hannah, do you like the book? Am I good?

Hannah McGregor 01:17

[Hannah laughs] Marcelle, I have mixed feelings about this book.

Marcelle Kosman 01:21

Damnit, do you have mixed feelings about me too?

Hannah McGregor 01:29

[Hannah laughs] Here's what I have realized. So I had in fact read this book years ago. And I didn't particularly like it which means that you and I never talked about it, because that's how the law works.

Marcelle Kosman 01:42

Because I am a cool and healthy person. **[Both laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 01:47

And so I was very delighted to begin this reread via audiobook and to find in the first few hours that I was having a wonderful time. And to text you enthusiastically about it, which you've responded to with discouragement.

Marcelle Kosman 02:04

I silenced you. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 02:07

I was like Marcelle, I'm really digging this book this time around and you were like, shut up!

Marcelle Kosman 02:12

That is the text I sent you, shut up Hannah, I don't want to hear about it.

Hannah McGregor 02:17

What I will say is that at a certain point, and I think this is what happened in my first read through. At a certain point, I was like we got it. It's a cool circus. **[Both laugh]** Maybe it's too much about event organizing for my taste. **[Both laugh]** But this time around. What I really noticed, which I did think that I missed in the first round, was how totally this book is about just the vibes. This book is 97% vibes. 3% plot.

Marcelle Kosman 02:56

Yeah, I guess I don't disagree with you. I get that I am definitely into a vibe heavy book provided that I am into the vibe. And I am into the vibe of *The Night Circus*.

Hannah McGregor 03:12

I mean, you and I both love an aesthetic assignment. I will say that, as noted by the way we have both dressed today.

Marcelle Kosman 03:21

I'm wearing an a-line skirt. **[Both laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 03:24

That's so unnecessary.

Marcelle Kosman 03:25

I know. I could literally be wearing my purple sweatpants right now. And nobody would know you

Hannah McGregor 03:32

You could be Winnie the Pooh-ing it right now and none of us would know. **[Marcelle laughs]**

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

It's time for "Why This, Why Now," the segment where-in we consider the material conditions that allowed for our object of study to become Zeitgeist-y.

Marcelle Kosman 03:49

So for the uninitiated, I have a few details here about the publication of *The Night Circus*. I promise this section will all be bullet points. But just to give some quick facts. Okay? The first drafts of the novel were indeed written during NaNoWriMo, the National Novel Writing Month, which is quote, "an annual International Creative Writing event in which participants attempt to write a 50,000 word manuscript during the month of November," end quote that comes from Wikipedia. But it also comes from the website of NaNoWriMo. So the novel that we know and some of us feel ambivalent about was published in 2011. Also published in September 2011 is the officially licensed interactive internet puzzle game based on *The Night Circus*. FailBetter Games was in fact approached by Random House to make the game and, fun fact, you can still play it, just not through FailBetter Games. And finally, the extremely well produced audiobook book read by Jim Dale of *Harry Potter* audiobook fame was also published in September of 2011. So all these things happening the same month, a big splashy entrance into the market, if you will.

Hannah McGregor 05:16

Yeah, I mean, that tells us some really important things about what Random House thought about the possible success of this book. Because you do not pay to have Jim Dale read your book, like prior to its publication.

Marcelle Kosman 05:29

And it's a well produced audio book, like he did more than one take. Unlike— and this is my favorite complaint— Unlike his reading of the *Harry Potter* books, where he had literally never read them before and did no takes. He just opened the book, started reading, occasionally pauses.

Hannah McGregor 05:48

Okay, is that a theory?

Marcelle Kosman 05:49

Sure. Yeah, it's a theory based on the material and how much the audiobook sucks. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 05:55

Okay. I really doubt he did it in one take. I really doubt he did it in one take, but that this is all a sign that they really thought before this book even went out that it was going to be a big deal.

Marcelle Kosman 06:09

Definitely.

Hannah McGregor 06:10

And it was.

Marcelle Kosman 06:11

It was. It was, indeed. Okay, so I went back through my book reading app. And according to my borrowing record at the Edmonton Public Library, I first read *The Night Circus* in September of 2019. So Hannah, tell me does anything in particular jump out at you about September 2019 in relation to *The Night Circus*?

Hannah McGregor 06:35

Yeah. It's eight years after the book came out. **[Marcelle laughs]** And it's like really recent, actually, four years ago. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 06:46

Yeah, so I literally completely missed the zeitgeisty-ness of this my favorite book.

Hannah McGregor 06:53

I'm sure we're gonna get more into this. But it's always really complicated to talk about Zeitgeisty-ness around a book, because books circulate so differently from other media and function so differently from other media. And with the exception of like, a small handful of titles, basically, never, like arrive at the level of collective Zeitgeisty-ness that say, like a really popular blockbuster movie will. Like, we don't really have blockbuster books in quite the same way. But it certainly is a book that I associate with, like a particular kind of bookishness. Like, I

think *The Night Circus* is often the favorite book of people who also own reading socks. Does that make sense?

Marcelle Kosman 07:45

Yeah, it does. It does. When did you read *The Night Circus* the first time?

Hannah McGregor 07:49

You know what, I have no idea. I don't. I don't have a clear document like you do.

Marcelle Kosman 07:54

Cause' I'm cool and healthy.

Hannah McGregor 07:56

Well, you know, I also don't think that I got it from the library. So I don't have a way of checking. Maybe I borrowed it, I definitely read it. And I don't currently own it. So make of that what you will.

Marcelle Kosman 08:11

I will.

Hannah McGregor 08:12

But I read it, like years and years ago, probably quite close to when it originally came out. And I remember, I definitely read it because a lot of people were talking about it, and had really built it up as like, if you like fantasy, you are going to love this book. And I read it. And I remember being underwhelmed, which is, alas, one of the many possible functions of a book being Zeitgeisty is that it gets recommended to you so hard and so often, and so enthusiastically that by the time you actually read it, you're like, well, this isn't changing my life as promised. And so it was interesting to revisit it via audiobook, because I read it in material, like a print format the first time around. The audiobook is 15 hours. I'm 8 hours in. **[Marcelle laughs]** And I need you to know that that eight hours happened in the last two days. So, I really binged the first half of this book. And then I read the SparksNotes to find out what happens at the end.

Marcelle Kosman 09:19

Okay, so one of the reasons why I wanted us to talk about how and when we read the book, is because I think these are essential to the argument that I'm going to be building, that I'm going to be weaving together overall. So I first heard about the book on Instagram. I tried to figure out what the specific post was, but I could not, because it was years ago, it's 2019 years ago and Instagram's search function is shit. It's absolute garbage. So I don't know who recommended it.

And so I don't know who to thank for changing me as a woman but somebody did. Somebody actually did.

Hannah McGregor 10:01

As it turns out, I don't like hearing you refer to yourself as a woman. So never do that again.

Marcelle Kosman 10:05

As a *woman*. [Hannah makes a disgusted noise and Marcelle laughs] Somebody, somebody said that they enjoyed it. So I borrowed the audiobook from the library, and thus became changed.

Hannah McGregor 10:17

Okay, so you saw the book first via Instagram. And then you, I assume, used an app to log on to your public library site to get the book, the audiobook?

Marcelle Kosman 10:30

That's right. So I listened to the audiobook using the app Libby, which I think you also use. Big fan of Libby. And I used my phone to access it. So this is going to bring me to the first of my two major Why's.

Hannah McGregor 10:48

Oh, "Why This, Why Now" then.

Marcelle Kosman 10:49

We're going to talk about the digital turn.

Hannah McGregor 10:52

Mmm. Marcelle, you know I love a turn.

Marcelle Kosman 10:54

I believe in my heart that you do, because scholars-

Hannah McGregor 10:57

I do, I love a turn!

Marcelle Kosman 10:58

Scholars love to talk about a turn. So Hannah, I had to literally look up what a turn is according to the OED. So I would love it if you could just explain to listeners what we mean when we say “a turn.”

Hannah McGregor 11:14

I mean, when I think about a turn, in terms of how we talk about it in scholarship or in theory, in particular, I think of it as like the emergence of a new focused conversation generally around a different method. So you'll have the ethical turn, where people start talking about reading an ethics. There was a political turn in the 90s, when people really shifted from a purely aesthetic discussion of literature to being like, ah, but what about politics? And there's like, historical turns, and there's affect turns. And I think it's kind of about new trends in scholarship. But we don't refer to trends in academia, because we're-

Marcelle Kosman 12:03

We're broken, we're fundamentally broken people. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 12:06

Yeah, but I see here you've actually given me an OED definition.

Marcelle Kosman 12:11

I did. I pulled out the OED definition, because I was like, you know, what, what if Hannah has literally never heard of a turn?

Hannah McGregor 12:17

How far down in the word “turn” did you have to scroll before you found specifically this definition of turn?

Marcelle Kosman 12:24

I'm very good at googling. And I Googled, “define turn in scholarship.”

Hannah McGregor 12:30

Oh, God, but you know what? Having a PhD makes you good at Googling. It's like the best thing about it. **[Marcelle laughs]** Okay, so here's what the OED says about turn. They define it as, quote, “A change in emphasis in the discourse of the humanities and social sciences, reflecting a recognition beyond the academic bounds of history itself, of the importance of historical context and historical processes.” End quote. Oh, so it's specifically about historicizing? I believe so, yeah. Coach, put the stinger in here, put it here. Put it here. We need it.

[Soundbite of Coach singing “Historicize, Historicize, it’s always time to historicize.”]

Marcelle Kosman 13:07

Because you can't talk about a turn until you're able to look back on it.

Hannah McGregor 13:12

Oh, my God, of course, and you're always turning away from something.

Marcelle Kosman 13:16

Mhm. And you don't always realize that you've turned away from it until you turn and it's not there anymore. **[Marcelle makes a surprised noise]**

Hannah McGregor 13:24

So the digital turn is like specifically when the humanities and social sciences were like, Uhoh! We have to talk about the internet whether we want to or not, because everything's on the internet now.

Marcelle Kosman 13:35

Yeah, so we don't use digital technology? Technology just is digital. Like our lives are entirely mediated by the internet. And that's why we have not only new media, but new new media, which is-

Hannah McGregor 13:52

Oh, new new media. **[Marcelle laughs]** Ooooo. You know what? We had new new media in 2010. So what do we have now? New new new new new media!

Marcelle Kosman 13:59

New new! Neo new!

Hannah McGregor 14:00

Ooooo. Neo new.

Marcelle Kosman 14:02

Neo new. You're welcome scholars.

Hannah McGregor 14:04

I was inside the digital turn, Marcelle.

Marcelle Kosman 14:07

Gross.

Hannah McGregor 14:08

I started my Masters in 2008. And immediately started doing digital humanities work. Yeah, so I was like, nestled inside the sweaty elbow of that turn. Is that a good metaphor?

Marcelle Kosman 14:22

Why are you so gross? **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 14:24

Abject.

Marcelle Kosman 14:25

Okay, so as you experienced wetly, our digital turn absolutely took place throughout the aughts. But my very, very preliminary research suggests that it was around the year 2011. We're talking like 2010, 2011, 2012, when social critics and scholars and indeed the numerous hand ringers of the world were starting to talk about how technology is our new normal and how it is ruining reading. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 15:00

Yeah, if I recall correctly, it was a lot of anxious white men authors in particular, who were like, if you read books on a screen, you are destroying humanity.

Marcelle Kosman 15:14

That's true.

Hannah McGregor 15:15

Maybe I'm spoiling something you're gonna talk about-

Marcelle Kosman 15:17

You are. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 15:00

-but they are the same demographic of guys who have written very similar moral panic essays about YA, in particular. Coincidence? Literally not.

Marcelle Kosman 15:28

Literally not. There's one exception to this.

Hannah McGregor 15:32

Okay. Is it one man of color?

Marcelle Kosman 15:34

It's one man of color. Yes. But let's talk about some of these new media that in the 20 aught tweens had become commonplace. So Hannah, you know a lot about podcasting in the 20 aught tweens.

Hannah McGregor 15:50

I mean, when people talk about the history of podcasting, it dates back much earlier than this. But the moment when it became truly mainstream as a medium was 2014, which is when *This American Life* launched their first ever spin off podcast, which was their first ever podcast they've made that wasn't radio first, but was made just to be a podcast. And that was, of course...

Marcelle Kosman 16:14

S-town. I'm just joking. It was Serial. I know. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 16:19

I still, I really love the fact that Ira Glass who was the, you know, Executive Producer. Executive Producer? I don't know, whatever. He's the boss, like went on *The Tonight Show* to promote Serial. And it included him showing people how to use the podcasting app on their iPhones, because it was still enough of a sort of niche digital medium. I mean, it existed for, it had already existed for like a decade. But the people who used it tended to still be sort of early adopter types. And so he came on, it was like, alright, so your phone has this app, and showed people how to subscribe to a podcast. So this is like, right in the thick of that moment.

Marcelle Kosman 17:05

Yeah. So podcasts are not the everyday, but they are happening. They're a normal thing. So even if people aren't listening to podcasts, they know what they are. It's not a new word. We also have audiobooks. So speaking of podcasts, one of the very first ads that I ever remember

hearing on a podcast, these early podcasts that I was listening to, predominantly by white men, was Audible. So the audiobook app being advertised to podcast listeners.

Hannah McGregor 17:42

Which makes perfect sense to me because it was an app that required familiarity with a digital interface and willingness to like, try out a new subscription model for a technology and again, it's going to be like a certain demographic who are willing to be like, cool, I will download this app. I will subscribe for this service, I will learn this new way of interacting with audiobooks as a medium.

Marcelle Kosman 18:08

Audible's big pull was that you could get a free audiobook. You could download for free the audiobook of your choice. And I remember listening to those ads and being like-

Hannah McGregor 18:17

Yeah, it's not free. It's for your monthly subscription costs, but they do say pay a monthly subscription and you'll get a free audiobook, which is a very funny way to spin paying a certain amount of money every month.

Marcelle Kosman 18:29

I definitely remember listening to the ad and being like, free book?

Hannah McGregor 18:32

Free book! Give it to me. Yeah, the other thing that was just starting to emerge, right around that time, of course, was dedicated ereaders.

Marcelle Kosman 18:41

That's right. So like the Kobos and the Kindles.

Hannah McGregor 18:45

The Kobos, and Kindles, and the Kobos and the Kindles.

Marcelle Kosman 18:47

That's right. And then with the popularity of Kobos and Kindles we also get people using their smartphones and then eventually the introduction of tablets.

Hannah McGregor 18:58

Oh, yeah, we're getting new devices every second in this period.

Marcelle Kosman 19:01

Yeah, all these new devices just slapping the print book in the face.

Hannah McGregor 19:09

[Hannah laughs] Oh, my God, people were so freaked out. They were so freaked out. They were like, This is it. This is the end of books. The book is dead.

Marcelle Kosman 19:17

Yeah. Yeah. So I did a little bit of Googling, trying to find some examples of this widespread moral panic. And so these are the white men plus one exception, who you were referring to earlier. So. So in 2009, Sherman Alexie called Kindles elitist. He got into quite a bit of trouble for saying that he wanted to slap a woman, or he wanted to hit a woman who was holding one. People got very upset about misogyny. Turns out it's like not that she was a woman. That's not why he wanted to hit her. He wanted to hit her because she was reading a Kindle. Anyway. So he backpedaled hard.

Hannah McGregor 19:53

Yeah, because when a woman reads a Kindle, you can't tell that she's reading books that you want to judge her for. You can't let her just read whatever she wants in public, she could be reading something that is not suitably literary. And how can you make her feel small about it?

[Marcelle laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 20:10

In 2010, this is the one that I found that sent me. So in 2010, *The Huffington Post*, a real website, a real website that writes about real things, ran a column by a poet named Alan Kaufman called "Google Books and Kindles: A Concentration Camp of Ideas." And in this column, Kaufman, literally describes ebooks as a Nazi quote, "dream come true." End quote. In 2011, Jonathan Franzen described ebooks as quote, "just not permanent enough." End quote.

[Marcelle laughs] In 2014, I know I'm skipping a few years, but here we are in 2014, *The Guardian*, yet another real website that publishes real stories, ran an opinion piece by Philip Hensher, who claimed that it should be a golden age for reading, but isn't because electronic communication means we aren't reading books.

Hannah McGregor 21:22

Oh, no, we're reading... We're reading emails instead.

Marcelle Kosman 21:27

Oh no, we're reading screens!

Hannah McGregor 21:30

Gross. Gross. Disgusting.

Marcelle Kosman 21:36

[Marcelle laughs] Foolish boys.

Hannah McGregor 21:38

Foolish boys. Okay, so we've got the digital turn, and we've got the ensuing moral panic that books will simply die. **[Marcelle laughs]** But Marcelle, you said there were two why's.

Marcelle Kosman 21:50

I did. I did. Two why's. Let's get to the second. And Hannah, you're not going to believe this. This is going to come as a wild shock.

Hannah McGregor 22:00

What?

Marcelle Kosman 22:01

Not what, but why! The second "why" is Harry fucking Potter.

Hannah McGregor 22:06

You promised me we would never have to talk about it again.

Marcelle Kosman 22:10

I know. I know. I know. And when I was doing research for this episode, I was like, Oh, no. I lied!

[Both laugh]

Hannah McGregor 22:18

Like running into your ex on the street.

Marcelle Kosman 22:20

Yeah, it is. It's like running into my ex on the street. But like not just my high school ex but like, but like my life partner ex.

Hannah McGregor 22:27

Yeah, yeah. You were together for a decade.

Marcelle Kosman 22:32

Ugh, awkward. Okay, so 2011. This was a naive time. Most of us perhaps, probably not all, but most of us were deeply ignorant of the depth of JK Rowling's transphobia. We were largely still enamored with the *Harry Potter* series, we were still leaving socks on the beach where Dobby died. And with the release of the Warner Brothers movie adaptation, *Deathly Hallows Part Two*, we genuinely thought that we were saying goodbye to the *Harry Potter* era. We thought that it would go quietly into the night and we could mourn privately. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]** We were fools.

Hannah McGregor 23:17

Or we were, again, I'm gonna keep thinking about this from the perspective of publishing where it's like, every time a new *Harry Potter* book comes out. It's like, oh, we get a huge infusion of cash into the publishing industry. And then like, you know, with the movies as well. It's like cool movies come out. The books are gonna sell really, really well, like extra well. And with the end of that cycle, it becomes like, uh oh, how do we get people to buy millions of books? **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 23:46

Turns out, there'll be multiple opportunities to revisit the series. We just didn't know about them yet. So the timing of the end of *Harry Potter* is really what makes it such a kind of formidable predecessor of *The Night Circus*. And so you and I have talked at length about *Harry Potter* and the internet. Could you do me a solid and just give our listeners just like a quick reminder of the ways in which *Harry Potter* grew up with the internet?

Hannah McGregor 24:19

Yeah, for sure. So this is something we've theorized a number of times, but sort of one potential significant factor in how huge the *Harry Potter* series was, is the fact that it emerged right around the same time as sort of web 2.0's birth of online fandoms and *Harry Potter* became one of the major texts that people produced fanfiction about and then very early on, started making like fan videos, right, we've got the fan made musical, which was really significant that then, you know, was a unique in person event but got filmed and shared on YouTube and so became another digital cite for the emergence of this fandom.

And because so much of this fandom got tied up in particularly online behaviors, then as the books continued to come out, the publisher very intelligently continued to invest in online infrastructure. So things like Pottermore with its like sorting quizzes, and the sense that you could, like, enter *Harry Potter* via the site, you know, game adaptations, and then add into that

like, the audio books, the movies, like it became like a major transmedia phenomenon in an era when like the idea of a single property that you have to be engaging with like seven or eight different mediums to like, truly be experiencing all of it. Like, it was a pretty new idea, like the *Harry Potter* series, was quite groundbreaking in the sense of like, really leaning into the use of digital media to build up and embrace fandoms and the readerships that are connected to fandoms.

Marcelle Kosman 26:03

Bless you. And now because you've given us that recap, we don't have to talk... **[Marcelle laughs]** We never need to talk about it again. So *The Night Circus* emerges fully and polished in and of the digital era with all the digital eras benefits, and it's like right there to satisfy us hungry adults who have been letting go of *Harry Potter* as gradually as possible, a magical world in which we might enter as spectators, perhaps even be invited in with special privileges like a Bailey or a herr Fredrick Thiessen? Or perhaps, we might actually join, whether as a long suffering competitor like Celia or Marco, or simply a performer, like Isobel, Tsukiko, or the Murray Twins, or perhaps even a conspirator, like Chandresh Christophe Lefevre, the Burgess sisters, Mr Barris, Tante Padva)—

Hannah McGregor 27:07

Marcelle. Marcelle, you are waltzing into a thesis statement two segments too early. You haven't even given me some theory to snack on.

Marcelle Kosman 27:17

I know, I know. Where's the caramel popcorn theory? Okay, you're right. Let's do it.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

My apologies, folks, I started fantasizing my way into my favorite book, when my essential task is to introduce the theory that I found to help explain my relationship to my favorite book!

Hannah McGregor 27:39

Thank you. Stop enjoying things and think about them. **[Marcelle laughs]** You know, Marcelle, it's not for nothing that we call this section "The Theory We Need."

Marcelle Kosman 27:46

I know we do. **[Marcelle laughs]** We need it. The whole point. Okay, so I found a book with a great title. And Hannah, I think you would really like it. I think you would like it so much. But I bet you've even taught it in the past.

Hannah McGregor 27:59

Yeah, I've for sure taught this book. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 28:01

So, the book is called *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* by Andrew Piper. I love the title. So charming. It's a great book, really good book. And I chose it not only because of the fun title that references a Gertrude Stein poem, but also because it was published in 2012. And I really wanted something that could help me work through this anxiety and moral panic that characterized that early digital age. And I think that Piper does a great job of providing us with this, like cultural and material history of reading, while also very, very beautifully reflecting on his own personal reading practices instead of being like, this kind of reading is bad. **[Marcelle laughs]**

I'm getting ahead of myself, but he's not prescriptive. He's not critical of different reading practices. He introduces his book by explaining that he is, quote, "interested in understanding how we relate to reading in a deeply embodied way," end quote, And so throughout this exploration, his organizing metaphor for reading is to think of reading as an ecosystem in which live and thrive multiple different ways of engaging with text. So, Hannah, would you kindly give us an amuse bouche by reading this quotation about books for me?

Hannah McGregor 29:41

With pleasure. Quote, "The spines, gatherings, threads, boards and folds that once gave a book its shapeliness that fit it to our hands are being supplanted by the increasingly fine strata of new reading devices integrated into vast woven systems of connection. If books are essentially vertebral, contributing to our sense of human uniqueness that depends upon bodily uprightness, digital texts are more like invertebrates subject to the laws of horizontal gene transfer, and non local regeneration." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 30:24

I love it. I love it.

Hannah McGregor 30:26

He is thinking a lot in this book about how the print book, the Codex, as we tend to refer to it, when we are trying to distinguish what we mean by like this particular material form of the print book, that the Codex was designed gradually over hundreds of years, to be perfectly fit to the human body. And it's a brilliant piece of technology that we very slowly and deliberately created to be this sort of organic extension of the human body. And so you know, this becomes a

metaphor throughout this, like this idea of the technology that feels organic, and like, quote, unquote, natural, despite the fact that it's not, we developed it over a really long time. And then how those like organic metaphors and ideas get disrupted and disturbed by these new ways of engaging with text.

Marcelle Kosman 31:27

Yeah, definitely. Where I see the big difference for me in my different reading practices is largely related to the way that I read for work. So if I'm reading something to teach it, I typically have it up on a screen in the way that you're describing, like, you know, I've got like the PDF, etcetera, I'm highlighting. But if I'm reading something that I plan to write about, I tend to either have the physical book, or if I can't access a physical copy that I can then markup and highlight, I will print it. And then one of the things that I really notice about myself when I'm reading something that I plan to write about, is that the embodied way that I read is, like physically painful, like I contort my body into these positions that hurt me.

And I don't know why I do that. I don't know why. But like my head is bent at an awkward angle, I have my shoulder up. Sometimes I find when I'm writing and highlighting in a book, I have turned myself almost 90 degrees away from the writing surface that I'm using. When there's no need for it. There's no need for it. **[Hannah laughs]** But for some reason, I force my body to suffer in order to read deeply. And I'm not saying that this is good. I want to emphasize that this is not good. **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 33:01

You believe like the scribes of old you must suffer for your knowledge.

Marcelle Kosman 33:05

I might as well read by candlelight, because I am not doing my eyes any favors. **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 33:12

Yeah, like the ancient scribes of yore- Hey, speaking of the ancient scribes of yore, doesn't Andrew Piper have like a whole bunch in these books about how the different reading postures we have come out of these different historical contexts?

Marcelle Kosman 33:30

Indeed, he does. So his first chapter is about hands. And it's about the way, the physical, the physiological way that we hold books in our hands, arguing that quote, "The books' graspability in a material as well as spiritual sense is what endowed it with such immense power in the foundation of Western humanistic learning." End quote. So like, for Piper, hands and reading,

not only shaped quite literally the material and sociological development of this object that we call a book, The Codex, but the book, and this is where I got very excited, the book shapes the way that we see and think about and perceive the world. So, Hannah, as a publishing scholar, could you remind us a little bit about the way that the book has been fetishized over centuries as somehow more than a mere material object?

Hannah McGregor 34:37

Yeah, yeah. I mean, the book has been sort of tied into all kinds of institutions of learning and religion and power in ways that have made it metaphorically associated with a lot of things for a really long time. You know, and, for example, you know, books in medieval Europe were produced almost entirely within monasteries, and very few people have access to them. So there were these rare and often sacred objects. And then as books begin to become mass produced, there's a lot of related cultural anxiety around the idea that this thing that had been sacred and elite and that had like gradually developed all of this metaphorical weight around, like how we understood the world, how we like literally read the world around us, that at the same time that the book starts to become an industrial mass produced object, the book industry also starts investing a lot in the idea that books continue to have a sacredness or a specialness to them as objects.

So we see in the 19th century, a lot of really deliberate anthropomorphizing of books, sort of an investment of humaneness or personness in books, such that the idea of building a library becomes not what it literally is, which is a sign of wealth and prestige, but also a sort of extension of who you are as a person. And that's, as I have argued elsewhere, the sort of root of a lot of contemporary bookish culture, where having a bunch of books on your shelves, becomes like a very weighted metaphor for the kind of person you are.

Marcelle Kosman 36:35

So because we've had these conversations, you and I before, this part wasn't particularly new for me, but what Piper really helped me understand is that through this process of making the book supersede its material value, the embodied practices of reading books, in turn, come to shape, you know, how we perceive the world. And so Piper points out that, while the moral panic around the digital claims that looking is replacing reading, he reminds us that quote, "reading in the 18th century was gradually colonizing the world of looking," end quote, which is like a wild and unexpected reversal of this panic that we're having.

Hannah McGregor 37:24

Yeah, I mean, the very premise that reading is better than looking has a history.

Marcelle Kosman 37:30

Yeah! So Piper arguing that we have forgotten the quote, “role that books have played in shaping our perception,” end quote, is really central to what is so psychologically upsetting about the so-called end of the book. So I think one of the sites of anxiety that I hear about a lot is the anxiety about, say preservation, about our understanding of access, preservation and loss-

Hannah McGregor 38:02

Simply not permanent enough.

Marcelle Kosman 38:04

Simply not permanent enough! So Hannah, would you do me a solid please and read the next quotation?

Hannah McGregor 38:09

Quote, “What strikes me as even more important is not this apparent choice between preservation and loss, between claims of one medium being more or less stable than another, rather at issue is understanding the way these two categories, the lost and found, mutually inform one another as conditions of knowledge. The sense of prints durability depended upon an imagined sense of the perishability of handwriting, although this was by no means actually the case. Compare the longevity of many medieval manuscripts with the fragility of Renaissance Chatbooks or much 19th century ephemera, and you will see what I mean. Printed books too, can come and go.” End quote.

And do. Which is part of why the collective imagining of books as synonymous with the durability of knowledge, I think, underpins the panic that people who do not work in the world of books experience when they find out how much every single person who actually works with books, librarians, publishers, booksellers are constantly destroying books. **[Marcelle laughs]** Constantly. So many books are pulped. So many books are de-acquisitioned. So many books are thrown out. We are getting rid of books all the time. And people are like, you what? And it's like, Okay, do you want 10,000 extra copies of *50 Shades of Grey*?

Marcelle Kosman 39:40

Indeed I do not!

Hannah McGregor 38:41

Do you want a 25 year old set of encyclopedias that are super racist? **[Marcelle laughs]** Like we just don't keep them all. We can't. We shouldn't.

Marcelle Kosman 39:50

So again, it's not that the digital or the print should be in competition with one another in terms of which is say lossier, but it is that the way we think about access and preservation is shaped by the history of *the book*. So I have another quotation from Piper that I will read, because I think it follows very nicely from what you were describing, Hannah, about the way that folks who work with books, in fact, work with throwing away books. Quote, "Scholars of the future will no doubt troll libraries to locate lost print editions of undigitized texts, just like their print predecessors scoured libraries for lost manuscripts. But what matters to such future endeavors is not some ultimate hope for completion of the digital record, that we will digitize all the books, or all the pieces of paper in the world, or that all digital texts will be preserved forever. Rather, these archival practices are important because they engage in the oscillatory rhythms of the lost and found of historical thinking, something that was itself very much a product of modern bookish learning." End quote. I love it.

Hannah McGregor 41:12

Ah! I mean, this goes back to what you were saying about turns, like, we can't know everything at the same time. We can't focus on everything at the same time. And our sense of how we lose and find and rediscover and forget pieces of information is shaped by how closely we align information on learning, specifically with the book as an object that can be shelved in a library that we can stumble across.

Marcelle Kosman 41:43

That's right. That's right. So to get back to this idea of reading as an ecosystem, because this is what I really love about Piper, Piper argues that quote, "The way the book emerged as one of the single most important cultural objects after 1800, was a function of its integration with other ways of expressing ourselves, the theater, visual arts, polite conversation, or writing by hand. The book was imagined to be a single all encompassing medium. And yet, this belied the truth of its own heterogeneity and the diverse ways it was woven within a broader field of communication." End quote. So for Piper, the success of the book wasn't that it was a magic technology, unlike, for example, the iPad, but that it invited, quote, "the same information processed in different ways and woven together." End quote. There's a word for this. And Hannah, I bet you know what it is.

Hannah McGregor 42:45

I think I do, because it's written right here on the screen. And I think that word is redundancy.

Marcelle Kosman 42:52

That's right.

Hannah McGregor 42:53

Like a big part of redundancy is the idea of having multiple copies of things, is having a bunch of a thing. A book is not useful if you only have a single copy of the book. You need to have a bunch of copies of the book so that a bunch of different people can read it, and annotate it in different ways and share what they've come up with with other people. And then other people are not going to read that book, they're going to watch the stage adaptation of that book, or maybe they'll do both. And so it's like, the non uniqueness of the knowledge is really key to how we think about the value of the printed book.

Marcelle Kosman 43:27

And the idea of the information in the book appearing only in that book, also not particularly useful. The information needs to be considered and reconsidered across multiple different channels, right? Like, it might be multiple books, it might be speeches, it might be conference papers, like, the idea of redundancy is that ideas are not complete in their uniqueness. Ideas are complete, maybe ideas are never really complete, ideas are in-

Hannah McGregor 44:22

No, because they have to circulate.

Marcelle Kosman 44:24

That's right. Ideas are important and useful in their circulation. And so Piper is arguing for the expansion of these channels in which our ideas circulate.

Hannah McGregor 44:15

When I taught this book, a big part of how I was trying to teach my students was the idea that a new medium doesn't kill an old one.

Marcelle Kosman 44:26

Mm hmm. Would you do me a favor and read this little recap here and tell me if I hit all the, if the recap hits all the important points?

Hannah McGregor 44:33

Okay, so, recap. The digital turn felt threatening to the humanities in particular, because our disciplines and our society more generally have evolved around *the book*. So the book feels fundamental to our society. We can't imagine our way out of it. Like what Ursula K. Le Guin says about capitalism, we live under capitalism. It feels inevitable, so did the divine right of kings.

Marcelle Kosman 45:00

That is right. Yes. Okay. So Piper's intervention, at least the intervention that worked on me was his effort to redirect the conversation about print versus digital by removing the versus. So, Hannah, would you do me the honor of reading this final quotation.

Hannah McGregor 45:22

Marcelle, I just realized where you're taking us and I got really excited.

Marcelle Kosman 45:27

Oh good! **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 45:30

Quote, "It is time to put an end to the digital utopias and print eulogies, bookish venerations and network Gothic and tired binaries like deep versus shallow, distributed versus linear, or slow versus fast. Now is the time to understand the rich history of what we have thought books have done for us and what we think digital texts might do differently. We need to remember the diversity that surrounds reading and the manifold and sometimes strange tools upon which it has historically been based. The question is not one of versus, of two single antagonists squaring off in a ring. Rather, the question is far more ecological in nature. How will these two very different species and their many varieties coexist within the greater ecosystem known as reading?" End quote. Marcelle, you're so smart.

Marcelle Kosman 46:32

You know what? No, honestly, this fell into my lap. Do you want to hear my thesis?

Hannah McGregor 46:41

Yeah, I really do. **[Marcelle laughs]**

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

All right, hold on to your red scarves, folks, because it's time for "In This Essay, I Will." The segment where all that reading and quoting culminates in a hot take that we academics like to call a thesis.

Marcelle Kosman 46:54

All right. **[Marcelle clears her throat]** The year 2011 was simply a different time. Although we were still years away from JK Rowling's public meltdowns about biological sex. We thought we were saying farewell to the *Harry Potter* series because the final movie adaptation *Harry Potter*

and the Deathly Hallows Part Two was in theaters. At the same time, writers and commentators were reflecting on the relative longevity of digital communications of the internet, and of the new tools being developed and marketed to accommodate the undeniable existence of a digital turn.

Indeed, these new technologies allowed us to carry our fan communities around in our pockets. Change, though, can be scary. And for many folks whose identities and careers were bound up in print media, these pocket sized technologies threatened to displace, perhaps even replace altogether, the printed book. Consequently, a flawed and utterly unnecessary opposition was constructed around print versus digital reading. It is no surprise then that Erin Morgenstern's debut novel about two competing schools of thought that seek not to collaborate and explore their respective strengths, but rather to vie for superiority in a fight to the death would be an effective if invisible allegory for the moral panic versus technological advancements in reading technologies. Plus, it's basically *Harry Potter* for adults. In this essay, I will argue—

Hannah McGregor 48:36

Okay, yeah, let's talk about this book, because what got me when I was reading that Andrew Piper quotation was where he talks about how we imagine the new and the old as rivals facing off against each other. And I was like, oh, fuck, yes, of course. So in this book, in *The Night Circus*, we've got these two protagonists, Celia, and Marco. And they've both been raised in these like, incredibly cruel fashions, but also in these environments shaped around two specific media. And one of them is the book and the other one is the stage. And so there's the sense that we've got, you know, the old versus new, the traditional versus the avant garde, the sort of isolated and contemplative and theoretical versus the practical and material and experimental, and those are—

Marcelle Kosman 49:36

The showy versus the subtle.

Hannah McGregor 49:38

The showy versus the subtle, substance versus style. And, literally, they are raised to duel each other, to be evidence of which school is superior. And the stage in which their duel takes place is this circus that is black and white, which I really didn't put together at all. That's like literally a landscape of binaries. It's like black and white, good and bad. These are the only options. You have to fight each other to the death. And then what starts happening very quickly is that they begin to collaborate. And they begin to like, push back against the idea that, you know, only one can win and that only one way is appropriate. And they begin to also expand their community and draw all of these other people in and ultimately undermine the entire premise that one has

to be better than the other, and that the two can't, in fact, be in exciting and ongoing dialogue with each other.

Marcelle Kosman 50:54

That's right. That's right.

Hannah McGregor 50:56

So Marcelle, as we talk about this book, like everything I've just said, is basically the premise, like, that's kind of a setup for the plot. We're going to avoid spoilers. Yeah?

Marcelle Kosman 51:06

Yeah, we can, we can definitely, we can and should avoid spoilers, because I think that it's my favorite book. And so I think if folks want to read it and want it to be their favorite book, too. You know, we love, we love to go in knowing as little as possible. And not only, like what you're describing, not only is it the premise, but it is also possible to read the book without that being the premise that jumps out at you. You know? It is a book that welcomes numerous rereads, as long as you can tolerate the heavy description of the circus content. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 51:42

One thing I found myself really wondering, as I was reading it was, I was thinking about, so it's set in Victorian England. And there's a lot of interest in the technologies of Victorian England that characterize the earliest days of modernity. So stage magic, for sure. Trains play a not insignificant role, clocks and clockworks. And of course, books, which we don't think of as being a technology of the Victorian era, but that had become industrially reproduced mass market objects in this period. And then you also have to add into this, like, the possibility of this kind of spectacle, like what the circus is, is itself made possible by industrialization and the kinds of concentration of populations in urban centers, right, that they set up outside of cities.

So as I was reading, I was thinking, why, why do we imaginatively come back to Victorian England so much? You know, the steampunk of it all, the like, fascination with this period. And part of it is that Victorian England essentially invented Western modernity, like, so much of what we think about as modern Western culture is actually like, a weird conceit of Victorian England, you know, an example I've used in the past is the idea of the white wedding dress, which people love to be like, of course, a long history. And it's like, no, it was actually just a trend because Queen Victoria wore a white wedding dress.

Marcelle Kosman 53:19

You know, speaking of looking at turns retrospectively, which you must do, you must look at a turn retrospectively, I think Victorian England, Victorian London, is really fascinating to us, because of the speed of technological development.

Hannah McGregor 53:39

That we can see from a distance rather than being inside of it.

Marcelle Kosman 53:43

That we can see from a distance. Yeah. And I think there's something that's still, there's something that's still very tactile about those technological developments that say, we kind of can't, and maybe we will in the future, but we can't really see when it comes to things like microchips and nanotechnology and digital technology, like all of that, the magic of that stuff is all quite invisible to the average person. Whereas rich descriptions of like wrought iron fences that bend and fold in this way that reminds you of serpents or something like that, like that has a texture to the technological developments of Victorian England that remains so fantastical even in its mundaneness.

Hannah McGregor 54:32

Yes, and that fantasticalness is generated in retrospect. It is fantastical in part because it embodies the opposite of how we think about digital technology, which itself is also deeply material, but a materiality that is often deliberately obscured. See our previous episode about *Avatar* and server farms, the way in which the materiality of the digital is deliberately hidden from us. So the profound tactility of Victorian technologies feels nostalgic, and refreshing, because it is so differentiated from how we imagine technology now, despite the fact that like, go back and read some Thomas Hardy, and you'll see that people were like, trains are going to be the death of us all. Man was not meant to go so fast. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Like, people didn't greet new technology with open arms. And that technology profoundly disrupted traditional ways of life and traditional, you know, ways of relating to time, for example, the industrialization of time, which transforms the sort of site specific rhythms into one overriding technologically managed understanding of time, which it's not a coincidence that the first thing you see when you enter *The Night Circus* is a huge clock.

Marcelle Kosman 56:06

A bespoke clock.

Hannah McGregor 56:08

A huge bespoke clock. And it's also not a coincidence that *The Night Circus* is characterized by its global movement, because it is also like, they put it on trains and move it around the world. I guess on steamships at some point as well, because it goes to the US somehow.

Marcelle Kosman 56:27

Marco asks Celia how it moves, and she says, by train, she never says steamships.

Hannah McGregor 56:34

She never says steamships. Just big train.

Marcelle Kosman 56:38

Listen, some things you have to say, You don't want to see how the sausage is made. Okay?

Hannah McGregor 56:42

You don't want to explain everything. But it's very specifically, a technologically sophisticated and advanced, globalized circulating phenomenon that is also, I think, really deliberately tied into British imperialism in a number of ways, including the sort of gesture towards the east via Chandresh. Right? Which, like, connects us to the sort of rise of Orientalism as a way of understanding the world and British imperialism in India. And the way that that then brought in these sort of imaginations of the magical as being synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious East. You know? We've got this, like, one named mysterious Asian woman. Yeah, yes. Yeah. So like-

Marcelle Kosman 57:43

Who is a contortionist.

Hannah McGregor 57:45

Who is a contortionist with a mysterious tattoo. So there's so like, it's so densely packed with like, Victorian trappings that are like, you know, about technology. Like, so much of it is about technology, but it becomes, like, it's in some ways easier to make something about technology from a distance.

Marcelle Kosman 58:13

Absolutely. Yeah. I want to jump from what you're describing here to some of the ways that the book is, if you will, better than *Harry Potter*. **[Marcelle laughs]** It does better and sometimes, well, a lot of the things that the *Harry Potter* series does, poorly, or insultingly.

Hannah McGregor 58:35

I think it does better than *Harry Potter*. And I think the bar is low for *Harry Potter*. What I find really interesting is how profoundly in conversation with *Harry Potter*, this book is.

Marcelle Kosman 58:50

Say more, say more about that.

Hannah McGregor 58:53

So a huge part of the fandom that emerged around *Harry Potter* emerged around the fantasy of being able to move from one world into the next. This idea that like we're in this mundane world, it's full of cruelty. We don't feel like we fit in. And then one day somebody says, actually, you get to go to this other place, where things are magical and you will fit in and everybody's weird, and weirdness is celebrated. And that becomes so crucial to sort of the way that the fandom emerges and develops. And that itself is ideologically at odds with the central understanding of the book, which is either you are a muggle or wizard. And if you are a wizard, you are allowed to go into this world, and if you're a muggle you're not.

Marcelle Kosman 59:36

That's right.

Hannah McGregor 59:37

You're not welcome. You're not part of it. You are disdained by most people in the wizarding world, with the exception of like a handful of people who kind of treat you like pets. And so none of us can participate in, really participate in this magical world except to the degree to which we disavow what we actually are. Which has always been, you know, one of the really tricky things about it. And what I think this book gets a lot better is the porousness of that boundary, is the idea that that is a boundary that people can cross. And that becomes self selecting for the degree to which like some people encounter the magical possibilities of the circus, and have a great time, and then go back to their lives.

They're like, this was really cool, I'm good here. And then other people encounter it and are like, this has changed me. And generally, the way in which it has changed them is that they make art about it. You know, like the character, what's the German clockmaker's name?

Hannah McGregor 1:00:43

Herr Fredrick Thiessen.

Marcelle Kosman 1:00:44

Herr Fredrick Thiessen, you know, comes to the notice of, you know, the people who work in the circus, because he writes so beautifully about the circus, because he has moved to write about it, because it has, like, captured him so fully. And so the possibility of entering that world is truly available to anyone, it is not a birthright, it is not a biological truth, which again, Rowling loves a biological truth that fits neatly into a category. It is a matter of participation in a community.

You know, even the way that this sort of fan community, the *Rêveurs* emerges from, you know, people who identify themselves as particularly deeply invested fans, and they communicate to one another who they are, by virtue of wearing a red accessory when they enter the circus. But it's not an exclusive group. It's not one that you have to pay admission to, it's not one you have to, you just self identify by virtue of being real stoked. Which is kind of like a textual celebration of fandom too, which is part of why I think this book really appeals so much to like a particular kind of bookish community who came up in, say, the like *Harry Potter* fandom fan fiction world is like other space for fans in the world of this book, and those fans are not treated with disdain.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:20

If we think about Friedrich Thiessen, as sort of like the, he and Bailey are the two fans who we get the most information about. But presumably, they're not the only two who are given these special access cards, where they can go for free anytime. And then as the book progresses, and gets closer to the end, we start to learn about all these other ways that the fans are in communication with one another. Again, you know, you know, pre web 2.0, they let each other know.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:52

You know what? Even pre web 1.0.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:56

Indeed, indeed, they let each other know, the circus is outside Munich. And then they go and there's this incredible, what I find really beautiful about the *Rêveurs*, there's this incredible community of care that comes around like they all understand that they have this thing in common, and they are willing to do whatever is necessary to support one another to participate. And we see that come to fruition through Bailey, like near the end of the novel, I won't go into details because we're not spoiling it. But it's really quite lovely.

And I really, I just really love the way that even though the premise of the competition between Marco and Celia is supposed to be that real magic must always be a secret, whether you are being showy about it, or being subtle about it, gradually with the circus it it becomes necessary

to start inviting non competitors into the development and the creation of it. And so as a person who once upon a time longed for my Hogwarts letter, it is I think really, really beautiful and satisfying to read about this magical world where you could participate in it without fucking it all up. You know? You can be trusted.

Hannah McGregor 1:04:22

It's not actually black and white, you're not a muggle or a wizard.

Marcelle Kosman 1:04:26

It's not black and white. There are splashes of red!

Hannah McGregor 1:04:30

Ah! The end!

[*Material Girls* Theme plays briefly]

Marcelle Kosman 1:04:40

Material Girls is a Witch, Please Productions distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes and our other podcasts on Acast or at ohwitchplease.ca. Our website may not be a circus exactly, but it has all kinds of fun stuff, and we think that you'll love it. And it's always open. You can access our transcripts and reading lists. You can look at cute pics of our team. And you can check out our merch because you know what? It's never the wrong season to buy a hoodie.

Hannah McGregor 1:05:12

If you have questions, comments, concerns, or simply want to tell us that we're doing well, it's not a competition but we thrive on praise, come hang out with us @ohwitchplease on Instagram, Threads, and X and on Tik Tok @ohwitchpleasepod where you get to see a lot of Gaby's perfect human face. But if you want to be the Rêveur equivalent of a gender neutral Material Girl, you should head over to patreon.com/ohwitchplease and sign up for a genuine circus of bonus content.

Marcelle Kosman 1:05:47

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Hannah McGregor 1:06:23

Oh so free. You can give us money for it though if you want. Special thanks to everyone on the Witch, Please Productions team who keep this circus and coordinating colors, including our digital content coordinator, Gaby Iori **[Sound effect of a ball bouncing]** our social media manager and marketing designer, Zoe Mix. **[Sound effect of a record rewinding]** Our sound engineer, Eric Magnus **[Sound effect of chimes]** and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka Coach. **[Sound effect of a sports whistle blowing]**

Marcelle Kosman 1:06:53

At the end of every episode, we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon or boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to:

Erika W.

Danielle C.

Dusty

Mars M. P.

Mo

Charlotte D.

Sonnie I

Alexis

ReynalsQueen

Hannah McGregor 1:07:18

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then—

Marcelle Kosman 1:07:25

Later Rêveurs and spectateurs!

Hannah McGregor 1:07:28

We're really stretching this rhyme! **[Hannah laughs]**

[Material Girls Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]