Covid Convos\_ Reading\_Rereading

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**SPEAKERS**

Amy Cooper Cary, Angela Sorby, Benjamin Linzy, Gerry Canavan, Brittany Pladek

**Benjamin Linzy** 00:00

You're listening to Marquette University's Covid Convos podcast. In each episode, representatives from Marquette's STEM and humanities communities will bring you insights into the pandemic that you may be missing. Marquette University is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the traditional lands of Pottawatomie, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee peoples along the Southwest shores of Michigamme, North America's largest system of freshwater lakes, where the Milwaukee Menominee and Kinnikinic rivers meet and the people of Wisconsin sovereign Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Oneida and Mohican nations remain present.

**Brittany Pladek** 00:45

Hi there and welcome to this episode of COVID conversations. This one is on rereading and reading during the pandemic. My name is Brittany Pladek. I am an assistant professor of English at Marquette University. Today our three speakers are Gerry Canavan, who is an associate professor in the English department here at Marquette, specializing in 20th and 21st century literature. His first book, *Octavia Butler*, appeared in 2016 in the modern Masters of Science fiction series at the University of Illinois Press. Angela Sorby, our next speaker has published four single author books and two edited collections. She has won multiple awards for her poetry, including a Midwest Book Award and the Brittingham Prize. And then finally, Amy Cooper Cary is the head of special collections and University Archives in the Raynor Memorial Libraries. In addition to her Masters of Library Science, she holds a master's in comparative literature and translation. She’s an eclectic reader with interests in British history and dystopian fiction. I'm so looking forward to getting to talk with you guys today. I'll start off by asking Gerry a question. So Gerry, you have said that you were rereading a lot during the pandemic. Why are you turning to work that you have read before? What are you reading and what does this have to do with the way that you've understood your attention during the pandemic?

**Gerry Canavan** 01:55

Well, like a lot of people I've found it pretty hard to concentrate lately. My main research area is apocalyptic science fiction, which weirdly doesn't help much. It feels somehow, like all my research projects have come to life to make me suffer. I've taken a lot of pleasure lately in reading comics, which is the thing I've turned to since graduate school as a way to unwind. I’m doing a lot of long form board games like Gloom, Haven, Pandemic Legacy. And weirdly, I've been rereading Kurt Vonnegut, who I've read semi religiously since I was a teenager, and in moments of different sorts of stress ever since I started doing this. I was thinking one morning about his novel *TimeQuake*, which is about this weird global catastrophe in which everybody becomes sick at the same time. Specifically, they call it a time loop where they have to relive the last 17 years of their lives over and over again in exactly the same way. And when the loop is over, they're spat back into normal time and don't know how to live. They're saved when the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout goes around and explains to people that they were sick, but now they're well, and there's work to do. And then slowly people get on to the business of rebuilding the world. And when I remember that line, early in the pandemic, it just struck me so hard, I honestly started crying a little bit. It's seemed to encompass so much of what we're going through and what we're going to have to go through in the next however many years of economic disruption, and maybe depression, as we try to rebuild our world. A friend of mine was rereading Vonnegut at the same time, mostly for the same reasons. And we wound up starting a podcast where we read a different novel or short story from Vonnegut each week and kind of talk it out. Vonnegut is a really interesting writer for the moment. He lived through an apocalyptic event that felt to him like the end of his life and then had to find a way to go on living anyway. So much of his work is about being kind and decent in a world with so much suffering that so much of it needless. He has a lot of outdated ideas, too. Unfortunately, we talk a lot about those. But mostly, it's been a nice place to reflect on where we are right now and where we might go. And for me in terms of why reread---it's been an antidote to inattention, what a lot of people are calling doomscrolling. You know, I find myself waking up each morning, going to sleep each night, just scrolling Reddit and reading the latest terrible news. And it's really nice to have something that isn't about that---isn't about being online, isn't really about gathering new information or having some new experience. It's almost kind of weirdly meditative to kind of inhabit something you've inhabited before. And think through it. It's a nice kind of antidote to attention destruction, and the sorts of things that are constantly pulling us away. And podcasts, as this podcast kind of attests to, are a really interesting way to build community too. It's such an intimate forum, and talking each week with Aaron and other people in our kind of weird, Twitter network has been a really fun way to have a regular kind of social experience at a time when you can't have regular social experiences.

**Brittany Pladek** 04:40

Amy, did you want to respond to that? You and Gerry could just to talk a little bit about returning to things that are that are beloved.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 04:49

Sure. This is Amy. I think that Gerry makes a really good point about sense-making meditation. Rereading has allowed us to kind of restructure our coping mechanisms to revisit how we establish habits, and habits that we maybe have long assumed even before the pandemic? That's one of the things that I have found in the practice of gathering my reading, of making a list and understanding where reading has taken me over time. I've done this for decades, it helps me to make sense of where I am, both in history and in in the context of the work itself. In that way, I think that reading and rereading are very much like meditation. You can refocus ideas, you can think about fragility. Literature that I've been reading about the pandemic in particular has focused on persistence of hope, something like the *Passage* trilogy, which I found just absolutely compelling, by Justin Cronin, or the *MaddAddam* trilogy by Margaret Atwood, kind of giving us an idea that there is at least some fragment of hope. For example, in *Station Eleven,* Emily St. John Mandel also comes across as a hopeful author towards the end. You know, I think that that act of reading is a way of making sense in our world.

**Brittany Pladek** 06:44

So to add a question onto that, and any three of you can respond: Amy, you'd mentioned fragility as being something that rereading has allowed you to work through and Gerry, you said something similar when you'd mentioned that Kilgore Trout tells people things are very bad, and they will continue to be bad, but we have work to do. And it seems that there might be some kind of relationship between fragility and rereading. I don't want to call it resilience because I'm not sure that's the right word. But could you speak to that kind of recognition of vulnerability? And is that something that you've all found to be coming out of this rereading experience?

**Gerry Canavan** 07:20

I definitely think that's part of what has been interesting about the Vonnegut reread for me. Obviously, in his own work, that kind of vulnerability comes out, because he's a young soldier who goes through this horrendous traumatic experience, then in different ways replays it over the course of his whole life. Since it's been such a touchstone for me over the course of my life, I there's a kind of way in which I'm returning to vulnerable spaces as I pick up the books and read them again, in this new context. And it's weirdly helpful to kind of make the sort of self-accounting that Amy was just talking about: of where I am and where things have happened, by reencountering these things I've encountered before. I think for a lot of people, different films, different albums, right? All have that kind of character that can instantaneously bring you back to an earlier spot in your life. And very often that's because it's a vulnerable spot or a spot of fragility or hurt. So, in a moment where everybody seems to need some kind of collective therapy we can't get, I found it helpful.

**Angela Sorby** 08:23

This is Angela. One vulnerability that I think we've encountered a lot is actually the strange world of the internet, which is probably the most vulnerable space that human beings have ever lived in, in terms of the degree of surveillance and also the degree of dependency that we have. And I mentioned that only because I left this space for 10 minutes because of that of an internet fail and it’s a kind of disappearance of the self, you know, and then you reemerge, and it doesn't feel very contiguous. Whereas reading, you have physical control over the technologies if you're reading a physical book, and there is that continuity and the return that you make to the book is also a form of, of continuity and reassurance.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 09:28

Two of the things that I have been reading: specifically, a recent collection of short stories called the *Decameron* project that was in the New York Times a few weeks ago, contemporary fiction around the covid crisis; and then revisiting the *Decameron* by Boccaccio with its novellas. The idea of consistency and continuity is really interesting because when you read the short stories in either [the *Decameron* or the *New York Times*], you know, you can read them all in one fell swoop, and it feels connected. You feel that there's a structure, there's a timeframe. Same thing with Boccaccio. You've got this structure in the middle of what is today, certainly a chaotic time during the plague, even though you had just the utmost of chaos. I also think about *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks, which reflected kind of that same chaos but the continuity of one community within within that. So that's a real interesting point that Angela just made.

**Gerry Canavan** 10:48

I heard a couple years ago somebody make a joke about how future generations would know people in the 20th century were insane because they put an alarm bell in their house that anybody else could make go at anytime they wanted. You know, we don't really use phones anymore. But we all carry a device that can interrupt us at any moment and make us do whatever it wants---with news alerts or work from email, and all of these constant interruptions and almost always bad news. So the removal to the book or to concentrate on some other kind of thing really helps with that. It's that that kind of meditation or moment of singularity that we were talking about when we started, but it's so helpful as a response to something that otherwise---my experience in the last couple months has been at any moment, my phone will tell me that something terrible has happened. And so the book is a space where that doesn't happen.

**Angela Sorby** 11:45

Also, I think that one of the things that Internet has trained us to do is expect order and predictability. And so we see randomness and unpredictability only in negative context. As a person who has always been a bit of a fan of randomness and unpredictability, I found that I'm a big fan of gathering and scrounging. I'm the person in the alley taking things that people leave out. The store that I do go to is the Dollar Tree, which is the good dollar store, not the adult Dollar General, the fake one, and they always have books. It's unbelievable the weird selection everything from Wendell Berry and Toni Morrison to Bible verses for horsewomen. So I get books from really random places, mostly due to them being free, and so on. When reading this stuff, I feel like that's a randomness that's very reassuring. I haven't read the reviews, I can't predict what it's going to be like, no one has told me that they liked it or didn't like it. And so it's this kind of encounter with the world that isn't pre-reviewed or predictable in the same way that people have become so addicted to predictability. And I will say the last thing that I wound up getting from a little free library was called *The Last Cruise* by Kate Christiansen and I don't know if anyone has read that, but it is an unbelievable analysis of cruise ship and its class and globalization conflicts, and a klezmer band and the 1960s Syrian-Israeli war, and I was blown away. But this book, I don't think it hit its stride in public. And I was like, it's good to kind of go out there and find these gems and these duds, and even the duds can be really pleasurable. I ended up reading an autobiography of Steve Jobs, by his daughter, which was a kind of meandering and winding narrative whining, but I still got something out of it. And it was okay that it wasn't the greatest book. So I think the idea is to just keep moving through different worlds and not try to control them too fully, to that point about control.

**Brittany Pladek** 14:54

Angela, I knew that you have also been writing during the pandemic. Amy and Jerry, you can speak to this too. But I'm curious. I tend to think of writing as quite a structured controlled activity. And I know that that isn't necessarily the case. And I was wondering if there is a way that these reading practices have affected what your writing practices are during COVID. What is the relationship between those?

**Angela Sorby** 15:19

Well, I think that creative writing, and actually a lot of academic writing has a creative component too, is in the first instance, at the first draft, much closer to dreaming than it is to any kind of conscious organizing or thinking. And then later, it becomes a very structured process if you manage to get anything done on paper that you can work with. So I think that there's the random exploration part first, and then there's the going back and organizing part. So I guess that's related to my preferred way of reading, which is this kind of meander. And back when we used to be able to go to libraries. I absolutely loved doing that too. Just pulling books out.

**Brittany Pladek** 16:11

Maybe a question that I could ask on top of that---unless Angela, you were going to read some poetry. I can't see your face.

**Angela Sorby** 16:21

We had talked about it and I do have a connection to that poem. I'm not going to commence with a long unwelcome poetry reading, but I do have a relevant poem, to that point. If this is a good time to read it.

**Brittany Pladek** 16:40

Thanks. Go for it.

**Angela Sorby** 16:41

Okay, so about randomness and scrounging. This poem is called “The Find.”

The Find

*April 2020*

Yes, the dollhouse

I scrounged from the alley

this morning is ruin porn,

its roof caved in,

its windowpanes blown,

                   and yes,

I scraped both knees bloody

hauling it up the stairs—

I’m 55, my skin’s thin,

I can’t absorb more virus news,

                        which is why

Glue gun!  Craft paint.

My teenager rolls her eyes.

*Jesus, Mom.  You’ll never*

*fix that thing.*I’m sure

she’s right, but once I was sure 

I’d be married forever,

and then came the bulldozer,

so maybe *never*is transient,

like Chaucer’s shoures soote,

like rain falling clean through

an open roof.  This dollhouse

was free, the flyest of prices.

Its rooms are large with freedom.

The end.

So yeah, that's a poem about about scrounging obviously, and also about the creative process and maybe also about a kind of reading where you find something and you decide that you're just going to plunge into whatever it has to offer.

**Gerry Canavan** 18:09

One of the things I really liked about that poem and about what you've been saying about writing is how---I don't want to say promiscuous, but how promiscuous coronavirus is, in terms of how it attaches to every other thing in our lives. We don't have a prefabricated kind of way of understanding it, of processing it, of knowing when it begins or ends, and so it just kind of like seeps into everything. Everything seems to need some kind of like encounter with coronavirus, even if I agreed to do it two years ago, and it seems nothing on the surface connects with it. It's just like: well, coronavirus is here now. And so this project is happening in the context of coronavirus. And there is a way in which part of our collective grief over what's happened and our collective processing of it is about smooshing it into everything else in our lives. And that poem does that in an amazing way.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 19:04

There's also that concept of fragility that we were talking about, and that idea that we have, by reconstructing something that we have found, something that we have scrounged, something that we have lifted from our past, something that we are familiar with---by taking it and reframing it in the context of what we're going through right now. It helps us understand where we are. One of the things about that idea of collating, bringing things back together for me. And that poem really speaks to that. It's a wonderful, physical, tangible, visible way to recognize a lot of what our conversation has been about.

**Brittany Pladek** 19:56

I actually have a question that jumps off of the end of that poem. Thank you for reading that, Angela, it was beautiful. And I'm really struck, especially by the final line about, and I'm going to misquote because my memory is shot---but about the rooms in the house being full of freedom. And I was wondering if one of the ways that reading and literature and especially anything that is considered “pop” is dismissed by people by saying it's merely an escape, it's only escapism. I was wondering, what's the difference between freedom and escape?

**Angela Sorby** 20:30

The quote was, “Its rooms are large with freedom.” And this was partly a result of the fact that they're actually really small. I was thinking about how you can be free in your house, and we are. Having lived in China, I can for sure say that we've remained relatively free. But speaking of fragility, this is not a sure thing. And so freedom is a political thing. And it's been appropriated at the moment by some morons, I'm sorry, I don't want to go there. But it's been but it's been appropriated to mean things that could be dangerously close to dissociating it from the fact that humans want dignity and a degree of autonomy, and that there are different ways to find this---by just controlling your consciousness and understanding what your options are, and how many we still have in this country, as we sit home, and also maybe that popular culture of domestic space is a valuable thing. There's this concept of” doll shaming,” where the pop culture that’s associated with men is often lifted up, and the pop culture associated with women and girls, traditional girls like dolls, and doll houses is stupid and couldn't possibly mean anything. But of course, it's like a miniature world, just like other kinds of world building. And through world building, we gain freedom and autonomy in our minds.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 22:27

When we were tossing around ideas, firstly, we talked about reading as a way to help us do something rather than just reacting. And it seems to me that that poem speaks directly to that not just in constructing a world as we find ourselves going back to in our reading in poetry or fiction, but constructing the space that we are actually occupying right now, and reconstructing something that is physical and representative of that space. The image of reconstructing a dollhouse with blown windows and a caved in roof is remarkable because I think all of us certainly feel to a certain extent that even if we're living in a house that's fully functional right now, our roof has caved in our windows are blown and we do not have anything except craft glue and paint to reconstruct what we're doing. How do we do that? Reading is one act of doing that taking the taking the glue gun and fixing a dollhouse is another way of doing that. But physical things have to be done to make order out of our world.

**Gerry Canavan** 23:51

Whenever I'm confronted with a version of this question about escape, I always think of Tolkien, especially after I came to Marquette and started doing a lot with Tolkien, because of the library and the class I teach. And in his famous essay on fairy stories, he says, there's nothing wrong with escape. A jailed man should dream of escape like, it's a perfectly natural thing. So I'm always a little bit inclined to defend escape. But he also talks about recovery and consolation---that these types of stories that are misunderstood as trivial, help us to see the world in terms that we always should have seen them in, to recover a kind of sense of the world as having an order that the adult world, or the realist world, denies, and then to push us in this in the direction of consolation, and a way of understanding the world as having a good order, a kind of good logic to itself---a logic of joy instead of sorrow. And so all of those things, that's so much of what science fiction and fantasy, which are the objects I study, are about. So it always seems to me that that there's more going on with somebody who picks up that card of work, than simply trying to run away from the world. We’ve used the word meditation and different variations on it. But there's something about that attempt to make sense of reality that sometimes requires getting away from reality for a bit.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 25:14

And it's creative. We had talked about that, but that the attentiveness, the awareness, is something different from escape, that we think of as putting our heads in the sand. But it's a creative process that we returned to.

**Angela Sorby** 25:35

I'm utterly astonished by the idea that reading could be the equivalent of putting one's head in the sand because we know that the one thing that people need right now to think through where we are, is context. And that doesn't mean everyone needs the same context because they couldn't have the same context, because we all live in different consciousnesses that take in different things. But we all need expansive consciousnesses that have encountered many things, and not just polemical ideas. The so called escapist fictions, and poetry, and science fiction, the good stuff, is not going to be about right and wrong in a clear way. It's going to ask us to put our heads into ambiguous situations, which is kind of an antidote---and I'm not against the internet---but it is an antidote to the decontextualized and dehumanizing discourses that can happen when people don't have the depths of context that long texts in particular can provide that. Really getting to know a voice, I think, is really helpful and political in an indirect but incredibly important way.

**Brittany Pladek** 27:15

I'm just struck by your use of the word ambiguous, Angela because it reminds me very strongly of one of my favorite sci fi novels, Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, whose subtitle is “an ambiguous utopia.” Of course, utopia here means not a world where everything's perfect, because that's not a thing, but just a different place, a no place that lets you recontextualize the way that you understand the place that you are in right now. Maybe to sort of round off this podcast, thinking of the no place that is full of everything that is reading and rereading, I was wondering---and if you don't want to do this, if it's too schmaltzy just say no---if you could each recommend one thing to our listeners: one piece of media, one poem, one novel, that you think might help them or be interesting to them. What would you say?

**Angela Sorby** 28:06

Just one, this is always so terrible.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 28:10

That was my thought exactly, just one. I have found myself going back to that New York Times magazine, thumbing through it and reading, rereading the stories with the *Decameron* project. It's a full issue with the New York Times Magazine. And I think what's so compelling about it is that all of the authors are taking different ways into the pandemic. Some of them are intensely personal and very small focus, and others---Margaret Atwood wrote a new piece of fiction for it and hers is just wild, you don't really know what to do with it until you put it in the context of the other stories. So I guess that's one thing I'm returning to but I could recommend six more.

**Gerry Canavan** 29:09

It is really hard to narrow down to one. My go to answer this has been Octavia Butler's *Parables* books because they're about an America in the 2020s that seems to be kind of falling apart, where all of the crises that have gone on for so long all come to a head at once. And then about not just surviving that but thriving in it, finding new ways to live in new ways to make sense of the world that can sustain human life in that context. So it's hard for me not to recommend her work even though it can be a bit grim. And I don't know that it necessarily ever quite gets to that kind of utopian place of providing an answer, but they're both generative books: *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. So that would probably be my one answer.

**Angela Sorby** 29:55

Okay, I'm gonna cheat slightly, and they're all fiction, even though I was claiming to talk about poetry. [If you want] something you want to keep going for a long, long, long time, then the very, very best book is *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman, which is going to explain what's bad about polemical-ism and totalitarianism, left and right, in the context of the mid 20th century, in an incredibly compelling and page turning---once you get past the siege of Stalingrad--- Russian narrative. And if you don't want to go there, I would actually say, like a little world built unto itself that I found so delightful was something I read early in the pandemic: *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell. It sounds really depressing because it's about the Spanish Civil War, but it it's like a little world, and it's also full of humanity. And it's full of ideas, and it's full of utopias, and it's full of flaws that utopian thinking brings. And I was just completely drawn in by that. And it's really shaded. Everything that I've understood about this pandemic, as I watched people start to join their camps. So I recommend that. And it is escape as it really is, I promise because it's so beautiful. I don't know if anybody's read it, but it's beautifully written. And he's funny.

**Brittany Pladek** 31:27

Thank you. All three of you, Amy, Gerry, Angela. Thank you all so much for being here and for having this conversation. And thank you listeners for joining in. And I do hope that reading sustains you or interacting with media and other ways during this pandemic. Thanks very much.

**Gerry Canavan** 31:45

Thank you.

**Amy Cooper Cary** 31:46

Thank you. Thank you, everybody. It's a pleasure.

**Benjamin Linzy** 31:51

Thank you for listening to this episode of COVID Convos. You can learn more about this podcast and research being done at Marquette University by visiting the Research and Innovation website at marquette.edu You can reach the podcast via email at covidconvos@marquette.edu Music for this episode is "Phase 2" by Xylo Ziko