COMMONPLACE PODCAST

Episode 82

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Transcripts formatted after those from Disability Visibility Project

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[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello, and welcome to episode 82 of Commonplace featuring writer, critic, and professor Maggie Nelson. I'm your host, Rachel Zucker.

Many of you listening will have read at least one of Maggie Nelson's incredible books. Some of you no doubt are dedicated fans of Maggie's book *Jane*, or her book *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, or *The Argonauts*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2015 and was a New York Times Best Seller, or her cult classic *Bluets* published by Wave in 2009 and reissued by Wave in a special 10th anniversary edition last year.

Maggie Nelson has won almost all the big prizes: an NEA fellowship, Guggenheim's Creative Capital Award, and the MacArthur, and her books *sell*. She is widely read and deeply appreciated by poets and scholars and by people who

hardly ever read poetry or criticism. There are, of course, many excellent reviews of Maggie's work, fabulous interviews with Maggie, wherein she talks about queer theory, feminist theory, the American obsession with violence and missing or murdered White women, art, identity, grief, the New York School poets, pain, pleasure, the color blue…

You can find links to a few of our favorite reviews and interviews and to Maggie's books on our website, Commonpodcast.com, and in our show notes. For those of you unfamiliar with Maggie's oeuvre, you have many delights ahead of you, including this conversation, which I recorded with Maggie at her office at University of Southern California on October 15th, 2019. And for those of you familiar with Maggie's work, I think you will also enjoy this conversation. We don't go over old territory.

I have wanted to have Maggie on Commonplace since I started the podcast back in 2016. When I finally got the opportunity, I realized that what I wanted to talk to her about is what it's like to be a poet and critic who started off publishing with small presses and whose glorious, strange books have found--and in some ways, created--a dedicated and enthusiastic general readership.

And I wanted to talk with her when she wasn't on book tour promoting a new book, when she was between books, or in the midst of writing a new book. And I got that opportunity. Maggie and I spoke the day after I recorded a conversation with Christine Larusso, episode 79, which aired back in December. I was in Los Angeles for a West coast *SoundMachine*/Commonplace mini-tour planned to coincide with a family wedding in Palm Springs. A few hours after speaking with Maggie, I read with Christine Larusso and Tommy Pico (episode 53) at Stories bookstore. Two days later, I had a lovely dinner with Sarah Vap (episode 30) and Victoria Chang (episode 75) and read with Sarah Vap at Beyond Baroque. The day after that I had lunch and a tearful but inspiring walk on the beach with Sarah Manguso (episode 37). The trip was a whirlwind, and recording with Maggie, even if it hadn't been so packed between so many major events, would have been a

nervous thrill for me because I've been reading Maggie Nelson's work and thinking about her with admiration, awe, affection and jealousy for years.

For this episode, we have a bounty of patron extras. All patrons will receive access to the audio of my reading with Sarah Vap at Beyond Baroque, which, if I do say so myself, is one of the best readings I've ever attended. Some members of the Commonplace book club will receive one of the following books, all by Maggie Nelson*: Women, the New York School and Other True Abstractions*, courtesy of University of Iowa Press, *Jane*, and *Something Bright, Then Holes*, both courtesy of Soft Skull, *Bluets*, courtesy of Wave Books, *The Argonauts* and *The Red Parts*, both courtesy of Graywolf, *The Latest Winter* and *Shiner*, both courtesy of Zed Books, and *The Art of Cruelty* courtesy of WW Norton.

[5:05]

For this episode, Commonplace's partner charitable organization will donate $150 to Critical Resistance, an organization chosen by Maggie Nelson. Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the prison industrial complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe.

To find out how to become a Patron of Commonplace or a member of the Commonplace Book Club or to sign up for our Newsletter, visit Commonpodcast.com.

More than almost any other writer I know, Maggie Nelson thinks and speaks and writes with complexity and lucidity about the untranslatability of certain life experiences in a way that is immediately interesting and that sneaks up on you in its profundity and usefulness. Relistening to this episode and preparing it for you was both a blessing and an emotional challenge. At the end of last summer, while recovering from my hysterectomy, I experienced a strong resurgence of anxiety,

which then gave way to depression. My youngest son broke his arm while away from home. My middle son went to college for the first time. By the time I recorded this conversation with Maggie in October, I was not in good shape. When I returned home to New York, I saw a reproductive psychiatrist who turned out to be extraordinarily horrible, and then a very good psychiatrist. I started an SSRI, which has been enormously helpful.

This was not my first experience with depression, nor would it be my last. Since January, my oldest son has been on leave from college and living at home while in the midst of a major depressive episode. For me, experiencing my son's depression has been exhausting, terrifying, confusing, full of moments that are psychically and physically obliterating, and full of moments of grace, deep connection, understanding transformation and revelation. In the past few months I've had to cancel plans, miss deadlines, and give myself over to the experience of being in the midst of something I cannot control. It has been humbling and awful and fascinating.

Listening to Maggie talk about Hannah Arendt, about death, about non-therapy ways of demonstrating compassion, about countering the natural anxiety of aging and trying to become more sane and less reactive. This conversation has helped me deeply, and I hope it might help you, especially if you are caught in the midst, if you are in-between, struggling, perhaps to care for someone you love or for yourself or to engage in a liberatory process while trapped bodily, historically, emotionally, financially, or philosophically. I wish each of you strength, health care and kindness. Here's Maggie Nelson.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hi Maggie.

MAGGIE NELSON: Hi Rachel. How are you?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm really excited to be here, but I'm also pretty nervous.

MAGGIE NELSON: Why?

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] We're just going to get right to it.

MAGGIE NELSON: Okay, great.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. A few different things I think: I've been wanting to talk to you for Commonplace, like, from the first time that I started it, so there's a lot of anticipation for me. Also, you are a writer who I've read every single one of your books, and some of them multiple times. I just taught *Jane* for like the fifth time.

MAGGIE NELSON: Amazing. Thank you for doing that.

[9:34]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you for writing it! Also, your critical work and the scope of your career and the way that you've been in the literary world has been both incredibly formative to me, and also sometimes enviable, or, I feel envious sometime, and that's such an uncomfortable emotion that I was like, "Oh, this is a really interesting one." Like, it's a different kind of intense nervousness to, like--I've recorded these conversations with Bernadette Mayer, with Alice Notley, two legends, right? Those have like a real different--and then there's also--I just recorded a conversation with a former student of mine whose first book just came out. That's a different kind of nervousness. Then, of course, with peers it's its own thing. Some of them, I know really well personally; others of them, I know, really, through my work. But I feel that with your work and my projections onto you as a person, there's a lot of stuff for me. So that's one thing.

MAGGIE NELSON: Great. Well, I'll put up all my projection monitors around me and see what I can tell is coming at me! [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: The other thing is that I'm just in this weird part of my life, which we can talk about or not, because I want to talk about you, but, to just to be transparent and honest, I think I'm just extremely nervous right now. I'm interested in figuring that out.

This is not where I thought my first question was going to be, but I was listening to an interview--now I can't remember who you were speaking with--but you were talking about being interested in drugs and books about drugs. And so that's been on my mind quite a lot, in particular, because someone recommended to me that I go see a reproductive psychiatrist, which I didn't even know existed.

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I spoke to her on the phone. She's a person who specializes in postpartum depression, postpartum psychosis, perimenopausal issues, menopausal issues. I had to, unfortunately for me, have a hysterectomy this past May, and there's so little information about what that does to your body and so little research and so little experience and so little access to women's experience around that.

MAGGIE NELSON: Did you have a super crash, like, a super hormonal crash?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, so that's the super interesting thing, right? So I still have my ovaries, but I don't have my uterus.

MAGGIE NELSON: Okay.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So most doctors will just tell you there's no difference, like as long as you have your ovaries--I can't believe this is what we're talking about--

MAGGIE NELSON: Right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm sorry.

MAGGIE NELSON: I love it!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. But, there's a lot of anecdotal evidence from people who've had hysterectomies who have said no, said they've experienced a lot of mood changes, in particular anxiety and depression, post-hysterectomy, definitely if you've had your ovaries removed, but also not.

And my understanding is that doctors either don't believe that or they associate that kind of evidence--I think of it as evidence--with women feeling like their femininity has been taken from them, like, a psychological response to some kind of sentimental attachment to the uterus. But I think there's a much more likely possibility that doctors don't actually know what the uterus does.

MAGGIE NELSON: That's probably true.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right?

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. So anyway, I spoke to this reproductive psychiatrist about the possibility of coming in and getting assessed for medication, and she would be somebody, who, unlike a regular psychiatrist who would just like say

“Here's some antidepressants; feel better,” would be able to have more subtlety of diagnosis around hormonal issues, how hormonal issues might be affecting mood. So I was very excited that someone existed. But when I spoke to her--she asked a bunch of questions… there were a bunch of red flags for me other than just the price, and including that--she said--she asked if I was married. I said I was married. And she said, “Maybe your husband can come in for the first part of the intake because it's very important to me to speak with someone who knows the patient the best.”

And I was like, “Lady, how do you know that someone's partner or spouse knows you the best?” That is such a massive assumption. And so infantilizing in certain ways. She asked like, “Oh, do you have any other--do you have any addiction issues? And I was like, “No, but I am a cannabis user.” And she was like, “Oh, I'm going to stop you right there and save you some money. Don't come in unless you haven't used any cannabis at all for at least four weeks.” And I was like, “That is so interesting.”

MAGGIE NELSON: So strange.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And so I was thinking about this when I was listening to this conversation that you were having and thinking about how, in some ways, it's a battle between different kinds of drugs--antidepressants being one, hormone replacement being another, cannabis being a third--and different conceptions of what's okay and not okay to put in your body.

So, I was wondering: are you still writing about drugs? Drugs are part of the book that you're writing about freedom, right?

[15:52]

MAGGIE NELSON: That's true. Yeah. You're going to know more about me with your research than I know about myself! But yeah, I kind of have just finished a

draft of that book, and it has several chapters that are very large chapters--each one about 80 pages--and one of them is about drugs. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you get into antidepressants or--

MAGGIE NELSON: No; I mean, it's really hard to say you're writing about drugs because there's kind of two major divides--which I don't spend a lot of time with, which, you know, logically and ethically you should--the first divide is between drugs as a kind of metonym for addiction--because drugs are not a metonym for addiction. But in this chapter, I mostly am writing about addictive drugs without naming them quite as such. I'm kind of using Avital Ronell's *Crack Wars* and also Paul Preciado's book *Testo Junkie*, where, even in the word testo junkie, people aren't typically addicted to testosterone or to other hormones but his insistence on putting them together is a kind of provocation about the state of addiction.

So the chapter more uses that kind templating. But then that's the first one. And the second divide is between, as you say, different kinds of--different classes of--drugs and the fact that--there's a book by Marcus Boon called *The Road of Excess*, which is all about writers and drugs, which I read at the beginning of my process and thought it was very wise that he has a chapter on cannabis, a chapter in anesthetics, a chapter on psychedelics, a chapter on narcotics, and his thesis is--and I think he's utterly correct--instead of talking about a drug canon literature, it really is more apt to talk about, like, the narcotic canon of literature, or the methamphetamine canon of literature, or the psychedelic canon, because they produce really different kinds of literature for various reasons.

My chapter also doesn't pause within that, but I think that if you were being a more meticulous scholar, you would definitely make a lot of gradations around those things. I think that the Preciado take in *Testo Junkie*, which maybe has to do with what you're talking about, is like, instead of saying like, "This is the era of opioids," or "This is the era of cocaine," you know, era of whatever, of crack wars, Preciado's theory about pharmacopornographia is that everything from Viagra to estrogen to--the'rey all substances, even including things like internet porn, which

aren't substances, per se. His theory about what pharmacy and porn, as a kind of regime, have melded together would be everything from like blood transplants--just like the whole apparatus of biomaterial. So I think in that sense, I'm not saying that's like the best thesis or reliance of looking at things, but I would say the drug chapter is more, like, philosophical about those kinds of questions than it is really burrowing into the difference between hormone replacement therapy and edibles. You know what I mean?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. ‘Cause I guess the connection has to do with addiction, or these drug books that are kind of in the drug genre--if that's even a genre--are sort of oriented to be about freedom, but addiction is also, in some ways, the anti-freedom.

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah, totally.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That's so interesting. What are some of the other chapters?

MAGGIE NELSON: The chapters right now are an introduction, which basically explains why the book is not about political freedom.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hmm.

[19:51]

MAGGIE NELSON: There are a lot of books about political freedom right now. The first chapter just kind of offers an explanation of why that's not the focus and what one might gain were that not one's only focus. And then the chapters from there are about the notion of freedom in the art world, freedom in discussions about the climate and decarbonization, freedom in drug literature, and freedom in conversations about sexual freedom at the present time.

Each one's like a little universe, a fractal world. It was very difficult writing this book, to move in between chapters. I would have to just stay with one for like six months or eight months, and it just was very hard. But now when I edit it, I'll have to look through and see what I've said in each chapter that can be extrapolated into some kind of overarching connection… I mean, there is a lot that connects them, but I think that I didn't want to--like the cruelty book about art, where instead of answering people's big questions like "Does watching cruelty make us more cruel?" Like it, instead, kind of insisted on brewing down into individual moments of art and context in history. And this is kind of similar where it doesn't argue for some kind of overarching notion of freedom that should be applied in each place, similarly in all places and times or that should be rejected. It's more of like, "How is this word operating at climate conventions," like what's going on with--you know, especially because after many years--many years! Maybe even 2-400 years or something, it's, at our present moment, not actually the lodestar that it has been in times past as a concept. So I was interested in that too.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I can't wait. So what stage of the writing--

MAGGIE NELSON: [laughs] I feel like I'm doing an interview for the book that is so far from coming out, kinda like promotion for a book that's like not even yet finished, but, I think it's going to come out--and this is all like very recently decided--I think it will come out in fall 2021 with Graywolf.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Amazing. That's great.

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah, no, I'm excited. I'm excited to make it better. I mean, I'm really excited to be done with it, at least to take a break from it, because I feel like we are all so--I mean, I'm not sure that we're all anything, but I know me and many people I talk to--are so exhausted by the kind of presentism of our political moment. I feel like it has made writing about things that are current, really taxing both to keep up with, but also in a moment when people are so feeling so

foreclosed or anxious about futurity, even how to imagine a book living outside of our present moment of it being written, have been very vexing.

I mean, if you're gonna write directly on the climate, that's obviously a very--like, if it takes five years to write a book like that, like this book did, and if over those five years you can quantify how much carbon dioxide has it send it to the atmosphere, there's a certain--it's like a painful perversity to the time of writing, which I think myself and a lot of other people have so often posed as a kind of ameliorative antidote to our times. But now we have this new problem, which is an urgency that can't be blithely attended with aphorisms about thinking historically or thinking in deep time.

I mean, they can, because it's part of the illusion, that this is the first catastrophic thing humanity's ever faced. But it's not like recognizing that worlds have ended before doesn't give you an eject button from the problem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. So how over the past five years have you managed to sustain yourself in this vexing process of writing about these things that--maybe, you know, why are you writing about them? Have you been writing something else at the same time? Have you been trying to make sure to do something other than writing that is restorative?

MAGGIE NELSON: That would have been wise, right? [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laughs] I don't know. Or have you just gone deep into the--

MAGGIE NELSON: These past five years have been really weird. I mean every bunch of years is weird, but I think that writing is very difficult, and that I think when you're really into a very long and big project that requires a lot of attention, and you have other things, as everybody does, that require attention in your life, you can want to have all the balance in the world, and you can strive for that. But

there's something about the project that demands a kind of unbalance and demands that, just like, giving more than you've got to give in a certain sense.

[25:22]

Although, as you age, that becomes a harder and harder thing to do without noticing the strains and the things that give... when you're younger, things give, but they don't, maybe, give in the same way. So I think that probably in the last year or two, I introduced more things that are helpful measures than maybe before. I think *The Argonauts* was just an odd--I've never really had a publishing experience that kept me so busy for so long, and I was very grateful for it. But at a certain point you're like, "Okay, this book needs to die [laughs]. I need to kill it to keep moving." I mean, not with my writing life--because I've been writing when I've been writing--but just in terms of talking about it and going around.

And then again, like, I'm not--I'm very grateful for its going on and on, but we were just talking before we started recording about France or something and dealing with French politics around the book. I was doing all that like three years after it had come out. And you know, from writing books, like, usually you're pretty done a lot earlier than that. Like, it's hard to get through the initial rush. But again, it's all been good. It's all been great. I'm very grateful, and a lot of things in my life have really changed from it having such a broader readership.

I think in terms of getting me through the project, in addition to all the things that one does--exercise, whatever [laughs]--I feel like I've had to bear down further into, like, not asking a lot of questions about my curiosity and just letting it be like, "I'm interested in this, so I'm going to stick on it," without needing to know the outcome of, like--I don't know, in 2021, when the book's published, will Trump be herding us into camps and it will be tyranny forever or will this episode be all we'll be talking about it.

Like already, in my book, I talk about in the drug chapter about Jeff Sessions and his stuff, and now I'm like, “No one even is going to remember that he was the attorney general!” Like, we haven't talked about the opioid commission for, like, frigging years! Like, the idea that Trump was ever even going to do anything about any of that is just so far gone. So God only knows what, two years from now, will be happening. But the same is true of all time and history. It's just, I've never-- I mean, *The Argonauts* is kind of tethered to time and history but not quite the same way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm so glad you said that about *The Argonauts*. I was thinking at first, like, “Oh, I wish I'd talked to you a few years ago,” but I actually was thinking that it's really nice to talk to you now, when *The Argonauts* is a few years--when you're a few years past the big rush because I'm interested in--there's one quality of talking to someone who has a new book out, and sometimes it sounds a little book tour-y, a little bit canned, or someone is a little bit like more how I feel: my recent book came out, and I feel like a deer in the headlights. Like I just feel sort of in shock. Both of those are very different experiences than looking back on this experience and being, sort of, after.

I think for you, in particular, both *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*, these were not your first book. But they launched you into a very different kind of status, a different kind of relationship with the public, if there is such a thing, or a wider readership. So I'm kind of wondering how you feel?

Like, who is Maggie Nelson now? [Laughs]. Do you feel pressure that you're writing this book or living your life to be, you know, the Maggie Nelson of the MacArthur? I mean, I love all of your books. Your book of criticism on the New York School was one of the most incredibly important books for me, so--

MAGGIE NELSON: Aw. You’re probably like one of the twelve people that have read it, so I'm very grateful to hear that.

[30:08]

RACHEL ZUCKER: That's what I mean! You know, when everybody wants to talk about *The Argonauts*--and, you know, we could have our whole two hour conversation about *The Argonauts*, but for me, there are moments where it's almost like, “Wait, don't forget about my other child!” Or where I'm like, “Wait, but have you read her book on the New York School; have you read *Jane*, have you read her two her other two books of poetry?”

I guess there's a little bit of a feeling that I have with those books that have a bit of a cult following around them. I feel like the people who loved your work before *The Argonauts* really blew up feel like they have a certain claim to you. And then there's everyone else who loves *The Argonauts*. So, I don't know, I'm kind of wondering what does it feel like to be you, after being part of the super marginalized literary life and then not?

MAGGIE NELSON: Well, you know how life is. You're just yourself moving along through your day, so I think--kind of like I was joking at the beginning when you were talking about projections--it's like, you note more often people projecting things onto you or prefacing sentences like, “Well this probably wouldn’t matter to you because you're a--”blah, blah. I feel like, you know, that other people are feeling different ways, but you yourself don't feel any different way. And I think, like you're saying--I'll just say this because I don't know who listens to these, but maybe people, especially from the poetry world, can understand--which is that in poetry land, esoterica is not a negative feature and also, you know, you can come up with a sense of more readership or more mainstream things being assigned that something's gone awry, not something good.

All of my heroes, in writing--I mean, Eileen Myles kind of raised me in the wild and in New York as a writer and Eileen is somebody else, and that moment of fame

that Eileen was having was so surreal in the sense of, like, for many of us, they were the most famous person in town for decades. So you're just like, “It's like people are looking at a totally different person.” So I think, in that sense, all of which to say that, think I feel kind of wry, grateful and wry. I think people have a presumption that all writers are going for this thing.

I don't know how I would feel if it hadn't happened, but I certainly wasn't unhappy with my writing life beforehand. I felt like the mark of your good writing life was that you could have the time and space to write the things that you cared most about and would find someone to publish them and the outcome was up for other people to decide but you just moved on to the next thing you wanted to write about. And I felt as though that was what I'd been doing.

So--and also, like you say, people like to put on writing careers. Like, the mainstream fetish likes to talk about things, like, leading to a particular moment, as if a book like *The Argonauts* is some kind of culmination of different stylistic experiments that has now come to some successful head. Whereas I fully stand by the modality in that book Like, moving between anecdote and theory or whatever is like one of many modalities. It's one deployment of the personal; it's one deployment of the theoretical. It's one deployment of criticism. I've tried other things. I like my experiments and other things like it. I don't think the New York School book or *The Art* of *Cruelty* because they're just fully critical endeavors--like, the freedom book is a critical endeavor--I don't think something needs a bleeding heart confessional “I” to give writing heat or value. So I don't think there's any problem with the books of mine that don't do that. At the same time, I've never had a problem with deep first-person violations of privacy and I, you know, wrote my undergraduate thesis on confessionalism and Sexton and Plath, and I'm super into that too.

I guess all of which is to say that I'm very, very grateful, and I'm not just saying that in a rote way. A lot of parts of my life that were difficult had been made easier, only up to three years ago, really, neither I nor my partner, in raising our kids and

stuff, really saw a way out of, in terms of living, an expensive city, and there were a lot of things that felt really like, “Wow, we're really heading into this with the proverbial not really making ends meet.” [Laughs]. I'm really truly grateful that out of the blue some things about our situation were just given some more ease, both for him and for me, just in terms of, like, him being able to rent a bigger studio to make art, just some things that don't always come around in a life, but I didn't expect them, and they don’t--

[35:45]

--okay, this is like a long monologue, but in case it helps any young writers, man, I would also just say that like, none of my books I've written were widely desired, if really desired at all.

So it's gratifying that people are interested in them now, but it only just reinforces what we as poets always know, which is that, like, it's not like some book comes out and just by virtue of its--I mean *The Red Parts* was dead and out of print a year after it was published. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that book. I mean, it should've stayed in print, but it wouldn't have been republished by Graywolf if *The Argonauts* hadn't done so well for them. And that was lovely that they reprinted it, but it doesn't mean anything about whether *The Red Parts* was a good or bad book. It just was like that was its fate for the moment. It was lying fallow, abandoned by a trade press, and, you know, it got lucky. Those are just luck things. They really aren't like--yeah. So, you know, wry, and grateful, grateful.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I have to think about that later, maybe, about the luck part and about what you're saying. I mean, *The Red Parts* is also is a hugely important book to me, and one that I've written about from a lot of different angles, in particular, this moment in *The Red Parts* where you talk to your mother. It comes up in a lot of different ways, but basically, the part where your mother thanks you for writing *Jane*. That was such a beautiful and painful thing for me to read

because of my own experience writing about my mother, who really did not want me to. And so it was the moment that I so desired--I'm going off on a tangent but just out of love for *The Red Parts*--but, you know, of course it is luck, to some extent, but at the same time, I think that we--I'll speak for myself as a writer--like, cling to the idea that we could have some control over this because I think it's very confusing, maybe particularly right now--how much work the author is supposed to do to promote the book or to strategize or… whether we have any control or not. Because you don't really have control over luck, but you--

MAGGIE NELSON: I mean, not luck, but--I don't think--well, I'm enough of an elitist and a narcissist to say I feel like if the books were really bad, it wouldn't be just like, "Oh, luck that I found this bad book and that people were intrigued!" I think obviously you have to try and write the best books you can, but I think that, by luck, I guess I'm more thinking of the whims of what mainstream culture decides to bestow its attention on.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right.

MAGGIE NELSON: I made a decision slash non-decision early on when the internet was invented that I wasn't interested in the internet [laughs], so I never did that, like had a website or joined any social media stuff. But I certainly spent--I mean, I'm sure you can relate for poetry books--man, I certainly spent years collaging invitations to book parties at Kinko's and I took *Jane* on the road, Akashic author Lauren Sanders and I took--she had this great theory that no queer books ever went to the South--So we went with our books in the trunk of the car to Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana. I certainly have hocked my wares and extolled my vision with a lot of chutzpah for many, many years. So it wasn't like, "Oh, let the book go out and then just like--" and I think like, I mean, as part of the New York School book, especially when I lived in New York, community was really important to me.

[40:05]

For every book I did, I imagined--like, the New York School had a book party that was one of the best nights of my life, hands down, in terms of the people that performed at it. The event in Tribeca organized around women and abstraction in the mid-century with Kim Gordon and Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer and Bernadette. I was attracted to the New York School initially because I always really wanted literature to bring together people across arts just to be, like, Frank O'Hara said, "Imagine me at the center of all this beauty," like, just really make situations that felt beautiful then marvel at your luck about being at the center of them.

Then with *Jane*, that was different. It wasn't euphoric, but I organized a lot of events. I did an event with Eileen and Claudia Rankine about violence and poetics. No one invited me to those. Those were like my brain children events, and I brainchilded a lot of events trying to imagine things. So yeah, not luck like "Let it out and die." But you know, I think that something happened also in my career that wasn't luck, per se, but I've been doing a lot of different kinds of books for a long time. They had some different readers or different people who were appreciating them, but for a while when you're doing that, it seems kind of ad hoc, and to you it all has a lot of continuity but to the naked eye who's not part of your community, it might not.

So I think I just had to write enough of them for somebody to be able to look back and start to see the continuity or something. I think that that also helped, and for whatever reason, *The Argonauts* provided a kind of opportunity for that kind of retrospecting. But that's just time and effort and just being around for long enough to keep going.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. That's a really helpful clarification or--complexifying is not a word, but I'm going to use that right now. Can we go back to Eileen Myles for a second?

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah!

RACHEL ZUCKER: We have Wayne Koestenbaum in common, and I think that--it's funny, I tend to do this weird psychological thing with poets or artists who have a similar foremother or forefather or mentor where I get into--maybe this is because I'm an only child and so I have to play this out with non actual siblings--but this kind of sibling relationship where I'm both totally fascinated by, "What is your relationship like with Wayne versus mine--"

MAGGIE NELSON: Where did you meet Wayne?

RACHEL ZUCKER: He was my undergrad professor at Yale.

MAGGIE NELSON: Oh, okay. Oh wow.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I was thinking about how I've heard you talk before about the people that have really deeply mentored you, and this is probably not all of them, but--Wayne, Eileen Myles, Christina Crosby, Eve Sedgwick--and I was thinking about how you and I are now the age that many of them were when we met them, and I imagine also that you are very frequently--but correct me if I'm wrong--in the position of mentor rather than mentee right now. I was curious about a few things.

First of all, well some of your mentors have passed away--well, Eve has--but how's your relationship changed with these people now that you're an adult and they are older adults? And, how do you feel in the world reaching towards students or younger writers or more emerging writers? Do you feel like you have maybe

gained friendship but in a way lost some aspect of mentorship that was important to you or no?

MAGGIE NELSON: No, I don't feel like I've lost anything. I think I always have behaved well as a student, but I think that one of the things I'm sure you know as a teacher, you recognize that being a student is a state of a lot of projection. I don't have regrets, per se. I think, though, that making people into--even if it's positively-- into these people who are really important to you is still doing something to them. I don't think with any of the people you just mentioned, I don't feel this, but I think in *The Argonauts*, which is a kind of self-portrait as a student in parts, I think it reveals a like sadistic edge of the student who, like, worships Anne Carson but wants to take issue with something she said.

[45:30]

Now I've lived long enough that I read those kinds of things about me regularly [laughs], and I find them puzzling because what you're recognizing is like--like I read an essay the other day that was like, "Maggie Nelson did a Skype visit to our class and was totally disingenuous." I was just kind of thinking, like, you're just getting through the day doing your Skype visit, but the things that you're saying are not just you saying them, it's you saying them as this meme of whatever your name or figure means to them. But I've done the same thing. I think it's a natural feature to people. I mean, I just went to a very fancy event in Cambridge last weekend with a lot of luminaries, and I was also being like, "Wow, like I'm opening the door for Merrick Garland, and, like, "Look at me in the bathroom with Sherrilyn Ifill!"

It was very intense, but you become very aware that people are people and that all these projections are interesting and they can make for funny moments and literature and they can make for great stories and you can tell Benjamin Moser them in a Sontag biography and have them be like "Snap!" But they're also just kind of apart from the field of regular human beings, you know? [Laughs]. So I

don't think my friendships with the people that you've mentioned have aged out of their earlier relations. Our friendships are reciprocal, I would hope. At the same time--I think that I've always had a real bone in me that, instead of wanting to rehearse Oedipal dramas, I've always thought that homage was better than cutting the knees out under your elders. That's both been just an orientation I have, like a feeling I feel filled with most often is gratitude and respect and amazement, like, "Thank God for you," but it's also one that I think I've begun to perform more ostentatiously in so far as I think it leads away from paranoid and narcissistic approaches to people.

I think that--especially in the freedom book--I think that the fact that the work of liberation and emancipation is never finished and the fact that it will never finish so long as there are people, but that people can really feel like work that's left to be done--emancipatory work,whether it's like about your sex life or whether it's about your voting rights, whatever it is--because people can quickly feel like somebody should have done this for them, which can then bleed into "the people that came before me failed me," to me seems like a real souring, where there could be something else.

I decided--actually in the New York School book, long ago--I decided that I was going to write about people that I liked. It's not even that I can't do the opposite--the opposite is so easy for me, and I think for most people. It would just be so easy to write snappy take downs I just feel like it would be a waste of my intellect. But it's not that I don't do it every day, all day, internally. I just have kind of made a career decision that that's not--you know, I don't review books or things like that, really.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I love that about your work. I think that I share that sense very much. I work some stuff out in my poems, but it's not cutting someone down. It's really exposing my own jealousy or paranoia or some of those ugly feelings that I feel are important to include. But that's different from--I'm interested in the phenomenon of critics who write those reviews that are like, "It's not just

that I don't like Sylvia Plath, it's the end of literature!" I'm really interested, not interested in doing that, interested in what that means, like how somebody can get a critic so alarmed.

MAGGIE NELSON: Mm-hmm.

RACHEL ZUCKER: One other thing that I was thinking about--it's a small sample size and I don't want to essentialize--but unless I'm wrong, none of those mentors of yours had children. I was wondering about that, too. I was wondering about the work and the energy--even if it's done with a generosity and with energy--of mentorship. I was wondering, I was trying to think about, how for--and I don't really know for myself, which is why I'm asking you--how do you think it affects your relationship as a mentor, being a mother, and to what extent maybe did we get kind of lucky to have mentors who were not also parents?

[51:00]

MAGGIE NELSON: Right, they're more patient cause they're not like, "I do that at home. I don't need to do that here in the office."

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah! I've thought about this so much, about mentorship and motherhood and lineage and influence and homage, and I really do feel that to some extent, Wayne was one of the most helpful and loving and non-competitive of my mother's--in part, not entirely, but in part because he doesn't have children. I don't know if that's true. I'm also starting to feel--we were talking about this a little bit before we turned the recorder on--that it's a tough time for me to be teaching undergraduates when two of my children are undergraduates. Because I really love teaching, but there's something complicated about that same age group.

MAGGIE NELSON: [laughs] You're like triggered by their age group.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I really am. I really, really am. And I kinda feel like I should teach, like, preschool until my kids are older and then go back to teaching college.

MAGGIE NELSON: I can see that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I feel for myself--even though I can't articulate it yet--that being a mother has a pretty profound influence on my relationships, especially with graduate students.

MAGGIE NELSON: How would you describe it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean I definitely think that my graduate students and some of my undergraduates or younger poets expect a certain kind of care from me, or imagine that they can have something from me that's maternal in a certain way that I don't think I really expected, even of my mentors who were mothers. So that's interesting. I do not see that they expect the same kind of emotional labor from my male colleagues or from my colleagues that don't have children. I do think that I'm both more likely to get--I mean, this could just be the kind of person I am and have nothing to do with having children, but--a student who I care about, I care about quite quickly. It depends on so many factors. I have become more and more aware of--I've always had very good boundaries about the big stuff--but I'm more aware of having to have very clear boundaries, around emotional labor, in particular, when that energy is very depleted from my children.

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah. It's so fascinating. We could talk for a really long time about the matter. I think partly why I think it's fascinating is because I'm just of a lot of minds about it. A lot of this book about freedom is about the idea of care because freedom and care are often pitched as against, like, opposite to each other. Jacqueline Rose's book on mothers makes this really clear. When adequate care doesn't seem like it's provided by mothers in particular, there's a kind of sadism

that kicks in that is what you're describing. That can happen with students or it can happen in a lot of places.

I think most of my relationships--it was very important to me that I forge relationships that were really based on intellectual principles and my writing. I did not want--to me, the care was precisely the freedom from having it be a sphere of care understood in a more emotional level. I do see that that's changed a lot, and the reasons why I say I'm kind of all over the map about how I feel about it--and there's actually a part in the freedom book that's about this in particular called "Politics in Therapy," which is kind of taking "Bifo" Berardi's call that all the politics of the future will be therapy, and as I say in that book--which I'm sure you can relate to--when male professors say that, it has a lot more elan.

But I'm also interested in the fact that I think we also all can note that keeping good boundaries in a world devoted to eroding them is a great--can be a great--act of care. At the same time, the paltriness of what we call mental health services and the feeling of like, "I know! I'll get on the phone and dial extension nine four two and get you some help--" like, we all know what happens because we've all called nine four two or whatever. I know what it's like. We've all done that ourselves, and we get an intake exam like you described to me at the beginning of this show, and next thing you know, people are falling through space going "Actually there is no "Just call this number."" "There is no help for me." Wherein maybe there might've been something that the professor could have done or said that actually would have been the thing that would have been the helpful thing, which is different than it being the mental healthcare thing. So I'm really of a lot of minds about this at present.

I was talking to my therapist the other day, and I said something--I was actually talking about students and mental health issues--and I said something like what everyone says these days, which is like, "I'm not qualified to deal with these issues," but yet passing them off like I've just described is, like, we know we're just rinsing our hands. And then I said, "Why does it seem like there's so much more of this?" And then she said, "Well what if there is?" And it kind of really landed on

me as, like, instead of just thinking it's always been like this, now we just have 75,000 diagnostic codes, suddenly I was like, “Oh God. What if people really are melting down? In which case that's where Biof’s whole idea of, as he says, the therapy of the future will be helping each other come to happy adaptation when what he calls “a modern man” has been dissolved. I do think that there is an element of that happening everywhere.

And that’s why… I mean, I don't feel like therapy or mental health services are the right place for me to look. I mean, I'm interested in other forms of training about ways of demonstrating compassion for others that wouldn't necessarily move into that territory. But I think it's a very complicated question. Because here's the thing: working on an intellectual project with a student is really therapeutic, and you're kind of like, “You know what? Your life doesn't have to be dominated by these feelings that you're having at home and your anxiety. Like, actually, you got yourself here; you care deeply about this Victorianist issue and Heidegger's lens on it. Let's do it together.” Because that also shows us that there's a third thing that we can both care about together, and that caring about the third thing--I mean, this was kind of the thesis of *The Art of Cruelty*--creates a kind of solidarity that's not collapsed. It's actually like a scaffold that Arendt described as the table between two people that actually facilitates their capacity to be sitting together. The table announces that they're not squishing their bodies together, like the structural hold, like the Winnicottian embrace or something.

I'm kind of a deep believer in that. I mean, I know it only goes so far, but it's what I think I have to offer. But again, it might not be what all students want. Some students need and want something else.They probably won't find it with me, but there are also a lot of different kinds of professors, and God knows there a lot of them that are willing to transgress their boundaries [laughs]. I think the fear I had of transgressing a boundary was very large, coming up as a student. I think it's really complicated now, where it's almost like both sides of the student-teacher relationship have a lot of anxiety about that, when in some ways, I just feel like the path to me of what we should be doing seems pretty golden and clear.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What are some of the other ways--I mean, you just said one--about really engaging in a shared intellectual pursuit or supporting a student in their intellectual endeavor, which I think is so deeply profound! We both know that, in some circumstances, with some students, recommending the right book is better than a year of therapy.

[1:00:08]

MAGGIE NELSON: Absolutely.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But what are some of the other ways--other than therapy and other than that kind of intellectual scaffolding--are you thinking about in terms of demonstrating care or compassion?

MAGGIE NELSON: I think just, like, becoming a more sane and mature person can involve becoming less reactive to other people. You're able to listen to them more, even when they're saying things that you find totally objectionable or whatever, and you're suspending your own reactivity. I think that that can be a great gift. I think it's really tempting, especially, like, say you go round and you're doing a lot of Q and A's, and you're familiar with some of the same questions, the same kind of gotcha! question. I did a Q and A with Sarah Lucas, the artist, the other day--people can watch it on The Hammer, YouTube, whatever. It was so brilliant and so moving, and I learned so much, where, after the presentation, in our conversation, somebody asked the kind of money shot question that's always asked, which is kind of like, "Given that the world's going to hell and we're dancing on the ship of the Titanic, how can you sit here and talk about your little sculptures and not be talking about these broader things?" Essentially, "How can you live with yourself?"

And you know, she just--it was affect-like. It was a classic, confrontational Q and A thing, but nothing about her being took it in as an attack. She just said, “Oh, you know, that's so interesting!” She was like, “I think that kind of question is precisely what you should answer about your art!” Like, “That's exactly the question you should put to yourself about what you're making.” She was like, “I'm going to answer in my own way. I make what I make,” but she was like, “That is such a good question for you.” But even the way I'm saying it now makes it sound more confrontational. It was just totally good-spirited. The reason why was because Sarah is that kind of person, so it didn't land and engage a whole defensive reactive thing. It made so much space. It completely defused the room. Because as that person was talking--I think the person began by saying something like, “No offense, and with all due respect,” and so of course everyone in the room had become really clenched because we knew that they were about to unload.

Just little things like that, they just teach me so much. I mean, they're just like with your own kids or anybody, we're so ready to teach and lecture and tell and react, with our partners or whoever. People come home and tell us something, and just the way we react to everybody, just rearranging oneself so that you're not in these rote modalities. It’s just a little teeny microcosm, but watching what happened to the energy in that room when Sarah met that with this like kind of huge sunlight was just totally, not only transformative, but I think her answer was also correct, which is like, “Yeah, we can't control what each other do. We can help each other get to thinking about what we all might want to do or what we should do, but that's not the same as telling each other what to do.” So I think it's somehow--I don't know if I'm like making any sense, but--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh my God, so much so. I was thinking about a few different things. One is that I've seen Claudia Rankine respond to questions--I wouldn't call it with sunlight, but--with that quality of a non-reactivity that really is just astonishing to me. Now that you said that, it's obviously, all of a sudden, so clear to me. I think that's part of what's making teaching complicated and somewhat painful for me right now. Particularly--and maybe you've had this experience with your

stepson--for me, particularly the teenage years and parenting--because the demands of younger children for me were logistical and physical and emotional, but not emotional in the sense that I felt I really lost my ability have a healthy level of reactivity. At a certain point, every reaction, I just think I felt so responsible for every emotion that my kids were feeling in their struggles. This question around control, which I wasn't doing with other people.

[1:05:15]

MAGGIE NELSON: Well, that's the problem with the kids! They are the most painful teachers of these things because we don't control them, but we have a responsibility for them, which is distinct from what we have for our graduates, from our students, for other adult human beings and stuff. You can't just say, “Hey man, hope you figure this out.” It's like, they're looking to you being like--

RACHEL ZUCKER: [laughs] “Good luck with that!”

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah, no, you can’t! And also, worse, you reap what you sow. So you also see in their behaviors a million things that you feel as though you put there.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yup.

MAGGIE NELSON: That's incredibly painful, you know? I feel like that's why--you can call it spiritual work, whatever you want to call it--I feel like I don't even do it for myself. I do it because I just keep thinking, the better I can do with some of this stuff, even if it's just one grain less of sand I put in my kids satchel, that's worth it. I say the one grain less because I think it can feel very all or nothing. Like you can feel like you fucked him up or you did it right. It can't be that; it isn't that, but I think as a parent, that's how it feels sometimes.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you have a spiritual practice right now?

MAGGIE NELSON: I mean...ish, you know? Do you?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I sort of take them up and then go through a whole drama around whether I failed at them, which is totally not the point of a spiritual practice. I did do a mindfulness-based stress reduction program, last January this past January, for nine weeks. I really, really loved the teacher and felt like it was very much about what we're talking about--noticing but not necessarily trying to fix or change. It got complicated for me--without going off on a tangent--but I was like, “Wow, this is the first time in my life that I'm really able to meditate!” I've always fought it and kind of suffered through it, but I was like, “I'm getting it. This is not always easy, but I get it.” And then I discovered that I was severely anemic [laughs].

MAGGIE NELSON: Oh wow.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I really actually think that the anemia was--

MAGGIE NELSON: Like you were tired?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I was. I had lost so much blood, which is why I ended up having the hysterectomy. But I think that I didn't have enough iron in my blood to be anxious.

MAGGIE NELSON: Then your iron came back and your anxiety and inability to meditate came back. [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Absolutely. Exactly. I was like, “Oh, this is so sad.” But in any case, while you were talking, this same teacher, Elaine Retholtz, who I really admire, in part because she is--this sounds like a not nice thing to say--but she's so clear and in a way, not maternal at all. That's very helpful to me in this context. She's offering a class on loving kindness meditations, and I'm thinking about taking that and trying to start some sort of meditative practice.

MAGGIE NELSON: How old are you?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Forty-seven.

MAGGIE NELSON: Okay. So we're the same age. I don't have any grand insight about this moment, but I definitely do feel like I'm at a crossroads where it's like--the freedom book I think ended up making this excruciatingly clear, which is kind of like--liberatory project often can feel like a young person's sport because by the time you get to midlife, you're pretty aware that you're trapped in this body and you're trapped in this mortality and you're trapped in this lifetime. You're trapped in history, and all of that is not going to change. And earlier, more juvenile notions of emancipation are patently unavailable and uninteresting and impossible. Given that what you spend the first half of your life thinking--like, you know, my dad died when he was 40, and I was like, “I don't want to die when I'm 40!” But then after I felt like I succeeded, then suddenly I was like, “But shit, I'm still going to die. I made it but it didn't solve the problem.”

[1:10:53]

So I feel like there's a grand crossroads of as you head into more and more forms of entrapment--from Alzheimer's to whatever it might be for you, and you know it will be something--I think I understand now--when I was younger I couldn't understand why all older people weren't more like John Cage or something, like why they didn't just seem more free. Now I feel like having seen my inlaws

through to their ends and my own aging parents, you just see physiologically how much more the anxiety is part of aging, and the anxiety can, if you don't counter it, can just blossom and bloom and continue. Because as you decline physically and/or mentally, your body will produce feelings of great anxiety and response to a world that you're frightened of. So it just feels like a grand crossroads that like you either figure out some methodologies by which you don't want to just let that happen to you or become more and more of a basket case, agoraphobic, or worried about people taking your money, or whatever it is.

I think I always imagined that you would have less and less to worry about, but your bonds to the living deepen, and your care for your children just becomes more and more excruciating. So the idea of escape, you're just like, “Oops, that was a fantasy and now it's gone. So what am I going to do next?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right! There was so much possibility. What kind of person am I going to be? Will I have children? Will I not have children? Oh, now I have children. What kind of people will they be? And not to say that everything is set in stone. But there is this real feeling that I have of like, “How did I get here? Is this the life that I wanted?” I think it's very hard to change, at least for me. I find it harder and harder to imagine a big change that wouldn't hurt the people that I love, which I don't want to do.

MAGGIE NELSON: Like, changes in like your material circumstance, like money, like where you live or who you cohabitate with, or just all that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I mean, like, I could cut my hair, [laughs] which I did, and it turns out it did have an effect, interestingly, a small effect, but not that much. Or I can try to write a totally different kind of book, and everybody's like, “Oh, it's just a Rachel Zucker book,” you know? [laughs].

It's hard to change because you have to drag people with you, and they may not want to change. Like, a very small thing, but, I've been really wanting to move for a long time, but without a job offer or where would I move? I don't know. We're trying to think about maybe taking a sabbatical, if my husband can get one, and going outside of the United States, but my 12 year old doesn't want that at all. That's the worst thing he can imagine. He's at a point in his life where he just has independence. He can see his friends, and he doesn't want to go away from his cohort. That's awful in his mind. So we might force him to do it, and we might not, but I guess that's what I'm saying.

And obviously, my teenagers--one's not even a teenager anymore--but they have so much life ahead of them, and yet, they are who they are. They're not going to suddenly be happy-go-lucky people. Not in the cards right now or maybe ever. And those are the kids I have. These are the circumstances I have, whatever I do next.

I've lived in New York for a really long time, and I didn't raise my children in the country. I didn't have a relationship with nature. All those things. Sometimes I think 90% of my thoughts and feelings are just developmental. It's hard for people to see like, "Oh yeah, those are mid-forties feelings, or late-forties feelings with the same kind of variation," but not that much variation, the way most kids walk around one and talk around two. Maybe these kinds of questions, which seem so existentially fraught for me, are just the questions of the mid- to late-forties.

[1:15:00]

MAGGIE NELSON: It's painful too because--this comes up mostly in the book; I just wrote in the sexual freedom chapter about the #metoo stuff. I really wanted to think about how do we honor--that sounds so cheesy, but I'll just let myself say it--how do we honor the wisdom that comes at different moments in life and not have this intergenerational warfare issue but at the same time fully know that it's not like the things you know later are not the things you knew earlier, and that both

states of knowing are important. I mean, one of the theses of that chapter is like, certain political conditions about sexual freedom are definitely achievable, whether it's like Roe v. Wade or contraception or different things. And you can try and make a populace and raise boys, as we both have done, with different gestalt, in terms of sexual activity. But you know, no one's gonna figure out your body for you. No one's going to figure out sexual mistakes and sexual experiments, and it does not always go well.

I think there's something about that process, like any painful process in life--again, I'm not saying you can't make it better--but it can't be really made-- it can be made easier, and some of the deepest traumas we can try and shave off at all ends. But it's something that you have to--it literally is your body, to figure out as you go along. I just think some of that just takes time and, not repetition of the same scenario, but many years of exposure to different scenarios for you to gather whatever information you need to get about a lot of things. It's not transmittable, I'm trying to say, from one generation to the next. But, you know, life is not transmittable. I mean, the seed of it is transmittable but not the experience of it.

So when your kids say to you, “You have no idea,” they are correct because we don't--we do know, but we don't know. They are knowing anew, and that is what their business is, and that's exactly what they should be doing. You can't transmit it to them. I mean, we wish we could, but then life would be moribund. As an exercise, we would just be going through the motions with no discovery.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That leads me to this question that I don't know how to ask as a question, so I'm going to try to just talk about it for a second.

MAGGIE NELSON: Okay, great.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So one of the things that I've been thinking about when listening to you talk on interviews and looking at your books again and thinking about your work and some of the things that I identify with, and then also being really interested and curious about some of the differences that I see between our

work, I was trying to think “Are these aesthetic differences?” And I was like, “No, that's not the right word.” I feel that you and I have similar minds in certain ways. I see in your work this desire, curiosity, almost compulsion to look at things from many, many, many different angles, to turn it around and turn it around and turn it around, starting through observation, through description, and then contemplation, and then moving to an idea, rather than, as we were mentioning before, these books that are like argument books. Even if your books have a less close relationship to the “I,” they're not, argument books in that same way. With all of your work, I really have this feeling that everything you were reading, everything you were doing, the people you were with, the place that you lived, the circumstances around the making of the book go into the book, whether they're named or not, and often they are named.

That's something that I think I feel really drawn to also, like, including--whether it's the domestic or the interruption of the children. So this is something that I identify with that I recognize. Wayne helped me think about your work. He had a phrase that I can't even remember, because his language is just, like--

MAGGIE NELSON: --incandescent?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes! But it was something about your relationship to lucidity. It's always a very bad idea to paraphrase Wayne, much better to quote him. I can't find it. But that you are really a genius in untangling things or--disentanglement I think was the word that he used--your relationship to clarity and lucidity. And I think that to some extent, I am really the opposite. I'm turning it around and I'm turning it around and then it sort of just stays a big old mess.

[1:20:38]

MAGGIE NELSON: Intentionally, do you feel like for yourself? Or, that’s the question, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. If I have a question. [laughs] Because I think that there are some advantages, or, not advantages, but a lot of the comments that I've had on my most recent book are like, “You notice so many things at once, and you're putting them all in the book.” Some people are really interested in that, but I think it's pretty overwhelming, both the experience of it for me and then the reading of it. If anything, it has, I think, the feeling of re-entanglement or further entanglement. I do think I have built a political justification around this, but I actually wonder if it's just temperamental.

MAGGIE NELSON: Does it happen in every medium, in every genre that you write? Like is it specific to poetry?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm trying to really finish, finish, finish this book of lectures that I wrote. That is really hard for me. One of the issues that I'm having with Wave is that it's too long. I don't know how to write a short book. If anything, this has gotten worse and worse for me as I've gone along. To some extent,I kind of feel like no one should just read one of my books. They should read all of them, which of course I'm not actually suggesting, but that's the feeling that I have, that all the things are connected. It's very hard for me to say one thing or to separate. There's almost grief around that. Like if I'm writing about this, it means I'm not writing about that. And if I'm saying it in this one way--and I think that my poems have gotten longer and longer and turned into prose. My prose has gotten longer and longer. And then if I'm writing about a subject, I feel compelled to call attention to the form that I'm choosing to write about anything, and why am I choosing that form and what does that mean?

MAGGIE NELSON: Sounds great!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I dunno. But I guess I feel like you have this incredible complexity of thought and of bringing things together, but the forms that then manifest--like especially with *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*, but with all of your books--there's a lot of space for the reader to breathe, to think, to engage your complexity, but also not feel like they are also having a nervous breakdown. I think

a little bit at this moment I regret--but I don't think there's something I can change--that my most recent book is kind of like a roller coaster ride through like anxiety land. Why?

MAGGIE NELSON: I think everybody feels… think that your writing summons a kind of hologram of what it is not. What it is not. I find lucidity in prose so onerous that there's always a moment at which part of my brain starts being like, "The next book is going to be gobbledygook, like dada word salad." Or I start reading Beckett and I'll just be like, "I'm just going to write monologues that are totally impenetrable." I get like a real desperate thirst for fugitive meaning. So I think that's very natural to also look at what other people do. I wrote a review recently of Fred Moten's book *Black and Blur* and that review was really hard to write. As I said in the first paragraph--which I only bring up because it was about lucidity--was like that I felt like it was such a fool's errand that I was going to try and be lucid about somebody's work that was really set up in a joyful way as a series of booby traps around the laser point of disentanglement or something.

[1:25:15]

So I think, sadly, as we've been discussing, we all are who we are. My mother has a company called Nelson Communications where she teaches business writing and bullet point communication and really grew up always telling me to get to the point or correcting my grammar. There's something in me that just also has that, as a capacity or a desire. I think that what you're describing about seeing things through a lot of lenses makes my first drafts of things--or whatever you want to call it, the 10th draft that somebody sees as the first draft-- it always is the same case. I already know that the two flaws that are going to be cited are it being overcited, too many other people talking and I'm hedging on what I want to say by representing too many people's arguments. I already know that that's what I do.

I think it's interesting because some people write really strong polemics that people say, "Oh, it's a little totalizing. Maybe you should back up a little bit." I know that I

don't start there, and I know that strong moments in my writing have to be achieved. I don't begin with them at all. That could be like my gender conscription; it could be many things. It could be positive things about my endless openness to varying viewpoints. But it definitely is something that I have to work on in the writing because I don't like--I mean, I like other people's polemical writing. Usually with myself, if it's not very earned what I've come to, it strikes my ear as so tinny as to be unreadable. So it really has to be performative. It has to be performative in a way where I'm confident that the performance of the strong statement is still hitting, like you say, a kind of multi-chord when it says what it's saying. I don't want it to hit one chord. So that is a very long and complicated writing drama.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That's so interesting. I think what I love so much about your work is that it's clear but not simplified. There can be such a violence of something that is stated authoritatively, or singularly, but there's also such a pleasure and such a strength in that. This draft that you just finished of the freedom book--does it have a title, by the way?

MAGGIE NELSON: No, not yet.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, I'll just call it the freedom book. How much do you think it's gonna change by the time it actually gets to be published? Either in terms of less citing, less hedging, or something else. Is Jeff Shotts the one who ends up really getting it from where it is to where it needs to be? Do you have another editor who is the person? Or is it more like you turned it into him--I don't know if he's the person that you work with there, but--

MAGGIE NELSON: No, it's Ethan Nosowsky.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so you turned it into Ethan and then is he gonna be like "Maggie, you know what needs to happen, do it?"

MAGGIE NELSON: My experience with editors is that they can diagnose problems but they can't offer solutions, so I don't really look to the editor to solve anything for me. My partner just wrote a book, which is really great, and it's coming out in March, so I've been going through his own editing process with him. I've told him many times because he'll be like, “Do I have to take this?” I'll say like, “I see what your editor's saying, but I don't agree with what he said as a solution.” And I think the editors just offer solutions cause they gotta like feel like they're doing something. They're earning their keep. But I think that they also know that they're not the person with the hat that the rabbit's gonna come out of. They can’t.

[1:30:08]

Often I'll agree, like, if we circle the same section, then I'll be like, “Yeah, that section is a mess.” But I think it's fine to turn in something that is flawed, at least in this book's case. A lot of my books I don't turn in for a very long time after every smart friend of mine has helped me and I've re-edited it a million times. I have to prove that the book, the books--like, a book like *Jane*, if it's not working, someone's gonna faultily say that it's not working because what I'm trying to do with the form is not possible. But I just didn't make it work yet. They're going to diagnose it as a formal problem, but it's not.

My partner who does a lot of video art talks about a lot how--and I've seen how it's true--like editing timing in a piece of video art, just milliseconds make something either funny or not funny, you know?

But in a book like this, like a big critical book, things won't change. We're not gonna change the topics. We might rearrange the chapters, but I don't mind handing it in baggy and loose because I think at a certain point with critical writing--critical writing is kind of weird because I think in part it can be a little bit

like a service where you are like, “Hey you might not know what Chakrabarti had to say about the notion of human freedom and its relation to carbon, so let me pause for two paragraphs to explain this to you,” while you're trying to get to your thesis, what you want to say about that and you don't really know… you've lost track of how much of your description is just super in the weeds.

Or someone will just be like “I have no clue what you're talking about. You need to go like three paragraphs more into this.” But I feel like I don't... I sometimes just lose track, and I also lose track of what ideas are interesting. I have certain ideas, I think, because I think that that book will be--like, each chapter right now is about eighty pages. I think they'll each be about fifty or sixty, and it's just a matter of whacking out--it's not that there is a thing I'm trying to get myself to say that I won't say, but it's like I'm still searching for--it might not be strongly stated enough because I'm worried that I don't have quite the right tone. Some of the things in this book are pretty--not what I'm saying is controversial, but the subjects are really heated.

I think a lot of contemporary writing can do too much hedging. But on the other hand, there's--what am I trying to say? *The Argonauts* was kind of trying to do this too. Sometimes more provocative arguments are much easier to take if they're embedded in something that shows how much you care about the issues that are at stake, that you’re not just coming in from some ignorant, reactionary place being like, “this whole thing is a pile of shit!” like so much writing these days that critiques like so-called leftist or progressive trends or habits of mind. So I think it’s like to spend enough time laboring with your care.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Have you been writing poems?

MAGGIE NELSON: No, I haven’t written a poem for, I don’t know, 10 years or something.

RACHEL ZUCKER: How do you feel about that?

MAGGIE NELSON: I don't care anymore. I cared for a while, but I just don't care anymore because it's been so long. I think I would like to--actually Wayne has always told me that “If you want to write poetry, you have to keep reading poetry.” I think the less you read poetry, it's kind of like--it can be very swift when I read great poetry to have the urge to write something poetry-like. I think that what you're describing about getting further into the murk, I think the really great poetry can really do that. But I think, for me, it was just beginning to serve as more of an escape hatch. Like where I could feel that if it sounded good enough, I didn't have to think any further through. That, to me, seemed not intellectually a compelling place to be. So I think I would have to somehow find that it sounded good enough and was the best of my thought at the same time. I think it's very clichéd, but the closest I've been to writing poetry have been strong events--witnessing death, things that like that, that you feel like it's kind of a violation to render in prose or something, but not daily poetry. What about you? Do you fall away from poetry?

[1:35:14]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, I keep trying not to write poetry, and I very much do not think of my recent book as poetry, but in part because I published it with Wave--

MAGGIE NELSON: It gets taught as--

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. But poet friends of mine have also said--like, Craig Teischer-- ”But you are a poet, and it is poetry, in part because of this quality of making the form as much what happened as anything else. But yeah, I have a very love, hate, hate, hate relationship right now with poetry. I've read Sarah Vap’s new book in manuscript and then when it just came out. Is that poetry? It's not not poetry, that's for sure. That book is extremely meaningful to me, in part because you have the experience of interruptibility, of the relationship between child and parent, between this political urgency that's played out only in the domestic sphere.

I don't think that she could have rendered that in nonfiction without it seeming extremely heavy-handed somehow. I don't really even know how, what that would look like. But the book is not in lines, and it's not doing the thing with language that poetry usually does, which I'm grateful for it not doing.

I think I'm gravitating towards forms that are hybrid, whatever that means, or genre-nonconforming. I've just read Anne Boyer's new book, *The Undying*. Every single page, I was like, "Oh, can I just--" to whoever was around--"Can I just read you this one thing?" That's not poetry is it? But it also is clearly from a poet's mind. I guess I would say that about a lot of your work too. I don't know that that's what I have accomplished. I think what I set out to accomplish, and I think what I'm really most drawn to right now, in my life, is not-poetry, from a poet's mind, whatever that means.

I think the problem sometimes is, when it's done well and when it's marketed properly, it appeals to poets and non-poets. When it's not, it's just confusing to everybody. Poets are like, "What is this? It's not poetry." And people who would read creative nonfiction and weird prose are like, "I think that might be poetry, and I don't like poetry. The only thing I know about poetry is I don't like it." Has any of the freedom book been published anywhere?

MAGGIE NELSON: No, no, no. It's all just in my hot silver box here. It's weird. My partner's always making fun of me because he's like, "You're such an exhibitionist, and you're just the most secretive writer." He makes sculpture--he writes too--but he'll be like, "Come to the studio; check out the new resin," and then I'll be like, "Okay, are you sure you want me to see it? It's not done." He'll be like, "Whatever, I just want you to see this new coat. We have a second." I'm just so the opposite, and I've always really felt that very strongly. A lot of it's just utterly self-protective. I don't want to hear what anyone has to say until I've solved this problem myself. So yeah, no, nothing anywhere.

RACHEL ZUCKER: All right, well, on that, do you have any questions for me?

MAGGIE NELSON: Are you still doing doula work, or do you not do that anymore?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I haven't, and I sort of have mixed feelings about that. The last birth I went to I think was about five, six years ago. I miss it a lot, in some ways. Mostly what happened was that my husband started teaching high school full time, and I just didn't have backup. I couldn't say, “Hey, I have to be at a birth for three days, you take the kids.” Because he couldn't do it. I think things also changed when I was nursing Judah, so like ten to twelve years ago. I had a tough time doing that kind of work and being apart from him for a long period of time. And then, I also didn't really want to only do home births, or certain kinds of births. That did not appeal to me.

[1:40:50]

But I did feel to some extent that when I was hospital births, I was kind of unwittingly supporting a system that I felt like--like, I was sort of there to give a woman the birth that she thought she wanted that she couldn't get in the hospital without a doula. But I was kind of like, “There's something not quite right about this.” So I stopped doing it, and I did a childbirth education certification, which is actually one of the most intensive educational experiences. You have to know anatomy and physiology and a lot, a lot of stuff. It was a very intensive program, and I did it also in part because I was like, “Oh, it's going to be better for me at that stage of my parenting to teach classes and also I'll be interacting with parents, in this more intellectual way, um less hands on but in a way that maybe is going to be more meaningful in certain ways at times. that I can control so that I can be home.” And then I didn't actually end up teaching childbirth ed classes for a lot of reasons.

MAGGIE NELSON: You teach at NYU?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm an adjunct at NYU, which is wearing thin.

MAGGIE NELSON: For a long time, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. So I think I might be ready to do something totally different.

MAGGIE NELSON: Are you going to move to the country?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I don't know. I either need to move and then get a whole new job or get a whole new job or get a whole new job and move or something. I don't know. We'll see.

MAGGIE NELSON: Yeah. Interesting!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Anything else?

MAGGIE NELSON: No, unless you have any burning questions!

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm sure I'm going to think of one as soon as we turn off the microphone, but--

[music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: You have been listening to episode 82 of Commonplace with Maggie Nelson. This episode was produced by me, Doreen Wang, Christine Larusso, and the newest member of the Commonplace team, Jay Hammond. Katie Fernelius, we miss you. We adore you, and we wish you well on all your reporting and writing and audio adventures.

Many thanks to Wave Books, Graywolf, University of Iowa Press, Soft Skull, Zed Books, and W.W. Norton for donating books to the Commonplace Book Club. Thank you to Beyond Baroque for hosting Sarah Vap and me in your beautiful reading space and for allowing us to share the audio with our Patrons. Thank you to all of our Patrons. You make Commonplace possible. Thank you for recommending Commonplaceto students and friends and for writing us reviews on iTunes and for sending us encouraging emails and social media messages. Thank you to all the therapists and psychiatrists who have been working with me and my sons. And to all of you, who are, in your parenting, friendships, professional and personal lives, caring for others.