8.3 Aspire to Magic but End Up With Madness: Adam Ehrlich Sachs speaks with Sunny Yudkoff (JP)

Transcript

John Plotz

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. Season eight is directed by Chris Holmes and Emily Hyde, and I'm your host today, John Plotz of the Brandeis English Department. So loyal listeners know that we bring you dialogues between the most fascinating critics and novelists around, and today, our critic, who is a proud member of the Society of Novel Studies Governing Board, is Professor Sunny Yudkoff of the University of Wisconsin Department of German, Nordic, and Slavic. Her *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing* was published with Stanford University Press, and she's currently at work on her second monograph, *Against Jewish Humor: Towards a Theory of Yiddish Joy*. And I just recently had the opportunity to read her piece about the joys of Yiddish, and totally fascinating, Sunny. I really can't wait to see how that book turns out. Sunny's joined today by the Boston-born novelist and Pittsburgh-dwelling Adam Sachs. His most recent novel, which I read with great pleasure, is this year's *Gretel and the Great War*. Earlier works include 2016's *Inherited Disorders: Stories, Parables & Problems*. Simon Rich said, “if Kafka and Louis C.K. were to join forces.” And his second—

Adam Ehrlich Sachs

An outdated blurb.

JP

True! Well, they could still join forces. [laughter] And his second, *The Organs of Sense*, which tells the story of Leibniz's trip to visit an eyeless astronomer, appeared in 2018. Short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* (Adam, I really love “The Philosophers,”) in *N+1* and also *Harper's*. And he was a finalist for the Believer Book Award and the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish literature. So all of these kudos and these impressive publications inside, Adam has one more great claim of being here today, which is that he's close friends with Sunny. So looking back to the earliest days of *Novel Dialogue*, thinking about Helen Garner talking with Elizabeth McMahon and Orhan Pamuk talking with his friend of three decades, Bruce Robbins, we have always really treasured and specialized in conversations that are defined by that sort of trust and amity, as well as perspicacity. I think we have that all in spades today. And I'm going to now recede graciously into the background, leaving the floor open to Adam and to Sunny.

Sunny Yudkoff

Thanks, John, and thanks, Adam, for being here. I'm looking forward to reading together, thinking together. And we have a chance to talk about your newest novel, *Gretel and the Great War*, which, like all of your work, is delightfully frightening. It's a text that gnaws at you and unfolds as you read it. I thought we could start today with you opening up the novel for us, and I'd invite you to read the preface.

AES

Good. Thank you for having me here. Yeah, so this is the first page.

"In November, 1919, a mute young woman was found wandering the streets of Vienna. She was handed over to the care of a neurologist who wrote up her case in an issue of *Nervenkranheiten.* No lesion, he concluded, could explain her condition, nothing organic, only a childhood deprived of language. Since she could not say who she was or what had happened to her, he welcomed correspondence from anyone with information about her past. He received a single response from a patient at a Corinthian sanatorium who claimed to be her father. The girl's name, the man wrote, is Margareta, Gretel, and her childhood, whatever its privations, hardly lacked for language. Indeed, until his present confinement put an end to it, he used to tell her a bedtime story each and every night. He wrote now only to resume that cherished ritual. The doctor was asked to read her the enclosed story titled "A: The Architect." She would understand it. The next day brought another story, "B: The Ballet Master," and the next day another, "C: The Choir Master," until there were 26 of them. Then they stopped, and the man wasn't heard from again. Whether the neurologist read her these stories, whether she understood them, whether she ever acquired the faculty of speech, not known. The letters were later sent on to Dr. Hans Princehorn, presumably in hopes of their inclusion in his celebrated collection of the art of the mad. Evidently, Princehorn found them unsuitable. They turned up in his archives some 80 years later."

SY

Thanks, Adam. And I hesitated to summarize the novel because so much of the novel gets summarized right in this opening preface, right? We have all the information we need. A young girl is found. She does not speak. She's wandering around Vienna. And then, throughout the rest of the novel, we sort of toggle across this geography, Vienna, the Corinthian mountains, broadly conceived German-speaking Central Europe. So to start our conversation, I wondered if you could tell us about what intrigues you about this time and place.

AES

To use a Freudian term, it's a little bit overdetermined. This is my second straight book about the Habsburg Empire, which is probably a mistake for any commercial considerations, especially in America. But for one thing, my family is from German-speaking Central Europe. My mom's family is from Prague and before that from the Sudetenland area. So, German-speaking

Bohemia. That's kind of always where my imagination goes to. Nothing around me, nothing in Pittsburgh or in Boston, has ever sort of—I think I wrote some
stories in my first collection about my surroundings. And maybe at some point, I'll have to go back there just because I'm a little exhausted. But yeah, America doesn't do it for me.

I keep going back to Central Europe. I also just like the books from there, Kafka and Thomas Bernhard, who unfortunately is a bit of an Albatross around my neck and all sorts of other, and Wittgenstein and, you know, the people from Habsburg, late Habsburg writers are the people I go to, the sort of tradition I'm like, you know, belatedly, very forcefully trying to insert myself into for no reason. Yeah. So I think those are the sort of, like, things that were in the background. I was also more specifically in like, turn of the century Vienna. I sort of wanted to set a book here for a while. And so I consider myself a bit of a dilettante. I studied some science and I did a bit of a History of Science PhD and quit it. And I've dabbled in a bunch of fields without learning too much about any of them. And I like that in 1910 Vienna, all the fields were in sort of weirdly close contact in a way that they're totally not now. So Wittgenstein was reading, Boltzmann, the physicist, Schoenberg was influenced by Karl Kraus, journalist, etc. I mean, everyone—the disciplinary boundaries that we have now are just, like, not operative then in some way. And so they're all reading each other, they're all sort of like hating each other, gossiping about each other, sleeping with each other. And, and they're all sort of obsessively, are—the good ones were doing this, were sort of ruthlessly criticizing their own fields in a similar way of sort of like, and it was all this, sort of these, like, language criticism questions, what—you know, the, the methods and the linguistic methods that we've used in our fields in music or in philosophy that we've grown comfortable with—they're actually completely meaningless. It's the sort of, like, positivist thing that struck all of them at once. And they all started sort of, like, hacking away at their fields and reducing it to sort of, like, childlike simplicity.

SY

What about the recourse to the fairy tale? *Gretel and the Great War*, we're in the world of “Hansel and Gretel,” we're in the world of Grimm, we're in that, that German speaking world of national myth-making. What—how did the form of the fairy tale get you going for this novel?

AES

I really like fairy tales, folktales, parables, kind of one big genre, I mean, the German fairy tales, but also the Arabian Nights and the biblical stories. There's something about the incredible economy and especially the, the thing I value most in a piece of writing is a sense of inevitability and like a headlong, like, lockstep motion towards the end. And in most novels these days, I, like, I don't feel that at all. There's, and I, they do seem completely foreign to me. There's, like, a lot of chit chat, and any—and, like, things could go any which way, but I like the feeling in a, in a fairy tale, or also—and I think a lot of writers that I like are basically doing fairy tales, like Kleist, I do think is a kind of fairy tale writer, or Voltaire. And they all have this sense that you, you sort of get on this conveyor belt and it is just like sweeping you along, like one thing to another, but everything is all part of one, sort of, like, unfolding—

JP

Can I ask if you connect that inevitability that you just described, which is formal or narrative, (we talk to lots of novelists and we think about that question of formal entailment or providential design) but do you connect that to the way in which at certain historical moments, it seems as if the suit—you know, the contingency and possibility and, like, the openness of how any historical event might occur is replaced by a sense of--this is a time when something really bad *is* going to happen?

AES

Yeah, I think definitely, at least in this book that became, I think that's where like, content meant form in some way, that the headlongness of those stories and the headlongness of the, like, march to war definitely came together. And I don't know if that was by design, but, sort of as, as it came along and I realized that's where it was going, those were definitely sort of twin, or, the same concern. Definitely. Yeah.

SY

Could you tell us a little more about how you think that concern has evolved over your writing? I'm thinking here in your first book, it's 117 parables and anecdotes and 117 is the willfully unremarkable number. There's, there's nothing you can see that there's 117 of, I don't know, except for the number of stories in your work.

AES

I own that number.

SY

Yeah. Yeah. So maybe that's it. But as opposed to *Gretel and the Great War*, which proceeds alphabetically, right? So you know, when you get to Z, that the novel is going to end, and the reader knows that they will come to the end as soon as we hit Z.

AES

Well, one way, I think I've only, well, I've written three books, so I shouldn't say how I get into a novel, but there's usually some sort of, like, formal thing that comes first of like a shape or formal problem. And what it was at the most basic level for this is I wanted to figure out how to combine my first two books. The first of which was, as you say, just like an endless stream of unconnected, very short stories. And then the second of which was a proper novel. Well, I don't know about proper, but these nested stories, a coherent thing. But in the first book, I missed that. It was fun to write, but I there wasn't that satisfying feeling at the end of tying something

up. I just went until I could not write another one of those fucking stories. And then the second one, I liked having to make 300 pages or whatever it was cohere. But I missed there, there's, I was complaining about chattiness and there was a lot of, there was, I missed that the compression that I could have in the, in the first one. So for this book, I wanted, I was thinking of a kind of like modular, uh, feel to it, something like Calvino or [Georges] Perec, something where I could write short pieces, but have them fit into a, a single architecture that would have a, so like, you know, I, I always cite *If on a Winter's Night, a Traveler*, even though I've never actually finished that book, I have to say, but I still like it as a—and Perec too, by the way, *Life: A User's Manual* is like always in my head, but I don't really like it. I like it well enough. But formally I really liked them and I think about them and that was what I wanted here. So I did want, unlike that first book of a single through line, but with the freedom page by page to be as short or, uh, speedy as I wanted.

JP

There's something really contingent and arbitrary about just A through Z, you know, which is different from, you know, the great arc of, you know, *Middlemarch* or something, like, realist novels have an order in which, which is entirely internally consistent and satisfying in its own right, which I think is what you're saying, seems kind of baffling or off-putting or something., But the A through Z structure is somehow at once orderly and like ridiculously arbitrary at the same time.

AES

Yeah. A fake, a fake order, an artificial order that doesn't actually provide order. And it occurs to me also as you were speaking that when I was talking about this logical sequence of events that I'm looking for. Like Kleist in [his novella] *Michael Kohlhass*, it's not actually logical, what happened, you know, it's, there's wild swings of caprice and crazy things happen. It just, somehow the style makes incredible randomness feel logically compelled. A story that is actually logically compelled would be completely uninteresting.

JP

Your point about Georges Perec totally makes sense to me. Like, I have the same response that you do to *Life: A User's Manual* and the one I really like is *W, or*...the something—

AES

The Memory of Childhood?

JP

Yeah, which is actually an odd number. Like it has an extra chapter that shouldn't be there. Like it deliberately deforms its own structure. Or like, you know, that there's a Dr. Scary [Seuss]

book, *On Beyond Zebra!* “My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!” you know, it's like extra letters beyond 26. (Maybe your kid would like it. It's a great book.)

AES

Yeah.

JP

But I like your point that there's a kind of innate illogicality in the seeming logicality of that one.

AES

Yeah. Yeah. No, that's helpful for me too.

SY

I wanted to offer my general perspective on, on children's books, books for children, so there's two types. There are types that are trying to teach a lesson and there are types that are trying to teach you how to manage your feelings. And I want to—

AES

Wait, what about the nonsense? What about the non, the non-didactic ones? They don't make them anymore, but there used to be.

JP

Yeah. There's a lot of, there's a lot of joy in, in empty babble, I think, like *On Beyond Zebra!*, you know?

SY

Okay. So then, then Adam, what type of, if your book is a children's book, what type is it?

AES

Well, even as I was, you know, I've had rants in our house about the current state of children's books, which I think are, like, very, tend to be didactic. On the other hand, I do think my delusional narrator in here is, so I would want to be a Seuss-ian type, but I think the, you know, I like wordplay and sounds and it, I would want it to be funny more than anything else or, but on the other hand, I think, you know, that the writer of these stories within the book is this, a kind of odious, ranting grievance. He's basically, you know, he, he's an unpublished playwright, sort of like failed, and he's seen—went a little mad, or his wife left him or he left his wife, and, and he's

basically in a sublimated way of ranting and raving about all of his contemporaries in, in turn of the century Vienna. So he's clearly being, he's trying to teach his daughter something about what happened to her, about the wrongs committed against him by his wife. This all comes out and you kind of have to squint often to get to some of these things, but that was what was going through my head. So on his level, I think he thinks he's, he's writing a nice didactic book, sort of teaching her about the horrible nature of the world and of her culture and the causes of war and all that. And my level, I just, I ultimately want nonsense and joy and, you know, like jokes and, but probably secretly, I want the other things too. Yeah, I want it all, I guess. And I'm sure John will point out how I'm contradicting myself because I'm sure I do with, you know, historical parallels. So I think what I claim to want is probably not what I actually want, but what I claim to want is nonsense. I think that's, yeah, I'm going to stick with that.

JP

It's interesting to think about your, I mean, I'm glad you brought up Perec and Calvino because it's interesting to think about your relationship to something like Oulipo, which they have to, have to work so hard at order and semiotic systems in order to go, you know, beyond that into the fundamentally arbitrary or maybe even inchoate nature of those underlying systems.

AES

Yeah. And not just, I mean, I think they would say that you like, you can't actually get to the arbitrary unless you get through constraint. If you're totally unconstrained writing, all the received ideas of the time will just speak through you and go right onto the page. So if you, if you want something unique or arbitrary, you actually need the, like, intense constraints that you come up with in the first place, which is something I sort of subscribe to, too. I think I like, I hinder myself or put, because I think I get to weirder places than if I don't do that. These novelists that are basically writing disguised essays, I generally am a little bit allergic to because I just think they should be writing essays and not passing it off as fiction. And I want all those ideas to be, like, turned into plot or action or, you know, the stuff of—that fiction should actually do. But I love Proust, which is kind of, so I always think of him when I, whenever I'm, like, preparing to go on a harangue like that, I think of, oh, but Proust, but Proust is great. But he can also do, you know, his, you know, his, the scenes, the dinner parties are amazing and hilarious. So he, like, he proves—obviously, more than proves himself capable of the traditional stuff too, which is—and the essays are just so, you know, the essayistic parts are just so good that, yeah.

JP

Like, I guess if I had to put a finger on what I think the difference is with your writing, it's that you're right. Proust is committed to being able to at least capture some echo of, like, what a dinner party novel would look like, or a social rise and fall story. Whereas you seem more, like the Oulipo people, you seem more interested in showing how either that that's, that's, that's an unworthy ambition, I guess, or just that that's an impossible, that that's, that's an impossible aspiration. Like your fiction, it's almost like you're, you're more, like, Pointillist, like Cézanne or

something, but you're all, you're focused on the dots, not on the picture emerging out of the dots or, yeah.

AES

Yeah, thanks. Although it does put me—in the book I've said about Proust that it was, you know, not a representation of whatever it is, turn of the century Paris, but an enormous fairy tale, claiming that it was, you know, that he was world building too.

JP

Yeah.

AES

And I think there's something to that.

JP

Because Doris Lessing says that to her reading, Proust is basically just like Zola, which I love. You know, like she only sees the sociological enemy side.

AES

The other side.

JP

She doesn't see that side at all. She just, I don't even think she notices it, you know, it's amazing.

AES

I guess they're all like self-justifying readings of the classics to, you know, justify your own.

SY

It's interesting that you, you brought back the fairy tale. Like, what do you think it is to call something like Proust a fairy tale? Or even if I'm calling your work a fairy tale? What is that? What is that category?

AES

Yeah. I mean, I think in that context would be like, you know, it's not represent, it's not trying to, it's not Zola, it's not trying to record what's going on, but it's, or just like get it down on the page, what's actually going on around you. But to invent and create and worldbuild, I guess would be, is sort of a contemporary term of art for it. I mean, there's different, yeah, fairy tale means, I think for me, at least different things and different—so in that sense, it doesn't have what I also view as important, which is the, like, concision and, and also the, like, the fact of very flat characters and the sort of anti-psychological—another thing, another thing I like about fairy tales that has not come up is eventually, you know, I'm aiming for something emotional, psychological, but I don't want, I don't care for it so much when it's, you know, directly represented in a character when you make a character deep in all the ways that we know a person is. But I, I kind of want it as, like, an emergent property of the, the feel or tone of the thing. So I like that fairy tales have, you know, there's a witch who is just evil and there is a “this” who is just scary. It's the same as those stories of Genesis, they're like, you know, simple characters, but you can think about them for a thousand, two thousand years. They, they become complicated in the combination of things. I just find that, like, more interesting than trying to make a character—like, I know a person is deep. I know they're complicated. I don't—and they're right, you know, next door. So I don't need that on the, for me, I don't need that on the page. They're all like, that's all around me.

SY

But I would also say that fairy tales have, have magic in them. There's something that's enchanted. There's someone who can behave, can, can make something happen that can't actually happen, right, through the wave of a wand or through a spell or through some casting. And one of the things that is interesting about your book is that there are all these characters who seem to want to make magic happen, but they don't have the tools of magic at their disposal. So they go to these absurd, often violent, cruel ends in order to make this artistic magic happen. It's like you've substituted, you've substituted the artistic striving for the magic. And your characters consistently end up in a sanatorium. It's like the, okay, not to, not to didacticize the book, but like, how do you, how do your characters achieve artistic greatness?

AES

But I should say that that part of the building the form, I was reading some history of madness in the, in Austria-Hungary and mentioned some little pamphlet written by a patient at a sanatorium who, at a clinic—at Dr. Obersteiner's clinic or something. And he was writing these cartoons about different characters in each of them. And the story ended with like, I condemn you to the clinic of Dr. Obersteiner. And he was sort of, like, condemning himself over. And so I think that I, yeah, that kind of madness is specific to me, but that form of just like being condemned to the clinic or one person replaying that, his own, you know, being committed and handing that to different characters, I think was taken a bit from that. I feel constrained by reality in a way that I wish I weren't, or that, like, when I read Kafka, it seems like he's not, he can, he has the boldness to turn someone into a bug in the first sentence. I often, like, feel that I'm hedging my bets with mad characters and I'm, like, making frames and I'm afraid to do the, like the single,

like, magical thing and just go on from there that a great fairy tale can do. So to some extent, I think that's like, yeah, I want to be writing magic, and instead I'm endlessly scribbling and going a little bit crazy.

JP

I like how you're doubling down—I take your point, I hear you saying to Sunny that you want it, you aspire to magic, but end up with madness. And I think that way Woolf aspires to sanity, but ends up with madness, that she aspires to integrative, you know, social realism of the nineteenth century form, but she can't sustain it. And so she ends up with a mad character instead.

AES

Oh yeah, no, that's definitely. Yeah. I mean, a lot of, like—you know, puts me in mind of Wittgenstein and the philosophical investigations who in the end just wants, like, ordinary, you know, it's hilarious that there's a, a—something called ordinary language philosophy, all these like weird, brilliant eccentrics who just want to talk like a normal person.

JP

Slab, slab, slab.

AES

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

JP

Boo, boo, boo, boo as ordinary language. Yeah. That's a great comparison. That's fascinating.

SY

Adam, every season there is a signature question. So we would invite you to respond. If you could live anywhere in the world for a year, where and why?

AES

So my mind first went to some sort of like, um, like a Heideggerian hut in a forest. But as I think I mentioned, I've, well, and it's clear from this book, I have two little kids. So it'd just be like a lockdown pandemic horror show of, I assume your question doesn't provide a nanny or something like that. So, so my second thought was, I actually did, I answered your, I answered this because I spent the last year in Vienna, just as I was finishing this book, I, my family, we went to Vienna, which is better for the kids. They were in school. It's an ideal city, but in other

ways, I've realized like, I wanted to be there in 1910, you know, it's a little bit weird now. I mean, it's kind of like how the book ends, of like, just German Austrians who are very nice, but there's some people missing and there's like, my family missing and there's like, some ferment missing. It's like a very, very, very livable, quiet kind of parochial town with nice parks that shuts down on Sundays. So if you can provide a time machine, I think I would go to Vienna, but you know, just before the war, I would say.

JP

That's a wonderful answer. At the end of another *Novel Dialogue*, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, *Public Books* for its partnership, and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out recent episodes with Katie Kitamura, Brandon Taylor, and Lauren Groff. From all of us here at *Novel Dialogue*, thank you for listening. And if you like what you heard, please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Adam and Sunny, thank you so much for a wonderful conversation.

AES

Thank you so much for having me.

SY

Thanks, Adam.

AES

Thank you, Sunny.

JP

Goodbye for now.