

## Reading After Trump, Episode 2 Morgan Frank

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Ligda: I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: This is Reading After Trump. Our aim in this podcasts is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians, about what literature can tell us about this political movement. The views expressed here are our own and don't necessarily reflect the view, policy, or positions of Stanford University.

We're here, let's see, three days after Valentine's Day, something like that. We were saying we need to date this exactly. What is it, February 16th? February 16th. I'm Alex Woloch. I am here with Kenny Ligda and Morgan Frank. This is hopefully our inaugural roll-out of a podcast that we are calling Reading After Trump: Conversations in Literature and Politics. Kenny and I got together, we talked right after the election and got together. When did we get together? A little bit-

Kenny Ligda: It was November 17th or something like that.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, and we had a conversation about George Orwell. Part of the impetus was thinking about what we could do after the election and the desire that so many people were feeling to do something, to do different things. One thing that we can do as scholars and students of literature is to talk about literature and think about literature collectively, in conversation, and that's what we did in that podcast.

It gave us the idea of just trying to initiate a more general sequence of conversations about literature, conversations about books, writing, the imagination in the context of where we are now politically and in the context of our unfolding reactions and responses and grappling with the political situation. That's the general idea, that this is an opening to think anew about literature. Maybe every moment is, but this seems like a rich one.

The idea of the podcast is to bring literature and politics together, to put them in conversation, not just what literature could tell us about this political moment, but also how reading and literature and literary culture can feed into our own thinking about politics and our ongoing individual and collective response and reaction and action in relation to these staggering political events. That's by way of introduction. We're very happy to have our first guest.

Kenny Ligda: Hey, Morgan.

Morgan Frank: Hi, I'm Morgan.

Alex Woloch: Hey, Morgan. I'm a professor of English at Stanford. Kenny, do you want to just introduce yourself and give some context for your involvement?

Kenny Ligda: My name's Kenny Ligda. I'm a Associate Director of Instructional Design at the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at Stanford. More to the point, I'm a scholar of 20th-century British literature. I came into graduate school saying that I was really interested in the 1930s and the intersection of politics of literature and maybe there was something to think about with that. The world unfortunately has continued to provide occasions to think about the intersection of politics and literature. As always, and more so, I'm excited to talk about books now, and I think especially the chance that we have here to dive into particular books that come to mind for people. Let me hand it over to Morgan to introduce yourself, Morgan.

Morgan Frank: I'm Morgan Day Frank. I'm a graduate student in Stanford's English Department. I studied 19th and 20th century American literature and its relationship to educational history. I know we haven't introduced the book we're gonna talk about yet, but the book is Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*. As an undergraduate, I read a lot of Nathanael West's work, some in class and some outside of class, and I haven't really thought about him too much or really read his work a lot during my time in graduate school. This is now my seventh year at Stanford. I thought it was a really cool and exciting opportunity to go back and return to this book that I had read a fairly long time ago and has persisted within me.

Alex Woloch: Why this book? Why now? How did this come to mind?

Morgan Frank: I think it came to mind shortly after the election, if not the night of the election.

Alex Woloch: Was it Nathanael West in general or this book in particular?

Morgan Frank: This book in particular. Nathanael West, for people who don't know who he is, he is a minor major American modernist author or a major minor Americanist author, depending on your perspective. He wrote four novels during the '30s. His two most famous novels are *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*. This book we're talking about today, *A Cool Million*, is definitely one of his more minor works. It is set during a very politically and historically precarious moment in our nation's history.

Kenny Ligda: I think that was 1934, right?

Morgan Frank: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: It's a Depression.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, it's a Depression-era novel.

Alex Woloch: It's set in '34?

Kenny Ligda: Published in '34.

Morgan Frank: It's published in '34.

Kenny Ligda: You don't really know the date.

Morgan Frank: You don't really know the date, but it feels like the '30s is the right historical frame to understand what's going on in it.

Alex Woloch: Where is that in his lineup of novels?

Morgan Frank: It's his third.

Alex Woloch: It's his third.

Morgan Frank: It's his third novel after *Miss Lonelyhearts*, before *The Day of the Locust*.

Alex Woloch: Then he dies pretty young?

Morgan Frank: Then he dies. I think he dies in 1940 or 1941.

Alex Woloch: Was he struggling at this period or was he ... Did he establish himself in a secure way? Do you know about his ...

Morgan Frank: He was one of the legions of struggling authors who moved to Los Angeles to write screenplays. I know that he wrote a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald in the last few years of his life where he talked about how his books have become increasingly less and less popular and how he felt like he was just telling private jokes that no one else really found all that funny.

Kenny Ligda: Ouch.

Morgan Frank: He certainly hadn't achieved any kind of steady commercial success.

Alex Woloch: He didn't have the kind of misfortunes that we see in this book. You're not reading this as an allegory for the author too much.

Morgan Frank: No, no, not too much. Not too much.

Kenny Ligda: What was it about this book that made it so on November 9th or 10th you were ...

Morgan Frank: The book is basically, it's a reverse Horatio Alger story where just misfortune after misfortune befalls the main character, whose name is Lemuel Pitkin. He gets swept up in the political tides of the '30s. Eventually he's reluctantly, but also ultimately willingly engaged with and incorporated into a fascist party.

Alex Woloch: A kind of American fascism.

Morgan Frank: An insurgent American fascist party.

Alex Woloch: Was it just that instantiation in literature of the idea of an American fascism? Was that the first thing and main thing?

Morgan Frank: Yeah. That's probably the most immediate ...

Alex Woloch: Obvious.

Morgan Frank: ... the most obvious reason my mind went to it. Also, and I'm sure we're gonna talk about this more during our conversation, it's just his attitude, the way he captures, effectively or emotionally, the experience of these times. The way he responds to these horrible political events effectively I feel like in some ways mirrored or inspired my ... That election night was emotionally really, really hard to handle and process that night. I think on those two levels probably, those are the ways that I feel like the book came to mind.

Alex Woloch: That's interesting, because Kenny and I, we talked about this in our first discussion about Orwell. Our emphasis was on this idea of shock. The shock was our shock. We weren't so much thinking about Orwell as the portrayal of what's outside of us, although it was that too, but also Orwell was actually somebody that is a portrayal of what we were experiencing as among the multitudes of people who were disoriented and terrified by these results in multiple directions.

I think it feels like that quality of shock is part of what is still in the air with the Nathanael West novel. We use the term "shock-driven," because Trump's campaign was ... It's a very weird thing to experience the shock that we all have been, because it feels like it's a rebellion against what's happening, but it also is the effect that's supposed to be deliberately being produced. Reading *A Cool Million*, it also has a shock effect, right?

Morgan Frank: Yeah, it's misfortune. Probably a way to describe it is escalation. You don't think it could get all that much worse, and then somehow it reaches

another order of magnitude that's even far worse than you had previously thought possible.

Kenny Ligda: I want to hear more about how this helps or captures process, because one can summarize it, so Lemuel Pitkin is 17 years old, he's told his mom's house is in trouble, so he's told to move to New York City.

Alex Woloch: This is the very beginning of the book.

Morgan Frank: This is the opening episode of the book.

Kenny Ligda: The way that this character embodies processing political shock is basically he's arrested, he loses his teeth, he loses his eye, he loses his leg at one point.

Morgan Frank: He loses his thumb eventually.

Alex Woloch: He loses his thumb.

Kenny Ligda: He's eventually killed.

Morgan Frank: Things are really, really bad, very, very bad for this character.

Alex Woloch: I think that sense of escalation, it's really interesting to think about. I'm just trying to hold us on those two levels. We can't think of that many examples in 20th century literature of representations of an American fascism, because that's one thing, but it also is this weird sense of escalation. There's a weird element of crying wolf now for everyone that's responding to the news, because you constantly think, "This is as bad as it ... It can't get anymore surprising than this." It's very strange to have that as a routinized effect, that you expect to be blown away by the latest development.

That was part of, for you, Morgan, election day. You might not just have been thinking about the political analogs but also that aesthetic effect that West is doing. It's almost like a joke structure where it's a one-up-man-ship where he keeps making things ... It starts really quickly. I was surprised reading it, because you had told me the basic plot, but it only takes a few pages for him to go completely off the tracks.

Morgan Frank: Yeah. We talked a little before the podcast about just some of the repetitions or the pacing of the book. To me, one of the things I find I guess I would say funniest about the pacing of the book is that in this first episode, what happens is Lemuel finds out that his mom's house is about to be foreclosed by a bank.

Alex Woloch: In Vermont.

Morgan Frank: In Vermont, her house in Vermont. Lem seeks advice from a town elder, this former president, Shagpoke Whipple. Shagpoke Whipple, in his role as benevolent elder, doesn't just give Lem the money, but he says, "Actually, it's now your chance to go to the city and make your fortune." There's this very explicit timetable that's laid out. It's like, "You have three months or whatever to get this money." I think in most novels, what would then happen is that that timetable would then structure the rest of the narrative.

In *A Cool Million*, you get three pages into it, Lemuel has not made it to New York, he's actually been arrested, he's sent to jail, and all of his teeth are removed. He's in jail for way longer than the three-month time span that is supposed to encapsulate what this book is going to be.

I think ultimately this stuff goes a long way in just intensifying maybe what we've been describing as the shocker, the escalation effects of what's going on. There constantly seems to be these expectations that are produced either by the convention of the novel as a form or within this book specifically, that are then violated, and in the most just senseless ways that you could imagine.

Alex Woloch: It's interesting, I think that nails down my feeling. I think it was the three-month thing that threw me off. It was really weird reading this, and he's on the train to New York, which I guess reminded me of *Sister Carrie*. Sister Carrie's a good example of going on the train to the big city as a plot device. In his case he doesn't actually make it to the big city. He gets dragged off the train and then thrown into the jail. Then the weirdest thing was the time passing.

Morgan Frank: We're just in a completely different kind of temporal scale than we thought we were by the end of this second episode of the book than we were when we were in the first episode of the book.

Kenny Ligda: Should we go to a passage?

Morgan Frank: Yeah, let's read. I can read this passage. One passage I wanted to talk about, which I feel like might bring together some of these strands that we've been discussing, this episode happens after Lem has finally made it into the city. He's been released from jail. He's had all of his teeth removed.

Kenny Ligda: When he's discharged from jail, I think they say, "We're sorry that we falsely arrested you, but we did take out your teeth, which would cost you

40 bucks, so we're giving you some free teeth, so really things are going well for you."

Morgan Frank: Yeah, "Things are looking good for you." Anyway, Lem is in the city now, and he seems a horse-drawn wagon careen out of control.

Alex Woloch: This is in Central Park I believe.

Morgan Frank: This is in Central Park. The wagon's heading toward an old gentleman and his beautiful young daughter. This is the passage. "Lem hesitated, then dashed in the path of the horses. With great strength and agility, he grasped their bridles and dragged them to a rearing halt a few feet from the astounded and thoroughly frightened pair.

"That lad has saved our lives,' said a bystander to the old gentleman, who was none other than Mr. Levi Underdown, President of the Underdown National Bank and Trust Company. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Underdown was slightly deaf, and, although exceedingly kind, he was very short-tempered. He entirely misunderstood the nature of our hero's efforts and thought that the poor boy was a careless groom who had let his charges get out of hand.

"Lem had been unable to utter one word in explanation, because during his tussle with the horses, his teeth had jarred loose, and without them he was afraid to speak. All he could do was to gaze after their departing backs with mute but ineffectual anguish." One reason I wanted to talk about this passage was that I think-

Alex Woloch: By the way, just to paint the picture here, Kenny had his hands on his face, because it's so depressing.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Alex asked me after reading this book, he's like, "Was it funny?" because my dissertation was on comedy. I said, "No," but then every time we talk about it I laugh. I don't know what to make of that.

Morgan Frank: It's funnier in retrospect maybe. I guess the two reasons I thought this would be an interesting passage to talk about, the first is that I just think this is a representative unit of the novel. What happens in a Horatio Alger story is there are these moments of coincidence in an urban environment that are ultimately deeply beneficial to the main character of a Horatio Alger story. These are the moments, the character running into a benevolent old man ...

Kenny Ligda: Then rising to the occasion.

Morgan Frank: ... and then rising to the occasion. This is what makes these poor protagonists ascend into the American middle class. In Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*, what happens instead is that there are these moments of coincidence, and everything that could possibly go wrong goes wrong.

Kenny Ligda: Or one thing that could possibly go wrong ...

Morgan Frank: Or one.

Kenny Ligda: ... because he does rise to the occasion.

Morgan Frank: He always rises to the occasion and it always goes terribly for him. In this episode his teeth fall out, but also we find out later that something gets in his eye, and that means that his eye has to be removed. Not only does Mr. Levi Underdown, President of the Underdown National Bank and Trust Company, not only does Levi not give Lem any money, he totally ignores him, and Lem has to have one of his eyes removed. That was one reason I thought talking about this passage would be really useful for our conversation.

Another is I think that description of Lem, "All he could do was to gaze after their departing backs with mute but ineffectual anguish," I think West in all of his works has a few different ways of responding basically to the kind of horrors he's depicting in his novel. This is a very typical one, this inability to express anything at all. This inability to take the experience and transform it into anything meaningful is definitely a very ... West is obsessed with the inarticulate as a figure. This is I think a great example of that. He also has other, I feel like, modes of responding, but this is a very prominent one that we see in this particular passage.

Alex Woloch: It's not just the increasing inarticulacy of Lem as he loses different sense organs and human body parts, but also that question of the relative inarticulacy or not of the novel, is this a response to anything, is it funny, is it repetitive, does it have a point, is there anything redemptive about it. Those hover over the text. Morgan, I had a question about this passage. I was just thinking about, even as you're rereading and we're listening to it, it's definitely making a fool of the reader too. The whole thing relies on that each time we get dragged into, I could feel it happening even now, you have such investment in the coincidence and in the happy ending, and it exposes the gravitation that we all have to these plots.

Morgan Frank: Definitely. I think that's definitely true.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Just the sense of mute anguish and not being sure how to respond or even what to say seems like a powerful literary statement or stance.



Morgan Frank: Definitely. I think that's also, just to get to one of Alex's points, Nathanael West, he wrote for a decade, and I think the Library of American edition has all of his writings in it. He didn't write a lot. Whenever I've in the past recommended *A Cool Million* to people, I always say, "It's incredibly short." It's a very, very short novel. I think that goes along with this anxiety or this sense in which whatever you say won't be all that meaningful or won't be able to meaningfully incorporate the range of experiences you've had in this horrible historical moment.

Kenny Ligda: I just read for this, W.H. Auden has a short essay on Nathanael West called "West's Disease," where it basically says that West's characters are unable to translate wishes into desires. Basically it means that people aren't even able to move from vague inclinations or guesses about how they want things to be to concretizing those in their mind. It seems like in this novel, your sense of how you want the world to be is just taken away from you. Maybe related to that is just the sense here of the American story and the American dream, that's what really stands out to me about this is instead of telling it like, "You do good work and you get this," it's like, "You do good work and you're just screwed all the time." I guess that's part of the power of the book too.

Morgan Frank: Yeah. It's interesting, because what do you ... I think people who have read West, scholars who have read West, I'm not sure anybody just really knows what to do with this. It's a message that it leaves you at a loss for a subsequent action on some level. If all of your attempts to do something productive or good ultimately end with you stepping in a bear trap and losing your leg, which is what happens to Lem later in the book.

Alex Woloch: Which has happened, yeah.

Morgan Frank: What is there left for human experience if it's all so terrible?

Alex Woloch: The joke structure, it does feel like it relies on the audience's participation, that you have to, insofar as it is working like a narrative, it doesn't work unless you're in the American ideology and your hope as a reader is activated. It feels really different than something like Balzac or the 19th century realists that are looking at this system. I'm thinking of *Lost Illusions* or something, which on some level, it's like the same system that he's looking at cynically in that it's the culture industry and the manufacture of dreams, and the narrative is outside of that, and seize it as for what it is to some degree. The hero loses his illusions. I don't know, it makes you feel foolish as a reader, this book, in some ways.

Morgan Frank: It's interesting to think about rereading it, because this is probably the fourth or fifth time I've read this novel. I think your reaction, since the book itself plays out its own rereading from episode to episode, since there

is this internal repetition of what happens over and over again, but there is a sense, I think the first time I read it I was probably horrified. The second time I found it very, very funny. I think this last time I did not find it nearly as funny as I normally do. That might have to do with ...

Kenny Ligda: With the times certainly.

Morgan Frank: ... with the times more than actual experience reading the novel. This time when I was reading it, I just found the violence, it was so intense, and the misery is so intense, that even the funnier moments, I just had trouble, I had trouble laughing at.

Kenny Ligda: I don't know how I feel about it. You say you've recommended this to people. Actually, it gets to the question of what we go to literature for. Thinking in the '30s perspective, there's a lot of talk about, "Maybe literature's propaganda or maybe it's information." What's the use of reading something this depressing, would be the crude way of asking the question.

Alex Woloch: Or what's the use of something that's so depressing also being almost frustratingly funny at the same time.

Morgan Frank: I was thinking about this question, in the context of not the "mute but ineffectual anguish" Lem experiences after his teeth have fallen out and he's about to lose his eye, but rather I was thinking about this by way of the more abstract and distant narrative voice, which is misanthropic, which seems on some level to delight in the characters' suffering, and who we on some level parallel in our desire to laugh at a lot of these things.

I was comparing this distant, hid narrative voice to something like the hard-boiled tradition, which was also emerging at the time. You think that behind a lot of forms of hard-boiled fiction, there is a more intense and deep sentimentalism. If you think of a Philip Marlowe or Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, these guys are rough, have a rough, hard exterior, but deep down they have felt more and they continue to feel more than anybody else.

In this case, I'm gonna leave that issue open, whether this narrator, who seems pretty misanthropic, I don't know if there's some program that's being recommended in Nathanael West's use of this narrator, but I think ultimately what I believe is the importance of Nathanael West as a writer, and what I think we can learn from him, is that there is I think a profound ambivalent ... I think ultimately all of this stuff points to just a deep ambivalence about the role of literature in politics and the role of literature in society.

I do think West himself, and he described this in some of his letters, he does have a desire constantly to act. He was a part of the Anti-Nazi League in Hollywood. He attended some migrant workers union meetings. When he was sitting in those meetings, he describes believing in the mission of the Anti-Nazi League, of the migrant workers party, but when he sits down to write, he has trouble translating that project into literary form.

I ultimately think, when I read it I guess now, what I would describe as my ambivalence towards now, which is like, "Oh this stuff is horrible, but oh, this stuff is also really, really funny. Oh I don't want it to be funny. Oh I'm caught in between all of these things." I think it's modeling an ambivalent literary sensibility towards the political world that I think is interesting and I think psychologically seems very familiar to me.

Alex Woloch: It raises a lot of interesting questions. It's just thinking about comedy and humor and laughter at this juncture. Among other things, this book is really interesting for making it really complicated, how humor works and what's funny and what's not funny.

Even if you think about the praise that is heaped on Stephen Colbert and *The Daily Show*, that's a relatively stable formula for comedy, a pretty happy, simple formula for comedy translating into socially meaningful communication. That's way less naughty than Nathanael West. I like the Colbert Show. I'm more or less indoctrinated into that as a good ... It's this weirdly virtuous comedy, because it's funny but we can also really see what the point of the humor is, and yet seeing that doesn't totally kill the comedy.

Something like this book makes it ... You're really sucked much deeper into something where question of laughter and then the unease about your own laughter comes up. This is partly the thing with Trump too. It's hard not to laugh at certain things. It's not all one note of horror and violence.

Kenny Ligda: It does raise, "it" meaning both this novel and politics now, raises the question of when is it okay to laugh and when do you stop. The headline I saw yesterday, again the date is important, and I think this was in connection with Mike Flynn and further revelations about Russian intervention in the election, was It's Funny Because It's Treason, which is not funny. I do wonder what it means.

The thing about laughter in this that strikes me is that sometimes laughter is a way of clinging to something that you can't articulate anymore. There seems to be that this novel in a way is a reverse sentimental story about America. Like Orwell said about *Ulysses*, *Ulysses* is saying about the modern world, "This is the modern world. Just look at it," and that West is

saying that about America, is like, "This is it. This is how I see it," what you think of that. The laughter is a recollection of everything that's not happening, everything that doesn't work.

Morgan Frank: I think that's super interesting. Yeah, I feel like I have a lot to say about the laughter stuff. To speak about just more contemporary events and my own biography, I remember after the 2004 election, which was an election that I feel like was really devastating, possibly for me biographically as devastating as this most recent election, and I remember the very next day on the Daily Show, this was before Stephen Colbert had splintered off to his own show, he had what to me was maybe the most perfect three minutes of comedy ever, which was he, because all of these Red State voters had said that they wanted to reelect President Bush for his ability to keep America safe from terrorism, and Stephen Colbert thanked the voters, from New York City thanked the voters in Nebraska for having his best interests at heart. It was just the most cathartic example of comedy I feel like I'd ever witnessed.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, because New York City had experienced the terrorist strike.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, experienced the terrorism, and for Nebraska the concerns of terrorists were much more distant. To me, honestly, I felt like there was this really depressing counterpoint in the Colbert show, his straight man, where it was almost impossible for him to make a joke about this election. There's something about Trump that begs to be laughed at, but there's also I feel like for that reason it's disabling for comedians. I think it's hard to effectively make fun of Trump, because there's something about him that is already ... There is no joke to be constructed on some level because he's already a joke.

Alex Woloch: It's not hard to make fun, but it's hard to effectively make it, where it's working in some more meaningful way.

Morgan Frank: Yeah. I'm saying a bunch of things about comedy, but who knows? Comedy I feel like in general is about just, on some level, exposing or drawing attention to things that had previously gone unnoticed, and especially issues of power I think. I think all of those things are so manifest now that I think the role of comedy, it's unclear what its purpose is in our particular moment.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. Of course that's true with the role of writing too and the role of imagination now or fiction or reading. It's part of the same thing. That's part of what's interesting about that enigmatic quality of this book, that Nathanael West, he's not giving you a clear answer about what the role of the artist is, as you were saying.

Morgan Frank: Should I read the second quote?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Let's go to the second passage.

Morgan Frank: This passage is three or four pages from the end of the novel. Lem, who as I suggested earlier, has been conscripted into this emerging fascist movement in the United States, is about to make a speech on behalf of the Leather Shirts. At this point in the novel he has returned to New York City and it's the last bastion that's holding out against the fascists.

Kenny Ligda: The Leather Shirts is the name of the national revolutionary party.

Alex Woloch: Just hearing that again, which is also sinister, but also completely ridiculous. This isn't a political novel. It doesn't go into nuts and bolts about ...

Morgan Frank: No, not at all.

Alex Woloch: ... any of this, and beginning with this odd figure, this odd figure who's the benevolent Horatio Alger figure, and also is the ex-president.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, Shagpoke Whipple. Yeah, it's very strange. Lem at this point, he is working in vaudeville. What he does is, there are two comedians who come out and do shtick with each other, and then they turn on Lem, the straight man, and beat him with newspapers. At this point Lem doesn't have a leg, he doesn't have teeth, he doesn't have an eye, so all of these things just fall off, and that's the joke of the vaudeville show that Lem is involved in.

Kenny Ligda: For 15 minutes, right?

Morgan Frank: Yeah. That's their performance. This night, which is probably the last formal scene of the novel, Lem is going to take the stage and not be the clown. He's going to give this impassioned plea on behalf of this fascist party. This is the passage.

"When the orchestra had finished playing, the audience reseated itself and Lem prepared to make his speech. 'I am a clown,' he began, 'but there are times when even clowns must grow serious. This is such a time. I ... ' Lem got no further. A shot rang out and he fell dead, drilled through the heart by an assassin's bullet."

I feel like this encapsulates a lot of maybe, if you could look for a moment where you feel like Nathanael West is reflexively talking about his own comedy style, it feels like this is that moment. What's funny about it is that Lem is about to finally make this transition from the clown to the serious

man, because, "There are times," he explains, "When even clowns must grow serious," but the joke is this is not the time when the clown must grow serious. He gets shot down. The joke continues on despite Lem's attempt to get outside of that joke. The joke marches forward.

Kenny Ligda: Because he becomes the martyr for the national revolutionary party and is celebrated in parades.

Morgan Frank: The book ends with Lem as the martyr for the American fascist party, which has taken control over the government. In that sense, West's joke is the one that wins the day. I guess to me what this whole episode and what the comedy of the novel in general made me think about is just so often I feel like comedy is at its best when it's attacking people in positions of power. This novel inverts that, because whatever humor it's extracting from the reader is coming at the expense of the people in America who are the worst off.

I guess then this is just circling back to a conversation we already had about the ethics of that particular kind of laughter, like are you allowed to laugh when a guy who has no money in the world, who'd just got out of prison, when he loses his eye, are we allowed to laugh at that, and what does that say about us.

Alex Woloch: Your reading of the scene, I'm just getting it now, the point is that the novel has acted just like these two cruel clowns, and the reader has gone along with it. Everything that they're doing in those 15 minutes where we're looking is this grotesque stage act where they're beating Lemuel, his eye pops out, that's exactly what the novel has done. That's the quandary.

Morgan Frank: Yeah. That's the quandary. Lem in this moment is trying to step outside of it, although it's more complicated than that, because ...

Alex Woloch: This moment is.

Morgan Frank: This moment, because even in stepping out of it, it's not like Lem is stepping out of the joke into some more authentic-

Alex Woloch: Yeah, he's being scripted.

Kenny Ligda: He doesn't understand what he's reading. That's important.

Morgan Frank: Exactly. Whatever kind of individuality he achieves by no longer being a clown is just as fake and manufactured and problematic as his being a clown. West doesn't even make that seem like an option that's gonna happen. He is thrust back into it when he's assassinated.

Kenny Ligda: What seems right next door but totally different is Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, and especially *Modern Times*. Every bad thing that can happen pretty much to the Tramp in *Modern Times* goes ahead and happens, but you have no doubt that Chaplin is with the Tramp. The Tramp toughs it out, and you get this sense at the end that he's gonna abide. The Tramp abides, endures. I don't know what to do with that, but it seems like Chaplin belongs to this Victorian period of sentimentality or love of his protagonist. West, there's just a move beyond that into something much more bleak.

Alex Woloch: Another thought popped into my head. This is going back to politics. I'm thinking about Horatio Alger. Just that as an ideological target, so that feels like in a typical Republican situation, that's a major target that ... I'm thinking of the 2012 race with, "You didn't build that," the use of that, where Obama says, "You didn't build the bridge that allows you to be connected to a transportation grid where you could have a small business," and then Mitt Romney and the Republicans just go off at this assault on the pull yourself up by the bootstraps, American free enterprise ideology.

The Horatio Alger stories typically we can associate with that, like the idea of laissez-faire, this myth or delusion that people can just individually rise through their own effort, which is such a pernicious trap to feel that that's the American dream. With Trump, that doesn't seem to be ... Is there any residue in his sales pitch of the Horatio Alger story basically? My first thought is not, because he's not about like, "You can succeed." He's all about like, "I succeeded." The most blood-curdling phrase from his convention speech was, "Only I can fix this," this weird sense of ... He's not even generous enough to put the Horatio Alger illusion into circulation. What do you guys think? Is that dead or is that still in the air with politics today, Horatio Alger, the myth of the self-made person?

Morgan Frank: Yeah. I definitely think your intuition is right that the Horatio Alger story has been central to, it definitely seems the Republican Party of the last 30 years, and it's a mainstay in many of their big public addresses and the whole dismantling of the welfare state.

To me what's confusing about Trump's election is that it's shown the hollowness of so many of these platforms that are normally trotted out, because it's understood that these platforms are what their base believes in, and just makes them into a coherent body, so you have things like family values, which the election of Trump, it makes no sense if you're a family values voter and that you vote for Trump. I think the self-made man, it makes no sense. Donald Trump inherited a ton of money.

It's unclear to me whether Trump's narrow, narrow victory and the fact that he lost the popular vote, whether that, or maybe another way of

phrasing this would be, it's unclear to me whether Donald Trump won in spite, people could accept the fact that he didn't abide by these values because he said he would get rid of TPP or NAFTA. There could've been things he promised.

Kenny Ligda: It seems to me there was an article, I'm sorry that I'm not remembering who wrote it, but there was an article around August of the election about saying that there was a deep narrative for many Trump voters that was based on a Horatio Alger story. The deep narrative was basically this, "I'm waiting in line." It's the politics of aggrievement, "I'm waiting in line. I'm doing my part to get the American dream. Obama and liberals are letting cut in line people that are not white, people that are from outside the country, women. All these people are cutting in front of me, and that I would be there if the system weren't rigged against me."

It seems to me that there is still that sense in the political mix, like, "I would be succeeding if it weren't that others were, and especially racial others, were being helped out."

Alex Woloch: I guess, yeah, when you put it that way, it's like, how well does the Horatio Alger myth sit with white nationalism? That would be a question almost more for historians. I'm sure that if you look at Horatio Alger in its various manifestations, it was tied into racial politics, but it does feel like at the very least that's not always a comfortable or natural alliance.

Morgan Frank: What I always find bizarre about that alliance is that in actual Horatio Alger stories, it's never just the fact that the protagonist shows up and performs well. It's always that that performance happens in a particular circumstance or in a certain kind of situation that's been conditioned by coincidence, where a benevolent older man can then reward the main character. There's a sense in which that benevolent surprise visit, a surprise visit by a benevolent older character-

Kenny Ligda: That's the fantasy, right?

Alex Woloch: That's the desire.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, that's the fantasy, but the welfare state, I guess there's something impersonal about the welfare state, and that's what seems so incongruous with the Horatio Alger myth, that there needs to be a personal and coincidental and arbitrary reward of good behavior.

Kenny Ligda: It gets back to something Orwell said about Dickens, that Dickens always has a rich man coming in at the end, like a transformed Scrooge or someone scattering gifts for everyone. It's never really been possible narratively to have the government bailout be a big ... Maybe we should



plow on the to the final quote, which ironically is the first [crosstalk 00:42:24].

Morgan Frank: Ironically, it's the epigraph for the novel. I don't even know if we have to say all that much about this, but I just think this is one of the funniest epigraphs in American literature. The epigraph is, "John D. Rockefeller would give a cool million to have a stomach like yours."--Old saying."

It's a bizarre epigraph. It's unclear why it's bizarre, and that's why it's so bizarre. I think there are two ways you can interpret this sentence, "John D. Rockefeller would give a cool million to have a stomach like yours." I think you can interpret it literally and say money can't buy everything, that John D. Rockefeller has all the money in the world, but he still gets indigestion, and he would give you a cool million to change places with you. I think that would be the literal reading of the old saying.

I also feel like there's an undercurrent to the saying, and to the saying as it appears as the epigraph of the book, which comes before basically all of these poor people getting miserably treated. I think the other way of reading this saying is that it's suggesting that you're a sucker basically if you think that money can't buy everything, I think. I think. I tend to side with that reading of this epigraph.

Alex Woloch: You mean that he wouldn't really give a cool million.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, he wouldn't. That's just something you tell ... You tell yourself that money can't buy everything if you don't have any money and if you have nothing else in the world. I think that's more ...

Alex Woloch: More true to what we're gonna see?

Morgan Frank: Yeah, exactly. That's more harmonious with the feeling of the rest of the book.

Kenny Ligda: I somehow am reminded of when Homer Simpson says about Montgomery Burns, like, "There's one thing all of his money can't buy him." Then he says, "What?" Homer thinks for a minute, he's like, "A dinosaur." There's also a bullshit factor that's, I don't know, resonant now, like "John D. Rockefeller," "old saying." That was not an old saying.

Morgan Frank: Yeah, this was definitely not an old saying.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, but it's a fact that's ...

Alex Woloch: It's like a tweet.

Kenny Ligda: It's like a tweet, and like from last week or something, like, "Never has it taken so long for a cabinet to be seated." It's like, "Oh, except for ... "

Alex Woloch: Every other time.

Kenny Ligda: "... every other time this has happened." Just this way that an old saying can just be like ...

Alex Woloch: It's not old and it's not a saying.

Morgan Frank: It's not old and it's not a saying.

Alex Woloch: This is something cool. I think we covered a lot of territory. Should we just wrap it up?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Any last thoughts? Any warnings before reading the book?

Morgan Frank: Yeah. I guess, yeah, maybe one thing I'll say, just because I didn't get a chance to say it, really fast, is that my research right now is about the relationship between American literature and educational history and the formation of the modern educational system. I think thinking about Nathanael West's relationship to educational institutions is so fascinating, especially the institutionalization of his work.

The book's ambivalence about the role of literature in society, in politics, I feel like you can see in its own liminal or marginal position on the syllabus. It's like this book has in some sense entered into the world of history, it has imprinted itself on history in some way through the college syllabus, but only in the most ambivalent and marginal way you could imagine.

I encountered *Day of the Locust* in an undergraduate class my junior year. I think that's the only time I've seen it show up on a syllabus. Then again, it does routinely show up on syllabi, but not with the kind of prominence as *The Great Gatsby* or other major modernist works of art, like *The Waste Land*.

Kenny Ligda: In my mind, Nathanael West has always been epitomized by the fact that we got Homer Simpson from Nathanael West, because he's a character in *Day of the Locust*, and I've never understood what to do with that fact. Nathanael West is there, but it's unclear in what way he's really in dialogue. He seems to be saying something that's still hard for people to translate.

Morgan Frank: I feel like just the whole experience, it's unclear to me whether the whole experience reading the book, withstanding all of the miserable things that

happen in the novel, withstanding its scabrous racism and horrible treatment, all of these things to me make it seem less likely that the book will continue to survive in literary history. Yet it's also perhaps those are the reasons that it will be preserved in some way, but never in any kind of significant or prominent role, but only as this weird text on the syllabus. You would never organize a whole class around Nathanael West I think.

Alex Woloch: Excellent. Thanks to Morgan Frank for this awesome suggestion, counter-intuitive, odd suggestion of this odd novel. What do you think, Kenny, how do we want to end?

Kenny Ligda: I don't know, but something we can edit in.

You've been listening to Reading After Trump: Conversations in Literature and Politics. This is a production of the Stanford English Department in collaboration with the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. Reading After Trump is created and hosted by Alex Woloch and Kenny Ligda. Sound engineering and editing is by Catherine Wong, except where messed up by Kenny Ligda. Music is by Brett Yarnton.