



an interview with
EMILY BARTON

Conducted by James Peacock

Emily Barton is an American novelist, essayist, and short story writer. She was born in 1969 and grew up in New Jersey, where she attended Kent Place School, in Summit. She went to Harvard College, from which she graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.A. in English literature, and went on to gain an M.F.A. in fiction writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Barton is the author of *The Testament of Yves Gundron* (2000), which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and won the Bard Fiction Prize, and *Brookland* (2006), which was also a *New York Times* Notable Book, as well as one of the twenty-five best works of fiction and poetry selected by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2006; it was a 2007 selection of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. Her third novel, *The Book of Esther*, is to be published by Tim Duggan Books, a Crown imprint, in 2016. Barton has been a fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation and has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Sustainable Arts Foundation. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *Story* magazine, *American Short Fiction*, *Conjunctions*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Observer*, *Poetry* magazine, *Nextbook*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *The Massachusetts Review* (which nominated her 2014 short story "The Once and Future Capital" for a Pushcart Prize). For five years Barton was a lecturer in the Department of English at Yale University, where she taught writing to undergraduates. She is currently Elizabeth Drew Professor of English at Smith College.





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Barton's first two novels can be read as explorations of the complex relationship between human beings and the increasingly sophisticated technologies they invent, but which come to dominate their lives. In *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, life in the village of Mandragora, which has seemingly remained the same for centuries, begins to change when Yves invents a harness for his horse. Further, potentially more drastic transformations occur with the shocking arrival of Ruth Blum, a young academic intent on studying the culture of the Mandragorans. Ruth's objectivity as observer is challenged when she develops a relationship with someone close to Yves. The novel is presented as Yves's first-person account but includes footnotes which reveal that Ruth has acted as editor of his journal. *Brookland* mixes third-person omniscient narration with epistolary sections and is set in a late-eighteenth-century rural Brooklyn yet to be connected to Manhattan. Its protagonist is Prudence Winship, who, along with her sisters Temperance and Pearl, takes over the management of her father's gin distillery and dreams of building a bridge between Brooklyn and "Mannahata," the island she regards as "the City of the Dead" (9), somewhere mythical and mysterious.

What *The Testament of Yves Gundron* and *Brookland* have in common is a determination to interrogate our understanding of, and the consequences of, "progress." How are human relationships, with their complex and contested concepts such as "family" and "community," affected by the technological advances that ostensibly make our lives easier? What room remains in our lives for notions of the transcendent when increasingly sophisticated technologies and modes of production bring about new economic considerations? And to what extent is nostalgia for a supposedly simpler time an ideological by-product of technological progress itself? Such issues are addressed in Barton's writing through a mode of inquiry one might characterize as historical or speculative (and the author has precise views on these terms), in which continuities and differences are held in productive tension and the reader is thus required to consider which human qualities are "timeless" or innate, and which historically and socially constructed. One of the more unfortunate continuities between past and present, Barton argues in the interview, is the suspicion shown toward women's enterprise, ambi-





tion, and creativity. Both *Yves Gundron* and *Brookland* evince fascination with the world of work in general, but especially the limits often placed on female participation in that world. Despite its name, *The Testament of Yves Gundron* is as much interested in Ruth as it is in Yves, and her editorship demonstrates an influence over the text as powerful as her influence on the lives of the Mandragorans. *Brookland* features three resourceful, independent women in the Winship sisters, and it is evident that their complex relationship is central to the development of the whole community.

Although Barton is disinclined to embrace labels, one might be tempted to regard her work as demonstrating some of what Andrew Hoberek has called the “uneven, tentative, local shifts” that characterize recent “post-postmodern” fiction (“Introduction: After Postmodernism,” spec. issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*). With its dedication to plot, character, history, exophoric reference to a world beyond the text, and its apparent lack of interest in recursivity and metanarrative games, Barton’s fiction possesses many of the post-postmodern characteristics described by critics such as Hoberek and Stephen J. Burn.

The interview was conducted by email between fall 2012 and fall 2014. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Emily Barton for her time and for the warmth and depth of her insights.

Q. Forgive me if you’ve been asked this one before, but why did you decide to write about Brooklyn in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in *Brookland*? What appealed to you about that period?

A. I wanted to write about the Brooklyn Bridge. I lived close to it and observed it day after day, in all kinds of weather. One day, the novelist Chris Adrian and I took a walk by the New York anchorage, and he said, “Will you write me a book about this?” He was kidding, and when I agreed to do it, I was also kidding; yet the idea took hold. But when I began to research the bridge, I learned how well it had already been written about. Hart Crane wrote that stirring poem—“O harp and altar, of the fury fused, / (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!).” David McCullough’s *The Great Bridge* is as beautifully written as any novel could be—and as rife with plot





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twists. Nineteenth-century Brooklyn had been written about a lot already, so I wondered where I might stake my claim.

In a footnote to *The Great Bridge*, however, I learned about Thomas Pope's Flying Pendant Lever Bridge, which had been proposed for the site nearly a hundred years earlier and never built. The plans were filed in the New York Public Library, so I went to see them. And what a bridge! It was a cantilevered structure, a hundred years ahead of its time, designwise. (And in terms of materials, as it turns out. Nothing like it could have stood up using the technologies of Pope's time.) At once I set to writing about it. I was interested in its radical design and in finding ways to write about its construction that would sound plausible (though in real, Newtonian physics, the bridge would collapse under its own weight).

Writing about Pope's bridge instead of John Roebling's offered multiple freedoms. Now I was building a structure that few people had seen before, not one that I would have to wrench clear of received images. And I was writing about a time period that had seldom appeared in fiction. Brooklyn was semirural, sparsely populated at the time of the Revolution. So both literally and metaphorically, I had room to build.

Q. I like the fact that in your response you use the term "building a structure" to refer both to the bridge and, metaphorically, to the process of writing a novel. With regard to bridge building and gin manufacture, *Brookland* is very interested in processes, the choosing of appropriate materials and, in the case of ginmaking, the correct, or at least the most pleasing, mixture of ingredients. For example, when Prue is watching her father at work with the ingredients, she comes to understand "how a gifted rectifier introduced these sundry essences in novel and harmonious proportion to the final distillation of spirit, such that their individual properties would be less evident than the balance of the whole" (59). Can this be seen as a metaphor for the novel?

A. Although I'm not sure the metaphor can stand for the novel as a whole (either my novel or novels in general), that's mostly because I'm uncertain how well a simple metonymy can work in such a case. Novels are so complex, while a single image is just that, unless it's the image behind a Zen koan. The images that govern a novel are





part of its great machinery for bodying forth ideas the mind isn't big enough to encompass all at once. This may be another topic.

I can, however, tell you that I have a deep, abiding interest in work. Both novels I've published, and the one I'm at work on now, concern people's relationships to labor and to the technologies that make their work possible. And an interest in work means an interest in process, tools, the arcana of different professions. Bringing that technical information into a work of fiction requires a sense of balance or "harmonious proportion." You want the details of the trade to be specific and vivid in the reader's imagination. But you don't want to overwhelm her with facts and tidbits.

Q. Yes, your interest in work and technology is evident throughout *Brookland* and *The Testament of Yves Gundron*. Coupled with this, it seems to me, is a desire to explore the tension between the Enlightenment spirit of rationality, Franklinesque experimentation, and empiricism (very much a part of the work) and superstition. It seems to be one of the key tensions in *Brookland*. Was this another aspect of the period that attracted you to it?

A. The tension between rationalism and superstition in "our" world piques my interest, so the parallel tension in the eighteenth century also fascinates me.

The other attraction of setting a novel in the eighteenth century is that it was the last historical moment at which a self-taught hobbyist could achieve mastery in most fields of human endeavor, as well as the last at which a person could strive to become a true generalist, knowledgeable in all philosophies, literatures, and natural sciences. After that period, the relative ease of world travel and the decreasing cost of printing and paper manufacture meant that knowledge from all over the world could be disseminated more easily . . . and it came to be that no person, no matter how intelligent and learned, could keep up with everything. You can see this in the development of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The 1768 edition consists of three volumes (the first much thicker than the last; I sense the editors tuckered themselves out and kind of slapped the final volume together), while by the early nineteenth century, there were editions of ten and then twenty volumes.





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You know, this is much of why I find Reverend Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* such a tragic and engaging character. He was born in the eighteenth century, and his “Key to All Mythologies” strikes me as an eighteenth-century project. By the time he’s trying to write it, in the nineteenth century, too much has been written for any lone scholar to keep up with. Readers often write him off because he’s cold and pedantic and makes Dorothea (more obviously a sympathetic character) so miserable. All of this is true, of course. But his main problem is that his interests and ambitions are out of sync with his historical period. How could you not have sympathy with someone unlucky enough to find himself in that circumstance?

Q. Your reference to the increasing ease of global travel (and hence trade) in the nineteenth century puts me in mind of another issue, and yet again, if you’ll forgive me, I’d like to pick away at your motivations for choosing the historical setting of the novel. The perceived contrast of Brooklyn-as-village or small town and Manhattan-as-metropolitan-center, with all the value judgments such an opposition implies, endures in popular and literary representations to this day, often in flagrant disregard of the geographical and socio-economic realities. The action of *Brookland*, it seems to me, starts at a time when, at least in some aspects, the contrast still held some validity. Would you agree?

A. Yes. It’s funny to me that the Brooklyn/Manhattan divide endures in the popular imagination as a bucolic/urban one. People still talk about “moving to Brooklyn” as if that’s prudent, cheap, a way to get one’s family a saner way of life. It remained so well into the 1990s, and that increased sanity may still be true for people who bought property then or found rent-stabilized apartments. But at this point, one couldn’t buy even a tiny, derelict house in brownstone Brooklyn for less than a million dollars. If one wants to live in the historically desirable areas (Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope), a house costs much more. So the only people who can choose at this moment to enjoy this “saner” life are partners in law firms, advertising executives, well-paid actors, and people with family money. Brooklyn used to be where artists went, but at this point, my two-writers, two-college-professors family has been priced out—we’re guessing for good.





Thomas Wolfe's "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" rang through my head while I worked on *Brookland*. I liked inverting that idea and making Manhattan the place where the dead go, at least in Prue's imagination. There's no question that soon after *Brookland*'s time period, Brooklyn developed into its own urban entity. But yes, at the time of the novel, it was still largely rural, a collection of small towns with tracts of farmland in between.

Q. OK, so in response, the obvious question might be, Is *Brookland*, like many Brooklyn fictions, a nostalgic work? As Pete Hamill says in the introduction to *The Brooklyn Reader*: "The details of such powerful nostalgias are different for every generation, often for every neighborhood, but the impulse is persistent. A voice seems always to whisper: *There was another place here once and it was better than this*" (xii).

A. I don't think *Brookland* is nostalgic, no—because the world it describes isn't better than the one that exists there now. The landscape is more bucolic, but is that always a good? The characters in *Brookland* live through a war, work in sometimes unsafe conditions, are, in some cases, enslaved. To my mind, it's a different world built on the same piece of land, not a better one.

Have you read Colson Whitehead's essay "Lost and Found"? It's eloquent on how New York (of which we have to admit Brooklyn is a part) is for each of us a private palimpsest and becomes more so the longer we live there. I do feel intense nostalgia for the Lower East Side of my childhood: the good quality, inexpensive clothes my parents bought me at Klein's of Monticello; my father's friendly relationship with the owner; tiny shops stocked floor to ceiling with buttons, hose, embroidered handkerchiefs; the Yiddish signage; the cart that, for a dime, would sell you an egg cream in a paper cup and a pretzel rod to dip in it. My heart aches for that lost world. But I couldn't write a novel about it—at least not yet. I'd be too afraid of writing schlock.

Q. I suppose the point about nostalgia is that it airbrushes out historical realities (war, enslavement, dangerous labor conditions) in order to paint a picture of a world *perceived* as better. But I think I asked the wrong question: a better approach might be to ask





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whether *Brookland* is a novel that warns against the nostalgic impulse—for the past or for the about-to-be-obsolete present—in which other Brooklyn fictions indulge. Prue’s letters to Recompense occasionally have a nostalgic hue, and yet at one point we are told that the young Prue “had to remind herself not to feel nostalgic for something that had not yet happened. Nostalgia for things already past was consuming enough on its own” (414).

A. I might say that *Brookland* explores both positive and negative ways in which the nostalgic impulse can influence a psyche and the course of a life. In the passage you quote, I meant to characterize Prue as a person sometimes crippled by nostalgia. She can be homesick even when at home. Yet although this preoccupation with lost people and things doesn’t make her happy, it spurs her to do great things—to grow her father’s business (in his memory) and to build the bridge (which she does in part to honor her childhood misapprehension that the dead needed to travel across the river to their rest). For me, the good and bad attributes of this tendency balance themselves out in the book, as they do in life. I don’t think nostalgia for a lost Brooklyn or, in my case, a lost Lower East Side (or the lost technologies of my childhood: the analogue wall phone with its tangled cord, the pop and skip of a needle on vinyl) accomplishes much. Nevertheless, I suffer pangs of it, as many people do. Does it trouble you, this nostalgic tendency you see in Brooklyn novels?

Q. I’m not troubled by the nostalgia in Brooklyn novels so much as fascinated by it, especially when it seems to ignore socioeconomic realities and disavow its own existence (not accusations I would throw at *Brookland*, I hasten to add). In fact, one of the things I really admire about your novel is the way it manages to acknowledge the human need for mystifying impulses such as nostalgia and superstition while powerfully demystifying them. A particularly vivid example of this, for me, is the “Ice Bridge of 1782” chapter. First of all, can I ask if this was based on documented events? I’d love to think that it was.

A. Yes, that stuff about the Ice Bridge is true. The chapter is based on firsthand reports as distilled by Henry Reed Stiles in his mammoth *A History of the City of Brooklyn* (1867). The mongers, the paper

twists of popcorn, Black Peg out with her pears—the details are things diarists recorded during a rare and miraculous river freeze.

Q. And then one of the things Prue learns is that Manhattan and Brooklyn are materially similar and that Manhattan, contrary to her childish ideas, is just as rough-and-ready as her home. I see this as a key moment of realization in the novel. Do you?

A. Absolutely. The material similarity of what she'd thought was the Other Side is key to the project of bridge building: there couldn't be any bridging between two different orders of existence, if that makes sense.

Q. Yes, it makes perfect sense. And because, materially, they aren't two different orders of existence, country and city cannot easily be distinguished ideologically, either. By which I mean that the building of the bridge gives the lie to the ideological assumptions that there is something eternally and essentially different in terms of character about the country and the city and that, as Raymond Williams describes in *The Country and the City*, an idealized rural lifestyle comes to be usurped by a rapacious, corrupt urbanism (the "hell" Prue initially visualizes). So my next question brings us back to gin, which also seems to be an important symbolic and material connector. The juniper berries that tickle Prue's nose in summer at the beginning of the novel help create a pastoral atmosphere, but they are also central to her father's industry—gin making—which participates in the degradation and dissolution so common to historical depictions of the urban experience. Again, I'm assuming that a good deal of historical research went into your choice of the family business, but were you also thinking of these rather more metaphorical links?

A. I wish I could say I'd thought of those metaphorical connections, but I didn't. My choice was driven primarily by historical fact (the distillery that stood at the foot of Joralemon Street made gin) and by gin's complexity: it's a liquor upon which a rectifier truly practices his art. Matty Winship struck me as more of a craftsman than a businessperson. Gin suited that. I think you're right, though,



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to note the irony of a natural, bucolic product leading to a place's urbanization.

Q. Or at least leading to some of the dissolute behavior upon which judgments about city life are frequently made. I'm interested in your mention of gin's "complexity": I guess that's what I was getting at when I asked about metaphors for the novel earlier. But I'd certainly agree that Matty Winship is a craftsman. Is Prue also one, or is her craft inevitably compromised by the exigencies of local, then national, then presumably global trade?

A. Yes, I would say Prue is a craftsperson, both in terms of bridges and of gin. I'd also say her craft is compromised by the exigencies you mention—as I'd say everyone's craft is, regardless of time or place. The difference is that, in the context of a novel, we can see how those forces affect the craftsperson. In our own lives, it can be harder to determine how the broader culture shapes us.

Q. True enough, and you eloquently identify one of the great things about the novel: the fact that it can be sprawling, dialogic, and slow-gestating allows for the oversight of the larger forces you describe, even if it is focalized through a particular point of view. Your mention of the "broader culture" brings me to another line of inquiry. Critics often assume that historical novels, like futuristic sci-fi novels, are critiques of the present. Are there any grounds for saying that about *Brookland*?

A. I'm not sure *Brookland* is historical fiction in a strict sense. I'd classify both it and *The Testament of Yves Gundron* as speculative fiction, or even as a sort of crypto-steampunk. I'm interested in the way people relate to technologies—whatever those may be—and how that relationship affects people's relationship to the spiritual, divine, or eternal. I think this will all make a lot more sense when my new book is out.

That said, I'm interested in how the historical and imagined pasts, and how the imaginary realm in general, are both like and unlike the world as we know it today. So there are ways in which *Brookland* comments upon the present. Somehow, in the twenty-first century, people still question women's ambition, for one thing. And there's



no doubt that the idea of burning down Prue's bridge relates in some way to the attack on the World Trade Center. At the time, I was living in the Brooklyn Bridge's shadow. In the weeks following the attack, police helicopters circled the bridge all night. No one who lived in the neighborhood slept for the noise. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who wondered if the helicopters meant there had been some credible threat against the structure. I don't know if I would ever have imagined burning down something of that size if those events hadn't occurred.

Q. Your answer adds further weight to my suspicion that the best post-9/11 fiction is that which approaches the event obliquely, or via more or less unconscious associations. But to respond to the distinction that the first part of your answer implies, isn't *all* historical fiction speculative, for the simple reason that we can't go back, just as all futuristic science fiction is speculative, for the simple reason that we can't know the future?

A. Yes, for the reasons you mention. Yet I draw a distinction between fiction that speculates about things that actually did happen, or that we can suppose happened, and fiction that invents an alternate history that breaks from recorded history at a certain point. Do you discriminate between different kinds of historical fiction?

Q. Do I make the distinction you describe? Yes, I suppose I do: the word *uchrony* is useful in describing the alternative history, the "what if," though what you are talking about differs in significant ways from uchronic narratives such as Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* or Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*. What excites me about your work is the way your formal choices reflect your interest in history—specifically, the status of recovered documents. In *The Testament of Yves Gundron* we have the first-person testament of the title, edited and footnoted. In *Brookland* we have the epistolary element, Prue's letters to Recompense. Why did you make these choices? Were you playing with the idea of authenticity, *à la* Washington Irving? Or were there other reasons?

A. In writing *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, I faced a dilemma: whether to tell the story entirely from Yves's perspective, which is



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limited, or whether to tell it from Ruth's, which might have oriented the subject matter, something I didn't want to do. One early thought was to write the entire novel as the transcripts of interviews . . . but though a transcript may involve conflict, it lacks other elements that make fiction sensory and engaging. That plan worked fine for five pages but would have stalled out or collapsed at a certain point. Allowing Yves to write most of the manuscript keeps the story in the hands of the right teller, but Ruth's presence (both in her footnotes, which the reader can see, and in her editing, which the reader can only guess at) complicates the story in ways that, for me anyway, are fruitful. At the time, too, I took an active interest in that kind of formal experimentation. I think I would have been disappointed had the book not taken some risks in that regard.

Brookland's early drafts were all in the first person, from Prue's perspective, in a fairly straight imitation of eighteenth-century sentence structure and orthography. I worked hard to reproduce the style and appearance of period letters. But an early reader—the novelist Kirsten Bakis—said she thought the imitation was *too* faithful, that no modern reader would have the patience for it, given that its only purpose was verisimilitude. I sought a solution that would let me keep some of that style and substance—I'd worked to create it and thought it made sense for the narrative—yet welcome a reader in. The idea of writing letters from Prue's future immediately seemed right. I just started doing it, on page 1, and went straight through the manuscript, deciding which parts I'd "translate" into a close third and which I'd address in letters. Recompense didn't exist before the moment Prue started writing that first letter to her. Once she was there, though, she helped me make sense of the narrative and made it richer, more complex. She turns out to be important to the novel, because even if Prue seldom speaks about it, her daughter shows her experiencing motherly love and concern (two qualities she tends to shunt aside in favor of work). Recompense allows the book some speck of optimism it might otherwise lack.

In both cases, the formal choices respond ad hoc to a difficulty in the narrative. I'm making different formal choices now, and I'm excited to get back to work on a different project, which asks and answers different questions, in part through the method of its telling.



Q. So the formal choices respond to specific narrative demands in your novels; I certainly get that. Do they not also respond to, by means of complication, many of the issues we've been discussing—nostalgia, the inflection of the past by the present (and vice versa)? For example, the last few pages of *The Testament of Yves Gundron*—when Yves looks back to the moment he started writing the testament and forward to a possible state of modernity, while we as readers look back on his narrative (edited after the event by an emissary from the modern world) from our vantage point, knowing how his world is likely to be transformed—is remarkably complex in terms of temporality and balances anteriority, posteriority, retrospection, and prediction very delicately.

A. I do think that one of the unique pleasures of long fiction is its ability to elucidate through complication. A good novel often leaves the reader with a more complex and nuanced understanding of a topic (or a series of topics or set of images) than she had before. So I appreciate your asking this question about *Brookland* and *Yves Gundron*. I do think both novels seek to complexify time, or at least to document our experience of it with a subtlety akin to how we experience it. One reason I enjoy writing about history (albeit in a counterfactual way), is that when we think about the historical or the imagined past, we have to accept that people long ago were, at the same time, exactly like us and different in ways we know about (through the historical record) and also in unknowable ways. I sometimes think that books are really *for* communicating across time. Those we read allow us to receive messages from the dead without any supernatural agency. Our own books speak to the far future—when who knows how our offspring and their offspring will live. Does that start to get at it?

Q. It certainly does. I love the idea of receiving messages from the dead without supernatural agency: your image reminds me of what T. J. Lustig says in his book on Henry James (and I'm paraphrasing here)—that in a sense all novels partake of the ghostly. Jonathan Lethem has suggested, in an interview with David Gates, that one of the reasons novels survive, despite repeated warnings about their imminent demise, is precisely that they have such a long gestation period, that they are "slow-reacting" (131) in comparison to the



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immediacy of, say, the Internet culture of commentary. Would you agree? Why do novels refuse to go away?

A. Because people like having stories told to them. Imagination is old, as old as the need to be startled by things in our peripheral vision (a prehistoric survival skill on which the Internet capitalizes). Think of our remote ancestors, out walking the veld. What did they do, to pass the time during the grueling march to the next source of food and water? How did they survive the winters without going insane? They told each other stories. Probably, given how much time they had on their hands, long, complex stories. Novels won't go away because people need to be entertained, and we need to imagine things, and we need to experience imaginative empathy.

I also don't think the bound book is going anywhere because it's such an excellent technology. I have an e-reader, a Kobo, which I like for all kinds of reasons. It's lightweight yet can hold a number of books at one time; it has a light in it, so I can read it in the middle of the night without waking other people. But then: It needs to be charged. Sometimes it needs to reboot. It can't come in the bathtub. And its files aren't yet device-agnostic—so if at some point I buy a reader not made by Kobo, I'll have to replace all those books, or lose them. A paper book is, in this day and age, inexpensive to manufacture, durable, lend-out-able, and unlikely to cause you harm if you drop it in water. So far, no one has come up with anything better. So the durability of the technology + our atavistic need for what the technology contains = not going anywhere. Also, I think Lethem is right.

Q. The other thing about novels that keeps them fresh is their voraciousness when it comes to other text types—letters, poems, scholarly reflections, footnotes, and, indeed, emails and texts can all be included in a novel. Your novels display this quality, but I suspect that you would tend to avoid including contemporary forms of communication like emails in your work. Am I being presumptuous?

A. I'm interested in how communications technologies can impede communication. Something that makes it easy to convey basic information—texting, say, or the cell phone in general—is, to



me, a destroyer of plot rather than something for it to hinge upon. You know that old Roger Miller song, "Engine, Engine Number 9"? Some of the lyrics go: "Engine, engine number nine, / Coming down the railroad line, / I know she got on in Baltimore. / A hundred and ten miles ain't much distance / But it sure do make a difference; / I don't think she loves me anymore." If they both had iPhones, he'd be like, "R U on that train?" And she'd be like, "Nah. Leaving U. L&r." Goodbye suspense, and wondering, and longing. And great song.

So if I were to put an iPhone in my novel, it would be malfunctioning. Unable to get a signal; accidentally texting the wrong person; an emissary from the beyond; that kind of thing. The novel I'm working on now relies on pigeon post. Now *that's* a way for a novel to get information from one place to another, on the wings of a fragile creature liable to be shot down during wartime.

Q. Yes, I guess a lot of blues tracks wouldn't have made much sense if they'd been written in the age of mobile phones. But let me press you on this just a little bit. You don't think these technologies are *bad*, and neither are you nostalgic for a time before them; you just don't see their appropriateness in long-form narratives—am I right? Don't they have the potential to excite new types of plots?

A. I am as big a fan of my iPhone as anyone. Despite which I believe that current technologies—like most everything ever invented or discovered, other than mosquito netting, the flush toilet, and certain antibiotics—remain value-neutral. Cell phones help. They also hinder. And you're right: they do harbor the potential to excite new types of plots. That's a great way to put it. But I believe some of those plots will look dated ten or twenty years from now. (Think about 1980s movies that feature car phones as big as bricks. The fancy guys in those movies whip them out and we all laugh.) Our reliance on them may seem natural to our children, or it may seem quixotic and dated, as bobby socks and Burma Shave jingles do to us.

Take a technology such as the wheel, or the telegraph, or the slate and stylus. We know how history has treated these things. We know the long arc of their plotlines. And to me, that allows them better to serve long-form narrative, because an author can employ them



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with a sure sense of how future generations will read and interpret them. Cell phones, iPads, Twitter—up in the air.

Does this make sense? I don't want to sound like a Luddite. I'm neither an early adopter nor a Luddite. Just an average citizen of Technology Nation, except that for whatever reason, I think it's also my job to think about what these technologies mean for us, as people in relationship to each other and to history and to whatever we think of as eternal.

Q. Actually, you explain very clearly why the novel is not best equipped to treat those technologies that have built-in obsolescence, or at least those things that are designed to be superseded and surpassed very soon after their invention.

Could we return to *Brookland*? I wanted to ask you about the character of Pearl: again, forgive me if you've been asked this one before, but was "our Pearl of great price" (19) inspired at all by *The Scarlet Letter*?

A. Yes! And by the 1955 film *Night of the Hunter*. Two uncanny little girls named Pearl. In an early draft of the novel, Pearl wasn't mute, nor was she entirely herself, more like a spectral presence that visited Prue. In that draft, she was called Silence, a more popular period virtue name than you might hope. When it became clear that she wasn't a supernatural being, just a person who, at least to Prue, drew tendrils of the Other Side along with her when she came into this world, Pearl seemed like the obvious name, I'm sure because of *The Scarlet Letter*. I had just reread it a year or two before.

Q. So why did she—at the same time she lost the name "Silence"—become silent?

A. I don't know. I guess something about that original virtue name made a deeper kind of sense than the name did.

Q. Fair enough. Your image of drawing "tendrils from the other side" is a beautiful one and recalls one of the topics we were discussing earlier—the relationship between Enlightenment rationality and superstition. For me, Pearl is a fascinating character partly because she straddles, or is perceived to straddle, these two realms





of activity or belief. Her amazing picture of the bridge elevation is a key moment: there's something almost otherworldly about it, and yet it comes from intense empirical observation.

A. I think "perceived to straddle" is key. It's Prue who thinks she's otherworldly—and also Prue who considers the elevation so. But Pearl asserts her quotidian humanity in the final chapters, for better or worse. I don't know for sure, but I think she must have felt ordinary all along, and frustrated with everyone around her for handling her with such delicacy.

Q. Once again your comments speak of demystification, while acknowledging the human need to mystify. Both *The Testament of Yves Gundron* and *Brookland* feature religious practices, houses of worship, elements of theology. I love the fact, in the latter, that Prue and Pearl's trip to church to hear Reverend Severn constitutes a kind of rebellion. But would it be right to suggest that ultimately there is little place for God in these books of science, work, the celebration of the ordinary, the everyday?

A. In fact, although I understand that reading, I'd argue just the opposite. To me, the great, enduring question about our fascination with technology is, How does it affect our relationship to God? Or to whatever it is that we consider transcendent. If I could say only one thing about those two novels, it would be that they ask the reader to ponder that question, in a subtle way. The new book is more overtly theological. It's preoccupied with how (and if) we can discriminate among beings imbued with life and things we ourselves have created.

Q. Fair enough, and I certainly take your point about technology. What I suppose I was driving at with the previous question was the—familiar, atheistic, perhaps cynical—idea that God/the divine/the transcendent/the mystical has receded through history as more knowledge has been acquired. Rather than science arrogating to itself answers, or certainties, it takes doubt all the way and refuses to label that which has not yet been understood as "God." If Pearl is perceived as the possibility of the unknown, the mysterious (and I see her muteness as an important part of this perception), then her



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unveiling as “ordinary,” in the best possible sense, chips away even further at the fragile edifice of what lies “beyond” knowledge, leaving less room for mystery. Does that make sense?

A. It does make sense, but I guess I don’t see it that way. For me, the issue isn’t whether Pearl ever was ordinary, or uncanny, or something in between, but that Prue refuses to see her for what she is, whatever that might be. Everything revealed by story’s end is something Prue might have known all along, if she hadn’t been so blinkered by her own ideas, opinions, work, etc.

This question sparked something in my mind that took a while to ignite, like a sputtery old gas stove: I’ve been thinking a lot about your assertion that science, instead of “arrogating to itself answers, or certainties . . . takes doubt all the way and refuses to label that which has not yet been understood as ‘God.’” Yes and no, I’d say. I asked a rabbi friend if he could put a finger on what this was reminding me of, and he mentioned the idea of *Yeridat ha-dorot*, which implies increasing distance from God throughout the generations. I feel like I’ve heard people ask all the time, “Why was God so present in the time of the Prophets, and why has God withdrawn from our world so completely?” Never a satisfactory answer; just a lot of wondering. And then there’s the problem (in America, at least) that so many of the people who invoke God in public discourse are those who suggest that because it’s called the “theory” of evolution it might actually be, you know, theoretical. And yet there is so much in the world we don’t understand. Some of it must be forever beyond our ken? I think there will always be room for mystery. And I’m glad there still is some in the world. We need things to wonder about.

Q. I wonder if Pearl’s Pietà, depicting Christ in “the full regalia of his wounds” (132), works as a distillation of the ideas we’ve been discussing. There’s religious mystery, there’s the metaphorical power of stitching as a self-created narrative (somewhat akin, perhaps, to quilting in Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*), and then there’s the fact of Prue’s incomprehension—without wanting to sound too trite, the possibility that the biggest and most enduring mystery is other people, especially those we are supposedly closest to.



A. I think that's a really nice reading. Not one I would have been able to come up with myself. In my mind, the Pietà is what she embroiders because it's the thing her family will least understand and be most embarrassed or horrified by. But yes, what you say sounds true.

Q. I suppose what Pearl wants most of all is independence—from a sister inclined to regard her as constantly in need of help and guardianship, from the sometimes stifling demands of family, among other things—and the bloody (and bloody-minded) Pietà works partly as a symbol of that. You alluded earlier to the continued questioning of “women's ambition”: given that the heart of *Brookland* is the three sisters, and that the narrative driver of *The Testament of Yves Gundron* is the editor of Yves's manuscript, Ruth Blum (who also leaves her family at the end of the story and is very independent in spirit), it seems clear that gender issues are very important to you. Expectations of motherhood, the balancing of motherhood and work, the power relations involved in marriage, the desire for the space and time in which to create, female ambition and the normative societal expectations that suppress it—these are major issues in both novels.

A. Also in my life. I had the good fortune to marry a feminist, someone who accepts my need to write as part of the ground situation of our marriage, and who therefore does half (or sometimes more than half) of the cooking and cleaning and shopping and childcare. But children aren't feminists, or equalists. Mine, at least, want their mommy. They want all of my time and attention. The younger one is still a baby, a nursling (who refuses to take a bottle), enmeshed with me for food and comfort. And who doesn't want to spend all their time with an adorable baby? I don't use a stroller with him, just carry him around with me most places, and we do so much together. It's a total delight. The older one—any opportunity to snuggle with me, or sit on my lap, or get me to take a walk or read a book or play a game or do *any* activity he thinks I might enjoy doing with him, he'll target that opportunity. Sometimes I find myself saying things like, “I just want five minutes without another person on my body.” Tom can't bear the brunt of that, only I can. It's not that I want to escape the children. I love them and love



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noodling around with them. It's that I need time, space, and mental privacy in order to do my work, and they have such a fierce biological and psychological drive to keep me from getting those things. I've also found that motherhood (or pregnancy, nursing, and massive sleep deprivation) rewires the brain and makes it more difficult to write.

As for women's ambition, it's a live topic in our culture. Ambitious women are still portrayed as ruthless, strident, pushy; a woman's ambition remains unseemly, while a man's is the status quo. VIDA keeps track of how many women's books are reviewed, and how many reviewers are women; far, far fewer than you might suppose, given our actual numbers. Books by women are published differently than books by men. A few people have said to me that they believe if *Brookland* had been written by a man, it would have been cast as a novel about architecture and ambition, a possible best seller. With a woman author, it's about "women's dreams," apparently a topic that keeps people from going out in droves to buy a book. This is part of why I'm so thrilled to be teaching at Smith at present. It gives me the opportunity to work with younger women writers (also a few young men who enroll through the Five-College Consortium). We discuss these issues, but in our workshops, we're able to work more or less outside of or away from them. It's freeing and empowering.

Q. Your point about the hypothetical reception of *Brookland* as written by a male author puts me in mind of something Jennifer Szalai wrote for a *New York Times* feature in October 2013. In response to the question, "Where Is the Great American Novel by a Woman?," she refers to that liberal humanist notion of self-discovery and self-making which seems (at least to us non-Americans) so central to American identity. The notion itself is gendered, she argues: "Men's self-discovery is hunting for big game; women's self-discovery amounts to tidying up around the house" (31). Men's self-discovery has long been regarded as the better suited to "serious literature." Do you think she's right? And do you see your female protagonists as conscious battlers against such myths?

A. You can take this question right back to Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, where she writes: "[I]t is obvious that the values



of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial.' And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room" (63).

From our current historical vantage, I would argue against this rather simplistic gender binarism as a woman who, for example, does not give a crap about the drawing room. (And Woolf knows she's oversimplifying, of course.) But yes. Men are still considered "people" in this culture, while women are considered "women." A novel by a man can be read by anyone, while a novel by a woman will be primarily marketed toward and read by women. Of course my female protagonists battle against this inequity. In my current novel, she does so in a quite literal way. So do I. So will my sons, I hope, and all right-minded people.

Q. And with that tantalizing reference to it, can you say something more about your latest novel?

A. Well, if my first two books are in fact crypto-steampunk, you would say that this one isn't "crypto" anything. You might call it dieselpunk, to be accurate . . . Jewish-feminist-theological, alternate-historical dieselpunk. The novel takes place in and around Astrakhan on the eve of Hitler's assault on Stalingrad; but in a world in which the Khazar Empire never fell in the 900s C.E., so the last thing barring Hitler's way to his prize is a polyglot nation of Turkic warrior Jews. And of course, because the novel's history diverged from our history so long ago, a lot of other things are different, too. Hitler and Stalingrad are both called other things, for example. Khazaria (what we know of it historically, and what I imagine of it, if it had survived into the last century) was a rabbinical Jewish culture. What if a girl in such a culture wanted to fight to save her country, despite her religion's views on a woman's place? That's a lot of what the novel's about. It's an adventure novel: battle scenes, alternate-historical war machines, and golems, the great Jewish mythic technology. It's called "The Book of Esther."



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Q. It sounds absolutely fascinating and as if it expands upon so many of the things we have discussed in this interview: speculative histories, technology, religion, and the role of women within a society. I have a question about the title. Dianne Tidball has called the Old Testament Esther a “postfeminist” figure because she fights *within* a corrupt and restricting patriarchal culture. With full awareness that the prefix *post-* in any such context (including discussions of “postmodernism” and “post-postmodernism”) is deeply problematic and must be used under erasure, I wonder if your protagonist might be considered in this way.

A. Despite being unfamiliar with the critical thinking behind postfeminism, I can parse the term. But my question remains, How can there be postfeminism when feminism hasn’t yet succeeded in creating things like equal pay for equal work or equal respect for equal personhood? In that context, I’d say that no, I don’t consider the biblical Esther a postfeminist hero. She’s intelligent, level-headed, forceful, wily when necessary. I see her as a role model for people of all genders.

