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Susanna Clarke's 'Piranesi' (with Susannah Black and Derek Rishmawy)

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SPOILERS WARNING!!!

I am joined by Susannah Black and Derek Rishmawy for a discussion of Susanna Clarke's remarkable new novel, 'Piranesi' (https://amzn.to/3dQSOnt).

Euripides' 'Herakles': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM4sYJ7hdqg

Owen Barfield, 'Saving the Appearances': https://amzn.to/3dPRe5p

Susanna Clarke, 'Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell': https://amzn.to/2PjZ3WH

Gene Wolfe, 'Latro in the Mist': https://amzn.to/2Ph6fTw

Lev Grossman, 'The Magician's Trilogy': https://amzn.to/3aXMQ2c

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I am joined today by Derek Rishmawy and Susanna Black. We have decided to boot Matt Lee Anderson and to add Susanna Black and to move it all over to my podcast.

It's a hostile takeover. And not really, but still. This is an unusual discussion.

We're going to be talking about Susanna Clarke's recent novel, Piranesi, which is a fascinating book. If you have not read it, you might want to stop now because this is going to be a spoiler-heavy episode in which we get into some of the meaning of the book, some of its influences, some of its philosophical themes. So to kick us off, I thought that Derek, who suggested this conversation, could say a bit about the fundamental setting of the book and some of the key plot points.

So really quick, I think we have established the baseline. Is it Piranesi or is it Piranesi? Like I just, I think it probably is Piranesi, but in my head, uneducated, unlettered man that I was, I kept on going Piranesi. I think it's Piranesi.

Piranesi. Yeah, my dad, so... It's Italian, right? Yeah, it's the name of a printmaker. And my dad actually, when I was growing up, he still has like a Piranesi print on his wall.

And Piranesi did these like freakish, strange, elaborate, sinister, mostly sinister interiors, like architectural interiors. So we should probably... I looked this up. Yeah, we should like find one to include as the image of the show.

Yeah, Piranet. I looked this up and I think he does, he did these because he did a lot of kind of like, I don't think it's neoclassical, it's like pre-neoclassical or something like that. But some of them were these crazy interiors of like prisons.

Yeah. And also like, you know, imagined classical settings, massive buildings and all that. And that is, we should get an image of that, but that actually kind of sets up a little bit of the background for the setting of the novel itself that I didn't catch until I looked it up later after I read the thing.

Just again, if you are trying to jump in here and you're like, I don't care about the spoilers, I will just tell you, this book is awesome. You should read it. Like if you don't plan on reading it, you should read it.

I read it in like five hours last week on an afternoon. You should care about spoilers. Because I just couldn't put it down.

Stop listening. You should with this book. Stop right now.

Yeah, well, I'm like, I'm just, right now we're warning, we're begging you, pleading with you. Yeah. Okay, but you've had your warning.

So Piranesi opens and it's conducted entirely in the form of journal entries by the main author, the voice of the storyteller who's known, goes by Piranesi. And he begins to describe the world in which he lives, which he refers to as the house. And the house has many rooms, but they're not just rooms, they're these, it's like a world that has

cavernous vestibules that extend for hundreds and thousands of feet or, sorry, meters, Alastair.

And there's 192 in one direction, 200, whatever, in another direction. And it's not just that these rooms extend to the side, they have different levels and there are layers. So on the first level, these rooms are filled with water, almost the ocean, great lakes filled with fish and all that.

And then the second layer is kind of like where Piranesi usually hangs out. And these are the, in a sense, habitable rooms. And then the upper level is, these are actually rooms that are filled with the clouds, right? They're that high up.

So this house is not just a normal house, it's worldish, it's whole worldish. All the rooms, all the vestibules are filled with statues of all sorts of figures, fauns and barbers and animals. And they're just figures upon figures upon figures.

Piranesi lives in this world and he begins talking about the world. And there's only one other person in the world that he knows of, which is just referred to as the other. And they meet regularly and he, it's just this fascinating thing where I'm setting it up and I realize I should be just expounding the plot a bit more, but basically the story revolves around Piranesi coming to discover the truth about himself and the truth about the world that he's in.

He only knows of 15 other people who have existed in the world, himself, the other, and like 13 dead folks that he's found their bones in the labyrinth of the world, of the house. And I'm, it's hard, it's so hard to describe, but there's this, the unfolding mystery is who is the other that he talks to as they, as they, they make observations about the world, who he himself is and where he actually is. What is the house? I, you guys want to interject because I'm, I'm not actually getting us the full plot storyline.

I'm just giving us a setup because it's so hard to describe. It, it, it's hard to describe because you only get the sequence of events. You only kind of understand what the sequence of events that led up to Piranesi sort of starting to narrate to you, starting to tell the story towards the end.

Like you, it's a very gradual unfolding of like what's happened in the last like five years or something. Like, is that the kind of timeframe that it seems? And it turns out again, just turn it off right now. Just go away.

Everyone go away, go read the book. You haven't done that. I'm going to carry on.

It turns out that they're all researchers from, are they from Oxford? Like, do we know what university they're from? I think, yeah, I think it's the Oxbridge. So they're essentially, I don't, I can't remember what department they're in. They're like physicists or something like that.

Or, no, it's like, it's like anthropology and kind of cultural anthropology kind of, but weird hybrid of disciplines. It's a very university-ish book. Nerds, grad students and nerds love this kind of thing.

Yeah. It's like, they're a bunch of grad students. Like this is what it turns out.

Every, basically everyone here is a professor or a grad student. And, and this is like what happens to you when you try to go for an advanced degree, you just end up in a gigantic house that is a world. So what's happened is there was this, there was this group of researchers who were, one of whom was the kind of, charismatic academic sort of head of this project.

They're all very familiar academic types too. Like it's, it's such a, it's such a university. So the guy Lawrence Arn Sales, he's a, he's like a transgressive thinker.

He's a visionary, poly, poly disciplinary thinker. Right. And he, you just triggered my memory of it.

Basically he theorizes the existence of other worlds. And one of the worlds in a sense is the world where things go when they kind of go out of the world. So he, he's drawing on this, this kind of like idea that the world used to be a certain way.

And this is where we come into like the idea of enchantment and disenchantment a lot. But, but essentially it's like almost like the, I want to say it's like the world of the four, it's like Plato's world of the forms of a sort. When they, when they, when they, when they, when they lose their place in our world, their functional place in our world, they don't just disappear.

They go into another world and they appear in this world of the house. And Lawrence Arn Sales is this transgressive thinker who theorized it and then tries to get there. And he gets there and people end up there.

They end up stuck there. And Piranesi is, you come to find out that he was a researcher who was, he was a journalist who's studying transgressive thinkers, falls down this rabbit trail of thought and ends up getting stuck in this world. And he was brought there by one of the former disciples of Lawrence Arn Sales, this guy named Ketterle, who's, he's known as the other.

And he's kind of a malicious character, but he traps him in this world. And then Piranesi being in this world actually for so long, he can't get out. He's all alone.

He, he, the effect the world has on him is he loses his, he loses his, his, his idea of himself. He doesn't know who he is anymore. He doesn't know his, his, his history.

And he basically just comes to believe himself to have always existed in this world. And

he takes, he, so, so the journal is initially like his journal of when you're reading it, his journal of like his readings and understanding of the world. He thinks of himself as a researcher alongside Ketterle because he has forgotten who he is.

And so the mystery is him finding out who he is, who all these people are going through old journal articles, old journal entries that he himself had written years earlier, but had forgotten about. And like thinking, Oh, these are all these characters. These are all these people who were, are a mystery to me, but like they were the people who in a sense brought me here.

At least my study brought me here. And so I, I, I cannot get over how, so at this point, I don't know, I feel like if we keep describing this book, we're just going to keep going on because it's so hard. I think what people should already notice if they're familiar with his work is the influence of Lewis, C.S. Lewis upon this.

Ketterle of course is the surname of uncle Andrew in the Magician's Nephew, which is perhaps the book above all others that is behind Piranesi. So if you look at the story of the Magician's Nephew, there are a couple of places within that, that resemble or remind you of the house. There's the ruined world of Chan, where the Empress Jadis comes from, who becomes the white witch.

And then there's also the woods between the worlds, which is a realm of forgetfulness, which exists in this liminal place between various worlds. It's a place that is horrific to the Empress Jadis, but it's a place into which others can sink and their consciousness kind of merges with the place. They're forgetful and they feel at peace and at rest there, but it's a place of profound forgetfulness.

So when you're reading the book, you will hear that influence throughout and some of the deeper themes of the book. So if you think about the curiosity that is seen in Diggory's actions in the Great Hall, where he rings the bell, or the way in which uncle Andrew expresses this higher vocation, this desire to exercise magic, the use of guinea pigs and trying to break through to other worlds, get power and control, and the way that that gives him license to treat other people in horrific ways. These are themes that are explored in Piranesi, along with other themes from Lewis.

So some of the things that came to my mind were the head in that hideous strength. You might also think of the discarded image in some of the ways that the medievals viewed the world and an attempt to recover that. And also the other inklings, most notably Barfield and his notion of original participation.

Right, and I mean the thing that most reminds me of, the distinction that Lewis makes in, I don't even remember where I read it first, but throughout his work between magia and goetia, between, somebody tell me how to pronounce this, between magic and kind of wicked enchantment or wicked mechanical attempts to control the world through, you

know, summoning demons and so on. The heart of the book seems to me to be, basically, the world as we understand it has fallen apart into science and magic, or into fact and meaning. And those two sides need to be put back together in some way.

But there are kind of two different ways that are presented of putting those two things back together. And those two different ways are represented by Piranesi and the other. And one is the way of the kind of magician scientist who's kind of a Faust character, who, you know, the other is attempting to find what he calls the great and secret knowledge.

Am I remembering that right? So yeah, the great knowledge or something like that. Yeah. And so he's trying to, Ketterling is trying to find the great and secret knowledge.

He's doing this in order to control other people, like explicitly he wants power. And in order to like, and he's basically exploited Piranesi. He's used him as a hidden pig to a certain degree.

He's sort of hidden him away and is entirely capable of doing terrible things to other people. So he's sort of like a magician scientist. And then Piranesi himself is kind of, I was trying to think of what the contrast would be.

And it would be something like, a Magus natural philosopher. So I know like the contrast between magician and Magus is wrong. But like, if you think of like a Magus as a practitioner of magic, who is not trying to use it to control other people who's not trying to exploit the natural world, but is instead kind of like in harmony with it.

And it's really difficult not to see Ketterling as basically Francis Bacon. I was going to say, he's like, he's the bad caricature of Baconian science as dominance knowledge, power knowledge or whatever, you know, as a way to control. Yeah.

That's awesome. That's all right. Everyone gets one.

It's more difficult to talk about this book than I thought it would be, because it's so interesting. And it's so like, as you're reading it, it's this experience of kind of these ideas kind of enter into you and you realize gradually like what Susanna Clark is on about. And then you try to like put those ideas into words.

And it's almost like you are by putting the ideas, what we're doing now by putting the ideas into words, you're anatomizing something that can't be fully anatomized. And, but I mean, at the very basic level, this is a book about what happens. So say things have happened, say there has been disenchantment.

Where did the enchantment go? And, but the thing that's so difficult to convey is that it's not about magic. What the house is, what the house represents is not magic as we would understand it at all. Like there's no, you know, Piranesi is not able to do, you know, there's nothing supernatural other than like the fact of the house.

But what it is, is everything in the house is charged with meaning and legibility. And Piranesi's relationship with the house as his world is a relationship of feeling loved by it and feeling like it's his job to read it and understand it. And that it is legible.

It's not just stuff like the fact that there are these statues, these figures everywhere. It's almost as though like they're like naturally occurring figures, but they're stories as well. And that kind of connection between a natural world that is not just matter, but that actually has meaning baked into it is I think what the book does such a good job of evoking.

I think understanding what the house is really such an important part of grasping what the book is about. So there are a number of things that come to mind when you read the book. It can, you can compare the house for instance, to the wood between the worlds or somewhere like Chan, but in a positive sense, it's a lost world that is not dead, but a sort of living world that has been abandoned.

In other ways, it might remind you of Plato's cave, but it's not Plato's cave. It's not. There is something that has a closer relation.

It's like where the forms have gone. Yeah. Yes, but, but in a way it's not that either because the forms it's what's left behind when the shaped with the flowing out of the forms.

So it's the hollow that the forms have left when they've, when they have departed from the world. So it's not actually the real world. It's not the forms.

It's the absence that is left by the forms when they have departed. And so perhaps the thing that came to my mind was the sort of Renaissance memory palace, but it's a palace of forgotten memory. It's a place where all these things that have been lost to the mind have, they've seeped away and they've left this hollow behind them.

But the image is one in which you, so for me, it's like the memory palace that you might have, but there's no life to interpret it. And so when you have when you have Piranesi within, he's trying to make sense of it, but it's not his mind that was created, that created it. The other is trying to ransack it for some hidden knowledge that isn't there.

The knowledge created the place, but it's, it's departed. And so it's a memory palace without any life to actually work out its meaning. So Piranesi engages in some sort of augury, thinking about the meaning of the statues that birds fly between, for instance, and trying to discern some hidden meaning in that.

And then the other is trying to engage with it in a more scientific manner with devices and measurements, but also with a certain sort of technologized magic. You might also think about the house as, as Derek already mentioned, it is a world. And so it includes the clouds above, they're part of the house, the sea in the basement and the lower floor.

And then you have the ground floor where the human being can dwell, and you have birds coming to that realm as well. So the, the arrival of the albatross is a key point within the book. It's one of the things that gives him his system of numbering and dating, keeping track of time.

And so the house as coterminous with the world, I think is really important. It presents the world itself as an inhabited place and a home. He is the beloved child of the house and the house is kind, it's full of meaning, it's charged with significance.

If only you were communing with it enough and understood it on its own terms, whereas the other can never understand it. He's trying to get to understand it in a way that it just is not going to deliver any meaning. It's externalized and it refuses to, the other sort of refuses to be a part of the world.

He's trying, he's holding himself apart from it and he doesn't perceive it as lovable. He doesn't particularly like it. And I mean, as you were talking Alistair, it, again, there's so many sort of links, but one thing to sort of think about is that it's a picture of Eden in a very particular way.

The kind of, the cosmos that's formed out of the chaos and it's also a picture of the tabernacle, it almost seems to me. And the weird, so the one interesting thing which kind of gets at the very end of the book is that the other is alone and, sorry, Piranesi is alone and the other is kind of like not, it turns out, a friendly presence. So it almost seems as though there has to be something that happens.

There has to be a kind of reuniting of the world of the house with the, our world. So a re-interpenetration of meaning and matter in order for Piranesi to sort of reenter society in a way or to not be alone. But it's not clear that that's, but he doesn't really perceive that need.

So what's interesting here is seeing this actually happening in Piranesi himself. There's so much going on here that, Piranesi's approach to the world is one of, yeah, that naturalist philosopher who is attuned to it, who's become attuned to it. It's deeply observational.

It's attentive. It pays attention to details. It looks at like the patterns of the birds flying and sees meaning in it.

It's not just a random bird showing up. It's like, what does it mean? What does it mean? Are they trying to speak to me? His approach to it is interesting in that regard. And it's not the kind of externalized objectified, I need to like suck the knowledge out of it to control.

But what's interesting about that is that it's, Piranesi goes through a transformation himself. He comes to find out that prior to being Piranesi, he was Matthew Rose

Sorensen. He was a student, he was a journalist.

He was somebody who was working academically on this figure, Lawrence Arnsell. I can't remember how to say his name. Arnsell, yes.

He's got this project on transgressive thinkers and the way that reason, the relationship to knowledge and all that kind of thing. He himself is, he's not necessarily like, when Arnsell comes to the world and talks to him, he looks at me like, what, when I met you, and this is something that Piranesi is not picking up at the time. He's like, when I met you, you were, basically you were a punk.

But now, now you're quite nice. Like something has happened in the way Piranesi himself approaches his subjects. He was a journalist who was observing people, trying to, as far as I understand, you know, capture them and subject them himself to write this book, to write these academic articles around Arnsell.

But as he becomes Piranesi, his approach to people shifts. His approach, I mean, so he attentively thinks about like the bones of the dead people who are in the house alongside him. Who were they? What was their story? And he cares for them and he moves them to safe places.

His approach to the world seems to shift. And, you know, when he's brought out of the world by, was it Raphael, the cop? He comes out of the world and he doesn't quite feel like Matthew Rose Sorensen as he comes to remember who he was. But he's not quite Piranesi anymore, fully or entirely either.

And, you know, towards the end, you see that like he is becoming, he has become some union or some reconciliation or an increasing reconciliation of Matthew Rose Sorensen and Piranesi. The one who was formed in a world without those, that kind of intrinsic meaning, the one who was kind of looking at people, researching, trying to pull them together for with almost a similar approach to power and knowledge as Ketterling, who was reconciling that with the time, the person he became in the world, in the house. And that is almost like happening within himself out now in our world.

And so he's transformed. She's not who he was in the pure world because in the house, he lost himself. He lost his sense of time.

So that wasn't fully himself. It was so like attuned to the house, like his sense of identity went weird. So anyways, that I see that movement happening in Piranesi himself and, or at least the attempt to have that movement happening within Piranesi himself and his own development as a character.

Yeah. And the other thing that I'm sort of reminded me of you guys are going to roll your eyes. So originally when he's studying these transgressive thinkers, he's not like, he's not really asking himself, are they right? He's just, he's like, it's like somebody who's like,

I'm really into like Julian Jaynes.

And also who's that guy who did the Robert Anton Wilson. And like, I'm just, I'm into these guys. I'm wasn't asking himself, like, are they onto anything? What is reality? And he, but he got sucked into the reality of one of the idea of one of these transgressive thinkers.

And it, I hate to do this, but it reminded me of my experience of, of sort of reading Strauss and reading Leo Strauss and the experience of kind of Straussian approaches to political philosophy, where, you know, the ordinary approach to political philosophy is you, you study the history of political philosophy. Like you study what different, you know, philosophical thinkers have, what their, what their systems are, what they believed, what they're, you know, they'll probably do something about what, what their time and place was. You might try to understand them from the perspective of the events that were going on around them, but you don't actually ever like say, okay, you know, was Plato right? Was Aristotle correct? Are they describing the world? And so his, his transition, Matthew Rose Sorensen's transition from being a kind of voyeuristic journalist who's interested in what these strange academics think to someone who's fully, fully living out one of the realities of their ideas is, that's also fascinating to me.

Yeah. I don't know. I want to interrupt Alistair, but go ahead.

No, just that, that, that being coming subject to them. I think, I think I'd be curious to hear what you guys have to think about, you know, that the figure of Arne Sales is extremely ambiguous, right? Not even a big, he's a bad, he's, he's bad. Like he's callous.

He doesn't care about the subjects of his experiment. I mean, Ketterle is, is more malicious, but he's this transgressive thinker. He's transgressive in all sorts of ways.

Right. And, but he's right. And so kind of like wrestling with, you know, the, the, just wrestling with his ambiguous morality, but nevertheless, insight into the way the world works, at least in this world.

I'm, I'm, I want to, I'd love to hear what you guys have to think about him as a figure in the book, like and how that relates to that. It's interesting the way that Piranesi refers to him as the prophet when he encounters him. There's a sense of, again, I think there's something about the way that words relate to reality that changes during the course of the book.

So the idea of the prophet is a word that illuminates the world that gives some sort of deeper meaning and significance and some sense of the charged reality of the world and one's path within it, as opposed to the word, words that can actually destroy your world that he's warned about by the other, that if he reads the words that are, or hears the words of this other person who's entered his world, his world might be destroyed. He

might be sent mad and writing and words and speech are such an important part of the book. And I think that may be one way into thinking about the character of the prophet or say on sails.

So the way that words disrupt something of his original participation, to use Bob Fields' understanding, he is at one with the house. He senses the house as a presence that interacts with him, that cares for him, that he's the beloved child of the house. And the moment that that is disrupted, he feels himself to be alone.

The capital H that always used to be given for the halls now becomes a small H. There's a sense in which the world has been demystified. There's something of an absence. And he is someone who's now alone in the world.

He's lonely. And that is a result of a particular engagement with words, among other things, the words that could not easily be erased, the words that he read in his book that gave him the memory that he had lacked as a result of his union with the house. The words that he himself had written.

Yes. Yeah. Yeah.

That's fascinating. Susanna, you were about to say something. I mean, so one of there, there's so many different kinds of reading experiences and hearing experiences that this book reminded me of.

One of them was actually, so Lev Grossman, who's this other kind of fantasist, other science fiction writer, wrote a series of books called Magicians Trilogy. And if this is about, if Piranesi is about meaning as magic, like what the magic is, is the meaning that's embedded in matter or the meaning that's embedded in reality, then the Magicians Trilogy is, I would say, something like goodness as magic, but you see it in the lack of goodness. So again, spoilers, although, man, I always, I can never tell whether I want to recommend these books or whether I want to warn people away from them.

But there are a series of books where there is a, it's very Hogwartsy, it's very Harry Potter-y. There are the standard sort of apparatuses, apparati, of a lot of sort of college-based fantasy novels where there's this college of magic and you get, if you are sort of have the potential to become a magician, you are taken away when you're, or you're invited to study there. And there are centaurs and there are spells and there are all kinds of different sort of creatures, but there's no actual, like no one's good.

No one's like super bad either, but no one's particularly good. There's no battle between good and evil. There's no quest.

The teachers are kind of careerist. The magic is very mechanical. So like you can do magic, but there's not any reason to do magic.

And that trilogy reveals by its absence, I would say, that when we're reading the Narnia books or even when we're reading Harry Potter, like the magic is like the goodness and the idea of a quest, the idea of there being something that's worth doing. And then the kind of friendship that grows up or relationship that grows up in the doing of it. And the idea that like you can, if you choose wrong, you're choosing something that's morally wrong, not just disadvantageous or something like that's intrinsic to the magic.

Like the magic is not about the centaurs or the fauns or the spells. And it's not so much goodness, although the goodness is there as well, but it's just really focused on meaning as magic. Two thoughts there.

One is that reminds me a lot of the other magic series that I want to bring on something. Oh no, not Philip. Patrick Rothfuss is the King Killer Chronicles.

Oh my gosh. The name of the wind. The name of the wind is so good, but like the form of magic and the way it's attached to naming and words and like the form of magic is interesting here and it relates.

Again, because this is not a magical, this is actually not magic. Like this book is not about magic. But it got me thinking about Susanna Clark's other book, Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, we should have a separate conversation about.

But even there, that book had an internal debate within it about the nature of magic. Is it nature magic? Is it scientific? That same debate in a sense, you've got strange as kind of like almost like a natural kind of savant of magic who intuitively taps into things as far as I remember. And then Mr. Norrell who wants to have this very like orderly science of thaumaturgy.

Yeah. Yeah, properly English magic. And yeah, and who eschews the old ways, looks down on you know the magic of the Raven King and invoking fairies and that sort of thing.

That's not at all kind of like disorderly and not really good magic. It's wild. And it's wild and it's natural in a way that but natural in a like personal way, not natural in a way of that can be like harnessed like the forces of you know, gravity and so forth.

But the personal dimension of like invocation and contract and all that. Yeah, the fight of around magic is, I mean, there's still some of that personal dimension of the way we relate to the world, the way that we relate to the depth dimension and the power contained within the world. Is it receptive? Is it personal? Or is it almost impersonal? Is it a matter of subject to our control, instrumental subject to our control? That's a theme that is running throughout both of her books.

Yeah. And is also tied into the question of disenchantment and the disenchantment of the world as we instrumentalize our relationship to nature and to create wealth when it

becomes nature instead of creation in a sense. She uses a lot of that's something to think about.

I think she explicitly references Owen Barfield at one point as one of the authors that was a transgressive thinker that people were in or a person that transgressive thinkers were interested in. And his theory of original participation and a sense of oneness with the world, relating to the world as if there were some intelligence or presence that were in the world that you could relate to and that you had some that it was present within you. And that's something that, for instance, we talk about panic and panic is something that overtakes you, that comes upon you.

This is a real thing out there in the world. Almost it's a force in the world. There's also present within you and acts upon you.

And he gives that as an example of the way that the ancient mind would have related to the world more generally, that there were great Godlike forces that you could experience their presence and impact upon you. And there's a sense of sacredness and communion and charge meaning. And then even after that, there's a residual sense of meaning that the world is a scrutable, meaningful place, as you have, for instance, in the discarded image of Lewis.

That's not quite the same thing as original participation, but it's something that has a remnant of the flavor of it. And so Barfield was very interested, for instance, in looking back at language and seeing the way that as you go further back in language, you see the connection of language, not just as putting tags on things in the world, as it were, but a sense of the unity of the various realities in the world, metaphor and direct reference coming together and this more poetic experience of reality. And so if you want to understand the world, one of the things you need to do is recover the sense of the etymologies in all our dead metaphors to trace back the course of language and to go beyond the sort of hollowed out dry riverbed of language to see the water that once coursed through it, the sense of participation, the sense of unity between the self and the forces of the world.

And one of the ways in which that course was diverted through science and the way that science engages with the world is something to be as a source of resources to be wrested from it or an understanding to imprison it and its forces to be harnessed and used for our purpose, but without any sense of the sacredness and the personhood almost of the world. And so you see this even in the differences between the ways that Piranesi speaks of the house. The house is personal for him, whereas the other speaks about the house in ways that lose any sense of its sacredness.

The statues don't have meaning, they're just things covered with bird shit as he speaks about it. The technological framework of thought that he brings to the house makes it impossible for him to see it in the way Piranesi does. And so there's a sense in which the

world that the other sees moves the world of Piranesi towards a sort of oblivion.

He can't perceive the world in that way. His eyes are dim to it, whereas Piranesi has this original participation. The struggle is then he's broken free from that.

So you might think about Raphael who comes to deliver him. You might think about the archangel patron saint of travelers, the blind, and also in Islamic thought the one who would blow the final trumpet leading to the resurrection. There's something of that character that she has that she's breaking him out of this world and then the problem is how does he relate to that world afterwards? Can he return to the original participation? He can't.

He's moved out of it and so somehow he has to reconcile the scientific world of modernity and the world that he is thoroughly invested in as Matthew Rose Sorensen and then the world of Piranesi which is the world of original participation and somehow move beyond that to an imaginative reunion. I was thinking about the work of E. A. Burt, the metaphysical foundations of modern science, as he talks about this sort of sapping of meaning from the world. This is one quote from him.

The features of the world now classed as secondary, unreal, ignoble, and regarded as dependent on the deceitfulness of sense are just those features which are most intense to man in all but his purely theoretic activity and even in that except where he confines himself strictly to the mathematical method, it was inevitable that in these circumstances man should now appear to be outside of the real world. Man is hardly more than a bundle of secondary qualities and so one of the ways in which he has to bring the world back together is to see the glory in things that have been sapped of their glory, that have been reduced just to their surfaces and to see hidden behind that some sense of their participation in a glorious reality beyond themselves and so that final participation, to use Barfield's language, comes just at the very end of the book where in its final line he recognises the house in the world of the streets that he's walking through and he also sees the way in which people that he meets have corresponding images within the house. There's one passage that comes to mind here.

People were walking up and down on the path. An old man passed me. He looked sad and tired.

He had broken veins on his cheeks and a bristly white beard. As he screwed up his eyes against the falling snow, I realised I knew him. He is depicted on the northern wall of the 48th Western Hall.

He is shown as a king with a little model of a walled city in one hand, while the other hand he raises in blessing. I wanted to seize hold of him and say to him, in another world you are a king, noble and good. I have seen it.

But I hesitated a moment too long and he disappeared into the crowd. That coming after 200 pages, it's just... It's something. You read it and I can feel my heart.

It's so good. One of the things that's interesting, Taylor talks about the porosity of the self in part of what makes Folk Secular is the fact that we're not porous anymore, we're not open, we don't feel ourselves to be subject or penetrable by spiritual forces and that sort of thing. We have buffered selves.

Ketterle is a buffered self in respect to the house. He comes in, he takes precautions not to be subject to the house in such a way that would impact his mental and intellectual integrity so he doesn't lose his memory, his sense of who he is in the normal world. Whereas, Piranesi is a fully porous self in that sense.

He's lost himself to the house. His buffer has gone down. It's been dampened almost entirely, which is why he loses himself in there.

And so the coming of Raphael actually reintroduces his old buffer to some degree, but it's now a far more porous one as he reenters the world. This is where you see that even in that quote, there's that level of the old Piranesi who had no buffer would have just grabbed him. Oh, you're in the hall, blah, blah.

Whereas the buffer of being out in the world has started to reassert itself but not fully. I think there's something even emotional about this in terms of thinking about the way Ketterle, the other, relates to the world and relates to others in the way Piranesi does. He becomes much more open and receptive emotionally and spiritually.

You think about even the nature of magic in these worlds of the nature meaning the ability to be receptive is risky. There's something risky about his relationship to the house, to the world, to persons he can be taken advantage of. He can be harmed in a lot of ways, but he's also open to trust.

He's also open to relate. Ketterle is self-contained. Ketterle trusts, takes only his own counsel.

Ketterle is narcissistically, he narcissistically relates to others and he's self-enveloped. There's a relationship there between his interpersonal relational dynamic and then the relational dynamic between him and the house, him and the world. Yeah, those are caught up with each other.

I think he's thinking about us and say in the sense that he's like he's closed off from reality and that makes him closed off from other people and therefore the only thing that he can serve is himself. That means that he can't actually perceive what's there finally. I feel like I want to try to describe, so I haven't read a ton of Barfield's or I'm trying to think if I've read any Barfield other than like quotes.

Shush, what? No, I haven't. That's me. I think I've read two quotes or I just see references to them.

I mean, I have the book, The World's Apart, I think, but and I've got, I think, anyway, so I'm going to try to describe two things that I think would get at like, so there are actually three things that I think would kind of like help people to understand at least my understanding of what Barfield was getting at, at least via my understanding of what Susanna Clark was doing. So first is like, so there are certain words that throughout, you know, most languages that have gendered nouns take one gender rather than another. So, oranos and shemayim are the Greek and Hebrew words for sky and they're both male and gaia and is it, gosh, arets, am I thinking of Hebrew word? Are both feminine words for earth.

And there's this weird thing that if you, you can probably do this. Think of nouns, you can very frequently, you can guess whether they're, whether they have this kind of, for the most part, masculine or feminine character and then like go check, see whether you're right. So it's a kind of like reading a masculine or feminine nature in nouns, both in words and in the objects that, for which they're referenced.

And like, you can kind of do this experiment with yourself and you'll probably get it more than, you know, a random degree, percentage of them correct. So that's like one way to kind of get into this, to experience your way into this earlier, earlier participation. The other is like, I don't know if you guys did this, but like I can remember kind of not realizing that, so throughout the year, each year, I would have different kind of emotional flavors for different seasons, but I didn't perceive them as things in myself.

I thought that they were like out there in the world. So like the Christmas feeling that I would get like in December, I didn't think that that was in me. I thought that that was in like in December and, or, you know, the feeling of May, April and May, you don't feel like that's a subjective thing.

You feel like, oh, that's, that's spring. And I mean, I still feel that way, honestly. I was going to say, Susanna, don't lie.

I was a kid last Tuesday. A lot of it is the openness to the world producing a sort of awe and wonder and a corresponding response in the person. I think of the first chapter of Lewis's, The Abolition of Man, and the way he talks about the proper correspondence between a response in the human spirit and actual physical realities.

And so if we do not have that corresponding response, there's something wrong with us. We've, we're not relating to reality properly. And what the example you give about language, I think is a good one.

You may be thinking about the term that you have in Genesis relating to Adam, where

Adam is from, formed from the earth, and the earth is presented as his mother. And you have that elsewhere in the poetry of scripture, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return there, knit together in the lowest parts of the earth, the sense that the earth and the mother's womb belong together. And there's a deep affinity to that with them.

It's not just a sort of poetic imagination, it's something real. And if you understand yourself and the world and your mother's womb, you'll see that that's something real in the world. And so the mother's womb and the earth, there is a continuity between them.

That is not just a product of the imagination, it is something out there. And you can feel it in this more original participation sense, or you can get at it in some form of final participation to use Barfield's approach. And I also think, for instance, of some of Heidegger's work along this line, the sense of, particularly his later work, the fourfold or the way sky, earth, divinities and mortals join together, language as a house of being coming in, having a sense of the movement of being and its disclosure and the way that the technological approach to the world has tried to wrest things from a reservoir of resources.

And as a result, has prevented us from actually having a sense of being at home in the world. And the way that even things like the temple or the bridge, to use some of his illustrations, can gather things together in the world. They're not just resting indiscriminate and fungible resources.

They're actually uniting a whole world of the earth, the sky, mortal beings and the gods, which has a flavor of animism to it, but an animism that is trying to recover that original participation through a poetic understanding for all of Heidegger's deep, problematic character. There's something there. So Piranesi, the thing is Piranesi and Kedrle's different relationships to the world, you see that Piranesi, after a while, there's this, there's one of the funny things that keeps happening is Piranesi realizing, I don't know how, Kedrle is always so well dressed.

He describes his various suits and he doesn't realize that Kedrle is popping in and out of our world and the house. And he's always dressed immaculately. He brings sandwiches that are prepared in a world, he doesn't have to at all be attuned to anything that's going on there, which is why, partially why he's so scared of it.

And he doesn't venture out and do Piranesi, he's lost his shoes. He's got shells in his hair. He's learned to fish.

He's learned to kind of be attuned to the cold and the heat and all of it. And he's closer to the house, like just actually naturally, physically, like he's subject to it in some ways that, whereas, you know, Kedrle has, Kedrle is in a sense, we keep coming back to the porosity and the bufferedness, but like Kedrle has utter control, almost utter control of

his relation to the house, because he can extract himself from it. Whereas Piranesi is, he is a child of the house.

He lives within it. He dwells within it. It is, it's the womb of the world is where he dwells in it.

And it, you know, in a sense, mothers him, kind of a harsh mother, in a lot of ways, when you see him describe the winters and the waves and all that sort of thing. But it's, his relationship is much more on that register. One thing I kind of want to pull on, which is interesting to think about is the feel, theologically, the house is personal, and the house is impersonal.

This is like a, this is a, this is like a pantheistic, panentheistic, kind of like participatory metaphysics, which is not the same as a theistic participatory metaphysics, right? Are, you know, there is, there is something different in a universe, where things are created, and God transcends it radically, even though he's radically imminent to it. And so this is, this was something that is interesting, that I'm thinking along, along the lines of wanting to go straight back to, going back to that original immunity, going back to that kind of participation. It's not, it's not an unproblematic thing of going back to the world.

I think there's something there with Piranesi's losing himself in the world. I mean, this is maybe just correlating, you know, the, I guess I'm curious what you guys think, correlating that issue of transcendence and imminence, and even Piranesi's own ability to distinguish himself, his continuity through time, his own identity, or losing himself to the house. You almost think of, you know, a theology of God being lost within the world, or actually distinctly creating the world as a, as his creature, that reflects his glory, reflects his paternal care, but is nevertheless not God.

I don't know, so I'm curious, you know, this is, that was a jumble, but these are some of the bells that are being set off, and I'm curious if you guys want to put some of those bells in order. So I have a couple of different ideas about this. One of them is that I recently saw a production in the Before Time, so not that recently, but like, I don't know, a year and a half ago.

I saw a production of Herakles, the Sophocles play, that was put on by my friend Caleb Simone, who's this, he's getting, he's actually gotten now his doctorate in classics from Columbia. It was his, part of his, you know, doctoral program was doing this production. He did, he's done a lot of research into Greek music, and the music that would have gone along with, you know, with each play.

He like, found an Aulos player. There's like three Aulos players left in the world, and he found one of them. And so, like, I, we could maybe like, find a link to that production, to drop in the show notes to this, because both in the, in the experience of watching the play, and in the play itself, in Sophocles' text.

So, Lysa is the, I forget, like, she's sort of like the goddess of, or the emissary of the goddess, who, you know, makes Herakles go mad and kill his family. Again, spoilers, sorry. Although, if you didn't know that, I don't know what to do.

And so, like, there is this, again, as I was, spoiler alert on Sophocles. It's kind of like, I think, you know, it's been, that season has been released for a while now. You can even go back and binge watch those.

Yeah. So, Herakles gets taken over by this music, which is played by this emissary of the goddess that drives him mad. And like, terrible.

This is not a happy story. It's, there's a reason that we call it a tragedy. And there's this moment where Herakles is sort of saying, I can't, basically, despite everything that we've just seen, where the gods are literally messing with him, he says, I just can't believe that God would be petty, or would be sort of like amoral.

I can't remember what the words are, but like, it's this moment of classical theism in the middle of this mythological story. And it's this moment where he experiences, like, the hope of good order in the world, which, as someone who's been, like, thoroughly buffeted, like, back and forth as a completely unbuffered self, you know, taken over by, you know, the madness and the music of the goddess. It's like, it's as though he's, he's hoping for the disenchanted world, but not fully disenchanted.

He's hoping for the world that we live in as Christians, where it's where God is a God of order and a God of goodness. But he's not hoping for, like, a world devoid of meaning. It's almost like, there's almost more meaning in a world where God can be counted on to be good.

But it's less of, it's, it's less pantheistic, it's less enchanted in a lot of ways. And Charles Taylor, I mean, my original, I tweeted after, right after I finished the book, I said, Charles Taylor, eat your heart out. Like, this is a very Charles Taylor book.

And Charles Taylor, in A Secular Age, talks about the disenchantment that Christianity, kind of, like, it's not, it's never totally clear whether Taylor is happy about this or not. But the disenchantment that Christianity brought to the pagan world, but it was not a complete disenchantment. So that's kind of a little bit of what I, I don't know if that's getting at anything that you were thinking about, Derek.

I was reminded of the work of the science fiction writer, Gene Wolfe, Latro and the Mist is particularly... Oh, I haven't read those. A lot of unreliable narrators, but this particular one is an ancient character who's constantly forgetting. He's lost the ability to remember for periods of time as a result of the judgment by a goddess.

And it explores many of the same themes of participation, the ancient mind and its experience of the world, and the attempt to try and hold things together with language.

And that, I think, gets at something of the book in terms of the way that language and the word is so important in actually helping him to, first of all, make sense of the world, to restore some reality to Matthew Rose Sorensen. And the word of the prophet is key there.

It's a world, a word from a sort of father type figure, entering into the world of his original participation with his mother, the house. And it breaks that original unity in some sense. And it seems to me that that's one of the things that is very important about the fact that God is our father.

If God were our mother, we would have that sense of original participation of unity. God has the womb in which we live and have our existence, and there's complete panentheistic unity. Whereas with God as our father, God stands over against the world in some sense.

There's a material hiatus between God and his creation. And so the world is a place where we can experience unity. The world, the earth is in some sense our mother, and we're not supposed to just relate to it as a depersonalized lot of stuff to be used.

But on the other hand, God and his word move us into a symbolic realm where there is a break of that original participation with the reality of a world into which we're just sunk in a sort of naive innocence and forgetfulness. We actually can step outside of it. And the coming to language, I think, even for the human person, the individual, that process of coming to language is a movement beyond a realm of original participation of the earliest years of childhood, where you're almost sunk in this realm of forgetfulness, of unity, and then you can step outside of it and you can stand over against it to some sense, to some extent.

And that comes with the word in particular. And I think that's something for Piranesi. I was thinking of like Trinitarian, like not just Trinitarian, but Christological, almost the dialectic between wisdom and Torah.

I mean, they're unified, but there's a distinction of like walking in God's world according to wisdom. Some of that's going to be like natural wisdom, almost like, I think of like the proper, I don't know, proprioception that you get from your feedback, just the way babies have proper orientation to the world just through your natural movement. But then yes, speech orienting, you're giving you categories that are, yes, kind of abstracted from immediate experience, but then orient your immediate experience and help you actually see more clearly.

There's something about an external word, a Torah, given, legislated, delivered, that is not immediately bound and caught up in kind of unmediated and uninterpreted experience, sense experience. You have that mediation. No, no, it's just that you have that dialectic of like lady wisdom and Lagos, but there's creation and redemption.

The world is charged and suffused because it has been created by and through God's word and God's wisdom. There's a reflection within that order, and yet God's word and God's wisdom is not bound to creation. It is not.

It's in and it's not. At this point, we're playing with the doctrine of divine ideas and exemplar causes and things like that. But that whole dialectic is there.

I mean, you're also, this is also the distinction between divine law in St. Thomas's sense and natural law. So divine, essentially divine positive law. So God's wisdom, God's eternal law speaking and natural law, which is God's wisdom sort of embedded in us.

So we can kind of read from ourselves as well as reading from his book. You can read from the book of nature as well as the book of scripture. And so like there's one other part of this and I'm not really sure if I'm so okay.

So first of all, the experience as well as recommending love Grossman and Sophocles as and Patrick Rothfuss as sort of good parallels to read in concert with this. I also really want to recommend Alistair's Bible studies because there's a way of Alistair's a distinctive way of reading scripture that reminds me of Susanna Clark in this book. And I can't describe it any more than that because also we are probably getting to the end of this podcast.

But just trust me on this. Anyone who's listening and has not kind of dug into Bible studies, I would recommend them. Would you say it's deep exegesis? Or weird.

The deep magic of the you should have called your study like the deep magic of the Bible with Alistair Roberts. No, but it's true. But that kind of hewing in on the fact that the words are inspired and written and taken down have that have an originary and rooted sense.

There's intrinsic dimensions to the image, the images and the words picked up and inspired and written. They're not just like extrinsic, like a self-contained sign system. Yeah, it corresponds and correlates and draws on the world.

Yeah. Yeah. I think I think for me, one of the things about it is that poetry is one of the truest ways of speaking about the world.

I once that clicks, I think a lot of what scripture is doing makes a lot more sense. It's not just decorative. It's not just fancy literary tricks.

It's telling us something true about the world. And likewise, with understanding the world around us, that the attentive poet who is attuned to the world can tell us something true about the resonance between things, the interpenetration of realities and the ways in which we are implicated as worlded creatures. And that, I think, is something we're very forgetful about within the modern world.

OK, one more thing. I think that so there's the sense that it's not just that the words of the Bible, as Alistair attacks them, kind of have the same sense of embedded meaning. It's also that like the history, the bits of the Bible that are history, that are describing things that happen, you can sort of see history itself as being.

Like similar stories or similar themes playing out in people's actions and people's decisions and people's relationships, and I feel like there's something about. You know, the Hebrew idea of history as having both a direction, but also a kind of spiral to it. So like we're going from creation towards, you know, towards the final judgment, towards the new heavens and the new earth.

But like as we go, there's a kind of like spiral shell that directionality of the spiral shell where you keep seeing the same patterns over and over again. And that's the kind of like that's in contrast to a purely cyclical view of the world, which you might get with a much more immanentist, like fully immanentist, panentheistic, and or pagan understanding where you're not actually going somewhere. Or a flat linear progress that is just going all straightforward and.

Where there are no echoes. Right. No echoes.

It's all radical breaks. It's all pure. And it fails to look back and see, oh, we're just doing a different version of the same dance, you know, farther down the line.

I'm amazed that we've got to this point without talking about the theme of progress in the book. Well, yeah, I mean, there's just so much. But that whole this is the thing about the disenchantment versus enchantment discourse and all that is.

You know, you have this sense people have this sense of lack. There's something off. There's something.

And I go back and forth in how much I evaluate that. I'm. But this is my kind of Protestant skepticism about our need to re-enchant the world is not all enchantments good.

Not all of it. What was what we've, you know, quote unquote, was lost. I mean, the fairies are freaky.

You know, the elves are mercurial and they're they're they're ambiguous characters. Not even refer to them. You don't just the good people.

Yeah. You don't say the they don't invoke them. But but that whole element of like, you know, there's the danger of the Baconian Ketterly.

But also, it's not it's actually it's not good to try and return and become just become Piranesi in the house. That's actually not a fully human existence either to tend to have

no sense of history, no continuity. And so that I think yeah, I don't I don't think Susanna Clarke goes into that kind of pure, pure enchantment nostalgia.

I don't think she does that. I think that's part of what she's playing with is that dialectic, which is why it's so rich. And it's only 250 pages.

It's crazy what she does in 250 pages of journal entries. If you have not read the book, then we're very disappointed in you for having listened to this point. But but you can redeem yourself somewhat by buying a copy of it and reading it now.

And thank you so much for joining me, Susanna and Derek. It's been a great conversation. A lot of fun.

Oh, yeah. God bless and thank you for listening.