

Endnote S2 E10: Book Club 4 w/ Aayu Pandey

Book List

“2 B R 0 2 B” by Kurt Vonnegut

“Sea Oak” by George Saunders

“The Semplica-Girl Diaries” by George Saunders

Transcript

Alex: Hello and welcome back to Endnote, a literary affairs podcast from the Hart House Student Literary and Library Committee at the University of Toronto. I'm Alexander Lynch. Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the land on which Hart House and the University of Toronto operate. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land. Happy New Year all! This episode is the fourth episode in our Book Club series, where we're speaking with Lit and Lib executives about literary works they love. This is a special episode for the holidays—evidenced, in part, by its atypical release date, but you'll also hear Meixi and Marta discuss a story of their own choosing in addition to their conversation with Aayu Pandey, one of L&L's equity and diversity officers. Enjoy! Up first, a conversation with Aayu on Kurt Vonnegut's short story "2 B R 0 2 B."

Meixi: Welcome to the fourth episode of Book Club for the 2021 to 2022 academic year. I'm joined by my co-host, Marta.

Marta: Hi.

Meixi: And our guest for today Aayu Pandey. Aayu is a second-year undergraduate at the University of Toronto pursuing a Physics and Philosophy Specialist, with a Math and Science and Society Minors. They're a published author of a science fantasy trilogy and a very big tea enthusiast. This is their second year at Hart House Literary and Library and first year as the Equity and Diversity Officer. How are you, Aayu?

Aayu: I'm doing well, thank you.

Meixi: Great. Today we'll be discussing "2 B R 0 2 B," a short story by Kurt Vonnegut originally published in 1962. The story opens by introducing Edward K. Wehling Jr., who is sitting in a waiting room while his triplets are born. However, it continues to focus on a variety of individuals passing through the waiting room, and explores their role in a society where no one ages and individuals must volunteer to die in order for newborns to survive. This method of population control is investigated through the ideas of a disillusioned painter, a naive woman who works for the Bureau of Termination, an idealistic doctor, and the aforementioned father to be. Wehling eventually kills the woman, the doctor, and himself in order to save his children. And the painter overlooking the grisly scene calls that fateful number which processes those who have volunteered to die. To start off our chat today. Why did you choose this piece, Aayu?

Aayu: I'm quite fascinated by dystopian novels in general. And I particularly like, well, it's hard to do dystopia right I think in short stories, and I think this very tiny story does, does a very good job of it, because it starts with this kind of wonderfully utopian picture of it. And the dystopia kind of just unravels throughout the story. Like the to be father Wehlings' frustration becomes clearer as the story progresses, and then there's the painter's defiance, where initially he's very against the idea of the suicide helpline. So he wants to like, you know, do it himself, whenever the time comes whenever he thinks he's ready instead of going to "2 B R 0 2 B." But then I feel

like the story kind of shows how dystopian it is and how frustrating characters get, and in how it ends. So like, for example, like, I think it's wonderful that the act of rebellion seems like it's going to come from the painter, because he wants to take care of ending his life on his own terms. And then it seems like that's the society that he's living in drives him to not do that and do something else. So it's kind of that kind of unexpected, well, not letting people be who they really are, and kind of forcing them into circumstances. I think the dystopia depicted here does really well.

Marta: I'll add to that, that I think the story really succeeds, because it's very focused on kind of like, one specific dystopian characteristic that it can hone in on. So like, it's not tackling what if these thousands of things went wrong, or like, what if this entire system of government went wrong, it instead like focuses on a very specific problem that like the President was thinking about, which is like the problem of overpopulation, and then kind of carries out a thought experiment of like, what if, and that's what allows it to kind of like build what feels like a realistic world within on it, like not that much space, like probably 10 to 20 pages, while simultaneously not feeling like bloated or like its shoes are too small for its own concept. So yeah, I think there's also like a tremendous amount of control put into the story from that perspective.

Meixi: Speaking of what you said about control, I think what really amazed me going into the story is that I've personally never read science fiction in such a short story format. So I was really amazed how in the smallest details, it was worldbuilding in a way, for like instance, I think there's a song just a brief mentioning of the lyrics of the song. And it talks about in those like four verses, the entire basically the entire world building of the population control, the man saying that, if you pass away a newborn would replace him, I think, to accomplish that in 10 pages or so and to have, I think I was able to get a pretty clear grasp of what the world was like, I think in 10 pages, I was very surprised at how well done that was.

Aayu: Yeah. And just to like, add on to that. I think it's really neat how Vonnegut achieves that world building. And in that tiny amount of space that he uses, he also manages to keep it very relatable. So there's like world building. And then there's also cultures even, I mean, well, the characters are relatable, but then also there's norms and in the world that are similar to ours, like the mural that the painter's painting is being painted because it's kind of a memorial to someone. And it's those kinds of things that we also observe in our lives. So it does a very good job I think of projecting dystopia on to our own lives, because it's just the right amount of, oh, it could be our situation also.

Meixi: As you said, like a comparison between our present life and the story's life, one of the questions we had was, how does the society more direct connection between life and death make us interpret their relationship in our own reality?

Aayu: I think we don't always think about birth and death as relative to each other as so explicitly relative to each other. And this story draws I mean, not just a connection between them it is essentially is drawing a law, right? Like it's like government mandated law. And I think that the way we see a good society or civilization, my understanding of it, does give a lot of freedom to people in choosing birth and death. And here, I feel like there's an illusion of some amount of

choice, which doesn't actually exist. Like, for example, it's not just that you have one birth equals one death in the society, in a normal situation. In the society, that means volunteers, it's essentially a suicide, right, which, in my head, before reading, the story was always associated with someone taking death in their own hands, and having that sort of agency over it. But then, given how government mandated it is, in this story, it makes me wonder how much of a choice people really have, even in choosing that like, even when people are volunteering to die like the grandfather, who's not even a character who is explicitly ever like comes in the story. In my head, it's always very easy to kind of every time I read it, imagine a grandfather who would have volunteered to die just because he would have wanted his son to have the same like joys and experiences of fatherhood that he did. So it's kind of interesting to see that this story really links, birth and death, while stripping the general population in the story from the choices and freedom that we usually associate with it.

Marta: There's also a kind of I think like a taking away that aspect of humanity of death and birth in the story, I think the story addresses a problem, I don't think it just offers like a new problem. It also addresses a problem of like overpopulation, of not having enough resources, which I think have become especially like, major anxieties for people in the past 100-200 years or so. And it's, I guess, it's just interesting to think about how it offers up that problem and almost claims that like, simple solutions don't function well ever, like they almost never work, because I think even of like, I don't have it up, unfortunately, but there's a part where at the very beginning in the prescript, it's like, "You have a problem? Any problem can be solved, if you just call 2 B R 0 2 B," which is obviously like a really weird way of looking at suicide, I think especially with the way that like suicide discourse has gone through the last 2,3,4 decades, with like the concept of suicide being a permanent solution to a temporary problem, especially that kind of mentality. I think that it's interesting that this story shows you like what would happen if the simple solution to overpopulation was that people would just be able to die when they wanted to die, that it's not like, you know, we interpret people wanting to die as a problem, but we almost like frame their problem, their problem and their fears and their like mental illness as a solution to a greater societal problem. And I think that kind of framing of suicide in the story stands in pretty well as the way that like death and life are almost taken like their humanity is taken away like the real life human impact of those experiences is taken away because you no longer think of those people as like individuals who are experiencing those things like who are experiencing birth or death, or who are experiencing like maybe dissatisfaction, like not being fulfilled mental illness. You don't consider those experiences, instead you interpret them as solutions. I think that was a really interesting aspect of how the story treated like "simple solutions."

Aayu: Yeah, I think, for me, when we think of simple solutions, like a very big question it raised was, you know how it, it kind of raises the question of, if we try to control overpopulation, is it going to be this mechanical? Is it going to be this, as you said, dehumanising? And then it also made me realise like, is there going to be a hierarchy and status quo because like, inevitably, it looks like there will be if one tries to do that, because, like, you know, how the mural is symbolising that society, you have these people who are tending, and like, you know, trying to trim the trees and just take care of the garden, and it's apparently better taken care of than ever before because overpopulation is not a problem anymore and these things aren't an issue anymore. But then there's others who are basically the plants and trees and it's such a clear difference between in the hierarchical status of the two that, yeah, it really raises that question for

me of like, if we try to solve such issues, do we just run into those problems? And those don't seem like very solvable things.

Meixi: A detail I want to point out that was really interesting to me: the fact that everybody who's having a kid or like is adding a child to their family needs to personally find someone to die is very, like interesting, because you could have that solution where people who like other people that you don't know choose to die, and then you get a cue, maybe and then you can have your kid. But in this story, I think they framed it as you personally need to find three people or like how many kids you're going to have, to die and then have like kind of receipt. And it needs to be a personal connection. And I thought that detail was quite humanising in a story that had many dehumanising details because in these emotions, where the father was trying to find three volunteers that he needed to like, basically personally know, he went through such a range of emotions, where you kind of figured out that he was trying to figure out what his value was what he was trying to value as human life. So for instance, like when he talks about his grandfather, how he didn't want his grandfather to die, even though he had volunteered, I think that was one of the only parts of the story where I saw a humanising detail rather than a dehumanising approach to life and death.

Aayu: Yeah. I think a tiny detail, which I felt like was a very interesting blend between a humanising and dehumanising aspect was the woman, Leora Duncan, and when the news hits that they're going to have triplets, her first reaction, and she's depicted as such a, she's not depicted as a bad or evil character at all. She's a naïve woman, right. And it's very interesting to me that her first response is to kind of think of the logistical or legal implications of it, because it's so different. Her response itself is very, I feel, in a way, humanising just because of her work and things like that, like her response makes a lot of sense if I consider her a functioning human being and her character in that society. But then if we think of it in ours, in our society, you receive a news of even a stranger having triplets, your first response is going to be something very exciting or enthusiastic or just like a congratulatory response. And here, it's just not, because their birth is not being thought of in that way.

Marta: There's a way in which the society almost contradicts itself because like in the in the way that like it asks, it demands of characters like Leora to lead the lives that they do and to ask the questions that they do, or even like, in the detail that Meixi pointed out, the detail about how families have to find the own people, that they're exchanging lives for essentially, that they're exchanging the newborn lives for. It seems almost like it wants to streamline the process of death in a way that doesn't make you think about it, but at the same time forces you to think about the cost of what you're doing. That like you need to think about the human cost of like the life that you're bringing into the world and who you are inevitably taking resources away from. And that makes like some other details in the story, like for example, I find the one exchange at one point with the doctor where he talks about like the I think it's like the headquarters of the Bureau of Termination, I think that's what it was, and it's got like all these nicknames and Leora's like, "I hate that nickname for it, use the actual name." I found these little like, details of euphemisms and stuff really interesting in the story and how like, it allows the characters to distance themselves in a variety of different ways, whether it be in like colloquial language by like not saying the actual name of the space. But then also like, the actual name of the space is in itself, in

a way, a euphemism, because it's like very distant and cold. And it's not really saying that place represents, the death that it represents. I found that very cool, too. Regarding world building.

Meixi: Yeah. And the second question we want to ask was, how does the ending affect your perception of the story as a whole?

Aayu: I love this ending very much. It's one of my favourite endings. The first thing that strikes me about the ending is that you get, the reader gets exactly what we're promised, which is a tragedy. It ends well for no one, it's something that's foreshadowed just by the name of the story, "2 B R 0 2 B." People die. And it's very sudden, and dissatisfactory for everyone. And then what's like, particularly interesting is that when the painter calls the helpline, well, before that, even when he calls, I really like how you can't at all predict that he's going to do that, till the very end. And then even then it's, I think there's a very specific point where his brush falls out of his hand, and he kind of has had this realisation that he can't paint anymore. So there's this kind of like, "Oh, what's the point of living now?" Until that moment, the first time I read this story, I was confident that this, he's going to do it, but he's gonna do it on his terms because it's him deciding that he doesn't want to paint anymore, and so on. But then it's not on his terms. I like how this the ending kind of converges, like how the story converges to the ending, how initially, there's talk about, when the painter is talking about doing it on his terms, another character says to him, that "You should be thinking about the mess that you will leave behind and how terrible that will be, and like, this is just better." And now he's witnessed three deaths in the last like five minutes or so, which were not assisted by any helpline, which were not so called, what anyone is expecting in the story really, that's, and it makes me wonder, is that partly what pushed him to be like, he saw a mess, and he realised that that's not what he wanted to do? Or was it just not having the nerve to do it? Yeah, or, you know, it's, or was it some kind of humane act as he decided to leave? So was it like a kind of defiance and also abiding to the norm of the society?

Meixi: I think what really struck me about the ending was, when I finished it, I didn't really think about like, the people who died. But what I really thought about was, if the three triplets after those three people had passed away, would they be allowed to like live? And I think, like, that's what really caught me the detail that which made me really like this story is because it leaves us with the question of how does the morality like in this story works? Are these people now like volunteers? Are these people being replaced with the three children that the Wehlings had basically killed? And how does like that work? Like, what are we, what is the government left with in terms of like dealing with what have happened? And how are these three births going to be tied in with these three deaths? And I think that was a really, really interesting part of the ending that really caught my attention.

Marta: Yeah, I was under the impression that there wouldn't be consequences. Ironically, I think I finished the story and I was like, yep, this makes sense. The children are gonna survive, it's gonna be fine. And it's an inter—I don't think, it's a like I think it's a valuable question you bring up, Meixi, because I don't think it's clear cut. I wonder if there's some aspect of like the two threads that you've talked about, like Aayu and Meixi that could be brought together wherein like, was them did the painter decide to like, call the helpline because he couldn't actually handle the chaos that like he claimed that he wanted? And the question of whether the children survived, meaning that like, I wonder if in a society where like, everything is so regulated and so

organised, when chaos does happen, we don't have ways to handle it. Like we don't have coping mechanisms, or ways in which we can actually deal with it because if the painter saw this scene and started having the same questions like, "Oh, okay, where does this fall now? How does this work now?" That could be theoretically overwhelming for a person if you don't have any laws or any kind of like framework even for that morality for that, like that guiding force, no one thinks about it, because it's unthinkable because people just volunteer to death, then that might be overwhelming for some, a figure like the painter.

Aayu: I think it's also, just to your point, I think it's very well corroborated with the story, because there's a point where they mentioned that there's no prisons. So, something like murder, or something that the to-be farther does, no one anticipates. Like, the people who made those laws probably didn't anticipate that. And it also goes to show again, like, one of the things that seems fascinating about the story, about how dystopian it is, how little freedom just in thought people have. Because if there is freedom in thought, then these kinds of thoughts would arise and there are abnormalities of criminal nature that do arise in regular societies. And here, they just, like, the conformity of people and their decisions is so much that no one has accounted for it.

Meixi: I think like talking about what you're saying about what the no prisons, and what the story really thinks about morality and murder. A detail I noticed that was really interesting was after the shots are fired, the painter notes that nobody came in running, and nobody noticed. And I found that really interesting because this is in a hospital like I'd say that there's plenty people around. And yet nobody heard or nobody noticed, and maybe nobody cared. And this makes me think that perhaps this scene is something that happens regularly. And perhaps the system or the world that the story is in, places no kind of heavy emphasis on how people die, but just that they die. And so I found that really interesting in the sense where I thought, when I first read the story, that it was kind of a utopia, it was a perfect place. You know, nobody was murdered, nobody was killed, nobody had bad things happen to them. But after seeing that detail, I think it might be the complete opposite in that murders and crimes made in the sake of you know, killing people or like creating new people. is completely justified. And I think that was a really interesting element of the story.

Meixi: Thank you, Aayu for that wonderful conversation. And I hope you had a really great time with us during this winter break to talk about this, honestly, like really well-done story.

Aayu: Thank you so much for having me and giving me a chance to talk about it.

[pause for music.]

Alex: Next, you'll hear Marta and Meixi discuss George Saunders's short story "Sea Oak."

[pause for music.]

Marta: "Sea Oak" follows an unnamed protagonist who strips at a restaurant for money as he goes through the death of a beloved and kind aunt, only to find that she has risen from the dead as a supernatural entity in order to push him, his sister and his cousin to work harder, so they can move out of the neighbourhood "Sea Oak," where she was literally scared to death.

Marta: Um, so this is quite an unusual story. I guess we'll just start off with what our first impressions of the story were, what did you think, Meixi?

Meixi: I think what I entered the story, so I've never read Saunders's work before. So I wasn't really sure what I was expecting. And when we first enter the story, there's a lot of terms that you don't hear in like ordinary life, for instance, like terms that they use to describe the different ranks of strippers and such. So, at first, I thought it was maybe like fantasy science fiction or kind of a dystopian story, because the I guess our last book was a dystopian, so I kind of expected something similar, and especially since I find that in dystopian and science fiction they use different unique terms for things like in our daily life. But, as I got further in the story, I found it was kind of a parallel between, parallel of our reality, but it like in a more unique way. And then as the story progressed, I think I got a little bit lost and we had a conversation, our prior conversation was about how Saunders uses very like unique ways of storytelling to like talk of and criticize life. And you can really see that in this story in the way that very, like strange things happen in the story. For instance, what really caught me off guard was when the sisters with their like children are watching, like the worst ways children can die. And I couldn't really figure out like what the author was trying to do with that detail the story. So I guess my overall first impression was that a lot of things caught me off guard. But I found it like very interesting in terms of how it told the story as well as, it was very similar to like real life, but it, for me, it kind of had that kind of dystopian, unreal factor into the story in the smaller details. What about you?

Marta: Yeah, I mean, I, I actually have read one of George Saunders's stories before. I read "The Semplica-Girl Diaries," which I think is more famous. It's kind of similar, that one's more dystopian. I believe, what's the case is like, girls get hired to essentially hang in people's front yards. And they're like an ornament. And it's, again, this kind of extreme version of our own reality where it's making certain comments by really cranking up aspects of like, American culture specifically. But yeah, I think that what really, what really gets me about Saunders's work is what I think I consider like world building is like, all these little, tiny details that get added in that just like make the world feel so real. And it's like, still grounded in our reality but things are just like, slightly different. Everything's a little bit like, more intense than you're used to. So it's almost, I don't know, there's something so fantastical about it, something so engaging, that I've always really enjoyed in his work. Like, I'll make a comment specifically. So, my first impression of the story was like, "Oh, this is so cool." Like, I, it's not that I would have never thought of it. It's just like, you know, Aunt Bernie comes back from the dead, and I'm like, "This is so much fun. This is hilarious. I would love to see this as a TV show." And in fact, I think it's actually getting made into a TV show. Don't quote me on that. So yeah, I will pull out on that specific little detail you mentioned, the reality TV show names. You know, I guess when I think about it, I think it's kind of just like, again, an extreme version of exploitation of like, what we already experience. My mum watches this show called "I Survived..." And in it, you have these people just telling these absolutely horrific stories of how they almost got murdered. And just like it's completely normal. And when I think about it, it's like, how different is that from the worst way my kid died? Like, it's different, but it's not that different. And I think that's always like what's fun to think about in Saunders's work. It's that like, you hear these and you're like, "Haha, that's hilarious." But then you're like, "Oh, wait, that's awkward. That's not so different from what we experience." You know?

Meixi: Yeah. Just want to comment on now that you've said it, it really reminded me of like, the how the kids and their mother were like watching "The Worst Ways My Kid Can Die." Um, you've mentioned that like, it's kind of a parallel between, like, what we do like as human beings. And all I can think about is how the Real Housewives of blah, blah, blah, and like, horrible things have happened to these housewives, like some of their husbands or like, partners have ended up like in jail. And all I can think about is, apparently the biggest, don't quote me on this, for sure, but the demographic who watches these stories are also like, usually housewives, upper class and such. So now that I think about it, like, it's not that strange to have a mother and her children to watch "Worst Ways My Kid Can Die" when this like happens in real life. And also, I want to point out what you talked about, how the story is quite grounded and I think that's what really brought me back to thinking this was dystopian, to knowing that I was kind of parallel of our reality is those small details. Like for instance, they've mentioned Red Lobster, they mentioned GEDs, and I, when I saw those details, I was kind of like, pulled away from those strange, unique names, they like term things. And then on to like, oh, like this is talking about a story that happens like in real life.

Marta: Yeah, I like that also there's a cool parallel there. And like, it also speaks to like the sense of detachment, because you were again, saying how like, why is a mother with a child watching this show about the worst way my kid died. But then at the end of the story, you obviously have Bernie being like, you need to get the hell out of this neighbourhood because your kid's gonna die by like, getting shot off his tricycle or whatever. And that sounds like the kind of thing that would be on the like, the worst way my kid could die. And like, it doesn't seem to hit I believe her name is Min until her aunt is telling her that this is a possibility. Like, it's just that complete sense of like, "Oh, this could never happen to me." Like you're watching TV, you're watching these people who had real experiences, and these TV shows that are exploiting their experiences. But you never think like, "Oh, this could be my experience." It's just entertainment for you. It's purely something you're watching to pass the time. I think that's what's is what really grounds it, like along with details, like the GED thing, and the Red Lobster thing. It's a really smart way of world building to like not really tell the audience about your terminology, but to let them figure it out themselves. Because that way, they're more sucked into the story. And you figure out what the terms mean like honey pie and stuff. You figure it out pretty quickly from context. So yeah, I always I thought that was really clever. That being said, we should probably get into like the biggest kind of shocker of the story, which is obviously like Bernie coming back to life as what I think is a zombie. I think I was kind of under the impression it was a ghost the first time around, but now I think she's just like, a zombie. So I don't know. What did you think of that? What did you think specifically of like this massive personality change between her living self and her dead? I think that's really like, striking.

Meixi: I think I found it really interesting because up until that point, I thought I had a decent idea where like, the story was going, I could like see like pretty strong parallels of the story and like American, I'd say like lower class living. And so when that happened, I think I was like, very shocked. It was very much like a shocker to see Aunt Bernie, like, come to life after all of like the funeral, you know, paying for the casket, and especially having an answer where she was gone. Like they were talking about how like teenage robbers would like steal the corpse and like drawn it abs do weird things. And so I thought that chapter had closed and so when the

protagonist comes home and sees Aunt Bernie like, in her rocking chair, I believe, at first I thought, oh, like, they had like, put her back like the thief had come with this strange like mystery behind this. But when the story progress, then we realised that it was kind of Aunt Bernie herself at the same time, like not really Aunt Bernie herself and like, maybe Aunt Bernie with a vengeance, you know, like a unique way to describe it. And so I was, for some reason, it made sense to me at the same time, it didn't. So from my read, I felt like if I like if I was Aunt Bernie and like I had worked all that, all my life to like provide for these like maybe like ungrateful people and like, I've done all these things and didn't really like get anything in return, like it talks about like, protagonist throughout talks about how Aunt Bernie didn't live a good life. And so, then she comes back and then she creates a list of everything she wants in this new life. And she talks about how like, this is what she wants from now on. And I think it's a really interesting like turn of events. And so for me personally like, it was quite a shocker to me and I didn't really know how to like, work through it for some reason. But I think the ending of how she like kind of crumbles away, it made sense because like, I couldn't really see like how she would fulfil her like desires. And I think that's partly how I read it was one of the reasons why she kind of crumbled away is because she wasn't going to get what she wanted, like all the things that she wanted were like unachievable essentially. And so I think that says a lot about how her life like wasn't going to go anywhere despite like having that second chance.

Marta: You mentioned like the fact that digging up the grave was kind of interpreted by the priest and also like the family obviously as something unnatural like a defacing of Aunt Bernie's death. I think that like the idea of her coming back to life is almost a way of demonstrating how the American capitalist machine or system and kind of like the way that people live currently are in this kind of like, enhanced version of America is something that almost breaks down the natural boundaries of what life is and warps it into something that doesn't make sense anymore, almost where you're always striving for something better. And you're always striving for tomorrow, or maybe in like a more religious context, you're always striving for the next life. But then you just die. And you don't get any of that stuff you wanted to do. Like the question really, I think to a certain extent is, is the Bernie after the fact a manifestation of the desires of Bernie the person who thought she was going to have time to fulfil those goals and then ended up not having time because of the kind of neighbourhood she lived in? Or is it a warped version? And I think both those interpretations are valid interpretations. And I think in both cases, the idea still, in general is that her massive personality change is somehow linked to this like, to being distraught over the fact that like, you never got that second chance. And that, like the crumbling of Bernie later on, is, as you said, a demonstration of the fact that that second chance is not really worth fighting for because it doesn't really exist. It's a construct used to keep people working their entire lives and keep people hoping that like a system of meritocracy is functional, but not actually trying to change their situation or change the systemic factors affecting them in any substantial way. So yeah, I also really, really like stories that use like small, random elements of the supernatural to enhance ideas that exist or to kind of like really hammer down points that they were already getting at. So I found that kind of like, I guess, device that Saunders used really effective in taking the story somewhere people didn't expect it to go, as you've already mentioned, Meixi, and getting the point across. Because if you shock people, I guess the whole point is, the whole point, to some extent is to shock people out of their comfort zone. Because if you shock people out of their comfort zone, which is this kind of like "Oh, I know what this is about. This is about capitalism." It kind of also it kind of helps to, to force people to

acknowledge the human impact of that, which I think also comes out in the way that the family has to grieve for firstly, Bernie's death, and then later for the like the very traumatic experience of watching her body fall apart.

Meixi: I think what a really interesting detail that I noticed was how Bernie like the second life Bernie, she has this obsession with like phases and like her plan to like make them successful. And I find that really interesting because what I saw in that was that you can't like the reality is you can't really plan your life like nothing will go to plan and I think Second Life Bernie's obsession with like making sure things go to plan and if things don't go to plan to change that plan is really interesting. And I think it might say a lot about her first life and how in her first life maybe she had these like dreams and her life didn't go towards those dreams. So she thinks in her second life, if she plans everything, everything out to a T and like she makes sure that everything goes along with their plan, then those like dreams will be achieved. I think that's really interesting because like, we're both students, and we always hear the idea of like, this is we're gonna do when you're 23. No, this is what you do when you're 27. And this obsession with like, reaching these goals at certain ages, the reality is like, a lot of people, their lives change, you know, things happen. I think Bernie's Second Life obsession with that and like, in the end, none of this like goes to plan because Bernie's like body crumbles, and the people around her like they can achieve these results. I think it's like, really interesting, like, and it says a lot about our, like, regular life and how, regardless of how much you like plan for things, you really don't know where things are going. In Bernie's case, she literally crumbles to death.

Marta: I think you also get the sense, though, that to some extent, well, obviously, this is a life-changing moment, like this is kind of still a transition for all of the characters in the story. And I think especially for the protagonist, who I honestly find like very compelling. I think among like these really, like distinctive characters like Bernie both before and after death. Like Bernie before death is this kind of like angelic level figure that's like, the joke is she's, of course that I believe it's Min, calls her such an optometrist. And then, on the other hand, like Jade and Min are both these kind of like aggressive characters who are like constantly bantering, and all their exchanges are really amusing. And then you have this protagonist, who I think is much more like world weary and is much more like sick of his position. And like, he doesn't stand up for himself. He doesn't really like, he's just going through the motions. I think, especially for him, even if it's not about like planning every moment, because I don't think that ends up working out too well, we don't really find out if Jade keeps her job, or if Min really becomes like a fantastic home, like home worker, I guess. But we do find out that like, obviously, the protagonist decides to start showing women his genitals for money. And I mean, I guess it depends on how you interpret it, I think on one hand, you can definitely interpret that as like a selling out of his body and like a regressive character arc, wherein he's become so detached, and he's sunk so deep into the system, that he's willing to do anything to get money. But on the other hand, you can also look at it as a kind of like, a character progression in that he is working towards something because obviously, Bernie tells him and Jade and Min, that one of the children is going to die if they don't move out of that neighbourhood. And I do think that like, that transition can be looked at as something positive. I don't know how you feel about that.

Meixi: Yeah. And I think it's really interesting, because at the end, I wouldn't say like, maybe not closure, but we find out that the protagonist, like he's going to move out of the neighbourhood, I

believe he like moves out in Swan Glen, and he talks about how like, there's never been shootings, it's great. Like, it's a great place. And you can kind of see that, like, from my perspective, I saw that as kind of like, closing this chapter, like the protagonist felt like he was closing this chapter of his life. And because he's moving to a new neighbourhood, he felt like this was like a step forward, despite his maybe uncomfortableness with like, his engagement and like sex work. And so I found that like, step forward, or like that kind of like step forward really interesting as like the end of the story. And I found it interesting, because we don't really hear anything about Jade and Min or like any of the other side characters or like, what they're doing, and I always wonder if Bernie's prophecies were actually going to come true. And I think that was the one point of the story where I wasn't sure how to like handle because I didn't really understand how the prophecies really aligned with Bernie and her like Second Life kind of idea. So what really stuck with me when I finished the story was wondering if all these things were going to happen to Jade and Min and their kids. And then how, if they were going to avoid that, and even for if like, Bernie's prophecy powers were true and what was going to happen after the protagonist had moved out?

Marta: I mean, yeah, I guess I interpreted Bernie's prophecies as a very literal take on hindsight is 20/20. Like, just the general idea that Bernie is dead and as a figure who has passed away, she represents someone who can look back on the past with a level of, I guess, like, again, that word detachment and rationality that allows her to process certain things in a way that is more logical. And I think that like, even if the prophecies aren't "real," it's still, the idea remains that she sees them living in this bad neighbourhood, she sees that she's literally died from fear, she sees that they need to get out of that neighbourhood as fast as possible, because if they do not, they're like, the child might literally die. And it doesn't really take a genius to consider that thought process, you know, but like, none of them are really like, they know it's a dangerous neighbourhood, but we even get the scene with the shooting, and none of them process it like an actual shooting, like all of them, kind of, I don't know, react really oddly to it. So I definitely think that's a part of it, if that makes sense to you.

Meixi: How do you feel about like, Jade and Min and like the mother and her mother's boyfriend as like characters? I like, the first impression I got from them was like, wow, they swear a lot. And also, like, they don't do much. Like, they truly like, they don't exactly watch their kids really well, as we see. Like, in the beginning scene, the baby like gets her his finger stuck in like a heater, I believe. And they like do not know how to deal with it. And they keep on yelling at each other. And I don't know, like, how to really treat them. Like I don't know, how do you feel about them as characters?

Marta: Yeah, I mean, I guess I could propose a couple of different theories. For one, I think it's kind of pushing back on the whole, like, concept of every person who is in poverty is automatically like, you know, this incredibly hard-working figure. I don't think they can be necessarily characterised as lazy. But I definitely think they're flawed. And it's clear how specifically things like a lack of education have harmed them and have harmed their children. I moreover think that the story doesn't represent them as not worth saving because of that. Like, I think that part of the part of the systemic goals of the story might be to lay, like the systemic comments of the story might be to push back against any kind of like, ideals that you don't deserve to, like, be treated with respect, or you don't deserve to be safe just because you're like,

not productive for society. And I think it manages to do that to some extent. I also think they're also they're just there for comic relief. I enjoy Min and Jade a lot, I think they are funny. And I think they add a lot of character to story. I think they're also a good juxtaposition against our protagonist, who, I don't think we ever get the sense that the protagonist is like, very, very hard-working either. But I think that at least when it comes to the protagonist, there's a sense that like, ironically enough, even though he does work, and he seems to work quite often, he's not treated with much more respect by characters like Freddie, who's, I believe the mom's boyfriend. He's not treated with much more respect than Min and Jade. So it might even just be kind of like a blanket statement on how like, it's not actually about how hard people work. It's kind of about the fact that they're in poverty in the first place. And that no matter what, no matter whether they work hard, or they don't work hard, they're smart or they're not smart, people still treat them with a lack of respect, and people still blame them for their poverty, even if it might not be like, "their fault" or it might not be in their control. So yeah, I think that's part of the way I interpreted it.

Marta: Okay, yeah, I know this was like your first time reading Saunders. So like, even though it was a little weird, it was really cool to discuss it with you.

Meixi: Thanks to you, too. And thank you for everyone listening and bringing in the New Year with us. Hope you enjoyed the episode.

[pause for music.]

Alex: Thanks to Aayu for joining the show and to Marta and Meixi for hosting both conversations. One quick announcement before we end the episode, and it's about a fictional language workshop hosted by L&L Writers' Co-Op and the Shale Project and entitled "Lingua Fantastica." More often than not, advice about making a language for your fictional world gets lost in translation. That's where the good folks of The Shale Project come to the rescue! Sienna Tristen, fantasy author and linguist by training, is back with her partner Avi Silver for a brand-new workshop at Hart House. In this workshop, they'll discuss the benefits and pitfalls of building a language from scratch, and how to effectively use a fictional tongue in your science fiction and fantasy stories. Whether you speak Klingon or Elvish, everyone will understand their excellent instruction. The workshop is taking place on January 27th—check out hhlitandlib.ca for more information. And that's all for this episode! As always, you can find the full list of works discussed on this episode, and all episodes of Endnote, on our website, hhlitandlib.ca, along with literary events, opportunities, and news from the rest of the Literary and Library Committee. Endnote is a podcast of the Hart House Student Literary and Library Committee, and I'd like to thank the committee for their ongoing support for Endnote. Our music is by Cameron Lee. Our next episode, returning to our regular programming, will be released on January 28th. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, you can subscribe to Endnote wherever you get your podcasts, or visit our website at hhlitandlib.ca/endnote! From Marta Anielska, Meixi Zhang, the Endnote production team, and me, Alexander Lynch, thank you for listening; we'll talk to you soon.