

Teachin' Books Episode 1.10 - Interview with Tara Chambers / André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jess 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and welcome back! Happy New Year, I guess, or just New Year, without the happy. I'm not sure what the appropriate phrase is for years like these ones, but it is a new year and I am back.

And on today's episode I'm chatting with Tara Chambers. Tara is a Sessional Instructor for Thomson Rivers University's Department of English and TRU's Open Learning division. And she's also a doctoral candidate at the University of Saskatchewan, where Her research focuses on John Milton's republican poetics, and the politics of *Paradise Lost*.

But today we're chatting about something much different than that, a more contemporary novel that we've both taught, called *Fifteen Dogs* by Andre Alexis. If you haven't read the novel, as usual, although I do think I forget to say this sometimes, oops, sorry, here is your spoiler warning that we will indeed be talking about parts from the whole novel, including the ending. So spoilers to come even right now in the next sentence. Parts of the novel, I want to let you know, deal with the deaths of animals, of dogs, so if you're not in a place to hear about animal or pet loss, then our conversation might not be the one for you to listen to today.

Okay, when Tara and I get together -- even over video apparently -- we definitely chat up a storm, so this was quite an interesting interview to edit, and I hope that you enjoy our lively chat.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Tara 2:13

Anyways, whenever you're ready. I'm ready.

Jess 2:16

Okay, you're ready, let's go. So yeah but why don't you just tell listeners a little bit about yourself or your work as an educator, or anything that you want to say.

Tara 2:25

Well, I'm I'm an instructor for the Department of English and Modern Languages at Thompson Rivers University here in Kamloops, British Columbia. Right now because of the remote nature of teaching, I'm also an instructor for St. Thomas Moore College at the University of Saskatchewan, where we went to school together, and in Saskatoon. And I'm also an Open Learning faculty member for the English Novel in the in the 18th century, and I'm also the Course Developer for open learning for a course that they want to offer coming up Shakespeare and contemporary film.

Jess 2:57

Ooh, that sounds great.

Tara 2:59

Um, so what it is is Shakespeare and contemporary film and I'm the way I'm scaffolding it is how Shakespeare, we are able to bend Shakespeare to contemporary issues, right, like using Romeo and Juliet the Leonardo DiCaprio one, we really see that 90s generation, the MTV kind of generation, through the whole Baz Luhrmann directorial extravaganza that that is right. So that's the way I'm trying to put it together and hopefully hopefully it all works out.

Jess 3:29

Well, it sounds like trying to bend it to make it I guess, I don't know if the word relevant is good to use here, but to make it relevant or sort of digestible for for contemporary issues or contemporary audiences and readerships that feels like a way to really get the fires lit, under the asses of students who sometimes come dragging their feet to Shakespeare right? And I know you do that anyways because I see how you energize the students, no matter what you teach, but but yeah I just feel like that's such a good way to make Shakespeare, which can come across as intimidating, more digestible for audiences or readerships or for students that are not always comfortable with it for good reason, the language can look scary upon first read, right?

Tara 4:14

That's how I'm teaching this one at St. Thomas More: the first module is basically why Shakespeare's not scary, you know, on including, you know, Akala's rap to "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," you know you have because iambic pentameter and showing them that this isn't it... Shakespeare was writing for everyone. He wasn't writing for... everybody thinks he's writing for the upper classes and he wasn't. He was writing for everyone. You gotta think about those people that were on the floor who paid you know two pennies, or whatever to go in and see those those plays. That's who he was playing to it's like going to the movies the movies aren't just for fancy people.

Jess 4:49

I actually am realizing as you're talking like yes we will have to have you back to talk about Shakespeare because A) you teach that and b) that's you know more firmly in your area of expertise. Just to give some context I guess the reason why you're here talking about Fifteen Dogs today, so not not related to the kinds of things that you've just explained that you've been working on and that you have been doing for so long, is because I knew that you had taught this in the past, I had heard a little bit about how you taught it, and so I became interested in in your teaching of it. Obviously, since we're friends as well, I thought I would ask you to speak about it. And I've taught this text a few times so I thought this would be a good conversation.

So, yeah, do you want to say a few words about Fifteen Dogs dogs do you have any, like...?

Tara 5:35

All I really had to say, because I did write out stuff I'm like, "oh my god I should probably look through this again!" I mean the story, the story starts out you know benign enough: we're in a Toronto bar with two gods, Hermes and Apollo, in human form, and they're debating whether or not human intelligence is a difficult gift or a useless plague, and they decide to wager, a year of servitude that they will give the creatures, other than humans, this intelligence and if the creature's happy at the end of its life, Hermes will -- I always say Hermes because I always think of the fancy store -- will win the wager. In the end, they give it to fifteen dogs. They get this higher order of thinking, fifteen dogs that are stuck in a clinic, an overnight clinic, vet clinic. And then from this, this point it's just I think the whole story is really interesting, interesting in that are they gifted or are they cursed with human intelligence? You know because they have to navigate the world, and it's the world is new now. This is not the world the dogs new, and they have this new awareness as well, and some are you know some of the dogs are a little indifferent, some embrace this new higher order of thinking, and some absolutely refuse to acknowledge it right? They have to you know keep their dog thinking. And, and for the most part, what I think is really interesting is that the dogs have to navigate this new awareness in a park, at first, which, and it's really interesting and this is, this is what I find fun is my sister. I used to go visit her in Toronto and she lived exactly in this area. So I could see it in my head, because it's close to Liberty village around Lake Ontario in downtown Toronto. So the whole area, when I'm reading, I'm always like, "I can see this oh my gosh, I know where this is." And so that's kind of interesting. Anyways, what more do you have to say about it? That's what I have to say really.

Jess 7:30

Well just on the last thing you said I was thinking about how so many of the students I've taught this to, because I've taught this a few times now, they actually aren't familiar with this area, or with Toronto, a lot of them aren't, and a lot of them are sort of prairies born and raised. And so, the opposite experience of what you just described is something I've heard my students say, which is that they're unfamiliar with these streets, they're unfamiliar with it, this area. So your reading experience, which brings such like

you're able to visualize the space and you're able to sort of read the book through that lens, the lens of your familiarity with it, is almost the opposite for students who are in a lot of cases really unfamiliar with this landscape so the map at the front of the book which... yeah, for any listeners who haven't read the book, you will have to go out and get a copy of it but, as this is a audio medium only, but yeah the map at the very beginning of the, of the book that shows the beach and Hyde Park is instructive for some students and it's helpful.

Tara 8:29

Actually that's really interesting because we're probably going to get into that a little later on I'm going to surprise you.

Jess 8:33

Oh, okay, cool. I'll just add a couple of things just basically details to add to your to your summary which is that we have... you mentioned that dogs sort of respond to this big change, them being given human intelligence or human consciousness -- they phrase it in a couple of different ways throughout the book - they, they respond in different ways. So we have a dog like Prince, for example, who really takes to the new ways as they call them, the old ways and the new the new ways or the canine and the human, and Prince starts, you know, playing with language in ways that he didn't before: he becomes a poet, he becomes a kind of artist figure, so he's reveling in the new ways. So then we have dogs like Atticus who, as you mentioned, wants to really stick to the old ways and the canine and sees the new ways as a sort of corruption of authentic doghood, like you're not being a real dog if you're going by the new ways. And by the way, for those who haven't read this book. What I mean by the new ways is they start to see the world differently, so they actually physically see the world differently in their perception, they see new colors, they experience empathy, like in one of the first moments after the gods grant them human intelligence or human consciousness, Atticus is dreaming and he dreams that he bites down on a creature's neck, and then he feels the sense that, oh no this creature must feel pain. So they start to feel empathy, they start to use new language, they can speak more metaphorically, they start to question whether their old ways of being, like power hierarchies, mounting, that sort of thing -- they start to question whether those are okay, whether they still make sense, whether they are still applicable to their new way of being. So that's what I mean by the "old ways" -- or sorry the old ways and the new ways.

A dog like Atticus really wants to stick to those old ways, so he forbids the new language that the dogs start using once they have human consciousness thrust upon them. He wants to keep the pack hierarchy the same and still have the same protocols around like mounting and superiority and the leader that sort of thing. And he essentially just forces all the other dogs to stick to dog ways. He says at one point in the novel, no ways but dog ways. So we have a real range from Prince to Atticus and everybody in between, of how the dogs are dealing with this new human consciousness, and then by the end of the novel -- sadly, spoiler alert.

Tara 10:55

Oh gosh. Yeah.

Jess 10:56

Should I say that? Spoiler alert -- it's implied, right? I think it's implied, like you know it's going to happen. But by the end, yes, all the dogs have indeed died and many of them do die miserably which kind of factors into the bet that the two gods make because they suggest that the dog has to be sort of happy upon the moment of death. So a lot of the dogs died miserably. Like I said, and then some of them or I should say one of them, Prince, actually dies, happy because he's thinking about the beautiful language that he's been able to play with and that he's been able to sort of use since being given...

Tara 11:34

Oh god, you're gonna make me cry.

Jess 11:36

Oh no! Okay well I actually had something to say about the feelings of this book. I think that'll come out later. His very final thought, and this is what makes Prince's death a little bit more emotional certainly, and it's in the last pages of the novel, his very final thought is altered by Hermes, I also always want to say "air-may," at the last moment, and his final thought is altered to be a memory of him running to his old Master Kim in Alberta who he loves and who he misses. And the final line of the book is "In his final moment on Earth, Prince loved and knew that he was loved in return."

Tara 12:18

Oh my god, you're killing me.

Jess 12:19

And that's where the book closes so I just wanted to emphasize that you know the dog's death, sort of, or the end of the book well they die throughout the book sadly

Tara 12:27

From the very beginning.

Jess 12:29

Yeah, from the very beginning they do die. But by the end we sort of had that last moment with prints that suggest that one dog did die happy and that's important for the, for the bet that the gods make

Tara 12:42

Absolutely

Jess 12:43

Yeah so that's the book in a nutshell. So what kind of class did you teach this in? What was your sort of teaching context?

Tara 12:49

Well this was actually okay so the first time this text I experienced this text was when I was taking care of Dr. Cooley's seminar classes as his TA for a first-year literature course at USask. And these literature courses are a year long, as you know. So what he would do and I know you've had to do it with him, like, as well as me like we've had to do this exercise. Because the text was not my choice, it wasn't Dr Cooley's choice, right? the assignment for at USask is basically a research exercise for the students that they must find an award-winning or -nominated novel and book like depending on what your last name was right. You have to find an award-winning novel or a nominated at least within the last five years, and a book like nonfiction and fiction. And then what they must do is read reviews and read some reviews about these novels. And then they have to nominate a novel that and a book that we read at the end of the semester. The last part of the semester, there's the novel, and the nonfiction, and of course the TAs get to tally up all the votes. And the one that gets them gets the most votes, is the ones that the students are going to read. Right, so, and I think students saw the word "dogs" in the title and decided that's what they wanted, to be honest, right. And so we ended up reading Fifteen Dogs in that class.

And then the second time, I was course design when I was when I was hired here for summer session here in Kamloops. I was designing a course for introduction fiction, for a summer class, and my theme was, I had to think up something quickly while I was still in Saskatchewan and I'm like thinking of short stories and I'm thinking of all this and I'm thinking, what does it mean to be human? Right. What does it mean to be a human or humanity? And so I was going to use Oryx and Crake okay because I've taught that quite a few times and but I was was talking to Dr. Cooley about it and he advised me, you know, It's an awfully long novel, for a compressed summer course right? Because you just won't have time to get in... I taught Oryx and Crake since then, I taught it this last spring, this spring, and it is... it is I forgot how long it is. So I decided on Fifteen Dogs instead. because it is much shorter than Oryx and Crake, and yeah, so that's that's that's where that's come in.

Jess 15:21

Great, I actually don't know if I knew the theme of your initial course even though, like I've heard of a few of the ways that you've taught this book but the humanity theme that you're talking about, that's actually so applicable and I didn't even know because I think the very first class yeah I didn't TA with this book, so we must have just been a different year, but the very first class that I ever incorporated this one into was when I first developed my "Nature versus Culture" class that has a unit on "humans versus animals" and by the way, of course, when I say "versus," I am totally complicating both of these oppositions, nature versus culture and human versus animal, but, so I probably was thinking the same thing as you were when you initially developed that course, where I was thinking about this book in terms of what makes a human? Or why like what definitions do we bring into humanity? So, that's what that's exactly what I was doing, too, and what I was thinking about when I put this put this novel in the unit on animals, like I said animals versus humans, in this in this first-year English class. So very much similar teaching situation to you that I've taught this in is, is every time it's either been a first-year English class on nature versus culture again complicating that binary or I've also the last time taught this in a unit, or sorry, a class on narrative, just reading narrative so it really didn't really have a theme, but it was...

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

So I guess your question, or the next question I had for you was what leads you to teach this text? But you were sort of, because of Dr Cooley's assignment where he gets students to pick out the next or the last books to read in his course, you sort of were led into this book, almost not by choice, but I kind of find that cool it's like you were led into this book by students who like you said might have been attracted to the title, fifteen dogs, because especially for dog lovers, who wouldn't be attracted to that title?

Tara 17:19

Yeah, yeah, much, much to their caution, really.

Jess 17:23

Totally because in the end as we just said like, you know, it's a pretty sad tale. I know we know another instructor who finds it very hard to teach this text because of the deaths of dogs which can be very beloved figures to some. So I just wanted to add in about the author a couple things. Andre Alexis was born at Port of Spain, Trinidad. He grew up in Ottawa, Canada. So the way that I know Alexis is, is through Canadian literature -- the literatures of Canada -- which is what I primarily study, and he is often

read under that category. The one thing I wanted to mention was that especially because it's on the cover of the book if you have like the edition that I have...

Tara 18:02

Yep I have the exact same one.

Jess 18:03

...here yeah on the cover of the book we see, and students see that this is a book that's been widely applauded by the nation's sort of literary institutions. So it won the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Rogers Writers Trust Fiction Prize, and it also won Canada Reads, so it won like three out of four really huge, national literary awards. And that is an interesting conversation to have with students because, at least when I set it up, I always I always have already talked about sort of literary elitism, and what kind of what kind of texts get valued, and what kind of texts don't. So when I, when I point out to them that these awards have been won by this text, I usually see them sort of nodding and get comments like "oh that's why it was weird." It was written weirdly, and it's true that we can sort of use that as a lens or a frame, through which to read the book it's like why were, why is this the kind of book to win Canadian literary awards? And what does the form of the book, including the prose style, how does that lead into it getting awards? So that's sort of a side tangent but it's something that I wanted to make sure we said, on the podcast, which is that it's a pretty... it's an award-winning book and written by a very sort of applauded author.

Okay, so what do you focus on when you teach this text? What is, what's the gist?

Tara 19:35

That's the thing. Because, like I've said I'm not like this isn't my area, but you know as we're teaching and we have to course teach in areas that we're not necessarily comfortable with, like I've done in this course. But if sometimes you have to do that. I also made the mistake and I made it again this year of teaching Heart of Darkness, which I honestly and one of the questions I asked my students is should this not we should this novella never be taught ever again? Or is it, or is it important that we do read this and talk about it?

Anyway so what happened was is that we have this theme and as I was progressing, the novel was the final text. And so what I did is I had a couple of short stories that examined humanity from an artificial intelligence and from an animal angle. Before that we did. Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." Okay. Have you read that?

Jess 20:33

Not --is that a short story?

Tara 20:34

Terrible. It's a short story. It's no it really actually it affected my students, because what I was looking at was the idea of who is God? Because we have these two gods in fifteen dogs, and this is how I moved into it, but but in these other stories we have society playing God, we have corporations playing God, we have humans, because "Evil Robot Monkey," for example, is this poor robot monkey, who was given human intelligence and he's kept in a cage. And all he wants to do is make pottery, but he's always getting bugged, right. So like the idea of this, you know, who who decides on the fate of people? of animals? And the idea of anthropomorphism, because we have that in "Evil Robot Monkey." And, I mean, like you were saying you know this is a storytelling device right, we you know we you have to look back from the ancient times with Aesop's Fables, and so forth, but you know, we still imagine animals with human traits. I mean that's what we like to do. And it's interesting because I just created an essay on Laetitia Barbauld's, "The Mouse's Petition," as a matter of fact I don't it's an 18th century, 19th century poem about, you know, animals should have rights, this poor mouse and this is what he must be thinking. We don't know what the mouse is thinking. But we do this. And then so we have to so I was moving through it, because we did this idea of humanity, what is human what is God, like what where does this all fit in? Homo sapiens are merely a species. right. So when we says we're the best. It's a species we just walked bipedal right? We're a mammal. And sometimes we use our reason. Right. And so all of a sudden, you know, just because you're biologically human how human are we, right? And when you if you ever read the Leguin, "Omelas," there's no empathy, the idea of empathy, does empathy make us human? So, no and then we have this in Fifteen Dogs, so it's slowly trying to get my students into this, this mindset about the idea of what does it mean to be human -- when we read Heart of Darkness. And what we see is the worst of humanity. Right. The worst humanity can be. We read "The Ones Who Walk Away." You know that is you know human beings who.... yeah, it's a very short story I do recommend people to read it, but there's so much to say about it, so I won't give it away.

So yeah, so I'm looking at who is God, what is God, who plays God. And we give these animals human intelligence right? We give them that these human traits, these human emotions. And what do you know what do we actually learn about ourselves? And I think that's what Alexis was really going for in a sense that, and the first thing I did with them is I made, I put them in groups. And I got them to, you know, I gave them a dog. And they had to find out what kind of dog it was find a picture of the dog. And then you know find what these dogs were good at like the duck toller, you know, so like what are these dogs for, right?

Jess 23:41

Like in the real world, so like find some real-world knowledge about these dogs that could help you read the characters of the dogs? Oh, that's awesome.

Tara 23:49

Yeah. And so they they did that. But the thing was, they already started putting human traits on the dogs, before we even were reading the story. And so it's just this automatic need to anthropomorphize an animal. And I think that was, that was really interesting to watch. And then of course you know if one creature is happy when they die, you know, Hermes wins. But what is happiness right? And that's the question, like you said, can we die happy and live a terrible life? Can we have a terrible life and in the end die happy? These are really big questions, and you know on a micro level, we looked at -- and this is where I probably would get into you and where you would be more of an expert than me and actually I was thinking of you when I did this -- because we were saying about the City of Toronto. And the idea of space and place, right? And how both of these affect happiness and security?

Jess 24:47

I guess I'm just the last note, the space and place, maybe this is something you're going to talk about later but do you involve the map or, and if so, what do you say about it?

Tara 24:56

Well no, I just make them to get familiar with the map where we have the beach and High Park, and then we have High Park and the beach and look at that little inset of Toronto itself to see like there, that there is actually they do cover a lot of space, the animals.

Jess 25:14

Yeah, okay. So similar to what you're talking about when I, when I've taught this text in the past I do a paratext analysis -- so paratext is just any, for those who, who might not know, is a term by Gerard Genette, it's just any parts of a text that are not the text itself proper but introduce us to the text or frame the text. So like that's the title, that's the cover, that's the back blurb, the copyright page, dedication, anything like that, author's note, that's a paratext. Yeah, so I always start this novel with introducing the concept of paratext and doing a paratext analysis, and I have had students look at the map which is why I was asking you, and I actually had to refresh my memory on what kinds of things they've said in the past, from just my notes of past classes. And one thing about the map is that it's from a sort of bird's eye, or almost a god-like perspective, right? But then, within the map you also have details that are important to the dogs, and then you also have and, for example, I mean something like the garden of death where some of the dogs are poisoned at, you actually have that marked on the map on this map from a bird's eye view. Then you also have elements of the map that are human, sort of elements, or related to human, like the streets -- you know, street names are not as relevant to the dogs or the gods, but they're here on the map. So the map right from the start, sort of functions as this troubling of the human / god / dog divide by putting all the concerns of all three together on one map. So the map itself becomes this paratext that almost gives us a sense of the competing, but also overlaid

perspectives that are in this novel and how all of the perspectives are brought together -- you know, you can't separate what the gods do from what the dogs do because the gods obviously are causing with the, what the dogs do. You also can't separate the life of the humans from the life of the dogs because the dogs are caught up in the human life going on around them as well.

Tara 27:17

That is actually awesome and I might steal that from you about the map like I don't really focus focus on it but that's a really good way of looking at it. Definitely.

Jess 27:27

Yeah, I was just thinking of it in terms of space in place we have a map starting out the beginning and even the Dramatis Canes actually: there's a list, so again for for readers or listeners that might not know, there's a list of the very beginning of the book that lists out the dogs and it's the Dramatic Canes instead of the Dramatis Personae. And in that list you actually see what kinds of dogs they are, but I've never gone that second step, like you know, each of the breeds are listed. I've never gone that step that you've gone and asked students to then take that paratext and fill in sort of information or bring in information about the dogs in the real world because that would provide a whole nother layer of reading the book through the lens of real-world dog biology, I guess.

Tara 28:14

"Real-world dog biology" (both laughing)

Jess 28:18

I'm not sure what this... I don't know science!

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 28:27

Do you have any other ideas or concepts that you focus on when you teach this?

Tara 28:29

Well, I was looking at, one of the things we did was, I brought up the tried and true Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which worked really well for the summer course because I mean this is the first time I did it, I didn't do it with the first years at USask because I didn't cross my mind, and I know the more I teach this novel, the more stuff is going to come up for me to teach and even just talking to you I'm like oh yeah that's great idea. But most of the students in this summer class are in human services. The Human Services program. So they're becoming social workers or were going into mental health or whatever. So bringing up Maslow's hierarchy, was really was, was great because they were already familiar with the concept.

Jess 29:12

So what do you say about the book through Maslow's Hierarchy? I think I can guess but what kind of....?

Tara 29:17

Well, we start out with the basic needs right? And we look at this in human terms for Maslow's Hierarchy, we have our basic needs right? Such as we need shelter, food, we need safety. Right. Those are our basic needs have to be met and these dogs. And before we can even move up in this hierarchy these needs have to be met. And so these dogs are meeting these needs. You know we're wondering, we have you know can these dogs actually make it to the point where they move up that hierarchy and self actualize right to find that self actualization? And I think probably Prince is the one that comes the closest, even though in the end his story is just heartbreaking.

Jess 30:01

So it seems like that's kind of a model you're using to explain why some of the dogs behave in the way they do? Like if they don't have the sort of lower levels of the pyramid met, then that can cause them to do X or Y?

Tara 30:12

I think that there's some of them that just wanted to stay in the lower levels of the pyramid

Jess 30:17

Gotcha. So it's more a desire thing it's not being forced to--

Tara 30:20

No. You know they have to you know they've got this higher order of thinking and it I think it's the dogs who who embrace the idea of this complex thinking, who are able to move up, whereas the dogs who... I'm trying to think of a word that I don't use when I'm writing the dogs that rejects this this higher order, are the ones that are willing to stay, you know, just, they want you know they want to live in the park or you know they looking through food and safety in the pack itself right because we have Frick and Frack with Atticus. And I mean, once again I'm thinking about this and I anthropomorphize them too, because I see Frick and Frack as these two, you know, those two crappy guys in high school that always bullied everyone you know and Atticus you know you can see it you know he's, he's older he's wiser. But he's a bully himself, too. Even though he doesn't. I don't know it I guess it's hard to explain now I'm thinking about this more and I'm like wow there's so much more to get into with this. Holy moly.

Jess 31:22

And actually, now that we've said this word a few times and it just occurred to me like anthropomorphizing. Okay, how do I say... anthropomorphizing characters that have already that are animals but have already had human intelligence thrust upon them... That seems like it's its own kind of complicated thing like they are already inherently anthropomorphized because that's part of the book right? The book has said, literally, it says human intelligence or human consciousness has been bestowed on them. So we're actually talking about animals who, and characters who, like are already almost pre anthropomorphize so it's like the book is kind of doing that work for us as readers it is already doing that anthropomorphizing work.

Tara 32:06

I think yeah okay I you know what that's a really good point but well not but the... I think the problem is is what we've done is we put or what we've done I didn't do it, you know, I'm not Apollo or Hermes. But what they've done is they take in these animals uh yeah i don't know it's... It is complicated, these animals that we tend to anthropomorphize anyhow. Right. For example, you know, most of these dogs have human names. Yeah, right. So you take these, these dogs that humans already anthropomorphize, and then like you said is basically give them a double whammy and now they are in a sense human, in a sense, right, just furry and four legged but

Jess 32:52

We have an entire storyline in this book, a huge one, where Majnoun becomes like intimately involved with a human to such a, such a degree that she says, essentially that Majnoun is equal to her her human partner, Miguel. So we do have dogs that are basically operating at the level of the human already, and what you're saying reminds me of one of the things I wanted to say in the way that I've experienced students responding to this text which is that because dogs in particular are not just any old animal to a lot of people dogs are not just any... they are such a beloved pet, a beloved pet, a beloved kind of animal

for so many folks, certainly not for all, that seems to make for my students a lot of the time this an especially hard read. Like it's not like this is 15 fleas, or 15...

Tara 33:43

15 cockroaches!

Jess 33:45

Exactly. I mean there's a reason I think why Alexis is drawing on this beloved figure of the dog, I do have a lot of students who resist some of the things going on in the book because of their beloved feelings for dogs such as when the dogs use the word "bitch," which to them in the, in the text is just a neutral term to describe or it seems to be a neutral term to describe you know the "female" dogs, and then also I've had students, sort of reject and really respond with disgust, in some ways, to the sex scenes where the dog is sort of watching humans have sex and also to the mounting in the and the politics around mounting in the text, so it's interesting that this beloved figure, this sort of held-up animal is being used in these ways that really push back at the idea that dogs are merely innocent, that dogs are always good dogs. You know, "good boys."

Tara 34:47

You're not always a good doggo. Yeah.

Jess 34:49

It's really troubling that. But the way it's troubling that is by saying the gods have interfered so I'm not sure if in the end, there is a lot of complication of this. It's not like saying, "these are 15 actual dogs that I'm complicating in this text." These are 15 dogs that have been touched by the gods which makes their behavior a little bit different, but certainly there's still dogs who, you know, watch two people have sex and have opinions on that, who mounts, and who murder... These dogs are murdering one another, too.

Tara 35:15

They're murderers. Well you know Benji's that guy that you don't lend money to because you'll never see him again. I mean that that's the thing about this dog you know he's he's a he's a manipulator. You know very much a manipulative dog. You know, and in the end, when he meets his, his demise, or I guess... students we you know they felt bad for him but not as bad as they did for the other two, the two that felt the worst for.

Jess 35:40

Yeah I think so I think Majnoun and Prince really gain a lot of sympathy, of course, and they're and they are sort of seen as ethical behaviors for the most part throughout the text, but then Benji is quite sketchy. You know he has self-interested motivations, he wants money because he figures out that money is important in the human world so he starts asking humans for it. And I just remember that scene I don't even know what page it is, but he's like "moh-neh" and he spells it out and he doesn't know what he's saying yet but he knows that it's important to the human world. So yeah there's certain dogs that garner our sympathies in stronger ways than the others, which complicates again... again, the ideal vision of the dog or the narrative of the good dog.

Tara 36:28

Uh huh. Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, and the other thing is you have to think about Benji I mean if it wasn't for Benji, and that you know the garden of death right, he's he's not a he's not a good guy and, and even when those dogs died I felt even though they were the dogs that wanted to stick to the old ways. I still there was still this you know feeling of sadness, because they were dogs that just wanted to be dogs and they were just doing their dog... trying to live their dog life, right?

Jess 36:58

That's actually so true. It's like Atticus...

Tara 37:01

Atticus actually hurts.

Jess 37:05

Yeah. And even in the way I, you know, I teach Atticus as kind of the warning story or the cautionary tale or the fate the fable because I don't know if I mentioned this, but this is called Fifteen Dogs: An Apologue, by the way. So it includes a moral, a moral. It's a moral fable. So Atticus I'll often teach as like... not as the villain, but certainly as the character who serves as a kind of cautionary tale that delivers the lesson, which is that you can't just stick to what's seen as natural or authentic, or normal. And you certainly can't enforce ideas about what is natural because that can get into very violent territory when you start to do that because Atticus says, you know, we're only speaking in the way that's "natural" for dogs, and we're only going to behave in the way that's "natural" for dogs, and it's really a larger lesson about the damages of, of trying to enforce this obviously way more complicated idea of what's natural behavior. We see that play out in the human world all the time, that being a problem of course, yeah.

Tara 38:11

And you know what's interesting is, it is it's actually an I read one article I remember when I was doing some research because I was frantically trying to come up with ideas for this course right. Because like I said I'd only taught it from a TA point of view or TA, you know. But the idea that you know the way, Alexis is really doing here is looking at diversity, you know, and we you know we had a brief discussion about that, especially since these were human services students, is the idea of, you know, diversity in Canada, are all these dogs are different, they all have different motivations. They're all different. You know, I would say breeds but they're all dogs. Right. And I don't know like we had, I can't remember exactly what we talked about when we talked about that as well yeah and we actually... You know, the idea of accepting something new, staying with the old, we have that issue in Canada all the time. You know there's there's um we see this across the country. You know we have to accept the new -- are we going to accept the new ways or are we going to be, are we going to stay stagnant? You know, I don't know, like I said it was one class because these are three hour classes so you have to fill them up as best as you can. Yeah!

Jess 39:28

I think the novel is trying to go for something like that totally where it's like the pull of the old and how that can be dangerous and then the pull of the new. And actually the main thing or the main text I introduce beside this text is Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

Tara 39:44

Oh, nice.

Jess 39:45

I think I have a feeling you'll know so much more about this than I do. So I teach it through essentially a video, which I'll link to in the show notes, and it's just it's a simplifying but still very enriching video depiction cartoon depiction of Plato's Allegory

Tara 40:00

I think I've probably used it, I think.

Jess 40:01

I use it every time. Yeah, it's just I find it to be a pretty good, pretty accurate and, while simplified, still quite rich depiction of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. And so I show this video, which again I'll link to in the show notes and I talk about... So the allegory is essentially Plato's theory of reality and of life and of

education, and in, in short, and very simplified, it's essentially for those who, who don't know, it's, it's an allegory that suggests that that we, or some humans, are like prisoners chained in a cave, sort of watching the wall of the cave and all they can see because of their chains are the shadows that appear on the wall of the cave, and they think that that's reality and that's all that reality is because they can't turn around and they can't really see any of the actual objects behind them making the shadows. Then finally, the one prisoner is released and goes out into the goes outside of the cave and is introduced to actual objects things that are not shadows and finally the sun, which first of all causes some distress because the pain of the light in his eyes, the light of the sun is jarring after all of these years being in the dark, watching shadows, but also is sort of illuminating to the prisoner who sees the sun and sees that the sun is what makes the shadows and the shadows that the prisoner has always thought is reality are actually made by the sun that he never knew was exists knew existed. Then when the prisoner returns to the cave and is like "hey guys i -- guess what, there's more than this!" Not only does he find it hard to go back to the cave and see the shadows in the same way, the fellow prisoners who are still chained up find it hard to understand his view. So that's a big simplification of what's actually going on there.

Tara 41:53

That's actually a good way to look at it absolutely yes.

Jess 41:56

This is totally what's happening in the book because we have these dogs who are immediately granted human consciousness, they're thrust out of the cave, they start to see things in new ways, and somebody like Atticus who says "no ways but dog ways" wants to run back into the cave and also, more problematically, convince every other dog that they too must run back into the cave. And Plato's theory is also something I introduce. In order to complicate: you know I say, oh yeah, I say in my lessons about, you know, Atticus actually and and the the theory itself the Allegory of the Cave, shows why it can be a troubling theory, because who decides who the people in the cave are and who the enlightened people are? The enlightened philosophers? Who decides who, what is real knowledge and what is shadows? I mean the book really engages with that question when it shows us Atticus trying to force other dogs to only speak in the original dog language, only mount according to the original mounting rules and sort of obey the usual cave rules of dog life right? And then we see other dogs who have exited the cave or been forced out from the cave sort of negotiating that light, sunlight, you might say, new knowledge in different ways and struggling with it in the same way that in the allegory of the cave you know the prisoners eyes sort of are distressed from the sun or taxed from the sun, because it is a painful experience to be to realize that new knowledge, or a new perspective, is to take on a new perspective or to or to have new knowledge sort of thrust upon you, but again it's not a theory without its problems. I just think that it applies so well and so richly to this text and so that's where I actually, that's what I usually focus on: I focus on the old ways and the new ways when I teach this text and actually usually students come up with a whole list of old ways versus new ways as they discuss, as they turn them in the, in the novel, and then we go from there into the Plato video, the Allegory of the Cave cartoon, we talk about how that applies to the old ways versus new ways. And then in the end we usually bring it back to Atticus because he's such a, like I said, a good example of the ways that the allegory can sort of

authorize really harmful behavior on behalf of individuals who think their way of seeing is the only way: "I am the one who's out of the cave, and you are not out of the cave, you're still in the cave, so you have to agree with me" right? And he really wants the dogs to be on his same side or in his same perspective. So we usually end with Atticus and talking about how he provides some of the moral of the story.

Tara 44:36

That's really actually interesting because the final class that I did last time as we did a debate. And so, which side, we have old ways new ways, which is better? Or which which which end and the student, of course, in a class of 24, these were big groups because I only did two groups, but it was really interesting that everybody got involved, and the debate was so lively, and I really liked that you brought Plato into that that would be a really good teaching or teaching way of teaching, to have them read the Allegory of the Cave and to debate through thinking about the what the way you just explained it. You know, just because the dogs you can even look at them for a metaphor for like human beings right? There's some people like I said that just don't want to change nothing is going to change their minds, even though I went to university and I have all these degrees, do you think I could change my dad's mind about certain things? And you know I could you know we feel are we seeing this right now in real time in politics, you know, and you know how much I love my politics. But we see this that there's you know just these people that you know they're in the cave, there's other people who are enlightened and like they like to think they're enlightened. And they're, you know, they're trying so hard to change people's minds about things but I think we see this in human form as well as in this dog form and that's you know that's what I got my students to do. They had to bring up text evidence, you know certain things that happened and then they had to rebut each other as well you know like saying oh the dog way or the new ways are better oh yeah but well look what happens to this dog look what happened, who says this is better? Right? How is this better?

Jess 46:16

That's hugely complicated in the novel. It's not clear cut, even though Atticus can look like the villain who dedicated to the old ways is bad. It's not that the old ways are bad; they actually see dogs that haven't been touched by the gods frolicking about enjoying their lives right? So your, your exercise your debate really speaks to both what I was just talking about with the Allegory of the Cave and also to the novel's really complicated morality, its complicated message on morality, on ethics, on on knowledge on neither of those two ways that you're talking about, necessarily being always better, right? Because we see dogs being unhappy across the board

Tara 46:56

Just like humans!

Jess 46:57

Exactly. So, and that's where I think again that anthropomorphizing thing comes in because they are sort of acting as humans in this text because they have been given human intelligence, so they're not they're not acting as the dogs that they see around them that haven't been touched by the gods so it's hard. It's hard to treat them as just dogs.

So you kind of went into methods already, or at least the debate which is great but what what challenges -- or have you had any real challenges in your teaching of this text?

Tara 47:31

Challenges mostly is just to try and find, like, like I said, the first time I was a TA, the second time I was doing this as quickly as possible like putting this together as quickly as possible. So a lot of what you've said is actually helped me to start thinking a little deeper about this, getting them to recognize... The challenges I had...

Jess 47:51

First of all, if I can just stop you there even: what you just said is so important because I think one thing that I hope to highlight on this podcast and hopefully will continue coming up is how the actual real pressures of our teaching and working lives, meaning precarious labor, how quickly we're hired for a class that we have to develop in two seconds, how low our wages often are, and that will impact how well we can teach, all of that is a real challenge, so I just wanted to pause here to say yes that is a challenge in teaching this text and a lot of texts, which is that the pressures of TAing, which means making money trying to be financially stable, getting hired precariously as sessional lecturers also similarly pressured, all of those things are going to shape the way that we're able to teach texts, and I hope that that I really just want that to keep coming up, if, if it does that would be great because it's something that needs to be emphasized. Current teaching practices are overwhelmingly shaped by the kinds of material physical and financial realities that we have to negotiate.

Tara 48:48

You know I totally agree and you know and then there's also the idea, the problem with the student evaluation, you know, which I mean I want my student evaluations, but a lot of times I feel that I am planning around "oh my god I don't want to bore them oh I don't want them," you know I want this to be interesting.

Jess 49:06

Oh, and that takes so much more labor to think about not just education and goals and having good teaching moments, but also keeping things fresh, keeping things interesting, of course that's more labor and and again it can be tempting to slip into complacency, but when your livelihood depends on it, you know that not only for yourself because you think it's important, but for the students and for your livelihood, you need to make this entertaining, make this fresh, make this make this a good lesson.

Tara 49:32

Yeah, exactly. But what else did I find difficult with it. Um, I don't know. There's the obvious. The obvious problem. The first time I read the novel. Okay, back in Saskatoon and I was TAing, I cried constantly through the last third of the novel, from you know Majnoun's five years, right, of, you know, and and it's really interesting that he's the one who's most deeply affected by time. Right. He's the one that discovers time in the first place, realizes that time is happening. But then he's also got this you know like then his his, his vigil.

Jess 50:07

Yeah he waits for did you say I couldn't even remember the details but he waits for Nira, who he doesn't know has died in a I think a car accident but maybe we don't know.

Tara 50:16

As far as I can tell, it was a car accident on their way home from their little trip.

Jess 50:20

Yeah, and he doesn't know that she's died so dutifully, as her as her sort of partner in life, dog partner and she is sort of like his master, I think he says that a couple times, he waits for her for five plus years until a god comes and collects him, I can't remember if it's Apollo or Hermes but comes and tells him to please stop waiting and sort of brings him into death. So the -- are you saying the challenge is the emotional aspect?

Tara 50:45

The emotional challenges. I've had I have huge emotional challenges with this novel, from the very beginning, from the very beginning there was like you know a little bit choking up, but by the end by the last like I said this third where we deal with Majnoun's vigil to Prince's Death, to the end, I was like I was like I remember I was sitting on bed in my apartment. And in my bedroom and finishing this up because I had to come up with some kind of lesson plan, and I *crying noises*. And I was just done. And then

when I came in and, actually, the students were supposed to be finished that the next class that next Friday. And I walked in, and I looked at them. And I was like, so who's finished the novel? And all of a sudden you just see these faces fall, and I was like I can tell who's finished the novel. So that was that's that's the biggest challenge I have because then I when I taught it again. I you know I because I thought okay well I'll do Fifteen Dogs, I've done it before, it's Canadian, I wanted something Canadian because I was trying to, you know, I don't want to just stick in my Brit Lit world of dead poets, right? And you know playwrights. I you know I'm trying to try and say I know it's good for me. So I thought Fifteen Dogs, it's great. Okay, we'll do this. And then when I was reading it again. You know, I was like, oh, for goodness sake, why did I do this to myself? You know.

Jess 52:05

And I had that written as a similar challenge: I said you know I personally, I don't know if I have cried right I will have to remember if I've cried during reading this, but what I do know is that students have come to me, have whispered in class, have emailed me about how emotional this was, so I do see that as something to think about as an educator for the future, not to prevent me from teaching it but: how do we shape the learning experience that we can talk about how our emotions will inflect our readings too, right?

Tara 52:35

That's actually interesting because I gave a lot of warnings, like I gave trigger warning trigger warning, "okay watch what you guys this is what we're about to do." But I think it'd be interesting, especially when I was teaching "The Ones Who Walk Away," because that involves humans. And there's quite a few so you know and then like I said I did Heart of Darkness is humans, but the idea of what it means to be human. We have complete meltdowns or most of us, many of us have complete meltdowns about this story, whereas we can dry-eye through stories where, you know, human propensity to commit violence on other humans, we're not crying, I mean we might be horrified. But we're not you know my students hated Heart of Darkness. Every student well not all students hate it, they start to understand that this is you know it's essential to recognize this, you know, this vile world and then what I do is I pair that with Apocalypse Now, after we read Heart of Darkness, we watch Apocalypse Now. But nobody's really... in Apocalypse Now, for example, I don't know if you've ever seen it?

Jess 53:40

Yeah, I actually have taught it alongside Heart of Darkness which it's funny that you say all the kids, you're like, "oh, should this ever be taught again?" and I feel like I have similar feelings where maybe no, but I taught it for almost a whole year actually with when I was co teaching with Len Findlay, we taught that text and another text over the course of an entire year, Heart of Darkness for a year, so it really--

Tara 54:03

Wow. So you know Heart of Darkness.

Jess 54:05

Yeah, it's... the emotional aspect that we're talking about right now of reading is certainly there when you're persistently returning to this text about atrocities and colonialism right like--

Tara 54:19

But do we cry about it? That's the thing that really bothers me or not bothers me but what I'm recognizing here is that we're you know everybody's a blubbing mess reading Fifteen Dogs, whereas we can sit there and watch Apocalypse Now, and this is really interesting when we watched it in class this spring, before the lockdown right and we had to go remote, I actually managed to get through Apocalypse Now, which was great. The only time students were gasping was when the puppy on the boats, the little puppy, and when the water buffalo gets slaughtered at the end. That's the only time I saw any kind of complete reaction, and I talked to them about that like complete like horror reaction with the animals, and I asked them about that afterwards when we had our question answer time. And I'm like, I noticed this like "what's wrong with you guys?" I didn't say what's wrong with you guys, but they you know everybody was saying that, you know, it's, it's animals.

Jess 55:13

I know that there's tons of work done on that sort of social or societal impulse to be emotional about depictions of animal abuse, violence or death on screen, but not like why is the, the same with humans and I'm sure there's this is probably a huge scholarly sort of rabbit hole that we could, we could go down if we wanted but it's a troubling, maybe a troubling impulse as you're pointing out, to be like oh no, that dog died but not to meet with equal horror, the violence of colonialism, let's say, talking about Heart of Darkness or...

Tara 55:53

Yeah so yeah so that's pretty much the difficulties. There you go.

Jess 55:58

Any last things you wanted to mention about this text

Tara 56:01

Read it, honestly. I think everybody needs a good cry. I think that it's really I think it's proper to draw parallels between what these dogs value and what humans value. I think that's you know like we were talking about through majority of this is how you know the old and the new, and also about how maybe this novel I don't know this sounds a little, a little, I don't know, hippie but maybe this novel will make us kinder, I don't know I do do -- to like start to recognize the human empathy for other humans as well you know and maybe everybody just be nice to dogs. That's all I have to say.

Jess 56:42

I think that's a very good place to end so I'll just say thank you so much for coming on and talking to me about this novel, I realized it's been a while since you taught it so I appreciate that you responded with such generosity to my request.

Tara 56:55

Well, thank you....

Jess 57:03

Thank you so much to Tara for coming on the podcast to chat with me about teaching *Fifteen Dogs*. It was so lovely to exchange ideas about a text that we both teach from different angles and to learn from that exchange and I think probably bring that learning into the next time that I teach this text.

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis, where at this time of recording, in the week before this episode will be released, there is crucial work being done toward prisoner rights and prisoner justice in Saskatchewan, a province, and inside a country, marked by the violent over-incarceration of Indigenous people. Central to the work being done here in Saskatoon is Cory Charles Cardinal, a prisoner justice advocate who organized a hunger strike that incarcerated people across Saskatchewan took part in this month to protest the government's gross mishandling of COVID-19 protocols and outbreaks in Saskatchewan prisons. Cardinal wrote a piece for *Briarpatch* magazine, which I'm going to link to in the show notes, and it contextualizes the hunger strike he organized within as he writes a quote "154-year-long campaign to diminish the identities of Aboriginal warriors as protectors of our people," end quote. There's also an open letter in solidarity with Saskatchewan prisoners, which looks like it will be sent out before this episode airs. But I'm going to link to information about the letter and also a list of actions you can take to stand in solidarity with incarcerated people in Saskatchewan, and to contribute to the organizing and the activism that Cardinal and others have been doing for prisoner justice on Treaty Six and beyond.

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at <https://soundcloud.com/dyallas>.

Thank you to Jade McDougall at <http://www.muskrat-hands.com> for the awesome podcast graphics. You know that you can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod, or you can also get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. You can use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod to talk about the podcast, and thank you to Kiera for using that hashtag, my book club friend Kiera on Twitter.

It is a new year and I would love it so much if you would very kindly rate and review the podcast, especially if you like it, on Apple podcasts, especially, or on any podcatcher that allows you to do so.

Okay, listeners, g'bye for now but please join me again next week on Teachin' Books, no "g." That felt too short but I will probably forever be changing my sign off because it turns out that I'm extremely indecisive. So for now: bye.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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