

Transcript

Bookworm with Michael Silverblatt & Harry Dodge My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random, There Can Be No New Thing April 2020

Silverblatt: Michael Silverblatt, Interviewer

Dodge: Harry Dodge, Interviewee

Silverblatt: This is Bookworm, and I'm talking today to the artist Harry Dodge, who has written his first book, which is called *My Meteorite*. It has a great subtitle, it's *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random, There Can Be No New Thing*. And [laughs] tell us where that subtitle comes from.

Dodge: Hey, Michael. It's a Gregory Bateson quote.

Silverblatt: Throughout Harry Dodge's book, *My Meteorite*, he refers to things that I love. Among them, Gregory Bateson's essay, but also Merleau-Ponty, also Bette Midler. He tells us what it feels like to see *Hello, Dolly*, and to see her dancing with all these astonishing muscular gay waiters. [Dodge laughs] There are many things that Harry Dodge loves and they appear in *My Meteorite*. One of them is Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*, because it gives him an idea about how to organize this book.

This book contains ideas about what happens beyond life and death. He orders a meteorite, can you imagine, from eBay, [laughs] and it comes in the mail. How much must it weigh?

Dodge: Well, you know, it's actually really heavy. It must weigh maybe—I'm going to say 25 pounds, even though it's really about the size of a kind of medium sized dog head, which I say in the book. [laughs] It's heavier than it should be. And it's quite beautiful. It's kind of made of iron and nickel composite and it's got these kind of scallop shapes. It looks like a big piece of chewing gum. [Silverblatt laughs] And it was weirdly my very first eBay purchase.

Silverblatt: I read it as an emissary from outer space coming with messages for you, Harry Dodge, to interpret.

Dodge: Yeah.

Silverblatt: And this book is about a thought that comes from the beyond about artificial intelligences and artificial super intelligences.

Dodge: Yeah.

Silverblatt: It's about our ability to alter the genetic structure of the embryo so that birth defects that can be found in the womb can be recreated and rewritten through

code. It's about the world we're now living in that we're only starting to know about. And you, Harry Dodge, are putting it in juxtaposition, as you say, with we are formed by collisions. What are those collisions?

Dodge: Well, the collisions are, you know, as I write about them, basically everything. You know, I have always been a very sensitive person and always very, very interested in these kind of scale shifts. I can't even say I'm interested in the scale shifts. I should say I've always been attuned and sort of busy with scale shifts from sort of this awareness of the cosmos down to this unawareness of, yeah, even viruses or bacteria. And there's nothing, in my opinion anyway, or as I write, you know, there's nothing that that we escape. We're impressed upon by everything. And I'm interested in that because it means that we're always changing. We're never fully formed.

Silverblatt: Oh, scale shifts. It's the way in which shape, getting larger and smaller and shifts of perspective become metaphorical, so we can see everything yielding a metaphor for everything else. The world becomes interconnected by metaphor and shifts in scale. I have to tell my listeners, Harry, and you, I've never read a book like it. I found it so revelatory. All sorts of writers are writers who see purely into things, and I think that you have, in this book, *My Meteorite*, shown how people tend to get things wrong until they're allowed to collide and form new things. Was this book very difficult to write?

Dodge: Thank you for that. I had an idea for the book and I began by writing out these three anecdotes that kind of are sort of the longer anecdotes. One was the anecdote about the performance in Chicago that had gone so poorly and how I started performing again, and that was a big coincidence. And there was another huge series of coincidences that I write about with regard to my birth mother, when I found her at age 36, and we had a bunch of very odd things in common. And another set of coincidences I wrote about at the beginning of writing the book was these guardian angel coincidences, as I called them [laughs], where I met the same cabdriver again and again a couple of years apart in the '90s when I lived in San Francisco.

I started there and then I started to take notes on sort of my everyday activities for about a year. And then when my father died—because, of course, the book begins with my father dying and the book ends with my father dying. I began writing the book in earnest when he died and I got confused. Here I had all these notes that I was going to fill out into a book that had a sort of forward progression. But now I was writing in the present, in 2017, but also filling out the notes from 2016. And then I realized the book could be kind of—I think of it as kind of horseshoe shaped, where 2017 is moving forward and progressing, as is 2016, and they sort of meet in some way at the end.

Silverblatt: Yes, and it goes through your whole life. You remember the, I think 14 page letter you write when you jump out the second floor window to go to a concert that you felt, without being there, your life would be inferior, altered, emptied. And you taped this letter to the collar of the dog [Dodge laughs] so that your parents would be sure to receive it when they walked the dog.

The book is full of important messages between you and the people in your life, and between you and your readers. You're a very good writer and you're a very good teacher and this book, *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing*—it's published by Penguin Press. It's a Penguin original. And I never thought I'd understand the things that you teach me about artificial intelligence, about robots, about how what we learn from the web comes to us, how many things have to be assembled before the triples occur that allow communication. You really took me by complete surprise and led me by the nose to understanding all kinds of things that I thought I was incapable of understanding, all in this book, *My Meteorite*.

One of the surprises with you and your birthmother is that you share the love of a particular novel by Theodore Sturgeon.

Dodge: It's a book, a really short little novella I think even, called *The Dreaming Jewels*, which I believe was first published, it was either the late '60s, early '70s. And as I say in the book, I found it when I was ten years old in the bookstore. It was I think miss-shelved in the kids section, and I used to read a lot of science fiction then. And I read it, and it's just a sort of weirdly abject book where this kid is caught eating ants under the bleachers [laughter], and he's an odd creature and feels like he's from another planet and he's kind of being raised by these really icky, brutal parents. And he's really alienated from his community and ends up running away from home and joining the circus, and he ends up being a shapeshifter and he ends up being controlled by these kind of maroon jewels that have actually fallen from space. And then the jewels tend to create things, and they had evidently created him.

And the book blew my mind, you know, as a kid. I used to keep this long list of books. I had hundreds and hundreds of books in this long list I used to keep, and under this one, this particular book that I read when I was ten, I had put five stars in the column. And so it was my favorite book for years. And then, you know, when I was—you know, 25 or 30 years later when I met my birth mother, we sat talking and we evidently had this book in common.

Silverblatt: Let me tell you something. I was born in New York City. I rode the subway. Every subway car I entered, I cast the people in the car in an imaginary movie. [Dodge laughs] And then I was laughing very hard because someone was reading a book called *Caviar*, and it was by Theodore Sturgeon and I thought that it was

amazing that Sturgeon would write a book called *Caviar*. [laughter] I went to get it right away. So I read *The Dreaming Jewels* too, and that title derives from a book by Diderot, for whom the dreaming jewels are a woman's genitals. Imagine that.

Dodge: [laughs] And how do you figure that out?

Silverblatt: Well, you see—

Dodge: I love that.

Silverblatt: Diderot wrote a book called *Rameau's Nephew* that I thought was so profound and so funny, I had to find it. I did find it in translation. It's not easy to find, but it's an astounding book that led to *The Dreaming Jewels*.

Dodge: Wow.

Silverblatt: And it's his version of what a woman says. You know, back in those days, those [INDISCERNIBLE 0:12:07.7], as they were called, there were profound, but they had the oddest [ph] attitude toward women and they thought that women's genitals were instructing them. [Dodge laughs] This is a magical thing because obviously, in one sense, true and in another sense, it was part of the ways in which women were reduced to their biologies, as was the case for an unfortunate long time. We're coming through another way of reading this. And of course, yes, the talking jewels are crucial to understanding the cosmos.

Dodge: Well, you know, what's so interesting about the dreaming jewels in the Sturgeon book is that—the word 'dreaming' is really interesting there, because in the novel, what they do is dream—when they're dreaming in the book, they dream objects into existence. And so I think, you know, it's kind of fascinating, this idea of rethinking what a thought is and rethinking what a dream is and sort of recasting a thought object as an object, as a kind of object, that it actually has a materiality and that it actually packs a punch or is a force in the world that changes other things. I think that sort of memory works like that in the book as well, where I'm sort of remembering certain things, or I'm misremembering certain things and in the misremembering, new thought objects get made. There's the real thing. Then there's, sort of in the book, there's how I remember it. And I'm interested in that sort of fecundity, the generative-ness of thoughts as objects. I'm obviously really interested in matter, and my sort of deep interest in matter and my deep interest as a materialist and my deep interest in the idea that there's nothing that is not material, so that thoughts are material, dreams are material, that there's nothing that escapes being made from material, and there's no sort of spiritual something that comes to slather life onto otherwise inert matter, you know? So it's sort of the extrapolation of that that led me to all of these other thoughts about robotics and artificial intelligence and stuff like that, because I'd been very sort of technophobic for my whole life and lately started to think I have to realize that all

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of this technology is also made by organisms who are made by matter and so that there's nothing that's unnatural.

Silverblatt: I'm talking to Harry Dodge about his book, *My Meteorite*. He got a meteorite in the mail via eBay, and it might as well have been a message from the universe. And Harry, I too began your book as a technophobe, [Dodge laughs] but you took me by the metaphoric hand and led me deep into the universe of explicable, relatable matter, and I'm incredibly grateful to you for this book. You know, I don't usually speak to anyone who isn't across the table from me in the studio, but this conversation is being performed over the telephone, and I am, dare I say, abject in my admiration for this book.

Here I am at home talking with Harry Dodge about his new book, *My Meteorite*. We'll continue after this short break.

[break 0:16:19.0]

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Silverblatt: I'm Michael Silverblatt, this is Bookworm, and I'm talking with Harry Dodge about his magnificent new book, *My Meteorite*, which blends the personal and the philosophical, the raw and the cooked, the surreal and the ordinary, the transgressive and the heartbreaking. How did this book dare to say that your personal life is part of the cosmos?

Dodge: I'm interested in the idea that there's nothing that's not impressing upon everything else. I'm interested in the idea that the very small has an effect, as does the apparently very sort of magnificent. And so it's not a problem for me to think that someone's personal life is important or part of the flow of things. I think more revelatory for me is these sort of ways that I test myself about matter and bits of matter that seem like they're coming from elsewhere, like a computer or a meteorite. I think what's so interesting about the meteorite, coming from space as sort of this alien object, is once I got it and held it in my hand and realized there are iron deposits [laughs] on the earth and there are aluminum deposits on the earth and I needed to rethink my technophobia and make some new thoughts that included the idea that humans themselves arose from matter that over billions of years created these organisms that we are, and so all of our inventions and all of culture really is part of the natural flow of things.

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Silverblatt: Your dear and beloved dog Max dies. You have to decide that you are not going to put him to sleep until it's absolutely necessary and you are going to find the right place in the world to bury him. In this place, one of what I consider to be one of the guardian angels of the book appears. This woman has also buried her precious beloved pet in this spot. You meet her there the first day, while you, with your shirt off, are digging the hole in which Max will be buried. She comes over and recognizes, the way an angel would—

Dodge: Yeah.

Silverblatt: She says, "This is a sad day for you."

Dodge: Yeah.

Silverblatt: And you say, "Yes, it is." And it's such a beautiful and alarming section in which we are present at the death of your dear friend, and his burial.

Dodge: Yeah. This is a section that was, you know, exceptionally hard to write. I mean, there's a lot of—you know, sort of the book is permeated with different accounts of death and they're always—it's always very hard to write about death. It's not enjoyable and it's not particularly therapeutic. [laughs] It's just hard. And all of those sections, you know, I had to really stick with and then once they were written, it was kind of—it's kind of fascinating, when you write a book, you're sort of dealing with this big huge block of created, constructed matter, you know, that works in time. So you tend to go over it and over it and over it like you would, you know, editing a feature film or something. And these sections, you know, where my mother dies and where the dog dies both were always really hard to go back into. But you know, I hope that in some ways, by the writing and by the reading of stuff like this, that there is some kind of weird elegiac comfort that comes, you know, between a writer and a reader. You know, it seems like it's important to share.

Silverblatt: I feel, as I was reading the book, that I was being exposed to so many things that connect and make the universe, the life, the daily life that we lead significant. And if there's anything that the book is for, it's to find the internal significance. There's a place where Harry feels he needs to pick up Hegel [ph 0:22:11.9] [laughter] and let Hegel interpret what's going on for a page or two. But it's not just Hegel, it's Descartes. And it's not just our usual "I think, therefore I am" Descartes. It's the profundity of the pain of the Cartesian world, which I knew nothing about. I had to surrender, Harry, to your book in the belief that when things were difficult or confusing, that you were generous enough to teach me how to understand them. And I came away from the book understanding so much more than I knew when I opened the book. That doesn't happen all that often for me. Most of the time, books are telling me things I already know and if I'm lucky, the style is beautiful.

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Dodge: Right.

Silverblatt: But you managed to create both a style and a content that took me out into the universe. And I don't know of another book like this. It thrilled me. What does it feel like to have managed to write a book that's like a message from the beyond?

Dodge: [laughs] Well, two things that I'm thinking as you're talking. One is, you know, that I really always enjoy being a little confused and I really like to be in questions. I like to be in a space where I'm sort of reading a little bit above my pay grade, I like to say, and trying to think a little bit above my pay grade too. And so I have to, as an artist, and as a writer, I think, trust these hunches, these kind of inchoate thoughts or spaces or shapes, you know, that are starting to emerge. And I think, you know, there's a sort of practice of going after them, whether it be making a sculpture or a video, or indeed, finding the thoughts that are there to be found by kind of sculpting them with words.

So I'm happy that some of these thoughts that were really hard for me to get to, you know, sort of landed with you. That's so gratifying. And you know, during this interview, it's sort of occurring to me that I'm not an expert on the book, which I think is really interesting. You know, it's interesting to be interviewed about this sort of creature, this organism that I produced and yet don't—I just don't feel like I'm the master of it somehow. [laughs] I do feel that I had something that I was moving on and moving toward. But I don't know everything that there is to know about it and I think that's really interesting. I feel like I'm going to learn what the book is by talking to people like you about it.

Silverblatt: I've been speaking with Harry Dodge. He's the author of *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random, There Can Be No New Thing*. It's published by Penguin Books. Thank you so much, Harry, for joining me. This has been a really splendid opportunity for me to talk to a writer who wrote a book that really helped me learn a whole new world.

Dodge: Thanks, Michael. My pleasure.

Silverblatt: You can visit KCRW.com/bookworm for a podcast of today's show, also available at Apple and Spotify and other podcast services. You can even listen on demand with KCRW's own smartphone apps.

I want to give special thanks to my co-producer, Sean Sullivan, the associate producer, Alan Howard, and the technical director, Mario Diaz. I'm grateful also to all the people at Penguin Books who helped to put this together. This style of interviewing without being able to look in my guests eyes is brand new to me.

I'm Michael Silverblatt. Join me again next time on Bookworm.

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Announcer: Funds for Bookworm are provided in part by Lannan Foundation. This program is produced in the studios of KCRW Santa Monica. You can access archives of—
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