

Milan Terlunen on the Pre-Reading Environment

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SPEAKERS

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Rahne Alexander

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior Publicist for the Hopkins Press Journals Division. On today's episode, we sat down in the library of the Hopkins Press offices with Milan Terlunen, author of an article in the new issue of *Book History* entitled, "What We Can't Know Before We Read: Towards a Theory of the Pre-Reading Environment."

That apostrophe T is parenthetical, delivering a can-can't double entendre because the term,

Dr. Terlunen coins, the Pre-Reading Environment, is interested in looking at all the ways we come to know things about a text, a book, a film, what have you, before we read it, if we ever read it.

It's not every day that we get to talk to a scholar who coins terms, especially one that seems so immediately ripe with possibility as the Pre-Reading Environment. What follows is a really fun conversation that stretches from early Agatha Christie to the recent Celine Dion jukebox musical, *Titanique*.

Milan Turlunen is currently the 2024 TAB Center AGHI Engaged Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow at Johns Hopkins, who specializes in public and digital humanities with a particular emphasis in podcasting. Dr. Terlunen is the co-founder of the Humanities Podcast Network and is host of the *How to Read* podcast. This spring, he is convening a series of podcasting Round Tables, called *What Makes Podcasting Accessible?*, featuring podcasters across the Hopkins community and beyond.

These roundtables will be available to attend both in-person and streaming as well. We've put links to all of this information, including how to register for the series, in the show notes, and we'll make Dr. Terlunen's article available free to all to read through the end of March 2025. With no further ado, Let's go into the Hopkins Press Library and visit with our guest, Dr. Milan Terlunen.

Rahne Alexander

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast.

Milan Terlunen

Thank you, Rahne.

Rahne Alexander

It's wonderful to see you again. We're in, in the library of the Hopkins Press recording this today.

Milan Terlunen

Yes, surrounded by so many books.

Rahne Alexander

All the history of this Press is around us right now.

Milan Terlunen

Amazing.

Rahne Alexander

It's really cool.

So, you've got an article in the new issue of *Book History*.

Milan Terlunen

Yes.

Rahne Alexander

And let me take a crack at reading the title of this. What we *can't* know before we read towards a theory of the Pre-Reading Environment. And you're putting out this new concept. It's not really a new concept, but you're putting words to this idea of the Pre-Reading Environment as a new object of study. And I mean, this idea resonated with me immediately. It kind of feels timely, maybe even necessary. Can you synopsise what you mean by the term and what brought you to write this piece for *Book History*?

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, thank you. Well, yeah, I'm glad it resonated with you because, yeah, one of the things with this term that I've coined, Pre-Reading Environment, is that it's a new term for something that I hope that we all recognise and that I'm arguing has a very long history. And so when I'm talking about Pre-Reading Environment, what I mean by that is all the information about a specific book that is circulating out there in the world and that people who haven't read that book have access to. So for example, you know, when a new book is published, there are book reviews and so if you read certain newspapers or websites, you might learn about information about that book through book reviews. You might also see that book discussed on social media that would give you information. You might overhear a conversation while taking public transport. A friend might recommend the book or say they read the book and hated it.

So, there's all these different ways that information about books is circulating in the world and that we never really encounter a book totally fresh. Right? There's always some kind of information about it that reaches us first, even if it's only the cover itself. Right? Before we open the book, the cover is giving us information about that book.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

So The Pre-Reading Environment is this term that I coined to describe this fact that like we're all absorbing information about books that we haven't read. Or at least haven't read it yet.

Rahne Alexander

And I mean, this is a term which is applicable to texts writ large, you know, like it's for films, it's for music -

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

It's for any thing that you could experience, obviously. But of course, you're focusing on books as [Laughter] you're -

Milan Terlunen

The journal is Book History, I stuck to books.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, indeed, indeed, indeed. In this article, you're focusing on two texts in particular, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, which is a more recent text.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, yeah, so they're about a hundred years apart and Agatha Christie, people might know as the famous detective novelist and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is one of her most famous detective stories. Has a huge twist at the end that I won't spoil, but I was interested in it because of that twist, because that raises questions. When this book was published in the 1920s, it raised questions for book reviewers who were writing these reviews in newspapers of how to talk about the ending. Because even saying that there's a twist would be a kind of spoiler, but what I found when I looked at these newspaper archives is like reviewers are actually they're not saying that there's a twist, but in vaguer ways they are trying to prepare potential future readers for the surprise at the end of this novel. So, that was where I started and then Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* was published in 2015, and I wanted to compare these two because, you know, they're a hundred years apart, so very different kind of media environments and that, so Hanya Yanagihara's book, I wasn't looking at book reviewers, but I was looking at Twitter and specifically how people that had read the book or were in the process of reading the book were tweeting about it in just the first few months after the book was published. But again asking some of those same questions about how do they talk about a book that has, again I weren't spoiled, but has a kind of shocking ending. How do people on Twitter talk about that ending without spoiling it for other readers, but also in some kind of subtler ways maybe preparing potential readers for this ending that they don't yet know is coming.

Rahne Alexander

I love that we're doing Pre-Reading Environment, not just for your article here -

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

But also for these other two books.

Milan Terlunen

Right.

Rahne Alexander

And I will say, for those of you that want to read the article, there is a spoil alert in there. Both of these, both of these books are spoiled.

Milan Terlunen

I do have to talk about the ending.

Rahne Alexander

So, yes. You do have to, you have to get there. So, do your reading before you do your reading.

Milan Terlunen

Well, [Laughter] what are you saying? Yes, but also, and this is me being a little cheeky, but I talk about this in the article, like I haven't read *A Little Life*, right? And that's a pretty, I don't know, controversial thing for a literary scholar to do is to like write an article about a book they haven't read, at least openly. Maybe people have been bluffing for all these years and -

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

Not admitting to it, but I'm open about the fact that I haven't read, *A Little Life*. And that's kind of part of my research method is that everything I know about this book comes from my Pre-Reading Environment, right? So, even before I began this research, like, you know, I was around in 2015, I was on Twitter, I was walking around in public seeing people holding this book cover, which has a very kind of like striking image of like a sort of monochrome image of a man's face looking either ecstatic or tortured, kind of unclear which. So, I had already been absorbing all this information just from existing in the world in 2015. And I decided to make that part of the method to be like, okay, what can I learn about this just through Twitter?

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, and as you're talking, you know, when we're in this huge historic library of Hopkins Press, and I was just suddenly hit with this memory of reading a piece. There's a Sartre autobiography called *The Words*. And early in it, he says, in it, he says, like, I grew up around all these books that were my father's library, and I didn't

read most of them. When you're around that many books, you don't need to read any of them.

Milan Terlunen

[Laughter]

Rahne Alexander

So like, here's, here's another, another [Laughter] like esteemed scholar, know, really valorizing the idea that like [Laughter], you know, maybe some books you really don't have to read.

Milan Terlunen

Well that's very flattering.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

And I've never read Sartre's *Les Mots* although I did study French as an undergrad and went to lectures about that book.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

So again, I have a bit of a Pre-Reading Environment about Sartre's *Les Mots* but I've never read it. So, thank you for sharing that with me. Maybe now I don't need to read it. You've given me the best part. I love it.

Rahne Alexander

So, you, let's talk about your process of looking at Twitter for the reviews.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

A Little Life, which again, also is a book that I haven't read. I'm a film person, so I'm often given to thinking of them as the same thing sometimes, so I might say.

Milan Terlunen

Let's talk about movies too.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. What brought you to that way of analyzing this out of all the different sorts of what criticism that you could look at?

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, I mean, I guess there a number of things. For me, one of the big motivations was to just think about how we learn about books and movies and art *now*. Because

no offense to professional critics and reviewers, but I think that most of us get most of our information from social media and from, well, who knows?

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

Anyway, I'll speak for myself. I think I get a lot of my information about books, literature, art, movies from social media, and so I wanted to kind of think about how we can study that, right, like how you actually can like gather data from Twitter about a specific book. So, that was a kind of technological challenge that I had to overcome in doing this research. But then also to think about, you know, what are those differences between, you know, with Agatha Christie, the newspaper reviewers in the 1920s, they have all read the book. They are coming from a position of full knowledge and a kind of professional status. Whereas people on Twitter, they're not professional reviewers. They may not even think about what they're doing as reviewing, but they're tweeting things like, you know, "I'm on page 475. I'm so worried about what's gonna happen to this character." Right? And that's, A, that person hasn't yet reached the ending, so they don't know what the ending is, they can't spoil it, but B, they are, in a sense, of on an equal playing field with all the other people potentially reading those tweets. Right? They're just a little further along in their reading, but there's not that same kind of hierarchy or like professionalism. And that feels like it's really, a new development of our moment, especially to do with digital media, social media, and democratising of criticism, if you even want to call it criticism, maybe just democratising of, of information.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely seems to be speaking to, yeah, not just, well, it's gonna change criticism. Right? Like it is changing criticism as we experience it, even as those of us that are looking at the academy or even yearn for that kind of like authority that a professional critic might [Laughter] bestow upon us. Right?

Milan Terlunen

I mean, yeah, I don't know if I yearn for that.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

As someone who's written some reviews and never got them published. [Laughter] I feel like maybe I wish things were more democratic. I don't know. But yeah, I mean, I think I have complicated feelings about the word criticism.

Rahne Alexander

Sure.

Milan Terlunen

Like literary criticism. but I think what I want to do with this research, and in my research more broadly, is to take seriously the way that kind of quote unquote ordinary people learn about, experience, interact with works of literature. Right? Not

everybody cares about reading book reviews, not everybody cares about reading certainly academic literary criticism. Right? That is a real niche interest for people like me.

Rahne Alexander

Sure.

Milan Terlunen

But like, if all you're doing is just browsing Twitter or walking through a city and looking at billboards, like what information are you going to pick up about books that way? That's the kind of perspective I want to take.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, and I think that's one of the things that makes this such a, a vibrant concept to me, the Pre-Reading Environment. You, you specify that this is something that is, it's a historical thing. It's about a time and a place. And so the modes are going to change, obviously, right? When you're looking at, Agatha Christie, you're looking at what? Newspaper, archives, you know? And that requires not just critics, but newspapers and archives.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, and companies that have digitized hundreds of, thousands of newspapers from the early 20th century. Yeah, there's a whole network of producers that make that research possible.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah. And of course, like I'm just thinking about all the other ways that this concept is applied because we're, I mean, I work in marketing. What is marketing but, setting up [Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

Shaping a Pre-Reading Environment.

Rahne Alexander

Absolutely.

Milan Terlunen

Absolutely.

Rahne Alexander

Spoiler alerts, especially in film.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Content warnings. Right?

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Right? Which are trigger warnings, content warnings, which are such an interesting and useful phenomenon now.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Maybe sometimes a little overdone, but sometimes really, really helpful to have that.

Milan Terlunen

Absolutely. Yeah. I think I touched on that briefly in the article, but I'm interested in both spoiler alerts and content warnings and seeing them as two sides of the same coin. Right? That both of them are like when you see the phrase spoiler alert or when you see the phrase content note, content warning, trigger warning, you know, you're about to get some information about book or a movie or whatever that you haven't read, you haven't watched, and that it's giving you the choice of whether to, like get that information or not. And, yeah, both of those shape your Pre-Reading Environment. And even the fact of seeing a content warning or a spoiler alert shapes your Pre-Reading Environment. Right? Like, if you're thinking of watching a TV show and then you see something that's like, spoiler alert, you immediately know, okay, there's a surprise coming in this TV show that, even if I don't know what the surprise is, I now know that there is a surprise.

Rahne Alexander

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. I do think it's funny that, I mean, I do this too, culturally. We're in a place where we're like, well, so anyway, this is gonna happen, and spoiler alert, and now I'm gonna tell you what happened.

Milan Terlunen

Right. [Laughter]

Rahne Alexander

So, I think I'm like, I'm rarely even pausing before I-

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, it's a little bit of a formality. Right?

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

It might be hard to kind of like stop your eyes from like reading-

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

Those next words.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

[Laughter]

Hit that pause button.

Milan Terlunen

But I mean, one of the misconceptions, I think, about content warnings, and some of the fear mongering actually about them is that content warnings are discouraging people from reading. Right? That they serve only to as a kind of excuse and as a device for letting people not read books that they don't wanna read. And my understanding, which is coming out of some of the feminist theories of content warnings, is that sometimes it can be about choosing not to read, but also it can be about enabling reading. Right? That there are certain kinds of content that some people can handle if they are forewarned and if they're able to create the environment to then experience that in the way they want, but that if it has sprung upon them would be traumatizing and would actually. That would be the thing that would prevent them from reading further. Whereas, actually being forewarned about difficult content can be the thing that enables reading.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah. Which is definitely something that I appreciate because I, I predate the concept of content warnings. You know, I mean, I've encountered so many things that I, I wasn't ready for. But, I think in my own, like just looking at my own reading and watching history, if I really wasn't ready for something, I didn't absorb it very well. I remember, I remember trying to read like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* when I was 10. What am I going to get out of that? Right? [Laughter] I'm just trying to be mature, and trying to do, like something that -

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Adults do at that point. Yeah, I feel like your audience is still always going to absorb what they can at the time they're historically ready for it, I would imagine, right?

Milan Terlunen

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's complicated because I don't know, for some reason I'm thinking about the movie, *Blade Runner* which I saw when I was too young and it just freaked me out, right? Like there are certain scenes in there that are very tense and very s-s-scary.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

And I was just very scared.

Rahne Alexander

Yes.

Milan Terlunen

And it wasn't so much about it going over my head as just like, yeah, yeah I slept badly for a while.

Rahne Alexander

Right, right.

Milan Terlunen

But, yeah.

Rahne Alexander

And that's kind of the thing about another Pre-Reading Environment is the MPAA movie review or movie ratings.

Milan Terlunen

Totally.

Rahne Alexander

Which, um.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah. I love the one, "scenes of mild peril."

Rahne Alexander

Right.

Milan Terlunen

That's something that children's movies, like those rating descriptions will often say and I'm like, Okay good to know, but also "peril" is such a kind of funny old-fashioned word.

Rahne Alexander

It is.

Milan Terlunen

And then like what is "mild peril"? Like how do we determine whether peril is mild.

Rahne Alexander

Right.

Milan Terlunen

Or medium or strong?

Rahne Alexander

Right. I mean, I think that a film like, *The Wizard of Oz*, or there was, there was even a, Shirley Temple movie, or *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Another film that terrified me

asa child, which were what, G-rated films that you could see on television, whereas, something else, know, something else that might have more adult content.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Might have been, have been, I might have been prevented from watching it. But again, if I couldn't understand what was going on in like, *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. Right?

[Laughter] I'm not going to be hit as hard by that. I'm going to be more terrified by the child catcher from, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Milan Terlunen

Right.

Rahne Alexander

Right.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, but yeah, so those, those like, MPAA or I think so in the UK there's the, BBFC, I think is the name of the organization that does these ratings, but yeah. They, they shape, you know in a sort of legal sense, like who can and can't watch these movies, right? Up to a point.

Rahne Alexander

Sure.

Milan Terlunen

I know I watched yeah plenty of movies before I was the right age for them, but you know in theory they leaked restrict that and then they also do circulate information about what is the sort of potentially disturbing or like adult content of any given movie. This is reminding me, also - It's going even a step further. So, when I was a teenager, me and my friends discovered this like, Evangelical Christian movie reviews website that. Oh gosh, I can't remember the name, but it wasn't reviews in the sense of like, is this good or bad? It was just itemizing the like, quote unquote, Un-Christian content of basically every movie. And so, you know, it would have these categories of like sex and violence and bad language, but also like blasphemy was a category that would be itemized.

Rahne Alexander

[Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

And we thought it was so funny because, because, you know, in very like pompous language, they would like describe the sort of like, you know, naughty content of movies and then also, I guess for us as teenagers, maybe we were like 13, 14, not yet allowed to watch some of these movies, but we could kind of vicariously get some of the thrill of this bad content through reading these Evangelical Christian movie reviews intended to have people avoid them.

Rahne Alexander

Right. To dissuade you. [Laughter] It's such a, yeah, it's such an interesting thing. And I mean, all of these things all together, you know, this Pre-Reading Environment that you're stipulating here does play into the calculus of whether or not I'm going to engage a text, whether I'm going to engage a movie, right? Do I want to spend part of my time, my life on this, story, on this idea? And what I think is interesting is that there are certain texts, certain films that I've decided not to watch, but also I've, not to read, and I still feel like I've engaged it fully. I've never seen the film, *Titanic* from beginning to end, right? But I feel like I have.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Like, I just, who knows, when, if I lose my mind later in life, maybe I'll just talk about how I went to sleep at, *Titanic* with my friends when I was young. But at the same time, like I know that I have never gone and sat and watched that film from beginning to end. I don't feel at this point in history that I need to. I feel like I've absorbed enough of it in chunks, all of that Pre-Reading Environment.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

To feel like anything I would possibly get out of that. I've already gotten out of it. I've heard the song. I know who, Leonardo DiCaprio is, you know? I know about the King of the World thing. And I know the spoiler alert.

Milan Terlunen

[Laughter]

Rahne Alexander

The boat sinks.

Milan Terlunen

I mean if you know bit of history you know the spoilers so.

Rahne Alexander

Yes.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, I mean *Titanic's* a great example because it was so like for a year right it was kind of so culturally omnipresent. At least like for me growing up in the UK and in the Netherlands like it was everywhere, I imagine in the US very similar maybe more. And yeah, you know, it's been parodied, memes have been made out of it, so yeah, there's so many ways in which you can kind of experience it, kind of secondhand, piece-meal. And I would say just on the topic of *Titanic*, there is a wonderful show that is called *Titanique*, which is currently running in New York and also in London, possibly also in other cities. It's a jukebox musical of Celine Dion songs.

Rahne Alexander

Amazing.

Milan Terlunen

So, obviously my heart will go on. The theme song from *Titanic* plays a big role, but it is a kind of very loose retelling of the story of *Titanic* as though Celine Dion herself was on board. And so she's sort of inserting herself into these scenes like the King of the World scene or when the boat sinks. She's just there sort of singing thematically appropriate songs as the action goes down. It's very funny and the singing is amazing. The performers are amazing. So, whether or not you've seen the movie, if you have any familiarity with, *Titanic* or love of Celine Dion, I would recommend it.

Rahne Alexander

We just keep bringing more Pre-Reading Environments to this podcast.

Milan Terlunen

Well, you know, in a lifetime, right, all of us are going to like experience way more things through a Pre-Reading Environment than through actually reading.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

That's just a fact of life.

Rahne Alexander

That's true. Well, one of the texts that you cite in this is, is Pierre Bayard's *Books You Haven't Read*.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Pierre Bayard.

Rahne Alexander

What brought you to that, that title? I mean, obviously, the title might have, grabbed you immediately.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, it's a book that I already knew about before beginning this research. And the key thing about that book, which is different from what I'm calling the Pre-Reading Environment, is he has this kind of French deconstructive argument that the, the content of books doesn't matter. That talking about the books you haven't read is a just totally valid thing to do. And in fact, we should embrace it and not worry about not having read books. That it's just like, we pick up from the discourse around us what's meaningful about books. And that's just as good as reading, if not better. So, he's kind of being, yeah, in this sort of, you know, counterintuitive French way, I think of, is saying like, don't bother to read anymore. You can just pick it all up from the discourse. Like the conversation around a given book.

When I call this thing a Pre-Reading Environment, the Pre- is important there because I want to think about books or movies or anything that you at least

potentially can still go out and read or watch, right? So it's Pre-Reading because you might still read it. You might not, but that it's about books you haven't read yet. And that is different from this idea of just books that you've never read and will never read.

And, it matters because like, if you, you know, these reviewers of, Agatha Christie's novels or the people tweeting about, *A Little Life*. Right? They are making choices about what to say about the ending and especially what not to say about the ending, anticipating that some of the people reading those tweets, reading those reviews, will go on to read the book. So, it does actually matter that at least the expectation is some people will read this book.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah. Well, one of the exciting things about doing a podcast with you.

Milan Terlunen

[Laughter]

Rahne Alexander

In particular is that you're a podcaster yourself.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

And you've got a couple of podcasts. The one that I've really spent time with is, *How to Read*.

Milan Terlunen

Thank you.

Rahne Alexander

It's a great, great podcast. I feel like I'm in the presence of greatness. [Laughter] in that way in terms of podcast solidarity.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah. I think we're allies in the mission of podcasts.

Rahne Alexander

Indeed. So, where are you in your podcasting journey at the moment?

Milan Terlunen

Well, yeah, so, *How to Read* was a podcast that I began in 2016 or 2017, and ran for six seasons. It's sort of on temporary hiatus because the team that I created and ran that with, we've all moved to different cities. So it's hard to keep it going in its current form. But, one thing that I am actually planning for it is a themed mini season to come, which will be all about Plot Twists.

Rahne Alexander

Okay.

Milan Terlunen

So this work on Pre-Reading Environment is connected to a book that I'm writing, about the History of The Plot Twist, which, at least in the book, book. I'm writing goes back to the 19th century goes back to writers like Jane Austen and Dickens and Charlotte Bronte and Edgar Allan Poe. We're in Baltimore.

Rahne Alexander

That's right.

Milan Terlunen

So I feel like I should name Poe. And so, I am thinking about a season that will be specifically Plot Twist themed. Up till now, *How to Read* has been very eclectic, lots of different kinds of books that are discussed, even lots of different academic disciplines. So, not just literary scholars, but also historians and anthropologists, social psychologists even. So, moving into the sciences. But yeah, the next step might be a twisty themed season to connect up with this book that I wrote.

Rahne Alexander

I love this. I love this. I'm very much looking forward to that Pre-Ordering your book right now. [Laughter]

Milan Alexander

[Laughter] I don't even have a publisher yet, so that's pre-mature, but thank you.

Rahne Alexander

Yes, yes. Yeah. It's cool. Put me down for two. Do you want to talk about the larger context of the work that you're doing?

Milan Alexander

Yeah, so yeah, so I, I have a book in progress on The History of The Plot Twist, but really kind of big-pictured, like what I want to be doing in my research is taking seriously and valuing more highly the kind of everyday reading experiences that people outside of academia have. Right? I think one limitation of literary scholars is we read in very particular, very slow, meticulous, careful ways, and that has its value, but it also, I think, prevents us from sometimes thinking about how, again. I wish I had a better word, but I'll say quote unquote ordinary readers read, and I mean that in a good way. Right?

You know, there are lots of kinds of literature, you know, and lots of kinds of art that most people don't experience in a slow, meticulous way, but you know, if you're reading a Twist Narrative, for example, you might be like gripped by the plot and then like have your mind blown by the Twist. That's not something that literary scholars are very good at taking seriously. It's just we don't really have the tools or the concepts for it. So Pre-Reading Environment is sort of one tool, one concept to get us thinking more extensively about what reading is, why people do it, and also, I guess, you know, Pre-Reading Environment is not actually reading yet. So, to think about how books and literature and other kinds of art can exist in our lives even without reading them or even without experiencing them firsthand. And I have a kind of personal example of this which is that when I was 20 or 21, I had the great

pleasure of living in Paris. In France for a year and me and two friends that I made there decided to make a short movie like a fictional film, a murder mystery set in Paris and we so we kind of came up with the story and then none of us had any kind of like professional movie cameras or anything, but I had a little like digital camera that could take stills. And I had heard about a film from the 1960s, called *La Jetée*, a French film, but I hadn't seen it. But I knew that it was a movie composed entirely of stills, right? Like no moving images, but just a series of stills with like sound running underneath it. And so, so I thought, well, yeah, we don't have a movie camera, but we have the still camera. We can make our movie that way. And we did. And, you know, it was great fun to make. And then years later, I did watch *La Jetée*, and it's great in its own right. It is mostly comprised of stills. It does different things from what we did, but like, we were able to take creative inspiration just from knowing secondhand about this movie without any of us having seen it.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

And I feel like that says something important about how art exists in the world. Right? It can be great to experience it firsthand, but also information that reaches us about art can be really inspiring and meaningful and, you know, can in itself be a kind of artistic experience just to imagine what something is like that you haven't read or seen.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Milan Terlunen

So, yeah, that's something that I value in my own life and also, yeah, want to kind of, through my research, think about ways to value that more highly.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, no, that speaks to me as an artist who often will come across an idea or a concept. And if I'm working on something in my own work, maybe I'll just want to get a little exposure to it. So that I'm not like completely copying or not at risk of just completely copying this other mode of making a thing or, you know, realizing like I need to, I need to put the brakes on.

Milan Terlunen

Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Here to make the thing that I want to. And then on the other side, see if there's too many similarities for me put this out into the world. [Laughter]

Milan Terlunen

Yeah, no exactly. Because I mean, I don't know, with like, with art and with reading, with movies, like, I think it's about quality over quantity, right? Like there's so much available to us more than we can read and watch in a lifetime. So yeah, figuring out what are the like things that you really want to invest your time in? You know,

whether that's things you haven't read yet or things you want to return to. Or sometimes like you're saying, like things that you kind of know are going to be too big of an influence, or too kind of pull you away from your own thing if you immerse yourself in it so you're just like not now.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah. And you're also putting together a podcast series.

Milan Terlunen

An event series.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, yeah. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Milan Terlunen

I do because it also involves you.

Rahne Alexander

It does.

Milan Terlunen

So, yeah, so this is Spring 2025. And during this semester at Johns Hopkins University, I am organizing a Series of roundtables with the overall title, *What Makes Podcasting Accessible?* And that is going to feature podcasters from within Hopkins, including the host of this show, Rahne Alexander.

Rahne Alexander

That's me.

Milan Terlunen

As well as podcasters from other universities in the area and discussing, *What Makes Podcasting Accessible?*, in all the varied meanings that access accessibility can have. So, I'm excited for that. The first one is next week and I think hopefully we can put a link of some kind.

Rahne Alexander

Yes.

Milan Terlunen

So if listeners are interested you can register, you can attend in person or virtually. I think at some point, we'll also make the recordings of those Round Tables available.

Rahne Alexander

Oh, wonderful.

Milan Terlunen

So even, if people are listening way into the future if that sounds interesting to you there should be a way to listen to those conversations.

Rahne Alexander

This is great.

Milan Terlunen

Thank you. Well, thank you for inviting me and yeah it was great to talk.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah.

Thank you for listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. Check the show notes for a link to read, Milan Terlunen's, "*What We Can't Know Before We Read: Towards a Theory of the Pre-Reading Environment*" in the journal *Book History* free through the end of March, and for more information on his podcast round table Series, *What Makes Podcasting Accessible?*, which runs this Spring in and around the Johns Hopkins University campus. The theme music is by Jean Toba, which you can find on the Free Music Archive, also linked in the podcast information page. Thanks for listening and we hope to see you next time on the Hopkins Press Podcast.