

“Gothic Feminisms & the Female Gothic”

A Big Read Podcast

[spooky introduction music]

ALEX ANDERSON: Hello, everyone, and welcome to this episode of the 2022 Big Read podcast series. I'm Alex Anderson, and today I'm joined by three wonderful guests: Frankie Knuckles, Narim Kim, and Veronica Ahmed. Today's episode is entitled “Gothic Feminisms and the Female Gothic,” and we'll be discussing how women, womanhood, and femininity function in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's novel *Mexican Gothic* and in the Gothic tradition more generally. Let's get started by allowing our special guests to introduce themselves. Frankie, would you like to kick us off?

FRANKIE KNUCKLES: Sure thing, Alex. My name is Frankie; I use they/them pronouns. I am a PhD student in the Philosophy department here at Purdue. I have Bachelors of Arts from Vassar College in English, Philosophy, and Queer Studies, so I'm very interested in the overlap of themes going on in *Mexican Gothic*. Some of my work right now is on local journalism, on queer readings of media—I'm kind of all over the place in a scholarly sense. So, yeah, that's what I am up to, who I am, some stuff about me.

NARIM KIM: Hi, everyone, I'm Narim. I'm a fifth-year PhD student in the English department. My dissertation is on contemporary American multi-ethnic women's novels. I'm interested in how they use magic and the affect of wonder to kind of elicit ethical responses or ethical relations. Broadly, I'm interested in aesthetics and affect and their relations to ethics. That's it—I think that's all about me right now. Nice to meet you all.

VERONICA AHMED: Hi, y'all, I'm Veronica. I am a fourth-year PhD student in American Studies. I concentrate on African American Studies and Women's, and Gender Sexuality Studies. I just passed my exams, and so I am getting ready to propose my dissertation. My research focuses on Black women's literary contributions, and particularly I'm focused on the Black woman's literary renaissance of the seventies and eighties [1970s and '80s]. I'm really interested in sort of the intergenerational work around literary work with Black women, particularly how the generation that was reading and writing in the seventies and eighties influenced twenty-first century Black women's experience of those texts. I'm really excited to jump into some of the themes in *Mexican Gothic*.

ALEX: Excellent. Thank you so much for those introductions. I'm thrilled that we have kind of an eclectic mix of interests represented here, so I think it'll be a phenomenal conversation. As always, for the folks at home, we are going to reveal some spoilers in this episode. So if you haven't finished the book, and you don't want to hear any spoilers, feel free to listen to this episode after you finish the novel. Additionally, because women and femme-presenting folk often experience sexual or sexualized violence in Gothic texts, we may discuss or hint about some graphic, explicit, or otherwise disturbing content. So if you prefer not to listen to that, no hard feelings there. Historically, many readers, particularly women, femme-identifying folk, or other non-men, have had an uncomfortable relationship with Gothic literature because of the tradition's often violent treatment of women. When you think about representations of women in Gothic literature, what characters and texts come to mind? What qualities do those characters have? How do those characters move through their respective texts? Are they static characters more similar to an archetype, or are they more of a dynamic character?

FRANKIE: Especially with regard to *Mexican Gothic*, the very first thing that came to mind was *Jane Eyre* and sort of this pervasive, spooky environment. The relationship between the environment and the inner-life of *Jane Eyre* in that novel is definitely one that is important to the Gothic tradition. And the other one that came to mind was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and particularly the treatment of Sybil Vane. She is this sort of beautiful icon of feminine beauty, and she is an incredibly static character. She is the focal point of all this longing, but she barely has any presence of her own, even though she is centrally involved. And, of course, thematically, there is some overlap with what's going on plot-wise in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and what happens in the action of the novel here, so I think that that's a fairly self-conscious engagement on the part of the author.

VERONICA: For me there are two texts that I think about, but I don't think that they are sort of aligned with Gothic literature formally, but I—after reading *Mexican Gothic*, especially, I was like, “Of course, these are related books.” And so I'm thinking about this one book by Thulani Davis, called *The Maker of Saints*. It's less Gothic horror and more investigative. Within the text, the characters are exploring similar themes around medicine, around race, in particular. And I think the characters—both the living ones and the ones who have died as a part of domestic violence—I think that some people can read them as static characters. But I think that in the course of the investigation, things become revealed about why we sort of conceptualize these characters. And I want to say “characters,” but these are archetypes that are attached to the historical time period that this book is being written in, right? And

so, *The Maker of Saints* is related to a real life story of a Black woman artist (I believe who was in Harlem) who gets murdered. And the idea is that her romantic partner is the one who murders her. and her best friend is basically like, “I’m about to find all the evidence possible to make sure you are guilty of this crime.” And so the whole book is sort of exploring this artist’s life, her romantic relationships, and her friend’s sort of investigation into it. And so I conceptualize *The Maker of Saints* as related to the sort of Gothic literary tradition. And then the other one that I’m thinking about is Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*. It’s also [laughs] an investigative text. It doesn’t sort of do a lot of gender work (or at least it doesn’t seem like it is), but it’s a really interesting text that I think might be good to explore as using race, gender, class as sort of entrances into sort of investigative or horror, right?

NARIM: So based on my very limited experience with the genre, I think it’s a genre of tropes. For me, I think the characters, many of them, are static, and I think the characters of the genre are used by Gothic authors to kind of explore larger forces that surround and manipulate characters. So they’re there to be used by the author so they have to be tropes. And I think some of the horror that readers feel from reading that genre is, you know, looking at characters and seeing such static, flat, one-dimensional characters. It’s kind of unsettling to see characters like that. Well, for me, at least, because all of the characters that I’ve read are intentionally fleshed out. They’re made to be very complex—you know, what is it—to elicit questions from readers, and so on. For the Gothic genre, I think that’s not the major preoccupation.

ALEX: I think something that’s interesting about all three of your comments is that you’re kind of picking up on Gothic elements that exist even in texts that we might not name as Gothic texts. So, for example, Veronica is pointing to Gothic elements in something like detective fiction; Frankie is looking at Gothic elements in Victorian-era texts, such as those from Oscar Wilde. And I agree, kind of, with what you’re saying, Narim, about how are more contemporary authors going to maybe move away or nuance those historically static tropes. What does the future of the Gothic look like once those tropes become stale in different traditions?

[spooky transition sound]

ALEX: Well, I think for the folks at home, it might be helpful to kind of unpack what we mean by “the Female Gothic” and potential “Gothic feminisms.” So just as a little bit of literary history: The term “Female Gothic” was coined by Ellen Moers, who’s a British scholar, in 1974 to describe Gothic literature written by and/or for women. And, in part, Moers argued that Gothic literature written by or for women

functions as a kind of message in a bottle, particularly for women readers. And what I mean by that is that this tradition represents women's interests and communicates concerns, anxieties, and fears that are specific to non-men. So since 1974, scholars of Gothic literature have become increasingly interested in what we might refer to as subversive Gothics, such as African American Gothic or Queer Gothic, and readers are also increasingly interested in the Gothic's potentially subversive technologies. So how do you all see what we might refer to as the Female Gothic intersecting or otherwise engaging with Moreno-Garcia's vision of a Mexican Gothic? What kinds of literary—but we can also broaden it to talk about what kinds of political—potential might that kind of engagement or intersection have to offer?

FRANKIE: For me the the main way that I see Moreno-Garcia's text as a whole and her vision of the Mexican Gothic intersecting with the more—I don't want to say “established” but a little bit established—tropes and norms of the Female Gothic is just the pervasive, the patriarchal nature of the sort of danger at hand in this text, both before it's recognized as a supernatural horror and after. Noemí is fundamentally in this position where she's sort of being halfway encouraged, halfway discouraged from marrying. And she goes into this spooky house where [laughs] her cousin has been trapped, essentially, in this marriage or is now [laughs] feeling sequestered, cloistered off, and all of this sort of fear in the novel comes from this subjugated position of being female. And it doesn't matter that Noemí is wealthy; it doesn't matter that any of this background is happening here. She is still equally subject to this, and especially toward the end, when so much of the fear comes from this threat of sexual violence, like, it's a fundamentally female subject-positioned book in those moments. And I think, you know, my reading is that Moreno-Garcia is pulling out this sort of particular relationship between these Mexican women and these English men in the book and really exploring the multiple axes of relationship going on here. And one of those is fundamentally that they are women—that they are in this situation—but also some of the interesting help comes from female sources. Particularly, I forget how she's referred to, but—

VERONICA: The curandera?

FRANKIE: Yes, the curandera. And that sort of, like, engagement, with “alternative” medicine, as we might call it, as sort of this juxtaposition between, you know, this more...It's both Mexican in its sort of roots in culture, but it's also, importantly, a woman who gives these cures.

VERONICA: Yeah, I like the point that you made about Marta Duval, who's a curandera. I think that that relationship to a particularly Mexican medicinal healer

within the community is really interesting and important for this sort of conversation that they're having around medicine and science. But I also think that, for me, what I see as Moreno-Garcia's particularly Mexican Gothic is sort of pointing to the colonial presence within Mexico, right? Particularly thinking about the house and even sort of the way the house is brought to El Triunfo—that it's built using Mexican labor and that they use earth for the cemetery and for the—I think for the foundation of the house that is brought from England. The literal foundation of the house is the presence of colonialism or settler colonialism in particular. We might not necessarily attach this sort of colonial history, racist history, to, sort of, horror, right? But I think in this novel in particular, it can be conceptualized as a particular function of how the Gothic sort of is situated within Mexico or within the the place that this novel takes place, which Moreno-Garcia talks about towards the end in her appendix items.

NARIM: I think Moreno-Garcia grafted onto Female Gothic form stories about colonization, specifically Mexico's colonization by the British. And I think it's interesting how I think at the center of the Female Gothic is women's fears—like you said, Alex—about sexuality, specifically about getting violated (which means getting impregnated). And that's, like, a very primal fear, I feel like. But then in *Mexican Gothic*, Moreno-Garcia shows that it could be related to other fears. Because getting impregnated by a colonizer, that means something more than just your body getting violated. It's definitely related to society in a way that's just not a woman's body being violated by one man. So I think *Mexican Gothic* makes readers see that by bringing together those two elements.

VERONICA: I want to make a point about what Narim is saying about violence against women as sort of a particular trope in Gothic feminism. And I'm thinking about my point about the land—we often feminize land, right? That is, “Mother Earth,” right? And I think of this house and even the invasion of these mushrooms [laughs] as also sort of a violence, a feminized violence, right? It's just something to ruminate on. So this is at the end—I think it's on page 314, and Moreno-Garcia is talking about the town that El Triunfo is based on, Real del Monte. And she says, “My novel *Mexican Gothic* takes place in a chilly, fog-shrouded town on the top of a mountain, a town with a deep British influence. For some people, such a locale would seem incompatible with their idea of Mexico. But *Mexican Gothic* is inspired by a real town complete with an English cemetery.” And she, you know, furthermore, starts talking about sort of mining and cheap labor. And I'm intrigued by the place that it's happening at, right? I think one of the—something else she said in the book is that sort of Gothic horror is always sort of situated around the home. She talks about domestic noir, which I thought was really interesting. And that I, like, when I

first read, you know, the first couple of pages I was like, “Oh, it's about to be about some gender stuff,” like, “we're about to get into it.” But I think that sort of having—maybe not—but from my perspective, as someone who's not familiar with the genre, having gone into the novel without any sort of preconceived notions, and then to get a lot of the sort of background about the Gothic, really sort of helped me understand what was happening in the text, right? Why it's sort of situated in the domestic sphere. Because that's sort of the space in which women and femmes are expected to be situated, right? And we can even sort of see that in the various ways that the Doyle family speaks to Noemí. [laughs] And even sort of conceptualizing Catalina, right? As like, you know, women belong here and, “You have a lot of opinions, don't you?” [laughs] Right? And so I thought the sort of understanding of the Gothic and Gothic feminisms as particularly situated within the home, was a really important point to have in trying to understand the overall novel.

FRANKIE: Yeah, just to sort of add on to that: We actually have textually explained that because of the whole fungi situation, Doyles literally cannot leave the domestic space. And we see the bits and pieces of Florence Doyle who is sort of our interesting foil for Noemí, the woman who accepts her place, who tried to leave and could not leave because of the whole supernatural mushroom situation. In the domestic noir, there's already this sort of like claustrophobia of the home where you can't [leave]—you're entrapped—but for the Doyles, it's literal. And that makes the escape, the breaking through from the domestic space at the end, like, much more dramatic. Because it's not just the trope that they have to stay in the house, that all of the action of the novel has to stay in the house, we have this sort of more powerful grounding [laughs] situation for them that keeps them literally tethered to this very creepy domestic space. And I think that, it's interesting to me, the way that the men are also trapped in the domestic space, and they adapt in an interesting way—alternately in a violent way and in a...less violent way? I don't know. I don't know where I come down yet. I'm still ruminating on how I read the men in this novel to be completely honest. But just that sort of force keeping them all tied in the house is very literalized in the text.

NARIM: Frankie, you brought up a really interesting point about Florence: that she tried to go away, but she didn't succeed. She realized she's tied, physically. And I think that detail helped me, at least, to accept Florence's flatness [laughs] because she is so, so strict. And she keeps repeating that Doyle is a god and things are, you know, going to run as Doyle wants them to run. There's no choice. But she wasn't always like this; she did try to escape. It was because she failed to escape that she became like this. And I, reading that part, when that information came up, I was

thinking also of Noemí's mom, Noemí's absent mother—practically absent. And that was a very interesting detail, too, because Noemí, when she talks about her family, she mentions her father, of course, and she also mentions her brother multiple times. But her mother—she doesn't really think about her mother at all. So I was thinking, maybe Noemí's mother also tried to go away, but she got caught, and she's now flat like Florence, and she has basically no personality. So Noemí doesn't think she deserves her time or something like that. Maybe that could explain why Noemí's mother is so conspicuously absent from the narrative.

VERONICA: I read Florence differently. I read her as an accomplice, right? That she left the house to do the Doyle duty, which was to go and get this husband and bring him back and create generations, right? Like, to continue the sort of Doyle legacy. That she wasn't actually trying to leave—at least that was my sort of understanding of her. Especially because her character was sort of described as, like, almost an enforcer, right? In the way she sort of interacted with Noemí and Catalina. And even at the end when she's, like, holding this gun on her, right? [laughs] Maybe my reading of her is unapologetic in that she becomes an agent of patriarchy within the novel and of, I think, colonialism, too. And so I don't know if I have any give for her as a character. [laughs] The other thing is one of the reasons why I think maybe Noemí's mother is not included is because she's actually a really strong personality. In some of the descriptions of her mother, she's very vocal, right, and she almost uses the father, I think, in the conversation where Noemí is trying to go to school, and her mom is like, “You need to figure it out.” Like, “You are taking too long. You need to get married,” and her dad is saying, “Hey, we're not gonna continue this education for too much longer, like, you're too indecisive.” [laughs] And her mom was like, “I'm gonna let your dad decide.” Not because she didn't already have a decision, but she knew that she would roadblock her child in that way. And maybe this doesn't mean that she's, like, on the side of feminism, but I think that her mother is very strong-willed, and maybe that's why she's sort of not included in this book, right? Because she's not a character that could be sort of subservient or nicely confined to the domestic sphere. But we don't see her enough for us to, like, necessarily make that judgment call. But the little pieces that I see of her, the way that Noemí describes her, makes me think that she's a very strong-willed woman, and there was no way she was gonna be locked in this house. [laughs] You know what I mean?

NARIM: Yeah, Veronica, I think Noemí thinks that her mother is basically like her father. I mean, they want the same: They want her married. But the difference is that her mom may be vocal, but she doesn't really have power. So it's, like, kind of a waste of time [laughs] in Noemí's point of view to think of any opinion that's not her

father. Because it's gonna be her father who's going to decide what she's going to be able to do.

FRANKIE: Also, Veronica, what you said about Florence seems to me dead on. I didn't mean to imply that Florence, you know, wants to escape, for, [laughs] you know, good feminist reasons, just that that sort of bit. And also, of course, the piece of the mystery involving Ruth also gestures at the same point. I think you're absolutely right that Florence becomes an instrument of both the patriarchy and colonialism, especially in the climactic action of the novel, I just to say that. And I also—I found not just Noemí's mother, but there's some snippets about Catalina's mother, who married a stepfather who constantly made Catalina cry. And, therefore, Catalina is displaced from her family, her immediate family, and sort of into Noemí's family. That's why we've got layer upon layer of mother issues, including the, like, metaphorical mother who is the hive mind type thing behind the gloom. And if we've got time to go there, I would love to talk about the moment where Noemí comes across the graveyard with the statue of Agnes Doyle.

ALEX: I mean, there are a lot of Gothic scholars who have said that the Female Gothic has to always inherently be about the Mother.

FRANKIE: So this is just after Noemí gives Catalina the tincture that she believes has harmed Catalina because she is listening, to an extent, to our spooky doctor man, Dr. Cummins. But, so after that happens, she leaves the house to go to the cemetery. And we have on page 150, "Noemí walked among tombstones and moss and wild flowers, her chin lowered, tucked close against the folds of the sweater." That sweater being Francis's sweater. "She saw the mausoleum and in front of it the stone statue of Agnes. Noemí peered up at the statue's face and her hands, which were weathered with speckles of black fungus. She had wondered if there was a plaque or marker with the name of the deceased on it, and she saw that there was. Noemí had overlooked it during her previous visit, although she could hardly be blamed for missing it. The plaque was hidden by an overgrown clump of weeds. She plucked the weeds away and brushed the dirt off the bronze plaque. *Agnes Doyle. Mother. 1885.* That was all Howard Doyle had chosen to leave behind to commemorate the passing of his first wife. He had said he had not known Agnes well, that she'd died within a year of their marriage, yet it seemed odd to have a statue carved of her and then not even compose a proper line or two about her passing. It was the nature of the one word etched beneath the woman's name that bothered her too. *Mother.* But as far as Noemí knew, Howard Doyle's children were born of his second marriage. Why choose "mother" as the epithet, then? Perhaps she was making too much of this. Inside the mausoleum, where the woman's body

rested, there might be a proper plaque and a proper message about the deceased. Yet it was unsettling in a way she could not define, like noticing a crooked seam or a tiny stain on a pristine tablecloth.” There is a *lot* there to unpack, both, you know, just the evocative imagery in that passage—the role of sort of plants, overgrown foliage, and the fungus on the statue as well (being sort of a nod to what we're gonna end up seeing later). But as we get at the end of the novel, we know why “Mother” is the epithet, and it's because Agnes Doyle was buried alive and used as the starter, essentially, of the gloom. So she's the mother, in a sense, of all of this current Doyle situation. There's just a lot there. Like, that central maternal figure is also the source of the horror.

VERONICA: And it's a maternal figure that is *forced*, right? She doesn't actually reproduce children, but this is forced by Howard Doyle as the essence of the gloom—or the way that the gloom sort of passes is through Howard Doyle. And so I think it's really interesting this, like, very interesting conversation that Moreno-Garcia is having about potentially forced reproduction—*without* the presence of children, especially. I just think it's really interesting, particularly in light of Gothic feminisms as being situated in the domestic sphere as sort of colonialism. The fact that colonialism often disrupted reproduction, often disrupted family structures. And what does it mean that this woman is still conceived of as the mother without having necessarily reproduced children? Well, she kinda has, but it's been a forced reproduction.

FRANKIE: Yeah, for sure, and in the intensely terrifying, I think probably the most terrifying passage of the book, where Noemí sees Agnes's body. She describes her as a monstrous virgin in a cathedral of mycelium. So that idea of both this sort of violation of motherhood with the intact sort of innocence thing going on, too? There's a lot there.

ALEX: Yeah, the idea of monstrous virginity, I think, is so interesting in this novel. That's a phrase that I—like, it's like a little worm in my brain; it stays in there. Because normally, and especially in contemporary Gothic horror, virginity, purity is the thing that is guaranteed to save female or, like, femme characters. And yet I think Moreno-Garcia is *definitely* playing with that trope.

[spooky transition sound]

ALEX: I'm wondering if we can spend a few moments thinking about Noemí because it is all but impossible to discuss *Mexican Gothic* without discussing Noemí Taboada. So throughout the novel, Noemí demonstrates interests in many

traditionally feminine practices and ideas, and many of those are historically accurate to midcentury, early 1950's Mexico. So, for example, she enjoys dating attractive men, like the all-but-forgotten Hugo Duarte, she's interested in contemporary fashion and makeup, and she's incredibly socially competent. She enjoys having that socialite lifestyle. However, Noemí might complicate readers' potential expectations for a kind of hyper-feminine Gothic protagonist. She's an avid reader across a variety of disciplines. She, for instance, has a bachelor's degree in anthropology, and she wants to get her masters degree in anthropology as well. She's typically very confident in conversations with authority figures, most of which in the novel are men. So, I'm just curious: What do you think of Noemí? Do you think she effectively counters readers' expectations for a helpless Gothic heroine? Are you charmed or annoyed by her? What are your impressions of her?

VERONICA: [laughs] You know, I initially really liked her. I was like, "Oh, she a badass smoking a cigarette." [laughs] And as soon as she sort of goes to this house, the house's influence on her is really striking, right? That she's this, you know, social butterfly, very much in command of herself, and she's being forced to fall in line with sort of these gendered expectations. And she's struggling with it—which I like, right? I like that she's not like [in silly voice], "Okay, I'll just go with the program!" [in normal voice] She's like, "No, actually—no. That doesn't make sense, I don't ascribe to those values. I don't think I have to be forced to..." What is it she says? She says to Francis, and I think they're talking about Ruth, and she says, "She wanted to run away with—" This on page 136. "She wanted to run away with her lover. Instead, she ended up shooting her whole family. I don't understand why she'd do what she did. Why didn't she run away from High Place? Surely she could have simply left.' Francis says, 'You can't leave High Place.' 'But you can. She was an adult woman.' 'You're a woman. Can you do anything you want? Even if it upsets your family?' 'Technically, I can, even if I wouldn't every single time,' Noemí said, though she immediately remembered her father's issues with scandals and the fear of the society pages. Would she ever risk an outright rebellion against her family?" And I think that she's sort of being forced, because of the circumstances of this house and the gloom and all these forces, to sort of reconceptualize her place in the world as a woman, as a daughter, as someone who's wealthy, which I think is really interesting for her.

FRANKIE: My largest issue with Noemí was that it seemed as though she was not making logical connections. Like, you know, in a horror movie when they decide to split up, and you're like, "Don't you guys have any sense of genre awareness? Don't you know what kind of movie you're in? Don't split up." She did have a tendency to do the exact wrong thing, which I lost patience with a bit. I actually think that

Noemí is an interesting protagonist who gets some interesting subversions going on. But also: She's having spooky dreams and then starts reading Jung but doesn't...leave the house? And I get that she doesn't want to leave Catalina. But at a certain point, man, why doesn't self-preservation kick in for her? And maybe that's in her favor. Maybe that's something that will serve her well in some context. But I was sort of yelling at the book a little bit, like, "Girl—get out of there!" Which I suppose is a genre convention, to have your protagonist make stupid choices sometimes. But one of the things and I—this relates to reactions to the ending a little bit—Noemí is subversive without ever subverting anything. She doesn't subvert anyone's expectations in the novel. She has this playful sort of "how far can I bend the rules" mentality. She knows she can kiss the boys, but she can't have sex with them. She knows exactly what she can do to push the envelope just enough without ever actually risking any damage to herself. And that is evident in her; that's self-conscious thinking on her part. And that, to me, is one of the [laughs] available reparative readings of the ending with her apparent romance with Francis, is that, fundamentally, she's not somebody who's going to subvert expectations, so why should her ending subvert the the norm of a Gothic—even a Female Gothic—novel. One of the famous—I don't know who coined this—but there's an idea in, like, sort of subversive proto-feminist literature that you can put it through the "marriage or death test," which is: If, at the end of the novel, the heroine is married, then she is subversive in a way we, as a reader, are supposed to support. If the protagonist ends the book dead, it is supposed to be a warning to the audience that if you behave this way. So famously, the other famous example that is usually referenced in this kind of a conversation, is *Jane Eyre*. A lot of people find the fact that (spoilers for *Jane Eyre*, I guess?) that Jane ends up marrying Rochester an unsatisfying ending. But if she ended unmarried, that would actually signal that we're not supposed to replicate her life choices. We're not supposed to be subversive or intellectually curious in the way that she is. I think Noemí is just the right amount of subversive not to ruffle any feathers, and I think that that is a trait she has cultivated about herself.

ALEX: That's an interesting point. I mean, I totally sympathize with what you're saying, Frankie, about Noemí making some frustrating choices, especially with getting Catalina out of that house. Like, at a certain point, you're like, "Noemí, let's pack it up. Let's steal the car keys. Let's get Catalina out of that house in the middle of the night. Like, do whatever you have to do to just remove yourselves from the situation. Then we have to reconsider the question: How many choices that Noemí makes in High Place is she actually making with a clear head? And how much of that complacency is being kind of forced upon her because of the gloom? You know what I mean? And so maybe if we were gonna give a sympathetic read of maybe

someone like Florence, too, if we're going to doubt her complicity. And I love what you said, Veronica, about the "Doyle duty" of tricking people, like a spider, to come back to the center of the web that's High Place. So I wonder if maybe that's the way we can give a more generous reading of Noemí's choices once she's in High Place?

FRANKIE: Yeah, and the destruction of choice is such a fascinating thematic going on. And that's another of my ways to read the ending. But we know that some of her choices are not her own. What's scary about the removal of choice in the gloom isn't just that the characters don't have a choice, and we see that happening, but that they feel that they *have made* the choice. Like, it, phenomenally, is "agential," would be the way to put that. And the feeling of these characters is that they are freely choosing, and I think we see Francis wrestle with that at the end, too, and sort of throughout. You see Francis—as soon as they're away from the house—that's when he gives Noemí his sweater. That's when they have this sort of behavior going on. Which—is that the gloom, is it not the gloom? That's a fascinating question. Is the gloom fundamentally tied to High Place, and how much of a perimeter? But we know that there's some sort of prickly relationship to agency going on, which does affect how you read every single character's choices and actions. And my reading of the ending is that, in fact, the gloom is not gone.

VERONICA: I don't think it's gone either. I would not be surprised if there was a sequel in the works. We've talked about Florence, we've talked about Noemí. But I would love to talk about Catalina as—other than Florence—the most active female or feminized captive and how, in some ways, it feels like she has been allowed as a character to subvert the power of the gloom. By getting this medicine, the tincture, from Marta Duval, from sending this letter to her cousin to solicit help, from having these very sporadic lucid moments where she could express to Noemí what's happening, you know. That sort of slip of the diary entry that she passes to her. And she's doing this all under the power of the gloom, right, and particularly of Doyle. And I wondered, too, how much this house that has this Agnes as the mother, right? How much to—thinking about these ghosts that sort of appear to Noemí—are they aiding in, hopefully, the destruction of or the freedom of these female characters? Right? Even in Florence, she dies so she's not under the purview of the Doyle men anymore. But I just think it's really interesting to think about Catalina being under the forces of the gloom and being still able to have some agency in trying to get out, even though she can't, necessarily, physically leave her room and go out of the house. And even at the end, I love the scene where she just, like, [laughs] starts stabbing Howard Doyle. That was just—I was just like, "Absolutely, thank you. A round of applause." Because I really wanted him to just, like, get his due [laughs] diligence, and she comes through, really. But on the side of the gloom, I don't think

it's over. And I think Francis is concerned; he's worried that this still feels a little sketchy. "I still feel some things," right? And I think that, again, Noemí is not listening, right? He's said these things to her like, "I think I should go back. I should—I think I should just, like, end the entire thing." And she's like [in silly voice], "Oh, it's fine! We'll, you know, burn it down later; we can go back later." [in normal voice] But I don't think it's that easy.

NARIM: I think it's interesting, the idea that's Catalina is under the influence of the fungi, the fungus, because I've been thinking about how it's *Catalina* who brings Noemí to the house. She specifically mentions Noemí in her letter. And it wasn't really clear to me why she would [laughs] pinpoint Noemí because they didn't really seem to have a strong relationship. Noemí, I feel like, constantly looks down on Catalina as this very silly girl who, you know, needs help now because she makes a bad choice regarding a husband. But I think it's very—it's horrific when you think about how it might have been the house calling to Noemí through Catalina. And it might have been Doyle somehow pulling this girl who, he thinks, would be a good addition to his collection. I was just so frustrated about Noemí and Catalina's relationship because it doesn't really seem to her that Catalina is *not* this fairytale-obsessed woman who used to be helpless. She's not that person. But even until the very end, Noemí is thinking of Catalina in those terms, thinking that, "Oh, Catalina seems fine now. She's back to *my* Catalina." I thought that was incredibly frustrating. [laughs] I think that part was more frustrating to me than Noemí's decision to kiss Francis for love—whatever that means. [laughs]

ALEX: Yeah, it is interesting that all of the ending, a reader could argue, is geared towards the romantic bow that's put upon Noemí and Francis's relationship, even if perhaps the edges of that bow are a little frayed and actively fraying.

VERONICA: And, in fact, it would be very much in line with what Howard Doyle wanted in the first place, if Noemí and Francis end up together, right? And so, again, you have the continuation of the gloom and High Place. Especially if his sort of hypothesis about Noemí's match with the gloom and with the house actually comes to fruition, right? If she's able to produce—if they, you know, if the whole story goes how it's supposed to or expected to—which is, they fall in love, they, you know, marry, have children, da, da da—I don't know if that's actually gonna happen. But there's so many options that could occur—that, I think, is really interesting. That it still falls in line with the expectation of Doyle and potentially the continuation of the gloom. Because of this decision that she's about to make about love potentially, right? You're about to create a new generation of the gloom.

ALEX: What is that weird joke that Noemí makes when she finds out she's gonna be in this forced wedding ceremony with Francis? She makes some bizarre attempt at humor, where she says something like, “What, am I supposed to be married in the Church of the Holy Incestuous Mushroom?” And it's kind of like, “Well, Noemí, the way things are going at the end, you *still* might be married in the Church of the Holy Incestuous Mushroom.”

FRANKIE: I went back and looked, and the last mention of Catalina is on [page] 296: “Catalina took one last look at the young man and closed the door behind her.” And I like to think that that means that Catalina said, “Peace out, I am done with this. I am getting out of here.” I also think, you know, the idea that you brought up, Narim, that maybe Catalina *lured* Noemí to the house is interesting. Especially with that explanation that Howard, I believe, gives that Noemí just, like, is more susceptible—she's a more perfect match—with the mycelium network than Catalina. I'm not sure how Catalina would know that, but it seems like Catalina does have this ability to be lucid at times and that—whether that's just because she has the tincture from Marta, and that allows her to have some agency there. But, importantly, the letter gets sent as Catalina's fail safe. And so, I think it's interesting to consider how many layers of manipulation from the gloom could be at play here, because it's *very much* open to the reader's interpretation whether any of the choices made in this novel are freely done.

[spooky transition music]

ALEX: If we believe that Noemí and Francis do, in fact, end up together at the end of the novel, one: I would just love to know if their relationship makes sense to you as a reader, or as a scholar, or both. But then, additionally, as a scholar and in this conversation about the Female Gothic, what are some of the perhaps implications of that romantic relationship? Veronica, you mentioned that it is kind of an extension of what Howard Doyle wanted all along; they will potentially end up together. But does Francis and Noemí's perhaps romantic relationship tarnish any of her previous characterization as a kind of strong, intelligent young woman? Or is that thinking in itself antiquated? And do you think that Noemí will actually pursue her master's degree in anthropology?

FRANKIE: The most interesting thing to me, both as a reader and from a scholarly sort of perspective, is that Noemí spends the early portions of the novel continuously reminding us that Francis is ugly. So there is kind of a nice reading of their relationship about her going from these sorts of surface-level, I will let it get this far and no further, sort of situations (like with Hugo Duarte) to sort of a more,

you know—it's probably a trauma bond. Like, I think we could say that. I don't think there was no chemistry between them...I did hope that this would not be the ending. And I was disappointed. But I do think that there are some interesting readings of the ending, both that are this is genuinely a romantic, you know, “for love” situation and that this is still the gloom. I know which of those I favor.

NARIM: I think, on a second reading, I think it's intentionally written in a way that's not clear. Because it says “for love,” and it could be Noemí kissing Francis because she wants love. She doesn't really feel it right now, but love is what she wants, and she thinks maybe a kiss could be the start of love. And I thought that because there is this weird moment in the novel earlier, way back, when Francis looks at the house and says, “This place isn't made for love,” and Noemí says, “Any place is made for love.” And I thought that was quite uncharacteristic of her. But if you go back to that moment and link it to this, maybe love is what she wants, really. [laughs] Could be—who knows?

VERONICA: From the beginning, when Francis was introduced, I was like, “I hope she does not end up with Francis.” [laughs] I was like, “I hope this does not end up going this way.” And for me, it's purely because his family is just—it's wild, right? Like, I cannot conceive of advising anyone to join that family or a member of that family. And I say this because I actually really like Francis as a character. I actually think that he *does* try to help. He does, he seems like—of all of his family members (other than Ruth) that we've been sort of introduced to—he's the one that actually wants to leave and can sort of see the issues and troubles with High Place, with the men in his family, with the gloom. But, like, he's trapped, right? And I think he wants to make sure other people are not trapped. And so, even though I think he knew he had a consequence, even though I think he knew the gloom's sort of power, he was sort of like, “I'm gonna help you subvert it in the ways that I can't.” But I just don't want her to end—I don't want Noemí to end up with anybody. I want her to be just, like, this single girlboss who just, like, exists to, like, you know, date and romance and be the, you know, socialite who's not necessarily tied down, right? I think, for me, it would be a really cool opportunity for her to sort of subvert all of these ways that patriarchy is showing up in her life, from, like, her father to the Doyles to this expectation that she falls in love and does the very sort of normalized thing within the domestic sphere, right? And I don't want that future for her. And on the point of whether or not she's gonna get a graduate degree in anthropology, I'm not sure. I think that's one of the things that I'm most unsure about. And it's partly because I think of the conversations around eugenics and around sort of her understandings of, like, environment. I wouldn't be surprised if she was like, “I'm gonna do environmental justice.” [laughs] Like, I wouldn't be surprised if that was not

something that she chose to do, right? Like her and Francis together could be—he could be, like, you know, drawing topography and the environment, and she could be researching it, right? I could see her doing something related to, like, science and medicine and the environment maybe, potentially, from some of the clues throughout the text.

FRANKIE: I do think there's something kind of sweet about their bond. Like, even though it's creepy when you, like, know what happened—there's something sweet about their bonding moment over his mushroom spore prints. He's clearly a huge nerd, and I do think that's nice. But genuinely I just think that I would have liked more ambiguity about how Noemí was thinking about it, maybe. Or, you know, maybe I just feel like we needed, like, one more scene to give us some context about what would happen. And, especially—I mean, I don't want things wrapped up in a neat little bow at the end of any novel—but especially not one with as many open questions. But, like, particularly to vibe with something Veronica said, this man was raised by a straight-up eugenicist. And he doesn't straight up say super horrible things to Noemí, but he comes close. And the idea that she has zero reservations about that is very troubling. Especially given her reaction when she first has a conversation with Howard, and you see her in that moment go, like, “Okay, it's not gonna ignore this and try—hopefully it goes away quickly.” But, yeah, I think they've got a lot of unpacking to do.

ALEX: Yes, let's hope that, as soon as they get to Mexico City, they are enrolled in couple's therapy ASAP. That's, like, item number one on the new couple agenda. [laughs]

VERONICA: Or maybe they're just best friends in love, you know? Like, they can also just be best friends.

ALEX: That's true.

VERONICA: I think that that is also a great ending. [laughs]

[spooky transition music]

ALEX: Alright, that concludes our conversation for today. Thank you so much to our wonderful guests, Frankie, Narim, and Veronica. It's been a pleasure discussing this topic and this novel with all three of you, and I am more than certain our listeners will be thrilled with what you've had to say. For the folks at home, if you'd like more information about the Purdue English Big Read, please visit the Big Read section of

the Purdue English Department's website, where we have a wonderful archive of materials about previous Big Read selections, including a schedule for this fall's remaining Big Read events. Thanks for joining us. This is Alex Anderson with the Big Read podcast.

[spooky exit music]