

## Open Section

# Literary Journeys and Screen Adventures: A Conversation

Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, Jessica Hille, Alissa Lienhard, Jia Shen Lim, and Marielle Tomasic

The editorial board of *In Progress* did not meet during the summer break, so there is a lot of catching up to do. We quickly realized that apart from vacations and term papers, we all had one thing in common: we consumed various forms of textual media. Additionally, we also had something to produce for this issue's open section. Thus, we thought, why not combine these two things and catch up in a written dialog? So, here we are. Welcome to our conversation about our favorite summer reads, shows, and films! Let's begin by sharing our experiences, criteria, and tips when deciding about what to read or watch next.

*Marielle:* Okay, where do I even start? My TBR (To Be Read list) is ever-growing, and most of the inspiration for it I probably get from BookTube (which is also great to listen to while doing something else), Goodreads, or places like lithub.com. However, all of those sources tend to focus more on newer releases instead of backlists (that is, books that have been published a while ago), so I do well to remember to go back to authors whose work I have previously enjoyed. I used to be a mood reader, but found that for the past few months, creating a list of books that I would like to read (with a few spots open for mood-reading) worked pretty well. For these monthly lists, I tried to go for a mix between newer and older releases, fiction and non-fiction (specifically, memoirs and other forms of life-writing), maybe throw in a short-story collection as well. I find making a written-down list of what I want to focus on next helps me not get too distracted by everything else that is out there. How do you guys decide what you want to read or watch? And is anyone actively following publishers they like to find new reads? I feel like I should do that more, but somehow often forget.

*Alissa:* I also have a really long TBR list, mostly thanks to books being gifted to me for birthdays and Christmas, with the occasional Bookstagram book I bought on an impulse thrown into the mix. Right now, with the summer being taken up with my master's thesis, I rarely get to read in my free time. And if I do, it rarely is anything challenging and educational but more something fast, fluffy, and entertaining, because otherwise I will not finish it within a few days, and if I take longer than that, I will not finish it at all. There is an embarrassing pile of books on my bookshelf that are  $\frac{2}{3}$  read and then never touched again. So, right now, I decide what to read based on impulses and moods – just like Marielle used to do – and I love to start books only if I am sure I will get through



them in less than four days. I really hope I will get to do more organized and educational reading after the thesis, and maybe I might even get to all of those unfinished books that taunt me from the bookshelf.

*Marielle:* Ugh, the  $\frac{2}{3}$  read books is actually what made me start creating those monthly TBR-lists, so I feel you... And yes, I think a lot of us struggle with reading alongside working on bigger academic projects. And I, too, had a phase this summer where I desperately needed a lighter read for the very first time in my life – and you know what? I think that if one feels like one *has* to read something academic/educational that kind of misses the mark. Along those lines, something that I personally found myself struggling with this year was reading a lot of books that I felt like I might want to write my master's thesis about, only to then discover that they were not what I had hoped they would be, which led to a semi-reading slump. So, I feel like it can be quite tricky to find the very interesting, analysis-worthy stuff but also not have it feel like a never-ending quest. If anyone wants to share how they go about this, I would love to hear it!

*Jessica:* I find both of your ideas very insightful and might try some of these in the future. This year especially, I also really struggled with finishing the books I started, or even beginning to read them. Honestly, some books on my shelf are there because I would have liked to be someone who reads these kinds of books, but I just don't enjoy them at the end of the day. So, I definitely want to be honest with myself and more organized when planning my reading. This year, I mostly decided based on friends' recommendations, chose other works by authors I love, or bought what struck me as interesting in the bookstore. However, during the semester where we read lots of texts anyways, I prefer visual inputs. There, I choose shows for mainly the same reasons as with books, but I also rotate between my favorite shows and rewatch them because this gives me a strange feeling of comfort. I don't think I would ever do that with books, at least not with fiction.

*Jia Shen:* I resonate with Jessica's experience. I often start books with enthusiasm but tend to lose interest along the way. Fiction, in particular, just doesn't hold my interest like it used to. I'm more into movies and television series for my fictional fix. When it comes to reading, I gravitate toward scholarly materials – essays, reviews, exhibition catalogs. Not all of them are heavy reads so I don't wear myself out. There are also easy reads in the form of short articles or essays in books, magazines, and even online. There's something satisfying about reading a well-crafted analysis or an insightful critique. I think it's the aspect of discovering and understanding new ideas that appeals to me. Plus, there's the added bonus of staying informed and having my curiosity stimulated. Which makes me wonder, does anyone here find themselves gravitating towards non-fiction for leisure?

*Lukas:* Reading for pleasure was my aim for the summer holidays as well, especially because I started with my master's thesis afterward, too. What I usually do is to move as far away from North American Studies as possible by asking friends and relatives for their favorite light reads or authors. This usually results in a similar list or pile you all mentioned, but I think this is half the fun of summer reads!

*Eiman:* Unlike Lukas, this summer, I chose academic books, especially those that teach how to think and write academically. Of course, I didn't select these books randomly from any bookstore shelf; instead, I bought the three most recommended books by experts and professors I follow on Instagram. By doing so, I believe that I was spared from having to compile a list of books.

*Marielle:* Seeing “I have to read so much for uni so I struggle with reading for pleasure” as a theme here – has anyone tried audiobooks as an alternative? I could imagine them working quite well when you cannot handle staring at even more print but still want to be entertained.

*Eiman:* Well, I think we all agree that reading as an entertaining activity is associated with enjoyment and interaction. In my case, at least, audiobooks can’t provide the same kind of interaction or fulfill even half the pleasure that I experience when using all my senses to hold and engage with a printed book. Maybe somebody has a different point of view.

*Jia Shen:* In the past, I have tried getting into audiobooks but it is not my thing. However, I enjoy listening to podcasts when I am doing chores, cooking, and even when I shower. My podcast library includes a mix of educational shows like *e-flux* and *Talk Art*, comedy series like *The Useless Hotline* and the true crime podcast *Rotten Mango*.

*Alissa:* For me, audiobooks actually do help a bit. I like that I can listen to them while doing chores, going on walks, or commuting. I also like to listen to books that I am not really invested in to fall asleep in the form of a podcast that is called *The Sleepy Bookshelf*.

*Jessica:* I totally agree with Alissa! I love audiobooks for chores and also long walks, however, as they never get my full attention. I usually go for audio versions of books that I already know (*Harry Potter*, of course) or “easy reads” where I don’t have to grasp every single detail. Also (ignoring that our professors might read this as well), I sometimes listen to parts of novels we have to read for class when I run out of time, as I’m able to multitask that way.

*Lukas:* I do, too! When it all gets too much to read, I sometimes create audio files where I let some AI voice read out the PDF. You cannot annotate the text anymore, but if you just want to get an idea of the key concepts and overall content...

*Jessica:* So far so interesting, now let’s talk about the actual content we’ve consumed throughout the summer, based on our various reading approaches. I’m excited to hear what you’ve read and watched!

*Lukas:* I have two favorite summer reads by the same author. As I have mentioned, I sometimes read outside the North American sphere; hence, I read two books by the Swedish author Alex Schulman. His novel *The Survivors* is about a dysfunctional family that lives below the poverty line in Sweden. In a very engaging narration, Schulman discusses generational trauma, family and especially sibling relations, as well as poverty and class, and finishes the novel off with a shocking revelation. Despite the rather unpleasant topics, I found the reading particularly engaging because it is simultaneously narrated in two directions. One narrative strand moves from the protagonist’s childhood to the big reveal. The other strand consists of only one single day told in reverse.

*Eiman:* That sounds quite challenging, especially in contrast to our lighthearted audio books discourse. How did you come across this novel? Or, what made you go for Swedish literature in the first place? I find this very interesting, I don’t have any experience with Swedish books.

*Lukas:* I don't either (apart from the occasional Scandinavian thriller)! It was on a pile of books I 'borrowed' from my mother. She volunteers in a small library, and there she came across Schulman. Eventually, I picked books by a Swedish author because I went to Sweden this summer. Very creative, I know... The other book by Schulman I read is called *Burn All My Letters* and is something like an investigative biography of his own family trauma. Schulman tries to find out why his mother and her siblings always burst into conflicts with each other and eventually discovers that his grandparents, famous Swedish author Sven Stolpe and Karin Stolpe, are at the roots of the cause. He recreates his grandparents' relationship by going through their estate, visiting archives and libraries, and conducting interviews with the son of his grandfather's archrival. In doing so, he not only deals with his own family trauma but also brings patriarchal relationship norms and their dangers to the fore.

*Jia Shen:* Lukas, diving into Swedish literature sounds pretty cool. It's always interesting to see how a trip or new experience can nudge us toward different kinds of books. About a year ago, I bought the autobiographical novel *Returning to Reims* by French author Didier Eribon after it was recommended to me, and I finally was able to get around to reading it this summer. It is also the only summer read I managed to finish. The book is a blend of sociological analysis and personal memoir of Eribon, following the author's journey back to his hometown of Reims after three decades. Prompted by his father's death, Eribon confronts his working-class upbringing and the challenges he faced as a queer youth in that environment. The narrative further deals with family dynamics, memories, and the exploration of identity. He candidly unpacks his past, looks at how class, sexuality, and politics all intertwine, and then connects it all to who he has become today. On a similar note, I find that Eribon's 'return' to Reims is akin to the 'notes' in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. As someone who prefers non-fiction for leisure reading, I think the book offers a thoughtful and engaging look into how our origins shape us, and how we can understand and reconcile with them over time.

*Alissa:* After these books introduced by Lukas and Jia Shen, which all sound profound and serious, like Literature (with a capital L), I am almost a bit embarrassed to introduce my summer read...

*Lukas:* Don't be! We all have guilty pleasure reads, and most books are beautiful, right?!

*Jia Shen:* Exactly! Every book has its charm. So, Alissa, don't hold back.

*Alissa:* Well, as I said, with the master's thesis stressing me out, I really like something fluffy and entertaining to read, and as someone who grew up watching romantic comedies with my mother and friends, I do love books that read like a romcom as well. So, one of the few books I bought on a whim and then actually managed to read within a few days (well, actually it was one sitting in a day) was *Love, Theoretically* by Ali Hazelwood.

*Jessica:* So, is the book intensely romantic, as the title suggests?

*Alissa:* It really is as cheesy as the title sounds, but I would also say it brushes on some serious topics that interest me as well. The author herself is a professor for neuroscience and the protagonists in all her novels are women in STEM as well. The novel explores what it means to be a woman in this male-dominated field, and also more generally addresses the power imbalances

and sometimes ugly competition for jobs in the field. I think some of this applies to academia in general as well, and as someone who once studied biology, I also find the science aspects in the novel interesting. And I also love that there is asexual representation in the novel – a topic I am interested in especially since I wrote a term paper about *Loveless* by Alice Oseman that focused on asexuality in the context of metafiction, autofiction, and queer joy. But first and foremost, *Love, Theoretically* really is a cheesy romcom that makes you smile and maybe swoon a bit.

*Jessica:* This book is going to land on my list for sure! No book shaming at all. I love a good cheesy, romantic novel and also television series for times where uni reads consume a lot of time and brain work. That reminds me of a highly cheesy (and slightly problematic) show I watched during the summer. Fittingly (or not), it's called *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, and most of the time, it gave me as much of an ick as you would expect from the title. However, I found myself binging it within a couple of days and I asked myself all the time: Why does this teen show about the literal introduction of a young girl to society (with a horrible focus on her looks) get me so hooked?!

*Marielle:* I think reading more fluffy and lighthearted books is totally valid and cool! Like Jessica mentioned before, I also tend to go for easier reads as audiobooks, so my favorite read of the summer is more academic. I feel like it is responding to a few of the issues we have been discussing so far when reading outside of our academic projects. To be more specific: I started reading this already in the spring, and it took me well into the summer to finish it. Now you may be thinking that this could not possibly be a good sign for the book, but hear me out: it's a short story collection, which I think we have not yet talked about here as a wonderful genre – especially when wanting to read something in a shorter amount of time and/or with a more distracted mind and a decreased attention span. Chelsea Vowel's *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo* is, according to the publisher's description, a collection of "[p]owerful stories of 'Metis futurism' that envision a world without violence, capitalism, or colonization" (<https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/B/Buffalo-Is-the-New-Buffalo>). I was drawn to it because I am very interested in Indigenous storytelling and am trying to expand my personal internal catalog of ways in which this storytelling can take place.

*Lukas:* Oh yes, I have seen a few ads for the book! From what I've gathered, it reminded me a little bit of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's writings. She is a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writes a lot about First Nation and Indigenous epistemology etc. Maybe this could go onto your TBR pile as well if you haven't read it yet. How did you like the *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo*?

*Marielle:* I have read some of Simpson's work, but not all of it yet. I really want to get to *Noopiming*... But yes, this is exactly along the same lines and something that I have been increasingly interested in. With this specific collection, I was leaving my comfort zone a little since it is marketed as speculative fiction/science fiction, which I often like in terms of what it can do, but almost quite as often find myself not feeling very engaged by. Somehow, I want to like it, but then rarely end up doing it, if I am being honest with myself. I think going for short story collections in cases like these can be very fruitful, because it offers an array of narratives – I may not love all of them, but some may very well end up working for me. In the specific instance of *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo*, what I found immensely helpful as well were the short explorations that followed each short story. In these, Vowel explores the themes of the story, explains a few concepts, at times also links the stories to one another. Yes, this makes the collection more academic, but I found myself deeply engaged and curious to learn more. But, of course, you could also always skip these explorations

and only go for the short stories themselves. In any case, I ended up really liking the entire collection a lot, and feel like pointing out the short story genre is really fitting for our conversation, too!

*Alissa:* Marielle, that sounds amazing. I will definitely keep it in mind for the future when I have more headspace to engage with this kind of intense and complex writing! But I also want to circle back to Jessica. I also binge-watched the second season of *The Summer I Turned Pretty* over the summer. And it is such a guilty pleasure of mine. I think it's so catchy because of all the drama and the high emotions, right? And also, sometimes, it is really enjoyable to be annoyed by characters.

*Marielle:* Alissa, yes, I highly recommend checking it out. And if you only read the short stories and skip the explorations, you could reframe it as something like *Black Mirror* told as Metis short stories ;)

*Jessica:* I am going to leave this conversation with 20 more books on my list. Yours are definitely going up there as well, Marielle!

*Eiman:* As I have said earlier, my focus for the time being is on academic books. One of the three books I chose is *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* written by sociologist Howard S. Becker. In my opinion, the book is as a valuable resource because each of the ten chapters offers practical tips for social scientists (not specifically) grappling with the difficulties of starting or finishing a short or long piece of writing. I say “not specifically” because it turns out that his tips and solutions (which are drawn from his personal experience) are used by lots of writers in other fields as well and work perfectly. Moreover, I think that one of the reasons behind my choice to read this book lies in its latest version, the third edition was published in 2020, which makes its tips up-to-date.

*Alissa:* Your book of choice, Eiman sounds incredibly helpful and like something I should have read at some point. My approach to my master's thesis was basically just trying to wing it. Is there any specific advice that was impactful, that you remember really well, or that you think every student should know?

*Eiman:* Ugh, yeah, and it may be unfair to reduce the advice and tips to a sentence or even two. But I will try to get to the point. I think the most important thing that the whole book revolves around is that academic writing is not a talent, but a skill which can be learned and taught, something that is not built all at once, rather step by step. I believe this is the reassurance and the relief that every novice writer seeks. Then there are other tips about organizing the writing process.

*Jessica:* It's good to hear that academic writing can be learned! I will definitely come back to that book, Eiman. With upcoming term papers and also my master's thesis, I can definitely use some academic writing tips. Similar to Lukas, my favorite summer read is from outside the North American Studies sphere and I actively chose it because it's written by my (current) favorite author, Sally Rooney. She is an Irish writer and the book is her third novel. It's called *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. In classical Rooney manner, it combines various important topics, like sexuality, feminism, anti-capitalism, political questions, historical movements, and others. Basically, it perfectly captures struggles or questions that resonate with me on a daily basis, as she also writes from a POV that I

can very much identify with (her protagonists are usually female literature students or writers, queer, and lost souls in some way). At the end of the day, it is also a romance novel in many ways, but definitely not lighthearted. On the contrary, it can be very challenging at times, but in the best way as it made me reflect on our conception of love and how to break the status quo. I have to admit, though, that I expected more from this book, mostly because of the ending that I'm not going to give away here, of course. I still recommend it because Rooney's way with words is amazing, and I definitely want to mention her other novels *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* here as well.

*Alissa:* Eiman, that's reassuring. We are all not perfect writers and keep on improving! And Jessica, thank you! This is the push I needed to pick up my copy of *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, which is waiting for me somewhere on my bookshelf. Well, at least it's high on the to-be-read list now and will be read soon.

*Jia Sher:* I have heard so much about Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, especially since both of the novels have been adapted into television series. I haven't gotten around to reading or watching them yet, but I should get to it soon. I'm curious to see how these novels which have garnered such a following, translate from page to screen. However, it seems like there is a consensus that books are often superior to their screen adaptations and that one should always read the book first before watching its adaptation. And of course, this is debatable. My impression is that – from a reader's perspective, it is a bit of a loss to watch an adaptation first as it can limit the personal interpretation that comes with creating your mental images – an imaginative process I think is unique to each reader. On the contrary, if one watches the adaptation first, the director's vision and interpretation can overshadow your own. This isn't to say that adaptations don't have their values, but they may alter or simplify the complex layers of the original narrative that a reader would otherwise discover for themselves. That being said, I often lean towards watching the movie or series first. I'm a visual person, so it sets a visual foundation for me, and then when I read the book, I can dive deeper and uncover all the details the screen version might have missed. It's like the movie is my introduction, and the book adds depth and nuance. Well, I think it's safe to say that our TBR list is now even longer than when we started our conversation. Thanks, everyone for such an engaging discussion and for all the great recommendations! Happy reading and watching ~

## Our Recommendations

### Novels and Short Story Collections

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* (2020)

Ali Hazelwood, *Love, Theoretically* (2023) – third installment of her series “The STEMinist Novellas”

Alice Oseman, *Loveless* (2020)

Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021)

Sally Rooney, *Conversations with Friends* (2017)

Sally Rooney, *Normal People* (2018)

Alex Schulman, *Burn All My Letters* (*Bränn alla mina brev*, 2018)

Alex Schulman, *The Survivors* (*De Overlevenden*, 2020)

Chelsea Vowel, *Buffalo Is the New Buffalo* (2020)

### Non-Fiction Books

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (1986/2020)

Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims* (*Retour à Reims*, 2009)

### Television Shows

*Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-2014; Netflix, 2016-)

*The Summer I Turned Pretty* (Amazon, 2022-)

### Podcasts

*e-flux Podcast* (<https://www.e-flux.com/podcasts/>)

*Rotten Mango* (<https://www.rottenmangopodcast.com/>)

*Talk Art* (<https://talkartpodcast.komi.io/>)

*The Sleepy Bookshelf* (<https://sleepybookshelf.com/>)

*The Useless Hotline* (<https://theuselesshotline.com/>)

### Websites and Online Communities

Bookstagram (a community on Instagram that is all about books and reading)

BookTube (a subcommunity on YouTube that focuses on books and literature)

Goodreads (<https://www.goodreads.com/>)

Lithub (<https://lithub.com/>)

## Author Biographies

**Eiman Alkhatib** (she/her) is a Syrian student. She is pursuing a master's degree in North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2016, she received her bachelor's degree in English Literature from Damascus University, Syria. Her research interests are cultural studies, drama, and media studies.

**Lukas Fender** (he/him) studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his bachelor's degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, popular culture and politics, as well as political education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

**Jessica Hille** (she/her) is a master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. After finishing her bachelor's degree in English and Geography (B.A.), she switched paths from a career in education to solely studying English literature in the master program North American Studies. Here, she focuses on television, feminist media studies, queer studies, and climate fiction. She has been part of the *In Progress* editorial board since January 2023.

**Alissa Lienhard** (she/her) is a former student assistant and current master student in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover (Germany). She holds a bachelor's degree in



the Interdisciplinary Bachelor with English as first subject and Biology as second subject. Her bachelor thesis, “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down’: Language(s) of Repression and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” develops an argument about the power of language in the context of feminist speculative literature. In her studies in the North American Studies master program, she focuses particularly on film, television, comics, science fiction, feminism, neurodiversity, and gender/queer studies. Alissa Lienhard is a founding member of *In Progress*’s editorial board.

**Jia Shen Lim** (he/him) is a master student in the North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). He holds a bachelor’s degree in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK. Following his undergraduate studies, he ventured into journalism, where he worked as a fashion and art writer for a national newspaper in Malaysia. His research interests at LUH are gender studies, transcultural identities in modern and contemporary visual art, archival studies, and periodical culture. He is part of the *In Progress* editorial board since January 2023.

**Marielle Tomasic** (she/her) is a student of the North American Studies master program at Leibniz University Hannover and holds a Bachelor’s degree in English and Philosophy. Her bachelor thesis “Liminality as Resistance in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* and *Dear Sentuhan*” critically engages with boundaries of genres and examines who gets to write what. It approaches literary studies of life writing through a lens of curious empathy and decoloniality. Beyond this, Marielle is deeply invested in figuring out ways that literary scholars can think, write, and work in ways that make the (literary) world a kinder place. Marielle Tomasic works as a student editorial assistant for a publishing house, is a student assistant at the Leibniz University Hannover, and a member of *In Progress*’s editorial board.