



## TRANSCRIPT

### ***Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa***

#### **Laura Brown Traces Our Love of Animals Through Literature**

Professor Laura Brown's endeavors as a literature reader and critical writer have provided a window into humans' relationships with various species throughout history. She reveals to host Fred Lawrence what alterity, monkeys, feminist portrayal, and imperialism have to do with each other and what she considers to be the status of the humanities in academia.

Fred Lawrence: *This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.*

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On this podcast, we feature conversations with leading scholars who are part of our Visiting Scholars Program. They travel to colleges and universities across the country and deliver public talks on their specialties. To attend a free lecture, visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org) for a full schedule.

Laura Brown is a Professor of English at Cornell University. She studies women writers, slavery and imperialism, species and racial difference, the portrayal of animals, and the imaginative force of things. Her most recent books, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes* and *Fables of Modernity*, explore the rise of the modern imaginative engagement with animals and the ways in which cultural history shapes literary form. By looking at poetry, lyric writing, and narrative from past centuries, Professor Brown has been able to trace the development of the evolution of human loving relationships to other species. Welcome, Professor.

Laura Brown: Thank you. Great to be here.

Lawrence: You have written extensively about non human beings in literature and other topics in 18th century literature. I want to get to those as well, but let me start with something completely different. I know our listeners are dying to hear you talk a little bit about how you got interested in writing about animals and 18th century literary culture. It's not the most obvious topic, and yet you have really plumbed the depths of that to really give us a window into—among other things—how we love and express love. So first, how did you get interested in that, and how did it open itself up as such a powerful explanatory area?

Brown: I have asked myself that question many times recently, and I ... And, there's two different answers. One is kind of pragmatic and the other is kind of theoretical. And the pragmatic one is, as I said, I was influenced by feminist criticism and by the study of women's literature. So I'm reading closely novels by women, and I'm reading this novel called *Evelina* by Frances Burney, which before the rise of engagement with women's literature, was not widely read or taught. Now, *Evelina* is rather widely taught even to undergraduate students.

So I'm reading this book, and I'm thinking I need to pay attention to this novel by a woman, and I need to pay attention to what ... It's a story of a woman who finds a husband, eventually, kind of on the model of Jane Austen's fiction. And, I'm reading the book, and toward the end there's this chapter no one's really written about in which this monkey shows up and engages in kind of a fist fight with one of the very stupid suitors of *Evelina*. And I just stop there and I'm like, Whoa, why is there a monkey? What is the monkey doing? Why is the monkey in such a prominent place, you know, really in the, one of the last chapters of the book.

So, the novel is coming to a close and coming together and starting to make sense of *Evelina*'s choice in marriage. So, I decide I'm going to look closely at what this monkey is up to. Providing a close reading of the role and impact of the monkey in that novel made me think about animals more broadly, made me realize that I had never ... I had not noticed the monkey before, and I'm like, Okay, pay attention to the animals, because you're going to find distinctive, significant, other things to say about the literary materials. So, that's the kind of pragmatic road to animals, and then, of course I find monkeys and I find dogs everywhere. You just aren't paying attention.

Lawrence: One you start looking, there they are.

Brown: There they are. The other road to it is really by thinking conceptually about difference. And, that arose for me from thinking about the representation of women, and women as a category of alterity in literary history and in representation, and in thinking about slavery and race and how representations of Africans are another form of difference or alterity in literary representation in the—especially in the 18th century with the rise of the slave trade. And, the notion of what it means to be engaged in a significant, with a significant figure who's a kind of icon of difference, whether it's a woman or a slave, made me think about alterity kind of more broadly.

What does it mean to be ... What is alterity? And what is difference? And, why do we ... What impact does it have on literary history or on particular literary texts?

And that led me to all the other formats for difference that one can kind of immediately think of, and that totally included the monkey in *Evelina*. That's a concrete representation of intrusion of something very different, that is this monkey, in the middle of a very conventional epistolary marriage plot. As if, imagine a monkey suddenly shows up in *Pride and Prejudice* and runs all around attacking people.

Lawrence: Right. So, did she expect her audience to have any familiarity with monkeys, or was it supposed to be something exotic and outside their frame of reference?

Brown: In the 18th century, there was a lot of engagement with pets, and the monkey, believe it or not, in the 18th century would be more likely that an audience would have seen a monkey than a contemporary American audience today.

Small African monkeys were kept as pets alongside lapdogs in the first half or quarter of the 18th century. So, some of our audience would have had or would have known someone who had a pet monkey. This monkey that gets introduced is, I think, a more intrusive and larger monkey than most of the ones that people would have had as pets in the period.

Lawrence: To what extent is the “otherness” as you say, or the alternative of the monkey in this case ... to what extent is that symbolic? To what extent is there almost a fetish-like aspect to it?

Brown: In *Evelina*, I'm going to say the monkey is meant to be opening up basically a question about what it means to be human. So, all the

undesirable suitors of *Evelina* might be metaphorically described as silly monkeys. In fact, that's how come this monkey shows up. Someone says, "Oh, he's a fop. He's just like a monkey." And then, you turn the page and in the next chapter, a real monkey jumps into the picture. So, the real monkey is the realization of a metaphorical monkey that's a descriptor for a human being.

And, I'm going to say a part of what the monkey is doing in *Evelina* is raising a fundamental, ontological question that was really relevant at the time: the discovery of the great apes in the first part of the 18th century. What happens is, first, comparative anatomy arises and scientists dissect a human body and a monkey body, and what they discover is they kind of look alike on the outside, but their organs and their skeletal system persuades you that they're almost indistinguishable. And the sudden realization of proximity between humans and hominoid apes is a kind of ongoing philosophical, creates a philosophical debate in the course of the period.

And Burney's novel is just latching onto that debate in ... Even as it's understood and realized in popular culture. And so, it's trying to say, "Well, what if we are all monkeys?" Or, "What if there isn't a real significant difference between monkeys and humans? Who do we then marry? Could we marry a monkey?"

Lawrence: Now, this is all well pre-Darwin, right? So, none of this has to do with evolutionary theory, and yet some of it has a kind of anticipation of some of the discussion that will come up a century later in Post-Darwinian writings.

Brown: Yeah, absolutely.

It's opening the way for Darwin in the sense of ... For one thing, it's asking questions about what being is, and it's also really disassembling or fundamentally altering the notion of the great chain of being, which is a religious and philosophical structure that imagines there being a chain from God to angels to humans to animals to rocks, and that in each link in the chain, you can't get past it. Each link is its own separate stage in the chain, and questioning and creating fluidity across the links in the chain through theories of hybridization, like "Could a man and a hominoid ape have a mixed baby?" Or, other theories of hybridization, like "Could a man, a woman mate with a fish? And could they have a mermaid?"

The idea that there may be hybrids that have thus far been unidentified, or that the whole scenario of this chain might be fluid, and that there

might not be simple demarcations along in the hierarchy fundamentally changes the perspective on the human, the animal, and even eventually on the material thing.

Lawrence: I want to take you to one of the lectures that you have given this past year as a Visiting Scholar. We talk a lot about the arts and sciences in Phi Beta Kappa, not just the liberal arts in terms of the humanities and the arts but also the science is part of the liberal arts, the left brain/right brain piece. And, it seems to me that one of your lectures just does that in the most extraordinary way, looking at Isaac Newton and Newtonian mechanics on the one hand, Daniel Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* on the other. What are the connections between Sir Isaac Newton and *Robinson Crusoe*, and how did you come to this project?

Brown: So, I'm thinking about new materialism, because it's the next step for me in thinking about the other-than-human. Moving from women to whatever I did, a range of representations of the "other" to animals, then made me think about all those other things that are not human that populate literary texts. And of course, *Robinson Crusoe* has only one human, and everything else ... the whole rest of the population of that novel is other-than-human stuff.

And, it struck me as a real proof text for taking seriously literature's engagement with the other than human things. So, that's how I got to the idea of the portrayal of things in *Robinson Crusoe*, and as I said, I'm not sure how I made my leap to Newton. I really don't know exactly how I got there except that when I did arrive at Newton, the connection was so obvious to me, in that what Newton's theory of matter and his idea of matter's relationship to force and energy... what Newton is doing is populating the world for us modern people.

He's showing us that the world is populated by things that move and have motion and attraction of their own. And, in a similar way, I'm realizing that *Robinson Crusoe* is a novel populated by things that are generating each other. So, one of the projects in my reading in my interpretation of *Robinson Crusoe* was to show how Defoe's description of this population of things in Crusoe's Island have a kind of opportunity to act, to create themselves, to exert a kind of active energy that is really corollary to the kind of irresistible engagement with motion that Newton's theory of gravitation is proposing as the kind of new way of understanding the world around us.

Lawrence: There were so many fascinating themes that run through the 18th century, and I wonder how you see them running through literature in

the period picking up right where we are with Crusoe. James Joyce famously said that Crusoe was the true prototype of a British colonist. So, imperialism is beginning in a serious way in the 18th century. So, how do you see imperialism being reflected through literature in the 18th century?

Brown: That's a cool question for me, because I described earlier my engagement with feminist criticism and with the representation of women, and I got to imperialism directly through reading portrayals of women in 18th century, especially poetry. We know that there's a powerful misogynist or anti-feminist tradition in 18th century poetry from especially Jonathan Swift's works. But what I feel like I discovered, and it really led me to think more deeply about imperialism, is that often women are the lever for critiquing or engaging with imperialist ideology in the period.

So, one of my books is on this topic and it takes the poetry, the drama, and—to some extent—the fiction and shows that women are a kind of metaphor or a kind of emblematic point of engagement with imperialism. A famous passage is from *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope, in which he says Belinda is at her dressing table, and she is dressing herself to be incredibly beautiful, and all the things on her dressing table are products of global trade. So, it's like an ...

Lawrence: None of it's coming from Britain.

Brown: Yep. Yep. It's like an assemblage of the British Empire, only it's compactly produced for her, and it's sitting on her table, and she's applying it to her body. And so, when she walks away from the dressing table, she's completely adorned by and covered by the consequences of British imperialism. What is that saying about women, about empire, about the British nation? The feminization of imperialist ideology is just a fascinating topic in a whole lot of different ways. So, that's kind of how I got there.

Lawrence: And, sort of the cousin of imperialism, the rise of slavery and the slave trade during the 18th century, how do we see—we talked about that a little bit earlier—but, how do you see that as a theme that runs through 18th century fiction?

Brown: Well, the most important statement on slavery in prose narrative is Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, really from the 17th century, from 1688. That poem is rewritten by Thomas Southerne as a play, and it's popular in the dramatic literature as well as in prose fiction all through the 18th century. It doesn't so much impact the traditional 18th century novel by

Richardson or Fielding, except in the sense that it takes the idea of the Heroic, and it tries to understand slavery in the context of the Heroic tradition, which turns out to be a kind of paradox or inversion of the engagement with the Royal African.

So, it's a complicated scenario, much less straightforward than the feminization of ideology in terms of the representation of women, and harder to discover an influence on the part of Oroonoko throughout the period, but I think it's there in the distinctive engagement with the hero in realist fiction.

Lawrence: And then, pulling the lens back a little bit further, we think of the 18th century—actually, beginning in the late 17th century—as the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment. Some date the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment to our friend Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, which is the late 17th century. How does the Enlightenment project show itself through the literature that you've been studying?

Brown: As a positivist claim to optimistic solution of local and global problems, I think. I think that's the kind of the mode of engagement with the world that's typical of the Enlightenment. If you think about the realist novel as a statement about the opportunities that are condensed in the idea of the protagonist with whom we identify, whose challenges we share, even when that protagonist doesn't come to a happy ending—like in the case of Richardson's *Clarissa*, where she dies in the end—the sense of fulfillment that you... that the realist novel creates in the reader based on the depth of identification with a protagonist, whom you know so well by the end of the novel that you know them better than yourself. I think those are tied to the ideology of the Enlightenment.

Lawrence: And, that there's a narrative arc to their lives, and we get carried along on that narrative.

Brown: Yep. We all belong there.

Lawrence: So, let me shift from the scholarly part of your life to the teaching part of your life. You were the Senior Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Cornell in an earlier part of your career and also Chair of the Cornell's celebrated English department, right?

Brown: That's right.

Lawrence: So I know you've thought a lot about undergraduate education in general and the future of undergraduate education and the humanities in

particular. I'm sure there's a lot of talk these days about whether the humanities is under attack, how the humanities can survive the moment that we're living through. So, I wonder what you learned this year as a Visiting Scholar that influenced your thinking about undergraduate education in the humanities?

Brown:

That's a great question, and I'm so grateful to have had this year to talk with great groups of undergraduate students at so many different schools. Okay, I learned three things.

One: Every time there was a group of undergraduate students at lunch or in some kind of informal gathering and I asked them—and these would be mostly English majors or humanities majors, I admit—I asked them whether this was a meaningful experience, being a major in this area of study and whether it was going to be relevant to their ongoing careers. They all said "Yes, definitely. Incredibly great." So, it was a very affirming experience for me in terms of ... So, that was my first very positive takeaway, that this country is full of schools, I bet, where if you go to a student who is an English major and ask them, "Is it worth it? Is it working out?" They're going to be really pleased and they're going to have concrete things to say.

The second thing I learned is that so many of these undergraduate students who are super engaged with their work is the scope of their connection with other disciplines. The numbers of double or triple majors and the ones who are majoring jointly in some kind of, even computer science or cognitive psychology, the students who are majoring in unexpected but corollary areas was really, really large. More than half of the students I talked with were doing more than one singular discipline as an undergraduate.

And so, I'm asking them, "Is this confusing you?" And, "How are you putting things," I mean, "Who's helping you make sense of these different paths?" And, their general answer is "Only me. I'm doing my very best. I'm thinking it must be relevant. I'm trying to write papers that tie them together, but..." So there, my impression is a huge amount of initiative on the part of the students and a little bit less support than maybe they should be getting on the part of their departments or programs.

Lawrence:

And maybe there's a role for us to play in the academy to give further flowering to that kind of interdisciplinary thought.

Brown: Absolutely. That was my takeaway lesson, and I'm hoping that we can do something along those lines here at Cornell.

And the other thing, the third thing, has more to do with creative writing. It's everywhere: new creative writing majors, new creative writing minors, students coming from across the campus who would come to my talk, because their friends were English majors, but they weren't. They're in some other field, but because they were taking creative writing courses in English, they're getting engaged with thinking about literary materials.

Lawrence: And, they're finding that their own creative project is a point of entry into the humanities rather than just learning how to read other people's work.

Brown: Absolutely. And even more broadly, what is creativity for the college students right now? We really don't know well enough. They certainly don't know. I mean, we don't know in the humanities, and if we don't know, how can we expect others to know in other fields? Because they're looking to us to know what creativity is about.

Lawrence: That's right. Well, I'm glad your Visiting Scholar experience has influenced your teaching and your view of education. Has it influenced your own sense of your scholarship and your writing?

Brown: It has, definitely. I'm currently writing a new essay on Newton and Newton's Theory of Gravity in relation to Alexander Pope. So, it's a brand new project, and as I start writing, I'm usually in this mode of writing something that's going to be published for a scholarly audience. But having talked with undergraduate students so intensively for the last, whatever—12 months, 10 months—I'm starting out in a whole different mode of discourse. And, just in terms of my writing style. And I'm starting out with a poem, I'm writing about one of Pope's poems, and I've ... I'm not starting out with some theoretical statement of new materialism, which I'm totally tempted to do. We'll see what happens and whether the journal editors like it, but I think I'm going to write this essay in a very different way.

Lawrence: Well, you've been at the academic business and the literary criticism business for decades, and to hear you come out of a Visiting Scholar year saying you're going to do it differently and you're thinking about it differently means that not only was it a success for the students, as I

know, but apparently it was a success for you, and I'm delighted to hear that.

Brown: Absolutely. I'm very grateful to have had this opportunity.

Lawrence: Well, we're grateful to have had you as a Visiting Scholar and glad to have you in the Phi Beta Kappa family. Thanks so much for coming in today.

Brown: Thank you very much.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paolo Mardo is our sound designer. Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer of the show. Emma Forbes is the show's intern. The theme song is Back To Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the Phi Beta Kappa visiting scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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