

# In Search of Lost Vibes

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## Living and Dying with Marcel Proust

by Christopher Prendergast  
Europa Compass, 256 pp., \$17.00

## The Novelist: A Novel

by Jordan Castro  
Soft Skull, 208 pp., \$21.36



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A lot of people who are commenting on New York City's cultural scene haven't read Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and it shows.

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Marcel Proust would've been on Twitter. There's a lot to observe. You can do it from your bedroom, from your parents' basement, from outer space. It's all on epistolary record—neo-Catholics in London, pool rentals in Queens, something going on with Doja Cat and one of the kids from *Stranger Things*, *Simone Weil bot*, crypto bros, *shirts that go hard*, academics, hockey stans, a Shakespeare truther ball, a girl from your high school lifeguarding class, *schizzed-out downtown reactionaries* and the psychos who chronicle their weird little lives, *WORLDSTAR-HIPHOP*, Tetsuya Yamagami's Uniqlo boxers, normies.

What's interesting about Twitter is what's interesting about the Internet: You never have to show your face. Even when you're showing your face, you're not *showing* your face. You're shouting through a megaphone, firing a gun with an unlimited range. When things get embarrassing, it's okay, because at your most personal, you're just an avatar of yourself. When things get really embarrassing, you can *delete your account*. You can write about social life—any kind of social life, which is to

say all of it—without ever seeing anyone IRL. This is perfect and beautiful because writing about social life has always been an exercise in estrangement: estrangement as aesthetic experience.

Before he was a canonical hero of Western letters, Proust was a fixture of Parisian society. Sure, he was a bit of a shut-in when he was dying of pneumonia and writing in earnest, but people who aren't Proust scholars tend to forget about the other stuff. Christopher Prendergast is a Proust scholar. "In Proust's world," he writes in *Living and Dying with Marcel Proust*—an omnivorous critical commentary on *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* published earlier this year—"sensory life is a tale of constant metamorphosis, of sensations that migrate across borders, shade into one another. . . . It is the psychophysical cognate of the basic stylistic principle of Proust's literary art—the use of metaphor to bring together that which is kept apart."

*Living and Dying with Marcel Proust* is aptly titled. To encounter Proust is to live with him.

Like the White Rabbit who leads Alice into Wonderland, Proust's labyrinthine speech patterns and evasive

stylistic maneuvers demand pursuit, obsession; you become acutely attuned to, consumed by beauty; you adopt his hypersensitivities, or recognize them as always having existed in yourself—and when you live with Proust, you become Proustian. Prendergast becomes an observant companion instead of a traditional critic: He immerses himself in his subject as he weaves together a tapestry of fragments, variegated impressions drawn from the text and its surrounding cultural substrate.

There's a distinct mimetic appeal to the fact that the end product structurally resembles Proust's own writing. Through a series of lenses (sleep, music, the lengths of days, a chapter titled "Breasts and Cheeks" that's about exactly what it sounds like) Prendergast goes in search of lost vibes. This is the only way to read *La Recherche*, which syntactically and thematically meanders through nineteenth-century France like the *flâneur* and aspiring writer—literally named Marcel, we're talking old-school autofiction here—whose life it follows.

Although Prendergast doesn't advance a single totalizing thesis, certain elements emerge and blur together



across the chapters of his book: transformation, boundary-crossing, the search and the return. These words all boil down to the same one—*metaphor*. A metaphor is what emerges when you bring two disparate things together; recursively, you use one to illuminate the other, exposing the meaning behind and beyond the isolated word.

Metaphor does for language what social life does—should do—for people. It is the way by which we come into contact, are subtly but crucially reshaped, become more than our safe and separate selves.

If *La Recherche* is really, centrally about anything, it's about the baseline conceit Prendergast ascribes to Proustian metaphor: being “kept apart” while seeking social and emotional synthesis. Proust's characters meet and traverse and are impeded by the boundaries—economic, sexual, romantic, intellectual—of their little worlds. Sometimes they change and sometimes they can't. Sometimes they don't want to.

A *flâneur* is an observer, a pathological scholar of social life who, by virtue of his craft or his imperfect brain, is fundamentally alienated from the world he inhabits, metaphysically stuck in the corner of the party. For someone who feels like that, there's a massive appeal to being online. Why not take the third-person experience all the way?

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The eponymous protagonist in Jordan Castro's *The Novelist* is a kind of 21st-century bizarro *flâneur*, most of the book is about other people and how he relates to them, but he spends it on Twitter or on the toilet. If *The Novelist* were seven volumes, the narrator might have to leave the house for more than a dog walk, but it's not, so he doesn't. His impression of reality is the only one presented; his opinions on characters stand in as avatars for the characters themselves. Castro's novel doesn't include a plot, an arc, or other people's perspectives, which is kind of the point—it's recursive, self-referential, a self-contained loop.

As with Marcel, the narrator of *La Recherche*, Castro's narrator is a writer, a professional observer. Unlike Proust, however, Castro doesn't give his narrator his own name. The narrator of *The Novelist* is an anonymous novel-



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ist; “Calvin” is the name he bestows upon the protagonist of the novel he's writing.

There is a character named Jordan Castro in *The Novelist*. This fictionalized Castro is totally *chaddad*, a digital Übermensch only visible through distorted projections in the novel's world. He appears, for instance, in memes like *Jordan Castro Internet -- REMIXX (fan video)*; in the cultural imagination, where he's simultaneously admired and slammed; and in the novelist's own reveries.

The novelist in *The Novelist* is decidedly *not* Jordan Castro. The novelist is pathetic. The novelist barely writes—instead, he goes on digital rampages through other people's feeds, feeling alternately superior and bad about himself, which end up being the same thing. It's embarrassing—not just the scatological stuff, which is deeply abject (and thoroughly unpacked in re-

al-life Castro's episode of Red Scare), but the sheer weight of everything the novelist wants and isn't getting.

In a lot of contemporary autofiction, no one wants anything. Not *really*. To paraphrase Anne Carson, allowing yourself to be seen wanting is extremely *cringe*.

For autofictional narrators and for us IRL, there are two ways to express estrangement. You can be estranged because you've *left society* by choice, in a way that indicates you truly don't care, or you can be estranged because you've been rejected, because you tried to do something and it didn't work. If you bill yourself as an intentional ironist, if you're sitting in the corner because you like the corner more than the people around you, there's nothing wrong with a life of observation. The problem arises when maybe you'd like to take part in the central action. You have to admit that you want to do



the thing you're not doing, the thing you can't do. Why would you ever admit to that?

As a text that engages directly with autofiction and its creation, *The Novelist* is unique in its earnestness. I don't mean earnestness in the sappy, confessional sense. There's a scene in which the narrator Facebook-stalks an acquaintance from college, closely studying her friends and features, "self-consciously perceiving [himself] as acting 'like a school shooter.'"

The stereotypical school shooter is a social reject—a creep, a loser, an individual driven to violence by his terminal *inability to vibe*. Acting like a psycho while being self-aware enough to admit it is rare; admitting a distance you can't cross, an *inability to vibe* when you're theoretically writing about your own experience, is rarer still.

The autofictional *self-insert* narrator is a meme—a joke, a shibboleth, a funhouse mirror—but it's also a representation of the self. The closer the meme-self gets to pure meme (i.e. the fictionalized Jordan Castro if he were presented as an unironic stand-in for the author rather than a metatextual joke), the safer *you* are. Instead of living as a real person, you can fully inhabit an ethos, an artistic voice. As a mimetic version of yourself—the protagonist, the *auteur*—you can traverse your world as a figure without anyone ever seeing your face.

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One can't bring up mimesis without bringing up René Girard. In "Eating Disorders and Mimetic Desire," Girard anticipates the contagious cultural anorexia of postmodern life. "With each new generation," he writes, "a new batch of iconoclasts boast that they are the sole genuine revolutionists, but they all really imitate one another and the more they try, the less they can get away from imitation."

The imitation at hand? A *blackpilled*, *memefied* collective motion toward a detached kind of godhood:

*Dostoyevsky realized that the new, liberated man, would generate cruel forms of asceticism rooted in nihilism. The hero of Raw Youth fasts in order to demonstrate to himself his will*

*to power. Even earlier, Stendhal, even though hostile to religion, had detected the same tendency in post-revolutionary French culture. The hero of The Red and the Black (1830) refrains from eating in order to demonstrate that he can be Napoleon.*

*There is great irony in the fact that the modern process of stamping out religion produces countless caricatures of it.*

The will to creative power is expressed through abnegation instead of abasement. The fashionable autofictional tone is one of social asceticism, of conspicuous emotional non-consumption. It's the farthest thing in the world from Proustian indulgence.

Here's the thing about Proust: He was down bad on main, in life and in art. *La Recherche* is just over four thousand pages of humiliations, failures, blatant admissions of desire and jealousy. Marcel stalks girls and obsesses and pines and stalks some more. Toward the middle of his seven-volume narrative, he falls in love with a character named Albertine—a fictionalized version of Proust's chauffeur and manservant Alfred Agostinelli. *Fictionalized* is a strong word: Albertine literally speaks in excerpts from Alfred's letters. When Proust bought Alfred a plane (down bad, see?), he had it engraved with the same Mallarmé stanza Marcel promises to inscribe on the yacht he buys for Albertine. In a long, tortuous series of secret lesbian affairs, Albertine cheats on Marcel; Alfred was married to a woman.

This is embarrassing. This is probably one of the most embarrassing moments in both literature and literary history. Marcel's ensuing descent into suspicion and possessiveness, which of course mirrors Proust's own, sees author and protagonist at their deepest *cringe*, their most *incelcore*.

But it is love—humiliating, consumptive, unrequited, disastrous love—that, for Marcel, enables a transcendence bordering on the sacred. Prendergast notes Albertine "as the referent of only one of two instances in the novel of the adjective *paradisic*"—her breath while asleep, Proust writes, emits "the pure song of the Angels."

As a boy, Marcel watches one of his idols—a slightly more removed self-insert, the *flâneur* Charles Swann—fall in love with the escort Odette de Cré-

cy, a woman whose infidelity and apathy drive Swann to the same eroticized, impotent madness (in a fascinatingly Freudian form of mimesis, Marcel's first ill-fated romance begins with a fixation upon Swann's daughter Gilberte). Of the affair, which Swann experiences "as it might seem to the first man who tasted it among the flowers of earthly paradise," Prendergast writes:

*The taste will soon acquire the bitter flavour of self-tormenting jealousy, in what is clearly a dress rehearsal for the narrator's own initiation into the narrative of the Fall, beginning with the painful memories of Gilberte in À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur [the second installment in La Recherche] for which the (short-lived) balm is the delusion of a wondrous golden age, a paradise where we are to be reunited and reconciled, but of course never are. It is where Proust's novel announces itself as an item in the capacious library of mankind on the theme of paradise lost.*

Whether you like it or not, there's something alluring about *cringe*. Remember Caroline Calloway and her long, autobiographical, blatantly self-indulgent Instagram posts about heartbreak, loss, the assorted cruelties of the Internet, making art, and profound artistic impotence? It's hard to look away from that kind of self-exposure. Even at its worst—saccharine, shameless TikTok sincerity—it's angelic, freeing, enviably true.

This is why Castro's novelist—who deliberately tries not to "get under the surface of things," who switches from third person to first person and back again as he tries and fails to write, who is rightly terrified of "narcissistic bile and sentimentality"—even considers the prospect of humiliating himself on paper:

*I didn't need to think of a backstory for Calvin; he was based entirely on me, and I had a backstory. I could emphasize surreal aspects with a disaffected tone, a move any amateur could pull off and seem more skilled than he was; but would the book—my novel—say what I wanted it to say?*

Castro succeeds in this project. People want to say things that are true. People will be jealous and envious and pathetic forever. People will be falling in love forever; people will be going to parties and embarrassing themselves forever; people will believe in God and truth and beauty—whatever that means—forever. People will be obsessed with art forever, even if it's bad. People will try to connect, to transcend, to keep from being *kept apart* forever.

You may be wary of this. Proust himself was—

*The trap was seduction by what Ruskin [one of Proust's own literary models] called the eidolon and Proust referred to as idolatry, beauty-worship as a kind of fake religion, where an ecstasy of the senses gets confused with spiritual transport.*

*But ecstasy is ecstasy—who cares if it's right? In Prendergast's words: "ecstasy turning into addiction: beauty as the narcotic you cannot do without."*

In other words, from the rapper Bladee:

*Beauty is my drug, I'm the pusher (push it)*

*We think we exist, that's why we suffer, do we not?*

I would be remiss not to mention the presence of an aesthetic counter-current to the tyranny of flat affect. Meme-selves are multiplying, taking on more and more varied forms—trad-Caths, confessionalism as a bit, unhinged schizoposting.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard theorizes that the great Modernist writers broke from tradition by abandoning the fundamental Romantic lie: the myth of self-direction. But there's a way in which the culture of the *hot take*—rampant content creation, Substack social journalism—has ushered in the return of that Romantic self. We inhabit a commodified era, an era that rewards branding distinct enough to be memorable but familiar enough to remain unthreatening. In life it behooves you, economically and socially, to create a meme-self, an online version of you that posts, a marketable av-

atar that adheres to dominant aesthetics while denying its own mimesis so as to appear to be a *true original*.

Art is different. The novelistic project has always been to create life, with all its attendant desires and embarrassments. That's the crucial difference between writing life and posting about it. If you're posting, you're not really in it, which means you're safe. No one can ever get to you if you only appear in the meme-form, aloof and abstract.

But beauty *is* a drug, a drug that originates from desire, which is a symptom of absence: the lack, the loss, the moral and aesthetic and spiritual lacuna you can't post your way through. In life as in art, you have to exist—not your meme-self, not your avatar, *you*. You're going to suffer, and you have to suffer. You have to suffer on main. You have to abase yourself to be *based*. You have to try.

*Blackpilled, godpilled, cringepilled.* Lay yourself bare. Crucify the meme-self and ascend.