ADAM GOPNIK IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:
WHERE IS NEW YORK?
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New York Public Library
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INTRO MUSIC: "New York, New York"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So good evening, my name is Paul Holdengräber, I'm Director of Public Programs here, known as Live from the New York Public Library, and it's a great pleasure to welcome you, Adam Gopnik, back to the library for the second—third time?

ADAM GOPNIK: Fourth time.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Fourth time. So, Adam is a real repeat offender. **(laughter)** And it's a great pleasure—

(applause)

ADAM GOPNIK: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And Adam and I have been doing public events together for quite some time, all the way back to my blissful years in Los Angeles, which I left for the dubious pleasures of New York, which we will talk about, since you seem to think this is a good place to live and bring up children.

ADAM GOPNIK: (laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Am I under the right impression, that you think this?

ADAM GOPNIK: I believe that, though. But I know there was a certain intensity when you were in Los Angeles, because you would bring together two sort of, you know, sad intellectuals, and everybody would be alight about it. "They're debating museums down at the LACMA now—"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I know, it's exciting when you are—

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, exactly, and Sharon Stone would come, and half the staff of CAA would come and they'd be taking notes, and hear it, but—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, Sharon Stone I do remember came to meet Bernard-Henri Lévy.

ADAM GOPNIK: Ah, it wasn't me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe it was you, maybe—I kept thinking it might be me. **(laughter)** But, you know, wishful thinking on my part. But Adam did an extraordinary event with Kirk Varnedoe and we may actually be speaking a little bit about him—in Los Angeles maybe four or five years ago or so, and, you know, these were two friends, and I don't particularly like chumminess onstage, and I'm going to try to become a little more conflictual as time goes on, here. But they goaded each other extraordinarily well. And so Adam has been here many times, and it's a pleasure to welcome him back to the Library. Adam, today something most amazing happened to me. I was reading your essay about 9/11, which is—which we'll talk about in a minute. And the phone rings, and my assistant calls me, telling me that my sister from Paris called, wondering if I was safe. And I was in Brooklyn, and I was

fairly safe, but she was extremely worried, because she had just heard—she was looking at television, some rugby match, I think, was going on, a football match. And she just had heard, that a plane had—

ADAM GOPNIK: They are different sports, Paul.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They are, no no, I'm sure. But they both have a ball, right? Am I right? **(laughter)**

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, you're right. You're right about that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My children are younger, so I haven't yet gotten into the whole ball celebration. **(laughter)** But, my sister was very worried, and I called up her immediately to tell her I was fine. But there was some kind of a plane that flew into a building on 72nd Street, and there I was reading your essay about 9/11, and reading, you know, how distinct and apart we can be from a tragedy, though we can see it, because we are on a long island, and my sister reported to me that this was happening. She knew something that I, in my small world, not small at all because I was reading you, but small world uncontaminated by the news that was happening at that moment.

ADAM GOPNIK: It's, it's—but the other amazing thing is just, one experience from this afternoon, is the amazing efficiency of information in New York. You know how people talk about efficient market theory, on the stock market, how quickly information is processed through? And I heard about this tragedy at about three o'clock as I was leaving the office to come uptown, and by the time I got on the elevator to go up to my apartment, the guy who was in the elevator with me says, "Oh no, what it was, it was nothing to do with terrorism, it was a pitcher for the Yankees, in fact, who crashed the plane," which turned out to be true. And fifteen minutes later, when I came in and I was speaking to my son about it, he said, "Oh, Dad, the really interesting angle here is, I've just been in a chat room, is that Mike and the Mad Dog gave him a terrible time on their program yesterday, in fact, and everybody's furious with them for having put him in this incredibly timorous state."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Does this say something—I mean, in a way this goes directly to the point, one of the points, of your book, which is that New Yorkers are extraordinarily resilient and that they will not leave the scene of—maybe some people said very quickly that this was an act of terrorism, I'm sure somebody must have said that, but very quickly, they come together, they get over it, they move on.

ADAM GOPNIK: Information spreads. People understand, people discount quickly—maybe too quickly—discount negative information and it gets absorbed into the system and it goes on, it's amazing. But not only does it go on, but it goes on in another way, so this whole Mike and the Mad Dog angle to the problem then rises up. Do you listen to Mike and the Mad Dog, Paul, typically? **(laughter)** I listen to them every afternoon, they're one of the sub-themes that are in the book, actually.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I always say that I have holes in my culture so it can breathe.

ADAM GOPNIK: (laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This is one of those blatant holes. And so what should I know about it?

ADAM GOPNIK: They have a sports talk show, WFAN, every afternoon from one till five, I guess, and I can't write without noise.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How long have you had that problem?

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: My entire life, in fact. I began writing coherently when I discovered that if I had a lot of rock music on, I could do it. So I always have Mike and the Mad Dog on in the afternoons when I'm writing, in fact, and they're in the book, too. Because there's something about—you know, Mike is, Mike Francesa has, you know, one of the great old-fashioned kind of New York accents, and he states the obvious in a totally stentorian tone. "The team that is ahead at the end of any game is overwhelmingly likely to win that game, Dog." **(laughter)** And I totally identify with this, you know, because that is essentially the role I play. And they apparently harassed this poor Yankee pitcher, so you

immediately, you have a substory, you have a secondary story in New York, and you have this enormous overflow of information, and this constant desire to turn that information into some kind of story, into some kind of narrative, and that's one of the things that the book is about.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So let me ask you. Why—when I arrived at the Library about a couple of hours ago, totally drenched. Thankfully I had a fresh pair of pants in my office to change into so I would look fairly respectable here onstage with you. And the subway was filled, and it was so crowded. And I was thinking, you know, I had spent five hours reading you this afternoon and I was *nearly* convinced that this was a great city. **(laughter)** I've been here for about five hundred days and I really mean this, of course I'm just joking here, I think it's a *fantastic* city, it's actually, quite frankly, the best city in the world, no doubt.

ADAM GOPNIK: (laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But why is this a great city—why is this a great city to live in? I'll ask you a subsequent question to that. Why in your view, since *really* the book is about your children, why is this a great city to bring up children?

ADAM GOPNIK: I suppose any city, any *can* be, and often *is* a great city to bring up children in, bringing up children is in itself a wonderful thing, and so I think you would do it with equal satisfaction in Schenectady or Altoona or in Brussels or Paris. I think there's something enormously moving about bringing up children in New York because it seems at first, at least, to be resistant to the activity. It doesn't seem to be a city that's designed for children. And that's what, the first thing people say about it when you say—the subtitle of this book is *A Home in New York*, and it's meant to have a slightly, mildly ironic tinge, because we don't think of New York as a place primarily of homes, that's not our literary imagination of it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: To make a home.

ADAM GOPNIK: To make a home. You make a *deal* in New York, you make a *career* in New York. But you don't make a *home* in New York, but in fact, of course, and self-evidently, all we make are

homes in New York. As human beings all we *can* make in New York are homes, and so what looks from the outside, what's presented in literature, what's shown in the movies, as a city of, you know, endless kind of Michael Douglas–like skullduggery and activity actually becomes in the lived, atomized, final chemical analysis of it, a city that's a vast beehive of homes. And we live in a big apartment building, and I write about this in the book, in fact, that I—every imaginable kind of human being seems to live in that apartment building. There's an Orthodox Jewish family down the hall. There's a single woman, an older single woman, living there, there's a young man who works on Wall Street down here, there are famous people, there are forgotten people, there are unhappy people, there are angry people. Every imaginable social type lives, finds a—makes a home in that building. And then we see each other only in the elevator, we jostle each other, we complain when one of us makes more noise. And that density is, I think, unique to New York and in New York.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That is—my subsequent question is this one. Because you use the word that I think is most telling to me, which is the word "density." I—could you tell me what makes a city great? Because I know that Rem Koolhaas, for instance, the great Dutch architect, believes that what makes cities great is congestion, which is usually what we want to flee. So I'm curious—

ADAM GOPNIK: I guess I think that that's true, but I think with the caveat that it's congestion of people, not congestion of vehicles, not congestion of automobiles. I think that exactly what makes the city great is overcharge and overload, in fact, the sense that you have that walking down the street you will bump into and be bumped into by every imaginable kind of person. One of the stories in the book that many people have read before, I think, is one called "Bumping into Mr. Ravioli." And it's about my then three-year-old daughter Olivia's imaginary friend. She had an imaginary friend named Charlie Ravioli. And what was interesting about Charlie Ravioli was he was *always* too busy to play with her. **(laughter)** And she would get on her little play phone, you know, we had a little play cell phone. And she'd say, "Hello. Can you call me? Okay, call me later." And then she'd put it down, she'd say, "I always get his machine." **(laughter)** That was true. And she had made up this imaginary character who was sort of a prince of our preoccupied disorder, because you had an imaginary friend, who she had genuinely imagined for herself, who would never be available for her, who was always pressed. **(laughter)** And when things went well, exactly what she would say is, "I bumped into Charlie Ravioli today." She was, "I bumped into Charlie Ravioli today. We grabbed a cappuccino but then he had to

run.” **(laughter)** And it’s what she had heard. It’s what she had heard her mother say, what she had heard me say, what everybody who she knew, that’s all. You know, there’s this little, you know, three-year-old girl and she’s walking through a world where all she hears all day is her mother saying, you know, “I bumped into Meg but then she had to run so then I grabbed a cab, I got up just in time but I was a little bit late, but I sent you an e-mail, did you get it?” **(laughter)** And it’s that, so—you know, country children make their imaginary friends out of light and sand and the breeze in the trees and our children make their imaginary friends out of busyness.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And we—we all laugh at the story you’re telling here, but in a way there’s also I imagine a certain pathos, or a certain sadness, in the fact that we are so occupied that we are perpetually *pre*occupied. I mean, busyness, which is a word you explore very beautifully in that essay, was not always a negative term.

ADAM GOPNIK: No, as I explained, in fact, if you look at, you know when Samuel Pepys is writing his diary and whenever he uses the word “busy,” he uses it as a synonym for “happy.” Usually he uses it as a synonym for sex. “I was very busy this evening with my wife.”

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I usually use it that way, myself.

ADAM GOPNIK: I unfortunately can never use it that way as it turns out. But, and that’s what busyness is, and it’s only, I think, in the late nineteenth century, as I explain in the essay, that people—that when you have this sudden crush of trains and cars, along with the telegraph and all of its hideous stepchildren, the phone call, the fax, the e-mail message, that for the first time in history you had this double dose of physical bumping into and virtual bumping into. And as I say in the essay, one of the things that’s true I think about the telegraph and all its children is that it’s the only kind of communication that’s ever been invented that’s perpetually suspended. So, you know, when the Apostle Paul is writing an epistle, he doesn’t say at the end of the epistle, “Give me a call and let’s discuss.” He just finishes the letter. **(laughter)** But—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you open the letter when you so desire.

ADAM GOPNIK: You open the letter when you desire, whereas every e-mail ends, "give me a call and let's discuss," and every fax says, "I'll get in touch with you by e-mail," and so that perpetually staved-off communication is part of what we live with. But you know, the story I wanted to have a little pathos, because it has some, for me in fact is overwhelmingly happy, because—and it happened and I wrote that story in 2002 and it occupied just the year after 9/11, that is Olivia came up with Charlie Ravioli in that year, invented Charlie Ravioli, and it became a talisman for my wife and for me. We would always say, "How did you spend the day?" and we'd say, "Oh . . ." and you couldn't begin to describe all of the missed connections, frustrations, exasperations, failures, and madnesses of a day in New York, so we'd just say, "Just bumping into Charlie Ravioli," and it was meant to include, to comprise, all of those things. And we had an enormous tenderness for it because it was exactly what we loved about New York, was bumping into Charlie Ravioli and in that year we had a—it came haloed, I think, with a certain kind of warmth, "*that's* New York." That's what we would—that's what we would be devastated to lose, that's the thing we love, and I think one of the things that's been true about New York in the past five years is that all of that kind of little affect and busyness and tone of the city which it's easy to find so exasperating that it drives you away, drives you to the suburbs, where my wife always trying to drive me, or drives you back to Los Angeles, in fact is incredibly wonderful in and of itself. And also because this is the last place that's like that. You know, in the last five years, as I write in the book, we used to think of Rome as sort of the—I beg your pardon, of New York as the new Rome, kind of the Rome of the new millennium, this kind of great vast sewer of ambitions and greeds.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's not only that.

ADAM GOPNIK: But it's not only that, it's also, as I say in the book, it's also become in the last five years, it's become a kind of, in our imaginations at least, a kind of new Venice of fragility, of beauty and fragility. Because you're aware as you are when you're in Venice, *this* city, Venice, could only exist once, the idea that "Oh, we'll make the city, but it's all water." "It's all right, we'll all go in boats and we'll make it work." **(laughter)** And you have the same feeling about New York—you know, it's on this tiny little island of Manhattan. You're on this tiny little island, we don't have enough room here. "We'll build the buildings very, very high. It'll be all right. We'll make it work." And we'll build the

buildings very high, but we don't have any room anymore. "Well, we'll build them even higher, and then we'll make them very skinny and very high." And then, "How will we travel?" "Well, we'll build a big hole in the ground and everyone will go in trains in the big hole." That kind of absurdity and impossibility of New York, which seemed to us until recently as self-evident as the impossibility of Venice must have seemed to Venetians through the sixteenth century and then suddenly one day in the eighteenth century everyone said, "My God, what a beautiful, strange city. There'll never be another one like it." And I think that that sense, "What a beautiful, strange city. There will never be another one like it," is a kind of piercing realization that's only come to us in the last five years.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm assuming that in using the word "vulnerable" you're also alluding to 9/11 in some form and it reminded me a little bit of Paul Valéry's line right after the First World War in 1919 he said, that he realized that now, civilizations are also mortal, and they also die, as it were, and that vulnerability is something that maybe we want to take care of, we want to become the doctor of the city in some way.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, I think that's right.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: 2002 was when you wrote "Ravioli." If you had to update that essay, how would you do so?

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, I do update it a little bit in the book. I wouldn't update the core of it, but I would bring the characters up to date. Because after that essay was published, Olivia explained to us, and I had the most wonderful years writing these pieces because, like everyone in New York, our apartment is sort of one size too small for us, and I didn't have a real study, so I just had a kind of Aalto screen that I would hide behind with my computer, and it was right outside Olivia's bedroom and right near the kitchen, so all day long I was sort of the forgotten man, nobody remembered that I was actually there, I was like Bartleby the Scrivener back **(laughter)** behind my little thing and I would hear Olivia very freely talking to her mother at lunchtime every day, and every day—because she felt very free just talking to her mother, she could tell her any story, and a mother will always believe any story you tell them. So she explained that Ravioli had gotten married, gotten married to a wonderful woman named Kweeda and we debated for awhile whether that was K-w-e-e-d-a, an African princess, or Q-u-e-e-d-a,

you know, sort of Bulgarian royalty. We decided it was Kw. He got married to Kweeda, they went on a honeymoon to a beautiful place called Cornfields, which I always think was like one of those WASP resorts you read about in *Gourmet* magazine, you know, **(laughter)** "come to beautiful Cornfields." And then, one day, Olivia announced, "Kweeda has died. I'm sad to say that Kweeda has died. She's died of a terrible disease called bitterosity. She's died of a terrible disease called bitterosity." And I thought, "Everybody I know is dying from bitterosity, in fact." **(laughter)** I don't know a single New Yorker who doesn't have one degree or other of bitterosity infecting their system. You know, it's what happens to all of us. It's happening to you, Paul.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Believe me, I've become so *fierce* in this city and nearly rude at times. I feel like from time to time I drink Drano in the morning.

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: Exactly. And bitterosity—you try and inoculate yourself against bitterosity, and you do all the things: you go running the park, and you see your friends, and you drink wine in order—it's sort of like, bitterosity is to us as, you know, consumption was to the nineteenth century. We don't have a cure for it, but we do all these superstitious things that we think will keep it off, in fact. So it was another wonderful metaphor for the painful side of New York life. And really, quite seriously, bitterosity is the thing that threatens us, threatens our mental health here, and it's a very hard thing to be pure at heart in New York. It's almost impossible. Which may be why—actually, one of the reasons why, raising children here is such a joy, because children, though not innocent of malice, are pure of heart in that way. They're not bitter. It's very rare you meet a bitter six-year-old. You meet angry six-year-olds, you meet hostile six-year-olds, you meet enraged six-year-olds.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They're not sarcastic.

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, they can be sarcastic in a sort of—but they're not bitter, you know. They don't say, "I made the wrong decision. It's my fault. It'll never be better." **(laughter)** *That* they don't say. That they don't say. They say, "I hate you. I hate you," and they slam the door.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or as you say in one of your essays, "I hate you and I don't even like you."

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, Olivia said to me once—we were arguing because she couldn't go to bowl at Bowlmor, the bowling place downtown. And she stood on the sidewalk outside and she said, "I don't even like you. I used to love you and now I don't even like you." And I hear her saying that, you know, every time I go by—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Updating—I was thinking of—I realize that you updated the essay in that form, it's just that our lives in the last five years, through various technologies possibly, have become even busier. I think, as I like to call it, the forbidden fruit I walk around with everywhere, the BlackBerry, is another object of torture, just, you become completely addicted.

ADAM GOPNIK: And the worst of the BlackBerry is, too, is that—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you have one?

ADAM GOPNIK: No, I don't have a BlackBerry, I wouldn't be trusted with a BlackBerry, I would lose it somewhere within the first six hours, in fact, and then someone else would have it and would be sending in text to the *New Yorker* all the time **(laughter)** and we'd be publishing it. But what's terrible, too, is that—I've gotten e-mails from you on the BlackBerry—is that it says on the bottom, "Sent via BlackBerry," which gives you this terrible feeling of your poor friend walking down the street pumping his thumbs against the thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm one of those.

ADAM GOPNIK: But you know the truth is the other part of it, too, which no one could have anticipated is, is that the more of these labor-saving devices you have, the harder it is to get work done. So finally your whole struggle in a New York life is to be *less* busy in order to actually be productive. In other words, you know, you have, it's sort of like the people in *The Matrix*, right? We have six orifices open with cables plugged into them all day long and you struggle to unplug yourself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And also what always strikes me is when you ask people how they are, they say, "I'm busy," which is really not an answer to your question.

ADAM GOPNIK: Actually, you know in New—it's interesting. In New York it sort of *is* a socially acceptable answer. If you say to somebody, "I haven't seen you in a couple of months. What have you been doing?" You say, "Oh, I've been busy," and people say, "Oh, yeah, well," but if you go to Paris, or anyplace in Europe, in fact, and you try to pull that stunt, you lose all your friends, right? Because friendship makes certain demands, right? And it was one of the things that was very hard to learn when we lived in Paris in those years.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's talk about that for a—what is wonderful, I think, about having a conversation with Adam, is that truly it's digressive, as the essay form is. Digression in a way is the sunshine of narrative, as I've often said.

ADAM GOPNIK: I saw the later questions you want to ask me, Paul, so I'm keeping moving in another direction. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Hmm, what was the question I was going to—I lost the thread, but it will come back to me.

ADAM GOPNIK: If I continue to row this canoe in long enough circles, I can evade all the hard questions.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So the question I was about to ask you is really not hard at all, and a pleasure to ask. We heard some French music before you came on the stage, and I would love you to

compare and contrast those five years you spent in Paris with the five years you've been back and talk a little bit about Adam Gopnik's life in Paris and the texture of your daily life there, which is a texture probably quite different from what you experience here. I imagine, though maybe you're the same driven kind of person.

ADAM GOPNIK: No, it's the same drudgery. You know, the truth is, in any writer's life, your life from day to day is always exactly the same. You sit in front of a screen and you stare at it for hour after hour after hour, in your shorts or your pajamas or your bathrobe, and you have these tiny little slices of experience, which you then try to transform into stories. So whenever people say, "Oh, God, you must have had such a wonderful time living in Paris, the life you had," or even say, in a more complimentary way, "Oh, the way you described your life in Paris made me wish to live it," there's always a little bitter, ironic part of me that thinks, "No, mostly what I did in Paris was, I sat at a desk and I stared at a screen hour after hour after hour creating those symbols of the stuff that sounded so pleasant." Now, the stuff actually took place, but the necessity of a writer's life is that there's this thin skin of balloon and there's a vast cloud of hot air that you pump into it, in fact, in order to bring the literature aloft, so in that sense it wasn't that different. In another sense, of course, it was very different. My wife, Martha, said, when we trying to, struggling to decide whether to stay in Paris or move back to New York was that in Paris we had a beautiful existence but not a full life and in New York we have an unbeautiful existence and a very full life, and I think that that was true. That's a reflection as much of us, I guess, as it is of Paris. But one of the things that is true of Paris, I think, is that it is not a city—One of the things that makes New York wonderful is that it's a city of weak ties. You know a thousand people who you bump into, and you know relatively few of them very well, but you know many of them a little bit, and you're constantly engaged with them in small ways. At the end of the book, I have a whole section about how, with my usual ineptitude, I couldn't get Wi-Fi hooked up in our apartment, so I was always stealing my neighbors' Wi-Fi. I no longer do that. I'm an honest guy and I let other people steal mine. But I would—does anybody else do this? I would pull down the menu on my Apple thing at 3:30 in the morning, searching for somebody, one of the neighbors, Ellen, Mark, someone who had a thing. And we were engaged in this weird copulative act **(laughter)** of sharing the ether but we had no other connection. So that's you know the kind of weak tie that you have in New York.

Paris is a city—I think this is generally true of European cities—is a city of strong ties. That is to say, you have a clan, a cohort, that you've known since you were seventeen. You have a family, perhaps, but you have deep friendships, which you cannot amend. If you drop a friend, not deliberately, but if you simply don't see or speak to a friend in Paris for two months, it's a really mortal insult, it shows a lack of regard and consideration for that friend. You've turned them from a strong tie into a weak tie. In New York, if you turn a strong tie into a weak tie, being a weak tie is in a certain sense a sanctioned state, so it's not so bad. You say, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in so long." "I've been busy." "Oh, me too." and you can go back in, so that's one of the charms of New York, I think, and one of the things that makes it so different.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And one of the ways in which you're addressed in France and perhaps particularly in Paris, is people don't ask you as a first question what you do.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, they never ask you what you do. They *never* ask you how much you make. Not that people really do that here, but they ask you how much you've spent for something very often.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And figure out the rest.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, and figure out the rest. They divide by twelve and multiply by two and you have the relevant number. **(laughter)** So yes, so that's one of the things that's very different. People don't ask you what you do. And you're assumed to have a—and you know something else that's extraordinary, that actually fits into this? In all the years I lived in Paris and even now when I go back to Paris, usually once a year, if you read a book by someone you find interesting, a writer, philosopher, journalist, and you finagle their telephone number or their e-mail, and you call them up or write them, and say, "I've read your book. I greatly admired it. I'd love to talk to you. Could we meet for a coffee?" Almost without exception, whether it's Jean Baudrillard or Michel Houellebecq or whoever it is, they say, with a sigh, visible or implied, "Oh, yes, all right, let's meet at 4:30" at whatever the café on the corner is. And there's a sense that you have a sort of obligation to do that. You have to do it. Well, you can imagine, you know, if you e-mailed Norman Mailer and said, "Could you meet me? I've always

been interested in your work." I think it's very improbable in fact that—**(laughter)** *I* will do it, you can e-mail me. I'll go do anything to avoid having to be in front of that screen for eight hours. I think that there's a role. In France you can play—you're expected to play a social role that's independent of your actual working life. In other words, your life doesn't break down simply into your working hours, as it does here, and your domestic hours. There's a space there that's for consulting, orating, adultery, being sententious, and drinking coffee, that's a few hours you fit into the day between work and responsibility. We have nothing but work and responsibility.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Right, and your list probably not necessarily in that order. Just to stay for one more moment in Paris. What do you miss from those years? And since you claim to think that New York doesn't inspire in you, especially when you arrive in New York from LaGuardia, any sense of nostalgia, but Paris and perhaps Europe does. It reminds me of Milan Kundera's line, "The European is someone who longs for Europe," and I'm just wondering, what do you miss?

ADAM GOPNIK: About Paris?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, in imagined missing or real missing.

ADAM GOPNIK: It's hard to articulate, Paul, but what I genuinely miss, you know, I don't miss, you know, either the absurd stuff or the insanely exasperating stuff. I don't know how to put it. I used to go at about three-thirty in the afternoon most days when I was done writing. It actually speaks to what I was talking about a moment ago. My son was quite small still and I would push him in his poussette, his stroller, to the Luxembourg Gardens, and he would play in the playground, and I would sit with a little coffee, we would get a coffee and a little piece of chocolate, which they always give you with an espresso in Paris, and I would sit there with *Le Monde*, which had just come out in the afternoon, and reading *Le Monde*, watching him with half an eye play in the park, drinking the coffee, having the little piece of sugar, which usually had a picture of a poet on it, it being French sugar, I would do that and there was an enormous sense, maybe completely unearned, maybe totally illusory, but very profound, that you were participating in an old culture, that you were doing something that was in the most beautiful sense well-worn and smooth, that that long walk to the gardens, the walk back, was something that was shared, that you were kind of etching a deep groove in history. I mean, your part of the groove

was tiny, but that there was a deep groove that ran from the Luxembourg Gardens back to your apartment in the Left Bank that Samuel Beckett and **(inaudible)** and Verlaine had all trod before and that sense of deep continuity, I don't mean the continuity of you know, I just had a brilliant, artistic idea, because people don't have brilliant, artistic ideas anymore in Paris, **(laughter)** but that sense in which a certain kind of civilized motionlessness ran into a certain kind of civilized continuity. It's almost mystical and I'm not describing it well, but *that* was the thing I missed most in Paris, and that you can't recreate in New York.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I detected a slight criticism of French culture in what you just said—

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: No, no, no.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: —which I tend to agree with, namely that—

ADAM GOPNIK: Maybe a better way of putting it, Paul, is that French civilization remains for me one of the miracles of humankind, but French culture, both French official culture, meaning culture of administration and bureaucracy, and so on, remains one of the world's great difficulties, in fact. And French *artistic* culture at this time, not uniformly—not in the movies, for instance. I think French film is in a wonderful moment of renaissance, wonderful kind of neorealist thing, not yet sufficiently well known here, I think. But I think this French new wave is as good as the old French New Wave, maybe not quite that good, but very good.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's go to something that might also be French-inspired, though I'm sure there are deep-rooted connections and influences in the American essay form. I'm interested in the form in which you write. I'm interested in the form you choose to write in, which is the essay form. And I'd love you to talk a little bit about this. And I must say that I was particularly taken, we might do this little exercise together, reading your book parallel to E. B. White's wonderful essay about New York.

ADAM GOPNIK: We wanted to call tonight "Where is New York?" in homage to White, who said, "Here is New York," and we're all stuck asking "Where is New York? What is New York? What is the condition of New York at the beginning of the new millennium?" I *love* the essay. I never know quite what adjective to attach to it. People say, "the personal essay," but that always reminds you of sort of things in the back of *McCall's*, you know, and so on. I say "comic sentimental essay," which is probably too rococo a form for it. But whatever it is, I love—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But unpack that notion, though.

ADAM GOPNIK: Comic sentimental?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because I've heard this said about you many times.

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, the comic essay is meant to be funny, and that's the thing I most value in writing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And in people.

ADAM GOPNIK: And in people. It's hard for me to imagine really enjoying reading anything that wasn't, among other things, funny.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Humorous.

ADAM GOPNIK: Humorous is too flat a word. You know, "humorous" implies, sort of like the guy who writes a column in the local paper. Funny, you know, really genuinely coming out of some appreciation of the—not just the absurdity of life, but there's such a close relationship between common sense and comedy, that you know, comedy is just common sense set dancing, and that's the kind of comedy I love. But the great thing about the essay—and "sentimental" because in a sort of pugnacious way, because "sentimental" is a word we use only as a pejorative now. But, of course, in its origins, it's a positive word, it's a word meaning "paying great attention to feeling." You know, C. S. Peirce, the great American philosopher, once defended the idea of sentimentality. He said, "What do we mean, truly

mean, by sentiment?" he said. "We only mean"—now I'm going to forget the quote, having raised it—"we only mean paying great attention to the motions of a sensitive heart," and I think that that's right. And that's the other element I love in writing, where you are willing to be vulnerable enough on the page to pay great attention to the sensitivities of a tender heart. Not of your own, but of the world, the situation, the people you're describing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the essay form is, in some way, is like no other form.

ADAM GOPNIK: The essay form is I think unique amongst all literary forms, because it's the one place, in prose at least, I suppose you can do this in lyric poetry, too, but no, not really, where you can—where ideas and feelings, where thoughts and emotions, have actually, have completely equal place in fact. That is, that you generally begin an essay or start an essay with a funny story, a funny and you hope a touching story: your daughter has an imaginary friend. Your daughter's goldfish has died. Something small of that kind. You're trying to have a baby and there are French doctors. On and on, in this book. I had to go do security patrol for the kids' school, and so on. And then from that little bit of feeling or that little bit of funniness you can construct an argument, you can say, "and that made me think of" something else. And then that thing that it made me think of can become a structure in and of itself. As in "Charlie Ravioli" saying, "What is the nature of business?" And then you go can go deep into Pepys and Virginia Woolf and Henry James and how did bourgeois people—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Or lightly. Deeply *and* lightly.

ADAM GOPNIK: Lightly. Preferably lightly. I hope lightly. And you can do that, and then you can turn back towards the original feeling or narrative that you began with, so the essay is, I think, a very difficult form to do well. People often have the—I think mistaken idea that it's the most sort of self-baring of forms. And I don't think it is at all. I think, in fact, it's the most self-concealing of forms, because it's the one form where—you're know, you're writing a short story, right? Or John Updike is writing a short story. And a woman is undressing in front of a mirror, he can just undress the woman in front of the mirror and then bring in her husband.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Whenever you describe something, you go like this.

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: That is a built-in tic of the forty years of doing it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Updike undressing a women is something like this.

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: That is the way writers undress women. **(laughter)** We undress women this way in fact and never this way, because we're not that—and women writers undress men in the same way, only even stronger. **(laughter)** They even dig deeper into the keyboard. So you can do—and you know, but in a story, if you intrude an argument right into it, if Alice Munro is writing about, you know, the bleak sadnesses of the Lower Ontario heart, and then she says, "And it made me think of the way the Canadian Confederation actually began with a misunderstanding," you'd say, "This doesn't belong in this story, Alice, please don't put this argument into the middle of this beautiful story," and similarly if you're constructing an argument about the nature of Canadian confederation and you say, "And it made me remember the sad and wistful moment my mother growing up outside Toronto," you say, "Well, this doesn't really belong in this." But in the essay the sad and wistful moment and the argument about the Canadian Confederation *do* belong together, that's the nature of the form, and as a consequence it's the one we have to be the most rigorous, it seems to me, about—it's not a memoir. An essay's not a memoir, an essay's not a confession.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Quite literally, it's something—it's a form in which you try out. But you also assay, you, I mean, it has a double meaning, both trying-out and weighing. And, you know, the French got a little bit into trouble, because they mixed the essay with the novel so often, I mean, Sartre in particular, if you think of—

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, yes, but in Sartre's novel it's sort of obvious that there's an essayist at work who's put on, who's got a ventriloquist's dummy on his knee called the novelist, right, and then things are going on and he clears his throat and says, "That makes me think of something. When Heidegger

says that in fact the second form of being is that—he's wrong," and then you just see the real Sartre coming out, right? Because he's fed up with all these other people he has to play with and he's speaking, but in an essay—so that's what makes, I think, Sartre's novels unsatisfactory very often—but in an essay, it's exactly, it's the perfect form for the Sartres of the world, in fact, and I think that that's one of the things that makes it very difficult and also makes it, and also makes it, for me at least, my favorite form to read, much less to write.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'd like to read something, if you don't mind. Let me find this passage, which is in a chapter called "The City and the Pillars," which refers directly to 9/11.

ADAM GOPNIK: I wrote it two days after, I guess on the Thursday of that week.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I didn't know that. I said earlier that I had been re-reading, or maybe I didn't say it earlier, I think maybe I told you, no I did say, that I had been re-reading "Here is New York," by E. B. White and was very struck in E. B. White—maybe I'll—which way should I begin? Maybe I'll begin with you, and I had been very struck in E. B. White's short book on New York that he foresees in some very uncanny way the towers, though I'm not sure he's talking about that, or it's bombs falling on the city.

ADAM GOPNIK: He's writing in '49. He's conscious of the fact that New York has suddenly become a target. Has become vulnerable. And he writes about the arrival of the men in the planes. He means men in planes carrying atomic weapons, not men in planes crashing them into buildings, but that sense of foreboding he announces in 1949 in a way that seemed tragically prescient just after 9/11.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Here is your last paragraph. Maybe I should have you read it. From "Here in New York," to the end there so we can hear you reading it.

ADAM GOPNIK: I wrote, "'New York,' E. B. White wrote in 1949, 'holds a steady, irresistible charm for perverted dreamers of destruction because it—the city—seems so impossible.' He wrote, 'The intimation of mortality is part of New York now, in the sound of jets overhead.' We have heard the jets now, and we will probably never be able to regard the city with quite the same exasperated ironic

affection we had for it before. Yet on the evening of that day, one couldn't walk through Central Park or down Seventh Avenue or across an empty but hardly sinister Times Square, past the light on the trees or the kids on their scooters or the people sitting worried in the outdoor restaurants with menus, frowning, as New Yorkers always have, as though they had never seen a menu before, without feeling a surprising rush of devotion to the actual New York, Our Lady of the Subways, New York as it is. It is this"—and I've written earlier on that New York exists both as a symbolic city—you know, as the city of the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty and all of the symbolic associations we have with it, and it's a real city, a place where we make a home—"New York as it is. It is the symbolic city that draws us here but the real city that keeps us here. It seems hard but important to believe that city will go on, because we now know what it would be like to lose it, and it feels like losing life itself."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And listen to E. B. White here, and then I'd like to talk about these two texts side by side. "The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city for the first time in its long history is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. Intimation of mortality is part of New York now, in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines on the latest edition."

And the last two paragraphs of E. B. White's text reads as follows, I think that, in a way, reading them side by side with what you just read is quite powerful. "This race between the destroying planes and the struggling parliament of man. It sticks in all our heads, a city at last perfectly illustrates both a universal dilemma and a general solution. This riddle in steel and stone is at once a perfect target and the perfect demonstration of nonviolence, of racial brotherhood, this lofty target scraping the skies and meeting the destroying planes, halfway home of all people and all nations, capital of everything, housing the deliberations by which the planes are to be stayed and the errand forestalled. A block or two west of the new city of man is Turtle Bay. There's an old willow tree that presides over an interior garden. It is a battered tree, long-suffering and much-climbed, held together by strands of wire, but beloved of those who know it. In a way it symbolizes the city. Life under difficulties grows against the odds, sap rise in the midst of concrete and the steady reaching for the sun. Whenever I look at it nowadays and feel the cold shadow of the planes I think this must be saved, this particular thing, this very tree." And then this

most amazing last sentence. “If it were to go, all would go: this city, this mischievous and marvelous monument, which not to look upon would be like death.” Was E. B. White on your mind very much?

ADAM GOPNIK: I feel a bit like James Frey on *Oprah* right now.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You don’t—

ADAM GOPNIK: Exposed!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I don’t feel like Oprah. Let me just say—

ADAM GOPNIK: Oh, of course, nor I like James Frey. Yes, of course, White is a writer I profoundly love. In fact, I think I’ve never discussed White in part because I do love him so much. I’ve often written—I’ve written and talked about Thurber a great deal, and Liebling, other writers from the magazine’s history that I love and of Updike, who have influenced me. White is a writer I couldn’t possibly be more unlike, in all the ways, but a writer who I love and I do think in a certain way there’s a certain mixture of the particular and the rhetorical that White has on hand is in that sentence, is in that passage, which I keenly admire. And yes, absolutely, when I was writing that piece, that essay, on 9/11, I was acutely aware of White’s “Here is New York” because it seemed both, it seemed to define so much of what one loved about New York and also because he had made this prophecy about New York as a vulnerable place, which had not come true, which had seemed totally—that imagination of catastrophe seemed to have evaporated with the passing of the 1940s—it’s very touching. He talks about the parliament of man. He believed in the UN, he believed in world government, which is just very terribly dated now. **(laughter)** Well, it does, as we look to—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: As we look for a new Secretary-General.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, and he believed it and used the pages of the magazine to—in the best sense—propagandize for it and so on. I think that that was, so it was very much something that was on my mind

when I was writing. And you know, it's funny, because it's one of the things that essays do, of course, is that they're, what do they call that in the academy? Intertextual in that way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We could have spoken earlier on of anxiety of influence.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, we write about writing, you know, every, the essayist is in that sense probably for its own bedraggled—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But in this way I didn't like feel at all Oprah to your Frey. I know you were teasing me, but I actually was trying to make a deeper point about the whole notion of the essay.

ADAM GOPNIK: But as a consequence, let me add something here that's more belligerent, too. As a consequence, the essay seems to many people the wrong form for tragedy, in fact. And people feel, I know, that you can't write essays in the face of tragedy, the essay is a diminutive form, and that to position it in the face of tragedy with all of its little curlicues of complexity and all of its intertextuality and all of its combination of argument and emotion is wrong and when you're face to face with some terrible horror you can't write about it in that form. And I understand that. It seems to me that writers write. There's always something to be said. You know, it's one of the great arguments, one of the great undecidable issues of the twentieth century. What do you do in the face of horror?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The famous comment by Adorno that after Auschwitz lyrical poetry is no longer possible.

ADAM GOPNIK: Right, right. But that didn't turn out to be true. You know, one of my great heroes, heroines, I suppose I have to say, and the person who supplies one of the two epigraphs for this book is Szymborska, the great Polish poet.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Fantastic poem.

ADAM GOPNIK: Amazing poem. And Symborska was born in the worst possible time for a human being to be born, probably. And the poem that superintends this book is "A Tale Begun," by Wislawa

Szymborska, the great Polish poet, who won the Nobel Prize just a few years ago, one of the few occasions on which the Nobel Prize went to the right writer. And the poem begins, "The world is never ready / for the birth of a child. / Our ships are not yet back from Winnland. / We still have to get over the S. Gothard Pass. / We've got to outwit the watchman on the desert of Thor, / fight our way through the sewers to Warsaw's center, / gain access to King Harald the Butterpat, / and wait until the downfall of Minister Fouche. / Only in Acapulco / can we begin anew." Meaning that, in any historical moment, there's always some reason why having a child is the worst imaginable thing you can do, and, of course, she goes in the poem, as you can imagine, to say, "like it or not, here it comes, here he comes, here she comes," that there's never a good moment to have a child, and I use it in the book to suggest that that's always true, that there never *is* a good moment to have a child, but we're never going to get to Acapulco, we're just never going to get there, so if we're going to begin anew, we're going to have to begin anew here and now, and so Szymborska, born in Poland at the worst possible time for a human being to be born, that is at the end of the First World War, with all of the horrors of the Second World War and of the Russian occupation of Poland to face, *does* write lyric poetry, lyric poetry of an *incredibly* high order, and what she writes about is exactly that contradiction, exactly about the necessity of pressing on, even though we're never going to get there. You don't write lyric poetry in Acapulco, you're writing when you're trying to get, as she says, to the sewers in Warsaw. So, I think that that's—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The belligerent nature here is that you're answering some of your critics.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, which I which often do belligerently, but usually it's about 3:30 in the morning and only my wife listens and she's heard it enough times and she turns over. That's a very—that's a thriving, but insufficiently celebrated literary genre, probably even more important than the essay. Is the—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What's that book, *The Art of Making Enemies*.

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, not so much that, it's the three-thirty in the morning mutter to your spouse. The writer's muttering to the spouse, and then the spouse has heard it all before and then turns over.

Some people publish these mutterings, in fact. **(laughter)** And it's usually a bad idea. They usually tend to think, "That was a bad idea to publish the long muttering to the spouse," so usually you turn over and you read, I read Bill James, the baseball analyst, and you get back to sleep. And you begin anew in the morning, in fact, but I do think, Paul, in all seriousness, in that great argument, which I think Szymborska answers as best as anyone could, by having lived through all that and gone on writing not just as she did, but writing the kinds of things she did, which are about the details of daily life, about children pulling the tablecloths from tables, about going to see the doctor and getting undressed in front of the doctor, and so on, answered as best she could. But I do think there's something always to be said for silence in the face of tragedy and there's something to be said for sensibility, there's something to be said for trying to organize fluently through all the resources you have as a writer, other writing metaphor. We do it with tragedy all the time. You know, the last essay in this book is called "The Last of the Metrozoids," and it's about the last year in the life of a friend of both of ours, Kirk Varnedoe, the great art historian, and in that year Kirk was dying of cancer, he was my closest friend, and also giving a brilliant series of lectures at the National Gallery and also coaching this flag football team of eight-year-olds, including my own son. And that was, you know, a very hard blow, as hard a blow as I've ever had to face, was watching this extraordinary man die, and you could be silent in the face of it or you could try to write about it. And the minute you try to write about it, it means you organize it. You don't organize it in some, you know, abstract Acapulcio way, if I can mispronounce a new adjective, as an aesthetic artifact, but you try to organize it using everything that you have on hand.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And Kirk was not sentimental about his own illness.

ADAM GOPNIK: Not only not sentimental about it, he was incredibly plainspoken about it. You know, he would tell you, "I think I'll give these lectures, the Mellon lectures, and then I'll die." And he wasn't saying it with bravura, he wasn't saying it with melodrama, just saying it because he knew that that was the case. And he chose in the face of certain death, certain mortality, he knew he was not—bitter irony, he was rediagnosed with cancer just before 9/11 and died eighteen months later—and in the face of it, he chose neither to complain about it nor to honor it by describing it and becoming hysterical about it, and he chose—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "Incurable but treatable," was what he said.

ADAM GOPNIK: Right, was what he said, which meant it was incurable in fact, but by reiterating his allegiance to art in every sense, to abstract art, which is what he talked about, to the art of teaching, to the art of making football plays for eight-year-olds, and it was his belief that meaning is something we create, and something we have to create every day, and that by the act of making meanings, whether you're making a pass pattern for an eight-year-old football team, or you're explaining the inner workings of a Twombly, or you're going down—I remember, right after 9/11, we went down all together, the kids, and Kirk and his wife Elyn and we went to see the Richard Serras, these wonderful torqued ellipses, and sort of kicked them, we kicked around in them, and that was for him in the presence of those abstract aesthetic artifacts, that was na affirmation of what we believed in, in both life itself and also the freedom of the individual to make perverse and obscure things and that that was part of the inheritance of our culture, and one of the things that was very moving was about, of all of the people I knew after 9/11, certainly not including the badly rattled me, he was the only person who wasn't rattled by it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He and—

ADAM GOPNIK: And our friend, who I call Sally, who is actually Patty Marx, the comedy writer, because comedy writers and ill people have in common the knowledge that it's never going to work out but you're going to manage all right. He said, "You know, we can either choose to be—" he said, "The one thing we can't afford to do is let our fears dominate our lives in a way that reduces the possibilities of living," and I think that's true.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I'm happy to say, though this is purely in the first stages, that we might have the pleasure of having Adam back, to offer an homage to Kirk Varnedoe, whose lectures, whose Mellon lectures are coming out as we speak, in about two or three weeks from now, and when speaking to Adam about how we might do it, he said, "You know we really shouldn't do something that is commemorative in the way that one might think of doing it, sentimentalizing it, but we should call the evening 'An Argument with Kirk Varnedoe,'" because up to the end, you described to me an evening conversation on the phone you had with him the night before he died, you were arguing about something.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, in fact we were arguing about Elvis Presley—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How could I forget.

ADAM GOPNIK: —because we had been driving around that day listening to old Elvis records, partly—we were up on holiday, not knowing that he was as ill as he turned out to be—and we were listening to Elvis records, and our son Luke, who is his godson, his favorite Elvis record is "Devil in Disguise," which is sort of a terrible Elvis record from the mid-Sixties and very low Elvis. And he said, "What's he like best on the Elvis records?" And I said, "Devil in Disguise." And he said, "Oooh, that's very bad. That's very bad Elvis. You haven't been playing the Sun Sessions for him." And I said, "Well, we've been trying, but you know, that's a little more difficult," and he said, "Well, you have a responsibility to play him good Elvis if you're going to be playing Elvis," and I said, "I'm trying, but you know, he likes 'Devil in Disguise' and 'A Little Less Conversation,' he likes those things." "He *likes* them but your job is to *teach* him what's good and what's bad." And that was the last conversation we had, he died four or five hours later. And he believed passionately, as do I, that argument makes art: that argument is at the core of what we mean by—when we talk about aesthetics, we don't mean something intrinsically lovely that we admire. We mean something that captures the nature of human difference, human conflict. We mean something exactly where you have two writers, whether it's E. B. White and Adam Gopnik, or two more significant ones, who are in friction, who are using each other and arguing with each other about—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Rubbing. A form of friction. Really they're giving eczema to each other. I was actually thinking about that because when I brought those two texts together, yours and E. B. White's, to particularly illustrate the essay form, the great essay form, with, you know, our granddaddy who in this case happens to be French, Montaigne, who wrote les *Essais*, the *Essays*, and whose essays are but a rewriting of Plutarch and then Montaigne was rewritten by Pascal and you're—

ADAM GOPNIK: I rewrite E. B. White. (**laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You rewrite E. B. White, and so, you know, it isn't the same thing as the Oprah show at all or the Oprah book she was featuring, which I hear is selling very well, because in some way this is a form of dialogue you're having with someone and the essay form is one of the best ways in which you can actually have that dialogue.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, dialogue with the dead, though, fortunately dead, the dialogue with the dead and the out of copyright. That's the rule.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have to choose them carefully.

ADAM GOPNIK: That's why Montaigne dialogued with Plutarch. He was long gone.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He was safe. I also am curious, you seem to think—well, maybe I shouldn't phrase a question this way. What has changed since 9/11 in New York? And the comment made that irony is dead after 9/11.

ADAM GOPNIK: Boy, that turned out to be—only I have said things as unprescient as that. I wrote an essay for the *New Yorker* back in about 1992 called "Death of an Audience," about how the audience for museums was disappearing. That turned out to be the single worst prediction that anyone's ever made, which you can discover by visiting the Museum of Modern Art now. You know, one of the things that—the hard thing to get, I think, though we all experience it. It's not hard to get, it's hard to say. Because it touches on certain taboos, I think. Is that, on the one hand, your experience of 9/11 was that, anyone with any historical consciousness would know, that it altered everything. You know, a sudden raid and the loss of that much life, and of two great buildings in a capital city, anyone with an historical consciousness would know that it would change everything, as the cliché has it, but anyone with a sense of reality knows that it hasn't, knows that the rhythms and rituals and rites of the city in themselves went on largely unchanged. The internal landscapes of our minds had changed profoundly. And so, we were stuck between those two kinds of knowledge, in fact. We've lived our lives the last five years more or less waiting for the other shoe to drop, as everyone says, and what we've discovered is that you can live quite well on one leg, in fact, that the real nature of existence is to hop through existence. We don't get to stride through it or run through it, we hop through our lives with the knowledge that the other shoe

may drop, will drop, it could have dropped this afternoon, may drop, but you don't have a choice, you can't simply stand there on one leg forever—you hop forward.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you wonderfully describe New York, quoting somebody, you're walking through Park Avenue looking at some of the wonderful structures there. I can't remember the person you're walking with, but some friend of yours, who says that the reason that New York continues to be a vibrant city is because men today have children late, their notion of delayed marriage, instead of being twenty-five, they are now thirty-five, and as long as people continue to have children late, this city will continue to thrive.

ADAM GOPNIK: Oh, yes. Everyone in New York has one billionaire friend, one celebrity friend, you know, you always know one person, only one, but you do know them. I know one billionaire. I have a friend who is, and he is a property tycoon. And he was walking me through midtown the week after 9/11 and he was saying, and he was explaining to me why you could never build a building like the Citicorp Center or the Seagram's Building and so on and I said, "So you don't really have any faith in New York, you don't really believe in New York." "Oh no," he said, "You know, it's just the opposite, you know Keynes said in the long run we're all dead. In New York in the short run we're all dead and in the long run we're all fine." **(laughter)** And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said, "Well, here's the thing about New York. Here's the key demographic that nobody sufficiently appreciates about New York"—and this comes back to the theme of the book—"it's the median age of childbearing." When people have children at thirty-five, women and couples have children at thirty-five, it changes everything, because it means that through their twenties, instead of having children and starting a family, they're searching for a mate. And when people are searching for a mate, there is *nothing* you can do that can get them out of the city. You know, terrorism, anthrax, anything. **(laughter)** If you are trying to get laid every Friday night, you are not going to New Jersey, **(laughter)** or there's simply no way you can be moved.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: To go to New Jersey.

ADAM GOPNIK: To Connecticut, where I'm always being moved by my wife. You won't go, you just won't go. And if the company is moving, you don't look around and say, "Well, I guess it's time we

go," you just say, "I'll find another job. I'm not going." And that means then that when you do have children by the time you're thirty-five, instead of having them at twenty-five, you're settled here. This is your home, this is what you're familiar with, this feels like home. It doesn't feel like the springboard to your real life, in fact, it just feels like home. And so you stay, and as a consequence of all of those people having sex in their twenties and children in their thirties, he felt, that the future of the city was secure, and I loved that notion, in fact, because that, of all the things that people were saying after 9/11, the notion that it was not just sex in the city, but that sex around the city.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You say sex is not only *in* the city from a real estate tycoon's point of view, it *is* the city. All the city's hope.

ADAM GOPNIK: All the city's hope relied on that notion, and it's turned out to be true.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So in closing, the title of your book, it's called *Through The Children's Gate.* Explain it a little bit to the audience and talk also a little bit about your relationship to Christo's work.

ADAM GOPNIK: Oh, the Gates. The Children's Gate, as I'm sure most of you know, is an actual place. It's the entrance to Central Park at 76th Street, on the east side of the park because when Olmsted and Vaux were designing the park, they had, and I haven't been able to quite track down exactly whose idea it was originally, they had the slightly waggish but romantic idea of naming all the entrances to the park after imaginary groups who would enter the park. This was, after all, a park for the people. And so there's the Miners' Gate, the Engineers' Gate, the Scholars' Gate, my own old favorite, the Strangers' Gate, up on the Upper West Side, and there's the Children's Gate, and the Children's Gate is where, presumably, children, one of more of the many classes and types who would enter Central Park and make it a park for the people, where they would come in. And I love that notion, that kind of nineteenth-century notion, that there'd be one place where the children would troop in obediently.

You can never actually see that it's called the Children's Gate because there's a hot dog vendor who parks his melancholy and his machine **(laughter)** right in front of it all day long all through good weather so you have to get there early to see it, and as it happens there's a playground right on the other

side of it, so it's a real place, and we actually, on our first morning back in New York, we went through the Children's Gate jetlagged and bleary-eyed on our way to the playground. But it's also—real city and symbolic city—it's part of the symbolic city for us because it represents coming to New York to raise children. It represents the extraordinary growth of New York as a place where the civilization of childhood, a place that welcomes and is good for children, which has happened in the last five years, to the great indignation of the—the heroin addicts and so on who feel as displaced by that outpouring of small people as the previous generations felt displaced by the income of the heroin addicts, so *that's* part of the life of New York, so I wanted to write about the Children's Gate both as a real place where you go in and as a symbolic place, and by the kind of wonderful coincidence that happens to poeticizing writers, the Christos did their Gates, in fact, I mean throughout the park, obviously, but not far from the Children's Gate and I was very moved by them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You felt disinclined to like the project at first.

ADAM GOPNIK: I hated the whole idea, not that anybody cared about my opinion, but I thought it was a terrible idea, because I think Central Park is not only one of the great architectural wonders of the world, but that it's the beating heart of New York and what people often forget about Central Park, is that perhaps uniquely among great parks in the world, it is not an enclosed green space. It's not—there was some green space there that somebody put a fence around. It is a *thoroughly* invented and fabricated place. Every rock and every tree that you see there is there because someone put it there. Olmsted put it there. So the notion that this great work of art in the most literal sense, not just a great park, but this greatest of all site sculptures was going to be ornamented, disfigured, by somebody else's mediocre site sculpture did not appeal to me at all. No one listened to me, thankfully, and the Gates took place and I found them very much to my surprise, incredibly moving. Quite ugly, quite ugly, those orange shower curtains, but incredibly moving. And why was it so moving? It was moving because it captured something about New York. There was, if you remember, and I think nobody quite expected it, I certainly didn't, an enormous sense of festivity that the Gates—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The spectacle.

ADAM GOPNIK: The spectacle projected out and everybody walked underneath them and you saw elderly couples promenading beneath the Gates and you saw small children there, and if I had been not already married, I think that I would have liked to have gotten married under one of them. And you had the sense that any newcomer, any alien, any Martian, any Japanese coming to the city would have marked down, "Oh, every few years they have the festival of the orange gates," **(laughter)** "and it's very important that everyone who is fourteen years old on the West Side must walk through, underneath six orange gates before," and you'd be convinced that there was some kind of ritual going on there, because it had the affect of a ritual, it had the look of a ritual. And there *was* no ritual, it was an invented ritual, it was a self-made ritual.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And it created conversation in the park—

ADAM GOPNIK: It was a series of secular rituals that were improvised by New Yorkers as they walked underneath them. And that for me is the heart and the essence of New York. It's a place of endless, beautiful secular ritual improvisation made up by people who don't know they're going to be doing as they begin to do it and who can't remember why they did it after they've done it. **(laughter)** And that's what keeps us here.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the subtitle of the book is *A Home in New York* which is, I suppose, a direct reference to the home you're trying to provide, you strive to provide to your children. You are Canadian. You are giving *them* a home in New York and they are becoming New Yorkers. And in some way, also, *they* are *your* mentors, as an inversion.

ADAM GOPNIK: We came in through the Strangers' Gate, my wife and I, we came in like so many of us as pilgrims, as strangers who got on a bus in Canada that said "New York City" and we came down to take a walk on the mild side, I suppose someone would say, and we did, but we came in through the Strangers' Gate and we wanted our kids to come in through the Children's Gate, as native New Yorkers and they become our tutors and our mentors in the city and at the very end of the book, of course, they've outgrown us, they've outgrown me as subjects, and at the very last thing in the book is that my daughter Olivia explains to me why *Through the Children's Gate* is such a terrible title for a book, she thinks it's the worst title you could possibly come up with, in fact. And she says that it's a bad title. And

she was talking exactly like an editor, exactly like a publisher, you know, just, “It won’t work, it won’t sell, no one will understand it.” And she said to me then, “It just won’t work. It just won’t sell. Trust me.”

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, I’m very happy to say that after your questions to Adam—Adam has agreed to answer some of your questions—we will in fact be selling the book and Adam will be signing it. So I would like to thank Adam very much.

ADAM GOPNIK: Thank you, Paul.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have mikes on each side, on that side. I will ask you to pose your question—in my ten years of experience of doing these public events, I’ve noticed that questions can be asked in about forty-seven seconds.

ADAM GOPNIK: You’ll be cut off at forty-nine, but you’ll get a warning at forty-five.

Q: I just wanted to know, do you ever get *tired* of being busy? **(laughter)** Because I do.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, you know, and occasionally, like Fresh Air kids, we go out to the country, and we sit there and say, “There’s no noise here. It’s like, quiet and there are birds singing, and it’s really—what’s this place all about?” And as I say, our family, like most New York families, are divided. One half of the axis of our family would like to—is ready to leave New York and go to leafy Connecticut or sandy New Jersey or some bucolic place. And the other half, me and my daughter Olivia, won’t. As I explain in the book, *she* is a true New Yorker. But when she was little she couldn’t say New York, she would say Yew Nork, she’d spoonerize it, Yew Nork. And once we’d been out, we’d gone on a holiday to the ocean, and we came back, and she didn’t like the ocean because things swim in it. And we came back and we went for pizza our first night back, and someone came down the street. We’re in, you

know, some outdoor pizza place on Second Avenue. Someone came down the street shouting that great New York cry, “F you, a-hole!” And she had no idea what it means, but she just knew it was the sound of her jungle, and she perked up, and she said, “Daddy, aren’t you glad to be back in Yew Nork?” **(laughter)** And that’s just how I feel whenever I come home from the country and I hear some psycho screaming imprecations, you know, I’m so glad to be back in Yew Nork. Someone else, lady down here.

Q: Why do men wear short pants? Why do men, intelligent men, especially, I notice, they never wear pants that are quite long enough. I’m beguiled by your ankles all evening.

(laughter)

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, actually I have a serious answer for that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mine got wet.

ADAM GOPNIK: If you are short, and I am, there’s no denying it, and in fact I’ve come to a turning point in my life, because it used to be that when people would meet me back when, they’d say, “Oh, you’re younger than I expected,” and now they only say, “Oh, you’re shorter than I expected.” **(laughter)** And as a short man you have a choice. Either you have your pants done in such a way so that they puddle terribly when you walk but on the other hand are very graceful when you put your leg up. Or you have them done short so they don’t puddle terribly when you walk, but then they show great expanses of socks. It’s one of the ethical and moral dilemmas that short men are faced with when they go to the tailor’s. And what can I say? **(applause)** Like all ethical and moral dilemmas, they’re insoluble, they’re only arguable, as we were saying before. Someone else?

Q: You said that to be in New York it’s hard to be pure of heart and that you like that your daughter can hear “Fuck you, a-hole,” and go “Hey, we’re home!” Didn’t you ever want for them to have that kind of pure of heart time, that time where fairies and everything else exist and that you can be pure and the rest of the world, the tough part of the world, will come later?

ADAM GOPNIK: Well, you know, I guess, and maybe it's an illusion, I think that New York in a certain way allows the purity of heart of kids—not the purity of their ears, perhaps, but the purity of their hearts, to thrive because they're making their lives in a resistant context, but they go on making their lives. I often think, I saw once a little boy on the subway, getting on the subway, and he sat down and immediately he craned around to look out the window to see what would go by—nothing, a wall, but that act of craning around, I thought, was very moving and I think that if anything the kind of daily dialogue between tiny small consciousnesses and this vast impersonal city is more moving, creates another kind of purity of heart, in fact, and I think that it's one of the things, you know, when we read Henry James's account of his childhood in the city or Salinger's great stories about children in the city, it's one of the things I think that moves us, is exactly the sense that the pure in heart surviving in an impure environment is more moving than the pure in heart managing in an already purified environment.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They grow up quicker, but they have imaginary friends.

ADAM GOPNIK: Yes, exactly.

Q: Do your French friends come to New York and visit and, if so, what do they think of New York?

ADAM GOPNIK: Many French friends come and visit all the time and French people, at least the Parisians I know, tend to love New York, they idealize New York City. "It's the most tonic city in the world," is what they always say. They tend to have, just as we have a slightly skewed movie-driven version of Paris, they have a slightly skewed, movie-driven version of New York. They tend, I often find, and I don't know if you've found this, Paul, to prefer uptown New York, where the buildings are tall and the avenues are long to the downtown New York that many of us prefer. They have no interest in Greenwich Village that they've seen, you know, or Soho or something. So I think that they respond in that way, too. I think that—and then of course they still come for things that scarcely, sadly, scarcely any longer exist, like classic jazz and so on. They—if you go to the Village Vanguard on a Sunday night it's filled with French people waiting to hear Miles Davis, in fact, just as if you go to the flea market in Paris, it's filled with Americans, right, waiting to find Django Reinhardt. So they have that. It's the same kind of dialogue of the deaf in part but I think that the French, the Parisian love of New York is one of the extraordinary things, the moving things. They tend to—the writers that they like best about New

York tend to be writers who we esteem but perhaps don't esteem sufficiently, like Jerome Charon, for instance, his Alphabetville novels are incredibly influential in Paris and keenly admired.

Q: I just finished reading a book about Irène Némirovsky. *Suite Française* but this is now a book by Jonathan Weiss analyzing her life and raises the issue about assimilation that Irène Némirovsky was never really was allowed to fit in. So I ask a hypothetical question. If you had remained in France, decided to stay there, do you think as a writer, or even just as a person living in France that you would have had to assimilate, been allowed to assimilate, or always on the outside?

ADAM GOPNIK: This is so bizarre that it's going to sound as if you were a plant in the audience. But I just finished reading that biography of Irène Némirovsky, **(laughter)** a day ago, two days ago, I guess. This just to fill in anybody who understandably doesn't know what we're talking about. She was an extraordinary writer, came from Russia, a Russian Jew originally, but of a kind of white Russian background, who wrote, who became one of the most popular writers in France in the 1930s and then wrote in private, it wasn't published until this decade, a novel about—*Suite Française*—about France in the Occupation, not in the Occupation, right, in 1940, in the year of the Occupation, and then was taken off to Auschwitz and died ther,e in fact. And she's been made understandably, appropriately, into a kind of martyr and what turns out to be true in the biography that we were just talking about is that she was a kind of anti-Semite, there's no other way of putting it. She had no Jewish identity, or wanted no Jewish identity, and her husband wrote these heartbreaking letters after she was taken away to Hélène Morand, the wife of the great writer—and anti-Semitic writer—Paul Morand, saying, "But you must understand," because she had an in, Hélène Morand did, with the Occupation authorities, "You must understand, she hates Jews, she always describes them badly, she's as anti-Semitic as you could possibly want someone to be." And this of a woman who was by that time probably already dead at Auschwitz so it sets off many a painful and resonant notion. I don't think I would ever have assimilated in France in that way and that was one of the things that brought us back, but I don't think it was because I was Jewish, I think it was because I was an outsider, in other words, I don't think that *that* was the crucial barrier.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A different way of putting it is you were not French.

ADAM GOPNIK: I was not French. I was not French Jewish, I was not French in any way. And as I've written, I think it's not even so much that you can be an outsider and become French. I mean, Sarkozy, who's likely to become the next President of France, or as likely as anyone, is as much an outsider, more of an outsider, than anyone who's ever run for the presidency of the United States. You know, Dukakis was much less of an immigrant than Sarkozy. Sarkozy's father, who was an immigrant, with a strong accent and a sense of himself as being an immigrant, said to his son "You'll never, you know, none of us could ever be elected, could ever succeed in French politics." So I don't think it has anything to do with being Jewish or being an outsider, but if you're in France at the age of seventeen and at school when these very powerful cohorts are being formed, then you'll feel French, no matter where you come from. If you're an outsider afterwards, then you'll be perpetually an outsider, it seems to me.

So, that's a very moving book, and it's strange you mention it, since I've been brooding on it for the last few days, and also, let me just add, since we're talking about it, I think that the tone of that book is a little unfair to Némirovsky, in the sense that God only knows what any of us would have done in that situation, right? And it's easy to look back at it now and say, you know, "How could she have said those things, how could they written these letters?" Her life was at stake. What wouldn't you write or say at that moment? I don't know, but I just mean that it's awfully easy. You know what I thought about as I was reading it? She was one of those wealthy Russians who was raised in a second language. Her second language was French, just as Nabokov's second language, first second language, he was raised in English. And so Nabokov went off and was in France for a while but went off to England. Had Nabokov's second language been French, had that been the language that he chose to write in, it would have been a very different life for Nabokov, too. So, it's a fascinating story and provocative.