

## Language as Magic in *Spinning Silver*

**Erika Gotfredson:** Hi everyone, and welcome to our second Big Read podcast. I'm Erika Gotfredson, and I'm here with Emily Pearson and Jason Abad. Today, we're going to be discussing language as magic within Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver*. What I'm going to do to start us off is I'm going to have my friends here introduce themselves by telling us a little bit about who they are and what year they are in school, things like that, and then I will round us off, and we will jump into our conversation. So Emily, do you want to get us started with an introduction?

**Emily Pearson:** Sure! Hi guys. As Erika said, I'm Emily Pearson. I am a second-year master's student at the English department at Purdue in the Literature, Theory, and Culture program.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Awesome! What about you, Jason?

**Jason Abad:** I'm Jason Abad. I am a third-year Ph.D. student in the Literature, Theory, Culture program at Purdue. Is there anything else you wanted us to...?

**Erika Gotfredson:** That's great, that's awesome. And then I'll round us off. As I mentioned, my name is Erika. I am also a third-year like Jason, a third-year Ph.D. student in the LTC program in the English Department at Purdue. I also serve as the Assistant Director of the Big Read, so I've been doing a lot of the event planning and things like that for the Big Read and enjoying that position. I also am teaching Intro to Fiction this semester where my students are actually reading *Spinning Silver* right now, so I want to give my students a shout-out. Hi students! I hope that you are listening in and enjoying this conversation! Okay, so here's what we're going to do: We are going to have three segments for today. So the first thing that we're going to talk about is the concept of names within the text and the importance of names, particularly as they can function as a version of magic in the text. And then our second segment will be thinking about moments where language can possess as much, if not more, power than magic. And then we'll wrap up our conversation with just a general discussion of Novik's interest in language and storytelling, particularly how the text is thinking about retelling Rumpelstiltskin and just breaking down stereotypes and narratives that we can build about other people and things like that. I do want to give a brief spoiler alert that I imagine we will be discussing most parts of the text; we're not going to stop ourselves from talking about the text in full, so if you haven't listened to or read the entire novel in full, listen accordingly. Okay, so let's get started with our first segment. So, here's what we're going to talk about: the idea of names [and] naming is really at the core of this novel. We see it all throughout this text. And so we see, for instance, that the Saryk king will not give his name to Miryem and that Miryem, once she gets to the Saryk kingdom, bestows names on various Saryk servants that she meets. We also see a moment where the Saryk king gains power over Mirnatius's demon by sharing his name. So let me just open with the question: Why are characters' names significant in the novel, and how maybe does the concept of naming work as magic in a sense?

**Emily Pearson:** Okay, I'll jump in. So, I think the concept of naming and the power behind it changes depending on where you are; the cultural context matters so much in how names work. For instance, for Miryem's family, names seem to be a way of tying them to their Jewish

heritage, even though they're not in a country that's predominantly Jewish and they're discriminated against there. But it means something completely different to the Saryks, where knowing someone's name gives you a power over them, and the Saryk king just doesn't want anyone to know his name because he doesn't want to be under anybody else's control. So in some senses, it ties people together; in other senses, it can keep people at a distance.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely.

**Jason Abad:** So maybe to add on a little bit to that, specifically about how the Saryk use names: To know someone's name in that sense is almost to know their nature. And that knowledge of their nature grants power over the individual. So there's this scene where the Saryk king encounters the demon Chernobog, and he calls him "Devourer," and says, "While I haven't seen your face before, I know your name." And so it has this kind of meaning built in there, almost like when you tell someone [that] your reputation precedes you or "I know who you are by that." So in this instance, we come to know Chernobog by that name "Devourer." There's also a reference that Novik is building in here with that name. So you have, I suppose, a reference to Slavic gods in here as well. Chernobog is a reference to one of the Slavic gods literally by the same name, sometimes called the "Black God." In that way, we're tying it into additional lore here.

**Erika Gotfredson:** That's really cool! Trying to piece together, I think, what both of you are saying is this idea that naming—exactly what you said, Emily—can mean different things in different contexts. So in all of the instances of naming in the novel, naming is powerful; it gives some kind of power. But then the power looks different depending on the context. And so we have the moments where Miryem is bestowing names upon the servants, and there's a power—there's a magical force even maybe there—in terms of binding them together, but that looks very different from the moment, Jason, that you bring up where the Saryk king says the demon's name and has power over him. So there seems to be, I think, a difference but also maybe a similarity there as well. What did we make of the moments where Miryem bestows names upon the servants as well as Flek's daughter in the Saryk kingdom? What did you make of those moments?

**Emily Pearson:** To me, one of the most powerful moments in this book about magic is one of the more simplistic ones where Miryem names Flek's daughter, and the name she ends up giving her is Rebekah bat Flek, which, I think, means something very different in this culture than how the Saryk usually interpret names. So the last part of the name "bat Flek" means "daughter of Flek," which is interesting because Flek had talked about not wanting her daughter's father to be part of her life anymore. So she creates this bond with the mother more so in the naming than a traditional father setup. And then by naming her Rebekah, not only is it a very traditional Jewish name, pulling her into that culture a little bit, but it also means "to bind" in Hebrew. So it's a way of not only binding Miryem with this child, but also with this culture and blending them together in a way that, I think, sort of helps Miryem come back to the Saryk kingdom at the end of the book when there's sort of some doubt about whether she will.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely.

**Jason Abad:** In a way, this is also talking about how we as people connect ourselves to other people. In the book, Novik talks about this almost as if it's a kind of magic that we have in the real world, the way she connects it to Jewish culture and naming. There's another scene where Miryem and her mother and a couple others are waiting in front of the gate to Vysnia, and they meet another Jewish woman. They see her by her attire, but really the way that they bond, that they realize their connection, is by reciting the names that they know of the people that they know. And it's almost as if that act of, not just the names themselves, but the act of calling up the people that you know, by naming the people that you know, that you make bonds with people that you wouldn't otherwise have a connection with.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Yeah, I really like that point of Novik gesturing towards the idea that this is something that we possess, right, that extends beyond the novel. And I think that that ties back to the experience that Miryem has in relating to the Saryk kingdom. We see when she is going to the Saryk kingdom and the Saryk king has said, "I'm going to marry you. I'm going to take you with me," and she says, "Wait, I don't even know your name," and he doesn't give the name at the beginning of the relationship. I think that in her initial interactions and movements throughout the Saryk kingdom, we see this lack of [a] name building into this more general lack of knowledge or connection that she has to the Saryk people and to their world. She isn't comfortable there, she doesn't have a good relationship with the Saryk king, she doesn't know his name, and so it's easy in those moments where she doesn't know his name to continue to demonize him or make him the monster in her life. But in these moments when she then starts to have names of the Saryk servants as well as Flek's daughter, I think—even though it's maybe not explicitly articulated—those are the moments that she starts to shift in her understanding [that] "This is a place, just like my home, where these people have identities, they have names, they are worthwhile." And she starts to maybe build a bond and feel more like she could make her home there, and I think you mentioned that too, Emily. So it plays into this beautiful idea of just watching her shift in her interactions with them along the lines of how she comes to know and give names to the people that are there.

**Emily Pearson:** And I think it's also really important—I just thought of this as you were talking about it—[that] the Saryk king, he withholds his name from Miryem for so long. But once he really accepts her and once he comes back to her for marriage on her terms, he does finally tell her his name, and so at that point not only is this her home, but it's her home with the Saryk king. I feel like it's the major turning point for him, the first time he allows himself to be vulnerable and build a new community with Miryem.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely.

**Jason Abad:** I think at the end we learn that she does find out what his name is, but it's a theme going throughout the novel that it's hard for her to even empathize with him because she doesn't know his name. And as we get even to that last part of the text where she's trying to find some way to free him, and she's explaining to him what it is that the Saryk have done to the people there, she mentions that she's not really freeing him for his own sake but for his people's sake. And I think it's important that she knows their name. That signals that she has a difficulty empathizing with him, but really knowing their name is that critical turning point there, that she's able to understand his people.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Exactly. I think there's even a line where she says, "I remember Flek's daughter, and that's the motivation that I have, and there's a child, and I know that this child is going to be consumed if I don't step in." And so there's a level of empathy there that she didn't have at the beginning. And I think that that relates to other storylines as well. You know, we have six narrators in this text by the end of it, and even in a more informal way, I think that we see naming functioning in Wanda's relationship with Miryem as well, because—I was actually talking to my students about this just this week—the very first interaction that Wanda can remember with the moneylender, which is Miryem's father, she calls him a "servant of the devil," which is again building into stereotypes about Jewish moneylenders. And it's a narrative, it's language that has been used around the town, to demonize the moneylender and his family. And so she replicates that language even though, in that interaction that she has with him, there isn't any evidence that he deserves that. In fact, in the very same moment, her father beats her, which is just [an] interesting juxtaposition. But then we watch that language completely collapse. It doesn't hold in her interactions with Miryem's family once she starts working for them. They are no longer "servants of the devil." In fact, they build an environment of love and acceptance for her and her brothers in ways that she didn't even get in her own home. And so I think—exactly what you were saying, Jason—at the core of the idea of naming here is empathy and how we relate to people. And naming—whether that's a bad name like "servant of the devil" or something like that versus a name with more intimacy—seems to be just so central to the idea of how we build empathy for other people. Okay, so I think that this is a good place to move to our second segment. And so we've talked about naming and the sense of how naming can work to bind, to build community, but also how it can give a sense of power over another individual. Another thing that I'm really interested in in the novel is the moments where language, without even bearing any sense of magic, can almost rival the force and the power that magic has. And so what I'm thinking about is these moments that the characters—and specifically, I think, our women characters in Irina, Miryem, and maybe even Wanda—use language to express power, to manipulate their situations, to gain knowledge in ways that maybe even their power can't allow them to do. So I have a few examples that we can dive into, but first I'm just interested in hearing: Is this something that maybe you also noticed as you were reading, and did you find it as interesting as I find it—this idea of language being such a powerful force for these characters?

**Jason Abad:** Yeah, I think the text gives a lot of power to language. And initially what stands out most is the power of language, the carefully crafted words that some of the characters use: their ability to manipulate other people and how they use that to give themselves power over others where they normally wouldn't have it either because of a lack of power or a lack of social position or something of the sort. Another thing I noticed is that there are places where one's lack of mastery over language can sometimes put the characters in positions where they have no power.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Oh, interesting.

**Jason Abad:** It's interesting, at the start of the novel when Miryem starts collecting money for her father, she's able to use language to her advantage by telling the townsfolk that she has the law on her side and [about] what will happen if they don't pay up, that sort of thing. But there's one scene where she loses control over language, and her mother is expressing how sad she is

that her child had to grow up so quickly, that she had to harden her heart. And Miryem lashes out, and she says, “What are you sorry for, that you have a child that can turn silver into gold?” And she says the wrong thing in the wrong place. She’s in earshot of Oleg, the slave driver who later hears this and tries to rob her. And this is also the moment that sets a lot of the story in action, where she says this and the Staryk hear her, and they misunderstand her. So her inability to communicate in this instance eventually causes her a lot of trouble. They take her literally when that’s not what she means—the Staryk, someone who doesn’t have her best interest. She tells them things, and they understand what maybe they shouldn’t have.

**Erika Gotfredson:** That’s fascinating, and I had not thought about that when I was reading that moment, but I think it’s such a good point of how language—and even more generally the knowledge of how to use language—seems to be so central to the characters’ success or lack of success. And I think in the instance that you’re bringing up, Jason, Miryem is still in the stage where she’s growing her abilities related to her business and the knowledge that comes with that, and we haven’t seen her maybe fully matured yet. And you’re right, that sets off everything. That is absolutely fascinating. What about you, Emily? What do you think?

**Emily Pearson:** Yeah, I’m still thinking about that. That’s just so interesting. But before I was thinking about Wanda and how, to her, [when] using language, she grows in it, and she finds her voice. And there’s a power and a safety in that for her. But in the beginning of the book, when she’s in such desperate circumstances living with a very abusive father, learning what not to say also has a power for her. When Miryem starts paying her in addition to paying down the debt her father owes, Wanda keeps the money she’s being paid—her wages—a secret because she knows that her father would take it from her. But she holds onto that secret and onto the money as a way of securing a potential future for herself and that gains [her] a little bit of agency in not saying something, which, I think, is maybe a little different than how we usually think of language. But for her, it has real meaning and—not really a sense of safety—but the hope of a potential future safety in it.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Yeah, I think that makes complete sense. And I think, the thing that’s so interesting to me about these three women that we have—Miryem, Irina, and Wanda—is how all three of them are around magic. Even in that instance that you’re talking about, Emily, there’s this white tree that is the mother. (I don’t know how we would maybe describe that relationship.) But she has this tree that protects her, that literally keeps her away from the Staryk road at one point, that gives her the things that she needs to make a tea—I think it is—for Sergey when he has his soul taken away by the Staryk king. And so power, or magic more specifically, is available to her, but it becomes less about the magic in the moments that she’s interacting with her father, and more about exactly what you’re saying: language and how she uses it. And that builds to this moment where her father is trying to marry her off, literally for the price of alcohol, and she says, “no.” And it’s not the tree in that moment that is protecting her from this future that she doesn’t want; it’s her ability to know when to speak and how to speak that carves out some space for her desires for her own life. Obviously, it’s a complicated situation, right, because the father ends up dying, and it doesn’t go maybe completely to plan, but also it gives her the ability to have a little bit of control over her life in ways that she wouldn’t have had if the father remained alive.

**Jason Abad:** I think I really appreciated it how the text repeatedly juxtaposes these scenes of actual magic with almost like everyday magic, magic that we would have in our world, this ability to use language in a given social context and how that becomes like magic for characters. I also find it interesting to compare these three characters that we're talking about to, say for example, Mirnatius. You know, he remarks at one point that he doesn't have the kind of social awareness, this political awareness, that Irina has, that he might use in the way that she does to manipulate his surroundings. So this character who has this social position who would otherwise have a certain amount of power is rendered powerless by his inability to use language to take advantage of his social position.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely. Well in both situations with Miryem and Irina, we have maybe their most impressive moments in the novel are coming—exactly what you're saying, Jason—not from these moments of high, pure power, but just their ability to use their knowledge to manipulate the situation, to navigate, to maneuver through the situation. So what I'm thinking here is of the moment where Miryem has told the Staryk king that she will change these three massive rooms of silver all to gold. She starts that process, [and] she's like, "Oh crap, there's literally no way that I am going to be able to finish this." And she finds a loophole through language, through the Staryk king saying, "the silver *in this room*," and so she has the servants move the silver that she knows she's not going to be able to change out of the room. And so there, it's not magic; you know, she does some of it, and that's impressive, and that's cool, but that's not ultimately how she succeeds. It's her ability to think, to use her knowledge to exploit the situation and find a loophole within the language. And I think we see a similar situation with Irina and how she ultimately defeats Chernobog, the demon, [when] he comes back after this big fight in the Staryk kingdom and tries to start consuming all of the people in the palace. And what we see is that Irina, the deal that she made with the fire demon, is that he won't touch the people that she loves as long as she delivers the Staryk king to the fire demon. What we then find out is that her language was very intentional; "the people that she loves," her people, is actually her entire community, and so she has protected not even just herself and her close circle, but she's protected everyone, everyone that she has power over in this kingdom. And so in both of those situations, it's not magic; it's language that both of the women characters are using very intentionally to navigate the situations. And I love it because it directly contrasts the Staryk king and the fire demon and the power that they have that is solely rooted in magic. Do you have any thoughts about that?

**Emily Pearson:** I was just fascinated listening to you talk about it. Yeah, Irina and Miryem really, really know how to use language to their advantage. Every time I think about Miryem focusing on "in the room," I'm like, "Oh, she knows how to deconstruct a sentence." Yeah, I think it's really interesting how important language is, especially in that task, thinking about what's actually said and how you can complete the tasks given to you. She has to change all of the silver in the room into gold, and the changing of the silver to gold is something that's a very solitary task, something that only she has the power to do and that she's alone in, but the second part—the "in the room" part—is where she's able to bring people in to get help, to take something that's essentially isolating and make friends in it and help other people out along with herself in a way that when they're successful, all of them benefit from it. And she grows in power too, so the language, in a way, becomes more important than the actual magic power because she wouldn't have been able to do it without that. But also every time she completes the

task successfully, she's able to complete the task more easily in the future. She becomes more powerful, stronger. So the fact that she was able to capitalize on what the language meant made the magic even more powerful. The magic is just so underpinned by her use of language.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Oh, I love that. That's awesome. Jason, any final thoughts on this section?

**Jason Abad:** Yeah. So on one hand I really liked that characters in these kind of oppressed positions are able to leverage their situation by language. But I had mixed feelings about this use of deceiving other people with language, right, because that's an instance where you're actively making communication fail. And they're using that to their advantage. So I almost prefer the instances where there's power in making yourself understood because, on one hand, that's really how a lot of the story resolves, by freeing the Saryk king. Instead of deceiving him, instead of tricking him, it's only by making the people of Lithvas understood as a people, by communicating effectively, by using language to make yourself known, that [Miryem's] able to convince him that he's in the wrong and then give him reasons why he should make a deal with her and allow her to free him in exchange for leaving the people of Lithvas alone, not bringing back the winter, that sort of thing. But also, in a sense, it's what Novik is doing with this entire story. She's taking these kind of anti-Semitic stereotypes of a Jewish moneylender, and she's giving us these characters and having them explain themselves to us in a way that makes us empathize with them, and so that's this whole act of retelling at work here. It acts by making these characters known to us rather than obscuring them, not just by allowing us to misunderstand something.

**Erika Gotfredson:** That's such an interesting idea of maybe the motivations, I guess, behind the different ways that language can be used as power. And I think to unite the first segment and the second segment before we move into the final one is this idea that—I'm specifically thinking of the relationship between Miryem and the Saryk king—the language that they use with each other changes throughout the text. So you know the point that you and I are talking about, Jason, where Miryem is manipulating language a little bit, there's a level of deceit there; it's still at this moment that Miryem doesn't know his name, he is nothing more to her than this husband that is trying to trick her and exploit her for her money-making ability, and I think that we see shifts in the way that language is used. You know, at the end, when there is a level of trust there, when they have more respect for each other, that is the moment that the Saryk king gives the name to Miryem. You know, we never learn it as the readers, but Miryem does, and so it's like language use and the intention behind it shifts as the empathy builds and as some sort of healthier relationship builds between the different people. Cool. Yeah, I really like that. So, Jason, you started us in this direction just a minute ago, but I think for the last segment I just want to open it up generally to thinking about—you know we've talked about how it's interested in language—but even more generally thinking about language as storytelling, or rewriting Rumpelstiltskin perhaps, or maybe even just more generally stereotypes or assumptions about each other. So one of the things that I love is that moment that I already mentioned of seeing the subtle shift in Wanda's language related to Miryem's family. So first they are the "servants of the devil," but then that breaks down, and she starts using words like "love" when she's around them because she builds empathy and she builds connection with them. So what do we think just more generally Novik is doing in terms of thinking about the power of storytelling, especially in how it allows us to relate to people around us? How is Novik thinking through that in this novel?

**Emily Pearson:** I feel like I always go back to the very first sentence of the book in thinking about storytelling where Novik says, or I guess Miryem says, “The real story isn’t half as pretty as the one you’ve heard,” and she’s referencing the Rumpelstiltskin tale and how much she’s going to address it and rewrite it. But at the same time, what we end up with, it’s not the same Rumpelstiltskin where there’s some beautiful damsel who’s caught up in this allegorical money-lending problem where she has to keep turning straw into gold, and then it ends happily ever after with her marrying a prince. Instead, we have this story with all of these characters, so many of whom learn to better connect with each other and develop empathy and help people outside. I think that it’s kind of a misdirection. We end up with a much prettier story than the one we’ve heard.

**Jason Abad:** And that’s almost commentary on that line here that “the story isn’t half as pretty as you’ve heard,” so the fact that we get this beautiful story is suggestive of, you know, why is it that, as a society, we’ve come to view the ending of Rumpelstiltskin as a happily-ever-after, right? You know, if you’re viewing this from the perspective of the moneylender or, I suppose, in this case the moneylender’s daughter, this is absolutely not a “happily-ever-after,” and so the entire project of this rewriting is to make that point.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely. I’m fascinated by obviously the introduction of the novel but then also how in the first few chapters where we’re just learning the world, we’re learning about Miryem, we see that this story—the Rumpelstiltskin story—is a way that the townspeople demonized Miryem and her family. And so they build this narrative of—again, I keep going back to this phrase—money-lending [and] moneylenders being “servants of the devil,” and they use Rumpelstiltskin as a way of building that idea, the original Rumpelstiltskin. And so this entire town hates Miryem and her family because of the power behind this narrative that we know, from reading the story, has no accuracy within Miryem’s life. She is not greedy; she is, in fact, doing what she needs to do to sustain her family, to provide for her family, by stepping into this role as the moneylender. But it’s the narrative that she has to break through. I don’t know with the townspeople if she ever successfully does. I don’t know if they ever come to see her as someone that isn’t the narrative that they’ve built about Miryem and her family. But in so many other instances—you know with her relationship with Wanda as well as just who the Saryk are and the relationships that Miryem has with the Saryk people—we see so many ways that stories have such power in dictating what we think about people and how we relate to them and interact with them. They break down over the course of the novel. And I think—exactly what you said, Emily—it makes for a much more beautiful tale, to watch the empathy build in all of these different characters across the board.

**Emily Pearson:** I think it goes back to something Jason said—I think in the second segment—about people learning to use language to understand each other. The story—the traditional Rumpelstiltskin story—is told only from one point of view, and [by] bringing in the point of view of the moneylender’s daughter and of the girl who lives outside the village who ends up helping her and of the tsarina and of the brothers and all of these different characters, we end up having these different narrators and going through these different stories. We start to see how it all fits together. And no one is able to effectively demonize anybody, except maybe Chernobog.



**Erika Gotfredson:** Maybe him, yeah.

**Jason Abad:** And I think [Novik] does this too with the Jewish characters as a culture in the book, and she's bringing down what it means to be a moneylender, what it means to participate in this business, because the tale of Rumpelstiltskin is invested with a lot of meaning because of moneylending, because of what you would call usury and the Western Christian meaning behind that—this idea that usury was once believed to be a sin because the act of usury is creating something from nothing which is, I guess, the domain of God. So there's this kind of view of that, right, in Christian culture, which we have here in the book as well. But you also have a culture here where this is really their only means of survival. They can lose everything that they have at a moment's notice, so the text pushes back on that kind of social understanding of money-lending.

**Erika Gotfredson:** Absolutely, and the story becomes inherently powerful purely in the act of centralizing a woman and a Jewish character in Miryem, but then also—as you said, Emily—not leaving it at that, but also bringing into the fold these other characters, both in the people directly around Miryem, whether that be Wanda or Stepon, the little brother, who have direct interactions with Miryem, but then also people that she has very limited interaction with. And so we get this widespread tale that has so much power just in how it's causing us to think about how people interact, how people tell stories about each other, and it's literally, in the way that it is written, not letting us sit in one version of a story. It's forcing us—encouraging us, maybe is a better word—to move between different stories and to just reflect on what that means for how we understand what it's talking about. That's awesome. I want to say thank you to our listeners for tuning in. I hope you have enjoyed our conversation. I know we've had a lot of fun talking about such an awesome book and the really cool things that I think Novik is doing in this novel. I want to say thank you to Jason and Emily for joining. It has been lovely chatting with you both. And then I also just want to give a quick reminder to check out our Big Read website. We have many other events that have been posted and will continue to be posted throughout the fall semester, and I'm sure you can find something that interests you related to this book. There are a lot of things posted up there, so take a look at that. And thank you again for tuning in! Bye, everyone!