



**WSIRN Episode 178: The Next Right Thing for your reading life**  
*Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Emily P. Freeman*

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EMILY: But because I was in school and I thought about that, oh, I'll read this book for fun. There's no fun, Anne, when you're in school. [BOTH LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 178.

Welcome to the show that's dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader: What should I read next?

We don't get bossy on this show: What we WILL do here is give you the information you need to choose your next read. Every week we'll talk all things books and reading and do a little literary matchmaking with one guest.

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Readers, I have exciting news for you. A couple of weeks ago we hinted at an announcement and if you visited our Patreon page at [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](https://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext) and watched the video you heard me explain that a new project was in the works. And now, that project is finally HERE.

We just launched another bookish podcast on Friday, and it's very different from What Should I Read Next? What Should I Read Next? is about helping my readers find their next read. In each episode, the recommendations are geared toward a particular reader's style, and I'm always looking for titles they haven't read before.

Our new podcast is a short format show, and it's called One Great Book. In every episode, I'll pull one standout selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it. I'm highlighting books I love that you may have missed or forgotten about, but that you'll be glad to discover—whether that's again, or for the first time.

We have 8 books planned for this first volume (commonly known as a season, on podcasts that are not of the bookish variety), and the first two books are available now. New episodes drop on Fridays beginning this week. And as a fun bonus for our patreon backers I'll be recording bonus episodes for patrons that correspond with new episodes of One Great Book. On One Great Book I'm focusing on books that have been out in the world for at least a year, but in those bonus episodes for patrons I'll be telling you about a great book that hasn't been published yet—so you can be in the know AND be the first on your library holds list. If you're interested in hearing those episodes go to [patreon.com that's P-A-T-R-E-O-N.com/whatshouldireadnext](https://patreon.com/P-A-T-R-E-O-N.com/whatshouldireadnext) and please, find One Great Book in your podcast player and hit subscribe.

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ANNE: Readers, decision-making is a HUGE part of what we do here on What Should I Read Next? and a personal favorite of mine. Today's guest, Emily P. Freeman is a podcaster, author, and an expert in the art of decision-making. She has literally written the book on it and it is out today. But when assigned school reading hijacked alllllll her personal reading time, deciding what to read next for pleasure got a little more complicated. That's where I come in.

Today I'm helping Emily find her way back to confidently making reading decisions for herself. Plus, we're discussing what to do when you pick up the totally-wrong book by a totally-great author, biographical historical fiction, the first YA book ever written, Emily's home base genre, spiritual memoir.

Let's get to it! Emily, welcome to the show.

[00:03:35]

EMILY: Thanks, Anne. I'm so glad to be here.

ANNE: Well I've wanted to talk to you about your reading life on the public record because we do talk about books on a fairly regular basis.

EMILY: Yeah.

ANNE: And I'm so excited to finally be doing it on What Should I Read Next? So thank you for joining me.

EMILY: Oh, I'm thrilled. I can't wait.

ANNE: All right. Well this is a big day for you.

EMILY: [LAUGHS] This is a big day for me.

[00:03:45]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] How long has it been since you've had a book come out?

EMILY: Oh, okay. So it was the fall of 2015. '16, '17, '18 ... yeah, so it's been four years.

ANNE: Does it make you feel really old? It makes me feel old. We're about the same age. To think like oh, four years, it's nothing. It just goes by in the blink of an eye.

EMILY: Yeah. It totally makes me feel old.

ANNE: But here we are. So you're coming out of a busy season and you have a book coming out in the midst of it. What has this book writing, grad school, what else have you had going on? 'Cause that doesn't seem like enough. That's just two things, Emily.

EMILY: It's only two things, right? I feel like the older our kids get, in some ways, the easier it gets. But in so many ways, the busier it gets because they all have things and they're at that age where they have a lot more things than they did when they were little. But they can't drive yet. Altogether, we have three kids. Two - twins who are 15 and then our son is almost 13. And so though they don't have a million different activities each, even just one thing per kid is three things a week, you know?

So I have found that to take up a bit of time. [ANNE LAUGHS] As you can imagine.

ANNE: Yes! I know. And I can imagine.

You've had these big life projects that have revolved around books and reading and yet what have those big projects done to your personal reading life?

EMILY: For the past two years or year and a half, I've been in grad school. So all my books that I'm reading are ... we have had to read one fiction book, I will say, for school.

ANNE: What was that?

EMILY: It was a Susan Howatch.

ANNE: Really?

EMILY: Glittering Img - Yes.

ANNE: All right. Hold on. We're going to do this right now. Something I wanted to talk to you about today was you are one of the only people I know who shares my weird love slash fascination with her Starbridge series.

[00:05:35]

EMILY: Yes. It's so good.

ANNE: Tell me about the series in your own words.

EMILY: Her series, if it were made into movies, which I don't know that it has been, would not be featured on Hallmark channel. Probably not even on like mainstream TV. It might have to be an HBO show [LAUGHS] because it's this very awesome, weird mix of spiritual formation and sexual exploration. [LAUGHS] But not in like a kinky way, but just like in the full formed experience of people and humans. But it's such ... it's such an unexpected brilliance that she has. Just the way that she writes about the spiritual life, but also the struggles that sorta happen underneath. It's fascinating and unexpected, but so good and so well written.

And we had to read ... I guess it was the first one of the series for a class and one of our professors was like just so you know.... and it's not like ... I mean, Anne, come on. You know ... it's like PG13. Let's say that, right? Do you think it's -

ANNE: You know, it depends on if this is HBO or Starz.

EMILY: [LAUGHS] Right.

ANNE: I think they could give it the full Starz treatment.

EMILY: That's true.

ANNE: But when you pick it up, it's described as a series about the church of England and the clergy in it. And you think oh, I could totally read this out loud to my grandmother and not be uncomfortable. But you totally couldn't.

EMILY: Right. Not the whole book either, there's just parts.

ANNE: There are many more steamy scenes, a lot more addiction. You know, a lot more human frailty in the-

EMILY: Yeah.

ANNE: This is real life sense and I expected about ... what is it, this point ... the early books are almost period pieces now looking back. And then as I remember, the newer books are more

contemporary. I mean she's been done writing the series for many years, so the newer books are set in the '80s, not just the '50s or '60s.

EMILY: Well and I haven't finished the series.

ANNE: Those second two books are very different.

[00:07:28]

EMILY: Is that right?

ANNE: I mean similar approach, but it's in a different era and they read very differently because of it.

EMILY: Oh, I can't wait. I look forward to that.

ANNE: You've probably been putting these off for many years though at this point because this has been your long detour through the academic life.

EMILY: Yeah. It was years ago. So for the past year and a half, I've been reading all nonfiction, some almost like textbook-y type. Many books I would pick up. Like I just finished Mike Cospers's *Recapturing the Wonder*, which is a type of book I would read on my own. A really lovely book about sorta how we've become disenchanted with life and faith and sort of reintroducing that into our daily life. But there are other books like *Christ in the Missional Church*, like books that are a little more ... I have to set a timer and make myself read it. [LAUGHS] Really good information, but probably not something I would pick up just for kicks, you know. But that's been my last year and a half and so I've been slowly been making a list of books that I can't wait to read once school's over.

ANNE: How long's that list?

EMILY: Well, some of the list is in my head. Right now, I have ... I don't know, maybe 40 books on my want-to-read list?

ANNE: Are you a list keeper in general? I mean have you been keeping a to-be-read list for many years and these are 40 priority reads? Or do you have a TBR list that is only 40 titles?

EMILY: That's a great question. I am a list maker, so I make lists about everything. Mainly I make lists with books that I have read already. I, years ago, had like all the books I read, you know, partial or not, throughout the ... basically because I wanted to see what books are influencing me right now. What books are talking to each other, and a book can influence me if I've only read three chapters of it, you know? But then I thought well I'd like to see what I've finished, and that list is ... I don't read very fast and so my list is fairly short every year, like when I look back at the end of the year, which I'm fine with. But because of school, a lot of times we're assigned books to read but we're not assigned the entire book. We're just assigned a portion. But I wanted to remember oh, that book ... I really loved that book. And maybe I'd like to go

back to it. So I have started now keeping a list of already reads and then a list of partial reads for 2019.

ANNE: What are your highest priority reads? Do you have any books that you've just been burning to get to?

[00:09:42]

EMILY: Well I'll tell you, I started the Louise Penny series, *Inspector Gamache*. But I've only gotten through the first two books. And then I checked out the third book at the library and renewed and renewed and then finally like I couldn't renew it anymore and I had to turn it in without reading it and it was like a really sad day in my life. But it's because I was in school and I thought oh, I'll read this book for fun. There's no fun, Anne, when you're in school. [ANNE LAUGHS] There's just no fun reading. [LAUGHS] There's only reading for a grade. That is my life.

So I look forward to getting back to like cozy murder book.

ANNE: You know, it's funny is a lot of readers are like, I love that too, Emily. Cozy murder. [EMILY LAUGHS] I am all about it.

EMILY: I'm not all about the scary murder I'm learning. Just the cozy.

ANNE: Tell me more about reading for a grade. What is it about reading on assignment that alters the reading experience even of a book that you might pick up on your own? But if you didn't, you read it differently. Like something I really have to combat against in my own reading life, any reading I do could be legitimately construed as work but reading like it's work is a terrible mindset as a reader. I mean it can be interesting and it can be enjoyable, but it still exists in a different brain space.

EMILY: It does.

ANNE: And I want to have part of my brain as a reader be a place that can just relax into and when you're reading for a grade, there's no relaxing.

EMILY: It's tricky. When I applied to go into this program for school one of the things that I talked myself into it 'cause I saw the syllabus ahead of time ... not all the books on the reading list, but I knew generally what the books would be. I remember thinking like, oh, so many of these books I want to read anyway. They're on my to-be-read list, so I thought, oh, this is great. It'll force me to read books I want to read. It's gonna feel like my real ... you know but let me tell you. You're exactly right. As soon as it becomes assigned, it's like my inner tenth grader rebels. Like wait, I don't – what do you mean I have to read this book? You know, it kinda changes the experience a little bit. And what I've discovered was it forces me to read at a pace that I'm not as comfortable with. Because you have to read it by a certain time because if you don't, then you can't write the paper. Or you gotta move on and it's gonna pile up into the next week's work. And so it wasn't as much about the fact that I had to read it as it was that it forced me to read more quickly and to process. And that took a few months to get used is that I haven't been a student in many years and reading like a student is different. Because you know

you're going to have to retain it and then be able to reflect upon it with some sense of you know, smarts. [BOTH LAUGH]

So that it makes sense and draw connections. And that's the other thing, especially some professors are more about this than others but drawing connections between lecture and this other reading and this article we read and then this book and how it all weaves together, commonalities, and comparing and contrasting and I mean, I've learned a lot. It forces you to learn, but it's also work. And so I have to take notes differently. I have to ... it's just a different posture when you're reading on assignment.

[00:12:44]

ANNE: Right. And you mentioned that you like to pay attention and see how the books you're reading are talking to each other. Obviously, any good curriculum is designed with exactly that, talking to each other in mind. But how is that different from the connections you see between the books you pick up on your own for your own purposes?

EMILY: I think it has to do with the time frame for me personally. Because I'm a slow reader. Like when I'm not a student, when I'm just reading as a human person, I think that I am able to let those books, like if I'm ... a lot of times I'll read nonfiction in the morning. And then if I'm in a season of life where I'm reading fiction, I'm not always, but if I am in that season, then sometimes those will talk to each other, but it takes maybe weeks and weeks for me to realize or I'll have a thought and I'll be able to reflect on it and I'll write a blog post or I'll find something to reflect on in the podcast or whatever. Whereas reading to make connections with school or on assignment, I have to figure out how these books or how these readings are talking to each other in five days time.

My brain doesn't always work that quickly, and so it is becoming quicker. It's definitely a learned skill as far as making connections quickly and then making drawing conclusions or even just having some reflections that coincide and make sense. It's a timing thing for me. It's just the pace is not preferred, but one thing I have learned is, Emily, you could work more quickly than you realized. I think I tend to like kick rocks and doddle sometimes and being a student has helped me pick up the pace a little bit and I think that's been good for me.

ANNE: Interesting. Now I really identify with what you said about being a slow processor. I feel like I need to put the things in my brain and just let them sit for a bit, but I didn't know that you identified as a slow reader.

EMILY: I do. I read a lot I feel like, but I'm not completing books at a pace that a lot of people seem to, so in my mind, that equates well I must be a slow reader because I can't plow through things at the pace that it seems like grown humans are able to do. [BOTH LAUGH] I don't know.

I will say, we have one professor this last class I was in, it was brilliant. He gave us reading assignments, which was a lot of reading, and then he would give an estimated time frame he thought it would take. And I found that it took about maybe about what he said or a little bit longer and he identifies himself as a slow reader. And so I thought, okay, well he says he's slow

and I'm reading about the pace he is or a little bit longer to finish than what he estimated, and so I figure well, if he says he's a slow reader and I'm even slower than that, maybe I am a slow reader.

However, my husband, John, thinks I'm a really fast reader. So I don't know what this means, Anne.

[00:15:16]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I think it means that whatever you're doing, it is okay.

EMILY: It's okay. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Emily, our listeners love behind the scenes. Or at least that's just something I want to tell you because I love the behind the scenes process of the writing life. So you're working through the idea of your next book, the one that came after *Simply Tuesday*. What happened next?

EMILY: So after *Simply Tuesday* released, I mean that book came out in 2015 and it was the last of four that had come out since 2011. So I had a 2011 release, 2012, 2013 ... three books, one per year, and then a year in between and then a 2015 release.

ANNE: And you know, I just have to say, if you're not the one writing the books, it doesn't sound like [EMILY LAUGHS] ... it's like having babies. Like my brother and I are two and a half years apart. And it didn't sound that close together when I was growing up.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: I mean, two and a half years. That was three grades in school. And then I started having babies and wow, two and a half years apart seems a lot closer than it ever did like when I was eight years old.

EMILY: Yeah, my second book was due the day my first book released. Like you said, when you're first starting out, you think this must be how's it done. This must be normal. Now I look back and I think, I needed a mentor [BOTH LAUGH] to tell me not to do that. A sanity check because that was, as you know, a really difficult thing. But at the time I just thought, well this is the job. This is how it's done. And that is how it's done for some people and some people have no problem with it and it works beautifully. I did that, but it was difficult.

And in 2015, when my fourth book came out, I remember thinking, okay. I am going to have some time of not writing books. I kept working. I was still doing writing and I was still speaking some and things, but I did not have a book contract. And so it was a few years later when I began to have this idea for what I thought would be my next book. It was a book on decision-making. I noticed how I experienced life as I had a decision to make and how it sorta fine-tuned all my senses. It's like I was a better listener. I was a better see-er. I was making connections because I was trying to find answers or clues to help me make a decision in a better way.

And I started realizing that this decision-making process is not just about the decision but it's also about how you make the decision. And so I started taking notes, thinking, Anne, like okay, this is my next book. And I even talked with my editor, who had edited the other books I had written, about it a little bit, and like, you know, she's like you have another other book ideas? You know, asking and I remember telling her, oh yeah, this, but it's not really fully form and decision-making and how it kind of has us pay attention to God and each other and we become this people who are really aware of you know, what might come next. She's like, mm-hmmm? [LAUGHS] Like semi-interested because she liked me, but I could tell it wasn't quite there yet.

I remember having it on my calendar like, I'm going to outline this because this is my next book. Like this is. And I tried to wrestle that thing to the ground, and it would not emerge the way that my other books had emerged. Usually like when I finally give an idea my full attention and turn toward it fully, it blossoms. It begins to talk to me and it has ... you know, my job is to pay attention and then the work, the job of the work and the writing, it starts to dance a little bit in front of me. This one was not doing that. It was flat. It was lifeless. It was going nowhere. And it was endlessly frustrating to the point where I just thought, well I guess I'm done writing books. I guess I've just forgotten how to write. I'm going to have to find something else to do with my life. [LAUGHS]

But as it turned out, this idea started to come ... I started to realize maybe I'm forcing it into a medium that it doesn't want to be in. And long story short, it ended up becoming a podcast instead of a book. So that's how The Next Right Thing podcast started was because I thought I had a book on decision-making when in fact it didn't have a narrative arc like a book, it more had shorter, almost like tiny chapters, but they weren't necessarily all holding hands with each other at the time. They were more like, let's dive deep into this one little idea on decision-making for 10 minutes. So that's kinda how it started.

And then, once I started doing the podcast for, you know, six to nine months, that's when I realized oh, this actually does want to be a book, but it had to be this first. But I never would have planned, like I'm going to do a podcast first and then I'm going to write a book. Like that was never the plan.

[00:19:43]

ANNE: When you did realize that the podcast needed to be a book, that all happened really, really quickly. What tipped you from this is not a book to, oh wait, [EMILY LAUGHS] we need to get this out there?

EMILY: I think it was the podcast had listeners. The listeners were talking back to me and I started to realize how it was resonating, so it was like, oh, this is a conversation that people want to have. And people are making life decisions, telling me I'm helping them make life decisions. And I'm like, I'm not telling anybody what to do. I'm just helping people create space so that they can connect the dots on their own. And it was working.

I had a base of readers who had been reading my books for years, and I think the thing that tipped me over into wanting to make this into an accessible form in a written way was I had a lot of readers who would never, ever listen to a podcast ever. I had complete transcripts of the podcast. Every podcast episode is transcribed to where people could read it and access it. But there's still something about having it in one place in one book. I love the idea of that and I wasn't ever going to make it a book, but it was thinking of those readers who were ... just don't love the audio format and I was creating all this content. I mean, tens of thousands of words worth of new content they didn't have access to 'cause they probably weren't going to download a transcript and they're book readers. And I thought I want this to be a book in the hands of book readers and the listeners, I loved the idea of almost like a ... you know, granted a lot of the material in the book, we talked about on the podcast. It's not copy-pasted, you know, podcast straight into a book. It definitely has an arc and it's appropriate for that form.

But I don't re-listen to podcast episodes, even if it was really helpful to me. You know, I can maybe count twice that I've ever gone back to a podcast episode of someone else's that I listen to twice. But I will re-read chapters of books that are meaningful to me, so I thought, well, even a podcast listener who listened to an episode that was meaningful, a book might be a helpful thing, even just for reference, for them to have. Or to gift. All of those things added up made me realize a lot of writers, they write a book, and then they create talks based off of their book. I sorta just did the opposite. I had all the talking [LAUGHS] and then I created a written form from the talking form.

[00:21:55]

ANNE: I think that's so interesting how we were talking earlier about how when you're reading for a grade, you approach it differently in your mind than when you're reading for another purpose.

EMILY: Yes.

ANNE: And it's so interesting how the same words can hit the same readers very differently depending on what context they're taking on those words.

EMILY: I script out my episodes. I mean, it's not word for word, but I do have a really robust outlines slash scripts for my episodes, but because I know they're going to be spoken, I write differently than I do for something that's only going to be read. And it's still me, my voice. Which is really weird and it's a weird thing to learn, but it's a different way of approaching the words. And so creating a book from that felt really different because it was spoken first.

ANNE: Where did the title come from? It's such a good one. How did it hit you?

EMILY: So *The Next Right Thing* is, I mean, clearly I didn't come up with like I'm going to create the concept of just doing the next right thing. I mean that's been ... that's been around. But I mean years ago when I was in college, Elisabeth Elliot used to have a radio show called Gateway to Joy. It was like a 15-minute show and I would listen to it while I waited. I was a commuter student when I was at school and I would have to get there very early to get a parking space.

And so I would listen to her show. It was almost like a podcast before there were podcasts [ANNE LAUGHS] Like a little 15-minute, short Elisabeth Elliot show.

But she would often quote a poem and the poem was called Do The Next Thing. And as a college student, that was always really meaningful to me because you know, we were always encouraged like, create a five-year plan and what are you going to do with your life? And so this concept of just doing the next thing was powerful for me and it was transformative even then.

And then as I've grown older, that's just always been a phrase I've carried with me. And I've heard it said by so many, Anne Malate, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa has a similar thing that she talks about. Alcoholics Anonymous in the big book, you know, they often talk about this concept of just doing the next thing.

It felt like ... even when I started the podcast, I wanted to talk about decision-making, and the phrase I kept using was the next right thing. So I kinda remember telling my friend Kendra, the lazy genius, I was like I think I'm just going to call the podcast The Next Right Thing and she's like, yeah, that sounds good. And then it just was. [ANNE LAUGHS] So when it came to write the book, well, we'll just keep it the same. You know, it's familiar. It's what people expect. So that's kinda where it all came from.

ANNE: Emily, when did you begin the podcast?

EMILY: August of 2017.

ANNE: So since August 2017, is it fair to say you've been in a heavy-duty decision-making mindset?

EMILY: I think about making decisions all the time.

ANNE: Has that changed the way that you approach the books you are reading? I'm just really wondering if we're going to see that reflected in your favorites or what you really don't want to read right now.

EMILY: It's such a great question and I haven't thought about that way. Honestly, Anne, I started school the same month I started the podcast. So much of my reading life has been decided for me based on the syllabus. So now that I'm going to have choice, because school ends this ... like I'm in my last semester right now. It'll be interesting to see how it impacts like moving forward.

ANNE: I hope this is something you discuss and write about at length if just for me.

EMILY: I'm going to have to now.

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[00:24:55]

*ANNE: Readers, last week's guest Kate gave us some ideas on how to DIY a master's degree in literature. If that appeals to YOU let me suggest you try The Great Courses Plus.*

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ANNE: Emily, you know how this works on What Should I Read Next? You tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you're reading now, and we talk about what you may enjoy reading after you graduate from your graduate program. How did you choose favorites considering the way that your reading life has been atypical for you over this past year and a half?

EMILY: This was really hard. And I hear people do it on the show and I think oh, they picked their favorites so easily, but maybe they didn't. Maybe they had this inner turmoil as well because which ankle do I want to ... here's - here's how I pick my favorites to talk to you about, Anne Bogel. I realized that I would like to be turning towards a posture of fiction. I tried to think of recent fiction within the last five years that I have read that I liked so that we could maybe go

in that direction. Because I do want some help thinking about maybe a fiction title because a lot of my favorite books honestly are nonfiction books and the books I've been reading recently are almost all nonfiction books. So I was like maybe that's not the direction I'm going to go.

Here's the thing. Growing up, my parents were kind of readers, but I didn't really have very strong direction. Like I read a lot of *Sweet Valley High* and *Babysitter's Club* and things that I could get at the library at school that were very easy and had another one right after it. So I didn't read a lot of the classics growing up, only as I've gotten older have I done that. And so all that to say, I don't look back and think oh, this beloved book that I read when I was 10 was my favorite book of all time. Some of that has come as I've grown older, but anyway.

So picking for me was I thought, I'm going to choose some fiction I've read recently that I really loved in hopes that maybe I can find more fiction that I can really love.

[00:27:49]

ANNE: I actually really like that you do have a nonfiction pick on this list. I see readers get into trouble when they answer these questions aspirationally instead of realistically and I really like that you're honoring the fact that yeah, you read and legitimately enjoy a ton of nonfiction.

EMILY: I do.

ANNE: I can't wait to hear about your books and to hopefully set up for this new chapter where you get to choose what goes in your tote bag.

EMILY: It's so exciting.

ANNE: Emily, tell me about the first book you chose.

EMILY: Okay the first book I chose is a book by Kate Morton called *The House at Riverton*. That was my first book of hers that I read. I read it because someone's said that if you liked *Downton Abbey*, you should read this. This would be a great book to read. And they were right. It was sort of a *Great Gatsby* feel. You know, Kate goes back and forth between eras and this one took place in I think the 1920s and then it kinda fast-forwarded to, I don't know, maybe the late '90s maybe. So I do like that time period of like World War II.

I don't understand the concept of reading book flaps or back covers or the last page. Like I will close my eyes during previews of things. If I'm reading a fiction book, it's almost like I don't want to even know the premise sometimes. I want to experience it as it is revealed to me, as the author intended.

ANNE: I appreciate that. I wholeheartedly endorse your idea to skip the flap copy which is how a lot of readers decide because the author did not write that. That's not what the author necessarily wants you to know.

[00:29:16]

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: That is really an act of faith though to pick up a book and dive in. You must really trust your sources that get you to pick up books.

EMILY: Yes. You have to. But I will tell you, Anne. Now I put this on my favorites list, but Kate Morton, I don't love all of her books. I've read almost all of them and I remember seeing a note from myself that *The Lake House*, I think, is one of hers sort of surpassed *The House at Riverton* as my favorite of hers, but I can't remember if that's true? [ANNE LAUGHS] So I hesitate to say it.

I also have this really terrible, terrible thing in my brain where I could probably quote you a line from a nonfiction book that I read today, but I will read an entire fiction book and sometimes a week later be like wait, what – what was that about? For some reason, I don't always retain the story, but I do know ... *The Distant Hours* is another Kate Morton. I did not love that book. I had to like make myself finish it 'cause I thought well surely I'm going to love it at the end. It was just slow. It was a slow read for me.

So usually I'll find an author and I love everything that they write that happens a lot.

ANNE: Well her last one, *The Clockmaker's Daughter*, felt like a departure to me. Very different narration.

EMILY: Yes.

ANNE: Don't want to talk about the ending. But *The Distant Hours* did have this decidedly darker, gothic feel to it and it sounds like that wasn't for you.

EMILY: Yes. I'm guessing that's what it is that's not for me.

ANNE: Emily, what did you choose for your second book?

EMILY: My second book almost feels similar to that one. I don't know why 'cause they're not similar. Last Thanksgiving, I read *America's First Daughter* by Stephanie Dray and Laura Kamoie. While I already love U.S. history, I used to be a sign language interpreter and one of the classes I had to interpret a couple of years in a row, I worked at a public high school for deaf students and interpreting their classes. And I had to interpret a couple years in a row U.S. history class, and I loved it. It was like my favorite class to sign because it was story-driven, but it was familiar because it was United States history and anyway.

So I'm learning that oh, this book, it's about Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Patsy, based off of letters, but obviously there's a lot of speculation I guess into the story. But there's a lot of history too where you can sorta point to these marks throughout the book like oh, that's what was happening in history, but here's an imagination of what might have been happening behind the scenes. And I really loved that I realized. I haven't read many books like that, but I just loved

the process of reading it and then it made me want to learn more about the real history that was happening at that time.

[00:31:49]

ANNE: How did you happen to pick up *America's First Daughter*? Do you remember?

EMILY: I don't know if I remember except it was about a month before I was going to New York to see Hamilton for the first time.

ANNE: Ohhh. Mm-hmm.

EMILY: I know I was going to see Hamilton, so I was already interested in that period of time.

ANNE: Interesting. Emily, what did you choose for your third favorite?

EMILY: This is truly one of my favorite books. Top ten, top five maybe. *Learning to Walk in the Dark* by Barbara Brown Taylor. I had read portions of her book *An Altar in the World* years before. I checked out *Learning to Walk in the Dark* from the library and as soon as I read it, as soon as I finished the last page, I think I drove out to Barnes & Noble and bought my own copy 'cause I thought this is a book I have to own. And I think I just loved it because first of all, Barbara Brown Taylor just is a phenomenal writer. She's so genius. I think she's able to write about really complicated nuance, layered human experiences in such a simple way that she makes it look so easy. That's how I know as a reader that it's so complicated is because it seems so easy. I don't know if that makes sense.

But I just love the way that she walks the reader through this idea of we all have these preconceived notions that light equals good and dark equals bad. You know, she does lots of great research and goes into caves and talks to like darkness experts. [LAUGHS] And she sorta brings out the beautiful and necessary parts of darkness that we might not often think about, but how darkness can actually be really nurturing to us as humans, spiritually and physically in all things. So I loved that book. I thought it was so well written, and also I think, she writes in a way that inspires me as a writer.

ANNE: What do you like about her as a writer?

EMILY: Well you know, I went to a workshop actually last spring that she taught, and I took voracious notes. I loved the way she encouraged us as writers to write ways that we might not normally think of writing about things. So for example, I think one of the things that she asked us to do 'cause it was a writing workshop. She asked us you know, what is the color of surrender? Or what does faith smell like? Using all the five senses, she kinda invites me as a writer to look at common things from perspectives that might not be my first or second pick. And I appreciate that challenge.

[00:34:16]

ANNE: It sounds like you're enjoying being surprised, but it's not just that you're being surprised for its own sake, but she's pointing out aspects of reality that had previously been hidden to you. And so when they come into view, it's like oh!

EMILY: Yes, because I'm always looking for meaning ... as an anagram for ... I think I heard Ian Cran once say that for an anagram we don't just want meaning, we want meanings with an s. Like all the meanings. [LAUGHS] You know and I think it's something in reading where when things have symbolism or there's a mystery revealed or something that is nuanced that isn't maybe obvious, but then it's revealed or I intuited it and then I see that I was right, it's so thrilling as a reader, you know? [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Which goes right back to families and secrets.

EMILY: Yes, families and secrets. I love it.

ANNE: Okay. Emily, tell me about a book that wasn't for you.

EMILY: So I had heard that Isabel Allende was a fantastic, phenomenal writer. She writes in Spanish, though, right?

ANNE: You know, some of her recent books haven't originally been written in Spanish.

EMILY: I don't know. I saw her on a list, you know, I thought well I need to read one of her books.

ANNE: And she does families and secrets and houses really, really well so I can see why any description of an Isabel Allende book would just scream your name.

EMILY: Well I read the wrong book. [ANNE LAUGHS] 'Cause I read ... I read *Ripper*.

ANNE: Which sounds kinda dangerous, Emily.

EMILY: It sounds dangerous. I thought I'm going to live on the edge and I'm going to read a book maybe a little outside my genre. It's like crime fiction.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] When good girls-

EMILY: [LAUGHS] Right?

ANNE: Do dangerous things. [BOTH LAUGH]

[00:34:56]

EMILY: And like the cover... at least one ... there's several different covers, but the cover that I read from the library was like the bridge over the water like was on fire. It wasn't ... It was like a reflection-

ANNE: It's very evocative.

EMILY: It is and it's like okay, this is going to be ... you know it's going to be a mystery. There's a teenage sleuth involved, you know, who's like the main character and the thing about it was ... I mean it's supposed to be ... so this is like the book I hate, right? I hated it that only after I read it, I wished I hadn't. Does that qualify as hate? [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Yes. I think if you finish a book and you either think that was not for me and I wish I could remove the contents from my brain, or I want my four to 14 hours back, yes, I think that's fair. You don't have to use the h-word, but I think it's fair.

EMILY: Because I ... I mean reading it, yes, there was story. I turned the pages. I kept going because I have been known to actually put books down, but I tend to not remember those. So this is a book I finished and after I finished it, I thought, eh, not really for me. And then later I learned, I don't know if it's true or not, but she said in some article or in an interview that she wrote it as a joke because she doesn't like the genre and she was like, I'm going to play with this genre and the tropes and I don't know if that's true, Anne. I don't want to spread rumors. But I thought, you know, I think I chose the book she wrote outside of her own genre and maybe I should give her another chance. But then that makes me feel like eh, I don't know if I want to do that.

ANNE: I hear what you are saying especially as a reader, and I don't think you're alone in this, who tends to feel like if you love one or more of an author's works, then you're probably going to love the rest of them. So I can see how that kind of general default readerly setting would make you not want to rush out and try another one.

EMILY: Right. Exactly. It's like oh, there's so many books I know I want to read.

ANNE: As a writer, do you find yourself wanting to invent reasons that maybe that book wasn't just for you and others could be? Like maybe her editor was on maternity leave. [EMILY LAUGHS] Maybe they rushed it to publication because there was a gap in the production timeline.

EMILY: Totally.

ANNE: Maybe they wanted her to try something new and adventurous, and she's like, this is the result. Don't make me do that again.

[00:37:47]

EMILY: Right, yeah. I definitely find myself making lots of excuses. [BOTH LAUGH] For books that just aren't for me 'cause I realize it's clearly for people because she's an amazing writer.

ANNE: Okay so right now you're reading ... or you're not reading. You wish you were reading [EMILY LAUGHS] the third Louise Penny book.

EMILY: Yes.

ANNE: As soon as you get it back from the library. Anything else you're reading right now?

EMILY: Well I mentioned it briefly before. I started *The Clockmaker's Daughter* by Kate Morton. Read about a third of it and put it aside, but I found that I'm not compelled to pick it back up, so that's interesting. But I'm currently reading ... another book I'm reading in the mornings is *Life Together* by Bonhoeffer.

ANNE: You know, I read that but only in German, which I feel like doesn't exactly count because who knows what went straight over my head because of translation issues.

EMILY: That is very fancy. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: I couldn't do it now. This was back in college.

EMILY: [LAUGHS] Yes. I'm reading that. That is a book for school, but it's definitely one that's been on my list. And it's a short book, but it's been on my list to read, so this is one that I'm grateful to have assigned to me.

ANNE: Even if you are reading it like you're reading for a grade.

EMILY: Even if I am reading like I am reading for a grade.

ANNE: Emily, what do you want to be different in your reading life?

EMILY: I wish I had a little bit more structure or rhyme or reason to what I'm going to read next, which feels like I'm in the right spot for that question with this podcast. [LAUGHS] Because it's funny ... I wrote the book on the next right thing and just do the next right thing, but when it comes to reading, sometimes I find myself spinning around the room, unable to settle into my book choice. I want to be more of a grownup about it, like go to the next one on the list or go to the next one that feels more life giving to you. That's okay.

You know something I say a lot on the podcast is just pick what you like and then see how it grows. And I think about that with decision-making. I've literally meant that about choosing a plant in your house. [LAUGHS] Like pick the plants that you like and then see how it grows. And I think the same can be true for books, but for some reason, it's not translating into my reading life right now.

[00:39:45]

ANNE: I should probably confess. The past few nights, I've taken like four books to bed. [BOTH LAUGH] And Will will go, how long are you planning on staying up? [EMILY LAUGHS] But I'm currently vetting summer reading guide titles and I don't know a lot about any of these books. I mean forget resisting reading the flap copy, there is no flap copy to read.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: And so I'm telling him you know, I don't ... I'm probably going to read 20 pages of three of these and one of them is going to stick. And it's true that that's a level of information that's much lower than most readers have, but I do relate to that resistance to just settling in.

EMILY: And there's something too, just about the way that our brains work these days. I think that's something to it, too. It's like I need to train myself to be a reader again you know. Even though right now I'm doing it for school, but even for joy and for pleasure and for fun, sometimes, I'm not always reaching for a book, but I want that to be what I reach for.

ANNE: Yes. And right now, in my research for my book that was just due, I'm reading a lot about perfectionism. I didn't realize that perfectionism was really hampering me in my reading life until right this moment 'cause what I do when I'm ready to choose my next book to read is I look at my bookshelf. My stack of books I could possibly be reading next and I want to choose the exact, perfect book for this moment in my life right now.

EMILY: Right, yeah.

ANNE: And how can you choose ... I mean sometimes that happens to you and it's amazing.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: But I mean, talk about a lot of pressure to put on that poor little book.

EMILY: I do that too. I didn't realize I was doing that, but now that you mentioned, that's what it is. I want it to speak to the place. I want it to be relevant to now, but how can you possibly know?

ANNE: Right. Especially when ... having a book surprise you in a way you didn't expect is such a wonderful moment as a reader. And I'm trying to force that out by choosing in advance the one that I know ugh, just perfectionism is the enemy of everything. [EMILY LAUGHS]

Okay well, this is going to be fun. We're going to put books on your reading list and I kinda want to be bossy, like you will read these first, second, and third, but I'm not going to do that to you.

[00:41:46]

EMILY: I kinda want you to be, but you don't have to. It's fine.

ANNE: But no perfectionism here. [EMILY LAUGHS] We're just going to see what floats to the top. You can pick it up and try it and see how it goes. I think it's probably helpful for both of us that you are very self-aware about what you like.

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*Readers, it's springtime now, which means hibernation season is over. All of a sudden, everyone's talking about making "better choices" and of course, getting ready for summer. Well, here's a better choice that will actually get you ready for those hot and muggy days to come: aluminum-free Coconut Deodorant from Kopari!*

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ANNE: So you chose *The House at Riverton* by Kate Morton, which I have to say, I love you, Kate Morton. Let's have coffee. That is my least favorite Kate Morton book, and I find that it's her debut. People who read that first really enjoy it.

EMILY: Yeah.

ANNE: People who come back to it after they read the others tend to not like it as much because her work really matures between book one and book two, but it's evocative. It's a historical mystery. It goes back and forth in time. It's about a difficult decision, Emily. I'm just going to notice that. But it definitely plays on that theme you said you liked which is houses, families, and secrets. You also chose *America's First Daughter* because of your ... I didn't know this about you, love of American history. We can probably do something with that historical

interest. And then Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, a nonfiction spiritual memoir that you found fascinating and surprising.

You didn't love *Ripper* by Isabelle Allende because it wasn't a cozy murder.

[00:44:06]

EMILY: Murder, yes. Cozy, no. And that is the stickler. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Okay. And you want more of a plan in your reading. Ooh and you're interested in revisiting some classics.

EMILY: I am, yeah. Yeah.

ANNE: I'm going to let my slow processing brain think about that for a second and I want to start with a book in a category that you didn't specifically mention, but I think you might be open to and that is a food-adjacent memoir.

EMILY: Ooh. I am open.

ANNE: *The Next Right Thing* is sharing a book birthday with Ruth Reichl's new memoir, *Save Me the Plums*. Do you know anything about this?

EMILY: I do not.

ANNE: I got to read this early. I'm so excited. It's coming out today, April 2nd. I wasn't sure right off the bat. I did know that I have loved everything Ruth Reichl has written in book form. And I was really intrigued when I found out that this is her memoir of her years at Gourmet magazine. She became the executive editor after she was the food critic at the New York Times. And then retired from that role. I think retirement is not the right word, but when Conde Nest overnight shelved a bunch of print publications, as a cost saving exercise. She showed up one day and found out that she didn't have a job anymore.

I read Gourmet magazine, not regularly, but I was always excited to see the new copy in doctor's waiting room some place and I followed her work over the years, and I thought do I really want to know about the Gourmet years in depth? And the answer was [LAUGHS] yes, yes, I emphatically do. [EMILY LAUGHS] I think if you did want to activate the how do other people make decisions part of your brain-

EMILY: Yes.

ANNE: She does tell the story of how this offer landed in her lap and how she thought that it would be crazy. I don't want to do that. But how she went through the decision-making process and ended up taking the job. When she came on at Gourmet, she completely transformed the magazine and I just didn't know enough about Gourmet before and after to understand how that happened. And I think even for readers who don't really care about the specific kinds of

recipes they were sharing in Gourmet magazine, the way she writes about recognizing a culture needing to change and taking the steps to change it from the inside was really, really interesting.

And then throughout she talks about human resources emergencies, and controversial articles she came to publish and how she decided to do it. Her tenure at Gourmet happened during a time of enormous change in the magazine industry going from print to digital, and that was really interesting. But there's just so much here that I didn't know would find fascinating and she writes in such a warm voice. I feel like she's cracking open the door and saying hey, let me tell you about this thing you didn't know you wanted to know about. Here's the scoop. How does that sound?

[00:46:41]

EMILY: I love let me tell you about this thing you didn't know what you didn't want to know about. That's my favorite line you said. But yeah, that sounds fascinating. And you're right, I do love memoir type books and especially if they're going to walk me through a difficult decision or a transformative decision. That's good.

ANNE: I'm happy to hear it. So that's *Save Me the Plums: My Gourmet Memoir* by Ruth Reichl. Whose name I pronounced wrong for years, but I've finally decided that if that's how she says it, then how it is how I will say it too. [EMILY LAUGHS]

Okay the next ones are harder. I was thinking that as a lover of Kate Morton, you found Louise Penny, which I think is a great thing to read next if you're out of Kate Morton novels and you are also a big fan. I was thinking about another historical author for you like Susan Misner or Pam Jenoff. They both have brand new World War II novels coming out, but those are on the other side of the pond for you.

You mentioned something about reading classics you missed as a kid when you were busy like I was reading *The Babysitter's Club* and *Sweet Valley High*.

EMILY: Right. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: And I hear you. I've read books like *Heidi* as an adult for the first time. Did you read Anne of Green Gables?

EMILY: You know, I just got it on Audible with-

ANNE: Rachel McAdams!

EMILY: Rachel McAdams reading it.

ANNE: Good choice. Okay. This is not 100% American history, but it overlaps and you will hear why. I'm really curious if you've read anything by the author, Sarah McCoy, who's written ... if not solely, then predominately American historical fiction.

EMILY: I've not.

ANNE: Okay. She had a book come out in October. It's called *Marilla of Green Gables* and I think this might be a really interesting follow up to listening to Rachel McAdams read you the original. I also think it's fine to skip *Anne of Avalea* and the whole rest of them to move on and I imagined that maybe some purists are going to throw eggs into my inbox. [EMILY LAUGHS] But I really do really think it's okay.

She wrote a historical novel about Marilla before *Green Gables*. And she starts with her as a child as she gets older. We do note that she ... I don't know. Emily, you don't want to know anything, so I won't share any spoilers.

EMILY: Good, good. Yes.

ANNE: But you do get to see in this book how Marilla whispered to make some major decisions in her life. First I have to tell you I was afraid to read it because Alexander McCall Smith said once that when one messes with the classics at one's peril, and he knew this because he wrote a Jane Austen project novel that was a contemporary retelling of *Emma*, which many people are bound to hate categorically because you're messing with a Jane Austen novel.

Sarah McCoy does that here with *Marilla of Green Gables*. What she does is she introduces the abolitionist movement in the United States during the 19th century and its effect on Nova Scotia, where Marilla Cuthbert, fictional character, lived. And she does it in a way that I completely didn't expect. That's not the direction I expected the story to go, but I could go with it because of the way she told it and I think as someone who really loves American history, that could be promising. Also building on a childhood classic that you didn't read as a child, but you're reading right now. What do you think?

EMILY: I think that sounds lovely.

ANNE: While we're talking about history, a book I have on my to-be-read stack right now is called *American Princess*. It's a novel of first daughter Alice Roosevelt. This is a story that anyone who has young children in their life might be familiar with because about ten years ago, there was a picture book that came out. It was called *What To Do About Alice*. [EMILY LAUGHS] How Alice Roosevelt broke the rules, charmed the world and drove her father Teddy crazy. So there's a new book for adults that just came out last month. It's the grown-up version of this story, and biographically fiction is really hot right now, when an author is telling lightly fictionalized accounts of a historical character's life. And what that means is they're imagining conversations and specific plot, but they are building the story around real events that actually happened.

The critical reviews are good. I haven't yet read this myself or talked to readers whose taste I really know and trust who have read it, but I am noticing that that is out there if you really want to indulge your American history interest with a brand-new book.

I do have to put in a good word for *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. And the thing about this that continues to surprise me is this is her first novel and it took her forever to get it published because nobody wanted to touch it. But when she finally did, and it was published first in Spanish, and then you probably ... unless you're a Spanish reader, and I don't know about it, be reading the American translation. So anyone who loves books and translation, this one would be a good one to pick up.

But it was an instant bestseller. Critically acclaimed. Launched her career, but her road to publication ... I mean it almost didn't happen. It has houses, families, secrets, Emily. But it's not ... I don't think it tips so dark that you finish and be like, yes, I would like my 20 hours back.

[00:51:26]

EMILY: [LAUGHS] Right.

ANNE: 'Cause it's a big book-

EMILY: That's good.

ANNE: It might actually take you that long.

EMILY: Right. Okay.

ANNE: But for the final book, because I'm thinking something lighthearted might be nice.

EMILY: Uh-huh. Always.

ANNE: Have you read *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith?

EMILY: No, I have not read that.

ANNE: Is this one you know? Or familiar with?

EMILY: I think it's on my to-read list.

ANNE: Is it really? Is it one of those 40 books? That would make me really happy.

EMILY: Yes. It is. It's number seven.

ANNE: Well what do you know about it?

[00:51:51]

EMILY: Nothing [LAUGHS] I don't remember. [BOTH LAUGH] I just know it's number seven, right above *Night Circus*.

ANNE: Well I'm going to start with a little fun bit of readerly trivia for you. This is considered the first young adult novel. It was published in the '40s and I don't know. I don't feel like you don't really want to read stuff because it's historically significant, Emily. [EMILY LAUGHS] Never the less, in that sense it is. But I like it for you because it's old at this point. This book is 80-ish years old, but it still feels really fresh and it's fun, but it's not sappy and it's told through the voice of a 17-year-old girl named Cassandra and she's such a winning narrator. And she's ... I almost said blogging. Where did that come from? [BOTH LAUGH] But she's writing about her family, and you've said that you like houses, families, and secrets, and they live in this literally crumbling old English castle. And she's writing about their eccentricities and daily events, both of the ordinary and the extraordinary variety in her diary and is a writer, I think you might find that really fun. But it's just full of funny and poignant stories and it's a little bit magical.

It has this really warm, infusive tone to it. Writer's block is a thread you see repeatedly and there's a very gentle love story in it as well. How does that sound to you?

EMILY: When you said a little bit of magic, a gentle love story, a crumbling English castle? [ANNE LAUGHS] A writer? Be still my beating heart. I love it all.

ANNE: I'm happy to hear it. Okay. So we put *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende out there, and we talked about *Save Me the Plums: the Gourmet memoir* by Ruth Reichl. We talked about *Marilla of Green Gables* by Sarah McCoy and we ended with *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith. Of those three titles, what do you think you will read next? I'm going to make you choose. I'm not going to do it for you.

EMILY: Oh you're going to make me choose. Okay probably won't be the Isabel one because I need to think about her.

ANNE: Based on your reaction, okay. *I Capture the Castle*.

EMILY: That might be next because it was already on my list which tells me that my past self already thought that was a good idea.

ANNE: Yes, and your present self responds.

EMILY: And my present self is going to respond and say I think that's my next right thing.

ANNE: Then we're going to do Ruth Reichl, *Save Me the Plums*, your book birthday buddy.

[00:54:10]

EMILY: Which I always found that books that release ... my book twins, like Jen Hatmaker and I are book twins, her *For The Love* came out on the same day as *Simply Tuesday*. So I always have a special place in my heart for book twins, so I really feel like the plum book ... what's it called again?

ANNE: *Save Me the Plums*.

Emily; *Save Me the Plums*. That's going to be next.

ANNE: And then Sarah McCoy and then you can finish with Isabel Allende. You'll be in the summertime by then. It feels like a good summer novel.

EMILY: That feels really good. I love it. I'm so excited.

ANNE: Well thanks so much for talking books with me today.

EMILY: Thanks for having me. It's been a blast.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Emily, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/178](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/178) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

Make sure to check out Emily's podcast *The Next Right Thing*, and her new book of the same name, which is out TODAY, APRIL 2. Find all the info you need on her website, that's [www.emilypfreeman.com](http://www.emilypfreeman.com), where you can also sign up for email updates. Emily's instagram account is one of my favorites. She's there at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman) and at the same place on Twitter, [emilypfreeman](https://twitter.com/emilypfreeman).

Next week I'm chatting with a book lover who's eager to discover the common thread that runs through what she sees as the scattered data points of her literary life so she can gain a clear understanding of who she is as a reader. Here's a sneak peek:

SHANNAN: I just know becoming more assured of myself and hearing my own voice. For years, I looked to others for direction. Obediently. Followed down the path that was given to me and of course, I'm approaching 40 and that is not how [LAUGHS] you want to live your life. You know you have to listen to your own inner knowing and your own inner compass and this has been across all levels for me the past few years. Spiritual, physical, mental, so I'm hoping to use this show and you as a resource to kinda get me on the reading path that feels authentic to me and I don't feel so scattered. I just feel eclectic. [LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

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Thanks to the people who make this show happen! What Should I Read Next is produced by Brenna Frederick, with sound design by Kellen Pechacek. Readers, that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening. And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading." Happy reading, everyone.