



**WSIRN Episode [number]: [Title]**  
**Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest [name]**

[00:00:00]

ANNE: See, here's the thing, Will, I read *Anna Karenina*, but it's been a long time. I've never read *War And Peace* though, do you want to make the case?

WILL: Uh, yes. [BOTH LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 184. 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.

\*\*\*

*Readers, it's the best time of the year: Summer reading season. For the past eight years now, I've put together a list of my top picks for great summer reads. This year, I'm emailing the 2019 summer reading guide out to newsletter subscribers on Thursday, May 16th. If you are not already subscribed, you can still get the guide by going to [ModernMrsDarcy.com/subscribe](https://ModernMrsDarcy.com/subscribe) and entering your email address there.*

*And if you want to hear more about the books I chose for this year's summer reading guide, tune in next week for our summer reading special, where I'll talk with What Should I Read Next producer, Brenna, and take your requests for what to read next this summer.*

\*\*\*

Today's guest is Will Schwalbe, reading devotee and host of But That's Another Story podcast. Will believes that if we all ask the question: What are you reading? more often, it could change

the world, and has a few literary supersitutions that I found absolutely delightful. We're chatting all about the downside of conquering your to-be-read list, misremembering poetry, bookstore serendipity, and Will's attempt to convince me to read a super ambitious classic that I just haven't had the nerve to pick up yet. Let's get to it.

Will, welcome to the show.

[00:01:42]

WILL: Thank you, Anne. Thank you so much for having me on.

ANNE: Oh, well, it is my pleasure. It's always wonderful to talk to a fellow book person, and your resume is particularly interesting. I'm looking forward to answering all kinds of questions that I really am clueless about, like what in the world does an executive vice president at a publisher do?

WILL: Well, that's a good question. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: See, I know you as an author and as a book podcaster, and I know what those things involve, but the-the EVP ...

WILL: It's actually ... I have a very simple job with - with a very unsimple title. I'm essentially an editor-at-large, and Macmillan has all these wonderful imprints. They have Flatiron Books, and St. Martin's Press, and Henry Holt and Picador and Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, and Celadon, and I acquire and edit books for all the different imprints.

ANNE: So I think 2/3rds of our audience just went, "He is living the dream."

WILL: It is a really - it's a really fun job and one of the most fun things about it is because all of these imprints are so different, I get to do all different kinds of books. I have cookbooks coming up, and every now and then, a novel, but not many. Any ... Really is, just really wonderful to be present from the inception through the creation through the publication of a book.

ANNE: How long have you been in that role, Will?

WILL: Well, I've been in that role here for about six years. Before that, I was an entrepreneur with a cooking website that I founded for about six years, and then for 20 years before that, I was an editor at a book publishing house. I was editor-in-chief of William Morrow and then I was editor-in-chief of Hyperion Books, so all in all, I've been in publishing in some way shape or form for 30 plus years.

ANNE: Would anyone who knew you say, ten years old, be surprised at the direction your life has taken?

[00:03:27]

WILL: I think they would have been surprised that it-it took a turn into publishing specifically because I, for a long time, and it's funny, I-I just did an anecdote on my podcast about this, for a long time, I told everybody I wanted to be a painter and then everybody and I made one really terrible discovery, which is I have no talent whatsoever when it comes to painting. [ANNE LAUGHS] So I had to jettison that dream.

And then the next dream, I wanted to be an actor. I actually ... I'd gone through an astronaut period 'cause it was the '60s and that's where the excitement was. But eventually then, actor was the thing, but one of the things about acting is [LAUGHS] you-you kinda need other people's permission to do it. After a while, I just decided that-that writing would be my bag. I don't remember specifically thinking, oh, I want to go into publishing. But there is one aspect of my personality, and I know it's one that you and I share, Anne, which really did mean publishing was the thing, and that's when I read a book that I love, everybody I know has to read it. I make them. [ANNE LAUGHS]

And to me, that's really what publishing is. Sometimes I joke with people about that some readers are privatizers, and that means when they read a book they love, they really don't want anybody else to read it, and some readers are publishers, and that means when you read a book, as I said, you-you really want all your friends, strangers, you just want to grab people on the street and say, "Read this." And-and that's what being a publisher is.

ANNE: So, have you ever accosted a person on the street with either a book recommendation or commentary on a book in their hand?

WILL: My method is a little more subtle than-outright, um, aggression. [ANNE LAUGHS] My favorite question in the world, and I believe it's a question that can change society, lives, the world, is a simple question: What are you reading? And so whenever I meet someone, anywhere, in a taxi, online, at the deli, next to me in an airplane, I'll say, "What are you reading?" And on the basis of what they're reading and what their interests are, I find myself recommending books to them. But also what's so great, I find them recommending books to me.

ANNE: Ooh. I imagine that there are many different ways you can take that question. Are you sometimes surprised by the direction people take the what are you reading question?

WILL: I'm very surprised by the direction they take, but I'm also constantly impressed and inspired by the fact that we make all kinds of assumptions about people based on all kind of extraneous information and when you ask somebody, "What are you reading?" what you're really asking them is, "Who are you and who do you want to become?" People surprise and amaze you.

Some people are reading popular science and some people are reading science fiction and someone who you would never expect to be in love with romance novels is in love with romance

novels. [ANNE LAUGHS] And-and so it's really a way of saying like, tell me who you are. You know, I also without judging sometimes people say, I'm not much of a reader. Sometimes I'll ask them if there was a book as a kid they loved? But sometimes they'll, you know, tell me something else. Do you like movies? Do you like sports? Where are you going on vacation? It's just a way of saying I am curious about you.

[00:06:24]

ANNE: Something that [LAUGHS] I've said before, I'm sure I'll say again, that I really enjoy about conversation about books is that you would never sit down with a stranger, an acquaintance, sometimes even a good friend, and say, tell me what's worrying you. Tell me what you dream about. Tell me what you think really matters in life. But books are a shortcut to talk about those things that really matter. They give you a way to approach the subjects that are really crucial in life.

WILL: I-I couldn't agree more and there's a book I wrote called *The End Of Your Life Book Club* and that was a book about the conversations I had with my mother when she was dying of pancreatic cancer. We talked about a lot of serious subjects, but there were some subjects that were just too painful to address head on. And books gave us a way to do that. And-and one of the most meaningful conversations we had was prompted by *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner, which was one of my favorite books.

ANNE: Oh, I love that book.

WILL: It's just magnificent. I was able to have this conversation with my mother, where I said, and don't worry, there are no spoilers here for listeners who haven't read it. [ANNE LAUGHS] 'Cause this all happens on the first couple of pages, you find out this woman-

ANNE: But, Will and I are going to tell you, you should read it immediately.

WILL: Immediately. [ANNE LAUGHS]

So, there's a woman named Charity and her husband is ... Uh, she's dying. And I was able to talk with my mother about whether her husband would be okay after she died, meaning the character's, but really talking about would my father be okay after my mother died? Which was too painful a subject to go to directly, but Wallace Stegner and those characters gave us a way of coming at it obliquely.

ANNE: Oh. Now remembering the beginning and ending to that book, 'cause it's a circle, Charity's husband, how poignant, Will.

WILL: Yeah, it really was. And so I talk sometimes about how I love the metaphor that books are bound as in the pages are bound when you read them in print, but books and people are bound together too. Every book in my life is in some way connected with a person, a place, someone

who gave it to me, someone I thought about when I was reading it, someone I gave it to. So-so books and people become inextricably bound together.

[00:08:32]

ANNE: That's a beautiful metaphor. So it sounds like even though you did have your years of painterly and astronaut ambitions, books have been a real constant in your life.

WILL: Oh, books have been ... I-I am that kid who was under the covers with the flashlight reading late into the night. I was obsessed ... I don't think anyone reads this author anymore, but Alistair MacLean. I was obsessed with Alistair MacLean. Um, he wrote-

ANNE: I don't know Alistair MacLean.

WILL: He was a monster bestseller when I was a kid and he wrote these kinda hairy, chested adventures, and there was usually a band of brothers, symbolically, and they were off to fight the nazis and one of them was a traitor and one of them would die during the thing. And-and they were slightly formulaic, but just glorious. The most famous ones were books like *Force 10 From Navarone*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *Where Eagles Dare*, they were all made into movies.

So I read those obsessively. I was the Tolkien kid, so I raced through *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I've always been a voracious reader and I get panicky if I don't have a book by my side.

ANNE: Has that happened lately?

WILL: No. I always travel with a book. [BOTH LAUGH] But I did start my most recent book, *Books For Living*, with a description of what I call the reader's nightmare. And this is a genuine nightmare that I have all too frequently, and in this nightmare, I'm about to board a plane for a flight to Perth, Australia and I realize [ANNE GASPS] I do not have a book. And the nightmare is one of sheer panic as I run frantically through the airport looking for a bookstore. As this nightmare always ends, I can't find one, the flight is boarding, I wake up screaming.

ANNE: If that's not a bookworm bonafide, I don't know what is.

WILL: Literally nightmares about ... And then I also have happy dreams where I open a closet and discover that there's a private library in my apartment I never knew existed.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Oh, I'm a little jealous now.

WILL: [LAUGHS] I think back, and I talk about this a lot, too, about how incredibly lucky I was to have a parent, my mother, who read to us every night. You know, this wasn't .... What I think back on that as much as I can remember, what I do remember is not so much the books, but the conversations we had about the books. And I think for book lovers, that really is part of is books

are a way to connect with one another. I think to give that gift to a kid, whether it's your own or some other child in your life, the gift of just not reading a book, but of talking about a book is priceless.

[00:11:08]

ANNE: Now, Will, I'm assuming that since you work in books, you've been reading forever, that people assume you've read everything.

WILL: Yes, people assume I've read everything, but sometimes, that's not entirely their fault. Sometimes I lead them to believe that maybe I've read a book that I haven't. [ANNE LAUGHS] You're having a conversation and someone will say something like, oh, yes, *Anna Karenina*, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, *Anna Karenina*, the train, blah blah blah. They come away with the impression that you have actually read *Anna Karenina*, but in fact, you just know something about it because everybody talks about it so much, and-and I bring that one up in particular because I love *War And Peace*, I talk about *War And Peace* a lot, so everybody assumed I read *Anna Karenina* and I did nothing to disabuse them of this, but in fact I hadn't, and now I'm halfway through *Anna Karenina*. I totally love it. I actually ... I love talking to you, Anne, but I'm also desperate to get back and see what happens next in *Anna Karenina*.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Are you a reading during the work day kind of person? Since you do work in Macmillan?

WILL: That is my biggest reading regret is that there is not one spare minute between the hours of 9 and 6 to read. I emails, and phone calls, and meetings, so I read first thing in the morning. I set my alarm an hour early every day and I just lay in bed and I read for an hour. Then I read at night too, but argh, not during the day.

ANNE: Ahh. What happened in *Anna Karenina* this morning?

WILL: [LAUGHS] In *Anna Karenina* this morning, there's just been this traumatic horse race. Ended up with ahh, I'm sorry, this is going to be very upsetting for everybody who hasn't read it and I won't spoil it too much, but with a horse being put down and it's a devastating scene.

ANNE: That sounds vaguely familiar. See, here's the thing, Will, I read *Anna Karenina* but it's been a long time. I've never read *War And Peace* though, do you want to make the case?

WILL: Uh, yes. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Go for it.

WILL: *War And Peace* really is the totality of society. There's everything there. David Halbert stamps the best and the brightest, how we stumble into war. There's *Downton Abbey* with

upstairs and downstairs scenes played out. There's romance, Natasha and Pierre, different theories about great men in history versus inexorable forces. And it is a page turner.

[00:13:13]

ANNE: After talking to a few What Should I Read Next guests who listed as a favorite or mentioned that they had finally read it and been glad, it has moved way up my priority list but I haven't actually made it happen yet. I imagine you know how that goes.

WILL: I do know how that goes, and I have one caution. And this may horrify you and your listeners, but I actually read *War And Peace* when I was a travel journalist and I was on assignment to travel across Siberia by railway. I was reading it, and because I had to keep my luggage really light, I did something terrible, which was, um, rip out pages and flush them down the toilet onto the tracks. [ANNE LAUGHS] 'Cause it's a big book. And in doing so, I ripped out and flushed out the list of characters with all of the various names they are called.

ANNE: Oh. I've been warned about this. I haven't been warned about flushing it down the toilet, but-

WILL: Yeah, so don't do that. [ANNE LAUGHS] Don't do that anyways, but really don't do that.

ANNE: So I will be helpless without my cheat sheet.

WILL: You really need ... Rereading ... And *Anna Karenina* the cheat sheet comes in handy too.

ANNE: I do remember that. So, Will, I imagine that because of your first of all avid reader nature and second because you actually work in the industry that you are acutely aware not only of what is being published, but what you're missing out on. How do you handle that, so many books, so little time dilemma?

WILL: I actually love and thrill to the so many books, so little time, and one of the peculiar things, I was going to say, if you come to my apartment, but when you come visit my husband and me in our apartment, you'll see that we have a lot of bookshelves like most people do. But our bookshelves are filled with books we have yet to read. They're very few books that we have read on it.

And I love that. I love waking up in the morning and looking at a wall of books and thinking, oh, I haven't read any of these. I have all of these ahead of me. [ANNE LAUGHS] Adding books to my to-read list just gives me more reason to live and I would be ... It'd be a terrible thing to read every book that you wanted to read. Every book I can add fills me with joy.

ANNE: One of my favorite lines is from Emily Dickinson, I dwell in possibility. I'm imagining you and your husband literally dwelling in the possibility of all those books awaiting you.

[00:15:21]

WILL: Yes. And it's fun also to shop your bookshelf. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's like going to a great indie bookstore and every book speaks to you. And this does speak to the fact that whenever I walk into a great indie bookstore, my eyes are bigger than my stomach, and I wind up buying all sorts of books, but also some of my all-time favorite books are from asking indie booksellers what are you reading? Having them enthused and I almost always buy the books they tell me about, but in particular, my local indie, one of them is called 3 Lives.

Joyce at 3 Lives just has me down. She for example told me about *Mrs. Caliban* by Rachel Ingalls. I never would have found that book otherwise and I bought because Joyce told me to. I put it on the shelf of books to read and one day, I shopped my-my bookshelf, found that, and was riveted by this extraordinary tale of a woman in a desperately unhappy marriage who has a passionate affair with a sea monster.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I did not see that coming. I do not know *Mrs. Caliban*. I do know 3 Lives and went there with several of my children a couple years ago, and one of them commented, the-the wisdom of grade schoolers, I've never seen so many books in so small space and have it still be pretty.

WILL: It's just one of those alchemic indie bookstores where the place, the staff, the books, they all come together perfectly curated, but just bursting with possibility. And the customers, 'cause they're all forced together, too, for me, it's this sorta [ANNE LAUGHS] dream because everybody's saying, oh, oh, I read that, or you're going to love that, or you know, if you read that, also read this and giving each other recommendations. So it's community.

ANNE: Oh, I love that. Will, I am very eager to get to the question that matters most to you, which is what are you reading? Are you ready to talk about your reading life?

WILL: I am ready.

ANNE: I guess we've been talking about that. [LAUGHS]

WILL: I'm ready to talk more about my reading life.

\*\*\*

*ANNE: Readers, staying fit and healthy, but it's not easy. The simple answer is working out consistently, but signing up for classes, putting it on my calendar, and getting out of the house on the regular all conspire to keep me from being consistent.*

*OpenFit makes it easy to get fit. It's a brand new super simple streaming service allows you to work-out from the comfort of your living room in as little as 10 minutes a day.*

*So lose the commute to the gym and let the workouts come to you.*

*OpenFit classes are lead by some of the most effective and engaging trainers in the world. Sculpt your body with Andrea Rogers, founder of the world wide sensation Xtend Barre. Or get in crazy good shape with Hunter McIntyre, named by Sports Illustrated as one of the top 50 fittest athletes.*

*These trainers know how to get your results quick.*

*I've done the Xtend Barre workouts, and Andrea Rogers combination of traditional barre routines with calorie burning cardio are a butt kicker. These 30-minute workouts can be done without a bar, but not without breaking a sweat.*

*Right now during the Openfit 30-day challenge, What Should I Read Next listeners get a special extended 30-day free trial membership to Openfit, when you text READ to 303030.*

*You will get full access to Openfit – all the workouts and nutrition information--- TOTALLY FREE. Again - Just text READ to 303030. Standard message and data rates may apply.*

\*\*\*

ANNE: Here on What Should I Read Next, you get to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what we're reading now, and then I have the [LAUGHS] complicated task of putting books in your path that you may enjoy reading next to borrow some of your own terminology.

[00:18:54]

WILL: Great.

ANNE: How did you choose your favorite books to talk about today?

WILL: Well, I chose ... I have so many favorite books that it was really a struggle, but I wanted to choose books that were very different because all different kinds of books affect me. I'm not just a fiction reader or just a nonfiction reader or just a poetry reader, books in really in every genre have grabbed me at some point in my life, so I very purposefully chose three books that were in three very different genres.

ANNE: If it was easy to pick, I think you're talking on the wrong podcast to the wrong people because for book lovers, this is a tortuous question. I'm so curious to hear what you chose to represent the different aspects of your reading life. Tell me about the first book.

WILL: So the first book I'll talk about is *Love Poems* by Nikki Giovanni. Nikki Giovanni is a national treasure. She is one of America and world's most greatest poets. She bursts onto the

scene as a young woman barely in her teens during the Black Power Movement with I believe her first book was *Black Talk, Black Judgement* and has just pursued a career of writing powerful, angry, loving, lyrical poems about things that happen in society and philosophical poems and she's just one of those poets who has always really spoken to me. And then years ago, and I was involved with this publication, she came out with a little book called *Love Poems*.

it's just a perfect little book. Some of them are about romantic love and a couple of them are about erotic love, but one is about making an omelette, and some are angry and some are joyful, and it's just this magical little volume that you can turn to again and again the way people used to turn to *The Book of Common Prayer*. And you always find something new in *Love Poems* by Nikki Giovanni. So that's a book I keep by my bedside and that's one-that's one I would recommend to anyone.

[00:20:52]

ANNE: Can I read you a stanza from her poem *Love Is*?

WILL: Yes!

ANNE: I had to look it up because as a book lover, I remembered it a little bit incorrectly. Let me read it to you and then tell you what I mean.

*"Some people forget that love is  
tucking you in and kissing you  
'Good night'  
no matter how young or old you are."*

But I remember it as some people that love is reading to you in your bed at night, not quite the same thing but that is also what love is, so when you were talking about your mother reading to you at night, I thought of this Nikki Giovanni poem.

WILL: That's so wonderful. I love that-that those came together for you. I don't know for sure, but I think Nikki would hardly approve of that [ANNE LAUGHS] misremembering.

ANNE: I sure hope so.

WILL: That's one. Another one I chose is *The Importance of Living* by Lin Yutang.

ANNE: Yes, tell me about this one.

WILL: Lin Yutang was an author who burst onto the world stage in the late '30s. Lin was a very popular writer in China, befriended by Pearl Buck, the Nobel Prize laureate for *The Good Earth*, among other books. He wrote in quick succession in the '30s, two books explaining the Chinese way of life to the rest of the world. One was about the Chinese people and their history, and the

second one, *The Importance of Living*, was about what he saw as the best things in the scholarly, Chinese way of life. And he called it, and I love this, the noble art of leaving things undone.

Lin Yutang was a great champion of poetry and reading and drinking tea and taking walks in nature and spending time with your friends and the book is degressive and charming and filled with all sorts of delightful things. One of my favorite things in it, his philosophy. He says, if you have spent a perfectly useless afternoon doing absolutely nothing, then you've mastered the art of living.

It's really a book about life and enjoying life and I will add in, there's one incredibly important thing to remember as you read this book and he talks about it later in the book, he was writing it in the '30s and he talks about the rise of Stalin and Hitler. And he talks about humanistic values like reading as being the antidote to everything that's wrong and evil in society. Greed, aggression and the grab for power.

So it's really a book about what it means to be human in the face of a society that-that often wants to crush humans.

[00:23:16]

ANNE: So when you said what are you reading is the most important question, that sounds very similar to me.

WILL: It is. It is very similar. Again when we're talking about books with one another, it's a humanistic endeavor. It's not totalitarian, it's individual. It's not mechanistic, it's creative. So we're really engaged as Lin Yutang saw it in something very, very important, and he really was calling out in 1937, 1938 to watch out, to protect these humanistic values. That's when I wrote my-my second book, *Books For Living*. That book is at the core of it because that really is at the core not just in my reading philosophy, but my life philosophy.

ANNE: Will, what put Lin Yutang in your path?

WILL: As a kid, I saw the movie *Cabaret* and I kinda fell a little bit in love with Michael York as many of us did. [LAUGHS] Partially 'cause I love the movie and partially 'cause I love Michael York. Um, I decided to investigate the era. And that is based on stories by my actually favorite author, Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories*. So I read a ton of Christopher Isherwood books. Everything I could lay my hands on, which lead me to read more and more about the 1930s, and then I discovered that the biggest bestselling author of the 1930s was Lin Yutang. So, I had to read Lin Yutang and see what that was all about and that's when I discovered *The Importance of Living*.

So again, it's one of those things that I love serendipity how a movie and an actor leads to the source material, leads you to other books of the time, and leads you to the book that'll be the most important book of your life or one of them.

[00:24:46]

ANNE: Yes. I think there really is something to finding the book that we need in the most unexpected ways and books appearing in your life almost at the moment it seems that you need them.

WILL: Absolutely. The universe puts books in your path when you need them, but you-you have to pay careful attention or you'll miss them. I love to talk about a library bookstore superstition I have, which is, if you knock over a book in a library, you have to check it out. If you knock over a book in a bookstore, you have to buy it. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's unbelievable how it works. I mean, that really is the universe putting a book in your path and you ignored at your peril.

And then the third book that I named when you asked me this wonderful question is *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. And this is a novel set in contemporary times that traces four friends from college through adulthood. It's a book that-that you race through just breathless to find what happens next. There's a lot of horrific abuse in the book that's chronicilled, but for me, really, this is the most powerful book about friendship that I've ever read. It-it's a book about friends. Friends and family, what can be more important than that? And Hanya Yanagihara engaged so beautifully with this topic, especially around [SIGHS] the really tough part of it which is when you have a friend who's not doing well, who for whatever reason, is not getting better. The real depth of friendship when you realize that you need to stick by them, no matter what.

ANNE: This has been a popular book on the podcast. So many readers love it, and so many readers are also hesitant to pick it up because of the abuse that you mentioned, but I love the way you described it, as being about one of those friends that you have that doesn't get better. Because I think so many of us have one of those people in our lives.

WILL: [SIGHS] You know, especially the friends who are suffering but as part of their suffering, push you away. It's not an easy question. These aren't - there's no quick answer I can give you. There's no, when they say this, you do that, and when they say that, you do this.

And I think that's one of the things that great novels do, great literature does. It's not a how-to book. It's not a self-help book, but it's a book that causes you to think much more deeply and profoundly about the responsibilities of friendships, the privileges of friendships, and how you move through the world.

ANNE: This is one I have been a little hesitant to read as I've said before, but I do like the way you describe it.

[00:27:19]

WILL: It will really reward you, and I-I know some people who've been hesitant to read it because it takes an unflinching look at the worst things that human beings can do to each other.

But I also really believe, and this is something my mother taught me, and I wrote about in the *End of Your Life Book Club*, part of being fully human is to engage with the worst things that we do to each other. A book that I almost named as one of these three ... It's an impossible task as you say [ANNE LAUGHS] is *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

ANNE: [GASPS] Oh.

WILL: It's a magnificent novel-

ANNE: Now I've read that and thoroughly enjoyed it, although I understand why it's coming up in this context.

WILL: At its heart, often a deeply, deeply upsetting book about cruelty, and it's also a book, and again, I'm not giving anything away, where evil is not punished and good is not rewarded. People muddle on, they do the best they can. But if you're looking for the bad people to suffer, you're not going to find that in that book. And that's a lesson that's true to life. I think if we go through life with the expectation that good will always be rewarded and evil will always be punished, we will end up very disappointed.

ANNE: I can't wait to hear you describe the book that was not for you.

WILL: [LAUGHS] The book that was not for me was *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. I don't really know why it wasn't for me, but I have a theory, which I'll explain to you. I was a Tolkien person, uh, *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* through and through. Most of the time, when I'm in a room full of people, and I feel like doing this little quiz, I say [ANNE LAUGHS] raise your hand if you're a Tolkien person and about half the room raises their hand. And then I say raise your hand if you're a C.S. Lewis Lion, Witch, and The Wardrobe person, and about half the room raises their hand, and they're totally different halves.

And there's something about these two sagas that are almost like a personality test.

ANNE: At what point in your life did you read this?

WILL: So, I was racing through Tolkien and-and my brother who didn't much care for Tolkien [LAUGHS] really loved C.S. Lewis and really loved *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, so I kept trying to give it a try and it would be one of those books that I just abandoned halfway through so many times that I finally gave up. And I-I to this day, I've never read more than half of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.

[00:29:26]

ANNE: I imagine there are times when people hear that you didn't enjoy, haven't finished because you didn't want to, this classic that's beloved by so many and think [GASPS] how dare you. I'd love to hear you reflect a bit about how we are all drawn to different books for different reasons and that it is okay for someone to not think a book that you love and adore with all your heart and soul might not even be worth your time to finish.

WILL: Well there's a wonderful quote that I love from my guy, Lin Yutang, who I was talking about [ANNE LAUGHS] which is if you don't like a book, let other people read it.

ANNE: Easy enough.

WILL: [LAUGHS] And so, if I didn't like it, I'm not stopping anyone else. But I also really believe that sometimes it's the right book, but not the right time. When I wrote about *Crossing to Safety*, one of the things I did write about is I had started that book a million times before I finally persevered and read it. There was something about the first ten or 15 pages that just didn't grab me, and I kept starting it and putting it down.

And I travelled with that book on so many flights that I used to joke that if books had frequent flyer programs, that one would have earned a first class trip to Tokyo. [ANNE LAUGHS] Finally when my mother dying said, you must read this book, I read it. And it was the right book at the right time, so it could well be that next year, five years from now, ten years from now, on my deathbed, I will pick up *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* and it will be the perfect book for me.

ANNE: That's interesting because so many people read that book as a kid and yet I can see had I tried to read *Crossing to Safety* at say, 19-years-old, I don't think I would have gotten very far. It seems like a book to me that you need a little life experience to grasp.

WILL: I'm still waiting for trollop. I know people love trollop. [ANNE LAUGHS] I'm going to do trollop in my 60s. I'm in my 50s now, and-and I'm waiting for my 60s.

ANNE: And Will, we know what you're reading now.

WILL: Yes. I'm reading - I'm-I'm well into *Anna Karenina* and absolutely loving it, so I'm very excited to have found the right time to read it. I had it on my shelf and something said to me, okay, now is the time for *Anna*.

ANNE: Well, I love how suddenly a book that never seemed important before just asserts yourself in your life and demands to be read.

WILL: And it's also interesting to me too how you can't judge an author by a book. I was talking about C.S. Lewis and how Narnia didn't speak to me, but *The Problem of Pain* is an

extraordinary book he wrote, which is a more philosophized - it's not a novel. It's-it's a work of nonfiction and that book spoke to me very deeply. And that's a book that I've read several times and think about a great deal.

[00:31:59]

ANNE: Yes, this is something that a recent guest, Holli, was saying, how she's learned now to give up on an author when she doesn't like one particular book because all books are not the same, even if they're coming from the same person.

WILL: I think we have to be really careful of that in our critical establishment too. I always sorta joke, you know, I can imagine the conversation if you imagine that Shakespeare was a book author and not a playwright, when like *Troilus and Cressida* came out. Would the critics had been like oh, this Shakespeare guy's washed up. This *Troilus and Cressida*, we-we used to like them, but no more. You know. Sometimes writers, maybe some people of your listeners love *Troilus and Cressida*, to me, it's definitely not Shakespeare's strongest.

But what I'm saying is sometimes writers need to write through a certain book to get to another book. And one of my favorite quotes from a passionate reader was I was talking about the novelist Sidney Sheldon. I really like Sidney Sheldon, the books are so much, and I said to her, what are you reading? And she said the new Sidney Sheldon, and I said, this was ages ago when there wasn't a new Sidney Sheldon. [ANNE LAUGHS] I said, uh, do you like it? And she said, you know, I haven't really liked his last four and to me that was so wonderful because she was Sidney Sheldon reader and she was just going to read Sidney Sheldon after Sidney Sheldon after Sidney Sheldon until he again wrote a book she liked.

ANNE: Well I admire her sticktoitiveness. And that is a good point. Something I feel is sad, but true in the writing life is that authors put their work out there, it's published, and then it lives forever.

WILL: Yes.

ANNE: Regardless of how they feel about it afterwards. So, yeah, all novels are not created equal. All right, Will, now it is my daunting task to see if I can just throw some titles in your path that you may enjoy reading next, and I'm so curious to hear your take. And before we hang up, I'm going to ask you to throw a couple of books in my path. Although I feel like - I feel like you've done that today. I-I have quite a list of notes going here in my fuschia fine liner about titles I want to look up later.

So, you read eclectically, but many of the themes are the same, so we see a lot of love and friendship. We see a lot of issues that are very important, crucially important to us as humans. I also see how you like stories or nonfiction that turns the ordinary into the universal, that turns something personal into something that we can all relate to, even if we're talking about one

individual or one family or one friendship. As we look for titles you may enjoy reading next, those are themes I'm going to keep in mind.

[00:34:22]

WILL: Great. That sounds like you have me to a T. That sounds perfect.

ANNE: I know it's very true that no one has read everything, but of course, I'm a little nervous about that. But I have to ask, have you read *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai?

WILL: I loved *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai. So I have indeed read that, and I approach it with a lot of trepidation because as a gay man who lived through the '70s and '80s and lost a lot of friends to AIDs and worked at Gay Men's Health Crisis starting in 1983, I approached it with trepidation of good deal of skepticism wondering if what she wrote would feel true. And I wrote her a little fan tweet 'cause I don't know her to tell her how completely I felt she achieved her goal. And it really brought back to me that awful, terrible time, but also brought back to me the fact that we did go on with our lives, that we had jobs and that we had friends, and I think that's some of the other people writing about that time got wrong. I love how her characters were going through this cataclysm, that-that we all went through, but also had to carry on with their lives. Um, so yeah, I-I love that book, and thought it was brilliant.

ANNE: Well I was especially interesting in your personal take on it now that I know you have read it. What I was seeing is that it is a story about a really fierce friendship between people who are-who are flawed because they're human. I also loved the fact that it incorporated that bit of the art world that I knew, now I know, is of interest to you.

WILL: Yes. The World War I art world stuff and making the parallels between the artistic movements of World War I and the present is wonderful and how-how the past is present in that art and in some ways too, in those passages it reminded me of one of my favorite series of books, the *Regeneration*, I believe, trilogy or tetralogy by Pat Barker, which touches on World War I or-or centers on World War I. But I thought it was masterful.

ANNE: I'm so glad to hear that. I'm going to think of it a little bit differently now. Okay. I'm really hoping you haven't read what might be the best book I've read in months, have you read the new Peter Heller, *The River*?

WILL: No, I haven't. I'd love to hear about that.

ANNE: This is my first Peter Heller and now I want to read everything he's written, although you know, not all works from all authors are necessarily for the same reader, but I'm excited to read more. This is a small book. It's small format. It's only 250 pages. It goes fast. When I started reading, I expected something contemplative and philosophical and it is, but it is also a serious page turner.

This is a story about two boys, college students, Dartmouth students, who are fierce friends, both avid outdoorsmen. One comes from a rancher's family in Colorado, the other comes from a more sensitive, artistic family in Vermont. And now they're taking this long planned canoe trip in Northern Canada. They're taking the boat down the river. This is not anything about and I still found it fascinating.

The story opens with the boys on the river and they're smelling smoke. What becomes clear, is it this trip is a real survival challenge might be putting it strongly. But they are doing something extremely difficult even to experienced outdoors men, and there's a lot of risk involved. And that's before they realize there's clearly what is a forest fire raging to the west, and they don't know how far away it is, but as the book opens, they're doing calculations like oh, how fast can we go in this beat-up canoe to get out of here, to make it to the bay in time?

Peter Heller neatly avoids one of the flags of modern novelists when everybody has cell phones and can text and communicate and you don't have this miscommunication issue anymore because everybody has cell phones. They couldn't afford a satellite phone, and they're in the middle of nowhere and that made sense to me and I liked how he resolved that. So you have man versus nature, but then as they're going down the river, they see this couple arguing on the banks of the river and they stop and they tell them there's a forest fire, you all need to get moving. They've entered the middle of marital spat as they later find out and this has serious consequences, which ends with basically an unhinged man seeking to make sure they don't make it out into the bay where they can tell everyone what's happened.

As the story goes on, as they move up the river, things get worse and worse and worse for these boys, but you're cheering for them so hard and the way Heller unfolds this is ... I wasn't expecting psychological fiction, but oh wow, this had my heart pounding. I didn't realize at the time and I think this is a real testament to the power of the work, I am so not the target audience for this book. Heller writes for Outside magazine. He used to be a travel journalist. He's an outdoorsy guy. I don't read a lot of that stuff, but I loved this book. Promptly handed it to my husband and said, you have got to read this next, you will love it, which I think that means it's for all kinds of readers, and I want all kinds of readers to find it and not just the guys reading Outside magazine.

What's your experience with Heller and how does that sound to you?

[00:39:17]

WILL: It sounds amazing. I have no experience with Peter. I'm aware of his work, and I think our paths has maybe even crossed, but I have never read him and that sounds like my next book, I think you've-you've found my next book.

ANNE: Well I hope so, and I want to hear what you think about it, Will.

[00:39:34]

WILL: To me, your wonderful description of it calls a little to mind the world of someone like Jack London, which was purely man against nature for the most part, but the idea of man against nature, man against man, or person against nature, person against person, sounds like-like an extraordinary combination. So I really can't wait to read that.

ANNE: I'm excited to hear that. Okay, for this next one, I feel like I need to go a little bit obscure and forgotten so I can get something that you won't have read. What do you know about *Maps for Lost Lovers* by Nadeem Aslam?

WILL: I know nothing about it.

ANNE: Oh, okay, this is a 2005 novel. I like it for you because it's about love and friendship. It makes the very personal, very small universal, it turns mundane events into events that are monumental. Although only mundane in the sense that doesn't matter on a grand scale, but oh golly, it matters to these people.

So this story is set in an insular community of Pakistani migrants in England. They've moved to this town. We never find out what the name of the town is. Aslam doesn't tell us. But they've given it a new Pakistani name that means the wilderness of loneliness or the desert of solitude. The story is about the inner woven lives of these immigrants and how if something happens to one of them, it affects everyone. This is a devout town. There are two lovers who break the Islamic law to live together and when this happens, this devout religious community does not know how to handle it.

The couple disappears. When the story opens, it's been five months since they disappeared. A theory has emerged that perhaps an honor killing was carried out. So what you see in the story is different people, most of whom are concerned about living rightly in the eyes of their fellow citizens and in the eyes of their religion, but they all have different interpretations of what that means. Different measures of strictness and of grace and different opinions on what to do and what it means for them. It's intimate. It's complex. What I really like about it is Aslam makes all her characters sympathetic, even though they all disagree. And it's a quiet book and yet it's so fraught with the tension that you would expect in a community going through what is really a prolonged crisis.

Some critics think that it becomes a little didactic in places, the speeches the author puts in the mouths of her characters, but the prose is so lovely and her descriptions of both the people and their emotions and also the natural world, which I didn't expect. So readable. She has such a way with words. You chose a book of poems as one of your favorites. I mean, I-I think a way with words would be appreciated and that's reflected in your choices. How does this sound to you?

[00:42:18]

WILL: Oh, it sounds really marvelous. I'm so intrigued by it. I'm intrigued by your description of it. Sorta the-the mystery at its core, but also this idea of community and about exploring this particular community, and of course, when you tell me that the language is really something, then I-I really want to dive in and hear this-this voice that I haven't heard before.

ANNE: Will, would you mind pulling a metaphorical book off the shelf and putting it in my path? What's something that you've read that you've felt compelled to tell everyone you know? Friends, strangers, colleagues, oh my gosh, you have to read this book?

WILL: The metaphorical book that I would pull off the shelf, a new book, is actually a book that-that I'm publishing. It's a book, *The Moment of Lift* by Melinda Gates. It is a book that shares the stories of women throughout the world using their voice and bringing attention to some of the most compelling issues of the time. It's a book where Melinda shares her own story for the first time, and it really is a book about how to save the world. In Melinda's eyes, that's a very simple thing because when we lift up women, we lift up humanity and actually the only thing we need to do to lift up women is to stop keeping them down.

This urgent call for equality with the cry that equality can't wait, but it's got marvelous storytelling in it. It's just one of those books ... I'm a little embarrassed to point out a book that I edited and was involved with [ANNE LAUGHS] because it may sound like self-dealing, but this one that I really believe in and this is one that I really want everyone to read.

ANNE: Never be embarrassed about a book you believe in. And, Will, I'm glad you mentioned this because this wasn't a book that I had felt really compelled to read. I've seen it, but I think I dismissed because of Melinda Gates being who she is as like a more businessy book, which it sounds like it's patently wrong. I loved *Half The Sky* and it sounds like it's in that vein. Is that fair?

WILL: Absolutely, positively. This is for readers of *Half The Sky*.

ANNE: Oh, perfect. Well thank you so much for putting that in my path today. Will, it's been a pleasure talking books with you today. Thanks so much for coming on.

WILL: Thank you so much, Anne. I love, love being on-on this show, your wonderful podcast, and talking books with you.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Will, and I'd love to hear what YOU think he should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/184](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/184) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

You can find out more about Will's work from books to podcasts to speaking at [WillSchwalbe.com](http://WillSchwalbe.com). That's Will Schwalbe S-C-H-W-A-L-B-E [WillSchwalbe.com](http://WillSchwalbe.com) and follow him on twitter [@WillSch](https://twitter.com/WillSch).

Next week, I'll be joined by What Should I Read Next producer Brenna Frederick to recommend spectacular summer titles for you, our fabulous listeners. We collected your voicemails, emails and comments over the past few weeks and can't wait to get your summer reading life off to a fantastic start.

Subscribe now so you don't miss next week's episode in Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, and more. We will see you next week!

If you're on twitter, let me know there [@AnneBogel](https://twitter.com/AnneBogel). That is Anne with an E, B as in books -O-G-E-L. Tag us on instagram to share what YOU are reading. You can find me there at [annebogel](https://www.instagram.com/annebogel) and at [whatshouldireadnext](https://www.instagram.com/whatshouldireadnext). Our newsletter subscribers are the first to know all the What Should I Read Next news and happenings. If you're not on the list you can fix that now by visiting [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/newsletter](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/newsletter) to sign up for our free weekly delivery.

We just wrapped up our first volume of One Great Book, my short form podcast where I take one stand out selection off my personal bookshelf and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less. I'll be taking a few weeks off, so if you haven't subscribed to One Great Book, now is the time to get caught up with the eight books in volume one.

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.