



WSIRN Episode 199: The perils of public book recommendations
Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Tara Anderson

[00:00:00]

ANNE: I don't know if an author would be delighted to share a review that says, like, this is so good. I stayed up till 9:45 reading it. But that would be high praise for me these days.

TARA: Heck yeah. [BOTH LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 199.

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, the intro I give every week of what we do here on What Should I Read Next sounds straightforward enough - I talk to a guest about books they love, books they don't, and books they could pick up next. It's simple. But long-time listeners know this show was originally supposed to be a tight 20 minutes. We were just going to talk about the books. And today, it's twice that long plus change most weeks. It turns out, a person's reading taste reveals a lot about who they are as individuals, and digging into those discussions is worth much more to me than hitting a certain target time.

Today's guest is no stranger to seemingly-mundane belongings that hold deep meaning - Tara Anderson hosts the NPR show 5 Things, where she gets to know people by discussing 5 items that matter to them. Guests' resonant objects might be books, but they might also be a houseplant, a special coat, heirloom knitting needles, even something as practical as a rice cooker. There are no home appliances in this episode, but we are investigating what Tara's 3

favorite titles say about what she wants out of life, and what new books will take her there. Let's get to it.

Tara, welcome to the show.

[00:01:43]

TARA: Hi, Anne. Thank you so much for having me. I actually work at all three stations that we have here in Louisville.

ANNE: You do?! I did not know that.

TARA: Yeah. We are super lucky here in Louisville that we have three public radio stations that operate under the same administration, so we're in the same building. The studios are all right down the hall from each other, but three different formats. WFPL is NPR News and Information, WFPK is like indie music, rock, pop, jazz, all sorts of things, and WUOL is the classical music station.

ANNE: Which I have not listened to in ten years. Let's be honest.

TARA: [LAUGHS] Well, it's still there. It's a huge benefit to listeners in Louisville that we've got three stations that work together because we're able to be efficient and maximize all of that behind the scenes stuff that goes into making a radio station while delivering three distinct kinds of programming. For somebody like me who has a background in classical music and a background in broadcasting, I can come in and do a bunch of different things there.

So I've just been kinda project based and popping around to different projects at the different stations, depending on what's going on. So I've hosted classical music. I used to have a regular shift on WFPK hosting an all request show, which was really, really fun. And then I have been the arts reporter for WFPL, the news station. Then I persuaded them to let me start my own podcast and that's how I got to talk to you. You were a guest on 5 Things, which I describe as Show and Tell for Grownups. [BOTH LAUGH] I ask people to pick five objects that have been meaningful in their life, significant or resonate in some way. And then we learn about them through those five objects. It's been a great way to get people talking about themselves and their lives without always relying on the same stories they always tell.

I find it's a great way to get people who are not so comfortable talking about themselves to open up a little bit and if I'm talking to somebody who is really used to doing interviews, somebody who's on a book tour or touring musician who does interviews every day. This structure has been a great way to get people out of their normal promotional speak and let us get to know who they are. So that has been a really fun project.

ANNE: I think one of the reasons I appreciate 5 Things so much is not just for your gorgeous studio, although it does make sense now that you're telling me that when you have three

stations sharing a space, you can justify having a space that's both beautiful and also sounds really, really good without having to put blankets over your head. [TARA LAUGHS] But what I love about books and reading is when you get people talking about books, they can't help but reveal things about themselves also.

[00:04:31]

TARA: Yeah.

ANNE: So you can hear about what's important to them and what they value and what they care about and what intrigues them without saying, oh, hey stranger I'm getting to know, can you tell me something meaningful about your relationship with your father? Like [TARA LAUGHS] 'cause you would never do that. But you can get at what's going on in someone's soul, which sounds so lofty, but you really can, by talking about something that matters to them and that's what I love about your show. I know that I'm not the only one who's brought a book to the table to talk to you as one of their five things. And it's so funny that you said that when you get a touring musician who gives the same talking points all the time, we get pitches for authors to come on What Should I Read Next all the time and they want to come on and talk about their talking points. You know, we get the press sheet and we're always telling them, that's not what we do. Like This is your opportunity to be yourself, to answer questions you don't normally get to answer, and we get to see a glimpse into who you are and what you care about. When people find out those things, they want to know about your book, your music, your project, whatever it is because they feel like they've gotten to know you.

TARA: Exactly. Exactly. And you know, by the same token, I have had a few authors mostly when they find out what it is we're doing back out. I'm not going to name any names, but there are a few people who have had said, oh, this sounds cool. I'd love to promote my new project and then I say, well, you know, we'll talk about your new project, but I also want to learn more about you. I've had more than one person say, ah, no, that's not what I'm doing here. [LAUGHS] I want to talk about my new book and that's it. So, that's fine. To each their own.

ANNE: Do you think they feel like that's not efficient or does that feel scary?

TARA: I think it does feel scary. I did have an experience with a writer who was coming to town, and I was doing a live event with her, and I was super excited about it and I asked if she would do an episode of 5 Things before the event and she declined. And then when I met her in person, she said, kinda riley, she was being silly, but she said, oh, you were the person who wanted to invade my privacy. [BOTH LAUGH] And I was like, yeah, I did. [LAUGHS] But she did not feel like doing that, so that's fine. This is a writer who doesn't really like to talk about her personal life very much. She writes nonfiction and she will happily chat with you about any of her books at length, but she doesn't really want to talk about herself. I respect that. That's fine.

ANNE: And we can also giggle about it a little.

[00:06:52]

TARA: Yes. Exactly. I won't say who she is, but we had a great time anyway.

ANNE: I've been listening to a new release called *What We Talk About When We Talk About Books*. She made an off-hand comment about how people don't always want to get their book recommendations publically.

TARA: Ooh.

ANNE: And she was talking about this in the new context of bibliotherapy, and she was discussing the book *The Novel Cure*, how sometimes prescriptions are being written by doctors for books in certain communities and certain countries. And she said, well, but if a book is a diagnosis of who you are and what you need, maybe you don't want everybody to hear that information. And I thought, hmm, I have a podcast where I give recommendations very publically to people based on what they say, who they say they are, and what they say they need.

TARA: [LAUGHS] Yes. That's a good point. Yeah, you are revealing something when you come on a show like this. What it is that has spoken to me and then what's missing.

ANNE: Well, Tara, I'm really excited to get to your books today because I saw the list of what you love, and what wasn't for you, and all the books, so many books that you've been reading lately. I'm just rubbing my hands together like this is going to be fun. [TARA LAUGHS] You do have a history in broadcast journalism, which I assume indicates that you are someone who likes information in the written word. Is that fair?

TARA: Oh, absolutely. I mean, since I can remember, I was the person who was happiest in the corner curled up with a book, you know. I distinctly remember in kindergarten I was reading on my own while a lot of my classmates were working on their letters, like I don't mean to sound like, ooh, I was so far above everybody else, but like once I learned to read, that was where I wanted to be. So I have always been a big reader from the time I can remember.

And honestly, in the last few years, I've had to make more of an effort to read not because I don't love it, but because life is busy. I have two little kids and you know, all that comes along with that. [ANNE LAUGHS] And I've also been-

ANNE: I've noticed you tweeting a lot, lots of relatable stuff to me about hello, I have kids and a job.

TARA: Yeah. Exactly. It's nuts. And also, like, I have noticed that my attention span has been different. I know that I can't concentrate on things with the depth and intensity that I used to before I had a little computer in my pocket all the time. And I found that to be kinda disturbing, so I've been making an effort in the last couple of years to read more books on paper. I like

audiobooks for road trips and things like that, but I really still prefer books on paper. And I've been making a deliberate effort to make time and space for that in my life again.

[00:09:44]

ANNE: How's that going?

TARA: You know, like the over achiever I am, when I track what I'm doing, I will do it more and do it better. So I track everything I read on GoodReads, and try to, you know, set a reading challenge for myself for the year. Also a bunch of friends of mine got together this year and did like a little informal reading club, I guess, remember BookIt when you were a kid? Right, were you could read all these books and then you got a free pizza at Pizza Hut at the end of the year? [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Oh, one of those cute little personal pan pizzas.

TARA: Yes! Exactly.

ANNE: Yes. We totally had that at my elementary school.

TARA: Right. A couple of friends of mine were like, why don't we do this as adults? So, she's got a little group of people and we all are tracking what we read and she does it through Google Forms. That leads to beautiful charts and graphs [ANNE LAUGHS] of what people are reading and how much and what kind of books you're reading. She has us tracking, like, the genre and some author stats, like what kinds of authors we're reading. And that's been really fun, so I'm eager to finish a book because I'm eager to write it down 'cause then it's real 'cause I finished it. I can say that it has made me more resistant to dropping a book that I'm not feeling because I want to put it on the list. So that's one downside is that, like, sometimes I would probably be better off freeing myself from a book that I'm just not feeling, but I will go ahead and finish it generally, so that I can check it off and put it towards that yearly total.

ANNE: Are there any other methods that you're experimenting with to meet your reading goal?

TARA: It feels kinda silly to have a reading goal, but-

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I know. My eyebrow might have been raised a little as I was saying that. And yet, I know that these kinds of things are important to people who consider themselves to be readers.

TARA: Yeah! Absolutely.

ANNE: So I do want to honor that too.

[00:11:41]

TARA: Yes. Something that does help me is like right before bed, I will set a timer for about 20 minutes.

ANNE: This is such a tried and true tip.

TARA: Right? Is it like a lot of people do this?

ANNE: Yes. But I think a lot of people who do it feel like it sounds silly, so I just need you to know like [TARA LAUGHS] if you're a timer user, and you're listening, there are so many of you. And if you're thinking, what is this timer thing? Just give it a try. Works for a lot of people.

TARA: It does. It works for me for things that I want to do but maybe have some kind of resistance to do. I use timers for my kids constantly. Okay, we have five minutes before we need to leave the house. Or you can play this video game for ten more minutes, and when you set the timer, it kind of takes it out of your own hands. It's like well, the timer went off. So now you're done. So I use the timer for myself for the same thing. Just because sometimes before bed, I can get stuck on social media, on my phone, or I like to do the crossword puzzle before bed, which is also on my phone, and then I'll dip over to Twitter. And that's just not a good use of my time before bed. So, [BOTH LAUGH] set the timer.

ANNE: Nope. That is the laughter of recognition.

TARA: I know. Exactly. So I set the timer for 20 minutes and I put my phone aside and usually when the timer rings, I am deep into whatever I'm reading and wind up reading a little bit more.

ANNE: So that's allowed under your timer situation?

TARA: Oh, yeah. Heck yeah. I mean, if I'm not exhausted. But you know, we're back into school time so we're on a schedule again as I'm sure you and your family are. Like I don't get that opportunity to stay up till midnight reading just because I'm so engaged in what I'm looking at.

ANNE: Yeah, no, I got up at five this morning. Not staying up til midnight.

TARA: [LAUGHS] Exactly. No matter how good the book is.

ANNE: I don't know an author would be delighted to share a review that says, like, this is so good, I stayed up till 9:45 reading it! But that would be high praise for me these days.

TARA: Heck yeah! [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: So you read because you love it and also have. Is reading other things to you at this point in your life as well?

[00:13:48]

TARA: It's quiet. [LAUGHS] I think that's what matters a lot to me. My life is full of sound, you know, in a very basic way. Again, two kids in the house. They make plenty of noise. My husband and I are both also musicians and there's a lot of music in our house, which is something I love and I really value. You know, I'm working with sound all day, professionally. So reading is quiet.

ANNE: Okay. That reminds me, we talked about five things, which you do not need to be a Louisville listener to listen to. It's produced by our local station here but you're interviewing national figures and it's a conversation that's just always interesting to eavesdrop on. Can we talk about one thing that you mentioned when I sat down with you for my episode? You said that half your guests cry and it's not always the people you expect.

TARA: Yeah. I'm not intending to make anybody cry, but very often, people get teared up when they're talking about something that's really meaningful to them. I really appreciate it when people feel comfortable enough to share and be open with me, you know, and the rest of the world. When you're in a little sound booth with somebody, it can feel like there's nobody else there and so maybe that helps make people comfortable. There are often tears, not always just the guests.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] No, I relate to that. If a guest is crying, I'm probably crying too. We do not have a half tear rate percentage on What Should I Read Next. I'd say it's like 10%. [TARA LAUGHS] But yeah, both of us are probably crying when that happens. Well, I'm always saying that I feel like talking about books and reading is a shortcut to talking about what really matters in life, and I love that you've hit on another way of doing exactly that.

TARA: Yeah. It's a lot of fun. I have actually put that project on hold for a little bit while I'm working on launching another podcast.

ANNE: Oh, I would love to hear more about the music box.

TARA: Yeah.

ANNE: Which is such a great name.

TARA: [LAUGHS] Thank you. It's - it's coming really, really soon. I'm just putting the final touches on everything. It's an educational music podcast for kids, to teach kids about fundamental musical concepts. So the idea for this one came from Louisville public schools. Last school year, the 2018-2019 school year, the local school board decided that every elementary school student in our county, in our district, must get an hour's worth of music every week. Now, that's great news. A lot of people were surprised to hear that was not required prior to last year. It was up to the principal at a particular school. It was up to their discretion if they felt music was important. So now it's mandated throughout the district which is excellent. There

are 92 elementary schools in our district and there were not 92 qualified music teachers in our area. So a lot of the schools pulled in somebody maybe from another department who wasn't an experienced music teacher. Maybe somebody who was a musician, but had never taught music. And as a musician myself, I can tell you that making music and teaching music are two very different things. I don't have an education background and if you put me in front of, you know, a class of elementary schoolers, I wouldn't really know what to do with them. [BOTH LAUGH]

[00:17:15]

ANNE: That's a whole different skill set.

TARA: Yes.

ANNE: Thank you, teachers.

TARA: So just being able to like play guitar down at your local bar on the weekend does not mean that you're ready to teach kids about these concepts. So, we have designed this podcast to be an aide for teachers in the classroom and we also hope that kids and families will enjoy listening to it outside that setting.

So it is hosted by my friend and colleague Jecorey Arthur who is an amazing musician himself and a former public school music teacher. So he has been there in the classroom. He knows what kinds of challenges teachers are wrestling with and we have designed these short episodes to be played in the classroom and then we have a website that has additional teaching materials, printable lesson plans, extra resources to help support those teachers because music education is really important. It is a fundamental skill that really relates to so many other disciplines. You know, when you're counting out beats and dividing beats, you're using math. When you are learning about performing and music traditions from around the world you're learning about geography and social studies and history. You know, when you're working together with other kids to make music, you're learning about collaboration and cooperation and team building. You can teach so much through music and we want to make sure that every kid has the opportunity to learn regardless of what is going on in their school at the time. So we've designed it. We hope it'll be helpful to both new and experienced music teachers alike while also being fun so that kids and families can enjoy listening to it outside of that classroom setting as well.

ANNE: That sounds like a huge project.

TARA: There has already been a first season of the music box that was made by someone else who used to work at the station. And she departed for another job, so we decided to take that opportunity to relaunch this thing and reconceived of it entirely. And we're just about to launch and we're going to put out all 12 episodes of our next season at once, so that they're available for teachers and families to use as they see fit.

[00:19:34]

ANNE: I love it when podcasters do that. But wow, that is so much work behind the scenes. We just had a Ask-Me-Anything kind of thing for What Should I Read Next in our Patreon community and our listeners were just flabbergasted at just how much time it takes to produce an episode and I wouldn't imagine that ours require the level of production that you're talking about with a project like the music box.

TARA: Yeah. I think a lot of people think that audios super, super quick and easy and it is really, really time intensive. Something I love about podcasting is that you don't have to make something that appeals to everybody. You just have to make something that appeals to your people. You can really do good work. It just doesn't have to be what we've always thought about in broadcasting, the word broad. If I'm going to put something on the radio, that's precious time that something else isn't going to get on the radio. So you have to think about appealing to as many people as possible. But podcasting turns it all on its head.

ANNE: Yes, I can't tell you how many people tell us that nobody that they know in their 3-dimensional life loves books the way they do. [TARA LAUGHS] You know, they just can't get their book fix. But you can listen to a podcast where people share that love. Thank you so much for coming on to talk about your love that you don't really get to talk about as much professionally.

TARA: Yeah.

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ANNE: Okay, Tara, you know how this works. You get to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you've been reading lately, and we will talk about what you may enjoy reading next. How did you choose these?

[00:22:01]

TARA: I just thought very quickly about the books that I keep going back to.

ANNE: Tara, that's funny you say that because many personality assessments and I know all this because my first book was about personality assessments, it's called *Reading People*. What they tell you to do to get accurate results is to go with your first thought, your first inclination, your gut instinct, and it sounds like that's exactly what you did.

TARA: Yeah. I think so. And two of the three books that I listed as ones that I love are books that I've read multiple times.

ANNE: Oh, wow. High praise. So what did you choose? What's the first book you love?

TARA: *Just Kids* by Patti Smith. I am not usually one for memoir all that much and I didn't even know that much about Patti Smith before picking up this book. What I was interested in was the story of her relationship, her long standing friendship with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, which is kinda the centerpiece of the book. It's the story of the two of them when they were in New York City in the '70s and they were poor, starving artists trying to make their way and figure out who they were and figure out what kinda art they wanted to make. It is an incredibly beautiful book from the standpoint of language. She is a gorgeous writer. She has written a lot of poetry and that comes through in this book. It's not difficult to read in any way. It's not like opaque, but the language is really beautiful. And there's also this kinda like Forrest Gump quality to the two of them wandering around downtown New York City, and then they run into Andy Warhol and they run into Lou Reed and they ... Like, all these people were there at this exciting time in New York art life. I lived in New York City for about ten years from 2000 to late 2009, and I loved being there, but it is not the same place as she describes in her book at all. [LAUGHS] And part of me wishes that I had been able to have a similar experience like that. Have you read this book?

ANNE: No, but I did read a piece and now I'm wondering if it was rift from Patti Smith, but I remember an artist who's a little older than me was saying, there was a time when you could

say, "I'm going to go figure out what I want to do with my life," and you can move to Greenwich Village and you could rent an apartment over the bookstore and you could work there by days and write by night, or figure out the rest of your life or whatever.

[00:24:30]

TARA: Yeah.

ANNE: And that was affordable.

TARA: Yes!

ANNE: And it wasn't as safe and it wasn't as sexy, but it was totally, totally doable, and now like, no, there's no way unless you have a healthy trust fund.

TARA: So during her book tour for *Just Kids*, I remember reading that someone asked Patti Smith, what would your advice be today for a young person like you were wanting to move to the big city and become an artist? What would you tell that person? She said, I would tell them New York City is closed. Find another place. And it's really true. Like you can't do that in New York anymore.

ANNE: You gotta go someplace cheap.

TARA: Which is why I love living in Louisville to be honest. For my day to day life and for my creative life, a place like Louisville is amazing. There is so much to do here, but we can afford to live our lives here. So that's been a huge inspiration. Patti Smith has also been a huge inspiration for me as a mother. This book, *Just Kids*, covers the time in her life until ... It ends right around the time that she got married and had her first child. Or maybe her second child. So she got married and moved to the suburbs and had kids and didn't really make any music for a while. And then when she got older, her kids were older, her husband passed away sadly, but she kinda re-emerged as an artist after that time. And I know that she wasn't twiddling her thumbs all of those years. You know, when you're an artist, I think you always are. But she's an inspiration for me as a mother. I have creative things that I want to do and especially when my kids were tiny, I felt just completely swallowed up in motherhood and kid world and I've always kinda looked to Patti Smith as like this is a phase in your life. Enjoy it. Love it. And it won't always be like this. The creative things that you want to do will be there for you later on.

ANNE: So there's a strong element of relatability to is it fair to say to why you enjoy her work?

TARA: Yeah. I think so. I mean, we come from very different backgrounds, for sure. I love hearing about New York City as it used to be. I would say that that's something ... I just realized this, Anne, that's also common to my second pick. Huh.

ANNE: Keep talking, Tara.

[00:26:56]

TARA: [LAUGHS] I did not realize that. The second book that I chose as one that I love is *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, which is in New York City in the late 19th century, early 20th century. I didn't even put this together until just now. Don't you love it when that happens?

ANNE: I do.

TARA: Two books about New York City in the past. *The House of Mirth* is about a young woman who she needs to find a husband because that's what you did in her social class at that time. But she kinda doesn't want to. She would like to be independent in a lot of ways. She's got dreams for herself. She's definitely a flawed heroine. She is not a perfect person. You know, you kinda keep saying, ugh, why did you do that? That was a really bad choice, Lily Bart. But the way in which she is written and the entire social scene of New York at that time is written, you understand her actions. What I love about that book and others of Edith Wharton is the way that she really puts you in this world. She was such a rye observer of her own class at her own time, and I think that is a rare and amazing thing.

ANNE: That's funny, I don't think of works from that period being New York as it used to be, but what else is it?

TARA: Yeah. Exactly.

ANNE: And society as it used to be. Not that things have entirely changed.

TARA: No. Of course not. I mean, what was *Gossip Girl*?

ANNE: Or we'd still be reading it.

TARA: *Gossip Girl* is Edith Wharton for the 21st century.

ANNE: Human nature remains the same, even as the [INAUDIBLE] change.

TARA: Absolutely.

ANNE: And she captures it so well. Okay, what did you choose for your third book, Tara?

TARA: My third book was a newer read. It's *Southernmost* by Silas House. He's a Kentucky author. He has been a guest on 5 Things. Graciously welcomed me to his home in Berea. We had a great talk. I just think he's delightful and smart and speaks so well about rural people. There's been a lot of conversation, I feel nationally sparked by the book *Hillbilly Elegy* about, you know, what do working class people really want? What do rural people really want? There are a lot of stereotypes about what rural people really are and you can't generalize about a

whole group of people, but he is speaking up for rural people and saying hey, not everybody's the same. Not everybody thinks the same way.

So *Southernmost* is a gorgeous novel. Also with a very flawed hero at the center. A man who is a pastor, who is thrown out of his own church in rural Tennessee because he wanted to welcome a gay couple into the church, and then he makes one really big, dangerous decision. I won't spoil the book, but he does something that's pretty indefensible. You can understand why he does it, but you also know that it is a huge mistake and the action kinda plays out from there. It's just beautiful. Have you read it?

[00:30:05]

ANNE: I have read it, and I read it right when it came out. Thoroughly enjoyed it, but what was so disappointing to me is that it was launched in my own community. I never heard him speak in person. I've only heard him on the radio, on WFPL. So thank you for that. Except I would have loved to go hear him in person, but I keep being out of town [TARA LAUGHS] when he's speaking in our mutual state, in my own city. So one day, Silas House and I are going to get it together and be in the same place at the same time. And when I say Silas House and I, I mean me. [TARA LAUGHS] I am going to get it together. It's not his responsibility. Did you know that you wanted to choose a Silas House novel as your favorite, or did you know *Southernmost* was a book that you wanted to choose?

TARA: *Southernmost* in particular. Just because I haven't stopped thinking about it. What really interests me in a lot of our national conversation is finding ways to talk about complexity. Finding ways to talk about contradictions. I think it's very easy for us to say, oh, all of them are like that. Whoever "them" is. You know, the people who are not me, they're all like that. What I loved about that book in particular is there is great compassion for all of the characters. There's no bad guy. There's no simplistic villain who is just the problem. Everybody has a reason for doing what they do and behaving the way they behave, even when you see the pain that it causes. I feel like ... Like that's just how life is. People do things for what they feel are good, valid reasons. Right, we all have our own reasons for how we think and how we behave. They may be causing harm to other people and very often do, but none of us are just so simple as to just be like truly bad. So I love the complexity and the compassion for all of the characters in that book.

ANNE: So when we're looking for the right book for you, we want a book that does embrace that complexity and contradiction instead of being big, bold hot take.

TARA: Yeah. For sure. I've had enough of hot takes.

ANNE: Okay.

TARA: I'm on the Internet all the time. [BOTH LAUGH]

[00:32:13]

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

TARA: So I am in a wonderful book club with a bunch of my really good friends and we alternate between reading fiction and nonfiction and we kinda decided by consensus what we're going to read. And what I love about the book club is that it makes me pick up books that I wouldn't choose for myself. So, a few months ago, we read *I'll Be Gone In The Dark* by Michelle McNamara.

ANNE: Yes. Massive best seller.

TARA: Huge best seller, and I don't like true crime that much. And I know that's huge in podcasting as well. I have a lot of friends who listen to a lot of true crime podcasts. It's just too scary for me. I don't want to read about depictions of people being killed in their home in the middle of the night, you know? I like to be able to sleep well. I had a lot of respect for that book, for *I'll Be Gone In The Dark*. She was a dogged investigator. She was completely consumed by trying to figure out the identity of this serial killer, and the book is not just a story of like oh, this horrible murder happened. I mean, she really sets the scene of what it felt like in this part of California when this serial killer was attacking people frequently. I mean, it's a ... Objectively, I would say, a good book and really respected the craft. It was just not for me. It was too scary. I just don't want to read about those kind of things.

ANNE: Tara, I imagine that on the surface, people have all kinds of assumptions about what you're interested in in your reading life or the rest of your life because you do work in journalism. So, on the surface, I can see people going oh, true crime. Totally for you.

TARA: Yeah. I guess. Part of the reason I love working in public radio is that we don't cover every crime that happens in a city, you know? Or if we do cover it, it's from a different perspective. Like I said, I know a lot of smart, thoughtful people who love true crime and I respect that. I just feel like the world is scary enough. Especially the parts of the book that talked about children that were in the home when these attacks were happening. I would say that's a big, red line for me.

ANNE: I know so little about what you're saying because I am with you. I just don't need to-

TARA: Yeah.

ANNE: Don't need to know.

TARA: Exactly. Exactly. So like any kind of ... A book or a movie, if there's a child in danger, I really don't want to engage with that. That's always been hard for me and since becoming a parent myself, it's just too stressful. It's not enjoyable at all.

[00:34:56]

ANNE: I know you've got a lot of company there. On a broader level, I'm wondering if you might appreciate books that raise good questions as opposed to maybe providing definitive answers.

TARA: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I think the books that I really love that I don't stop thinking about raise good questions. And I think that's something I love about *Southernmost* is that it, you know, it asks how to be a good person. The choice that the main character makes that sets the rest of the book in motion, on the one hand, you can understand it perfectly and on the other, you know that it's going to cause him so much heartbreak and so much trouble. That's a tough problem and that does raise a lot of questions for me, and I think about oh, what would I have done in that setting? What was the right thing to do? And I love the fact that it's left up to the reader to think about that.

ANNE: Interesting. Tara, what have you been reading lately?

TARA: So it's been a mix of nonfiction and fiction. I've read a couple of memoirs lately that I really did enjoy. I read *Born to Run* by Bruce Springsteen. I'm not a huge Springsteen fan, but it's a fantastic book. I learned so much about him. He's a really engaging writer.

I also really enjoyed *Becoming* by Michelle Obama. It's not a political book. Let's just say that. Like it's legit a good book. It's not a memoir that was just written to sell books. Super enjoyed it.

I've read *How to Change Your Mind* by Michael Pollan, which is about psychedelics and how they're being used in therapy and all of the range of uses for psychedelics. It was totally fascinating. My mom read it too and then gave it to me, so we talked about that a lot.

As far as fiction, I really enjoyed *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. That was a quick read, but also very thought provoking. What would happen to the world if women had the ability to run electric shocks through their hands, a lethal force at any time? I love that it had this one change from the world that we know and then everything that followed from that.

ANNE: Tara, what are you looking for in your reading life?

TARA: I think something that is a little bit escapist. Not like I said, I'm not big on violence. I'm a bit of a sensitive reader, I'd say. I'd love to go somewhere that I've never been before. Something that I loved about *A Gentleman in Moscow* was being in that hotel in Moscow through the decades. It was fascinating. So a really strong, vivid setting taking me to a world that I haven't been to before is something that I find really attractive.

ANNE: Ooh, a strong, vivid setting. All right. This is going to be fun.

TARA: Ooh, she's rubbing her hands together. She's excited.

[00:37:52]

ANNE: Can you hear that?

TARA: [LAUGHS] Yes.

ANNE: I totally am.

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ANNE: So, Tara, you loved *Just Kids* by Patti Smith, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, and *Southernmost* by Silas House. Not for you was *I'll Be Gone In The Dark*, a true crime story by Michelle McNamara. And lately you've been reading all kinds of things, all of which have a strong vivid setting and let you escape a little bit to a completely different world. Okay how about we go one memoir read by the author and two novels.

[00:39:48]

TARA: Sounds good.

ANNE: Let's start with the memoir because I feel like that's the genre that you're least enthusiastic about on the whole, but it's got a tie to New York the way it used to be. I think it'll take you into a whole different world on several levels and you can listen to the audiobook read by the author. And the one I'm thinking of is *Notes From A Young Black Chef* by Kwame Onwuachi. Is this a book you know anything about?

TARA: I know nothing about this. I've never heard of this author.

ANNE: Oh! Well that is fantastic. I don't watch Top Chef. I know a lot of people do, but many listeners will know his name because he was on season 13. After he had a career well under way, very expensive, newsworthy restaurant at the time was being funded was going to open in D.C. called Shaw Bijou, which has since closed, but this is a story that combines I think many elements that are new to a lot of readers in one story, which I think can be a lot of fun. And you get to go to New York plus spend a lot of time in New Orleans and I mean, what's not to like about either destination?

TARA: That sounds really fascinating. I am reminded that there was another memoir, a food memoir that I really enjoyed. *Blood, Bones, and Butter* by Gabrielle Hamilton.

ANNE: Oh, I read that a million years ago. Yes.

TARA: So I like the food stories, too, so the chef memoir, that sounds good.

ANNE: Oh, that is fantastic to hear. Now he's about 30, so he's a little bit younger than you and I are. [TARA LAUGHS] But he's telling the story about how he grew up in the Bronx. He has some family roots in Texas and some in Nigeria. And he talks about how his family was poor, but they had enough resources that his mom knew about the test she could sign him up to take so he could get into the really good public school. And she knew how to find help. And he talks a lot about what it was like to grow up in poverty, but about the levels of poverty and then he talks about his attempts to rise out of it. So he's a really interesting upbringing.

TARA: The whole time I lived in New York City, I worked in the Bronx, so I'm excited about that connection too.

ANNE: Oh, I hope then that there are destinations and streets that you'll recognize that you haven't seen with your own eyes, I know exactly where that is. Because I always love doing that when I'm reading a book, especially this does have a very strong setting like you love. His childhood was so interesting. It was hard, but it was interesting. He was a troublemaker at school and he comes home one day and his mom is like, pack your bags. You're going to Nigeria to live with your relatives for a while, which turned into a couple years.

[00:42:13]

TARA: Oh, wow.

ANNE: He comes back to New York and he talks about how based on who he was, where he lived, what he did, where he went to school, of course he got involved in gang culture. How could he not? It's just the way it was. And he talks about culture and going to college and how he dealt drugs and how he cleaned up and went to the Culinary Institute of America, and I've read several fascinating books set at and involving the Culinary Institute of America or the C.I.A., but you have to be in the right crowd or people think you mean something else.

TARA: Mm-hmm. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: And how he went on to open his own restaurant. And he talks about all these things that I think you and I both would be peripherally acquainted with, but we don't really know.

TARA: Yeah.

ANNE: Like we've eaten at restaurants, perhaps some nice ones, but we don't know what it's like back in the kitchen except from books or TV shows we see, and he talks about insidious racism in really nice places like Per Se and he talks about what it's like to not be seen in the kitchen because he is a Black man, but he also talks about making it big as a chef. When the story opens, he's talking about preparing a dinner for a crowd that is super important at the new African American Museum in Washington, D.C., and then he goes back in time and tells you how he got there. So memoir isn't your go to genre, but this book was written with the help of a seasoned author, Joshua David Stein. It's an audiobook. It has a strong sense of place and you can listen to Kwame narrator his own story on audio, which I would highly recommend you do.

TARA: That sounds great. I am excited to check that one.

ANNE: I was thinking about recommending a title to you set in contemporary California, but I think the violence level might be tricky. So I'm thinking about going back to, like, the 17th century, but I don't see that kind of long throw back in any of your picks. Too much of an escape or do you think we can do it? Historical fiction?

TARA: No, I'm totally open to that. One of my favorite books that I loved over the past few years was *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel.

ANNE: Oh! All right. Say no more. We're good. We're good.

TARA: [LAUGHS] Strong setting, though.

ANNE: Oh, such a strong setting. Okay. Well the book I'm thinking of is the new novel by Philippa Gregory, who has written a lot of historical fiction, about kings and queens and

important people in history who you would have studied in history class. But she has a new series and *Tidelands* in the first book in it. In this new series, she's focusing more on the lives of everyday people in this era where like, yes, we know Oliver Cromwell and we know King Charles and she's written historical fiction about the likes of them, but now she's focusing on what like a commoner's life might be like.

[00:44:47]

TARA: Mm. No, that sounds really interesting.

ANNE: The thing I like about this book for you is the tidelands is referring to where this book is set specifically. A land, in England, that cannot be mapped because of the movement of the tides, where the land is and where the crossings are is constantly shifting. Nothing ever stays the same. That mood and that atmosphere are so persuasive in the story, and I think that could really be enjoyable for you as a reader. They live on an island accessed by ferry. There's one way in, one way out, and who controls that, which family, who it is, what they think of you really matters.

So, at the beginning of this book, we have a woman. She's a midwife. She's an herbalist. Some believe her to be a wise woman, which is very, very dangerous in the 17th century when that means you could be tested for witchcraft, which will probably kill you, even if you are found innocent. But she is in desperate straits because her husband's disappeared. He's presumed drowned, but they don't know that for sure. And a woman whose marital status was uncertain in 17th century England was a perilous social position, especially when you're poor.

So when the story opens, she's in a graveyard in the middle of the night hoping to meet the ghost of her dead husband because it's, ah, midsummer's eve or something like that. Does that sound like *Outlander* enough for you? [TARA LAUGHS] It's not that kind of story. The ghost of her dead husband does not come, but someone else does come instead. And these people become important to each other very quickly. He could be her way out of poverty, and she has to conceal his identity or he will be killed instantly.

It's a story about ordinary people but what's moving in the background is King Charles imprisoned on the island of White. People are trying to remove him. The politics are in uproar. There's a big question among the commoners like, are you for Parliament? Are you for the King? Whose side are you on? And what does it mean for you? It seems like everyone's in danger, stakes are high. It's terrible to be a woman. It's terrible to be poor. You can see the enriched social structure and you can see how for so many people, there was just no way out of the life they're trapped in, and yet they are going on living. And I think that probably sounds really bleak, and it certainly can feel that way, but it's also just really fascinating. If you want another audiobook, this is fantastic on audio. The British accent and the way she narrates the character voices is really fantastic. But it's also a book that I think you could sink into the story really quickly if you are reading on paper.

Now when you're talking about going into the 17th century, it may take you a couple of chapters to be like oh, right. It's not 2019 Kentucky. [TARA LAUGHS] This is where I am now. But I don't think it'll be terribly difficult for a reader who is at all interested in this kind of plot or premise to sink right in. How does that sound?

[00:47:26]

TARA: It sounds really good. It actually sounds like it has something in common with *The House of Mirth*, talking about being in this kind of, like, rigid social environment and how do you push back against that and find happiness in spite of it all.

ANNE: Absolutely does. I don't want to beat the New York thing too hard, except I'm totally going to. [TARA LAUGHS] There's a new novel just out in August by Susan Rebecca White. She's an Atlanta author. Her new book is called *We Are All Good People Here*. It's a real interesting story. It spans 30 years. It's fictional, and yet, it's one of those stories that over time, is tracking specific historical events you're familiar with, but she showing you what it might have been like to experience them through two fictional characters. You said you liked stories about complexity and contradictions and I think this one really delivers on that score because White says her inspiration for the story was from a real, historical woman who's not in the book, but is definitely the inspiration for one of the characters who is Eve in the book. But she says that when she was much younger, she became completely fascinated by a story she saw on the news about a woman who was arrested in Minnesota in 1999. She was a housewife. She was happily married. She was a member of her local church. And she was arrested for having once been a member of the SLA, the domestic terrorist group, the Symbionese Liberation Army.

TARA: Wow.

ANNE: White said that she just thought how in the world do you go from a nice middle class upbringing to domestic terrorist? Like, people contain multitudes, but how? So what she does is she takes two women and she follows them from the time they meet as freshmen at college in Virginia in the '60s and then follows them through the '90s. These women become very involved in events and causes that readers now will know but probably have never considered what it might be like to experience. One of the girls participates in The Mississippi Summer project. One of them gets very involved in domestic terrorism to protest the Vietnam war. There's lots of music. You'll recognize other historical events as well through the eyes of people who are fictional people who are living it. You hear from several different points of view, some of the stories told in letters. Some of the story is told by one of these characters' daughters, but I think it could be a very interesting way to go places we've learned about but have never really considered from a first person point of view. And that's what a book like this can allow you do. How does that sound?

TARA: That also sounds intriguing.

[00:50:04]

ANNE: So that is *We Are All Good People Here* by Susan Rebecca White. And it is brand new practically.

TARA: Excellent. Well it's a good thing I'm at the library.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I'm so jealous because I haven't been to see that shiny new northeast regional branch yet. Readers, if you subscribe to the What Should I Read Next newsletter, we included a link showing the tour of that new library a month or two ago when it opened.

TARA: It's beautiful. I come here pretty often to work. It's bright and light and spacious. Mostly quiet, although not silent, which is fine. [ANNE LAUGHS] A lot of people use it, and so it feels alive. The only problem that I have with coming here to work is that I'm distracted by all the books. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: We know what that's like. Okay. Tara, of the books we talked about today, which were *Notes From A Young Black Chef* by Kwame Onwuachi, *Tidelands* by Philippa Gregory, and *We Are All Good People Here* by Susan Rebecca White, what do you think you may read next?

TARA: I think I'm going to give the Philippa Gregory book a try first.

ANNE: Well I can't wait to hear what you think. I hope you enjoy it, and thank you so much for talking books with me today.

TARA: Thank you. This has been so much fun.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Tara, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/199 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today. You can follow Tara on Instagram and Twitter @taraeanderson, and make sure to go check out her newest project at musicboxpod.org

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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.