



**WSIRN Episode 201: The hidden value of a terrible reading experience**  
*Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Brian Eichenberger*

[00:00:00]

ANNE: Okay. When I saw that this was one of your favorites, I thought, I have been meaning to read this book for ... Probably since 2010 when it came out or right around then ... And so I thought, I'm going to do it now. And I'm at like the 76% mark.

BRIAN: Oh! Good! So you're reading it right now. [ANNE LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 201.

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.

Before we get to today's guest, I wanted to share an email about book twins. Last week as part of our 200th episode celebration, which was so much fun, thank you all for participating in that with us. Well what we did was asked listeners to share their stories of finding their reading doppelganger in our archive of 200 episodes. Our goal here on the show is to eventually feature a guest here that every single one of you will think, "Ah! That person reads like me." And when you find that person, we call them your book twin. So, here's the story Donna shared:

*My #BookTwin is Madeleine Riley from episode 72. She talked about multiple things I could identify with—loving mysteries (my favorite genre as well, AND she picked my favorite series, the Inspector Gamache series by Louise Penny), also middle grade books, judging books by their cover and never feeling like your TBR is too long.*

*I started following her on Instagram (@topshelftext) and over time we got to know each other and became online friends. We recently started a small online book club called 'The M&M Book*

*Club' (for Mystery & Middle Grade) which has already been a lot of fun. So not only is What Should I Read Next great for book recommendations, it also helped me find a new #BookTwin friend.*

This is such a GREAT story! Readers, let us know in the comments and on Instagram who YOUR #BookTwin is — this game never gets old. Just use the hashtag #BookTwin so we can find you.

Speaking of games, here's a little reading personality test — when you are totally hating a reading experience do you A) keep reading, or B) leave that book in the dust and move on to the next thing? Well, today Brian Eichenberger and I are diving straight into this hotly debated issue, discussing the horrible books that nevertheless may have taught us lessons we still think about all the time. Brian is the kind of reader who wants to chew on BIG ideas and follow characters from childhood to old age to see what makes people tick, and who loves big juicy family sagas, but he also has a taste for the unusual. so today I'm recommending 3 titles that will hopefully hit more than one target. Let's get to it.

Brian, welcome to the show.

[00:03:02]

BRIAN: Hi! Thanks for having me.

ANNE: Oh, it is my pleasure, and it is so fun to talk to somebody else who lives in our lovely literary city of Louisville, Kentucky, which I think is underrated on the literary spectrum.

BRIAN: Well I do love this place and I definitely think that the literary aspects of it are one of the highlights.

ANNE: Well something that I love about this show is that readers seem to experience this common bond no matter where they are, but it is fun to feel like your community is representing as far as books and reading is concerned.

BRIAN: Absolutely.

ANNE: Well my first clue that you were a serious reader 'cause we know each other casually. We have mutual friends and all that. I was in conversation with Celeste Ng at the library downtown for her book *Little Fires Everywhere*, which so good, right? By the way, I'm thinking that's in your wheelhouse.

BRIAN: Oh, oh, man, is it ever in my wheelhouse. We need to come back to that. But yes, I'm just going to say that I was so jealous when I saw that you were getting to facilitate that conversation. But she was super sweet. I'm sure she was great to you, but like I stayed for the

signing and I was the very last person and she signed my book thanks for being the very last person and waiting in line this whole time, Celeste Ng. So it is -

[00:04:05]

ANNE: Classy!

BRIAN: ... A favorite book, which is pretty cool, yeah.

ANNE: Well the first clue was we're in conversation and you may be jealous, but I mean, it was. It was super fun. I was thrilled when Carmichael's asked me, but also, oh my gosh, that's so much ... It takes so much preparation to have an effortless conversation. But I was trying to have this effortless conversation and I looked up, and I was like oh, hey, there's Brian and Deb.

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] Yup, there I was in the back enjoying life and enjoying your ... You did a very good ... You did a very nice job.

ANNE: Thank you. You weren't that far back. But I figure if you're going to show up at the library on a weeknight downtown to listen to an author talk about her book, you either have a good friend that you're doing a favor for, or you are excited about literature.

BRIAN: It's actually funny because I was actually there with my sister, and my sister and I recommend each other books and we also hate the books, but we continue to recommend books to each other. [BOTH LAUGH] I would recommend all these books to her and she read like four of them, bless her heart, and then she was like, I don't like any of these. But then she read *Little Fires Everywhere* and she really liked it.

ANNE: Yeah.

BRIAN: And she said, this might be the one book that we agree on. And it was. And so when we saw that Celeste was coming into town, I said, this has got to be a thing we do together. We've gotta go see her speak together. So it was a blast.

ANNE: That actually sounds a lot like my brother and me. We're both huge readers. We don't read similar stuff except for that one little silver on the venn diagram where we overlap and we like, really geek out about ... Oh, what do we both like? Like Emily St. John Mandel is one.

BRIAN: Oh, sure, that's great.

ANNE: But I do feel like maybe we just have enough of a history there. He's good at being like, eh, I don't know if this book is for me, but you need to know about it and I can do the same. Like, oh, hey, I just got this book in the mail and I have no intention of reading it, but you are going to love it. [BRIAN LAUGHS] I mean, you can still have great discussions about books without enjoying the same books. Thank goodness.

[00:05:54]

BRIAN: That's true. Yeah. But I just made my sister read *The Goldfinch* and she's going to hold that against me forever I think. [ANNE LAUGHS] Because I mean, let's be fair, *The Goldfinch* is really long, so putting that much effort into anything, she kept being like, I think I'm going to quit. 'Cause that's a big difference she and I have. And I'm very interested in your philosophy on this.

I'm not necessarily one of these people that's like not a quitter in life. Like I'm okay with ... If there's extraneous circumstances and you need to move on from something or whatever, it's okay to stop a project. But when it comes to reading, if I start something, I am very adamant about finishing it even if I'm hating every minute of it. Like if I'm reading a novel and I really hate this novel, but I'm going to finish it so I can get all the way to the end. Because I find that there is this ... Sometimes you get to the end and you're like, you know what? Either I liked it more than I thought I would or I learned something from it or it had an impact on me and in an artistic sense, like, it made me feel something even though I never want to feel that thing again.

My sister has a different philosophy where she says if you start something and she doesn't like it, she doesn't care how far along she is, she'll just drop it and go to something else because her statement is life is too short to waste my time reading books I don't like. Which I kinda get on a certain level but I think you cheat yourself out of an experience that's outside your comfort zone if you just quit when you're like eh, not digging this.

ANNE: I have strong opinions about this actually. Both in favor of quitting and in favor of preserving.

BRIAN: Oh, okay.

ANNE: First of all, just speaking for me and my reading life, I used to be a finisher every time because conscientious first born daughters who got good grades and you know, want to be upstanding citizens, they finish what they start.

BRIAN: Yes.

ANNE: And that includes books. But really the thing that tipped me into being really like a floundering abandoner is professionally, I would need to read a lot of different books for a lot of different purposes. I mean the summer reading guide is my big example. We put out a summer reading guide for *Modern Mrs Darcy* every year. It's 25-30 titles that I have read every page of, that I love, that I'm really excited about, that I think many readers of my audience will love. And I know what I am looking for, and if I start reading a book and I think you know, this could be an amazing book for the fall or I think I might enjoy this but I don't think it'll have the broad, the potential for broad appeal like I'm looking for the summer reading guide. Sometimes I'll start reading something and I'll think, eh, the quality seems to be lacking here. Maybe it just needs

another edit and I need to wait not to have the advanced review ... Now I'm just equivocating, Brian. Sometimes I feel bad about quitting books, but I do.

[00:08:22]

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] Wait, which I think is part of this whole discussion, right? It's like there is a certain point where you want to give everybody a certain chance, but then where do you pull the chances back? I did a thing a few years ago, just a personal thing where I was like, I'm going to write down a list of all of these writers that I've never read that I've heard of. Big names like these kinda literary fiction people. So Joyce Carol Oates, Wally Lamb, John Irving, John Updike, all these guys.

ANNE: I've not read two of those authors ever.

BRIAN: Okay, so-

ANNE: [LAUGHS] They're on my list.

BRIAN: Can I guess that one of them is Updike?

ANNE: Yeah, Updike and Oates. I mean, I seriously, I'm recording in my office. I have books by each within reach. But I haven't gotten there yet.

BRIAN: Yeah, okay, so it's an interesting conversation because Updike has had a huge influence on people and probably people that I like as writers, but I read one, and I probably read one that wasn't great 'cause I read a later one that was on audio when I was just curious to read something in his library. I was like, I don't ever really want to read Updike again. And I really kinda don't ever want to read Irving again. I hated *World According To Garp*. Hated that book. Thought it missed on all cylinders, but clearly, I'm missing something because that book is highly lauded and I told a woman I used to work with, I said, she was talking about her dog named Garp and I was like, please tell me you did not name your dog after the book.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Of course the dog was named after the book, right?

BRIAN: Yeah! So, we had-

ANNE: Course.

BRIAN: You know, it's like, I highly respect her as a writer and as a reader and you know, she loves that book. So it's, you know, everybody has a different opinion, but I think there's different lines. Read it once and then don't read them again. If you just decide you really don't like it, I might not ever read another Irving, but I want to try it once. But you're right, especially in your situation, you've probably come across some things that you're like, well, the quality just doesn't

live up and at that point, I think that's a different judgment call than just saying I don't like the story.

[00:10:12]

ANNE: There is the pragmatist in me who can see that if like, you're reading professionally, the reader in you may want to continue, but the reader in you may want to give it a shot, but like the professional in you cannot. I mean, it's like if you want to give a meeting the attention it deserves, but you talk too long and you miss your dentist appointment, like, there's a problem there. Like you may have been really well intentioned but you can't fit all the books you want to read into the life that you're living.

Something else that I hear a lot is it took the author years to write that book, so I can do them the service of reading it. Part of me agrees with that. Like yes, it's extremely time consuming to write a book, and I have great respect for anyone who has finished doing such a thing. But like, it takes five hours minimum to read a book and I'm not getting in a car with a stranger to, like, drive to Chicago with them to do them a favor. That's what I can do with five hours of my life, and so that argument [BRIAN LAUGHS] I know I hear it a lot, it does not hold water for me.

But something that I want to go back to is there are good reasons to abandon books. I mean, sometimes you can read a book and you can be like, eh, this is clearly not for me. This has content I don't want to read. I'm not in a place in my life right now where I want to read about something tragic for example. But it also makes me nervous when people say they'll quit a book if they're not enjoying it. And there are lots of reasons to read. Reading for enjoyment is one of them, and yet, some of my most profound reading experiences have been from books that have really like, messed me up that I didn't enjoy at all. But like the ideas have really stuck with me. And the resulting conversations have been really valuable and I wouldn't want to trade that. I don't know if you have a book like this, but my book like this is *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I hated that book.

BRIAN: Oh, my God, I am in the last little bit of that book right now.

ANNE: Right now?

BRIAN: Right now.

ANNE: That is unexpected. I hated that book.

BRIAN: It's awful.

ANNE: Okay because ... Something I wonder is did I hate that book because I was a baby when I read it. I was like 21 or 22 and I really wondered if I just was not mature enough to read and appreciate the concept. I thought that was a real possibility.

[00:12:13]

BRIAN: I think there are moments in it that are really interesting, and I do think there are moments in it that will stick with me. What I-I ... I get a little frustrated with him in the same way that I get a little frustrated with Updike and Irving both. This certain male perspective that I understand why it's existed and why it continues in certain circles, but it feels very ... Especially ... This book was written in '82, '83? It's about 1968. So I mean, definitely things were different but the perspective is overwhelming, and then he does that thing that like that Clare move where all of a sudden you're not in the story anymore and it's just all this philosophical meandering. And so it's a little hard to wrap your head around why you're even paying attention to this story because it kinda feels more like he's using it as an object lesson to talk about these philosophical things. Which I think he was because there's a lot of political stuff, and this is a great example of what you're talking about. Where is the value in it? Because the value in this book for me is learning a lot about Czechoslovakia and Russia, which are two things I didn't know anything about what was going on there in 1968. [LAUGHS]

*Milkman* by Anna Burns is a great example of that. I didn't love the book, but I learned a lot about Ireland and revolutions and things are happening in the '70s there that I might not pick up a book out of the nonfiction section about that, but if I'd written a novel and it's historically grounded, it's a great place to kinda grow that knowledge, which is one of the reasons I read when we're talking about reasons to read, right? It's not just reading to enjoy, it's about learning. But if I can do it and kinda in this mask of I'm also having fun, then that's a win.

ANNE: I have not read *Milkman*, but I've heard so many readers say, eh, I didn't really like it, but that is the best book club discussion we have ever had.

BRIAN: Totally! You know, a book like this for me that I read almost a decade ago. I still think about it all the time. And it's called *The Unnamed* by Joshua Ferris. Have you ever read it?

ANNE: No. I haven't. I've only read ... Oh, his first one.

BRIAN: *Then We Came At The End*?

ANNE: Yeah. That's the one I've read by him.

BRIAN: Oddly that's the only one by him I haven't read. And that's the one that everyone says is good. [LAUGHS] So anyhow, I should read it. I read the one after this, which is even weirder, but I enjoyed way more because I know him. But *The Unnamed* is about a guy who wakes up one day and can't stop walking. It's really strange. Like just that being the plot is really strange, but I think about it all the time. And I don't really know why I think about it all the time, but now with 10 years perspective on it, I'm like, this is a great piece of art.

Joshua Ferris has been in my brain more than Barada and Trapper and all these guys who I would say are like some of my favorite, just like good, feel good writers that I like to read. I've

dedicated way less brain space to them than I have to this Joshua Ferris novel that I don't like. [LAUGHS] Like, you know what I mean? It's so weird.

[00:14:46]

ANNE: Yeah, I feel that way about Milan Kundera, which I read because I was going to the Czech Republic and I wanted to read this famous book out of the culture, and it was just so bleak and it made me feel so helpless. But his central metaphor is one that I have come back to every few weeks for 20 almost years now. What does it mean to live in the face of you know, happiness and also deep, deep sorrow? And I'm so glad I read it.

BRIAN: So my favorite thing in that book he says basically that this relationship, this man and woman are having an affair, and it's not really working, right? It's not like lining up. And the way he illustrates this is by a glossary of terms for how she defines things in like the memory and the sense that she brings into something. And then the way it affects him. So it's like they go into a cathedral and-

ANNE: Oh, no.

BRIAN: So it's like this specific cathedral, and it's like when he sees the cathedral, he thinks things about this. When she sees inside the cathedral, she thinks about this, and so even though they're both saying cathedral, they're feeling very, very disparate things. And I just thought ... It's an amazing device to use as a novelist, but it's also an amazing way to think about things, right? About how much loaded emotion we bring into stuff that the other person experiencing with us has no idea of.

ANNE: Well we are wading into dangerous territory because I did not remember that, but you're making me want to read this book I hated again and that's just ... [BRIAN LAUGHS] We might need to move on.

BRIAN: Read that part. Just go to that part. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's in the first quarters of it.

ANNE: I might do that. So when people talk about abandoning books because they're not enjoying them, I think that's just one of so many reasons to read. What I think of is, I want to read books that are worth my reading time. And a book that isn't to your taste, that you don't think is fun, you know, can be absolutely worth your reading time. That's how I frame the question in my own mind.

BRIAN: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Like I actually do think about *Garp* quite a bit just mostly because I'm irritated by it. [ANNE LAUGHS] But I don't find myself pulling things out of *Garp* like I do out of *Unbearable Lightness of Being Liked*. Like even while I'm reading this book right now, I'm thinking like I'm not really enjoying this, but I am getting something out of it. It's like watching a film and seeing camera angles and going oh, that's an interesting perspective way of doing this, right? And this is how I feel about *Unbearable Lightness*, like, I think he's doing a lot of things



with form that have been clearly a hugely influential novel and that's probably part of it, is all of the kind of formatic stuff that he's able to play with.

[00:17:01]

ANNE: Yeah and there are many different ways to appreciate a book, and that is definitely one of them. Something else there is about reading books that aren't to your taste is you can learn a lot about what you do like and what does work for you by reading things that don't fit that because you mentioned that *Garp* kept niggling at you. I would imagine that that causes you to wonder okay, what is it about this book that just keeps tapping at me? If you can identify that, then the next time you do want to find a book that you will enjoy, you have a better idea of what to look for.

BRIAN: That's a great point. And now it's an archetype, right, so now I'll start something and go uh-oh, this is *Garp*-like. And a great example of that is I made myself read *The Shipping News* earlier this year. Have you ever read that?

ANNE: I still haven't read that. I bought a copy so that I would, but I haven't yet.

BRIAN: I didn't like it because it, to me, is built on the same framework as *Garp*. And it's like I don't really necessarily know archaically to explain what I'm talking about, but there's like this ... [SIGHS] It's not satire, but it's like this attitude about how the characters are presented and it's like kind of tongue-in-cheek but kinda not. It's almost like a disrespecting that form or something. I can't decide what it is that I don't like, but those two books to me feel very similar so now if I see something compared to either of those books, I know hm, this might be something to pass on.

ANNE: Okay. So I just said by reading what you don't like you can better understand what you do like. Next we're going to come at that from the different direction on What Should I Read Next.

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ANNE: Brian, you know how this works. You're going to tell me three books that you do love, one book you don't, and what you've been reading lately. We will try to pin down what you should read next.

[00:21:44]

BRIAN: Awesome.

ANNE: So we've talked a lot about what you don't like. Brian, what is a book that you love?

BRIAN: I really don't ever walk away from calling this my favorite book of all time. Like I can't do it with a movie, but I can with a book say definitively at this point in my life for the last 10 years or so, is a book called *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* that was written by Aimee Bender. Do you know anything about it?

ANNE: Okay. When I saw that this was one of your favorites, I thought, I have been meaning to read this book for ... Probably since 2010 when it came out or right around then ... And so I thought, I'm going to do it now. And I'm at like the 76% mark.

BRIAN: Oh! Good! So you're reading it right now. [ANNE LAUGHS] I've bought this book for people. Like I also have this annoying habit both with music and with books. It's really annoying with music because most people don't have physical music anymore, so when I show up and I'm like hey, I bought this thing for you. You're like what do I do with this? [ANNE LAUGHS] Send me a link? But I buy books when I find them cheap in bookstores or whatever, you know, if I'm going through a bin and I'm like oh! And I bought so many copies of *Particular Sadness* and I've just handed it to people and said, here, this is yours. I want you to read it. You know, normally with a little, like, where I know they're going to enjoy it.

My sister did not enjoy this book. But you know, the premise is a nine-year-old girl wakes up on her birthday. Mom makes her a cake. She takes a bite of it and realizes she can taste sadness in it, and she doesn't understand what that is. And so the rest of the book is really about this girl who realizes she can taste feelings inside food. So it sounds kinda wacky, but it's very much ... I love coming-of-age stories. I mean, that's probably one of the categories we can tack on here. Because childhood is such a magical time, but like, figuring out how to be an adult as hard as that is can be kind of magical too. And that's really what this book is about. And I had a really

interesting experience with this book where the first time I read it, I had one experience with how it ends and how I read into the character's brother specifically.

[00:23:35]

ANNE: Oh! I don't know how it ends. Tonight, this is happening.

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] And then something happened in my life personally. Now I'm going to avoid all spoilers here, especially since you're reading it. And it kinda colored the way I thought about the character of her brother. And I read it again a couple years ago and I called a friend of mine and said, hey, how did you read the character of Joe? And what happens to him? And she told me and I said yeah, that's how I read it the first time, but the second time, I read it as this. And I told her and she said, oh, no, yeah, I definitely did not. That's not what I got from it at all.

When people have read it, I'm very interested to have this conversation because there's kinda two ways to come at what happens to him in a sense. It's very interesting to me how a piece of writing that hasn't changed at all has changed a lot for me based on experiences that I had in-between two readings of it.

ANNE: Yes, and I really love how a good book can do that. Like you track your own life against it, you know? Because the book hasn't changed, but you have.

BRIAN: Right. That's like an intangible, hard to explain thing, but it's really exciting when it happens for you. I kinda have two categories of books that I love. And one of them is what I would call, though I don't know that technically this one falls in this category, but I kinda call magical realism, right? So this is a great example of that where it's like the normal universe, the normal world, except this nine-year-old wakes up and suddenly can taste feelings in food. That's the only detail that's switched, right?

I mean, and to that degree, I mean, you can call *Underground Railroad* magical realism kinda, right? For that same reason? And I like that book. Mostly because of that. I loved *Exit West* because of that. Because there's this one little detail that you can tweak and then it really changes how you interact with the story and I just think, like, you know my wife says she loves fantasy books and she loves *Harry Potter* because J.K. Rowling invented this world. And I guess what I find more interesting is not inventing a world that doesn't exist, but figuring out ways to mess with the world that we're in to make it more compelling. And so I really like books like that because of that.

ANNE: Brian, something that I found really interesting about *The Particular Sadness*, I noticed how you nicknamed it, was I think based on the title and the cover, I expected it to be something whimsical and charming and I'm not saying those elements are wholly absent, but those are not the adjectives I would choose to describe that book.

[00:25:49]

BRIAN: No, not at all. If you've read Aimee Bender at all, you realize that this is what she does, right? She takes these concepts and I mean, she has this crazy book that I've not read all the way through and I've always meant to, I think I just returned it to the library or something. I'm forgetting what it's called. They actually made a movie out of it with Jessica Alba that no one saw? *Invisible Sign of My Own* I think is what it's called. And it's about this girl who, like, starts walking around with an axe, and she just carries an axe everywhere she goes. If you need to figure out if you can stomach Aimee Bender, you need to read some short stories. Because you'll get a taste of what she does before you commit to a full, whole-length novel. She does has this very specific way of messing with the universe that you're reading about and these small, but very significant ways that it's not necessarily sweet.

And I do wonder if the way the book was marketed, I mean, this is a whole other conversation, right? But if the way the book was marketed kept some book people from reading it or got it the wrong audience in some way shape or form because it does kinda look like something, you know, it kinda looks like it's about cooking or [LAUGHS] you know what I mean? It looks like *Eat, Pray, Love*, or something and it's definitely not that.

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

BRIAN: *The Hike* by Drew Magary. When it comes to fiction, I have two things I really like. I like magical realism and then I like this, like, let's take a family through a period of time and follow all the family members.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] That book gives me the creeps.

BRIAN: I assume you've read it?

ANNE: I've read part of it. Oh, and then I didn't sleep for a week.

BRIAN: It's really, really strange. There are these over the top magical elements, not like small tweaks to the universe, right? But you didn't get to the end of it?

ANNE: Haven't read the end. We did discuss this in the episode with Liberty Hardy, but she loves creepy books and she of course had read it multiple times.

BRIAN: You need to look up the ending of that book. It is unbelievable the last page of that book.

ANNE: The last page? Oh, oh, that is intriguing.

BRIAN: If you have a copy of it, you could go and read the last page and kinda get this effect. So I will bait people with that. As long as you kinda know what the set up of the novel is. Like

read the back and then read the back page. It's a short circuit. It won't be as impactful, but like, it's pretty cool and I didn't know anything about Drew Magary. Drew Magary is like a sports writer. If you know anything about me, I do not care about sports really at all.

[00:27:56]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] You just endeared yourself to a lot of listeners.

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] So I know, I mean, obviously I don't have time. I'm reading all these books. I don't have time to care about basketball. But that being said, I think it's interesting because it is kinda this giant metaphor for trying to provide and be a resource and be somebody your kids can look up to and somebody your wife is still in love with, and all this stuff, but it's told as this crazy, pilgrims progress meets *Harry Potter* meets six Stephen King horror movies mashed together. [ANNE LAUGHS] Like it's super, duper weird. All kind of tied up in that last page. So I love it, but it's a very personal book to me because of that and I don't necessarily know that other things he writes even that I would love or things that are like weirdly have those horror elements that this has. I don't know that is what I love about it. It more has to do with the overarching kinda metaphor he's going for, and the really offbeat way he's able to do it. So it kinda combines that personal journey thing that I like along with the magical realism and using strange elements to tell the story.

ANNE: Okay. You just said weird a lot of times and it's just underscoring a book recommendation that was floating through my mind. I think we're going to do it. I think, but first we're going to hear what you chose for your next favorite.

BRIAN: I mean, I almost have categories, right? Like so I just finished *The Last Romantics* by Tara Conklin and it's a perfect example of this type of book. But I would go with if I just had to pick one probably *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer. This long, expansive look at a group of friends who meet at summer camp, and then what happens for the rest of their lives and how they kinda circle back to each other in different ways.

ANNE: So you like a book with a wide angle lens.

BRIAN: Yeah! And I like a book with a lot of characters that goes really deep and you get to meet them young and kinda watch what happens, right? Like I find that idea and this goes back to that coming-of-age thing, of like who do we become and what makes us become who we become?

ANNE: Oh, Brian, you're singing my song.

BRIAN: So interesting and that's why I love *Little Fires Everywhere*, right? And I love *The Children's Crusade* by Ann Packer and *Commonwealth* by Ann Patchett. I mean, I could go on and on about books like this. There's a certain type of book, and it's like once you see that one of them is related to the other, you can just read all of them. There's a million of them.

A recent book that did this well that kinda did this really overtly is *The Immortalists*. The Chloe Benjamin book?

[00:30:17]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Another book I've read half of.

BRIAN: I think there's other books that do what that book is trying to do a little better, but it's interesting because it kinda combines the magic realism thing with this story ... That's probably the ultimate version of my two favorite type of books smashed together.

ANNE: Oh, yeah. It really does, doesn't it?

BRIAN: From a critical standpoint, I think there's other books that do it better and I just ... *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer is just ... It's just dynamite. I mean, I think about the characters in that book a lot still and I read it probably five years ago.

ANNE: Okay, Brian, it's really interesting to me that you've chosen a lot of reads that have very mediocre aggregate ratings on a site like GoodReads.

BRIAN: Oh, really?

ANNE: Yeah.

BRIAN: I've actually never looked that up.

ANNE: Well I think that's a good life strategy.

BRIAN: So like, I'm big on personal recommendations. Like if you - like whatever you tell me, I'm going to read immediately, but like I'm not big on going to a website and saying, like, these are the things that you would like if you like this. Like I just think it sells something short of the experience, right? Because there's so many little nuances that can make up the reading experience. And so when you're just like looking for that same kind of thing over and over and over, you miss out on ... And I mean, this is kinda what our whole conversation has been, right? But you miss out on the other elements that add to a reading experience.

ANNE: Sometimes people will proudly say to me, oh, I'm a book snob. And I never read a book with less than a four star rating.

BRIAN: What?!

ANNE: And I just oh, that's not a - that's not a good life strategy.

[00:31:40]

BRIAN: No!

ANNE: Not at all. But I think that it can be really interesting to know what works specifically, you know what was custom designed for you that is not for the masses.

BRIAN: Yeah.

ANNE: it makes me feel like a very special snowflake when I feel like a three-star read, you know a book that many people like eh, it was fine, is absolutely perfect for me. That means that whether it was a recommendation or whether I got lucky or just chose really well, I'm reading the right thing.

BRIAN: Yeah! And like you mentioned *Station Eleven* earlier, well you mentioned the writer of *Station Eleven*. I'm assuming you're talking about *Station Eleven*, which does a lot of what I love. You see all these different people. I mean there's a different mechanism to bring them all together, and you see them all at different phases of their life. That's why I find friendships and people fascinating, right? 'Cause every time you meet them, they're a different version of themselves.

ANNE: Yeah, lots of moving parts that come together in an unexpected and always interesting ways. Okay, Brian, so we've talked about your dislike of *Garp*. Are there any other books that just did not work for you?

BRIAN: So, [SIGHS] another book that I did not like is important to mention because on paper, it looks like exactly my jam.

ANNE: Ooh.

BRIAN: So like if this was reversed and you had said everything I have said so far to me, anyone would then go, oh, by doing this mathematical equation, you should read *A Visit From The Goonsquad* by Jennifer Egan. It is about a set of characters and throughout their lives, the way they ... What happens and the way they turn out after having grown up as teenagers in punk rock. And I am a huge punk rock guy. I'm a huge music guy, so like I had so many people tell me that this is going to be your favorite book. Forget *Lemon Cake*, this is going to be your jam. And I really didn't like it.

ANNE: You know, *Goonsquad* almost reads like short stories. They're character sketches. There's not a big narrative unity.

BRIAN: I don't think it comes together very well.



[00:33:29]

ANNE: We can see that you ... Like you are okay to go to bleak places. But I think maybe malays for its own sake, or to just highlight the despair of humanity is not for you. There has to be either a greater end or a thread of hope.

BRIAN: I think a 100% of what you're saying is true. Like I think the difference between a *Goonsquad* and like a *Commonwealth* by Ann Patchett just to use that one, is that there's a character who you're on board with the whole time.

ANNE: In reading *Interestings*, Ann Patchett, *Lemon Cake*, you're leaning in, going, come on family, pull it together. You can do it.

BRIAN: Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's really interesting. You might have helped me figure myself out a little bit more.

ANNE: Happy to help.

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ANNE: All right. Brian, let's look at your books. You loved *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Aimee Bender, *The Hike* by Drew Magary, and *The Interestings* by Meg Wolitzer. Not for you are *A Visit From The Goonsquad* by Jennifer Egan, even though it came highly recommended and *The World According to Garp* by John Irving. So you know a lot about what you like. You like coming-of-age stories. You love stories that are completely set in an ordinary world except for that one significantly different thing. You like a good novel that follows a family or a found family through a long period of time. I'm so glad you read *The Last Romantics*. That does sound like right squarely in that-

[00:37:00]

BRIAN: Right in the heart. Yup.

ANNE: You ready for some ideas?

BRIAN: I'm super excited, yes.

ANNE: Do you remember forever ago where I was like, wait, I read a book like that recently? I've read a book like that recently?

BRIAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What was it?

ANNE: It comes out on October 29th. It's the new one from Kevin Wilson and it is called *Nothing To See Here*.

BRIAN: Oh, I've read some Kevin Wilson and I'm excited. I liked that last one, the one about the social experiment where they all lived together.

ANNE: Mm-hmm. Okay, well, this one is very interesting. Here's what you need to know about this book. In his pre-release chatter about *Nothing To See Here*, Kevin Wilson has said that this novel continues his obsession with family dynamics, which you like, and spontaneous human combustion.

BRIAN: Yes. Oh, perfect.

ANNE: So you said that you liked super, duper weird and this one totally delivers. Okay, so in this novel, you have a powerful privileged political family in Franklin, Tennessee. The dad is

angling to become Secretary of State. Might want to run for president one day. Married a perfect wife who could support his every political goal, but he has this one teeny, tiny problem. Are you ready?

[00:38:06]

BRIAN: Uh-oh.

ANNE: He has two small children from a previous marriage who spontaneously combust when angry.

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] I cannot wait.

ANNE: Okay, so Kevin Wilson says that he's obsessed with how people are weird and how we live with that. And you mentioned that you really love stories about how people become who they are and how they respond to the hands they are dealt, and the forces that shape them. And not just obviously how people deal with this strange spontaneous combustion situation, but the fact that what you see, I think, in all his books is how the people that you live with and your family and your close friends, too, we see that in this book, they shape you. And they make you who you are. Even if you are desperately trying to assert your own identity. You may try to break free. You may succeed, but those people still influence who you become and how you become it and knowing that he's always writing towards those dynamics and the element of weirdness, I think, makes you take a step back and go whoa. What is actually happening here? I think this could be really fun for you.

BRIAN: Oh, man, it sounds perfect. It sounds like if I was going to write a premise to a book that I wanted to read combining all the elements that I laid out here today [LAUGHS] this would be ... This is exactly it. So well done. I'm very impressed.

ANNE: Awesome. I'm glad to hear it. So that is *Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson. October 29th.

BRIAN: I'm writing it down.

ANNE: Wasn't going to recommend you another Ann Patchett book but it's too good so we have to go there. She has a new book coming out September 24th. It's called *The Dutch House*. When I heard about this, I thought really? A painting school? I saw the cover, which is striking. I mean it looks like a painting by a dutch master. Really bold colors. Really vivid. It's a closeup portrait of a young woman's face. I didn't care. I was like I don't want to read about a house. I want to read about people. But luckily-

BRIAN: Yeah, that doesn't sound good.

[00:39:48]

ANNE: It's good. Hang on. I'm sharing my misconceptions with you so that you can avoid the same. The Dutch House of the title is in fact a real house and it's a house that sounds so realistic that I was rushing to Google to go, is this a real place? How much of this was inspired by reality and how much is Ann Patchett's imagination? I'm going to hear her when she comes here on book tour in Louisville, I'm not sure she's going to discuss this, but as far as I can tell, this is not a real place. But this is a house that is practically a character in the story because we just talked about the forces that shape you and make you who you are even though you don't want them to have an affect on you. Well for this family, The Dutch House is a key force that shapes them. There's a father who grew up poor and when he did make some money, the house represented success and fulfillment and achievement. But to his wife, it represented entrapment. And to the kids, it represented both their identity and also a very unhappy home life. That house was everything to some of the people in it and a big creepy burden to others. It's a house that provokes strong reactions, but the thing I like best about this story is you got a narrator that you can root for, who's telling you the story of his childhood, his upbringing, and most importantly, his relationship with his sister.

So when you meet Danny, he's old, but he takes you way back in time to when he was less than ten and tells you about his mother who is driven away by the house. His stepmother who sounds like something out of Cinderella. But most importantly is his relationship with his sister. And I really enjoyed Ann Patchett's work in the past. I think this is her best. It's so good. It spans more than 50 years. Tells the story of three generations and what I like about it is she really probes the complexities of family relationships. And every time I think, oh my gosh, that's amazing. Like I'm so glad you added that element to the story, it provides so much depth, she adds more and more and more and more. Brings characters that had kinda been in the wings back to the forefront. I mean, she just goes so deep with each character. She just keeps digging. So much so that even though this book, it's just barely over 300 pages, it feels like it contains worlds. Does that sound interesting at all? I feel like I'm saying a bunch of words that don't sound like anything.

BRIAN: No, that sounds again completely and totally up my alley. Partly because of the sibling element. I realize about myself years ago, there's just so many works of art, books, movies, music otherwise, they're about romantic relationship. There's not that much stuff about brother sister, right? Like we've named a lot of novels in this case today, but like in general, it would be very outweighed by romantic story. I remember seeing that movie like I didn't even know there was a good movie called You Can Count On Me with Mark Ruffalo, it's just about ... There's no romantic story in there at all. It's just about this brother and sister and how they get along. And I remember getting to the end of that movie and being like, that might be the first time I've ever seen a story that was just about a brother and a sister. Just about siblings and the dynamics and I think the sibling relationship is so interesting because in a lot of cases, it's the only other person who started at the exact same starting line or real close to the exact same starting line, right? And had the same parents, probably lived in the same house. Granted there are different versions of childhood for people, but like in general, then siblings grow up and they become

very, very different. So what are those things that cause that to happen? That to me is just so fascinating. So the idea that there's siblings relationships in the middle of this, that's what I loved about *The Last Romantics*, right? It's all about those things.

[00:43:11]

ANNE: Mm-hmm. It's all about the siblings.

BRIAN: Yeah. I'm super excited about that one, too.

ANNE: Something that she tells you that she wants you to pay attention to in the story is how the past is constantly informing the present and how our present shapes the way we understand the past and how there's this constant inner play because as we look back, we don't just see it as the people we were back then, but we see it as the people we are now which means we're always seeing it in a new way. And I gotta tell you, we've talked about symbolism and metaphor in some of the books you've enjoyed, pay attention to the building metaphors in this story. I mean, there's all kind of nerdy fun.

BRIAN: Fun fun. I'm excited about that.

ANNE: I don't know what direction to go in next. I'm debating between a family saga spanning many years set in New York City and a found family saga spanning many years about a group of classical musicians. What do you think? Choose your own adventure.

BRIAN: Ooh. They both sound good. Well you've given me the family, so let's do the found family classical musician.

ANNE: Okay. What we're going to talk about is *The Ensemble* by Aja Gabel. Do you know this one?

BRIAN: I've seen it and I know that name, but no, this is the most unfamiliar of the recommendations here as far as writers.

ANNE: Okay, it's got a really striking, memorable cover, so I'm not surprised that you remember it if you've seen it. This is a novel. It's actually Gabel's debut and she used to be a cellist, so she knows what she's writing about here. But it's set in the '90s in a functional family, meaning there is no blood or marital relationship here. But they function as a family unit or rather this is novel, though it's not about an actual family, feels like a dysfunctional family story.

BRIAN: Ohh, okay.

ANNE: It's about four promising musicians who are talented enough, one of them is a genuine prodigy, that they would usually go the soloist path to musical success but instead they've decided to join forces and form a string quartet, which means that they are bound professionally

and just because of the nature of the business, personally. I have to say that I'm not a huge music person. My brother tells me most of what I know, and I do like a good novel that explores that, but this is not a world I was familiar with and I found that really fascinating. Any pursuit you're doing it at a high level attracts strong personalities. Is that fair to say? That's a sweeping statement, but you have four strong personalities who are very different but live much of their lives way up in each other's spaces. What I like about this for you is the characters are not always likeable. I mean, at the beginning, it starts with somebody doing something that's going to make you go, really? Is this a good idea? Are you sure? Like ooh, you're not going to feel good about, I think it's Jana at the beginning. So they're not likeable but they ring true which makes for really interesting reading.

[00:45:52]

BRIAN: Typically you would take this idea of musicians getting together and binding each other, making a found family over their music in a rock band setting, right?

ANNE: Uh-huh. You would.

BRIAN: Totally into that, yeah. These recommendations are great. It's like you do this for a living.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Well read them first and then we'll talk about it.

BRIAN: [LAUGHS] They sound good on paper. It could be a *Goonsquad* situation so I'll keep my fingers crossed.

ANNE: Well I'll keep my fingers crossed too. Okay, Brian, so here's what we got. We talked about *Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson, *The Dutch House* by Ann Patchett, and *The Ensemble* by Aja Gabel. Now of those three books, what do you think you'll read next? I have a feeling I know what you want to read next.

BRIAN: Yeah, I want to read the Kevin Wilson book.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I know.

BRIAN: Only one of them is available to me right now. I will check out *The Ensemble*.

ANNE: [GASPS] Oh, that was so rude of me. [BRIAN LAUGHS] We've gotta have something to look forward to.

BRIAN: I've got little spots in my fall to plug these books in, so that'll be very fun.

ANNE: Well I can't wait to hear what you think. I have no doubt that you'll tell me. Brian, thanks so much for talking books with me today.

[00:46:53]

BRIAN: Hey, thank you for having me. This is been a blast. Like out of control blast.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Brian, and I'd love to hear what YOU think he should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/201](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/201) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today. Make sure to check out Brian's podcast, The Story Guys. You can find that at [wearethestoryguys.com/podcast](http://wearethestoryguys.com/podcast), and give him a follow on Twitter @beichen22. That's at b-e-i-c-h-e-n-2-2.

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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.