



**WSIRN Episode [number]: Required reading revisited**  
*Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guests Mel Joulwan and Dave Humphreys*

[00:00:00]

ANNE: When you announced on your blog on April 1st, whatever year [MEL LAUGHS] that you were moving from Boston to Vermont so Dave could go to cartooning school, I thought it was a ... Happy April Fools! [ALL LAUGHING]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 219.

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, on today's episode we're talking about travel reading. Well I have my own travel coming up and I want to make sure you're in the loop. My book tour for *Don't Overthink It* is booked. I'm going to wonderful bookstores I've been to in the past and I'm excited to say we have great events planned at brand new and new-to-me stores and cities, including New York City, Milwaukee, and Madison, CT. *Don't Overthink It* is out March 3rd and in-person events start that week. Get the details at [modernmrsdarcy.com/events](http://modernmrsdarcy.com/events). I hope to see you live and in person at one of these book tour stops this spring. That's [modernmrsdarcy.com/events](http://modernmrsdarcy.com/events).

Last week when Anna Mitler talked about her goal to read her way around the world I mentioned a resource I thought might help her find books from or about different countries. Little did I know when I recorded with her that we'd have this episode, today's episode, ready for your ears the very next week. The timing is perfect.

You might remember way back in Ep 60 (called, "the last page can make or break it," go look it up, it's so good) my guest Mel Joulwan and I talked about her love for books with a strong sense

of place. Mel realized she loves to travel in her literary life, and in the years since we chatted on What Should I Read Next she's made that the priority in big, delightful ways, along with her husband Dave Humphreys. Mel and Dave are joining us today to chat about their reading journey together, fulfilling their long-time dream to move across the Atlantic, and their new destination-reading podcast aptly named Strong Sense of Place. Readers, it's a lot of fun. Let's get to it!

Mel, welcome back to What Should I Read Next, and Dave, welcome to the show.

[00:02:23]

DAVE: Oh, thanks so much.

MEL: Thank you, I'm so excited to talk to you about books again.

ANNE: It's mutual. Although remember that time we could talk about books in person. That was pretty great.

MEL: That was the best talking about books.

DAVE: It's true.

ANNE: All right, we will get to that. So, Mel, our regular listeners may recognize your voice from episode 60. I think it's called "the last page can make it or break it."

MEL: Yes, that was such a long time ago. You have had over 200 episodes now.

ANNE: Okay, so what's changed in three years?

MEL: So much. If people have listened to my episode from before, they might remember that when we spoke, we were about four months from moving from the United States to Prague. And spoiler: we did it. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: What city were you in when we talked?

MEL: We were in White River Junction, Vermont. Dave had just finished getting his master's in cartooning. We had just released our third cookbook, *Well Fed Weeknights*. So we were in a big transition phase where his master's was finishing and our work project was finishing and we were ready to finally make this move that we had been planning for about six years. So it was a really exciting time, which I'm not sure I talked about when I was on your show. [ANNE AND MEL LAUGH] Exciting being like terrifying and stressful and unsettling and awesome all at the same time.

[00:03:40]

ANNE: When you announced on your blog on April 1st whatever year that you were moving from Boston to Vermont so Dave could go to cartooning school, I thought it was a ... Happy April Fools! [MEL AND DAVE LAUGHING] That was real.

MEL: No, that was real.

DAVE: Yeah, that happened.

ANNE: But a long, long time ago, 'cause now you're in Prague.

MEL: We are in Prague. We've been here for almost three years now.

ANNE: When's your anniversary? Your Prague-versary?

MEL: April 14th. We actually do call it our Prague-versary, so well done. [DAVE LAUGHS] I don't know if you know this, Anne. I'm not sure if we talked about this in our personal asides, but being a guest on What Should I Read Next was a really big turning point in my reading life, which is amazing and I will always be grateful because prior to being on your show, I had not really thought of reading as a hobby. I read a lot. We talked about that, but I didn't think of it as a thing that I did, which now as I say that out loud sounds absolutely ridiculous. Of course reading is a hobby, but I was not thinking about it that way.

After I was on your show, I realized how excited and fired up I got when I was talking about books and how enthusiastically I wanted to share the books that I loved with other people. And I started to become a lot more deliberate in my reading life. Number one, I read so many more books now than I did before. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: That's so interesting.

MEL: So I've been keeping a book journal since 2007 and it's really funny to go back to 2007 'cause I think there's only 12 books there. And all I wrote down at the time was the title and the author. And so I was going back through my old journals and in 2016, I read around 40-ish books. And then 2017, I was on your show early in the year, and that year I jumped up to 75. So almost doubled. 2018, I jumped up to 113, which was my high score ever in my whole life. [ANNE LAUGHS] And this year, 130.

So the thing that I wanted to say about that for people who are listening is, it's not the raw numbers that I'm really excited about. It's that I brought in what kind of books I read and the ratings I'm giving them are much higher because I've gotten better at picking out books that I love, and I feel like all of that is due to you, Anne. So thank you.

ANNE: Aww. Thank you.

[00:06:05]

MEL: Yeah, it's been really, really interesting to kinda give reading time a little bit more respect and heft in my life and just the way that's kinda unfolded has been really interesting.

ANNE: No kidding because [MEL LAUGHS] okay, tell everybody about your day project because this has been incubating for a really long time and I'm so excited that it's finally been time to talk about it recently.

MEL: Dave and I launched a project in October called Strong Sense of Place and it's a website and podcast dedicated to books that have a strong sense of place, and literary travel destinations like historical libraries and amazing bookshops and literary cafes. One of the things that I noticed, I was relistening to my old episode and I actually said the phrase "strong sense of place," three or four times when I was talking to you and this project was not on my radar at all at the time. It just was bubbling somewhere in my subconscious I guess that I didn't know about.

ANNE: Clearly. That's so fascinating. Okay, Mel, we've heard so much about your background as a reader and anyone who knows you from your well fed and Meljoulwan.com days, knows that you've been talking about *Jane Eyre* for a million years [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH] but Dave, we haven't heard your background as a reader. I do know that you are way more interested in the science fiction book shops than the rest of us.

DAVE: That's true.

ANNE: Tell me a little bit about your reading background.

DAVE: Well my reading background started young. My mother was a librarian and my father calls himself the most educated cab driver in Cincinnati.

ANNE: Oh my gosh. [DAVE LAUGHS] How did I not know this?

DAVE: It's true.

ANNE: What a pedigree!

DAVE: Yeah. [LAUGHS] Yeah. And so I was brought up with books everywhere and regular trips to the library and all that. In high school, I was a horrible student. [ANNE LAUGHS] Got used to being really good at listening to other people talk to about books and that skill kinda, I mean, I got good at it, but I also got bad at reading. And eventually I turned that around, but it took awhile. I had to get past my 20s.

And then my 30s, I started to really get involved in book clubs and remember reading books with my mom a lot, we did that a lot, and then eventually we started making books and then eventually I went to the cartoon center for cartoon studies, and now I've made a whole lot of

books and read a whole lot of books. I tend to be like a project reader I guess. I tend to set up long lists of reading material and then work through all that. I read widely, nonfiction, children's books, photography, graphic novels of course. Fiction as well. So I'm flexible I guess as a reader.

[00:08:51]

ANNE: Let's back up a little bit. So you said when you were younger, you became bad at reading.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: Tell me more about that. What does that mean to you?

DAVE: [LAUGHS] What does that mean to me ... So, there would be assigned reading and I would think, well, that's for suckers. [ANNE AND DAVE LAUGH] And I would - I would figure out how to sorta not read, but still like pass the test and get through and all that. It's not a winning strategy, I will say for anybody who's out there. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: I read a book recently, it was *What We Talk About When We Talk About Reading*.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: I didn't love the book, but it did talk about how this narrative is developed where we read because we have to or we read because it's good for us, and we may have to, and it may be good for us, but like [LAUGHS] there's no efficient way to suck the joy out of reading than to do it for either of those two reasons.

DAVE: Yeah, I feel like I was sorta late in life when I happened upon the trope that we read novels because life is too short to get to know that many people that well. And that really like lit me up. I was like yes, that's right. That's, you know, exactly why it's important to read novels. And also about the same time, I was involved with a book club that it was called Required Reading Revisited and we read the stuff that I was supposed to have read in high school.

It made me appreciate it so much more to have some distance and to have some maturity to look at something like *The Great Gatsby*, which is now one of my favorite books. Which when I was not reading it as a teenager, I thought was ridiculous and as an adult, understand that it's about longing and not being able to get the things that you think you want and what that means. And as well as sorta capitalism in America, and all that stuff, and all of that resonates a lot more when you're, you know, 35, than it does when you're 16.

ANNE: Mm-hmm. So if I wanted to get you started with how we ruin reading forever for kids by making them read *The Great Gatsby* book when they're 13 [DAVE LAUGHS] you'd be here for it?

[00:10:52]

DAVE: I'd absolutely be here for it. [LAUGHS] Yeah. I'd be in the front of that line. Yeah.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] My first high school term paper that was 12 whole pages was on the meaning of time in *The Great Gatsby*.

MEL: Whoa.

ANNE: And miraculously, I still liked to read afterwards.

DAVE: Wow. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: I don't think I liked reading *The Great Gatsby* at the time, but it didn't ruin reading for me forever.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: Hallelujah. Thank you, Mr. Gates.

DAVE: [LAUGHS] Yeah, and I had some fantastic English teachers too, and I apologize to them now [ALL LAUGH] but yeah, they were great at breaking down the book or attempting to and one of the things we revisited, we talked about a lot in the Required Reading Revisited group was how hard it would be to frame you know, something like *The Iliad* for 14 year olds.

ANNE: I don't think I've recovered from my 8th grade experience with *The Song of Roland*. I mean, it was just pure torture. Okay, so you've gone from being a bad reader to reading for a living. Well, reading and drawing about reading for a living.

DAVE: Yeah. [MEL LAUGHS]

ANNE: I like it.

DAVE: Yeah, thanks. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: How long have you been working on Strong Sense of Place?

MEL: I have been working on Strong Sense of Place for about two or two and a half years. Because while Dave was working on some other projects, I was doing some foundation work on Strong Sense of Place in the background, so I feel like I've been at it for awhile. We've spent a lot of time talking about how we define strong sense of place and what kind of books we really wanted to feature on our podcast and on our site. The motivation for this whole project really, okay, well, I think there's two things that happened. I really like books that transport me

somewhere else. I am not a super adventurous person in my real life, but I love to read about dangerous adventures and imagine what I would do if I was in those situations.

When I was in college, I wrote a book called *A Street in Marrakech* that was about a woman whose husband was teaching at a university in Marrakech. She and her family move there for a year. And it's just this really great memoir about her year abroad. And sometimes I wonder if that isn't where strong sense of place kinda started for me. You know, how sometimes there was just these books that kinda get stuck in there, and [LAUGHS] you kinda find yourself coming back to them over and over. So there's that. There's been books throughout my life that have really stuck, *The Historian* is another one which I know I've talked about the last time I was on your show. So much like a travel log and there's a big adventure in it.

One of the things I noticed when we started traveling more is that I really wanted to read fiction set in the places we were visiting. And generally if you ask someone, I'm going to Prague, what should I read? They recommend what I can consider kinda homework books. The first thing people say is Kafka. I'm in no way saying that Kafka is not a great writer, but I'm saying if you want to know what it's like to drink a coffee in Prague and walk across the Charles Bridge and take in the view of the castle, Kafka is maybe not the best first choice. [ALL LAUGH]

[00:13:59]

DAVE: Just not fun, you know?

MEL: Thank you for saying that.

DAVE: Yeah. [ALL LAUGH]

ANNE: Somebody had to do it.

MEL: I mean, which is not to say that we only will be talking about fun books in Strong Sense of Place because for example, one of the books that I read this summer that I really, really loved was set in Syria. It's called *Death is Hard Work* by Khaled Khalifa. This is not a fun book. It's beautifully written book. It's a really compelling story. It has unforgettable characters. It definitely gives you a sense of what it would be like to be in Syria as these civil wars are going on. It is not fun, but it is a great book and it does not feel like homework, and I think that is the fine line that we're trying to walk which is books that really can inform you about the place and give you an understanding the place without it feeling like work.

ANNE: I hear you, and something I always struggle with my terminology on is that I can read a book and not enjoy reading it at all. I cannot want to pick it up. I can cringe when I'm reading it. It can be a hard book. Horrible things can happen, and yet I can be so glad I read it because even though, there's some books that I never actually would say that I'm enjoying reading it, I still feel like it's so worthwhile. But we tend to talk about books in terms of I love it, or I didn't, and

sometimes what you want to say is, you know, that book wrecked me. It was hard. And I never wanted to read it, but wow. What a novel.

[00:15:25]

DAVE: Yes.

MEL: Yes, it affected me really deeply. It hurts so good.

DAVE: There's also books that take you on a very long journey. I'm thinking of *Moby Dick* as the classic where it's a very long journey, and I read that book and I really enjoyed that book, but I have no interest in picking that book up any time soon. [LAUGHS] You know, you've been on the tour. You've seen the whole thing now.

ANNE: Yeah. And you never want to go back, but you're so glad you went.

DAVE: Yeah.

MEL: We talked about something similar this morning because one of the other big accomplishments since the last time I was on your show, was that I finally made it all the way through *Wuthering Heights*.

ANNE: I can't believe you hadn't read that yet.

MEL: How could I have not read it when I am such a Bronte fan? I've read all of Anne's books and most of Charlotte's books, but I could never get through *Wuthering Heights*. It took me five tries. And the difference on the last time was that I decided that instead of reading it like a story that I was going to fall into and love the way I did with *Jane Eyre*, I was going to read it as kinda an experiment to see what this thing is all about that I'm somehow supposed to have read and maybe enjoy.

I didn't enjoy the story, but I have so much respect for Emily Bronte now. Just the claustrophobic atmosphere she created with the names. Everyone has the same names. How do you give all your characters the same three names? [LAUGHS] And the houses, so dark, and the valley and it's just so moody and atmospheric. And that part of it, I really, really loved, but I never need to read that book again.

ANNE: I felt the same way after reading *Wuthering Heights*. I'm so glad I read it. Never going to do it again, but Mel, I think that's so smart to approach it with that spirit of experimentation than instead of going in thinking okay, this is how I'm supposed to feel or I wonder if I'm going to feel the way everyone's telling me I'm supposed to feel where you have a big weight on you. Just to say, okay, let's see what I think.

MEL: Yeah.



[00:17:21]

ANNE: And if nothing less, I'll have checked the box that I wanted to check. I'm not saying that everyone needs to read *Wuthering Heights*, but there's a good reason that you wanted to and now you did it.

MEL: Yeah, and I mean, there are definitely things that make that book great. It is not a love story though. I mean, we could do three hours on how *Wuthering Heights* is not a love story.

ANNE: People probably do call it a love story, huh.

MEL: Oh, they do.

ANNE: It's a messed up world.

MEL: In my book journal, it actually says, this is a really weird little book. And I stand by it.

ANNE: Little though?

MEL: It's not so long. It just feels long because it's so creepy.

ANNE: Okay, how's this for atmospheric: The copy of *Wuthering Heights* I read was unearthed from a drywalled in under the storage section.

MEL: No.

ANNE: In our first house. I don't know how long it had been there. So it was green and possibly a little moldy, but I wouldn't call it mold or I wouldn't touch it. And when I opened it, the polio vaccination certificate of the previous owner of our house fell out and I used it as a bookmark.

MEL: Are you kidding me?

DAVE: No...

ANNE: No, and it's on our library shelves right now.

MEL: That is a beginning of a novel. [ANNE LAUGHS] Yes.

ANNE: Let's get together in Scotland and plot it out. [DAVE LAUGHS]

MEL: Okay, done.

ANNE: So, Mel and Dave, I hope you're game because I'm kinda changing up the What Should I Read Next rules for you today.

[00:18:37]

MEL: Should we be nervous?

ANNE: Uh, yeah, it's not easy to recommend books to people who've read a lot. [MEL LAUGHS]  
You should be very nervous.

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ANNE: Well, I want to take advantage of your expertise and hear you talk about books with a strong sense of place by asking you for recommendations as to what I should read next. So what I thought what we could do is I could tell you three books that I love that have a strong sense of place, one book that I also loved, but does not have a strong sense of place.

[00:20:28]

MEL: Okay.

ANNE: And then you could recommend three atmospheric books, evocative of their location that couldn't take place anywhere else that I could read next.

MEL: Okay.

ANNE: How does that sound?

MEL: That sounds awesome.

ANNE: I am excited to talk about books that I've read recently that I haven't gotten to talk about on the show before. Or at least not recently.

MEL: You hardly get to talk about the books that you love.

ANNE: Well, I mean, I can't help myself but it's not all the books I love all the time for sure, but now I get to talk about three or four, maybe we'll see if I can slide in some extras.

MEL: You could do an episode where you interview yourself and you could talk about three books you loved, one book you don't, and then recommend three books to yourself.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] But then I still have to do the hard work! I want somebody else to do the heavy lifting and today it's you. Thank you very much. [MEL LAUGHS] I chose three books I loved that were really atmospheric. And sometimes the whole reason I enjoyed a book, it might have been a little weak on plot; it might have been a little weak on characterization, but the setting was so amazing. There are many reasons to love a book and the first book I chose I loved because of the atmosphere. And that is *The Orphan of Salt Winds* by Elizabeth Brooks.

This is a debut novel that came out in I think early 2018. It begins when a 10 year old girl comes to live with a childless couple at Salt Winds. This is their home on the edge of a beautiful but incredibly dangerous marsh. The marsh itself is its own character, and I have to say the marsh, which is foggy and moody and dangerous and sometimes beautiful, but sometimes seriously creepy. And also destructive. Such a powerful metaphor for this young girl's precarious situation. She's 10. She's entering this new home with a new family. This is happening right on the cusp of World War II in England. She's entering a family, the relationship is sometimes beautiful but also not as it seems at first blush. And pretty quickly this 10 year old girl comes to

realize more about the relationship than the husband does and that is the problem that puts everybody in danger. The author does such an incredible job of building a seriously disturbing, heavily gothic atmosphere, and even though I wasn't entirely satisfied with the resolution of the novel, the setting really made the story here.

[00:22:57]

MEL: That sounds like something I would really love, so I am making note of that for myself.

ANNE: Mel, I think it is totally up your alley. [MEL LAUGHS] Okay, that's book one. *The Orphan of Salt Winds* by Elizabeth Brooks. Okay, the second book I'm choosing is a new one. It doesn't come out until May 22 here in the States. It is called *Sea Wife* by Amity Gaige. I am not sure if she's written anything else before. I wasn't sure what to expect going in, but this sucked me right in. I really enjoyed it. This has summer reading guide written all over it because that's totally what I'm thinking about books I read in the winter. Just so you know how my reading for a living.

MEL: That's right.

ANNE: I would caution readers. I find out more and more not just this book, but so many books, the reviews totally give away all the beats that make, that drive the story forward and I just want to say like, Publishers Weekly, Kirkus, what are you thinking? I don't understand.

MEL: A review is not a plot summary. Don't tell me what happened.

ANNE: Ugh, yeah. And also plot summaries just aren't interesting.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: We don't have strong feelings about this, it's fine.

MEL: [LAUGHS] My face just got really hot when you said that.

ANNE: [ALL LAUGH] I was really intrigued by the editor's letter in the front of the advanced review copy I read. It said that the novel was loosely inspired by a story the author read in the paper and just found irresistible. And it's about a real life situation.

In April 2014, the coast guard received a may day call from a boat 900 miles off the coast of Mexico. A couple that was sailing around the world with their two young daughters had gotten into distress and they needed to be bailed out, almost literally bailed out. The rescue that they required was very complicated and extremely expensive. And debate ensued about what you can do in this world and how far your responsibility extends to others and what kind of responsibility do we all have to keep you safe. Whether that's logistics or resources or cash or effort or you know, putting other people's lives in peril to bail you out because your yacht got into trouble when you were sailing around the world.

[00:25:03]

MEL: Right.

ANNE: So I thought, oh, that was interesting, and I will say that the story here does not follow the exact arc of that. 'Cause I was never sure when I was reading. Like ooh, are we about to have a very expensive and complicated rescue 900 miles off the coast of Mexico? [MEL LAUGHS] The book's first sentence is, "Where does a mistake begin?"

MEL: Ooh.

ANNE: But what we find out is that this husband and wife and their two kids have decided to sell their stuff, buy a boat, and go sail around the world. And the husband is the only one of the four of them that is really interested in doing this, but they do it. From the very beginning, not a spoiler, anybody who wants to can put this in the review and I won't complain. But only three of them have returned. The husband is not there, and we do not know why. We do not know what happened. We don't know who is at fault. So the story unfolds in two different narratives. We have the wife in real time, who at the beginning of the book is sitting in her closet not coming out because that is how she is coping right now.

MEL: [LAUGHS] Oh, that's so sad.

ANNE: And at first, Mel, you're not really sure why - I mean, obviously a woman in the closet means that something's gone wrong, but you're not sure about her level of mental stability or why she's there or what exactly has happened because you don't know. You don't find out until well into the book unless you read the Kirkus review ... Don't do it. [DAVE LAUGHS]

Very early on, she finds the captain's log that her husband has kept of the voyage. So alternately, you're getting her real time this is what's happening, back in the States at home in my safe house, with my children story as she copes, and then you're reading his captain's log. His technical narrative of their journey, which very quickly turned into a diary. He talks about the history about how he ended up buying this boat and there's some complications there, especially with another person who's involved. You see the choices they made, how they planned the trip, where they ... How they decided where to go, how his wife doesn't really know how to sail, and yet they're setting out onto the open seas together. You know things didn't go well on their journey. You know things aren't great between the two of them, but you're not sure why and you're not sure just how dire everything is.

So you have this couple in tension and then you put them into a tiny boat with tiny children in a high pressure situation dealing with a very real either adventure or terrifying situation, depending on how the weather is really. And the way that these individual elements come together is so powerful and so gripping. I love a literary page turner and that's how I would describe this one. Okay, it takes place a little bit in the suburbs. No strong sense of place there.

Could happen anywhere in the United States and not have changed the story, but it did feature a couple of sea towns of coastal cities that had me Googling like oh, is this real? 'Cause the way they're describing it made me want to go there immediately and made me want to see pictures. They were all real, but also the sea itself is such a powerful character here, and obviously a book about going to sea in a tiny yacht with your husband you're not on great terms with could not have happened anywhere but the open ocean. That is *Sea Wife* by Amity Gaige, and it comes out in May 2020.

[00:28:11]

MEL: Yeah, that sounds amazing.

DAVE: I'd love that book. That sounds awesome.

ANNE: I really enjoyed it.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: For my next favorite, we can talk about what strong sense of place means exactly because after talking with my husband Will on What Should I Read Next, he had his return episode recently as well, and we called "deconstructing your best reading year yet," he talked about how much he enjoyed *Gold* by Chris Cleave, which I've been meaning to read for a very long time, and I finally did. Go back and listen to his episode. You can hear him describe the book, but I'll tell you that it is set in the world of high-stakes, hyper-competitive Olympic velodrome racing.

MEL: Whoa.

ANNE: Yeah.

MEL: I have a tiny, tiny, tiny personal connection to Olympic velodrome racing.

ANNE: Really?

MEL: I mean, the tiniest of connections. I grew up in a very small town in Pennsylvania where nobody is really from and nobody really goes to [ANNE LAUGHS] and in the 1980s, a teenager who graduated from my high school qualified for the Olympics. But it was the year that we boycotted because of Russia, and he didn't get to go.

ANNE: Oh, that's so sad.

[00:29:24]

MEL: Like he was a huge star and everyone was so excited and it was really, really sad. And he ended up owning a bike shop. And I think he had an okay life. But when you said Olympic velodrome, I was like yes! That was really meaningful to me. I was 12 or something.

ANNE: Sometimes it's the personal connection, whether it's to a place or a theme or a character that just sucks you right in and that's really fun that you have that. If you don't know, 'cause we're a ways out from an Olympic year right now as we're recording, the velodrome is the track with the heavily banked sides that allows, it allows riders to go faster in a circle over and over. They're not really protective. I mean, it's just a person on a bike with a helmet and you're going at incredible speed. Like you can go 50 miles an hour when you're accelerating down the slope of the turn in these banked curves, but it's just you and your bike and there are a couple really significant wrecks in the book, and oh, they're just so hard to read.

MEL: Ugh.

ANNE: But it's about two girls who basically have grown up together training with each other, but also competing against each other. They're very complex, personal lives, especially because one of them has a daughter and she has leukemia. And you know from the very beginning she's sick. I don't think it's named in leukemia until well into the story, but it's obvious that something is very wrong with her. I don't think that's a spoiler, and now I'm paranoid about the spoilers. [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH] But most of the book takes place in London.

They're a couple of bike rides through the countryside that are extremely atmospheric. Setting is everything, and Chris Cleave is so good at describing his settings and every book I read by him so much of the action takes place in the gym and specifically on the track. You don't have a track here. You don't have a story. Something that I wasn't expecting about this book that I loved so much is it's told from multiple perspectives and the one that really made the book for me was the perspective of the aging coach [MEL LAUGHS] in the very beginning of the book. He can't get out of the bathtub because his knees won't cooperate.

MEL: So brutal.

ANNE: His narrative voice is so funny, and he's desperate to get out of the tub so he can get his dentures so that when his girls, his riders come to have their big meeting about something important that's happened, they won't know that he has fake teeth because he's still too young not to be vain about that. [MEL LAUGHS] He's wise and reflective and without his voice, I think the novel would be too melodramatic. Oh, he just made the story for me.

It's such a great book about a world that I didn't know I would find fascinating. I was just so happy to be plunked into the middle of that world for 320 pages or whatever it was. But we're not talking about Japan. And we're not talking about Chicago. We're talking about a velodrome track. Does this count as a strong sense of place?

[00:32:24]

DAVE: Absolutely. We're going to, in fact, do a couple of episodes every season that are themed based instead of a particular location, so we are going to do for instance, the strong sense of the sea.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Oh, maybe you have a recommendation for me.

DAVE: Yeah. [LAUGHS] But we're also doing like a strong sense of the circus. Books that encapsulate a place and make you feel like you're there.

MEL: One of the things that's happened since I was on your show is I have gotten a little obsessed with manor house novels.

ANNE LAUGHS] I like it.

MEL: Any story that takes place in an unusual enclosed space, hotels, one apartment building, a train carriage, that has become catnip to me. And when I'm reading not for work, just for fun, that is what I gravitate toward now. So I'm pretty excited about some of the books you talked about because they fit into that box for me. So thanks.

ANNE: I am delighted to had have a part in your manor house renaissance. But I gotta tell you [DAVE LAUGHS] my backup pick if that *Gold* by Chris Cleave did not like fit your strong sense of place requirements, *44 Scotland Street* is what I had in mind by Alexander McCall Smith. Now I don't know if this is the kind of book that I would want to read by the pool, but as we've hinted at, the two of you and Will and me and then our friend Tillie Walden all went to Scotland together last year. And we spent a few days ... Well first of all, you all totally masterminded this and said hey, we're going, you want to come? So thank you very much.

MEL: Because of Wigtown.

ANNE: Because you had the foresight to book *The Open Book*.

MEL: So we have to like time travel. Dave, do you remember what year that was?

DAVE: First I want to say, is it foresight or is it compulsion? That's the question. [ALL LAUGH] 2016 I think it was the spring of 2016.

MEL: Yes, and we were in our house in Vermont and he called me into his office and said, did you know there's an airBNB where you can run a bookstore? And I of course said, what? And within a couple of minutes we had booked it even though we couldn't get a reservation for two years. We figured we'll be living in Prague then. We'll just figure it out and we booked it. And then we roped you into our crazy caper, and there we all were.

[00:34:36]



ANNE: Listeners, if you can find friends with compulsions that you can benefit from [DAVE LAUGHS] I highly recommend making the most of that. [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH] So I don't know if I would have wanted to read *44 Scotland Street* or the whole *Scotland Street* series like you know, by the pool or by the beach in California or in Morocco, but I read it at home and on the airplane on my way to Scotland, and then I read it in Scotland. And then did I tell you when we checked into our airBNB in Edinburgh, having just finished the first book in the series, the second book in the series was waiting for us on the bookshelf of the airBNB?

MEL: It's magical.

DAVE: Yeah.

ANNE: What I love about this series specifically as someone who had never been to Scotland, but now really hopes to go back, was that Alexander McCall Smith is so precise with his descriptions. *Scotland Street* is a real street in the New Town, *44 Scotland Street* is not a real address, which I think is brilliant if that's the way you're going to play it 'cause somebody has to live in that house and you wouldn't want to curse somebody [MEL LAUGHS] Just to be able to ... If you wanted to just navigated turn by turn the neighborhoods he's describing in the city is so fun for a certain kind of strange minded reader like myself, who will read about a location in a book and go, is this real and can I see it? On Google or preferably with my real eyes, and I just love that about this series.

DAVE: Strong agree. I love a book that you can read and then track in your browser or go there and see the whole thing. It comes alive in a really real way.

ANNE: So that was *44 Scotland Street* by Alexander McCall Smith and he keeps cranking out those books like I know the *Peppermint Tea Chronicles* is the latest installment, and that just came out just before Christmas.

MEL: He is the definition of prolific that guy.

ANNE: He has written so many books. It's really incredible. You know, I saw him in Louisville. He came here when his Emma modern retelling came out. He spoke in a kilt. He didn't even have to open his mouth. He could have just stood there in his kilt, holding his book [DAVE LAUGHS] and we all would have sat in a crowd and gone, aww. The whole time. That was not my favorite book, but that was one of my favorite author events.

Now for a book I loved that does not have a strong sense of place. I just want to highlight how you can love a book, but atmosphere may not be the reason why. [MEL LAUGHS] Even if one of the reasons you pick it up is because of where it's set or you think the setting sounds really interesting, that doesn't mean that the setting is going to be significant to the story. So this is a 2015 mystery called *The Unquiet Dead*. It's the first in what is now, I think, there's four books in the series at this point, but it's definitely a continuing series. The author is Ausma

Zehanat Khan. This is a mystery series that has so many elements I love. It's got a high functioning partnership between two detectives who really need each other, but not at all alike. The old pro working with the newbie here. This happens to be a male/female pairing. You've got interesting procedural cases. I love a good procedural. Mel, you were saying that you like to live vicariously experience adventure. I'm a good girl who hasn't had a parking ticket since like 1998 [MEL LAUGHS] but I love to read about solving horrible crimes.

[00:37:35]

MEL: You know what I love about procedurals is that none of the detectives feel like they have to be nice to each other.

ANNE: Oh.

MEL: Like they just say what's on their mind. It seems like it would be so refreshing.

ANNE: So it's like you get to experience another way of living basically. Yeah, from one really nice girl to another. [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH] I live in Kentucky, so maybe someone who's more familiar with the setting for this novel would pick up on more details, but the series is set in Canada, Toronto. And it's specifically set in the Muslim community, and I know that this is going to sound like a stretch, but for that reason, I kept thinking about *Aisha At Last*, the *Pride & Prejudice* retelling set in the suburban Toronto Muslim community that came out earlier this year. And I really enjoyed that book. The parallels might end right there. [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH]

But aside from the occasionally Tim Hortons reference, and they go to a bar once and grab some drinks and dinner and, you know, bump into someone from their past that fires everybody up, when I finished the book, I couldn't remember what Canadian city it was set in. I felt like while the particulars of the community were extremely important and even the neighborhood where one of the crimes takes place, that neighborhood, is extremely important, I would never use the world's atmosphere to describe this book. The setting was interesting, but the setting was not the story and definitely, you would never say the setting is almost a character.

MEL: I had that experience with a book I really loved which I know a lot of people who've been on your show love which is *Beartown* because I feel like that story is set in Sweden, but could have been set equally easily in Texas in the football community or in another perhaps like Canadian town where hockey is really big, and I felt like that story had amazing characters and a lot of rich detail, but was not firmly anchored in Sweden as wonderful as it is.

ANNE: Definitely a small town story. But could have been about football in Texas, mm-hmm.

MEL: Which makes it a great book and not a book for strong sense of place. [LAUGHS]

[00:39:40]

ANNE: Right, right, because they are not by any means mutually exclusive.

MEL: No.

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ANNE: So what I gave you was *The Orphan of Salt Winds* by Elizabeth Brooks, the book set on the gothic, evocative marsh; *Sea Wife* by Amity Gaige, which is about a couple sailing the open sea on their yacht with their two small children; *Gold* by Chris Cleave set in the world of Olympic velodrome racing; *The Unquiet Dead* by Ausma Zehanat Khan and *44 Scotland Street* by Alexander McCall Smith set in Edinburgh's New Town. So it's your turn, Mel and Dave, what should I read next?

[00:43:07]

MEL: Okay. I'm going to try to recommend a manor house novel that you haven't read, which I think is going to be very challenging.

ANNE: I really don't think so.

MEL: This is a book that is not going to be for everyone. And I'm not even sure, Anne, if you will like it. But I thought it was really, really well done and ticks the box of manor house novel you perhaps have not read. We'll see. It's called *The Governesses* by Ann Serre.

[00:43:35]

ANNE: I don't know this one.

MEL: Oh, yes. [ANNE AND DAVE LAUGH] It came out in 2019 and it was nominated for best book in translation award.

ANNE: Ooh, I like a good book in translation.

MEL: I really do too because when you get the beautiful translation, it really transports you to that place which is magical. So it's a small book. It was ... Did I say it was originally written in French?

ANNE: No, but I'm interested to hear that.

MEL: It is a sort of fairytale. It's got that tone to it, and it's the story of these three sort of mysterious sisters who are governesses in an isolated mansion behind a golden gate. They're watching over a bunch of children. We don't really know how they came to be there or why and the parents mysteriously are not there. So the story is just kinda unfolding as we travel through the days with these three mysterious, kinda sensuous women, and kinda crazy things happen because it is very gothic fairytale. And it's short. So I can't really tell you more than that without giving anything away [ANNE LAUGHS] but selling points: Loaded with atmosphere. And even though it has gothic elements, it's really different than other gothic novels because it's not dark. It's infused with light. When I read it, I felt like everything was golden and pastel colors and glowing, and that's kinda in contrast with these sorta sinister feelings that you get when you're reading it.

ANNE: I'm so curious. And I love a good book in translation. That's also a reading challenge category for the Modern Mrs Darcy reading challenge this year. Especially American readers, we don't read a lot in translation, and it really helps people try something new.

MEL: Couple words of warning, I guess. For readers who are sensitive to kinda sexy content, there is a little bit of sexiness. It's not super explicit, but it is very sensual. There's not a lot, but there is some. So if you know you're sensitive to that, this might not be for you, but you can also just avert your eyes from those couple of paragraphs.

ANNE: Okay. Thank you for the heads up.

MEL: I think in my journal I wrote it was a naughty fairytale. [ANNE AND DAVE LAUGH] So that's the level of sexuality going on.

ANNE: Not what I might have expected from a book called *The Governesses*. So warning appreciated.

[00:46:05]

MEL: They are not prim governess.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] That sounds great. All right. What else you got? I'm ready.

DAVE: Let's see. Book two. Have you read a lot of John McPhee?

ANNE: No, but I've loved what I have read by him.

DAVE: Okay. So John McPhee is just an extraordinary essayist. He has been on staff for the New Yorker since the late '60s. He's a professor at Princeton. Somebody said if there was a hall of fame for American nonfiction writers, he would be on the first ballot. He is just incredible and he has been writing for 40, 50 years now or so.

In 1969, he and his family went to a small tiny island off the coast of Scotland and they lived there for I think a year, and he wrote about that experience in a book called *The Crofter and The Laird*. It is hard to read this book without getting ocean smell in your nose [LAUGHS] and sand in your hair. It's an amazing book and he really does a great job of capturing the ins and outs of what it's like to live just on a remote island with limited resources with the same people every day, and the sorta complex relationships that they have and develop overtime. And the sorta relationship of men and women and children and how all of that relates to the crofter the name of the person who is the farmer and the laird is the person who owns the land. And so there's a complex relationship between those two figures. It's been changing over the last few decades, but it's a fantastic book and it's well told. Again, it's short. I think it's maybe 140 pages or so. Kinda want you to read it because our shared experience in Scotland, and I highly recommend it. It's a great book.

ANNE: Dave, how did I not know about this? [DAVE LAUGHS] Ah. I love him. I read *Draft No. 4* like three times-

DAVE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ANNE: I totally need to read this.

MEL: I can piggyback on that. This is not our third book. This is a 2 1/2.

ANNE: You see why this is hard, right?

DAVE: Yeah.

MEL: [LAUGHS] It is hard. Dave and I often find that we have chosen books on the same subject, but he's selected a nonfiction and I've selected novel, and then we start talking about them and realize we're reading books about the same thing [LAUGHS] which is really fun. I read *The Blackhouse*. Do you know this?

[00:48:30]

ANNE: Okay, I only know this because you told me about this when we were walking and I think the most extreme wind that I've ever been [DAVE LAUGHS] a victim of. I don't know that my hair recovered yet. [DAVE AND MEL LAUGH]

MEL: The pictures, your skin is blowing them back off our skulls.

DAVE: Nobody seen Tillie since we went on that walk. [ANNE AND MEL LAUGH]

ANNE: So I think, I think you were in the middle of this.

MEL: Yes. So *The Black House* is the first book in the Lewis trilogy by Peter May. All of the books are set on the isle of Lewis, which is a tiny island off the north west coast of Scotland in the outer hebrides. So basically the island of Lewis is the last piece of land near Europe until you get to Iceland. So it's just open ocean bashing this little pile of rocky shore off the coast of Scotland.

This novel also really captures that just the mythos of living in this isolated place, in this tiny town where everyone knows everyone and knows everyone's business and has all these deep relationships which are fraught and also in a way really comforting because that's what they've known their whole lives. It's really, really dark police procedural and I think I have to trigger warnings on all of my books. [MEL AND DAVE LAUGH] And the crime is pretty violent, but the lead detective character is so compelling that I tore through all three of them.

ANNE: Okay. I'm going to have to read that when it's still cold outside.

MEL: I'm really torn, Anne. Last book. I'm going to ask you, do you want a book about the sea or do you want a book that is loaded with atmosphere and maybe introduces you to a world that you are not familiar with?

ANNE: Oh, yes. [DAVE LAUGHS] Yes, number two.

MEL: Okay. *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber.

ANNE: I don't know it.

MEL: [GASPS] Yay! Oh, that's such good news.

ANNE: You're four for four here on books I haven't read.

[00:50:33]

MEL: *Crescent* is set in a Middle Eastern restaurant in Los Angeles and the neighborhood in real life and in the book is known as Tehrangeles because it has such a large population of Middle Eastern people, and it is right on the border of UCLA. So in the book, a lot of the clientele of this restaurant are foreign exchange students and professors who come there to meet with each other and read the newspapers that are imported from their homelands but of course they're reading them a couple days late, so the news is a couple days old. They're looking for a sense of community and a place to feel at home because they are so very far away from their real homes.

The cafe is called Nadia's Cafe. The chef who works there is an Iraqi-American woman, so she is both part of this community and separate from the community. She has milky white skin and green eyes and blonde hair, but she's also Iraqi. So she is kinda straddling two worlds and this is a love story about her relationship with an Iraqi professor who is in exile.

So, we learn all kinds of things about how the restaurant works, and the role that food plays in all of these peoples' lives. What it's like for him to be so far away from home and feel safe in the United States but still be worrying about what's happening in his home country. It's set in the '90s when the wars were going on, so there's a lot of really fascinating political stuff. There's a thread of Middle Eastern folklore running through it and then there's this really beautiful powerful love story both between the two main characters, this romantic love story, but also the love of this found family that's all centered around the cafe.

ANNE: I love it. I'm not the one who spent two and a half years on *Strong Sense of Place* but if you want to put out a list about restaurants in the food world, I would gobble that right up.  
[DAVE LAUGHS] How's that for a bad pun?

MEL: [LAUGHS] I love that pun. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's so funny that you say that, Anne. This was not planned, listeners. [DAVE LAUGHS] Our second episode is *Strong Sense of Restaurants* and we are going deep behind the scenes in restaurants.

ANNE: Great minds. Okay, so we have *The Governesses* by Anne Serre, *The Crofter and The Laird* by John McPhee, *The Black House* by Peter May, and *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber. Okay, I'm going to stick with John McPhee, *The Crofter and The Laird* to get some momentum going.

DAVE: I win! [LAUGHS]

ANNE: And then I want to launch into *Crescent*. [ANNE AND DAVE LAUGH] Mel and Dave, it has been a delight to have you back. Thank you so much for talking books with me today.

MEL: Thank you so much for having us on and for letting us recommend books to you.

DAVE: It was such a pleasure, Anne. I'm so glad to talk to you.



[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

[00:53:23]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Mel and Dave, and I'd love to hear what YOU think they should read next at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/219](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/219) to leave your recommendations and comments, and you can also pursue the full list of titles we talked about today.

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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.