



**WSIRN Episode 265: 10 questions to ask yourself about your reading life**  
*Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Laura Tremaine*

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

[00:00:04]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 265.

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, you sent in some fabulous questions for our upcoming Ask Anne Anything episode. I had so much fun recording my answers—you'll hear those next week—but I was surprised by a few questions that I forget you don't all know the answers to.

We do a lot around here, and if you don't know that, I'm not surprised! So here at the beginning of the year, I'm highlighting where you can find me online. We'll include links to all these places in today's show notes; those are at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265)

If you listen to the end of each episode you've heard me talk about our newsletter. That's our weekly Tuesday email you'll get with links to three things I love, one I don't, and what I'm reading lately, plus announcements our subscribers hear first—like our request for Ask me anything questions.

You also hear me say you should be following us on social media. Both the show and I are on twitter, facebook and instagram. If you want to follow us in just one place I recommend instagram; we're there [@whatshouldireadnext](https://www.instagram.com/whatshouldireadnext).

I've been podcasting for nearly five years, but I'm about to celebrate the 10th anniversary of my blog Modern Mrs Darcy. There is so much there after all that time. That's where you'll find me writing book lists, essays, and musings on life and, of course, the reading life. Go to [modernmrsdarcy.com](http://modernmrsdarcy.com).

I also have two bookish communities. For bonus episodes, live streams, fun podcast-specific printables, and to get closer to the creative process, become a supporter of the show by signing up for our What Should I Read Next patreon community. Find out more and sign up at [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](http://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext).

For even more bookish community with an educational component, there's the Modern Mrs Darcy Book Club. Join us in book club for author chats, book discussions, classes on the reading life and other fun live online events. Visit [members.modernmrsdarcy.com](http://members.modernmrsdarcy.com) to get started.

Finally, we have a brand new Youtube channel so please head there and subscribe.

Again find links to stay in the know and join our communities in the show notes: [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265).

Thank you for subscribing, following, and supporting our show. Another great way to send us some love is by writing a review in Apple Podcasts. These reviews really make our day, like this one from Justus7777.

He says: "Perfect! I discovered Anne Bogel and this podcast about 2.5 years ago and it's revolutionized my reading life. I needed help finding books I thought were worth reading that had been published in the last 50 years or so. Having been an English major, I'm familiar with the classics and wasn't sure what contemporary writing was good. Thanks to Anne, my TBR list is always toppling. Anne is also excellent at interviewing her guests to get to the heart of their reading lives. Each episode is a gem. Even when I don't share the same reading tastes as her guests, it's still a joy to listen to."

Thank you, JustUS7777. And thank you all for your kind words, you who've left reviews, and please keep them coming. Reviews are truly podcasters love language because it helps other readers find the show and we love it when we get to keep making great podcasts every week. We can't wait to share all that we have in store here at What Should I Read Next HQ for 2021. Happy reading, friends!

Now, Readers, we're kicking off the new year with a special episode to help you set the right tone for your reading life in 2021. My friend Laura Tremaine is joining me to guide us in some readerly introspection. Something that we both really love. Laura hosts the Ten Things to Tell You podcast, where she shares guided questions and prompts to help listeners reflect on different aspects of their lives. She's also the author of the book *Share Your Stuff. I'll Go first*, which comes out on February 2. As you'll hear I just loved it and was delighted to endorse it. Laura brings her expert skills as a conversation-starter to our literary therapy session today.

Here at What Should I Read Next, we love thinking about books almost as much as we love reading them, so today we're sharing 10 questions to ask yourself about your reading life. These questions are meant to help you read with purpose and create a reading life that YOU love.

Of course, we can't help but share our own answers and offer advice along the way. Whether you're too easily distracted by shiny new bestsellers, or simply in need of a new reading routine, I hope you enjoy this intentional time to reflect on and recharge your reading life.

Let's get to it.

ANNE: Laura Tremaine, welcome to the show.

[00:04:44]

LAURA: I am so happy to be back chatting with you, Anne. Thank you so much for having me.

ANNE: Oh, it is my pleasure. Thank you for being our first guest of the year for 2021.

LAURA: I am so glad that it is 2021. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Laura, I just thought that you would be such a fun guest to have back on because we talked again as long time listeners may remember. If you're not a long time listener, you can go download that episode right now. But you were on almost four years ago 'cause this show is about to be five next week. I cannot believe it. But you were on in episode 68 in February 2017.

LAURA: I was doing a different podcast then. I was doing a blog then, which I don't do so much now. Like it feels like a long, long time ago because it was.

[00:05:31]

ANNE: As you may have guessed from listening to What Should I Read Next readers, I love to think about what I want more in my reading life and what I want to be different in my reading life and what kind of tone I want to set for it. And as I thought about all these things, I thought you would be such a fun person to have on because I know that you're very structured in your approach; I know you're very thoughtful and reflective; and I know that you like to ask lots of questions about different aspects of your life and I thought, well you know what, what if we could frame up some questions for readers to ask themselves about their reading lives? So thanks for being game. I'm excited to talk about it today.

LAURA: This is exactly my jam. I love any kind of introspection, but especially reading introspection. I feel like my own reading life went a little bit off the rails in 2020 just because the world looked so different. My routines looked so different. I'm definitely at the beginning of this year like trying to get back to where I want to be and being a little more thoughtful and intentional about what I'm reading instead of just reaching for comfort or fluffy or shiny new bestsellers only because I'm distracted by bookstagram. You know, I am trying to like get back in a place of my reading life that's a little more even. A little more consistent I should say. So this was great for me to write these prompts that we can sorta take to do a reset on reading.

ANNE: I think that sound you're hearing is thousands of readers just nodding like oh my gosh, let's restart this for the New Year. It's fine to want comfort and escape from your reading life. I mean you can want any number of things for your reading life, but the point is that it's what you want and just knowing if you are reading to connect. If you're reading for knowledge. If you really need to be refreshed and replenished, or if you do want to escape and comfort yourself in a good book. All of those are totally valid, and that's something that we're exploring on Modern Mrs Darcy in book club this season. We want you to do it on purpose instead of just accidentally stumbling into somebody else's reading life, or unconsciously adopting other people's goals and intentions 'cause that's not gonna work for you, and it's not gonna make you happy, and we really want your reading life to make you happy.

LAURA: Yes, exactly. All of that.

ANNE: Okay, so with that in mind, I thought it would be so fun to give listeners ten prompts to ask themselves just help them think about their reading life as a whole because so many readers pick up the next book often because they saw it on bookstagram, often because they saw it being talked about or being pushed by publishers or by booksellers and they don't really stop to ask themselves what am I doing here? You know it's so easy to move from one book to the next especially when

they do look so enticing, without really slowing down to say what am I even doing, and what do I want to be doing?

And listeners, if you're wondering, why ten questions? Why today? It's because Laura has a podcast. And it's called Ten Things To Tell You, and also I so enjoyed reading your book in advance — thanks for letting me do so; readers, I got to blurb it — but it's called *Share Your Stuff. I'll Go First*. Subtitle is Ten Questions to Take Your Friendship to the Next Level, so that's the structure of the book, but in the book, you have all these little lists of ten questions. I think my favorite was ten questions to ask yourself at the end of anything, but there are many lists throughout the book and so I asked you to make one more. And it's going to be ten questions to ask yourself about your reading life. How did you come up with these?

[00:08:56]

LAURA: I do this on my show, my podcast, Ten Things To Tell You, all the time and so maybe I've just gotten into the habit of, like, looking deeper and trying to figure out what I actually want to know. Like these lists that I make, this list today, it's not totally arbitrary. What I'm trying to do is get to a better place in my reading life, to be happier; to have less missteps, you know. [LAUGHS] When I sorta think of a goal like that, I can just pound out these questions and I love to put these prompts on the show, put all these prompts in my book about life and friendship and reading and all kinds of things. It's like my gift, I think, is to ask more and more questions you know to get to some kind of truth or to get to some kind of result even.

ANNE: Do you ever have a hard time narrowing down your list from say like 14 to ten? Or coming up with that one last one?

LAURA: Usually I have to narrow more than I do have to struggle to come up with another one, and sometimes it's just because when I sit down to make these lists, I just brainstorm out, and I'm just like just write everything that comes to mind. And then when I try to put it into a cohesive structure either to present, you know, here or on the blog or on the podcast, I realize like oh no, that one was dumb. So I kinda strike one out. [ANNE LAUGHS] Which is pretty normal, you know, it's just to have like a brain dump and be like well that one doesn't even make sense.

ANNE: Well I found these really fun to think about, even though I have to say I imagine because of what we do, we probably think about our reading lives, not just what we're going to read next, but about our reading life as a whole all the time, and yet I do love that reflection and introspection like you said and so I'd like to invite our readers to join us today, and I want you to know if you're driving or folding laundry or whatever, these questions will be in the show notes at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com). You can go

them anytime and just review them. And as you're listening, if you could just see what your gut reaction is to these questions, but at the same time that's not necessarily the right answer.

We also invite you to load them up on the show notes and just sit and ponder them and maybe journal about them, maybe pop them into your reading journal so you can see them as you're deciding what to read next, and after that, and after that and I hope they benefit you. And we'd love to hear from you what conclusions these questions lead you to. Okay, Laura, are you ready to jump in?

[00:11:10]

LAURA: I'm ready. I have all ten. Okay, question number one is what books have made the most impact on your reading life in the last year, or five years or twenty years, depending on how you're looking at it. But for me I have realized that I have often gotten a little off of my normal path because I fall down the rabbit hole of bookstagram or someone just really raves about a book and I don't take into account that that person and I don't usually align in our book tastes. But then I kinda, you know, I don't wanna say waste time but I end up reading a book that just probably isn't for me.

So when I'm needing a reset, I think about the books that I have loved over the past few years and see if I can get more in that genre, whether it's like memoir or literary fiction or even just thriller or something that really blew my mind in whatever way. If I can really intentional about remembering those books and those authors or those genres or topics, maybe I can find a read alike and that will sorta get me back to remembering like who I am and what I love about reading instead of just like trying to read what everyone else says is amazing. That's the first question. What books have made the most impact on your reading life in the last year, or five years, or twenty years?

ANNE: That is such a good question, and also I completely relate to the experience of reading a book because someone else loved it. Something that flusters me sometimes is that we'll see reviews or we'll get emails that say I read this book because you recommended it on your show and I didn't like it. [LAUGHS] And I wanna be like, well, who was I talking to? What was their taste like? Like the whole premise of this show is let's find books that based on what you've loved before and based on what has not worked for you, let's find those patterns and see what you may enjoy reading more of next.

So like [LAUGHS] I appreciate you taking a chance on a book that didn't end up working for you, but I also just want to be really careful, and I'm so maybe over cautious as I'm giving recommendations you can probably hear me equivocate more than I ought to after five years of literary podcasting, to say like not every book is for every reader, so

listen up. And the better that you can articulate what you does work for you and why you read, and why the books you've read had that impact on your reading life, the better you can choose and again, this is the part where I'm going to equivocate, Laura, and say there are plenty of reasons to read books you don't like, but you should do it for a purpose. You want to have the experience. You're reading for empathy. You want to get through that classic 'cause you want to see what the fuss is about, but at the same time if you don't understand why a book is working for you or why it's not, we've got ten questions for you today to ask yourself.

So that's a great question and I also really love that it led you to ask why, why did those books make such a big impact on you? What did they mean to you? That gives you a clue to what you could be looking more of in the future just like you said. Okay, what's question two?

[00:14:17]

LAURA: Number two are you should-ing yourself to death? I realized when I said "should-ing" out loud that it sounds like a bad word. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Well, I have to tell you in my essay collection, *I'd Rather Be Reading*, oh, I wish I could tell you the name of the essay. It's short. Just go read them all, friends. There's a story about how in the reading life, like the bad s-word is "should" so I totally get this question, tell me more.

LAURA: I find myself doing this as well and I think it's a really common affliction that we decide that we should read this book because it's quote-unquote "important," or we should read this book because everyone loves it and is going to be talking about it. Maybe we want to be a part of that conversation even though we can kinda see from that outset that this book may not be for us. But we really just need to be honest about what we truly like and want to read, and this is kinda a change for me.

I used to really think that we should read certain books. Classics, or book award winners, or anything that feeds our brain in a different way, challenges us, etc. But you know, the older I get, the less I feel a "should" around a lot of things. Particularly reading. People can be reading for all kinds of reasons. You can be reading to be entertained. You can read to educate yourself. You know, for the idea of educating yourselves, there might be books you should read, but if you're should-ing yourself to death, like you're really only reading things that you feel obligated to read, it's going to zap the joy out of something that you know readers love, like a big part of our life. It's gonna rob us of what's fun about reading if we're just reading all these things that we're supposed to read to be good citizens of the reader community, you know what I mean?

[00:16:12]

ANNE: Yeah. And something I hear a lot from readers is that they feel like they should enjoy something or they should be able to see the merit in something like Jacey, one of our very first guests, said I feel like I should read the books and appreciate the books that the smart people are reading, but whenever people talk about what they should do, I just feel like that's a big flashing warning sign that you are taking other people's expectations and making them your own and you really ... You don't have to do that, friends. I'm calling everybody friends today. It's like a therapy session or something.

LAURA: Well you can just consider me your reading therapist. Just kidding. Please don't do that. I don't ...

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Bibliotherapy to start the year. It sounds good to me.

LAURA: Okay, number three. Are you a planner or not? And again just be honest with yourself about this. Some of us are naturally bent towards having a reading plan and some of us just you know, pick what we're in the mood for, pick what comes across our Kindle. you know that kinda thing. And as you're asking yourself are you a planner or not, maybe you want to be or maybe you just want to abandon a plan because again it's zapping your joy from it.

For me I am not a big reading planner, and so when I have people who show up in my DMs or message me that they have a big plan for their spring reading, their summer reading, their holiday reading, I'm like a little bit baffled by that because that is not how I read. But I actually want to be a little bit more of a planner because what I'm finding is the last couple of years, I've gotten to the end of the year and I didn't really read the books that I actually wanted to because I got distracted or moody, so I think I want to implement a loose plan. Not a rigid reading planner, but a loose plan for getting to some of the books that I really been meaning to or that I really want to and try to stick to that. Like following a reading challenge is a great way to do that or just looking at your calendars as a whole or looking at the seasons or the holidays or whatever makes sense for you, if you like your planning situation or if you don't and can maybe use a little bit of structure in your reading life.

ANNE: And I just wanted to say that so many people when they ask themselves this and also probably other questions on this list, they answer aspirationally. They answer the way that they wish they were or that they want their personality to be but that doesn't make it so. So I would just encourage you to be honest about yourself, like there aren't good or bad answers to most of these questions, but getting the real answer is what will actually help you.

[00:18:52]

LAURA: That's right, and also there's always room to like try being a reading planner and then get to, you know, March or May and be like you know what, I'm not a planner. I'm just gonna read what I want to, and sorta release yourself of that obligation. But since we're at the beginning of the year, for me and I'm trying to sorta make up for some weird shaky reading ground in 2020, I just have some loose goals of I want to have read these three or four things by my birthday, which is in June. So that's like boundaries that I don't get to December and think, well I just never read those things I wanted to read and now here we are.

ANNE: What I've observed from talking to so many readers over the years is that the combination of structure with flexibility and some gentleness does wonders for so many people's reading lives, which is what you're describing. Four books by June, there's a structure there, but because of how much you read, there's so many options within it.

LAURA: Okay, number four: when is the best time for you to read? So one thing that I realized that comes up with listeners to my show or people who follow me on Instagram where I share a lot about what I'm reading, people are maybe not reading at the best time for them, and then they're getting all caught up in their feeling or frustrations around their reading life, and some of the things that come up a lot is reading at night. I'm surrounded by a lot of moms and by the time they get to the end of the day, especially if they have younger kids, they cannot keep their eyes open trying to read a book at night before bed. Like they're just falling asleep by page two, you know what I mean.

Also people put pressures on themselves, oh, they want to read a certain amount of books while they're on their vacation, or they want to read, you know, a certain amount of books over the weekend, you know, that kinda thing, but maybe if your vacation is really active, that's just not how that's going to shake out. And so then they come home having read nothing and mad at themselves about it.

So a lot of questions seem to be about being honest with ourselves about our reading lives instead of you know trying to emulate what we see on the Internet or what our reading bestie is doing, and I think if we can just relieve some of the pressure of like you know what I can't read at night. I want to be a person who reads myself to sleep but that just isn't working for me. I'm going to have to set aside some time in the afternoon or you know read 30 minutes before my work day starts, however that works for you. Just being honest about, like, I have to figure out the best time for me to read. My family vacations just don't look like that.

[00:21:35]

ANNE: First of all I'm noticing how much this goes into should 'cause we see other people reading before bed. I'm on the record as this is where I do the bulk of my reading. I do typically an hour before bed every night, but when I talked to Jenica on What Should I Read Next last month, she said I want to do this. I know you do it. I know it's really important to you but I fall asleep too fast, and like the first question I asked her was are we sure this is what you want right now? Are we sure this is what you need right now? Let's - let's just explore that question before we move on instead of, you know. just accepting the premise that it works for them, so it should work for me.

LAURA: Exactly. And number five is tied to this actually: how is the best way for you to read? Again we have these preconceived notions I think about when we should read, how we should read. There are so many people who are purists about only reading physical copies and they just cannot make the emotional leap to reading on an ereader, or people who have hang ups about audiobooks and like don't consider that to be reading in the same way. And I think we just have to get over all that and again be honest about how is the best way for you to read?

If you have little children under your feet and you fall asleep at night trying to read a physical book, girlfriend, you need to take up audiobooks. Or something like that. You know, just be real about it. There are so many amazing ways to read. We are not bound by one way of reading, and so just test it out. See if it works for you. Like when people say that they read in line for ten minutes at the grocery store on their phone like on their Kindle app or whatever, I like don't actually understand that. I've tried to do that. [ANNE LAUGHS] But my brain does not do that. I'm like what? What? Like I can't ... My brain cannot get into a novel and have to like check out.

ANNE: I do that, Laura.

LAURA: [LAUGHS] I know you do, Anne.

ANNE: I totally do that.

LAURA: How do you do that? I'm like and here are my eggs, yes, I want bags. I don't know. I just like cannot make my brain do that switcheroo. So that's not the best time for me to read, like also the best way for me to read, and I used to sorta be embarrassed by this. I prefer reading on my Kindle paper white to a physical book, and I feel like as a long time, lifelong reader that like shouldn't be my truth, but it's my truth. I prefer the paper white.

[00:23:59]

ANNE: You gotta be honest with yourself. If it works for you. Okay, I feel like this is a good time to ask a question that's been lingering unanswered on my list. We have one Kindle for our family of six. I'm the one who uses it the most, especially in 2020, we borrowed so many ebooks from the library just because of the logistics of getting books curbside delivery, everything's quarantined for a week. It just takes forever, which I'm glad they're there, but sometimes you wanna read the next book in a series like today. So we just have one Kindle, which I can read on the app on my phone, but I really prefer not to be because I really like that the Kindle sends the message to your brain and to the other people in your house that you're reading. You're not just goofing off on your phone. But I accidentally bought a Kindle Kindle, and not a Kindle paper white on Prime day when they were cheap, and I just can't bring myself to open it because I'm not sure I really want it. I haven't had an original Kindle in like 20 years. Do I wanna open it or should I just send it back?

LAURA: Well I would send it back because I just love the paper white and I love that I'm only reading on it and I can't do anything else. Like that's a huge thing for me with a phone, you know, I get a notification. I ... The screen is shiny. I feel like my brain is doing a different thing, which ... And the regular Kindle has that same type of screen as like a tablet or a phone, right? So that wouldn't work for me.

ANNE: I think I should send it back, but that's just such a pain. It's been keeping me from doing it.

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*Readers, as we kick off a new year, I'm starting to tackle small but satisfying home projects, like re-organizing my spice drawer, culling my bookshelves, and washing my shoes. I know that last one might sound weird, but my favorite pairs of Rothy's need a good cleaning. Thanks to their washable knit fabric, I can toss them in the washing machine and they'll come out looking like new.*

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*great. My navy blue loafers have trekked across town, splashed in puddles, and side-stepped messes on the sidewalk. They're still adorable, and they still feel great.*

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ANNE: Okay, Laura, I'm totally intrigued by the next question. Let's hear it.

[00:26:28]

LAURA: Number six, and listen this might just be for personalities like mine. I'm an enneagram-1, but I'm really going to throw it out to everyone because I think it's something to think about. Number six is: what are your personal rules around reading? I think we should maybe say these out loud or write these down instead of them being just like vague, in your mind. I think you should kinda come to a conclusion and make that rule. So around this I'm saying types of questions like do you give up on a book or no? This is a big one. Some people feel like once you started a book you have to finish it. If you allow yourself the rule of I'm going to get to a 100 pages or not even, I'm going to get to 75 pages and if I'm not into this book, I'm going to abandon it and it's not a moral reflection of me. [LAUGHS] You know that's a personal rule. You're going to make that rule.

Are there certain genres or authors that you will not read? Listen, everyone's going to have an idea about why that might be. Sometimes it's just a preference. Sometimes it is an actual objection to that genre or author for some reason, but just define it. Like just make it the decision. I'm going to give up on this 'cause it's not working for me and I've tried it and I don't like it or I object to it, that's my personal rule. I'm not going to read it.

Or purchasing versus library decisions. So I'm always going to purchase from this author or I'm always going to read this genre or best sellers or this kinda thing from the library instead of spending money on it and not being sure if it's going to be something I'm going to want to keep, but instead of just sorta making that maybe haphazard decision every time, wouldn't it be helpful to have some rules around it? Like I'm always going to try the library first, and if that doesn't work, you know if it ticks the box of XYZ,

then maybe I'll purchase it, but whatever it is, you sorta have your rules and so then you're not taking up brain space in your reading life around oh, should I do this, should I buy this, should I give this author another try. you know, should I keep reading or not ... All of those decisions really can be draining and take up mental space that you don't need. Make a rule around it, stick to the rules or at least try the rules for six months or something like that, and see if it gives you a little bit of peace, a little bit of like space around your reading life instead of just trying to figure it all out a new with every book. [LAUGHS]

[00:29:04]

ANNE: Right, that's so true and to those who are perhaps bristling about rules around reading, you already do this with some things I'm certain of it, and you just haven't articulated them to yourselves but it's so helpful to do so. And also this is like a huge *Don't Overthink It* strategy. Not that it's original with me, but something I talked about in my book is that like yes, it does save you so much decision fatigue if you decide in advance. It's really frustrating for a reader to go through that limbo where they're like do I keep reading or not? How am I going to decide? This is the point at which I get emails that say Anne! How many pages should I give it? Or how can I not finish 'cause I'm always a finisher and I'll try to talk you out of being a finisher, I just want you to know how that goes.

But a rule that I've shared before is unique to me, but because I absolutely abandon books at the moment I think I'm going to regret the time I spent reading this. I'm happy to read the end of a book I don't like. That's fine. You can have amazing discussion about books you don't like, but a book that I will regret spending time on because it was a specific kind of bad or because it was just forgettable and it doesn't serve a purpose in all the many books I've read that does, then I want to put it down as soon as possible. A reading rule that I made for myself years ago after so much hemming and hawing about should I buy it, should I not, if I'm number 47 on the library list ... If I need a book for work, I just buy it from preferably my local indie. They can get almost anything like period, the end. End of decision because of what I do. That's not just a personal reading decision, but like a professional decision as well, and Laura, it has saved me so much time and mental energy, I cannot even tell you. What are some of your personal rules around reading?

LAURA: Well I definitely will give up on a book I don't like. That is not something that I struggle with. I don't have like a hard and fast, you know, page number or percentage number on the Kindle that will make me ... Like there's not a finish line for that, but I absolutely have no problem giving up on a book so that's one of my personal rules. I have a few very popular authors that I won't read. I have tried to read them. I don't like them. I'm constantly frustrated by the experience, but a lot of people really love these

authors, and so this one is actually hard. The rules are not always easy to stick to. One of these authors in particular like puts out a book a year it feels like and so when her book is everywhere ...

[00:31:24]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] This is the point where everybody says, Anne, which author is she talking about?

LAURA: Well I'm not going to say because she's actually quite beloved, but I have to like really light knuckle resist buying her books because everybody loves them. They're everywhere for a month or whatever and I just given her a real long shot. She's not for me. I made a rule around this author. I'm not going to read her.

But my biggest personal rule which is a little outside of what we're talking about but it is so effective for me and I absolutely love it, so I'm putting it as a personal rule is that I read for 20 minutes at a time. I set the timer so it's not just like oh, I have 20-ish minutes. No, no. I like literally set the timer on my phone for 20 minutes and I read for that 20 minutes and that's all I do. When the timer goes off, maybe I continue reading if I have the time, but if not, like I'm done. I did my 20 minutes and for me this is as important as, you know, exercise or any other personal rule because I do 20 minutes in the morning. It's part of my morning routine. I read some nonfiction, something that will sorta set the tone for my day, and then if the day allows it, I do 20 minutes in the late afternoon before dinner time and then maybe 20 minutes in the evening time, so I'm getting like roughly an hour in every single day at least, and I'm doing it in this 20 minute, very structured sprints.

It's really effective to read that way and it makes me feel like this is a personal rule because I don't debate the time. I'm like should I do 15? Should I do 30? I don't debate should I quit before the timer goes off? No. Like 20 minutes, set the timer, read only. You cannot check Instagram in that time, and then it's done. People sorta laugh at this because it is kinda rigid but you can get through a lot of books this way. Ask me. I do. I get through a lot of books reading in 20 minute segments throughout the week.

ANNE: Is it going to embarrass you if I read to you from your own book?

LAURA: No, please read from my own book. I wanna hear it in your voice.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Well, it's not your words, but it's about you, so Jenna Fischer wrote the forward to *Share Your Stuff. I'll Go First* and you'll just have to pick it up if you wanna find out why because Jenna tells you right at the beginning. But I'm going to read from the forward about Laura and her 20 minute timer. "One time I marveled at her

ability to read so many books, remarking that I had finished maybe two novels since my kids had been born. I told her I tried book clubs to be accountable; audiobooks, never finished a single one; reading at night; reading in the morning; reading on vacation, but nothing worked. I still had piles of unfinished books I was deeply interested in reading. This question prompted Laura to explain in great detail how she organizes her morning routine and why. It's the "and why" part that's uniquely Laura. Lots of people are willing to tell you their routine, but Laura is willing to go deeper.

She told me that she starts each day by starting a timer and reading a book, making herself read for 20 minutes no interruptions allowed. In typical Laura fashion, the conversation didn't stop there. She went on to explain the guilt she felt about taking that space in the mornings, about the mental gymnastics she had to do to get herself to enjoy her time. Her honesty prompted me to admit that I also had a hard time taking space for things outside of work or childcare," and she goes on to say that the conversation stuck with her, and she started the timer. And now Jenna Fischer reads a lot of books because of you.

[00:34:48]

LAURA: Well, Jenna is a dear friend. She did me a wonderful, wonderful favor to write the forward to *Share Your Stuff* and yes, now she uses the 20 minute timer trick [ANNE LAUGHS] to read. I'm like an evangelist for this because it's free. You don't have to buy any equipment. You don't have to figure out the mindset around it. Just set the dang timer and read for 20 minutes. That's it. It's like a magic reading button.

ANNE: If you try one new thing for 2021 readers, this might be it. Although I will say right here if you haven't started your reading log yet, it's only the 5th. What are you waiting for? Let's do it. Okay, what's the next question, Laura?

LAURA: Number seven: Who are your reading people? So who do you want to talk to and listen to about books? We talked about this briefly already in terms of taking recommendations from, you know, someone that maybe doesn't align with your tastes. But I need to reiterate here because it is so, so, so important. Your reading people can be you know actual friends, your book club, or it can just be the people that you follow on the Internet recommending books to read and things like that. But really identifying who you want to talk about books or listen to about books matters because who you're getting a recommendation from can really like shape your entire reading life. If you are taking recommendations more than you are reading the blurbs and figuring out if it is for you or not, identifying those people really matters.

Also in terms of a book club, I've seen this go a few different ways. So sometimes people are in book clubs online or in person. It is like very fulfilling to them to talk about

books with these people, and then I've seen people who are perpetually frustrated in book clubs because they don't really like the vibe of the conversation or the types of books that group reads. If you can just be like you know what, these are not my reading people. This isn't the person I want to follow for recommendations. This isn't the way that I want to talk about books. It doesn't leave me fulfilled. It leaves me frustrated. Just be real about it, and then it'll save you some real like heartache and frustration.

I'm sensing a theme that we keep talking about being honest about your reading life. And maybe this is just a reflection of what I need to do. [LAUGHS] But it's coming out in this list because I really think that finding your reading people is super important. And I also want to say that this part is an important caveat to this, when I say that finding your reading people it doesn't mean people that always agree with you or who like to read the same exact things that you do and that you have the same opinion on those things that you're reading, no. The best book clubs that I have been in force me to read something I never would have picked up on my own or we very much disagree on the book, but the conversation is fulfilling to me in some way. I'm learning something. I'm stimulated. I'm reading outside of my comfort zone. All of those things. Those people are still my reading people even if we don't always agree. What I think we get into a weird problem with reading people is when we constantly disagree in a way that feels like unfun, or unhelpful, that type of thing. So just identifying your reading people is number seven.

[00:38:09]

ANNE: That's a great one.

LAURA: Number eight: Is there a genre or an author or a topic that you just need to quit? Now we already touched on this when we were talking about personal rules around reading. You know, I separated it out here because it comes up, you know, and there's lots of reasons you might want to quit and it doesn't always have to do with like [LAUGHS] you know, morality or something like that.

I realized after years and years and years of reading very scary books. I like dark books. I like scary books. But I sorta hit a time in my life where I was having some high anxiety. I was home a lot. My husband was making movies, so he was away a lot. I had to quit really scary books. It was actually unhealthy for me to truly be scared in my own home and in my own life. It wasn't like that fun, kinda scared it used to be. It had morphed and changed, and so I realized like, I need to quit this actually. This isn't good for me. Even though it's something I used to enjoy, I don't right now. And maybe I'll circle back to it but right now, I need to quit that.

Another thing that I see a lot is like in the self-help genre, self improvement genre, which I really love and recommend a lot of those type of books, but sometimes people can sometimes end up drowning in those type of books because they start to feel like they're not enough because they're reading all this personal development tips that they feel like they'll never attain a type of thing. Or you know, just it's not helping their relationships, it's not helping day to day life in the way that they think it should. They like read too much of it. It's making them feel worse instead of helping them be better. And so self help I feel like is a genre that can also be quit for a while or forever, you know, so. Some of these books that we like or maybe we liked one of them in the genre but you know, doesn't need to become a whole thing. We can just look at is there something we just need to quit full stop, doesn't need a ton of analysis. Done with it for now.

[00:40:15]

ANNE: That's a great question, and I especially like how you pointed out the timing. I mean sometimes we know that something doesn't have a place in our life or we feel like we've been burned and you know what that's the last time, I'm done, with an author or a genre, but sometimes I mean in the reading life and so much of life, it is all about the timing. And quitting for now is maybe something you need to do. I also love the way that this question isn't what is the genre or the author or the topic that you need to quit, but is there one? It's a good question and the answer might be no, and that is fine too.

LAURA: Okay. Number nine: What books have you been meaning to get to but never quite make it? This one is so personal to me because as I already said I have been getting to the end of the year and realized that there's a whole stack of books that I wanted to read and I didn't. So the second part of this question is can you make time for them this year? For me this list looks like some classics that I never actually read that I've been meaning to read or reread, you know, revisit something from high school lit class type of thing. I really want to get to some of these classics.

Backlist titles are a huge thing for me right now. So over the last few years I have read some authors that have become absolute favorites. I absolutely love their writing and fully connect to them. And instead of going back and reading some of their backlist titles that are all so celebrated or recommended you know, I don't. I just reach for the next new bestseller. Instead of staying with an author that is really affecting me.

So backlist titles to me always get pushed to the bottom of the list, and I don't want them to be. That's another thing I'm going to be intentional about in 2021 is reading older books from authors that I have recently discovered. A series might be something you've always been meaning to get to the series, but because there's a chunk of books in that series you never really like start it because you feel like it's going to take a couple

of months to get all the way through them or you know, it's a lot of books to add to your stack. But if it's something that you've really been meaning to get to or someone has really recommended to you, you know, put that on the list of what books have you been meaning to get to but you just never quite make it.

[00:42:28]

ANNE: Laura, I love how the question so easily could have gone to what books should you have read, but the reason why I like this question is because it's about what you want. When you have the opportunity to reflect and think about what you want for the long term, not necessarily in the next five minutes, what books have been there for a while? And how can you make that happen?

LAURA: Okay, final question is number ten: What does reading bring to your life? Now this seems like a gimme question a little bit especially for listeners of your show.

ANNE: No, I don't think so at all! Here, tell us more.

LAURA: Well for me in a lot of areas of my life, not just reading, I have tried to journal. I'm a big journaler. I have tried to articulate what this is bringing to me, what I'm getting out of this, what the big picture feeling of this is or the microeffectives. But when you can really define something, when you can really articulate what does reading bring to your life? I think that it clarifies all of these things we're talking about. That's why I put it last. Because when you can say that it will make you really clear on what your reading goals might be or what your reading rules might be or who you want to take a recommendation from. All of these things we have been talking about because if what we answer here in what reading brings to your life is entertainment, then that might really shape how you choose books. That might really let go of all the shoulds of reading the heavier titles or you know that kinda thing. If you say what reading brings to your life is you know brooding your worldview, well then that might make you start to prioritize books that are really going to educate you on a topic or on a slice of the world that you didn't know otherwise.

And it might be a combination of these things. Of course reading just doesn't bring one thing to our life, but I think if we can really define it and write down or say out loud what reading really does bring, then it can release some of the other noise that comes around to reading. If you're just looking to be entertained, you should go with books that, like, are actually fun for you to read. If it is bringing to your life connection because you have had a lot of loneliness lately, then you might look for books that make you feel connected. And so I really think when you can say this really clearly what reading brings to your life, it will sorta answer all these other questions in a different way. It's kinda a domino effect of like okay, this is how I want to think about this. This is how I want to

plan or not plan. This is what I don't want to read anymore. Everything that we just said culminates in this. What does reading bring to your life? And so I just want people to think about that. Be real about it. Be honest about it like we've said.

[00:45:23]

ANNE: The reason that I love this question and that we're asking it here is that I've heard from so many readers who say oh, I just feel bad. I see some people reading so purposefully, but all I want from my reading life is variety. Or I'll read anything I just want to be in a community of readers so we can ... So I can talk about it and feel connected but those are reasons and they aren't less valid, so I love that it stops and makes you ask what am I doing? What do I want? It does inform your picks, and it does inform the way you want to be reading.

And also I want to say that there are so many good and valid answers. There are a myriad of ways to have a satisfying reading life. When we say, like the intentional and doing it on purpose, we don't mean that you need, like, an action plan for your reading life or a bullet point checklist. We're not trying to like turn it into a spreadsheet. If you are not a spreadsheet person. We know some people get all kinds of warm fuzzies about their spreadsheets and that's great. We want you to think about what reading brings to your life so that you can enjoy that reading life more.

LAURA: That's right, and I think this question filters out all the shoulds we've been talking about.

ANNE: Well those are a great set of questions. Laura, thank you so much for sharing them and again, they will be in the show notes on our podcast site. That's [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com), so you can refer to them at any time. Well, Laura, with all those questions in mind, we would love to hear a little more about ... It seems funny to say about your particular reading life, how about the particular books in your reading life? Are you ready to go there?

LAURA: I'm ready to go there. I tried to give you books that really, like, encapsulated my general reading habits and tastes right now, but you know, it's so hard to narrow it down for your show, Anne.

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*Readers, one thing I'm not changing in the new year is my morning routine. My daily decaf coffee ritual works perfectly well as is, and why mess with a great thing? Our younger kids are sticking with their routine too: taking their new Ritual multivitamin with breakfast. We trust Ritual to make vitamins with the very best ingredients, which is why*

*we choose Essential for Kids. I love not having to think about adding them to the grocery list or ordering more, because we have an automatic subscription. And my kids love the citrus-berry flavor.*

*Ritual knows how difficult it can be to get your kids the nutrients they need. That's why they made Essential for Kids to help fill gaps in the diets of ages 4-12 without making a single compromise to quality or taste. Not only do they have a natural citrus-berry flavor, but they're also convenient by design. Each gummy features a 3-in-1 design that combines a daily multivitamin, vegan Omega-3 DHA, and a good source of fiber per serving.*

*As always, you can trust Ritual to be transparent about their ingredients so you can create a daily supplement routine with confidence.*

*When it comes to what goes into our kids' bodies, they've got being picky down to a science. That's why Ritual is offering my listeners 10% off during your first 3 months.*

*Visit [ritual.com/READNEXT](https://ritual.com/READNEXT) to start Ritual or add Essential for Kids today.*

\*\*\*

*Readers, over the holiday break, I took "work from home comfort" to a new level, spending a whole lot of entire days in workout clothes. But as we get back to our usual routines, I'm eager to get dressed again, and not just throw on a Zoom shirt to go with my runnings tights. A full outfit makes me feel put together and ready for the day. But I still want to be comfortable.*

*That's why I love Betabrand Dress Pant Yoga Pants, made of wrinkle-resistant stretch knit fabric. They look like stylish dress pants, but they're super comfortable - without any zippers or buttons that dig in. I love my straight leg classic dress pants in black, but if you prefer bootleg or skinny pants, Betabrand has several styles and colors to choose from. They launch new styles weekly; I have my eye on their new Yoga Denim collection made from unbelievably soft 4-way stretch fabric.*

*Right now, our listeners can get 30% off their first Betabrand order when you go to [Betabrand.com/\[readnext\]](https://Betabrand.com/[readnext]).*

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*“Discover what it’s like to be comfortable and confident all the time.” Go to [Betabrand.com/\[readnext\]](https://betabrand.com/readnext) for 30% off.*

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ANNE: Okay, Laura, you know how this works. You’re going to tell me three books you love, one book you don’t, and what you’ve been reading lately and we’ll talk about what you may enjoy reading next. Do you remember what you chose back in 2017?

[00:49:33]

LAURA: I almost guarantee there’s some Stephen King on there.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] You did indeed choose *IT*, a book that has been mentioned as a favorite several times in What Should I Read Next history. *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver, and a book that you chose today.

LAURA: Oh, no, I doubled up?

ANNE: I love that you did. I think it’s indicative of something, and you can tell me what. You also chose *The Sound of Gravel* by Ruth Wariner.

LAURA: Oh, gosh, I love that book so much and I recommend it all the time even though it is not for everyone. I still recommend that book all the time. I can’t believe I doubled up on it, but you know what [ANNE LAUGHS] memoirs are one of my favorite genres and this is a particularly dark memoir and also is religious extremism, and so all of those things, yeah, that’s right. That’s one of my favorite books of all time, *The Sound of Gravel*, so. It’s funny because those three books from the last episode were really reflective of what I was reading at the time except for *IT* which is one of my longtime childhood favorites. Stephen King is my absolute favorite author, favorite storyteller living, but I tend to like the darker books. I just do, even still, all these years later.

ANNE: That is okay, and I think it’s one of the reasons I enjoy talking books with you so much ‘cause I’m skittish about the darker stuff and yet I really enjoy the conversation and hearing about what it might be like to read more in that way ‘cause I don’t foresee myself ever finding out through personal experience. Maybe I’m wrong. We don’t know what’s coming down the pike, but I don’t foresee that happening. Laura, what did you choose for book two?

LAURA: I really loved the books *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai. It is just an amazing novel on its own, just the story, but also for me I love a novel where I can learn about, you know, a topic or a time period and in this book, *The Great Believers*, it was about the 1980s AIDS crisis. And this is something I thought I knew some general things

about but reading this novel version with real faces, real stories on this health crisis from a time when I was alive by the way, it made a huge impact on my life and also Rebecca Makkai is just a great writer. Is just a great novel all around, so that was *The Great Believers* and I put it on my list. It was the first one that I added to my list for this show actually 'cause I really want more people to read it.

[00:51:56]

ANNE: Well that's a good way to do it. And what do you choose for book three?

LAURA: So for book three I chose *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman, and this one was sorta a toss up. I loved this book. I thought this was beautiful but I chose it to share with you because it had a fantasy element and in my life I've gotten a little more into sorta fantasy elements in books that I didn't used to always be into that, but I'm just really enjoying that. It had a darkness to it but also it had a real beauty to it. I love his writing also.

This is an example of a book that I would love to read more books like this, but I would have to seek them out a little bit because this isn't the type of thing that's constantly coming through my personal bookstagram recommendations and so I put it on here because I want to be a little more intentional about reading more books like this one 'cause it actually had a big effect on me, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*.

ANNE: Now Laura, tell me about a book that was not right for you.

LAURA: Last summer I read on recommendation from several people, I read *Mrs. Everything* by Jennifer Weiner, and this book just isn't my type of book. It's sorta a vacation read. It's a little lighter than I would tend to go to, and actually that's why I reached for it is because I thought that's what I wanted. Not so much apparently. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Okay, so this one was not right for you because it was a little lighter.

LAURA: I just think I don't like traditional beach reads. I don't love when romance or marriage or certain family dynamics are the main plot point.

ANNE: Uh huh.

LAURA: I felt like I wanted to give this author and this type of book a try because daggum, it was the middle of 2020 and I just wanted to be sorta loosely entertained. But actually it ended up being frustrating for me and my type of tastes. I felt like yeah, this isn't ... This isn't what I need to reach for comfort actually.

[00:53:55]

ANNE: Okay, so if marriage and family dynamics are not great for key plot points and yet I know some of the books you've really enjoyed that I think would contradict that, so I'm trying to get a beat on it.

LAURA: I like dark family dynamics. I don't like fluffy, like I hate romance. [ANNE LAUGHS] *Mrs. Everything* is not a romance by the way but I just don't like romantic. Marriage plots are only my favorite if there's something really dark and complicated happening. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Okay, so, if it says feel good fiction, you know that you can keep moving.

LAURA: Exactly. Yes.

ANNE: Okay. Okay. 'Cause I haven't read *Mrs. Everything*. I've read some Jen Weiner, but I can work with that. What have you been reading lately, Laura?

LAURA: Lately I've read some really beautiful books. At the end of 2020 some of the best reading I've done in a while. I loved *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell and that is actually not my typical favorite. I don't really love slow or writing that can be called beautiful. That's not usually my sorta jam, but I thought *Hamnet* was absolutely gorgeous. I also loved *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. I picked up that book thinking it was going to be sorta chore, sorta homework. This was a should book, but a good should. I wanted to be educated in this way. Turns out that was an incredible, compelling read, so I loved that. I also really liked *Leave the World Behind*. I thought that was just dark and stormy enough but without making me jump out of my skin.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Except for the teeth.

LAURA: Except for the teeth.

ANNE: Yeah. Those are all wonderful books but I especially like that you chose *Hamnet*. I was so excited to see back when you shared it on your Instagram account how much you enjoyed it because I don't see that book has gotten the acclaim I really feel like it deserves this year, so I appreciated you shouting it out, sending readers that direction. Although I would say you said you don't like books with beautiful writing but as I'm flicking back through my mind, I could make based on [LAUGHS] I read *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* many years ago and *Hamnet* many months ago, but I would say that the writing style, there's a lot of similarities there, especially because Shakespeare's wife is a mystic in this book. I mean she's almost like [LAUGHS] she's on the spectrum of Disney heroine, like singing to the squirrels and all that. [LAURA

LAUGHS] There's some writing there. I have to tell you I was so bummed when I found out that Maggie O'Farrell's next book was going to be about Shakespeare because I did not care. But I love her so much that I picked it up anyway and by about page four I was like yep, keep telling me the story. I wanna know it all. I loved it so much.

[00:56:37]

LAURA: You know it's not that I don't like writing that's beautiful. I probably shouldn't have used that word. I don't like writing that's flowery. But if you're going to compare *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the similarities to the beauty of *Hamnet*, I see what you mean by that. It's not flowery at all, in fact the beauty in those books it's a little bit sparse, but poetic storytelling I feel like in both of those books.

ANNE: And, Laura, as you think forward to the year ahead, what do you want more of in your reading life? Laura, we touched on this a little bit today, but as you look forward to the year ahead, what do you want more of in your reading life?

LAURA: I want more quality and less popular. And I feel like I've been saying that a while but I have discovered some new authors. They're not new authors. New to me. Elizabeth Strout, James McBride. I want to read some of their older titles. I've had an older Colson Whitehead on my Kindle for forever. I know because I feel like I know enough about these authors to know that these are quality books. I don't get to them because I don't want to miss out on what everybody's talking about, and so I want more out of my life this year, and I'm really going to be intentional about it is quality over quantity and over trendy and over bestsellers.

ANNE: And that is not going to happen unless a reader does that intentionally because I mean something that I've discovered in talking books to readers and doing ebook deals for many, many years is that people kinda know what they want to read, but they need a reason to read something right now. Or to read something next. One way you can do that although it's not the same is having a book on sale, or having a library hold coming due or having a book club meeting ahead of you that serves as a deadline is I mean you gotta - you gotta make your own reason to read it right now. So I love that you're thinking about it on purpose and planning on doing that in the year to come.

Okay, so this is the time where I can give you some new options for books you may discover that you may enjoy reading next, and yet I feel like you know what you want to read next. So we are going to lean hard into those things that you already say that you want. I jotted down a few titles of books that are newer this year, that I think you may enjoy, but I'm afraid that they would serve as something shiny and new. I'm looking at you, *Plain Bad Heroines*, we're not going to get into it. So I want to - I want to go to

those things that you say that you want and I don't want to put books in the way to be roadblocks instead of on ramps to getting those books.

So the books you said you love were *The Sound of Gravel* by Ruth Wariner, difficult memoir. It's the story of her childhood, right? About growing up in a polygamist Mormon family.

[00:59:17]

LAURA: Yes, and her escape.

ANNE: Oh, that makes my stomach turn just thinking about it. I mean I listened to it on audio. It was fantastic, but also ooh, dark. You weren't kidding. *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai, a 1980s AIDs story, you got to learn about a time period as well as travel through the years with this cast of characters, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman, which represents this fantasy element that you didn't know you wanted to read but now you like more. So what I'd like to do is draw from the backlist of these authors that you've enjoyed before and also the backlist from your most recent favorite authors like when we were talking you mentioned Elizabeth Strout, Colson Whitehead, James McBride, and choose from their backlist titles to help you consider which books you've been meaning to read or which authors you want to explore prior works from, you may enjoy reading next. How does that plan sound to you?

LAURA: I can't wait. I want to hear all of your recommendations. I always take what you recommend so seriously.

ANNE: Okay. I'm a little nervous about this based on what you said about *Mrs. Everything* by Jen Weiner, but I'm wondering about Elizabeth Strout's debut. It's *Amy and Isabelle*. Is this one you know? Have you read?

LAURA: I have it on my Kindle from a Kindle deal. But of course I have not read it.

[LAUGHS]

ANNE: Do you really? Okay. Well you said that you didn't really love books that put marriage and family dynamics front and center necessarily. However this book is not by any means lighter or cozy or feel good even though it is about a mother and daughter pair in New England going through some stuff. If they're going through some stuff and their stuff is really dark, can we keep going with this?

LAURA: Yes, please.

ANNE: Okay.

[01:01:00]

LAURA: Dark, I'm already there.

ANNE: This is about a complicated relationship between a mother and daughter, Isabelle is the mother. Amy is the daughter. And the setting almost reminded me of oh, what's it called ... *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo because it's set in a mill town and the mill town is called Shirley Falls. And Isabelle moved there when her daughter was tiny. She's a single parent, and they love each other so much because they only had each other. But Amy's grown up and after a period of just you know, the normal squabbles, all hell breaks loose when Amy falls in love with her math teacher, which obviously is not good. She's 16 years old. And what happens next has cataclysmic consequences for her relationship with her mother who does drastic things when this comes to light in the community.

And something that's important to the story is it takes place in a very cloistered, small town setting, and that's really important here, is the cultural backdrop of what is happening in the world. Like there's a local girl who may have been abducted; somebody thinks they may have seen a UFO. There's a lot going on in this town, and it makes it feel charged. But you've loved Strout before. You wanted to read more of her backlist, and this is a dark ... I mean you know how Strout writes her human characters. They are so very human, which makes for really touching, resonant reading also for really like oh my gosh, people reading that can just be really uncomfortable. I think a story of a really messed up mother/daughter pair who love and hate each other and are working through some stuff could be right for you. What do you think?

LAURA: Well you also had me at small town, which Elizabeth Strout's books ...

ANNE: Oh, really?

LAURA: Yes, I love a small town. I'm from a small town, so I think that that feels really nostalgic to me because I live in a huge city now. I feel like in Elizabeth Strout's books, the town or like the community is always an important backdrop, is always an important part of the vibe of her books and it's one of the things I love about her, so yes, this all sounds amazing to me.

ANNE: Okay, good. I like the sound of that. Now because I know you love memoir and you've chosen mostly novelists here who have backlists, I'm looking at James McBride who has an excellent memoir called *The Color of Water*. Is this one you've read?

LAURA: No, but when I posted about my great love for *Deacon King Kong* as one of my favorite novels last year, so many people recommended this to me. People that I was

surprised, you know, it was one of their longtime favorites. It was kinda a surprise to me. So I took note of that, but I have not read it.

[01:03:40]

ANNE: I mean, I think it ticks your boxes. *Deacon King Kong* is brand new. It came out in 2020. That's a book that's gotten heaps of praise that's very well deserved, but his memoir's almost 25 years old now. So this is the story of his parents who had a very unique existence in 1940s America because they were not of the same race. His mother was white and Jewish, and his father was Black, and not having race or religion in common was exceedingly rare in 1940 in the U.S.. So McBride grew up in Brooklyn where his parents were married and the romantic in me thought, oh it must have been such a love match, but there were so much that was hard about it that a wish fulfillment is not happening in the pages of this book. But it's so poignant and he's such a gifted storyteller and knowing that he's telling the story of his own childhood and of his own parents, just imbues it with an extra dose of poignancy.

But the story is told from two points of view, and Laura, I know you're not an audiobook listener, but I did listen to this audiobook and it was so powerful in that format. In the book, one of the views belongs to McBride who's telling the story of his childhood and the other to his white, Jewish mother who also begins her story in her childhood. So you see not just what happened when she became mother to James, who's one of the younger children in the family if I recall correctly, but also how she got to the place where she was and how she'd end up entering into the kind of marriage that was so, so rare then. And each voice is just beautifully done, but when you put them side by side, the combined effect, this is certainly one of those places where it's greater than the sum of its parts. And I know you love memoir and James McBride, so *The Color of Water*, what do you think?

LAURA: I definitely want to get to that one this year. So many people have recommended it. I love your description of it here, and I just think he is the most talented writer. I feel so bad that I'm like slow on James McBride train, but I am there and I really, really want to read this one also.

ANNE: The nice thing about being slow on the train is that if you're one of those people who want to have a lot of works by an author you love to look forward to, wow, this metaphor is breaking down. There's a lot of cars in that train by now, Laura. Like you could ride this train for a long time. He has novels. He has stories. He's got quite the catalog that you could enjoy working your way through.

Okay, since you said that about Neil Gaiman, I think that *Coraline* would be an excellent pick for you because it's similar in feel but not so similar. There's also an animated

version of the movie that is amazing, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about *Coraline* the book which is actually pretty different from the movie, but this is about a girl whose family moves houses and she goes exploring and she opens a door into another universe where everything is like her own family's flat, but better. All the people have buttons instead of eyes and basically she has a fake family. A button family next door and she is tempted to go stay with them and be their little girl forever and it's ... Can I say deliciously creepy without sounding too cliched?

[01:06:53]

LAURA: Well wait is this aimed at children?

ANNE: Okay, so many people ... I've talked to quite a few readers who have thought this was aimed at like young children and have been mortified as they encounter a scene as they're like reading as a family or listening as a family like pretty early in the book. Laura, I don't know if this is technically YA, but I believe this was pitched as a novel for all ages, but this is not a children's book. Like a children's-children's.

LAURA: I think I'm thrown off because of the movie version which I have not seen, but I'm, like, familiar with the imagery of it, so I think I just like assumed it was for children.

ANNE: Oh, sure. You could watch the movie with your fifth grader. You don't want to read the book with your fifth grader.

LAURA: Okay. That's what I like to hear. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: But I think that could be fun for you but I feel like if you want a Neil Gaiman book, and I know you said that element, not necessarily Neil Gaiman, but we're trying not to load you up with new authors here. If you want a Neil Gaiman book, they're easy to find. He's written extensively. That would be pretty simple, but I'd like to point you to an older Rebecca Makkai. How do you feel about that?

LAURA: Oh, yes, please, because I haven't read anything else from her.

ANNE: The one I have in mind for you is her second novel. It came out in 2014. And Laura, I'm trying to get a read on this for you. Shoot. No pun intended. Actually you know what, we joke in book club like bookish puns are always intended. My experience with this book is that readers love it or it frustrates them, and I think because it does have so many elements in common with *The Great Believers* that there's a lot ... This book has a lot going for it for you. As an author one of the things that she says she loves to do is play with time and set her books in multiple time periods because it helps with dramatic irony. Like it puts you as the reader in a position where you can know

more about these characters' lives and how they interact than any one character could know, and that could be really fun. And it also gives a nice texture to the story because you can meet characters at different points in their lives, you can visit the same place at different points in history. Since you enjoyed going to the 1980s and learning about that time period in *The Great Believers* I think that sounds promising.

So this book is called *The Hundred-Year House*. It's about a family home. I think it's called Laurelfeld that over the course of, you guessed it, a hundred years it's gone from being a family home to an artist colony and back again. And there's a question throughout the book is that the people who stay there end up haunting it, or are they haunted by it, or is there some of each happening? The book begins in 1999, but then you go back to 1955, and 1929, and then all the way back to 1900. There are mysteries of the house and the people who inhabit it that slowly get unravelled through the course of the story, and it's a serious story but the writing is kinda playful.

There are lots of plot twists, like just when you think you know what's happening, Makkai kinda shifts it on you and you have to go wait, what? What's happening again? So, Laura, before we got started we were talking about how you don't like books that are tied up with a bow. So I think you'll be okay here. This is not tied up with a bow 'cause it does end with some unanswered questions. There's definitely ambiguity, and readers, if you're not comfortable with that, then this may not be the book for you. Although books with ambiguous endings are wonderful to talk about in book club. But if you like a puzzle box of a book where you're constantly figuring out what's happening and feeling like you need to be reoriented and you're moving through time getting a new look at familiar elements, I think this could be a lot of fun. How does that sound?

[01:10:40]

LAURA: Well I love that there are plot twists and sorta mysteries to this book because that's not how *The Great Believers* is, but I can see with her writing which is layered and does jump in time that that would be a really great thing to read.

ANNE: Okay, Laura. We discussed *Amy and Isabelle* by Elizabeth Strout, *The Color of Water* by James McBride, we touched briefly on *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, and then *The Hundred-Year House* by Rebecca Makkai. Of those titles which one do you think you may read next?

LAURA: I really want to prioritize *The Color of Water* but I'm just going to be honest and say the what I'm dying to pick up now is *The Hundred-Year House* by Rebecca Makkai. That just sounds like exactly what I want. A solid writer, some twists, some mysteries, a long time period. I just ... Everything I want right now. [LAUGHS]

[01:11:36]

ANNE: Well I can't wait to hear what you think. Thank you so much for talking all the reading questions and for talking books with me today.

LAURA: I loved it so much, Anne. Thank you for everything. I love being on this show.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Laura, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/265) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

We also talk about Laura's book today. It's called *Share Your Stuff, I'll Go First*, and it's coming out February 2. You know how excited I am for you to get to read it, and the preorder bonuses Laura is offering for it right now are pretty fantastic. I recommend going to check them out. Go to [shareyourstuffbook.com](http://shareyourstuffbook.com) to find out more.

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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.