



Library podcast

Leslie Jamison and Claire Dederer Discuss 'The Recovering'

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[00:00:35] Hi everybody. I'm Sasha Brandon I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. Welcome to tonight's program like Leslie Jamison and Clara DTR. Thank you all for being here. Before we begin I just want to start by acknowledging that we are on Duwamish land. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Koonce and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Thank you as well to our program partners Elliott Bay Company. Finally we are grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. So for library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support. Now without further ado please help me welcome Rick Simonson from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce tonight's program.

[00:01:26] Thank you. Thank you very much for being here. Before I even say a little bit about the book that we're here for tonight I do want to say about having Leslie Jamison here before tonight she would have been known to many of you as a writer for this extraordinary book of essays called The empathy exam which came out four years ago and a Graywolf Press published it. Graywolf had been doing a number of these books somewhat similar to that of books of essays writers like lobis Geoff Dyer Maggie Nelson and others. But the Empathy Exams was the one that truly took off it became a national bestseller.

[00:02:04] And prior to that I've talked to New York publishers who were part of the whole landscape of books smaller Pope publishers and the big ones. But you'd say oh what about this kind of book and they say oh it's essays that just sort of give this dismissive these little books of pieces and things like that and they wanted these big books in scope or same they want novels were not short stories. But Graywolf was doing these books that all were working and then in the case of Leslie's Empathy Exams it truly became this incredible thing. And so that has changed the way New York publisher is now taking on various books and especially at a time when journalism doesn't have all the place that used to have magazines newspapers in the form of that kind of nonfiction writing the place that has in books is an even more important one. This is something that's also borne out and what Leslie's I wouldn't call a day job. But her other role besides being a writer is directing the nonfiction writing

program at the graduate program at Columbia University. It's an important part of writing but what happened with *The Empathy Exams* is that the book she's here for tonight the recovering intoxication and its aftermath is a book that does many things and it's really powerfully written book.

[00:03:15] Tracing her own story but always through this story of her own self. There are larger and other stories being told as well. The whole issue of sobriety and going through alcohol and addiction and all the stages and phases of things that are gone through individually but also with others and there's also a whole special part to the relation of this to creativity to writing and early on in the book were universal I was written of many writers we've known Raymond Carver certainly prominent in this story. There are issues with drinking and eventual recovery. Through all the book though she tells the stories but also there's this larger and great spirit going through it and her own journey to and through recovery to coming out the other side as it were but still being you know taking this on as a daily thing is powerfully written and a lot of background. You look at the back of the book. This is not just a light slight memoir. This book has no footnotes and source material. Her even her acknowledgments have all these other books written. So it's a very learned and knowing book although also as important as two stories from just the personal to the larger areas they are all based in.

[00:04:26] So tonight you will first hear Leslie read from *recovering* and then she will be joined here in conversation by Claire DTR who we're delighted to over from Bainbridge Claire herself has written extraordinary nonfiction books of earlier book called *poser* and last year's *Love and trouble with the great subtitle A midlife reckoning* which is just about to be in paperback. But it's a book that tells a personal story but also there's a larger thing she does there. The stories of where it was to come of age in the 1980s. Being raised a certain way. In her case she had a largely raising herself or being able to learn all sorts of things in your district. But there's things that go on and a lot of it about the sexual objectification of girls that age and both in popular culture has also lived out. And as she portrays quite powerfully in this book so they will converse up here and then Leslie will take questions and then following that we'll have copies of her books. So with that we again Elliott Bay and everyone the Seattle Public Library Foundation and ceil Public Library thank you for being here.

[00:05:30] And as you please join in welcoming the extraordinary writer Leslie Jamison thank you for that introduction. And thank you all for coming. It's incredible to be here.

[00:05:42] I am in awe of the structure that we're all inside of. I'm so happy to be talking to you tonight Claire. And as some of you may know I'm on this book tour with my 3 month old daughter and and my mother are worried about where the baby is at this particular moment

[00:06:03] And it's just a really it's a special time in my life to be able to share this journey with her.

[00:06:09] And so we thank you all for being part of it.

[00:06:12] I'm going to read just a short section from the beginning of this book. And Claire and I will chat for a bit and then hopefully there'll be some questions from you as well. The first section of the book is called *Wonder*.

[00:06:26] The first time I ever felt it was I was almost 13 I didn't vomit or blacked out or even embarrassed myself. I just loved it.

[00:06:40] I loved the crackle of champagne. It's hot. Pine needles down my throat.

[00:06:47] We were celebrating my brother's college graduation and I wore a long muslin dress that made me feel like a child until I felt something else initiated a glow. The whole world stood accused.

[00:07:03] You never told me it felt this good the first time I ever drank in secret I was 15 my mom was out of town. My friends and I spread a blanket across living room hardwood and drank whatever we could find in the fridge. Chardonnay wedged between the orange juice and the manikins we were giddy from a sense of trespass.

[00:07:30] The first time I ever got high I was smoking pot on a stranger's couch my fingers dripping pool water as I dampen the joint with my grip.

[00:07:40] A friend of a friend had invited me to a swimming party. My hair smelled like chlorine and my body quivered against my damp bikini.

[00:07:50] Strange little animals blossomed through my elbows and shoulders where the parts of me bent and connected.

[00:07:58] I thought what is this and how can it keep being this with a good feeling.

[00:08:07] It was always more again forever.

[00:08:15] The first time I ever drank with a boy. I let him put his hands under my shirt on the wooden balcony of a lifeguard station. Dark waves shushed the sand below are dangling feet.

[00:08:27] My first boyfriend he liked to get high. He liked to get his cat high. We used to make out in his mother's minivan. He came to a family meal at my house fully wired on speed. So talkative said My grandma deeply smitten at Disneyland.

[00:08:50] He broke open a baggie of withered mushroom caps and started breathing fast and shallow in line for Big Thunder Mountain Railroad sweating through his shirt pawing at the Orange rocks of the fake frontier.

[00:09:04] If I had to say where my drinking began which first time began that I might say it started with my first blackout or maybe the first time I saw blackout the first time I wanted nothing more than to be absent from my own life.

[00:09:21] Maybe it started the first time I threw up from drinking the first time I dreamed about drinking. The first time I lied about drinking the first time I dreamed about lying about drinking.

[00:09:34] When the craving had gotten so deep there wasn't much of me that wasn't committed to either serving or fighting it.

[00:09:43] Maybe my drinking began with patterns rather than moments. Once I started drinking every day which happened in Iowa City where the drinking didn't seem dramatic and pronounced so much as encompassing and inevitable. There were so many ways and places to get drunk.

[00:10:03] The fiction bar in a smoky double wide trailer with a stuffed fox head and a bunch of broken clocks or the poetry bar down the street with its anemic cheeseburgers and glowing Schlitz and a scrolling electric landscape.

[00:10:19] The gurgling stream the neon grassy banks the flickering waterfall I mashed the lime in my vodka tonic and glimpsed in the sweet spot between two drinks and three then three and four then four and five.

[00:10:37] My life as something illuminated from the inside there were parties at a place called the farmhouse out in the cornfields past Friday fish fries at the American Legion. These were parties where poets wrestled in a kiddie pool full of jello and everyone's profile looked beautiful in the crackling light of a mattress bonfire. Winters were cold enough to kill you.

[00:11:04] There were endless potlucks for older writers brought braised meats and younger writers from plastic tubs of hummus and everyone brought whisky and everyone brought wine.

[00:11:16] Winter kept going.

[00:11:18] We kept drinking. Then it was spring. We kept drinking then to sitting on a folding chair in a church basement.

[00:11:31] You always faced the question of how to begin.

[00:11:36] It has always been a hazard for me to speak at an AA meeting. A man named Charley told a Cleveland AA meeting in 1959 because I knew that I could do better than other people.

[00:11:48] I really had a story to tell. I was more articulate. I could dramatize it and I would really knock them dead.

[00:11:57] He explained the hazard like this. He'd gotten praised he'd gotten proud he'd gotten drunk.

[00:12:06] Now he was talking to a big crowd about how dangerous it was for him to talk to a big crowd. He was describing the perils of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to a meeting of Alcoholics

Anonymous. He was being articulate about being articulate. He was dramatizing what the art of dramatising had done to him.

[00:12:27] He said I think I got tired of being my own hero. Fifteen years earlier he'd published a best selling novel about alcoholism while sober but he relapsed a few years after it became a best seller. I've written a book that's been called the definitive portrait of the alcoholic. He told the group and it did me no good.

[00:12:52] It was only after five minutes of talking that Charlie finally thought to begin the way others began.

[00:12:58] My name is Charles Jackson he said and I'm an alcoholic by coming back to the common refrain. He was reminding himself that commonality could be its own saving grace.

[00:13:11] My story is much different from anyone's he said.

[00:13:15] It's the story of a man who has made a fool of by alcohol over and over and over year after year after year until finally the day came when I learned that I could not handle this alone.

[00:13:37] Hi. Thank you for coming out. Sock it to me and thank you for having me. I'm so excited. I want to say first congratulations on the book.

[00:13:44] I love it. It's it's beautiful. I mean it's a beautiful book and I wanted to start with the question of bigness. Like almost the elephant in the room to choose the right metaphor which is you became famous as a writer of essays. And as Rick pointed out you sort of rehabilitated the essay the essays and the empathy exams and many other essays you've written are really shaped and this is shaped as well but it's it's got a monumentalism to it. So I want to.

[00:14:18] I was hoping you would talk a little bit about how you got from there making essays to here which is this very big book.

[00:14:32] Yes well in a way this book feels very continuous with the empathy exams in the sense that I knew from the very beginning that I wanted it to hold multiple kinds of writing braided together so I knew that I wanted it to a whole personal narrative and cultural history and literary criticism. ANES repp or Taj.

[00:14:55] And that I wanted all those modes to speak to each other which was the mode of of many of the essays in the empathy exams and the reasons I wanted those modes to speak to each other and this book had to do with wanting to create a book that could have a kind of chorus of voices in it in the same way that a meeting has a recovery meaning has a chorus of voices in it.

[00:15:18] And also I wanted to kind of enact the structure of a book that could open outward from just the singular story of my own life to look at all of these other lives.

[00:15:28] So this is all well and good in theory and practice. It was a good Gourriel mindfucked like it was because in a way like the associative structure of some of the of the essay is one thing you can ask a reader to kind of follow your mind moving from your own life to the discovery of saccharin accidentally in a laboratory in the 1930s or whatever it happened to you know something that happens to your brother once too. Madame Bovary and that kind of lateral motion and zigzagging and veering back and forth without necessarily plot arc with a ton of like relentless forward momentum. That's it. It's it's it's not easy but you're asking a reader to do that with you for like maybe 20 pages and that's one thing and trying to take a reader through an entire book. But still trust you in terms of some of those associative lateral moves. I knew that I just needed to come up with it. It was a different structural problem and it was good to have a different kind of structural answer. And so the the structure of the book went through many many iterations.

[00:16:38] The most well the the way that I got it drafted involved I had a I was I had been doing research for the book for years and years and writing some fragments of personal narrative and then my life kind of got up ended. Both because the empathy exams kind of took off and which was exciting but it meant that I you know kind of had people ask me to do more things with Amidror asked me to do before and I met my husband and came into my daughter's life and she was five.

[00:17:11] And so I was suddenly like you know living in a very different world of like playground's and after school and you know it was actually accountable to human beings who were me and things so a lot of things changed at once.

[00:17:23] And I had this one month at a residency in Marfa Texas and I remember just showing up and saying you know how am I going to write this book. And maybe I can just write down on pieces of paper all the different pieces of the stories that I want to tell. So pieces of my own story pieces of Charles Jackson story pieces of Reese's story pieces of the kind of history of AA and Bill Wilson story. All of these different pieces of these stories that people I interviewed and I literally wrote them down on pieces of paper and then just spread them out on the floor office house that I had there which was incredible because back home in New York I was at that point sharing a futon with my husband in the living room of a one bedroom rent controlled apartment. And like we didn't have a bed much less like a desk or like a centimeter of floor space so to actually literally have a room where I could put these pieces of paper and start to map out what the what the the building of this book might actually look like was kind of like one of the turning points really long answer.

[00:18:32] A good answer. No I mean I'm trying not to go off and just drill into process with you are not going to do that.

[00:18:38] One of the things that's really beautiful about this book is that Leslie has a way of engaging with the work of other writers that feels really immediate. So other characters in the book are Charlie Jackson like you said and John Berryman and Jack London a little bit and Denis Johnson and Raymond Carver who's dear to us and they're important voices in the book and they're part of what creates this kind of chorus. And often in books like this it can feel dutiful or like book report. But you

go to these writers these drunk male writers and it's like you're going to them because they have something important that you need. So there's an urgency in the way you go to them and this is not a question I just really liked it. So one line I really loved was when Leslie is writing about Berryman which she does really better than anyone with the same heart that he brings to his own writing it's really beautiful. And Berryman poet John Berryman wonders whether wickedness is soluble in art.

[00:19:44] Which is a really great line. In other words does the writer turn wickedness integrate art and of course the corollary Larry which is do you require wickedness to great to make great art.

[00:19:55] And this is sort of the engine of the book I would say. One of the engines of the book is this question are you going a flatline once you're sober.

[00:20:04] Do you need to be bad to make a thing a great thing. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

[00:20:11] It's a great question and you were chatting a little bit beforehand as well and it does make me think of probably many of you have read it but Claire had a great essay in The Paris Review about monstrous men and how we reckon with the beautiful things they sometimes make.

[00:20:27] And yeah I think one of the kind of selfish reasons behind the research that went into this book was my desperate desire to find examples of stories of writers and makers whose creativity had found new traction in sobriety and in recovery as alternatives to this fear that I had in my mind that sobriety was going to look like.

[00:21:01] You know I pictured it different ways the different moments that sobriety was going to look like endless nights of like tea with my boyfriend where we were just like I wouldn't have anything to say to each other that you know or like you know just like a dried up little like lemon rind or something like that I had you know there were all these somehow like parched metaphors for what sobriety was going to feel like or sometimes I thought about it like a tundra I had all these fears about what sobriety would be and all these fears about a kind of dull purposeless prose that would come from sobriety it was not that actually my writing I was doing when I was drinking was like God's gift to anyone but I had fears about what would happen when I was sober.

[00:21:42] And so I started researching and it initially was happening under the auspices of a doctoral dissertation I was writing. I started researching writers who had gotten sober and and just seeing what sobriety had done to their work and the way they understood the purpose of their work.

[00:21:59] And so in that sense when you say I was like going to these writers because they had something that I needed. That's exactly right. Like I thought about it as almost a kind of speculative autobiography.

[00:22:12] Like what are these possible lives that I might look to for for models of what my own sober creative art could look like which is also complicated by gender.

[00:22:22] Yeah yeah yeah.

[00:22:24] Well so and I should say also it wasn't that I necessarily found the thing I was looking for in each of these cases.

[00:22:30] Like sometimes you know Dennis Johnson is a beautiful example of somebody who like wrote a lot of his most powerful work once he got sober. Carver obviously wrote beautiful beautiful things in his last decade of sobriety.

[00:22:43] But a lot of times I found not the kind of fulfillment of my desire but something that I refused it in a way or challenged it.

[00:22:53] I saw writers Berryman for example was working on a novel called recovery that he never finished. And like his own recovery was very unfinished.

[00:23:02] So it was important to include that in the book as well not just like sort of example B example see example D of fulfilling my thesis statement about soberer creativity but to show how kind of messy and imperfect it could be. Yeah and the gender question you know there's the a line in the book where I say when I was in my early 20s at the Iowa Writers Workshop that I was I spent my days reading Dead Poets Dead Poets and my nights trying to sleep with live male poets and I think there was there was definitely a sense of wanting entry to the boys club but when it came to great literature and I do I could lie back on the couch and try to speculate about what that might be about my relationship to my dad or my older brothers.

[00:23:53] But the truth is a lot of the writers that I fell in love with were men and that at a certain point I had to kind of think about what kind of book was I writing and was it really a book all about like white men.

[00:24:04] I had enjoyed reading and and there are a lot of white men enjoyed reading this book. But I also felt important to kind of tackle the issue of gender head on which we can talk about. And I know you do in the book but there are also female characters who became important presences as well. So Jean Rhys Billie Holiday Amy Winehouse those are some of the kind of more famous female figures as well as a set of ordinary people I put that in quotes because I kind of really believe in the concept of an ordinary life but people who went through a particular rehab in Maryland when interviewed and kind of brought their stories into the fold of the book and two of them were these acts really to me very extraordinary women.

[00:24:50] So it did it it was something I also pushed back against.

[00:24:56] I both acknowledged the ways in which maleness was part of how I was relating to art and part of how it kind of came of age as an artist but also important to bring female stories into that kind of breed as well.

[00:25:07] And I felt like the transparency of the way you brought the female stories in worked really well because as a young ambitious writers we do swim in this ocean of white male ness. These are the great writers. And to pretend otherwise you know is false. But we can try to acknowledge that there are these other voices and the passages about Billie Holiday are really beautiful especially dealing with this idea of making when you're drunk or on drugs and making when you're clean and you know she comes out she says there's a line in the book dope never helped anyone to play better. So she sort of falls into your thesis like oh maybe there can be a creative life after drugs and alcohol and her example and her example as she failed is really beautiful. So you just brought up the idea of ordinariness. And to me the like one of the central cruxes of the book has to do with ordinariness. You talk a lot about how being ordinary or allowing your story to be ordinary is essential to sobriety and the kind of constant focus on your specialness subverts your sobriety. And the book is really funny on specialness and like those self aggrandizement that comes with being young and drunk and a writer like all at once right. And yet so you're talking a lot about the value of ordinariness and yet you've written 400 plus page memoir. So there's a tension in the book where we're talking about ordinary ness is important. But there's here's my story which is very much the project of memoir I'm in and give you my story so you feel less alone right.

[00:26:53] So that tension was what I loved best about the book. You sort of tell your own story in order to join the ranks of the blessed ordinary. And it was beautiful. So did you think about that as you were writing or is that something you kind of swam toward.

[00:27:09] Yeah I mean I would say something it is like a useful way of describing writing feel like to me kind of less having that clear conceptual arc structure architecture in mind from the outset more kind of discovering what I'm doing as I'm doing it with this book. Yeah it felt it felt important. Kind of like Walk the walk as well as talking the talk when it came to ordinariness both by confessing the ways in which I did not understand my own story is anything extraordinary and that you know my drinking was was nothing special.

[00:27:52] It was just it was just the drinking I happened. And at a certain point you know I talk about telling telling your own story isn't about thinking your story is more special or better than anyone else's.

[00:28:10] It's just it's just the life you happen to live. And I kind of compare it's like using a nail in your drawer not because you think it was the most amazing nail that anyone ever made but just like the one that happens to be in your drawer.

[00:28:24] And I have a you know I think each of us has a kind of singular access to our own lives. So in a way it was like my story was was the story I had the best access to I really I loved and I loved to tell. Maybe this comes from having originally been a fiction writer but I love to tell stories with kind of a lot of specificity and granularity and as I've kind of access to the specifics of my own life in a particular way.

[00:28:50] So that's why I wanted the spine of the book my own story.

[00:28:55] And it kind of gets back to that structural question from the beginning. Also it felt to me that there needed to be a narrative taking pages even if that narrative was going to go on a lot of go down a lot of other forking paths in terms of looking at other people's stories.

[00:29:11] And I kind of larger cultural history.

[00:29:13] But I both wanted to confess the ordinariness of my own story and also to to write a book that as I got sober and sober was sort of doing more and more to look outward at others stories so the others the other voices kind of come to loom larger and larger as the book.

[00:29:32] Yeah you used the phrase and I think it was from a review of a book by Mary mann. I think it's an anthology of earnestness. Somebody accuses him of writing an anthology of LOWRY Yeah yeah.

[00:29:44] Lowry Yes yeah. But I thought of that book a lot.

[00:29:48] I thought of that line when I was reading the book a lot. I thought there was a way that you were trying to anthologized these voices into the book and allow them to be earnest and not always have everything be the smartest plot choice or you know like oh here comes another fight with Dave her boyfriend like oh god we're fighting with him again. But there is a way that brings you really close to the ordinariness of the story. And you talk in the book about how you as you come out as you come into sobriety you come to distrust your own narratives like story itself starts to throw you which actually brings me to the idea of utility like one thing I really loved in this book was the word useful. You write your story is probably pretty ordinary.

[00:30:36] That doesn't mean it can't be useful and when you have like literary types talking about how to structure a book or whatever useful is not a word that comes up so can you talk about that word.

[00:30:50] I mean I'm part of it. I mean one of the kind of like engines behind this book was my attempt to reckon with how storytelling worked very differently and to different communities that I had been a part of.

[00:31:03] And one of them was the literary community where er er of various manifestations of literary communities where storytelling was all about telling the most beautiful story the most original story telling telling a story that had never been told before telling the same story in a way that it had never been told before.

[00:31:20] All of those kinds of imperatives and I describe an early evening in Iowa when I sort of showed up at this party in somebody's basement where literally everybody was sitting around in a circle. And the object of the game if you could call it a game was just to tell your best story people

were going around and it was kind of like nerve racking I remember like you know my sweaty armpits and like my ass was just like what kind of story was I going to tell. And that when I when I answered recovery it was another kind of community that was totally formed around storytelling. There was a really different set of ideas about what the purpose that stories were and that it was much more about sharing your own story as a kind of offering to the room rather than necessarily an expression of like narcissism or ego even though it can be hard to separate out all those things.

[00:32:14] But and in the sense that if your story was interchangeable with other people's stories that was OK. And in fact that was the point. Like you were going to tell a story that had already been told.

[00:32:25] Yes. And that is precisely why it was going to be helpful to somebody else.

[00:32:29] So I wanted to you know ends years later in Iowa when I started going to church basements and telling stories in that way I would think about that first night where everybody had been in a circle kind of trying to tell the best story and see how those circles worked in such radically different fashions.

[00:32:46] And so I wanted to write a book that was thinking about that question of like what makes the story valuable ends. And in a way I think in the literary world it can be really taboo to think about a story is useful or you know to think about kind of getting consolation from stories or Life Lessons from stories but like I certainly do like I mean there are so many books that I have read that have felt like company and so many books that I have read that have changed the way that I live or the way that I think about what it means to be a human being unlike those those are extraordinary kinds of usefulness.

[00:33:21] Yeah I think it's a charge like for me it's a moral charge of memoir that there's this charge to sort of get over your hump of feeling like you're hung up on how narcissistic it is to write this story and to remember that when the other person comes out they're being transported into something else and they're seeing the darkness. So the difficulty of their own experience reflected there and it's something I think about a lot and talk about a lot with students it's like yes it feels narcissistic to you but it's actually you know you talk about Louis Hyatt in the book it's actually this kind of gift like quality where you're giving it to someone.

[00:33:58] Have you did you read that book by Kristen Dombeck on this book called Oh yes you saw the narcissism of others.

[00:34:05] Yeah it's like I think it's called on the selfishness of others an essay on the fear of narcissism.

[00:34:10] And so it is a great book but one of the things she I think she mentioned book books she did a conversation with her ones where she talks about how you know people will talk about the rise of the memoir as kind of like a sign of the narcissism of our times.

[00:34:26] But that you can actually read it as precisely the opposite right.

[00:34:29] That people the fact that so many people are hungry to consume memoir is proof of the opposite that people are interested in these lives that on their own. And I think that it really is for me when I when I get petrified and anxious and feel shame about writing about my life and hear all those voices that say here's a narcissist why do you think your story is important.

[00:34:53] Etc.. It's like I really the only place that I can come back to that feels like stable ground is my experiences as a reader and how much it has meant to me to read other people's stories.

[00:35:04] That's what feels like a kind of reminder of what this thing when other people want or hope for what it can be what other people encounter it.

[00:35:14] Yeah I mean I think if it was if we were all writing them and then there were no readers that would speak to this like you know perfect culture of narcissism. But the fact that there is a readership proves Karen's point. Yeah it's a great book. The selfishness of others. It's like one of those little FSG standalone essays. Very good.

[00:35:34] I want to you mentioned earlier about actually the opening of your book you talk about beginnings. The first time you drank and you go almost immediately to the first time you drank and had a sexual experience. And I wanted to talk a little bit about that. You know we're in this moment where constantly these threads are being drawn to the to movement and issues of consent. This book hasn't really been talked about in that context but I think it's a really important book in terms of talking about how women use and abuse alcohol in the context of sexuality. And Leslie does a lot of really I think I hate this word but you know what word I'm going to say.

[00:36:15] Yeah totally do.

[00:36:17] Leslie does a lot of brave right talking about her own experiences in that nexus. And there's a line from Sarah Heppell who wrote the memoir blackout. She talks about her time of being a blackout drunk. She describes it as I drank to consent. So she would drink until she consented and I thought that was such a beautiful phrase.

[00:36:45] So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the relationship between alcohol and consent not as something like for me as a tut tutting mother but you know sort of as someone in the midst of it yeah I am I do I think that part of the reason that as you point out the sort of litany of first times that opens the book travels quite quickly to the first time I drank with a boy is because the My Life with men and my experience of desire and my desire to be desired all felt so inextricably linked up with drinking from the very beginning. And that sense of part of what I loved about booze was that it made me feel like I had permission to exist which might sound super dramatic but it just I always felt like I had to prove why I deserve to be in the room why I deserve to be in a relationship why I deserve to be at an institution why I deserve to kind of be speaking why I deserve to be listened to and boos just like shut down all those voices and just like let me be in a room.

[00:37:53] And it was OK that I was there and so much of my relationship with my relationships the men over the years felt like plagued by that same anxiety of like why do I deserve love in some way and that it felt like the only thing that could kind of state that anxiety or quell that anxiety was to get enough affirmation or enough desire. And so there's something about the kind of feeling like like a leaky bucket where you could just like take take take and it would never be enough. Felt like the logic of drinking and I felt like the logic of men and you know and that kind of thrill of falling in love felt like the only thing that was as thrilling as getting drunk. I mean everything just felt so related to me about about men and drinking.

[00:38:44] But I think the question of consent is so tricky and I wish that trying to figure out how to say this I wish that we talked more about alcohol we talked about consent and that we could find a language for doing that.

[00:39:05] That didn't feel like a species of victim blaming because I think that's sometimes why it's hard to bring alcohol into the conversation is that it can code as somehow saying somehow assigning some sort of blame and that's not at all the way I want it brought into the conversation. But I do think there's there's just there's just deeply a relationship between kind of women finding themselves in situations peril and women getting drunk. And so it was less that I wanted to kind of philosophize on that in the book and more that I dissect a few of my own experiences and thinking about those spaces where I don't know what the language of.

[00:39:47] I don't know what language of consent applies to some of the situations I found myself in.

[00:39:52] And I actually feel like we don't have language for a lot of sort of murky in between states of danger and regret. And but I did just want to kind of get zoom in on some moments from my own life that spoke to that relationship between booze man sex regret and how those things can kind of become part of I think.

[00:40:19] I think the history of many women who drink more than wish they had.

[00:40:24] Maybe not always. Maybe just when they're in certain periods of their lives would that tend to be tied not great sexual situations. I have time for one more question and then we'll open it up to you guys and I'm going to ask a selfish question Ari. The book is about pain ultimately like that was one of the reasons the book movie so much was you really described your own pain and that you know is sort of its absence and its presence and you didn't shy away from that and there's a lot of ways in which female pain is something that we're very uncomfortable with in terms of literature. And you guys probably know Leslie's incredible essay Grand Unified Theory of Female pain from Empathy Exams which was really important to me during writing my last book Love and trouble. And she talks about the idea of the wounded woman and this that we all want to reject the idea of a woman as wound or woman as a victim. But we also need to talk about you know it's valid for women to talk about their pain and there's a way you can write about your pain without you know she says walking backward into a voyeuristic rehashing of old cultural models.

[00:41:35] So you give as examples and emo cutter hurt seeking missile of womanhood a body gone drunk or bruised or barren and I felt like there was a clue to this book in that passage that almost like that passage was a dare that you took.

[00:41:51] Like you wrote that paragraph and they were like Yeah I'm going to I'm going to write that book.

[00:41:58] That is the book of female pain and I'm not going to call it female pain. I'm just going to write my pain. That's not really a question. But you know I mean it's like it's kind of an amazing question in the sense that

[00:42:12] Know because I do I mean I do think there is a I think there are lots of ways in which that same was throwing down a kind of gauntlet that became this book.

[00:42:26] And and certainly one of them was this this wanting to create space for the discussion of pain in a way that could feel again useful rather than simply kind of all the charges that get thrown at women who talk about their pain too much of their selves the sick self-absorbed narcissistic looking for men to take care of them or pity them or save them and that there can be other there can be a kind of meaning to be found in pain. It isn't about seeking pity or isn't about sort of dramatize anger or extolling the self.

[00:43:01] And so I did want to explore that in this book. But I also there's another line in that essay that also feels like one of the gauntlet thrown down that became this book which is where I say suffering is interesting but so is getting better and. And that essay Grand Unified Theory of Female pain was was was was not particularly about getting better it was more about clearing space for the discussion of pain and trying to like question the ways we judge that discussion. But I very much wanted with this book to write about pain but to also write about that space that exists when you are living into a life that is not entirely defined by pain and that is defined by other things as defined by just getting up in the morning and being okay getting up in the morning and going to work and trying to show up for your partner and maybe showing up for a group of people in a church basement that night.

[00:43:57] That kind of figuring out what stability might feel like.

[00:44:04] I want to explore the ways that that could be a compelling story.

[00:44:08] It's very hard to write contentment right. It's extremely difficult.

[00:44:14] All right well we'll wrap it up and open it up to y'all.

[00:44:20] So the question was about relationships and sort of forgive me if I'm missing something in the summary but about relationships and also kind of yeah.

[00:44:32] What what makes for a strong relationship and whether in a way is sometimes separation and coming back together.

[00:44:38] And part of strengthening a relationship or deepening a relationship and I guess I what I can say about that in the context of this book is that there is a relationship story that's that's a huge part of my drinking and sobriety story and I didn't actually want.

[00:44:58] I didn't sit down to write a book about that relationship.

[00:45:02] But I sort of found that I had to write about that relationship in order to tell the story of why I stopped drinking and what early sobriety was like for me.

[00:45:13] Anes well and part of part of your question that that was really speaking to me had to do with like separating and then coming back together and because there there was a way that I thought that one of the rewards of getting sober was going to be like saving this relationship and that I talk about this thing called Contract logic which is basically it's that alcoholics have no monopoly on contract logic but basically the idea that if I do X you know the universe is going to give me y or if I do X God is going to give me y.

[00:45:50] And you know I had the sense that if I got sober this relationship that's going to be my reward. This relationship is saved and then that really what happened was that I just had to reckon with the relationship more fully. And that was this kind of long messy ragged process where we broke up we got back together.

[00:46:07] I wanted the relationship to be the reward for getting sober but in fact seeing the relationship more clearly was the reward for being sober and that's not actually the reward that everybody wants.

[00:46:21] So. So certainly certainly that question kind of speaks to so many things that are at play in the book it's actually speaks right to the plot of the book.

[00:46:31] It's a great question. The question is about the relationship between sobriety and motherhood. Yeah. And the book actually it ends before that part of my life when I became a stepmother mother.

[00:46:45] But it's something that I've I've had quite a bit about Ann's. Yeah I think I mean many women are mothers while still in the midst of active you know alcoholic drinking and many women who are like wonderful mothers.

[00:47:01] That's part of their story.

[00:47:03] But I I have I have felt just exceedingly grateful that I got sober well before I became a mother because I think for me one of the ways that one of the things that would have been hard about drinking while mothering was just how much I would have essentially just resented my kids as like obstacles.

[00:47:23] Just being able to let go ahead and get good at drunk at like 6:00 p.m. and you know and I guess the other thing I'll say is that certain things that felt useful in recovery insofar as they applied to drinking like taking things one day at a time or one hour at a time or one minute at a time like however small you needed to make the unit you could make it small enough.

[00:47:45] Those have been just deeply useful to me in parenting as well like that idea of like I don't have to think about being someone's parent forever to think about being someone's parent for like today and what's that going to look like.

[00:47:57] So there are certain ways in which that kind of the ways in which recovery has shaped me feel very applicable to Parent Yeah.

[00:48:07] No I think it's a great question.

[00:48:08] The question is about why and how we feel the need to apologize and maybe especially women feel the need to apologize for having feelings or expressing feelings or somehow maybe the felt imperative sometimes that in order to be spoken or narrated a feeling needs to be bad enough or are bigger.

[00:48:31] And yeah I think that is like yet deeply one of the questions in this book.

[00:48:36] First of all this sense that the ordinary lives are interesting ordinary feelings are interesting ordinary pain is interesting. I mean these are not facts these are my opinions but I believe them very deeply that things don't have to be grand dramatic plot points in order to be worth narrating or worth honoring him. And I think certainly there was something about drinking for me that was a kind of a desire to take a bad feeling and make it even worse. Right.

[00:49:09] And maybe that hunger for superlative feelings rather than just like low grade feelings was one of the was was you know it was like booze could feel like you know tossing kerosene onto a fire and that hunger for X extremity I think is is that kind of like narrative grandiosity or something is totally bound up with drinking and I think one of the antidotes to that is to say it's your feeling can be ordinary sized and not something that you have to apologize for and still something that kind of merits speaking and merits listening to Yeah.

[00:49:53] So the question is about that. Well the relationship between addiction and creativity ends sort of. What kind of argument can be made in the opposite direction for the ways in which addiction my kind of obstruct creativity and what are the other sources of creativity. And in relation to the writer Elizabeth Gilbert and how she's spoken about these things then yeah I mean I would say one to one

of the kind of primary engines of this book is a desire to like debunk that knee jerk association between addiction and creativity on many levels.

[00:50:29] So thinking about what how have we come to these archetypes of like the rogue drunk genius. How are those archetypes often very very gender like we have a little bit more of an available archetype for the drunk male rogue genius whose dysfunctionality is like sort of dashing and charming and we don't know when a woman drinks too much she's probably just like being a bad mom you know that's a very different cultural archetypes but also trying to look at some of these writers like you know one of the places where I really found that mythology of like thinking and creativity being seen as bound up together and kind of mutually constitutive was this 1969 Life magazine profile of John Berryman.

[00:51:16] The title of the profile was whiskey and ink and you know it began by saying whiskey and ink. These are the two fluids that John Berryman needs to survive. This idea that he's literally like kind of bringing in bringing the whiskey into his body and it's coming out as poems or something and that you know his poetry was was brilliant because it was tuned into this kind of psychic darkness and the booze was the thing that helped him survive that it's movement.

[00:51:41] Can you talk a little bit about when you made your proposal to your dissertation committee I think about the topic.

[00:51:48] Yeah yeah well so so I think you know part of what I'm part of why I wanted to write this book was to say like John Berryman was actually like shitting his pants and his liver was so large you could see it through his skin and like it wasn't just the whiskey and ink. It was like a lot darker and harder than that. And the flipside of that was wanting to think about you know OK. If the Besos of the drunk genius is actually more complicated then than we've built it up to be then there's this other thing that we never talk about which is the relationship between sobriety and creativity and what does that look like. And and that was really the focus of my of my dissertation. These authors who got sober and how it shaped their work. And when I was presenting one of the early chapters of my dissertation This is the moment I was talking about one of my advisers basically you know said some version of Well yeah I'm less interested in the relationship between sobriety and creativity.

[00:52:52] What about the relationship between addiction and creativity and it was different because it was like I mean this is like a motion anybody spent time in academia will recognize this notion of like well I don't really care what your project was actually this other project that has nothing to do with your project.

[00:53:07] And and so I felt like I felt in that moment I felt like she was saying you know what this old myth is that you're trying to debunk. Like that's actually that's the mythology I still believe. And so whenever my husband needs a doorframe described he's like Leslie do it.

[00:53:27] M Yeah yeah.

[00:53:29] So the question is is is whether people in my life are always asking me to write their Bumble profiles.

[00:53:39] Yeah I mean I do is the short answer and in fact during the during the you know two months of my life that I was doing online dating I actually had to recruit one of my friends to write my profile like a true confession.

[00:53:54] But I will say that one of the blessings of my life is that I have a lot of writers as friends. And and one thing I notice that that comes from that is that like they're really good describers of things so if you know one of my friends goes on a date with somebody and I'll say well we know what was he like.

[00:54:16] I don't get it. Well he was nice but we didn't really have chemistry. You know she'll say well yeah I felt like the way in which his body moved through space was both appealing. But it wasn't it wasn't erotic to me. You know there's like a very. It's like it's. It's like a little bit more. It's like a little bit more precise and a little bit more well to you.

[00:54:38] So I mean maybe there's some way in which the way I describe you know date night with my husband is similarly compelling to friends. But I guess I would say I feel like I get to move through very articulate company and I feel I feel grateful for that.

[00:54:54] So as so the question was about you know if it's a great question. If we if we can all sort of admit that recovery is stability wellness are our are challenging things to right. Well then what are some suggestions about how to write them or how to bring them to the page and compelling ways. And yeah I think it might actually have something to do with that earlier question about ordinary feelings and making space for ordinary feelings because the truth is is that at least in my experience sobriety is not a narrative flatline and life doesn't shut down in sobriety. It actually kind of opens up in sobriety and the truth is that there was something at least about my addiction that was quite tedious claustrophobic and repetitive. And so it wasn't exactly promising narrative terrain either. And so I guess that to me is the flipside of sobriety is sometimes more interesting than we want to give it credit for. It's like addiction is sometimes more boring than we give it credit for. And when it comes to then thinking about how to write sort of sobriety and recovery and compelling ways on the page.

[00:56:05] I think part of the answer is that it's not that life turns into something static and an utterly reconciled. Once you get sober it's actually life is still knotty and charged and evolving and difficult and unexpected and.

[00:56:24] And you know in motion in flux and so I think honoring those ways that life isn't resolved honoring those ways in which it keeps kind of changing and unfolding in unexpected ways and also honoring that just because a feeling isn't.

[00:56:40] Or an event isn't the most dramatic Capitol letter thing. It actually can hold a lot of richness and a lot of complexity and sort of tuning into those veins of complexity as well.

[00:56:53] A great place to end.

[00:56:55] Thank you so much for coming out.

[00:57:02] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.