

5.07 Suddenly I Love Nonfiction?

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library, a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

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Angourie [host]

Who is afraid of nonfiction? Raise your hand, people. Me. It's me. I'm afraid of nonfiction. If you haven't been here before, hello, I'm Angourie, I'm an actor and a podcaster, and every year I set a goal to read more nonfiction. And every year I kind of fall behind. I love reading fiction, I find it easy, fiction can make me feel safe and cosy and it's what I grew up reading. But I tend to have a bit of trouble with nonfiction because if it's about a big, intellectual topic, it can be difficult to read, and some of the more easy and accessible nonfiction books are memoirs, and I don't really like reading memoirs. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I know so many people love memoirs. But! This year I've really gotten into reading nonfiction. Like for the first time ever I've actually found myself craving to read nonfiction? Weird. Who is she? I don't know her. So since last episode was an hour long and very in-depth and scripted – if you haven't listened to it yet it's about 90s teen movies adapted from classic literature, so if you're interested, give it a listen. But because that was so long and maybe boring this one is – this episode is gonna be shorter, a lot more chatty. I'm going to share with you 10 things I've learnt from 10 of my favourite nonfiction reads this year. That's one thing from each book, don't worry, we're not covering 100 things I've learnt – though I have learnt a lot. Another note before we get started, it is bucketing cats and dogs outside ... maybe I'm mixing metaphors there? I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do about it, but pretty sure you can hear it, but it's gonna be raining all week, so ... we're just going to have to deal with it. That's okay, hopefully it's cosy. So with that, settle in, get a cup of tea and a biscuit, and let's get into it. So the books on this list cover a range of topics and genres within the category of nonfiction, we've got an instructional handbook, a collection of personal essays, historical accounts, even a few memoirs. I know, I actually managed to enjoy a few memoirs this year. And my hope, or my aim with this episode is that hopefully it will help you find your next nonfiction read, or encourage you to pick up a nonfiction book if you, like me, are scared of them. Or if you don't want to read a nonfiction book, then you can just take the key thing I learnt from each one and go on your merry way. I've listed them in order of when I read them in the year, so let's get started. With one of the first – maybe the first nonfiction book I read in 2021, and that was ...

1. *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, published in 2019. This is a memoir. What I learnt from this is:

There are many ways to tell a story.

In the Dream House is an account of the author's experience in an abusive relationship with a woman. And it's about queerness, abuse, power. As I said, it was one of the first books I read in 2021, but has stayed with me throughout the whole year. I keep going back to it and keep thinking about it. The thing that makes this book so special is the way in which it's written, and I think that's why I liked it, even though it's a memoir. Because each chapter is a vignette that frames a memory of their relationship as a different literary device, or genre, or theoretical lens. We observe Carmen Maria Machado's relationship through the lens of 'Film Noir', or 'An Exercise in Point of View' or 'Lesbian Cult Classic'. And she retells sections of her relationship with this literary viewpoint or genre in mind. So it's really a blending of literary criticism and a memoir, and I think that's why I loved it. And the effect of telling it this way, it just shows that there are many ways to frame the same story. And I just think this book is a feat of literary excellence, and I really do recommend it to everyone, though be mindful going in there are many trigger warnings for this, so definitely look that up before you go into it. But I loved this book so much, I already know it'll make my list of favourite books of the year.

2. *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr., E. B. White, published in 1918. This is an instructional handbook, and I learnt that:

Vigorous writing is concise!

I received this book for my birthday, and this was originally published in 1918, but I received a new edition that is illustrated, and it's got these beautiful, amazing illustrations in it. And it's a writing handbook and it's all about practical advice for writing such as grammatical rules, and turns of phrase, and stuff about commas, and apostrophes and conjunctions. And it also includes some more general advice on writing style. This book is full of good advice, some of it a little old fashioned, as I'm sure you can guess. But the best piece of advice that I took from this was 'vigorous writing is concise!'. Be clear, get to the point, omit needless words. And with that, I think I'm done.

3. *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life* by Ulli Lust, published in 2009. This is a memoir. From reading this book, I learnt that:

Things aren't so uncomfortable outside of my comfort zone.

So if you are a regular listener of the podcast, you will know that I read this graphic novel for an episode in which I tried out graphic novels. And this lesson is one that I learnt more from the reading experience, than the book itself. This book was very out of my comfort zone; it's a graphic novel, and a memoir, and about the punk scene in 1980s Europe. All of those things just aren't usually elements of a book that would make me pick it up usually. But, I actually really enjoyed it, and found so many things about this story and this book that I really connected with and related to. And so this whole experience really taught me that it's great – it's a really good thing to step outside of my comfort zone with reading, and it's nowhere near as scary as I might think it is.

4. *Intimations* by Zadie Smith, published in 2020. This is a collection of personal essays. I learnt that:

‘Suffering is not relative; it is absolute.’

Zadie Smith has become one of my favourite writers, and *Intimations* – which I always, in my brain I read it as ‘Imitations,’ but it’s not, it’s ‘Intimations’ – is a collection of personal and political essays about life at the beginning of the pandemic. So it was written and published in around May of 2020, and I read this in April of 2021, so a whole year after the whole pandemic had begun, which was very strange. It was very weird to reflect on how the whole world was feeling a whole year ago and what had changed since then, and also what hadn’t changed since then. But one of my favourite essays in this collection is called *Suffering like Mel Gibson*, and in it Smith talks about the similarities and differences between privilege and suffering. And she ultimately makes the argument that suffering cannot be compared in order to make you zoom out and feel better about your life, basically. So she writes: ‘Suffering applies itself directly to its subject and will not be shamed out of itself or eradicated by righteous argument, no matter how objectively correct that argument may be.’ And I think this is such an interesting and important sentiment, and I kind of wish I had read that in May of 2020, because she talks about how it’s really important to allow yourself to feel your suffering, because that’s the only way you can move forward from it. And it is irrational, and it is deeply personal, and you can’t change the way you feel or think about it from ‘righteous arguments’, as she says. So the only that you can kind of move forward from it is to acknowledge it. So I thought that was super interesting, very valuable lesson, and a lesson I wish I’d learnt earlier on in the pandemic, I think.

5. *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability and Making Space* by Amanda Leduc, published in 2020. This is a nonfiction book about social justice. I learnt that:

Throughout history, storytelling has filled the gaps in scientific understanding.

So again, if you are a regular listener of the podcast, you will know that I read a chapter from *Disfigured* when I did an episode on *The Little Mermaid*, and then I went back and I read the whole thing and I chose it as a book club pick for *The Community Library*. So maybe you read it along with me then, and if you didn’t, then take this as a sign to read it, because I love this book so much. This is part memoir, part social commentary, part literary criticism. Amanda Leduc, the author, talks about the link between disability and fairy tales, and how that informed her childhood and relationship with her own disability, cerebral palsy. I learnt so much from this book, it changed my understanding of fairy tales, it really reframed the way that I decided to construct my episodes on fairy tales moving forward. And so I learnt so much from it, but one thing that really stood out to me in the book was this quote: ‘Without the capacity of science to understand that which doesn’t fit in line, it only makes sense that stories are the first things to make that space.’ So Amanda Leduc talks about how disability and storytelling have always been linked, even before fairy tales began using disability as a shorthand to indicate a bad or evil character. Leduc writes: ‘Kleine-Levin syndrome [is] a condition where individuals experience prolonged episodes of sleep. [...] But the fact that Kleine-Levin is also known colloquially as ‘Sleeping Beauty syndrome’ speaks to how intertwined our experiences of story and disability are – once upon a time, we used story to explain the disabilities that we didn’t know, and now we use story to explain the disabilities that we *do* understand, situating them in a world using cultural touchstones that explain to us what medical terminology cannot.’ I just wanna leave you with that quote, just like, take a second to sit with it and think about it, because I had never read something like that before, I’d never considered

the link between disabilities and storytelling in that way, and storytelling and science in that way before. So this book really just changed so much for me in terms of how I read fairy tales.

6. *Alice + Freda Forever: A Murder in Memphis* by Alexis Coe, published in 2014. This is an historical account. I learnt that:

The press hasn't changed much in 130 years.

This book is a true account of the story of 19-year-old Alice Mitchell who murdered her 17-year-old lover, Freda Ward, in 1892. The story itself is fascinating, but the book is so great in the way that it explores female friendships and relationships in late 19th Century America. A large portion of the book focusses on Alice Mitchell's court trial, because many newspaper articles from that time have survived. And many sections and headlines from these articles are reprinted in the book, and just reading through the headlines and articles from the trial, it really highlighted how little the press has changed in 130 years. The headlines were very ... clickbait-y, I guess you would say now. And I guess what I mean about press not changing is just ... I guess the way that certain taboo or exciting topics are talked about and written about in popular media to grab people's attention in the most sensational, exciting way possible. So these headlines really sensationalised the murder, the girls' love affair, and Alice Mitchell's mental instability. It was pretty sad to read actually, but I think the main thing I took from the book was how wonderful it is to know that their story is being told now in a different way, in a way that can recontextualise the meaning of their love affair, and can move past all these sensational headlines that make light of such a deeply distressing event.

7. *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, published in 2018. This is a memoir and I learnt from it that:

Hope fuels action much more than fear.

Michelle Obama's memoir was something I didn't ever think I'd read, just because I'm not a huge fan of memoirs, as I have mentioned. But I read it to complete a reading challenge, and I ended up very much enjoying it. Michelle covers her entire life: her childhood, high school, college years, meeting Barack Obama, his career in politics, their family, and then their time at the White House and what she did with her time at the White House, much of which I didn't know about because at the time that they were in office, I was ... let's see, it was from when I was seven to when I was fifteen, and during that time I wasn't really engaged in American politics, it really only started towards the end of their time in office. So anyway, I learnt lots about Michelle Obama and what she did during that time. And Michelle Obama is someone who has faced a lot of opposition in her life; she talks about how she's often been the only black woman in a room. But the overwhelming message of her book was that hope and love always prevail. Which sounds kind of cheesy, but like, the way she phrases it is much better. The book ultimately ends on kind of a sad note, because she's just left the White House and Trump has just been sworn in, but she remains ever confident that hope is the key to everything, and that hope will always inspire action and unite people much more than fear, and I really liked that she ended the book with that sentiment.

8. *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* by Jonathan Safran Foer published in 2019. This book is about the climate. And I learnt that:

Knowing is different to believing. Our systems are not built for conceptual threats.

We Are the Weather is a book about the climate crisis and what we as individuals can do to help. And it's kind of less ... it talks a lot about facts and it presents facts in a very kind of easy way, it's just bullet point lists. But then he – it's a very philosophical book. He goes into the moral dilemmas and ties it back to sociology and how we live our lives and all of that. And this book taught me a lot, it's kind of hard to narrow it down to one thing, but the main theme that the author drives home is that knowing is different to believing. He talks about, when being confronted with big conceptual threats, there's a difference between our brain logically knowing something is true, and actually believing it in our hearts, which is what motivates the strongest response of action. And the reason why we have trouble actually believing that the climate crisis is upon us is that we are not built to understand big, conceptual threats that manifest in many different ways over a long period of time. The thing about the climate crisis is that there are many, many, many disastrous things that are a product of the climate crisis such as mass floods, storms, bushfires, ocean levels rising, increased temperatures, all of that. But because it's happened slowly over a long period of time, and because it manifests itself in so many different disasters, it's hard for us to really believe that it's happening. So this book was really tough to read, and I highly recommend reading it yourself rather than just getting, like, the SparkNotes from me, because he says it a lot better. But ultimately, it inspired me to number 1, learn more and to number 2, take more action. And it also made me become a vegan, so there's that.

9. *The Whole Picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums ... and why we need to talk about it* by Alice Procter, published in 2020. This book is focussed on social justice. What I learnt from this book is that:

Displaying is controlling.

This book is my most recent nonfiction read, and one of my favourites of this year. I know, I've read so many good books this year, but honestly, this one is just top tier. So in this book, Alice Procter takes you – me – the reader, through the history of museums, different types of museums, and particular pieces these museums hold. And she does all of this to illustrate a broader point about colonialism in art. And I learnt so much from this book, again. But one of the most poignant phrases that I think sums up the point of the book is that 'displaying is controlling'. So controlling how certain art pieces are displayed, the way they're titled, the way they're lit, what they're placed alongside, the room they're in, what their description reads – it all controls the way an audience thinks about and responds to a work. Throughout history, art has always highlighted and glorified certain ideas or people, and omits or ignores others. But museums also have a part in that, because they reframe and reshape these narratives to highlight and glorify certain things and ignore others. This book may seem niche, for those of us who aren't interested in art or don't go to museums, it may seem niche, however I think it's something everyone should read. She talks a lot about how art and museums and the act of displaying and controlling and interacting with artwork feeds into the way that we live our lives and the culture we create and live in. But also, if you are someone who goes to museums, like myself, definitely read this book. Please, please, please read this book! No, do whatever you want. But I think this is a really great resource for people who love to go to museums and it really pushes the reader to challenge the way they think about certain artworks, the way certain artworks are displayed, and the way that museums function in displaying art.

10. *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* by Mary Beard, published in 2015. This is an historical account. I've learnt that:

The Romans did not plan to conquer and control Italy.

This is a bonus one for you: I haven't actually finished *SPQR* yet, it's over 600 pages long and the print is so teeny teeny tiny, and I knew I wasn't going to finish it in time for me to record and upload this episode, but I'm almost halfway through, I'm like 260 pages of the way through, and I've already learnt a lot. I promise you, there is so much information in here. But the main thing that I have learnt so far that really intrigued me, is that the Romans did not plan to have like, this massive empire. They weren't like, they didn't like, sit down with a map – also because they didn't have maps back then, this is how old we're talking. They didn't like sit down with a map or a list of places and were like, okay we're gonna create the biggest empire ever. I always imagined the Roman Empire to be bloody, and ruthless, and controlling. And it was, to some degree – I mean, Mary Beard talks a lot about this, that it's hard to say what the Roman Empire was 'like', because the time between Rome's founding and the Empire's downfall was, like, a thousand years. And this book covers a thousand years of history. But what surprised me was that one quote: they did not 'plan' to conquer and control. And here's a bigger quote for you, because Mary Beard says this a lot better than I can. She says: 'These Romans saw their expansion more in terms of changing relationships with other peoples than in terms of control and territory.' And I thought that was so interesting, because it just goes against the pop culture image of Rome and Romans. This isn't to say that they were friendly with the people whose land they dominated. Mary Beard writes: 'It was a coercive empire in the sense that the Romans took the profits and tried to ensure that they got their own way when they wanted, with the threat of force always in the background.' But even though they didn't plan it, the Romans were able to expand so quickly because they didn't try to impose any sort of infrastructure of government in the overseas territory that they conquered. So, outside of Rome, each little bit of the Empire had a different relationship to Rome and its government, and it wasn't standardised. It was very, very, very messy. At least, you know, this is – we're talking about what I've learnt up until this point. I haven't gotten to the crowning of the first Emperor yet, we're still in the 1st Century BCE. So that might change, they might try to enforce more sort of government in their overseas territory, I don't know! No spoilers!

So there you have it, I've been talking for actually longer than I intended to, but there's 10 lessons from 10 really great nonfiction books. I recommend all of these books if you are interested in them, of course. Don't let me tell you what to do. I hope that some of these piqued your interest, maybe you'll give them a go. If not, then I hope maybe you learnt something. Anyway, let me know if you have any nonfiction recommendations for me, you can always DM me or comment on my Instagram @the_community_library. I don't respond directly to DMs, but I do read them and note down any suggestions or feedback you have! As always, you can find a full transcription [hi, transcription readers! 😊] of this episode on my website angourieslibrary.com, plus more links and resources. We'll meet back here in two weeks' time to talk about something else related to books, and until then, I hope you're all keeping safe and maybe reading some really great nonfiction! Bye.

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