



Transcript: Maggie Smith

Katherine May: [00:00:00] Welcome to the True Stories Book Club. I'm delighted to welcome Maggie Smith here tonight, who is, uh, yeah, we've just been having a lovely gossip backstage. That's my favourite bit, I love to have the little gossip. I know loads of you are just coming in, so, and it can take a little while, so, um, we will shoot the breeze for a couple of minutes while you're all just, you know, getting in, logging in, making sure the microphone works.

Rebecca's here tonight to help you out if you get stuck, but always the best thing. As I've just said to Maggie, is to log out and log back in again if there's any problems. It works. It works. It's like the same as all tech. There's no solution except for going out and going in again. True. Yeah, please do say hello and where you're from.

I love. to see that in the comments. That's always so exciting. It gets so, like, global so quickly. And also, if you've got any questions for Maggie tonight, there is a little question box on the right hand [00:01:00] side of, I think it will be the same for you, on the right hand side of your screen, which is like a square thought bubble with a question mark in.

Um, I will be devoting some time to questions at the end, so please do ask them. I have had one in advance too. Um, but I, I know you guys are always really shy about asking questions, and it is fine. It's really fine. I bet, I bet Maggie's had every single question in the book.

Maggie Smith: That is, that is actually

Katherine May: true.

I love the way you predict them in the book as well.

Maggie Smith: I tried to solve that problem a bit, but it didn't, it didn't quite work. No.

Katherine May: No. Um, well, it is so lovely to have you here. I, I tried a year ago when this came up, but you got hellishly busy last year, didn't you? Can you tell us about the year you've had?

It's been wonderful, but it must have been a lot.

Maggie Smith: It's been really wonderful. I know, and here we are, the paperback will be out the first week of June, so I feel like I've just sort of had, like, the [00:02:00] long, deep breath after, um, sort of shepherding this memoir into the world, and, um, we'll be back, back on the road and back at it again, but yeah, it's, it's been really Beautiful in surprising ways, you know, it was like an incredibly personal book to write and, um, difficult at times, but also really, um, cathartic at times as well.

And then, um, sharing it with other people, both people I know. Um, who may not have known really like the sort of interiority of our lives, you know, sometimes I think when you publish a memoir, there are always people who will say, How did you share this with so many strangers? And I always want to say, Oh, that's one thing, right?

Because there's a sort of asymmetrical quality then to those encounters where someone has read. all about your life and knows a lot about you and you might know next to nothing about them, [00:03:00] but there's also this sort of strangeness of having people who know you at some level of depth read and not know what was happening like two houses down the street.

Yeah, that's the, you know, which is a, which is a little strange, but it's been, it's been really wonderful bringing this book out and, um, most of my, Anxiety about it. Most of that was quelled by how warmly it's been welcomed and the, the messages I, I get about this book are, are really, um, I mean, I'm used to getting messages post Good Bones, I'm used to getting messages post Keep Moving, and the messages I've gotten about this book are, um, really special and sort of singular, um, for reasons you can probably imagine.

Katherine May: Well, I, I remember we talked about Good Bones, uh, when I interviewed you in my podcast, and I remember you saying that the problem with Good Bones is that I know when something [00:04:00] terrible has happened because suddenly my Twitter notifications go wild, you know. This is, I mean, I imagine, my guess is that you got a roar of recognition from other women that have been in your situation and it's that sense that like a parched desert has been watered and everyone kind of reaches up to the sky almost.

Maggie Smith: Oh, that's beautiful. You should write that down. Just write that down. Lose that. Lose that. That's

Katherine May: beautiful.

Maggie Smith: That's a problem. Yeah, that's, that's exactly what it's been. It's, it's been interesting how many um, either letters or DMs or emails I get that begin with the sentence This is the first time I've ever reached out.

Um, and I think there is something maybe in the vulnerability in the book, um, or, or maybe in, in the, the sort of way the tale is told that, um, got people to come out of their comfort zones. [00:05:00] To shift things and to sort of reach out in ways they might not have done before. It's

Katherine May: an area with a lot of shame, you know, I mean, I'm the child of divorced parents and infidelity featured.

I won't go into details, they'd probably prefer if I didn't. But I remember the kind of conversation about divorce then that was like in the early 80s. And it was really, at the time, all about kind of quite hard, angry emotions. It was sort of about revenge and being betrayed so badly that you never got through it.

Or, you know, like it was really It was a very different tone of conversation and I think we're so ready for that softer, more vulnerable response to what is essentially being really hurt. Like the pain is there.

Maggie Smith: Yeah. And also just, I think being curious about [00:06:00] what the possibilities are for ourselves in our lives, you know, and, and being open to, even if a possibility is opened up in a painful way.

It's still a possibility. Like, I wouldn't have created that door for myself. I would not have opened that door for myself. I never would have. Um, I wouldn't have, I wouldn't be doing a lot of the things I'm doing now without that door being opened. for me in a really painful way, and I may not have seen it that way at the time.

Katherine May: It doesn't feel great in that moment.

Maggie Smith: That was an opportunity. Um, but I, you know, with perspective, I think it's, um, I feel I'm better now, you know, I feel better now. And so I hope that the conversation is, is sort of switching more. Into a, into a line of like, okay, so what does your life look like in middle age and what might you do differently?

What would you change [00:07:00] about it? It doesn't necessarily mean the end of a relationship, but just not feeling stuck. And I think that's, you know, the, the permission to not be stuck. is,

Katherine May: is real. Not to stay there forever, like not to sort of be the hurt divorcee. Yeah. Um, I would love to ask the people that are here live, like, I'm just really curious to know how many people here have been through a big breakup like the one you've written about in your book, and I wonder how many Our solo parenting as well.

I'd just be really curious to know. It's, um, it's almost still hidden, you know, there's almost still this assumption that everybody's married and paired off and, uh, yeah, that all parents have two children, all children have two parents, sorry. Yeah. It's, we're still there a little bit, but yeah, it'll be interesting to see.

Um, before we go any further, can I invite you to read a little from the book? Just to, just to give us a taste. Is that okay? [00:08:00] Sure. It would be really lovely to open up with that. Sure, sure. Lots of heartbreak in the room tonight, I can see from the comments.

Maggie Smith: Um, I might just skip around a little bit because the book is, um, in, you know, the tiny little vignette, so I might read a little bit, and then a little bit, and then a little bit.

How's that? Yeah, great. That sounds okay. How I Picture It. We are all nesting dolls, carrying the earlier iterations of ourselves inside. We carry the past inside us. We take ourselves, all of ourselves, wherever we go. Inside forty something me is the woman I was in my thirties, the woman I was in my twenties, the teenager I was.

The child I was. Inside divorced me. Married me. The me who loved my husband. The me who believed what we had was irrevocable and permanent. The me who believed in permanence. I still carry these versions of [00:09:00] myself. It's a kind of reincarnation without death. All these different lives we get to live in this one body as ourselves.

A note on foreshadowing. It's a mistake to think of one's life as plot, to think of the events of one's life as events in a story. It's a mistake. And yet, there's foreshadowing everywhere. Foreshadowing I would have seen myself if I'd been watching a play or reading a novel. Not living a life. And then maybe I'll, I'll flip to, um, a page that, uh, a lot of people have told me they have either wanted to throw the book across the room when they read this page, or actually threw the book across the room, which I said, I'm like, Oh, I feel warmly towards you that you felt protective of me in this moment.

It just didn't want to hold the book in your hands. [00:10:00] The chapter is called Air Quotes. Air Quotes. After I returned from teaching at an MFA residency in California, in a meeting in my lawyer's office, my lawyer and I on one side of the conference table, my husband and his on the other, my husband's lawyer used air quotes when she talked about my work.

When you were working, she said.

Katherine May: I'm getting ready to throw. Um,

Maggie Smith: and then the, spoiler alert, I'm going to read the last poem. The book actually ends on a poem. It was not going to. This was not the original ending of the book. The original ending of the book was a chapter back, which is called How It Ends.

But we flip flopped some things around so that the last word is, um, is a poem. And it's called Bride. How long have I been wed to myself? [00:11:00] Calling myself darling, Dressing for my own pleasure, Each morning choosing perfume to turn me on. How long have I been alone in this house, But not alone, Married less to the man than to the woman, Silvering with the mirror.

I know the kind of wife I need. And I become her, the one who will leave this earth at the same instant I do. I am my own bride, lifting the veil to see my face. Darling, I say, I have waited for you all my life.

Katherine May: Wonderful, thank you so much. I, just an observation, I love the way poets read compared to the way, like, people that originally were, like, fiction or prose writers read.

We read it like just some continuous prose and you did the poet's thing and you're like, I'm going to do a bit of this, a bit of that. It's so lovely to watch. I must learn to do it. [00:12:00]

Maggie Smith: I think I'm usually kind of slow readers because we're always kind of thinking, I'm always thinking when I read a poem, if you don't have it in front of you, I want you to be able to sort of hear the form in the air.

And that means hearing the white space and hearing the line breaks. So you can kind of visualize the units of language as I've broken them up. And so it's hard, it's hard to erase that habit when reading a paragraph.

Katherine May: I think, I think you should train us all to do it. But the bits that you made were really interesting because.

This is a book that almost, it sort of almost turns itself inside out. There's something slightly postmodern about it and it's Awareness of its own narrative arc, awareness of foreshadowing, awareness of the reaction to it before it's even been published. What order did that get written in? I wondered when I read it if that came in a later [00:13:00]

edit when you were kind of pre judging what people would think about it, or was that original?

Maggie Smith: That, all of it's original. Um, I wrote all of the vignettes, um, not in chronological order, but there wasn't, um, like I think of them all as strands, you know, it's, it's like, it's braided, but there are definitely more than three strands in this book. There are multiple, multiple strands. Um, all of the strands started from the very beginning.

Um, so the book was always going to have the kind of meta narrative in it where I'm talking about plot and character and setting, um, and things like that. The book was always going to, um, sort of break the fourth wall and speak directly to the reader as a human being. Um, and so the, the, The book really was a kind of assembly project in the same way that a collection of poems is an assembly project.

The difference was that I knew I was [00:14:00] writing a book. When I'm working on poems, um, I'm not writing a book. You know, I've published four collections of poetry, but I've never written a book of poetry. Right. Um, because I first sat down and thought, well, I'm going to write a book about X, and then here's a poem, here's a poem, here's a poem.

It's, I write many poems in the course of a year, and then a number of years go by, and I realize I have enough poems since the last book to build a book. I print it all out, I see what I have, I pull out the things that don't fit, I pull out the things that fit, but I don't really I'm not excited about them.

What I've got left are things that hang together that I'm excited about and then I shuffle them together and try to figure out, like, based on the ending of one poem and the beginning of the next one, what those sort of natural juxtapositions or transitions are to build. Almost like making a mixtape or a playlist.

Yeah. I think this [00:15:00] memoir was the same, the only difference was I knew at the beginning of the year I was writing one book, and at the end of the year I needed to be done with that book. Um, but I still wrote them as individual pieces, printed the whole thing out, you know, 300 and some pages, laid them all out on the living room floor, um, and then I got markers, and I color coded.

Sort of separated them into piles and color coded the different strands. Like the quotes from other writers, which is kind of a Greek chorus of mostly women thinkers and artists. Um, the anticipated questions that I was hoping if I put the answers in the book that no one would actually ask me. Those questions later.

The metaphors, the plot, you know, the play. And then I just shuffled them together to get, like, relatively even color. Or strand distribution from the [00:16:00] beginning of the book to the end. It was a craft project. It's a

Katherine May: craft project, or a stationery project. Which I bet everyone here would be like, Yeah, stationery.

Yeah. I'm really, I'm really interested by, by that kind of, that means of constructing actually, because it's, yeah, there is obviously the sense that it's braided with these multiple strands, and you're kind of conscious of all of these. sort of callbacks over and over again. And the, it gives the whole thing this, this kind of rhythm.

But despite that, there's a real sense of movement through the book as, as you gradually come to terms with this change. And it's, it's very unstated, but it's almost like towards the end, someone opens a window and the air kind of breezes into it. And it's quite hard to detect what exactly is. Causing that, that, it's a change of feeling rather than a change of [00:17:00] even tone.

Um, so I'm fascinated that you, that it's like put together in that way because the movement is definitely there. Did that, was that just obvious from the bits that you had or? Yeah,

Maggie Smith: I mean, I think so because, you know, even though not all of it is chronological, the spine of the book is chronological. Um, and so I think we do go from, Um, a sort of like devastation through processing to at least acceptance, if not like utter joy by the end, you know, so I love that idea of, of it feels like a window opens and there's sort of like fresh air and sunshine at the end.

And actually that last bit takes place in on a warm day at the ocean. And so there is even Like, in the setting, a kind of, like, widening, I think, at the end of the book, and I think it's about time, you know, [00:18:00] like, over the course of the actual timeline of writing the book, I was covering a lot of years in the book itself, but the writing of the book was basically one calendar year.

And so how I felt on day one, when I sat down and thought, okay, what stories do I want to tell? What stories can I tell? And my feelings about my life, the day that I turned it in, which was New Year's Eve, I felt like that seemed symbolic. And like, I'm going to, I'm going to finish this and then start the new year.

Um, I think I had changed. And maybe that's kind of like organically coming through in the writing. It

Katherine May: does. You can cut, you can feel it. It's not, it's just kind of present in the text and it's I wonder, um, how close you were to the material as you, as you went through it, like, did you have, sorry, I'm asking really technical questions, like.

No, I love technical questions. [00:19:00] But there's a, there's a sense of, that you're very close to each chapter. Was it, was it based on contemporary diaries and things like that, or were you relying on memory?

Maggie Smith: I, um, I was relying on memory and, um, you know, I think the closest I come to relying on diary is there are a few places where I had to revisit my social media.

Isn't that a strange thing? Like to not remember. in like 2013, but if you can travel back through old Facebook posts or, um, you know, emails, correspondence, like text messages, like there was, I had a digital archive that I could work with that was mostly, um, conversations between myself and others that helped me kind of, um, Like, recreate the emotional weather of those times for myself, but, but also I think some things.

[00:20:00] Are so, um, like, sort of, there's such a tectonic shift with some conversations and some events, that no matter how many years you distance yourself from them, or how many months, or how many decades, they're, um, sort of crystallized in your mind. And like there are some phone conversations you'll never forget, right?

Like there are some bits of dialogue that you may not remember really anything from that year, but you will remember that one thing that someone said to you, kind or unkind. Um, and so there was some of that. And then I don't keep a diary, but I do keep notebooks, um, and legal pads where I. draft poems, or, you know, just jot down ideas that I don't know exactly what they'll become.

Like, maybe it'll be an essay, who knows? And so I ended up going back through these old, like, stacks of notebooks and old legal pads and flipping and [00:21:00] just being like, oh, that's interesting. Like, this was happening in my professional life because there might be notes from a meeting that I was on. And then two pages later, it's like a line of dialogue that You know, preschoolers said in the car or something.

And so just being able to assemble my, you know, past life from my own writing was, was something that I did too.

Katherine May: Yeah. And of course, the, I mean, the question that memoir is get asked over and over again is a question that you kind of preempt in the book and a question that I know Alyssa Altman's writing a book about at the moment.

Like, how do you have the right to, you know, that's, maybe that's the way that we receive the question, you know? Yeah. We receive it as. How do you feel like you've got the right to write about this? And I don't think people necessarily mean that. I think what they often mean is, wow, how do you have the nerve to say that thing that I would love to say too?

Maggie Smith: Yes, yes. Well, and I think the question, like the phrasing of [00:22:00] the question matters because I have been asked, like, how did you find the courage to write? this book, but I think there are also ways to ask the question that, um, that sort of betray the asker and it's a little bit more of a judgment with a question mark at the end and not a question.

You know, like when people say, I have more of a comment. Instead of a question, there are certain ways that that question can be asked that it really is just a judgment wearing the trench coat of a question mark, but you can see underneath it. And, you know, like, why didn't why are you airing your dirty laundry or why didn't you just process this?

yourself, or why not write this in a journal or talk about it to your therapist or your friends, but not publish the account? Oh, I did that too. Yeah, yeah, [00:23:00] I definitely did that as well.

Katherine May: An evening, like masters, creative writing masters, I used to have a student who every time, every class, A sort of slightly older woman, I'll say, who used to purse her lips and say, And so, who is looking after your son tonight?

Oh, yeah. And I'd be like, Oh, I've got him locked in the cupboard under the stairs tonight. He's fine. I left some bread and water. He should be okay. He's in a dog crate.

Maggie Smith: Yeah. I mean, oh no, I mean, and I think I actually think I wrote about this in the memoir that like when I travel for readings or book tour or conferences, people don't really ask anymore because I'm solo parenting.

But when I was married, and even when I was sort of co parenting and we had joint custody. people would ask me, who's got your kids? And I just thought, you know, that's interesting, because I really don't feel like their father was ever asked, probably ever asked that question when he traveled for work.

And [00:24:00] I think it's, we, it's again, betrays the asker. Yeah. And you're kind of like, you're showing yourself in a way if you're asking that question. And it's honestly, not always men. Like, I think we sometimes, you know, women will ask. that question and sometimes in the spirit of like, how do you manage to get away?

Tell me your secret. Um, but sometimes there is a quiet judgment to that.

Katherine May: Oh, definitely. I wonder, um, I wonder if there's a generational shift that's happening in that I, I feel, I mean, I'm 46. I feel like I have come through an era when it was not okay to talk about your stuff, your dirty laundry. You know, I, I, I come from a family where my grandma used to peg her knickers on the line between the sheets so that you couldn't, you know, you couldn't, we didn't even air our

Maggie Smith: dirty laundry.

That's a metaphor right there.

Katherine May: I do have poems about that. Um, but I, But actually, I [00:25:00] definitely feel that there's real permission for us to talk about our stuff now. I wonder if there's a generational shift there though, and if there's a sort of older generation looking back towards us thinking, really? We can't, we can't say that.

And I, I wonder what the next generation on, you know, the level of permission they'll feel, like what permission will our kids feel to talk? I hope it will stay open. I

Maggie Smith: hope so too. And I suspect it will. I mean, I think that they're already used to sharing more of themselves just via growing up with the internet in a way.

I mean, I'm 47. I didn't grow up with the internet. I didn't have the internet until college. So, I mean, and that's still fairly early in one's life, but I did not grow up online. I could not just Google anything. I didn't have access to news at all moments of the day. And so I think, you know, there are a lot of aspects of that that stress me [00:26:00] out for, you know, for my kids.

But I think one of the perks of that is this breaking down of these silences, because it's about shame. Um, and I know that's what Alyssa's writing so much about in, in On Permission, is like, how do we, how do we, um, find the courage to tell our stories, not just because we're, um, over sharers. Because part of the drive, like, part of the importance of writing about our lives and talking about our lives is that we, might like open the window and let some air in for somebody else,

Katherine May: right?

Yeah, no, absolutely. And in fact, one of the questions that we've received touches on this, so I'm going to ask it now. Um, it's from Kim. She says, I have such deep respect for your tell mine rather than tell all approach. Um, Is there a mantra, a litmus test, or some

other guiding principle you continually [00:27:00] use to determine what to include and what to exclude?

It's such a perfect question when you're writing memoir, isn't

Maggie Smith: it? Oh my gosh, that's such a good question. Like, what is mine? You know, and that's actually one of the questions I ask in the book, like what is mine, you know, and I think it, it makes me think about that, um, that famous Anne Lamott quote about, you know, if people didn't want to be written about unkindly, I will get the quote wrong, that they should have behaved better, and I, and I actually don't, I actually, I love that quote, I find it charming, it makes me laugh and smile, and I find it like emboldening, but I also don't live or write according to that principle.

I don't want to be written about on my worst day. Like, I think we are all badly behaved at times. And so I, I also believe in like extending grace, um, when possible and protecting privacy when possible. And, um, you know, to the, to the best of our ability, [00:28:00] putting ourselves in other people's shoes and thinking, okay, how would it feel?

And, um, and, and not being sort of silenced by. That feeling of like, oh, that might make me uncomfortable, but like letting it inform your craft choices, really? So the litmus test for me with this book and with most things is first and foremost, how will my children feel about it one day? Yeah, it's a huge one.

It's the big one. It's the big one. And I edited this book with them in mind more than really anyone else. Because my relationship with them is the one I want to protect at all costs. Yeah. And so reading with a sensitive eye, almost reading like them, You know, like, not just at this age, but like, trying to imagine how would this feel when they're 25?

How will this feel when they're 45? Like, what would they be okay with me [00:29:00] sharing about our lives? And what is like, frankly, more their story to tell because it's about their interior life and should therefore come from their perspective and not mediated by me?

Katherine May: And how is this going to land for them? But I do, I mean, yes, I agree.

And I, I often think about that. And I think really hard about, like, how people will see themselves in the text. You know, I know it lands really differently that even when you've tried to write as kindly as possible about people, we have these super sensitive antennae for a portrayal of ourselves. It's just the way we are.

But I also. I often think, I wish, in a way, my parents had written about their state of mind at various points in their lives when I was finding them quite mysterious and hard to understand. I still find them mysterious and hard to understand, let's face it. But, I actually, I don't, that question about like how You know, what will it do to your children to read this about you?

I kind of think, I'd like to flip that [00:30:00] on its head because I, I think for some of us, that would feel like a real privilege to be able to, You know, when we grow up, not, not right now, not when we're eight, not when we're 12. Yeah. Even when we're 16, but when we're 30, be able to look back and go, Oh, I can really see the motivation behind my mum when she used to get, in my view, hysterical about the laundry.

I now really get it. I get how she was feeling. And I, like that's. That's, that's the, that's the way I, I tend to see it actually, and that's the way I actually feel about the mystery that is my, my parents when I was younger, you know, I don't mean my parents specifically, but yeah.

Maggie Smith: Yeah, I agree with that.

And I think, you know, there's something, and I, you know, this is in the book, but I, I see honesty as care. Like, I really don't believe in family secrets. I think they're poison. I think, um, usually what you are imagining is happening is so much worse than what's actually [00:31:00] happening. And the, the sort of narrative that you make for yourself.

or the gaps that you try to fill in, especially as a child, um, it, it's just, it's anxiety producing to have to fill in those gaps, you know, for, for, for years. And so I'm much more on the side of, like, age appropriate conversations are a good thing. Let's just, you know, and it may be that what I say is like, I can't really talk to you about this because I'm not your friend.

I'm your And so it's not appropriate for me to be sharing things about. my personal life with you, regardless of whether your other parent is involved in that or not. Like, there are some things that are not for children, like this book. It's not for children, my children or anyone else's children. If you want to read it when you're an adult, let's talk about it.

If you never want to read it, you don't need to. It is not on the syllabus. It's not on the family. You know, and it's only my, I mean, [00:32:00] again, it's only my perspective of my life. It's a time capsule of my perspective on my life in a very specific time. So even though the events Will not change. That's a bummer of memoir.

Writing about it actually doesn't change what happened. Change now, yeah.

Katherine May: Um, my, my, You're actually not gold.

Maggie Smith: No, no, no, I, I'm not omniscient and I can't, I can't change things, but, but my perspective may change. So the way I feel about some of these things may not, may not hold the same way that some of the decisions I made when I was 22 didn't hold, um, you know, were ever evolving.

And so I think, you know, Also, thinking about that as you decide what stories to tell and how. It's like giving yourself permission to just be the person you are now and talk about it with your current consciousness and not giving yourself the pressure of having to write, like, the definitive [00:33:00] version of this event that happened that you were part of.

That's a lot of pressure.

Katherine May: And I, I mean, I know from, you know, memoirs that I wrote a few years ago, I don't even agree with myself now on some of the things in it and that it doesn't, it doesn't mean the slightest. No,

Maggie Smith: that's actually growth. I mean, I think if we, if we write something and then we evolve. in a different way, I actually think that's not a failure.

It's more, I'm much more wary of feeling the same over, across decades than I am of feeling differently. Yeah, that would

Katherine May: be weird. But of course, in the book, we know that your, your former husband did edit, you gave him the opportunity to have a last say on a piece that you wrote for the New York Times.

Yes. And he did try to edit some of it. And I wonder, I mean that for me was the other bit that made me want to throw the book across the room, um, the bit with the lawyer. Definitely. [00:34:00] But, but that was another bit where I thought, oh, he's got his nails into you, but you resisted it. And I wonder if the expansiveness, I wonder if he gave you a gift there in the, in the kind of expansive potential of this book.

book was seeded in that moment, like you'd, you'd rebelled against those tiny edits and that let you say, no, no, no, no, no, this is definitely my story. Was that, was that kind of a formative experience?

Maggie Smith: It was, I mean, it was data, you know, like everything that happens to us is data. And, um, and, you know, sometimes I don't want to receive the data I receive.

Sometimes I need the data, but I don't want to receive it the way that I am receiving it. It was really painful and frankly obnoxious at the time. Um, and yet what it taught me was not to ask again. I mean, if you don't want feedback, that's a really good way to not have it anymore is, is to [00:35:00] nitpick. I mean, I feel that way with my kids.

Like I, I know better than to nitpick. Um, and to, and to nag about things, because I will not be consulted if I, if I come at things in a certain way. And so, you know, that kind of communication was data, and it taught me something important about, um, owning my own experiences and writing from my point of view, but it also taught me, I think, what I was up against.

Um, and, and it allowed me to write the book in a way that, Both protected his privacy, but also, um, protected me.

Katherine May: Ultimately, it is a book about your perspective. It's not a book about him. It's not at all. I mean, there are a couple of moments where some, you know, some bad behaviour is visible for sure. Um, but they, they again are data rather than necessarily interpretation.

Yeah. But actually. [00:36:00] That's what memoir does, that's what good memoir does for me, is it gives the perspective, it owns the perspective of the memoirist, it doesn't go out to exact revenge, it doesn't go out to set the record straight, it's not an autobiography in, in that sense, like that's one of the differentiators I think, but what it does is it, is it owns your feelings and your responses and your emotions, which are not always the behavior of a perfect human being either, and that, That's the value of reading them, because none of us quite pull that off, I don't think.

Maggie Smith: No, unfortunately, that's the other real bummer, is, um, we are not omniscient, we cannot change the past, and we're not perfect. These are just the facts. These are just the facts. It's a strange name. I know, I know. But I think you're right. I mean, I, I think it, um, Gina Frangelo says something, um, has said something really smart about memoir, and, and I, I didn't hear this.

Until after I'd written mine, then I was like, oh, I think, I think I have these two pieces, thank goodness, [00:37:00] because you don't really want someone to come at you with, here are the two essential pieces of a memoir after you've already completed your memoir. Like, that's, that's data you'd like to know ahead of time.

But according to her, it was, um, the two sort of essential pieces of memoir are self assessment and societal interrogation. It can't just be a sort of closed circuit where it's only about you. It's about sort of like pulling in like, okay, so this happened in my life. And what part of a pattern is that? Um, you know, what, what are those ripples?

How does it, how does it affect others? How, how did I get to that place? And so. The self assessment part was important to me. I had no interest in writing a book in which I was the hero or the martyr of my own story. I found that it's unsophisticated and boring and frankly not true. [00:38:00] Um, and so I didn't want to do that.

And I also, you know, wanted to contextualize some of the decisions that I made and, and some of what the, you know, some of, some of what had happened. I think. It has to be understood in the sort of context of what is the institution of marriage, what are our expectations around gender and caregiving, um, how was I raised and how does that impact what my expectations were of a partnership, um, and then frankly, like, how do I, how do I break some of those cycles?

Yeah. And what are some different possibilities for my own children?

Katherine May: I feel like, I don't know how to, I wouldn't like to test this, but I feel like the the overriding theme for the vast majority of all memoir is how do we heal? And that's, that's what this book is about. That's what all of my [00:39:00] books are about.

I just find lots of different things to heal from. There's no shortage!

But yeah, it's that's the That's the question that we're all trying to figure out. And I, and it's, it's great to see other people just in process. We don't need to see them solving it or getting it right, or telling us how to do it in 10 easy steps, which is my great bugbear. We just need to witness other people in, in the process that we are continually in as well.

And, and it's like knowing about the renewal of cells. It's just so important, I think.

Maggie Smith: Oh, I love that. I think that's so true. And I think, you know, part of Part of what I think memoir in general makes possible for other people is that feeling of being less alone. Yeah, you know, because when you were, when you have a little, a little window into someone else's messy, human

Katherine May: life.

The carnage of being human.

Maggie Smith: [00:40:00] Right, I think it's really, it's, whether the mess of your life mirrors the mess of theirs, it doesn't even matter, like, which is why I don't think this book, is, is like a divorce book or needs to be read by people who have been divorced, although it certainly has enough. If you have, it has plenty for you.

But I, I think reading, reading about someone else's experience and how they are trying to find new possibilities and yes, heal. And sort of recover themselves. Um, I think that, that makes us feel less alone. It makes us feel seen and heard and understood. I think that's incredibly empowering. I know that's what I get from reading about other people's lives.

It's like, Oh, you too? You too are imperfect and just trying to figure it out on a daily basis. Great.

Katherine May: And I can see from the comments there, there's loads of people here tonight feeling that. I have a couple of questions, but guys, please, there's a little time for you to add a couple more if you'd like to.[00:41:00]

But I will try and tackle them. Um, so, the first one is, uh, How do you get your best mental state in order to write what you planned on doing that day, night, morning? What's, what's your warm up?

Maggie Smith: I have zero warm up. I have zero warm up and I tend to not plan much. I'm not, um, I'm not much of a planner. So I, um, my goal is I'd like to write early in the morning, um, before the day gets at me, um, before the emails are coming fast and furious, before I feel like there's a bunch of, like, What I would classify as administrative tasks, you know, that are not, that do not require creativity, but do require time and energy.

And so if I'm feeling fresh and I can get the kids, you know, out the front door and off walking to school, if I can hold the day at bay. Yeah, like just the business y stuff of the day for even just an [00:42:00] hour. I'm usually pretty well primed first thing in the morning, um, before I've like switched my brain into a different mode because email mode is not poetry mode, even though both are short and happen in the same space.

Um, and so that for me is helpful. It's like, Either going to a coffee shop and, you know, turning off the Wi Fi so that I'm not looking at my phone or scrolling Instagram or, you know, doing something else that is like eye candy, but actually is, I have no business doing if I have some writing I'm supposed to be doing.

Um, and time of day matters, like early morning and late night. I think there's something to those like boundary times where you're kind of like just entering the day or just ready to exit the day or your edges are a little softer. Um, and you'd be there like, yeah, that's, that's what it is. So that, that helps me or just taking a walk to kind of like shake the [00:43:00] 15 emails I just did off before I start something else.

I

Katherine May: am so similar. I have to get in before the emails start. Like if, if I open my inbox, it's over, it's over for the day because they're in my head then. And I'm like, Oh. I didn't reply to that properly or, you know, I've got to do this or I, it has got to be pre inbox. Yeah. And the earlier I start, the better I write.

And I think my, my inner editor gets up later than I do. I think they Oh, I love that. Get the energy first thing. Yeah, yeah. If I'm trying to write at four o'clock in the afternoon, my inner editor is fully active, fully aware of what I'm saying. And it's just no Okay, uh, so that was a question from Linda, by the way.

I've just worked out where I can see people's names on these questions. Oh, I love that. Well, it's fine. Um, so this one's from Rachel, um, the quote from a friend's therapist, therapist, wish for more pain in myself saying that as a therapist. And sometimes I [00:44:00] see it as being very true in my personal development.

And yet I long for it not to be true, or at least ever decreasing in intensity over a lifetime. Um, was the helpful advice from said friend's therapist? And if so, why? Does that make

Maggie Smith: sense? Yeah, that was, um, actually, um, Chris, the writer, Christy Tate, that was something that she wrote about was, um, a therapist saying wish for more pain, because then you will have to Because the problem with Um, things being just a little bad, or just a little, just a little stressful, or just a little boring, or just not that fulfilling, you know?

Like, you're willing to eat something that doesn't taste great, but if it tastes terrible, you're not going to eat it. And I think there's something that happens in life where it I mean, often it seems like, I wish we could learn, I wish we could receive data in a different way, and I'm sure there are people who do, [00:45:00] but I am someone who, yes, I have a high tolerance for meh.

I just do. And I, I think I'm resistant to change. I'm, um, a dutiful firstborn daughter. I'm a dutiful parent, um, I am a little type A, I have perfectionistic tendencies, and so I am unlikely to sort of veer off the path I'm on, unless the path is untenable, and it takes a lot for a path to become untenable, and so what I would like to To not need more pain or more difficulty, you know, say, um, you know, taller, stronger roadblocks.

To have to find a different way through, that's who I am as a person. And so it was actually incredibly helpful. And now that, now that I know that about myself, I do think it's possible for me not to get to my breaking point to make a change. Yeah, right. Look, if I [00:46:00] get to the point where I'm like, this situation isn't really working for me, but I'm not at rock bottom with it just yet, like, maybe I don't need to get there.

Like, maybe I can recognize it's enough to not be fully in to get out, you know, and knowing that is important.

Katherine May: It's almost training. I mean, that's exactly what I wrote about in Wintering, really. And I think there are some readers that receive that as, well, sometimes you just get to choose to duck out of life.

And that's really nice, isn't it? And, you know, people get angry with me about that. And I always say, no, no, no, this is about how, if you ignore pain for long enough, it will take you down. Yes. And you will be forced to deal with it. Like it will visit you. You can't, you don't get to choose around these things.

They. They will carry on haunting you until finally they fell you. Yes. And then you will deal with them. And so actually what you realize after a while is that you have a choice. You can, you can look [00:47:00] them in the eye early and you can choose to feel the pain. Or you can wait until your whole life falls from under you.

And, and also the problem with all of that is that sometimes life will still fall from under you for reasons completely beyond your control. Yes. Welcome to human life guys. There it is. We're

Maggie Smith: not really selling this

Katherine May: human life thing.

Maggie Smith: This is not an infomercial for human life. No,

Katherine May: I, I can see why the self-help people sell copies that we do.

I just say '

Maggie Smith: cause of, because a bullet point list of like how to avoid pain would be, would be useful even though it's probably not .

Katherine May: Yes. We're like, it'll still get you .

Maggie Smith: It's, it's hunting you down .

Katherine May: Okay, okay. Another one. This is from Linda. Um, I'm beginning to lose my voice, everyone. I'm really sorry. I sound like uh, Scrappy Doo.

Is it? No, I sound shaggy, I think. Don't sound like shaggy. I'm [00:48:00] moving through all the notes. Linda said, Can I ask a question about good bones? If yes, that's very nice of you to check this, I'd like to ask about, for every kind of stranger there's at least one who will break you. Who wants to know about that line?

Maggie Smith: Yeah, I mean I, so I have, I have talked about, and actually most recently I talked to Adam Grant about this, and I said, um, some of the, the sort of pushback I've gotten about this poem has to do with, the math, um, you know, like, which I find kind of funny, but because I'm not a mathematician, it's all metaphor, right?

So I recognize that literally for every bird on earth, there is not a rock to be thrown at a bird, you know? And like, and I recognize that actually, literally, um, For every kind stranger, there is not one who would break you. I [00:49:00] know, I know both anecdotally from my own lived, and from my own lived experience, that there are more good people, more kind people, more helpers than herders in the world, thank goodness.

The herders get a lot of airtime. And take up a lot of space in the news, um, and they, they tend to speak more loudly and in scarier ways than the helpers, who a lot of times do their quiet, um, good and decent work to themselves, and so we're not always getting the, you know, the good news. The news should be called bad news, mostly.

Um, The The And so it's easy to, I think, get ourselves into a headspace where everything seems like it's so easily tipped in one place or the other, and that's why it's metaphor, it's the feeling of thing, it's the feeling of precarity, the feeling of like, life could tip this way. What [00:50:00] could tip this way?

For every nice person you meet, there was someone who would treat you poorly. The ratios are not statistically accurate. Not one to none. It's not. I think, you know, I wrote that poem out of a feeling of, you know, my children, I think were Maybe two and six when I wrote that poem, and they're 11 and 15 now, so it's been a while.

Um, but it really came out of a feeling of helplessness. Like, what if I, I brought them to this place by no, no, not requested. Like, no one asked to be dragged into, into this world. Um, It's a complicated place. It's not a safe place. And it's much less safe, I think, even than it was when I wrote the poem, certainly for them.

And, and it's, it came from that feeling of helplessness and precarity. So it was a time capsule moment.

Katherine May: [00:51:00] Yeah, yeah, and there is that question that comes to all of us, which is like, what do we tell our children about the world? You know, and how much do you reveal to them and when? I find that a really tough question.

Like I, I felt for the longest time, like, I just didn't want my son to know that racism existed because I, I felt, you know, I had the privilege of keeping that from him being white. But also, I kind of thought, is to know about it, to be at risk of, of perpetuating it. Like, I think that was very naive of me now in retrospect, but there was this sense that, that we hold Pandora's box for our children and, and like, we, we either get Like, we either choose when to release the contents of it for them, or someone else will at a moment that's beyond our control.

And I honestly still don't know what's better or worse, like, [00:52:00] is gonna come, but who, how do they find out and who do they And can I sterilize it enough? Clearly not, I can't.

Maggie Smith: Yeah, or just, you know, I think in most cases I would rather hear them, I would rather have them hear hard things from me, because I know them personally and I know how to phrase it.

I know, I know what their particular experiences and anxieties around whatever that thing may be. And so I feel like I have a place, I have a way of, of, of not sanitizing it, but giving them a soft place to land with the information that they might. You know, hearing it from an Apple news alert on their cell phones, or hearing it from a classmate who has no ability to really help them process it, I would much rather have the tough conversations with them and have them have a dialogue with me than, yikes, you know?[00:53:00]

Katherine May: Yeah, and there are so many different angles that yikes can come from now.

Maggie Smith: And again, there's no answer. I mean, there's no answer. We're just figuring out as we go.

Katherine May: Yeah, yeah, we just make it up as we go along. There's a question here from Rumi, um, Maggie, do people still refer to your work in air quotes? Oh yeah, this is a super clue. How do you protect the white space in your life necessary to write poetry?

Oh, that's a great question. That, that air quotes thing. Oh, I know. The problem with it is that we often feel, as artists, we feel a little air quote y, and then when we see it replicated in the outside world, that's a killer, isn't it? It's a real killer.

Maggie Smith: You know, it really hurt me, and also the fact that the lawyer was a woman.

Um, and, and a parent. Exactly. And I had that experience where I was like, really? And then it occurred to me later. And like, [00:54:00] I mean, frankly, like, internalized misogyny is real. And we, um, you know, may judge other people based on our own experiences and upbringing, and There are plenty of, of women in the world who will, um, be unkind or dismissive of other women in order to, um, keep a close proximity to power.

And that tends to be men. And so in order to stay in favor, um, and it's, it's ugly. Um, but the second question is, um, that's a great question. How do you protect the white space in your life to write? Um, it is white space, isn't it? That, like, breathing, that breathing room. You know, what I've, what I've done is I, I don't have a sort of, I don't have a schedule.

I don't have a regular kind of life, which is a, [00:55:00] Um, a strange and often anxiety producing fact of my life that I kind of cobble a living together from various, like, things that I do, none of them which look like a real job. I know you know. So it's like, I want to speak in geek here, and some book royalties here, and some teaching work with grad students here, and newsletter here, and, and so I have, I have my, my sort of like tentacles, my creative tentacles in several different things.

But what, what that means for me is that when I get up in the morning, Most days I may have one or two things scheduled, like a wonderful conversation with Katherine May and you all, but for the most part I don't have, um, a really tight, really packed schedule, unless I'm like on book tour or in like heavy pre publication mode, and so I found a way to build in a lot of time.

what I [00:56:00] need in order to write, which is nothingness. Like, sometimes my kids are like, you just look like you're staring into space. And I'm like, that's the word factory. That's what it looks like when the word factory is actually up and running. Like, you don't hear whirring of machinery, you don't see little people running around and they're actually doing and making anything, but that kind of quiet space to just take a walk, look at the way a tree is like moving in the wind, it sounds, I know that you're people are like, oh poets.

But it's so true. We love

Katherine May: this. All of us in this room love that. Yeah,

Maggie Smith: you just have to have time and space to sort of put your antenna up and, and listen. And so I get cranky if I'm overscheduled because I haven't built the white space in. Yeah, I don't,

Katherine May: I can't

Maggie Smith: bear it. I can't bear it either. And I, I never want to come across as sort of like, um, [00:57:00] like a prima donna with my schedule, but I will sometimes push back and say like, that's too many things in one day.

You know, I need for my own sanity, I'm also an introvert, like, I'm, I know I have a, maybe a, a lower threshold for activity than the average human.

Katherine May: Writers, like, isn't that just being a writer? I

Maggie Smith: mean, I know some extroverted writers who don't seem to feel this, um, but I need a lot of solitude, like, and I know that about myself, and I'm, I'm more unapologetic about it now.

I think I used to feel kind of like Oh, that's a deficit. Like everybody else seems to be doing just fine. Go, go, go. Why can't I make myself function at that level? And it's just not how I'm wired.

Katherine May: Well, we are very similar. Um, Maggie, it has been amazing to talk to you. Likewise. I'm going to wave a copy of your book up because it's There she is.

[00:58:00] This is a proof from last year. It's got the letters.

Maggie Smith: It is. I have my much loved, like, my all flags. Beautiful. But

Katherine May: if anyone here has not been convinced during our conversation to read this, I'd be very surprised who hasn't read it already, but it is It's just spectacularly good, and thank you for coming to talk to us, it's been such a pleasure.

No,

Maggie Smith: this has been, this has been a joy. If I'm, if I'm going to have a conversation with another human being on Thursday, I could do no better than you. Well, I'm

Katherine May: always here. Excellent. Good night everyone. Oh, there's going to be no book club in March because I'm, uh, I've got my paperback launch in the UK, and then I'm going on holiday.

So, um. White space. Yeah, it's a white space. So, uh, we will be back in, uh, May. I'm not good at months. We'll be back in May with, uh, this book, which is Cloistered by Katherine [00:59:00] Coldstream. Uh, I'm, I'm gambling on the fact that you guys will be as fascinated by nuns as I always am. Just, just putting it out there.

It's really good. It's a really great memoir of being a nun and then not being a nun anymore.

Maggie Smith: Oh, I'm putting this on my list. Thank you for the

Katherine May: rec. It's fantastically good. But thank you everyone. And I will take loads of care and I'll see you really soon.