



Transcript: Erica Berry on the meaning of wolves

Katherine May:

Hi, everyone. I'm Katherine. Welcome to How We Live Now. I'm standing in my garden underneath the big ash tree that overhangs it and I'm listening to the wind ruffle the leaves. It's one of my favorite sounds. There's two ring-necked doves a little higher up. They're coming away. On Saturday, they got chased out of the tree by a very angry squirrel who lives up there too, and I heard him scolding them. It was very, very funny. Today, all is peaceful, but it is beginning to feel a little bit like autumn. It hasn't yet. Even last night, I had my dinner outside in the pitch dark, such a strange thing to live through these profound changes in our weather systems. And of course, here, in England, we don't feel the worst of it. Anyway, I am back with a new season of How We Live Now. Had a nice little break over the summer when I really, really needed to take a bit of a rest, not just to restore my energy, although that was very important. I'd done an awful lot of talking in the first half of the year promoting my new book *Enchantment*, and I was beginning to feel a little weary of social contact, as you know I do. But also, during that time, I'd really got so far from the habit of writing that I began to wonder if I could ever get back into it again. It's so easy in this world to put creativity aside. Even for someone like me who's living, whose career has writing at its center, there's always an email that needs to be replied to or a meeting that needs to be had. Someone who wants to have a cup of tea and pick your brains about something, somewhere to go, somewhere to be, someone to talk to, and the writing feels like the least substantial part of that.

And I had this kind of big realization at the beginning of summer that only I could fight to put writing at the center of what I do. And that meant truly honoring it myself, truly believing it wasn't a silly, embarrassing thing that I do on my own and that everything else is proper work. It might surprise some of you to know that that attitude hits me too and it does. We grow up with a vision of work that often involves salaries and regular hours and going to an office and career progression, pay rises, promotions, limited holiday, very fixed hours, and most of all, that pay comes from hours put in.

That's not how writing really works. Most writers for most of their career don't get paid anything like the value of their work in creative or cultural terms, or the value of the hours they put in. And for me, it's completely disconnected. It's taken me a long time to integrate that, but I've been working really, really hard on it. And I think that's a good moment to mention that there's a little bit of a change happening in the podcast for this season, at least, in that I'm still pausing a tiny bit and I'm sharing with you something that's already going on in my world elsewhere on the internet or my Substack, which is katherinemay.substack.com. It's called The Clearing. And one of the things I do on the Clearing is run a book club called the True Stories Book Club, which is a way of talking about the best nonfiction books that are coming out, and particularly nonfiction books that tell quite personal stories.

And so, for this season, I'm going to share with you the recordings of those True Stories Book Clubs, the interviews I do... Big crowd of doves are just flown over. That was really cool. I hope you heard the wing beat. That was lovely. Sorry, I will carry on. I'm going to share with you the interviews that I do with the authors of the books in our book club. Now, over on Substack for paid subscribers, you're able to attend these live, to attend the recordings, to submit questions, to talk to the author in the chat, and to really be part of it. And if you want to join that, then you're really, really welcome. Please take a look at it. But it's also possible to watch those video recordings afterwards and to listen to the audio without any advertising.

However, what's great about this podcast is it's free for everyone to listen to if you can tolerate a few ads, which I think we're all used to now. So I hope you really enjoy it. And I want to introduce to you my first guest this season who is a fantastically poised and accomplished debut author called Erica Berry, talking about her book *Wolfish*. Now, *Wolfish* is quite a hard book to describe, but it's absolutely wonderful. It is a book about the reintroduction of wolves into the Midwest of America and the reactions to that and the survival and the progress of the wolves. It's also about the history and culture of our relationship with wolves and how we see them, about the way they enter our language in so many different ways, the way they enter our folklore, the way they enter our films and our books and our TV programs, and how absolutely saturated our culture is in the image of the wolf.

But there's a third element to this book, which I think makes it really special, and that is Erica's own discussion of her experiences as a woman in the world, being predated, feeling like prey, having to understand that there are metaphorical wolves out there as well as literal wolves, but also thinking about what a nuanced and complex relationship that is about how we become predator sometimes as well as prey, and about how we often choose to fit into those roles rather than resist them. I don't think I'm really doing it justice in my description, but Erica does in our conversation and I absolutely love

speaking to her and I hope you'll really enjoy it too. Do read the book and do let me know what you think. I'll be back in a little while.

Erica, welcome. It is so lovely to have you here. I'm thrilled that you agreed because it's such a wonderful book that we are talking about today. I'm going to hold my copy up of *Wolfish* and I think some people here will have a different cover, so I love it when we get to talk about covers as well because it's fascinating.

Erica Berry:

Me too.

Katherine May:

So I wondered if you'd like to start us off by reading a little bit from it, giving us a taste of *Wolfish*.

Erica Berry:

Thank you. Yes. I've just been flipping, this is the UK version, which I just adore this cover. So this is from the beginning of a chapter that's about the idea of truth and sort of specifically the idea of crying wolf was what I was thinking about.

There's a story my gramps likes to tell about one of my early visits to his sheep farm. I must have been two or three toddling. We're walking toward the barn and I am running ahead in grass already mowed to fuzz by the herd, probably chasing butterflies, those ones that appear each spring to surf the breeze, like shreds of torn lavender tissue paper. I turn a corner, round a hill, and stop. I've seen something, made eye contact with it. "Gramps," I say breathless, running back to his ambling frame, his boots, nearly my height. A wolf, there's an animal ahead, eyes glassy but alert, neck hooked in a metal snare trap.

As an environmentalist, my gramps believed in the conservation of wild spaces and their inhabitants. But here on the farm, he was a tender and he reckoned those two aims with little angst. His responsibility for the sheep was love, but also business. His job was to keep the flock alive. On the ground from a distance, the animal is my size, and for a second we watch each other. Her breath surely labored. Did she know she would die? Did I? It's not a wolf. Gramps knows that immediately. There are no known wolves in Oregon at this point in the early 1990s. My wolf is just a coyote, but I'm a child and I know only stories and the wolf in my stories looms big. The wolf is the beast that gets the sheep and I love the lambs. I lean over the rose-colored bathtub and help bottle-feed the ones whose mothers have for whatever reason turned away.

What did I feel watching that predator? I would like to think I cried on instinct, aware I was witnessing a brink of death, but I'm not sure. There is a chance I may have felt like we had won like this was the last threat, like we had saved the lambs, or maybe, and this

is worse to consider, I saw the animal I thought was wolf and I did not realize that we had won. Maybe I thought the animal was still a threat. So I ran to grab my grandfather's hand. Maybe I saw panic in the animal's eyes and mistook it for my own. Gramps does not have answers to tell me about what happened after I got him. When I asked recently, he waved it off, eyes floating elsewhere. He began to tell another story. So many of his stories are tall, stretched, sculpted. Does it go without saying I have no memory of the encounter with the trap, no memory of the creature I thought was wolf, no memory of what twitched inside me when, if I rounded the corner alone and looked her in the eye? In French, the word *loup* means wolf. But in other contexts, it can also mean other things. An error in calculation, for example. Pluralized, it's the black velvet mask worn at a costume ball. Both definitions suggest one's first impression of a wolf is wrong or rather imperfect. The truth is not always what it seems.

Katherine May:

That is such a perfect introduction to the book. Thank you so much. I mean, one of the things that struck me over and over again was the way that the language of wolves is absolutely knitted into not just our language, but so many other languages across the world. It seems like it's a sort of enduring obsession of humans almost.

Erica Berry:

Well, and I think that was, I sort of thought when you say wolf in America and England, people get this sort of big bad wolf sort of stereotype if they've been raised in a certain western folkloric biblical tradition. And I started trying to figure out when did that conflation of wolf with bad scary things sort of start. And you go back in the language and impression and Slavic and Iranian, there are words for wolf that are the words for outlaw really, really a long time ago. And this idea that some of these metaphoric conflations that I had thought were these kind of contemporary problems, you realize they're really deeply in a lot of certain linguistic traditions, not all of them, of course. And that became interesting.

Katherine May:

And that threat is so often entirely imaginary as your clip that you just read there suggested that we project wolves onto things that are not wolves so often. And at the same time, we fail to see the dangerous things that are lurking around us all the time.

Erica Berry:

Yeah, I became so interested in the idea of how often we define ourselves off of creating this other thing like that's over there and that's what it's doing, so we must be this civilized, this more rational, I don't know, whatever it is, those projections go so deep with the wolf. And I think I started this project looking at wolves from a sort of environmental studies standpoint. And I was trying to understand some of the

animosity toward wolves in my own family, which includes taxidermists and ranchers and also environmentalists. And just understanding that when people said wolf, there was this just shadow wolf beneath it.

It was sort of the tip of the iceberg was when you'd see a headline about a wolf. And beneath that iceberg was just these deep feelings about what it meant to be in community, but also to have an other, and to have these boundaries between what is safe and what is dangerous. And the things we are told to fear are so often that's like a story sold to us. And I became very interested in not just how do we grow out of our fears, which was often how I heard fear talked about, but how do we grow into them and what would, investigating that idea of inheriting fears, how might that help live with them.

Katherine May:

So before we get too deep into the book, I'd love to know a little bit more about your origins as a writer. This is an astonishingly kind of poised and authoritative debut. Where did you begin as a writer? How did this start and at what point did you decide to write the book?

Erica Berry:

Thank you. First, it means so much to have it in your hands. I was a poet first. I think that was the sort of attention to language and the specificity of that as a teenager. And I was reading things like Sylvia Plath's journals because I was like, I'm this poet, I'm interested in how she's putting voice to woman's experience. And it was then reading, say, journals that I was like, "Oh, it's really interesting when she's also writing about her own life," and understanding it, but also there's this porousness between looking at the self and looking at the world.

And I became very interested in the idea that I could look outward and I was curious and I was sort of doing journalism at the same time and was interested in having these interviews, but it was often in service of knowing myself. And I think if you'd have told me I'd have written a nonfiction book that would be on the mythology shelf or the science shelf as a kid, it's on all of these different bookshelf, but I would've been very surprised because I was so deep into stories and writing fiction and poetry were really my love at the beginning.

But then, this project was sort of in the rock tumbler of my mind for about 10 years. And I think I just needed to really, it was circling this wolf in many ways. And my first iteration was I'm going to do this kind of cool reported project. I'm going to solve all the problems of the American West that I feel deeply in these own family tensions in my own life. And I'm going to write this book for the people who are fighting. And then, it

was like, well, we'll talk more about this, but these things were happening in my personal life and I realized I had to look at these things closer to me, and that that was the lens through which I was sort of doing the journalism. I was wearing these glasses of my own experience that I couldn't take off. And so, this genre that your work is very much inspiring in of being able to do this sort of weave where you're both being quite intimate about my own life, that felt appealing to me. I guess I was writing what I was trying to figure out at all points.

Katherine May:

That's what helps to deliver the kind of symbolic heft of this book. That it's very different to just explaining the folklore of the wolf and the kind of linguistic clout of the wolf, it's the use of your story that really brings that to life. I would love to hear a little more about how you came to decide on those incidents, because as I was reading about these different encounters with different men that you delve into, I mean, I think any female reader in particular would find it impossible not to be conjuring all the different encounters that they've had. And I mean, it is hard not to notice the commonality of all of our experiences there, but I wonder how you selected them because I suspect that all of us have got many, many, many of them to tell.

Erica Berry:

Yeah, I think there's this book also follows the story of one wolf who left his home pack in Oregon. And the only reason we follow this one wolf is that he was the first one. He was wearing a collar. And so, scientists were able to track his locations through GPS. And in a way, I think I see my stories in this as I've just been putting a collar on myself and tracking these little micro movements. And it's not that my story's been any, there's nothing really superlative, as you say, these are quite quotidian some of the experiences, and that does not mean they're not traumatic. They don't reshape your experience of moving through the world. But women's experiences and sort of exposure to predatory patriarchal behavior get so normalized. And early on, I had written a scene with someone that's not in this book, as you say, there are many to pick from. And an advisor sort of said, "Well, this is really just, this is a pretty standard assault."

Katherine May:

Sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but I find-

Erica Berry:

Oh, I know. I just thought those two words-

Katherine May:

It's so revealing-

Erica Berry:

... together. What does it possibly mean that we've standardized a certain encounter so deeply that this would be not worthy of writing about because it's a standard assault? And so, at a certain point, I thought actually there are some things that are harder to write about that I feel like worse things that happen that are not in this book. And some of that is because things that are in here are there is an everydayness to some of them. There are encounters that happen when we're riding buses, when we're walking down the street and trying to capture that. I had a sociology professor who said, "We make this familiar strange."

And I started thinking, what would it be like to try to create this granular texture in making the familiar experience of, to me what often felt like hauling around my adolescent as I was coming into womanhood, this body that I didn't know how to have. I had really enjoyed being this sort of asexual tomboy child and I didn't know what to do with the fact that I was desiring attention and also running into experiences where I felt very uncomfortable, and sometimes those were happening simultaneously, and I just didn't know what to do with any of that. And so, trying to write those moments. And I think I went into this book thinking I'm going to write about real wolves and that's all I'm going to write about. And then, very quickly, I got to graduate school and had this experience where I was grabbed on the sidewalk. I do write about this by a man one night who I didn't know, and he grabbed me from behind and didn't let go. And another stranger intervened, but I realized that the way I was moving through the world. I'd previously been this sort of off leash dog just running around feeling very adventurous. And it was this turning point where I felt like I was suddenly very skittish and I was moving through space in a different way.

And that changed my relationship with my body, but also with nature and with new people and all of that. And I started thinking about Little Red Riding Hood and I was like, "I don't want to think about Little Red Riding Hood." It's the story that has trapped the wolf in a certain narrative. And it's also, I began to realize has trapped a certain version of what it means to be a young woman going out, walking at night, going out alone, and I didn't like that narrative. I was uncomfortable with it, but I started thinking what were my Little Red Riding Hood moments and how have they changed the course that I'm charting.

Katherine May:

Yeah, it's funny because when I think about Little Red Riding Hood, the version that I know the best is the Roald Dahl version. I don't know if you know it, but I learned to recite it when I was 10 years old for a Brownie Guide convention because I have always been this rock and roll. It's been like a consistent thread that's run through my life and I can still recite it now. But in that version, Little Red Riding Hood is the predator. And

she suddenly shoots the wolf without giving away a very exciting ending and turns him into a coat. And I won't recite it now [inaudible 00:22:27].

Erica Berry:

I really want it. And also, I can't believe I haven't revisited this recently. I'm sure I read this.

Katherine May:

Oh well, there you go. But it's really interesting to compare those versions of Red Riding Hood because that's the truth that you're circling in this book, that we are both predator and prey. And our fear, our very real fear of what a hungry wolf can do turns us into something much more dangerous than the wolf. And that cycle then kind of seems to repeat itself. And there's something in this book about the inescapability of those cycles of fear and of then violence that we enact.

Erica Berry:

No, that's beautifully said. I mean, I do think I felt uncomfortable feeling like a prototypical victim in the narrative. And a lot of that was just thinking about that is about unpacking my gender identity, unpacking my whiteness. There's many layers of that. And at the same time, I was uncomfortable thinking of myself as predatory in that presence too. And of course, we're both. And thinking about the wolf in a way helped me understand some amount of fear towards this wild animal makes sense. And I can also feel some amount, or it's useful to not think of a wolf like a pet or a dog, I think. We have to respect that, but also I can feel fear for this creature. And I feel like I was really thinking about that with humans and climate change. And I feel both afraid and also afraid for, and that is sort of that paradox was not always explored in some of these black and white fear narratives.

And I think about talking to a biologist who told me this story about he'd been following one wolf with a collar that was sort of this master big alpha wolf kind of in Yellowstone. The idea of the alpha wolf is challenged, I should say with a footnote. But it was this big wolf. And he said one day he finds it, the collar shows that the wolf is dead. And he goes and tracks it and finds it in the middle of a snowy field. And this wolf is lying there with a spattering of blood around him. And he's like, "What has happened here? We've got this dead wolf, a circle of blood." And he realizes the wolf has two holes in its side where an elk has just skewered it with its antlers and sort of spun it around and tossed it. And that was a phenomenal story because he said, "What we don't realize is that the prey needs more credit. The prey can be really fierce."

And in that moment, who is the predator, who is the prey? And even thinking about stories like that in the natural world helped me sort of think about the ways that even when I've had some of these encounters on the street, it's not a clear, I had certain

predatory privileges or certain experiences that made me feel bad perhaps for the person even as I was very threatened by them. And I felt like that is a hard thing to write into because it's sort of a sense of uncertainty in my own voice, but I felt like that was important to share.

Katherine May:

Yeah, absolutely. It wasn't until I was writing *Wintering* that I got curious about why we no longer have wolves. And I had not understood that we had eradicated them so very deliberately. I'd assumed that they'd kind of, I don't know, gradually died off due to habitat change or I don't know, I suppose I hadn't thought about it that deeply, but I'd not realized the systematic way that our society and others have hunted down the wolf and the fact that we've definitely done the wolf more harm than it has ever done to us. And of course, as in America, there are now some people that are advocating very strongly for bringing wolves back into the environment. For anyone that hasn't geeked out about wolves to the extent that you and I have, can you outline the arguments for bringing wolves back? I think from a standing point, you'd maybe think, well, why on earth would we do that? But there's actually some very good reasons that people are considering it.

Erica Berry:

Yeah, I mean I think one of this idea that the landscapes that we're both in have been shaped by the eradication of wolves was really interesting to me. Like swamps in New England drained and you have reports of forests in Ireland being burned for this. And so, this idea of getting rid of the vermin was often the language. It justified all of the way that our world really looks on an environmental history level, but also social history eradication of indigenous people or expulsions. Those narratives were so tied. And so, I think to some degree, repopulation of wolves is related to this idea of not just going back to it, there's no sort of stable wilderness, but it is thinking about what does it mean to go back to think about the ways that colonizing forces have really altered a certain balance in the ecosystem.

And in America, especially out of Yellowstone, there's been many studies about how wolves, they sort of change the ecologies of fear and these beautiful terms that I look at metaphorically too, but landscapes of fear where you have wolves affecting how elk are going to be feeding, maybe they're a bit more skittish, so they're eating fewer saplings. And then, you have birds that are living in those saplings. And scientists are careful to say that some of these studies that happen in Yellowstone would not, it's too simplistic to say that wolves are just going to save songbirds all over the world, but I do think they are a part, there's this keystone predator that their connections into all of these things now, it's being tested out in really interesting ways.

There's fewer cars hitting deer in Wisconsin because the deer are staying away from the roads where there are wolves. So there was a really interesting study out of Wisconsin that was trying to put a number on here's how many car accidents. If we reintroduce wolves, we'll prevent car and accidents, because so many people hit deer. And there's research about deer having this chronic wasting disease. It's called this illness where that can affect hunters. It can be a brain-related thing. You don't really eat deer with this illness, but wolves will pick out the sick number of deer in a herd and that might be positive.

So there's all this new research now about the ways that we have not understood the myriad ways that predators in our ecosystem do help maintain this balance. And an animal dying at the hands of a wolf is sometimes less cruel than dying because there's just not enough food because the herd is too big. I thought a lot about this idea of what is the cruelty of losing an animal to a wolf to dying by a predator. Wolves are not cruel when they kill. That's what they do. That's why the metaphor of humans as wolves falls flat for one of those reasons.

And of course, the other side of that is wolves do not understand that this is ranch and that is wilderness and they do predate. And you have circumstances where wolves will learn that there's a sheep herd and continue to come back. But I've talked to a number of livestock producers in Oregon where I live in Montana where I have family and there's electric fences around their territories that really prevent wolves coming in. And there are ways that people have been living beside wolves. So I am on the side of like, this is not a thing we haven't done. This is, for many thousands of years, people have lived beside wolves.

Katherine May:

I mean, one of the things that came to mind for me when I was reading your book was I just wonder if agriculture is a bit incompatible with a world that has wolves in. As you say, it's a system that the wolves can't read. They can't see that this group of livestock belongs to this human. And it's like we've overlaid this patterning over the landscape and the wolves are still using it in a much more ancient way. But I think we find it, particularly at this point in history, more than any other time, I think we find it incredibly hard to understand that a predator that eats and kills other animals could be beneficial. We don't have the same relationship to cruelty as we used to or to death or to suffering. We are so hypersensitive to those things happening in the animal kingdom. And yet weirdly, we seem very mellow about it happening within human populations quite often. It just boils up all of these contradictions that come from us and not the wolves. The wolves are behaving pretty consistently. They're being wolves.

Erica Berry:

Well, yeah, no, that's beautifully said. I think the putting the cost on everything, it's this competitive instinct that we are supposed to make this amount of money from these cattle, and if the wolves are stealing it, they're like taking our money. But it reminds me of some ranchers I talked to who were saying, "If wolves are in our pasture, that means that deer are in our pasture and that means it's good... The deer are happy." And actually, they were saying, "We want to raise cattle in a place where wolves want to be because that shows us it's a healthy ecosystem." And so, they've hired a tracker who is with the ranch, and he's sort of, "Okay, we're getting some predatory behavior. Let's have the cows cluster together in a different way and keep each other safe."

There's different patterns of agriculture, and that's part of it is that that's just sort of gone. Mother cows around wolves will learn to take care of their young in a different way and to teach fear and to teach protection. And that was also quite poignant for me in animal and human context. The threats are not necessarily gone, but when we're living around them and acknowledging certain things, we learn how to adapt and live beside potentially in different ways. And many of the animals, livestock that are being bred right now are not bred to be smart. They're bred to be a certain amount of fat in the market, and there are these docile and how could we sort of I think the wolf can maybe push our food system in interesting ways and much less our relationship between my property and their property. And that all is a bit rusty and a very colonial mindset. So as you say, how can the wolf help us think about interconnection more broadly because the wolf could walk in and out of many of our different systems.

Katherine May:

Talk to me a little bit about the link between wolves and colonialism or the parallels that you draw, because that for me was a really fascinating part of the story. I mean, I think particularly understanding that indigenous communities have often got a very different picture of what a wolf is, but also this kind of way that we have again been the symbolic wolves in this area.

Erica Berry:

Yeah, I really didn't really understand that there was a link until I was researching the history of my home state of Oregon and I found that the first meetings, the first sort of government meetings were about putting a tax bounty on predators to kill wolves, essentially. And it was going to say, "Here's what we'll pay if someone brings in this wolf pelt." So okay, my state was founded on the expulsion of wolves. That was shocking to me.

But then, researching a little bit more and understanding that the next round of laws passed were Black exclusion laws they're called, which was really only white people are allowed in this state. And understanding that it would've been the same people voting like no wolves, no people of color, no Asian Americans. And that was really, I just began

to see the ways that those connotations in the language go back so far and were really embedded absolutely inextricably in the founding of nationhoods and statehoods. And early national parks in the states, you had these game wardens who were chasing out not only wolves, but the Blackfeet people who were hunting as well. And it was just this real effort to control who was allowed to hunt, who was allowed to kill, who was allowed to profit off of the land. And I think in so many of these stories, there's research onto how wolves maybe helped. Humans were looking to wolves and learning how to hunt in certain ways from them. The idea that we're these really close, there's so many similarities between wolf packs and human communities, the ways that they care for young. You have sort of auntie figures, you did stepchildren, foster families, all of these groupings are actually terms that biologists will use to talk about wolf packs.

And the understanding that humans have known that for thousands of years and been watching wolves and learning from them at the same time, that is sort of western colonial mindset was like, we have to differentiate, this is a threat to us. And trying to figure out the seed of why was the wolf so threatening. Why did we, a white settler perspective, why so much torture of this creature that you really don't necessarily see with even mountain lions, cougars, some of these other big predators? There's something very specific about the wolf. And I do think part of that is this is my theory, but the dog likeness of it, but it's foreign. It doesn't respond to us. And this idea that it's not man's best friend, it doesn't really care about us. The wolf is living its own life, and that is hard for this sort of mindset of everything has to be in service of me, Western domination and nature feeling.

Katherine May:

That struck me a lot as well. This kind of idea that a wolf is a sort of wrong dog almost, and we like dogs as a human population. And therefore, this slight deviance or divergence is incredibly uncomfortable to us. And I'm quite a recent dog owner. I never thought I'd be a dog person. And I rescued a dog couple of years ago, and it's just been fascinating living with this creature who is on one hand, so kind of loving and obedient towards us, on the other hand, has this nature that kind of comes out in her sometimes. And that's particularly when she's approached by other dogs. She will suddenly snarl and it's really, really shocking. And in particular, if I'm with her and we are approached by a lone man, her hackles will go up, she'll start growling. It's so interesting that she identifies the same threats that I identify.

But first of all, I thought she was just kind of a mongrel. But as I read about her, she's from Greece and she's actually quite a specific breed called a Greek Shepherd, and she's bred to defend the pack against wolves. That's what her kind of genetic role is. And so, she's incredibly hostile to other dogs because that is exactly what she's been put on this earth to do. And that really changed the way I saw her, because now when we are

walking through the woods and she'll suddenly pause and look around and growl, and I'll be like, "Fraggle, there's no wolves here." But she's on the alert for wolves all the time.

Erica Berry:

That hypervigilance. I'm curious if being around a dog like that has made you feel like an animal in different ways. I've thought a lot about what looking at a wolf, part of it is learning to see this other animal, but part of it is seeing myself as an animal and understanding the sort of codes. Yeah, I'm just curious how that's affected. Do you feel like we're just these two animals ever?

Katherine May:

Yeah, and that struck me so early on when I got her, because when we rescued her. She'd been very badly injured and then turned out into the street, so she had a very badly broken leg, and we shipped her right over to the UK. She was like four months old, and it was a big to-do. And when I could finally take her for a walk in the woods and take her off the lead, there was snow on the ground, all in between the trees. And I just had this extraordinary moment of walking with my dog in the woods and the freedom that she clearly felt.

And she was snuffling through all the leaves and digging and really looking around. And there was, I don't know, I don't want to overstate it, but it felt like there was something very ancient there of a human and a dog walking together. And it was this really transcendent moment for me. There was something that we understood about each other and something that she opened up for me in that territory when I was there with her as opposed to when I was there alone.

Erica Berry:

Well, I've thought about that too, just being around some small children recently. I don't have children, but my friends and the ways that there's an attention to sensory detail that I would pass over, and similarly being around animals, and I spent a couple weeks observing wolves and just watching the ways that what a bird means. That is all altering my experience of being a body in the world in a way that's really beautiful. And I was just on a panel about why write about animals right now in our time of extinction? What can it gain us by writing about animals?

And I think part of it is it's an exercise to try to think about how do I describe the world as a wolf is seeing it. A wolf leaves these olfactory breadcrumbs as it walks, and so a wolf is going to know who else was walking there. And that's just this layer of beautiful what would seem like telepathy or magic to me. But knowing that has changed the way that I walk through the woods, because I am starting to imagine and who was here and

walking with a tracker, I had a similar experience. He was able to see things that I wasn't. And I think that granularity of experience feels so, yeah, there's something so enlivening about that, that we can get from thinking with wolves or dogs.

Katherine May:

Definitely. And I mean, I always think about the archeological research that suggests that ancient hunters probably tried to enter the minds of their prey. We can see it in cave paintings. We can see it in artifacts that seem to have turned people into deer, for example. And it seems that whereas now we would only hunt as an act of domination in general. In western societies, it's done for fun and for sport and as this kind of expression of machoness in quite a grim way. The ancient roots of hunting appeared to be much more about respecting the animal that we hunted, but also to the extent that we became it, like inhabiting it. And this sort of merging between the self and the prey, that kind of suggests this sort of absoluteness of the ecology, I guess, this complete intertwining of the ecology. And there's something that feels [inaudible 00:41:24] about that.

Erica Berry:

So interesting. Well, and if you look back, research like shepherd societies were more, the wolf was bad, but hunter societies were really looking to the wolf. And I just think that the idea that what a wolf means depends on the capitalist or the agricultural system that you're in is so interesting. And I was really struck by some stories from northeastern Japan hundreds of years ago, where if you're growing rice, the wolf is the one scaring the deer. So the wolf is someone to be thanked, and there's these shrines to wolves, and the wolf becomes this shepherd in that category. And just this idea that the wolf could be this sacred tender in the way that if I'm growing up near a sheep farm, the wolf is the problem, the wolf is the... Right? But that's not innate, that's a story that we tell. And recognizing those stories, it becomes useful. And also, I think what you were saying earlier about the dog is familiar, but the wolf is this gone rogue version.

Katherine May:

Yeah, that version.

Erica Berry:

I think that goes back to the conflation of wolves and women, which go back in ancient Greek texts and Anne Carson writes about it, this idea of I want to live beside this thing, but I want to live beside it. And this is a male voice in a way that is very domesticated and clear, and you are listening to me. And when that version of womanhood acts out, that becomes a threat in the way that the wolf being wild is a threat to that. And so, those confluents, they're just there. They're there through hundreds of years.

Katherine May:

But at the same time, I mean, I think Native American cultures often see the wolf as a symbol of humility.

Erica Berry:

Absolutely.

Katherine May:

And of good motherhood. And there there's a lot of gentle attributes, female attributes, I think, for feminine attributes that come with the wolf in some societies.

Erica Berry:

There totally are. And that idea of this sort of mother wolf that can be really deeply fierce. And I look at it not just as mother like a biological mother, but with wolf packs especially. Everyone will play the mother, other members of the pack will regurgitate food for the young. The caretaking is very loosely horizontal in ways that were really inspiring to think about what can we learn from how wolves take care of one another. There's a lot there.

Katherine May:

But I just begin to wonder if it isn't the fact that they show their vulnerability to us so much that makes us so angry with them. They're not the perfect predator in that sense. They're not the, I don't know, killing machine. Even if we like to portray them as that sometimes in this kind of post wolf society that we live in where we can imagine a wolf for something other than what it is. I mean, cultures that are intimate with wolves know that they're deeply vulnerable.

Erica Berry:

And most of their hunts are not successful. And this idea of the lone wolf that goes out alone, it's so often talked about as just this big scary threat. And yet, the time in the wolf's life where the wolf goes out alone is the most vulnerable. There's territorial disputes. It's harder to hunt when you can't be doing this beautiful choreography. Watching wolves hunt from up above is extraordinary. Often, you have the matriarch leading the pack. You can't do that if you're alone. You're eating roadkill. It's a hard time in the life.

And the idea that a wolf will go it alone, not as some sort of exercise, and I just am this kind of macho figure, but they're looking for partnership. They're looking for another pack, they're looking for more land. And that was really instructive to me too.

Sometimes the vulnerability and the ferocity are not mutually exclusive. They're often the same and when I think about a lone wolf shooter headline or something, that's the

wrong metaphor, but how can what I now know about lone wolves, that animal, the non-human animal, help me think about maybe the human version of that.

Katherine May:

Yeah, talk to me about wolves and the uncanny, because I think that's how we so often think about them now. They crop up in horror films and in ghost stories. Their sound is enduringly eerie to us. There seems to be this residual memory of what it's like to hear the wolves howling. Talk to me a little bit about that link.

Erica Berry:

Yeah, there is something that sort of a rancher who I was talking to was like, "We always hear wolves and we never see them." And she was sort of saying that's part of the, I think she compared it sort of to having a crush, but there's nothing ever happens. And so, you actually think more about that person because they're never really there when you're a teenager or something. And that idea that in the absence, wolves don't want particularly to hang around with us. They do their own thing, and that distance creates, again, a sense of illegibility that I think is quite threatening.

And it was really interesting looking at some of these werewolf stories. I began to think about there's many legends of people becoming wolves, and what does that mean, what access to a fierceness that we are not allowed as humans doesn't mean to want to be. I've started having dreams at a certain point with this book where I was like, I had wolf parts, or I was in that zone liminally between a wolf and a human, and trying to think about that fantasy of becoming this wolf. That also feels very primal in a way to me, and I don't know what that is, but there are these just so many legacies of people and women having this slippages between becoming a wolf. Now, I'm grasping for the particular [inaudible 00:46:57] of the story, but for our sort of spooky season that we're in, I do feel like it's this wolf season.

Katherine May:

Yeah, it is. It's wolf season. And there is this enduring sense of liminality that trails the wolf. And as you were speaking, I was thinking about how often I'd read wolves as being described as dissolving into the forest as if they're non-corporeal. They're like ghosts. There's a merging of the wolf and the wild, and they're kind of inseparable. It represents a pole of wildness that is almost the ultimate.

Erica Berry:

Well, and so this phrase that becomes one of the conceptual backbones of the book, *entre chien et loup* between a dog and a wolf.

Katherine May:

Yes, I love that.

Erica Berry:

I've got this roots in Latin and French, but this idea that when you're walking down a path at sunset, you can't tell maybe if the creature before you is a dog or a wolf. And that idea of not being able to parse if it's your heart right to pound a little bit more. And part of that feeling is maybe fear or anxiety of the unknown, but with the unknown comes excitement too and this sort of intrigue. And I think the inseparability of those feelings, and it wasn't until, so I started thinking about that idea, how am I, whether it's me walking in the woods and hearing something or me on the sidewalk and hearing footsteps behind me. And I'm thinking, "Am I right to be really scared right now?" And that evaluating of the fear is such an innate thing.

And I was researching how wolves live with fear in their own lives. And wolf pups are born very fearful, but what does that fear do? It means they hear something under a tree, they go to investigate. And so, the fear is always tied to curiosity, to inquiry, to investigation. And I think in my life, I was thinking sometimes the fear is closing a door. My world got smaller when I was most kind of anxious. But I started thinking about the ways that fear could open doors too, and mean, well, let me go look at this more. Fear is often a lack of knowledge. And so, again, the thing I could learn from the wolf was sometimes feeling that fear means just like go look at it a little bit more. Of course, not on a dark sidewalk, but there is a processing that the [inaudible 00:49:15]-

Katherine May:

I don't know.

Erica Berry:

... could be intriguing maybe. Yeah.

Katherine May:

Well, we talk a lot about reclaiming nighttime spaces and lonely spaces, but I just wonder if sometimes that's naive, the idea that this can somehow be conquered and that we can dispel all the darkness. I don't know if that will ever happen however hard we fight the patriarchy.

Erica Berry:

Well, and I do think that was, it's so bleak, but I was really raised in this sort of girl power, feminism is here, everything's happened. You're fine, you're safe. And that was many sort of my intersecting privileges and where I was growing up. But it was the first realization that that just wasn't true and that I wanted to toss out Little Red Riding Hood entirely. But some amount of what the mother says to the daughter in the sort of original Grimm's version of that is go to grandmother's house, there is a forest, there are

wolves, and go. And that idea of go out, even though there's something scary. And I think I went into this book thinking I'm writing this book because I'm trying to evaluate when am I right to feel fear, when am I right to fear, how do I live with these fears. I was trying to collate them and realizing at the end, there's no way that I can predict what is happening or when something scary is going to be.

So it's like how do we walk beside that sense of uncertainty and mortality and fear and frustration, and of course, I want to make the world sort of, I'm very pleased when men who've read this book, say... A rancher wrote to me, and he said, "I realized that I was a wolf in my younger days." And I was so surprised because he'd lost more livestock to wolves than anyone in the state of Oregon. I thought he'd react to this book on a sort of wolf-cow level. And instead, he reacted on a I see myself in a certain version of male wolf, a big bad wolf, and I'm reckoning with it. And he was having these conversations with his wife, and I'm like, that's really positive and also-

Katherine May:

That's incredible.

Erica Berry:

... these things are still going to be there,

Katherine May:

But equally, I wonder how many women have ever looked back at themselves and thought I was a wolf.

Erica Berry:

That's really interesting.

Katherine May:

I find it unrelatable to be able to look back and think that. Yeah, wow. And as I was reading, I was thinking it was chiming with so much in the news. Like last week, I couldn't help but draw parallels between your book and the revelations about Russell Brand and this man who, to me, it seems like he went out of his way to present himself as wolfish. And we kind of liked it until we didn't, honestly.

Erica Berry:

The movie Wolf with Jack Nicholson and Michelle Pfeiffer, it's about the publishing industry. It's really wild. And I was just researching, anyway, I was googling Jack Nicholson for something related to that, and I found a profile of him from 1994, and it was saying, "Wolfish is in." The word wolfish was tied to him and this idea that this fierceness, it's been defanged by feminism, but now women actually really like this

fierce, mean wolf guy. And we're back to that. And I was just thinking about the ways that wolf and desirability politics have gone in and out, and that's exactly what you're saying about Brand. And that's a thing to interrogate as women, as well as any identity. What are these figures and architecture?

Katherine May:

Yeah, I mean that kind of sense that on one hand there's the wolf as predator, a sexual predator, but there's also that meeting of female desire, which is much more ambiguous than we like to think it is, and which often enjoys that vision of the predatory male to an extent. If you look at research in sexual fantasies, it's just such a common fantasy. But that not being the same as wanting it to actually happen, and how confused we feel about that, how difficult we find it to really interrogate that and express that. We know when the line has been crossed when it happens. But I think we find it quite hard to truly articulate where that line is, and certainly not consistently across the whole of society either.

Erica Berry:

Well, and it makes me think about Angela Carter's wolf stories, which I was looking at some of those early drafts, and I think so often I was raised very much to know when to say no. We were taught no in a sort of sexual consent way, but not yes. Actually, the idea of what to say yes to was really never explored, and that's a lot harder. And I think as we think about not just, I don't want to be in a place so much of the way girls are raised in certain cultures, I think my own is like you are the sort of gatekeeper and you are just pushing saying no to things.

And that is such a lousy way, I thought, to be a young woman where you're just sort of imagining yourself constantly under siege and just in that process. And I'd much rather be sort of saying yes and having this eagerness and curiosity and sort of knowing what I want and what new language do we have for that. I think, again, the Roald Dahl's example is a beautiful one because there are these fairytales that mine this scaffolding that's very familiar, and yet build something much more liberating.

Katherine May:

I mean, weird that comes from Roald Dahl, but sure.

Erica Berry:

It is.

Katherine May:

If it's selfless.

Erica Berry:

There are other feminist versions.

Katherine May:

Yeah. Let's go back to Angela Carter quickly.

Erica Berry:

Exactly, exactly.

Katherine May:

But yeah, it is, it's such a... I'm just trying to think of the name, Billie Eilish, who recently was talking about how she realized that porn had taught her to expect some fairly brutal treatment. And I kind of thought, wow, that's shifted yet again. That made me feel really old because when I was growing up, women just didn't often watch porn. And that has definitely changed. By the time I was teaching in university, I don't know, eight years ago, a survey was published that said that at least one in three women were regularly watching porn. And that really took me by surprise. I actually, I specialized in porn research when I was at university doing sociology.

Erica Berry:

So interesting.

Katherine May:

I wrote my dissertation on it, and that was my major interest. I was like, that relationship between women and porn had completely-

Erica Berry:

Fascinating.

Katherine May:

... passed me by. It had changed so very much. But then yet here was Billie Eilish talking about how she was beginning to look out for the other side of that and think how she'd been trained into expecting this certain genre of male behavior towards her, and that maybe wasn't an absolute truth. And I thought, wow, there are huge societal shifts around sex and predation happening all the time, and we have so little understanding of it, and we still don't understand what what our yes means.

Erica Berry:

Well, and that idea that the way that we're living and thinking is based on these stories and codes that we've often unconsciously inherited. And the idea, I think about this with falling in love. We do these scripts when we're young. Here's me performing what I

should do when I'm going steady with someone. I can picture being 16, but also understanding that when I'm afraid, we're also enacting scripts. Or this idea in sex, we're like enacting stories, and if we're not sort of interrogating those stories and thinking, what have I inherited here, what do I want to keep, what do I want to give away, then we are mistaking free will for actually being traded and given something often by a system that's exploitative, capitalist, patriarchal, racist. And we have to do that work of excavation, interrogation, I think. And it's hard.

Katherine May:

It's hard, but it's completely vital and inescapable, I think. I don't think we can get anywhere without thinking about this Jungian archetype really.

Erica Berry:

Exactly. Just this idea, when I said the title of the to my sister, she said, "I think of a big sloppy kiss, like a wolfish kiss, and this idea that a woman would be wolfish. A woman's not really wolfish." And I was just really thinking about that as an idea of I'm someone who's deeply hungry and deeply sort of omnivorous, and I saw that in how I researched this book, but how I move through the world and what does it mean to reclaim that idea of a word that's too much. There's something sloppy about it perhaps in a certain stereotype of the masculine.

Katherine May:

You're not allowed to be too hungry.

Erica Berry:

You're not. Right, exactly.

Katherine May:

I was just going to draw another parallel really, or ask you what you thought about it, because in the UK this week or last week, we had a lot in the newspapers about these Bully XL dogs, which are a breed of dog that seems to have been bred to emphasize their physical power and heft. And this is its own debate, but perhaps aggression, although a lot of people would say that it depends on how the dog is raised and trained and treated. What does it say about us that we are breeding scariness, let's use the word scariness, to encapsulate all of that into dogs and inviting that into our home? Not all of us clearly, but some.

Erica Berry:

Yeah. I mean, I hate to say that it makes me, the first thing I think of is the sort of video camera surveillance state that's become so normalized here where every porch, you're really told someone will steal your packages, so you've got to put up this camera and this

mistrust of neighbors. They're strangers, they're not neighbors. And I think there is a degree of you need to protect yourself. I just thought so much about the ways that I was told to protect myself and distrusted those, just because I think something scary doesn't mean it's a threat. And this is true for a man on the sidewalk, the gap between perceiving something as predator and actually them being predator. And so, a dog like that, it seems like that's such a deep story about the stories we're telling about each other and the fact that we're in a world where people think they're under siege from each other instead of seeing our commonalities, our interconnectivities, right?

Katherine May:

So you need a dog that's a weapon that kind of aggrandizes you.

Erica Berry:

Yeah. Yeah.

Katherine May:

So just to close, I had a question sent in from Jojo who asked what you are writing next, the traditional question that we all want to know. Tell us, where'd you go after wolves?

Erica Berry:

Well, I'm writing about love, not fear now. And I think in some ways the question of I was writing this book to try to deal with how to live with my fears, and now I'm far less hypervigilant and I'm much more comfortable living beside it. And I don't think a book always solves your problems, but there is a degree of puzzling it over enough. And so, the question I was then left with was like, the world is still scary, it's going to be scary, the future scares me. And yet, it's not a reason not to connect and love each other. And I've been thinking about the way love in the face of uncertainty looks different and climate change in particular, and how animals are changing what they're doing and adapting and they're mating and they're in relation to each other in different ways. I will say whether it's marmots are suddenly, there's more infidelity among the marmots. What does that say about how we're learning to take care-

Katherine May:

Marmots, no!

Erica Berry:

I know.

Katherine May:

They're so cute, how can they be mean to each other?

Erica Berry:

Maybe it's not a bad thing. We've got to get inside the marmot heads, but-

Katherine May:

I'm being very judgmental at the moment. I'm so sorry.

Erica Berry:

I know, but this is the thing that I relate really hugely. Certain birds being too tired to do their mating rituals because it's so hot. And so, there are these, I'm looking at this animal world and thinking also about the sort of questions and stories that I've inherited about love and what it means to be in relation as we're moving into a period of deeper perhaps unrest and uncertainty. But I think it's so important to be thinking about these sort of love stories and connections because that's a way of visualizing excitement in the future that's always been there for me, and I'm thinking about, I do feel like things are quite dire environmentally, but I also feel this really strong sense of hope and ongoingness that I'm trying to kindle. So looking into that.

Katherine May:

That sounds absolutely amazing. And please send me an early copy. I'm getting in the queue.

Erica Berry:

Fingers crossed, it becomes anything, and not my serial killer scribbles on a giant piece of paper on my wall.

Katherine May:

Erica, I would read those. Thank you so much. It has just been amazing to talk to you, and I hope everybody reads this incredible book. I just loved it, so congratulations.

Erica Berry:

Thank you so much, Katherine.

Katherine May:

Thank you for being here. It's always so, so great to see you. But for now, very good night and thank you again.

Erica Berry:

Thank you. Take care, everyone.

Katherine May:

Well, welcome back. Wasn't that just great? I absolutely love running this nonfiction-focused book club, which is quite a rare thing. So many book clubs are really about fiction books, but I just adore getting the chance to meet the authors behind my favorite new books and to really being able to have a conversation with them about what makes them tick, how they think, and finding those interesting corners where our work relates. It's fun out there, isn't it? Get to do lots of things. I find that a problem, frankly. There are too many good things to do, and I have to learn to cut down a bit. As you can hear, I'm a little bit hoarse after a week of talking to interesting people on various podcasts.

It's one of the big challenges of this world is knowing how much to do, knowing when to stop, knowing when to take a break. But we're just moving towards winter now, towards the dark half of the year, and that is, as you know, my favorite time of the year. And I love that it invites us towards a slowing down our pace and a reframing of who we are as people during that time when everything feels that little bit quieter, that little bit more peaceful, that little bit more domestic. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this new season. If you'd like more information on Erica's book, do check out my Substack, which is katherinemay.substack.com, and I'll see you very soon. Bye.