

Neil Pasricha (00:01.44)

But that's probably me.

Susan Orlean (00:01.731)

Uh, yeah, well, I'm, um, sitting close to my desk. Um, I think if I were sitting... Oh, I can't get taller. Oh, let me tilt my... Sorry. Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (00:14.688)

What about the screen? Oh yeah, that's it. That's perfect. Yeah, is it going from the top of your laptop?

Susan Orlean (00:22.485)

I'm on a desktop. So...

Neil Pasricha (00:24.364)

Okay, perfect. That's great.

Susan Orlean (00:27.478)

I think that's as tilted as I can get without it being super distorted.

Neil Pasricha (00:30.852)

That's wonderful.

Neil Pasricha (00:34.716)

So yeah, it's one of the few cities where there's still houses in the downtown. And so we are becoming slowly surrounded by giant high rises everywhere, but we're still stuck in here in a home with my wife, Leslie, who's upstairs in the kitchen. I'm in the basement in my studio that we... Yeah, we are very lucky. And I've got four boys. And I know you're the proud parent of a boy as well. I've got nine, seven, five and...

Susan Orlean (00:50.146)

How nice to have a house. That's great.

Neil Pasricha (01:02.484)

as of Friday, a three-year-old boy, and we're done. In case you were wondering. Ha ha ha.

Susan Orlean (01:06.414)

Oh my god, four kids, wow, that's amazing.

Neil Pasricha (01:12.152)

It's amazing. It's amazing. Amazing is a good big, holistically inclusive word.

Susan Orlean (01:18.7)

Yeah, no, that's amazing. That really is awe inspiring. Bye.

Neil Pasricha (01:24.812)

Ah, well, Susan, it is so, so nice of you to do this. I feel so excited and I've been looking forward to this for a very, very long time since the email connecting us from Michael Harris, the dear Michael Harris. And you are known for your powers of observation and perception.

Susan Orlean (01:45.714)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:53.084)

and you're also known for never carrying a tape recorder with you. So I wondered if you might kick us off today by simply describing this scene.

Susan Orlean (02:04.63)

the scene we're in right this very minute. Well, I am sitting in my glass box of a studio, which is out on the courtyard of my house in Los Angeles. It looks like I'm in Hawaii, I think, because I'm out in the yard surrounded by greenery.

My dogs are clawing at the door to come out and make noise. And I've begged my husband to keep them inside. So for the moment, it's very quiet. I'm in, I have a standalone studio that is on the courtyard. It's a little building on the courtyard of my house. So my house is...

Neil Pasricha (02:39.594)

So you're inside or outside?

Susan Orlean (02:56.778)

I don't know, I'm terrible at distances, but I could, you know, hop on one foot for 10 seconds and get to my house. But it's my own private space that I work in and try to keep very much sealed off from my family. And distraction.

Neil Pasricha (03:08.243)

Rawdoll-esque.

Neil Pasricha (03:24.412)

So we've got your glass box Hawaiian-esque with dogs potentially clawing and scratching at the door. And that's fine if there's noise. We like all sound. So it sounds like you've described half of the scene.

Susan Orlean (03:38.294)

Oh, and now I have to describe you. So I'm looking at the, in the modern world, I'm looking in the portal of reality. And through my portal, I see you.

I see very, it looks like you're in a study of some sort, because I see a lot of boxes and an interesting pop art painting behind you. And otherwise a fairly spare room. It looks like, I'm guessing it's your recording studio slash workspace.

Neil Pasricha (04:21.708)

Yes, yes. And of course, your very famous first line when describing John LaRoccia and the Orchid Thief is John LaRoccia is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slout-shouldered, and sharply handsome in spite of the fact that he's missing all his front teeth.

Susan Orlean (04:43.731)

Ah, well, how about if we just say it applies perfectly to you?

Susan Orlean (04:53.57)

we can just reuse that.

Susan Orlean (05:02.062)

We'll just recycle it, Neal. We don't need to even edit it. I can't tell how tall you are though. That's the only thing. Since you're sitting down. Well, you know, oh, there you go. All right, fair enough.

Neil Pasricha (05:10.976)

5'9", 164 pounds.

Susan Orlean (05:24.31)

Well, you're wearing a very cool pink blazer that I'm lusting after. And I would say, and you know, the funny thing about communicating with someone by email as we have, this is the first time we're meeting. So.

I had no idea of what you looked like, none. So there's the freshness of meeting a person and having them fit or not fit your expectation. Though as a writer, I think it's really good to be surprised because that's how you notice things.

Neil Pasricha (06:07.124)

Mmm. Ooh, it's really good to be surprised. Yes. Our relationship with surprise has diminished substantially over the last few decades, I would think.

Susan Orlean (06:20.526)

Well, sure. I mean, think about, pardon me. I was discussing this with my son recently. He's 19. And he had asked, we were talking about dating. And I said, you know, you may find it hard to believe, but I was dating people in an era.

before you could Google someone and see what they look like and look at their social media and, oh, good for you. And be completely, you know, you have an experience with the person before you actually have an experience of them. I said, you know.

Neil Pasricha (07:06.316)

Oh, interesting. You have an experience of the person before you have an experience of them, if I said that right. Before you meet them. Yeah.

Susan Orlean (07:13.974)

Yeah, because if you do all of this preparation, you look up the person, you read all about them, you see lots of images of them, you aren't meeting them freshly. You can't. No, I'm not saying it's good or bad. I'm just saying that the difference is you don't enter.

an encounter with people these days with that kind of shock of the new.

Neil Pasricha (07:51.728)

unless you purposely don't Google your podcast host to preserve and maximize the visual start where I see your beautiful sweater as you pull your hand through your incredibly, you know, dark orange locks curling over your navy blue and white ribboned shoulder in front of the reflective glass. Hawaiian is a great phrase. I was thinking Jurassic Park, like tall.

Susan Orlean (07:55.52)

Right.

Susan Orlean (08:19.918)

But yeah, a little bit of that. I'm sorry.

Neil Pasricha (08:21.508)

big plants, you know, they're not, these aren't your little corner house plants. These are people, these are like going to the top of the screen if you're not watching this on YouTube. And CubeWorks, by the way, Susan, is a local business in Toronto where my friend Michael Manoska hand makes to your spec and design your own Rubik's Cube art.

Susan Orlean (08:42.933)

Oh, brilliant.

Neil Pasricha (08:45.208)

So mine is 260 cubes spelling out the word wow. He wanted to do awesome, I refused, and I just wanted something to give me some physical and mental pop before I do an interview or a speech or something, you know? Yeah, yeah. And so now you've entered into this, I don't know if we wanna call it an envelope, a little bubble together, which is a chapter.

Susan Orlean (08:58.654)

Oh, that's great. That's brilliant.

Neil Pasricha (09:14.764)

of Three Books. And so this is a very highly organized podcast. I use the word organized with you purposely and with both because we're gonna connect over that right now. So for those that are new to the show watching or listening for the first time, Three Books was started on March 31st, 2018, and it finishes very specifically on April 26th, 2040. Not just those particular two dates, but the specific

on those dates when the full moon is its most full. As people may or may not know, full moons are actually only full for one minute. They're not full the minute before or the minute after. Because they're a waxing gibbous, or they're a waning gibbous right before or after, that they're totally perfectly full. And so, we just thought that the lunar, we thought the Gregorian calendar was so, it's so like contemporary, you know? It's like.

Susan Orlean (09:55.142)
I didn't know that.

Susan Orlean (09:59.099)
Oh.

Neil Pasricha (10:13.156)
500 years named after a pope. I mean, let's go with something we've been using, you know, wooly mammoth bones on checking out for 30,000 years. The lunar calendar people, and so books are that. They're that to me. They're that to you, I know, in terms of their way to annex and communicate with history. And so on the exact minute of every single full moon for 333 straight lunar cycles, we're gonna talk with an inspiring person.

Susan Orlean (10:24.206)
Mm-hmm

Neil Pasricha (10:42.884)
such as the one and only Susan Orlean, author of The Orchid Thief, author of The Library Book, basis for Meryl Streep's Oscar-nominated performance in the movie adaptation, New Yorker staff writer since 1992 and having written for them well before that. And I'm gonna go on and on, I'm just gushing because I'm so, so in love with your work. And on the exact minute of every single flumen, we drop a conversation, we call it a chapter, we have 333 chapters, each chapter discusses three formative books.

for a thousand formative books total over those 22 years. Speaking of organization, I have a few questions for you, but let's start with Susan, how do you organize your shoes?

Susan Orlean (11:27.458)
Oh, gosh, you've got me in, I mean, I'm a little compulsive about organization. And I feel honestly that I function better in an orderly environment. So it's actually really hard for me to work or be happy in chaos.

Neil Pasricha (11:54.748)
Ooh.

Susan Orlean (11:57.634)

I just it doesn't have to be Sterile or Absolutely minimal it just needs to be orderly so shoes We do not we live in a mid-century modern house that Back in 1946 when the house was built closets were not a great

kind of focus in home building and closets of older houses are generally very small. I think people just, you know, didn't have a lot of clothes. So I have to be really careful about my shoes and have them organized so that I can find them and see them. So some years ago, and I don't remember when.

I realized that it would be better for me to take shoes out of the shoe box and put them in a clear shoe box so that I could see the shoes. And that worked well from the container store. And that worked, yes. And they, you buy them, you know, in a box of like 20. They're great for organizing a lot of stuff, but they're meant for shoes.

Neil Pasricha (13:07.732)

From the container store, right? For those that wanna buy one.

Susan Orlean (13:24.006)

And then it started to become harder for me to see the shoes. So I came up with an idea that makes me sound super OCD. I'm not, but I will own the fact that this is more effort than some people might choose to make. But I started taking a picture.

of each pair of shoes printing out the picture in a small format and then taping that to the front of the shoe box so that I could see instantly which the shoes were. Just front view and I have the boxes stacked with the short end visible so it's just a small picture.

Neil Pasricha (13:59.777)

In color, obviously.

Neil Pasricha (14:05.534)

Just front view or side view or both?

front view, okay?

Susan Orlean (14:17.878)

but it's the most effective thing I've probably ever done in my life.

Susan Orlean (14:29.102)

I, you know, it really, it took something that was sort of ungovernable and challenging and frustrating on a daily basis because I would try to find shoes and think, wait, where, where are

those green sneakers? And, you know, it'd be plying through a pile of shoes or opening different shoe boxes. And now I am in

a kind of zen space when I go in to pick a pair of shoes. I just walk in and look and I see the ones I want and I pull them out and I take the shoes out and I'm very happy. I should have been a librarian, look. I mean, this is all, you know, we, I mean, humanity is into,

Neil Pasricha (15:11.2)

Nice, I love this. I've been telling...

Susan Orlean (15:23.798)

taxonomy. I mean, it's just it's a human impulse to find and categorize and index and organize and there's a real reason for it, obviously scientifically, but I think people respond also to knowing where things are and how to find them and

making things like with like in terms of, you know, organizing. And I'm not somebody who, you know, alphabetizes the books on my shelf or I did alphabetize my spices. I will confess.

Neil Pasricha (16:09.284)

Well, that's actually a really nice segue because my next question, before we get into three books, you can see I've got a few, amuse bouches for you. And one of them is, I was gonna go into how do you organize your kitchen right after the shoes. So why don't we, we could just focus on spices and then I'm just gonna ask you how you organize your books on your bookshelf, which I know they're not alphabetical, but now that leaves open a lot of other things.

Susan Orlean (16:38.266)

Right. Well, I began, you know, I love to cook and I have fair number of spices, not an enormous number, but every time I would try to find, say, the oregano, I would literally have to look through every single jar of spices.

to find the oregano and very often I would think, well, I guess I don't have oregano and I'd go buy it, bring it home and then of course immediately find the oregano that had been, you know, mysteriously misplaced. And it just was so maddening because I had a very good spice cabinet.

but they were completely out of order. And it just dawned on me one day that it would be a lot easier if they were alphabetical, not by first letter, not...

Neil Pasricha (17:37.528)

Ooh, interesting, not by first letter. Oh, I'm fascinated now.

Susan Orlean (17:39.922)

No, only by the first letter. Like I don't, within the Cs, I don't think, let me see, cardamom comes before cloves. It's just the C. So I'm not getting, I'm not drilling down into the second letter. It's just by letter. The Gs are all together, the Cs are all together. And.

Neil Pasricha (17:43.244)

Oh, okay.

Neil Pasricha (17:50.57)

Oh.

Neil Pasricha (17:54.012)

It's all the seas to ya. You're not less.

Susan Orlean (18:07.998)

It really, it spared me this annoying habit of not being able to find the spice that I want and buying it again and then thinking, how did I end up with five jars of cardamom? Like, that's not good.

Neil Pasricha (18:21.6)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right, right. This would have really helped me on Sunday when I was making chili and I couldn't find chili powder, heaven forbid. And so eventually as you have intimated it was at the back in a totally incorrect location. But I have a couple of questions here. Number one, like.

When I go out and rebuy spices, like some of them are in bags, some of them are bulk size, some of them are in this one tiny little organic container that I have seven glass ones. And that's how the set started, but it doesn't continue that way. And so the alphabetizing sounds great in theory. But for me, if I was going to go upstairs and do it, what do you do with the rubber bands, Saran wrap bags? You know what I mean? Like how does this all work together?

Susan Orlean (19:02.03)

Yeah, well Again, this is makes me sound I'm embarrassed to say this does make me sound more OCD than I really am but I The jars that are Square I Keep anything that's not in a square jar. I transfer I just bought a bunch of empty square

square edged Spice jars and I transfer stuff into them so that they can all fit

Neil Pasricha (19:37.924)

I like this, I like this. This is really, really smart. That's the piece I'm missing. That's the piece of the puzzle I hadn't figured out yet. The buying of mass quantity square edged glass spice jars.

Susan Orlean (19:41.428)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (19:49.778)

Right, and you know, they cost maybe \$20 on Amazon to get \$40. I mean, they're very cheap. But I also had the discovery some years ago that round canisters and round containers waste a

bunch of space. And so, you know, if you have a limited amount of space, as most of us do, you know, a finite amount of space,

Neil Pasricha (20:09.41)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (20:14.785)

Yes.

Yes.

Susan Orlean (20:19.832)

it. So I had all of these round canisters and containers and I swapped them all out for square edged ones to make better use of the space because you know my pantry isn't huge. My spice rack is very nice but limited and you just can fit a lot more in.

Neil Pasricha (20:21.118)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (20:24.707)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (20:42.916)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (20:48.808)

You know, I totally hear you. And you know, you are famous for the like hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of articles you've written for the New Yorkers since 1987. Of course, you were a staff writer there since 1992. And one of your most famous columns is called Afterword, which is sort of what I would describe to my wife upstairs at lunch. Today was like sort of an unconventional obituaries type of thing. And so as you may or may not.

No, and you could keep track of it. Somebody at Fiji Water had the exact same insight, which is why they changed all those round water bottles at Fiji to squares so they could ship them from Fiji, where they're bottled, the actual country Fiji, over to sell them to us for \$17 each in the airport.

Susan Orlean (21:40.45)

That's so interesting and it also makes you understand the phenomenon of container ships and containers. Container ships are the standard of global shipping and they're very familiar to all of us.

Neil Pasricha (21:52.884)

Yes!

Neil Pasricha (22:05.796)

We have a wooden one right outside my studio right now for my kids. Like a wooden container ship.

Susan Orlean (22:09.442)

Yeah, well, believe it or not. Yeah, believe it or not, one day someone brilliant who is now a multi-billionaire, of course.

came up with the idea that you could ship a lot more stuff if you put it in a uniform container that could be stacked versus a barrel, a box, a bag, where you have random items sort of jostling together on a boat and there's a lot of empty wasted space. But if you...

if you kind of standardize the way you package items that are being shipped.

You know, you look at these container ships and they are carrying hundreds, these massive containers and they can be secured together. And, you know, it became almost immediately that after it was sort of conceived became the standard of global shipping. That's all that's the only way things are sent around the world.

Neil Pasricha (23:06.521)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (23:26.54)

Right, and you know, there's some, there's very few kind of like universal humanity ah-hahs in life, one of them of course being the identification of that little arrow on your gas gauge that tells you which side your gas pump is on. But another ah-hah that I've noticed many people have, including myself, by now seeing it in my kids, is the common universal humanity ah-hah, that is the container ship containers are the same as the things being pulled down the train tracks.

Susan Orlean (23:39.489)

Right.

Susan Orlean (23:54.194)

Right, and that's exactly why. And they're also the exact same things that are on the back of flatbed trucks. They pull up to the port and they get loaded onto the truck and the truck drives off. I mean, it really was a brilliant concept that...

Neil Pasricha (24:02.12)

Oh yeah, I forgot I honestly forgot that

Susan Orlean (24:18.562)

fits in a world in which an item that you buy from China might travel both by sea, by train and by truck, but it never has to be unpacked. It just moves in this container from one mode of

transportation to the other. And there's a good chance that we will never iterate further on this. It's like, it's such a...

It works so well that, and you know, that's the way things get around the world is on multiple different forms of transportation. So, I mean, it's pretty cool.

Neil Pasricha (24:49.518)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (24:56.402)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (25:05.364)
Do you think it's just capitalism itself as a concept that helps further and create such clean, crisp, global uniformity on things like container ships but doesn't for things like controlling pollution? Or is that the sort of magnet that creates us being able to do things like that globally, but things like the...

ice cubes on the top and bottom of Earth are melting and we're not gonna have New York soon, that we can't figure out.

Susan Orlean (25:41.054)
Right. Oh, you know, sadly, yes, I think profit and commerce are incentives that really push forward enterprise and innovation and motivation. You know, I

If you look at global warming, there will be people who will lose a lot of money because of it. And I mean, it is ultimately a world ruin wrecker. But in the short term, nobody feels incentivized to solve.

the problem. Right now it's mostly a negative thing that companies have to figure out how to create less pollution or people have to figure out how to drive less often. I mean, it feels like all sacrifice. Whereas when there's a tangible profit short-term,

Neil Pasricha (26:56.708)
Yeah, short term. Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (27:01.302)
You get a lot of smart people thinking how can this How can we figure this out? And yeah, I mean that's It's a sobering fact about human nature

Neil Pasricha (27:15.344)
So the solution is, if we can have somebody make money off of figuring out how to fix the electoral college system, it would be solved soon, as opposed to the Iowa caucuses as we talk having a hugely disproportionate effect on the future of the world.

Susan Orlean (27:24.686)

100%.

Susan Orlean (27:31.066)

A hundred percent. I mean, yeah, I think...

Susan Orlean (27:41.102)

Human beings are Wired to be selfish. I mean that's the survival Instinct and then when you amplify that it's I want more Not only do I want to? survive I want more of the good stuff that's out there and

Susan Orlean (28:09.73)

You know, we've certainly made tremendous improvements in life since say the 1500s. But a lot of those improvements have had somebody is also...

Neil Pasricha (28:23.62)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (28:34.318)

Making money. I my husband and I were just talking the other day about AIDS and we were watching Television and there was a commercial for a An AIDS drug that allows it's one pill a day and it keeps you in a maintenance mode with

no detectable HIV in your bloodstream. And, you know, I lived through the AIDS crisis. I lost friends. Yeah, it was something that was a terrifying, overwhelming circumstance. And really when you look at it within a

Neil Pasricha (29:08.395)

Oh wow.

Susan Orlean (29:27.722)

pretty remarkably short amount of time, we've managed to figure out how to treat it. I mean, this is a very complex disease. It's, you know, it killed millions of people and we figured out how to give many, many people with HIV a perfect...

Neil Pasricha (29:34.008)

Yeah, yeah.

Neil Pasricha (29:37.706)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (29:43.135)

Right.

Susan Orlean (29:54.138)

life that is sustainable as far as we know for a normal lifespan. And I just, we were marveling over it. And then I thought, well, you know, pharmaceutical companies do have a profit motive. I mean, you know, certainly the NIH was involved. I mean, it was a global effort to figure out how to treat AIDS. But

Neil Pasricha (29:58.178)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (30:11.624)

Mmm. Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (30:21.918)

At the end of the day, it is a very commercial thing to cure a disease. People make money.

Neil Pasricha (30:31.168)

Oh, interesting. What a fascinating observation. It is a very commercial thing to cure a disease. Obviously, when you hear it, yeah, but you don't think of it that way.

Susan Orlean (30:40.046)

You know, the largest company in Denmark, which is now responsible for an enormous percentage of the GDP is Novo Nordisk, which makes Ozempic. So yes, I mean, drugs are very profitable invention. And yeah, we benefit from...

Neil Pasricha (30:52.163)

Oh!

Neil Pasricha (30:56.105)

And insulin, right? Yeah.

Susan Orlean (31:06.134)

the drugs that are developed that cure disease. But we don't live in a society where that's done for the public good and nobody makes money off of it. I mean, drug companies are public or rather private for profit enterprises. And there's a ton of innovation.

Neil Pasricha (31:30.92)

Right, right, right. Casting the play in fun of Lego aside, being another Denmark company, I think.

Susan Orlean (31:41.158)

Yes, well, yeah, and that's right.

Neil Pasricha (31:44.824)

Right. So like play, you know, play can be profitable too. But, you know, not nearly as profitable as putting stuff in pills. Well, Susan, you've been very kind to let me tease out a little bit of my curiosity around you with the, you know, letting us into the sort of palate cleanser, letting you describe the scene and then getting into this sort of organization kind of geek out, you know, that we both share the structure of the show, the structure of your shoes, your spite, your spice jar. I'm going to save the.

Susan Orlean (31:49.834)
Right.

Neil Pasricha (32:13.296)
Bookshelf and Book Organization for a little later is gonna come for those listening that wanna know how Susan organizes her books. I'm not gonna miss it, I promise me. But the other palate cleanser I often do on this show is when I'm interviewing guests who has said or written a lot of things about books, writing or reading, I comb through a treasure trove of their quotes written or spoken and I find three or four of the best ones. Unfortunately, with you, my favorite books

book, writing or reading quotes are two pages. I have just two pages before, just on my favorite, not even yours, just my favorite of yours on books, writing or reading. And I don't know how to get three out of this. So let me try for each quote I read to you, I'd love you to expand, explain or elucidate as you see fit, or you could simply say.

you know, rim shot, next one, you know, like if it's just, if it says it, great. First off, hats off to Melville Dewey. We owe him a lot. He's a hero. You said that on the Sleeping With Celebrities podcast.

Susan Orlean (33:26.926)
Well, this goes back to what we were just talking about. This human impulse to organize and categorize probably is most explicitly

shown when we think about books and knowledge and information and the Dewey Decimal System. You know, the idea of organizing the mental output of history's

you know, the writers throughout history and to have come up with a system that, while it's not perfect, it's withstood the test of time, but also to begin to allow us to impose some kind of order on books is pretty extraordinary. And, you know, it's a fun, it's funny. It's such a funny.

Neil Pasricha (34:27.826)
Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (34:33.27)
Feels like such an old fashioned arcane system, but we haven't ever improved on it.

Neil Pasricha (34:39.628)

Every single library still organized today. And if you were at my house right now, I would take you upstairs to my, lucky to say, a room where I have floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and all my books are organized in the Dewey Decimal System. Yeah, except for my mass market paperbacks because I was very lucky to find recently in my house a whole big metal pillar that I didn't know existed that six-sevenths of a mass market paperback can sit. So as long as nobody touches my shelf.

Susan Orlean (34:52.246)
Really? Wow.

Neil Pasricha (35:09.288)
then I have made new room for books, which is what I've, which I'm, yeah. So all my mass market paperbacks are on one separate shelf. And the 2019 Book Riot review of your Arlington Public Library press stop for the library book, they quote you as saying, when it comes to, and I'm holding it up in case you're watching on YouTube, that when it comes to your remarkable heart,

rending book, the library book, you wrote or you said, I didn't want a dust jacket. I didn't want anything between you and the book.

Susan Orlean (35:51.182)
You know, this is in reference to the design of the library book. And when you're writing a book about books, the design and the physical object of the book is extremely important.

because it really is the physical manifestation of what the book is all about. So I always had in my mind that it would be only text on the cover. Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (36:28.008)
Oh, interesting. Only text on the cover. That's a surprising decision.

Susan Orlean (36:33.502)
Right, I mean, if you go back to the front cover, we have this little symbol of the fire in the very center, but otherwise I just wanted it to be the name of the book. So it's very much the book as a book. If that makes sense. Exactly.

Neil Pasricha (36:48.232)
Why?

Neil Pasricha (36:52.041)
Ah, okay, yeah, no interference. No thing standing in the place of the book except a small flame icon.

Susan Orlean (37:00.588)
Exactly.

Neil Pasricha (37:02.192)

and on the spine, which I'm holding up now carefully in my camera, would you...

Susan Orlean (37:07.026)

Yeah. Well, so what we have on the spine, and I think it's so beautiful, and the design all hats off to Simon and Schuster for really making this an exquisite book. We've got those two palm fronds, which is a...

you know, a very subtle reference to the fact that this takes place in LA. And then if you look, if you turn to the spine again, that little, what looks like a little building is a sort of graphic version of the tower of the LA Public Library. Now,

Neil Pasricha (37:30.779)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (37:52.087)

Wow, I had no idea.

Susan Orlean (37:53.59)

until you read the book you wouldn't know and you wouldn't even necessarily know. No, I mean, actually I didn't, I shouldn't have even put it that way. It's, it is a obviously meant to look like a little building or a little tower of a building. It happens to be based on the tower of the LA library, but it doesn't matter that you know that or you don't know it.

Neil Pasricha (37:55.369)

Yeah. No, I read the book. I still didn't know.

Neil Pasricha (38:23.168)

Right, like the palm fronds. And there's also some bird, like silhouette of birds as well.

Susan Orlean (38:25.504)

Exactly.

Susan Orlean (38:29.458)

Right, right. So we've got, you know, the sky, the... Just almost as if you were looking at the library tower from outside and you see the palm fronds and you see the birds in the sky. It's a wonderfully subtle...

Neil Pasricha (38:32.708)

Which are not, which are, why birds by the way? I'm a big birder.

Neil Pasricha (38:45.053)

Oh, wow.

Neil Pasricha (38:49.071)

Wow.

Susan Orlean (38:52.878)

And it just reads as being beautiful, whether you take apart the meaning of each of those symbols. It's, um, the effect of it is still just being beautiful.

Neil Pasricha (39:07.608)

Well, I also in that same 2019 book, write review of your Arlington press tour for the library book came across the Easter egg that you hid in the back flap of the book, which of course is the mock library checkout card in a yellowed envelope with four names on it reading Ray Bradbury. And this you know, the everybody who's listening will be familiar with the sort of librarians sort of off centered date stamp.

across August 24th, 1950, then Edith Gross, October 31st, 1955, then Susan Orlean in a blue cursive writing, not sure if that's your real signature, on April 29th, 1986, and then Austin Gillespie, September 10th, 2010, and there is much discussion on Reddit online about what the non-obvious two names mean, Edith Gross and Austin Gillespie.

and no conclusive proof, although the top commenter in this Reddit thread I went deep on says that they suspect Edith Gross is your mom and Austin Gillespie is your son.

Susan Orlean (40:17.098)

Yes, that is actually correct. I am like, yes. And partly why, no, that's the date that.

Neil Pasricha (40:22.156)

and we have it on the record for the first time.

Neil Pasricha (40:28.184)

Is that his birth date? Is that his birth date, the date?

Neil Pasricha (40:33.764)

He said he's 19.

Susan Orlean (40:34.391)

I was, that I believe that, I mean, it was as close as I could guess to being the date that I took him to the library and for the first time thought I have to, I have to write this book. It's not a joke.

Neil Pasricha (40:50.292)

Right, because he's 19 now and it's September 10th, 2010, so I guess he would have been five or six.

Susan Orlean (40:55.814)

Right, because he had an assignment from his little school class to interview a public servant, and he wanted to interview a librarian.

Neil Pasricha (41:07.6)

And why April 29th, 1986 beside your name?

Susan Orlean (41:12.014)

to date of the fire.

Neil Pasricha (41:13.836)

Oh, of course. I'm not, of course I read the book and neglected to capture that. And can I ask just cause I'm now in nerd world here, Edith Gross has October 31st, 1955. That's your birthday. Oh, for your mom. Oh, you're born on Halloween. My sister-in-law too. And then Ray Bradbury, August 24th, 1950.

Susan Orlean (41:17.322)

Right, but it's, you know, it's.

Susan Orlean (41:26.422)

That's my birthday. Yeah, so, yeah.

I am. It's like birthday.

Susan Orlean (41:41.538)

That was a date at which he was working on Fahrenheit 451. And that we were sort of trying to pick a random date when we thought he might have been in the library and when he was in the course of working on the book.

Neil Pasricha (41:50.214)

Oh.

Neil Pasricha (42:03.172)

Wow, wow, wow. Couple more, I can't resist. In Senegal, this is from the opening of the library book, but also I noticed you used the same phrase in your wonderful foreword for the Nancy Pearl book. And Nancy Pearl's been a past guest on our show as well. Yeah, for the writer's library. And so, and the quote is this, in Senegal, the polite expression for saying someone died is to say his or her library has burned.

Susan Orlean (42:19.591)

Oh, wonderful.

Susan Orlean (42:34.923)

This was an expression that I came across completely serendipitously. I don't even remember where I first saw it. The minute I saw it, I thought,

Susan Orlean (42:53.51)

I didn't yet see how you would equate a library to a person, but I liked it. I thought it sounded interesting, so I wrote it out on an index card, hung it over my desk, and I would look at it a lot while I was working on the book. At some point in the middle of working on the book, it all clicked, and it actually became...

thematically the entire meaning of the book the closeness between our human Soul as it were and the library and how well the connection may not seem that obvious The way in which a library contains

dreams and knowledge and facts and history and memory and really the whole of human experience is much the way a person contains dreams and memories and knowledge and fantasy and you know we contain our own personal library of thoughts and

Neil Pasricha (43:56.34)

Mmm.

Neil Pasricha (43:59.804)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (44:06.236)

Wow.

Susan Orlean (44:20.958)

And I think that many of us have had this experience of trying to remember something and you almost feel like you're flipping through a card catalog. No, no, not that, that's what I'm trying to remember.

Neil Pasricha (44:34.548)

Yeah, like trying to find a word or the name of the guy that played so and so.

Susan Orlean (44:38.415)

I like exactly remembering the name of a place. And I began feeling like we have such an emotional connection to libraries because on some level, there are sort of manifestation of the way our own minds feel. And they are for a community.

collective mind of a community.

Neil Pasricha (45:12.465)

Wow. Hence us creating them, potentially.

Susan Orlean (45:14.206)

And when someone dies, what goes with them is that their entire library of stories and memories. And the parallels became more and more emotional to me that, you know, and

I've often said to people if City Hall had burned down, I don't think you would have had people crying and um

lining up to help in some way, but when the library burned people were literally sobbing and 2,000 people gathered at the library as it was on fire saying what can we do? How can we help people take the burning of a library?

as an emotional blow. And that's why, as I said in the book, throughout the history of war, libraries have been burned, even though it's not particularly useful as a strategy in war, but it's a psychological and emotional devastation for a society to have a library burn people. People feel

devastated by it in a way that's very special. And we just have a different connection to books than we do to many other objects. They just have an emotional and sort of spiritual meaning to us that is unique. I think.

Neil Pasricha (46:39.098)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (46:51.113)
Yeah.

Susan Orlean (47:05.918)
in the entire sort of span of The things that are around us books have a very distinct place that goes deep

Neil Pasricha (47:21.599)
Why? Why more so than anything else?

Susan Orlean (47:23.934)
Well, I think my feeling is that storytelling and knowledge sharing is the essential human experience books are just the The means by which we do it and But uh, you know it has

It's how we exist together. We tell each other stories, we share knowledge, we...

Neil Pasricha (48:03.324)
And then wouldn't people get just as upset if they lost their DVD collection or the record collection?

Neil Pasricha (48:12.45)
or their...

Susan Orlean (48:17.527)

We have so little.

Neil Pasricha (48:18.152)

Cannot film to the young Austin and my little tiny boys be a replacement for books in this world where people are arguably reading less.

Susan Orlean (48:27.822)

I actually see it as one or the other. I mean, I think film is just another medium for storytelling. I do think books have an immediacy that...

Neil Pasricha (48:39.85)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (48:50.754)

You know, a film is a whole big production and there are hundreds of people involved and it's a laborious process and it's mediated so much by the fact that it's hard to make a movie. A book is almost like a whisper. In a way, there's a simplicity. I've written my book and I'm telling you my story and it feels more intimate because in fact, it really is.

Neil Pasricha (49:13.957)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (49:21.09)

you know, it takes one person to write a book and then yeah, you've got an editor and you've got the guys working the printing press but it still really is as close to the really essential simple

Neil Pasricha (49:21.914)

Yes.

Susan Orlean (49:44.23)

experience of telling someone a story.

Neil Pasricha (49:47.22)

Yes, yes, yes. And it's in its mind to mind. You know, as opposed to mind to eyes to mind. You know,

Susan Orlean (49:49.35)

Oh, I mean, I love movies. Yeah, exactly. And...

Exactly. And I think that books exist more in your imagination because you're not getting the visual.

Neil Pasricha (50:11.7)

Exactly. This is probably why I love reading music reviews or like food. I like food descriptive stuff because it's like I it's neutering some of my senses by definition. Well, this has been a wonderful I don't want to say a rant with what was the positive word for rant.

Susan Orlean (50:23.458)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (50:30.998)

rant.

Neil Pasricha (50:32.624)

Rant can be positive, good. You've helpfully annexed a number of quotes I had right into that beautiful answer, including, and I'll just read them quickly, because I wanna, then I still have two left, including, destroying a culture's books is sentencing it to something worse than death, colon. It is sentencing it to seem as if it never lived. That's from the library book. Also from the library book, writing a book just like building a library is an act of sheer defiance.

It is a declaration that you believe in the persistence of memory.

Also from the library book. Books are a sort of cultural DNA, the code for who as a society we are and what we know. All the wonders and failures, all the champions and villains, all the legends and ideas and revelations of a culture last forever in its books. Then the two I still need some expansion, explanation or elucidation on are the last two. Our second last, the reading of the book was a journey. There was no need for souvenirs.

Susan Orlean (51:39.482)

This is in reference to my parents who were big readers but were not book... They liked taking books out of the library and they didn't feel the need to own lots of books. Part of it was

thriftiness and feeling like, well, why buy it when you can take it out of the library? And I think because they felt like, well, the point is to read the book, not to own the book. And you don't need it on a shelf. What as like a token of having read it, you read it. You know, they didn't they didn't really feel that was

Neil Pasricha (52:25.267)

Hmm.

Susan Orlean (52:32.742)

a part of the experience. Now you remove the re-reading of a book or making your notes in the book that some people love to do. I think for them, it was just about you read the book. And if you don't need to own it. Now I...

Neil Pasricha (52:43.824)

The lending.

Neil Pasricha (52:50.008)

Yeah, you know, I...

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (52:56.502)

the minute I could buy my own books, I started buying them like crazy. But I now do feel sometimes where I'll look at a book and think I read it, I enjoyed it. I don't know exactly why I need to keep it since I've already read it and chances are I'll never read it again.

Neil Pasricha (53:17.083)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (53:21.376)

Oh, interesting. Yeah. Well, to your finite space comment earlier, I keep only two kinds of books on my bookshelves, which are one books I've never read, like I want to read to be read or the anti-chip anti-library phenomenon that Nassim Taleb coined and his book, Anti-Fragile to have books to remind you of what you do not know. So I, you know, there's the not read books. And then the only other kind of book I have my bookshelf Susan is books I've loved.

Susan Orlean (53:47.527)

Right.

Neil Pasricha (53:47.664)

So that's the Marie Kondo idea of if it falls in between, it falls away, and that's partly space-oriented.

Susan Orlean (53:55.722)

Well, and I sort of feel the same way, and I've begun feeling more like, I have books that were written by friends, and I keep them because they're special to me, and books I haven't yet read that I intend to read, and I've gotten more comfortable looking at a book and saying I read it, it didn't.

I'm glad I read it, I don't need to keep it, you know, and this is partly because we do have bookshelf space, but it's not unlimited.

Neil Pasricha (54:35.151)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (54:36.686)

You know, we have... We're pretty tight and we've gotten so that all our bookshelves are completely full. So if we get a new book, we kind of have to get rid of another book.

Neil Pasricha (54:38.445)
Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (54:50.572)
Mm-hmm. We all hit that pall eventually until we buy another house or something. But it's interesting, you know, Seth Godin in Chapter three refer refers to books as souvenirs of ideas. That's how he describes the concept of books themselves. Malcolm Gladwell, who was our guest in Chapter 37 when I first said and I interviewed him in his place in Chelsea and we were in a room.

Susan Orlean (54:56.272)
Exactly.

Susan Orlean (55:06.012)
Mmm!

Neil Pasricha (55:15.628)
you know, 10 feet by 10 feet and all four walls of the room. So we were sitting in a table in the center, all four walls of this room. So kind of the same size of the room as I'm in were floor to ceiling bookshelves of hardcovers. And I said to him, wow, you know, I feel like I'm entombed in your book. And he looked at me and he said, this is a fraction of my books, I should say. And I said, well, what do you mean? He said, I have another place. I keep another spot. And

That idea is so close to me because I'm there, like I'm ready to build more book space. And because I've become really good friends with Doug Miller who runs a used bookshop called Doug Miller Books. He refers to himself as a bibliomaniac. He has 300 to 500,000 books. He has rented the aforementioned, the containers, he has three containers rented full of books in his bookshop.

Susan Orlean (56:07.214)
container.

Neil Pasricha (56:12.016)
which is, I encourage you to go if you're ever in Koreatown in Toronto, is a mere 1% of what's in the containers. And so I don't wanna go that far, but in a way he's also inspiring.

Susan Orlean (56:27.858)
Yeah, yeah, although I think that I've embraced a certain Marie Kondo attitude. I mean, partly because we have a finite amount of space. And it's very funny, my mother-in-law's a book-

Neil Pasricha (56:43.781)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (56:47.524)

and a lot of its shoes.

Susan Orlean (56:49.754)

A lot of it is shoes. My mother-in-law is a book hoarder and has books piled everywhere. And there's a way in which they just become objects. Like you can't even actually get to them. And I think if I had books off site, I would feel like what's the point of having them? I can't get to them.

Neil Pasricha (57:03.58)

Mm. Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (57:12.528)

Right, right, right. It's like the china in the cabinet.

Susan Orlean (57:16.07)

Yeah, and you know, it's a Swedish deaf cleaning kind of thing too of thinking, oh my god, I like if this is a book that I'm done with, I mean some of it is feeling like someone else can enjoy it now. Maybe someone who can't afford to buy it. Yeah, so I used to be much more into

Neil Pasricha (57:34.452)

Yeah, you don't want Austin to have to deal with it in 32 years.

Susan Orlean (57:45.898)

acquiring books. Now I'm, I just, I think about it more deliberately and also interestingly for the last year or so I've been mostly reading audiobooks, mostly listening to books. So those take up no space.

Neil Pasricha (57:48.39)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (57:57.525)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (58:05.574)

Oh, wow.

Neil Pasricha (58:11.644)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right.

Susan Orlean (58:13.866)

because I'm just doing them online. And in a way it's very liberating, but you lose the experience of flipping back. And I mean, it's very different.

Neil Pasricha (58:20.127)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (58:26.72)

Yeah, what percent of your audiobooks do you purchase in physical form afterwards, if any?

Susan Orlean (58:34.146)

I do that sometimes. Like if there's a book that I love, if there's a book that I just love, and this is the same with eBooks. If it's a book that I really love, I'll go buy it in the physical form.

Neil Pasricha (58:36.312)

And what's your decision matrix to making that decision?

Susan Orlean (58:55.986)

so that I can look at it again in a different, and also it is different to read a book versus an ebook or an audio book. It's definitely different.

Neil Pasricha (59:03.758)

Yeah.

And are you hardcover? Paper box?

Susan Orlean (59:09.934)

Well, it depends what's available.

Neil Pasricha (59:10.712)

Like if you go back and buy the book you love, which version of it are you buying if you have every version available?

Susan Orlean (59:18.255)

It really depends on what's available. I mean, if I'm, if a hardcover, I mean, I love hardcover books. So if a hardcover is available, that's usually what I'll buy because these are books I'm buying because they really resonated for me. And they are then just something I want as a trophy of something that I really loved.

Neil Pasricha (59:20.945)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (59:34.967)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (59:44.788)

Yeah, on your surprising reveal of the audiobook transition that Susan Orlean is undergoing in her beautiful seventh decade of life that's inspiring for all of us, I want to just insert one tiny funny phrase given to us by our guest in chapter 18, David Sedaris, who said, if people who love books are bookworms, then I love books on tape. So I guess I'm a tapeworm.

Susan Orlean (01:00:09.182)

Ah! That's really funny. Well, you know, I love, I am loving books on tape, or whatever you would call them, because I'm consuming a lot, many more books than I could. Oh, bye.

Neil Pasricha (01:00:23.484)

Yeah, it just amplifies your consumption. It's like it's like a fat guy loves whipped cream, you know, like you get way more. You can fit a lot more down there than if you just have a piece of pie.

Susan Orlean (01:00:32.598)

Right. Well, exactly. Now I'm reading probably three or four times as many books because I have time in the day. I'm driving to do errands. I'm driving across town. I mean, mostly when I'm in the car. And that's all time now that I can use to read a book. It's wonderful.

Neil Pasricha (01:00:42.568)

Right.

Neil Pasricha (01:00:47.637)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:00:58.376)

Right. I mean, this is why David does it. He picks garbage for nine hours a day, as is well known. And he has the picker, you know, the thing that stabs the garbage. He has the garbage bag and he has the thing in his ear. So it, you know. Right, right, right.

Susan Orlean (01:01:10.922)

or on a flight or I mean, I really have loved it. I used to read a lot at night before I'd go to bed and I would be just so tired that I would read two pages and fall asleep. So now I'm able to listen to books while I'm alert and awake which is a big plus.

Neil Pasricha (01:01:28.317)

Right, exactly. Well, you know...

Neil Pasricha (01:01:36.008)

And this is an unpaid mention, but I'll just say for anyone listening who's similarly inspired as I am, I love that Susan calls it, and you refer to it Susan as reading books, because it is, absolutely. That is the act of concentration. People often say, they demure, they say, oh, I wasn't really reading, I just listened to it. No, no, that's reading a book. But I just wanna answer a little plug in, it's unpaid and I have no affiliation with them officially, but I personally highly recommend everybody check out Libro FM.

libro.fm. It was introduced to us on three books in chapter 107 when I went down to the Bronx and hung out with Litanya and Jerry on the Bronx bound book bucks as people know the only

bookstore in all of the Bronx has the same population as Manhattan, but 81 less bookstores and the reason is because when you sign up for LibreOffice it costs the same as Audible but when you instead of the money going to Jeff Bezos 110 million dollar yacht You choose your local indie bookstore or whichever indie bookstore you like and they get the profit margin

So it's just a really small way to just continue to support your local indie while you're also in audiobooks without funneling it into the 90% monopolist.

Susan Orlean (01:02:32.621)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (01:02:37.622)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (01:02:41.342)

Right, I think that's really great because, you know, audiobooks are, you generally are paying top dollar, and I buy them rather than having a subscription with Audible because I just would rather, if I wanted, I'd buy it and that's that. But that's a fantastic thing to bring up.

Neil Pasricha (01:03:02.979)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:03:08.576)

Yes, and you know, Audible, I had a friend show me recently, look Neil, I listen to 12 books a month, but I only pay for one token. And I said, what do you mean? He said, well on Audible, you can just press return. I didn't like it. I returned, I didn't like it. Return, I didn't like it. And I thought, oh my God, Jeff Bezos figured out a way to rob the money from the publisher and the author, but he still gets the token price, which all he cares about is the... Anyway, I could go on a rant. I'm not good, I'm gonna hold myself back. Susan, the last opening...

The one hour opening. The last opening quote is about your leads. I read and listened to a ton of interviews with you in preparation for this. My absolute favorite of all was your 2004 interview with University of California writing on the edge editor John Boe, B-O-E, which he's very kindly put up online as a 10 page PDF. And here's the quote. It's the last one I have before we get into your three books. I think.

and you're discussing leads. For those that don't know, that would be the beginning of your articles or often the first sentence, if I have it right. You're famous for your leads. Maybe you can tell us a few of the most famous ones in your answer to this, which is, I think it's the nature of a really good strip tease act that you've got to choose very carefully which item of clothing you're going to take off first, because it's gotta be enough, but not too much.

and it has to be arresting so that you think, hmm, what comes next?

Susan Orlean (01:04:43.099)

You know, the strip tease metaphor, I keep going back to it because it does feel like that to me. And right now I'm working on a memoir and I'm writing a long section about a story of mine that got a lot of attention called The American Man, Age 10.

Neil Pasricha (01:05:05.484)

I've read it and oh, I should have said this, Susan. I didn't, and I apologize. I don't mean to interrupt you, but the bullfitter checks her makeup. The collection of New York articles that I'm holding up on the screen here was added to our top 1000 list already by our guest in chapter 95, Bess Kalb. So in addition to being our guest now, your book is already on our top 1000, this one. And in...

Susan Orlean (01:05:32.094)

Well, that's pretty cool.

Neil Pasricha (01:05:34.012)

Yes, and in best calb for those that don't know is a comedic genius who do you know her?

Susan Orlean (01:05:40.546)

We are, we've never met in real life. We've emailed.

Neil Pasricha (01:05:44.8)

Oh, okay. Right. Wonderful. So for those that know she's just a yeah, yeah. Oh, she's a Twitter wonder can, etc, etc. But the back to you, but that essay you're talking about is collected in this collection. Right, right.

Susan Orlean (01:05:48.703)

I think of her as a friend even though we never met.

Susan Orlean (01:06:00.362)

Yeah, yes. It originally ran an Esquire magazine and I was writing about the lead because the lead was very quirky. The lead was...

Neil Pasricha (01:06:15.045)

What was it?

Susan Orlean (01:06:19.39)

It was a profile of this 10 year old boy, Colin Duffy. And the lead begins, if Colin Duffy and I were to be, get married, we would have matching superhero notebooks. And it goes on from there. And, you know, I guess speculating on what it's like to be married to a 10 year old boy would strike people as unusual. And I was trying.

Neil Pasricha (01:06:45.764)

Some people.

Susan Orlean (01:06:46.846)

Yeah, some. And so in the course of working on this part of the memoir, I was acknowledging that some of writing a lead you can't explain. And in a way, I think you don't want to. I mean, some of it is...

just some intuitive sort of flash that happens. And that is usually coming out of somewhere other than the newspaper maxim of, you know, who, what, where, when, how.

Neil Pasricha (01:07:19.448)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:07:36.621)

Right.

Susan Orlean (01:07:38.198)

because it seems to me not at all important to address that in the first line of a magazine piece, of a book, of, you know, we're not talking about a newspaper story. And that I love the idea of having people startled or,

Neil Pasricha (01:08:02.147)

Mmm.

Susan Orlean (01:08:02.398)

taken by surprise enough or have some emotion so they go, wait, what? Well, I have to keep reading this, which is of course the whole point. I mean, you're trying, you're, you want people to go, wait, I've got to read this. So, um, and I think leads are.

Neil Pasricha (01:08:21.89)

Yes.

Susan Orlean (01:08:26.766)

incredibly important and become more and more and more important as our attention economy is flooded by things demanding that we tune in. So you have one bid for a reader's attention and

Neil Pasricha (01:08:36.781)

Mmm

Susan Orlean (01:08:56.146)

if you don't make it powerfully, you're probably not gonna get it.

Neil Pasricha (01:09:03.616)

Right, right, and you do a lot with your leads, and so I cannot take, I cannot miss the chance. I'm gonna flip randomly through the Bullfighter checks your makeup right now. I'm gonna give you

three of your own leads, and you're gonna tell us why they work. And we know that they work because they've all been immortalized in arguably the top literary publication in the world, The New Yorker and or Esquire, et cetera, and then further curated to a best-selling book.

featuring you on the cover in address. Okay, so I just flipped randomly. I have not read this particular piece before. It's called Tiffany. One thing that Tiffany, Tiffany's manager, and the entire Tiffany organization would like you to know is that even though it may seem too good to be true, Tiffany's real name is really Tiffany.

Susan Orlean (01:09:57.046)

This was a profile of a young teenager who you may have never heard of who became a singing phenomenon named Tiffany.

Neil Pasricha (01:10:10.872)

Oh, I think I'm alone now. I think we're alone now. Yes.

Susan Orlean (01:10:13.454)

Yes. And she got her start singing in shopping malls. She was, you know, really a big deal for a short amount of time. And it always seemed so, you know, she was known by one name, Tiffany. It was

Neil Pasricha (01:10:40.836)

Like as opposed to two names.

Susan Orlean (01:10:42.754)

Right, as opposed to Tiffany Smith, or her name was Tiffany. And there was something so much of the moment, I forget what year I wrote that piece, but it was probably in the 80s. And the name Tiffany was so much of the moment, and such a perfect one-name name.

Neil Pasricha (01:10:57.741)

Yeah, I don't know.

Neil Pasricha (01:11:03.964)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:11:08.644)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (01:11:09.43)

that part of you would be inclined to think, well, that's probably like a stage name, but in fact, it was her real name. And the story was of course about how much of her was artifice and how much was authentic. And also it was fun to just repeat the name Tiffany like five times in the percent.

Neil Pasricha (01:11:15.565)

Right.

Neil Pasricha (01:11:34.528)

Right, right. No, no, that's a really good point, right? No, that's great. Like the repetition of the same word five times in a sentence is something most people have never seen before, right? Unless they're doing that buffalo game in grade school. A gentle rain begins with this phrase. Qabena O'Pong, who is the king and supreme ruler of the African Ashanti tribes people living in the United States of America.

Susan Orlean (01:11:38.215)

Yes.

Susan Orlean (01:11:48.673)

Right.

Neil Pasricha (01:12:03.512)

has a throne in his living room.

Susan Orlean (01:12:07.847)

So this story, which was my first full-length feature in The New Yorker, very meaningful to me, was about a wonderful man, Nana Apong, who was a cab driver and

Neil Pasricha (01:12:13.127)

Oh, congrats.

Susan Orlean (01:12:26.698)

was also, as it turned out, the king of his tribe in the United States. So he lived in a housing project in the Bronx, and he had a life of...

tremendous contradiction. On one hand, he was a very much a working class man with young kids and struggling just the way you can imagine a cab driver would struggle to make ends meet and live comfortably. On the other hand, he was the revered, honored king of his tribe who,

Neil Pasricha (01:13:08.772)

Oh my gosh.

Susan Orlean (01:13:11.672)

respect and approached by his tribespeople to help mediate disputes or solve problems and you know was had all of these beautiful robes that were the kingly wardrobe and so the contrast of this very modest living room in the Bronx and a housing

not a project, but government housing, working class housing in the Bronx, but he had a throne. So his life was such a matter of crazy contrast.

Neil Pasricha (01:13:49.69)

Wow.

Neil Pasricha (01:13:55.785)

Yeah, and you got all that across in one sentence.

Susan Orlean (01:13:59.462)

I felt like it was a way that I could signal the tremendous contradictions of his life without saying, wow, it's pretty weird to be a cab driver but also be king.

Susan Orlean (01:14:22.619)

I'm like a less-

Neil Pasricha (01:14:24.76)

That's another lead that was the second or third option there. Oh my gosh. I can't choose because there's so many. I'm flipping as we talk as you can see. I gotta go with this one, but I looked at three and they're all great, but we gotta get into your three books. But here's the last one. This piece is called Shortcuts. Robert Stewart ran away from home when he was a teenager. Used to be macrobiotic.

Susan Orlean (01:14:29.095)

Exactly. I turned it down.

Neil Pasricha (01:14:50.412)

worries that Republican welfare reform might lead to urban violence. Thanks Hugh Grant is good looking, but not amazing looking. Is a Nietzschean. Has been faithful to his wife since they met 17 years ago. And planned to become a social worker, but ended up a hairdresser.

Susan Orlean (01:15:12.307)

Well, this is a story that I had an absolute blast doing which was One day I was getting my hair cut and I was just Observed and this was he was my hairdresser and his salon was fairly small so that you could kind of hear everybody talking and

I just was listening to all the conversations and sometimes people would eavesdrop on the person in the chair next to them and sort of interrupt and give their two cents and Robert himself is quite voluble and would be holding forth and chatting. And I thought, you know, women's hair salons.

really are this kind of beehive of conversation. And this one in particular, because Robert is such a chatterbox and has had such a crazy, you know, he's had a life with many different chapters. And I thought I just want to spend a week in this hair salon.

and try to capture the sense of this river of conversation that's constantly flowing.

Neil Pasricha (01:16:31.23)

Oh wow.

Susan Orlean (01:16:32.694)

Roberts, sort of the captain of the ship as it's making its way on this river of conversation. So I liked starting with this kind of jumble of information because that's what it felt like to sit there for hours every day. That you could on one minute be talking about Nietzsche and the next talk about hair color and then the next talk about

Neil Pasricha (01:16:46.649)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:17:01.805)

Yeah, Hugh Grant.

Susan Orlean (01:17:03.371)

you know, being macrobiotic and then about Hugh Grant and...

Neil Pasricha (01:17:06.576)

Yeah. Now, lest people think that all your leads are long, because we've talked a few long ones, the bonus one in this game is the three sisters, which is the name of the piece. And the opening line is only eight words. And it goes, in Bulgaria, some tennis balls are like dumplings.

Susan Orlean (01:17:33.124)

I do love that lead. The story was a profile of three sisters who were Bulgarian tennis pros. I followed them on the tennis, on the pro circuit for a couple of weeks. They played in French Open. They played. We went all over the place.

They were living the life that you might imagine of tennis pros that it's not exactly glamorous but certainly elevated. But they would come out of a culture that was at that time still behind the iron curtain, very impoverished and...

Neil Pasricha (01:18:14.591)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:18:21.68)

Oh, interesting. Right.

Susan Orlean (01:18:25.718)

they could barely get decent tennis balls to practice with when they were kids. And their mother, who was hilarious and who traveled with them, was the one who said to me, you know, we got the worst, the balls were all flat. They were like dumplings. And of course, dumplings are such an Eastern European food too, it was like, oh my God, this is so perfect.

Neil Pasricha (01:18:49.471)

Yeah.

Aaaa

Susan Orlean (01:18:53.91)

So it was really fun. I had a great time doing the story. And it was very interesting to be on the pro tennis circuit for a while and see what that life was like. Well, they were playing. Yeah, I mean, I went with them. Yeah, I mean, I went with them to the Swiss Open and the French Open and.

Neil Pasricha (01:19:05.296)

behind the iron curtain.

they were like ranked. They're at the US Open or the Australian Open. Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:19:17.655)

Oh wow.

Susan Orlean (01:19:18.93)

You know, we were, they were traveling around the world on the circuit along with American players and, you know, Canadian players.

Neil Pasricha (01:19:27.9)

See, this is the cool thing. I hope your memoir's got a chapter just on the tennis, on the tennis circuit, that'd be cool.

Susan Orlean (01:19:34.622)

Oh my God, I feel like my memoir is going to be five billion pages long because there are so many stories I want to tell and you know.

Neil Pasricha (01:19:43.36)

Oh, you're having to be prolific about your prolificosity. So...

Susan Orlean (01:19:49.087)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:19:54.54)

It's 1.1954 at the bottom. Craig, who's listening to this, not now, but later, I'm gonna do a quick audio stop here, and the reason I'm doing that is for two reasons. One, I just wanna check in with you, Susan, see if you're comfortable, see if you need some water, see if you need to go to the bathroom or anything.

Susan Orlean (01:20:10.114)

I'm good. I need to know how long we'll go because I have a noon Zoom. Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:20:18.004)

Right, which is in 35 minutes? Okay, so I guess the answer is 35 minutes.

Susan Orlean (01:20:24.022)

Well, I can quickly email her. I mean, tell me how long.

Neil Pasricha (01:20:31.212)

Well, I'm loving this. Like you have no idea how much I'm loving this. I did Surgeon General Vivek Murthy and we had budgeted an hour and a half like this and it got to be kind of like this. And he said, Neil, I'm loving this, but he's the Surgeon General. He's like, can we convene again, you know, in a few hours or a few days? And we did that. And then when people listened, it sounded like one big, beautiful, long thing. So I'm in heaven and I have...

similarly prepared for each of your books. So I'm like, I can't wait to talk to you, but I also realize, oh my gosh, I'm totally hogging you. So I don't know how movable it is.

Susan Orlean (01:21:11.682)

No, no, I mean, let me email the person I was going to Zoom with and just see if we can bump it back. I just don't want to feel panicked and rushed. So let me do that. I mean, that shouldn't be a problem. I just need to.

Neil Pasricha (01:21:26.704)

Thank you.

Neil Pasricha (01:21:31.304)

Yeah, yeah, take your time.

Neil Pasricha (01:21:39.052)

And I'm the 44 year old man with a walnut sized bladder. So I'll be right back. Okay.

Susan Orlean (01:21:43.454)

Okay, well, let's reconvene in a moment.

Susan Orlean (01:23:36.159)

Okay. Whoops.

Susan Orlean (01:23:43.518)

Alright, so I've just, um, emailed her.

Neil Pasricha (01:23:49.424)

Thank you. Does that mean we should wait for a reply or do you want to give me a new end time?

Susan Orlean (01:23:52.834)

Let's keep going and then I'll check. I'll just keep an eye out for her response. And, you know, it's a meeting that wasn't time, it wasn't urgent to do at noon. It's not a podcast, it's a meeting.

Neil Pasricha (01:24:00.045)

Yeah.

Okay.

Neil Pasricha (01:24:13.316)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:24:19.634)

Okay. Thank you. And before I jump into your three books, and this isn't recorded, but is there an order that you read these three in that I should know about?

Susan Orlean (01:24:30.319)

Yeah, I think Faulkner first then Tom Wolf and then Great Plains

Neil Pasricha (01:24:35.932)

Okay, and are you ready if we keep going? This is amazing. I think this is the Susan Orlean interview. That's how I'm thinking about it.

Susan Orlean (01:24:39.434)

Yeah. Yeah, I'll just.

Susan Orlean (01:24:48.062)

It's been really awesome and I know that I'm giving long answers. So the fact that it's long is in part my doing. So I'm and I'm fine with that.

Neil Pasricha (01:25:05.592)

Wonderful. I am just making sure I have I have I got a question for you specifically from Michael Harris, by the way so I'm yep, so I'm going to make sure I have that here otherwise I have to just grab it from my Email if I don't have it here. Oh Yeah, I have it here. Okay. Here we go Okay. All right. Okay, Craig. It's about 125 27 and I'm gonna come back in now. Okay

Susan Orlean (01:25:12.252)

Oh!

Susan Orlean (01:25:25.01)

Oh, sorry, I turned my camera.

Neil Pasricha (01:25:34.3)

OK, that was one of our that wasn't just a moose bouche. And like, you know, that was like we got we threw some inner mezzo, some palate cleansers, some appetizers. Now the listener, I want them to feel like the lead of the whole three books conversation has been properly, evocatively introduced.

Susan Orlean (01:25:55.706)

Right, we got that nailed down

Neil Pasricha (01:25:58.324)

We got that nailed down and now it's time to jump into your three most formative books. And so for those that are new to the show, I am going to try to give the listener a 30 to 60 second overview of each book with the intent of having them feel like they're visually holding it. So your first book is *The Sound and the Fury*.

by William Faulkner, that's F-A-U-L-K-N-E-R, originally published in 1929 by Kaepern Smith in the US and Chadow and Windus over in the UK. I am holding right here a 1990 vintage international trade paperback with ominous purple pink clouds, the sound and the fury in the thin, tall, white, windswept font below a massive linoblock-styled

giant all caps Faulkner, which is black against a gold ribbon. William Faulkner was born in Mississippi in 1897 and died in 1962 in Mississippi. Not many authors land where they started. He is the Nobel Prize winning writer known as one of the best American writers of all time. And he's often rated the very best Southern U.S. writer.

From the back of the book, I'm gonna read it right now, it says, one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, *The Sound and the Fury* is the tragedy of the Compson family featuring some of the most memorable characters in American literature. Beautiful rebellious Caddy, the man-child Benji, haunted neurotic Quentin, Jason the brutal cynic, and Dilsey, their black servant.

I will read simply two of the blurbs on the back, there are more. From Ralph Ellison, it says, "For all his concern with the South, "Faulkner was actually seeking out the nature of man. "Thus we must turn to him for that continuity "of moral purpose, which made for the greatest "of our classics."

Neil Pasricha (01:28:04.964)

In my boldest fantasy, Susan, I would never receive a blurb like that from Ralph Ellison, of all people. And then from Edmund Wilson, you know, Wilson may be best known for kind of hanging out with the Hemingway group. He says, Faulkner belongs to the full dressed post-Flobear group of Conrad, Joyce and Proust. Wow. File this one Dewey Decimal heads like Susan and I in 813.52 for literature slash English North America slash American fiction.

Susan Orlean (01:28:11.857)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:28:33.996)

slash 20th century slash 1900 to 1944. Susan, please tell us about your relationship with *The Sound and the Fury* by William Fox.

Susan Orlean (01:28:44.326)

I was introduced to this book in high school. It was assigned as reading in my AP English class. I am in Cleveland, Ohio, and I have no southern roots. I have no attachment to the South. But the story of the South, of course, is an American story, regardless.

Neil Pasricha (01:28:54.636)

Ooh. In Cleveland?

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (01:29:15.486)

had never read writing like Faulkner. So my first reaction was to this extraordinary craftsmanship, the artistic structuring of sentences, the gorgeousness of the writing.

I was swept away and swept into this fictional world, a fictional county in Mississippi that he writes about in a lot of his books. And the story of the family, and really it's a book about the family, the tragedy of the family. At the heart of it.

in many ways it's the tragedy of slavery, of the... And this family, each individual in the family has their own narrative that becomes really compelling. And I just was... My breath was taken away.

I felt absolutely drawn into the story. Books about families fascinate me. The way that Faulkner toggled between the intimate story of the family and the bigger story of the South struggling with the legacy of slavery.

was just masterful. And, you know, I do love fiction that does that, that tells a very intimate story, but in a context that is a character in its own right, the context of when and where the story takes place. And in fact, I would say probably all my favorite books,

Susan Orlean (01:31:31.746)

have that quality. Just an intimate story and stories about families really interests me. But then a context that tells you something about the world in general. So reading this book, I just, you know, exactly.

Neil Pasricha (01:31:34.992)

toggling.

Neil Pasricha (01:31:54.168)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. The wear of the book.

Susan Orlean (01:32:01.334)

You know, for a long time I was fascinated by Indian fiction because I don't know that much about India and so many of the great books, great Indian literature. You are also, you're learning about India itself and even the politics and the, you know.

Neil Pasricha (01:32:25.932)

Hmm. Sorry to interject there. My dad's from India. I've never been, sadly. Is there a couple of books that you would just throw in for the novice Indian fiction reader?

Susan Orlean (01:32:33.082)

Oh, absolutely. Like the God of small things, a fine balance by Roman mystery. There are, God, there's so many. Those two instantly come to mind.

Neil Pasricha (01:32:37.401)

Mm.

Neil Pasricha (01:32:43.312)

Mmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:32:50.736)

Come to mind. Yeah, those pop out. The first one is I think by Roy RRY Booker Prize winner and the fine bounces by as you said, mystery MIS-TRY.

Susan Orlean (01:32:59.374)

And they are both very, very specifically stories about the individual characters, but you learn so much about, you know, the history of India impacts people also in...

in very intimate ways. The legacy of the South, in particular slavery, but the entire saga of the South is played out on an individual level. So, The Sound and the Fury, I think was perhaps one of the first times that I...

I felt so drawn into a new world, but also incredibly attached to the characters as people. The book, I loved it so much that I started rereading it while I was reading it. So I was reading it in two different places. And part of that is it's also not an easy book.

Neil Pasricha (01:34:11.717)

Oh wow.

Neil Pasricha (01:34:18.263)

No.

Susan Orlean (01:34:19.859)

you know, it's challenging because...

Neil Pasricha (01:34:21.756)

Stream of consciousness, they call it in some places. They refer to that as that phrase.

Susan Orlean (01:34:24.698)

Yeah, and one of the characters is developmentally delayed, so his chapters are very kind of impressionistic. And Faulkner doesn't tell you, here's the story, here's the relationships. You have to.

Neil Pasricha (01:34:50.006)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (01:34:53.594)

understand it, the more you read it, the more you begin to see, oh, I get it. Quentin is the older brother and, um, it, you know, it just takes some time.

Neil Pasricha (01:35:06.621)

Yeah, that's not it's not paint by numbers.

Susan Orlean (01:35:09.914)

No, but it's immersive. And the more you are immersed in it, the more you begin understanding what it's all about.

Neil Pasricha (01:35:14.636)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:35:23.312)

Yes, yes. Wow. The legacy of the f-

Susan Orlean (01:35:25.226)

I mean, it's a very melancholy book. It's very tragic. There are moments that are very funny, but it really is about the sort of collapse of a family.

Neil Pasricha (01:35:40.188)

Mm hmm. Yeah, epic collapse, the tragedy of the family, the tragedy of slavery, the legacy of the south, the toggling between the micro and macro and the phrase I loved it so much. I started rereading it while I was reading it. And I know exactly what you mean, because I have two bookmarks in one of your other books right now. That's

maybe because of jumping around, but I'm doing it. And the lead, by the way, because we shared that conversation about leads on the sound and the fury is, through the fence between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.

Susan Orlean (01:36:22.894)

And that gives you a good idea of some of the challenges of the book, which is you hear that and you have no idea.

What is going on? Who's talking? Where are we? What era is this? And the first chapter is told through the voice of Benji, the son who is disabled. So, and you don't understand that at first. And what you don't understand, for instance, is...

Neil Pasricha (01:36:50.308)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:36:54.884)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (01:36:59.606)

He's talking about men hitting and you immediately think of violence and only... Oh, okay, because it's people golfing. Right? And...

Neil Pasricha (01:37:04.437)

I think, yeah, I was thinking baseball.

Neil Pasricha (01:37:12.781)

Right.

Susan Orlean (01:37:15.37)

You know, but it's also funny because, you know, you begin with a word that, and there's a lot of violence implied in the book. But in fact, when you hear the word hitting and it's actually associated with just people playing golf.

Neil Pasricha (01:37:16.224)

Neither being correct.

Neil Pasricha (01:37:30.506)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:37:35.865)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:37:39.788)

Yeah. You know, yeah. And there's also the N-word on the first page, which I, you know, you just don't see much anywhere anymore. And I know you posted on social media recently that you really liked the movie that Leslie and I, my wife and I just saw and we really liked, which I don't think many people have seen yet. So we'll both just say it's called American Fiction by Core Jefferson, his first ever feature film. And it opens with the N-word on a blackboard.

and a woman disgruntled in the college class storming out, a white woman saying, I can't agree with this. And of course the professor is black. And he says, you know, and there's, so there's a lot of, not saying that comes out necessarily in Faulkner, but like there's, the racial high definition-ness of this book is unusual in our current culture.

Susan Orlean (01:38:13.984)
Right.

Susan Orlean (01:38:27.886)
Right, and of course that's so much of what Falcon wrote about was the legacy of slavery and the sort of original sin nature of slavery that having engaged and permitted slavery for as long as we did we are forever burdened with it, cursed with

the responsibility of having done this immoral thing. And so, you know, there's a lot of sensitivity around language and people disagree about whether books of a period using language that we now find uncomfortable are permissible because...

They are about a period of time, but then you see a movie. Right, and then you see a movie like American Fiction where he's trying very hard to needle you about the sort of overreaction to language. And I mean, I thought the movie was just brilliant. And.

Neil Pasricha (01:39:27.432)
or said by a character who says or thinks.

Neil Pasricha (01:39:45.368)
It was brilliant. Where do you net out on that conversation that you began that you said there's a conversation today about what words can be used? Do you have a point of view or a stance that is helpful for us who are still forming ours?

Susan Orlean (01:39:54.469)
Well, I find... I...

Susan Orlean (01:40:01.614)
I feel like there are probably many different ways to look at this. I think going through Mark Twain and deleting language is not a good idea. And that, yeah, I mean that part of learning how to have perspective.

Neil Pasricha (01:40:18.188)
or a rawl doll.

Susan Orlean (01:40:28.902)

is being exposed to things that at one time were, I mean, in the case of Faulkner, he's using the language that was used. And I feel like that's kind of the point and the fact that it is uncomfortable or shocking.

Neil Pasricha (01:40:40.404)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (01:40:55.426)

that it's used so casually is part of the point. And I just think it's a giant mistake to go through and say, well, we're gonna kind of tidy this up.

Neil Pasricha (01:40:58.581)

Right, right, right.

Neil Pasricha (01:41:07.292)

Yeah, otherwise this news speak.

Susan Orlean (01:41:10.315)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:41:12.08)

So many ways we could go here. Faulkner, one thing I've been wrestling with myself that I'd love to get your perspective on, because you've achieved a tremendous amount of success. I think you're one of the top non-fiction writers in the world, period. And you are, and Faulkner, he got some big prizes too.

Susan Orlean (01:41:30.888)

Oh my god, thank you.

Neil Pasricha (01:41:39.816)

of course, the best known of them being the Nobel Prize in writing. And there's this conversation, I think, happening in the world right now oriented around Stephen Pressfield's famous book, *The War of Art*, where he encourages people to go pro. Pressfield, of course, is a movie writer, most famous for writing *The Legend of Baker Vance* and many others. But he's taken on a second life as sort of a self-help coach where.

All my friends, Rich Roll was a podcaster, a very famous one, and he puts the war of art as one of his three most famous. Many people have humbled the poet, has on this show, and it's all about going pro, turning professional, going pro, becoming, committing to the chairs, committing to sitting down and writing, committing to, it doesn't matter, day after day, 7 a.m., as David Sedaris told us in *Jeffery Teen*, I write on Christmas, I write on my birthday. There's a professionalism there, and you're a successful professional.

as well. And you also, you know, the barbershop for a week or the salon for a week, you have maintained an ability to sort of gather up the cultural refrains of the bus, regardless of the fact that you live in an elegant mid century modern LA home, you know, with your year, and you're writing for the New Yorker, you know, that's the not many quote unquote stuffier mags. And I don't use that word negatively. I love the New Yorker. I'm just saying

you know, let's talk about that. And Jonathan Frandsen has a quote that I came across and he's a future guest, I'm interviewing him next month. And his quote is, I take a certain amount of pride in not being a professional and apparently being a lifelong amateur, period. I don't wanna be slick, period. So I'd love you to just open up what I've tried to paint as two sides of this view. You are a professional by any regard. Do you?

Think of yourself as an amateur. How do you come out on this view? And it's with an eye towards coaching future and current writers.

Susan Orlean (01:43:40.742)

Yeah, I would disagree with Jonathan Franzen. I don't think being a professional necessarily means being slick. I think being a professional means having the discipline to...

Susan Orlean (01:44:08.322)

to get your work done and to work hard and not let, not give in to...

Susan Orlean (01:44:28.226)

I mean...

I just cannot believe that he really means... I don't-

Neil Pasricha (01:44:37.393)

It's a 15 year old guardian interview. So I'm also grabbing what I like, you know, yeah

Susan Orlean (01:44:40.518)

Yeah. And I think I'd like to feel that amateur, that I'm both a professional and an amateur in the sense that I bring to my work the same degree of joy and surprise that I have felt since the very beginning and that I don't

Neil Pasricha (01:45:06.372)

Wow.

Susan Orlean (01:45:09.886)

Look at it as just got to make a widget But when it comes to work habits and Discipline I'm very much a professional. I am and I'm proud of it. I feel like when it comes down to it I sit down and I Think and I look at my notes and I

You know, I look at my deadline and I get into work mode. So I don't see a conflict between having that kind of orderly drive, which I think of as professional, and having the vulnerability.

and openness that an amateur might have.

Neil Pasricha (01:46:12.676)

Wow, wow, wow. I bring the same I bring to my work the same degree of joy and surprise that I felt since the very beginning. I don't see a conflict between orderly drive and vulnerability and openness which makes which begs to me the fall question of how do you retain? How do you retain the connection to all of humanity which you so that's your pieces like that's what you do you

The unconventional eulogies is all about the like, wow, how'd you get into that little tunnel? Like, and you do so without heirs, which I think would be hard to do after 30 plus years of the New York like, how do you maintain a groundedness?

Susan Orlean (01:46:46.913)

I'm sorry.

Susan Orlean (01:46:57.802)

Well, writing is very humbling. And if you think because you've written lots of books or written for the New Yorker or had a best seller that the next sentence you write is gonna be easy, you are sorely mistaken. And it is, so the humility and respect for how hard it is

Neil Pasricha (01:47:13.37)

Oh wow, that's nice.

Susan Orlean (01:47:28.235)

um is very grounding.

Neil Pasricha (01:47:31.421)

Yeah, yeah, wow.

Susan Orlean (01:47:34.09)

And I think that when I go into each story, and particularly for instance as obituaries, each one was a world that I knew nothing about. And unless you're really a jerk, you're going to be, you know, enter it with that, the humbleness of thinking, you know, I really don't know anything about.

a rattle snake wrestling, you know, and I'm writing an obituary of a guy who You know was a rattlesnake wrangler I don't know anything about it the fact that I

write for the New Yorker or had a seller doesn't make me any more capable of writing the story. And I still have to say, tell me, tell me what it takes to wrestle a rattlesnake.

Neil Pasricha (01:48:22.438)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:48:29.866)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:48:37.472)

Yeah, what's the rattlesnake wrestler, right? Yeah. And this is the way I summarize the popular non-fiction book, *Range*, by David Epstein, where I tell people my version of that book is, your learning curve is the steepest when you know the least. And if I may, it's maybe a bit more personal, but I'm thinking about this with relation to my kids. Yes, it doesn't make your next sentence easier, but Austin Gillespie, age 19, has a mother who has achieved.

Susan Orlean (01:48:52.99)

Yes.

Neil Pasricha (01:49:06.332)

great success and arguably my kids have someone who's achieved less success but some success that they can see and feel and they haven't done it and they haven't done anything. How do you ensure humility in your kin?

Susan Orlean (01:49:25.622)

that's tougher um honestly because they see the parts of it that are glamorous and they don't necessarily have the ability to feel what it feels like to sit here and think I cannot think of the next sentence and what comes along with that which is to say

not gonna I I've lost it I this is the piece that I'm not gonna be able to write and the

Neil Pasricha (01:50:02.04)

Which happens every piece. To tell anyone who's writing, as we all know, as every writer knows, as David Mitchell has said to us, as George Saunders has said to us, as every frickin' writer has said to us, it happens every piece that you feel that way.

Susan Orlean (01:50:03.725)

Yeah, and.

Susan Orlean (01:50:16.018)

every piece and you know to a much lesser degree every sentence but certainly every piece and you sit in front of your computer with the conviction that this one is the one where it's all going to fall apart. So my son you know I might tell him that but it doesn't land for him.

Whereas he'll see my book in a bookstore or...

Neil Pasricha (01:50:51.716)

An invitation to the New Yorker Festival or... Ha ha ha!

Susan Orlean (01:50:54.574)

Yeah, something sort of wonderful and glamorous. And he'll have, of course, the feeling of, oh, wow, this is really fun and cool. I love this job.

Neil Pasricha (01:51:10.492)

So you're not gonna give me parenting advice, which I was hoping for.

Susan Orlean (01:51:13.61)

You know, I would love to since why not? But I try, now that he's older, I try to emphasize to him that this didn't come about because I didn't work hard. This is, you know, in large part because...

I really did work hard and I really did stay strong and right when it would have been more fun to go goof around and I really did need to discipline myself. And I think at his age it's...

Neil Pasricha (01:51:42.3)

show the work.

Neil Pasricha (01:51:50.384)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:51:58.259)

Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (01:52:06.19)

clicking more than it might have when he was younger.

Neil Pasricha (01:52:09.484)

Yeah, and you know, kids grew up as we all know, you know, differently every year, generation, but that focus on showing the work, I think is really brilliant and magical, and we try to do that here as well. Okay, let's move on to your second book. This one blew me away. It is our third Tom Wolf book on our top 1,000. So remember, we're collecting 1,000 formative books total, so it's worth mentioning that.

Susan Orlean (01:52:20.884)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (01:52:39.344)

In chapter 15, Tuesdays with Maury author Mitch Albom gave us The Right Stuff by Tom Wolfe, which I read the first 100 pages of Love but didn't get through. And then in chapter 21, Franklin the Turtle author, Paulette Bourgeois gave us The Bonfire of the Vanities, which knocked me off

my feet and I went immediately into a man in full and that knocked me off my feet. And then I went and then I was like, oh my god, OMG, Tom Wolfe.

And now here we have as your Susan Orleans, the Susan Orleans second most formative book we have indeed. Here it comes everybody, the electric Kool-Aid acid test. Speaking of leads by Tom Wolfe. File this one under 306. Do we, that's my answer for social sciences slash social sciences, sociology and anthropology slash culture and institutions. He has right there in the backbone because this is a fresh glossy still in print.

432 page Picador press 2008 edition of the original 900 and 1968, that'd be 1968 if I was reading my right stuff properly, Farrar, Strauss and Geroe book when it was originally published. My version is a paperback with this, as you can see, slick, shiny cover that fades from black at the top to a dusky twilight blue near the bottom, across the top and in all caps yellow green is the big bold phrase.

Tom Wolf is W-O-L-F-E, W-O-L-F-E. So the E at the end for those that don't know Tom Wolf. And below are two images. Number one, the first image is the phrase, the electric Kool-Aid acid test written in a rainbow wavy, tie dyed colored hippie style of twisted words. This book of course, partly being given the cultural credence of kicking off the hippie movement in its documentation of the 1964,

Bus Ride Across America by Ken Kesey and his group of Mary pranksters. Then of course, the second image is a pencil type drawing of the rainbow colored bus, importantly, interesting to note, not Dayglow, because Dayglow had not been invented yet, but they used primary colored paint.

Neil Pasricha (01:54:54.492)

Ken Kesey lived from 1935 to 2001. He was the author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and his evolving and rotating group of 12 to 16 merry pranksters included famously Neil Cassidy, the bassist for Dean Moriarty and Jack Kerouac's On the Road and future members of the Grateful Dead, including Carolyn Mountain Girl Garcia, partnered to Jerry Garcia, on their wild drug infused neon rainbow school bus drive across the United States in the summer of 1964.

Again, sometimes considered the or one of the cultural kickoffs to the entire hippie movement. Tom Wolf, born in Richmond, Virginia in 1930 and lived 88 years to 2018 dying very sadly only two months into the start of this show. So I will never sadly ever be able to invite him on the program. Susan, tell us about your relationship with the electric Kool-Aid acid test by the one and only Tom Wolf.

Susan Orlean (01:55:48.894)

This was certainly a formative book for me and probably was, except for school books, one of the first non-fiction books of its sort that I had ever read. So that's very meaningful as a person who ended up pursuing that as a profession. Well.

Neil Pasricha (01:56:09.902)
of its sort.

Susan Orlean (01:56:13.394)
You know what? I read it when I was in high school. So it was very close to the time when I read the Faulkner book. But, you know, at that time, new journalism was really in its early stages. And while we certainly had extraordinary. Creative nonfiction books, I cringe a little using, but narrative nonfiction books.

Neil Pasricha (01:56:26.596)
Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (01:56:40.284)
Yeah, narrative nonfiction as opposed to Wikipedia style nonfiction.

Susan Orlean (01:56:44.862)
Right, so you had Joseph Mitchell and A.J. Liebling, and there were millions of, you know, and Hiroshima by John Hirschi, and there were brilliant narrative nonfiction being published, but I hadn't, to my knowledge...

Neil Pasricha (01:56:49.86)
Hunter S Thompson.

Neil Pasricha (01:57:01.217)
Oh, I see, yeah.

Susan Orlean (01:57:06.91)
I had not read much at that point. It was certainly not taught in school. The nonfiction I read was history books and you know, and then otherwise it was fiction. Anyway, somehow or another I got, I think my brother told me about this book and for what it's worth, I was really into The Grateful Dead. So I began,

You know just curious about the Grateful Dead the book had an impact on me as Much about the way it was written as what it was written about Tom Wolfe

wrote the way no one I had ever read wrote. And certainly no one had ever written nonfiction the way he wrote it that I had read. And I think that we all kind of agree that he was one of a kind. And in fact, I would say at least one generation of people

if not more, were burdened by the desire to try to imitate him, which was, you know, a fool's errand since nobody could imitate him. I mean, he was, that was his voice and that was, but he, it

Neil Pasricha (01:58:29.936)
Mm.

Neil Pasricha (01:58:35.78)
Hmm.

He's inimitable.

Susan Orlean (01:58:49.226)
It was the first time it dawned on me that you could do this sort of immersion journalism.

really be embedded in a subculture, but still remain a journalist. And still, because he was absolutely a journalist. No one was less of a hippie than Tom Wolfe. So, you know, he was embedded in that world, but nobody would have ever mistaken him for a hippie.

but he was an incredibly voracious reporter and he could make himself, he could enter these subcultures and observe them. He was extremely funny, quite cynical, but also deeply empathic. I mean, he wrote out of...

a real desire to understand these subcultures and to illuminate them. And in the very best sense, without judgment, even though, you know, he could both make fun and be sarcastic when necessary, but you always felt that he had one mission in mind, which was to show you this other world.

So that's where his empathy arose from, which is my mission is to show people the world of Ken Kesey and this extraordinary youth movement that's unfolding and this drug culture that's unfolding. What I personally think about it, I'm not gonna hide it from you, but that's not really the, you know, it's the difference between an op-ed writer.

Susan Orlean (02:00:51.046)
And a reporter, which is an op-ed writer, what's primary is for them to let you know what they think about a subject, whereas a reporter like Tom Wolfe and, you know, I certainly feel inspired by that. I feel like it doesn't really matter what I think, although I'm not gonna hide from you.

what I think, but what I'm really here for is to be your, your Virgil and to show you this world that I've uncovered. And, you know, it comes up all the time that you write about things that you have an opinion about. I think it's wrong.

Neil Pasricha (02:01:36.812)
Yeah, you've even said every decision you make about what you're right is even a moral choice, you've said.

Susan Orlean (02:01:42.35)

Absolutely, and I think that it's wrong to think you can't both be empathetic and opinionated. I think one of the most interesting examples of that in my experience was writing a story about children's beauty pageants. And you know, it was a real challenge because...

Neil Pasricha (02:02:03.512)

Mm-hmm. I've read that story.

Susan Orlean (02:02:10.03)

I had very strong opinions about it, namely that they were very disturbing to me, but

The my mission and what I cared about deeply was not to tell you my opinion but to explore that world which my strong opinion was based on No exposure to that world. I've never been to a children's beauty pageant. I didn't know anyone who had been in a children's beauty pageant so

I felt like as a writer it really was compelling to me to go look at this world and in a way even more compelling because I had a strong opinion about it based on a knee-jerk reaction and I came out of the experience still feeling strongly that I didn't

like them and wouldn't participate and had real misgivings about whether they were really good for kids. But my mission was to say, come with me and I'm going to show you this world that most of us have never been exposed to. And we don't know why people do them. But I'm going to try to tell you that.

Neil Pasricha (02:03:33.496)

to put it. It doesn't really matter what I think, although I'm not going to hide it from you. You said a few earlier in your riff that this was formative to you in both how it was written and what it was written about. So do you want to take us down the ladder rung of both of those two points? How was it formative in terms of how it was written? How is it formative in terms of what it was written about?

Susan Orlean (02:04:03.854)

Tom Wolf showed me that you could take a subculture, and in this case it was, you know, this sort of hippie drug culture, and particularly this Ken Kesey's little band, and write about it.

and have it be important. It seemed to me that he was saying examining subcultures is valuable.

Susan Orlean (02:04:45.45)

it's meaningful for us to know, you know, the way other people are living. So his giving that kind of attention validated the idea that writing about the nooks and crannies of society was...

Neil Pasricha (02:04:52.098)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:04:55.989)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:05:02.262)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:05:12.202)

really legitimate and important and fascinating, and that there was an anthropology at play. And I think certainly he wasn't the first person to do that, but in the modern era, he was the greatest practitioner of

Neil Pasricha (02:05:19.728)

Hmm

Susan Orlean (02:05:38.182)

saying I'm basically an anthropologist out looking at these tribes that make up our society and each one merits serious attention and examination. So that really mattered to me in terms of the subject. You know, I didn't read this and think, oh my god, I'm gonna...

Neil Pasricha (02:05:56.796)

Wow.

Neil Pasricha (02:06:03.141)

Mm hmm. Sorry, sorry on the subject and you're gonna go into this, but I just wanna throw in here for those listening. You said to Debbie Millman when you started writing for the New Yorker that New Yorker didn't say it was funny or kind of silly and it will be a place, your pieces, it will be a nice balance to our otherwise serious important work, but that it was legitimately important. It doesn't have global impact, but it has real impact. It's about how life

presents itself. It was intoxicating to me to have that sense of what made a story validated.

Susan Orlean (02:06:35.122)

Yeah, and I think that is, you know, when you look at a newspaper, I'm not throwing shade but in a newspaper it's gloom and doom and then they have the light feature.

Neil Pasricha (02:06:52.297)

Yeah, the good news story.

Susan Orlean (02:06:55.818)

And there's a way when those were just seen as the little palate cleanser before you dove back in to the doom and gloom. And I never ever felt... First of all, I didn't think these subjects were...

Neil Pasricha (02:07:10.362)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:07:13.66)
Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (02:07:23.002)
lightweight and unimportant. I thought they were extremely important. And the New Yorker made me, I felt at the New Yorker that they saw it the same way that, um,

Neil Pasricha (02:07:36.988)
Yeah, as you saw it, as they saw it, as Tom Wolf taught you to see it. Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:07:42.418)
Yeah, illuminating the way people live their lives is meaningful, whether what they do is very niche and small or whether it's global policy. Nobody's trying to equate a child beauty pageant with, you know.

the war in Gaza, but in terms of mattering in your richness as a human being and your knowledge of the world around you, and I don't think we need to say one is more important than the other, it's part of being a citizen of the world that you learn this broad,

Neil Pasricha (02:08:28.964)
Mm.

Susan Orlean (02:08:39.798)
range and within these little light stories there's a lot of darkness and light and humor and tragedy and you know they're they touch on a real range of emotion and meaning um and I felt that the New Yorker that's what the New Yorker stood for.

Neil Pasricha (02:09:08.824)
Yeah, and despite a relatively much smaller ripple in culture, sadly, because obviously I know all the online series, but a lot less people subscribe to the magazine and there's just so much more media and so much more content. And I think that's what they still get when I, especially when I read like a talk of the town piece or something like that, or a great profile, one of those rich, like 10 page profiles that just takes you the whole flight.

Now, so you've gone deep into the kind of, you said it was formative to you in terms of how it was written and to what it was written about. And so the how it was written, we've really done a nice job opening that up. On the one that was written about, I just get a little bit more context here on what is written about for people. And then I'd love your formativeness here. The electric coolant acid test has been described as faithful and essential in depicting the roots and growth of the hippie movement.

Susan Orlean (02:09:38.732)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:10:04.012)

including some say even the start of like the rainbow colors, right? Like they painted the bus these colors. Well, think about like tie dyed shirts, etc. The bus they drive, Ken Kesey brought a generous supply of the then legal psychedelic drug LSD. And they reportedly also took 500 benzadrine pills in bracket speed, and a shoe box full of rolled marijuana cigarettes. They were stopped several times by the government, but explained they were filmmakers. Until 1965, drug use received little

media attention for officials to be suspicious. And so I guess the question that you're letting us repel into, and I appreciate your letting us go here, is something akin to what was your awareness, understanding, and involvement with the culture before and after reading the book? Because if I have my math right, you were nine when the Mary Pranksters rode their bike, their bus across the States, 13 when the book came out, and then you read it probably a few years after that.

Susan Orlean (02:11:02.346)

Right. And I was really a whole different generation than Ken Kesey. And I was, you know, in high school, this was as exotic. The story of the lives they were living, I mean, it was extremely exotic to me. I was.

leading a very conventional good girl life in high school. And even though I was a big Grateful Dead fan and went to many, many concerts, I was, you know, very, and I really was passionate about The Grateful Dead. And I think that was a big part of why the book.

resonated so much with me, but it did not have the effect of making me think, oh my gosh, I can't wait to drop acid and, you know, do live that life.

Neil Pasricha (02:12:03.19)

He doesn't glorify.

Susan Orlean (02:12:05.502)

No, I mean he's very, um, interested.

Neil Pasricha (02:12:09.86)

It's kind of glorified today, maybe, but it wasn't glorified in this book.

Susan Orlean (02:12:14.594)

No, I think what he glorified was... I don't... I think he didn't glorify anything. I think... um...

He reveled in the adventurousness and...

Susan Orlean (02:12:36.966)

inventiveness of this group of people, their willingness to kind of head out in, I mean this was early on, it was not an era where people were in rainbow painted school buses and dropping acid. It's hard for us to believe because the culture

Neil Pasricha (02:13:01.564)

It wasn't illegal because it wasn't a thing.

Susan Orlean (02:13:04.638)

It was so early. Right. And I forget what your LSD was for synthesise. I just don't remember. But yeah, so this was definitely. Oh, is that right?

Neil Pasricha (02:13:06.524)

It's like crypto before there's laws about crypto or whatever.

Neil Pasricha (02:13:15.6)

50s or 60s for sure. Up here in Canada, I think. Then we get it from the, I think we got it from the rye plants, I think. I watched the Michael Pollan documentary on LSD. I forget where it was from, but yeah, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:13:30.302)

Yeah, I can't remember. But just to answer your question, I didn't read this and think I wanna be part of this. I think that I read it, marveling at it, loving the insight into the Grateful Dead.

You know, at that point I was living in a world that was very influenced by hippie sensibility. So it served as a bit of a history book. But I think how it really influenced me was reading and thinking, I wanna write books like this.

Neil Pasricha (02:14:12.964)

But no relationship with drugs or drug culture or hippie culture kind of after the book that you can trace back and say, oh, I started smoking weed or I certainly lowered my defenses against being open to or aware of it. Or I saw some, I went to a lot of Grateful Dead, you know, like there was there no, and we're lucky we're in 2024. So these conversations are, have become a lot more open than they used to be. And I'm very happy to share my.

view and perspective and relationship with things like weed and LSD and so on. But I just, I would, I would be surprised to hear that Susan or Lee now had no, like, did you not, um, get into it?

Susan Orlean (02:15:00.366)

I think like everyone on the planet, I smoked weed when I was in high school and college and experimented with drugs for sure. I wouldn't draw a direct connection to the book in any way. I think by the time I was in my drug use phase...

Neil Pasricha (02:15:18.234)

Right.

Susan Orlean (02:15:26.39)

the book had been out for quite a long time. I mean, it was no longer something that you would say directly. I read this book, it made me really curious about trying drugs because everyone...

Neil Pasricha (02:15:38.669)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:15:47.182)

It was so common to smoke pot when you were, you know, in that, well, obviously it's become only more common, but it was, I wouldn't draw that connection. And I don't think I looked at them. I mean, look, what was more meaningful to me was...

Neil Pasricha (02:15:48.445)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:15:57.24)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:16:11.25)

reading further about drug use and the Grateful Dead and how it went from this

exploratory, adventurous, kind of intellectual pursuit. And then the band sort of split between the people who started using heroin, which ended very badly, including sadly, Jerry Garcia, versus the other people who just stayed with psychedelics and the drugs that were...

not to numb them out, but to enhance perception. So I was actually.

Neil Pasricha (02:16:52.128)

Yeah. That's a really, it's a really good delineation. Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:16:56.382)

Yeah, I mean, I think that affected me more because Jerry Garcia's decline in death really upset me and realizing later, oh my God, Jerry Garcia became a heroin addict? What a dumb thing. Like he of all people. So I would say.

Neil Pasricha (02:17:14.405)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:17:21.956)

But do you, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:17:24.71)

I don't draw any connection between my pretty run-of-the-mill drug use that didn't end up being super interesting.

Neil Pasricha (02:17:27.449)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:17:39.952)

And then, and then, and then do you do you while we're hanging out here, because I think it's a fun space, you know, there's that famous Hemingway quote, you know, write drunk, edit sober. If you asked me if someone said, Oh, you know, you wrote the book of awesome 10 years ago, any writing principles like there was one I would say, you know, sometimes I wrote high and edited sober or, you know, to come up with some of those ideas, I found cannabis to be a helpful infusion. Do you see a relationship between drugs and writing it?

in any way today or no.

Susan Orlean (02:18:09.638)

I mean, I have never written either drunk or high ever, ever. I just, um, it's never occurred to me. And for that matter, I've never even thought, I'll bring a glass of wine out to my office. Never. I'm very...

Neil Pasricha (02:18:17.54)

Wow, wow.

Neil Pasricha (02:18:35.436)

Oh, interesting. That's interesting.

Susan Orlean (02:18:37.206)

strict about it. First of all, I feel like I have plenty of time to drink on what I'm not working, but also I never thought I think that could really enhance I mean and this is just me anybody Right, right

Neil Pasricha (02:18:56.552)

Yeah, yeah, no, no. And that's why it's fun to talk about. You learn everybody's writing routines, right? But not bringing a glass of wine to the terrarium is pretty interesting. I like that, you know? Yeah, yeah, that's interesting.

Susan Orlean (02:19:08.598)

Never, never, never in my life. And believe me, I've, I certainly enjoy drinking and, yeah, I mean, I'm not a Puritan. I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm not a Puritan, but it has never struck me as being something that would help me in my writing.

Neil Pasricha (02:19:20.772)

We feast on life, Susan. Yes.

Hahaha

Neil Pasricha (02:19:36.248)

And you're writing. That's kind of great to hear. Anyway, there's no judgment here. It's just all the spirit of learning. Now, book organization. I got to ask you about book organization. The electrocuted acetest begins in this wild. He starts in the back of a pickup truck. And then it's linear, and then it's not linear. Like, I thought the bus ride was going to be the whole book, but then 150 pages in, he suddenly starts saying, I.

he started saying, I this I that I was like, what like this has gone from like, what's going on to like, you're in it. Like, I didn't think you're even in this thing. And so I'm kind of picturing like Tom Wolf having like 100 cue cards, with all these scenes of what happened when he was hanging out with these people. And then like, not just, oh, it was 1234. But like, how do I braid them together in the most interesting story way? And then why this is interesting for me to ask you is because when I was reading about the library book when I

I sent you my review of the library book pre-researching you for this interview. So I was, I was, couldn't believe that I had written this phrase in my own review in my book club that I send out at the last Saturday morning of every month saying, it feels to me like reading this book is like walking down the shelves of a library. And then of course I read you saying the exact same phrase when you were talking about how you organize the book. So I both have a question. My question about book organization is on the library book, how did you actually practically organize it?

Feel free to go into any level of detail you're willing to. Like, how'd you think about it? What'd you do on your walls? Did you set up your home or studio in some certain way? How did you think about weaving the threads together? Did you map them out? Like, how'd you organize it? And the reason I'm asking you is because I detect from Wolfe to Arlene a similar nonfiction narrative, but not just linear narrative type of approach.

Susan Orlean (02:21:24.678)

Right. And I think, um, I'm sure this is true for Tom Wolf. It certainly is for me. I don't intentionally disregard chronology for the hell of it. I mean that

you know, or to confuse people. That's not it at all. I have a system that I've used now for a long time, which is I write, I create index cards, and by that I mean these, yeah. These big, I don't know how many inches these are, but.

Neil Pasricha (02:22:03.105)

Oh, she's holding them up.

Neil Pasricha (02:22:08.944)

looks like about, yeah, five by seven inches, but they're quite big. That's bigger than like, it's like the size of your face, the whole index card.

Susan Orlean (02:22:10.443)

Five by seven or

Susan Orlean (02:22:17.194)

Yeah, and I put on each one a sort of unit of information. When I wrote the library book, I had over probably close to 700. I then.

At that time I had an office that had a long, long wall that I put up corkboard and I organized the cards thematically because I felt like that's how I wanted to organize the book was more by theme rather than by chronology. Although there were certain sections like the development of the library that needed to be chronological.

It would be silly not to be. So I was juggling multiple timelines and But the chronology was never the overarching narrative. Right, I mean so certainly like telling the story of the development of the library and ultimately the

Neil Pasricha (02:23:27.362)

Other than the fire, I guess, or at least the beginning of the fire.

Susan Orlean (02:23:38.002)

you know, but I told the fire early in the beginning.

Neil Pasricha (02:23:41.297)

Exactly, exactly. As soon as I said that I was like, wait a minute, then she didn't actually do that. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:23:46.714)

I mean, I felt like, let me tell you what is the trigger for this investigation and then pull the camera back.

and start in the 1800s before LA had a library. And, you know, it was a small city, kind of a cow town. Hardly anyone even had books, et cetera, and then move forward in time. But at the same time, I interspersed that with sections in which I journeyed through

many different departments of the present day library and spent time in, you know, spent time with the security guards, spent time in the department where they answer phone calls with questions, spent time.

Neil Pasricha (02:24:32.984)

Right, right, right.

Neil Pasricha (02:24:41.561)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:24:45.976)

Right, so if you spent time in the department where they answer phone calls with questions, like what's on the cue card then?

Susan Orlean (02:24:55.234)

That's a very good question. The way it works is if there were great quotes that I wanted to use, I would put those on a cue card. If it was something bigger like the, or it might be statistics about how many calls they get in a day.

So one card might say 2000 phone calls a day versus 10,000 phone calls a day 20 years ago. I'm obviously making this up. And then say I had something like a newspaper story about that department that seemed funny.

Neil Pasricha (02:25:22.896)

Hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:25:28.252)

Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:25:42.65)

I might have an index card that would say go to file X where the newspaper story is.

Neil Pasricha (02:25:52.649)

Oh, I see, right, and then.

Susan Orlean (02:25:53.878)

So the index cards were not all of the same nature.

Susan Orlean (02:26:05.014)

but each one was like a unit that could be moved around where I needed to put it.

Neil Pasricha (02:26:14.288)

But you say unit, but you mean it represented potentially like 100 to 1000 words of prose.

Susan Orlean (02:26:20.346)

Exactly. Right. I mean, if it was a funny quote, it was going to be plugged in somewhere. And I just wanted to remember the quote. If it was statistical information or factual information, which a lot of it was, then I would put them in order in which I wanted them to where I thought they would, you know, fit the best. I would organize them.

Neil Pasricha (02:26:32.046)

right.

Neil Pasricha (02:26:39.234)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:26:47.344)

Yeah. So am I correct in thinking? And I'm probably not, but I'm trying to get the process nailed here for the process junkies like me out there. Say you had, so there's one fascinating chapter. The whole book's fascinating. There's a fascinating chapter on the history of the library. This guy walks across the states. He starts the LA library or takes over for LA library. But it's got the history of the library in there, Charles Loomis. And so if you had 10 or 15 cue cards,

on library origin stuff, you then assemble it together with a butterfly clip, sit down at your computer, and then you are like, okay, there's a chapter here, I got all the units, so now I gotta build the writing.

Susan Orlean (02:27:28.771)

Right.

Susan Orlean (02:27:33.406)

Exactly. It's almost like you go to Ikea you buy the flat pack you lay all of the pieces out and some of them are just a screw some as a giant panel of wood some as some little plastic plug and you know before you begin building

you sort of lay them out in an order in which you kind of can understand how it may come together and then you begin assembling.

Neil Pasricha (02:28:11.224)

In some sense, you're writing the Billy bookshelf manual.

Susan Orlean (02:28:17.031)

Precisely, and that's my dream job.

Susan Orlean (02:28:22.826)

That's what I'm... this is all for.

Neil Pasricha (02:28:23.929)

No words at all. She just wants to evolve to iconography. We got to get to your last book, but I just, you know, Tom, you read this in 60, you know, late 60s, early 70s, Tom Wolf died in 2018. By my math, that gives me almost 50 years, but you guys are in the literary world to cohabitate. Did you have any, did you got any Tom Wolf stories of any kind?

Susan Orlean (02:28:28.158)

Right. Exactly.

Susan Orlean (02:28:50.826)

You know, believe it or not, I never met him. And yeah, I mean, if I had put some effort into it, I certainly could have. We knew many people in common. He had a particular antipathy towards the New Yorker, having written a scathing piece that people still, you know, cringe when they think about it. But...

Neil Pasricha (02:28:53.18)

Wow! Aww!

Susan Orlean (02:29:23.205)

I would have loved to have met him and...

I, it would have been a delight and I'm sorry that I didn't make the effort. Um, you know, just for the heck of it.

Neil Pasricha (02:29:37.228)

You didn't have a podcast in the 90s that gave you an excuse to do what I do and come tap on everybody's door. Hahahaha

Susan Orlean (02:29:42.891)

Exactly. It would have been a pleasure. And he lived in New York. I lived in New York. It would have been easy to do, but I never did.

Neil Pasricha (02:29:52.996)

too many dudes walking by in white suits.

Susan Orlean (02:29:55.486)

Right, he would have been easy to recognize.

Neil Pasricha (02:29:57.936)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. By the way, his quote on why he always wore a white suit is reminiscent of what Casey Neistat, the famous YouTuber says for why he always wears sunglasses, which is reminiscent of why Jack Nicholson says he always wears sunglasses, which is akin to, and I'm paraphrasing all three of these people, you know, when I'm not wearing my sunglasses, I'm just a regular guy. When I wear my sunglasses, I'm Jack fucking Nicholson.

Susan Orlean (02:30:24.056)

Yeah!

Neil Pasricha (02:30:30.178)

Okay, let's transition now to your third and final. I can see you're biting your tongue a bit, which I appreciate. You can feel free to say something about that if you want. But why is he always wearing a white suit? Because he says, when I wear a white suit, I'm Tom Wolf. There's

something there. Your third and final book is, of course, Great Plains, P-L-A-I-N-S by Ian Frazier, if I'm saying that right. F-R-A-N-S.

Susan Orlean (02:30:45.727)

It's funny.

Neil Pasricha (02:30:55.372)

Zed or Z I E R originally published in 1989 by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. Again, I'm holding a first edition hardcover, which I absolutely loved. I have not consumed more than 30% of the words in this book, but I'm hopping, skipping and jumping around feasting on this thing like a Davis Adaris theft by finding style of diary, but meshed together like more prozy than that. It's a beautiful.

giant varsity font great planes across the top half of the dust jacket with a faded big blue sky over a haystack yellow and road gray highway in Frasier is in a black stacked font on the edge of the horizon. He is today the 73 year old two time Thurber prize winning nonfiction and comedy writer born like you Susan in Cleveland, Ohio. I opened the dust jacket and I see Okay, this is one of my first YouTube interview. I've been trying to get into this for a few years, but this is a good one. As I'll show on the YouTube here.

um, the YouTube, incredibly, incredibly vivid end papers with a light orange map of the USA with the Great Plains, lower case from I'm saying that lowercase from Montana, North Dakota up top to Western Texas at the bottom encircled in a gray shadow with little lines covering famous roots like Coronado in 1541, Lewis Clark in 1804 and of course, Ian Fraser in the 1980s.

The flap copy I thought was wonderful, it says Ian Fraser's new book is about the Great Plains. A place people from all over used to visit for adventure and he still does. The Great Plains are the short grass prairies in the middle of the continent where the Crow and the Sioux and the Cheyenne and the Colmance had a few decades of prosperity between the coming of the horse and the coming of the army, where 40 million buffalo were wiped out in about 10 years and cowboys drove herds of longhorn cattle north from Texas where farmers

plowed up every foot of sod they owned to plant wheat to feed World War I, and then whole counties blew away in the dust bowl. Ian Fraser visits these ghostly places on the plains where the past is more alive than the present, like the sight of Sitting Bull's cabin on the Grand River in South Dakota, like a rock shop made of fossilized dinosaur bones, like an abandoned house where Bonnie and Clyde terrorized inhabitants, like the house where the murders of Truman Capote's in cold blood took place, like Nicodemus Kansas Population 50.

Neil Pasricha (02:33:15.728)

founded 110 years ago by black homesteaders. File this one, do we decimates under 917.80433 for history and geography slash geography and travel slash geography of travel, North America slash Western US slash travel. Look, Susan, don't you think the DDS is biased because it's only

Western US. There is no Great Plains categorization under 804. Susan, tell us about your Great Plains by Ian Frazier relationship.

Susan Orlean (02:33:46.154)

first started reading Ian Frazier when I got my first New Yorker subscription which was in college, instantly fell in love. It's not only that he's hilarious, he's also a writer who has an eye for detail that

really is exquisite. He, and he has a way of making you feel you're encountering people for real through his eyes. He's just got an incredible, yeah, he's, I instantly thought, oh my God, I'm.

Neil Pasricha (02:34:32.316)

Mmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:34:35.964)

quotes and stuff.

Susan Orlean (02:34:43.35)

This guy is extraordinary. Great Plains, and God, I have my same copy that I've had forever and it's really falling apart and I should treat myself to a new one because I look at it all the time. I turn to it frequently. Some of it is just, again, the writing is amazing. It's alternately funny and mournful and...

perceptive and documentarian. There's a lot of just wonderful detail that he conveys in a way that is just, it's the most delicious way to learn history and learn geography and sociology. And, yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:35:21.917)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:35:41.836)

May I ask you to read the first page?

Susan Orlean (02:35:42.776)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:35:46.078)

Away to the Great Plains of America, to that immense western short grass prairie, now mostly plowed under. Away to the still empty land beyond newsstands and malls and velvet restaurant ropes. Away to the headwaters of the Missouri, now quelled by many impoundment dams. And to the headwaters of the Platte, and to the almost invisible headwaters of the slurped up Arkansas.

used to set its most popular dramas, but not anymore.

Away to the land beyond the hundredth meridian of longitude, where sometimes it rains and sometimes it doesn't, where agriculture stops and does a double take. Away to the skies of sparrowhawks sitting on telephone wires, thinking of mice and flaring their tail feathers suddenly, like a card trick. Away to the air shaft of the continent, where weather fronts from two hemispheres meet, and the wind blows almost all the time. Away to the fields of wheat and

Milo and Sudan grass and flax and alfalfa and nothing away to the parts of Montana and North Dakota and South Dakota and Wyoming and Nebraska and Kansas and Colorado and New Mexico and Oklahoma and Texas

Neil Pasricha (02:37:07.58)

Oh, exclamation mark on almost every sentence. And you read that well. For those that can't see us, which is almost everybody, because I haven't really done this before, I was holding up my book on this side of the border. I'm in Toronto, my basement, and Susan's reading it live from her home in Los Angeles. I just think the world is amazing that we can even do that. He talks to Indians, ranchers, kids drinking.

Susan Orlean (02:37:10.048)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:37:28.978)

It is. It is. And that's the death-

Neil Pasricha (02:37:34.684)

grain elevator operators, park service employees, Air Force computer specialists working on nuclear missiles.

Susan Orlean (02:37:41.114)

Yeah, part of what appealed to me so much about the book was he takes the traditional form of a travel book, first of all, goes somewhere no one wants to go, which is what we, you know, and that's part of the humor, which is, you know, he's saying, I'm going where nobody wants to go and nobody thinks about. But he also...

Neil Pasricha (02:37:59.356)

flyover states. Yeah, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:38:09.466)

embraces the, you know, the very traditional notion of the journey and he drives to the Midwest and through the Great Plains and talks about the actual journey, driving from place to place and he shows the, how the sausage is made, you know, you're very much

taking the journey with him. And he's one of my very favorite writers, definitely an inspiration. Again, like Tom Wolfe, he writes in a way that it's tempting to imitate, but you can never.

get it right. And I had to work very hard to get over my Ian Frazier phase where the same way I got over my Tom Wolf phase of, you know, being so enchanted by his writing that I was imitating it. And

Neil Pasricha (02:38:55.484)
Hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:39:01.77)
Oh, interesting.

Hmm

Neil Pasricha (02:39:13.648)
How do you get over one of those phases? I'm sure I'm still in at least three.

Susan Orlean (02:39:17.41)
Well, I think that in one reason is I realized I wasn't good at it. And secondly, I my editor who edited in Frasier as well sort of. Noticed.

Susan Orlean (02:39:36.438)
You know, I think he kind of knew that I was so influenced and you know, so fangirling so much that I was writing in a way that wasn't true to my own voice. And...

And you know, I think imitating people is a great way to learn and that everyone should do it and there's nothing wrong with it. It's and if you have a good editor, they'll edit that out when the time comes. But it is certainly a way to learn how to write, is to read people whose work you love and say, I want to I want to somehow achieve the same thing, but I'll do it in my own voice.

Neil Pasricha (02:40:04.118)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:40:18.546)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:40:24.664)
Well, that's so interesting on this topic of voice. Let's pause here just for a second, and then we're gonna get into our closing fast money questions. And then I gotta weave in Michael Harris' question, which I've had sitting here the whole time. On voice, so a voice question, a Michael Harris question, and then a fast money close, and we're done here. Like when I read the library book, I didn't find it necessarily funny. Like there was descriptions in there

of people or things like when you're taking that guy around and he's trying to decide whether or not to move this garden at the back of this distant branch. I found like the scene comic, but I

didn't find it laugh out loud. But then when I listened to you, as I've done for a very generous nearly three hours, and I listened to you a lot before coming in here, I'm like, she's hilarious. Like I keep thinking that I'm like, you have this wonderful sort of self-aware tongue and cheek awareness of your own obsessiveness and you.

You have such great timing, you pause, you're thoughtful. I'm like, I've laughed a lot just talking to you, like more, you know. And so I wondered if you might tell us the difference you see between your own speaking and writing voices and how other writers might learn to see or think about this. I guess the classic, how you find your voice but how you relate that back to how you actually think and speak now.

Susan Orlean (02:41:48.343)
Right.

Susan Orlean (02:41:52.266)
Well, I certainly, I think your ultimate goal always is to try to have your writing sound as much like your actual way of expressing yourself as possible. And I think that seems like such a simple goal, but it's actually very challenging. So you're always.

working toward that and I definitely like being funny and whenever I can and whenever it's appropriate, I like to be funny in my writing. It's not always appropriate, depending.

Neil Pasricha (02:42:37.902)
Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (02:42:39.374)
And I like I often like being funny when I don't have to tell a joke and instead I show you something that's extremely funny

Neil Pasricha (02:42:49.552)
That's hilarious, because yeah, I like to be funny when I don't have to tell you a joke. Wow.

Susan Orlean (02:42:54.182)
Right, I mean instead it's me saying... uh... Just me ca-

Neil Pasricha (02:43:00.14)
Like the opening lead of the age 10 profile.

Susan Orlean (02:43:04.322)
Right. I mean, I don't tell jokes. I either like to write something that will make you laugh or I will describe a scene that is funny and I want you to laugh because the scene is funny. You know, finding a voice is the ultimate challenge. And I think...

Uh, the only helpful thing I can say is that, um, the great surprise is discovering it's, it's a little like the Wizard of Oz that you were home all along. You know, your voice is the voice you have in the world all along. And

Neil Pasricha (02:43:42.648)

Oooo

Neil Pasricha (02:43:52.453)

Oh, yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:43:53.502)

what makes writing hard is we get tense, we get self-conscious, we, you know, you sometimes feel like you just don't even know how to say a simple sentence. But the truth of the matter, and I find it funny, the more I write and the more experience I have, the closer and closer it is to the way I would have told you the story.

Neil Pasricha (02:44:05.379)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:44:21.938)

If I sat down with you and said, oh my God, I'm doing this book about the fire at the LA library. It's the craziest thing.

Neil Pasricha (02:44:29.312)

you don't record yourself and like replay it and type it out.

Susan Orlean (02:44:33.302)

No, but I am conscious of when I'm talking about stories to people. I feel like I'm test driving.

sentences or seeing if an anecdote is genuinely as interesting as I think it is, you know, it's always happening.

Neil Pasricha (02:44:53.46)

Yeah, yeah, okay. Wow, not gonna go down the rabbit hole there. I'm gonna go to Michael Harris. Our guest, so Michael Harris, for those that don't know, was our guest in chapter 29. I flew out to Vancouver, I interviewed him and him and his husband, beautiful apartment, kind of near the mountains. He had a framed poster on his wall of an Adrian Tomine New Yorker cover, which you would appreciate, Susan, because it was that one where a guy's looking up from a subway train.

He's got his face in the book and he sees, you know when the two subway trains cross, you can see each other for a second, but then you'll never see them again? Well, but there's someone like a woman, like a pretty girl, like reading the same book. And you just know it's like, ah, but he can't say anything because the trains are about to go on the separate, oh, just a beautiful. If I

have it right, Michael, as you're listening to this, I hope that's the right cover that you have on your wall in your kitchen.

Susan Orlean (02:45:26.572)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:45:47.812)

He's also the author of *Solitude*, which is one of my favorite books of all time. It helped delineate for me that lonely is alone and sad, and solitude is alone and happy. And he also, his new book is *All We Want*. He was our guest in chapter 29. So he says to you, Susan, many writers of literary nonfiction bend the truth as *Great Plains* is, bend the truth or omit things for the sake of a clean narrative. But your work always feels unafraid of contradictions and complications.

How do you react when you encounter inconvenient truths while researching?

Susan Orlean (02:46:20.954)

Oh wow, that's a great question and it's very important to me and meaningful to me because we are kind of living in a post-truth society and I feel that there is such a clear black and white, things are true or they're not true, facts happened or they didn't, you know, they're

It just doesn't seem hard to me to, and I think readers deserve to know that if they're reading nonfiction, it's factual. And that means, certainly, as Michael very correctly points out, that sometimes things just aren't quite as neat as you wish they were.

I mean, most of the time, in fact, that was my discovery along the way with the library book was suddenly thinking, you know what, like nothing is ever neat. Real life isn't neat. When I started working on the library book, my publisher said to me, oh, you're going to find out who did it, right? And I said, oh yeah, of course. Thinking.

Neil Pasricha (02:47:30.644)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:47:40.72)

Oh, oh, interesting. Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:47:45.002)

that's a hundred percent not happening. I mean, I'm not a forensic investigator. I'm not gonna go 30 years back in history and figure out who started the Tsar's end. And I mean, he was hopeful that I would end up being able to determine who did it.

Neil Pasricha (02:48:05.176)

and you've just spilled the beans for those that have not read the library book, you don't find out.

Susan Orlean (02:48:10.57)

Right, and look, would it have been simpler to say, bingo, we now have the answer? Sure, of course it would have been, but.

That is not the truth. And I mean, let me give you a simpler example perhaps, which was when I wrote *The Orchid Thief*. Part one of the kind of ongoing late motifs in the book is my attempt to see a ghost orchid. And the orchid, that's the great sort of passion of the guy I'm writing about and the cause of this whole story to begin with.

Neil Pasricha (02:48:47.76)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:48:51.663)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:48:56.72)
Yes.

Susan Orlean (02:48:58.094)
I went into the swamp to see the ghost orchid multiple times. Each time was its own version of a failure.

Neil Pasricha (02:49:04.839)
Mm-hmm.

Susan Orlean (02:49:12.738)
The last, finally, I was just, I had no time left to write the book and I had one more time to go. And John LaRouche assured me that there was a ghost orchid blooming. We would go, we would see it. And that would put the cap on my book and everything would be perfect. And that was how I was gonna end the book with me seeing this ghost orchid and so on and so forth. And we hike into the swamp and we got lost.

And we never saw Ghost Orchid. And I was devastated and I thought, well, this ruins my book. Like this ruins the book. This was the central conceit of the book is that I'm gonna finally see an orchid. Exactly. And that.

Neil Pasricha (02:50:01.464)
You have to see it to thief it.

Susan Orlean (02:50:09.71)
thought, no, that's not it at all. I mean, in fact, it's perfectly appropriate that I've never seen it and that is the nature of passion, which was what the book was all about. And it's never about achieving some sort of conclusive.

Neil Pasricha (02:50:24.293)

Ah.

Susan Orlean (02:50:36.326)

experience or acquisition. It's about wanting. And it was more

Frankly more appropriate that I never saw a ghost orchid The way most of us never achieve this perfect thing that we aspire to It also Was true. I didn't see a ghost orchid now someone else might have thought well, I'm just gonna pretend

Neil Pasricha (02:51:01.89)

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:51:12.)

Yeah, sure. Or like, you know, you'll see one in the museum and just, you know, like you'll figure out a way to make it work kind of thing or something.

Susan Orlean (02:51:21.038)

But I would have certainly never, I don't believe in making things up and to my knowledge I never ever have and never ever will. But secondly the lesson was there in front of me which was in fact it didn't matter about seeing it.

And it was more fitting to the theme of the book than if I had.

Susan Orlean (02:52:01.934)

Would it be easier in all these instances if things just were tidy? Of course.

Neil Pasricha (02:52:15.34)

Well, I can see why you and Michael are friends because his answer, because I asked him for his answer so I could bounce it off the view after. He says, Susan's work taught me to lean into contradictions. At the start of my writing career, I didn't trust that readers could handle quote unquote messy truths. But now I feel that messiness is actually the joy of great nonfiction. Contradictions become a stamp of authenticity in a way because real life is messy and doesn't offer simple truths.

Susan Orlean (02:52:20.799)

Oh.

Susan Orlean (02:52:39.638)

Well, I agree entirely. And it's interesting with the library book, I thought, uh-oh, is this gonna be tough that I'm saying to people maybe he did it, maybe he didn't? I mean, we're all very used to watching Law and Order and you get in like a conclusion and...

Neil Pasricha (02:53:00.77)

Yeah.

We don't like Lost because it didn't tell us the conclusion.

Susan Orlean (02:53:06.518)

Right, I'm happy to say that I have never to my knowledge had a reader say to me, yeah, well, I didn't like the book because you never said who did it. Instead I've had many, many people say, who do you secretly do you think he did it or not? And, you know, isn't it maddening to not know and.

Neil Pasricha (02:53:27.676)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:53:32.663)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:53:34.226)

It's that's the reality, you know.

Neil Pasricha (02:53:36.152)

And that chapter on that dude was unbelievable. Like that was a read it twice chapter for me.

Susan Orlean (02:53:40.706)

Bye.

Susan Orlean (02:53:43.978)

Well, and, you know, he passed away. We'll never. Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:53:46.848)

or his family, the quotes from his, like that, you just, you did something, there was a magical element to that chapter, particularly so on top of a magical book. That chapter where you talk to his family in the way, because you start seeing like all these refracted ripples in a water of this dude's life, where he goes, that he's changing jobs, and he's got this real big challenging life, but he's regarded this way from high school, and his family says it this way, and you're like, whoa.

Susan Orlean (02:53:54.952)

Oh, thank you!

Neil Pasricha (02:54:17.092)

That's the kind of stuff books can do that we, I don't think, can do as well in film yet. I mean, a great actor maybe, but like it's hard to get that much complexity on a person, you know?

Susan Orlean (02:54:17.25)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:54:23.618)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:54:28.914)

Yeah, yeah, I mean, and I was very lucky because I talked to the family, talked to, you know, former lover, talked to people who knew him well, and his, he was a fabulous, and the more I learned about him through these other people, the more that was kind of played.

it became real to me. And then, and then again, this is the sort of thing where I feel like the point is, this is a guy who told stories and he sometimes even told stories that were really terrible. Like I burned the library down. And I mean, that his compulsive need to be a character in a story even included...

Neil Pasricha (02:54:59.628)

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:55:18.775)

Yeah.

Susan Orlean (02:55:25.386)

saying that he had done this, you know, very stupid crime. Did he do it or was he just telling the story? Oh, that's partly the nature storytelling. We will never know.

Neil Pasricha (02:55:32.038)

Mm-hmm.

Neil Pasricha (02:55:38.152)

Yes. Oh, I am feeling intellectually and somatically satiated in a really wonderful way. And I am so grateful to you for I believe because I've listened to every other one, the longest interview you've ever done.

Susan Orlean (02:56:02.134)

to do the lightning round because suddenly my life is beginning to, you know, unravel as I'm not attempting to do it. Right, my house has burned down while we've been talking. I mean, it's...

Neil Pasricha (02:56:08.344)

unfurl like the smokes down the billowing, the billowing library steps.

Neil Pasricha (02:56:16.172)

Well, all these questions are lightning round questions, but you may, as you know, as you can tell, take as long as you like on each one. One question that's been a thread line throughout our five year odyssey so far is this issue of trust. We touched on it a little bit, then it's related to a book I'm working on. How do you define trust?

Susan Orlean (02:56:24.846)

Okay.

Susan Orlean (02:56:39.744)

Uhhhhhh

the comfort of feeling comfortable and being honest.

Neil Pasricha (02:56:48.38)

How do you organize your books on your bookshelf?

Susan Orlean (02:56:52.59)

badly, but no, I would say I have thematic groupings. I have one section that's all books about art and furniture and architecture. And then I...

Neil Pasricha (02:57:15.951)

Isn't that what Melville Dewey did?

Susan Orlean (02:57:19.702)

Yeah, but mine's really bad. No, mine's not. Right. I mean, certainly... It is...

Neil Pasricha (02:57:22.104)

except it's the Orlean decimal system.

Susan Orlean (02:57:32.31)

The idea of grouping books thematically makes much more sense to me than doing them like alphabetically. Oh, well, yeah, that's its own thing. I did the books in my old house in the front small bookshelf. I kind of did by color and it looked really pretty. I did it just because I thought, oh, I mean, I think I was bored one day.

Neil Pasricha (02:57:38.541)

Oh, don't get us into color.

Neil Pasricha (02:57:42.66)

that's cop is popular though.

Neil Pasricha (02:57:52.357)

What? Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:57:56.004)

It doesn't you know what you know what color organized bookshelf screamed to me and I and this is gonna sound nasty And I'm sorry, but it screams to me. I don't read these Cuz obviously you don't cuz you can't find shit, you know Do you have a favorite bookstore living or dead

Susan Orlean (02:58:05.375)
100%.

Susan Orlean (02:58:09.414)
I know it's a very used system, but.

Susan Orlean (02:58:18.426)
Oh, well, yes, it's living, although I no longer live near it, and it's Oblong Books in Rhinebeck, New York.

Neil Pasricha (02:58:29.232)
Oh wow, that's a new one for us on the show. Rheinbeck New York, all belong books. We will shut them out and make a donation to them on your behalf. And favorite library, Living or Dead.

Susan Orlean (02:58:42.238)
Well, that's a toss up between my childhood library, Bertram Wood's branch of the Shaker Heights Public Library in Ohio. And, you know, for obvious reasons, the LA Public Library for having been a marvelous subject. Yeah, yeah, the main branch.

Neil Pasricha (02:59:04.856)
Is it the branch that burned or any particular branch? Yeah, yeah, the main branch, called the main branch. What's your book lending policy?

Susan Orlean (02:59:20.561)
Okay with it if I've if I've already read the book then I'm happy to lend it out and I Prefer getting them back, but I also lend with the idea that I may never get him back

Neil Pasricha (02:59:35.292)
Okay, okay, good, good. That's, this is your role model for me. I follow Malcolm Gladwell's book, Lenny Palsy, which he describes as grudging. Is there one book that you would most want to read again for the first time?

Susan Orlean (02:59:55.366)
Oh, well, probably The Satin and the Fury. Because I'd love to re-experience what it felt like to read that. Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (02:59:59.594)
Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (03:00:06.896)
Do you have a favorite? Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. Yeah, yeah, exactly. What it felt like. Susan Orlean assigned this book, AP English, you know, in Cleveland and is shook by it, like that feeling of being shaken. Do you have a favorite book jacket?

Susan Orlean (03:00:18.956)

Right.

Susan Orlean (03:00:25.454)

Oh, that would be tough. There's so many gorgeous books. I don't have a favorite. There are too many that I like.

Neil Pasricha (03:00:35.508)

Yeah, yeah. And we and we did the nice deep dive on the library book, which is beautiful. Do you have any formative books that we didn't mention in depth on this show that you just want to throw in for our listeners who are capturing Susan's books?

Susan Orlean (03:00:50.374)

Oh, sure, I'll add a couple. A collection by Calvin Trillin called Killings. The White Album, or no, I would say, yeah, The White Album, Joan Didion.

Neil Pasricha (03:01:07.952)

Yeah, nice. I have not read that I've read some other stuff by her Just read my first Joan Didion novel ever actually Yeah, first Joan Didion book I've ever read actually and I can't even I can't even remember the name of it So it's one with the rattlesnake on the cover. No, I really like the book but

Susan Orlean (03:01:20.274)

Oh, interesting. Not a good sign.

I'm looking here to see what's on my bookshelf right here, except they're mostly my books. So that would, I don't think that would count. Yeah, no, I mean, in my office, I mostly have my books. So, but those two for sure. Oh, one other one, just cause I love it so much. Life After Life by Kate Atkinson. It's a novel and it's just.

Neil Pasricha (03:01:35.453)

No, no, it does. It does. It does.

Yeah.

Neil Pasricha (03:01:43.779)

Um, okay.

Neil Pasricha (03:01:53.708)

Nice. Life after life.

Susan Orlean (03:01:56.835)

Um, just an incredibly brilliant novel.

Neil Pasricha (03:02:01.712)

Beautiful, and mine was played as it lays, I forgot to say. And then to close, and by the way, for anyone listening, every single thing we mentioned, every piece of information that we mentioned will be on threebooks.co in the show notes for the show, along with the full transcript, as long as everything, no ads, no sponsors, nothing on the show ever. In addition to telling us...

where people can find you and how they'd like you to reach you if you would like them to, like what social, because I know you're not on Twitter anymore if I'm reading it right, et cetera. Do you want people to send you messages anywhere? If not, that's fine, but if so, where and how? Could you close us off with one final piece of hard-fought wisdom or advice for anyone aspiring towards the North Star of doing some of what you do?

Susan Orlean (03:02:59.108)

Ah.

Susan Orlean (03:03:05.414)

This will sound perhaps obvious, but why not? Um, read, and then write and write and write.

Neil Pasricha (03:03:17.865)

Mm-hmm, beautiful.

Susan Orlean (03:03:21.462)

I mean, not to take too much away from Nike, but really, if you love writing and you want to do it, you just have to do it.

Neil Pasricha (03:03:35.505)

Exactly. And do you want people to say hi to you anywhere?

Susan Orlean (03:03:39.662)

Uh, well, I'm now on threads. Um, and Arlene and, um.

Neil Pasricha (03:03:43.8)

at SusanOrlean.

Neil Pasricha (03:03:48.292)

You made a conscious step away from Twitter, right? Even though you were prolific on there with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Susan Orlean (03:03:52.006)

I did. Right. I haven't visited my account there in quite a while. So yeah, I just found the policy is really disturbing. And I think, you know, it's just a different.

Neil Pasricha (03:04:01.7)

And there's a reason for that, I'm assuming.

Susan Orlean (03:04:13.806)

place and threads. I've enjoyed being on threads. Who knows ultimately what it, whether it'll be the place that has some of the fun that Twitter had. I mean, not so far. I'm enjoying it. I'm also on Instagram and Facebook. Pretty findable.

Neil Pasricha (03:04:14.836)

Right.

Neil Pasricha (03:04:33.18)

Okay, that's who's really... Yeah, you are. And I just took a peek at a curiosity that your 359.6 thousand followers on Twitter are still hanging out there with you and your bio which says writer, period. Oh, comma, I also write, period.

Susan Orlean (03:04:54.686)

I guess that's the same as my words of wisdom, so it's appropriate. Yeah, it's appropriate.

Neil Pasricha (03:04:59.392)

Oh, your voices match. This has been the gift of my dreams. I cannot even describe to you how grateful and happy I am. We have a worldwide cadre of book lovers, writers, makers, sellers, librarians, who you just gave hours of an ending joy. Thank you so much, Susan. I am so grateful.

Susan Orlean (03:05:22.25)

Well, thank you. Thank you. It's really been a pleasure. I've enjoyed it so much.