

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 7: Narrative Nonfiction

(Brief intro music)

Melody: Hi, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a reader's advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Melody.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel.

Melody: And today we're going to be talking about narrative nonfiction, and we are also really excited to welcome our special guest, Maria, to the podcast!

Maria: Hello! Thanks for having me.

Melody: Yeah! We're so excited to have you. Welcome.

Rachel: Happy to have you.

Melody: So, Maria is our Youth Services Manager here at OCPL, and she's been here...you've been here about a year?

Maria: Yeah, that's right, since last October.

Melody: Okay. Do you want to just tell us a little bit about yourself, your background in libraries, what you like to read?

Maria: Yeah! Yeah, so, before coming to OCPL I was over at Janesville at the Hedberg Public Library there in youth services for about six years. And then coming here I've been able to do some new things in the children's room, and I really enjoy working here. It's been great getting to know everybody and the community and staff members. A little bit about my background...I majored in history and political science.

Melody: Oh, I never knew that.

Maria: Yeah, in undergrad, which is partly why I enjoy narrative nonfiction so much. Growing up, I feel like I really liked just historical fiction, and then with this new genre sort of emerging I find myself actually more drawn to the nonfiction arena because of the narrative nonfiction. Besides reading, of course, which I love, I also enjoy knitting and travelling, hiking, and all of those things give a good opportunity to also listen to books. I love listening to audiobooks.

Melody: Me, too.

Rachel: Same.

Maria: It...you know, it's almost a different experience sometimes, so I definitely encourage folks who haven't given audio a chance yet to definitely dive in there.

Melody: What's your...one of your top vacations you've ever taken?

Maria: So, definitely going to Europe. We were able to go to kind of Eastern Europe. We went to Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria. It was just such a wonderful experience to get over there, so hopefully we'll be able to go back again soon.

Melody: That's amazing. So, today—I'm sure you've figured out—we're talking about narrative nonfiction, and I just wanted to see, like, have you guys read narrative nonfiction before, what's your experience with it, do you like it?

Rachel: Well, I rarely read nonfiction in general, but I think narrative nonfic is a good gateway drug since it's kind of a mesh of the creative stylings you get with fiction and what that kids call #trifax.

Maria and Melody: (laughs)

Rachel: When we read everyday nonfiction, like in newspapers or online, the idea is that stories are meant to be conveyed without bias, right? They're not supposed to have flowery language to color one side over the other. Everything is supposed to be presented in a very matter-of-fact way where the reader will be brought from point A to point B with few diversions in between. That's what we learn to do in school when writing essays—at least, in my school. And maybe that's why I shy away from reading nonfiction these days as an adult, but narrative nonfiction is a lot more compelling, I've found. It paints a picture of events as vividly as possible and, to do that, authors often rely on literary techniques like foreshadowing, metaphor, and imagery without straying too much from the story, and that aspect really intrigues me.

Melody: Yeah, I would agree. Definitely. Sometimes that cut and dry, non-biased reporter style writing, while very valuable and important in our society, you know, doesn't catch your attention.

Rachel: Right. (laughs)

Melody: Yeah. I actually started a different book for this podcast and came across that issue, and I was just bored out of my mind.

Rachel: Are you going to name names, or...?

Melody: Mmm. It's within the genre of the book that I did read. It's pretty well known, so...

Rachel: Listeners can find out for themselves.

Melody: Yeah, I'll let you go sleuthing and try to figure it out. (laughs) Yeah, but that...that storytelling aspect is really cool. How long have you enjoyed narrative nonfiction. Pretty much since you've been reading?

Maria: Yeah, I would say since library school, probably. That was about 2012, not to age myself.

Melody: Right. (laughs)

Maria: Yeah, and there's really been a growth in it. Coming from the youth services perspective. I...I read a lot of children's books and a lot of young adult books, being in the youth services field, and it really started to grow at that point in time because of some of the standards that were coming into place in the education field. So, in 2010 you see the Common Core standards coming in and more of the focus on information literacy with kids and teens. So, that's where you also see that rise in narrative nonfiction

and the young adult age group in general, I would say. You see kind of a boom in the 2000s. So, there's just been more out there, and I would argue it's getting better and better.

Rachel: Sure. People would have to be perfecting their craft in order to grab our attention all the more.

Melody: Well, it seems like a very valuable tool for teaching, as well, because reading history out of a textbook is not going to grab you as much as, you know, reading a narrative nonfiction, you know, story of someone's life, so...

Maria: There's a lot of interpretation there, too. We want to teach our kids and teens how to interpret information. Kind of like we were talking about before: there's a lot out there, so teaching them how to navigate all of those sources that we're bombarded with all the time, right?

Rachel: To be more discerning.

Melody: Pretty cool.

Maria: Yeah.

Melody: So, Rachel, what have you been reading?

Rachel: Well, I actually read "Into the Wild," and I picked it not only because I bought a copy at a thrift store a few years ago and this is a great excuse to dust it off but because it's written by Jon Krakauer, and he is a fairly well-known journalist. I do have a fun little story for our listeners. If you follow us on social media, we have an Instagram account where we often post previews of books that we cover in each episode of the podcast, and for this episode I did bring my copy of "Into the Wild" and—fun story—I killed a spider with this book the other day.

Everyone: (laughs)

Rachel: It...and I normally am fine with leaving spiders be. I'm not a murderer.

Melody: (laughs)

Rachel: But he was right on the middle of my pillow as I was about to lie down, and this was the closest thing to hand. So, thank you, book, for being valuable in more ways than one. (laughs)

Melody: Not just for reading.

Rachel: Right! Multitool.

Melody: That's funny.

Rachel: (laughs) As a writer, Krakauer is very skilled in using those literary devices I was talking about earlier, and his work easily draws readers in through his imaginative leaps. That can be a good and a bad thing, though, and I will talk about why in a little bit. "Into the Wild" is a biography of Chris McCandless. After college, he donated his savings to charity, effectively removed himself from society and his family, and he traveled across the U.S. in early 1992, and then he hitchhiked to Alaska and set off along the Stampede Trail. A group of hunters then discovered his body in an abandoned bus over 100 days later. That last bit is how the book opens. (laughs) Which is pretty intense, right?

Melody: Wow. Wow, yeah.

Maria: Audience is intrigued.

Rachel: Uh-huh. Krakauer does get into the somewhat mysterious circumstances of the man's death, but a large part of the story focuses on McCandless's life and his journey into the wilderness as well as the possible reasons why he chose to live apart from others, which I think is way more interesting.

Melody: That was one of my first questions when you started describing this book, is 'why?'.

Rachel: Mhm. The book is based on an earlier article titled "Death of an Innocent" that Krakauer wrote in '93. He couldn't shake the story, though, so he followed it up with "Into the Wild" a few years later. McCandless has since become a bit of a folkloric hero, his journey romanticized by some but viewed in poor light by others who think he simply waltzed in unprepared into the Alaskan wilderness, unprepared for the realities of the harsh northern landscape. Krakauer, though, posits that McCandless went off in search of enlightenment and freedom from conformity. A lot of others think that he was flat-out stupid not so much for doing what he did but doing it in the way that he did it. It's theorized that McCandless died of starvation, although he also may have suffered from poisoning that—due his already poor diet out in the wilderness—led to his starvation because it put him into a very weak state of being. He did keep a journal and took photographic self-portraits while camping, and there's actually a photo of him in front of the bus where his body was discovered. It's very creepy. (laughs)

Melody: Wow. So, I'm guessing, like, after an autopsy, they...there were not definitive results?

Rachel: Well, it was said starvation, but over the years there've been a lot more looks into what happened. Krakauer thinks that he ate poisonous potato seeds, and there's a lot about that in the book and...kind of...it gets into the science a little bit.

Melody: Okay, okay.

Rachel: But years down the line, as technology and science have developed, they've gone back in and tried to determine for sure.

Melody: Got'cha.

Rachel: And different people have theorized different things about what led to that, but they're pretty sure that he misidentified something and ate it and that was a big no-no, turned out.

Melody: Okay. Wow.

Rachel: Yeah. So, that bus I was talking about, it's since become a destination for a lot of people, both people interested in McCandless and just the...I would say 'morbidly' curious. And, really weirdly, while I was halfway through reading this book, I spotted a story on Twitter about a young woman who died trying to cross a river while leaving the bus site. So, sadly, she wasn't the first. If you have any interest in marking that as a destination, I cannot stress enough the need to be careful. I mean, I totally get wanting to go out there and see it, but you have to know what you're doing. It's some scary stuff.

Melody: That's amazing.

Rachel: Yeah. As for the book, it's really well written, as I've said. Krakauer admits it was impossible for him to cover the story without bias, and boy howdy is that ever true. The problem, I think, is that this is a biography of a dead man—and don't get me wrong, a lot of biographies are exactly that. Still, Krakauer

makes many creative inferences about what was going through McCandless's mind while he was doing the things he was doing. Not just the documented moves he made, or the conversations he had with people he met along the way, or even the written journal entries, but what his actual motivations were behind everything. It makes the story interesting to read, but there is simply no way to confirm the veracity of those interpretations one way or the other, and even with the author's disclaimer it can be hard to read the story and not conjure up McCandless in your mind with the exact thoughts and reasons that Krakauer attributes. I think that's a danger with a lot of narrative nonfiction.

Melody: Yeah, I think...so, when he does that, does he kind of present it in a way that this...I don't know if this is true or not, but this is what I'm speculating?

Rachel: No, not even. Yeah, it's...it's very sneaky the way it's brought in, but that does make the story move vivid, because it's woven in so seamlessly—those interpretations—with the fact that it's presented as a very interesting story. But, if you're not being discerning...as we were talking about earlier, we want to teach people to pick apart the facts from everything.

Melody: So, this may be a good discussion about that, to discern what...what is...you can validate and what may be speculation.

Rachel: Yes, exactly. Mhm. As far as I'm concerned, those parts are pure fiction, and I found it difficult to look past that in an account that is otherwise pretty solidly based on truth. If I went into the wild and didn't come back out, I wouldn't want others to ascribe meaning to my personal motives. But, that said, judging by some of McCandless's journal entries and recorded interactions he seemed kind of...egotistical? Which, I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but... For example, he sometimes referred to himself in the third person, which...that's always off-putting, to me. Like, 'Rachel did this, or Rachel did that!' and to write that down? It's...it's really bizarre.

Melody: Yeah, I wonder if he was trying to be factual?

Rachel: I...well, and he takes a lot of his inspiration from Jack London, and so I don't know if maybe McCandless was kind of writing his own story as he was going out into the wild and he was using his journal entries as a way of conveying that story, and that's why he wrote in that kind of point of view?

Maria: He was hoping to write his own novel, had he got out. (laughs)

Rachel: Right! Uh-huh.

Melody: So he's already writing in third person just to get a head start. (laughs)

Rachel: It just seems to weird to do that in a journal, though. (laughs)

Melody: Yeah, it does.

Maria: Now we're making our own narrative. (laughs)

Melody: I remember when I started my first journal I really had a moral dilemma about how do I write this? Like to show...should I write it in present tense, should I write it in past tense, how often should I be...? Like, I really was concerned. So, you know, maybe that was a strategic choice.

Rachel: Right, so, maybe he was the kind of person who would have wanted have his life analyzed, scrutinized, and turned into myth, but I can't make that call, clearly. That's just the impression I got from

those journal entries. And I do think about his family, too, and their probable want for privacy surrounding the tragedy, and that's a major reason why I don't like true crime in general. It makes me feel voyeuristic, I guess. At any rate, I have to say that Krakauer is a master of the craft so, even with my own gripes, I do still recommend it. As a readalike, his other book is "Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster." It's about real-life survival during the 1996 Mount Everest blizzard and, as you can tell from the subtitle, it is a first-hand account. Krakauer was one...he was in one of two parties that scaled and tried to descend Everest during the storm. Otherwise, if you've read "Into the Wild" and can't get enough of it, it was adapted into movie, and...

Melody: That's why the title sounds so familiar! (laughs)

Rachel: Sure.

Maria: And I think it's been used in just other pop culture and kind of, like, referenced in other movies and shows.

Rachel: For sure, and brought up a lot in true crime podcasts, I'm sure.

Melody: I'm sure.

Rachel: And then, Chris McCandless's sister, Carnie, also wrote a book called "The Wild Truth" about their upbringing, which is quite interesting. I haven't read it but, if you read the blurb alone you might be hooked, so give that one a go. All four titles can be found at Oak Creek Public Library, and each book is available electronically through Libby.

Melody: Yay! Perfect. All right, so, Maria, you have a book that you...I actually have read as well, but it's been a long time since I've read it, so I'm really excited to hear you talk about it to refresh my memory.

Maria: Yeah, so, I thought today I would talk about "The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia"—see these long subtitles.

Rachel: (laughs) Yeah, we've come across that a lot!

Melody: Yeah, we discussed that in our last episode, I think. The really long, explanatory subtitles.

Maria: Yeah, it's like everything you need to know. Yeah, so, it's by Candace Fleming, came out 2014, and it's about the Russian Revolution, the last tsar—Nicholas II—and his family who...they had met a tragic end. I never know if it's a spoiler alert if it's a nonfiction title, but...

Rachel: I feel like if it's a part of actual history you can't put a spoiler alert on it. (laughs)

Maria: Right, right? Exactly.

Rachel: But it is a book, so...

Maria: It is a book written in that narrative nonfiction form.

Melody: I feel like that's common, though, that there was a tragical end.

Maria: Yes, so I know we're also kind of crossing the disaster podcast. You were talking about some intense tragic moments in history.

Rachel: Well, it's nice to know that you listened to us.

Melody and Maria: (laughs)

Maria: Yes! Fangirl. (laughs) All right, yeah! So, I think the interesting thing about this book is it's told in multiple perspectives. So, it's not just the royal family or just the tsar, which, I think, you know, looking decades back is often what you would see in a biography or a historical account, but you're also given the perspective of the revolutionaries, the...the peasants, as well. And there's a lot of primary source material, a lot of secondary source material. She does a really great job with her bibliography, and you also get a family tree, you have an index. It feels a little bit more like that traditional nonfiction text, but then you also have this narrative story that keeps you engaged. You do, of course, get that bias a little bit where you're kind of seeing what Candice Fleming...what her take is on the family and what happened. But going back to...to the story, basically, it follows some of the reign of Nicholas II but mostly focusing on the downfall. So, during World War I, Nicholas II was facing a lot of trouble in his leadership position. You have the revolution starting up, people wanting to take the power back, moving away from the monarchy. What you see in a lot of different European countries at the time. So, he ends up abdicating the throne, and the family is taken in as prisoners. I mean, they're living in a house, they have, you know...a lot of their needs...they have cooks, they have their servants, but—again—spoiler alert.

Melody and Rachel: (laughs)

Maria: They end up all being assassinated by their Russian Revolution's...the bulk...?

Rachel: Bolshevik?

Maria: Bolshevik.

Rachel: There you go.

Melody: Rachel...Rachel has saved me many times. Apparently I can't say 'apocalypse'.

Maria and Melody: (laughs)

Rachel: You just did! (laughs)

Melody and Maria: Yay!

Maria: All right, so when you have me back, I will be pronouncing it correctly.

Melody: Do you remember how long they were in that house?

Maria: I don't remember exact dates, but I feel like it was, like, maybe over the course of at least a few months if not a year, and they were actually moved at one point, as well. So, as they're getting towards their final days—at least the way it's written in this novel—they don't seem to really know that this is their end game. And actually, part of the really vague tragedy is that night when they tell them that they're moving them, everybody gets their coats on. The...so, the Romanov family—I should go back a little bit. There are four daughters and one son. So, you know, a big family, and the whole family is imprisoned in this house, and they think that they're being transferred away. They're hoping to get out and be saved by...by some of the other political parties that are at play at this time, and the

revolutionaries are facing a lot of pressure from that side that wants to bring back the monarchy, which is ultimately why they decide that they need to assassinate the...Nicholas II and, eventually, his family.

Melody: His heirs.

Maria: Yeah, so they think that they might be moved out, and they're hoping to get out, but they're actually just brought into the basement and, essentially, assassinated.

Melody: Yeah, I remember that vividly, reading that description in the book. And didn't the mom sew jewels into the girls' clothes?

Maria: That's right. While they're in this house for months on end, they are sewing all of their family jewels into their clothing so that they have something when they hope to start their lives again in another European country, and so it's not a quick ending for the children. And yeah, it's really tragic.

Rachel: It's very depressing.

Maria: Yes, and part of that narrative nonfiction, again, is that, you know, you do delve into some of those emotions where the author is taking maybe a few liberties here and there. With the Romanov family, a lot of them did write journals, so there are primary sources to draw on, which I think is maybe a little bit different than your book, Rachel, that you were describing. But yeah, it's...it's just really interesting how that all comes together. And, this is a YA novel, so as far as primary source, secondary source materials go, I think that's really great for information literacy. When you're reading the story, there's a lot to talk about in regards to what...what did happen, where are they pulling sources, where are they taking liberties.

Melody: So, one of...a couple things stood out to me remembering this book, because I don't remember much. Now that you've refreshed my memory, I'm remembering that they really describe that political unrest and what led to this revolution.

Rachel: It's really good for context.

Melody: Yes, it is. I also remember their son, and he was the youngest. They finally had a boy, so now he's the heir to the throne. And I...I...if I'm remembering right, didn't they assign servants to protect him, and they just kind of, like, let him run free and wild?

Maria: So, he had been diagnosed with hemophilia.

Melody: Yeah, that's right.

Maria: So...and that's a big part, I think, of his upbringing. So, going back to the...the family tree. Queen Elizabeth...or, excuse me, Queen Victoria is the grandmother of Alexandra who is the wife of Nicholas II.

Rachel: Oh, I had no idea.

Maria: So, yeah, so Queen Victoria had the hemophilia gene, and it's passed down to Alexi. So, he's going to be the next tsar, you know, as he's growing up, so they are very protective of him, because when you have hemophilia you have a hard time with blood clotting. So, if you're injured, I mean, that could lead to your end, essentially.

Rachel: Especially back in the day.

Maria: Yup, exactly. There wasn't treatment at that time. So, that's a whole other layer, you know. His whole life they're really protecting him, and...

Melody: But didn't they also...weren't they so happy to finally have a son that they kind of just let him do what he wanted? Am I remembering that right?

Maria: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think, you know, they talk about some of those interactions where, you know, he's five years old and he's, you know, going to see the commanding troops, and you know...

Rachel and Melody: (laughs)

Maria: Waiting for everybody to bow to him, right? You know, that kind of upbringing. (laughs)

Rachel: As you would, as a five-year-old.

Maria: Yes! As any five-year-old would. (laughs) Yeah, yeah, so there is that vanity. You know, he's their pride and joy, and I think, you know, that protection also aligns with some of that isolationism of the family. Which leads to some of those problems. I mean, they often talk about Nicholas II just not being aware of the needs of his people, and that's where—in this story—where you get those...those clips, those primary sources from some of the peasants. I think it really shows that balance. It's like they met a tragic end, but there were a lot of people in Russia at that time, a lot of peasants who were meeting tragic ends every day, as well, you know? So, looking at that whole picture...

Melody: There are multiple perspectives. It's not just one-sided. So, I am a big fan of the animated movie "Anastasia." (laughs)

Rachel: Who isn't? (laughs)

Melody: Which was made in—I don't know—'97, '98 is my guess. Late '90s, probably? Which is definitely not historically accurate. (laughs)

Maria: Paints a different picture. (laughs)

Rachel: There was a dragon! (laughs)

Melody: But it's...you know, with this very common idea that Princess Anastasia survived and escaped. So, I actually went and saw the...there's now a Broadway show, and I went and saw that in Madison a couple weeks ago, which was very good. I recommend going. I'm a little snobbish about the movie, and they made some changes, but overall really good show. But because I knew I was going to that show, I went and rewatched the movie. (laughs) And it never occurred to me that there's this opening scene in the beginning—if anyone's not familiar with the movie—this big musical number, and all of St. Petersburg is singing about, 'Have you heard there's a rumor, Anastasia might be alive! How exciting!' and I didn't even think about even leading...before that, in the movie they really downplay the unrest leading up to this thing. You know, people are just gossiping. They also have Rasputin being this magical character who's like...has this black magic, and in the opening scene, Rasputin sends his little magical bats to go cause unrest in...

Rachel: So, it's not the royal's fault.

Melody: No!

Rachel: It's the evil wizard! (laughs)

Melody: Yes!

Maria: Kind of a big scapegoat.

Melody: He is!

Maria: Who can we make the evil character?

Melody: Obviously, Rasputin, not the people or the king! So, it's just fascinating.

Rachel: Interesting. (laughs)

Maria: Yeah, it's...I mean, and you understand, of course, when you know the tragedy that took place, probably wouldn't do for a G-rated film, but it is interesting because you do wonder—okay, you know, like, you're hoping the kids who watch the movie maybe will pick up the book and read the story. You know?

Rachel: I feel like Disney had a huge monopoly on princesses, so they...

Melody: They needed one.

Rachel: Right.

Melody: Because this is not a Disney movie.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Maria: Well, and I suppose when the movie came out it was before they actually...so, when they found the bodies, they didn't find all of them. They were missing two, initially. So, the movie came out before they actually were able to find all of the bodies and do the excavation. And there was, you know—decades later, after the tragedy in 1918—there were a lot of people coming forward saying, 'Oh, you know, I'm Anastasia', or, you know, there was this big kind of public, I guess, draw to 'maybe somebody survived', which, I mean, is very hopeful.

Melody: A lost princess somewhere. But since, the two bodies have been found, which is covered in the book.

Maria: In the book, yeah.

Melody: The other thing I just wanted to mention is...one of the changes that they made in the Broadway show from the movie—which we've established is not historically accurate—which I thought was good was in that opening sequence where they sing about all the rumors in Russia, they changed the lyrics to really emphasize the unrest in Russia and how things were still not good even after the revolution. So, I think they took steps towards being slightly more accurate. They also replaced the Rasputin character with a different character who did not have magical powers.

Maria: Interesting.

Rachel: A step in the right direction.

Melody: Yeah, so it's...it's interesting, and I think that may lead people to do more research and find out the truth. Yeah, it's a great book. It's one of my favorites. Did you have a readalike for that one?

Maria: So many readalikes. (laughs) It was very hard to choose. So, as we talked about before, Victoria—Queen Victoria—being the grandmother, there's "Victoria: Portrait of a Queen," very good read...can kind of get the backstory. "Symphony for the City of the Dead." So, this is another one that takes place in Russia a little bit later in World War II. Very good read. And then, going back to more of, like, the disaster—I always think it's interesting to look at what else is going on at the...in the world at the same time, right? So, "Titanic: Voices from the Disaster" by Deborah Hopkinson and "Blizzard of Glass: The Halifax Explosion of 1917" by Sally Walker—all very good reads.

Melody: What is the Halifax Explosion?

Rachel: I've never heard of it.

Maria: Oh, yes! (excited noise)

Rachel: (laughs)

Maria: So, it's...during World War I, there are two ships that collide in the harbor in Halifax, and it causes a huge explosion in the city, and the reason the title is "Blizzard of Glass" is glass just shatters in most of the buildings. I mean, horrific. And this is following the Titanic, which...the Titanic sunk in 1912, and a lot of the work as far as identifying folks who were killed in the accident took place in Halifax, so they talk about in "Blizzard of Glass" how they're able to do some, like, disaster control, essentially, because of that preparation that came from the tragedy of the Titanic. So, it's kind of interesting. It connects, you know, in multiple ways, but yeah. It's a very interesting story.

Melody: Definitely.

Maria: And I think with narrative nonfiction you are seeing a lot of these historical events that maybe everybody doesn't know about—that you don't learn about, necessarily, in school. It kind of brings it to light in a way that you can really relate to.

Melody: Yeah, I really like that you paired these readalikes in correlation to things that are happening around the same time. I think that's a really smart idea.

Rachel: It's very easy to look at a disaster and kind of just have it isolated, but there's always something else going on in the world, so that's very fascinating.

Melody: Yeah. Thanks, Maria.

Rachel: What about you, Melody? What did you read?

Melody: Okay, so I'm so excited to talk about this book. (laughs) I've been hounding you, Rachel.

Rachel: She has. (laughs) It's been great.

Melody: We sit next to each other at our desks, and I keep telling her, 'I read more!'. So, I read "The Monster of Florence" by Douglas Preston and Mario Spezi, and this is about a serial killer from...in the 1960s through the 1980s who I had never heard of. So, he...I'm going to get a little descriptive about what he did, so...

Rachel: Trigger warning.

Melody: Yeah, so he targeted couples who were in parked cars in the Italian countryside at night. I'm guessing you can assume what they were doing. And when the couple were finished, he would shoot the male and then shoot the female, drag her body out of the car, and...he mutilated her and removed her feminine organs, which is tough material. And this was a...this was his signature thing. He would do this continually, on a repeated basis for, you know, a good amount of time. He has not been caught yet, which is also fascinating and horrifying. That's a big part of this story. He killed 16 couples from 1968 to 1985. So, I'll give you a little background about how this book was written...what the research was. So, Douglas Preston was an American journalist who moved to Italy with his family. They wanted to just live in the Italian countryside—he was planning to write a book when they moved there, and he met Mario Spezi who, if I'm remembering correctly, was an Italian journalist who covered a lot of the homicides and police cases, and he...he learned when he met Spezi that his backyard, which is this beautiful field in this house that he bought in Italy, was one of the locations where one of these murders took place.

Rachel: Imagine being told that.

Melody: Yes, and then he found out talking to Spezi that Spezi was kind of the prime journalist who covered the Monster of Florence. He followed all of these stories, he wrote countless articles about it. So, after they met, they started to do further research to try and figure out if they knew who it was, and they also decided to write a book about it because it was completely fascinating, and Preston also said, even though he came there to write a different book, he could not stop thinking about this and he just had to write about this particular case. The other super fascinating part of this book is that's the first half, is that description of all of these murders, all of the research that went into who they think it might be. The second half of the book is when the Italian Government starts to interrogate Douglas and Spezi, and they are not accused, they're actually not told what the charges are against them, but they're taken and interrogated. Spezi is imprisoned, and they think that Spezi is the Monster. So, totally fascinating book. It's was just...had me intrigued the whole time. Really interesting. So, a couple of things I wanted to talk about...this whole 'parking culture' in the '60s that they described, because when you hear the description of these murders, to me it seems so odd that there were so many, you know? Like, maybe once you might notice that there's a parked car and assume what's going on, but there's this whole culture in Italy in the '60s. So, young people would usually live with their parents until they got married, so their only privacy was when they were away from the home. So, it was very common in Italian culture for a couple to park their car in the countryside, get some privacy, and go back home. But because of that, there was this subculture that started forming of peeping toms—this is, like, horrifying (laughs)—who would park in a hidden location and wait and watch. Yeah. Yes!

Rachel: (laughs)

Melody: Yeah, and, like, there were spots that were really well known and certain cars that were, like, 'the good cars'.

Rachel: So creepy.

Melody: I know. And then...so, now there's a second subculture of people who started blackmailing the peeping toms. So, they would wait and watch for the peeping toms and take pictures of them or steal from them and then blackmail them later, like 'I have pictures of you doing this. Give me your money'.

Rachel: That is such a weird circle of people.

Melody: I know! It's...it's so odd. It's not at all what you think of when you think about Florence. (laughs)

Rachel: Or Italy.

Melody: Now you will never be able to get that out of your head. I'm sorry!

Rachel: (laughs)

Melody: Yeah, but that was just really fascinating to me, which kind of makes this serial killer story make a little bit more sense. You know, where he could target those kinds of couples.

Rachel: Right, because there were so many out there.

Melody: Yes! Yeah. There were a lot of suspects in the case. Some were arrested. There was a pair of brothers that were suspected. They thought at one time they had found the Monster, and he was in prison, and then after he'd been in prison for a while—he was still in prison—another attack took place. So, this investigation just was going around in circles, and they constantly thought they had him, and then it continued to happen. So, it was just really difficult to find out who the...the person had been. There...there was a man who was known for his sexual exploits and orgies, and he had this history where his wife had been having an affair which he approved of, which is a whole other story. But an attack—a similar attack—had occurred with his wife and her lover in the car, so they thought it was him. And it...it's just really fascinating. They're now...people are saying that there is a satanic cult involved and it was a group of people who did it as part of this cult. So, it's a wild ride. Preston and Spezi suggest who they think the murderer is, but they say this investigation has gone, like, beyond the rails. 'I can't promise you that this is the person, because who knows what further evidence will appear'.

Rachel: You know, I feel like there are a lot of parallels with the famous Zodiac Killer in the States who I believe was operating around the same time, if not a little earlier. But he also preyed on couples in cars and would kill them...and the amount of suspects they had from that case, and it's still unsolved. But they do have pretty conclusive evidence about one person over all the others, but it's still unknown.

Melody: And you can't accuse someone if you don't have evidence.

Rachel: Which...right! Imagine how often that happens. It's quite scary.

Melody: Yeah. The other fascinating thing about it is based on the...the murders and what he was doing, the assumption is that he was incompetent [sic] and he was hurting these...removing parts from these females because he couldn't rape them, which is also, like...

Rachel: What! (laughs)

Melody: Yeah. It just changed the whole field of suspects, as well. So, yeah. It's been...it's kind of horrifying but just completely fascinating. I could not stop reading this. There...I...I don't know if a film is going to come out based on this, but in 2011 George Clooney was attached to the film. To play the journalist, not the Monster.

Rachel: I was going to say—what? (laughs)

Melody: (laughs) So, that...I think that would be really fascinating, as well, but it's really heavy content, for sure. But yeah, I really recommend it. It was a really good read. And then, I have a readalike which I'm going to talk a little bit about, too, because—also completely fascinating and within the same vein—it's a true crime story. So, there is a podcast and also a television show called "Dirty John." Have either of you heard of this?

Rachel: I have not.

Maria: I have not, either.

Melody: Okay, so I would recommend listening to the podcast first. It's a story about this man named John Meehan. He met this woman named Debra Newell. She was a successful designer, and he was a doctor, and they fell in love, and in two months they decided to get married.

Rachel: Never...I mean, that's so ill advised. (laughs)

Melody; (laughs) It is. It is ill advised. On top of that, her daughters—she had been divorced a couple times—her daughters and son had misgivings about John, and they weren't particularly happy about their relationship, so they didn't tell them they got married. So, they also got married in secret.

Maria: Deception doubles.

Melody: Yeah, and so her...her children really start getting suspicious because he's...he's acting in weird ways, he's kind of intimidating to them, he's...they discover he's being deceitful about some things, and then they start investigating, and this story is a revelation of John's past—his deception. He was stalking, doing blackmail, manipulating people, crime. It's a really fascinating story. I think the other really important part of this story is that Debra, the wife—the woman that he married—really struggled to accept the truth about him, and when she did find out that he had been lying to her she took him back.

Rachel: Huh.

Melody: Yeah, and at the end of the show you see her make a phone call to the reporter who does the whole podcast, and she says, 'Yes, this story is embarrassing and it's going to be difficult for my family, but if it can help any other women escape what I did, it's worth it'. Yeah, so it's really interesting. The podcast also starts kind of like yours, Rachel, with a description of the final events of this story. So, there's a murder victim.

Rachel: Dun, dun, dun!

Melody: 13 stab wounds, one through the eye.

Rachel: Whoa!

Melody: And brain damage...and we don't know who it is or what happened. It's just a description of the autopsy report.

Rachel: That's quite the hook.

Melody: It's quite the hook! (laughs) And I'm not going to tell you. You have to listen and figure it out yourself. (laughs)

Rachel: Dang it! (laughs)

Melody: The podcast is narrated by Christopher Goffard of the LA Times, so it's very well done—really intriguing...keeps you engaged. There are interviews with family members, with victims. There are first-hand accounts of John's past and things that have happened. I finished the podcast in three days, so...

Rachel: So, really good, then.

Melody: Really good! The TV show stars Eric Bana as John—so, well cast—and Connie Britton as Debra. Also really, really well done. They capture the personalities and perspectives of those two so well. It's really intriguing. And the...that murder that I described earlier happens in the...in the show, and it's extremely well done. If you're queasy about blood, skip that part. (laughs) But yeah, it's really, really well done. I also finished the TV show in three days. So it's just a fascinating, intriguing story.

Rachel: It sounds like all of these that we've talked about are pretty cool and gripping.

Melody: Yes, like, it will give you chills, but it's good. So, yeah, I think all of these are really, really good reads.

Rachel: Nice. Well, I think with that we're going to call it for this episode. Check out the show notes for titles and links to everything we've talked about today. Remember to subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. You can reach out to us through the library's website or Facebook page. Be sure to use the #notyourmotherslibrary. Thank you so much for joining us today, Maria! I hope you enjoyed it.

Maria: Yeah, thanks for having me. It was great.

Melody: It was really fun.

Rachel: We'll be back next month to talk about (scary voice) spooky stories! (laughs)

Melody: Oooh! (laughs)

Rachel: Happy reading!

Melody and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)