

EP:78 Emily Ruskovich

[00:00:00] **Emmett:** I always felt so supported and there was just such a sense of warmth and encouragement and excitement for writing, and there's such a generosity to her feedback, critiques and advice about writing and, and how to live a writer's life.

[00:00:32] **Emily N:** There's a joy there. There's a desire to explore something more deeply. It's easy to lose sight of that, but I think that Emily really embodies that in the way that she teaches and the way that she leads, she always reminds me of the why that I'm writing towards.

AK: You just heard the voices of Emily Nelson and Emmett Knowlton, MFA students in UM's Creative writing program, talking about our guest on this week's episode, Emily Ruskovich. Emily is in her second year as an assistant professor in the English department, but she's not new to UM: she finished her undergraduate degree here in 2007 and has returned after an MA in New Brunswick and an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, in addition to teaching stents at Colorado, Denver and Boise State, if you pay attention to big literary prizes, you might have heard her name. She won the Dublin International Literary Award in 2019 for her debut novel *Idaho*, which has garnered readers from all over the world. It's available in 12 translations. After this episode. Listeners who have not read *Idaho* will definitely want to.

[00:01:19] Every episode we ask our guests to read a poem or a short passage from Literature about Rivers. Emily has chosen a passage from Chris Dombrowski's book, forthcoming from Milkweed, *The River You Touch*. You'll hear her read it, and then we launch into conversation about the path that led her back to, UM, her investment in the writing lives of her graduate students and her exploration of the mysterious forces that drive humans to inexplicable violence.

Emily is a passionate voice for the power of writing to illuminate human life and lead us to greater self understanding, and we are delighted to share the inspiration with you. Welcome to Confluence where we love the touch of the river and all sorts of things can happen!

[00:02:00] **Emily R:** This is a passage from Chris Dombrowski's new book, the *River You Touch*: "or broom the fishing for a morning and bathe yourself in

Tanager song, their plumage garishly bright in green willows. Follow a leaping spring creek far into a meadow where the windblown grasses toss and sink with a lone chestnut mare's tale. Ignoring the mosquitoes you stir, creep on all fours toward the shadow fish you might or might not see finning in shallow air, clear water, the largest brown trout—if it is indeed a trout and not a swaying bed of weeds--you've laid your eyes on in years. Forget retrieving the rod you left at the boat and inch closer, watching the maw of the buck flash white as it opens to take a nymph, closer still.

From your knees, ease your left arm under the cut bank, and when the fish sees your upstream shadow and instinctively swirls toward its sanctuary feel all two and a half feet of it, type to tail tip, slide across your open palm. It is Montana, after all, where these sorts of things can happen.”

AK: Welcome to Confluence, Emily.

Emily R: Thank you so much for having me.

[00:03:12] **AK:** So, you know, I've been wanting to talk to you on Confluence for a while, but you're at the end of your first year here in actually in Montana. We hired you and you had a maternity leave. You had to attend to family life, but now you're here. You spent a full year in Montana. How's it been?

[00:03:27] How's it been? It's been wonderful. It really is my dream job. When I was an undergraduate student here, I actually fantasized. About one day being a professor and walking these, these same pathways as a, as a, an author getting to work with students and I really can't believe that that actually happened. So It's a dream.

[00:03:50] **AK:** And so it's a full circle story and we, we've run into a few professors that have had that full circle story undergrads here and, and went away and did their thing. And so in between you, you got this MA in Canada, which I'd like to hear a little bit more about. What was that all about? Why Canada and what were you doing?

[00:03:54] **Emily R.:** It's slightly embarrassing story, but it's also really speaks to who I am that I, that I chose this school. I grew up in love with Anna Green Gables. I wanted to be her. Yeah, I loved her. She was a part of my soul, still is, and so I wanted to get as close to her. It was very huge decision to base on a

childhood notion, really. You know, and I, when I arrived in Canada, I hadn't even secured housing for myself. I, I, I just got off the plane and basically--

AK: where are the green gable? That's what I thought.

Emily R.: Really, I was sort of like, well, I'm here. Where's the university? I don't have a ride from the airport. I was, I was very young for my age, and I, I was a dreamer and very romantic and very idealistic. And anyway, so I, I wanted to go to Prince Edward Rhode Island, but there was no graduate school in Prince Edward Rhode Island to study creative writing. So I went to the closest possible place, and that was the University of New Brunswick, which, you know, was a wonderful program.

[00:04:59] **AK:** And that was mostly writing. So, and in Canada the system is, they don't do the mfa, they do the ma and you do kind of, A literature curriculum, but you're writing.

[00:05:07] **Emily R.:** Yeah, it was a, it was a literature curriculum with a creative thesis. Um, but the creative thesis had a, a large, uh, research component. Um, you had to choose a, like a lens. And so I wrote stories, but I also wrote about childhood psychology and the, all the research that I had done on obsessive compulsive disorder in kids, which was linked pretty loosely to my stories. But the, the original impulse was an interest in psychology.

[00:05:31] **AK:** s That's interesting cuz you know, that is an important thread. A lot of your writing mm-hmm. real emphasis or interest and investment in the child's perspective. necessarily to the exclusion of the adult world, right? It's a piece that, that is integrated into a full adult world. And of course, you know, in Idaho, the two children are in a very adult, you know, scenario. I mean, they're put into this absolutely difficult. So that kind of, it's illuminating about, about what might be lying underneath Idaho in terms of your thinking about a child's world.

[00:06:02] **Emily R.:** Yeah, my childhood. Present with me all the time. I remember, I remember it vividly. It's so much that it doesn't feel like a memory. It's something I'm living all the time. Even right now, I feel like my childhood is running through me in this other part of my memory. And so it's, I, I remember my feelings vividly as a child, and so it's, they're not separate of my adult feelings.

[00:06:25] **AK:** Yeah. So it's easy to tap into when you, when you turn that into fiction, you can find.

[00:06:28] **Emily R.:** Yeah. Quite, quite easily. Yeah. The children's voices in Idaho came first in a way. Well, no, Ann's Ann's perspective came first, but the children's voices came most naturally and most easily. Yeah. And they're, they're also the parts I never read out loud.

[00:06:43] **AK:** It's because they're too close to you.

[00:06:45] **Emily R.:** They're it's too painful. Yeah. It's, it's, you know, these children are gone and I, and to me, they are actually like people in my life, um, all the characters are, and so it's really personal in a. Yeah. It, I never read from their

[00:06:58] **AK:** perspectives.

Wow. I'm gonna come back to that cuz I want to dig into the and voice a little bit later. Sure. But, : but let's, let's continue this story. So you, you finished the masters and then you ended up in the writer's workshop with one of your heroes, Marilyn Robinson. Yeah. What was that like in terms of, I mean, of course she's just a massive figure in American letters. What was it like? Was it intimidating to kind of engage with her and, you know, do you have to kind of pull a certain cloud away in order to get the teaching experience?

[00:07:30] **Emily R.:** You know, I wouldn't use intimidating. She's, she herself is a very shy. Person. Um, she's, she's very quiet. And her, you know, her inte, her intellect is of course very intimidating, but as a person, she's.

She just emanates like a kind of understanding, even as she says very little, like when I think about her classes, her workshops, she, she remained pretty quiet, but the few words that she would say every workshop were so lovely. She just spoke right from her heart. It was more being in her presence that taught me so much than any individual thing that she.

Said, um, which is kind of how the workshop process works, I think is, is that you're in a room with people that you respect and admire so much that you just want to live up to their presence, and so you write better. Because of that.

[00:08:21] **AK:** So that relationship, the, the forming of that relationship with your workshop, and that's your peers as well as the, the, you know, instructor that's almost as important or more important than what's actually being said, the content of the critique

[00:08:34] **Emily R:** Yeah, in some ways, yeah. And she was, um, she and I became very close really. I did a few interviews with her and I don't know, I have just very nice personal memories with her. She's very generous with her time, even as there are shocking demands on her time, you know? I can imagine. Yeah, I'll, you know, I'm still in touch with her.

I, I will always treasure that experience. It was one of the great gifts of my life to be able to study writing at the graduate level and at the University of Iowa especially. It was where I met my husband, where I met my agent, where I met people that. Hold in my life forever.

[00:09:09] **AK:** Mm. So those friendships carry you forward and they, they become a kind of, I think that's a pretty common story across graduate education. It's an intense time. You know, that, that's one of the things we try to elevate on this podcast is some of the. Sociology of grad school, right? Yeah. Not, not, not, it's not just about you mastering a skill set, or you're mastering a craft or an artistic form. You're also forming this network, you know, you're, you're building out a network. And that's common across fields. The STEM faculty will say the same thing. You know, that how important their lab group was and how much they, they still remain tied to them. Yeah,

[00:09:42] **Emily R:** and maybe this is true across lots of disciplines, but what I have found is that very quickly post graduation, the like mentor mentee relationship dissolves.

Mm-hmm. , and it's really your graduate students become, My peers, you know, they, they, they're already writing at such a high level when they're admitted and you know that they're struggling with the same things and writing that I continue to struggle with and that, you know, all writers struggle with at every point in their career.

And so the, you know, sometimes you have graduate students where true friendships develop over many years because of this bond. And because it's easy to, it's easy to transition into friendship and a real, you know, peer relationship after the classroom.

[00:10:24] **AK:** Yeah. And, and the writing and the investment in the writing as the shared space where that happens. It's kind of a nat, it's a natural space for that kind of personal relationship to take place. Right? Because it's, it really is you disclosing yourself to the world, right? Whether or not you're writing semi biographical fiction or not, you're still, you're pulling something from yourself. Yeah. When you, when you're engaged in the creative act, it's a vulnerable

space. And so it's kind of natural that you, if you're sharing that with someone, that you would wanna keep that bond.

[00:10:50] **Emily R:** Absolutely.

AK: So well, while we're on it, let's, let's stay with graduate education a little bit. I mean, you know, you came from the writer's workshop at, at Iowa, which is of course a storied program, but you're now in a fairly storied program with one of the, with this really interesting legacy, uh, especially in the West and the Western writing. What's that meant to you? I mean, as an undergrad, were you kind of aware of Montana's legacy?

[00:11:12] **AK:** Yes.

[00:11:13] **Emily R:** It's, I think, unusual to choose a university based on. Like an undergraduate program, but I wanted to go to the University of Montana and I applied nowhere else because of the professors that I knew were teaching in the Wow.

[00:11:27] **AK:** You already knew that as a senior in high school.

[00:11:28] **Emily R:** I knew it as a junior in high school. That's amazing. Yeah, I did, I had read, uh, Judy Blunt's book, breaking Clean, and I had connected so much with her experience. I mean, my experience was very different and than hers, but just this sense of being different from everybody because of the place that you've come from and, and having to sort of figure out how to be in society.

And I knew I wanted to study with her. And then I read Dee McNamer pretty early on, I think, my senior year, and I just, yeah, I wanted to come here.

AK: And, and how did those books come to you? Did you have a, you know, was there a, a, a teacher that was kind of recommending them? How were you coming across that literature?

Emily R: My dad, my dad was a high school English teacher and read everything. I don't remember who gave me those books in particular, but he and I always were reading together and, and talking together. And then I had a very beloved. English teacher, Mr. Proser. Who? Mr. Proser.

AK: Mr. Proser. Wow. That's a little on the nose.

Emily R: I remember when I entered, I was in the eighth grade and um, he was the principal of our school and he asked us, you know, what are your goals by the time you graduate from the school, like five years from now? And I said, I really just want to go somewhere to study writing. It's. It's what I am meant to do.

And I know I'll never make a living at it, but I have to study writing. And he wrote, I still have it on this essay, I hear Montana's good. Oh wow. You know? And so I had that from the one time I was in eighth grade. It, it was, I understood the legend that was Montana.

[00:12:54] **AK:** Yeah. And that legacy, of course goes way back. And, you know, um, even before there was the MFA program, there was HG Merriam. I don't know if you know about him, but he's, he's, people should know more about him. He's fascinating figure. He was the first, um, in the first Rhode Scholars class of Wyoming. The Miriam Frontier Award that we have Oh, right, the Frontier Award, it's named after him. And, and he founded this magazine, the Frontier Magazine and a literature scholar and, and a Rhodes advisor just, you know, uh, an incredible personality. I mean, you know, burn the whole podcast talking about him. But, but, but there's been this really interesting generational turnover, legacy, you know, that there was the Merriam Age and then there was the age when the MFA got founded, and this, this, you know, incredibly, uh, dynamic young faculty core, formed in the late sixties and then, you know, another phase with Hugo. And so we're in one of those phases. That's why I'm so excited to talk to you is that, you know, we're, we're in this mode where the creative writing program is restocking. Yeah. It's had some retirements and it's going through this phase of change. Pretty exciting to be part of that.

[00:13:58] **Emily R:** Oh, it's so exciting, so fun. The creative writing faculty, as you know, is just wonderful, sweet, kindhearted, giving people who just want to make. Writers of our students, you know, and, and so it's been, it's a crazy time to have started at new university.

AK: COVID and all that.

[00:14:19] **Emily R:** All the, yes. Yeah. But it's been. Wonderful. Yeah.

[00:14:22] **AK:** And so let's think a little bit together about that in terms of, you're telling a story of, I love this Anna Green Gable story. Mm-hmm. I'm kind of thinking about that. What a frame that is for you that you've had this romantic

ideal about the writing life and the world of fiction. Does it mesh? I mean that with the real, real of, of being the writer's life and finding time to write and grinding something out, which are hard, you know, it's hard labor.

[00:14:45] **Emily R:** It is very hard, but it is, it is the dream of my life that I, I mean, it is a, it is an immense honor and privilege to be able to write and share what I write with other people. It's, I more and more I'm aware of just how difficult it is to publish, and the fact that it happened for me so young was a stroke of insane luck combined with hard work. Of course, but

AK: Well, if the work wasn't there, the luck wouldn't have mattered. Right? Yeah. Yeah. But, but I, I'm glad you said that cuz I was gonna ask you about that as well, about that feeling that you got, you caught some breaks, right?

I mean, you had incredible project on your hands, but you've talked about this in interviews too, about how people said, Hey, this isn't a short story, this is actually a novel. Yeah. And so you needed someone to kind of give you that confidence to kind of carry forward and do this bigger thing. Yeah. But I love what you're saying because you're actually, and this is in your personality, right? Such a positive person, but it's that sense of gratitude and that sense of, that you're doing the great thing that allows you to kind of see the grind as not, doesn't overwhelm you. Right. It's hard, but look what you're getting to do.

[00:15:44] **Emily R:** Yeah. And it's also the, you know, the ways in which it's hard are also, I don't know, wonderful. Like, I, I love when I'm stuck in a story, you know, and, and things are not going well. Weirdly, it's to break yourself out of a, out of a plot. It's very freeing and it, it, I, it's, it's like I'm leading many lives all the time. And it's also my husband Sam is also a writer. And so we share this life on this mountain, and we do have two small kids, and that makes everything hard.

Being a parent is harder than anything that I've ever done in my life. But, uh, he and I trade off with the kids. And when we come together at seven o'clock in the evening after the kids are asleep, we read what we've written throughout the day and it's, it's. How we are together. It's who we, it's who we are, what we write.

It's, we are, it's just threaded into your life and Yeah. Yeah. In every moment of, of our lives. You know, he says something like yesterday, We have, um, we have this one Turkey that comes by and he's, uh, he's called Arrow Turkey because he has been shot through with an arrow, but it missed his skin. It's underneath his wings and--

AK: The arrow's still there?

Emily R: Yeah. So he he's been visiting us for three months now or so, and he's perfectly okay. And we, but he's not tame enough for us to catch him, but just the presence of a Turkey and how a Turkey is like, you know, showing up in things that we're both writing and it's just, I don't know. It's just such an honor and so I'm very, very grateful.

And also being a professor, just to have the support of your colleagues, that writing is not the separate thing that you have to try to sneak by to do. Um, that it's a part of what you are supposed to do here, and that means everything to be in a community of, of writers, people who just get it.

[00:17:27] **AK:** Yeah. And you're not having to make, yeah, you're not having to apologize or make a case or whatever. Well, speaking of the case, I mean, what in your view, especially now that you're coming back to, um, so you, you came here as an undergrad and now you're on the, kind of the other side of the, of the window, so to speak. What's the role of writing in a writing culture in a modern university? Why do we, why do we have writing programs?

What's their value? What are, what's their importance?

[00:17:52] **Emily R:** I think that writing is about getting as close as you can to who you are and what matters most in your life, and encountering what you're most afraid of. You know, I think that there's of course the goal, like you go, go get your MFA and then you publish a book.

[00:18:09] **AK:** That is the goal, of course, kind of the professionalization track.

[00:18:11] **Emily R:** Yeah. But a lot of people, You know, that's, that's more of a dream than a goal. And a lot of people come to get their MFA because it's, it's been a calling. They've had their entire lives to tell a story, and that the writing and the getting better at writing are an end in themselves.

You know, and just maybe you're writing a book for your family. Maybe you're writing something because you, you don't understand something that happened to you once. Or, you know, just that, that writing is a, is a calling and it is a separate thing. Publishing, but I do think it, I think. Across any discipline.

[00:18:48] **AK:** Writing makes you a better person, you know, so, so that's where, I mean, so that's the part that we would elevate and say that's the educational goal being achieved, that it, that it somehow enhances your

humanity, makes you more self-fulfilled, self understand. I'm trying to get you to give me the language. What is that language of educational contribution to the institution of a higher ed?

[00:19:05] **Emily R:** I think it's a, a lot about developing empathy and compassion and finding. All the voices that are within yourself and within the people that you care about and within your culture, you know? And I think that everybody should be writing whether or not you intend to publish, I think.

I think it is just really the best thing that you can do for your own humanity, like you said. Yeah. And so, I mean, especially listeners, who are coming from other disciplines, you're making this case for the importance of, you know, just it's a human thing that you should be doing. Mm-hmm. But part of what we also kind of talk a lot about on the podcast, the cultivation of talent at its highest levels. You know, a mathematician might say that same thing. Everyone should know how to Yeah. Take a derivative. Right. And of course not everyone's gonna be able to that there, at some point you need to know, you know, some basic core mathematical competencies, but you reach a point where you just can't do it.

So for an MFA program, that's one of those step level differences. You know that when we're admitting people in, we're getting hundreds of applications Yeah. Every year, but we're only admitting a handful. Right. That in each class, you know, we're admitting 10, 15 students to bring into this. High talent pool of people. What are you looking for when you look at those applications? What, what, what are the, the attributes that you're looking for in that writing sample and in the letter that, that say, this is somebody who can do this thing at this highest level.

[00:20:25] **Emily R:** So, I, I look at the sentence a lot and just the, the rhythm of the sentence. The, the way that a sentence can cast its own spell. I care about clarity. More than show. Um, I care about ambition. That a story. I really want something to sweet me away. I really want to feel like, where is this going? This is, this plot seems like it won't be able to be sustained. But I like the attempt at something big and I, you know, I see a lot of very fine writing in these applications.

It's, it's very difficult to make those, those final cuts. But ultimately it's, it's kind of an in indescribable quality of heart and a kind of magic a spell that, that the, that the writing casts and it's, for me, it's all about the writing sample. You know, I, of course we look at the cover letter and care to know, you know, various things about the applicant, but an applicant's background is not.

Whether or not they've published here or there doesn't really matter to me if I just. Here is a voice that needs to be out in the world. Um, and I've been very lucky that very grateful to see that students of mine have gone on to publish with major houses. And to be able to get my students books from the shelves of Barnes and Noble is just an incredible feeling. It's just to have played any small part in their development as people, as writers, and you know, now in their contribution to American literature. Yeah. It's amazing.

[00:21:58] **AK:** Yeah. And it is a privilege, right? Yeah. It's a privilege to, I think, so many professors in at um, uh, in, again, in all fields kind of speak to that. When you bring the talented people in, And you give them that space to do their thing. Your goal is for them to outstrip you. Yeah. Right. I mean, in the end. Mm-hmm. If you're a good professor, you're hoping they're better than you, right? If you're hoping that you take whatever you have to give and they do something, you know, innovative and, and transformational.

[00:22:20] **Emily R:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I had a student, um, Jackie Polzin. I was her thesis advisor at Boise State, and she wrote this thesis that I thought was one of the most amazing things I'd ever read. And it was all about chickens. It was just a, a, like a woman taking care of chickens in her backyard and this untold tragedy inside of her heart that is never directly engaged with on the page.

And I remember thinking, this book should win the Pulitzer Prize, but I doubt it will be a book. Like I, I saw all of these barriers to publication because it was so quiet, because it was. I don't know, just like so literary. I, I, I didn't, it was, it was hard for me to imagine that she would get through all those early barriers.

But of course, great literature makes it through. And she did publish an award-winning novel *Brood*, and I read it again recently and I just, the passages that are the same from what her thesis was, I, I get this swell of pride. Like I read that, you know, I read that when she was, before she was Jackie Polzin to the world.

[00:23:24] **AK:** You said that, so literary and that's something, um, I was thinking about in our pre-discussion. You know, I noticed around a little bit about, you know, your relationship to Marilyn Robinson and I, and I think there's a common thread there in your story, "Owl." This is definitely the case, meticulously seen world that you bring a reader into little things like how they're cooking food and the sound the food makes when it's being cooked.

Uh, and then in, in *Idaho*, similar kinds of details where. The feel of a life is there through that detail that that's such a tough balance because of course, great. Literature is not photographic and it's not photorealism, it's not, it's not actually depicting reality. It's carving into reality and giving a bit that has weight. And I think the, the literary thing, that's what made me think about it here, that Bakhtin calls this aesthetic weight. It's the, it's the sense that a small detail has this weight that goes beyond. The thing being said. And that there is a, a bit of a mystery to it, but it's not, let's say it's not, it's, it's magic in the sense that it can be conjured. It's not physical magic, you know, that the thing just happens, it's craft. Right. And that's, that's an important part of your writing, that the sense that something's happening that's bigger than the moment that you're seeing that it's nestled in a set of bigger things. One of those things would.

And in the case of your writing: violence which is, is kind of interesting cuz it's not the first thing. Anyone who meets you would think of you, you're this light, happy, uh, uh, good-hearted person, right? Oh, thank you, but then violence is at the core of all this, this award-winning short story, "Owl," which is, which is a man reconciling with his, his wife being shot in the woods in the turn of the century. And then *Idaho* with this murder, a mattress side, a mother killing her child. You know, one of the worst acts that we can, we can imagine, right? Yeah. And we can think of literally doubles of that, you know, that, you know, beloved Scott, same thing, but it's. It's couched in a different, it's couched in a totally different meaning system where the systems of slavery and everything kind of give you an in yours is different.

I mean, it's mysterious at its core. And I've heard you say in an interview that, that just arrived as a fact. It's not something you conjured up. You know, it's not that, that that core event's not something you sort of, I'm gonna write a novel and it's gonna have, you know, but it's like this fact that occurred to your imagination and you had to build a novel around it. You had to kind of construct backward from it.

[00:25:51] **Emily R:** Yeah. And you know, it's, it's a very painful book for me as well. It was, uh, painful to lose the people that I lost in the book, but that darkness is within me and has always been in with me since I was a very small child. This fear. That things were possible without reason, and I grew up worried that I was capable of something terrible.

I wasn't, you know, I, I'd never done anything wrong in my entire life, but I grew up very guilty, um, to the point that I had very severe obsessive compulsive disorder that was related to the worry that I had committed a crime.

And that nobody knew about it and that I, including yourself? Well, that I couldn't remember it, that I was so shocked at what I'd done.

I couldn't remember it. And you know, this, this came back for a while in my adulthood also, just the fear of having done something terrible, but the inability to know what it was. And so I, I do feel like in some way I have suffered the guilt of somebody who has taken a life. Part of me knows what that guilt would feel like.

And so when I am exploring this mother who actually did the unthinkable, I can write about her with a strange understanding because. Well, I mean, OCD is a mental illness, but it, it's also just a part of who I am. My whole, my whole spirit, not just my psychology, um, is just this, I know. I know what it's like to be guilty of terrible things, even though I've never committed terrible things.

[00:27:18] **AK:** Well, I mean, there's so many. Oh gosh. There's so many layers to what you're saying too. I mean, on one hand it's, it's this refreshing directness that you're giving, you know, we talk about this all the time, um, in higher ed. Well, we don't talk about it enough, but here I am gonna talk about it. De-stigmatizing mental health and as a, you know, we need to be having these conversations. Yeah. Most of us actually are on this range. Mm-hmm. And then, you know, we have our internal problems that create problems for us, largely because we can't understand them well enough to actually control them. And we're not self-aware enough to actually do something about it. And so, so first of all, just thank you for saying what you just said. Sure.

[00:27:55] **Emily R:** Right, of course.

[00:27:56] **AK:** Because that's part of this conversation is, is destigmatizing mental health. But then the other layer is that you're also speaking on behalf of a, of a psychological complex. Whether you put the label OCD or not, but that, that guilt complex mm-hmm. that maybe you're capable of or have done. That's kind of common. Right? That's universal.

[00:28:14] **Emily R:** Oh, it's common. Every time I say this, someone says, oh, I, I have driven back to look for bodies. Yeah. You know, certainly, and yeah, I think it's, I think it's in everybody that, because the fact of the matter is, And same things do happen all the time all around us and people's lives are in our hands all the time.

Yeah. You know, I, for a long time I had, you know, I could hardly drive a car because people's lives literally are in your hands when you're in a car. Right.

And if you think too much about that, you will be unable to Yeah. To go on in your daily life. But I think it's, you know, we. Flickers of it. Yeah.

[00:28:52] **AK:** And, and your art then is to convert that into a, into a form that other people can then empathetically identify with. And, and so these characters, Anne on the one hand, who's kind of your double in the novel, right? That is she's come to this world from the uk, you know, so she's a foreigner and outsider. And then by the time we really get to know. We've seen her in, in another space, right through narration. But then we get to know her as a prisoner and we get to know her in this other space. Yeah. Where she is also, I mean, that's a marginalized space. There's a lot of that kind of writing in your cross, uh, writing is, is Yeah. People viewing the world from these angular, marginalized spaces and, and then, and then the sympathy that lies underneath That is what draws us in as readers, that we're learning something from the world by empathetic. Occupying it from this other really extreme space. Yeah. Anne has a mystery to unravel, I guess.

[00:29:47] **Emily R:** Yeah. I mean, she does very unlikely things. She marries a man she knows will likely suffer from Alzheimer's disease very soon. You

[00:29:54] **AK:** Right. Thank you. From that, I forgot to bring that. That's the other marginal mental state is the wages, dementia.

[00:29:59] **Emily R:** Yeah. And so, and she's married somebody who has. You know, it's, she herself is a mystery and the things she does are mysteries, but they all make sense to me, you know? And I think they all make sense to readers that so much of our lives and the decisions that we make are based instinct.

But it's not all, it's also not instinct. I think we often don't know who we are until we've done something that we don't quite understand. But it reflects upon something true within ourselves. And that's why Anne's so interesting to me.

[00:30:29] **AK:** That's fascinating. So it's kind of, yeah, you pulled back from instinct, you pulled back from that.

Emily R: It's not quite instinct. Yeah, but I It's drive or, or it's something Affinity. Yeah,

[00:30:37] **AK:** Something is is magnetically pushing us out into the world and, yeah. And then. Doing cleanup work later to try to understand it. Yeah. Like to go back and understand it, that's really, that's fascinating.

[00:30:50] **AK:** We end every episode with our quick hitters. Same questions we ask everyone, just a little bit of the life of the professor, especially in Montana. They're very locational, specific morning or night person. Morning. And that, is that a writerly thing?

[00:31:01] **Emily R:** Um, it's a kid thing. Okay. I think I could be either kind of person, but the kids get me up.

AK: Very, very good. Before kids were you writing at night? Yeah. Before kids I just would, uh, a day would just spread out luxuriously before me and I would write, you know, morning, whatever. Morning to night.

[00:31:16] **Emily R:** Morning, noon, and night. Yeah. Yeah.

AK: Winter or summer.

Emily R: Summer.

AK: Is that reaction to the cold of Idaho bringing there.

[00:31:25] **Emily R:** Yeah. I mean, the winter is hard and continues to be hard. We live again on a mountain exactly like the one that described in Idaho and the plowing, the dragging groceries up in a sled. It's, it's hard work and it's, you are always a little bit stressed. . Yeah.

[00:31:41] **AK:** Yeah. And then summer, you just get to relax a little, a little bit more.

[00:31:43] **Emily R:** I slid off the, Many times this, this winter, you know, it's, uh, treacherous. But yeah. But I, you know, I appreciate them for the contrast that they bring.

[00:31:53] **AK:** Yeah. Sunrise or sunset?

Emily R: Sunset.

AK: Yellowstone or Glacier?

[00:31:58] **Emily R:** Glacier. I don't know. I love them both. Yeah.

AK: It's okay to love 'em both, but you love one a little bit more. It's not like your children right?

[00:32:07] **Emily R:** Yeah. I mean, I, I guess I've only been to either place once.

[00:32:10] **AK:** Um, oh, okay. Well then you've got a long, you know, future ahead of you, working out the subtleties. What's your favorite Montana river?

Emily R: Clark Fork.

AK: That, that, um, that passage you chose? That Chris Dombrowski passage wasn't necessarily set on a Clark Fork, but that's our home river. And I, I always tell the people that are choosing their passage, they. They cannot choose *A River Runs Through It*, which you never would've done anyway, but, but we have had other fishing passages. But there's something about Chris's passage that's really wonderful because the river is, you know, literally the world he works in, right? I mean, he is a fishing guide, but there, it's such a tactile passage. What, what'd you pick it for?

[00:32:48] **Emily R:** Yeah, just the experience, the slow down experience of water and the, the way it captures you know, the eternity and the life and the, the mental forces of this animal that's being pursued. And it was hard to choose cuz there are so many amazing passages in the book.

AK: The “song of the Tanagers,” It's so multisensory.

[00:33:08] **Emily R:** And just the idea that there are some things that are possible only here in Montana. Yeah. That, that seems very true to me.

[00:33:15] **AK:** It opens up with that broom away the day of fishing, which I also love that metaphor. You know, that the art, of course there are also just those days fishing's no good. Or there's just another thing to do on the river, and, and here's this micro event, you know, seeing this magisterial, you know, it's a great choice. Anyway, we got into that a little bit, but the river, right? The river is so important to our ethos on Confluence. What's your favorite Montana Mountain range?

[00:33:40] **Emily R:** You now I don't know. Yeah. I, I love the mountain that we live on, but it doesn't have a name.

AK: I love a no name Mountain. Yeah. And it's at the edge of the Bitterroots. It's kind of on the, on the. Sort of Northwestern edge. Yeah, yeah. But it's, it's kind of, yeah, it's kind of no name, no range. It's kind of just out there. What's your shadow profession, A thing that you kind of had thought about doing, but, but didn't do?

[00:34:04] **Emily R:** Well, I never actually thought about being an actress. It never, I, it never would've occurred to me to actually pursue that, but, It's in my heart. I, I would love to be, I would love to act.

AK: What's the attraction there?

Emily R: I would like to do weirdly sketch comedy. I, now you're talking my, I feel like I'm a very funny person, but that I don't, I'm also very shy and so only the people closest to me know that I, you know, I do impersonations. I, you know, and I, it just, it just, So fun. Yeah. But I, I don't have the stomach for it. I don't have the confidence for it.

[00:34:39] **AK:** And stomach for it is the right word. You have to be willing to fail a lot in that one. Yeah. Yeah. What would your best friend say about you when they asked what you were

[00:34:46] **Emily R:** like? Uh, she would say that I care really deeply about the things that I care about, to the point that I manage to find pain in my greatest happiness. She's talked about that quite a bit. Can't you just enjoy this moment? Instead of mourning it's end .

[00:35:05] **AK:** What's the voice you hear in your head when you go to sleep at night?

[00:35:08] **Emily R:** The voices of my family, my mom and dad and husband, Sam, and my little kids.

[00:35:14] **AK:** And then finally, and this is a, a pregnant question for you, what's the one piece of music you'd be willing to listen to for all eternity?

[00:35:22] **Emily R:** It's this very simple, very sweet and sad song that my dad wrote when he was 19 years old, when he was grieving his father. It's called "Take Your Picture Off the Wall." And it's the song that I wove into *Idaho* as a tribute to him and also because it's just a beautiful song, but also. To acknowledge the effect that he's had upon my life and upon my life as a writer. I wanted his words to be very central in my own story.

[00:35:48] **AK:** Yeah, that's amazing. And, and, and what a gift to him, you know, that, that his, his, his song was published kind of through the novel. Yeah, he was 19? So what year would that be?

[00:35:58] **Emily R:** Uh, he was born in '52...

[00:36:04] **AK:** So 71, right? So That's so interesting. You know, I told you I think that when I was reading the novel, that Immediately brought to mind the Kris Kristofferson song helped me make it through the Night, which has that very evocative opening line, "Take the ribbon from your hair." But that has a kind of similar sound and feel. And uh, thanks to your good gracious and your father's good graces. Well, listeners will get to hear it. We'll kind of lead out with this song. So Thank you so much. And thank you for joining us on Confluence.

[00:36:29] **Emily R:** Oh, it's been my pleasure.

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