

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 52 – Emily Giffin – All We Ever Wanted

Something New

And now a personal word,

I haven't read any novels by Jane Austen. I haven't read any stories by the Brontë sisters. I did read *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. I did not read *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Tales of love and loss in the English countryside and single women trying to make it in the big metropolis have not been on my bedside table. However, I have seen my share of romantic comedies. My absolute favorite is *The Break Up* with Jennifer Aniston and Vince Vaughn, but they're not first on my list when I go to the movies. All of which is to say when a friend of mine mentioned that a friend of hers worked for Emily Giffin, I responded blankly. Her name did not register at all. Then I received a notice from our local library that Emily would be on a book tour through town. I saw it as a sign. Wouldn't it be great to have her as a guest of the podcast and learn more about her?

I reached out to her publicist and did not hear anything back until the day before her visit. Suddenly I was scheduled to meet Emily. That gave me one night to read her work. I went to Barnes & Noble and sat down with her first eight novels. All pretty covers in blue and pink. I set out to skim them quickly. I read for structure and themes. I looked for sentences that I could bring back to my discussion with Emily. But as I fell into the characters and dialog, I was struck by how captivating her novels were to read. I remember putting my pen down and getting comfortable in an oversized chair and enjoying them for what they were: really engaging stories about people who seemed genuine to me.

Emily writes about characters who are taken by surprise, who confront moral dilemmas, who are tested and become better versions of themselves. I'm curious about what this means for Emily. I noticed a progression in her writing, from stories about young single women whose lives revolve around a man to stories about more complicated women and men managing marriages and commitments and conflicting demands. Her first book, *Something Borrowed*, told a captivating story about female friends navigating loyalty and love. Her latest book moves toward different terrain: toward issues of class and race and identity. She is teeing up subjects that challenge happy endings and whether love conquers all. I wonder if Emily is on the verge of something new. I wonder where her writing is going. I wonder how brave she will be.

The great joy of this podcast for me is sitting across from my guests: observing them, listening to them, being with them. In every conversation I see myself in my guests and my guests in me. With Emily, almost from the moment she walked into the room, I felt we were versions of each other. As she told her story I could sense the next part of it as if her story were my own. We both moved frequently as children, adjusting to new people and circumstances. We both found comfort in reading and writing. We developed private, introspective lives while learning to make new friends. Like Emily, I wrote relationship-driven stories that I shared in handcrafted booklets with my name proudly on the cover. Like her, I got along with people from all walks of life: with athletes, artists, musicians, and classmates interested in business, science, medicine, and the law. In college, Emily and I both majored in history, a reading and writing discipline about choice and consequence, context and narrative. Emily and I both went to law school to read and write some more. The law is about people and society. Every case is a set of facts and principles. Case law is story and precedent. All are grist for writing novels. I loved law school. I loved learning. I loved my friends. Just as Emily did.

After law school, I clerked on a federal court of appeals. Then came the next rung on the ladder of achievement: a prestigious, high-paying national law firm. On the first day, just as Emily did, I knew I had entered a soul-sucking, mind-numbing, morally compromised world. Emily lived in Manhattan. I lived in Miami. We both were sent off to warehouses and document review. We both worked for partners we couldn't stand. Emily plotted her escape, writing her first manuscript. I did the same. She found an agent. I did too. Emily's first novel was rejected. She moved to London and wrote her second manuscript about a love triangle, and secrets, and the charge of electricity between two people. I wrote my manuscript about a love triangle, and secrets, and the charge of electricity between two people. And it is at that point that our stories diverge: her novel was about love and friendship. Mine was psychological suspense. Emily's novel was published and became a sensation. My agent wanted to sell the movie rights first and the literary rights second, but it stalled and went unpublished. Emily has since written eight more best-selling novels. Over the last many years my energies shifted to business and investments and media and education.

All of this was on my mind as I sat across from Emily. What would her life be today if her manuscript never sold? What would she have created for herself? What would my life be today if my story had sold? What would I have done and not done? We both are interested in choices. We both are interested in good lives. Is she happy with her life? She is. Am I happy with my life? I am. And here we are. Two lives now connected.

Here is what I sense about Emily: She will roll the dice to win big. She is productive and disciplined. She creates the life she wants to live. She is grateful for what has come her way. She is highly intuitive about people. She has more stories to tell. And I can't wait to read them.