



Transcript: Katherine May and Elissa Altman

Katherine May: It's really nice to see you. Um, well, hello, everyone listening. I think it would be good for us to just explain why the hell we're doing this to begin with.

Elissa Altman: I'm not weeping, by the way, I'm just having a, I'm having an allergy problem, so. You've

Katherine May: got beautiful light streaming into you as well, which looks incredible.

Elissa Altman: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I feel like I'm going to vaporize. You're going to ascend somewhere. Right.

Katherine May: So we've been having chats for a long time, haven't we?

Um, and. I think it just occurred to [00:01:00] both of us at some point that it might be really good to record them, um, because I think, I mean, is it bad to say that both of us have been around the block a few times? To

Elissa Altman: yes that it's absolutely, it's absolutely correct. Yeah. And

Katherine May: yeah, and we talk a lot about, you know, what it is to be a writer, and particularly a writer of memoir.

you know, like going out in the world and how much it's changed. And I, I think at some point, I just thought, God, we really need to find a way to talk about this out loud, because whether it's through like politeness or a lack of will to shape the tree too much, I think we on, we as writers aren't talking enough about how our practice and experience of the world has changed.

And I, I know, I know this is true for you too but I have, I'm kind of having this surge of protectiveness towards the writers coming into the industry and the [00:02:00] pace

that they have to catch up with now if, if indeed they're going to get any attention at all, like it seems really binary and I kind of, I kind of want to help a bit, I don't know.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah, no, I am. It's very different. I think, you know, we were just, we were in the green room having a conversation about this. Um, I love that, in the green room, um, about the, about how much it's changed and what's expected of us now versus what was expected of us Maybe even, you know, 20 years ago when I was still in the, in the business, sitting on the publisher side of the desk, which I did for so many years.

But, um, you know, I watch what's going on now everywhere, whether it's Substack or, um, the podcast community. And, um, and it, it feels To me, very much like the world that we live in professionally is a bit of a pie [00:03:00] and everybody wants a slice of the pie. And they will climb over each other to get the slice of the pie.

And what does that do? to, and that's not a, you know, that's, I think that that's human nature in a way, unfortunately, but I think it's human nature. Like a

Katherine May: prize available to, to hundreds of thousands of people

Elissa Altman: who would love it. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I, and I think that, um, it does impact, um, the actual creative process and it impacts.

Um, what we are expected to produce and the pace at which we're expected to produce it. And I do think that, you know, newer writers who are coming in are not necessarily completely. aware of that until they're in it, you know, um, and then it can be, and then it can be really, um, surprising, sometimes detrimental [00:04:00] to work sometimes detrimental to quality of work and message.

And, um, you know, and I am certainly finding that to be the case.

Katherine May: Well, I think we're going to try and talk about a different topic

Elissa Altman: every time.

Yeah, try stopping

Katherine May: us. Um, we're going to start by talking about writing about yourself, which you need. hugely relevant to both of us. Yes. I would, I wondered if we could start by addressing that question that I think you probably get loads as well, which is, um, aren't you brave to do

Elissa Altman: this? What do you think when you hear that?

You know, I think it's generally meant, I get it all the time, I get that question all the time, having written this very Most recently, there's a very transparent book about my [00:05:00] mother and relation who was still with us when I wrote it and still, you know, yeah. And, and, um, you know, and, and before that writing about my family and, uh, extensively and, and I, the word brave on the one hand, I understand what people are saying and I'm, and I'm, um, I don't wanna say I'm grateful that doesn't feel like the right word.

Um, and it makes me squirm because it's not a matter, um, it's not a matter of bravery. I'm not trying to, um, to reveal something that's going to, you know, shake the tree in any way or generally what I'm trying to do when I, when I write about things that might be considered quote unquote brave. is I'm trying to get to some core truth.

I'm trying to get to some level of understanding, both at a micro level and at the macro level. [00:06:00] Um, and, um, and, and to do that, um, you know, one has to peel back layers. Um, and, and there's, there's no, I think all writing is brave to some degree. Uh, you know, and Pip just came in and agrees, actually. Um, um, he's Um, but I, I think that all writing to some degree is, is very brave because it's, um, we expose ourselves, uh, in a, in a way that I think all artists expose themselves, um, in a, in a world that can be, uh, difficult, unkind, um, uh, particularly critical, harsh, all of those lovely things.

So why do we keep doing this? I don't know.

Katherine May: I'm never sure with that question whether there's a subtext in it, you know, like, Oh, aren't you brave [00:07:00] doing this? Does that mean brackets stupid? Or

Elissa Altman: like, I always,

Katherine May: I think, um, I think it often comes from people who, don't have the same drive to write about life. Um, and I think that sometimes the way it's framed, it's like, why are you airing your dirty laundry in public like this?

Like, why would you tell people about struggles with mental health, you know, or whatever it is? And I, and I sometimes feel, maybe, maybe it's not intentional, but I sometimes feel like there's a bit of shaming going on when people ask that question. There's a sort of, you know, whether it's like, can't you make it up, like a right fiction, or whether it's, um, how naive of you to put this out there.

I, I, I often think there's like a little undercurrent to that question, but

Elissa Altman: [00:08:00] yeah, no, I think that it, it often feels like there's a, um, A subtextual shaming going on.

Katherine May: Yeah,

Elissa Altman: subtextual shaming. I, you know, and I just, I mean, I, I, I'm, I just got my manuscript for On Permission back from the publisher and, and one of the questions that keeps coming out, not in their comments, but that's really at the core, is who do you think you are?

Who do you think you are to tell these stories? Quite important,

Katherine May: yeah.

Elissa Altman: And, and, you know, I grew up at a time when, um, uh, we were children, um, and adults and young adults were admonished, um, by the teacher, the finger waving teacher, who would say, Who do you think you are to tell, tell on the blank? And I think that it's a very much.

For us, um, among, uh, you know, when I was [00:09:00] talking about subtextual shaming the subtext is, who do you think you're to tell these stories? Mm-Hmm. I mean, um, why would you do this? And it, and to me, the, the, the sentence, well, aren't you, aren't you brave to, to write. Whatever its you're writing, there's another part of that sentence aren't, and who do?

And, you know, the what are you trying to accomplish means to me that readers and, um, you know, readers at large therefore then see, um, what we do as a means to an end. And I don't know that there, that it always is a means to an end. Um, I don't think that novelists write what they write as a means to an end.

I mean, maybe, [00:10:00] Some of the, you know, the bigger, more commercial ones do, but, um, But that's the driving factor for me, and I don't know that that's the driving factor for you too. No, I mean, honestly, like,

Katherine May: I really like reading memoir, and so I like writing it because it's really That's how the whole thing works, isn't it?

You kind of want to write into the genres that you enjoy and that you, that to some extent you're expert in. I always think that really good writers are absolute experts in the genre that they write into. They read it compulsively, they know everything

Elissa Altman: about it. Yeah, yeah.

Katherine May: Yeah, like I, when I started writing as an adult, some of my first pieces were memoirs.

I was doing a correspondence course at the time, like, you know, starting to write or something, as they're all called. So at the time, goodness me, this, this makes me sound very old, but at the time you'd [00:11:00] send in your work and the tutor would send back a handwritten letter in response.

Elissa Altman: Wow.

Katherine May: Okay. It was actually really lovely, but he did not like my work, and he particularly objected to me drawing on like my working class background.

He found it dowdy and unglamorous.

Elissa Altman: I

Katherine May: remember writing once about going to a party under the, um, like the electrical substation. It was in a hall under there. and saying like how the, how you could, all you could hear was the buzzing of the generators over your head. And he, he really like, he really took it to pieces and basically kind of said like, why would anyone find this interesting?

You know, why, why would this be the subject matter of a serious writer? Wow. And I, And weirdly, it spurred me on completely, like it should have completely deflated me, but I just thought, [00:12:00] you don't know how many people would be so pleased to see this kind of experience of life, you know, where every party has a raffle and,

Elissa Altman: um,

Katherine May: and like it's catered by the fish and chip van driving up outside.

Elissa Altman: I love that. That's great. Great.

Katherine May: There were great parties. Um, you know, like, like you don't know, I just thought, you don't know, you don't know what anything's like if you've never been to, never enjoyed it. Like, if you think that party's bad, if you think that's like, uh, degraded thing that definitely needs my writing in the world.

That was my kind

Elissa Altman: of attitude. Yeah, I find that really fascinating. I mean, I, I, um, you know, one of the things that I lead with when I'm teaching is in a, in a workshop, you know, I've got 12 people or between 12 and 15 people and Every, I mean, I've taught workshops where I've had a National Book Award [00:13:00] winner and someone who's never written in the same class sitting next to each other.

Um, everybody was very kind, which is wonderful because it could have gone south, but it didn't. And the one thing that I always lead with is when we read other people's work at this stage, um, we don't read it with aesthetic bias. Right, meaning I, I'm not into, I'm not right, I'm not reading to determine whether or not I'm engaged by someone's life.

I'm, I'm reading to determine if I'm engaged by their writing. Um, and those, those two things are very, very different. And I, I find that. you know, when we read memoir, um, memoir for me is like the great leveler. I want to read memoirs, uh, by people who have had completely different experiences from my own, um, [00:14:00] to whom I would not necessarily, uh, I wouldn't be familiar to them and they wouldn't be familiar to me.

I want to read memoir about other cultures and other parts of other cultures and And, and that, that to me is why we, why we do what we do. And that there is bravery. And I think in. in, in the work of writers who go to places, um, that are not commercially hot, you know, um, You always know that when we start the podcast.

And people who have resisted the, um, you know, the words of whether it's a workshop leader or a professor or. Or, um, you know, writing friends saying no, no, no, no one's going to want to read about that. No one's going to, you know, and, and we just feel like [00:15:00] that's the thing that we have to be writing at the time.

There is bravery in that to some degree. Um, yeah, I think it needs to come, that bravery has to be Uh, has to be, it has, I don't know if it has to be felt by us, but it, I, it, the fact that it comes from, it often comes from the outside, make, does make me squirm. Yeah. I see

Katherine May: what I think it's a sense of like, pushing through that, you know, the secrecy that you even apply to yourself sometimes, like I often feel like I'm pushing through a membrane when I'm writing something.

I can make several attempts at it, like keep making passes until it feels like it, it breaks through that force barrier of the self, but that kind of, and I think that's when you reach that really universal territory. Um, when you push right through and into the, the really raw,

Elissa Altman: the raw experience

Katherine May: inside.

[00:16:00] But I also, I also think that bravery question for me sidesteps craft so carefully, like, like the only thing that you're doing with that work is just telling someone something about yourself. Yeah. When I read a really good memoir, the thing that I admire about it is often the craft that it takes to shape real life into a narrative that feels like a narrative, that, you know, that feels complete and satisfying.

And, you know, and how much harder it is to do that with real life material than it is with fiction, where you can always go anywhere. Like with memoir, you've got The material that happened, and you have to find a way to tell it as a story. A story that people want to read to the end. And I, I do, yeah, there's a little bit of me that gets a bit stung about how little people perceive of the [00:17:00] craft of delivering.

Elissa Altman: Yeah. Yeah. And I, I absolutely agree with you. And, and, um, you know, when I, I always say that it's not, um, it's not the story itself, but the manner in which you tell the story. Um, and those two things I think are, you know, are, are very, very, are very different. And, you know, your, your description of, um, of sort of having to, peel away a membrane, um, is so spot on.

I mean, it really, it really is. Um, I, you know, I sometimes talk similarly about a scrim and having to sort of step through that scrim and, and to get to a place of, um, you know, unraveling of, um, of chaos and making order and sense out of chaos and turning your narrator into a. you know, into a character so that you, you know, you can take a big step back and watch [00:18:00] them slash you, their lives in the story unfold on the page.

And, and may, you know, maybe there is bravery to that. I don't know. But, um, but I, I think that for me, I mean, I think we do what we do. Because there's a certain order making that we attempt to apply order to disorder. We attempt to apply order to chaos. And, you know, when I'm writing memoir, I, um, I inevitably go into it with the The knowledge that I don't know what the story's gonna be.

I don't Mm-Hmm. I don't understand. I don't necessarily know what's gonna happen. Yeah. Um, by the end. By the end. No,

Katherine May: it's funny actually, because I, I often find in that process. I find myself writing about, like, memories that I would otherwise find, like, [00:19:00] insignificant. I hadn't even considered that they were particularly important.

But suddenly, in the service of the story, they, they take on weight. And you, you draw, you find yourself drawing in these events because you think, Okay, well that, that actually shows something really important here. That's actually, there's a beat to this

that, that kind of And it's, and it's often the bits that don't feel very vital that are the bits that people respond to.

They're just real, they're just human, they're just kind of understated and kind of, yeah,

Elissa Altman: there's constantly Yeah, no, I, I, um, I, you know, I think that there's magic in the mundane and, and not, which is not to say that who we are and the way we live and what we go through on a day to day basis is necessarily mundane, but in the broad, scheme of things, it kind of sort of is, you know, we all have our day to [00:20:00] day and our, you know, I'm sitting here talking to you, my cat's coming in, my mother's calling on the other phone, my, you know, my wife has just come through a skin cancer treatment and is on the other end of that, you know, I, I don't love the expression lifey, life gets lifey, but life gets lifey and, and And I think the mundane is where the magic is, and we're expected as writers and creatives to live these extraordinary experiences that are sort of loud, both literally and metaphorically, um, and that's where the excitement is, that's where the, You know, that's where the, the, the, the hook is.

And, and I don't think that's true. I really don't. Um, I think that, you know, I, I don't know if you ever saw the movie Il Postino. You remember the movie Il Postino? Yeah. It's one of my [00:21:00] favorites because I mean, it's very quiet, but the beginning of it has the, the postman and. I think it's his father sitting down and sort of slurping soup together in this little kind of rundown cottage that the father lives in.

And they're kind of like mumbling at each other. And it was magical. It was absolutely magical. And I think that's where, you know, that's where the life is.

Katherine May: Yeah, that's what that's kind of what we want to see. Do you kind of, um, do you have like a line, I mean, have you ever written pieces that you've decided not to publish, or, or

Elissa Altman: like,

Katherine May: cut them out of books, or decided not to go there in the first place like do you have like a

Elissa Altman: Not only do I have a barrier, I have a box here somewhere that's like filled with it.

No, seriously, um, yeah, I mean, I, I, I do. I have a [00:22:00] file on my desktop that is filled with stuff that I've cut out. And, you know, with my first book, I, I, um, I was sort of venting my spleen, um, about three quarters of the way through the book and I had a

wonderful editor, um, who was just an amazing, amazing editor, so thoughtful, and she said, this is really terrific writing, but it has nothing to do whatsoever with the piece that you're writing, and it amounted to about a hundred pages, you know, which is, which is a lot, but Thanks, Katherine.

You know, there are things that I know that I have to write about and I, I cannot write about them right now. Um, I can't write about them right now because my mother is still here. Um, I'm not there yet. Um, and, and I don't know if I ever will be, you know, I [00:23:00] don't know, I, I don't know, you know, I don't write about so much about my wife and her.

and our life at home, because Susan, who you know, is a very private person and, and tends to be very sort of circumspect and, and I, um, I respect that, uh, immensely. And so I know that there's a. That there is a boundary that I just, I just won't, I just won't cross. It's not appropriate. It's not fair. She didn't ask to be married to one that was, you know.

I think that

Katherine May: a lot actually, like the, yeah, the people around you, I mean, they, they become characters in. in your book. And I, and I think sometimes you read books where you think, wow, that author has forgotten the line, you know, the, the, the privacy line and the, the fact that this is a real person that they're writing about.

Like they've, they've [00:24:00] completely forgotten that and, um, you know, made people look monstrous, you know, who maybe are just, just behaving quite normally. And I, yeah, I'm very self conscious about that actually, you know, particularly having a child, like, who can't really consent to his portrayal in my books.

Like I, I, I include him less and less, though I think very hard about what I include. It would be so easy to have a huge impact on his, his life by putting stuff in that he would find embarrassing or that could be used against him in schools because we know what schools are like.

Elissa Altman: Yeah. And I

Katherine May: always called my husband H because H for husband and uh, that just gives him that little tread of privacy.

It's not like you couldn't connect the two of us together if you wanted to, but it just, I hope in lots of ways it signals to the reader like this is a, you know, this is a stand in for a person in lots of ways. You're, you, you're not [00:25:00] getting his memoir, so like.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah. Does he, um, does he read your work before it goes off to the before it goes out to the publisher.

Katherine May: No, no, no, he doesn't. He, um, I, it's hard to say this without making him sound bad. He's just not all that interested in it, honestly. It's not his thing. There's no laser guns in it.

There's like no elves, there's no medieval weaponry, and there's no lasers.

He listens to the audiobooks that are published. Okay, okay. And like, obviously, anything very personal to him, I do show him.

Elissa Altman: Sure. And he's,

Katherine May: you know, he's chill about it, genuinely. Um, but It's not that interesting. And I, like, honestly, I'm kind of grateful [00:26:00] for that because sometimes you meet, I don't know if you've come across these, these people, but you meet, um, you meet writers who've got a partner that really thinks that, like, is that like their promo And it's so weird and awkward and You just think like, I, I'm grateful for being taken down a peg, you know, when I've had a really nice day and everyone's like, DM'd me to say they love me, um, it's really good to have a husband that's like, I can't believe you still haven't washed up.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah, I mean that is, it is very, it is very refreshing, isn't it? I mean, I, you know, I, and I know exactly, I know exactly what you mean, because it is just. You know, I do, I do write about her to a degree, and she's in the publishing world, as you know, and, and, um, and so she, she sort of [00:27:00] lives and works in that world, um, every day and has done for, um, 20 years in April and, and was with a different publisher before, before the one she, she's in, uh, she's now, but you know, I'll.

Write something where something will appear somewhere and it'll be like, great, you know, did you do the laundry yet? You know, have you picked up your socks? You know, your dresser is looking like a bomb site, you know. Um, yeah, you know, you overcooked the eggs. And, uh, and I'm like, but, but I got this great route and it just doesn't matter.

And it's very, it's great, you know.

Katherine May: It is, it's really necessary. Like, equally, I quite often see people on social media posting a picture of their partner and saying, this guy, it is always a woman about a man, this guy is like the most perfect person ever and he is [00:28:00] like masculine.

I read one the other day that was like, he's tender and masculine. And I was like, oh, I don't. Like, people just don't need, they don't need you to sell them your relationship.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah.

Katherine May: Don't realise how nauseating that can be. It's not, don't treat your partnership like an aspiration for other people. Yeah.

Just weird. Like, let's just all come down off of that, please.

Elissa Altman: I love that. That's, that's hilarious. I mean, you know, it's, it's such a funny thing. I mean, Susan, you know, is on Instagram, but has, and has many, many, I mean, you know, for someone who's not engaged in it, many followers and zero posts, zero. She does not post.

She's not in it. I said, are you a lurker? Are you like lurking behind, you know, and And I think for her, she is, I mean, you [00:29:00] can call her a creative lurker. You know, she loves music. She loves visual art. She, um, obviously loves writing and loves poetry. And, and, um, you know, when she discovered that Patti Smith was on Instagram, that was it, you know?

So, um, you know, and Patti's very active on Instagram, which is wonderful. Um, but, but she's just, she's not, she will never post about me. ever, um, anywhere, not even on Facebook. I mean, it just doesn't, you know, and, and she recently actually said to me, does it bother you that I don't ever do that? And I, and I said, no, you know, it's just, it's a digital extension of, of who you are and who are in real life, you know?

Yeah.

Katherine May: And also, I mean, there's a bit of politeness in this too, about what you, like, Display. I mean, [00:30:00] I, you know, I hate displays of wealth and ownership. Um, I think when I see people kind of bragging about their relationships, I mean, A, I don't always believe it. But also, from long experience, that's sort of, that's ever the sign that someone's about to announce their divorce.

But, um, also, I do think, like, why, what, What are we doing here? Like, why do you need to do that? What are you trying to make other people feel by that? Um, yeah, I don't know. Maybe that's a memoirist thing. Maybe we don't care about people seeing our flaws. Maybe we know that. I

Elissa Altman: don't know, you know. I mean, I won't use names.

I, I know someone who is a, um, not really a friend, um, but I, but I know them fairly well and they are a, um, a novelist and have been known as a novelist for, for years in a particular genre and, um, and, and [00:31:00] this person has the most of the novelist. really extraordinary, um, extraordinary Instagram feed. They travel everywhere and they're wearing the most extraordinary clothes in there, you know, and it's beautiful, highly curated, heavily curated, directly linked to their books and to the tone and sound.

of their books and, and, and by extension what their readers think they're going to get when they go there, um, which, you know, which then begs other questions, you know, when we, when we post on social media or when we, when we don't, when we just, when we're writing, um, are we Are we writing with an eye to what we think our readers want to hear, what they want to read, what they want to see, or are we authentically producing [00:32:00] Um, you know, extensions of our curated, but extensions of our lives.

Um, and, um, and I, you know, I don't know if you have the same thing over there, but when you sign a. A publishing agreement with a book publisher. You're asked to fill out a, um, it's sort of like a, um, um, an author Q&a, you know, who are you, in words or less, who are your, who are your connections? What are your connections?

Hate connections,

Katherine May: question, .

Elissa Altman: Where are you? What are you connected to geographically? What schools did you go to? What, you know, on and on and on. And I, You know, I understand from a professional point of view why they, why they do that. Um, but it feels like the first, the first rung on the let's, you know, give [00:33:00] the readers this but not this ladder.

Um, and I don't know, you know, I don't know if that's, I mean, it may not even be fair of me to say that. But, uh, do

Katherine May: you, do you? Yeah, I think, you know, particularly the, you get asked who you're connected to. And Who Might Coverquote Your Book? And I just think, I mean, having filled that questionnaire in at a moment when I know absolutely no one, um, I remember having a conversation within, I'm going to say very gently, within publishing about this very thing where it's about my responses to a questionnaire early in my career, and someone, and the person going, You don't know anyone famous, like no, like no one at all.

You don't know anyone famous. I was like, like, no, literally I'm just scrambling off the street here. Like I just,

Elissa Altman: yeah, I mean, I,

Katherine May: I, I worry about, I worry a lot about that. [00:34:00] I worry about the, the way that we, that it's just so much easier to publish someone who's got connections than it is to publish someone who's good, but completely unknown.

And. There's been, I mean, I've seen a lot of authors kind of complaining about this out loud, which I have some sympathy with lately, about the acceleration in the kind of cover quoting and endorsement kind of market.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah.

Katherine May: And actually, I, you know, like I'm, I'm at the stage now where I cover quote very few books and I will bump Books at the top of the pile that I think the author will struggle to get other quotes or that I don't know them or that they are from some, some kind of minority within, within publishing because I, I just think it's a bit of a trick.

I mean, you see, I mean, I've, I've heard, I've heard that some authors are just asking the editorial [00:35:00] assistant at their publisher to write the quotes for them anyway.

Elissa Altman: Really? Ooh, I didn't know that. It's quite common.

Katherine May: Yeah. Wow. Brackets, mostly male authors too. The ones that are quite prolific in having their

Elissa Altman: names on the front page.

Now I'm just thinking about it. I know, I know. It's

Katherine May: quite common for them to ask uh, you know, a junior to, um,

Elissa Altman: Oh my gosh.

You know what? I, listen, I, I have heard, um, I don't know, you know, I, I once had a publisher, um, sort of sift around in, um, social media. And they came up with something that a very well known American [00:36:00] memoirist, a woman, had written about something that I'd written. Very, very complimentary. I was just sort of, it was just, it was lovely and, um, meant a lot to me.

But it was not a quote, it was not a blurb for a jacket, and the publisher took, or someone at the publisher's office, I suspect someone very new, uh, took a little bit of this, and a little bit of this, and a little bit of this, it, from that, from that comment that this person

had made, pasted it together, Did And suddenly it showed up on, you know, on Amazon, it showed up, um, you know, in all of the publicity material and it, I was really upset about it.

The author was very, very kind and did not, uh, you know, knew that it was not something that I had done and obviously got it [00:37:00] and understood what had happened. But, um, there's a, also a belief. That, um, in a certain camp. that quotes and blurbs don't sell books, that they don't drive sales, they don't drive publicity, and yet I sit down at my computer every morning at nine o'clock, I turn things on, and I have five or six requests for blurbs, um, from the publisher, you know, very often.

So, I don't know. It's really difficult

Katherine May: because, you know, I don't know if it works or not. I don't know if it makes any difference. But in a market where everybody has got quotes on their book, you kind of don't want to be the person who doesn't have them. Um, and so no one's going to blink first.

Elissa Altman: I think that's very true.

I mean, I, I, I still, because I started out life as a food writer, I still get a lot of [00:38:00] cookbooks and, um, that come in, um, for comment or publicity or, you know, whatever it is. And one of the, and I just got one from a publisher who I will not name. Um, Beautiful, beautiful book. And I looked at the cover, and there were no blurbs on the cover, and I turned it over, and there were no blurbs on the back cover.

It was nothing. And the first thing that I thought of was, the book was, the manuscript was delivered too late. Right. To get, uh, blurbs from authors. There was a hitch in the publishing process and it got too late to put, somebody dropped the ball somewhere. Um, it might be, uh, a book that was published, um, in another country.

And, um, the publisher sort of, what they call, ran on with them and didn't have a chance to do anything to the cover. Um, but more often than not, my question is, what happened here? You know, [00:39:00] um, was it a mistake? I don't, you know, I don't, I don't know. I do want to know that people whose work I love and whose work I am drawn to, that they are, supportive of, um, you know, a new writer or something that I might not have otherwise seen.

Um, it was important. It's,

Katherine May: I, yeah, I agree. And I, like you, I just, I get far more requests than I could ever say yes to. And I, you know, I, I think everyone maybe goes to the phase

where they say yes to a self destructive amount of manuscripts just because. You feel, you know, you want to help, um, but I am, you know, I, I have some kind of personal rules of thumb, um, and I, and I think, and I have got to the point now where I genuinely won't cover quote books that I'm not interested in reading, or that I don't, like some, I've, I've had a few this year that I've read and [00:40:00] not enjoyed, and I've just gone back to the editor and said like, I'm really sorry, I wish them well, but I just don't think this is, I don't think I can say anything, you know, genuine here, which, like, feels like really pulling up my big gun panties, honestly, that one, but I, I've had a few books that I've quoted out of, you know, a sense of obligation and then, then they've come out and I, and then people start saying, Oh, you recommended this book.

And it's like, Oh God, I didn't actually like it. I was just, I was trying to be nice. I think I've learned, you know, maybe learned that that's not the case. But also, like, I'm a little bit more careful in that if a, if there's a book that looks close to something that I'm writing at the moment, I'll turn it down because, you know, there's a, there's just a risk that that you get accused of plagiarism and I, you know, that way I can make it really clear that I've not read it, um, stuff, like a lot of stuff.

But also, honestly, like, I just, I need, I need some headspace and I need to sometimes [00:41:00] read things that I want to read from my own motivation and that hasn't been you know, given to me, it's just, it's, it's, it's just awful. I feel terrible about it.

Elissa Altman: You know, I, I mean, I, I have a good friend who's a very, very well known memoirist and, and um, She was, uh, I remember her talking one day about an author whose work she respected but didn't really completely love aesthetically.

And, um, and, and the next thing I knew she had blurred the person's book. And why did, you know, I'm curious, why did you do that if you didn't, you know, and her answer was because he asked me. To people that you actually know.

Katherine May: Yeah, I don't know. Yeah, it's, it's, it's really tricky. And I, I think there's rumblings a bit changing.

I think I've heard [00:42:00] both authors and editors saying it's got a little bit of out of hand, and does such and such really need a cover quote, you know, I've heard some authors now saying that they won't blurb established authors. That they, you know, that they just consider them too big to, to need it and that their own name will carry it.

And I, like, I really get that, actually. Um, and I also will never forget my first, I mean, I've got to say my first book, but like my first several books, including Wintering, incidentally, um, in the, for the UK release, having to, having to, like, my editors didn't, get quotes for, didn't solicit quotes for me, um, which is quite common in the UK and

having to try and contact people that I didn't know myself to ask them for quotes and how absolutely mortifying that was.

Um, and how, you know, how generous some people were and how other people just like in the [00:43:00] same position that I am just couldn't, couldn't possibly do it. And I'm so sorry. Like I, I just can't. Um, and, and how, You know, like I, particularly Wintering actually, more than any other book, scrabbling around for quotes, not really knowing that many people, and thinking I'm going to sync my own book because I'm, because I don't have, I don't have enough friends, you know, I don't have enough famous friends.

Yeah. And so I massively sympathise with. people needing me to have a look at their

Elissa Altman: book? I, I think that there is nothing, as you say, I mean, I think that there's nothing more mortifying than, I mean, when I was in, when I was an editor, we did all of it. We did all the solicitation. We reached out. I think it's more common

Katherine May: in America,

Elissa Altman: it seems.

Yeah, but now I think that the authors, uh, primarily I would say probably 80 percent of the time are expected, no [00:44:00] matter who they are, they're expected to do the outreach themselves. I, you know, I had one experience where, where, again, won't, won't use names. Maybe some people will figure it out. But, um, where I was, it was, uh, suggested that I reach out to a very well known memoir.

And I did. Um, this person's everywhere. And I was like, Oh, I don't want to. Oh my God, I don't want to do this. And, and I, and I crafted, I was like sweating over this letter that I wrote to them and they know me, you know, and I know them. And, and I was just sweat and I got, and I got a one line. response from them by text.

Yeah. Um, no. Oh God.

Katherine May: Ouch. Wow.

Elissa Altman: Okay. You know, and, and I mean, this person is, is known as [00:45:00] quite prickly and, and, um, but like can be fine. And, and,

Katherine May: um, but

Elissa Altman: I was so, and this was for Motherland. This was for like the last, you know, the last book. And I was I, when I showed it to Susan, I was like, Oh my God, this is awful.

I feel terrible. I'm never going to ask anybody to blurb ever again, as long as I live. And I'm hanging up my quill, you know. If you didn't. It was awful. I mean, it was just the, it was the worst thing, but for me, I mean, I just was horrified by it and, and mortified by it, um, and then I thought, you know, there are other ways to say no.

Katherine May: I mean, that's just really bad manners on their part, honestly. Like I, yeah, it's not okay to belittle someone over it. And I, You know, like, it was one of the things that worried me actually, God, we've gone so far off topic as ever. Um, this is going to really set something [00:46:00] in train. One of the things that bothered me about it when I was having to do it was I felt like I was damaging relationships for the future already.

Like, there was a potential to do that. Um, to put awkwardness in a place that actually you might, at some unspecified moment, be friends with that person. Yeah.

Elissa Altman: You know,

Katherine May: like I, everybody who asks, I hope, gets a polite reply via my assistant because I don't have the time, but I do consider all of them and Often when I say no, it's literally just, I just haven't got the time or the headspace and I won't have for the next six

Elissa Altman: months.

Um, I

Katherine May: do, like if, as much as I can, I do say, but send me a finished copy when it's out and I will, you know, I will wave it around on my Instagram if that helps, you know, like I'll put it in, put it in an Instagram story. Like it's the least I can do.

Elissa Altman: Me

Katherine May: as well, and I don't know if it's true for you, but I [00:47:00] am also, because I write about autism, I have, I get sent every dodgy book about autism.

Like, people, I get sent people's terrible novels about a kind of stereotypical, horrible autistic person who's got no feelings and has maybe also murdered someone, we're not sure, uh,

Elissa Altman: with a

Katherine May: perky note from their publicist going, Oh, we think you would love this because you're interested in autism, Katherine. And you're like, are you kidding me? Which, which means, and I did, there was one instance where, uh, it was a memoir about someone whose mother was autistic and it was so offensive.

It carried every negative autistic stereotype, and throughout the book, I carried it on reading because it pissed me off so much, and throughout the book, uh, quoted, like, websites that were devoted to hating autistic people, like, forums for parents to [00:48:00] get together and say, Um, oh, if I'd have known I'd have been sterilised and all this kind of

Elissa Altman: stuff.

Oh my god. Um, yeah, and

Katherine May: I was, so I wrote this editor, it took me a day, this blow by blow account of, of why the book was so problematic, and so please, like, get a sensitivity reader and that is not me, this is not a sensitivity read, and please, like, talk to your author about what she's doing. And also to, because they were like, oh, we'll be, you know, we're making comparisons to electricity.

I was like, please do, you know, you take a book out of your filthy mouth. And if I see it on the front of this book, I swear to God that I will, I will publish this letter on like, never replied.

Elissa Altman: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Katherine May: And, but that, but what that means is that, um, I would never cover quote a book that I haven't read top to bottom because.

There might be the dodgy autism reference on page 275, and if I don't spot it, I have done some harm.

Elissa Altman: [00:49:00] Yeah. It's, it really worries me. Yeah, um, you know, I, I, I cannot imagine, um, some of the, the things that you're asked to read. Um, and Don't get me started. Lack of sensitivity and the, I mean, I cannot imagine, I cannot imagine that.

Um,

Katherine May: and I mean, what is funny is that people don't realise that it's even bad. I mean, that's what's really shocking. Like, oh, so this is a book about how awful autistic people are and you think I'm going to love this. Fabulous. Thank, thank you. Thank you

Elissa Altman: so much. Unbelievable. And do you think, do you think, um, and I mean, it's kind of a, there might not be any easy answer, but do you think that those kinds of solicitations for quotes and comments come from people who are, you know, very young, very inexperienced, um, [00:50:00] you know, I, I mean, I, I remember, um, I remember publishing a book when I was at Harper about, Um, Two Women During the Holocaust, um, and the, um, the solicitations and the press release were both written by someone who was just straight out of college and clearly had not, like, read the manuscript and was in fact Um, going by what we call the, you know, the, the, um, the tip sheet, the title information page.

Um, which is written very quickly in, you know, 300 words or less. What is this book about? And, and she sort of picked up the ball and ran it into the end zone and came up with these solicitations that would, could make your hair go straight up. So I just, I often wonder, I mean, do you The, I mean, is it, is it a function of, um, just, um, [00:51:00] inexperience, um, lack of sensitivity, all of those things combined, combined?

Katherine May: Yeah, I, I would love to say I think it is always an experience, but I, from, from experience, like a lot of the letters are coming from the senior person editing them.

Elissa Altman: And I, you know,

Katherine May: and actually the, I think the problem is the fact that they've picked up the book in the first place thinking it's fine.

betrays the sort of problem. But yes, there's definitely a problem in the industry with like, you know, how young some of the people are who are, who are working on sort of publicity and marketing quite often. And, you know, with all good intention. The issue, like, I think, I think that's where a lot of, um, you know, the attitude that our lives are too boring comes from because we're not young enough to be interesting.

Yeah.

Elissa Altman: Yeah. It does

Katherine May: change the shape of publishing sometimes. It changes what, what

Elissa Altman: gets out there. [00:52:00] Absolutely. No, it's,

Katherine May: uh, I mean, and it, like, I, actually, let's talk about this because, because this, this comes back to the core of, like, writing about yourself, that, that you, Become this, like, representative of the people that you're writing about, and I, like, I feel this huge responsibility to the autistic, the broader autistic community, who I have never made the claim to represent, but nevertheless, I'm, I'm so conscious that anything I do or say will be taken as is representative of that group.

Do you feel that too? Do you, do you feel like that sort of burden, having written about yourself specifically, I think?

Elissa Altman: Yeah, you know, I, I think, um, I think that one is easily, uh, certainly here, one is easily pigeonholed. Um, you're the person who [00:53:00] writes this about this, and Um, and, and, you know, when I wrote about, um, my mother, when I wrote about, when I wrote, um, I suddenly became this, uh, anointed elder care expert, um, and, and an expert on, you know, dealing with, uh, elderly people with, um, with bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder and so on and so forth, and, um, I.

I did and do find myself, um, very protective of, um, the senior community and how the senior community is portrayed, um, if they're portrayed at all, because to your point about You know, marketing, um, and publicity tend to skew very, very young, and, um, and, and, and I will never [00:54:00] be one of the cool kids. I mean, I wasn't one of the cool kids when I was 30, you know.

There's a train on that, um, that, um, the, the issues that seniors face and mentally ill seniors face. Um, is, is it, I mean, is there voluminous issues? Um, certainly here in the States, but it's not sexy, you know, it's not sexy. And when, um, marketing people and publicity people. Um, when their parents are my age, you know, like just turned 60, um, they're not going to really know how to, um, how to pitch, talk about, um, engage the reader, the reading community about people who are close to [00:55:00] 90 years old.

And, and the stories that, that we have created, that I and that other writers like me have created about them. Um, it's not sexy stuff and it gets me, um, it, it gets me, um, very cranky, makes me very cranky. Um, And then I under, you know, I kind of understand, um, demographically where it's coming from. And I understand from a marketing standpoint where it's coming from.

But at that point, I also make sort of silent green jokes. I don't know if you've ever seen the movie Silent Green, but I'm like, oh, next in line on Soylent Green, um, and, and that's a, that's a, that's a concern. I, I do find myself concerned that there is a, there's sort of like an unwritten, unofficial, um, cutoff, demographic cutoff, that after a certain

age, um, you know, in the case of my, my mother's in her [00:56:00] late 80s, she would kill me.

If she heard me say this to you publicly, um, Oh,

Katherine May: uh, you realize this is going

Elissa Altman: out, right? Yes, absolutely. She won't see it. She doesn't know where the on button is. I know when I say that with all love and respect. It's those very real issues are not, uh, are not of interest, um, because they're, they're outside the boundary of what is Um, topical, cool, you know, fabulous, extraordinary, all of the

Katherine May: things.

It's an industry that has a huge dropout rate as time goes on because people, it's such an absolute career. People find it very hard to stay in publishing if they've got kids or if they're caring for elderly parents or if they don't have supreme levels of 24 hour energy and are happy to work all their weekend too.

Um, it's, yeah, there's a, [00:57:00] there's a problem there. And of course it's not publishing. It's only problem, you know, representation across the board is Sure,

Elissa Altman: massive. And always in there, always been a problem. Yeah, I was

Katherine May: talking to a Muslim author recently who was saying, um, that often where she does get opportunities or commissions, it's because people say very directly to her, oh good, you know, essentially, like, we've got a brown one, you know, like, we love your work, but you're, you're meeting a quoter for her.

And, you know, she said, like, I have to grace that out more often than I can tell you. So that, um, she gets work turned down because people say we don't think we can market it and what they mean by that is we don't know how to talk to Muslim communities. We, we've got no, we've, we've only got channels into white communities and,

Elissa Altman: you know, You know,

Katherine May: and that is a huge, huge problem and I think, yeah, particularly when your work is [00:58:00] personal and you know, you know that there are people out there like waiting to see that mirror that, that is so valuable.

Um,

Elissa Altman: it's Absolutely. Absolutely. And this is, you know, this has been, um, you know, this, this isn't certainly in the States an old, old story, you know, an old issue that's been going on. Um, you know, probably since the beginning of, you know, the beginning of publishing time, um, it's extremely, um, it's extremely white, you know, it's extremely white and, and it, um, and I've seen changes here and there, but the changes feel very quota driven.

You know, um, and, and that's also a problem. I find also a problem. Um, and what does it say about us? Uh, you know, in us in terms of humanity, you know, and what, what we want [00:59:00] to read and the worlds that we want to experience and, um, and the voices that we want to hear. And, um, and, and, and that, um, that is a much bigger, that I think is a much bigger bigger issue.

I do think that publishing is a microcosm without, you know, without, without question. Um, some publishers are better than others that way, but most, um, most are not. Um, and I think it's a, you know, I think it's a historical thing.

Katherine May: Yeah, I think it takes, the problem is that change takes a long time and when you still see those very low pay levels at the bottom end of the career ladder and actually like in America that that solves itself as it goes up the chain but actually in the UK even quite senior roles have, you know, you're not, you're not looking at the big bucks like and I think a lot of people will leave that career just because they can get better money elsewhere.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah.

Katherine May: That, [01:00:00] that will always make it hard for new entrants into that field who are not being funded by wealthy parents who can, yeah,

Elissa Altman: yeah, who can fund a 10 year apprenticeship essentially. Yeah, you know, when I started in publishing was 1985 and I was making 13, 000 a year and I was living at home with my mother and my stepfather.

Um, for two of the longest years of my life, um, and, and that's very, very common even now, you know, so it's a, it's, it's an interesting, and then of course there were publishers who were doing really interesting break, break the mold kind of things, um, after, you know, the industry at large has said to them, Oh, you, you can't do that.

That's not the way we work. And smaller, more literary publishers are. able to say, well, no, of course I, you know, why can't, of course I'm going to do what I, what I, I'm going to publish who I want to publish and produce what I want to [01:01:00] produce. And, um, they may not offer advances to their authors, but, you know.

Katherine May: Yeah. You gotta get paid. Yeah.

Elissa Altman: won't get paid, you'll just get, you know, you'll get paid in royalties, um, which is also fine. But, um, yeah, yeah, it's a, it's an interesting, it's an interesting business and an interesting time. It's funny

Katherine May: is that I think anyone Anyone in publishing can just geek out about publishing itself

Elissa Altman: forever.

For years, go on and on and on. Yeah, I've

Katherine May: never stopped being interested in it.

Elissa Altman: Thank you for going down that path, it's very much on my mind.

Katherine May: Yeah, I'm just thinking, um, like one of the beauties of this format is that we don't have to stick to a straight hour or whatever, but I was just thinking like as we probably draw towards the close, I was wondering about following that chain through because I feel like doing publicity as a person that writes about themselves, as a [01:02:00] memoirist, as like a, as someone whose work has been intensely personal, I feel like publicity is really different for us than it is from other authors.

I was, I went to a literary festival recently and um, watched this author on stage and the interviewer was literally asking her about the contents of her novel and literally saying, so why does this character do that? So they, and I thought, my interviews are like, tell me about this excoriating moment in your life, you know?

I was

Elissa Altman: like, I want to be her, that looks great. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm sure

Katherine May: you've had these experiences too, but I I often wonder about whether there's a better way to handle publicity for those of us who are making personal work, because I do feel like my consent gets overrun sometimes in interviews and I don't get the opportunity to say, [01:03:00] I may have written that in a book, but it was painful and I don't want to talk about it right now.

Like I've got to get on with it after this.

Elissa Altman: That's such a great point. I mean, I do think that publicists believe, um, and interviewers believe, that if it's between the covers, if you've written it, if you've said it, it's fair game, and, um, and that's a journalist. I think that there needs to be a lot more common sense and, um, sensitivity applied to that.

Um, and, and, I mean, I don't know if you've had this, this experience, I'm sure you have had it, where you have said publicly, you've had to say publicly, I'm not comfortable speaking about, you know, Phil and the, fill in the blank. Um, when I've done that, it's been sort of painted me as a crank. I'm cranky. Um, but interestingly, um, years ago, I, I was, [01:04:00] um, when my second book came out, I was, uh, at the Miami Book Fair, um, doing a panel, uh, with Diana, the wonderful Diana Abujaber.

She's just terrific. And Betty Lerner, I think. Um, and And we were all, we were all writing about, uh, mothers and family and, and, um, and we were speaking to a, an audience probably of about 100 people, 100, not gigantic, and, and this woman raised her hand at the end of, um, our spiel and from the audience, I don't know your book is just so loveless.

And, and, um, and I was really taken aback by that because I've been accused of a lot of things but that's not one of them. And I and I stammered and stuttered and wanted to ask her exactly what she meant. [01:05:00] And I was so taken aback by it that I didn't have the presence of mind to. But sitting in the audience next to her was Danny Shapiro.

Like, Danny's face kind of went bright red from like here up, and Danny and I are friends, but she, she kind of got very tall. She's this tiny, tiny little person. Without, um, without attacking this other person, she definitely, Um, made a comment about how when it comes to memoir, um, we often do not, um, we criticize the life rather than the work.

Yeah. It's about

Katherine May: craft, like the craft's invisible to people and so they, they think it's you that they're, you know, they don't

Elissa Altman: like. It's fine. Yeah, well Sabinos talks about this all the, you know, [01:06:00] all the time where, where, um, I can't remember where I read it recently where she talked about It might have been in her book, Body Work, where she talked about the fact that, you know, nobody will ask her about the craft of what she does versus, um, the content of what she writes.

And, um, and I would love to be asked about craft. I would love that. That would be wonderful. That would make my day. Rarely happens. Would that, would it happen if I

were a man? I don't know. You know, um, I mean, that's a whole other can of worms. Um, but, um, but, but that goes hand in hand with like, well, you know, I want to know, Katherine, how you wrote this particular section in one of your books from a craft perspective.

Um, With the understanding that, was it painful? I'm [01:07:00] sure, you know, how did you get to that place from a, from a craft perspective? I

Katherine May: write painful things in my notebook all the time. I wouldn't publish them, like I want people to I understand that there's a selection going on, but I do, I do begin to think that, you know, part, one of the big changes that's come over the industry that you and I have talked about a lot, that's, I think, I think it's very recent.

I think it's a pandemic effect that so many people, me included, have started podcasts and then substacks, and that has exponentially increased the number of interview requests. And I think it means that all of us are doing more interviews than we previously were, which is like great on loads of levels.

It's brilliant. And I, I don't, I think, you know, visibility will always be a problem for authors, but there are so many more outlets now than there used to be. But I, but what it can [01:08:00] mean is that as the interviewee rather interviewer. You can feel dragged and it is, like, I don't mean that they're meaning to drag you but what I mean is that you're being asked to talk about painful things over and over again and whereas you might once have steeled yourself for the three or four interviews that you got to do God willing, you know, now you're doing it.

You know, and there have been, there have only, like, there have been weeks when I have been dismantled by having to talk about stuff that otherwise I'd only talk about with my therapist.

Elissa Altman: Yeah. Yeah.

Katherine May: And I, and as a, you know, someone with a podcast, I've noticed a sort of key observation would be that quite often I'll, um, I always like, particularly when I was doing the wintering sessions, I'd email people behind the scenes and say.

I run this podcast, we talk about the wintering moments in our lives. [01:09:00] Like, would you be up for talking about this, that you wrote about in your book? Completely understand if not, like that was always my approach.

Elissa Altman: Sure,

Katherine May: yeah. 80 percent of people would say no, I really don't want to, you know, thanks. And it was always like really amicable.

On a few occasions I then got a pitch from that person's publicist. Six months later saying, I'm sure such and such would love to talk to you about this. And it's like, no, I, I know they don't. Have you checked? Have you, have you asked them? Because they've told me very specifically that they'd rather not.

And I, I worry about the sort of, yeah, the, the way that people's consent can be really eroded by that because the, the interviewer has got every right to think that that's true, that they do want to talk about it. When in fact, they actually may be very wisely. Felt that they, that that would be a little too much at, at this point in their life.

That, that maybe it was fine the week that they wrote the book, but, but maybe six months, 10 months, 12 months [01:10:00] down the line, it doesn't feel fine anymore.

Elissa Altman: No. You know, I think that, um, we have, as humans, we have, um, you know, our lives are, um. feel safe, um, what we feel safe talking about a year ago, we may not feel safe talking about now.

And, you know, publicists, God bless them, are not always as sensitive as you might be, um, when you reach out to someone and say, um, is there anything that you're not comfortable talking about? Is there anything Um, uh, which is what I've done when I've, when I've, uh, been in an inter, rarely been in an interviewing situation and said, is there anything that you're not okay?

Is there, you know, just tell me and, and, um, and if it's particularly sensitive or I, I, I deem it particularly [01:11:00] sensitive, I will you know, I'll have a sort of pre interview, um, but that pretty much never happens, um, in publishing with, with publicists. I mean, I, I remember years ago, When I was doing the, um, I was doing the early marketing meetings for Motherland, you know, publicity, and I, you know, you've seen pictures of my mother, she's a very, she's like bright and sparkly, you know, she's a bright and shiny object, as we call, we call people of that, um, glamour and glitz, and, um, and I just towards the end of the book, the writing of the book, I kept thinking, um, Oh God, they're going to ask me to go on tour with her.

I just know it. I know it. And I talked to a bunch of people on my team and they were like, we're never going to let it happen. It's not going to happen. It's not going to happen. And, uh, during my marketing meet, my first marketing meeting, [01:12:00] um, uh, the publicist who was quite a high ranking publicist, um, on the team said, we have a great idea.

You knew it was coming. And they said, we want to pitch the two of you together. I thought, have you read the book? I mean, and I, and I literally, I went home. I might have stopped at a local bar on the way home, um, for a shot of something very strong. Um, this was a while ago, obviously, but. I'm so stunned that, you know, and the people who had been on my team who said, No, no, no, we're never going to let it happen.

Just sat there, you know, and they didn't respond. Um, and I, I understand the need to, you know, to reach as many people as possible and to go that sort of loud and bright and [01:13:00] shiny route. I am not bright and shiny. I'm not one of those. those people, um, like my mom is. But the lack of sensitivity was stunning to me.

Stunning, stunning, stunning. I, I mean,

Katherine May: I, like I have to say, my, my current publicists have been really sensitive to what I have and haven't wanted to do. And actually, Like sometimes it may be understood before I have what I might not want to say, because I can be quite bad at it. But um, I do remember Electricity Era being asked repeatedly, like, would you do an article with your son about what it's like to have an autistic mother, and it's like, my five year old, like, are you, um, do I look actually crazy to you?

Like, don't answer that, but, you know.

Elissa Altman: That's absurd. In

Katherine May: what world would I put him through that? And also, like, yeah, you know, very personal articles about my family, specifically, that would have been really [01:14:00] exposing for them, and just having to say to people, like, Why on earth would I do that? Like, what person would I be if I did that to my child?

Or to my husband, or to my mother, or like just absolutely hell no.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, it's um And when, I mean, do you ever find that you get pushback, um, from, from I, do you know what, I've

Katherine May: never had any serious pushback, but I have had the kind of like, Well, it's difficult out there, and if you, you know, if you want this book to do well and blah blah blah.

So, um And, you know, having done, having done book events about electricity many years ago now, um, I really know how horrible it is out there actually talking about adult autism. There's a whole range of people that are angry at you for [01:15:00] daring to

take up space on that front, and then there's a whole other load of people that are just morbidly curious about weird details of your life because they think you're weird.

And they will ask you really offensive questions. Like the one I often mention is, um, a very nice woman standing up to say,

Elissa Altman: tell me, are you capable of love? Like, oh my god. And you're not

Katherine May: allowed to kill them. You're not allowed to like, jump out of the audience and throttle them because that looks bad on you, right?

It's like, you know, do you know what I know from experience that I don't deserve to be put through that particular ringer? Nobody has to account for their humanity to a group of people who, some of whom are not listening and just think you're a specimen and that and their understanding of you is never going to get past that.

That

Elissa Altman: is utterly horrifying. Wow. It

Katherine May: was awful. I was so shaken by it.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I can't, [01:16:00] I can't imagine. That's um, and then you wonder, you know, what, what, what would make a person think that that's okay? Um, you know, and, um, I mean, what, what would make a person think that that's Because that's okay, you know, it's, it's What on

Katherine May: earth gave them that impression?

I mean, nothing. I

Elissa Altman: think we live in a very strange world. Yeah. I think, you know, to your point earlier that, you know, there is a belief that if it's between, and with memoirists, if it's between two covers Um, it is, um, you know, it is fair game, and, and that's not the truth, I don't think, you know. No,

Katherine May: I think that's right, but I, I wonder what there is out there, except for us, um, that's, that's really dispensing that, that's actually, you know, that's actually, [01:17:00] I'm starting to talk about like, what are the rules of engagement here for memoir, because actually maybe they're a bit different to any other book, like maybe anything other than a spoiler is fair game for a thriller.

Elissa Altman: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Actually,

Katherine May: for memoir, perhaps there's a lack of understanding that, that yeah, it might, it might be difficult to talk about even if you have written about it, and that that's, one doesn't necessarily follow from

Elissa Altman: the other. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think that's, I mean, I think that's, that's, I think that's very true.

I think we can, we can go on about that, certainly. You know very much.

Katherine May: It's probably time for us to come to an end. I hope people have enjoyed listening to us talk at length. It's really nice to, um, to have like a fairly undisciplined conversation. Is that a terrible thing to put out there, that it's actually nice to ramble a bit?

Elissa Altman: It's, you know what, I think if you were sitting here, which I wish you were, um, and [01:18:00] having a coffee with me, we would be having a very similar conversation. Yeah,

Katherine May: we'd be naming names.

Elissa Altman: Names, right. We'd be naming names and, uh, and, and speaking about, you know, process and things like that in the world at large, which I, you know, maybe we will do that down the road, but, uh, yeah, but I mean, these are very, these are, you know, this is, this is Katherine sitting in my kitchen, um, on her way to Maine with her beautiful family, um, having chats about, um, and, The publicist.

No, no. I don't want it to seem like we're publicist bashing because we are absolutely not.

Katherine May: But I have, I have come into contact with the, um, the other, other aspects of that.

Elissa Altman: Yes. In my time. It can be done. But I think this is wonderful and I hope everybody, [01:19:00] um. I hope everybody, uh, enjoys and is engaged and wants to be engaged, um, about these various issues.

Oh, well, we'll soon find out. Okay. All right. Bye bye.

Katherine May: Okay, that's the recording. Stop.

