



## **Transcript:** Katherine May and Elissa Altman

**Katherine May:** [00:00:00] Hey everyone, uh, welcome to Elissa and Katherine talk mark two. Oh, Alyssa, you just disappeared, that's what happened. That was, that was quite like theatrical. Um, hey everyone, thank you for your lovely feedback about the last one. I really, um, I don't know, I kind of wasn't expecting it. I sort of, um, I sort of thought that maybe a few people would listen and go, oh yeah, all right then.

**Elissa Altman:** It was really nice. It was great. It was, it was great. And, and, you know, I so enjoy hearing from viewers and readers. listeners and it's just a, it's a nice, it's a nice way to not be sort of alone in this endeavour and to know that people are out there, um, um, engaged is

**Katherine May:** great. Yeah, it is nice. It's, um, I think there are whole swathes of your writing life when you're not really sure if it's landing anywhere [00:01:00] or who's receiving it or what, you know, what they think and I, and every now

**Elissa Altman:** and then.

Yeah.

**Katherine May:** Yeah. That's why I quite like Substack, I think it's, yeah, it feels continuous, which is very

**Elissa Altman:** interesting. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I mean, I, you know, I don't know if you've had this happen, but I mean, certainly it's happened to me where I've written things, I've put them up, I've had conversations, I've put them up, and it's just, it's like, hello, is anyone, hello, is anyone out there?

So it's nice.

**Katherine May:** It's really nice. Definitely, definitely. So, um, we two very weary writers are here today to talk about, about boundaries and, and kind of managing expectations, which is, oh my God, like, I mean, such, such a big topic for [00:02:00] me. And I think, I think it's fair to say something that I was really wrestling with all of last year very actively.

Um, but of course, I mean, it's, it's, it continuously comes up for, for writers now. I don't think, I don't think it always did in that kind of a way. Um, and it's ever present, but I, it has been more present for me in the last couple of years than it ever has before and I, I have many, many things I want to say about it.

**Elissa Altman:** Can I, can I ask you, um, were you doing something differently last year that made it so much, uh, more, You know, extreme for you last year than you have been in years

**Katherine May:** prior. Yeah, I, um, kind of. I mean, I think, I think last year was the year when I [00:03:00] realized that I had to make a transition from a previous, like I, I always felt like I was quite good at boundaries anyway.

But I think last year was the year when I realized that my previous set of boundaries no longer served my current situation. And so, you know, like I, I trained as a, as a school teacher, and if you don't learn boundaries very, very fast, there you are sunk. So I always felt like that put me in very good stead like that taught me very early on to say, no, I'm not happy with that.

Or, you know, I'm, I'm not comfortable with that treatment or I'm not gonna do it that way. Um, probably more than most I would say. Um, but, and that, that served me really well in the early days of writing and the early days of being online, but the, I, you know, since Wintering came out, uh, the, the level [00:04:00] of need that is coming towards me is, It just was swamped by those boundaries before.

Um, and I've found the transition to more tight boundaries very hard to make, which perhaps we'll dig into a bit more later. Um, what about you? Is that, are boundaries something you think about? Or are they something that you just quickly come up with?

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah, it's, it's, it's, um, it's kind of funny. I mean, I, um, and I, and I think that for me Um, you know, I, I, my, my previous existence, professional life was, um, as, um, as an acquisitions editor and, and, um, and general editor for a major, um, international publisher.

And, um, I lived three blocks or four blocks from my office, which was [00:05:00] great. Um, but it also meant that the expectation was that I could be there, um, as early or as

late as, uh, as anybody wanted me to. And I was very dedicated to my authors and very dedicated. To my books, um, and to the company, actually, and it was great.

It's very, very different now, I gather, but, um, and, you know, this was in the 90s, and I remember seeing someone, seeing someone, that sounds like a therapeutic seeing someone, who said to me, I think that you're a chronic people pleaser. Right. I had never, it was like, what? I had never heard, really heard that expression.

And I, I grew up, um, believing, you know, with two, I grew up in a situation with two people. Um, one or two wonderful, individually wonderful people who could not stand each [00:06:00] other. You know, and, and as an only child, um, I saw the, the discontent and the unhappiness. In their lives. And I would think, even very young, well, you know, what can I do to make them happier?

What can I do to make it better? And, and I, and that has actually carried over into my, you know, what can I do to make my author, um, um, a happier author and more productive? And what can I do to get this book? To sail and to do really well and, and, and now, and that was in the 90s, and now, in, as a, as a full time, uh, author and writer, I find myself having taken that mindset and just translated it to, um, you know, to new writers who were reaching out to me every day, to [00:07:00] media outlets who were reaching out to me, Um, uh, every, every day, and I, for a very long time, um, I, I was quite responsive to them.

And, like, all through the week, all through the weekend, you know, in the early part of the day, at the end of the day, uh, because I do have a lot of readers overseas, and, and I realized that, you know, I started to question, well, what do I do if I need a chunk of time in which to write, or my own time with my family.

For my own time for rest and sort of reflection and, and, um, and sort of refilling the, you know, the bucket. Um, and, and as you know, I mean, I write very personal essays, very personal books, as do you. And when you do [00:08:00] that, the expectation is that. And I couldn't do anything but that. But the expectation is that.

You are available physically, emotionally, creatively, 24 7. Um, yeah. And that's hard. It's very hard. And it's, you know, for me, it's very hard to say no. Very hard to say no.

**Katherine May:** Yeah, I mean, I, I think about this a lot, really. That, you know, this hyper availability that authors sort of unwittingly offer now. I don't, I think we've all sort of stumbled into it, you know, and

**Elissa Altman:** I, I,

**Katherine May:** I know where it comes from.

It comes from the fact that we've all spent years building a career when nobody's wanted to pay any attention to us at all. And now we feel, and like, so at the time you traded your availability for that, that sense that [00:09:00] you were trying to build your, your place in the world. You're trying to get people to notice what you were doing.

Um, but I, I worry about that now, like I, I don't think that was a great pattern for me to have set myself, and I, I would love to talk about this now, just for, for new authors coming into the industry, to sort of talk about the kind of patterning of availability that you might set, because actually I'm not convinced that that hyper availability serves your career even, but it certainly will.

become quite destructive quite quickly and, you know, that's availability both to your audience and to the publishing industry in the sort of back room as well. Like there's a, there's a big, um, sort of tug of war going on, I think, quite often. Um, and I, like, I honestly often think about authors who came onto the scene 20, 30 years [00:10:00] before me and think how anonymous they were really in everyday life, like how little demand they experienced from everywhere because they're, you know, like there weren't that many literary festivals.

Previously, for example, there weren't podcasts and blogs and everything, social media. Um, there has been an acceleration very, very recently. And I think we've stumbled into meeting the demands of that acceleration. And I, I think I'm beginning to sense that there's pushback happening. There's a lot of, not just me, but, you know, lots of people.

Just really hitting their limit with it. And I, I don't know about you, but I've seen so many authors hit burnout recently. That seems to Yeah.

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No, I, I, you know, I absolutely agree. And it's a [00:11:00] funny thing, you know, when you talk about Um, years ago, before the days of the internet, and before the days of, um, you know, the, there were big literary festivals, but there were not really a whole lot of regional literary festivals, and We have lots and lots of them here in the States, and, and they're wonderful, and they're, um, you know, I, I've gone to Miami as an author a bunch of times, and I love it, and I love talking to people, and, and it, it's, it's, um, it's a really great, it's a really great experience, um, but, going, 20 or 30 years.

You know, I used to work for, I worked for Little Brown and Company, um, for, for about two years at one point. And one of our most famous authors was Thomas. And Thomas was Notori. I mean, he, he is notoriously, um, uh, I don't even know what

[00:12:00] the right word is. You know, like Salinger. I mean, he, he just nobody saw him.

We used to say, does he really exist? And one day I was, we had a book room like most publishers have or used to have a book room and I was coming and it was down the long hallway and it Coming out of the hallway, coming out of the book room, and then the men's room was right there. And I walked into the hallway, and I walked right into Thomas Pynchon.

And I remember, and I could tell you what he looked like, and what, you know, and he was just like, You're like, he's real! He's real! And, and, and I, and I made a mistake of telling that to some writer friends of mine who were just like, What did he look like? What was he wearing? What was he, was he carrying any books?

Was he carrying a manuscript? What did it say? And I, and it was, you know, it was, it was remarkable to me. And I, I think that. [00:13:00] Certainly, that's an extreme. That's, that's obviously an extreme. Um, and I think that is very hard. It would be very hard for any author to be sort of that, um, that, that removed from the whole PR and, and, uh, cycle.

But, um, you know, I, I, I think that for, Authors coming into the, to the publishing world now, um, you know, they're faced with, um, certainly, you know, Substack, Instagram, very few, I think, do Facebook so much anymore. Maybe among, um, Uh, um, you know, Twitter is, I don't want to get, you know, political, but, um, but, and they are [00:14:00] told, these, these new authors are told by anyone, from an editor to an agent to a, um, you know, a publicity person, um, a hired publicity person or an in house publicity person.

These are the things that you must do. You must make yourself available. Or, you know, why bother doing this? You know, you have to carry your end of the couch. That's what I call it, carrying your end of the couch. Um, and, and if you don't, then you're not really into this. Then you, then you're gonna, and, and I, and I don't think that's, um, I don't think it's true, and I don't think it's healthy.

Um, and what we wind up having, uh, a lot of new, um, young and great new authors who are excited about their work and excited about the work of others. Overextending themselves and setting a precedent for themselves so [00:15:00] that, um, you know, people think that they're reachable all the time and, and, and that I think is part of a bigger question of like, well, if we're not authors, if we're ordinary folks, you know.

Are we available all the time? And, and the answer to that question, of course, is yes, we are, you know. Um, I mean, my phone is here. I've shut it off, but my phone is here. I no

longer wear my full, uh, watch during the day because I don't want to be, I, I just can't be that hyper connected, you know.

**Katherine May:** No, there is a sense that something has peaked, I think, for all of us.

Um, but, I mean, I think, you know, one of the things for me is that I, I was a writer before I wrote *Electricity of Every Living Thing*, but when I wrote [00:16:00] that book, I I wrote it, you know, from within a community that I'd found online who were really supporting and educating me through my unders, you know, my new understanding of myself as an autistic person.

Um, and I, I felt a huge amount of responsibility to those people, you know, and I, I didn't feel separate from them and I didn't want to do anything to separate myself from them. And The problem with that was that I didn't, I wasn't treading on the same ground as them because then when I kind of, you know, went to an event or took part in something online, everybody knew all about me and my story and I didn't know anything about them.

And so there was this sense of forced intimacy straight away. that people weren't that aware of. Like, you know, they just, they [00:17:00] just knew that stuff about me. It didn't seem weird to them, but it would seem weird to me when people would start talking about something that felt very personal, that I knew I'd written about, but I didn't have the same insight into their life.

And And that was, I think that was the first little moment for me where I thought, Oh God, I have done, I've done this thing that's made me separate, that's made me need to separate myself because actually I'm not, I'm not protected in the, I'm not protected by privacy, you know. And I. Yeah. And I sort of, that, that tour, I mean tour, I say tour, I mean like the few, the few live events that I did this fall.

Um, yeah, that's not, that's not a grand prize, um,

**Elissa Altman:** but

**Katherine May:** I hope you have a time to go. That, that was like, I think that was the first big. boundary shifting change for me, [00:18:00] um, in terms of the kind of audience questions I got then, you know, which is only a few years ago. Like I do think it's probably changed since, but people were so naive about autism then that I got some truly offensive questions and I had to like adjust, you know, I was having to adjust my boundaries live to sort of say, I'm not going to, you know, and people intruding into my son's life because I hadn't said enough about him and they wanted to understand.

What he was like, you know, as my child. And I, you know, you're kind of like, I'm sorry, I'm not going to answer that. And most people kind of say, Oh yeah, of course. As soon as you, as soon as you push back, actually, of course some are the same. And I think that was, yeah. As I say, that was like the first time that I had to really reflect on.

Who I was in the world other than like a [00:19:00] private individual citizen, you know, knowing that I'd published that stuff really

**Elissa Altman:** Sure, but you

**Katherine May:** lose control of what people are going to do with it And you can't predict everything that people are going to do with it and you have to have this It's a sense of real clarity about what lines you will and won't cross.

And of course, sometimes those lines will be crossed, you know, you're not always fully in control of, of that. No, no.

**Elissa Altman:** And I, and I do, um, I find, and I was just talking about this to, um, another, another memoirs, very well known person who, who I think is also, you know, constantly being, you know, Um, you know, the scrim of privacy is constantly being poked through, um, and, and sometimes I think people, you know, people just want to, they just want to talk to you or they want to share an experience with you and I.

And I, and I [00:20:00] get that and I, uh, you know, one of the reasons why I write is because not because I couldn't do anything else. I mean, I, I do feel that way, but when I find a book that, um, makes me feel particularly less alone in a certain situation, someone you know, Where, you know, you read it and you go, Oh my God, you know, this person totally gets it.

I'm not alone. Um, that's a very, um, that's a, that's, um, a very powerful thing to have happen, especially in a world of such ironic overexposure and simultaneous isolation. And so this, this particular, uh, this particular memoirist. Um, was, was, uh, talking, we were talking about how [00:21:00] the engagement now, um, the outside world as an author, now, you know, when, as an author of very personal, um, work, suddenly in the last year and a half or so has become, in our experience, in my experience and in her experience.

Entitled, wrapped in just a tiny little hint of cruelty. Um,

**Katherine May:** and I don't know, I don't

**Elissa Altman:** know



**Katherine May:** that, I don't know where

**Elissa Altman:** that comes from. I mean, I can venture a guess. You know, certainly in the States, our world changed radically, you know, in 2016, 17. That's all I'll say on that. Because it doesn't matter, like, what side of the fence you're on.

It's just sort of this undeniable [00:22:00] change. Yeah, it's just, it was just a radical sea change in the way people, um, engage with each other, but there, there is a contradiction that is happening when you're a writer of. Memoir, deeply personal work and, um, and you're writing about a discovery in your cases who made about yourself and the, the understanding, um, of really who you are in, you know, living in this.

In, in this world, and readers believe, and why wouldn't they, that they can say anything to you. They can say anything, and they can ask you anything, and isn't that what you want as a writer? You want engagement. Yeah. And, um, and, and then sometimes, I, I think, Don't people, don't they listen to [00:23:00] themselves?

Don't they understand the kinds of things that they are asking and saying? And the possibility that they might be overstepping and that it might be completely offensive? I don't know that That happens very much anymore. It's interesting, isn't it, as well,

**Katherine May:** because I think, yeah, on one hand, there's that coming at us, you know.

Yeah. And like meeting it is this picture we have in our minds of the good author who, I mean, I, how many times have you heard like X answers all their, their letters by hand? All the time. How many times have you heard that? And I, like, I will tell you for sure that. If I answered all the mail that I got, I would not have time to do anything else in my life whatsoever, like it, it wouldn't be possible.

And also some of the people that I've heard that said about, I know for sure have people employed full time at their

**Elissa Altman:** publishing company. [00:24:00]

**Katherine May:** You know, like it's a big, there's, there's been a lot of myth making around what, how good authors behave and what represents love and respect for your readers and audience.

And it's a little self sacrificial actually. the conversation hasn't been very practical. Also, I think for a lot of us, you know, we've, we've written about issues, you know, you've written about how it feels to be kind of unmothered and unappreciated and, uh, and,



you know, to like, I'm not going to repeat all your work to you, but, you know, you've written about those issues that feel really needful in our society that, you know, that people are reaching out for that discussion and, and You want to help, like it's the same as me writing about autism.

I want to help, and I, and I know how, I know how deep my own need ran and still runs for affirmation around those ideas. [00:25:00] And everything in that situation points you towards saying, Right, I'm going to be super available for you. I'm going to answer your questions. I'm going to, you know, if you're going to DM me, I'm going to spend some time, like, hearing you and replying to you and giving you advice.

And I'm going to meet you if you happen to come into town. And I've done all of those things. And there was a point when one of my editors said to me, Have you closed your DMs yet? And I was like, Oh, no, no, no, like, you know, I'm really happy to chat. Yeah. And she said, Okay, great. What are you going to do when you get your first suicide?

**Elissa Altman:** Oh God, oh dear God.

**Katherine May:** And I was like, it brought me up short because it hit on a reality. You know, she said like, if you make yourself into an emergency service for your audience, then at some point sooner or later, someone is going to message you and say, I'm absolutely on the [00:26:00] brink. Yeah. And you might miss that email, or you'll have to make a very tough decision about how you respond to that, or whether you can make any effect.

But she said like, you need to not get that message in the first place because you actually can't help. And it's actually, it's inappropriate for you to be Offering that kind of help for you to be available to be implying that you're available to give that kind of help because you know, you're misleading that person that you are something that you're not, and I, yeah, that I really that's always stuck in my mind and I, I.

always tell that to other authors now that actually, please bear in mind that you are not a professional here, you don't have the same resources, you don't have the level of support and oversight that a therapist does, for example, or a You know, [00:27:00] a Samaritan's volunteer or whoever it might be.

**Elissa Altman:** Sure,

**Katherine May:** sure.

And, and, like, realistically, you might fuck it up. You might say exactly the wrong thing that somebody with more experience might know how to do. And you do not want to

open that channel up to encourage people to come towards you with that. You want to actually, you, the actual, the useful thing to do, the socially useful thing to do is to block that channel, to divert them towards Professionals who

**Elissa Altman:** Professionals, oh, sure, sure.

Wow. I

**Katherine May:** find that really challenging because we live in a society where there is not enough provision for the need. And yeah, I still can't provide it. And that's something that, that I wrestle with a lot. And I, and I think the other thing I'll throw into that ring is I know that, um, I mean, it's really hard to find my email [00:28:00] now for, for loads of reasons.

Um, and, and, you know, if you do find my email, it would definitely go to my assistant. But I actually came to realize that my assistant does not need to receive the kind of emails that I was struggling with too. Because actually people put, through sheer desperation and through sheer isolation and through lack of, lack of available help, you know, put some genuinely traumatizing things in their emails, which leaves the person that receives that information with nowhere to go.

And I get the need behind it, but it's also not okay. And so there's been some, yeah, there's some hardening that is. You know, had to, had to happen. It's, it's so tough to do that, but it's, it's also very necessary, I think. Yeah, I mean,

**Elissa Altman:** I, I, um, I mean, that you, that's an extraordinary [00:29:00] point that you, that you make.

Um, and, you know, I, I also think that there's the, you know, the sense from the outside. If two people work together and are seen together, like we are often seen together, thank goodness, because you're wonderful, and I love talking to you, um, uh, and this I think goes back to when we were in Maine, when, you know, back in 20, I think it was 2022 when we did, um, a really great event in Maine, it was a lot of fun.

Um, people will come to me, you know, um, because my, my email, um, is out there. Look at that, Melissa. I know, I know, I know. And, um, you know, and, and that's just not, I mean, that happened fairly recently. And. And [00:30:00] let it, let it be said here and now that I'm, I'm like, I'm never going to have, it's never going to happen.

You know, I do not, I do not pass along the emails of my. Colleagues and friends who I know are, uh, are, are very, you know, um, very sort of restrictive that way and their boundaries are really good as opposed to mine, which stink. Um, and I think for me, you

know, a lot of that has to do with having been an editor and, uh, and I still do, I still do editorial work.

I'm doing editorial work, you know, even now. Well, I'm balancing my own book and, uh, but, um, yeah, I, I find it really interesting that, and, and, you know, we can go around and around about this, that when you are a [00:31:00] writer of memoir or you are, you know, who, someone who writes, uh, something that's particularly revelatory, It's, it's also not just you who you have to protect.

It's your family, it's your child, it's your spouse, it's your, in my case, mother. Yeah, yeah. Um, you know, and, and, you know, Susan used to go, Susan used to go to work every day when she was going into the office. And people would say to her, so how was the pork chop? And she'd be like, what are you talking about?

You know, and obviously this is not quite the level of, you know, the level of import,

**Katherine May:** but Uncanny, isn't it? I guess that's the

**Elissa Altman:** But she'd be like, you know, they'd be like, how was the pork chop? And she'd think, how do you know that? Why do you know that we had pork chops last night? [00:32:00] Because my wife wrote about it, that's why, you know.

Yeah. But, but, you know, beyond, beyond that, I, you know, I, I'm on, I am in, um, online communities of people who have very complicated relationships with, uh, elderly, mentally ill people. Yeah, I do. That's a very

**Katherine May:** specific kind of cohort, isn't it? Yeah,

**Elissa Altman:** and they're at the point now where there's a particular point in time where you're not sure if it's the mental illness that's at play or dementia that's starting to be an issue.

And there are very few places for. Which the adult children of those people to, to [00:33:00] go for help, to have conversations, to see what our options are, because in the States, our options are minimal at best. And, and, and so everybody wants to, to, to have this conversation and, and they write those conversations range.

From really insightful and really supportive and really wonderful to extraordinarily offensive. Um, like, how, what, what, in what world would what you just said be okay? Um, you know, I just, I just posted something the other day. I wrote a, wrote a sub stack about, about something and I, and I actually said to somebody, you know, were you raised by wolves?

I don't know.

**Katherine May:** I saw

**Elissa Altman:** that, that was so funny. I love that. But you can't always say that, you know, you can't, you can't. It's quite tempting though. It [00:34:00] is. It is. It is. Yeah. Yeah. So is there a balance? I mean, how do you find a balance? Because I,

**Katherine May:** I'm, I think the question I always ask myself is like, Okay, there's, there's the kind of lines that I don't want to cross anymore, and there's, there's the walls I'm putting up, but, but what invitations, like, what am I giving in return?

Like, I do, I do still see the role of an, of an author like us as being part of some kind of an exchange. It's just that there has to be a lot of protection around that to me. Um, and I suppose like, I suppose one of the things I do is if I get, if I'm getting asked a question about something a lot, I will try and write something in public about that.

So I will keep it out of Private domain because that then becomes, you know, like that then becomes an exchange that can become very demanding on my time into the future. [00:35:00] Yeah, but put it into public, you know, with like not naming the person or anything like that, but saying, Oh, I've been asked a lot lately about demand avoidance, which is what's coming up as a very live issue for me as I talk about this.

Yeah. And here's, you know, here's a piece about it. And I think, you know, for me, that is, that's one of the ways that I can make myself the most useful to the most people. Like I, I cannot serve on a personal basis. I'm not. available like that. But what I can do is, is, you know, open up the debate and talk about things that maybe you know, there's no other resource of.

I spent a long time a couple of years ago writing a very thorough resource about autism that's on my website. Um, and I share that freely and I give it to anyone that I, that wants to talk to their audience about my autism, like they can have that to give to them. That I hope is as helpful as [00:36:00] possible.

It falls out of date all the time. I think I might just cut some bits out of it because all the kind of blog links and things just die. You know, it's really hard to keep up to date, but, um, that's, that's one way that I can offer something. Um. But I think I, I honestly think that one of the best things I can do is do things like this and talk about my boundaries out loud because I actually think that the issue for a lot of your audience and for my issue and my audience is how they can set their own boundaries and whether they feel permission to say no to things and it seems like such a huge It's a huge problem for loads of people, um, and so for that reason I, when I'm interviewed I share, uh, like a

two page PDF about, uh, to help people to talk about autism, um, and to say like, this is how I refer to it myself, these are things that would make me uncomfortable, but.

you know, these, this is also the [00:37:00] invitation about how, how, you know, I'm inviting you to talk about it as well. Um, and I make that available to anyone that wants to crib from it. I've got no problem with that.

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah. Yeah. That's great. That's

**Katherine May:** great. Versions of that now. So that's, that's really cool. Like I'm really happy to, to help on that.

Um, yeah.

**Elissa Altman:** And that's, you know, it's, it's, it's, um, it's personal and it's valuable. Um, and it's important, uh, and it also maintains your personal boundaries, you know? Yeah. Um, you know, I, I, one question that I have for you, I mean, it's just something that I definitely struggle with, um, and that is, and I know we started talking about, uh, the publishing world earlier.

But when the expectation that you will do [00:38:00] X, Y, and Z, um, and very often the people who are either asking you to do X, Y, and Z, or who are signing you up to do X, Y, and Z without your knowledge, um, And, and you have to either go with it, and you go with it, and you, if you're me, cursing under your breath and chewing on your lips, which is what happens to me, um.

Or say, I'm really sorry, but I absolutely, absolutely cannot do that. Um, and then be pigeonholed as an, uh, uncooperative, um, uncooperative author person. Um, and I'm, I'm curious about that. I mean, I, you know, I, I, we've talked about this. Um, Um, you know, famous, famous story. I was, I was, uh, [00:39:00] in, I was just in the pre-publication Days of Motherland, and it was, you know, it was a considerably not mid list book.

It was a, it was a supposed to be a, you know, a, a bigger book. Um, whatever that means, and months and months and months and months earlier, I, I, I was writing and I was filling out the author questionnaire, which is always a little, a little slice of heaven, um, for me. Hang

**Katherine May:** on, we should say what the author questionnaire is, because not everyone will

**Elissa Altman:** have come across the delightful.

Yeah, yeah. So the author quest, the author questionnaire, every publisher has it, um, and it, it gets sent out to. Um, to new authors on, on, uh, their list, um, to find out basically, who are you and who do you know?

**Katherine May:** And who will help you? Yeah. That always seems to be the crux of it. Like, who do you know? Who

**Elissa Altman:** will help you get [00:40:00] the word out, you know?

**Katherine May:** Do you know any famous people, questioner? That's right. And do you,

**Elissa Altman:** where did you go to university and what will they do for, you know, and, and on and on and on. So. I was, I was feeling, and some bigger publishers tend to have much longer ones. Some

**Katherine May:** of them go on for like decades. Pages!

**Elissa Altman:** Like warranties, you know?

Like warranties. So, the one I just, I filled out about six months ago for my, for my new publisher was like such a godsend and a breath of fresh air because It, it just was, it was great. It was just, it was just great. Um, so, so was filling out the Motherland, um, um, author questionnaire, and I suddenly realized that my mother, who is the other main character in the book, is on Facebook all the time.

And she is on In, [00:41:00] on Instagram, people stop her on the street because she's a bright and shiny person, you know, and really extraordinary looking, enormously glamorous, totally not like me, you know, and

**Katherine May:** She doesn't sink into the background, your mum, does she? She

**Elissa Altman:** does not sink into the wall, she is not wallpaper, that's not who she is.

And I was, so I was filling this thing out and I thought, Oh, my God, they're going to ask me to do an event with her because she's a public person and she performs and she, you know, she's a singer and you sort of wind her up and push her out onto stage and, you know, and let her go and. And I talked to my, my in house team and they were like, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope.

It's never going to happen. We're never going to do that to you. We're never going to happen. And in the first marketing meeting, and, and, and my, my editor, um, was a, is a

dear friend now. I mean, she was an extraordinary editor and just brilliant. [00:42:00] Um, but the marketing director said. I have a great idea! We think it would be terrific to put the two of you on tour together.

Yeah. And, and, and I, I struggled to not become physically ill on the spot. Yeah. It's horrifying. It's actually horrifying. But I was like, did you read it? Do you have an idea of the fact that, that, the fact that this is a book about trauma and having to face the person. Who is at the root of your trauma and become their caregiver in their older age.

And it took about three days of back and forth and back and forth emails for me to say I'm just sorry, I, I, I have to draw the line there, I absolutely can't do it. And I know that that was perceived as, well, you're just not, you really don't care about the [00:43:00] success of the book. You know, and it was. It was horrifying, and I think that that kind of thing happens a lot.

Um, you know, that was my, that was my, and if I had told my mother about it, my mother would have been like, Yeah, let's do it! When do we hit the road, you know? Yeah, yeah. And, and I don't think that they meant to be hurtful or harmful in any way. They wanted the biggest bang for their buck. Um, and I get that former publisher.

I get that. Um, but, but the idea that I could actually say, no, it's inappropriate. Yeah, it took

**Katherine May:** me days to get to that place as hard for you as well as a as a sort of self confessed people Please sir. Yeah, that's really yeah. Yeah. I mean, I you know, you want to say yes to your publishers, don't you? I [00:44:00] mean you want to be always helpful and you know But I mean I so I'm I guess I'm kind of lucky in the electricity had a very quiet launch and by the time People started reading it in any sort of numbers.

I mean, it still hasn't earned out from a 10, 000 advance if we, you know, let's, let's be open here. Like, it is never sold in big numbers and I think more people say they've read it than have read it. Yeah. I hate to, you know, make any accusations, but I, that happens a lot, doesn't it? And I, but I, you know, like the people who have read it often, it's very meaningful to them.

Um, but I never really came under that much pressure from my, in fact I'd have liked more opportunities from my original publisher to talk about it. And by the time, um, people were more interested in it, my current publishers of course don't really want me to spend a lot of time talking about it. Sure.

They want me to talk about the books they're [00:45:00] publishing, and that's actually quite a nice balance for me. But I have, you know, like a lot of people quite recently have



wanted to talk in depth about that, and I felt rather hijacked by it, to be honest. And I, it took, I felt really guilty about not wanting to do it.

Um, and first of all I thought, um, it's because I want to please my current publishers and I don't want to not talk about my book. And it took me ages to really get to the point of thinking like, no, do you know what? I don't, even though I've written about my trauma, I don't, or my, you know, my, the most difficult parts of my life, I, I don't want to kind of glibly say my trauma because I think that's becoming a problem, but that's for another time.

Um, I've written about the most difficult points of my life, the very emotionally intense. that I've gone through. I've shared that already. That doesn't mean to say I'm ready to talk about it at any given moment. And that doesn't mean that I won't feel exploited when people are using it as like a kind of a hook, you know, it was like a [00:46:00] fallacious hook.

Yeah. You know, in some situations I felt almost like people were using my very difficult accounts. of my life to show their own empathy, like, to sort of demonstrate how right on they were going. So

**Elissa Altman:** interesting, yeah,

**Katherine May:** yeah. And so actually, very, very recently, I've realised that it is really time for me to say, and I, and now this goes on my, uh, advance, I have advance materials that people get about me, and one of them is, I'm no longer giving substantive interviews about autism.

Um, I hope you'll understand that. Um, if you, if you are planning to talk about it, please tell us in advance and we'll review the questions. Yeah, that's great. I like, that was a, that was a really hard one for me because I always wanted to be able to say, of course I'll talk about it because we need to talk about it.

Yes, fine, but I was coming out of these things so, like, upset. Upset is just a simple word [00:47:00] to use for it. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And, you know, it would be going around my mind for days afterwards, and I would get into these big cycles of worry about, um, like, did I say, did I say it exactly right? Like, did I, like, did I get the language precise enough to make sure that I've represented everybody?

And I, and like, it's so hard to do that on your feet without any preparation when you've been a bit surprised by the question. And I, I just, I need to not have that in my life. Like I, I've done a lot. I've put a lot out there and it's still there. It's still available. Yeah. But

I've had a couple of interviews recently where despite supposedly them getting this information, they've said they've wanted to talk about it.

And I've actually now, you know, said. I'm sorry, perhaps you didn't get the message, but I, I really don't want to talk about this. And I know that's different, and I, like, here, here's where the boundaries thing come in. Right, right. Because that's changing their interview [00:48:00] schedule, and I, I know that, but I cannot keep doing harm to myself and my well being by going into that.

There's plenty out there, it doesn't have to be in their particular podcast or their particular sub stack.

**Elissa Altman:** Right, and if you're, you know, if you're providing. Um, interviewers and media with clear, you know, a clear indication. First, you're wondering, do they, do they read it? Who read, you know, do they go to, um, an assistant level person who just didn't share it?

Um, I mean, there's so many layers and layers and layers of people now. But, you know, my sense is that. I mean, that's brilliant that, that you did that, that you, that you provided this. This is what I will talk about. This is what I will not talk about. And that is entirely, um, appropriate and fair [00:49:00] and, and smart to protect yourself and to also, you're also in a, in a way protecting them, you know, because if they're do, if they're planning on a podcast or radio spot or whatever it is.

Um, or television, they know and admit it well in advance. You know, they know, they know well in advance. My question for you, and as I've been talking, you know, this is like coming up, how, I mean, I hope that this isn't the case anymore, but what did you, did you struggle with guilt about saying, over saying no?

And how did you deal with that?

**Katherine May:** Yeah, I kind of struggled with guilt on two fronts, I think. One, you know, one out of loyalty to my community and to like, you know, the people like me who. I learned that I was, I realized I was autistic by hearing an autistic woman talk on the radio and I'd never heard.

anyone [00:50:00] described that experience before and it changed my life like straight forwardly and I need I really needed to hear it. And also, you know, out of guilt about that, that contract you make when you commit to an interview. And, you know, like, I'm, I'm always really conscious that if someone's You know, taking the time to interview me.

I have a kind of duty to be interesting and entertaining and open, and to not be cagey or to give like rote answers to questions. To engage as a conversation. The problem with that is that this isn't bounded by the same conventions as a, as a normal conversation.

**Elissa Altman:** Right, that's right. You know,

**Katherine May:** people are not holding back out of social politeness.

Yeah, yeah. It's a normal conversation. They're saying them because that's the, the very different convention of an interview. And yeah, but yeah, massive guilt. I really, I really found it hard to get over [00:51:00] that. And I, and I think as well as guilt, the sense that I, Um, I didn't want to be seen as a mean person.

Sure. I mean, we

**Elissa Altman:** all know how mean you are, Catherine. I mean, I personally know how mean you are.

**Katherine May:** Like, I, you know, I love to be generous. And part of the generosity is people's questions and taking them seriously and at face value. But actually that that's one of the things that I really had to come to terms with over the last year that I was finding it harmful.

And I had to, I had to draw back from that.

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah. Yeah. What do you, what do you do about boundaries regarding time? I'm really curious about that. Um, you know, If you're, if you're writing essays, certainly you're writing substats, um, you're working on another book, um, [00:52:00] um, you're doing podcasts, and is there a point at which you say, But come, come the weekend, uh, no, the answer, the answer is no.

And I, and I, and I asked this because I recently had an experience with a lovely, um, um, uh, very smart, um, person who I'm, who I'm doing some work with. And early on, I had said, I am available anytime, but I, I am not available, um, on Sundays. Sundays is like, that's my family day, that's my day, uh, where I try not to look at screens, and that's my reading day, I hang out with the spouse, and the dog, and the neighbors, and I cook, and that's my sort of, that's my time where the energy Alyssa,

**Katherine May:** only Sundays!

Only

**Elissa Altman:** Sundays, yeah. Yeah, well, you know, I, I, if I'm, I'm doing a lot of [00:53:00] teaching right now, and so my writing time And my teaching is usually in the evening, so my writing time is during the day and on Saturdays. Um, that's like, if I am in the throes of writing a book, you know, all bets are off. Saturdays are just, you know, choosing takes over and, and make sure that the wheels don't come off the bus.

But, so I had said early on, you know, that Sunday's not the, you know, I, I, that's my day and blah, blah, blah. Wonderful response, lovely kind. And sure enough, sure enough, email, um, and, and, and, uh, and, and another friend of mine who's also a writer and very much in the public eye said to me, don't you love it when you get the emails that say, You know, I, I'm, I really hate to bother, I really hate to bother you, but, and how, you know, how do you respond to that?

[00:54:00] And, um, for me, it was, that was the question, but there was no Uh, there was no problem because I didn't, I don't look at emails on Sundays, so I didn't actually get it. Yeah, exactly. That still fires me, yeah. To January. Yeah, yeah, and, and, and I don't know if that's just like a personality thing or, um, or just like how far can I push, how far can I test.

I don't think that most people are like that. Um, but I do, but I do think that, you know, we were so hyper connected. All the time, everywhere, I get all of my emails on my phone, on my watch, it's crazy making. But I'm, so I'm curious for you, you know, what time boundaries look like? I mean, do you have like a set schedule, set writing schedule for yourself?

**Katherine May:** Yeah, I mean, here's another effect of the last revolutionary boundary in a year. Um, because actually, you know, [00:55:00] I, I began to really find that I was not writing after, you know, a couple of years of Wintering being out and trying to kind of meet so much interest and constantly saying yes and constantly being really on it and then, you know, it's really tiring doing a lot of interviews and things like that.

It takes a lot out of you. And also saying, again, I think we've talked about this before, but saying yes to lots of um, blurb requests too, which pushes out all of your kind of reading. So I, I had a really big thing about it last year and I've set a kind of really clear pattern for my week, which is um, I, I never do interviews or meetings in the mornings.

My mornings are just for my writing, that's it. Nobody's allowed to intrude into that. Nobody can book anything into that. And, but I, in addition to that, I [00:56:00] don't, I don't make all of my week, my afternoons available either. I have two afternoons a week which are also not bookable, so I have only three bookable afternoons a week.

And Those afternoons finish at six o'clock, and to me that gives plenty of time for even Americans to fit something into my diary with the time we have. And it's, you know, it's not, I have no flexibility around that, but, you know, like, for example, I did an Australian interview recently, which of course had to happen at a very different time.

But people have to ask very, very nicely and explain to me why it's important, and I will push back first. Or my, sorry, my assistant will push back, which is another boundary I've put in place. So I've, I think being available for three afternoons a week is actually plenty for anybody. It gives people lots of flexible time.

And I still get people that say, I can only do it at nine o'clock on a Thursday morning. And [00:57:00] I, like, I am in the fortunate position now where I can now say, sorry, I'm just not available then. Because, unless it's Oprah, who hasn't called yet, you know, just between you and me, um But she will.

**Elissa Altman:** You have a point.

I think she will. But you

**Katherine May:** know what I mean, like, unless it's someone that You know, I'd be excited to meet and who would, you know, be a really big deal in terms of like my, my book's exposure. Um, I'm, I'm like to quote Sex in the City, I'm out there, you know, I'm out there. I just, I think people must be so freaking tired of hearing from me.

I'm actually getting increasingly relaxed to say, I'm really sorry, I'm just not available. And it's not a value judgment on your podcast or anything like that. But I. Cannot keep being available and weekends. Forget it. I mean, [00:58:00] I've got a kid that really helps to set that boundary. Sure. Um, but I just, I can't, I can't keep outputting all the time, but of course what I do have to do at weekends are like, um, sometimes, uh, appearances at, you know, festivals and events.

bookshops. Um, but again, so sorry, my, my very regimented life. Like again, I, I've started to push back quite hard against too many. Um, it's too much for me. I can't manage it. I find it very exhausted. I get very burnt out. I get, you know, I got, I kind of going to shut down. And so I've, I now I've talked really carefully with my publishers about clustering events and then giving me two or three weeks off in between so that I'm not constantly traveling because I can't handle it.

Yeah, that they're traveling.

**Elissa Altman:** I don't think, you know, unless you've, unless you've done it. Um, uh, you know, I, I, I remember when, um, certainly when [00:59:00] Motherland came out,

but Motherland came out just like on the throes of COVID. But my first two books, I mean, I, it was crazy. I mean, I was in city after city after city after city.

Really? Wow. Yeah. And, and I want to say before I know. You know, two and a half weeks at one point, um, and, uh, you know, and there were, I mean, there were great, certainly, I mean, I, I, I love bookstores. I love, love,

**Katherine May:** love, you know, we agree on that.

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah, I mean, you know, I mean, we, I could get, and I know you could get completely lost and absorbed in a, in a bookstore, and I will do.

pretty much anything for an independent bookseller. I mean, I love them and they are doing, um, they are doing as, as we say here, God's work. That's what they're doing, you know, um, but it was, it was, uh, I didn't realize like what kind of physical condition I was [01:00:00] in once I came home and how, um, how really, uh, um, exhausting it can be, you know, um, and, and wonderful and exhaustive.

So, yeah, I mean, and, you know, you, you, you take the travel aspect of it and then you compound that with the fact that you are Out, you know, as they say you were out there. Um, it's hugely

**Katherine May:** socially demanding and, and again, like I, you know, I get people be getting quite emotional when I, when they come for signings and things like that, and I, I can't handle too much of that.

It's really, like, I say that with full compassion to, you know, and empathy after, you know, after some signings when five people have cried at, you know, at you while you're signing their book, you just come away feeling. like such an asshole. I let's like, it's just awful. And I do that too much. [01:01:00] And again, like the specter of the good author gets raised here.

You know, David Tadaris does too. It's like, I love, I love his work. And you know, that everyone will tell you what David Tadaris signs until the line finishes. And sometimes he's there till two o'clock in the morning. It's like, great.

**Elissa Altman:** Well

**Katherine May:** done, David. Well, yeah, love that. He seems to really enjoy that. And I, It's wonderful.

What a wonderful thing. Um, yeah, I'm not going to do

**Elissa Altman:** that. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's really a very, very good point. And I mean, you know, he, what he does both on the page and off the page is, I mean, he is brilliant and he's absolutely one of my favorites. He is massively performative. And that, that performance is, you know, extends from the page to the handshake, to the book signing.

I mean, he draws little cartoons on people's, you know, on, on, uh, title pages, you know. Um, and, [01:02:00] and, uh, and I, you know, I remember years ago hearing that Julia Child did the same thing. And she, you know, even in her late 80s or mid 80s, there would be, you know, hundreds of people. Wrapped around the block waiting for her to sign a book and she would sign every single one.

Um, and, and it's like, you know what, good for her.

**Katherine May:** Great. I think that's wonderful. And, and at the same time, I just need to acknowledge my own limitations and I can't. Not that, to be, like, let's be clear, no one's queuing around the block for me. Like, I, you know, it's not, it's not been a live issue, but yeah.

I have not got juice in my tank that Julia Child has. There we go. In so many ways, actually.

**Elissa Altman:** Oh, I don't know. Maybe it was the whiskey for Julia. That was the juice. I don't know. I don't know. I, you know, I was a very big fan of hers and I had utmost respect for her. You know, changed everything here in the [01:03:00] States.

Changed a lot in the States. So, um, but if somebody has that kind of energy, you know, God bless. I am. It's, it's difficult. It can be difficult. And it doesn't mean that you don't love and respect your readers, you know. Um, it doesn't mean that at all. Um, yeah.

**Katherine May:** You just have to acknowledge your capacity as a, as an individual, which is, you know, going to be different from other people's capacity.

And

**Elissa Altman:** Yeah, it, it

**Katherine May:** has to meet us where we are. It's the only, I mean, I, I mean, we need to close, but I, I'm thinking at the moment of the, you know, the stuff that Susanna Clarke wrote a few years ago, but the account of her burnout after her Yeah. Years of touring for Jonathan Strange and Miss Norrell, which is my favourite book ever, incidentally.



Which I turned up to one of those many, many tour dates that she apparently did. But it left her unable [01:04:00] to write or do pretty much anything else for over a decade afterwards. That's incredible. And I, like I, I think that's a, that's a parable for, for, that every publisher should read and think about what value they're really wringing out of an author.

Because I think with her, she was obliged, she was contractually obliged to do it, there was something in her contract that she was unable to escape, she had to kind of keep going, and she was clearly ill suited to that kind of life. Um, but, like that's, if you do that to an author, then what you get out of them is, out of a genius of our age is no book for a very long time.

Yeah. And that is tragedy, I think. Although Pyrenees is great, so she's, it's okay, she got, she got back on the horse.

**Elissa Altman:** I haven't read it, but we'll I think Susan has, [01:05:00] I'm sure Susan has, so, yeah. Anyway, we could go on and on. It's

**Katherine May:** quite nerve wracking talking about boundaries, isn't it, because I realize as I'm speaking that, you know, these boundaries are landing on some of the people listening, you know, and it's, it's like, it's so hard to articulate the, just the sort of simple necessity of those, those little barriers between you and, and, Anyone who fancies showing up to you.

Yeah, and I, you know,

**Elissa Altman:** and I think that it is, it is, um, it's so emblematic of where we, capital W, all of us as a, you know, where we are now in our culture and the way the way we are expected to be on. Everyone. Author, not [01:06:00] author. Um, you know, I, I, I have, um, neighbors who are constantly amazing people running From this event, to this event, to this event, to this event, this sporting event, to this, you know, um, and no one wants to say, or has the ability to say, no, you know, I, I need this time for myself.

So, yes, this is our experience as writers and people in the public eye. But I think that it's so emblematic of the way the world is working right now. And that's, that's a very big concern. You know, it's a very big concern. Want people to take care of themselves. We have to take care of ourselves.

**Katherine May:** I won't be happy until I read the sentence, reclusive author, Catherine May.

**Elissa Altman:** Oh God, do I get to write your next bio? Recluse of author, Catherine Meagher. Catherine Meagher is a

**Katherine May:** recluse and we hear that she's

**Elissa Altman:** well armed. [01:07:00] Can you imagine? That would be absolutely hilarious. I would love that.

**Katherine May:** I, I bring to mind late Faye's Jean Rees, who in her house in Bewd, if somebody approached the door she'd throw milk bottles at them.

**Elissa Altman:** Well, Jean Rees was also, was always a little bit worse for wear, shall we say. I love that, I love that clip

**Katherine May:** of her sitting drinking in a bar in her, I think it went into her 80s, and apparently as she got drunker and drunker her wig would slip down, and she'd like drop it back up again.

**Elissa Altman:** Oh my god. Yeah.

Yeah. Milk bottles. I like that. That's good.

**Katherine May:** It's just a thought. I'm just putting it out there. Okay. Alright. Good. Melissa, thank you. It's been really, it's been really, it's actually been quite cathartic to talk about this. Oh good.

**Elissa Altman:** I'm glad. For me too. It's always a pleasure. See you later. Take care. Bye bye.[01:08:00]