



Book Gang Podcast Transcript: How The Bright Years Was Paved Through Letters

Amy Allen Clark's Pitch and Warm Intro for Listeners:

Every so often, a debut novel arrives so confident and assured it's hard to believe it's the author's first. Sarah Damoff's remarkable storytelling is deeply informed by her experience as a social worker, offering readers an empathetic and profoundly immersive exploration of alcohol addiction within the framework of a gripping family saga called *The Bright Years*.

Told through a linear timeline from 1958 to 2019, the story unfolds through three distinct and deeply personal perspectives: Ryan (the father), Lillian (the mother), and Georgette (the daughter).

As a child, Ryan fled with his mother from an abusive, alcohol-fueled household. Now an adult, he works as a waiter while pursuing his dream of becoming a painter and

gallery store owner. At the local library, he meets Lillian, and the two fall deeply in love, eventually marrying.

But family planning doesn't come quickly. Lillian harbors a secret: years earlier, at twenty, she gave up a child for adoption, a fact she kept hidden from Ryan until after their marriage. Unprepared for motherhood at the time, Lillian reflects on that time, disclosing, "Sometimes a woman's choice is between impossible and impossible and impossible, and she just has to make it."

After enduring the heartbreak of a miscarriage, the couple finally welcomes a daughter, Georgette, who grows up as their only child. Yet the pressures of new parenthood and Ryan's struggle to support his family through his art gallery weigh heavily on him. Quietly overwhelmed, he turns to drinking, a choice that leads to a life-altering incident. Realizing he is repeating the destructive patterns of his own father, Ryan leaves his family, choosing alcohol over the life he's built with Lillian and Georgette.

The novel poignantly portrays the passage of time, with birthdays and milestones slipping by in Ryan's absence while Lillian shoulders parenting responsibilities alone. But Damoff masterfully layers the story with shifting perspectives, revisiting past moments through new angles as the narrative marches forward. As one powerful passage reflects, "Time can wash dirt off a memory until it is revealed as something else entirely."

While heartbreak abounds, so does hope, as Lillian's friends and Ryan's mother provide much-needed support. Sarah skillfully captures the details of each era, seamlessly integrating political events, cultural shifts, and even tender moments like Lillian deciding that a ten-cent text to Georgette—just to say "I love you"—is well worth the cost.

The characters in *The Bright Years* are richly drawn and achingly human—a family you can't help but root for. The novel's exquisite prose and moving story twists will leave you awestruck. It's hard to imagine a "best books of the year" list without this extraordinary debut being at the top of my list this year, and I'm so honored that I have the opportunity to share the story behind this story with you.

If you're new here, HI! I'm Amy Allen Clark, the voice behind the Book Gang podcast. This podcast celebrates debuts, backlist books, and under-the-radar book gems.

This spoiler-free episode will introduce you to Sarah's writing process from epistolary first drafts to the magical book we hold in our hands now. You'll also become acquainted with her scrappy and savvy mindset that she embraced to secure her first book deal.

For each episode, I've created an immersive experience for you. Today's book list that you can browse while listening to this show includes the best books I've read on addiction and recovery. I've included some incredible new releases as well as backlist gems you can pick up right now from your local library.

You might not know that you can leave comments through the Spotify app on these episodes, and I would love to hear from you- what is the best addiction fiction novel you've read lately? I can't wait to see what you suggest!

If you are a patron of the show, you'll find a printable version of this book list in your inbox today and I'm so excited for our book club chat together on April 25th at 8 PM ET with Lynda Cohen Loigman to discuss her cozy novel of two characters finding their second chance at love in their eighties! Lynda is one of my favorite joyful Jewish writers, and this is one that made my face hurt from smiling- you'll adore it.

Now let's meet this week's guest. Sarah Damoff lives in Texas with her husband and children, where she is a social worker. Her work has appeared in Porter House Review, Ruminant Magazine, and Open Global Rights, among other publications. The Bright Years is her debut novel from Simon & Schuster that hits store shelves on April 22nd!

One last thing- if you love this show, leaving a review on iTunes is a free way to support my work. And to our patrons who keep the lights on at Book Gang and provide this show for us commercial-free, you have given me bright years that I didn't even know were impossible. Thank you for choosing creators in a world turned upside down by AI! Now let's get chatting.

(transition music)

Sarah Damoff (00:00)

Hi, my name is Sarah Damoff. I am the author of The Bright Years and I'm so grateful to be here today with Amy on the Book Gang Podcast.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (00:10)

So Sarah and I were not recording and I was like, you have to stop telling me this story because I want to be in awe on air and I want everyone to hear about the book cover of your beautiful book as our little icebreaker because you are only the second person who's been on the show that has a painting in your possession from the book cover. So tell us about this book cover, Sarah.

Sarah Damoff (00:34)

Yes, so when Simon and Schuster, the team at Simon and Schuster and I started talking about covers, I just gave them a couple general, I said, maybe something that's painted because one of the main characters is an artist and a painter. And they came back to me with this beautiful cover by a Korean artist named Young Park. And she is not primarily dupe of covers, she's just a painter, a beautiful painter and I loved what they sent me. It was the only option I saw and everyone loved it. I mean, I think I showed it to some people who had read the book and some who hadn't and people would tear up just seeing this beautiful artwork. And then I come to find out because Young Park is just an artist, this painting was actually for sale. And Simon and Schuster had licensed it for the book, but I was able to purchase and now have it hanging in my living room this beautiful artwork that is on the cover of The Bright Years.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (01:28)

My gosh. So Tao Tai was on our show for her debut which was called Banyan Moon and she had the painting as well and we were talking about this being a bit of a legacy that you're gonna get to like give your kids someday and like be able to show them like this was something that mom like it was a cover of the book that mom made which is so so cool.

Sarah Damoff (01:46)

Yes, it's so special. I feel so grateful.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (01:49)

Well, before we get into the nuts and bolts of your beautiful book, beyond the cover, which is gorgeous, and there is a reason why acquisition of this painting is so special because it is beautiful. And I'm going to go look up this artist after we're done talking

here. I'm trying to not do it on air because that's very distracting. But I want you to tell our listeners what this book, The Bright Years, is all about.

Sarah Damoff (02:10)

So The Bright Years follows a family through four generations and we see in particular the coming of age of one young girl named Georgette as she kind of learns who her parents are. They have some secrets from their past that they've even kept from each other, some struggles and just the people they were before they had this child. And then she has to come to learn who they were, how it impacts her generation, her life and her legacy. And to just make sense of what the intangibles that she has inherited.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (02:44)

It's gorgeous and I know I told you this, but this is truly, I know will be in my top 10 books of the whole year because it's so assured. It was actually very, very surprising to read someone who writes this assured. Like your prose is beautiful and it doesn't feel like someone just writing their first book. And I was digging in a little bit on another podcast that you had happened to do about how you were starting the process of writing this book. And what struck me is that you were learning through podcasts and through a lot of free resources though that I think I just appreciate that you were sharing that because I mean, I would not be doing this. I would not be having this conversation with you without YouTube, without YouTube bros teaching me how to do stuff with sound and editing. And so I want to hear a little bit about just what inspired you to start a book and then what initiated that process of being like, well, maybe I can just DIY it and figure it out myself.

Sarah Damoff (03:49)

Yes, great question. Thank you for asking. What inspired me to start writing? I had been, I've worked at social work for about 20 years since I started volunteering when I was 17 years old. And I've always loved to write and read. And I really wanted to write about some of my experiences with families that I was working with. And I had never really considered fiction until I read the book. This just happened to be the one that did it for me. The Lost Children Archive is a novel that came out in 2020 and the way that she used fiction to talk about a justice issue and I just I was so inspired by that and I thought it was the first time it dawned on me I could fictionalize I could make up brand new characters but still tell some of the true experiences I've had, the emotional experiences I've witnessed working with families. And so that was the inspiration. The Bright Years was actually my second attempt at a manuscript. So I

started that one the end of 2021 and kind of worked on it off and on. And after about a year, I never really considered not wanting to share it or not wanting to get it published. Once I had it done, I was like, okay, now people need to read it. That's why I wrote it.

But as you said, I had no, I didn't have a degree or education or training or any community or connections in the writing and publishing world. So one of the first things I learned from podcasts was what a query letter is. I think that I had never heard that phrase. I think some of the first agents that I reached out to, I definitely did it wrong. I didn't know there was a format to it and some just expected etiquette and all of that. And so I just started immersing myself, yes, in free resources. There are a lot of great writing and publishing podcasts and even just listening to author interviews like what you do, because a lot of times the interviewer will ask the author something about how they got their start or something that, and I would just latch onto those details and research things. Another thing I learned from podcasts was about the website publisher's marketplace which was another thing that felt like this insider industry secret. I don't know, it's not a secret, but to me it was new. And I had just been Googling, like internet searching, agent? Like I was not having a lot of luck finding, there are a lot of agents out there. And so when I was able to look at Publishers Marketplace where you can actually see book deals reported, then I was able to get a better idea of who might be a good fit? What are other people representing? And that was just kind of my entrance into the world of publishing, which is an entire thing to learn on top of the craft of writing.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (06:36)

Right. You know, speaking to that, it, if people didn't know this, I know most people that listen are well versed in this, but it's not just landing the deal. It's like, also you have to do the marketing, keep up with the social media, keep that momentum going after launch, which is like, that's a whole process itself and answering readers. And especially with social media, the way it is now and having that immediate feedback and people tagging you in photos. just, it's a lot of extra on top of just getting that book deal landed. It's like all the things that go beyond the book deal because you are the product and you have to keep pushing the product on the people as well.

Sarah Damoff (07:14)

Yes, that's true. I feel very fortunate because I have an amazing team at Simon & Schuster and they have done a lot of that. And I will say, I don't know how common this is, but nobody initially asked or talked about my social media presence or my

platform, which was encouraging to me because I felt like, okay, I have no connections in this industry. I have no platform. So the work must have something to it. It just was an encouraging keep going because it must just be the work. That's all I'm giving them. So I know that it's, yeah, platform is always something very interesting.

And I know you said off air, my Instagram is very full of books that I've read. And I started doing that at a time. I know many people kind of wrestle with what should I be using this space for online? And a couple years ago, before I had a publishing deal or anything, I just was like, well, this is what I would never regret sharing. This is what I love. I'm just gonna start sharing the books that I'm reading. And I'm not a Bookstagram influencer, but I just share whether it's something brand new or backlist. And so that's just kind of what my social media was and still is right now.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (08:25)

Yeah, it's funny because, and I don't like this is silly thing on my end, but you know, I always read like the first 25 % of any book that we get pitched for the show or, you know, potentially for guests. And our show does focus a lot on debuts, but I also go on their Instagram accounts as well, the authors and just kind of poke around. And the reason why I initially was so intrigued by you was that your reading tastes perfectly aligns with mine. And I was like her reading tastes is impeccable because of course my reading taste is impeccable. So we share so many favorite books and I was like, my gosh, if this is like a taste into the kind of work that you're interested in, I have a feeling I'm really going to enjoy this book, which is to say that I absolutely did.

Now I do know that this has kind of gone through an evolution process for you because we're talking about different forms of the manuscript. And at one point you were entertaining doing a book of letters in that was really interesting to me. Now, I'm someone who doesn't really get into books with letters in them and that just intrigued me. So how did this evolve over time with this manuscript?

Sarah Damoff (09:31)

Yes, well, I think you are in the majority because after I wrote an entire first draft that was epistolary, that was all letters, I came to find out that agents weren't interested in that. I had agents tell me they won't look at any pages of any epistolary novel. So after hearing this a couple of times, it was very interesting to me and I think some of the reason is probably, and maybe you can speak to this since you don't like reading books with letters, and there aren't a lot of them, especially coming out contemporarily. But

I think they're just inherently more reflective. When you're writing a letter, it's a lot of hindsight. And I think contemporary readers really like to be engaged in that experience in real time along with the characters.

After I had heard from a couple of agents that epistolary is just very hard sell, we don't want a book of letters, I thought I would just experiment and go to the page and just try a first person present tense and make it more immediate and take us through the story with the family rather than having a mother writing to her daughter about the story. And I knew I have to personally love it if I was gonna rewrite the whole book in that way. And I did. Within just a couple chapters, I realized this is why this is so much more compelling. It's not just we're reflecting on what happened; it's we're experiencing it.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (10:53)

Mm. Yeah, I just I as soon as it's a book of letters, I'm like, I don't think I want to read. And I feel so bad because I'm sure there there have been books that I have read and I've been thankful. And I'm always like, will always lead the review with like, this is really out of my wheelhouse. Like, this is not a book I would normally pick up. And it's usually a whole bunch of praise or it becomes a bestseller or it gets adapted for film. And then I'm interested and intrigued by it. And so I think it's just a reader preference.

Now I will say too, like I think, you know, speaking to that, there are like a lot of mixed media experiences now with books as well, like more contemporary settings. And even that I'm getting a little like burned by like, I'm like, okay, I don't want to read a book about a podcast anymore. I don't want to read a podcast script. And so it really takes a while for me to like pick that up where that was something I enjoyed. So I do wonder if like maybe that little switch.

And the thing about the way that you've switched it, even though it's not where you're saying like the reflective sense of the letters. You did a great job with being able to maybe revisit through different perspectives or revisit through a memory that is later developed for the reader and you like see it through a whole different lens. So I thought that what you did with that was really intriguing and interesting and something that I cataloged is like, wow, I hope someday I can tell a story like that where, you are layering that experience on for a reader.

Sarah Damoff (12:18)

Thank you so much. And I do think a lot of that came from the fact that it was letters in the first place because those different perspectives were originally the different writers of the letters. And the thing about rewriting the book was that I didn't lose anything in what I was trying to do.

There's always this artistic choice you have to make when you have a vision for something and then you realize, maybe readers or editors don't want it exactly that way. And then you have this choice of, well, how can I give them what they want, but not compromise what the vision is? And honestly, there was nothing lost. There was only, there were only gains to be had when I rewrote it because the original conceit was this, a mother wanting to document for her daughter once she has this baby even as her daughter was a baby and a toddler, writing letters about, I have these big things in my past. I'm gonna wanna tell you about them someday. And she wanted to just document them and set those letters aside to give to her daughter eventually. And that was the original conceit. And I know people who have done this. I, sort of, my husband and I have written letters to our kids on their birthdays each year that we save. And they get them then. And they're not really about our past lives. They're more about just our relationship with them. But I think this is a common thing and for some reason, sometimes writing something down can be an easier way to communicate a big reality to a child or to a child that you know will one day be a grownup and be impacted by you as the parent. And so that was the original conceit and that's why it made sense that it was letters and then it made sense that it wasn't.

I don't think I lost anything in the rewrite. But that's how people will ask, how did you decide to do the first third is the POV of one character and then the second third is another and the end of the book is the other, rather than alternating. And that's just because that's how it was with the letters. And that's how their story played out and made sense to me.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (14:13)

Yeah, it flowed so well and I enjoyed that as someone who, you know, I get very like disgruntled when there's like so much switching going on and I loved that these were sectioned off. So you had like almost like a full complete story and then you get a different perspective for sure on that same story, but where I'm not feeling pulled back and forth. It just in all ways worked. I think the decision to move away from the letters, at least for me, it really, really worked. Although I would have been curious to see what that looked like and it probably would have still pulled me in. I just love the format that you chose with this, which was interesting and beautiful and the ways

that you were able to tell it was, was beautiful. And I know that, this story was inspired by someone and I would love for our listeners to get to hear about what the inspiration was for this particular novel.

Sarah Damoff (15:06)

So he was not an inspiration for the book. He kind of came up later, but he was very important to it. You're right. So as I started writing the character of Ryan Bright, who is the husband and then the father and struggles with alcoholism, again, originally I was writing letters from a mother and she was just gonna kind of tell her daughter, this is what happened with your dad. And as I started writing that, I just felt like, well, that feels too stereotypical. That feels too flat. Who really is this? So then I gave him some chapters and I gave him a voice and I started writing from his voice and he became a lot more complicated. And that's when I thought of my friend. I had a very close childhood friend all through childhood into college years.

And even as a kid, he could articulate that his greatest fear was becoming an addict like his dad. And very sadly, in his case, he did become an addict and he died in his early twenties. And I just kept thinking of him as I really started giving this character of Ryan a voice and just thinking, he's not, this character is not leaving his family because he doesn't care about them. He's pulling back because he does care about them because he sees his own struggle and he can't get on top of it and he wants to, in whatever way he can, he wants to protect them. And he became a lot more human and a lot more complicated. And as I gave him, put him on the page more, I definitely was thinking a lot of my friend and his experience and how, again, just how it was his greatest fear and it was this generational struggle that was very real.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (16:44)

Yeah, if he was not on the page, because I know initially you were like, it'll be kind of in the background of the story. Everything revolves around it, but they won't be on the page. And this voice just kept coming in. Like, was it nudging you? Like it needed to be part of the story.

Sarah Damoff (16:59)

Definitely. And then I even had, can't even take credit for this, but I had someone else who read it suggest that I open the book with a scene showing him as a child because I had told that, but I had just referenced it. was, again, it was all very, began very hindsight and very reflective. And when I started the book with him, I realized in many ways their family story even though still the majority of pages are given to

Lillian and to Georgette, but the arc from beginning to end belongs to Ryan. And so it was like a puzzle, putting together one change and then another, and he just became, we just needed to hear from him more.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (17:39)

Yeah, and you humanize that experience so much. I mean, showcasing both the generational trauma that has that ripple effect within families, unfortunately, and then also like Ryan's addiction and how he wrestles, like it's such a wrestling that the reader is going through with him. And, you know, I know that some of this was informed by some of the research that you did or like meeting with people and hearing about their stories.

I'm wondering, I know that you have a social worker background, so I imagine you kind of knew what you were getting into, but was there anything that surprised you when you talked to people about their experience with addictions?

Sarah Damoff (18:18)

Yes, yes, definitely. Yeah, in social work, addiction is a huge thing that breaks up families. It's the number one, poverty and addiction are just the two biggest factors that break families up. But that's different, working with all those families over time is still different than having the experience myself. And there were some very generous people, some who had struggled with alcoholism themselves, some who had a spouse or a parent that they had lived with for many years who struggled with alcoholism and they were so generous to talk to me. And the first thing that I was surprised by actually was when I first kind of put out the call to see who would be willing to talk to me is how common this is.

I was aware that it was big, but I had people who I've known for many years reach out to say they'd be willing to talk and I had no idea that they were struggling or that someone in their house was going through that. And then the things they shared with me just really reinforced this. People were coming out of the woodwork to talk about this. It's very common. It's still, it's still largely invisible. It's still, there's still a lot of shame. It's still a lot of people keep it private. It's in the walls of their own home. They're not talking about it. So that was the first surprising thing to me was people that I had no idea they were struggling with it and they said, I'd be willing to talk to you. So was very common.

The second thing, and maybe this sounds a little naive to say, but I actually was surprised by how destructive alcoholism is. I kept fearing that I was maybe making it too big in my book on the page. Like, I know people that struggle with alcohol dependence and maybe it doesn't, maybe I'm making it too big. And if anything, I heard the opposite from people who have actually experienced it just telling me, I mean, it's just completely destroyed my family. And so then after hearing that repeatedly, I wasn't as afraid of really highlighting how destructive it can be and how hard it can be on a person and on the people who love them. So that was actually surprising to me.

And then kind of on the other side of that same token to hear the way people would talk about a loved one with such affection and the good memories and the good times that they're still having with that person after in the previous breath, they had recounted some terrible memory of that person's struggle with alcoholism. That was a tension that I took to the page because to not downplay the pain, but to not neglect the fact that there's still good memories being made, there's still deep affection, the reason it hurts so much is because the love is not diminished by the addiction. It's painful because of that love between the people who are watching someone suffer and continue to make choices that they wish they weren't making.

So yeah, there were definitely, and just, yeah, I was, I...I'll always say how grateful I was to the people who were willing to talk to me because it was so vulnerable and it was so generous and I felt like they put a lot of trust in me. I mean, I wasn't telling any of their specific stories and it was all confidential, but I still, as I wrote, their voices were in the back of my mind, their stories were in the back of my mind, and I just felt like the humanity of this, especially knowing how common it is, like I just, wanna get that right.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (21:31)

Yeah, I loved both the ideas that you're saying, like these people have happy memories and they could be living so simultaneously or parallel to these other experiences that they're having with these same people because, you know, that's not the there's a, you know, a reason that people embrace something like that. And also that their personalities can be very big to like the impulsiveness, the things that they're doing.

I can see through a child's eyes, someone who's super impulsive and fun and getting rowdy and interesting and that kind of thing, and then seeing it through the wife's eyes, right? This is not okay. Our kid shouldn't be seeing this. Act like an adult. Those kinds of things.

I appreciated seeing these different perspectives because we get that chance to see through Jet's perspective as well. What does she think about this? You know, it's complicated, right? Those feelings are really complicated around someone.

And, you know, I would say at least with my generation of, you know, moms, you know, mom wine culture was so celebrated and our idea around like how fun it was. And I have some images and I'm thinking about some of the things that I've done over the years. You know, saying, mommy needs wine or, you know, someone even bought me like wine bottle that had that on there. And I thought it was so funny. And it was like kind of a common joke that I really loved wine. Like I couldn't like do anything without wine. Right. And I have not had a drink in several years, but it was a choice that I had to make that I didn't want to be associated with that anymore. And that that wasn't something that I needed. Like I didn't need it as a crutch, but it's shameful. It feels shameful that there was a period of in my life where I did do that. You know, what does my child remember from that? Or like, what do my children remember about that experience? And yeah, you have to approach that with some vulnerability to say like, that's a different version of me. And I'm that's behind me now. But how lucky to be on the other side, right?

Sarah Damoff (23:30)

Thank you for sharing that. Yeah, I think it's very common at all varying levels, of course, of how dependent someone might be. But I think it's brave every time someone talks about it.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (23:40)

Yeah. Well, this story also had one element that I just really appreciated about it is that we are traveling through decades of time, which is a lot, you know, and could be a little encumbered by the details. But you like put these like tiny little details in that were so like astounding, but it was like these little asides that as a reader, you're like, like it could be let's say the fabric of the dress or like the style of what she's wearing, or it could be something like, it's gonna cost me 10 cents to send a text message to

someone and it's worth it to say I love you. And also accompanying a little bit lightly the political times or what's happening in the world.

So I just wanna hear how you wanted to encompass that and not overburden the reader with those kinds of details because you, I'm sure, had to do a little bit of research.

Sarah Damoff (24:34)

Yes, it's such a fun question and you're gonna laugh Amy because my first draft was again, it was letters. It was not set in time at all. It was like there were no dates, there was nothing happening. It was like floating out nowhere. It wasn't really even very strongly set in place. It just was, this is what's happening. It was very focused on the relationships and I was getting that down.

And I finished that first draft and my first big revision was, okay, I have to set this book in time now. I don't write with an outline, I just write by the seat of my pants and I had no idea it was gonna cover so many years. And so I remember as I was drafting that first draft thinking, well, what year are they in? What cell phone would they even have? I'll figure it out later. And so I knew for sure by the end of that first draft that I need, that's what I needed to really focus on.

So I'm very grateful that it works and maybe it helped that I had an entire revision where I was just focused on which year would this be, what was happening. So one thing I'll say is this was, I definitely had to still do research and confirm things, but a little bit of a cheat is that when I said it in time, I realized we're watching Georgette go from when she was born through adulthood, but the end of the story she's like in her thirties. So I gave her the same birth year that I have. And it was so helpful because then I thought no one can say we didn't have cell phones that year because I would think me and Jet did. I, you know, I would put us in the same and I, and it was helpful to remember, you know, and I definitely had to still research what happened in what year. But using my own experience incorporated in that in that research to know which year something might have happened; the internet research can't totally compare to that. So I was putting them together.

And as soon as I realized we were going to be covering decades with this family, again, getting back to kind of how, how private the struggle of addiction can be sometimes, it felt like inconceivable to me to not include references to the broader world and what was happening outside of their home. In the background, as they became very real to me as characters, it's like, that was the year that Clinton was impeached. That

was the year. And I did want to reference some of these big things because in real life, in our lives, usually the private and the personal are the forefront of our stories. And then in the background, we have the things that are going on outside the doors of our homes. And so, that felt very natural and like it had to be there. I did definitely not want it to be in any way, even any section of it be, you know, a political book or saying, having any kind of agenda. So I, tried to put on my, like, I tried to put on more of a observational, even childlike or journalistic type lens where I'm just saying this, this is the year, like, for example, I mentioned the, the Clinton impeachment, which was just barely referenced, but it was, think, from Lillian's point of view. And so she just was thinking, how would I feel if I were, like, I know what it's like to be married to a man with a vice. So that's all I said about it. So it felt like, you know, there were some delicate cultural and political issues referenced, but in the context of the Bright family and their experience.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (27:56)

Yeah, no, it just works so well. And I was laughing because I forgot that, you know, you would have to pay for, let's say a text and how, you know, Lillian wanted to send that text where she was like, I'll just eat the costs and the 10 cents. And it was just so like, it's like one of those things where I'm like, yeah, that's right. You know, or, I remember that. Or yeah, getting to revisit some of my memories too. I'm much older than you, but, you know, it was such a great way to do it and to feel enveloped in it without it being encumbered by anything like it was just like really nice because sometimes with family dramas like I'm trying to think Claire Lombardo's books like they they could be in any time or space right and sometimes that's nice, too I mean there were times where I was like I want to escape the world and her debut was like the perfect thing because I'm like I could be anywhere like this is only insular It's only about the family and there's nothing you know, intruding in that experience. But this one, I could still have that kind of like tiny bit of intrusion, but without it like spoiling anything or like, you know, changing the way that I was feeling in that insular experience with your characters.

Sarah Damoff (29:03)

Okay, that's great to hear. Yes, and again, originally mine was very floating out there, not with any of those references. And I actually did have someone kind of say, you know, maybe you shouldn't reference certain brands or certain places because that really, then it won't be as timeless. And I actually thought about which this book is referenced in The Bright Years, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, which of course is a classic. Yes, okay. It's referenced very early in The Bright Years and one thing I loved about

that book is how she just talked about Brooklyn. And I remember thinking of that and thinking, I want to do that with Fort Worth because I'm not very familiar with Brooklyn, but I loved how that book put me there. But it wasn't at all the main thing, but it was just the background.

And so I do remember thinking of the way that she did that in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn and just thinking, I have to have this the place and you know it's kind of fun too as a 90's baby as a millennial kid because there's like references to Blockbuster and it was just fun to be able to throw in it felt natural because throughout the whole book there are these very specific to me I just felt like the more specific the better because it makes the characters more real

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (30:13)

Yeah, no, I loved it. I absolutely loved it. Well, I do want to just acknowledge, which I think we did earlier, but there was one line that really stood out to me that said "time can wash dirt off a memory until it is revealed as something else entirely". And your revisiting of memories, that really added so much for me as a reader. I know that you say you didn't outline, but how do you rethink about scenes in a way that it feels new to a reader, but it's also revisiting something from the past?

Sarah Damoff (30:46)

Great question. Yes, you're right. There's no outline. There's no mastermind plan. There were some things that I knew ahead of time - this character doesn't know yet, in particular, Georgette, because she's going from child to adult. So as all of us have to do, we learn things with age. And then there were some things that I didn't know. was a very fun experience to discover alongside the readers as I wrote it, as I put it on the page.

Or I would think before I wrote it down, I would think, this is what's gonna happen. And I would start writing it and just the emotional arc that I thought was gonna happen didn't feel right or real as I started writing it. And it would just go in a different direction.

I actually was a theater kid. I think that that, really do think that the drive to like inhabit the characters, I mean, there are times where I'll just zoom or I'll think like, would their body, if they learn this new information or they have this experience, what would their body do? What would their face do? What would they be seeing?

And I think some of that is kind of like a leftover from being a theater kid because I really want to be like emotionally present for each scene and inhabit the character.

So in a way it was like, yes, I'm unspooling the details and I'm kind of doing that along with them as the writer. I'm either learning it right alongside them on the page, or if I already know this is gonna be unspooled, then, you know, it's like, I'm just getting into their experience.

And I will also say, let me think about the line you said, time washing dirt off of a memory. The structure of the book is interesting because you go from one POV to another to another, but you're going through time. So we're not reliving the same scenes from different perspectives and different points of view. We're 20 years in the future. So we have not only, we experienced this with Lillian 20 years ago, but now we have Georgette learning about it. And so it's 20 years later, but it's also her.

You know, with that much time passing, it's just natural for perspectives to change because you have new maturity, new experiences, new information. And there are things that her parents have been withholding from her. And so as she gets the new pieces of who they are and as she gets older and maybe has some grace with herself, she's just learning how to see those memories.

Memory is such a fascinating thing to, to think about, learn about some of the research, just about how much it changes. The event didn't change. The event doesn't change. The past is the past. It's solidified. It was what it was, but our memories are just constantly changing. And there's little amendments.

I don't know if you're familiar with Lisa Genova, another author, but she writes a lot about memory and talks about it. And I've heard her talk about it as almost like a word document where every time you reopen the memory, there are some edits made and then you, you know, and it's, so it's, is a very interesting thing to explore with a character with family and, and how we see each other and how that shifts over that many years. It's really fun to, to write covering that much time because you can explore what really happened and how does my perspective of that change and not only a memory but also the different characters and how they see it differently. That was a super fun part of writing it and it, yeah, it's just fascinating. The time washing dirt off a memory I think is a true experience of life.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (34:18)

Yeah, it was unique to have a linear timeline, right? And still have these moments where you're like, well, I'm kind of going back in time, but it's really just going back in our own vaults of memory. And I love that.

I love this idea that Lisa Genova is saying about that being like an edit to a Word doc. Yeah, that is absolutely true. And I think that's what made this book so special is that I didn't feel tricked at any point that I was getting, like it was just, okay, here's new information, right? We're getting new information that this character is receiving in real time with us. And that's what made it so incredibly special. And if it had a nonlinear timeline, I think it would have been, again, a very hoppy timeline experience. And so where you have such a long, enduring story that's going over the cross of those years, it kept me intrigued all the way through because we're just, you know, marching forward, even though we're learning, marching forward, even though we're learning new information. So I loved everything about this book.

I do want to ask you, what are you reading right now? Since you're my book twin. Also, I'm a theater kid and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is my favorite classic that I collect. Yeah. So you are totally my people.

Sarah Damoff (35:30)

I love it. We're just like book art soulmates here. Well, what I'm reading right now is a complicated question because I'm reading my second novel over and over and over again. So when I'm at this point, I don't have a book that I'm actively reading. I do have, and I only just read the first chapter of it, the first couple chapters of it this week, Broken Country by Clare Leslie Hall.

It came, it's today's publication day for her and we shared the same editor. And so one of our first, US, she's UK based, but the same US editor. And so one of our first events that we did for our books was together last fall in New York. And so I'm so excited about all the hype that Broken Country's getting and I haven't actually read the book yet. And so I just started it this week.

Some of my favorite, I don't know if this is in what you asked me, but in general, my always go-to, will always read everything they write are Barbara Kingsolver, Maggie O'Farrell, and Dani Shapiro, who I actually got to go do a writing... It was my first ever writing retreat I did in November. And I got to go spend a couple days with her and five other women. And it was just magical. And she is truly one of my favorite contemporary novelists.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (36:41)

That's amazing. What was that like? Were you like stars in your eyes the whole time? How do you like keep it like tamped down? Did it get normal after a while and you're like, she's just she's just a person.

Sarah Damoff (36:51)

Yes, it was amazing. It was so great because we were workshopping. All of us had different pieces that we were workshopping the six women and it was amazing to learn from her. We had these long dinners each night together and yes, it was magical. So now, again, I just, have no background in any of this, so I've never done a retreat or a conference even or anything like that. And so, I think I was spoiled with my first one because it was wonderful.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (37:20)

Yeah, I hope they're all like that. I hope you have like an amazing time at all sorts of events like with this book. Well, as we're closing out this main show, although I do want listeners to know there is a lot to be spoiled by this book and there are some really big things that happen in the story that I think are worth paying over on Patreon. So if you want to join Sarah and I as we spoil the book over in our spoiler section you can join our Patreon and there's a link to it in the show notes.

But we always end our main show with just reflecting on what you're feeling proud of as an author. And it can be about this project or about anything in your life. But I just also want to echo that this is a beautiful book and it made me feel lots of things. I cried a lot. It's a great book to evoke emotion, to make me contemplate you know, my life and my family and just, loved everything about this story and the way that you told it with so much compassion. You didn't make it a trope or at any point feel like anyone was exploited or anything like that. Addiction fiction can be really tricky. And the way that you told the story was told with so much love and empathy and beauty and I'm so grateful I got to be screening it and to share space with you. I know this is just the beginning of many good things, but Sarah, what are you feeling proud of right now?

Sarah Damoff (38:44)

Thank you so much for saying all of that. I think probably what I'm feeling the most proud of at this point in the journey we've kind of already touched on is just that I was able to get to this point and have it published with a major publisher without having

had connections or an MFA or any kind of background that it made me feel really proud of the story being told and the work on the page because I know it's not, you know, I cold pitched an agent and she pitched the publisher. So that does, when I think about that, it makes me feel proud of the work. So thank you for asking that.

And I also just want to say just quickly to some of what you just said about the book, because I know that there are people who have been touched by alcoholism who might be listening to this podcast. One thing that I really thought about a lot in the writing of this book and in particular writing Lillian's character as she's married to someone who struggles with this addiction and he's kind of in and out of their lives is this tension between forgiveness is not the same as trust and there's a big theme of forgiveness in the book while also being healthy boundaries. And that was something that I really wrestled with in almost every scene that had both Lillian and Ryan, and it was this, they really love each other. I really wanna highlight what forgiveness can look like, but forgiveness is not saying, it's okay what you did to me. It's actually saying, it's not okay what you did, but we're gonna move forward. We're gonna figure out how to move forward. That's what forgiveness is.

That's such an important thing to me in this book and I think something you said about it just now and the way it was written and it's addressing such a big issue that I just wanted to share that for our listeners.

Amy Allen Clark (Book Gang) (46:39.87)

Well, thank you, Sarah. This was such a joy and I will meet you guys over on the other side of the paywall.

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