



Book Gang Podcast Transcript:

Laurie Frankel (00:00)

I am Laurie Frankel, author of Enormous Wings, which is my sixth novel!

Amy's Warm Intro:

Hey, Book Gang! As a longtime Laurie Frankel fan, I was thrilled when her publicist reached out to see if we could feature her latest novel, Enormous Wings, on Book Gang. Much like "This Is How It Always Is," our recent MomAdvice Book Club backlist selection, Frankel immerses readers in a boisterous, bighearted Jewish family drama—complete with a juicy book club topic guaranteed to spark conversation.

Breast cancer survivor Pepper Mills finds her life upended after a minor fender-bender leads not only to losing her license, but also her home and independence. Her grown children relocate her to the Vista View Retirement Community—a place that, coincidentally, also houses her ex-husband.

Mourning the loss of her hundred-year-old house—"whose every inch of warped quarter-round she knew like the three humans she'd raised there"—Pepper discovers her new, sterile residence is missing all her creature comforts. Her beloved novels, cozy rugs, and throw pillows are gone, sacrificed in the name of fall prevention, and she's left with mediocre, mushy meals served daily.

Encouraged to make friends, Pepper meets another resident—the charming Moth Holden—who becomes her first "Senior Prom" date at an assisted living social. Moth shares her love of ice cream cones and evening walks. As the two grow closer, weeks later, Pepper's children notice her nausea and lightheadedness, prompting a doctor's visit—where she discovers she's pregnant at seventy-seven.

Naturally, Pepper wants to terminate the pregnancy. But as a Texas resident navigating strict abortion laws—and facing medical concerns about her age—she finds her options limited. Everyone seems to have an opinion: her adult children, the man who impregnated her, her physicians, and even tabloids like *The Daily Beast*.

As she pores over her memories, Pepper recalls her first pregnancy as a young woman and a phone call with her mother about the timing being all wrong. Her mother had chuckled and said, "Oh, that's how it always is. When it's least convenient. When you decide to wait a little. When you think next winter might be better. That's when you get pregnant. Because it's a good first lesson in parenting. It won't be convenient. It won't accommodate you. And for the rest of your days, your schedule will be shot to shit. That's when it always happens—when you least expect it."

It's clear there's overlap with my beloved "This Is How It Always Is," almost as if these books are in conversation—not just in their themes, but also in dynamic character development, which is what drew me to Frankel's stories in the first place.

Family members have their own distinct styles: a grandchild who communicates in colorful emojis, a son with uneven biceps from arm-wrestling competitions, and a lawyer daughter who brings that classic eldest-daughter energy to every scene. Traditions and family lore linger on every page—like their parents' National Coming Apart Day, celebrating the couple's divorce—which creates heartwarming hilarity in both family text threads and vivid scenes.

As a midlife reader, I think the bigger story thread here is that there's no perfect way to help those we love through this life stage. Sometimes we rally, sometimes we nudge or even push them into safety as they near life's finish line. Body autonomy isn't just central

to this unusual pregnancy—it's also essential in how we manage elder care, humanizing the experience for those whose decisions we help navigate.

Frankel has an incredible talent for creating a story pace that feels fizzy—bubbling up all your emotions, sometimes within a single sentence. Her storytelling percolates, probes, and ponders, offering a fresh perspective on this stage of life.

And while it might sound like a sales pitch, discussing the second half of this novel was an absolute treat; Frankel makes bold storytelling choices that might challenge readers. As I pored over reviews, I found one that I shared with the author. The reviewer wrote: “My beliefs do not match the characters’—or the author's. That being said, it was nice to get a sense of other people's feelings who hold different opinions than mine. There were things I learned that I wouldn't have even thought about if it weren't for this novel. Some brought up an emotional feeling of anger on Pepper's behalf. This book is heavy on ‘my body, my choice.’ However, Frankel finds ways to express and share her views without shaming or hating anyone who opposes them. I wish there were more books like this.” In a world that often feels so politically divided, Frankel's approach stands out as she presents hot-button issues with empathy and nuance. She gives readers new language for experiences we may never share and encourages us to approach familiar long-held stances with fresh eyes. What struck me most wasn't just this single issue, but the broader conversation about body autonomy as we approach life's final chapters.

I have to laugh—someone recently left the kindest review for our show, mentioning that I don't come across as star-struck by authors. But today, I might be failing that assignment. I'm absolutely mad about this author, and I don't care who knows it!

If you're new here, hi! I'm Amy Allen Clark, the voice behind the Book Gang podcast, and I'm so happy to have you. This show celebrates debuts, backlist favorites, and under-the-radar book gems.

In this episode, Laurie shares the inspiration behind *Enormous Wings*' radically original premise, how the novel explores autonomy, aging, and family dynamics, and how she balances humor, empathy, and social commentary in all her work. We'll also dig into the challenges of elder care, the quirky realities of family life, and why conversations about body autonomy are more timely than ever.

Be sure to check out this week's companion book list—just click the link in the show notes to browse 60 inventive stories featuring older protagonists, proving that life's boldest chapters can begin at any age. Patrons get a printable reading checklist and

access to a spoiler-filled chat with Laurie Frankel, where we unpack the novel's surprising twists.

If you're joining our book club for May, we're diving into Janelle Brown's literary thriller, *What Kind of Paradise*, with our discussion set for May 28th at 8 PM ET on Zoom. Janelle visited Book Gang last week to talk about her writing journey on this project, so check out that episode for more behind-the-scenes insights. In the novel, Jane's world revolves around her father—until the outside world comes knocking. A laptop and modem break their isolation, sparking Jane's curiosity about life beyond the woods and leading her into the chaos of 1990s San Francisco at the dawn of the digital age. I can't wait for all the discussion this story will surely spark!

But that's not all, I'm busy putting together another incredible summer reading guide—and it's no spoiler to say that today's book, *Enormous Wing*, is one of my top picks for your summer stack.

Now, let's meet this week's guest:

Laurie Frankel is the New York Times bestselling, award-winning author of *Family Family*, *One Two Three*, *Goodbye for Now*, *The Atlas of Love*, and the Reese's Book Club pick *This Is How It Always Is*. She lives in Seattle with her husband, daughter, and border collie. *Enormous Wings* hits shelves May 5th and is available to pre-order now.

And one last thing—if you love this show, leaving a review on iTunes is a quick, free way to support my work.

And to our patrons who keep the lights on at Book Gang: may this Gloria Steinem quote resonate with you or a special woman in your life—"Women may be the one group that grows more radical with age." Thank you for supporting human creators in a world turned upside down by AI. Now, let's get chatting!

(transition music)

Amy Clark (00:08)

Book Gang, I am so excited to have Laurie in the hot seat today. We were just talking about how I was trying not to be annoying and I'm very nervous and you guys know how much I love Laurie so this is very exciting for me. I am a completist so I have read every Laurie Frankel book which I feel very proud of and it is so fun. I was trying to think today what these books all have in common and can I tell you what I think it is and then you tell me what you think it is? Okay.

Laurie Frankel (00:41)

Please tell me what you think it is, I'd be thrilled.

Amy Clark (00:44)

Okay, when I line all of these books up, I see them like a piece of music and I feel like they all have the same refrain, which is I am family. But it's always like a new way of thinking about family. So it always changes my brain a little bit. Maybe some preconceived notions about what I thought family looked like. Is that what we're going for here? Am I right?

Laurie Frankel (01:08)

Yes, you're absolutely right. That's a you get an A. I think that's exactly, that's what I would say too. And it isn't necessarily that I set out to do that. And so I feel like, like you, I am observing that kind of after the fact. But yes, when I look at, when I look at them all in a line, that's what I think it's there about non-traditional families. And, you know, and generally this notion of like wider ranges of normal. Yeah.

Amy Clark (01:34)

Yeah, yeah, and also like I don't think that I have preconceived notions about these topics and then you'll do something that surprises me or makes me question how do I feel about this? And I think the way that you do it is in such a warm and enveloping way which we can talk about later but I just feel like the way that you present it even though people don't always agree with your interpretation of what that family looks like or how they got to that family or what that family story is you are having a conversation with them that they are willing to indulge in.

Laurie Frankel (02:09)

Yes, yes. That is only goal always is let's have a conversation. I don't want to talk you into anything, and I also don't want to, I don't want to write or read books about things that everyone already has made up their mind about or already thinks they know everything or already agrees about. I just get very bored of that. I want to talk about things and I want to read about things too as a reader that you know where we can have a conversation. I feel like this is the, this is what novels do. This is the beauty of novels is that it, you know, if you, if you want to talk about things where, where your mind is already made up, like that's a social media post. If we want to get in and have a conversation, then like, yeah, it's going to take 300 pages and 10 hours of your time and be really entertaining and, you know, and mind expanding. I just think this is what novels are for. This is what novels do best.

Amy Clark (03:02)

Mm-hmm and they're so good for book clubs and I've had some of the most thoughtful conversations around your work. I am very excited to talk about this new book. So as

someone who has read them all I will say this is another very bold premise and I have to hear how you came up with this inventive concept for a story.

Laurie Frankel (03:12)

So this is a really great question and it's always a difficult one to answer this kind of like where did the idea come from? But in this case, I know where it came from. It's just that a lot of time happened in the middle, which is that when my grandmother first got sick with what we later learned was cancer, which she was in her 80s and had been smoking a pack of cigarettes a day for like six decades. So she came by it honestly.

But when she first got sick, it was this very vague symptoms of like nausea and dizziness and fuzzy headedness and kind of general confusion. And I was in my twenties at the time and kind of threw out to her, well, maybe you're pregnant because I was in my twenties and that was on my mind. And what struck me later thinking about that was that if she had been pregnant, that would have been really great news. I mean, she laughed and she thought that was a great idea. That would have been much, much better news than lung cancer. If I had been pregnant in my twenties, that would have seemed to me to be really terrible news that I was taking pains to avoid. So it was an interesting confluence of things.

Later, it occurred to me and has occurred to me many times since that had I been pregnant when I was in my 20s, I wouldn't have had to stay pregnant. And that's not true for many people in their 20s anymore. And so that started to strike me as something that was really important to think about. That idea occurred to me at that then I guess three decades passed before, two and a half at least, it struck me as a thing to write a novel.

The other piece of that, the other part of the answer to this question is that the first, I wrote this book in the first place in 2017. And I mean, and I mean, wrote it like research drafted, revised, edited, polished, wrote this book in 2017 and just could not quite manage to convince you that this character would do anything other than terminate this pregnancy that that a person in this situation would do anything other than have an abortion and I put in a drawer. It just it just wasn't working.

And when I took it out again in 2023. All I had to do was relocate to Texas or any of the 13 states where abortion had become illegal in those intervening years. And not only does that bridge that plot hole, it refocuses the book where it was meant to be all along, which is on these issues of of agency and and bodily autonomy, where I think that pregnancy is such a good metaphor for the kinds of decisions that we face and make, we face when we're, as we get older and that we make on behalf of elderly parents as we get older, but not nearly as much older as that. And that metaphor that had, you know, that was sort of

the seed, I guess the kernel of this idea all along thereby worked quite a bit better than it had in the first.

Amy Clark (06:28)

I love that this had been put aside and then you just really just needed a new location for where you were telling the story. So picking something up after all that time, did you fall right back into it or did you have to like reread your work and be like, where was I with this story? Tell me.

Laurie Frankel (06:46)

Yeah, I mean, right. Exactly. Because I say, oh, all I had to do was relocate. I read, I, it's like the underst of understatement. I do not believe that a single sentence, even a single clause of that 2017 book remains in this one. Not because it was bad, just because when I went back in, everything had to change. And that point, I mean, I think probably at first I harbored fantasies of like, I'll just edit a few things. I'll search and replace and set in terms and move on with my life. And it was immediately clear to me that that was just not remotely going to be possible.

That book was much, we heard from lots of characters, there were lots of points of view. There were lots of people who got to speak for themselves and what became clear to me when I went back into it was that this really is Pepper's story and that's where it has to be. And in fact, when I picked it back up in 2023, so the 2017 version was in the third person from several points of view. I kept it in the third person and I tried for just months and months and months before I realized, in fact, realized is also an understatement. Until I thought to myself, this works better in the first person and then I put it all in the first person and that is what I never looked back from. That's what kind of finally brought a bunch of things together for me. So no, it was a just absolutely, like I would say I took it down to the studs, but I also took out the studs. The idea is the same, many of the characters are the same, but otherwise it is a completely different book.

Amy Clark (08:23)

Okay, I love this. I love this so much. I remember the announcement from Publishers Marketing when it like came out Marketplace where you had like announced the book deal. I don't often get to interview seasoned authors. So for me, I want to know what the process looks like for you when you have established contracts. Did you have to start this over? Are you a one book at a time person? Do you have a couple of books at a time? What does that look like for you contract wise?

Laurie Frankel (08:39)

Yeah. I am usually a one book at a time person. I have kept my same agent for all from the beginning, or she has kept me is another way of looking at that. And so I have that continuity. Editors change houses and sometimes I have gone with them and sometimes that has not been possible. And when you change houses, then you change teams. So there's not always a ton of continuity, will you or no, basically, in addition to my agent really prefers to do one book at a time, which makes sense for me because I'm not writing series because every book is really notwithstanding where we came in here, which is like, it's about there are certainly through threads, there are themes that I am forever on about, but I think each one is really to differentiate from the one before. So it kind of makes sense to do them one at a time.

And, you know, I think for people who are doing a book a year or so that they're like finishing the one as the beginning, the next, I am in my heart, but I would not, not in a way that really necessarily matters to the publisher. It just kind of makes sense to, to, kind of re-think things through every time. But what that means is that in many ways, each time feels like the first, certainly as far as like my, my confidence that, absolutely, obviously this is going to sell and we're going to find a home for it. It's going to be fine. I, every time I'm like, what if no one will read this book? What if no one will love this book? What if, you know, I, just, and, and there's so much I find of the writing process and therefore it makes sense to the publication process that is just so different from time to time that what you learned last time simply doesn't help it doesn't apply to the next one. And I find that to be pretty true of publication too.

Amy Clark (10:58)

You know, because you've been at this for so long, what do you think has really changed? Like for you as an author, how do you see your process looking so much different from like, especially with selling a book now, do you find it's harder because the market has become more saturated or you still have the same kind of response because you're more well known?

Laurie Frankel (11:20)

Yeah, that's a really good, big, big question. And I feel like some of the answers, well, it depends on what day. Like every morning when I wake up, it's different. It's one of those things that people like to say like, it's a roller coaster. And I feel like that's exactly what it is in a way that, but what people mean by that is it's up and down. And I feel like it's a roller coaster in that I hate lots of parts of it, even the part that's supposed to be fun.

But it's like people, you know, think like the point about roller coasters is I am really unhappy when I'm going up a roller coaster and I'm also really unhappy when I'm going down a roller coaster and I'm basically unhappy all the time on a roller coaster. So I don't

go on roller coasters. And that is kind of how I feel about publishing. Not so much that I'm unhappy all the time, but that like when things are going well, I'm nervous that they'll stop. And when things are going poorly, I'm, you know, unhappy because they're not the way that I think they are. Although I'm more like confused because

There's so much of it that's still such a mystery. you know, I think because, because I'm so, I'm not that long between books, but I'm long enough between books that it feels like much has changed in between one book and the next. know, in particular, like so much of book promotion now happens on social media and social media changes hugely in you the four years I usually am between books or sometimes it's because it's because this well there was a global pandemic during that book so then everything was different for that one you know it's that it's that kind of thing everything feels feels kind of new again I also just think that most of my job is sitting alone in a room with people I made up. and so I do that almost all of the time. And then once every four years or so, I stop doing that and go off and be this other, this other person, this other aspect of my job that I am much less practiced at doing. In some ways, less duty too because the skill required to sit in a dark room with people you made up for four years, It's like the opposite of the skill required to go on a book tour.

Amy Clark (13:24)

Oh my gosh, I can only imagine, you know, we just went out to brunch last week with some friends and they were asking like, do you ever go out anywhere? And I said, well, no, my husband and I both work from home and we never go anywhere. We felt so unpracticed by it all.

And the thing about this that is nice, and maybe it feels this way too, is like you will see me and maybe I won't see you again until your next book comes out, right? There's no social pressure with this experience other than the one time, but I totally understand like if it's not in your wheelhouse to go out. And I feel like the reason why I don't often reach out to seasoned authors is because I think that they kind of don't want to do this part or it feels like this is the hardest part of their job and they just want to get back to writing. And so I almost feel like I'm interrupting a process instead of being like a helpful person. So when, when your team reached out, it was like, well, yeah, of course I would take her, but I'm like, does she want to do it? You know?

Laurie Frankel (14:24)

Yeah. I mean, I love doing this. I love having these conversations and especially because I can do it without getting dressed and leaving the house. It's true. I mean, it's true. When I get dressed to when I like put on a coat, my dog looks at me like, what are you doing? Because I never leave the house without her. If I put on a coat, it's because I'm walking the

dog. I'm home just so much of the time. But it's so great to go out and meet people and talk to people. I feel like the pressure is different.

Like for me, I'm like, I am I disappointing people because, you know, because like, I'm not equipped to pick out a shade of lipstick or whatever, you know, like that, that kind of like to be a public person in a public, like I have to get dressed and I have to find the right shoes and I don't know what are the right shoes and that, that kind of thing.

But no, if people are happy to come out, you know, to book tour, to tune into podcasts, you know, videos or whatever, I'm so grateful to talk to people. And you know, when people are interested in talking about what I'm talking about, it thrills me. It's I mean, it's like you get to be in this community of geekery where everybody wants to talk about books and like over the moon.

Amy Clark (15:34)

Yeah. I love it. Well, so you sell this book. Did you do anything fun to celebrate?

Laurie Frankel (15:50)

To celebrate selling the book? I don't know if I did anything fun, but this book in particular, I was really concerned that no one would get. Because it's a strange premise. I mean, and this sort of also circles back to your previous question, like, nevermind what number book it is. It's a strange idea.

Amy Clark (15:51)

Yeah.

Laurie Frankel (16:17)

I wasn't sure whether anyone would get it or would love it. I also, my editor had left and she and I remained very close, but therefore I was a little bit at sea. didn't know what was gonna happen. And we sent it to Holt, who publishes it and who published the previous ones. But with people I didn't...I didn't really know anymore with a new team of people and they loved it and they loved it immediately and they got it immediately and they were like instantaneously enthusiastic. And so I feel like the celebration was that I didn't have to spend months fretting about it. Within days they said, my gosh, we love it so much. And I was so relieved.

But I will tell you that the first time I was talking to them, the first time I was meeting them, I was doing it on Zoom because I'm in Seattle and they're in New York. I was so excited and I was all ready and prepared and everything was great. And at about two o'clock in the morning, my kid came down with stomach flu. And at about five o'clock in

the morning, I came down with stomach flu, literally. And so I felt so embarrassed about having to say to these people, like, I am barfing, I'm an adult. I don't know why this is happening. Can we move it back 24 hours? Which I felt like it's not like a great way to start off a relationship and sounded fake because like adults shouldn't throw up, but here we were. So what I did to celebrate was like saltines and ginger ale, but it was awesome.

Amy Clark (17:37)

It happens. I will say my husband is a saltine connoisseur and he would absolutely love this. We had friends on his birthday that will like drop off three different varieties. Hey, you can use that material for your next quirky character.

Laurie Frankel (17:53)

I did not even know there were varieties. I mean, I don't think that wasn't my first thought. Like, I can use that. That's good character development. Yeah.

Amy Clark (17:55)

I know, it's pretty good. It's pretty good, I'll tell him. Well, Enormous Wings, was that always the title?

Laurie Frankel (18:10)

Pretty much always. Before it, I was flirting with a variety of other titles that weren't working. And as soon as that one came into my brain, I was like, aha, that's the one, that's the comes from a short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings. And I was using it, that story to explain a thing about the book to my husband. And I was like, oh, you know, because it's like in the short story. And first of all, he didn't remember the short story, so it didn't help me. But as soon as I started explaining it and explaining the connections and why that was so important to me, I was like, whoa, this is the title of the book. This is the perfect, perfect title of the book. This is my sixth novel. It was, I was on number five before I got to pick a title and myself. And, and so this is the second one that I kept, but once I learned after book one that I wasn't necessarily going to get to pick a title, often choose them in a kind of a well maybe way. And this one I knew, I knew, I knew, I knew that this was going to be the title of the book.

I really am so pleased with this title. I just want to say book titles are really, really hard. It's hard to get them to do all of the things that you want to. And some of it I think is like just the connotations of wings are so many. know, have connotations of flight and you have connotations of freedom and you have connotations of like caretaking and wrapping around and protection, all of which works really, really nicely for this book. But because the protagonist is an English teacher, was an English teacher before she retired, it gave

me, I knew I was gonna have that opportunity to just do like a really, really quick summary of the short story.

And the short story is about a very old man with enormous wings. It's about a couple who in a storm find a very old man with enormous wings washed up on their beach and they look at him and conclude he's an angel. Like human shaped persons with wings equal angel, but everyone else in their community is like, no, he's gross. He's old, he smells bad, he can't really, you he's not spry. I don't understand him when he talks. And therefore he can't, he can't be heavenly. He can't be blessed. He can't be an angel. And I just thought, my gosh, that works at like 400 different levels. I'm using them all. This is going to be really great. So yeah, yeah, yeah. Very, very thrilled about that. Sometimes titles are compromised. And this one, I feel 100 % thrilled by.

Amy Clark (20:41)

Well, I love it. I want to get into your plot. I'm so excited to talk about this book. So I have already set readers up, but obviously this really starts with Pepper losing her license. She's losing her home. She's losing her routines. She loses her autonomy. It's a one domino fall moment. And I thought when you were crafting that opening spiral, why did you want to show how quickly independence can leave a life and how we were supposed to experience and witness to Pepper's journey?

Laurie Frankel (21:14)

Yeah. Yeah, such a great question. So thrilled you noticed. So one of the things is I really liked the idea of starting this book, which is in so many ways about new beginnings, all sorts of new beginnings and really new life. And I liked the idea of kicking it off with a bunch of endings that the first thing that happens is a lot of things end. And I just thought that was a very short first chapter. I think it might be a page in the book, maybe a page and a half, very, very short.

And, and so I hope that you will notice that we start off with a bunch of things coming to an end. I think starting with an ending is always very interesting. and we get lots and lots of beginnings and endings throughout this book. That seemed like a really great place to me to begin.

I also think that it is true so often in life and especially for people at this particular stage of life, at this kind of elderly stage of life, that they are dominoes. That one thing falls and it knocks over everything else. Again, I think that's true so often throughout life that we think it's going to be this discrete thing that happens.

And I can handle that discreet thing. And it's almost never discreet. Very, very few events, I think, that befall us, that happen to us, happen on their own. so that is something that I wanted to kind of think about throughout. And it's because I am using this metaphor of freedom, and choice throughout this book. Looking at the ways in which this thing happens that doesn't really have anything to do with her being old. She gets in a minor fender bender, which of course could happen to anybody at any time. Yet for her, it means not only are all of these changes set off, but she is deprived of many decisions going forward because she, because they have determined that she, because she gets in a fender bender they decide she cannot drive and because she cannot drive, she cannot live at home. And because she cannot live at home, she has to move into this facility.

And these are the kinds of things where choices are taken from you. I, one of the things that I found over and over again, as I was writing this book is that this notion of choice and who gets choices and what those choices are is much wider than that we usually talk about it and think about it. And this is one of those examples where her children, her adult children, her middle aged adult children in nothing but care of her make decisions on her behalf that she is more than capable of making herself. And she too makes decisions on their behalf, that she, however, would not make for herself, as one does for one's children at every age of parenting. And so, you know, that I think like when we think of like 30 year old moms who are making these decisions on behalf of their infants, we think, well, that's, you know, that's how it's supposed to be. But when we're talking about 77 year old moms making the same kind of decisions on behalf of like the welfare of their 53 year old daughters, that's a different conversation. And so I want to talk about all of that in like the 350 words that kick off this book.

Amy Clark (25:01)

Yeah, I love it. You know, I feel like I'm having these kinds of conversations with my peers right now This is a really tough stage where you desperately want your parents to be independent But also that hard decisions are being presented, you know, maybe a parent falls or you know early onset dementia or some kind of diagnosis starts to intertwine with their life and you get you know, you have to make decisions whereas with Pepper I felt like okay, so she gets in a minor fender bender and like everything gets taken away. And I think what you presented so well is that, you know, the experience of living in this assisted living home also takes away a lot of choices, like the food that they eat or, you know, she loves throw pillows and they're like, no, that you could fall on those, right? And the ways that you want to decorate your place are not actually like conducive for this. And you have to get used to having these like medical aspects to a living space that she's never had before. So there's so many other ripples to that that I personally maybe didn't contemplate before or think about. Like all of a sudden it's not just the choices that her

family is making for her but the choices that are being made by the assisted living home itself in order to keep all the residents safe.

Laurie Frankel (26:21)

Yeah, right, exactly. That idea of moving back for the first time in for many people, decades, into an institution where decisions are being made on behalf of the whole and the well-being and safety and protection of the whole rather than, you know, like when you're living in your house by yourself and making your own decisions in your own house for yourself. And for lots and lots of people, that hasn't, I mean, what Pepper observes is the last time she did that she was living in a dorm in college.

Another thing that she observes almost at once is that most of the other communities that we live with and even live alongside for most of our lives are often pretty small in age range. Whereas senior homes, retirement communities, mean, frequently they're 55 and up. And so it's 55 to you know, like 105, and that's a huge wide range of people. And when you start to say things like, okay, rugs are not safe, well, rugs are not safe for a small portion of those people. But just in case, we're gonna say no rugs for anybody. And that makes sense on the one hand, and on the other hand, difficult change in life, it's a difficult thing to take on.

And so she is very much this new kid moving, moving into a new school or a new neighborhood. And at the same time, as she imagines, this is probably my last move. This is another thing that you do over and over again in your life. You move houses, at least maybe you move towns or states or countries or, you know, whatever, up-sizing, down-sizing, all of these things. She thinks that 77, this is probably the last one. And all of those reckonings were things that me too, I...I really just hadn't thought through until I sat down and thought them through to this book.

Amy Clark (28:18)

Yeah, it's funny you bring up school because you do give her a senior prom, which I appreciate. So I loved this aspect. You know, it's funny, I had PT in an assisted living spot and they did themed nights and I came and it was like New York, New York and they were serving like New York strip steak and they were doing a New York movie and I was like, I would love to live here. I love this so much. But you know, Pepper does find a love interest there and we were going to have a late in life romance, but then we also are presented with reproductive choices that maybe feel radical, but it's quite ordinary for all women. Why is it important that Pepper's desires feel neither tragic nor comedic, but just deeply human for readers?

Laurie Frankel (28:47)

My gosh, Amy, I'm so thrilled. You're just making me so happy with you. Yes, exactly. Because that's exactly what I think. What happens to her is eventually quite extraordinary and unlikely, but I did not want to set up and in particular the romance to feel to feel that way, nor did I want her to feel mocked in any way at all. One of the things she herself observes is no one wants to talk about seniors having sex. And her point is, we talk about sex, I mean, in all aspects of culture, all the time, among basically everyone, in ways that are often wildly inappropriate, but not among seniors. That's disgusting.

Which is of course absurd, particularly when you put them all in a place together. You know, when everybody is living together in the same place, of course they're gonna fall in love and of course they're gonna have sex because they are human people also. And that is what I wanted it to feel like. I certainly didn't want anybody to laugh at her, you know, to like play this relationship for comedy, but I also didn't want...

There are definitely aspects of this book that feel miraculous and this isn't one of them. This just feels, you know, I think lucky, blessed, like, because it always feels to me, you know, extraordinary when you, you know, when you meet a soulmate; when you think like, this person is my person and we've, and we've managed to come together, you know, against all odds of, you know, I don't know, whatever likelihood, probability, fate, what have you, but not in any way, any more extraordinary than that, than I think that that always feels. And it was important to me not to elide the facts, I guess, is how I wanna say that. I didn't wanna fade out on that part. you want, like, you're just like on TV or like they're going for the kiss and then the camera pans over and who knows what happens? I want you to know what happens. I wanted to make sure that we talked about that too. I feel like, you know, these people deserve a sex scene. The fallout of this sex is tremendous. So let's see the sex and celebrate that and have it be, you know, as you say, human. That was the thing that I knew going in. I was gonna have to figure out how to pull off.

Amy Clark (31:36)

Yeah, no, it shouldn't feel so revolutionary to say I refuse to fade to black with these characters. I think this is so important and I also think many bedroom scenes are very important to witness, whether that's with disabilities or, you know, aging or our bodies changing and not really recognizing them anymore. There have been so many impactful mirror scenes and things like that that have, you know, been laced within books that have made me think or normalize some of my own experiences and this is important for the next generation and the generations moving ahead that we don't pretend like these things don't happen or that they you know are gross they are totally human and I think that's what makes Pepper as a character so appealing to me is that she has like this fully lived

life and also that the life experiences are continuing and just as they would for anyone right?

Laurie Frankel (32:30)

Yeah, exactly. And I think you're right, too. I think that's exactly right. I mean, in general, fiction doesn't need to be an exact mirror. It's not like, yes, I myself have also been 77 and pregnant. It's saying, like, yeah, doesn't always look the same. It doesn't always look like it looks on TV. It isn't always this idealized thing. doesn't always happen among, I don't know, extremely fit 22 year old heterosexual people. There's a wide variety. Let's look at all of it. And that I think is a mirror of a different sort. It says like, okay, yeah, I'm not this exact thing. I've experienced a similar difference and gap between what is presented to me, what my reality is in thousands and thousands of ways.

That too, I think, is what fiction does really well.

Amy Clark (33:25)

For sure. Well, I want to revisit one of your scenes with you. So this is me coming to you hot off reading [This Is How It Always Is](#).

Laurie Frankel (33:35)

Okay, good.

Amy Clark (33:55)

So in a scene, Pepper is pouring over her memories. She's reminded of her first pregnancy as a young woman. And the phone call she shared with her mother was that the timing is all off in this. And her mother had chuckled and she said this, which I'm going to quote you, "Oh that's how it always is. When it's least convenient when you decide to wait a little, when you think next winter might be better. That's when you get pregnant because it's a good first lesson in parenting. It won't be convenient. It won't accommodate you. And for the rest of your days, your schedule will be shot to shit. That's when it always happens when you least expect it."

So of course I'm like, is this a call and response to [This is How It Always Is](#)? Did you know you were in conversation with this book? Please tell us for the real fans out here.

Laurie Frankel (34:00)

Yes, yes, and I'm so thrilled you noticed. Yes, it came out of, well, I was gonna say it came out of my head, but it didn't, it came out of my fingers. I typed that and then I thought, that's too close. And I was like, no, no, no, that's great. Like double down on it. Let's leave that for, you know, for people who will enjoy it and notice. You know, I think that that happens all the time where like, I mean, by the time these books come out, I've read them

in the order of 400 times. So certainly they, you know, the phrasing sticks in my head and so sometimes it comes out again and then sometimes I change it. But in this case, no, I decided to, I decided to keep it for exactly, exactly, exactly that reason. So I'm thrilled you've noticed.

Amy Clark (34:59)

Okay, it was an Easter egg, so I'm very excited that I discovered it. Well...

Laurie Frankel (35:05)

Yes, it was an Easter egg. Yes. Yes. Awesome.

Amy Clark (35:09)

One of the other threads that really struck me is how these adult children can both rally and inadvertently bully a parent into safety. And I wanted to talk about writing that tension between your characters honoring these different roles that they are all falling into and not doing very well at first. Everyone's really struggling, which is true for any family, but I'd love to hear about how you wanted to really illustrate that tension and what it takes to write that.

Laurie Frankel (35:28)

Yes, well several things. One is that well, I was saying before about that we tend to think of very narrow notions of choice. And one of the things that I kept rediscovering and coming back to is that there are a lot of people who are pro-choice as to abortion and consider themselves pro-choice and are pro-choice who would however make a decision to to confine a parent, an elderly parent, to a retirement home against that parent's will and better judgment. Which is to say that we're pro-choice and pro-bodily autonomy sometimes, and other times not, and for really similar reasons. Like if we delved into, well, okay, that's different because of issues of safety, because of issues of responsibility.

Because of, you know, they're concerned that that person was not really capable of making a decision. And that's really interesting to me. And of course, the vice versa is true too. That there are lots of people who are anti-abortion, but who would be pro-choice when it came to a parent's unwillingness or lack of desire to, you know, to leave, say, a single family home and move into a retirement community. I am very interested in the way in which the language is the same and the logic is the same, yet we diverge on these ideas because these ideas are so much more complicated than we usually think of them.

Most people know how they feel about abortion and most people are never, ever going to change their mind about it. And so okay, we don't need to have that conversation anymore. What else can we talk about? And this struck me as a really interesting thing to

talk about. And that this notion of having to parent your parent instead of your child whips a lot of those ideas on their heads in ways that I think are very surprising insofar as of course you have to make decisions for your children, they're children. Your parents aren't children.

And so that shift is really interesting. And it is a shift that almost everyone, if they're lucky, will undergo, which is to say, like, parents take care of children for many, many, many, years. And then if you're lucky, that flips. And all of a sudden, or sometimes very slowly, children are taking care of their parents. And all of those rules and all of those roles suddenly become different than they were, all that stuff seemed very, very interesting to me. And so that's, feel like, maybe the first half of your question and the second half, like, how do you do it? I think that it almost writes itself. That makes it sound easier than it is, but that you develop these characters, these complicated characters and complicated relationships, and then they get to go muck about in complications. And that's great.

That's really, really great. That's what you want for, you know, for your novel.

Amy Clark (38:55)

Well, I feel like one thing that you really succeed at and you know, I often say this on the show and I apologize if people have heard this too many times, but people with screenwriting backgrounds tend to do these big big casts really well. They can understand each character and they flesh them out really well. And then, you know, it's very easy for them on the page because they're used to like moving lots of moving components and your casts are always big and they always have very, very detailed, very memorable characteristics. So in this cast of characters, we have a grandchild with very colorful emojis. We have an arm wrestling son who has one arm that's like a little bit bigger than the other. We have an official family like national coming apart day. I feel like every time when you put these families together, I can see these characters very fully as each individuals and that I don't feel overwhelmed with the big cast because they're so well played. I don't know how else to explain it but sometimes like I'm thrown into a book world right now where they they have far fewer characters but because the details are so not exciting to me that my head just can't seem to remember like I'm like who is this? Like who is this? I won't say what the book is because we want to be nice but you know what I mean that that kind of thing comes up. So I want to talk about making quirks and also these big boisterous scenes where, you know, like little women where there's so many characters, like all the little kids all in a room. And I think you did that with This is How It Always Is. Like I remember all these little bedroom scenes where they're like saying a bedtime story together and how you layer these characters so well. But we're

seeing that same kind of world oriented in this world. So tell me about making these characters.

Laurie Frankel (40:27)

Yes, I mean, first of all, that's so nice of you. So thank you. And second of all, I'm totally with you. And that's, that's at least the start of the answer to your question, which is it drives me crazy when I'm reading a book and I cannot keep track of characters. And I'm a very good, attentive, careful reader, but I can't tell these people apart. It drives me crazy. So because it is a peeve of mine, it's something that I'm very careful about when I'm writing to make sure that you can keep track of who's who. That's part of it.

The very short answer, I think, is editing. They don't start out that way. And I find that if I set out to give characters quirky individual characteristics, that they're very cheesy and they feel fake. So I find that I just have to keep writing them and writing them and writing them until they happen, they become real enough characters that they take on.

What I want to say is that I realize quirky things about them, basically. Like I get to know them enough that I realize I realize the ways in which they are interesting or stand out or different or like what aspects of them want to go on the page and want to be written about.

The characters reveal themselves. The characters start talking for themselves. I am a dialogue heavy writer and reader. I like dialogue, but left to my own devices, I'm essentially writing plays. And my editor will often write things, like little post notes that are saying, maybe you could describe really anything at all. Tell us what's happening in this room or even what the room looks like or even where we are because I don't see it.

I don't think about it, it isn't where my strengths are and it isn't where my brain is, but I hear them. And not at first, but eventually these characters start talking to me. It sounds very woo woo and I don't mean it, it is the most practical thing. It's just that you get to know these people and then they become real people, I guess, with real quirky things and real ways they talk and real ways that they interact. And then at that point, all I have to do is write it down. It's just that it takes several hundred drafts before that starts happening. And one of the things...

Amy Clark (43:13)

And then one of them is like, one of them's like, one of my arms is really big and the other one is not and I actually am really into arm wrestling. Is that what they're saying to you?

Laurie Frankel (43:18)

Yeah. I mean, basically, I'm trying to remember where that particular thing came from. And really, I made that up. That is, I don't really know anyone who arm wrestles, but it does seem to me that if you were arm wrestling... So sometimes what happens is it comes out of my fingers and then I have to go to Google and say, are there professional arm wrestlers? And then you find out, yes, there are.

Then sometimes it's just logic where I'm like, okay, if you arm wrestle, I assume one of your arms must be bigger than the other one. And if not, okay, it sounds true. So, you know, so we'll go with it. And that, you know, that is the kind of thing that, you know, that I come up with. And, and I should say that in the course of a novel, dozens and dozens of those things go in for a little while and then leave. They fall by the wayside, they get cut. They're not doing enough for me. They're not landing. They don't work. And then sometimes, you know, it's funny. And then also it was useful to me down, you know, 100 pages later for some other reason.

So then that stuff gets to stay. In general, a thing that I tell students all the time is all details have to do two things. And so any of the details that are only doing one thing, like it's kind of quirky and cute, but it isn't helping me with character. isn't kicking off a plot point. isn't something I can call back to 100 pages that gets cut, that goes away eventually. So what's left is left because it was working.

Amy Clark (44:52)

Okay. That makes sense to me. And I like how they like tell you who they are over time. That actually delights me. I think one of the other things that you do really well and just I'm, I am not Jewish, but I am often so moved and intrigued by the Jewish history and like how you weave Jewish culture into your stories in ways that feel very organic, not like you're trying to teach me a lesson or here's the instruction guide on being Jewish but there is something very lived in and always surprising. I would love to hear if there was anything specific like Jewish trivia humor that you were proud to have embedded into this book.

Laurie Frankel (45:38)

Oh gosh. I think that, so Pepper is not especially, in fact, I'm almost never writing very, very religious characters, but she might be my most Jewish character yet. Entirely culturally. Because she's from Brooklyn, but the book is taking place in Texas, that contrast is really interesting to me. I also wanted to take off the table any kind of an argument that she couldn't or wouldn't seek an abortion for religious reasons. And so that is certainly part of it. And then the question is, and of course she rear ends this priest in the first line of the book. so then that contrast, I thought, would be a thing that would keep giving.

I became very interested in a relationship between this kind of profane, foul mouth, Episcopal priest. He makes this very important distinction again on the first page of the book where she just assumes priests are Catholic and he's like, you know, he's not, he's Episcopal. So like, okay, talking to this old Jewish lady, I thought was going to be a gift that was going to keep on giving and indeed it did. That is a kind of detail that I got to keep throughout. You know, I think too I want to say this sort of stereotypically Jews are a people of opinions. That is, think that the stereotype, the thing that you hear all the time, and I think it's meant to be pejorative is like, oh, you know, if you have two Jews in the room, you have three opinions.

And I think that that's meant to be an insult and to suggest, I mean, I don't even really know what it's supposed to suggest, but in fact, think that's such a compliment. I think it's such a wonderful thing to be true because among other things, it suggests that at least one of those Jews is able to hold two different ideas in their head at the same time. And this again is always my goal here. I'm not trying to make an argument. I just want to look at a variety of sides of an issue. Let's look at them all and then have a conversation about how this is complicated. And I think that that is a thing that the stereotypically Jews are known for, for better and for worse. And I want to put it in the for better category. Like, let's bring our opinions and have complicated arguments about complicated things by reading deeply and educating ourselves. I feel like, yes, that's definitely what novels suit up for. And if that's what we want to say about Jews, then great, I'm here for that.

Amy Clark (48:25)

I love it. Well, this really leads me to, I think, very important conversation that we should be having which is when book clubs pick this book, you know, there are going to be strong opinions. I believe this book is going to be, and I say this in the most kind way, but I think it is going to be polarizing among readers about the outcome of this story and I am excited to ask you, what do you want book clubs to be talking about here without spoiling it? Well you'll have to be on the spoiler side if you want to know the truth on the ending, but I do think that you are presenting something that you know as a book club leader you know I want people to feel really warmly enveloped and and feel like they are having safe conversations and this is a good place to practice. How do we feel about things and how do we want to talk about those things with other people?

Laurie Frankel (49:24)

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I agree completely. That I think is really one of the wonderful things about book clubs is it's a safe place to have a conversation. In fact, it might be the safest place to have some of these conversations because communities, mean, like as an example, think classrooms, classrooms are hopefully a safe place to have a conversation,

but they're not always. Whereas your book club, presumably is. You're among friends in someone's home and hopefully it is a really safe place to have conversations with people who know you and who you know well. And I think all of that is really wonderful. I do think this is a good book club book. And I mean, I hope that people will love this book. I hope it's very entertaining. I hope that people are turning pages and can't wait to find out what happens and you can't put it down and it's well written and all of those things. But really what I think makes a good book club book is there being something to talk about. And I think sometimes there are books where everybody, where you go to the book club and everyone was like, I really love this book.

But then like that's, you're right, like you loved it, so great. But there's nothing to say about it because everybody agreed. And I think that this book is going to generate some conversation. And as you point out, almost everything I, right? It pisses people, I piss people off. You wouldn't think it, because I'm really nice, but people will get mad and some of them, some of them want to email me and tell me all about it. I don't, you know, I certainly am not aiming to anger anybody, but I do think that that these are difficult conversations. that, again, in my opinion, is a really, really good thing. I think let's have more difficult To my mind, this is not a book about abortion, but there are some abortions. The topic comes up, certainly.

I think that that will create some feelings among people. I do want to say it's really not, because of where she lives and because of the structure of the plot, abortion isn't really on the table. And so it's not really offered as a should she or shouldn't she because she can't. That's not really what the conversation is. Instead, I think that the book looks a little bit into those arguments. And I want to say again, almost nobody ever changes their mind about whatever their position is on the abortion debate. So I want to say like, okay, great. But within those arguments, within those within that stance that never changes, what do you disagree with? And what do you agree with? What comes along with that? That's more complicated. What other ways are there of looking at it? How does it how is it the same as, you know, as being an elder? How is it the same as being 77 and not having as many choices available to you as once you did. How is it the same as being 50 and saying to your mother, I don't care if it was just a minor fender bender you can't drive anymore, you have to go live in this retirement facility, and how is it different? So I'm hopeful that there will be lots and lots to talk about, lots of different kinds of bodily autonomy and lots of different kinds of agency and how those are the same and how they are different for different members of our population with different relationships.

Amy Clark (52:42)

Yeah, I feel so so lucky to be in a multi-generational book club because I learned so much from women who are older than me, women who are younger than me that are navigating

very different worlds than I did when I was, you know, in my 20s or 30s. Like the world has changed quite a bit and I'm always like interested and profoundly moved by that. Usually my elders are a little bit more progressive than even I am because I, you know, grew up in a religious home and I have very different kind of upbringing that I'm bringing to the table, but I also have a curiosity and I hope a warmth to the ways that we lead. And I agree, I think this is so much more about body autonomy as a topic as a whole.

And I did have like a very interesting conversation with another reader who wanted to talk through this ending with me and I brought up an aspect of body autonomy that she had not been thinking about because you know I was really moved by one particular character named Dot which you'll get to uncover in the story and her body autonomy and her decisions about her own body about you know if I want to be here or not and when when do we get to make those kinds of decisions so I think there's so much more I think it's easy to focus maybe on the one aspect that is a hot topic issue but this is a book about a lot of body autonomy regarding how we you know treat our parents, how parents treat their children, how we treat even our kids, and how we show up in the world for people when they are confronting very hard decisions. So I just want to echo back that I agree. I completely agree. I think it's a great book club book.

Laurie Frankel (54:29)

Yeah. And I think those intergenerational book clubs are the best in general. In the same way that you're saying it's a safe space, there are so few spaces that are truly intergenerational. And if you are in a book club that is one, I just think that's gold. And I'm very hopeful that this is going to be a good book for those book clubs and that they'll have lots to teach one another, which happens a good bit in the book too. I mean, because I think one of the things that as a society, we tend to think is like, oh you're no longer valuable because you're too old and what you think is out of date, it's no longer true. And sometimes it is out of date and no longer necessarily true. But instead what it has is perspective. It's like, here's how it used to be. And that's really, really important for a lot of the topics in this book.

But just a lot of topics in the world. That perspective is extraordinarily valuable. And I'm here for these intergenerational book clubs. I think that's awesome.

Amy Clark (55:30)

I love this. Well, Laurie, we are going to close out here on the main show, but she's going to be joining me over behind the paywall to discuss this book's ending. It's \$5. And that gets you into the multi-generational book club, by the way, for \$5 a month. And it keeps us commercial free and gives space to writers like Laurie to be able to share their stories, which is really important.

But we end our shows the same way with every guest, which is to say, what are you feeling proud of? Whether it's with this project or with in general, but while you think on it, I get to tell you, like, I know I shouldn't meet my literary heroes. Sometimes I am disappointed, I won't lie. Sometimes I've built something up very much in my mind, like the senior prom in your assisted living home. This was just a delight. It was everything that I had hoped it would be. I feel like I'm in good communion with you. I love your stories. Thank you for expanding the ways that I think about family. You really have made an impact on my family and I'm trying not to cry but there have been very memorable stories that I still carry in my heart.

Laurie Frankel (56:37)

Thank you so much. Thank you so much. I mean, me too. I feel exactly the same way. It's such a good conversation. And I am grateful from the bottom of my heart to you for doing this, really for everybody. But I mean, since here I am, I am personally really, really grateful to you for doing this. And these are dream conversations we are having.

Amy Clark (56:59)

What are you feeling proud of though, Laurie?

Laurie Frankel (57:02)

I mean, at the moment I am feeling, I mean, this book is really eating my whole soul, because it's here, finally. For an idea that I had 25 years ago, and that I wrote in its entirety and then shelved, what is just about a decade ago, and to now be here finally, I'm feeling a lot of emotions surrounding it. One of them is pride though.

And all of the other aspects of my life, I think, are kind of pushed to the side to the extent that they can. And that's not entirely a good thing. And I certainly am having a lot of emotions. But as to what I am feeling proud of at the moment, this is it. So but happy that this is here finally.

Amy Clark (58:00)

Yeah. It's earned. I'm so proud of you for dusting off that old draft so that we all could experience the story. Your characters are still talking to you and we are so lucky to have them.

Laurie Frankel (58:00)

Finally here, yeah. Thank you so much.

Amy Clark (58:14)

All right, listeners, I'll meet you on the other side.

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