



Book Gang Podcast Transcript:

Sarah Damoff (00:00)

Hi, my name is Sarah Damoff. I am the author of The Bright Years and of The Burning Side, which is coming out May 19th.

Amy's Warm Introduction:

Sarah Damoff's second novel, *The Burning Side*, hooks readers from its unforgettable opening: "The night their house goes up in flames, April stumbles out the front door with her baby in one arm and a book in the other." As April boils pasta in the kitchen, Leo delivers the news that he's contacted a lawyer to start the divorce process. In shock, April leaves a burner on, setting off a chain reaction that sends their already fragile world into chaos. Set in 2022, the novel follows April and Leo—married nearly a decade—as they lose everything in the fire and turn to April's parents, Deb and Billy, for shelter.

But Deb and Billy have secrets of their own. Billy, once a beloved dentist, is facing early-onset dementia, his rapid decline reshaping what should have been their golden years. As April and Leo move in—and a surprise visit from April's sister upends routines—old wounds and hidden truths bubble to the surface. The house becomes a

crucible where the most private struggles of two generations are forced into the open, and the cracks in seemingly steady marriages are exposed.

Damoff draws on her background as a social worker to deliver heart-wrenching, authentic scenes—especially as we glimpse the full scope of Leo Torres' childhood. Raised in poverty, often left alone, and disconnected from his Mexican heritage, Leo's relationship with April gives him the family and belonging he's always craved. Yet he remains quietly caught between cultures. As April begins to buckle under the pressure of motherhood, Leo remains oblivious—until a jarring turn of events forces him to reckon with the possibility that their marriage may not survive, and with it, the loss of the only true family he's ever known.

The novel truly shines in its depiction of Deb and Billy's journey—navigating difficult decisions about Billy's care, reimagining their future, and revealing the secrets that shaped their own marriage. These moments are rendered with deep empathy and honesty, showing that even the strongest relationships are built on daily acts of compromise and resilience. Damoff makes clear that what looks effortless from the outside is often the result of years of struggle, sacrifice, and determination to hold onto love.

Structurally, *The Burning Side* echoes *The Bright Years*, shifting between perspectives and weaving timelines in ways that surprise and deepen the story—especially as the novel draws to a close. Damoff masterfully anchors the narrative in time and place, capturing the texture of contemporary Texas and the pandemic era without veering into overt commentary. Details—like passing American flags, Fox News in an assisted living facility, or a couple packing their lives into newspaper headlines—ground the novel in reality and lend it authenticity. At its core, this is a story about marriage: the choice to stay, the sacrifices demanded, and the hard-won hope that can emerge from even the messiest family histories. Sarah delivers another assured, absorbing saga for anyone drawn to the complexities of love and family.

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, and this week, we are kicking off our Summer Author Series after launching the 2026 Summer Reading Guide out into the world. In case you missed it, we have two incredible episodes this week as we try to align our author guests with their upcoming book launches. It was a joy to share space with Christina Baker Kline for *The Foursome*, which we aired on Tuesday.

If you're wondering about the Summer Reading Guide I keep mentioning, here's the scoop: from December through May, I dedicate myself to reading widely and thoughtfully, curating a guide to inspire your summer reading adventures. Unlike most lists, mine isn't limited to new releases—it's a handpicked collection of the best books I've discovered all

year. This latest edition is the biggest yet, featuring 70 carefully selected titles—upcoming releases, buzzy debuts, and beloved backlist treasures—across 57 pages designed to help you build your perfect summer stack.

Your support of this download is what makes all of this possible—every episode, every book list, and the guide itself are built on your generosity and engagement. Thank you for being part of this community and for making it possible for us to share thoughtful recommendations and deep-dive conversations with authors week after week.

Before we dive in, I want to thank you for the incredible enthusiasm for this year's guide. In a world overflowing with book content, it means so much that you trust me with your reading life—whether you tune in here or use the guide to shape your summer picks. I'll have it available all summer, so it's never too late to grab your copy. It's just \$7 and you'll find the link in today's show notes.

This is a reminder that our May book club selection is Janelle Brown's riveting literary thriller, *What Kind of Paradise*. Set aside May 28th at 8 PM ET for our Zoom deep dive, and don't miss Janelle's guest appearance on the Book Gang podcast—linked in the show notes—where she shares behind-the-scenes insights into her writing journey and the inspiration for this page-turner.

What Kind of Paradise centers on Jane, a young woman raised off the grid by her elusive father. As Jane nears adulthood, a startling revelation shakes the foundation of everything she's believed, sending her on a search for answers far from Montana. This month's pick is tailor-made for fans of atmospheric suspense and emotionally layered family stories. I'm thrilled to welcome so many new members—can't wait for you to join our vibrant, multigenerational club! Membership is just \$5 a month, with a 10% discount if you sign up for a year.

Every episode comes with a themed book list, and this week, in honor of *The Burning Side*, I've put together nineteen books—fiction and nonfiction—centered on fire, both literal and metaphorical, for browsing today for free. Patrons can download a printable checklist and join us for a spoiler-filled chat with Sarah, where we dig into the book's second half.

Now let's meet this week's guest: Sarah Damoff is the bestselling author of *The Bright Years*, a Goodreads Choice Awards finalist and Southern Literary Review Book of the Year, now published in fourteen languages. Her writing has appeared in outlets like Oprah Daily and Porter House Review. Sarah holds a Child Protection Certification from Harvard and lives in Dallas, where she's worked as a social worker. Her second novel, *The Burning Side*, is out May 19th.

If you enjoy the show, please consider leaving a review on iTunes—it's a quick, free way to support what we do. And to our patrons: you're the spark that keeps Book Gang

burning bright all year. Thank you for supporting human creativity. Let's dive into the conversation!

(transition music)

Amy Clark (00:10)

Well, Book Gang, we have a special guest back. We had celebrated Sarah last summer for The Bright Years, and now we get to celebrate the second book. And I thought for our icebreaker, we could talk about your 2011 experience of living in a multi-generational home that inspired this book. I have an experience as well that I would love to dig into and I would love to hear how this inspired your story.

Sarah Damoff (00:39)

Yes. So my husband and I had only been married about pretty much exactly one year when we moved in with his grandparents. His grandmother was sick and we were expecting our first baby and it was a very distinct season having such newlyweds essentially in a home with this couple who was at the end of their story and had been married over 50 years. And I remember even then thinking this category of love and what it looks like, the expression of it and it's just a completely different thing from being early in your marriage and starting your story. And so it was a very formative season. And you know, a few years ago when I was kind of considering, I think I don't think I was even trying to figure out what to write. I think I had just been reflecting on that season and specifically how two marriages in different stages can impact each other. And that was the seed of the idea for The Burning Side. And then I just started thinking about like, well who could those characters be and what would be happening with their marriages and how could we get them all under one roof?

Amy Clark (01:57)

Yeah, I love this idea. I had a pretty similar experience in some ways. When we moved here from Massachusetts, we had like six weeks, I think, where we didn't have a home and we lived with my in-laws and it taught me a lot. You know, I think those kinds of relationships can even in the best of circumstances, there's some friction because you're all using like the same appliances or you you have dinner routines or things that are all kind of gone, going sideways in a big group setting like that and in some ways I feel like it's almost like a locked room setting would you say that with this book?

Sarah Damoff (02:37)

Yes, absolutely. It's a very intimate thing to live with people. And we were with his grandparents about a year and a half. We had our baby. I became a parent in that home as

I was helping take care of an older woman who was sick. And even to see contrast comparison with the the end of life and the beginning of life and new life and the way that just the presence of a newborn impacted people of that age and specifically a woman who was dying to be around a baby was very I'll never forget it. I mean, there's no words to put to both how challenging and how unspeakably beautiful some of those moments were

Amy Clark (03:22)

Oh my goodness. Well, it's a great seed for a story. I do want to talk about your writing journey. I, there are categories of writers that I've talked to and I have a few and they are mostly like, I would say like older women who have been in publishing for a very long time and really understand what the publishing game looks like. And then I have you Sarah. So the first time that I met you, I remember you had such a distinct strategy. You were very, very driven in a way that I think is quite unusual for a debut novelist. And you launched The Bright Years and when you did that you didn't have what I would say is the quote unquote know what industry says you need to succeed right? You didn't have a big social media platform. I think when I first met you, you had maybe 300 followers. I think it grew up from there. No publishing background, no built-in audience, all these things that people say this is what you need to succeed. And yet your book became a national bestseller. It was a Goodreads Choice Finalist. I could go on and on. I've enjoyed fully seeing all the reaction videos, how it's become a TikTok sensation. When you look back, what do you think drove that success?

Sarah Damoff (04:39)

I think it was the people who believed in the story from start to finish. You need so many voices championing the book. I mean, people say, you have to sell a book like seven times before you even start selling to readers. So from getting an agent who believed in it and an acquiring editor who was passionate about it, a marketing team who, you know, and publicity who were passionate about it at a wonderful publishing house. And then the glory and beauty and wonder of readers just spread. Every time I get a chance to be with readers I'm just thanking them because my editor at Simon & Schuster has told me they had never seen anything like that amount of word of mouth with a debut and so I have endless gratitude for all the voices and people who have shared it and championed it and put it in someone's hand and said you need to read this and that the way that that spread, you know, you can't manufacture it and I feel incredibly grateful.

Amy Clark (05:45)

Yeah, I remember having a conversation with Holly Kennedy where she called it a big mouth book for their publisher where a book just goes crazy and that happened with The Sideways Life of Denny Voss. And it's that same kind of sensation. It's been so interesting to watch like all the reaction videos. And I feel like a lot of this even though you know

some of it is for sure social media driving and the readers driving, you also had a very engineered path. And I want to say that from the beginning because I remember you were doing business podcasts before you even had a book to market. So I would love to talk about some of those specific directions you took with publishing that kind of gave you a bit of an edge in understanding the business and how this all works.

Sarah Damoff (06:33)

Well, I'm not sure if you're referring to anything specific, so let me know if you are. I just am a huge researcher in everything I do in life. And so that included the book industry. When I first started writing about five or six years ago, started trying to write fiction and creative writing, I was not thinking about publication. And I did not know at all. I mean, I was completely, I didn't know about Bookstagram. I didn't know about literary writing for me just started very purely.

And then when I wrote The Bright Years, it was like, I had set it aside for like six months. And then I just kept thinking about it, you know? And thinking, well, maybe other people would want to read it. And so for me, the first step, once I had that thought, like I'm kind of interested in getting published, was to find every article, every podcast I could where they talk about the business side of things and listening to authors, literary agents, editors, people in the industry. I had no idea how big of a learning curve and how much there was to learn, but it was like once I started trying to learn and I couldn't stop, it was so fascinating to me. kind of like a personal challenge, like, well, okay, so let me see if I can do this step and just one step at a time. Can I do this step and then this step? So, a lot of fun. Very different from the craft of writing, but both of them are fun.

Amy Clark (07:54)

Right, but I mean in order for a book to succeed I do think at least a lot of the debut novelists I meet don't have a firm grasp on the business end of things and so when I see a success of a book like this I see someone who has went into it with maybe a more analytical sense of how things are going to transpire and I also think that adjusts know maybe some expectations as a writer what to expect so everything has exceeded the expectations you may have held before.

Sarah Damoff (08:40)

Mm-hmm. think what makes someone want to write it or be a good writer is the skill of observation and I feel like what I you know for my first step was to do that with characters and forming characters and actually writing the manuscript and but then the next step was studying what is working and not working for other contemporary authors and How might that look for me? So just asking that and studying and observing every day

Amy Clark (09:13)

And I can say too because this is something that has definitely been cataloged in my brain since we talked the last time. They don't always have it right so there was some guidance on this book that epistolary novels wouldn't sell as well right? How have you been feeling about The Correspondent?

Sarah Damoff (09:33)

Oh my gosh, it's so funny that you're bringing that up. Yeah, I mean, I've been able to connect with Virginia, which is amazing. Our books came out the same week and we're really on a very similar trajectory for a long time. And, you know, she kind of catapulted with The Correspondent, but not until about the six month mark when after her book came out, I was doing well, but then it was like stratospheric after that. And so those early months, I remember every book event I would do and people would, what are you reading now? What's the recommendation? I just felt like I always said The Correspondent. And normally at that point, people still hadn't heard of it, you know, even though it was out. And it was just so fun for me to see an epistolary novel succeed so beyond anyone's expectations. And also Virginia did it so well.

My first draft of The Bright Years was the Bright Letters and it was epistolary and it was not as well done. It was not as well done as The Correspondent is in that form. And so I think for me, it was good that I ended up, but it's like cataloging this note of, but if you can do it well, if you want to do epistolary, I mean, there are all kinds of rules about form and structure and even content. And if someone breaks a rule well, people love it, you know? And so I'm so grateful that The Correspondent has been received the way that it is.

It's just as funny to look back and think for months I was telling, I love telling people about books they might not know about. And I felt so like I, Virginia and I had talked and I was like, I just, there's such like a sistership between our books because of when they come out and the audience they might attract and the fact that mine had begun as an epistolary novel. So it's a lot of fun to see.

Amy Clark (11:19)

I love it. And I love that your worlds are overlapped. And I do want to ask you, I did see you're going to be talking to Maggie O'Farrell, tell me more about this experience. What do you have on deck for everyone? I'm so excited for you.

Sarah Damoff (11:26)

Yes. I'm beyond excited. Yeah, so it's interesting. The Dallas Museum of Art has an incredible Arts and Letters program they host. I mean, I think it's every two weeks, an

amazing author all year long. And it's been a program that I've gone to see various authors there over the years before I was even writing. never do debuts. So I haven't done an event there. But as soon as The Burning Side was announced, they reached out to see if I would do an event.

So I have an event there in June, which is incredible because so many, mean, like the last one I went to was George Saunders and he's been writing books for decades and won all kinds of awards. And so, you know, to be on the same stage as these kind of incredible authors that I've looked up to for years is such an honor. And then, you know, not too long after that, they were they asked if I would be interested in moderating Maggie's conversation. And Maggie O'Farrell is one of my top five, maybe top three living writers. And I've said that for years and I've said that since before I was even considering writing. And so I just keep telling people, like, am more excited slash nervous about that event than even my own. And I'm very excited about my own. But it's going to be a wonderful summer at the DMA.

Amy Clark (12:55)

This is amazing and now I feel like maybe I'm two degrees away if I know you. I love that. Maggie has also been one of my favorite writers and I remember still her debut novel and just being really enraptured with it. So seeing the more commercial success I guess with Hamnet and everything that has transpired since then is such a delight. I think it's a perfect pairing. I love this. Well I want to ask you if someone is sitting on a manuscript right now and they're looking at your journey as and seeing how you maybe went about it and saying, I don't have the audience for this. What would you say to them?

Sarah Damoff (13:31)

If you believe in your work and you're passionate about it to keep going and you have to keep going with an understanding that it could be a very long and sometimes demoralizing road to figure out and to be able to adjust and make tweaks to your work and your strategic planning that you might, you know, it's not to say that you want to just get a goal in mind and insist on that one specific thing, but I do think with those

tweaks and adjustments to what you're doing, just keep going. And for a lot of writers, I certainly can speak just for myself, I will be writing all the time no matter what. So really the part that's difficult is who wants to receive this writing. And sometimes, you know, there may be a project that has to go in the drawer, but keep creating, I guess, is what I mean when I say keep going and do what you can to put it out there. And of course, there are certain things we have control over and certain things we don't, but we do have control over what we continue to create. So I would just say to know that it's normal for it

to be a long, hard road to get your work out there, but to keep creating it and to keep trying.

Amy Clark (14:49)

Yeah. Has the success changed expectations on yourself at all or anything like that? Does it put more pressure on you as a writer or do you feel like you are coasting a little bit because you've had such a great debut launch?

Sarah Damoff (15:07)

That's a great question. Yeah, I don't know if I feel too strongly one way or the other. mean, my life looks mostly the same as it always.

Well, I wrote most of The Burning Side before The Bright Years was even out. And so that was lovely because I was still in completely the same sort of tunnel with my characters. That's how I keep talking about it. It's like, so then The Bright Years came out while we were in edits. And as I'm seeing the response to The Bright Years and hearing, you know, reviews and thoughts on The Bright Years, I guess that would be the biggest temptation was to start thinking about my readers maybe a little too much in the formation of the subsequent story.

Some of it is good because I'm like, I'm getting this feedback, so I know they like this or they don't like this. But there are so many, it's so subjective with so many voices and opinions that you certainly can't write to just to please this broad swath of readers and people because everyone will have what someone loves, someone else may it's just so, reading is very personal experience and so is writing. And so I had to remind myself of that.

Yes, I wanna listen to what people want. That is important to me. But when I'm actually creating the characters in the story to just stay true to the integrity of that story and kind of get in that tunnel with the characters and then later in how we're sharing and interacting when we enter that phase with the book, then think more about the readers. And I think that's actually how readers will have the best experience. I mean, people talk about having an ideal reader and I don't know if this sounds weird. I tried to do that for a while and then finally I was like, I think just I am my ideal reader. Like I need to, if I can open my book to any page and be sucked in and feel something, then that's a good sign that maybe someone else will too. Instead of thinking about this other ideal reader where if I open it, maybe I'm not sucked in or I'm bored or I'm whatever, but I'm thinking, well, but maybe my ideal reader, that's not helpful. Like it just has to be resonant with me to then think, well, then it'll hit the people who need it in the same way. If that makes sense.

Amy Clark (17:31)

Yeah. I get it. No, it totally makes sense because you know, you are writing a story to tell yourself and then you're telling a story to us. But like, if you don't enjoy the story you're telling, I do think that sometimes, especially when it comes to like more unlikable characters, you can tell if a writer doesn't enjoy the characters they're writing. You can write unlikable characters and grow to love them. I've seen that happen as well. But if that writer doesn't love their story and they don't feel passionate about the people that are in it, I think that's really hard to translate to the reader. And so you have a passion for these people, this family. And I think what you do so well is that all of them, all of your characters, I remember their names, they imprint on my heart. Like I follow the family saga in a deeply beautiful way that I don't always get where, you know, there's a character I don't really care about. There's no throwaway characters in your stories. I think you do such a great job at telling those kinds of tales.

Sarah Damoff (18:29)

Thank you. Thank you.

Amy Clark (18:31)

Well, I want to get into this story itself. I know that you said that this is really coming from this personal experience of living in a house like this. And also you embed a lot of beautiful details for a reader that I think are astoundingly good. So when it comes to setting, something I love about what you do in this story is we have very real things happening. So we have moving objects and they're being wrapped in newspaper and you specifically call out a series of headlines that go around Ukraine, Ozempic, all of these things that are happening politically and those are embedded. We also have a waiting room conversation because this is set around the pandemic where someone's educating someone else on vaccines, right? Which is a scene that you might find. So we're really getting thrown back into 2022 very much in this setting. How did you strike that balance with, you know, re-immersing a reader back into a very frankly tough time and make it a welcoming spot for people to stay?

Sarah Damoff (19:46)

Yeah, that's a great question. I think I started writing this book, you know, my the first idea of it and the first pages of it late 2022 and So it wasn't I wasn't going back I was kind of observing what's happening right now and it's interesting the first draft like the draft that went to my editor went 20 it was it cut spanned one year the in present day and now it's just one summer and that was really at my editors encouragement like I think we need a little bit more of a ticking clock because I had gone all the way through 2023 summer. And so I kind of adjusted the timeline and it was interesting because I remember specifically because by then it was end of 2023, beginning of 2024. And I had a reference

to Barbie and Oppenheimer because 2023 summer, those were the movies everyone was seeing. Those two movies. And I remember finding that and being like, whoops, I have to cut that because we haven't gotten there yet. We're in 2022.

So from the beginning, it was just, it was, that was what was present day to me. And it's like, anyone might have this experience right now. If you go to a hospital waiting room, someone might be educating someone with their unsolicited opinions on vaccines or whatever it was that I was experiencing, just throwing some of that in there.

Amy Clark (21:13)

Yeah, I felt like this is such a beautiful way to embed details and give us a real sense of time and place without it overshadowing plot. I think this is a difficult season for a lot of people and, you know, it kind of chuckling at some of the things that come up because, you know, I'm kind of thrown back into that space. You're writing a very distinctly Texan story that never feels isolated, but more connected to broader American moments. And I was thinking, what do you think Texas brings to this story that maybe another setting might not?

Sarah Damoff (21:51)

It is a place that I know really deeply. I mean, that's, that's my, I was born and raised in Texas and have lived here most of my life. and so I just know it very well. And I think.

Amy Clark (21:53)

You're like, I know everything in it.

Sarah Damoff (22:06)

I love when people write about places that you have to go on a research trip and really, and I think there's a specific detail that comes from writing a place that you're kind of an outsider to. I haven't done that yet. I'm writing about a place that I know and I think there's a lot to be seen and understood about our country as a whole through the people of Texas. And I'm sure that's true in different ways for every state, but this is the state that I know.

Amy Clark (22:38)

Okay. Well, let's get into the opening line of this book. You say, the night their house goes up in flames, April stumbles out the front door with her baby in one arm and a book in the other. This story obviously is hinging on a very small human mistake, a burner that is left upon the stove that starts this fire. Why was this the perfect inciting incident for this particular novel?

Sarah Damoff (23:04)

So originally it was simply the tool to get this couple in this young family into the parents slash in-laws house. Because that's what I wanted to do. And I started thinking, how can we get them in? As the idea developed in my mind, I've come to realize this is going to be a couple kind of at this point in their marriage where they've been married a while, almost a decade, but they have young kids. Everything is very heightened at that time. As you mentioned, they go through the years of the pandemic and so there's increased isolation.

They go through many other things, which I won't say because we're not spoiling, but they're at the point where they're moving towards divorce. But then they lose their home and it's kind of like, they don't have it figured out yet. They are still living together. And so they have to make an immediate decision about where are we going to go? Where are we going to stay as we figure out what's happening with our marriage? We have two young children we're taking care of. And the obvious answer is April's parents because they're already close to them both geographically and relationally. That was, yeah, the original idea of the fire.

Now what was interesting about the fire is that I was about halfway through the first draft when the LA fires happened and I really got sucked into just watching interviews of people, what that looked like for them and that loss and that destruction and it really made it made me feel that the fire was more important. It's not just a device. It's another thing that this family has gone through. And it's a very real, and even though, in the first scene, they're all OK. They escaped the fire. Nobody has any major injury from And it's easy for people who maybe haven't experienced that to think, well, that's what matters. And obviously, that's what matters the most. But it's a big deal to lose your home.

Amy Clark (25:05)

Yeah, I can't believe that timing because, you know, it really gave you more insight into building a more emotional, you know, aspect to your story that maybe you wouldn't have been able to tap into had that not happened.

Sarah Damoff (25:17)

Yeah, I remember then like, okay, now I want to speak to people who have had this experience. I spoke to an insurance guy because I just was like, what is this really, like, what are the nitty gritty practical details look like? What's the first step after you, you know, cause I'm thinking you start thinking like, I'm sure many readers do like, what would I save in a fire if I had a matter of seconds? And what would I do when I walk out of my house and have no, you know, you really start thinking about as a writer and a reader, what would I do in that situation? And I kind of realized, I have no idea what happens on a

practical level to deal with your house once it's been destroyed, or in this case, in The Burning Side, half destroyed.

Amy Clark (26:02)

Yeah. I mean, we've lived in our home for 25 years, so there would be a lot of history here that I honestly could not answer that question. Was there anything surprising that you uncovered that, you know, through this insurance adjuster, like what they were tapping into that maybe you couldn't have done on your own or any?

Sarah Damoff (26:21)

Well, I certainly couldn't have done it on my own at all because all the timeline and how much insurance does or doesn't do, and of course it depends on your policy and all these things. And that's not all in the book, but to write some of that believably, I had to personally understand how much do they do or not do, and how does that feel as you're going through something very emotional, as oftentimes crisis is. OK, now we have to take care of some very practical things, even though we're all hurting. So I mean, yeah, just all the details were fascinating to learn and kind of made me think like, what is our home insurance policy like?

Amy Clark (27:03)

Yeah, I worked in insurance as an insurance agent before this and it was a wonderful thing to have because when we moved we added like this little buffer on our policy that people wouldn't know about that would protect our items in transit and of course everything got destroyed when they moved our belongings. I have no idea but we hired a terrible mover and we were able to make claims adjustments but those kinds of things happen and you know if you have no insight to it I'm sure it was just an oyster of information for you.

Sarah Damoff (27:35)

Yeah, and you know, this book is so much about memory and material, our material things are very, our tie, like our memories are very tied to our material things and our senses. And when we see and touch things that have history, as you mentioned, like, and so I don't think I really even understood that when I, you know, had the first idea of the fire basically being the tool that brings the family under one roof. And then as I really got into writing it, it did feel like, my gosh, this is perfect for the story because we get an even deeper exploration of memory and how that is tied to the people and the material things and you know in our home and our home itself. So that was a fascinating journey.

Amy Clark (28:20)

Well, I want to talk about your marriage phases that you chose for this book because this younger couple, they are not newly married. They're no longer in the honeymoon phase. We're out of that. I think they've been married for 10 years. Is that correct in this book?

Sarah Damoff (28:37)

I think nine, uh-huh.

Amy Clark (28:40)

OK, nine years, roughly. And that older, like the Leo in April's marriage. And I'm wondering what you wanted to emerge for us by seeing characters during these two times within marriage.

Sarah Damoff (28:51)

I kind of touched on this before, that Leo and April are in a place where, long past the honeymoon phase, to me, just anecdotally, from my own observation, it seems like the most likely time that a marriage might crumble, where you're not decades in. I mean, there are still things that are new. And specifically, it's very important that they have two young kids, they have this marriage with Deb and Billy, April's parents, and they are decades into their marriage. You do get a sense of, even though they're dealing with health complications and things of their own, you get this sense of stability with them that you don't get with Leo and April. And how might those two marriages impact each other? And what might they learn from each other? Whether that's, I want to be more like that, or I definitely don't want to be like that, whatever it is that they learn and then those things that are those more hidden parts of ourselves, more hidden parts of the characters that kind of start to come out as they're all living together and beginning to talk through both marriages are in a very different state of upheaval and how do they move forward? And honestly, a question that, you know, I would love readers to kind of end the book with when they read it is like, how might these marriages, their trajectories been different had they not had that summer under one roof with the other marriage and how that interplay looked.

Amy Clark (30:24)

I would be curious what your answer would be to that.

Sarah Damoff (30:28)

I think both marriages would have had different, well, I think Leo and April absolutely would have had a different trajectory. I don't know if Deb and Billy would have, so, yeah.

Amy Clark (30:38)

Yeah, I like this contemplation and you know, I've been married for gosh, how long have I been married for? 20, we got married in 2000. So we've been married since, you know, for 26 years. And you know, there is that period, that middle marriage where, you know, you are trying to identify yourself and a lot of people, especially if you get married young, you are evolving into new people. And in this marriage, they are evolving into new people and we have to figure out how to grow together. And I think that it's really beautiful when it happens. And then I can also see why it doesn't because you evolve so much as people. So I love that this is where you start it from instead of choosing the earliest aspect of marriage, we have this to build upon, and also that we have this older marriage, and neither is perfect, right? And that is so important.

Sarah Damoff (31:36)

Yes. And as you're talking, I'm also thinking that both couples discover things about each other, not the other couple, but like the husband and wife discover things from their spouses, their partners, history and background. Even Deb and Billy have been married for decades. Find out things during the course of the story that they never knew about their own partner's background and how that then shifts, you know, the dynamic moving forward. So there really is no time that we outgrow learning about someone that we're with.

Amy Clark (32:13)

Yeah, it's so true. Well, this locked room setting, I want to talk about what are the challenges as a writer, you know, when you are in a more fixed setting. I know that we go out of the house, like we're not completely locked into that, but you also don't have, an escape. There's a little bit of a claustrophobic nature with your characters when everyone is under one roof. So can you talk about writing those kinds of scenes?

Sarah Damoff (32:27)

Mm-hmm. Yes, I did really want the Russo's home that they're staying in to feel like a safe place. It's a refuge. It's a warm place, but it's also complicated. There's just these layers of there's also a lot going on and it's going on in close quarters. We do have Leo and April's house is about an hour away and they're back and forth trying to take care of this house that has had the fire. And that also, I mean, it's just a very obvious metaphor for the states of these marriages and what are we going to do here?

There's a lot of room for tension and there's a lot of room for humor because that's how it is in real life when you have that many people sharing one kitchen. interestingly, when my early draft, which changed, that my editor saw there was a whole middle section where the siblings the adult siblings went to Paris.

And that was because as I was writing it, I had this feeling of like, even as the writer, I'm like, we've got to get out of this one Dallas home. My editor really pushed back, like, I just don't think there's enough reason to take us, you know, to Paris and back, and that we need to kind of up the ante even more with that locked room feeling and just set those things that are happening that I originally had happening relationally in Paris, I would just take them back to Dallas. And so that feeling that I had had of like, we've got to get out of this house for a little while, which is probably how the characters feel. And I think in the end it was a good call. That was funny because I, I as a writer was feeling the close quarters.

Amy Clark (34:29)

Yeah, you're like, somebody needs to go abroad. We need a little bit of a break. It actually reminded me, like when you're saying that I love to watch like people play Sims and where they're all putting like millions of characters in one space and then like giving them terrible personalities and just making them kind of like work it out and everyone's getting mad about like spoiled food and all of that kind of stuff. It's like, it creates that tension for all of the characters, whether that's juggling a bathroom, a sibling showing up that wasn't planning to be there. I mean, you really do create that claustrophobic setting, but it's also almost combustible the ways that they're going to be able to deal with the emotional aspects because they have absolutely nowhere else to go.

Sarah Damoff (35:10)

Right. Yes, and you do know and you get a sense that both the older and the younger couple are needing to make decisions soon about what are we doing next? they're just kind of having to, which adds, you know, people are not at their best when there's a stressful situation. And so there are multiple stressors and they're having to make life-changing decisions about are we moving, really, are we moving together? Are we moving forward together or apart? And what is that going to look like for the rest of the family, whichever choice we make.

Amy Clark (35:44)

Yeah. Well, we want to talk about the backstory that you've created specifically for Leo. I know that you have worked in the foster care system for years with the work that you do. And I feel like maybe as a reader that this is giving us some insight into some of the experiences that you have seen in your work with Leo in this book, we're dealing with neglect. have poverty. There's also a cultural disconnection, which I would like to get in with you. And I wanted to talk about how you wanted that all to be portrayed both with some honesty but also a lot of love and care.

Sarah Damoff (36:21)

Yeah, thank you for asking about that. I love to talk about how the characters backstories come into it and Leo, I mean is his own character not based on anybody. Certainly, for any fiction writer, everything we've experienced comes into what we're writing. Each character, if they're not based on one person, which I've never written a character that's based on one person, they are amalgams of what we've seen of people. And I've never written an autobiographical character, but Leo is the closest that I've come.

All the details being different, just this broad situation where you have someone from a broken family, a different culture, more poverty, marrying into a very different family who's more affluent, a different culture, and very not broken. They've been together for a long time. They've raised kids who are all the siblings, have close relationships with one another. And so what does that look like and what kind of strain might it put on a marriage that you might not anticipate when you're falling in love and deciding to get married. And then of course, I've been sitting with lots of families and in lots of homes, like Leo's childhood home, working with families through social work. And so, yeah, it was very important to, I mean, those, his childhood was one of my favorite parts to write and trying to understand that and understand his family of origin. And originally I didn't know that that would be part of the book. And then it became what I think is an important part.

Amy Clark (38:07)

Yeah. And I think what really, you know, makes the stakes higher for Leo is that her family is his family, right? And so like I married my high school sweetheart and I've known, you know, his sister since eighth grade. I mean the ways that you intertwine and when that family becomes your family, it is so much bigger than just losing a spouse. It is so much bigger because that would be like losing my family and because he doesn't have anywhere else that also really drives a lot of the story because he doesn't want to lose his safety.

Sarah Damoff (38:48)

Absolutely. That is you've you're articulating something that was, you know, just exactly what I was wanting to explore is how when someone gets married and then you bring, you have children and parents in laws and, it's not always like this, but in The Burning Side, Leo is very close to April's family because they really embrace him as, one of their own. And so I think even she, you know, at least internally acknowledges throughout their movement toward divorce.

Like he he's losing more than I am because she's aware that you know He's become part of the family and that would necessarily change with divorce So yeah, like you said, it's much bigger than just the two people

Amy Clark (39:29)

Yeah. Because you are thinking about it is an enormous loss. It's so much bigger than just that. It's, it's losing a family. And, you know, I think any reader who also could talk about that in a book club, what would you stand to lose if that happened to you? I mean, it goes so much deeper for many of us, including myself. And I think that's what really pulled at my heartstrings. But there's also another aspect to this story that is really pulling at my heartstrings. There is something really, especially heartbreaking in this book about watching Billy going through his early onset dementia, which is revealed quite early in the story. And we did talk about what can we talk about what we can't here You can join us on the spoiler side for the other bits, but I did want to talk about how you wanted to approach writing Billy that honored who he was and also who he's becoming because he is evolving into someone new along with everyone else understanding his journey.

Sarah Damoff (40:14)

Yeah, absolutely. Alzheimer's was probably the most intimidating aspect to write about because it's fairly common and I did live with someone for over a year who had Alzheimer's and had also had a grandparent who had it so I've been around it but it still feels like like so many health conditions it's just very personal and everyone's experience is going to be different and yeah so it was it was intimidating to write about I and probably the thing I did the most research on because my personal interactions with people with Alzheimer's have been not early onset.

And so I read a book, a wonderful investigative journalism called The Valley of Forgetting, which is specifically about early onset and how that introduces different questions, especially then to his children who are worried about him how to help him through this extended, I mean, you're basically entering this long indefinite season of both grief and transition. And how do we, like you said, he's becoming someone different, but how do we welcome that person, have patience with that person while remembering who he is at the heart of who he's always been. I mean, there's so many like identity. Identity is also such a big part of this book. and then, you know, the kids, the children, which are adult children, then having to think about like, do I have it? It's one thing to know it might be in my genes when I'm much older, when I'm at the end of my life to begin losing my memory, but what would it look like if I start losing my memory in the middle of my life? It's really just a devastating disease.

You know, originally I had tried briefly to write from his point of view too, and then decided I couldn't do justice to it. That would be a whole thing in and of its own. And I didn't feel that that was the main story or point of the story. And so instead we get everyone else kind of witnessing him and walking with him. And some of the confusion and stress that can be there, but also beauty because in every part of life, even when

there's crisis and disease, there is still beauty there always is hiding in little crevices of the room like it just is there and so that is why we have Deb as one of the points of view so we have April and Leo kind of the main couple that we follow but then Deb as a caretaker and what does that look like and where is that heart on her but also what kind of example might she set so I feel like I may have strayed from the question but

Amy Clark (43:05)

No, you didn't stray at all. You know, I know that you and I had talked about before we started recording is that you did want that included in the book description. Why was that important for readers to know that information?

Sarah Damoff (43:39)

Just I think sometimes, and people can choose not to read the book description, but sometimes if it's too vague, a reader might pick up a book and have a certain expectation. And when something is in there or not in there that's surprising to them based on the description, they won't like, they won't enjoy the experience. And it's important to me to set correct expectations. And I feel like there are these certain big topics, you know, just a few big topics that are in pretty much every book you read.

And some, occasionally you may not be able to say something if it's going to be a spoiler, but with my publisher we just quickly felt like this is not a spoiler, it's revealed early on, and we just want people to know when they read, I might, this might be good for me to read, or it might not, because they have a correct expectation that there is Alzheimer's in this book. And you know I really, didn't know, I mean it revealed itself to me pretty early on that Billy would have Alzheimer's, but originally I just was like, I really want to explore memory. Not specifically with Alzheimer's, but just memory is very important, especially you're talking about something like a marriage where, as you said, you become different people and how you have your own memories and they differ from each other about what happened in the past, whether that was together or separately.

And so very quickly I realized, ok to drive this home even more and to go even deeper into the exploration of memory, I do think we need one character who's losing their memory and to see how that might impact the whole family.

Amy Clark (45:13)

Yeah, it's beautifully done and I just love that you are disclosing that so it gives readers their own decisions on if this is a good fit for them or not. I know it's such a sensitive topic and you know, I've really been surprised. I feel like it's almost not a trend, but I think there must be so many writers dealing with it right now because I see this in

romance. I see this in literary fiction. I am seeing this come up in so many books that are unexpected.

Sarah Damoff (45:42)

I agree. I feel like is this the frequency effect like when you get a new car and then everyone has you you're like I didn't realize there were so many white Hondas I just after the book you know was pretty much done just noticing hearing other people like wow Alzheimer's is in more books than I realized is that and I have no idea I'm like is that a newer thing or is am I just noticing it because I wrote about it I don't know

Amy Clark (45:46)

Yeah. I know I would say it's not because you wrote about it. I would say that it is actually a trend and I'm just wondering how many writers are actually dealing with that in their own personal life right now. And maybe it's just a stage we're at. And also a lot of the writers that I'm reading are in that midlife stage where we are starting to care for our parents and we're seeing things like that and we have to find ways to process our grief and our experiences. And so yeah, it was just really interesting. I do feel like your books, you know, they do have very heavy topics, but I never feel like a Sarah Damoff book is hopeless. Like I don't leave feeling hopeless. This one in particular has such a hopeful ending and such a hopeful message. And I would to hear about what does hope look like to you when you're writing about families under pressure like this?

Sarah Damoff (46:55)

I think to me hope is a belief that the situation can change and that family, love, relationships are worth those difficult seasons where hope is a thing unseen, unfelt. It's a thing you're saying in the future, this can be different. And so what does that mean for this moment? To keep a perspective that...

And it's tricky because, for example, you can't take Alzheimer's away from someone. We don't currently have a cure for Alzheimer's. And many times, divorce happens. And we just have to figure out how to do this in a way that hurts as little as it can. And that's still going to be a lot. So there are so many nuances and so many difficult things. But to believe that, a situation can get better and it is worth the journey, oftentimes worth the journey together, even if that's a marriage ending or surviving. I'm personally married, have been married for 16 years and have never been divorced. But one of the most beautiful things to me with my friends who are divorced is to see the way they will, very painful situations, but the way they will not regret the marriage. It's like this was what needed to happen, but also this, like the divorce needed to happen, but also the marriage needed to happen. And here's maybe what came from that, that I hold onto, that's

beautiful. And it didn't have the end I expected, but we're in a different place now. But that doesn't mean...

Anyway, so hope is a very, I'm kind of rambling, but hope is a very forward-backward thing. It's like holding, it's a way to kind of step back from a certain moment in time and just believe as things have changed in the past, they will and can change again, and we can't see into the future, but we can believe that it just is worth it, even the hard parts.

Amy Clark (49:04)

Yeah, and every day is a choice, right? And you know, I always think that you in our marriage that, it's a choice to stay together and it's a choice that you actively sometimes have to fight for. And sometimes, sometimes it's not, not worth fighting for. And sometimes that's a choice too. And I think that there's so many ways that this can be explored when book clubs are talking about this book about, you know, their own experiences in marriage, marriages that they've witnessed that they, glorified that maybe weren't, you know, as great as I think that many couples have secrets. all evolve as people and can we honor all those different versions of ourselves and then and then still stay together? You know, that's also a choice, but whatever you choose, I hope it's good for your life. And that, I think that this book is so good in celebration of that, that, you know, these couples have to make choices every single day and choosing to fight for something is also a really cool thing in this story. And I'm so glad that we get to see it.

You know, Sarah, we always end this show the same way. We always ask what you're feeling proud of, whether it's with this career or just life in general. And, you know I'm such a super fan. I talk about the episode that we did. I feel like almost every episode I reference it because you just have really impacted me the way I think about storytelling, the way I think about how this career all got started. And you're just so interactive with the people that read your stories and love your stories. And I can feel that I can't imagine the magnitude of all that you deal with on social media. I'm so impressed at the juggle, but I am also so grateful for the kinds of stories that you tell. I think they are so needed in 2026, especially to see something heartfelt and hopeful, but I would love to hear what you're feeling proud of right now.

Sarah Damoff (51:05)

So when I first started this journey, I think even before I sold The Bright Years to Simon & Schuster. There was a publicist who asked me, but I was trying to sell it. I had it written. And she asked me, well, do you see this more as like the trajectory toward literary awards or more toward like commercial and media? And again, I hadn't thought about that. It was a completely new, I was like, what do you mean? These are two different things. And so my answer at the time was, I don't know. I only want to see it in rooms of people like book

clubs and groups of people being led and being kind of ushered into deep conversation with each other through the book. So I basically was like, have no idea if that means awards or media or some of both or what. I just want it with people discussing it because these are character-driven stories.

And I believed that that would happen to a degree, but the way that that's happened over the past year, we're coming up on pretty much exactly a year since The Bright Years came out the way that that's happened and the people that I hear from every single day about how they felt seen or it resonated with them, or they had such and such conversation with a family member, a friend where they really opened up about things they hadn't really talked about before. Literature can be healing because of what it kind of leads to in our real life, real time thoughts and relationships.

It's such a powerful thing, which I've experienced as a reader, and it's the absolute gift of a lifetime. I feel proud of it and also extremely grateful that people have been talking about their own lives because of what they see in these characters.

Amy Clark (52:55)

That's so beautiful. Well, listeners, we are going to have Sarah join us over behind the paywall. It's \$5 a month and that keeps us commercial free and gives space to writers like Sarah to tell their story. And we're so grateful for your support. And you can join us for a spoiler filled conversation on this book, which I'm very excited to unbox with Sarah. Thank you so much, Sarah.

Sarah Damoff (53:19)

Thank you, Amy, I love chatting with you.

This transcript is provided for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, errors and omissions may occur. The content of this transcript may not be comprehensive and should not be relied upon as a substitute for professional advice or judgment. The views and opinions expressed by individuals in this transcript are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the transcriber or any associated entities. Furthermore, this transcript may be subject to copyright protection. Any

reproduction, distribution, or other use of this transcript without the express permission of the copyright owner is strictly prohibited.