

00:00 You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast, and this is episode number 198.

00:08 Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey. This is my simplified life.

00:41 Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today we have another incredible Zibi Books author, Brittany Means, whose memoir comes out today. It is called Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways. This is the true definition of a memoir of an author who opens up of herself and shares everything that she has gone through as a child, as a teen.

01:10 and where she is today in her adult life. It covers everything. I can't even begin to explain what Brittany went through from the beginning where she is driving in a car with her mom, and that's literally their home. She finds comfort in the back seat because that's where she sleeps, and she doesn't know any different. This was her childhood.

01:36 She goes on to live with her grandparents and her mom disappears, just leaves her. And there's all kinds of devastating abuse that Brittany endures, but she goes on to put herself through school. She puts herself through college. She launches a career. She is someone who overcame so many obstacles. And quite honestly, the odds were against her.

02:04 For going through everything that she went through as a child and teen, one would not anticipate that she would do so much for herself to become so successful and then to write about all of it. I commend her so much. You'll hear me gush in the interview about how impressed I am that she could be so vulnerable and candid and share everything with us.

02:31 I really enjoyed getting to know Brittany, to reading her story, and I know you will too. So get ready to listen to Brittany Means. Hi, Brittany. Hi, Michelle. I'm so excited to get to meet you and talk to you. I have read the book, and when this airs, it will be Pub Day. So let me be the first to say congratulations. Happy Pub Day. Oh, thank you. Can you take a moment to introduce yourself to everyone, please? Yeah.

03:01 My name is Brittany Means. I'm an author and an editor. I live in Albuquerque and my memoir is How Love Food Don't Change Our Ways. And I love the title. It was, as you read the book, you will understand why that is the title. I love the aha moment of you're reading along, you're like, oh, that's why she titled it this. It's great. Can you share a bit about what

03:31 it entails because as I was saying to you before we started recording, it's intense. And it's the journey of you being with your mom, driving in a car and like this was your life and you didn't know any different and you were comfortable with it. The way you were like, I find comfort sleeping in the back seat or in the trunk of the, not the trunk, but in the back of the car with your mom and like...

04:00 this is just what life is like. I think that for so many children, we experienced myself included, childhood that we don't know that there is any different, that there is any better. And I feel like that was very much what your story was about. Yeah. I listened to a recent episode about, you interviewed MC McDonald. And you, yeah, you talked about like the way

04:29 trauma is categorized and I really liked what you both said about you process things one way when they happen and then maybe you process them different later. That was definitely my experience with a lot of the stuff in the book. Going through it, living in a car, you're like, sure, I live in a car, why not? Then you think about it as an adult when you have a totally different perspective and you're like, oof.

04:57 Maybe I ought not have. When you find a good therapist, she's like, yeah, that's not really what everyone else's childhood looks like. Yeah, I completely agree. What made you want to write about what happened to you as a child and growing up? Well, I've always, well, as long as I've been able to read and write, I've processed things that way. So.

05:26 I used to write little poems when I was a kid. My mom wrote poetry and my grandma wrote stories. I think that just to me became the way that I thought through things. Especially when I was a teenager, if my ex-boyfriend was yelling at me or something, sometimes the way I escaped was thinking, this is how I would write this scene and these are the details I would put in it. It was just a way to kind of...

05:54 I guess compartmentalize what I was going through. Then when I was in college, I took a nonfiction writing class with Jill Christman, who also has multiple memoirs. She pulled me aside and was like, you're a writer. It was kind of an aha moment. I can do this and people think I'm good at it. I started thinking of it.

06:23 as something that I eventually wanted to be a book in that class. Originally, it was a way to process. Then the longer I thought about it, the more I was like, I didn't need to put it all together. Did you have from those teenage days of writing down certain things that were happening and you were processing, is that part of what you used for the book?

06:53 crafting it originally was the memories that were loudest in my head, like the things that I just revisited all the time and I felt like the most urgent about writing. And so sometimes those were the things that stuck with me because I had been crafting them to get through them. Yeah.

07:21 And I could feel the farm, the barn, everything. I felt like I was right there and the poor dog who knew not to go out into the highway. So you get to that point and then now you're experiencing their Pentecostal religion, right? And speaking in tongues and now you have to conform this whole different way of life. What was that like as a child?

07:51 You go from total freedom in a car with your mom to, oh no, now there's all kinds of rules and you need to believe in this and do this. What was that like and how has that molded who you are today? That's a really good question. It was so hard because I think when we're kids, there's the timeless joke about...

08:19 children asking why, why. They just want to know why things happen the way they happen and why things work the way they do. I thought I'd figured out the way things worked, which was you're always moving, there aren't really rules. My mom was cussing and chain smoking and we listened to secular music on the radio. Then suddenly there was this new structure like you can't listen to secular music.

08:49 you can't watch TV and you can't wear pants. To me, all of my whys had been answered. So I had a baseline and then suddenly there was this new baseline and I was confused. Like, okay, but I want to do those things. And then it happened again later when I moved in with the Foster family. There was this new structure. So I can watch TV and listen to music, but I can't.

09:18 go off on a walk by myself without telling someone. So yeah, a lot of figuring out a baseline and then having it completely redefined. And I felt like throughout the entire book, and obviously this is your life we're talking about, so it sounds a little weird, like I felt through your life I saw that. You were always striving to do more for yourself.

09:44 And, you know, I think that was definitely reflected in college and, you know, finding your apartment and setting things up and like you wanted to do more, to be more, and you worked your butt off. You truly did. What was your inspiration for that? You know, was it that you just wanted to get away, that you wanted something better, that you wanted to see what was out there? I mean, you really came through when...

10:13 Kind of the odds were against you, you know? Yeah. Sometimes it feels hard to define because I know so many people, and I've loved so many people who have wanted the same escapes that I've been afforded. And they want them and they work just as hard. And for some of them it never came. And sometimes I have like a survivor's guilt because...

10:41 I mean, I wouldn't have made it if I hadn't moved in with a foster family or if the English teacher hadn't pulled me aside and told me that I was actually good at something. I had all of these little things that came up, and a lot of it was hard work and a lot of it was circumstance and these lucky breaks, they felt like. But really, I think I spent a lot of time just imagining things. A lot of the book is like...

11:10 there's this awful thing happening and here's me thinking about Falkor from the Neverending Story or building a little house in my head and imagining walking through it. I think my imagination gave me a little pocket I could hide in and survive the hard times. I had, I don't know, more stuff left to get through what was coming. I had a lot of dreams and a lot of fantasies.

11:40 I chased after them and a lot of the time I felt like I wanted too much and for my circumstances I kind of did. But yeah, I think escaping mentally eventually led to like materially escaping partly. Oh, I like that. Thank you. That's like a new level of depth right there. You also talk a lot about your brother.

12:10 feels like it's, you know, you're full brother. I have a half brother and half sister and my kids do too. And I'm like, we don't say half. We just, you know, you're siblings. And there's so

much similarity that it's like, there's nothing half about it. But I know he obviously, because you talk about how you talk to him about writing the book and how proud he is of you. And I loved how you come together in it. I don't want to give it away, but you know, how you got to spend more time together ultimately. But

12:37 What was that like? Because I imagine it's so hard to have this little person you want to protect and you can't always protect them, especially when he goes to his dad's and you're with your grandparents or somewhere else. But then to come back together and have this bond, tell me more about that. Yeah. I love what you said about half-siblings because

13:07 I sent my brother the ARC and he got it in the mail and called me and gave me a personal reading while pretending to sound goofy. It's just kind of how we functioned. But one of the things we talked about was seeing half brother in print and how weird that felt. I've never thought about him that way. He's just my brother. But I needed to clarify for the readers.

13:35 But yeah, we talked about that a little bit like half brother. Right. But yeah, I think I've always been very anxious about being responsible for something. And I don't know how much of that came from taking care of Ben when we were younger, but yeah, it's really hard to be so aware of someone else's fragility when you're a kid.

14:05 I was aware of my mom's and it was very different from the way I was aware of my brother's. We would be, like if I was by myself and he was with his dad and I was in a house and people were fighting, it's like I can go hide in a closet or behind a couch or just escape into my head until it's over. But if he's there, I couldn't escape. I couldn't fantasize about things. I had to be present and I had to...

14:32 be aware of like, is this escalating to a point where I need to take him outside or is he going to say something or yeah, it was really hard, you know, realizing like, I can't just like put my nose down and get through everything if he's here. It was like harder sometimes when he was there, even as it was, you know, a comfort to have someone to survive it with. It was like, okay, we're together.

15:00 but that also means you could get hurt, and that's worse than just me getting hurt. I completely get that from a personal level that I haven't shared openly, but I completely get that. I have a younger brother. I've done the same thing. I've been in the exact same instances that you're talking about, and even as we've grown older, and he's gonna turn 40 this year.

15:23 there's still that protection that I feel this mama bear, he calls me when something's wrong, fix it because you did 35 years ago, fix it now. Is that still the same kind of bond you have with your brother? Yeah. It's something I struggle with because it irritates them a little bit. If he calls me and he's complaining about an interaction with someone he works with or some...

15:51 conflict with a friend, I wouldn't do it. But inside, I'm like, I'm going to call them and I'm going to tell them what for. But I try to give them a little more credit. Like, so what are you doing to work through this? Or do you even want to talk about solutions? You just want me to listen. I have a lot of trouble with that. I'm always like, I can find the solution and I can give you a

five-step plan to reach that solution. And I really have to dial it back and just be like, do you just want to vent? Because I'll...

16:21 I'll fix it if you want me to, but I'll also just listen. It's a big sister thing, I think. I love that. So when you finished college, because obviously you didn't just write this book right out of college, what was this path like to getting to the point of I'm going to write this down, I'm going to sell my book? What happened in between all of that? Well, I think it was a really good question.

16:49 I went to grad school. After I graduated, I worked for a couple of years. And then I was like, it was a combination of just being miserable in an office setting and also just missing writing. Because I would work all day, and then I would get home and have a migraine and be sad and depressed and tired. And so I wasn't writing very much. And I was just afraid of living a whole life where I didn't.

17:17 write anymore. All I did was make Excel sheets. I applied for graduate schools and then I ended up going to Iowa. Really, aside from just wanting to be somewhere where I could write, I knew that I wanted a book, but I wasn't quite ready for it yet. I didn't have all the research skills and I didn't feel like my writing was where I wanted it to be. I wanted...

17:46 I wanted to tell my story, but I wanted to tell it the best way I could for myself and for everyone I shared my stories with. So yeah, it's the University of Iowa nonfiction program is like the center for the essay. So I got really good at essays, but I was frustrated sometimes because feedback I got a lot was like, I think this is maybe like two essays or there's three different essays. And then thesis here came and I was like, now it can all be one big thing. I don't have to contain them.

18:17 And that, yeah, it kind of came together in the grad program, my thesis here. And then from when did you write the, when was graduation from graduate school to writing this book and releasing it? So I worked, I got like roughly the first draft done. And then I got with my agents and they...

18:43 kind of helped me edit it, gave me a few rounds of feedback. And then I think they, I'm trying to remember when, I think it was 2021 or last year they sold it to Zibi Books. And then I worked with an editor at Zibi Books. It's been so much editing that it's really hard to like track the timeline, ironically. When did you finish grad school though?

19:11 Um, I finished in 2020. Okay. So this is all kind of like come together kind of at the same time. Yeah. Wow. That's exciting. Yeah. And I get the ending process. I just got my first five chapters back. They're like, here, start this round one. Yeah. Round one of one million. No, not that long. It's coming out too soon.

19:38 So what is next for you besides the book tour and getting this out into the world? What are you going to work on next? So I have two more books that are kind of fighting for space in my head right now. I know which one I'm going with. I have so much research to do for this one.

20:06 writing how if we don't change our ways was really healing and then unhealing and then healing again. There's so much else that I want to write about and this next thing is more about health and mental health and religion and how they all come together. It feels really good. I know it's going to be another very personal book, but it's more research heavy. I think

20:35 maybe that level of distance will be kind of nice, a nice change from how if we don't change our ways. You bring up a great point about healing and unhealing and with the book that you wrote. What was that like? Because you're open, it's kind of like it feels to me like you're opening up old wounds that you might not have thought about recently or they're so far in the past and yet you're like, okay, I'm going to put them at the forefront of my mind and basically relive them.

21:05 What was that like and did you have to step away from the computer and come back or call the therapist and be like, I just discovered this new memory and I'm writing about it. What was that whole thing like? Yeah. Oh gosh. It was... So, the end of my thesis year was also when lockdown started. So I finished the book in lockdown, which was really hard.

21:33 I finished the first draft because when I was first working on it, I was running constantly. So I would ride a little bit and then it was just like there's so much going on in my body. I just need to go and I was running like 10 miles a day and my hips got really messed up. It was too much. I think at first it was like...

22:03 I'd been thinking about the events of the book, obsessively for a long time, trying to make sense of them and just grapple with them and contextualize them within my relationships. I was finally putting them down on the page. It was hard. It was physically harder than I expected. I just would have days where I would be like,

22:31 You get the inspiration and you can sit there for like eight hours and just write and write. And then at the end of it, you're like, I forgot to eat or I haven't changed positions in hours or I haven't talked to another person. And then when lockdown happened, at the very beginning, we really didn't know a lot. So it was like, I wanted to go running, but I didn't know if it was safe or I wanted to just like go.

22:59 to the co-op and get a sandwich, but I couldn't do that. It was like, I'm right in the house, and then I'm stuck in the house, and it was cold, and there was nowhere to go. And that was really hard, but then, I think once I got the draft done, it felt like, okay, I at least have, it's there, and now I can just mess with it, but it's all out. And then after I...

23:27 got to the point where I submitted it to Zibi Books. It felt like I had exercised it by writing it and getting it into the shape I wanted. And that was a really good time. It was like, okay, I did it. And then all of the rounds of edits. And at first I was like, all right, I'm fixing it. It's getting better. And then near the end, I was so miserable

23:53 sit here with my hair and my fists just like, I can't do this anymore. It's just like, once you move past something, like forcing yourself to sit in it and like literally build the scene of something that you've already like processed and feel like you've healed from it, it was really

hard. And then yeah, like once they were like, all right, this is the last, last thing. You just have to check this final copy edit and like the typeset and everything. And then

24:23 I remember walking away from that and I just went on a walk and I was like, it's done. So yeah, very long-winded way of saying a lot of healing and unhealing and then healing again. Now writing about so many family members, it's kind of like you opened the can of worms of here's who we are. What is that? Because I have that fear of, oh.

24:50 people are still alive. Do we write about them? Because that could sever all relationships. What was that like for you, if you're willing to share it? What was family reaction to all of this being out there for the public to read? Yeah. I think this is like every nonfiction writer's anxiety on some level or another.

25:21 I definitely got the full range of reactions. I got like, we're not talking anymore, all the way to thank you so much for writing this and everything in between. So when I was writing it, my goal was I don't want anybody to feel like I only wrote like

25:47 here's what I went through and it was so hard for me and I was the only one who gets any complexity. I just, I wanted people to come across as like complicated. I didn't want anyone to be able to finish the book and just feel one way about a character. And so like writing with that goal in mind was like, I guess it made me feel like I have this light at the end of the tunnel, which is that.

26:16 I know I did my best and regardless of how much research, how much consideration and compassion and love I put into it, if nobody really fully likes how they're portrayed on the page, if someone has a really big bad reaction, I can know I did my very best and I wrote it with love. There were times I had to go back and edit something because I had to write it the angry way and then come back and write it the nuanced way.

26:45 But yeah, I think everyone has to come up with their own answer and there's no objective, moral right way to do it. I think there are some objective wrong ways to do it, but yeah, for the most part, you kind of have to figure out your own little system of am I doing my best and what does my best mean and all of that. And doing it for yourself. I did not like the ex-boyfriend. I did not.

27:13 I admired your uncle. I was like, oh, he just wants you guys to play and to have a, yeah, I liked your uncle. Yeah, he's pretty cool. I hope he's good. Yeah, there were certain ones. It's funny because it's been a while since I read it. I was like, oh, I got to refresh my memory. It's been over a month and other books in between. And just as we're talking, like, oh yeah, her uncle would play with them and take them, you know, go driving and do other kinds of things. And it's nice to get that familiar feeling of, oh, yeah, I like your uncle.

27:43 You know, now it's all there. I can picture it all. Yeah. I love it. You're a pleasure. And your book is fantastic. I am so appreciative that you've shared all of these stories and these memories and your experiences with everyone. I feel really blessed to have been able to read it because it is eye-opening that you're so vulnerable and you're candid in it. And I appreciate it.

28:13 I think there are people who need to read it. Unfortunately, we can't let little kids read it. There can be light at the end of the tunnel, but it's so admirable for you to share so much of yourself and to be so open. You are still young. You're still a baby. Oh, I'm just joking. You are. Where can everyone purchase the book, follow you, find you, get their hands on the next book when it comes out?

28:42 So you can find the book. It's still pre-sale right now, but it'll be available wherever books are found on October 3rd. And I always like to encourage people to buy from your local bookstores, buy independent. And you can find me pretty much anywhere. My handle is usually Brittany Means It. And I have a website with pictures of, forthcoming pictures of the chickens on there.

29:12 Perfect. Thank you so much, Brittany, and congratulations. Thank you so much. I am so grateful I got to read Brittany's story and got to know her because she's a true inspiration. She is the definition of being able to overcome such incredible circumstances and to really fight for her dreams and to go after what she wants.

29:38 Please go out today, purchase Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways by Brittany Means. It is out by Zibby Books. A huge thank you to Brittany for sharing your story, for encouraging others, and for showing us that there can be light at the end of the tunnel.