

Transcript

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You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 216. 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.

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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. Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today my guest is Donna Heemans, who is a former journalist and the author of The House of Plain Truth. The House of Plain Truth comes out today, so happy pub day.

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I was fortunate enough to actually meet Donna in person last week at the Zibi event new year new chapter, which is very rare. So often I don't get to meet the guests I have beforehand. And yet I got to hear more about her and her journey and some tidbits behind this book, as well as what her favorite hobby is. All of which you are going to also hear.

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I read The House of Plain Truth, I cried. We all know I'm emotional, so of course I cried because it is a beautiful book, one that takes you as the reader right into Jamaica, into the house in which all of this is taking place, and it is just beautifully written, so I am so excited to introduce you to Donna Heemans. Hi, Donna. Hi, Michelle. Thanks so much for having me on.

01:52

Thank you. I'm so happy to see you again. It's been a whole two days, right? Yeah. Three days. Can you take a moment to introduce yourself to everyone, please? Sure. I'm Donna Hemans and I'm the author of the forthcoming book, The House of Plain Truth, which comes out January 30th from Zippy Books. And I am also the author of two previous books, Tea by the Sea and River Woman. I love it. And I read House of Plain Truth. It is amazing.

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I was just telling you that I felt like I was right there where it was taking place and I love that. It was, it means that your writing is fantastic because I could visualize all of it and be there. Can you give a little synopsis of what the book is about without giving away any spoilers? Sure. So it's a book about family secrets, which are triggered when Perlin decides to give up her life in Brooklyn and move back to Jamaica to help take care of her dying father.

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And on his deathbed, he asks her two things. One is to be his memory. And the second is to find her siblings who had been left behind in Cuba 60 years earlier. And it's her job to try to figure out how those two things are related and what exactly her father meant by being his memory. And it also has some family push and pull of, you know, you've come back and why are you even back?

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with the sisters and it's just, it represents perfectly the conflict that can happen in a family, especially when one person moves away and comes back and the others feel like they've been doing the work and whatnot. What's your background? What's your story? Obviously there's an accent. Yes, there's an accent. I'm Jamaican and a book is set in Jamaica.

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There are some similarities to my story, but not necessarily this house issue. Hopefully, I will not have that issue. My sisters and I will get along. And there are three of us, so there is that similarity too. But yeah, I think, you know, I try to, when I'm writing, pull from my life in some ways, whether it's the community I'm writing about or there's something within the story that reflects my experience. And it could be just as broad as the community.

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as broad as just simply the issues of immigration. But in this case, there is a little bit more that pulls from my story. I love that. And then we all get to think about what are those, those secrets that you get to pull. Well, the part that I really pull from is not so much a secret, but I'm sure my

family is full of secrets like everybody else's. I just haven't figured them out yet. Maybe I don't want to.

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The book itself was inspired by my grandparents' story. They went to Cuba in 1919 and went back to Jamaica in 1931. And growing up, I knew that basic fact, which aunts and uncles were born in Cuba, which ones were born in Jamaica. I knew that my grandmother was pregnant when she was on her way back to Jamaica, as Perline's mother is in this book. But I didn't know any of the nitty-gritty details of what their experience was like.

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And so what I wanted to do with this book was to try to understand what they experienced in Cuba and why they decided to come back to Jamaica. So it was a very interesting experience doing all the research and learning historical stuff that I just simply didn't know. That's amazing because I feel like there's so many people who don't know their ancestral history.

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I did a deep dive because my family's from Ireland, and so before we visited, I wanted to know everything there was and how far back can I go? And yet there's so many people who don't. And yet looking at your story, if we all learned more about where we've come from, we could all be writing books about it. Yeah, we could. But I think too that there is something about...

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You know, you can do the research, you can do a lot of that kind of background, you can understand what was going on, the political climate, the social issues. But then there are so many other little stories that your family members have that, you know, really affect who they are and how they live their lives. And some of that is just missing that, you know, you just can't really access. And it's those little stories that I really wish I had, really wish I could

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go back and find, you know, my grandparents are gone and I don't have that still. This is what I hope is a very close representation of their story, minus the drama. But in some ways, at least it

reflects some of what their experiences were like. I love that. Can you share part of your journey? How did you come to America and become an author? What's that look like? Yeah, mine is, it's not a...

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I guess a sexy story like some of the other side, there's no big drama. My parents studied here in the 1960s. My older sister was born here and then they went back to Jamaica. And so I think somewhere along the way they had to make a decision what they were going to do with these two other children. You have one who is technically supposed to be back in America because that's what her passport says. And you have two other children, what are we going to do with these other two? So

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I think a lot of my story was really tied with pretty much what my parents wanted for us as adults. So I finished high school in Jamaica and then came here, went to college and decided to stay. Did you always want to be a writer? The funny thing is when I went to college, I had the grand idea that I was going to become a lawyer. Me too. Oh, you too? I'd love to hear your story, how you went away from that.

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But, you know, I was watching, you know, Law and Order one night and I saw, you know, I can attorney stand up and he was lying. And I decided, you know, this is not what I want to do with my life. Instead of lying for somebody, I can just write books and, you know, lie there or create stories there. It's not lying. It's just creating stories. You know, so as an undergrad, I was majoring in English and media studies and I started writing for the school newspaper. I took creative writing classes and really began to see that.

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you know, there was something there. I could really tell these stories and people like them. And in addition to that, I took an independent study class with a professor who turned me on to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When I read that book, what I heard and understood and saw was even though this book was set in Florida, what I heard and saw was something that really reflected my community. It sounded like people I knew.

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it looked like and felt like communities that I had seen and known growing up. And so, you know, I wanted to do something like that, you know, for my communities. And so I, you know, I hope I'm doing that, but that really is sort of my journey towards writing. And were you in a different career or did you just write out the gate, become an author and say, I'm just going to stick to this until I get things published? Yeah, well, I started out as a journalist. So I've always been writing.

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in some way. So I've, you know, journalism, I've edited, I've worked in corporate communications, so everything related to words in some ways. I think about three years into my journalism career, I started writing what turned out to be my first novel *River Woman*. And because I was surrounded by journalists, you know, doing a different type of writing, I knew that I needed to be in a creative writing program to get a better understanding of how to tell.

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and how to take these 10 pages that I had and turn it into something much bigger. So I applied for a creative writing program, got in and worked on that manuscript as my thesis and ended up publishing it. I love it. That's such a great story. Like Brittany Means who wrote her thesis too and it became the book. I wish I had that in college. I would have been a step ahead of 20 years later.

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I had a question, I just thought of it and then it went away. Oh, it was about this weekend and talking about family issues and how you write about that. How do you approach that and the truth behind certain things? And I know that it's fiction, but as I was talking to Angela Brown the other day too, and she had said that her mom read her book and she could pick out the parts that were real.

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So how does that affect you or what does that do for your writing when someone in the family can go, oh, I know that part's real? I hope that nobody can pick out what's real. Or if they can,

that nobody will be totally disturbed by it. And we pull from our lives. There is, that is a simple fact.

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But I try my best. I don't think there's any one person who will be able to look at anything I have written and say, this is me, or you have written a book about me. While I try to definitely look at the people I know and take some of the characteristics and traits from those people and try to create characters that feel real and who you believe. And you, well, whether you like them or hate them, that's a.

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different issue, but at least they feel real and you can believe their story. But I am not writing about people I know. So hopefully there's nobody who's coming to sue me because it's not you. It's not you at all. It's somebody else. But, you know, certainly the circumstances, people might be able to see some things and say I remember when that happened. You know, certainly also with my second book, the house that I described in there, the second book Tea by the Sea.

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The house I described in there was my grandparents' house. And any family member reading that book would be able to see and know, this is that house, this is where it is. I am, yes, I know that little dip in the, you know, where the wood was kind of soft, you know, little details like that. But, you know, I think doing that allows other readers to really believe and feel and see, because some of it is probably what they have experienced. Or...

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You know, it just feels real. Yeah. Just like your book, The House of Plain Truth, it felt very real. I could imagine myself in the house, the furniture being moved and, you know, going out in the field and everything. I could literally feel it. So I completely understand what you're saying with that. How do you go about planning out and plotting the book? What inspired you? We know what inspired you with this book of, you know, your family's history and whatnot. But how do you go about planning it out?

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What's the ritual behind you getting up in the morning and you, I'm gonna write today. What does all of that look like? There's no ritual, I wish there was. I mean, I make tea, that's the first thing that I do. And I tried some years ago, cause I drink a lot of tea and I've been making teapots. And so my big thing is that I'm drinking loose leaf tea with this teapot and this tray and this nice cup. And that's supposed to work. That you've made, because ceramics are your hobby, right? Right.

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It doesn't work. I mean, I still drink tea, but it doesn't, you know, it's just something I do now. But yeah, in terms of getting myself set up to write, I just simply get up and get started. I do not plot out my novels beforehand, so it's, you know, when I sit down to write or to begin something new, I usually just have a small idea. It might be a sentence, it might be a character, but I really just start writing and building from that.

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with the hope that as I continue to build and expand on, you know, whether it's the scene or just one little event or situation that I am able to flesh it out enough into a novel. And usually, and it works, I like the surprise element of figuring out the story as I go, as opposed to knowing beforehand what plot points I want to hit and kind of like feeling like I'm just plugging in.

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information into those points that I've set out beforehand. Do you go forward or do you ever go back and say, oh, you know what, I want to change this or no, I need to rewrite all of this? Or do you just write the whole thing and then go back? I move around so much that there is no linear path to writing. For me, I may write somewhere in the middle.

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then the next day I might write the end or I might, I just move around, whatever. If one section isn't working, I set this aside and move around in the book until it all comes together. Oh, this is fascinating. How do you do that? How do you organize that? I'm so curious because I just have a Google doc and I'm like, I'm writing, writing, writing. How do you organize that like in a nice way where you're going, okay, this is the middle part and I'll go back to this? There's no nice way. It's just one big document

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You know, I think sometimes in my head, I just have a sense, well, it's either going to be a story that's told, you know, like linearly, or it's a story where, you know, I know certain events need to happen to get to where I'm going. But, you know, I'm just moving around, I just have little notes in there, a little notebook where I'm asking myself questions. And I'm so I'm moving around to a lot of different places trying to figure out what I have, and what works where.

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And then there are times where I will take something that's not working and drop it into a completely different document. So you see how confusing this gets. There's nothing that I'm saying that makes sense to anybody but me, but it works. I'm so happy to hear it. I'm thrilled to hear it because I've had multiple Google Docs open and I'm going here and there and I'm like, well, this might fit here and you know what, I better write this over here and then I put in page breaks. So I appreciate that it's all over everywhere because that's how...

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my writing is right now. But eventually I think what happens is that you know the story in your head. And you know, at least for me anyway, I have written it and looked at it so many times that I know bits and pieces that I've written. And so I can remember, oh yeah, I wrote that already. I just need to find it and then plop it into this particular section and then it works here as opposed to where else I had it and it just wasn't working.

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but there's some kind of order to it that I cannot explain, but it works. That's the genius of it. If you can't explain it, then that's your genius. I love this. How did you get into ceramics? I wanna hear more about this because we didn't get to talk enough about it on Saturday. I really wanted a teapot. That's it, I wanted a small teapot. And I couldn't find it. I kept finding really big teapots that, you know.

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I just want one cup of tea, not, you know, I don't want to feed a whole family. And I, you know, I wanted to make it. So that's how I got into it. It's just that simple. I needed a cup of tea and a

teapot. So I started ceramics. That sounds so simple. You could have gone on Etsy, I'm sure. I am sure. I'm sure I could have. But you know, I bought one, but it was too big. And then I actually bought one that was the right size.

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broke that one, I bought another one. And I once I bought a second one, I said, but I really want to try making my own. And so I have made multiple teapots. I'm obsessed with making teapots. Some are good. I want to see these after this. I need to see some of your teapots. Yeah, I can send you some. There's some on my Instagram page, actually. Okay. I need to scroll and stock some more than obviously. And when do you find time for this?

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I make time, I'm still taking classes. I am still so new to this that I am taking classes, usually on a Tuesday afternoon. So that's where I'll be this afternoon. Later today, oh, I love it. And then I usually, when I'm procrastinating, when I have deadlines, I go and fiddle around with some clay and make something. And then what about the painting? Are you painting them too, or is it strictly the process of making it?

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Is there more to it than just making the teapots and the ceramics, or are you painting and getting creative in that sense too? Yeah, and join the glazing process as well. And what I've been doing lately, my new obsession, is carving through the clay to reveal the color beneath. I'm learning. I'm expanding my little skill set. Yeah, I'm going to need to see these. You promised Zivia a bowl, so. Oh, yeah, there is that.

19:13

How has it been coming up to this launch? When this airs, it will air on your launch day. So congratulations, by the way, because it is launch day as everybody's listening. How has this process been? Has it been different working with Zibby Books? I know it's amazing because there's the team in support are incredible behind Zibby Books, but what has that been like for you?

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It's been a wonderful and lovely and different process. And with three books, I've had three different publishers. And my experience here is just very different from the experience I've had before. And a lot of it is just really, sometimes in some ways, it's just the simple things that help that matter. It's getting note cards and getting postcards and being- Through the poster board.

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Oh, well, yes, and a poster board. You know, just little things that come and make your experience. You know, publication day, the run up to publication day, just so much more fun and good and fulfilling. And I think just all of us authors feel really well taken care of because this entire process, publishing a book, it can be daunting, it can be difficult, it can be a very lonely process showing up in a bookstore with, you know, a...

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one reader or nobody at all in the audience. But here I feel like there's a lot of effort that they're putting into making sure that we are putting out not just a good product, but putting out a product that really reaches readers, making sure that readers are aware of these books, all of the books. And so it has been a really wonderful experience. And I, you know.

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highly recommend Zibiworks. I do too. If I could, next book, we'll see. Yeah, it's completely different. I've been watching on the sidelines since the beginning, since the very first book and before that. And I can see the difference, whether it's in what I've experienced or what my clients have experienced. And it is the simple things. And isn't that funny that the little things in life are what make the biggest difference?

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It doesn't cost a ton of money to create note cards that are personalized and yet nobody else is doing it. So it builds a greater appreciation and the community. I mean, look at everybody who showed up on Saturday and that was incredible. Getting to meet you, getting to meet the other Zibi authors and then the other authors that were all there. It's just, it's a wonderful experience because we don't get to, and I know this was said on Saturday, but I had already.

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I'd said it actually in my book too, that for authors, I feel that you're all celebrities in my mind because you've written these incredible books that I can hold in my hand. And yet most of the times we're not going to recognize you on the street because you're not on the TV, you're not at the awards ceremony, you know, you didn't get the Emmy and the Grammy and we're not seeing you all the time. And I actually, this happened on Saturday where Angela, the author of Olivia Strauss is running out of time.

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is in the lobby and she introduces herself and I say hi and she's like my book just launched. I'm like oh mine too. We kind of just went on our way and then I googled her and I went oh my goodness her book is on my Kindle. Like yes of course I know who you are you big deal. But we don't get to interact and meet you so we don't like recognize you on the street which is such a shame because you are a big deal. You've written something beautiful that we all get to experience and

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and it's a part of you, so I appreciate it so much. Right, yeah. It's great getting to know all the other ZippyBook authors in particular. And I think that so many other situations are not set up to allow you to build that kind of community before your book comes out. And I think we have done a lot to form our own community and to

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to bond with each other and to just simply share stories and show up at individual events. And I think, especially for new authors coming in where you're either probably, maybe you went to a creative writing program and you have met other writers, or maybe you haven't. It can be just such a very lonely experience stepping out into this process, not knowing anybody, not knowing who to ask.

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how do I do this? And here we have this nice little community of Zibi book authors and also other people who, you know, like certainly like all the other authors who are at the event on Saturday, who we now have in this little fold and probably can reach out to, you know, if, you know, you have made that kind of connection. Can I ask who are you closest to of those authors? I will never tell. Oh, come on.

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I have certain ones that I'm, I know I'm close. I love them all, but I know that there's a closer connection bond with certain ones. You know, some of them, I even have their phone numbers. So, you know that those are up-leveled. Those are up-leveled friendships. Yeah, that's good. What advice would you give someone just starting out who has hopes and dreams of publishing three books someday and of getting to where you are?

24:49

Well, the first thing I would say is, you know, read and read and read a lot. Don't pay too much attention to what, well, pay attention to what is being published, but don't pay too much attention to what is being published that you tie yourself into trying to imitate or imitate what, you know, the market is, or look for what market is publishing.

25:14

write your own stories, write what you want to write, because your voice is going to be so very different and it's unique. And I think, you know, when you remember that and you try to build that as opposed to trying to imitate somebody else, you have a much better product and a much better experience with writing and publishing. That's the best advice ever. I love it. That's going to be one big quote, Donna.

25:43

Can you share with everyone where they can find the House of Plain Truth, how they can follow you, connect with you? Sure. The House of Plain Truth is available at just about every bookstore. And if you don't see it there, ask. They will ask them to order it at your library as well. Same thing. If it's not there, ask them to stock it. And you can find out more about me, where I will be. Launch day, I will be at Politics and Pros on Connecticut Avenue in DC.

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and several other events which I will post on my Instagram page, which is at Donna underscore humans, also on Facebook, which I can't thank you so much. That's okay. We'll add it in the show notes. Congratulations. And thank you for writing such a beautiful book. Thank you.

Thanks so much for having me, Michelle. I appreciated this. My pleasure. Well, friends, I thoroughly enjoyed getting to talk to Donna, getting to have met her in person.

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person and to have read this beautiful book inspired by her family journey. It's just so amazing to me that there's a book written about what her family went through and that we all get to be privy to what that journey might have looked like and for her to be able to pull it all together to create and craft this story, some of which may have happened some of which she hopes happened.

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So I encourage all of you to not only read *The House of Plain Truth*, but to also write your own story. What a gift to be able to give yourself, to give readers, to give to your future generations this craft of this story that you've pulled together, you've weaved together, and the words and your hopes and what you really and truly hope might have actually happened.

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So let this be your encouragement for the week to not only pick up and purchase this amazing book out by Zibby Books today, but to also start writing your story and write about what might have happened or what could have happened because you get to be the author of your life. So start writing it.