

Transcript

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You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 246. 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. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, author of How to Get on Podcasts, the podcast matchmaker

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and CEO and founder of the MLG Collective. I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey. This is my simplified life.

00:43

Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today, I am interviewing USA Today bestselling author, Mary Jones. We are talking about her recent debut of short stories called The Goodbye Process. I have not read a collection of short stories in probably, oh, 30 years. I'm gonna guess it's since high school. And I devoured this book.

01:13

I loved it so much because it took you through so many different stories so quickly, and yet they were all related by this common theme of goodbye. I wanted to get to know Mary, and I'm so glad that I got the opportunity to talk to her, to hear her process on how to write a short story collection, because this is totally new for me, and to introduce her to all of you. So I hope you enjoy it.

01:40

and learn a bit or two about another form of book writing that I was not totally familiar with. Hi, Mary. Hi, how are you? I'm so good. I'm so excited to get to talk to you and get to know you because I feel like there's a lot that I don't know and I want to know. Okay. Can

you introduce yourself to everyone, please? Sure. I'm Mary Jones. I recently wrote and released the short story collection, *The Goodbye Process*.

02:10

which is a short story collection where all the stories are connected by a central theme of letting go and moving on. And that just came out about a couple weeks ago. And it's a best seller. Let's add that to your title. Congratulations. Thank you. Such a nice surprise. It's amazing. I love it. It's well deserved.

02:33

I was just telling you that I don't think I've ever read, at least in my adult life, a collection of short stories. So it was like a breath of fresh air. I've recently in the last year read poetry again too. And it's like revisiting all of these high school honors English, AP English classes. I know. I'm hearing that a lot, that people haven't read a collection in a while, or maybe this is their first collection. I'm hearing that. So I think more people tend to gravitate toward novels.

03:03

Well, and so do you normally write short stories? I feel like that would be, it seems like it would be easier in a sense because they're shorter, but at the same time, you have to fit every detail in to this much more condensed version of a story that tells the story.

03:23

Yeah, I mean, I do consider myself a short story writer. I do mostly, although I'm working on a novel now, I do mostly write short stories and I have focused on that. It's kind of, short stories are kind of what made me want to be a writer. It's the form that I fell in love with and I've been reading it and studying it and teaching it and everything for years.

03:45

And yeah, I do. It seems like it would be easier because it's shorter, but it is a challenging form, at least for me. It remains challenging because you do, it's a less forgiving form, I think. You don't have the luxury of going off on tangents or, you know, you have to, every

word, I think, that's in a short story has to be earned and has to, you know, need to be there in order for the story to be effective in an ideal short story, I think.

04:13

So it is a challenging form. And because we come right in to this certain spot in someone's life and you give us this snapshot and really it tells almost the entire story of their life. I'm thinking back to some of the various ones because there was definitely shock and awe and where's this going from, there was the story of the two girls who get abducted and it's like that was the blip in their life and yet.

04:41

You also tell the story of the friendship and how they became friends and that they were pickpocketing things and stealing from the dollar store. And then you've got the guy who had all of his plastic surgery and meets the woman who's like, no, I like you the way you are. And then I think she eventually leaves him. It was complicated.

05:09

Yeah, I mean, that's what I love about a short story is finding those little moments about a character that can reveal everything about them, you know, or a little moment in life that might seem like a mundane moment, but it ends up being the most significant moment. Those are the moments that I'm looking for. And, you know, in terms of forming characters, I'm looking for what little action can I show or what what can I show about this character very quickly? That'll help you understand who they are. You know.

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So you don't have the time to really build it in a longer way. How do you go about this? Are you going through your day and you see something, because I know that I'm doing this for my novel right now, that something happens and I'm like, oh, that's gotta go in the book. Do you see people who do something and you kind of grasp onto it and then create a story in your head about it? Yeah, I think a lot of times it happens in a similar way to that. I think I'll either experience a moment or I'll hear about a moment.

06:07

or I'll read about a moment in a newspaper magazine or something, and it'll stick with me and I'll just keep thinking about it and thinking about it. And then I'll try to find a way into the story and I'll try to write towards that moment. But a lot of times it does start with some little thing that I've either experienced or witnessed, and then the story builds from there. Tell me about Mary. I wanna hear.

06:32

I've got all day too, so whatever you need. But I want to know more about you. How did you start to write short stories? What was the whole process to getting to where you are today? Share this journey. Yeah. I think I always wanted to be a writer. I don't know where that comes from. I think some people just kind of have that gene. From when I was little, I just always sort of dreamed of being a writer.

07:02

I never really took it seriously. I was always writing little stories. I always sort of thrived in my English classes. And any chance that I had to write fiction as a younger, you know, like an elementary school or something, I always excelled at that and I loved it. And, but then I...

07:22

You know, when I went to college, I didn't think like, oh, I'm going to go be a writer. I'm going to study that. I think I think sort of nowadays people do. But like, you know, when I was that age and from the background that I come from, it just wasn't didn't seem like a practical thing to try to pursue. So I majored in psychology and I was pretty happy on that on that road. And I was had plans and goals and I, you know, thought I'd be a psychologist. But then just sort of I went to Syracuse University.

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And just by a happy accident, I ended up in this fiction writing workshop. I shouldn't have been in there. It was a class that I should have had to apply to get in and like been accepted. And, you know, maybe had already have had like a bunch of stories under my belt. But I somehow just managed to get in there. And I showed up on the first day and the instructor, you know, the professor felt sorry for me and let me in. And it ended up

just being a very transformative experience for me. I that's where I fell in love with the short story form.

08:21

Syracuse has a very rich literary tradition. I think some of the best short story writers of all time have taught there like Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolfe, and now George Saunders, and a bunch of other great writers as well. And I just feel like there was something in the air with short stories. And I just, I don't know, I just fell in love with it. And it was sort of all I wanted to do after that. And I switched my major. I did a double major in English.

08:48

And it sort of just led me on a different road. After college, I went and lived in Boston for a while and worked in publishing. But then it wasn't until I moved to California, where I live now, and decided to go to grad school, where I really started taking it seriously. And then I got my MFA in fiction writing. And since then, I've just been reading and writing and teaching. And it's kind of just become a big part of my life. It sounds like such a dream. Yeah. I read it, I write it. I take it. Yeah.

09:18

Of course, you don't know if it's going to work out along the way. That's true for any career. I know. It's been a lot of years of pursuing it just with the hope that the stories would get picked up and published. How did you decide on this collection of stories that all say goodbye, and you must have just a plethora of stories already written that you then said, okay, we're going to comb through these. How did that process all work?

09:48

I think I had written probably about half of the stories that are in this collection. When I got to the story, which ended up being the title story, The Goodbye Process, it's the last story in the book, but it's not the last story that I wrote. And in that story, it's a man who's lost his wife for 40 years. And he's talking to a funeral director and the funeral director says to him, you know, you have to release your feelings. It's a very important part of The Goodbye Process.

10:18

And as soon as that funeral director said that, I knew that that was the title of the story. I often get my titles from lines in the story. And I was like, oh, that's the title for this story. And then like five minutes later, I was like, I think that's the title for the whole collection. I think that's what all my stories, I understood that's what all the stories had in common and that's what I had been writing about. And then I, for the rest of the stories, for the second sort of half of the stories, I wrote with that theme in mind and I.

10:44

you know, tried to explore areas and relationships and types of loss that I hadn't already written about. The funeral director one was great because he hires someone. It's comical and yet so sad at the same time. Yeah, I know. Somebody was just asking me about the humor in my stories and I'm like, the funniest thing about the humor in my stories is I'm always surprised what people find funny. Because sometimes I will not find something funny at all. And then people will be like, oh.

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story was hilarious. And I'm like, Oh, okay. Well, you know, some of them, you know, obviously, I know there's humor in them, but. Yeah. And this one, I, yeah, as weird as that may sound, then he hired someone to grieve and yet she like puts on this production and then everyone's drawn towards her. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was funny. It's, it's, it's funny when you think about it in a really sad way. The

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Yeah, the way that I remember the daughters are like, leave her alone, she's grieving, and he's thinking to himself like, no, she's not. These are fake tears. And yet they look like real tears. Yeah, it was, I felt like I could be there. And I think that that's part of the beauty of all of these stories that you've written is I could visualize all of them. I was there in the snow with the two girls in the back of the car, you know, getting out.

12:09

I could just visualize. I'm sorry I put you in that. Yeah, I was trying to read, I wanted to go back to one of my reviews that I had left for you because I remember saying there were

all these different places and different people. I just thought that was incredible that you could be so many different things and put us in these different places that I enjoyed it so much. I think that when you read a novel that you're in one spot and you're really...

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with one character and you're getting through there. And yet this was such a great read. It was a very quick read for me because you're reading short stories. I think that that might have been part of it where I wouldn't put it down until I finished a story. And yet it didn't consume my entire day, you know? Yeah. Yeah. I think that for a book that's exploring loss, I think I'm, you know, I really like the way the short story form worked for this because my experience with loss, I think

13:08

has not been like what you would see if I if I were to have written a novel exploring the theme of loss, it would most likely be one sort of big loss that I was looking at. You know, but I think in my experience, loss is more like a lot of little sort of random things and the cumulative effect of all these different losses and how they, you know, get to you in your life. You know, all these different things that keep popping up and they and they are very different. You know. So do you think that your psychology?

13:34

thought, background, potential career played a role in this, because it seems to me like it might have, that it kind of makes sense that. Yeah, I think to some degree, I think it's a great background for any writer to have, just to understand human nature and a little bit more about why people do what they do. And, you know, I do think it helps in that way. Was it like, what was it like to want to sell this book? Because I know that...

14:01

I've sold a nonfiction book, so I know that process. I know the process for novels, but what is it like for a short story collection? Because maybe it's the type of books that I'm reading that I don't see a lot of these that are out there that become bestsellers within the week. So what was that like and how was it different?

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I think it's a little more challenging to sell a short story collection, you know, historically more than a novel or a memoir. I think, you know, I think it's, I feel like I got a lot of lucky breaks. I think it's hard to find an agent to represent a short story collection, which is the first hurdle. Of course, you know, if you've never sold a book, it's hard to get an agent to represent it. And a lot of times if agents have.

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a couple of short story writers, they don't want to take on another short story writer because agents also help with submitting to literary magazines and doing, like it's a lot, sort of a lot of work for an agent. And then it can be a harder sell with the publisher. But I had really good luck finding an agent. I submitted to several people and one of the people said,

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you know, I can't, I can't represent this, but I do know somebody who'll love it. And I, and she, you know, it's just such a sort of blessing that she gave me somebody's name, you know, she's like, try this person. I think she's really going to love it. And she did. She responded in the next day. Uh, so I was lucky there. And then, you know, Siby books kind of, um, popped up, uh, you know, right after sort of right after we started going out with the book, this new publisher popped up and at the time.

15:41

It was co-founded by a writer named Lee Newman, and she's a short story writer. She had a book out last year or the year before called No One Gets Out Alive, and it's a great short story collection. And so she was looking for a short story collection. So she was actively seeking out a collection. So it was kind of lucky for me that my book happened to fall right in her lap right then. It was good timing. The stars aligned. Yeah, yeah, they did. Yeah.

16:10

And it fits to me knowing Zibi, I feel like something about the goodbye process really fits Zibi personally. I noticed that a lot of the books share a theme of loss in some way. And

even her own books have that in them, her memoir, of course. And so it is something I think she's interested in and it is a subject matter she keeps coming back to as a publisher. Yeah. It's funny what you notice when you read all of the books by... Yeah. Because you're really...

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too. I'm like, Oh, yeah, yeah, I see that. And you don't really get that opportunity with other publishers because they're publishing so many but with one a month, you have that opportunity to read all of the books and go, Oh, I see this. She even has that there's a comedic book coming out I think next year. And I think it's called the obituary writer. So it even has that, you know, yeah, I got to meet him. Yeah, he's hilarious. Yeah, yeah.

17:04

for an adventure. It's hilarious. Again, that humor in the sadness. I like humor and sadness. I think it can be a dark humor, but I think in my own life, whenever something bad happens, my husband is a very funny person and he's always there with the dark way to look at it in a way.

17:29

You know, I think it's like sometimes you can't go there and it's not it's not a loss where you can even consider the funny way to look at it. But sometimes you can. And if you can, I think it's a relief. And I think, you know, can relieve the tension and it can be a comfort. And I think that's the same thing that happens in the stories when dealing with serious subject matter. If you just kind of have a funny way to look at it for a minute, I think it gives the reader that little break and it relieves the tension for a moment. You know.

17:57

Have people come to you after reading it, saying that they relate to a certain story in particular, or something like that happened to me? Have you had any of that kind of feedback? I've had such a, you know, it's been sort of all over the place, which is so interesting to me, which stories people are sort of responding to the most, where some people will respond to a story I never thought like that would be the story that stuck out, but I'll hear it a lot, you know? And,

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Yeah, so it's kind of been all over. I don't know if anybody has specifically said they've gone through something similar. They can relate, but I can tell that people are connecting with certain stories. I know like the correct way to breathe, which is the story about the woman with experiencing chronic pain. I think a lot of people are really like connecting with that story. I've heard a lot of feedback on that. And then tell me something new, which is one of the stories. There's three stories in the collection with.

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recurring characters and tell me something new is sort of the middle story in that set. And a lot of people have really responded a lot to that story. So but it's it's kind of, you know, it's been all over the place with what people are responding to. What's been the most surprising one for you that someone's been like, oh, this one for sure. And you're all really, you know, there's a story like towards the end of the collection called I'll go with you. And I'm hearing a lot of feedback on that. And I didn't.

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That's a story that a lot of the stories in the collection have been published already, like in literary magazines. They're written over the course of a long time. And in that time, for short story writers, you try to get them in place in different literary magazines. And so a lot of them have been published. And those stories, I'm like, okay, well, I know that story's working because it was picked up already. And maybe I've gotten feedback on it, but then this story, I'll go with you, is a story that.

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It's sort of a newer story and I hadn't really submitted it to Literary Magazine. So I just had no idea if it was going to be a hit or not, but I am getting a lot of feedback on that. It's funny because in getting ready for today, I read the book, I want to say over a month ago, it was over the summer. And so it's not like other books where you pick it up and you go, oh yeah, that's the character. Okay, good. Like I remember that John and me.

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I went, oh my God, there's so many. Yes. Which ones do I? But then as you talk about them, I'm like, oh yes, the one with the chronic pain. Yes, I remember that. I know. And Hashi kind of fell in love with the doctor and all of these. I'm like, okay, yes. Now I remember all of them. It's very interesting. It's different for me as an interviewer, but also a reader who's read them and you're like, oh yeah. And oh yes, that one was good too. And oh, that was good too.

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It's like you had a collection of books. That's the experience I had with reading somebody else's collection. If you mention the title of a story, I might not remember it, but then if somebody mentions what happened, I'm like, oh, yeah, yeah, I like that one. All right. I remember that one. Yeah. How is your process different now that you're writing a novel? What is the difference in the processes? And when you're writing a short story, like how quickly are you getting these done? Not quickly. Because they're short, it's quick, but I'm a very slow writer.

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I have a hard time with sort of just getting in the chair and like, you know, making myself like sort of write. Once I am able to do that and get in the chair and like, you know, actually commit to writing every day, which I think is important if you're trying, if you're working on something, I would say like, you know, one of the longer stories maybe takes two or three months or something. But more often, it can take a really long time where I'll start a story like this story is a goodbye process.

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I started this story 10 or 15 years ago when I was at a residency in Arizona and I started writing this story and I really liked it. And I was like, oh, I like this idea. I don't know where this idea came from with the idea of a professional mourner, but I was working on it and I liked it. And then I sort of hit a wall with it. And I think it was, I wasn't ready to write this story. I think I had to have a loss in my life.

22:13

obviously not the same loss. This man lost his wife of 40 years. He's an older man. But I had a loss of sort of what felt to me like similar magnitude. And then I felt like, and then

like after that, I was like, oh, I'm gonna go back to that story. And it just sort of, I was able to write it. So in a way that story took, you know, 10 or 15 years to write whatever the timeline is. I lose track. But, you know, actually, if I'm actually sitting down and I get through a story and I'm,

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You know, and I don't get blocked. I don't get stopped. It probably takes two or three months or something. And so what's this novel like? If it takes two or three months for the short story. Oh my gosh, are we going to see it in five years? No, I'm just kidding. Yeah, probably if I'm lucky. But yeah, I think for me, the process of writing short stories is sort of, you know, it's almost like playing. It's exploration. I don't have any idea where our story's going when I sit down to write it.

23:12

Like the story you mentioned, realtor with the real estate agent. That I just kind of, I live in LA and I kind of became fascinated with sort of like luxury Los Angeles real estate agents who are just very glamorous people. You know, and they're so beautiful. Yeah, it's on Bravo. Million dollar listings. They're so beautiful and they're cars and they're just, I mean, they're like a unique, you know, they're just like an interesting set of people. So I had this idea in my head about writing about.

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you know, a luxury Los Angeles real estate agent. And then the story just, I just sort of sat down and started writing it and it just kept surprising me. It kept going in different unexpected directions. I had no idea where it was going. I kept thinking it was over. And then I'd be like, well, I think I want to add something and I'd add a little bit more. And then I'd be like, oh, a little bit more. And I added a second point of view character. And so it's just.

24:06

It just grew and grew and grew and became this thing. And I'm very proud of that story, but I had absolutely no idea where it was going when I started it. And I think that's how novels are different. I think for me, because it's such a bigger thing, I think I kind of, in my mind, I have to have a little more planning at the beginning stage, a little more

outlining, a little bit more of an idea of how it's moving. Otherwise, I feel like I'll just be writing.

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forever. And like, you know, I don't know, you know, I think it would be too wild. But so that's the way it's different in my experience so far. And I haven't gotten through the novel yet, but. I'm in the trenches with you, but I have no idea. I'm like, I think I know where I'm going, but I don't really know. I think that's good though, to stay open to possibilities and to being surprised and let it, you know, if it surprises you, I think that's usually the best kind of story, you know.

25:02

What do you teach? I teach fiction writing. I teach, I've taught at Santa Monica College. I taught literature there and a little bit of fiction writing. But I've been teaching at UCLA Extension, and I teach beginning creative writing classes. And I often teach sort of short story classes, either intro or intermediate or advanced short story writing. And what do you say I'm enrolling in this? I'm just fascinated because I've never taken a writing course.

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What does that look like when I come in and I'm like, yeah, I can write something, but are you teaching format or like how you discover things, brainstorming? What is it? I think for me, I'm sort of a very, I guess, organized teacher and I like to teach sort of the different elements of fiction writing. And I think a lot of people come in with no experience, maybe just a little interest. A lot of people say like, I always wanted to be a writer, but...

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And that's kind of where I was at too in my own life. And like, you know, you kind of, a lot of people want to be a writer, but maybe they don't pursue it for whatever reason. And so I think, you know, I go into the classes with that in mind. Maybe these people never wrote before. And then we just, I structured around the elements of fiction writing. So maybe one week we'll talk about plot. Maybe one week we'll talk about scene and summary. And we'll...

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I'll tell them sort of everything I know about these different things or setting or point of view. And then let them read stories where they can see what I'm talking about illustrated. And then give them little writing exercises where they can practice something. And usually the writing exercises, it does spark creativity and people come up with amazing stories in these classes. I'm always so impressed by what they, you know, somebody could come in in the beginning and say, oh, I never write before. And by the end, I'm like, wow.

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the stories, like send this out. This is amazing. You sound like such a good teacher. Yeah. Oh, thanks. How do you something I'm curious to ask you about, because you said that the goodbye process you started like 10, 15 years ago, how are you organizing these things and not forgetting what story went where? And obviously it's probably all on your computer, but to reflect and go, oh yeah, 10 years ago, I started this. No, I have like, I don't know. I have my own system for organizing my stories.

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And for some reason, I can kind of keep track of like, oh, when was it that I started writing that story? So I organized by year. So I have like a writing folder and then I have, you know, like 2010, 2011, all the way, you know, whatever. And then within those folders, I'll have a folder with the story title. And then I have, you know, all my drafts. And most of my stories take, you know, 30 drafts or something to get them finished.

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So, and when I save every draft, so I'll say, you know, one, you know, like the goodbye process one. And then when I edit it, when I go back in, I'll say the goodbye process two and I'll keep going. So then within every year, there's all these folders with the stories. And I can usually like, if I think back on something like that I started that I didn't finish, I'll have an idea of when it was that I started it. So I can say, oh, I think that was.

28:16

2015, you know, and I could go back and find that story. Or if there's something I'm still interested in working on, I pull it and I bring it back to the current folder, you know? And so I have, you know, stuff in progress in the current folder. The draft part's interesting. I hadn't done that and I haven't done that. I feel like maybe I should do that. You never know what you might. Yeah, I like it because I'm a ruthless editor. And so I will, you know, if I...

28:43

if I write something and then I'm like, I want to try it this way, then I can, I can freely like cut three pages or four, you know, whatever. And then I know it's still going to be there in the previous draft. So I don't think I would be able to be as ruthless if I didn't have that previous draft, if I changed my mind and I'm like, actually, I like that better. You know, I can go back and say, yeah, I've been, I just downloaded Scrivener. And so I.

29:06

take things that I copy it and I paste it into a different little area so that way I don't lose it. Oh yeah. I don't even have that. That sounds good. I just got it because I'm a Google Doc person and I know that publishers and agents don't like the Google Doc thing. Yeah. That sounds good. Where can we find you? Where can we find your next novel?

29:32

that's coming out in less than five years. No pressure. Yeah, I have a website. It's maryjoneswriter.com and then I'm also on Instagram and it's at [maryjoneswriter](https://www.instagram.com/maryjoneswriter). And yeah, I'm on Twitter too, but that's a confusing name. It's like Mary FJ Jones because my name is so generic. It's so hard to find like email addresses with the name Mary Jones or, you know, so I'm always like Mary Jones, 12345 or whatever.

30:02

But mostly I'm on, you know, my website always is up to date and then I'm posting on Instagram here and there. I'm trying to get used to it. Yeah, it's tough. I know. Yeah. The Twitter thing. Don't get me started. Yeah. I used to like Twitter a lot and then it's changed. I don't know what happened. I'm out of the algorithm of the people. Like I used to see all these writers that I liked seeing and hearing about and how when I go on there, it's just all people I don't know come up. So I'm like, I don't know. They're all on threads now.

30:31

Yeah, yeah. It's a dumpster fire over on Twitter. Yeah, they're gone. I think everybody I, yeah, all the writers I liked on there have left. Yeah. But so I don't go on there much. Well, Mary, you're just an absolute delight. I loved your short stories. Congratulations on it coming out on making best seller. That's amazing. And thank you for coming on and sharing yourself with me. I love getting to know you.

30:58

Oh, great. Thank you so much for having me. I love talking to you too. It's been so much fun. Okay, friends, I have to say I'm a little disappointed that it takes a long time still to write a short story just as it does a novel. But what a great experience and education on this new piece of work. For me, at least, I loved getting to know how Mary goes through this process, what that looks like and how it's different for her.

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I also loved getting to hear how she teaches her students in her classes, because as I said, I have never taken a writing class before and am curious, so you know that when I'm curious, I ask those questions. I highly encourage you to go grab a copy of *The Goodbye Process* by Mary Jones because you will devour it literally in a couple days, if even that much. It is a quick read, which means it is a great read.

31:55

and I know that you will enjoy it. It will have you laughing and crying. I promise you that. As always, thanks for listening. Don't forget to leave a review for the podcast and for how to get on podcasts. And if you've read Mary's book, go leave a review for hers too. I promise you, we are so grateful when we see those five stars, see a new review. It means so much to an author, a podcast host, to all of us. Thank you.