AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Amy Reading, author of *The World She Edited: Katharine S. White at The New Yorker*, which was a finalist for a Pulitzer and the National Book Critics Circle Award and is now available in paperback. Now, one of the key arguments that you make in the book is that The New Yorker would not have reached its recent 100th birthday were it not for Katharine S. White and her work, so could you elaborate?

AR: The New Yorker turned 100 last February and has been celebrating its 100th anniversary this whole year with special articles in the magazine, an exhibit at the New York Public Library and other festivities, and my argument is that it wouldn't have achieved this remarkable stability over the decades, it wouldn't have achieved this status as this cultural gatekeeper, this real tastemaker in American culture if it hadn't been for Katharine White. Because when Harold Ross founded the magazine in 1925, it was a very light humor weekly. He had no ambitions for it to be a career-making literary powerhouse well into the next century. It was just this light, fizzy, very readable, consumable magazine during Jazz Age '20s. And it was very focused on New York because that's how he thought he could crack the formula for successful magazine by having hyper-local ads that were targeted to a very specific socioeconomic class, which is what we would now call DINKs: double-income no-kid couples, and harnessing all of the money that's sloshing around New York at that time. He hired Katharine a few months after he founded the magazine in February, he hired her that August, and she immediately began drawing into the magazine's orbit more and more serious authors who were writing about topics that were of great interest to that exact same socioeconomic slice of New York, that exact same readership. But she thought, in addition to the light verse that the magazine had to punctuate some of its longer articles, there should also be serious verse, serious poetry. And she spent years campaigning with Harold Ross to get him to include more serious poets. And once they did, that ended up becoming a magnet to more and more serious poetry. And now to be published in The New Yorker as a poet is a huge honor. Same thing with short stories, which were initially just these short sort of throwaway interesting little tidbits of New York life.
And eventually over the years grew longer and longer, grew more serious and more, not even necessarily serious, but more substantial, more about commenting on social life rather than being a just fun take on that life. And her influence even extended to nonfiction because for the first decade of her work on The New Yorker, she edited nonfiction as well as fiction. Later she specialized just in fiction, but she was very interested in, she helped commission and edit profiles, which are The New Yorker's kind of distinctive articles about living figures. And she was always interested not just in the ephemeral sort of person who's being talked about at the moment, but the real shapers of New York and eventually national life. So all of that worked and over the decades helped bring The New Yorker into the shape that we recognize today. But it was the work of many, many years and many arguments and many conversations and many editorial meetings and lots and lots and lots of recruitment on her part to bring the people that she wanted into the pages of the magazine.

AT: What's striking me at the moment is that she needed to understand not just the public, but also the writers that she was working with. I guess you could say that about any editor, but she needed to understand how to get what the public wanted out of the writers that she believed had the capacity to do that, shall we say.

AR: Yes, that's very well put. She was an interface between really three groups of people: her authors, and she had a stable of authors, but she was always looking for more, reading other publications and trying to poach and scoop in writers that she thought properly belonged in The New Yorker. So that's one group. A second group would be the readers of the periodical and the people that she thought the magazine was speaking to, again, a group she's always looking to expand. And then the third group would be the staff at The New Yorker, first Howard Ross and then William Shawn and her fellow editors and the other people that she needed to convince in order to bring an author or a piece into the magazine, because all of the editorial decisions were ultimately voted upon. They were joint consensual decisions. So itwasn't just one person making the magazine or even one section of the magazine. Everybody was reading everything and voting. So she's at the interface

of these three groups. And you're exactly right. She wasn't simply accepting the best work that any given author was producing and publishing it in the magazine. She was accepting the best work that that author was producing that was right for The New Yorker. So she would often turn down a piece that she loved because it wasn't right for The New Yorker.
And that's something I think editors that maybe are listening to this podcast are probably nodding their heads, like everyone has to do this because you're shaping a publication, you're shaping a sensibility and you're speaking to a particular moment. Often, especially in the early years, the reason for turning down a piece that she loved would be length. The New Yorker was not publishing anything very long. Again, it was very much supposed to be a light, consumable magazine. And each piece was also light and consumable. You're flipping pages. You're getting a vibe, as we would say nowadays. But over time, it was, in fact, her authors themselves who were pressing her to press on the staff to expand the limitations of the magazine and especially the space limitations. So the authors themselves were saying, “can't you accept this piece? It can't be cut anymore. And if you if you don't take it, I'm going to sell it to a competitor.” And so the authors themselves had a surprising amount of power or influence on Katharine to then trickle that influence through the structure of the magazine itself. But then also the the readership, all of these components are dynamically responding to one another to create the magazine. So she's editing for who she thinks is reading the magazine or should be reading the magazine, which of course changes over time.
And then, of course, she's purely responding to her taste on some level. And a big argument of my book, a big argument for why one should read a biography of an editor is that you can understand any one individual's taste if you understand their life and why they are drawn to a specific aesthetic or a specific trend or a set of authors. And so in Katharine's life, it's very clear she was very interested in women authors. She was very interested in women authors who wrote about topics that you might find, for instance, covered in women's magazines, but in a slightly more critical or dyspeptic or disillusioned tone. So she was publishing a wide range of poets and short story writers who were writing about love, but not in the happily ever after, “once you get married, your life is forever a bed of roses” take that you might find in some of her competitors in the 30s and the 40s, because her own life wasn't that way because her own marriage, she was married twice and because her own understanding of love and marriage was not reflected in the pages of women's magazines. And so her taste was shaped by her life and then her taste in turn shaped the magazine. Again, it's a dynamic, infinitely changing set of relationships. And she's right at the center of all these different moving pieces.
The chapter in which Katherine goes to Reno to live for three months to obtain the divorce from her first husband was hands down the most enjoyable chapter to write, because it was such a slice of life for women at the end of the Roaring Twenties. She gets divorced in the summer of 1929. And she's absolutely immersed and embedded in this community in Reno of women there for their divorces. It tells you so much about a very specific time and place and socioeconomic stratum that changed over the years as the conditions for getting a divorce changed. But it was extremely telling and revealing about a certain take on women's equality almost 10 years after the right to vote and the evolving constraints and possibilities for marriage and love and her particular life and very, very just a great little capsule history of a time and place.

AT: Well, let's dig more into her love life, which regular listeners will know is not a topic that I typically focus much on, but hers is pretty interesting. And particularly, I would say her second marriage to E.B, White, which for anyone who's not aware, he was the creator of *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*. So even if you don't recognize his name, he probably impacted your childhood, in addition to other things that he obviously did.

AR: That's right. I've never met anyone who didn't recognize his name. I suppose they're out there, but *Charlotte's Web* is kind of a universal addictor. If you read it, you love it. But he was her second husband. So Katharine White began college at Bryn Mawr women's college when she was just turning 18. She began college engaged to be married to her first husband. Their families knew each other through summering in the same place in New Hampshire. His name was Ernest Angell. He was a bit older than her and they had a long

engagement while she was in college. And by the time she graduated, he had graduated from Harvard College and Harvard Law. And they married and she moved with him back to his hometown of Cleveland, where he began practicing law. And on paper, they had a lot in common. They were from similarly ambitious, educated families, upper-middle-class very comfortable in the same spaces, the same clubs of the Northeast.
But it turns out that they became quite incompatible quite early on in their marriage. So they had a daughter not long after they were married. And then the war interrupted their married life and Ernest went to serve in France for several years and came home quite a bit after the war ended. And when he came home, he came home with a very French idea of what marriage should look like, which means he wanted to have a wife and a mistress, which he had had abroad. He had sampled that lifestyle and he thought that that would suit him just fine. And Katharine absolutely did not want that lifestyle, but also wanted to keep their family together. When he came back from the war, they moved to New York and had a second child, their son. So they're now a family of four and she was doing everything she could to preserve their marriage and their family. And so for a long time, for many years, she put up with his philandering, with his mistresses on the side. And there's quite a story in the book that I learned as I was researching this, which I don't want to spoil because it's a good one. But even among her knowledge of his affairs, there was still a great deception and betrayal that he pulled off right underneath her nose. And this she tolerated for a very long time, but it made her extremely miserable and was the main motivator for her to work outside the home. There were other motivations, including money. Ernest Angell was a lawyer, but he wasn't making spectacular money in part because he was very interested in civil rights and in working for causes that were not particularly remunerative. But the main motivator for her to work outside the home was that she was miserable inside the home.
And so that was why in 1925, she walked into the offices of The New Yorker and asked for a job and worked there until she retired in 1961. So for a time that did work. But the other thing that working outside the home and specifically working at The New Yorker did was introduce her to a much younger, very talented writer named E.B. White. He was then new to New York and casting about and trying to launch a career as a humor writer. He was very interested in a certain kind of light, casual, sardonic take on social wars and urban life. And he started writing for The New Yorker and his sensibility was perfect for the magazine. And Katharine was tasked with hiring him. And it took a while because he was a very commitment-phobic person, both in the sense of a job, but also later in the sense of a relationship. But she eventually hired him. And that began a perfect relationship with The New Yorker. He was the exact right writer for the time. And Harold Ross loved him and would come to consider him a keystone writer for this magazine. But you would not on paper think that he and Katharine White, well, she was then Katharine Angell, would be a good match. She was seven years his senior. She was his boss. She was by then one of the pillars of the magazine, one of the authorities of the magazine. And she was a mother of two and a very married woman and doing the hard work of being a woman with a career in the ‘20s. Nonetheless, they began an affair and as her marriage continued to deteriorate, he became a lightness and a source of pleasure and possibility, just the sense that there could be more to a relationship than the constant fighting that she was experiencing with Ernest.
So E.B. White, I should pause here and say he hated his given name, which was Elwyn Brooks White, and he went by the name of Andy for complicated reasons. So I will refer to him, as I do in the book, as Andy White. So she and Andy were in no way serious. And she eventually went in 1929, she went to Reno to obtain a divorce from Ernest, not with the intention of marrying Andy, simply with the intention of breaking free from what had become an emotionally and slightly physically abusive marriage. And she and Andy had said that they would not write for the three months that she was in Reno, that they were not together. They broke that resolution almost immediately and wrote these amazing letters, which enabled me to write a very lively chapter of her time in Reno. And when she came back to the city in the end of August, 1929, they did, in fact, pick up the relationship where it left off. And two months later, October 1929, stock market crashed and then Andy White and Katharine Angel got married. And that relationship lasted until her death.
They had this extremely enviable marriage and literary partnership. And it was one and the same. There were many things that Katharine got out of this relationship. But the very first thing is that, of course, her ability to

work outside the home and to have a career and to work at The New Yorker was completely secure because that was baked in to the marriage itself. That was the terms under which Andy White met her and fell in love with her. But what Andy White got out of this marriage was a built-in editor. As this writer who is very painstakingly building a writing career, he had in his most intimate partnership, a woman whose entire purpose for being on this earth was to foster and support writers. And she did that for dozens of writers in her stable. But she did it best of all for her beloved husband, Andy White, whom she thought was a genius, and she would do anything to preserve his ability to sit down at his desk and write. So their marriage was a true literary partnership in that he was always going to write and she was always going to edit. That was just the structuring logic of their marriage. And I think that's best exemplified by the house that they eventually bought in Maine, this old farmhouse where if you enter in the front door, which nobody ever did, the formal front door that faced the road was not really used. But if you entered into that door, you'd be in a hall and there would be an office on either side of that hall. And if you go to the right, it's Katharine's office and to the left, it's Andy's office. And they would each be in there working in what Katharine's son called two silences. But they would punctuate that silence quite often if one of them would read something funny, they would shout across the hall to the other and tell them the joke or the funny line or the interesting thing that one of their mutual friends said in the letter. So it was a true partnership. They were in sync so completely in their intellectual interests, in their humor and in their work, in their day to day work. And that was just this enduring decades-long marriage and relationship that we all benefited from because it made its way into the pages of The New Yorker, as well as in Andy White's many books.

AT: It is kind of funny because in my book, I do write about, among other things, how wives have often been editors of what we think of as the great male writers. This takes it a little further than most of the women in my book. And I feel like Katharine maybe also got a little more credit than a lot of the women in my book, even if she wasn't always explicitly credited.

AR: I wish she had gotten far more credit. This was a different time and place. Andy White never had a literary agent. He had Katharine. He never needed to ever hustle to get his work published because he had Katharine and her extensive contacts in the literary world. And if he needed to find an editor, find an illustrator. It was her. She did all of the legwork of his literary career, did everything in order to make it so that all he had to do was sit down and write. She cleared obstacles. She kept the world at bay. When he became more and more of a success, she answered his voluminous fan mail. And when he began writing for children, that fan mail came from children and she's writing and signing these letters in his name. And the other thing that she did, there are many meetings to the word editor. She didn't often sit down with a pencil and line edit his writing. She did in the early years of The New Yorker, but not not in later years. She would read and comment on drafts, but not in the copy editing or line editing sense. But what she absolutely did was edit his collected works.
So at one point in the 1930s, he left The New Yorker. He found the weekly rhythms of writing for The New Yorker to be quite punishing, and he thought that if he could unchain himself from that rhythm, that he might find a different way of working and he might be able to write different kinds of writing. So he ended up working for Harper's and writing a monthly column called One Man's Meat. And Katharine's son, Roger Angell, who was also a writer and editor and a New Yorker personage, would say that One Man's Meet was really the making of E.B. White as a writer, that this was where he found his groove and found his working rhythm. And it was Katharine who decided to collect some of the columns from One Man's Meat and turn it into a book called One Man's Meat. And it was she who figured out which articles should be included and what the structure should be and how to organize it and what the themes should be and who should publish it. All of that work is the work of an editor and it's substantial intellectual work as well as substantial logistical publishing work. And he never had to worry about any of that. He had this built-in helpmeet who could just exactly meet his needs and help get him out into the world. And she did that and she did that happily. She did that in full deference to what she considered his genius. She never looked for credit. And it was my job to give her that credit and to

make all of that work visible because it's hugely important because no writer writes in solitude, not even E.B. White.

AT: So I want to dig more into the lone male genius myth, because, as you said, pretty much everybody knows who E.B. White is, or at least is familiar with his work. But even as someone who is a huge reader and focuses all of her work on women's history, I had never heard of Katharine S. White. And it repeats this pattern that I talk about in my book of the woman behind the supposedly lone male genius. And I think you get this especially with writers. I feel like many people do not realize how many individuals are involved in most writing that makes it to the public. But apart from E.B. White, we also see this with her boss, who you mentioned earlier, New Yorker founder and longtime editor Harold Ross. He ran the magazine basically until he died. And Katharine repeatedly turned down opportunities to replace him. And from the way you describe it, it's not just out of loyalty to him, but it's also on the premise that he **was** The New Yorker, that it couldn't be the same without him. But as you've explained to us, his original version of The New Yorker is very different to what it became because of Katharine. And so I would really question this, whether that was just her excuse or whether this was some form of internalized misogyny that she was thinking that she couldn't take his place. To me, it just seems unlikely that that that was truly the case. And it just feels like such a tragedy that she could have had this more public-facing role. She could have been that role model that everybody recognized her name, in addition to that position of greater authority. Like you said, she had a lot of power, but she was not the ultimate person in charge. And she could have been. That's what's so frustrating. She could have been, multiple times.

AR: I am right there with you. It is tantalizing to speculate on what The New Yorker would have been like if one of the three times she was offered the top job she had accepted. And that's just a fun thought experiment that we can all play in our minds about what it could have become and what it would have meant to the literary culture at large to have a woman in a position of such visible power. But the way it turned out is that Katharine White has been largely unknown. The reasons for her to be unknown are so plentiful as to be overdetermined. So one of them absolutely is that she was no feminist. And let me qualify that by saying she was an ardent activist for suffrage in the Teens. And she absolutely believed that women should be paid the same as men. But she never hired women as editors. And she didn't work very hard to equalize power relations within the office because she believed in deferring to Harold Ross's power. She believed, at least on some level, in his genius, in the force of his personality, his charisma as a structuring factor for The New Yorker's success. And how right she was about that we can argue about because there is something to be said for the particular way that he represented the magazine out in the world, the way he drew people to the magazine by going to nightclubs and by he owned a restaurant and by doing a certain kind of socializing – that has value, he had cultural capital and he played it to the hilt.
But yes, could she have edited the magazine to the standards that it eventually achieved? Absolutely. She absolutely could have. But another reason why we don't know of her, another reason why her power has been invisible is because she staunchly believed that an editor should be invisible, that her work, which she was very proud of, her career, which was the structure and meaning of her life from 1925 until she retired and beyond. She was forever connected to The New Yorker, even in retirement, that that was very valuable, but that she was always in the service of the author. And so there was a way in which she didn't acknowledge, at least in the way that she spoke about her career and spoke about the business of writing, she didn't acknowledge the truth of her own life, which is that writing is always social and certainly publishing is social. But even before you get to that point of publishing, writing and producing and really any kind of work, of an artist working in their practice with their medium there's plenty of times of solitude there. If we think about Andy White in his office that he crafted out of a boathouse down on the shore of their main farmhouse, he couldn't have been more alone with just his typewriter in this wooden shack. And yet a piece of art is always a conversation and a piece of writing is always written for a readership. And even if that reader is just one person for many, many authors, many of the canonical authors of the 20th century, that one person was Katharine

White. She served as the recipient, as the ideal reader for so many writers, to the degree that they could write things that they wouldn't have written if they hadn't known her, if they hadn't been in conversation with her, if they didn't know that there was this extremely receptive, sympathetic editor sitting at a desk waiting for the piece of writing that they were about to produce and then send to her. So that relationship, that conversation about writing that happens over time, over letters, over martinis at the Algonquin, over summering at each other's houses, the relationships that Katharine built with these authors was absolutely generative in a way that just thinking about one person sitting alone at their typewriter simply cannot capture.

AT: But even after Harold Ross died, she still didn't step into that role. And I wouldn't be surprised if at that point it was just because she was quite advanced in years, shall we say, at that point. And I don't know if that was more of wanting to get someone in who was perhaps a bit younger. But what I found really frustrating about that period at The New Yorker for her was she had this boss, Gus Lebrano, who apart from just kind of being a jerk, from what I recall from the book, he doesn't seem to have respected her at all. He doesn't seem to have trusted her. He doesn't seem to have wanted to work with her, which is an awful boss for anybody to have. But particularly for him to treat her that way after all of her years and all of the reputation that she had built up, it seems particularly unfounded for someone to treat her that way.

AR: The story between Katharine and Gus Lebrano is long and complicated, and it starts many years before the moment in the 1950s that you're referencing. So Gus Lebrano was younger than Katharine. In fact, he was, if memory serves, E.B. White's roommate in college. They were friends. And so after she had hired Andy White as a staff writer, sometime in the ‘30s, she hired Gus Lebrano to be one of the editors in her office, one of the fiction editors. She was the boss. He was one of the junior editors and responsible for his own authors who he would cultivate. And then each of the editors in that office, if there was a piece that they wanted, they would bring it to all the editors. They would all read it, discuss it, vote on it. That relationship was perfectly congenial and continued for many years. But one thing that happened to change that relationship is that Andy White in the late ‘30s, again, because he was unhappy with this very punishing, time consuming weekly rhythm of The New Yorker, wanted to leave the city. The Whites had purchased this beautiful saltwater farm in Maine a few years earlier and were living there in the summers. But at Andy's request, the Whites decided to move full time from New York to Maine, where Andy would reconnect with his writing, maybe produce the great American novel or something else that was different from these columns that he was churning out on commission that were not his heart's desire.

So what this meant was that Katharine became a pioneer of the work from home lifestyle in like 1938, back when the mails were fantastic, coming twice a day to the house with these huge bags of manuscripts and letters from The New Yorker to Maine. But it also meant that she went from full time running, being the boss of the fiction department, answering only to Harold Ross, to being a part time consulting editor. And this meant that she lost a lot of standing and footing and power within the office. She was no longer responsible for finding new authors and cultivating them and recruiting them, which was her absolute favorite thing in the world to do, building these relationships with people that she thought she could elicit good work from. And that was what she was put on the earth to do. And suddenly she was no longer doing that. That was not part of her job description. All she was doing was responding to the mails, responding to what the other editors would send to her if they needed another opinion or if they needed her to doctor a piece and make it a little better. And this was a vast underestimation of her talents and underuse of her. But it was what they could swing in terms of keeping her connected to The New Yorker while still being quite far away.

It's an interesting moment in her life where she makes this what I consider to be a huge sacrifice for her husband's artistic well-being. She would never have called it a sacrifice. She never complained during or after this moment. But it's also a moment where she can see what her true passion is in life and how she was being underutilized at The New Yorker. That moment didn't last terribly long because the next thing that happened was the war and everyone in The New Yorker being sent overseas and Harold Ross begging the Whites to

give up their country idyll and to move back to the city and and become once again the power couple of The New Yorker and to write and edit from the city itself, which they did, returning to Maine in the summers. But once Katharine returned to the office, eventually she became underneath Gus Lebrano's hierarchy. So he was above her in the staff hierarchy, this this younger man who she had hired and trained into the job. And that was a very uneasy relationship between the two of them. She was not very good at being an employee rather than the boss because she was just doing what came naturally to her, which was basically everything, just doing the work of running the magazine. She was always just so competent and so effective at her job. And it was very difficult for her to rein that in. So there was tension there.
There's much else to this story. It also has to do with her health troubles over the years. And it has to do with how the magazine was trying to grow. It grew enormously during the war. They earned many, many new subscribers and it just absolutely ballooned and came into its own. And then, of course, the death of Harold Ross and his successor, which was William Shawn. So there were lots of other changes that feed into this story. So it's never just as simple as, "oh, there was one misogynist male who was keeping this brilliant woman down." There there was some of that, but there was also a lot else going on.
And the amazing thing to me, whenever there's a moment in Katherine White's story where there's some sort of obstacle or some sort of setback and it often has to do with a relationship or a health trouble that she was suffering through, the amazing thing to me is always every single time you can see Katherine White working as hard as she possibly can right through that obstacle, doing whatever it takes to solve the problem and also continuing to do her job at The New Yorker. This woman wrote to her authors, wrote her editorial letters from hospital rooms, from sick beds at her homes in New York and Maine. Through every kind of obstacle, she is continuing these extensive conversations with her authors to continue to bring them into the pages of the magazine. Her work ethic was phenomenal. And I think that's the main story. And that's the thing that I find so impressive and so inspiring about this life that was never easy, but was always just massively effective.

AT: Well, let's talk more about her relationship with authors, because one of the elements that I found particularly telling about how important this was, was that at one point in her career, she had to take a temporary absence. And when she returned, she essentially had to try to salvage these relationships with particularly women writers. I believe Nabokov was also one of the writers, so not exclusively women, but writers like Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Bishop, Shirley Jackson had not been treated as Katherine would have treated them, shall we say. And so Katherine comes back and she's having to try to fix this.

AR: She never really edited Shirley Jackson. Shirley Jackson was one of Gus Lebrano's authors. So there weren't a lot of letters between Katherine White and Shirley Jackson, which I was disappointed in because I love Jackson's writing and I would have loved to have seen what the two of them discussed. But Shirley Jackson's relationship was with Gus Lebrano. So I do spend a few pages in the biography speculating about what Shirley Jackson's career, which was not ever easy at The New Yorker, what it might have looked like had Katherine been her editor. So what I did see in the postwar years was the same pattern again and again. Katherine would notice that there was a promising author who another editor had begun a conversation with, either to an author at the very start of their career or an author who had had some success in another publication, and The New Yorker was trying to swoop in and bring into The New Yorker. And this other editor would start the conversation and it would go a little ways. And maybe they would publish one or two things from this author. And then the conversation would peter out and this author would not then be cultivated or brought on board and nurtured. And a promising writer would potentially not have the start to their career that they could have had. And so this happened. As you say, the three big examples in the book are Nabokov, Elizabeth Bishop and Mary McCarthy. These are heavy hitters of 20th century American literature whose careers could have been completely different if Katherine hadn't gone through the files and seen this aborted or petered out conversation and picked it up and reached out and said to each of these authors, "hey, we haven't seen any submissions from you in a while. Can I take you to lunch?" In Nabokov's case, "can I lend

you some money on the basis of absolutely no reason? It's not an advance for a piece you bring. Can I just give you some money in the hopes that you will write something brilliant for us?" Which absolutely worked.
So she, in these three cases, restarted conversations and went to extreme lengths to keep a relationship going until such a time as that author would produce something amazing that she could publish. These are extremely speculative, kind of risky conversations. She's spending time and in a lot of cases money to nurture a relationship, which may or may not pan out. But of course we have the hindsight of history. We know in these three cases, they panned out beautifully for The New Yorker and for these authors. So I think in these instances, what you can really see is the hiddenmost part, the really hidden part of editing, that it happens long before the author even puts pen to paper or typewriter key to paper, that it is about creating the possibility for a certain kind of work to be written in the first place.
So for for all three of those authors, what Katharine White helped bring into being were prose, not poetry in Bishop's case, and they were memoirs, The New Yorker term is reminiscence, but the beginning of *Speak Memory* for Nabokov, Mary McCarthy's fantastic edited collection, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and some prose pieces by Elizabeth Bishop that were never collected into a book, but that she had hoped someday to expand into a book that were about her childhood. In all of these cases, Katharine White helped bring about this very specific take on an author's retroactive look at their own childhood and their own making as an artist. And this was as a result of these conversations with this editor who had a particular vision and a particular genius for fostering the relationship that was going to bring these works about. Katharine White was playing the long game. It took years for some of these conversations to, between the time she's reaching out with this letter saying, "hey, can we talk?" till the time that produces an article that The New Yorker published. But that was the meat and substance of her job. That's what she loved. And my God, were her authors grateful for that. They adored her for it and were absolutely eyes wide open to the effect that she had on their ability to write.

AT: And so I know I've just mentioned a very specific moment in her career, but obviously this was a much larger pattern that was her career for decades.

AR: Yes, Katharine was very interested in women writers. That's who she wanted to read and that's who she wanted to publish. And so from the beginning, without ever making it an explicit project or drawing attention to what she was doing, she very concertedly brought women into the pages of The New Yorker. And I'll list a bunch of people and some of them will be names that you know and maybe some of them won't be. I certainly learned about a bunch of new writers through my research. But she helped bring Janet Flanner to The New Yorker, one of the defining voices of early and mid-century New Yorker. She brought Kay Boyle to The New Yorker in the '30s as a very brand-new experimental writer who ended up having a much more glittering career. There were a bunch of short story writers who helped define the tone of The New Yorker. People like Sally Benson, Nancy Hale, Emily Hahn. One of her major coups in terms of poetry was that she brought Louise Bogan to the magazine, who was both a poet and then eventually the poetry reviewer. And that was a real victory from Katharine's many, many battles with Harold Ross about what kind of poetry they should be including. That they would now be tastemakers in poetry, not just from what they published, but that they would have a reviewer who would be speaking to the larger marketplace and conversation about poetry. So that helped bring other poets to The New Yorker, including Auden in the 1930s.
We've already talked about Mary McCarthy. Mary McCarthy was one of Katharine's very favorite authors. She worked very hard to get and keep Mary in her stable of writers. Not only did she specialize in fiction, but even beyond that, and fiction for the New Yorker, by the way, did not mean fiction. It meant literature. It meant fiction, poetry, and memoir. But eventually they hired a poetry editor. But even so, occasionally Katharine would be bringing poets into the magazine, including, as we've said, Elizabeth Bishop, but also Adrienne Rich and Phyllis McGinley, who wrote light verse and was very popular. And then she had an enormous success with bringing foreign-born or women who were living abroad into the magazine, both American and often British women that were women that she loved to read. This was absolutely guided by her own taste in a particular

kind of woman who is a very keen observer of social moors. So that would be Indian-born writer Christine Weston, South African writer Nadine Gordimer, British authors like Rumer Godden, Sylvia Warner Townsend, and Elizabeth Taylor, not that one, all of whom were brand-new to me. And I had an absolutely delightful time reading their stories and learning their voices. And then another favorite of hers who she edited for a long time and had a very close relationship with was the American short story writer and novelist Jean Stafford, and there's a beautiful story in the book about their relationship because Katharine really rescued Stafford from just the nadir of her writing life after her very violent and abusive marriage to the poet Robert Lowell. And Katharine helped bring Stafford back to her feet and back to her desk and really fostered her career over many, many years. And it was a very fruitful relationship between the two of them, both in terms of just a friendship, but also this professional, they were just firing on all cylinders, the two of them when they were working together. And the culmination of that was that when Stafford published her collected stories in the early ‘60s, it won the Pulitzer. And it was dedicated to Katharine White, that this was a career that was really brought to being by Katharine. There are plenty more. There are lots of women who owe their appearance in The New Yorker and the beginning or sometimes the middle of their careers to this woman. And as I said, she did this without any fanfare, without announcing that this was her political passion. And The New Yorker just very matter of factly published men and women in almost equal proportion because in part, there was this very powerful woman sitting at the editorial desk, the only woman in the room, but one who was able to really influence the makeup of the magazine.

AT: While I certainly appreciate that in isolation, shall we say, it actually makes me even more frustrated that she doesn't really seem to have done anything to promote or nurture woman editors. So Rachel MacKenzie was recommended to her. So this is the person who was the second woman editor at the magazine. Katharine had been there for 30 years by the time Rachel MacKenzie came along. And even with that recommendation, Katharine was still skeptical about hiring another woman to do the same type of job that she had been doing for 30 years. She even said when hiring editors, “we need men, not women.” And she would relegate women to manuscript readers. And so it's deeply frustrating and baffling to me that as she can very clearly recognize the value of women writers, she can't see the same thing when it comes to editing. She can't see other women doing the job that she is doing as a woman. And I can't wrap my brain around this. Make it make sense!

AR: I don't know that I can make it make sense, but I can try. I share your frustration and it's very clear that there are contradictions here. So not only did Katharine do just such incredible work to promote women authors, but she also worked with other women editors and an entire cohort of women agents. So it's not as if women were rare in publishing and it's not as if women were hard to find to fill the job openings at The New Yorker. She had applicants that she turned away. So she certainly could have hired women. The best way that I can make sense of it, and of course there's no smoking gun letter where she explains exactly what her philosophy was toward women in the workplace. And I will also note that anytime we talk about an individual, we need to keep a historical perspective and really be clear on the fact that there's change over time and what Katharine believed in the 1920s, right after the passage of suffrage, would be very different than what she might believe in the 1950s after a career of disillusionment and after the culture had changed enormously. So with all of those caveats, let me say that I think the best way to make sense of it is that she believed that men and women were equal, but she also believed that men and women were different. And she believed that to her bones, in a way that we don't nowadays believe in that kind of biological determinism. So she believed that there were jobs that men were better at. And I don't have a whole lot else to fill in the subtleties of that belief. I do know that, when they were considering men and women for various editorial positions over the years, there are a couple letters where she would say, “we can't hire a woman for this because, we need someone who can handle stories that are about sex.” And she had a bias that “this needs to be a man,” and that “women aren't really good with this kind of realism.” The excuse that people hold up, she was a product of her time. Well, she was ahead of her time in a lot of ways. And she was of her time in other sort of contradictory ways. And it is a

shame. And again, just like with the idea of her holding Harold Ross's job, it is an interesting and sometimes frustrating thought experiment to think about what it would have been like had she been a feminist like we are feminists now. She was a feminist of a different stripe. But if she had hired more women, if she had filled The New Yorker office with people like herself, what might that have looked like? And that would have been a different magazine. And we could say the same really about a lot of what-ifs, a lot of speculations. We could say what would the New Yorker have been like if they had published black authors, for instance, which they did not for the first two or three decades of their existence. What would The New Yorker have been like if they had acknowledged homosexuality? They published stories by queer writers, and they had queer editors and queer employees. It wasn't as if you couldn't be queer at The New Yorker, but definitely, it was not a subject that they thought their readers could handle. So there are a lot of what-ifs. But it is the work of history and biography to try to preserve the way it was at the time, my my interest was in seeing how did the world look like from Katharine's viewpoint, not what do I wish Katharine had done if she had experienced the world as I have in 2025. So I think that frustration has to remain a bit of a mystery. And the most that we can say is that she did more than you would expect for women in the workforce and for women's literary culture than another person would occupy in that same position.

AT: I do have another episode about Mary Ward and her book *Marcella*. So she was a New woman Writer, late 1800s, wrote essentially, let's call it proto-feminist heroine. And her book was incredibly popular. But then she went and was the head of an anti-suffrage league for a few years. And so what's interesting is that in the '70s, I believe, when feminist academics were reclaiming all of this literature that had fallen by the wayside, because it was written by women, they basically blackballed Mary Ward, even though her book had been so influential and so popular, because they basically said, "you were head of this anti-suffrage league, and therefore we reject you." And that's a whole other conversation that, like I said, I have on another episode. So go listen to that one after you've finished this one. But I do really enjoy, regardless of who we're talking about, I like digging into nuance and the fact that people are not entirely perfect. They are not the idol that we want them to be. But that also doesn't make them someone that we shouldn't be talking about, that we shouldn't be celebrating for the good things they did, while also acknowledging that there are other things that they could have done better from our modern perspective, shall we say.

Listen to Josephine Browne on Mary Ward, Marcella and the New Woman or read the transcript.

AR: That's right. I think it would be a mistake to insist that people from the past be ideologically pure or ideologically aligned with the future that they couldn't have imagined. So it's much more interesting if, as you say, you take a subtler view, and I would add a historical view, a view of change over time, and really see, how did this individual match up with and lag or run ahead of their own time? That's interesting, but that requires more than a soundbite. In my case, that requires 600 pages of biography. And that's interesting. That's what brings the past alive and brings a person alive. And I think that's what we're here for. I think that's what the promise and I think even some of the mystery of women's lives, it's important to keep that mystery alive and to mark it, as you say, to perform your frustration. But it's okay if we can't resolve the contradiction or fill in the mystery. We can just live with it.

AT: Yeah, it's the difference between a two-dimensional character and a three-dimensional human being, is really what it comes down to. And with that in mind, I'd like to dig into her reputation, both contemporaneously and her legacy, because you talk about how "in the scant writing about Katharine's career, there is a debate about whether she was formidable or maternal, as though those were the only two ways to describe a woman in power."

AR: So I first noticed in the writing about her since her death, largely in The New Yorker, that the word "formidable" is used all the time. And then eventually, it gets used so often that some of the writers then

comment on these. So there's a meta discourse about the word formidable in relation to Katharine White. And I had to therefore take that on myself as a kind of meta commentary on the way that Katharine has been perceived and remembered to the extent that she was remembered. And the thing that's abundantly clear to me, having read hundreds and hundreds, thousands and thousands of letters between Katharine and her authors, is that her authors adored her and were so grateful to have her in their lives. Not one author would describe her as formidable, a word to me that is a backhanded compliment. If you're describing a person as formidable, you're saying that you're a little bit scared of them, right? You're saying that they're impressive, but in a way that's certainly not warm and nurturing. As I also say in the book, and I have since I very much noticed this to be true, and just reading the newspaper, the word formidable is never used to describe a man. It is a particular word with a particular valence that is used to describe a particular kind of woman in power. As you go through the world, see how often men are described as formidable, and I think you'll agree.
But that word was never used by her authors, who did find her to be incredibly nurturing, incredibly responsive. These are my words, not hers, but she was someone who was both very analytical of a story at hand. She could look at it with x-ray vision and see what was good and what was bad about it, and really see how else it could be. Very, very analytical, very intellectual, very interested in ideas and the life of the mind. **And** extremely emotionally adept, and able to connect with people across these letters that she's writing over years and years, and forging these relationships. And those two things, absolutely went hand in hand, and absolutely led into the particular genius of her career. So to my mind, it's what her authors have to say about her that is the most accurate and representative.
But certainly people that worked with her in The New Yorker, people on staff, found her to be very intimidating. There's a story, I don't know, true or not, a lore about the sound of her heels clicking on the linoleum would strike terror in the hearts of junior staffers, and she would peer at you with a kind of intensity, and you would be afraid of what questions she might ask about your well-being. I'm sure that there's truth to that. I'm sure that she didn't do a lot to soften the power that she wielded in the office, that she was perfectly happy to be authoritative and to have a certain stature and to command a certain deference in the office, and maybe that was looked upon as crossing a gender line. But then what also happens is that The New Yorker is a place of rampant mythology, very much a self-mythologizing kind of place. And over the years, her particular story, her life story, and to my eyes, the story of her first marriage and her divorce, and we haven't even gotten into anything about her kids and the custody battles, and then her second marriage and her personal life has gotten wrapped up into the fact that she was the only woman in the room for most of her career to form this picture of her as a kind of dragon lady, which she never was. And that becomes part of her lore in The New Yorker. And now it has gotten sometimes when to the extent that people have heard of her before my book, it was as this formidable, fearsome gatekeeper who was someone who wielded her power unapologetically. And that is not the story that you find when you go into the archives. That is a mythology that's pretty easy to pierce. And I hope that the subtlety of the book, the subtlety of the portrait of her does that and shows that if she had been the person that the mythology says she was, she would not have been successful at her job. She would not have had these incredible relationships with these writers that are now revered and beloved because of the work that they produced under her aegis.

AT: Anytime I talk with a biographer, one of my key questions is always, why her? So how did you come across Katherine? And what made you say, yes, I need to write not just a book, but a 21-hour audiobook. I don't know how long the physical book is. But it's so extensive and nuanced in ways that possibly just because you had more documentation than a lot of biographers have access to. But the depth and detail in this biography is so rich that I'm curious, not only how you first encountered her, but what made you, I don't want to say obsessed, obsessed sounds weird. What captured and then held your attention so much that you produced this book?

AR: I love this question and obsessed is not a weird word. I think you have to be a little obsessed to finish a biography. I first encountered Katharine White when I was doing a deep dive into 20th century American

literature by women and reading really widely. A perennial question of mine, and it sounds like of you as well, is what made the writing that I love possible? What were the conditions that led to some of the works that have been so meaningful to me, especially when women are writing against so many obstacles of family and poverty and lack of access to resources. And so in the course of that reading, I came across an essay in the Sewanee Review, a journal that was about Katharine White's relationship to Jean Stafford. And I was absolutely floored. I was so moved. What Katharine did for Stafford made me almost want to weep. It was so extensive, so above and beyond anything I had ever conceived of as the work of an editor. And it made me ache. It made me wish that I had a Katharine White in my life. It also made me want to be Katharine and to be able to do that for the writers in my life that are still facing obstacles to a career. So that really started me off.
So then I read what was out there and I will say there was already a biography of Katharine White called *Onward and Upward*, which was begun shortly after her death in the ‘70s by a woman named Linda Davis. And she was a master's student writing about Katherine's career. And she wrote this biography, which is fantastic, but it had long been out of print by the time I discovered it. And she wrote it decades before The New Yorker papers were open to researchers. So she wasn't ever able to give a very fulsome account of her career. It was more of a biography about her personal life and her marriage to Andy White, who Linda Davis knew at the time. So that biography was such a gift because that was a great launch pad for my own more professionally interested biography. So I could use that as the basis for my own inquiry into The New Yorker archives, which were vast, basically bottomless. So The New Yorker donated their papers to the New York Public Library in the ‘90s. And the only way I can explain how vast they are is to say that if you were to print out the finding aid for the archive, just the list of all the boxes and folders, it would be over 800 pages. It is enormous. And it's not as if there are five boxes over here that are labeled “Katharine White,” her letters are throughout this entire archive. So it was a huge job. I had to be obsessed in order to figure out who were her authors and how do I make my way through this absolutely colossal and incredibly rich archive to tell the story? And then how do I edit that down? And how do I edit it down without having Katherine to help me?
But what I discovered quite early on is that these editorial letters, they're very long, not initially, not in the 20s, but from the ‘30s, and then especially ‘40s and ‘50s, her letters go on for pages, any given folder with any given author, any given year is bulging. And The New Yorker files have both sides of the correspondence. So I'm reading this back and forth. And these editorial letters, are incredibly rich and incredibly available for a literary reading, just exactly as if I were reading an archive of a poet or a novelist, that these memos say more than you might think that they say. They say more than Katherine ever thought that they said. They are available for a literary reading about the work of literature and about many things in 20th century literary history that kept me absolutely riveted and made the writing of this book so pleasurable. Her voice comes through these letters crystal clearly. I felt that I got to know her very well because she's right there on the page, not because I did all this work interpreting her, but because I just had to listen. And so to throw back to something that I said earlier, part of why this book felt very urgent and pleasurable for me to write was because I really felt not only that I knew her, but that I recognized her and that I share qualities with her. I think that I share her particular combination of intellect and emotional intelligence. And the way that I've said it before, which I really think is true, is that for both of us, criticism is our love language. Criticizing a writer's work was how Katharine told that writer, “I love you, I believe in you, I think this could be even better.” And so what might seem like a negative thing, like “I'm giving you some notes on how to improve this story” was conveyed and was received as a love language. And I couldn't get enough of that, to see that unfold over the course of the decades and her relationships with all of these writers was just constantly moving to me and constantly surprising because I could then see what that produced in the way of a book or a story or the payoff for the public reception of this author's work. So I think lots of people could have written this book and I'm very glad that I got to be the one to do it because I really felt like I recognized her and in some way a part of me was affirmed in knowing that, yes, this was a particular combination of skills that she absolutely activated and made into a very fulfilling career.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.