

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. Today I'm joined by Dr. Marsha Gordon, director of film studies at North Carolina State University and author of *Becoming the Ex-Wife: The Unconventional Life and Forgotten Writings of Ursula Parrott*. First, could you introduce us to Ursula?

MG: So Ursula Parrott was a once incredibly famous best-selling author and public personality. And Parrott's career really took off in 1929 when she published this book called *Ex-Wife*, at first published anonymously as a marketing gimmick. And it was based on her own experience with divorce and being a young single woman in New York City. And this book came out in 1929 and it was a sensation and from there she went on to have a pretty extraordinary publishing career. She published 20 books and over 100 articles, serialized novels, and short stories between 1929 and 1947. She was widely adapted in Hollywood. There were 10 films produced from her writing and she spent time there as a screenwriter and she was in the newspapers all of the time. After her first marriage and her first divorce, she had three more. She had a young son. She was a colorful personality and at a time of the the great gossip columns of the day, she was frequently to be found within those. So there was a period of time, I would say certainly the 1930s and into the 1940s, where I think most people in this country would have recognized the name Ursula Parrott, whether they had read her writing or not.

AT: And so just to give people a little bit of context, because according to your book, she is credited with popularizing the label "ex-wife" in the first place. (MG: That's right.) And so it's so ingrained in our culture nowadays that it doesn't seem nearly as shocking. But in 1929, she wasn't just writing about single women, she was writing about divorcees. (MG: Yes.) So can you give us an idea of sort of the society that she was dealing with in a cultural context?

MG: Yeah, there's a lot to talk about here. First a little stage setting, which is that she was born in 1899 in Boston and raised there. Her progressive parents sent her to the Boston Latin Girls' School for her high school education. And then she went on to Radcliffe College. So she wasn't part of the first generation of college educated women, but she was part of the second wave. And so out of this world of increased opportunity and freedom for women came a lot of different things, including different expectations for marriage, relationship, sexual behavior, and the like. And so she was part of this Jazz Age modern generation. And she ended up moving and living with her first husband in the hotbed of all of this in Greenwich Village in New York City. And so she was part of this generation that was really thinking about how to navigate the world in ways that were unprecedented. So if you think about 20 or 30 years prior to her, and Victorian age sensibilities about women's place in the home and as mother to their children, and that was their job, and they should just be satisfied with all of that. Ursula Parrott was navigating this world in which women were given a greater access to opportunities, to things like political participation with the passage of the women's right to vote, and so on. And so when Parrott wrote about being a divorcee in 1929 in this book *Ex-Wife*, it's not that she had invented this category or this term, but she was absolutely associated with it. And she was credited with basically putting it in the universe as a category of identity. You could be an ex-wife. And I don't think anyone had really put it like that before. There were other writers who had written about divorced women, but Parrott was really attaching this label and this idea to a swath of the population who then were navigating the world as ex-wives, who were typically in a Parrott story on the lookout for a way to get out of that category through remarriage, which was almost never a successful proposition in a Parrott story, but also having to figure out how to support themselves by working. And even more than by working as in getting a job as a shop girl or a secretary, having a career. So Parrott often wrote about women who were advertising executives or performers on the stage or screenwriters or authors like herself, magazine editors. So women who could earn really substantial amounts of money, sometimes even more than their ex-husbands or their current husbands or their current boyfriends, which was always a source of conflict. So Parrott really was operating at the nexus of all of this change having to do with marriage and divorce, having to do with women and the public sphere. And so she was airing a lot of

these dilemmas through her very popular stories.

AT: So one of the things that I've noticed when talking with people about "this writer was groundbreaking for their depictions of X, Y, or Z," whatever type of person. So I'm going to guess that if divorcees had been written about previously, or I should say when divorcees had been written about previously, (MG: Yes.) because I assume it wasn't super common, but I'm guessing there was sort of a moralizing warning tone about them before, whereas I'm guessing she made them more human, more well-rounded, more realistic in terms of, as you were saying, they need to support themselves, they may need to support their kids.

MG: Yeah, here's a number of things at work. And I'll just focus on *Ex-Wife*, since that was her breakthrough book, which was then adapted into the divorcee in Hollywood, which gave Norma Shearer her first and only Academy Award. So this is really the book that Parrott is associated with more than any other. I would say that yes, on the one hand, this novel is really giving agency and a depth to the female heroine who is navigating this divorce. And I often like to put this book in contrast to say, a little book you might've heard of called *The Great Gatsby*, which is very focused on male perspectives and male experiences at the expense, I think, of the dimensionality of the female characters in that story, right? Fitzgerald's novel is one very focused on male experience. And Parrott's novel is very focused on Patricia's experience, but what's so essential to her narration of Patricia, to my mind, what is so innovative, what is so radical is the way that Parrott really explored the darker sides of this experience. So in the novel, Patricia's husband is physically violent with her. In the novel, Patricia is raped. In the novel, Patricia undergoes an abortion. And one of the most beautifully written and harrowing scenes, I think in 20th century American literature, Parrott handles it with such artfulness and with such frankness. Parrott was part of this generation as the critic Anne Douglas refers to the idea of terrible honesty of New York writers of this generation. Parrott was really doing that. And she was really approaching her subject with this honesty that had a lot to do with the female body and what it meant to have a female body that was subject to these various perpetrations of violence and the consequences of sex, which always fell on women's shoulders. So to my mind, that's what makes this book really special and spectacular. And Parrott really spent her career thinking about what it meant to be a woman in this time period. And that is the story she tells 200 different ways, is what it was like to navigate life in a female body, in a culture in which women were allegedly getting some parity with men in the culture, but in actuality, that was never the case.

AT: I'm just thinking about how much they would have had to change when adapting that for Hollywood during, I assume during the Hays Code period.

MG: This is actually a pre-Code film. So it comes out in 1930 and the Production Code really starts getting enforced in 1934. But having said that, there was the kind of baby version of the Hays Code in effect when it was made. And there were certainly things that they had to do. So for example, they were forced to change the name from *Ex-Wife* to *The Divorcee*. I guess it's a slightly classier way to refer to it, but also I've looked at internal memos that basically said, "look, if you call it *Ex-Wife*, people are going to expect the book and you can't give that to them. So don't raise people's expectations." And no doubt, they were talking about some of the things I just discussed, rape and abortion and the kind of brutality that is enacted. But I will say that I think the adaptation is incredibly interesting in its own right. And I've shown the film all over the country while I was on my book tour, including at a lot of college campuses and students, young people really respond to this film, especially to the central core tenet, which I didn't even really explain, which is that the plot revolves around the breakup of a marriage, obviously. But the reason the marriage breaks up is that the husband gets drunk one night and has sex with another woman and confesses it to his wife. And she decides in the modern way of accepting people on modern terms, not on Victorian principles, that she will forgive him and let it go and prioritize their marriage above all else. Well, he goes out of town and she gets drunk and reciprocates the adultery. And when she confesses it to him and says "look, this is what you did. I did the same thing. I've

evened the score,” as she puts it, he cannot accept it. And he is a total hypocrite. And I think especially watching it today, and again, through young people's eyes, I've heard them yell at the screen. They're so mad at him for the double standard and hypocrisy that gets enacted. But I think given the fact that this is 1930, when the film gets made, it's really interesting to see the way this plays out. And as you can imagine, the film ends quite differently than the novel does. And I won't give it away, but I suspect you can guess. So yes, there were definitely accommodations made, but still, I think that the film and even the discourse around the film when it came out, this was a huge smash by the way, it actually really helped save a number of theaters during start of the Depression, because it was such a success. And it got people coming to the theaters when people were beginning to hold back their cash in the wake of the fall of 1929 and the stock market crash and so on. So this was an immensely popular film. And I think it was a conversation starter for people in the same way the book was, but it had a very different reach, because even though the book was wildly popular and a bestseller, movies just reached hundreds of thousands of more people than a book ever would.

AT: I do wonder how many people saw the movie and then went and read the book as well.

MG: Yeah, I suspect a lot, *Ex-Wife* was also serialized in a New York newspaper. And by the way, it was serialized as the stock market was crashing in October 1929. So one of my favorite details of Parrott's life is that she got her first big paycheck as the stock market was crashing. And the poetry of that is that if she'd gotten it a few months earlier, she might've invested it, right. As one would be inclined to do with a huge infusion of cash. But she actually got her big initial pay day when everything was falling apart in the country. So she was really able to ride that wave of economic success. And unfortunately she was not very good with her money as I discuss in great detail in her biography, but she did have a lot of capital flowing. And of course when you work for Hollywood you just amplified your income many, many thousands fold. And so for a good decade or so she had this fantastic loop of writing and adaptations and serialization in magazines and really a pretty tremendous reach in the culture. One of the things I like to remind people of when I invoke *The Great Gatsby* is that it sold less than 25% of the number of copies that Ursula Parrott's *Ex-Wife* did when it came out in the 1920s. And it was really only after World War II that it began to kind of ascend into the popular imagination. So I like to think that after all these years of neglect for *Ex-Wife* with it only coming back in print, basically in 2023 for the first time in many decades and now I think it's been translated into at least eight different languages, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, and so on, that maybe it's time for an Ursula Parrott and *Ex-Wife* revival and people will start reading and thinking about this book again.

AT: So we've established that her book was incredibly popular. The movie was incredibly popular. The serialization I assume was also very popular. (MG: Yes.) But what did the critics think?

MG: Well, that's a very interesting question because it depends upon which critics you are asking about. So interestingly enough, and this really starts with *Ex-Wife* and it really carries through entire literary career. It is the female critics who respond most, I would say effusively, kindly, thoughtfully, respectfully with her work. It's really interesting to see the way that women critics in particular were recognizing Parrott's ability to identify these cultural tensions and talk about them in a very accessible, compelling way. Not idealizing - Parrott was not some kind of fantasist about how amazing life was for women in this age. Her tales are almost always cautionary and almost always tragic, especially for successful women who she can really rarely find a glimpse of happiness for at the end of the story. But male critics pretty much across the board tend to be condescending and dismissive. And my favorite review of *Ex-Wife* came out in the *New York Times* and the critic has this passage about “oh, it's sloppily written and hasty” and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Very not generous at all. But he credits it with two things. One is this idea that Parrott put her finger on the zeitgeist with this categorization of the ex-wife. And number two, he says he left the book on the coffee table and within seconds, his wife and all of her friends had grabbed the book and were huddled around reading it. And so he

says this, of course, in the most insulting way possible. That was not a compliment. That was like, “oh, it's a book for women.” And we all know what that means, which is not as important or valuable as a book written by a man for a male audience. And so Parrott really got saddled with this categorization of being a woman writer. And she was very aware of it. I've looked at all of her correspondence that survives. And she would talk about the fact that she's like, “I need to write my next important book.” And she really tried several times to write a book that was not so easy to categorize as a woman's story. So she wrote a family epic about three generations of an Irish family that was modeled on her own. And she was really trying to take on this epic tale of Europe to the US migration and family wealth and the way generations change over time. She did manage to publish that. She did have a couple other projects, including a memoir that she was trying to write towards the end of her life that are just lost. They were never published. I don't know what happened to them. They were probably thrown away as worthless when her life was falling apart in the 1950s.

But so she knew that she was put in this box of the woman writer along with people like Faith Baldwin, for example, who these are writers that were very commercially successful, but they really got stigmatized for being unserious. And I think this is a whole other subject because of course, and I will invoke Fitzgerald again, he was also publishing in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. He was also being collected in the best love stories of 1934, etc., etc. But it's just the way these authors were framed and presented as serious or not. And so Parrott really got put in this box of the unserious, the frivolous, for women, etc. And this is one of the great injustices of literary history because so many women were categorized in the same way. There's so much going on here about the culture of reviewing and also the way we create these totally fictitious labels or categories, definitions of important versus trivial. And there's just no way around the fact that this has been gendered, it's been racialized. All of the different ways in which people have been excluded from being taken seriously, been excluded from canons, been excluded from publishing, been excluded from anthologization, from classrooms and so on. And the ripple effects, it's really hard to reverse those. We see it happening sometimes, but once you have, and I think about this a lot, again, I'll bring up Fitzgerald again with Fitzgerald and Parrott, with *Great Gatsby* and *Ex-Wife* about how you can encourage a book like *Ex-Wife* to be brought into the classroom alongside something like *The Great Gatsby*, which is taught to everyone every year of their educations, at least in the United States. And how hard it is to crack open space for a text that's been kept outside for so long.

AT: So I'm guessing that men made up the majority of critics then as they do now. And so this creates this idea that most of the critics don't like it and people aren't really necessarily paying attention to that gender gap.

MG: Yeah. There's so much more going on, and this is always a much more complex discussion than we can attend to in a podcast, but I will say that it was interesting, even if you look at all of the “women's” magazines, like *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan* was not a women's magazine at the time, but the magazines with the “lady” word in it or “women” in it, which often had male editors, of course, but predominantly female authors, not exclusively. And you can see in the pages of those magazines, the way that often they had female reviewers of books when they came out. Whereas if you look at someplace like the *New York Times*, the reviewers were by and large male. So you have publications that gender and gender perspective is baked into the reviewing culture. Now, having said that, it's not that there was no presence of a male critic that ever liked a Parrott book. I'm simplifying things for the purposes of having this conversation, but if you tallied up the male critics versus female critics, it's definitely an imbalanced scale. And it's also interesting to think about the way that these texts circulated. So one of my favorite stories by Parrott is called *Breadwinner*, I think it was 1934. And it is an extraordinary serial about a woman who is widowed actually and raising a child, and she becomes very successful. And the whole nature of the serial, which is basically a novel that's just parsed out over a series of months in the magazines, is that she falls in love with this man who is actually a failure who does very little. And then the stock market crashes and he's had all of his money in stocks and he doesn't do anything in his job. So he loses all of his money in the crash and then he loses his job. And she basically says, “well, look, I'm wealthy and successful and we love each other. Let's just get married.” And his answer is, “well, of course I

couldn't do that. I couldn't be supported by you, but we can have an affair." And so he ends up basically forcing her to be his mistress. And then in the final installment, he marries her 30-years-younger niece at the end of the installment. And it's just the ultimate takedown of, again, this hypocrisy and double standard and delusional ideals of male identity. And so I think it's really interesting to see stories like that, that exist in these female spaces. Because that's a story I can't imagine circulating in other contexts. But the fact that female-oriented magazines were interested in stories like that, I think is very telling because I think it means that she was really hitting on some nerves in the culture. And sometimes you can even find letters to the editor in those magazines from women who have read the stories that give you a sense of, "oh yeah, people were really like, sing it, sister. You're seeing our world."

AT: I wonder how much of that disconnect is just men feeling attacked by what she was writing and women feeling it resonated with them. (MG: Yes.) And that's not the dynamic that men are used to.

MG: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I think that's got to be part of it, is that she was really convinced if you take her stories as an iteration of her experience, which I do based on what I know about her experience and the way I see it mirrored in her stories, that men in general were not really having a good time of this, women entering the public sphere and public life and having more freedom and having more opportunity, that they were really threatened by those moves. But she also saw that there were great disadvantages to that. Parrott was not someone who just believed that female success in careers and otherwise was just a gift to the universe. She saw the fact that women could support themselves as another reason that men could leave them, because they were fine. Like they could raise kids on their own. If they were able to have careers, why would men feel obliged the way their parents or grandparents did to stick around and take care of their families? So I do think that there's a good amount of, I would say, critical representation of men in Parrott's stories. And it's interesting because Parrott did not like to be called a feminist. She said she was not a feminist. She blamed feminists for a lot of the things that she saw happening to her generation. And what's really interesting is if you look at the arc of her career after World War II, she started writing these stories that were about men coming home from the war and returning to their wives and getting fat and getting heedless about their women's, forcing women to quit their jobs, their wives to quit their jobs, stay in the house, drinking beer with their war buddies and telling war tales. And she wrote this series of stories for Cosmopolitan that were basically like, "ladies, pack your bags and get out." So she came back after World War II, having lived through World War I and version 1.0 of this, seeing it again at the end of World War II. And she was just trying to pass on her perspective and her wisdom. And some of the last things she published were in this vein of trying to call attention to a crisis in the making. And of course, we know what happened after World War II in retrospect with the baby boom and suburban domesticity being idealized and so on. But she saw things, I think, about the culture. And I think it's one of the things that, she was a little crazy. She was a little out there. She struggled with alcohol. She struggled with spending. I think so many authors of this time period in this post-World War I frenetic drive to experience things and live a big life because you never knew when it was going to get taken away from you. A lot of that generation pushed themselves to the edge and it's hard to see that in her life because she really did struggle with so many things. She tried over and over again to get herself on a stable path, but it was really difficult for her. And part of it was she never found, and she saw herself as needing, an ideal partner in the form of a husband who could accept and understand her and be a stabilizing force. And she just never found anyone who could handle her. And so I think that was the tragedy of her life is that she spent so much time thinking about these questions of how to create a relationship in which you could have two successful partners. She really was thinking about that in the early 1930s, which is quite extraordinary. And then she could never enact that in her life.

AT: I do wonder how much of that post-World War II push for domesticity was also backlash against the increased independence that women had in terms of going out, getting jobs, being allowed in industries where

previously they'd been kept out. And I've talked before with other people about how you can't unring that bell both during World War I and during World War II. Once women know they can do that, it's a lot harder to convince them that what they've been told is the norm, like what they've been told is right and proper is the only way because they've seen it isn't.

MG: Betty Friedan famously did her study of women's magazine stories and saw what happened to all the career women. They just disappeared. And so, yeah, I think that was part of what was happening is putting the genie back in the bottle through all these both rewards and punishments that we see happening in the post-war era. Parrott had witnessed this once before. She had already seen the backlash to feminism, first-generation feminism. And she died in 1957, so she didn't live to see the wave of late '60s and 1970s feminism come to fruition. But I think she saw the way that the narrative about gender and gender relations was at the core of the American drama.

AT: So I want to get back to what you were saying about being dismissed as a woman's writer, because we see this in so many areas, like pretty much any medium that has any art form or genre that is intended for women, especially one that makes them feel good. So, for me, it's cozy murder novels, other people might be romances in pretty much any media, a lot of fantasy, soap operas, anything that is made for women is pretty much always dismissed and diminished and undermined as "lesser than."

MG: Yeah. And this includes for movies. So this even filters into when Parrott's films are adapted into movies, it's really interesting, because the last film, I'm going to work backwards, that was made of her work was Douglas Sirk's version of *There's Always Tomorrow* with Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray. And this was absolutely Hollywood-pitched melodramas. These were women's pictures, they were weepies, and that was their nickname. They were meant for female audiences. And you can read reviews of Sirk's film, which was an Ursula Parrott story that was made first in the 1930s, and then remade in the 1950s. But if you read reviews of the 1950s version, it's like, "oh, God, guys, watch out, your wives are going to try to drag you to this sappy movie, and they're going to expect you to buy them a ticket and take them to this movie, and they're just going to sit there and weep." And *There's Always Tomorrow* is super interesting. It's about a career woman played by the amazing Barbara Stanwyck, who has never had time for marriage and romance in her life because she's dedicated herself to her career. And so she comes back to revisit a former flame, who is Fred MacMurray, who's married to another woman, has children who don't appreciate him, everyone ignores him. And basically, the premise is that they are either having an affair or on the verge of having an affair. It depends on how you want to read it. But she decides not to break up his family, and she goes off to live her lonely life as a successful career woman with no romance, no love, no marriage, no children, no family, having now seen what it looks like and hoping that her threat to the family will allow for the rehabilitation of his life because he's been so taken for granted.

So again, this is a film that when it came out, totally dismissed, "oh, this is crap for women to watch and weep into their hankies. And then they can go home and make dinner for their families and appreciate their lives again." But, after the fact, Sirk has become one of I think the most interesting filmmakers in terms of people who study film and who think about film history because he was so open to, he was this man making these films that were so embracing of women's experiences. And he was really an unusual filmmaker who did not find emotions shameful, who really kind of embraced them. And so I think a lot of this has to do with the values of the culture. And so often in a Parrott story that gets dismissed as women's romance, that's always the label. If you look at the actual story, it's not a romance. I would say four or five of Parrott's stories are actually romances. What they are almost always are failed romances and they're cautionary tales and they're career women tales. So another perfect example to me is maybe my second favorite Parrott book is called *Next Time We Live*. And it was remade as *Next Time We Love* in Hollywood with Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullivan in 1935. It was Jimmy Stewart's first starring role. And this is an unbelievably modern story. I love this film.

Everyone should see this film. Everyone should read this book. I would love for this book to come back and print. I would love to work with someone to get this book back in the world. But it's about a couple, a male journalist and a woman who's an aspiring star of the stage who get married and have a kid and he loses his job. And she decides to take work and she starts ascending. And basically his career is stalling. So he has to go abroad. And long story short, their lives are driven by their career. They spend no time together. She raises their son basically on their own. And then she ends the novel by basically afflicting her male character with consumption, the classic killer of so many women in 19th century novels, and killing him off. It's just this astounding story and it's so touching because the book nor the film doesn't damn either of these characters. It's really working through "okay, what happens when both members of a family prioritize their careers? How do you do that?" And so anyhow, my point being that that to me is not a romance. That is a book about a dual career family trying to make it in the modern world. And in that way, I think it's every bit as modern as any of the other male-authored stories of that decade that were exploring life in cities and suburbs and so on. So it doesn't have even the characteristics that one might associate in a negative way with degraded women's romance writing.

AT: That's the funny thing because those examples that I was listing, like cozy murders, romances, that sort of thing. One of the reasons that has been put forth that why these are so popular with women is that women are treated well in these stories. But as you were saying, she's getting told that she's not serious when she's writing about abortion and abuse and rape. So this clearly doesn't even fit that criteria of stories where women get treated well and get and have nice things happen to them.

MG: They were not feelgood stories. Parrott did not write novels with happy endings. She did not write stories with happy endings. I'm often stunned. I have a spreadsheet because I actually read every single story and novel that she wrote over the course of two years. I just plugged at it every day and I kept an Excel spreadsheet because I didn't know how else to keep track of all these things. And one of my categories was happy ending. And I think it's five. And two of them I think are happy-ish. (AT: Out of how many?) Out of like 150 or 160. So this is a very small percentage, right? She really didn't see, often the novels end with a sense of kind of resignation. So at the end of *Breadwinner*, that earlier serialized novel I was telling you about the successful woman who can't get the man she loves to marry her, only to sleep with her. The end of it is that she and another successful woman decide to rent a Park Avenue apartment together where they'll be able to throw a lot of great parties. That's the end. It's a pretty grim end, right? Economic success, comfort, a little bit of community, but it's not a happy ending in any conventional sense of that term.

AT: Do you think, though, that that may have been part of why she was popular? Because a lot of women's media, both at the time and I would say today, does in itself kind of talk down to women, right? It doesn't necessarily present realism and it acts like things are going to be tied up with a neat bow at the end and everyone's going to live happily ever after. So do you think that that's part of what appealed to women is that here's a realistic story?

MG: Yeah, it's so hard, of course, to make a broad generalization like that. But I will say just based on the female critics, the book reviewers that I've read, of Parrott's work, they absolutely responded to that. They absolutely appreciated that she was kind of getting her hands dirty by working through some of these complex, unsatisfactory narratives that were happening in the culture. Parrott drew from her own life so extensively in her writing. It was really kind of shocking to me as when I first encountered a Parrott novel, it was *Ex-Wife*. It was a totally random encounter and it's what sucked me into the world of Parrott. And as I learned more about her and tracked her personal life to her stories, I was like, "oh, okay, well, she took that and put it in this story. She took that and put it in this story." And she took friends and stories that she was hearing about in her various jobs and encounters and narrativized them and changed a few things about them. So she was, in fact,

brokering very much in the real world. And she even was really committed to things like historical accuracy of what was happening in the news at the time of her stories. You often get references to politics and headlines. She was very anti-war. She threw fundraisers for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which were controversial. She was really in touch with what was happening in the culture, not just to women, but also more broadly. But I think partly because she basically lived her entire adult life as a single mother as well. She also wrote a lot about child rearing and raising children in the modern age and raising children alone. And what that meant that women could do that now, women who could figure out a way to support children and raise them on their own. And even she thought about having a second child and raising that child on her own, which is pretty radical that she was talking about this in the 1930s, that she didn't really need a man or a father to raise the child. She was perfectly successful and could do that on her own and had very strong beliefs about parenting as well. So I think she was really looking at the world that she was navigating and trying very much to tell stories that reflected mostly the difficulties of that world.

AT: So you've told us a lot of really interesting things about Ursula Parrott, but was there something in particular that made you say, "I have to write a whole book about this person because she is so amazing and I need to tell everyone about her?"

MG: Yeah, I'd like to answer that two ways. And I didn't expect to keep coming back to F. Scott Fitzgerald so frequently, but I have because that's the reason I'm writing this book, because of F. Scott Fitzgerald. So I first came across Ursula Parrott's name in the University of South Carolina F. Scott Fitzgerald Screenplay Collection of all places. And Fitzgerald was hired in the late 1930s by MGM to adapt a series of stories into films. And one of them was a story called *Infidelity* and it was written by Ursula Parrott. And so I was in the archive looking at the *Infidelity* screenplay and I thought "this is a really interesting story," because it is not a moralizing story at all. It was published in *Cosmopolitan* as a series that Parrott wrote about divorce and infidelity was one of the causes for divorce. So I actually spent almost two years thinking that I was going to try to republish the screenplay material and the story and write a book about F. Scott Fitzgerald writing this Ursula Parrott screenplay. And as part of that, I started doing research on Ursula Parrott. So I thought she was going to be like a chapter in this other book. And I basically started hitting my head against a wall with the studio legal department about publishing this screenplay, despite the fact that no one even knew it existed in this archive and it's of absolutely no commercial value and it wouldn't decrease the commercial, all the things. So I remember that as part of this process, I got a copy of *Ex-Wife* on eBay. It was out of print and I picked up a copy and I read it.

And I remember just like every chapter, like, oh my gosh, wow, I can't believe this book exists. Why haven't I read this book before? And I asked everyone I knew in women's literature studies, in 20th century American literature studies and modern literature studies. No one had ever heard of Ursula Parrott. No one had ever heard of *Ex-Wife*. And there was a literal day where after hitting my head against a wall again with a studio legal department, as I'm getting an increasing large file on Ursula Parrott that I just said, "oh my God, the world doesn't need another book about F. Scott Fitzgerald. Absolutely not necessary for the world, but the world could really use a book about this woman who wrote this amazing novel." So I just started buying more of her books, all on eBay and trying to pull together her stories. And the more I learned, the more I thought, this is a story that deserves to be told. And this may be her only biography. This may be the only thing that's ever written. I hope it's not. I hope it's the first of many biographies and many books about Ursula Parrott. But I really, I was so drawn to that novel and to the complexity, modernity, originality, the voice, the way she captured the spirit of the Jazz Age in a way I had not seen in other writing from that period. And I'm a film historian. So it was also so important to me that there was such a large body of film. 10 films is no small number to be adapted. And they were so interesting. They were also historically relevant in terms of the way they were produced and who was in them, their Academy Award history and all of those things. So yeah, so that was the confluence. And then she also lived big. This is a woman who didn't do anything in half measures. So her

affairs, her divorces, her scandals were unbelievable, unbelievably juicy. When I started turning up some of the headlines about this crazy story, when she smuggled a soldier who was accused of a federal charge for marijuana dealing, she smuggled him out of a minimum security facility, military base during World War II in Miami for a night on the town. Then she was tried in a federal trial. When I started piecing together all of the aspects of her life from her being raised in Boston with a Catholic doctor father and her education to her elopement, to Greenwich Village, to her first divorce, raising a child on her own and all of the other things, I thought, "my gosh, this is a movie," right? This is a movie. Well, it's the movie that should be made of her life. And so, I feel like I was fortunate in that strange first encounter in the Fitzgerald Screenplay Collection at University of South Carolina, or I would likely never have heard of her.

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