AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by biographer Lorissa Rinehart. Regular listeners may remember Lorissa from the last time she was here to tell us about another of her books, *First to the Front: The Untold Story of Dickey Chapelle, Trailblazing Female War Correspondent*. Now she's back to tell us about the U.S.'s first congresswoman and the subject of her new book, *Winning the Earthquake: How Jeannette Rankin Defied All Odds to Become the First Woman in Congress*. So first can you introduce us to Rankin's career and her place in history?

Listen to Lorissa's episode on Dickey Chapelle or read the transcript.

LR: Jeannette Rankin had a very interesting career in a number of different ways. And first of all it speaks to this truth that women cannot and do not have a pre-prescribed timeline of success. We need to be able to go at our own pace. And so Jeannette never married and didn't have children. However, she was the oldest sibling of six, born in Montana in 1889 and at that place in that time the oldest sibling was like a second mother in a lot of ways, this oldest daughter I should say. And then her father passed away when a number of her siblings were quite young and her mother had mental health issues. So she was really the primary caregiver for her siblings for a long period of time and it wasn't until she was 28 that she was able to venture out into the world and find herself. And it was at that point that she discovered the suffrage movement, first in Washington state in 1908. And she really got started on her activism there, playing a key role in winning the vote for women in Washington and then moving on to working for the suffrage campaign in California. She was then hired as the field secretary for the National Americans Women's Suffrage Association, which is the most awkwardly named organization of all time, which we all have to know but I probably got it wrong. In any case, she worked for them and then she left for a long time campaigning in different states for suffrage including New York, Ohio, Florida, Tennessee, so on and so forth. But she stepped away to run the campaign for women's suffrage in Montana which she very much spearheaded. And it was a master class in community grassroots organizing because she didn't rely on hierarchies. She built coalitions between farmers and miners and ranchers and office workers. But most importantly she also empowered women throughout the state to organize themselves because at the time, this is 1912 to 1914 in Montana, not a lot of roads, let alone telephones. She could not be everywhere all the time like we kind of can today with the internet and so on so she had to empower and rely on this vast network of women to do the community organizing work where they lived. So in two years, they flipped the Montana state legislature from adamantly against to in favor of women's suffrage and then they put it on the ballot that got passed and then she converted that political machine that she had built into her own congressional campaign. And so in 1916 she was elected as America's first congresswoman four years before the ratification of the 19th Amendment. So that's how Jeannette got started in a nutshell.

AT: And I love that she, by virtue of being in that position, she was the only woman in Congress and therefore the only woman who was able to vote for women's suffrage a few years later.

LR: That's right and actually she did not vote for women's suffrage the time that it passed the Senate because she had been gerrymandered out of her district, which we can talk about more, by the oligarchical mining company Anaconda Copper, which if anybody watches Yellowstone 1923 you'll recognize. It was a real company. In any case, she got suffrage, the Susan B. Anthony Amendment through Congress for the first time. However it did not pass the Senate. But by opening the door she really was crucial in enabling the final passage of of the women's vote.

AT: She also controversially was the only congressperson from either house to vote against entering both World War I and World War II because as you mentioned she got gerrymandered but she wasn't out for good, shall we say.

LR: Yes. Her first act in Congress was to introduce the Susan B. Anthony amendment or what would become it

later, But her first vote in Congress was against World War I. She campaigned for peace during suffrage and then again during her congressional campaign. Everyone understood what her position was on World War II. What she understood and a lot of people understood at the time was that World War I was not a war about preserving democracy to a large degree. It was a war about imperialism and it was a war about profiteering and we hear about profiteering we think “oh munitions people were selling guns” and stuff like that. Yeah, that that was a lot of money but the most money was made by bankers who were lending the Allies their money to buy these munitions at a huge interest rate and then collecting on that. And so basically when push came to shove and it looked like the allies were going to lose and therefore default on their debts, that's when America entered the war. And that came out later on in the 1930s, all the details of that, but people could see what was happening at the time. I should also say that once war was declared Jeannette always voted for appropriations to get the soldiers what they needed. She understood that the most important thing was to end the war and to bring the boys and men home from the front.

During the interwar years she lobbied tirelessly for disarmament. I'm going to try and keep this short because it's a very long story but on a personal level my first son's middle name is Roosevelt. That is how much I love FDR and that is how much that generation and the fight against fascism defined me. Growing up I wanted to be Lauren Bacall fighting Nazism in a tailored suit while singing in jazz club. I did my best to fulfill that fantasy. I married a jazz musician. I have some nice suits and now I'm fighting Nazis, so I'm working on it. In any case, Jeannette very much saw that the profiteering that began in World War I was continuing through World War II, through the interwar period and that the countries of the world were arming to the teeth and she began to say, “if you prepare for war, you will get war. If you prepare for peace you will get peace.” And on so many different levels she presented alternatives to the United States and to the international community to this path that led directly to war. And I never understood that there was just sort of this very clear buildup and line from World War I to World War II, not just in the Treaty of Versailles and its disastrous consequences but in the actions of all of the participants in World War II, in building more and more machines of war and how that could only result in global warfare.

So in 1939 Jeannette started campaigning for Congress again. She had been out of Congress since 1919 and she did it very differently. So instead of this big grassroots organization with a lot of people, she just kind of drove around Montana and she talked to precinct chiefs and she was like, what do you think Congress should do?” And she would just listen to them and they were all men. She'd nod and she goes, “well do you think I should run?” And they go, “yeah, yeah, you should run for sure”. She really didn't say much. Most of her campaign events were at high schools because she wanted the children that were there, one, to be aware of what was at stake for them if war was declared right because it would be the boys who would go to war and it would be the girls who would have to deal with the fallout of that and PTSD etc etc. So she defeated the incumbent Republican, who was not a great guy. And then despite another FDR landslide throughout the country, she won, she ran on the Republican ticket actually and she won both terms she ran on the Republican ticket. And when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. It was something that she had not necessarily exactly predicted but she had always known that preparing for war would lead to war and she also said, and this is the title this is where my the title of my book comes from, “you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake.” And so she didn't believe that war could end war and it turns out she's right and so when it came time to vote for declaring war on the imperial empire of Japan she was, as you said, the only person in either chamber to vote now when it came time to vote on declaration of war against the German empire she voted “present” because again she understood at that point that objection was not helpful to her cause or to the people who would be committed to the battlefront. So that's her pacifistic stand in a nutshell

AT: And we're not going to get into a moral debate about whether that was right or wrong and particularly in hindsight of what we know now versus what she would have known then.

LR: I actually encourage people to to read the book and make a moral judgment. I obviously support fighting

Nazis all the time. And Jeannette said of Hitler, of Nazi Germany and I'm paraphrasing, I'm not quoting, “if we truly want to support the German people we need to make it possible for them to have more democracy not less democracy.” And the foreign policy of the United States and the allies before World War II did not support more democracy for Germany. It very much enabled the Nazi party to come to power. And so morality is a long arc and if you spend your entire life in the service of the ideal of peace, it is difficult to compromise that in the face of almost anything. And as I said she voted present to declaration of war on Germany but not Japan and I think that's an important distinction.

AT: I just think it's very privileged to be able to vote for peace when your people will only be dying if you send them to defend others.

LR: I agree. Her argument, her moral argument was that the war was not necessary to begin with. So for instance let's go back to the Treaty of Versailles. Few people know that the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, international from all belligerent parties, from all belligerent nations, met while the Treaty of Versailles was being hammered out. And they presented an alternative to that disastrous treaty which subsequently Woodrow Wilson adopted nine of those points into his 14 points for the League of Nations. Had those women been listened to history would have turned out very differently. And it is one thing if your vote would have changed America's capacity to go to war and to defend the freedom of the world in no uncertain terms. But it is another thing I believe to keep that light of of alternative possibilities lit, even if it is at the expense of your own personal ambition and safety, because Jeannette was very much disappeared after her vote on on the declaration of war with Japan and she also sort of faded out of public view for 30 years as well. So I absolutely hear what you're saying but I think the counter argument to that is, she had spent 20 years putting herself in personal impoverishment in order to work against the mechanizations and the machinations of war and when the moment came, she could not betray her ideals. I think it's a really important conversation. It's very sticky and thorny but I think it's incredibly important because in our present moment, where are we going? What is happening? The world is aflame in conflict. Countries are armed to the teeth and we are being told that it cannot be any other way and that's not true. It can be another way. It could have been another way for all those people who died in all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons during World War II and World War I. It did not have to be that way and we need to elevate these voices regardless of how difficult it is to wrap our heads around that saw another possible future. And as I said at the beginning of this, this was really hard for me to write this was really hard for me to approach. But spending so much time with Jeannette as she campaigned for peace and disarmament was incredibly eye-opening to say the least

AT: So I want to get into the context around how she was able to get into Congress because on a previous episode I talked with April White, who's the author of *The Divorce Colony*, and one of the things that we got into was how these more western states tended to have more rights because they had less rigid social structures but then those social structures got more rigid over time. So there was sort of this not “wild west” as we might think of it period, but this period of grace where women actually had a lot more options and opportunities. And so I do think it is very important to note that she was representing Montana, as you said. She was in Washington fighting for them to get the vote and I'd just like to dig into a bit how women's rights in the western states versus the East Coast were factors in her career.

LR: Yeah, that's a great question and it was so interesting to me to research and write about in this book. And it wasn't just that there were more fluid gender structures in these western states. There were also less hierarchies in general, because for instance Jeannette was very was pretty wealthy. Her family was pretty wealthy. Later she was not as very wealthy. But her father came to Montana, pulled up the Missouri River, was a failed miner was then crushing ore for other failed miners because there was nothing in there. And

Listen to April White on The Divorce Colony or read the transcript.

then he decided to teach himself how to be an engineer and learn how to build bridges. And so if you know about the geography of Missoula where Jeannette is from, it's surrounded by rivers. So it's like this island surrounded by rivers and if you're gonna be able to have a settlement there, a city there, you're gonna have to cross those rivers. So he built the original bridges in Missoula. Then he bought a ranch with a bunch of timber on it and he milled that timber and built buildings. Then he opened a hotel and he rented out the rooms and had a restaurant there that people would travel for miles to go to. And Jeannette and all her siblings helped to run this business. But the point being is that there was a lot of social mobility. Washerwoman can become a business owner or a failed miner can become a real estate mogul. So in that, you have a greater sense of possibility and then added to that the sense that women's labor cannot be completely disappeared as it is in more gender structured societies. You have this confluence of circumstances that is ripe for political change. And so at the time of Jeannette's suffrage campaign from Montana and then subsequent run for Congress, you also saw a number of other very interesting concurrent social movements for progressive change. So for instance, it was in Montana that the idea that senators should be elected by the populace and not by state legislatures was born. You get a lot of labor movement development in Montana because of all the miners that were there and were unionized and were fighting against this oligarchical mining company. So as we often see in social movements one feeds the other and they are stronger together and so that's very much how I view that ecosphere of progressivism in Montana developing into women gaining the right to vote.

AT: This is making me think about the evolution, and in some cases devolution of american democracy because I feel like when we're taught democracy in a US context in school, it's very much “okay here's the Declaration of Independence and then women got the vote and then you've got Jim Crow.” And they sort of treat it like that's all there is to it. But like you were saying, deciding that senators should be elected by the people rather than by state legislators - there are all these aspects where the Declaration of Independence wasn't a blueprint for “here's how everything is going to work.” And there's all these interstitial steps that I feel I get overlooked a lot of the time like I love talking about Stella Stimson who was an Indiana woman and she is largely why we have as fair and free elections as we do have (big asterisk on that). But she got a bunch of clubwomen in Indiana to document this incredibly corrupt mayoral election in Terre Haute: guys voting multiple times, 100 registered at the same address and it's a saloon. There were only I think three eligible African-American voters and yet somehow like 150 voted. So there's all these very blatant things that if she and her clubwomen hadn't staged this campaign basically to document that so that then a male lawyer could take it to court and she was the first witness at that trial that laid the groundwork for later federal legislation that made things like that much more difficult. And so I just wonder if you have any thoughts about how this evolution and how democracy in the US, how those processes changed over time, because as you mentioned, gerrymandering is still a huge issue as any reasonably informed person knows about the US political system

LR: Yes, absolutely. So in regard to the relevance of Jeannette's particularly first Congressional run and our own democracy right now, the state of our democracy right now, there are astounding parallels. So as I mentioned Montana at the time that Jeannette was campaigning there, was very much owned by Anaconda/ it's a copper mining company. They owned the majority of the mining interests in Montana. They owned the vast majority of the newspapers. They bought and paid for the state legislature to the point where every opening of a new session in Helena was accompanied by a fete paid for by Anaconda Copper that included a bar and brothel crawl down Last Chance Gulch. They paid for the state legislatures. They bribed them to elect certain senators, which is why the people of Montana eventually rebelled against this because it was so just unbelievably corrupt and that became obvious. And when Jeannette ran the first time, Montana was a very new state, relatively speaking and it was an open state. It was an open Congressional district, so there were no districts. Montana had two Congresspeople and everyone from Montana got to vote for those people. So you had in effect what's called a multiple member congressional district and you had ranked choice voting. So you could say “I like Joe Smith the best and I like Jeannette second and I like Harry Pinkerton third.” And whoever

gets the top two number of votes go to Congress. So Anaconda Copper during her first campaign for Congress basically tried the strategy of writing her out entirely. So they didn't cover her campaign, they very rarely wrote about her and they hoped that through this blackout that people wouldn't learn about her or her campaign or her candidacy. But her slogan was Let the People Know and she traveled for, I believe it was 9,000 miles on horseback, in borrowed cars and on trains and on wagons all throughout the state campaigning to every kind of constituent, again just as she had with suffrage, to build this broad coalition both ideologically and geographically. And through this way, she was able to to win.
But once she got to Congress, the moment that she got there Anaconda went back to its state legislature that they bought and paid for and the unofficial slogan was, “you don't want to keep a woman in Congress, do you?” And they divided Montana into two different congressional districts and without this broad coalition, she really didn't have a chance of of winning re-election. So gerrymandering as Jeannette defined it is when political parties pick their voters rather than voters getting to pick their candidates. And it's very interesting because even in 1914 and 19 and so on, Jeannette was campaigning for ranked choice voting to become adopted nationally as well as multiple member congressional districts. And she rightly understood that these enlarged or rather broadened the definition of “we the people” and gave the power back to the people to elect their representatives rather than the representatives having the power to remain in power basically. So in regard to, if democracy is a direct trajectory upwards, the answer is no. And the problem is and has been for, if not the entire history of America then for a long time, that democracy has not been able to grow at the same rate as the needs and diversity of its citizens. And so some of the electoral reforms that Jeannette talked about, we are still trying to enact today and that are even more urgent and vital.

AT: I’ve actually worked several elections here in Australia. So we have ranked voting here and one of the things that I think that that contributes to - I'm not an expert on this, I don't have stats or research or anything like that. But my impression is that ranked voting is also contributing to why we have such a strong multi-party system. So we do have two major parties and a third that's… semi-pro, let's put it that way, in the major versus minor leagues. Bless the Greens, we love them. But you can also have somebody running as an independent or you can just form your own party, for better or worse. Some of them are definitely worse. That simple fact that neither party can get a majority for the most part, even when they have a really strong showing as Labor did in the 2025 election they still I don't think quite have a majority. And that means that they have to work with other people from outside their party who may be largely ideologically aligned with them or they might be a single party system. So in Jeannette's case, she could have just had a peace party. We have Animal Justice party, we had a Legalize Cannabis party this time. (LR: Party?) It's a party party. We were stacking up the votes and I was like, “okay which one's Legalize Cannabis?” And they were like, “well it's the high pile.” (LR: Nice.) Among the these smaller ones, it actually was fairly popular at my polling location. But point being, ranked voting not just means that if your top choice doesn't win, your vote essentially hasn't counted. It's not that it doesn't get counted, but with ranked voting you can then essentially give that to another person rather than it feeling wasted. That leads to this much broader political spectrum in terms of who's actually making up the people representing the people.

LR: Exactly and in winner-take-all elections, most voters I would say are disenfranchised because they favor, and winner-take-all means what we have in the United States is you can vote for one party and one party only and only one party is going to be in the Senate or in Congress or even in the White House. Jeannette was like, let's get rid of the Electoral College and whoever gets the most votes gets to be president and whoever gets the second most votes gets to be vice president. So the point being, is that when you have winner-take-all elections, the majority of voters are disenfranchised. And you say okay but you know most people in this district voted for Democrats or Republicans or whatever but what winner-take-all elections do is that they prioritize wedge issues. And so they have to basically create animosity in order to win elections and that's what we see now in American politics. Why is it so divided, why is it so partisan? Because that is the nature of

winner-take-all elections. It's like a cage match of politics and it doesn't have to be that way. When you have ranked choice voting, when you have multiple member congressional districts it encourages and in fact requires candidates to campaign together, to build coalitions to have a dialogue with each other because basically if you're the Democratic party and I'm the Green party, I want your voters to rank me second and you want my voters to rank you second. So it doesn't behoove you to speak poorly of me. And actually that's how Jeannette ran her initial campaign, was what she said everywhere she went. She said, “vote for your local man and Jeannette Rankin second.” She never said a negative word about any of her opponents because she didn't have to.
I also write this Substack called The Female Body Politic, which is about women's participation in American democracy for 250 years. I have never been so fired up and enlivened in my life because, and I don't mean to make this so gendered or whatever, but it's just like “elect more women! And people who identify as women are women! Everybody elect the women and everything will literally be better.” And then if we implement policies that favor the election of women, like ranked choice voting, like multiple member congressional districts, like the ending of the electoral college, then we have the society and the country and the world in which we want to live and not this dystopian constant fight over everything. And, look people come at me and they're like, “what about Boebert, what about MTG” or whatever and I'm like, “yeah they're mouthpieces of the patriarchy.” When you have women who are “conservative” who are also not dyed in the cloth white nationalists, they are more willing to dialogue with their political opposition - not opponents but the other party. And it's not necessarily about, as RBG said, “when will enough women on the Supreme Court be enough?” And she said nine which is fine. I'm not necessarily advocating that all elected officials be women, as they once were and for a very long time until Jeannette got elected in America in 1916, men. But let's at least have gender parity and see how that works out. And the more I study this issue, the more I look at how women lead and how women govern and how women envision the future for all of us together, the more I am inspired and hopeful that we can actually get out of this mess if only we can see past our moment into another possible future.

AT: Okay, I do always have to push back against the idea that more women is the answer because when you do look at women who have ruled, I don't think that they are in any way worse than the men. But women in power do awful things too. Indira Gandhi was both a nepo baby and a dictator. You can correlate her rise to, yes she was democratically elected. She literally had a state of emergency declared where she was locking up her enemies, she was censoring the media, she staged a mass sterilization campaign against men. So there's always situations like that where I point to that, look I don't think women are inherently better. I would say it's more removing the oligarchy. So anytime you can diversify a group, whether that's racial, gender, class, social status, disability. We have almost no disability representation in Congress and we've had three disabled presidents but they all hid their disabilities and that's how they were able to get elected. So I agree we need gender parity but I agree that we need proportional representation across all these different fronts.

LR: Yes we need proportional representation of all people and my particular topic is women and gender parity. That's my jam everybody except for white male nationalists and white women nationalists can come along on this party bus, let's go. I love it and what benefits these electoral reforms that Jeannette was campaigning for, benefits all, everybody all these “non-traditional” candidates benefit from these reforms. And to your point, Margaret Thatcher is the best example of terrible women leaders. She was awful, she was awful for a long time, she was awful in all the ways that you can be awful. She makes Ronald Reagan look like a little teddy bear. That being said, studies show that women across the board, not singular examples but overall tend to lead with purpose rather than intention of holding on to power, with community in mind rather than individual desire and they have a greater sense of empathy overall. I'm not arguing that women are more moral but I am saying that if you look at the aggregate of women in leadership roles, not only in the United States but globally, they exhibit a very different definition of success and very different priorities than their male counterparts often do.

AT: There was also a study done by, I think it was the University of Queensland, found that during COVID, countries that were run by women heads of state did better. They had lower infection and death rates and I forget all the metrics, but they actually did quantify that and were like, “yeah, women-run countries did better during COVID.”

LR: Yeah, and going back to MTG and Margaret Thatcher and Boebert and Indira Gandhi - okay, yeah, they got elected democratically, but “democratically.” It was a democracy built by, of and for men, white men, white wealthy men, white educated men, white connected men, white largely urban men. Even if you're from a rural county, you are at the center of power. You have connections to urban power structures. And so when you have different modalities of power, and of more importantly power sharing, then you can have more effective ways of serving the people through your government, which is the purpose of government. And this is so tangential to our conversation but I'm just like, at this point as an American, I'm like, “where are my tax dollars going?” Schools are crumbling and god bless teachers, I'm not bad mouthing teachers. They're doing goddess’s work out there. But let's pay them, my god, $75,000 a year starting salary - how hard is that? And it's like $30,000, $40,00. You're kidding me. On and on and on and on, the roads the this, the that, the everything - are you kidding me? Where is our money going? And there has to be a fundamental repositioning of how we think about the purpose of government and simultaneously change the way government is run. And as you said before, the most crucial part of that is having an actually representational government that is both by and for the people. All the people

AT: I didn't need to go on this whole tangent about democracy in America but…

LR: But that's what my book is very much about and that's what Jeannette's legacy is about. When she was older, she said “I guess I've been trying to amend the constitution for my whole life.” This is a girl who would sit by candlelight on her ranch in Montana and read the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. She was one of these great patriots that changed the course of American history. And I also want to say I began this conversation by saying that women cannot exist on a standardized timeline of success and, Allison, I think as you so often find in your own work, women's voices are not always most resonant when they are alive. Sometimes their resonance finds its most powerful pitch later on and I really feel that in this moment when American democracy is in crisis, Jeannette's voice is more important than it really ever has been. And I'm hoping that it can be amplified to the point at which it will make the difference that I believe she deserved and worked to make.

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