

Austin:

It's the ultimate pool accessory. Actually, if you have a pool,

Neil:

Really

Austin:

Because, you I'll literally be like floating in the pool and I can like answer a text or, or like change the music. Yeah.

Neil:

You don't cut to go anyway.

Austin:

Yeah. Yeah.

Neil:

Okay. Well, they say these things are taken off. I've been razzing my buddy who works at apple for these advertisements, cuz the ads are like, you know, some old person falls in the forest and like their apple watch saves their life. Right. That whole idea. And I I've been kind of cynical about those ads. I fear based fear mongering.

Austin:

Yeah. That one is kind of funny. I I know which one you're talking about and, and, but it's, it's, it's weird. Like is it essential tool? No, but it's kind of fun. And I, my neighbor is, is in his seventies and we, we ride bikes and I talk into it and he'll be like, oh, you got your James Bond, you know, watch out.

Neil:

I love that you rode your bike with your 70 year old neighbor. So we are, we are at Mi Madres Restaurant east Austin been here since 1990. We were outside on the patio. As you may hear there's music blaring from tiny little black speakers up in the, on the wall around, there's kind of like a wood lattice work around this. If you can picture it. Little hanging lights that are not on right now, cuz it's the daytime, a big old rusty dusty fan swinging left and right. A red kind of clapboard wall to Austin's left. We are sitting at a, I wanna say a teal kind of metal crisscross table. Veronica. We love the guacamole. Yes. And what, what kind of taco did you get? Austin? I

Austin:

Got the number four,

Neil:

The number four, which <laugh>

Austin:

That's

Neil:

For audio listers. If you can...

Austin:

That's eggs, beans and cheese on flour.

Neil:

Nice. Delicious. And you portion

Austin:

One of the things that you'll know if you.. . Everybody's got their numbers here. Yes. Right? So when you come to Mi Madres with somebody, you ask them what number you get.

Neil:

Well, I asked my Uber driver away from the airport who told me that his godparents run this place as a small town, as you say. And he said get the number zero. And I was surprised by that for a few reasons. One of it was, I couldn't believe a number zero exists. Most menus begin at number one, this <laugh> keep Austin weird.

Austin:

The Zero's the classic that's that is potato bacon, cheese and egg.

Neil:

Yeah. Nice.

Austin:

That's the breakfast?

Neil:

Well, this is the thing about Austin. You gotta not just tacos the lunchtime or the evening, the breakfast taco. So we're surrounded by grackles. You could probably hear them, just people kind walking by on the sidewalk, gentlemen, enjoying a talk to the, to the left of us... looking good.

Austin:

He's probably is that,

Neil:

Is that a Daquiri with it or something? That's

Austin:

A frozen margarita. He's probably regretting sitting here is what he is.

Neil:

And then I got Austin in front of me and Austin is wearing a, a baseball cap with a, I was gonna say, when you walked up from a distance through Detroit tigers logo, but it was, it's like half the D wow. So what, that's not the Detroit tigers, obviously?

Austin:

There's a there's a place about three hours from here called Lady Lodge. Ah, and they have these caps and when I stayed there, I liked him so much. They gave me one. Nice. So I like to wear it around to confuse people <laugh> cause they think, oh, he is in he's Detroit. And then they, the old Magnum and then they get close and

Neil:

It's not, it's nice to wear a ball cap that people don't know. It's the big caligraphic L you've got some nice shades on or you, I kind of a permanent sunglasses kind of, I guess, in this heat, this sun,

Austin:

Well they're prescription. So it's if I have to take 'em off, I can't see. R

Neil:

Right. And you're wearing a black t-shirt it says dang and big letters on it. There's a drawing at the bottom. It says Lynda Barry, who we're gonna, yeah. So we're gonna talk about, I'm wearing like a, like a white polo shirt. I got blue shorts and you the Three Booker listening to this, it's sitting on the chair between us, which right now just has in praise of good bookstores, which is a book I thought you might like, well also I'm so, so excited to talk about your formative books, but to kick us off, I thought what I could do is you have said more about books and reading than almost anybody than almost anybody I've ever interviewed on this, on this show. So I've pulled out for you, some of your quotes about books, and I'm gonna read them back to you just to get a, get us started, create like an aural tapestry here. And, and you know, you can expand, explain elucidate as you see fit. Or as George Saunders told us in chapter 75, deny if you want, if you, if you do not, if you want deny, okay. Number one, number one "books are stored energy." That's a quote. You said on the Book Dreams podcast, "books are stored energy."

Austin:

Are you asking me to comment?

Neil:

You can expand, can explain, you can elucidate or you can pass. So it could just hang up either. No, no pressure.

Austin:

Well, I mean, you know, my theory of reading is that an author brings all their energy to the text and they put everything they've got into the book. And then that energy is stored, you know, the, in that, you know, in that essential package and then the reader brings their energy to the book and unlocks the original energies from the author. And you know, sometimes the energies don't match. Sometimes the book isn't the writer and the reader don't don't link up. And so it's, it's a matter of the kind of magic of reading is when the writer's energies are unlocked by the reader's energies. And if you think of, of, of books that way, I think it, it keeps you from falling into lots of traps. One of the traps is, is that you read

what you should read, rather than what unlocks your own energy. You know, cuz cuz the point of a book should really be the author's energy kind of attracts your own and unpacks something for you.

Neil:

Wow. The author's energy attracts your own and then impacts something for you. I love that. I love that. Number two, this is from your blog. The, the, one of the richest blogs on the internet, Austinkleon.com. You wrote a post on January 1st, 2014 called My Reading Year of 2013 as you do every year. And the quote that I pulled out is "breakthrough this year; thinking of books as potential experiences, not just objects, matching up a book with my mood, life situation, et cetera." I'm guessing that kind of builds right off. The last thing you said.

Austin:

Yeah. I mean like the, the idea that Crime and Punishment is gonna be the best book in all situations is, is absurd. Like there's a time and place for Crime and Punishment and there's a time in place for an Elmore Leonard novel. And then there's a time and place for Lynda Barry comic and you know, it's, it's that? I think I, you know, I think about books a lot. Like I think about music and I think that comes from my being a musician and being passionate about music. You know, you wouldn't put on an opera, you know, when you were hanging out with your friends, you know, you would put on like

Neil:

You wouldn't and I wouldn't either, but some

Austin:

No, you can't like Beethoven. You can't, you can't put on a Beethoven Symphony and have a conversation. Right.

Neil:

I hear what you saying that the music is commanding. Yeah.

Austin:

So it takes the room. There are different art art, really this idea that art is great, no matter the context is, is I think a really faulty one. I think a lot of great art now, some art does transcend multiple contexts and it certainly changes with different contexts. But to me, reading is contextual. Yeah. You, it's not just about the book. It's about what is going on in your life. What are you trying to do with yourself? And you know, what are your energies at the moment? You know sometimes some books take more than they give, you know, they need more of your, they need more energy to unlock, you know, think of it that way. Yes. Like a really dense book or something like that.

Neil:

Malcolm Gladwell told us on this program that a book shouldn't reveal its secrets to you on the first read

Austin:

Malcolm Gladwell said that mm-hmm

Neil:

<Affirmative> he, we were talking about this, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, the John Le Carré book. And he said, every time I read this book and he's read it every five years for 20, 30 years, he's I get something different out of it. It keeps revealing itself to me more and more

Austin:

Well, part of that though also is that the book doesn't change, but you do. Yes. I mean, every time you come to a book, you're a different person with different energies and different experiences. And so that's part of the deal like Malcolm Gladwell when he last year, hopefully is not the same Malcolm and Gladwell. Yes. That he was <laugh>. He is now, you know

Neil:

No man walks in the same river twice. Right. 2019 blog post on Austinkleon.com. The title of the blog post is How to Read More. You say gigantic book piles, aren't a sign, you're doing it wrong. They're a sign. You're doing it right.

Austin:

Yeah. I mean like people get real guilty about their unread book piles. And to me, it's a, it's a win for possibility in that, you know, book piles are hopeful in the sense that you might get to 'em someday. I mean, at some point a, a reader has to, a writer too actually, a reader has to come to the realization at some point that they simply don't have the years to get all the books that they're ever gonna want to get. And so there is a real triage and there's a choosing that has to happen. Yeah. But if you can kind of get cool with that and know, you're never gonna be able to read everything. Yeah. Then you can kind of take things as they come and you can kind of you know, you can enjoy yourself more. There's

Neil:

There's a Japanese word you sometimes talk about, is it Tsundoku?

Austin:

Yeah. Tsundoku I think, or I don't, I certainly don't know how it's pronounced, but anyway, is the phenomenon of books piling up.

Neil:

Nice.

Austin:

You know Beautiful unread piles of books.

Neil:

I got just two more. The One You Feed podcast, which is a wonderful interview. We'll link to this in the show notes. I would love people to check this out. It was a wonderful interview and I dropped Eric a line to tell him, I thought he did a great job chatting with you. You can read all the books in the world. I love books. I mean, I've staked my life on books, but at the end of the day, you've got to live your life. The experience is what's gonna drill it into you.

Austin:

Yeah. I mean, Juno Diaz said something one time. He was like, "you should read more than you write and you should live more than you read." <Laugh>.

Neil:

Oh, nice.

Austin:

And I like that. Although sometimes I'd rather read than live sometimes, you know, life can be kind of boring sometimes, but then sometimes life is more interesting than books. Yeah. so I don't know. I, I mean, the hope is that.. I was thinking about this. I, I gotten a little tiff with somebody online, which I never recommend, but following our own rules is the hardest thing in life. And I got in this tiff with a guy online who was talking about how important travel is, and I was kind of pushing back on him, cuz I like to mess ..people who think travels, oh, you know, changes your life. Yeah. You know, they're always talking about, and I'm like, I, I like to mess with them because it's like messing with a con the, the it's like messing with someone's religious beliefs or something.

Austin:

It's like heckling because people hold on to that notion that travel is so important. Yes. They really hold tight to it. And I think part of it is they wanna feel good about all the time they've spent traveling <laugh>. But the thing I'm always pushing back on people about is like, well, travel can change you if you want to be changed. I mean, if that's part of your impulse, I usually think that what travel does is it gives you fresh eyes for where you come back to. Mm. But I think books can do that too. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> like, I mean, Mo most of my favorite write like some of my favorite writers literally didn't go anywhere. You know? Like Thoreau never went anywhere. Like he went to Maine and then he went to like Boston, but like he never really went anywhere. I mean, Emily Dickinson didn't really go anywhere.

Neil:

I not too long ago, people couldn't go anywhere. I mean,

Austin:

Yeah. It wasn't really an option

Neil:

Brand new idea. You

Austin:

Go around,

Austin:

I'm very interested in this idea that that books, books are like a really cheap form of travel. They can be deeper in some ways than travel. They can show you more in some ways. And then in other ways, you know you, you go to a book to, to, to come back. I mean, you, you, you go to a book to, to go into another world or another person's head, but then you come back and it's the coming back, the reentry where the work kind of happens, you know, cuz and it, and it might not happen right away. I mean,

that's the other thing. And, and you see this in education all the time. It's like, you might read a book this week that, you know, on the whole didn't do much for you this week, but it might come back to you in a year or two years, you know? And so your exper it's just, just like travel actually, you know, you might go on a trip and come back, eh, and then later on it becomes something more meaningful to you

Neil:

And perhaps like travel it's, it's hard to predict from the beginning. Absolutely. Which, which trip you're gonna like the most or what part of the vacation you'll

Austin:

Yeah. I mean, I, and you know this from traveling around, I mean it, places will surprise you, like you might have a better time in a place that you thought was gonna be real bore.

Neil:

Yeah, yeah. Absolut. Absolutely. And the last one page 24 of Keep Going which I think is vastly underrated. I'm gonna throw out there. I'm asking. Thank you. Cause everyone always talks to you about Steal Like An Artist. I always appreciate, everyone's always on Steal Like An Artist. Like I love the other two just as much. And so thank you. And actually the other three, cuz Newspaper Blackout is wonderful too. Keep Going. You have a list called How to be Happy in the book and your number one thing on the list is read old books. How does that actually make you happy?

Austin:

Well, that's a good question. It doesn't actually make me happy. That's a weird word. Happy. I mean, you know more about that word than I do. I think the

Neil:

Not necessarily, I

Austin:

Think, I think the thing

Neil:

About you might have just gone past me to the point where it's now confusing again.

Austin:

Well that's a fun topic. <Laugh> I just like meeting people that I would never be able to meet otherwise. So like old books, it's time travel, who doesn't want to be part of a time travel like .. I grew up with like when I was growing up, like Back to the Future was the coolest movie. I mean, it was one of the coolest movies and it's time travel, books are time travel devices you and their cheap it's it's travel they're travel devices, you know? And so for me, it's a, it's a form of time travel and there's nothing at stake. Like nothing's gonna happen to you. There's no real danger. You know, your only danger is that you might like change your mind about something.

Neil:

I thought you were gonna say paper cut or something.

Austin:

Yeah. Paper cut. That. That's good. Yeah. Papercut

Neil:

Wonderful. Well, it, I was holding myself back as you, as you, as you, as you responded to all those, because we could have picked any of them and gone 20,000 miles below the surface, but what we've done, I hope for the listeners to this and for me is just set a nice little landscape of like, this is the level we're gonna talk about books within, you know, it's like, it's an emotional experience. You come out a different way. It's time travel. It, it, it meets you. Here, you come out. This is, this is like books as real emotional growth entities. At some point on your journey, Austin, you bumped into a book called Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong by James Loewen. I think it's L O E W E N.

Austin:

Yeah. He just died. Recently.

Neil:

James low lived from 1942 to 2021, an American sociologist, historian and author best known for this disruptive book. The book was published in 1995 by the New Press. I am holding a very thick paper back in my hand right now it says national bestseller across the top has an empty teacher's desk with a pile of books and apple in a green chalkboard behind it, which is holding the blurb "powerful and important deserves to be an instant classic" by the Washington Post Book World. In a big sort of white aerial style font says Lies My Teacher Told Me and underneath that the, the author's name is in red James Loewen and author of Lies Across America. Very quickly Lies My Teacher Told Me critically examines 12 popular American high school history textbooks. And in this book Loewen concludes that the textbook authors propagate false eurocentric and mythologized views of American history, Dew decimal heads. You can file this one under 9 73 for history and geography slash north America slash United States. Austin, please tell us about your relationship with Lies My Teacher Told Me by James W Loewen.

Austin:

Well, when I read this book,

Neil:

Thank you,

Austin:

Veronica. I would've been bring

Neil:

Us more water on the hot day,

Austin:

13, 14, 15. Thank you. And my parents would've been going through a divorce at the time and right around that time, I, there are, this is one of the, this is one of the things I was hoping we talk about today there, when we talk about formative books, there's usually like a book that's like kind of a center

of a network, but there's all these other books around it. So I think I actually picked up Lies My Teacher Told Me because I'd been reading Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States. Right. Which I found out about, because I had watched Good Will Hunting, which was a famous movie that day. And yes, Matt Damon mentions it. Yeah. And I got it from the library <laugh> so when I was at the Walden books at the mall with my mom, I saw that on the shelf and it had a it had yeah, Howard Zinn...

Austin:

If your parents go through a divorce and you're sort of watching the fabric of your life, kind of, you know, there's something essential. That's kind of coming apart for you when you're a kid. If you're listening to a lot of punk rock, like I was at the time and reading George Orwell, 1984 and Lies My Teacher Told Me and A People's History of the United States. And then another book at that time. Oh, there was one other one on my mind. Oh, there used to be a site called disin info, like disinformation. Yeah. So there was a disinformation guide to lies you're being told. So this very, this idea that as a kid you're lied to, and then when you become an adult, the lies get like kind of uncovered. That was very powerful for me when I was like 14 or 15, this idea that everyone been lying to me and that, that is sort of an adolescent feeling.

Austin:

It is that, wait a minute, this magical world I've been kind of presented as a kid. Now, all of a sudden I have to, you know, operate in this crueler world. And I think a lot of people are sort of, there's something about divorce in particular that kind of exposes that, you know, you to that feeling. And so I think that's, I just really got off on this idea that people are lying and the world that we're being, you know, presented is not the necessarily the one that's true. And so when I read Lies My Teacher Told Me, you know, this is right up my alley, cuz my mom's an ed. My parents are both educators. And the whole narrative of my young life had been, be good in school. And as long as you're good in school, you know, you'll, you'll achieve and, and progress and whatever. So the idea that school is inherently flawed, particularly in the field.

Neil:

I mean this guy, he takes down Columbus in a chapter, takes down everything you could possibly believe about the history of America chapter by chapter.

Austin:

Yeah. And I ate that stuff up cuz that's the kind of stuff that, you know, you're, you're at, you know, that Thanksgiving dinner and you're like, well, you know, Columbus was a murderer, right. You know, dropped that kind of stuff. But I, I, you know, this had a lot of energy for me. I mean cuz cuz one of the things that's really interesting is like, if you feel like you've been lied to and the world is fundamentally different than what the kind of default setting or whatever has been presented to you on the one hand you could be angry and lash out about that. On the other hand, if you can get to the other side of that, that means the world. There's all kinds of possibilities. What else have I been lied? What else is not true? What else have I not seen? And so it kind of blows the world open.

Neil:

What did you think was true about you.. cuz you've mentioned the, the divorce and I've, I've heard you talk about it lightly in other places, but not, I don't think that what, what about marriage or relationships

or, or love or a home, were these also things that were becoming stretched at the time? Because you said you read this book at the time your parents were splitting up.

Austin:

I think what I was interested in is how people change. Once people get once, once your family is not intact, you watch how people behave differently around you. And that was sort of what I was interested in as a kid, looking back is this idea of just that like once your parents are split, then all of a sudden you're not like this normative, you know, family walking around you're you've got some fact about you that is new or, and people don't really wanna talk about it. You know, that's I, I don't know. It was, it was interesting to me. I, I just felt like it just felt like the world was cracking open, but it was cracking open in like an interesting way. Yeah. As a teenager,

Neil:

I re I still remember the very first thing I said to my therapist on my very first therapy session as I was going through my divorce, I was in my late twenties and he said, so, you know, what do you wanna talk about? And I said, I don't want to be here. I don't, I don't want to be, I divorced person. I don't want to have this label on, I, I was having a lot of trouble coming to terms with this, leave the word had so much baggage to me. And it was, you know, I sometimes forget now that I am divorced, but, but at the time it was like, yeah, it was, it really opened up a lot of, you know, it did something for me probably a lot later in life than it did for you, which is pull back a curtain in a way. Well,

Austin:

I, I would not classify my childhood as happy by any stretch. I, I did not have a, a nice.. I always felt a little outta, I like a lot of artists, I felt a lot of, I, I felt really outta place in rural America. I was not interested in football or you know, I, I just didn't, I wasn't interested in sports. I was, you know, I was a smart person who was interested in books and writing. And ..

Neil:

Did you have that label already back then? Artist? Did you, when did you come to

Austin:

Identify with that? I was probably called a faggot more than anything. I mean, not to use that. That's all horrible.

Neil:

It's no, but, but

Austin:

I mean, you know, the one thing I will say about my gay friends is if you're no one can equate that experience, but you kind of understand the violence of being different when you're, when you're growing up in like a small town. Like I won't, I won't say that anything super violent ever happened to me, but I will definitely say that well, that might not even be true, but there's a certain low level when I was growing up there's kind of a low level violence of being a, a threat of being different, you know, you just, and I think that's a very American story. Yeah. And I think a lot of kids feel that I also I'm trying to think of when Columbine happened. Columbine was

Neil:

Like, I think 99. Oh 98.

Austin:

Okay. Yeah. 98, 99. So I would've been 15, 16 at the time. And so like all these kind of questions of violence and, you know, I'm very, I'm very interested now when I, you know, kids who I'm just very interested now in, in looking back at my young life and how desperately I kind of wanted to be normal, but like, I, I obviously wasn't. Huh. And so

Neil:

And the slurs got thrown in there in that. Cause I had, well,

Austin:

I mean, you know, I mean that, I, I think the reason I use that word and I kind of hate to use that word, but it's like, that was the word. If you were different, like if you were a guy that liked different things, that's what you were,

Neil:

I mean, and I'm not that much older than you and it was same, same

Austin:

Nice hair, you know, whatever, you know, so I mean, like to me, that's the word that comes up in my head a lot. And that's the, that's how deeply rooted, I think homophobia and the macho American culture that, that that's there. I don't know if it's as there now actually.

Neil:

And how relieving it must have been to read a book like this that sort of started to dismantle some of the system that you were kinda living in.

Austin:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean like you, you, well, and also the terror of understanding that America's always run on violence. It's a violent country. We, we came, I mean, Europeans came here and they systematically imposed violence on this landscape, on the people and the landscape until it did what they wanted them to do. And that's a fundamental fact. I, I would find it hard to argue against that. Very. And so when you, you know, when you kind of unpack that you know, but, but I don't find these things. It's interesting. I don't, I don't really don't really feel these things are essential and crucial. They're not on my mind that often anymore. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> I think part of the joy, my narrative when I was younger yeah. Was I'm getting out of here. Ah,

Neil:

Okay.

Austin:

When I was younger, I was like, I'm getting out of here. Yeah. I, I, the, I am going to what I'm gonna do. I'm very interested in the word pass. Pass. So they use that a lot for like, if you, the idea of passing, like passing for like, I'm very interested in that. And I felt like I'm gonna pass enough that I, I was valedictorian in my high school. I was super high achieving. I was like, I'm a pass and I'm gonna pass in a big way as in pass the hell out of here. Mm. And that was my whole narrative when I was growing up. I'm getting out of here. And you know, what's kind of interesting is <laugh>, there's a great, great Patton Oswalt skit where he talks about Sterling, Virginia, where he grew up and he talks about how much he hated Sterling.

Austin:

Couldn't wait to get outta there and all this stuff. And then at later in another standup special, he starts talking about Sterling again. And he, and he talks about reconnecting with people back home and he says, you know what? It was my fault. Like, I'm the person that was different. Like, it wasn't Sterling's fault. I was the one that was like, kind of, I was the one that needed. I'm the, I'm the, I'm the person that's different. So it's kind of interesting cuz there, there, I thought that was a very mature yeah. If not, you know, way of looking at it. Yeah. But I, I always knew I was getting out there. And

Neil:

You mentioned in the last couple sentences ago, you used the word home. How do you define home now?

Austin:

I, I did a blackout poem. One time that says home is me and you in any town. You know, I mean, home is just home is where you come in the door and you're accepted. You know, that's what home is, you know, you open the door and you're in there and that's why so many people don't have a home. You know, they don't grow up with a home like that. I will say I always received pretty much unconditional love from my parents. And that really was a through line for me. What was really cool is we lived in an old ranch house that had been expanded. And you know, it's probably twice as big, not twice as big as my house now, but oh, it's like kind of sprawling ranch. And my parents just gave me part of the house. They were just like, yeah, you can have this like just you have this room. And so that, that idea of a room of one's own, Ooh, you know that you can, you know, that, that I had from the very beginning. So I always had, so like in high school, I mean, I'm trying to get back to that room I had in high school, basically I spent my whole adult existence trying to get back to that room, which is like the

Neil:

Building. You're building a studio

Austin:

Now. Right. I am right now. And it's like the piano is there, the drawing tables there, the TV and the couch are here. The drum sets here, the guitars like the computer, you know, it's like, I, I had a space, you know, and I think that that fundamentally is the hour spent. My wife and I always talk about how, like, she actually got a better education than I did in high school. She went to a girl's school in, in Cleveland. I got a much poorer education, public education, but I had unbelievable free time. So I'd get home from high school, be like two 30 and I didn't have a parent home until like four or five. So I just spent that whole time and I wasn't hanging out with my friends cuz I had to get off the bus and you were home. So like I spent a lot of time just playing guitar, reading books, watching a lot of movies that I got

from the library on VHS, you know, like that was so in some ways it's interesting. I I'm an elder millennial, but I really sort of, my GenX friends, we sort of bond more cuz I think I had more of a Gen X upbringing just from the fact that I grew up in rural America. I think rural America sort of put you back a few years. So like yeah. I always feel more like aligned with Gen X.

Neil:

Huh. Interesting. And I, it's something worth pausing on for everybody and myself included, you know, what is the room of one's own that you may be chasing or trying to re-cultivate. I love your definition of home. Leslie's and my first dance at our wedding was Home by Edward Sharp and the Magnetic Zeroes. Yeah. You know?

Austin:

Yeah.

Neil:

That's all. Yeah. This book came about 95. If you think it at the time, you know, it's talking about misinformation, disinformation, the threat of like, you know, fault kind of listen to the wrong voices on page 356, James Loewen writes, we all need to become crap detectors. And it just strikes me that the world's got a lot more crap and misinformation in the 30 years since this book has come out. So yeah. I'd love to talk a little bit about that. How do you think about tuning your crap detector? What to you is crap? How do you, what isn't I mean, I got on the Uber drive over here and this is just like a seven minute drive from the airport. You know, I learned that cause I was wearing a mask in the back of the Uber and I said, I notice people here don't wear masks and he's like, oh, you don't need to, you know, you know, mega hats are what you wear on the right.

Neil:

The mask are what you wear if you're on the left <laugh> and and you know, I said, well, what about the science? And he said, the whole point of science is to question science. Anyone says, listen to the sciences isn't following science. And he's like, most of the scientists are bought and paid for. So I mean I learned a lot, right. My, my BS detector, my crap detector was let's just say the, the, the needle was, was going crazy. Right. Like I was listening and I'm, I'm, I'm always curious. And so I'm always asking questions, but how do you think about that today for you and for your kids? Right. You've got two boys.

Austin:

Well, it's interesting because lies and bullshit are different. Bullshit is just someone kind of telling you what you might want to hear or sort of speaking to be speaking. I mean like the former president here was great at that. He would just talk and he wouldn't really be saying anything, but he was really good at just bullshit. There's a great book called On Bullshit by I forget his name. He is philosophy teacher or something. Harry something..

Neil:

That's enough. We got it in the show notes. Anything you say like that title in awkward, right to the show notes. Okay.

Austin:

Lies are manipulations lies are like structural in that they're trying to present something to you for a reason. And so for me, bullshit and lies is, you know, bullshit an be fairly, I mean, it can be toxic, but it can be benign, lies are direct our manipulation. And,

Neil:

And we, we can maybe agree that that's becoming more of an like the deep fakes, the, the videos that you can't tell if they're true or not.

Austin:

My question was always who benefits from this, this story? What, what would this story prop up? You know? And, and if you think about it that way ..you know, like what, what would be the, what, what is the impulse behind this lie? Like what, you know, whether this, you know, that that's a, that's a big thing for me.

Neil:

But the problem with that, though, I would ask, I would ask you is like, when I watch the apple watch TV clip and I'm like, this is just to, they're the most profitable country company in the history of the universe. This is just a way to sell more watches. That's true. And also it could also be true that if you fall in a forest and you, you know, you can't get up, you could, you know, your phone's gonna save you, cuz it's gonna tell people where you are. Like, there's always somebody who's motivated by anything. So it doesn't necessarily help us filter. Does it?

Austin:

Well

Neil:

Could you always find someone who benefits?

Austin:

Well, yeah. I mean that's what the world is. Yeah. I mean, for sure, for me, it's like who's but who's present. I mean, Apple's trying to sell you things. So like they're presenting that that's their ultimate goal. They don't care about anything else. They just care. They wanna sell this product. So for me, like the Lies My Teacher Told Me stuff is like, the way these textbooks are written is they're selling you a version of America in order that you will fall in line with this vision, this notion that we're, you know, a special place that we you know, that there's forward progress, that we're a progressive place that we're, you know, always moving forward and all that kind of stuff. So I don't know. I mean, like it's very difficult now, but in, in library, in library science, you know, they teach you to look at and all kinds of resource research. They tell you to look at sources and you know, be critical and, and to weigh things and whatever

Neil:

It's not easy though. Right? Let,

Austin:

I also think that here's my, here's my other thing. What you wanna do is you want to think about the vision that's being presented to, to you about the world and what the result, what is the end result of that vision? So like a world with masks, what happens? People wear masks, and less people get sick. You know, it's just like, to me, the, to me, it's like that kind of the fundamental problem I think with America is that freedom is presented as your right to do violence to your property. Like it's your right to you, you could do whatever you want with your property. That's and that's built into the racism of slavery, you know, cuz once you make people subhuman, they become things and then you can do things to them. It's in property rights, like, you know, we're in the middle of Texas and the idea that you could do, whatever you want with your property is like a very embedded. Yeah. Mm-hmm <affirmative> it's about doing freedom has become the notion that you can do violence to your environment. That's really what freedom has become here. It hasn't been and

Neil:

Then redefine it or help us go help us chiropractor, adjust that word to what it should mean or did mean or,

Austin:

Or I think

Neil:

What was it before?

Austin:

Well, I, I think that freedom is really your ability to connect with your community. Like freedom should be your ability to move freely throughout your community, to be free from harm, to stay healthy, to, to live your life and to make connections. Cause if you think about the opposite, I'm, I'm cribbing from David Graeber here. I just read his book Debt. If you think about slavery, like the essential thing that slavery does is it destroys all your ties to anything that made you human before. Like it takes you out of your context. So when people are taken out of the context of their family or they're their continent, their community or the continent they're, they are made inhuman by taking them out of context. And so for me, it's like freedom is really being able to interact in your environment and make connections and, and, you know, live your best life, which is why I don't think I felt particularly free when I was young. You know, that's why now with my kids, I'm very, I, you know, I bought a house that was walkable to a bunch of stuff that, that was, you know, you could ride the bus and go downtown. You could ride your bike on the bike path. It was very important to me. I mean, I always try to keep in mind, Andrew Solomon's line that we give our kids what we didn't have that we wanted.

Neil:

Interesting.

Austin:

But for me, it's like you know, when I got a car, when I was a kid, that that was, I hate cars now. I hate what cars have done to cities. I hate, I hate the whole, I, I fundamentally detest cars because they're just the dumbest, they're just a dumb design. They're just poorly. It's just a poorly designed machine. I, I, I, you know, it uses this dirty fuel. It ruins the planet. It's it's expensive. Uhhuh the bicycle on the other

hand to me is like a, a incredible technology. Like here's 150 year old technology that's human powered, easy to fix on your own. Fairly affordable. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> anyone can have one, you know,

Neil:

Doesn't take that much longer to get the same place. I mean, unless you guys have a super car

Austin:

If you're

Neil:

Going for 20 minutes away, it might take 25

Austin:

Now in rural America, you know, a, bicycle's not gonna do much for you. I

Neil:

I feel like we're both fans of Walkable City by Jeff Speck.

Austin:

I don't know that one, but I am. I mean, walkability to me is a real factor of yes. If I went back to rural America, I would live in town, you know? So I could walk everywhere.

Neil:

Page 355 of this book. There's a quote from a writer who I know you like Neil Postman. Yeah. And the quote is, once you have learned how to ask questions relevant and appropriate and substantial questions, you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to

Austin:

Know that's from Teaching As ... it's funny, cuz I haven't looked at this book in a long time and I know the book that that comes from that's from Teaching As A Subversive Activity. And this is a great, this is a great thing about the reading life. I read this book when I was th 14 and only now do I have the sources that the book comes from? You know, I've made my way back around to the things that that writer was reading.

Neil:

And how do we learn how to do that? Cause I mean, he's saying you gotta learn how to ask good questions. Well, call me out without one or trying to do that on this podcast. But

Austin:

<Laugh> an easy way to find, well, there's two different things. One, you look in the back of the book and you read the bibliography, which you learn very easy normally, but as far as good questions, I don't know. I mean like I, the question thing is interesting. I actually think I, you know, people say there are, there is no such thing as a stupid question. I actually think dumb questions are the better questions.

Mm-Hmm <affirmative> I mean the dumber, your questions in some ways the better you can get to the heart of the situation, kids are great at this cuz they ask why a hundred times, why do we have to drive to the store? Well, we gotta get food. Well, why, why you gotta get food at a store? Cause <laugh>, you know..

Austin:

You start unraveling your whole culture asking why is kids are great at that kids. You know And, and this is what, like, kids are really, really good at. They, they want to know everything about their world. They're curious in a way that like adults aren't and they have no preconceived notions of what anything is. And so they're, they're really natural artists or scientists, you know, cuz they're really inquisitive about the world and they don't, they don't have any preconceived notions about it.

Neil:

I imagine having you as a father who was an artist who grew up in rural America and felt a slightly stifled will be really beneficial to kids today. Therefore a question is gonna go, how do you retain that? How do you keep that in your kids? As they get to become teenagers in early, early 20 somethings? How do you not chisel it off? Like, like the book warns, this could happen.

Austin:

I leave them alone a lot. I mean, I, I really believe in self-directed learning. I mean, that's what my parents did for me. I mean, my parents kind of let me go and let me do. They had very strong, there was structure, there were boundaries. But what you did within the boundaries was kind of your own.

Neil:

How do you let a seven year old go like .. Saturday morning, you do your own thing. He does his own thing.

Austin:

Well, I mean a seven year old in our house it's like at some point the TV goes off and then it's like,

Neil:

I'm happy to hear that the TV was on. It made me feel less guilty about the amount of TV

Austin:

<Laugh> oh, I, yeah, we, we, my kids watch a lot of TV. I watch a lot of TV actually. I grew up watching a lot of TV. You know, TV is what mom and dad put on so they can have two minutes to themselves.

Neil:

<Laugh> exactly. I mean, so, so then you turn the TV off. So, and

Austin:

In some ways TV is a lot better than an iPad or a computer, you know, cuz at TV you can kind of control what's on there. You know, it's hell a lot better than YouTube. Like my God giving, giving an iPad with YouTube on it to a kid. That's that's

Neil:

Sorry, when you say TV, I wasn't understanding, but you're talking about like click and channels on cable. Is that what you're talking about? Well as opposed to the auto recommendation engine feeding you endless algorithmize content

Austin:

When they were really young, they watched the there's a PBS kids channel here in Austin. Like that was really cool about the PBS station here as they have a dedicated channel for kids. So I used to watch that

Neil:

We got that in Canada, too. TVO.

Austin:

Yeah. So like that, that used to be on. Now they go on Netflix and watch their little kid shows and they're really into, oh God, they're really into the like videos where some dork plays Minecraft and,

Neil:

But retaining that childhood sensibility of open-ended questions and natural curiosity, the TV goes off on the Saturday morning. Then what happens at the Kleon house?

Austin:

Well then it's chaos. I mean, they're like fighting with each other and

Austin:

Sit down and, but you know what the pro the thing I it's really about family is, are really about dynamics. And you just don't know what you're gonna get with each kid. So my oldest kid is like extremely he's very much wants to be in everyone's business. He's very much like, wants what would happen if I did this and upset everyone <laugh> and then every, you know, he wants to be like very locked in and center of attention and stuff. My other kid is extremely introverted and would be happy to be in his room, drawing all day. So it's like, it's navigating that. They're both extremely creative, but they're creative in like, different ways. So it's like trying to keep them from annoying each other to violence. And you know, you have boys, you know what...

Neil:

Yeah. There's so much to that phrase though. You don't know what you're gonna get. I think that's vastly underrated. I remember years ago, I think on your blog, you posted about some book, maybe it was on Twitter. I was following you. You posted about some book that it's about like how to be a parent that every page was like blank or every page was like every kid different.

Austin:

That's Colson Whitehead, tell me that that's Colson Whitehead. He said the name of my parenting book is good luck with that. Everyone's different. Everyone's different. And every chapter is a topic there. Like, you know, it's a topic like, like feeding, sleeping or whatever. Yeah. And then the only text is good luck with that. Everyone's different.

Neil:

<Laugh> I love that. I love that. That is, there's a lot of wisdom in that Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong. A book that Austin CKeon read as he was in his kind of like late adolescence or early teen years. Let's transition now to your second book, which I am gonna go out on a whim. Cause I know when you read your third book, I'm gonna guess that your second book chronologically is called What It Is by Lynda Barry. That's B a R R Y published in 2008, by Drawn and Quarterly. This is an unbelievably hard to describe <laugh> large handwritten hand drawn, entirely hand colored hard cover about the size of the shape of a textbook, actually it's doodles comics, blues, yellows orange on the cover of it. It's like, it's like What It Is is like got little metal studs on it against the blue background.

Neil:

There's paint chips at it. There's little words, collage across the top. As somebody I'm sitting with does themselves. The formless thing, which gives things form insight outside. What is an image? Do you wish you could write, dramatically illustrated with more than, and then there's an ink, blotch color pictures, all kinds of little animals and mythological creatures are here. Lynda Barry born in 1956 in Wisconsin, still alive today. American cartoonist author and teacher best known for her weekly comic strip. Ernie's Ernie Pook's Comeek, C O M E E K. The good times are killing me and 100 Demons. What's the summary of this book. How do object summon memories? What do real images feel like for decades? These types of questions have permeated the pages of Lynda Barry's compositions, with words, attracting pictures and conjuring places. What It Is demonstrates a tried and true creative method that is playful, powerful, and accessible to anyone with inquisitive wish to write or to remember part memoir, part collage, part workbook, Barry instructs her readers in methods to open up their own creativity. The book when the comic industry is 2009 Eisen award, for best reality based work and Dewey decimal heads, you can follow it under my favorite Dewey decimal category growing up 7 4 1 0.59. That's the category I'd always go to for drawings slash cartoons, caricatures and comics. Tell us about your relationship Austin with What It Is by Lynda Barry.

Austin:

Well, I mean, Lynda's sort of my, Lynda's sort of my great teacher and hero from afar. I mean, like I, so the story of how I came in touch with Lynda's work is my wife's from Cleveland and we lived in Cleveland Heights after college. And one of the things I used to do in Cleveland when I was first getting started is I just started a blog and I used to go to readings, a lot of other writers and I would draw them. That was sort of the thing I did because back then it was like, it was a differentiator one. You couldn't get very good pictures unless you had a really good camera. Like this is before cell phone cameras got real good. Yep.

Neil:

What's the approximate time frame

Austin:

Talking this be 2005, 2006. Okay. And so I went to see this guy named Dan Chaon. Who's an incredible fiction writer who has a new book coming out soon called Sleepwalk. And I went to see him read and I drew him and Kelly Link was, it was an incredible Kelly Link. And I think it was Ellen, I forget her last name. I'm sorry. I'm blanking. It was, it was another writer, Kelly Link, Dan Chaon, great writer. I mean, just luck out cuz Kelly Link's like one of the best short story writers working

Neil:

Just like at a bookstore

Austin:

Or this was at a Mac's Backs around the corner from our apartment.

Neil:

That's is that a bookstore? That's

Austin:

A bookstore in Cleveland that Mac's Backs. That's still around. I like that.

Neil:

Yep. Paperbacks hard backs. We got all

Austin:

Kinds of backs, everything. Mac's Backs so in the basement at Mac's Backs and I drew everyone and then I, what I would do is I would draw them and then I would write up what hap you know, what they talked about and like, you know, what, what happened at the event? And Dan Dan saw, what I quickly found out is if you write about someone and if you, if you draw them and you write about them, especially in 2005, 2006 on your blog, they're gonna find it cuz everyone, you know,

Neil:

Googles themselves. Yeah.

Austin:

I found that out real quick. So then

Neil:

That's still Dan, that's true today, I think, right? To some extent. Yeah, I think so. To some extent, if you talk about people, they're gonna hear it.

Austin:

So Dan said, oh, you drew me like a Lynda Barry character. And I said, who's Lynda Barry. And you know, he freaked out and was like, I can't believe you don't know who this person is. And after Dan and I went to coffee a few times, he was very, very generous with me. And Dan, Dan, you know, we hung out a couple. I used to see him at the grocery store, let you know, cuz we were in the same neighborhood. And he was very, very kind to me and, and took me out to coffee a few times. And, and he said, we're having Lynda at Oberlin. You know, that's where, that's where Dan was in the creative writing department at Oberlin and Ohio, which is a great, which is a very well known school in Ohio. Oh, why don't you come?

Neil:

You should come. Yeah.

Austin:

And, and see this woman. So I show up and it's in a chem lab. That's where they did the reading in like a chemistry lab at Oberlin. And this woman came in and she just had this. Anyone who's ever met, Lynda Barry knows that she just has this magic. She calls it magic, hippie energy. She just like sort of exudes this. She it's a very spiritual kind of experience being around.

Neil:

Add some more adjectives to the energy. So she walks into the room, you're in a hip C

Austin:

Hip energy, magic, hippy energy, just, she radiates energy. She, she is radiant. She's a radiant. She gets, she, I don't know if she still gets nervous, but she gets very her nerve. She uses her nervousness as a superpower when she's talking to a room and or she did back then I'm I'm, you know? And, and so she got up, she took off her cowboy boots and stood in her bare feet. And she read from this book called Cruddy, which is one her novel. And it was just, I just, you know, we, all the whole room just is like, oh, I have a great

Neil:

Austin is holding his hand and like pulling it down and making a facial expression. That's like a, like a, wow, is that it? Or it's

Austin:

Like seeing a band that's like really great. You know, it's like seeing someone who's really special, you know, to me, Lynda Barry's like James Brown or something, you know, it's that level of like aura. And I don't know if James Brown's the right example. But she, you know, she's special. Everyone knows that, like when she's in a room, everyone knows that this person is special. So she read from Cruddy and Dan invited us, my wife and I, she was, we were, she was my fiance at the time. She invited Meg and I to come to the bar afterwards and hang out with Lynda and spent like an hour, two hours at the bar. And I have run my whole career off that, that, you know, both Dan and Lynda would probably <laugh> like, oh God, what did we do? But you know, they, that really is where things really came together for me at that, that evening because Lynda was the first person I ever met who was able to sort of project everything that I wanted to be, that it was in her the way that she thought about pictures and words, the way she thought about creativity, the way she thought about writing her extreme Midwesternness too.

Austin:

I mean, she grew up in, she grew up in the Northwest, but she lives in Wisconsin and she's a, but she's, she makes a joke about how she's half Filipino, half Norwegian, but Norwegian blood will suck the color out of everything. You know, she tells that joke and stuff.

Neil:

So she is half Filipino.

Austin:

She is half Filipino mm-hmm <affirmative> and and just,

Neil:

And a very challenging childhood based on this book.

Austin:

Yeah. And a very rough, very unhappy childhood. And all of her work comes out of a deep that, well, you know, she, her real, her real achievement as an artist is she's able to go back to childhood in a way that not many people can and evoke that in her work in her, in her comics. Now, when I met Lynda, she was about to start her second act because, and that's, what's really interesting is when I met Lynda, it all the alternative papers that her comic strip had run in for 30 years were folding. So Lynda was about to start the second career as a person who teaches as a teacher. So at the time that that I met her, she had to be at this really interesting juncture. I mean, I've never talked to her about this and never heard her talk about it, but she had to be at a point in which things were about to change for her. So after I, I became of Lynda Barry nut, this is 2006. So What It is actually the first pages from What It Is, came out in an issue of Tin House that I still have. Mm-Hmm

Neil:

<Affirmative> Tin House is like a literary magazine

Austin:

Oh, literary magazine. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. And I just, so anything Lynda ever did after that, I just stalked her online. I like anything Lynda ever did. Like I was there. So when, what it is came out, I mean, it was just, I

Neil:

Was 2008. I was yeah. Three years after the bar.

Austin:

So I, I had moved to Texas by then. And I was ready for it. You know, I was teed up. I, I had read a lot of the stuff that was in it. It's funny. I actually have a little collection. Didn't know you're gonna get this. I have a whole, What It Is. I have the

Neil:

Austin is Rubbing the cover of the book here.

Austin:

I have the Tin House issue that the first pages were in. I have the free comic book day Drawn in Quarterly, did a whole comic book, the activity book in the back. They published that before the book, I have all those things that I collected as I was going.

Neil:

So what happened at the bar? You go to the bar you're with Meg you're with your wife, you're invited amongst this little cadre of, of writer's authors illustrators. Was there something

Austin:

Chit Chat? I, I don't know. She, I, it was just chit chat. Okay. And she was really exci, I remember her being excited that we were getting married cuz she loves being married. She's married to she's married to a Prairie restoration Uhhuh. So that's why she lives on a farm in Wisconsin cuz Kevin does a lot of, he restores prairies for a living. Yeah. That's what he does.

Neil:

A failed relationship with Ezra oh, sorry. Ira Glass. Yeah,

Austin:

Yeah, yeah. Who actually is one of the terrible boyfriends in Lynda's book, 100 Demons.

Neil:

I was researching that. So Ira Glass of this American Life, you know, and, and his quote about everything she said about him is it was all right. I take, you know, I was a terrible person.

Austin:

Yeah. Cause he's smart. Yeah. Cuz he's smart. And he knows that he can't Dodge it, you know, like he owns it, which is good <laugh> cause he really can't. Yeah. So like, so this to me was like, I just took so much from her. And then the other thing that happened is Dan invited me when George Saunders came to speak at Oberlin. That was another, those two are very connected in that for, for George and for Lynda, I'm not really on a first name basis with either of them, but they're both sort of, there's a real spiritualism to writing for them. I mean their, their writing comes out of their deep, moral core in a way that not all writers, their writing comes that way. So

Neil:

Especially not in non-fiction usually.

Austin:

Yeah. And they're also, they're Chicago people they've come from, so there's like a Midwestern connection there. You know, George Saunders lived in Chicago for a long time or grew up there. So yeah, What It Is is just like you can, it's in the DNA of steel, like an artist, it's just in some ways collage

Neil:

Based, lots of questions, provocative

Austin:

Quotes, very part, very textured.

Neil:

I mean there isn't a single computer. I mean this book is just again, say it's more than a 200 page book, entirely handwritten hand drawn. I don't think I've ever seen a book that's entirely handwritten handdrawn.

Austin:

So the, use your hands chapter of, of Steal Like an Artist is directly inspired by Lynda and it starts with Lynda.

Neil:

So it's nice that like now I got the, the Lynda accolade, is that the right word? You know, you're a

Austin:

I would say probably a disciple disciple.

Neil:

That's the right.

Austin:

The problem with that is like, I, Lynda doesn't want disciples. She wants, she wants fan. Yeah. I mean, I mean, this is the interesting thing. There, there, you can't control who you influence. And so part of what I do is I just try to leave Lynda alone. Like I, I just don't, I praise her. I'm very open about her influence, but I also like try to leave her alone because she just doesn't need me nattering at her. You know? Like I'm just, I'm, I'm eternally grateful for, to her and I will spread her books and, but I, I try desperately to leave her alone. Cause she, she is a person who needs a lot of, she is not in this for, she is a pure creature as far as creativity goes, like she's not in it for anything other than she has to do. She has to do that. When you read Lynda Barry book, she had to do that.

Neil:

There's a compulsiveness. That's evident.

Austin:

Well, I mean compulsive maybe. Yeah, but that keeps her alive. That when you're, when you, when you read Lynda Barry, like she's, that's that stuff keeps her alive. And she's very clear about how comics and drawing kept her alive.

Neil:

Well, she talk, she talks about at page 111 of this book, she says she writes a few blocks west of where she lived was the edge of skid row. In the beginning of a long street of peep shows, strip clubs, bars, X-rated theaters and adult bookshops. It was a port town, there were vomiting sailors. There was also a head shop and in the head shop where bootleg Neil Young albums and underground comics, if the hippie at the counter was the mellow yellow hippie, excuse me, I could go in if the mean hippie was working, keep kicked me out saying adults only I went into the head shop scared, but doing it anyway, I bought underground comics and bootleg records when I saved up babysitting money and I took the bus home, reading them.

Austin:

Yeah. I mean we had completely different childhoods in a lot of ways. So like one of the things that is probably different than Lynda and I is she has a lot more faith in the classroom as a place of possibility because school really saved her when she was a kid, when she was like an unhappy kid, you know, she

had teachers and the classroom was a safe space for her. You know, it was a safe place to, to go and there were books and there were art supplies and all that stuff, you know, for me, school was a little bit more malevolent in the sense that I had all that stuff at home. I had to go to school and be around all these people, you know, I'd rather just be at home with my stuff. So like, it's interesting from a class perspective though, too, just how like, you know, our upbringings were different that way.

Austin:

Yeah. So she really locates a lot more possibility in the classroom than I do. Because I think school is fundamentally structured in a way that it will never, there's just things about school that as it's structured, won't get fixed. But I do think her dedication as a classroom teacher really comes out of that for her classrooms are safe spaces. She grew up that way. I mean, I'm projecting, I'm inferring that from her work. But I, I assume that because it seems like the atmosphere, she's just a born, she's also a born teacher. There are people that are just it's in their makeup, you know?

Neil:

Sorry, just to dive deep into this classroom thing that you're opening up here, because we talked a little bit about unlearning or unschooling or free range or yeah. Kind of free free, but I'm assuming your, do your kids go to like a local public school? Yeah. So they're in this broken system, the system <laugh> oh yeah,

Austin:

Yeah.

Neil:

And how do you think about that now? So you're in a you're, you're an intentional father. You've got kids in the system that you see, you know, wasn't it, wasn't incredibly serving to you and everything structural issues. Now what, what's the, how do you think about that for your own kids?

Austin:

Everything good that happens in the school is about the people in the school. So you have every teacher I've ever met. Well, no, let me back up. Most teachers I meet are incredible. They, they, you know, I mean, you gotta have a certain at any work that's truly valuable in this culture we don't pay well enough. I mean, it's, it's almost like the, the problem with this culture is that if you're doing work, that's meaningful and, and does something well that you should just be happy that you get to do that work anyway. And so we don't reward it, you know? So to be a teacher is already to enter into a kind of, not if not outright poverty, a poverty of respect and compensation. So like for me, every teacher I meet is is, is up against impossible odds. And so for me, it's like, it just comes down to who's in that room. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> I mean, it, it comes down to the kids are in that room. Yeah. What their families look like, where they come from, and then it comes down to the teacher that's in the room. So as broken as the system is they're, the classroom is a site of possibilities simply because humans are in that room and it's unpredictable, what's gonna happen.

Neil:

Yeah. Yeah. And Leslie, my wife is a public school teacher. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> and she describes a child's education as a quilt. So quote, unquote, good teacher, bad teacher, strict teacher, easy teacher. Like they end up no matter what, no matter what your journey is, creating a vast tapestry, which you

can, you know, plum and draw upon. Sure. And reflect back on. And there's all kinds of twists and turns. And it becomes part of the story of the kids' education experience. That idea, I find incredibly stress relieving doesn't mean every year you gotta have the right teacher and you figure out, make sure that they're doing the right project and with the right kid, you don't, you can't, you can't lean in that much. You gotta sort of lean back a little bit. Or I I'm feeling like I I'm noticing. I need to that's that's the growth for me is, is learning how to lean back.

Austin:

Yeah. For me, school is like, it's a, it's a pre we don't go to church. We don't have a ton of friends. We don't have a lot of family around, school is kind of a community you can just plug into. It's like all these and the thing that unites you just send your kids, this building for seven hours a day, you know? Yeah. and that's what kind of unites you. And so for me, it's like, it's just been a lot less malevolent than when I was before I had kids. And I was all worried about school and sending them to school. It's just, it's it's been more benevolent than I thought it would be. But I also have really, I have one kid that's really good at school. And another kid that's really good at school too. He is just not quite as actually, they're both really good at school, so it's easy for them. So that's a whole different thing. When school is easy, like its almost kind of, in some ways I think both my kids think school is a waste of their time. Huh. And I, and that doesn't mean that their teachers aren't good. It doesn't mean that like the people, I just think they both kind of think school's a waste of time.

Neil:

It does create the idea that I think is true, which is now you're in charge of your own education. I mean, you, you take what you can get. Yes. And then you, then you learn on your own and because you have everything at your fingertips, you can.

Austin:

That's what I try to tell my kids is that you're in charge of your education. You, you are the one that leads it and you know, your teacher's gonna give you these worksheets or whatever, but you're ultimately gonna be the one that has to push yourself where you need to be.

Neil:

I'm gonna ask you one last question on this book, we'll go to your next book. I wanna ask you about drawing, which specifically, why should adults get back into drawing and how should they do it? Cuz on page 102, she writes most people eventually at some point in their life, feel bad at art and never draw again, except for on the margins of pages or on the covers of telephone books. That thing we call doodling. A lot of people still do that when they are taking notes or listening to someone or waiting for someone to come back to the phone. Have you ever wondered why? What is the reason for it? I believe it's because it helps us maintain a certain patient state of mind. And there is a part of us which has never forgotten this. Talk to me, you are a writer who draws.

Neil:

That's how you describe yourself and your bios. I'm an, I'm an adult who does not draw, but used to love drawing as a kid. Like the people she's talking about. Talk to me about the voyage from adult who doesn't draw to adult, who does, how do we get back into it? What are some of the reasons, how do we, how should we think about introducing, drawing back into our adult lives? For those of us, I think I speak for the majority that no longer do it, but certainly see it as a loved joy for kids.

Austin:

Well, I mean, I, I just think drawing is a pleasant experience. I mean, and I think that's what Lynda is so good at is showing that you don't go to the page to get a drawing. You go to the page to draw, to have an experience, to do something like when I go on a bike ride, it's not like at the end, I'm like I have this bike ride, check out this bike ride. You know what I mean? Like I go on a bike ride to ride my bike and it should be the same thing with drawing. You go to drawing, to draw and to look and to see and to make marks. And it's pleasurable. Now I will say that one of the things that's really, I think the prime there's, there's different kinds of drawing. That's that's one thing you have to understand is that there's there's picture writing, which is kind of what comics are, which is like expressing inner, you know, telling a story or something like that.

Austin:

That's one kind of drawing where you're kind of trying to communicate something you're trying to like, there's a message or you're, you know, you're trying to tell a story or you're trying to, you know, your kid says, I want a picture of a snake and you're like, okay, well a snake, you know, that's one kind of drawing. That's like a representative kind of drawing. The other kind of drawing is that you're trying to focus on the world and look at the world and slow down long enough that you can somewhat accurately represent it on a piece of paper. Those are different things. Like when you're, when you're making comic or you're trying to draw for your kids. A lot of times that's just represent. That's like CA you know, that's like shapes. You're, you're trying to, and that's one kind of drawing and that's a beautiful, wonderful kind of drawing.

Austin:

And then there's this other kind of drawing where the point is to try to look at the world. And so those have different benefits. I mean, there's pleasure in both kinds of drawings. But there's different kinds of drawing. And the one, it's a way to communicate with people in a, in a way that it becomes, I mean, it's a superpower. If you can, if you can write words and draw pictures, you've got two different modes of communication at your disposal instead of just one. So that's one thing, Dan Roam's really good at this, the writer.

Neil:

How do you spell Roam?

Austin:

Dan Rome, R O a M. Okay. He teaches business people how to draw mm-hmm <affirmative> so, you know, use drawing in the corporate boardroom and stuff to sell ideas to people, but the other kind of drawing is being awake and alive to your world and slowing down long enough to see what's in front of you. And that's the drawing that really, really, that's not even necessarily the drawing that Lynda teaches, but that's, that's a different kind of drawing that I think is the most beneficial to, because you really don't know what something looks like until you try to draw it. Like, if I asked you right now, draw a bicycle.

Neil:

Yeah. I, I would draw two circles, a stick between them and a stick at the top with a, a handlebar on it. Yeah. I'd probably stop there. Yeah.

Austin:

Mm-Hmm <affirmative> but it wouldn't, most people, most people couldn't draw a bicycle, even, even as a diagram even as a schematic, they couldn't actually draw a bicycle. How it works. I can draw you a bicycle because I've drip. I've one. I know how a bicycle works. And so I can, I know all the parts, but I've also spent time drawing bicycles, and I know how they, you know what I mean? Yeah. So it forces you to, you realize how much you don't look at things when you're, when you draw.

Neil:

What's the easiest way for someone who doesn't draw today in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, who is hearing your message in hearing Lynda's message, understanding that it can be very therapeutic. I I'm kind of with you on all the logics that I still don't do. What do I need to do? Surround myself with cue cars and markers? Like, what is it a, is it a before bed practice? Is it like draw something that you see out your window? What, what are some of the ways that people can get back into this, this practice that sounds quite positive.

Austin:

Well because we're, we're on a, this is a podcast about books. There are two books that are for the different kinds of drawing. The best book for the kind of symbol picture writing we're talking about is Ed Emberly's Make A World, which is a book that literally shows you how step by step, you can draw a stick figure or here's how you draw a car. Here's how you draw a boat, like

Neil:

A triangle plus a circle plus a square kind of thing.

Austin:

Exactly. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> here are the five here's. If you can draw a triangle and a square in a circle and a.in a line, you can draw all the things in this book. That's the book to get. If you have like kids or you just wanna do symbol writing and you just wanna learn how to like draw things, okay.

Neil:

Say this, say the title one more time.

Austin:

The title is Ed Emberly's Drawing book, drawing book. Okay. Make a World. And they're million of them. Ed Emberly is incredible. He's and they're for kids, but they're for anyone. Really? Yeah. And these are great.

Neil:

I can picture them in our house from the library.

Austin:

If you're in a parent, if you're a parent, that's the perfect book to use with your kids. Okay. The, as an adult, and you're trying to learn to draw the book to read is Betty Edwards, classic Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, which is all about when people start drawing, they draw what they think should be there rather than what's there. And so that book is about really looking. And so she has all these

different, you know, techniques, like one of the techniques is to turn a picture upside down and draw it, draw something upside down because the minute you turn something upside down, you don't know what it isn't. You, you have to really draw what's in front of you, just like little tips like that. There's a writer named Sam Anderson who just taught himself to draw during the pandemic. And he's a great, he writes features for the New York Times.

Neil:

Has he got the real Boom Town? Yeah. Okay. Yeah. That book about Oklahoma city. Yep. Okay. Yeah.

Austin:

Sam's, Sam's become a friend of mine and I he's one of my favorite working writers, but Sam has literally made his way. He that's what he did through the pandemic is he went through Betty Edwards book. Wow. So those are the two books that, and, but they're different. I would say the Ed Emberly book is drawing on the left side of the brain in that it's mainly about symbols and representation and almost drawing as a form of language. And then Betty Edwards drawing on the right side of the brain is more about like actually drawing what's in front of you.

Neil:

Thank you. Yeah, you are, you are so good at pointing out all these resources. Like you seem to draw upon from everywhere, like you say, of course. And you're just like, you know, flicking your wrist as if we've all heard of these. I've never heard of any of these books. This is so wonderful. Well, my

Austin:

Mind is I, I do have, I can remember things that happened to me. I, I can't, I can't tell you, like, if we, if we had gone someplace and had dinner together or something, I probably couldn't tell you what, like we, where we went after that or whatever, I'd have to have my wife fill in the details or something like that. You know, Meg would have to tell you, like whatever, I can remember things I read and I can remember movies and song lyrics and stuff like that, that I can, I can remember all that stuff. So I do have like, kind of a, I sometimes wonder if I'm, you know, borderline like autistic in that the sense that I have an incredible visual, I can, I can pull things up, you know, like a, like a, like a file system. Yeah. That's just something weird that I think, no,

Neil:

No, no weird, not weird. Temple Grandin told us in this show that, you know, I, she said, I think in pictures, in her famous book is called Thinking In Pictures.

Austin:

Yeah. Thinking in Pictures when she's talking about that in the beginning of that book, that's, that's a lot how I work now. What's really interesting is my wife has aphantasia. And what that is is that she doesn't see pictures in her head. She can't make form images in her mind. So it's the opposite of what Temple Grandin is talking about

Neil:

You guys are a good fit.

Austin:

Yeah.

Neil:

Together. You remember everything

Austin:

<Laugh> well, I mean, it's different, it's different. It's taken us a life, you know, know almost lived half our lives together now. And it's taken us this long to realize that, you know, we fundamentally see things differently. I mean, we really do. It's not like, oh, what a nice metaphor. We all see the world differently. No, we literally, we don't just see the world differently. We think differently. So that's when you live with a, the, the example I like to use with people, which I'd never know if it lands or not, is when we're rearranging a room. When we're trying to get the furniture right. In a room, she will wanna try something. And I'll say, that's never going to work. That won't fit there. Cuz I can see the thing and I can see the I'm like, that's not gonna work there a lot of times.

Austin:

I'm right. What happens though is that she has to push things around the room. And if I leave her alone, like if I go on a trip or something, she'll, I'll come back and the whole room will be rearranged and it'll be in this brilliant way that no one else would've arranged the room because she took the trouble to push things around and try things. That's the superpower of a person with aphantasia is they don't get hung up by what's in their head. They have to try things. And so I think people with aphantasia have a great lesson for people, all people. And you, you, you find this with all people with differences and disabilities, that if you study a disability or a difference, there's always lessons in there for people of all kinds at the same way that if you design the world for, with disabilities in mind, for example, for people who have a hard time getting around or you know, whatever, the world gets better, mm-hmm <affirmative> when you design for that thing.

Austin:

So for me, it's like, she just has taught me this great lesson, which is, you know, if you've ever watched the movie Amadeus, like the, the Mozart's agent or his friend who wants to put on place is it's no good to anyone in your head. Aren't it's, it's all right up here in my noodle. It's like, well, it's no good to anyone there. And that also jams people up because a lot of people can see what they want to do, but they don't have the ability to do it on the page. And so their perfectionism jams them up. They'd be better off in some ways, if they didn't have a picture in their mind and they just started sketching,

Neil:

Huh? That's this is great. I no, no I'm loving it. And then right behind you, there's a big, long tailed grackle flying towards us with a shimmery kind of blue head, the patio

Austin:

That's now 93 degrees outside.

Neil:

The, the PA <laugh>, the patio is cleared. The lunchtime is over. The truck is pulled away and we are tipping back into your third and final book, which is The Journal of Henry David Thoreau by Henry David Thoreau.

Austin:

Abridged,

Neil:

Abridged, abridged. I should say, even though it's let me see here. That's pretty long 667 pages published in by 19, in 1984 by para grant Smith books. And now published in the, by the University of Princeton press who also publishes his full journal, the cover depicts flattened leaves and the small branches of plants and yellows in greens. And the center has a yellow box with the simple title, the journal 1837 to 1861 in green and Henry David Thoreau's name in red right below that says preface by John R Cilgoe C I L G O E. Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts died sadly at age 44, I believe a tuberculosis, 1862 in Concord, Massachusetts. He's an American naturalist, essayist poet philosopher and transcend transcendentalist. Did I say that right? Best known for his book Walden and his essay, Civil Disobedience, Henry David Thoreau journal was his life's work. The daily practice of writing that accompanied his daily walks the workshop where he developed his books and essays and a project in its own right, One of the most intensive explorations ever made of the everyday environment, the revolving seasons and the changing self. File this one, dewey decimal heads under 8 1 8 0.303 for literature slash English slash author slash middle 19th century from 1830 to 1861. Austin. Tell us about your relationship with The Journal of Henry David Thoreau.

Austin:

Well, I've actually never read Walden, which everyone thinks is hilarious, cuz I'm huge Thoreau fan. So I avoided Thoreau for most of my adult, you know, most of my law, you know, I didn't get to Thoreau until I was like 35.

Neil:

So wasn't an active avoidance.

Austin:

No, it was an active avoidance. Oh, I literally stayed away from Thoreau because I couldn't stand the people who I thought read, Thoreau So I, I have never been a naturalist. I've never been interested in I and that's changing rapidly, but when I was growing up, I really considered myself an indoors person. Like I was not interested in nature or anything crunchy that John Krakow.

Neil:

You mention, you know, football, no sports. Right.

Austin:

I mean, right. Like, and, and, but that that's one thing, but like the whole like, like grizzly man or into thin air, all that REI shopping, you know, people, camping, stuff like that. I just like could not be more interested in that. And I, the part of the reason I picked this book is Thoreau ended up being such a formative writer for me. And it was really that kind of thing where I had avoided this guy, my whole life,

because the cultural narrative about him, I had kind of absorbed that narrative instead of actually reading him <laugh> you know? And so when I I'm trying to think of, I think the first thing that happened, I don't think I read the journal first. I read a biography of Thoreau by this woman named Laura Walls. And I started reading it and I was like, all right, this dude like lives with his parents. He's overeducated. He's really upset about the government. He loves plants. I mean, this dude sounds like every millennial, I know basically <laugh> so I was like, this is just, I like, well, this is extremely relatable stuff. And you know, when I started reading Thoreau, I thought this is just a guy who trained himself to see the world in a grain of sand. Like William Blake says, I mean, this guy could,

Neil:

What do you mean by that?

Austin:

Well, so what's interesting to me about Thoreau is that everything people think is some kind of gotcha about Thoreau is actually an, a crucial, essential fact makes him even more interesting. So for example, one of the things people always about is like, well, Walden's like he was a mile away from his house. He wasn't living in the wilderness. Like,

Neil:

So for those that Don know, he, he lived at, at Walden pond for a couple of years on a self-made kind of parcel of land.

Austin:

His buddy Emerson owned this land,

Neil:

Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Austin:

Yeah. And Thoreau built this little cabin on it'd be like, if your buddy was like, yeah, go build a cabin on my, on my property or whatever, you know? But he was really only a mile away from his house. He wasn't that far outside of town, but it was really, it was his attempt to live deliberately is what he called it. But to me, this makes it all the more splendid that he was able to find this whole natural world and this universe right in his backyard. Now, the other thing that people about with Thoreau is that his mom did his laundry, you know, or his mom brought him food or whatever. And the great case that, you know, Laura Wall says nowhere in American literature has a man ever been you know, crucified for not doing his own laundry or spending time with his family. You know, she's like, this is absurd. None of the men that you read from this time period ever did their own laundry or anything, you know, but part of the problem is that people don't now I haven't read Walden. Walden's very preachy. Walden is very like, it's, it's a different kind of language. He's he's speaking in like a kind of elevated, I mean, I've read parts of Walden. I haven't read the entire, the journal is a guy working things out,

Neil:

Presumably not for publication at the time.

Austin:

Well, I mean, so you've talked to the other David who works a lot like this David,

Neil:

David Sedaris

Austin:

David Sedaris and David Thoreau. Cuz he switched him

Neil:

Yeah. His name really is David. Yeah.

Austin:

They actually worked in a very similar way. They have this diary that they, you know, they go on little adventures. Yep. You know, Thoreau walked for four hours a day, right. Tramping around

Neil:

Sedaris is doing

Austin:

Sedaris does the same thing. And then they come back and they write about it. So what, but what they, you know, what they both do is they work out stuff in their diary.

Neil:

It goes from the, it goes from, it goes from the walk to the

Austin:

Diary. It goes from the walk to the diary or the life to the diary, whatever. And then the diary becomes a lecture or something, read aloud to an audience.

Neil:

exactly how David Sedaris does it

Austin:

Right. Yeah. And then the lectures become a book.

Neil:

Right.

Austin:

They they're basically working the same way. Right. So in some ways reading Thoreau's diary and David Sedaris' diary at the same time kind of blew things open for me. Cause it just was this like, it's like, oh, okay. I can have this. You know, I, I explicitly started keeping a diary diary in 2017.

Neil:

Do you have a yellow, small? Is it a Moleskin

Austin:

This is not my diary.

Neil:

Oh, it's not. No.

Austin:

Okay. This is my pocket notebook. Okay. My diary is, looks like a Bible basic it's like Bible SI. It's like a or not that thick. Maybe it's it's probably sir.

Neil:

What's the difference between a notebook and a diary?

Austin:

Well, a notebook is, oh, what is the difference for me?

Neil:

Yeah. Well, you've got a picture

Austin:

This is just random stuff. This is like this is just, I have this on me to take notes,

Austin:

To the diary is to literally sit down and I do like Lynda, I have a paper, I have a little brush pen and I write the date and I look through my notebook and I have another thing called a log book, which is like an appointment book in reverse where I just write down what happens to me every day. Cuz I don't remember what happens to me. And then I look through my log book. I look through my diary. Sometimes I look or, or my pocket notebook. Sometimes I look at Twitter or like my blog or something. And then I write down what I wanna, I figure out what I wanna write about in the diary. I probably only fill two or three, four pages each morning, but those pages accumulate. And then usually what I come up with in the diary often becomes a blog post or a newsletter. And then when it's time to do a book, a lot of those blog posts and newsletters, they become a book chapter. Right. So it's this like,

Neil:

Is the book the end state?

Austin:

Well, it's weird. Cuz the book then becomes usually like a, you know, a series of talks or something or, but then the book like kind of, that's a good question. I mean the book is what it is, but then usually what happens is after the book comes out, there's all this new writing from stuff I figured out after the book. So

Neil:

There's something else is cyclical and they're probably for other people that read your books, maybe they get their own thoughts and their own diaries and their own notebooks.

Austin:

Yeah. I mean a book I believe is a crystallization of thought in a particular moment in time. Wow.

Neil:

Like a book is a crystallization of thought in a particular moment of time in time.

Austin:

Yeah. Like you a book has because it has a publication date. Like I really hate Leaves of Grass by Whitman because I love it. I hate the fact that he just kept redoing the book. Like I, it drives me nuts as a reader because, and this is just my, my own self. I, I, I appreciate his, I appreciate the project. And I appreciate what it says about books and literature. The fact that he's just like remaking this thing over and over and it's getting whatever. I hate that there isn't one artifact I can go to. Cause I like the artifactness of a book. I like the fact that it's a moment in time. I don't actually like updated books that much like, like when Steal Like An Artist came out, I really didn't wanna change much in the book cuz I was just like, why would I change what this book essentially is and what it does for people? Like it's I, you know, so that's why I decided to do an afterward instead of like an introduction or anything. Cause I felt like in

Neil:

10 year anniversary, Steal Like An Artist just came out, wonderful book, everybody should get it. Everybody should read it. I got a copy here right beside me. And you're saying, when it came out in 10 year, you didn't wanna mess with it. Cuz it was at moment in time.

Austin:

Yeah. Like an AR the afterward felt very much like the, the, the way I could, you know, that that's the way I could leave it. The easiest cause even an introduction, you're disrupting the flow of the book. Like the book, you open the book and it goes, and it's like bam.

Neil:

Yeah. I feel the same way about dedications. It's a weird thought, but I don't have dedications any of my books for that same reason. But wait, so you, you, you kind of mentally had dismissed Thoreau growing up, you caught thought yourself as an endorses man. He was more of an outdoors man. Right? You bump into this Laura Wells biography of tho somehow, cuz that, that, by the way I bought it on your recommendation is a thick, meaty book. Like yeah. Not many people just stumble into an 800 page biography.

Austin:

That was my friend Levi Stahl who runs marketing for university of Chicago press. It was his book like that came out from them and he was pimping it on Twitter. And he was like, you gotta read this and sent me a copy.

Neil:

So you read that book, it tipped you off to throw and then you chose to start not with his most popular work, which would be Walden, but you rather traced it back and bought the journal, his journals.

Austin:

Yeah. So I'm trying to think of how I got to the journal. Well, one of the reasons John still go, who did the preface for this? He wrote a beautiful book called Outside Lies Magic, which he's the perfect book to, he's the perfect person to write the intro to that. Cuz Outside Lies Magic is John still go's book about getting outside and exploring your, your urban environment and the weird spaces. He's a real proponent of like following power lines and seeing where they go, wow. Like going to easements and finding like weird retention ponds and like stuff all over the built environment. So he's the perfect person to write this, but yeah. So then I just start. So the way I read this is the other reason, it means so much to me. I read this, I've never read it straight through. What I do is when I'm in the process of reading it, which I'm not right now, I've lapped it twice. I've read that book twice.

Neil:

It's a 24 year book. He wrote it from each 20 age 44 his death.

Austin:

So what I did is I put sticky notes, little post-it flags on each year, the date that approximated today. And I read it throughout a year as like a daily read. Now there are books where you can do that. There are books that people put out. Yeah. But I did it myself. And what I did was I read it's it's May 17th. So I read every, every entry in that book that was on May 17th. I read on May 17th. Now what's incredible about that is he repeats himself over and over. He's like, you know, like, oh the birds, you know, the Robins came out today and it's like, yeah, four years later, he's like the Robins came out today. You know, whatever it is, he repeats himself over and over. And you realize he really is the great American chronicler of the seasons because he, that is how he he's just deeply attuned to his environment. And he's like the micro seasons and the kind of micro the things that happen. He's just over and over and over. Now the other fun thing about the journal that not alot people know is they, there are all these doodles and sketches in the journal that, that the New York review of books who put this out have been really good at reproducing. But he's, you know, I mean like Thoreau is sort of like,

Neil:

So, well, how did this change you? What, what changed about you? You read this in 2017, so five years ago, ish.

Austin:

Well, you know, Thoreau is sort of, he's privileged in the sense that he's you know, he's a white guy in 18, went to Harvard, whatever he went to Harvard, but Harvard didn't have the reputation. It had Uhhuh now, you know, back then Harvard was kind of more of a crazy, it was a little bit Wilder than, than now. But you know, he's, he's pretty well cared for. But he's sort of a, he just, he he's very, he writes a lot about attention and that's one reason he is really interesting to read now because Thoreau's kind of feeling is that the, the world is trying to distract him from what he's truly interested in, which is his, his immediate environment. Like what he's really interested in is like trying to get a ground hog to let him pet him or so, you know, like, like, like, like your squirrels or like flat

Neil:

The blossoms are so pink.

Austin:

Exactly. Or he's the

Neil:

Color of the sunset,

Austin:

What's the temperature of Walden pond at this? You know, he's, he's very deeply interested and is extremely local environment. And he feels very much that his, the news and the media of the time is taking him away from this life. And he feels that a good life is one in which he's paying attention to his local universe rather than whatever's going on. Right. So you can see how in 2017, this is a book for me where I'm like this dude has it figured out, like he has figured out how to pay hyper local attention to his world and stay focused and not let himself be kind of caught up in what what's going on in the wider world. You know, he talks about, there's a certain point in the diary where he says, you know, this weekly paper I get, I don't have time to read this weekly paper. Yeah.

Neil:

<Laugh> he says reading, not the times read the eternities.

Austin:

Yeah. And, and he's very much like, but, but he literally right now reading the weekly paper seems to me like a very, that would be a really good media diet, actually. That would be a really good news diet. Like if you just read like a weekly paper,

Neil:

It's a lot slower than the 15 time a day. It comes.

Austin:

That'd probably be enough actually for you. Yeah. Thoreau it was too much. So it's like, it's very interesting,

Neil:

But you're biking a lot more now you're taking a lot long walks. Your talking

Neil:

He's kind of, I'm assuming he's kind made you closer to being an outdoors person.

Austin:

Well both Thoreau and Sedaris taught me that what I realized is it's not like these jokers went out and had all these great epiphanies and then came back and like, oh, you know, I can, I have this great memory right. About, they're all scribbling in a notebook all day Thoreau got a notebook with him. David

Sedaris has a little piece of paper in his pocket. He's scribbling things down. It's not like these dudes have, you know, like whatever. So like for me, it just made what it did, what reading Thoreau and getting to know Sedaris' method. What they did for me is show me a repeatable way of working indefinitely.

Neil:

Ooh, interesting

Austin:

You set up systems in which you're never devoid of material because you're constantly, constantly writing. You're just, you're doing stuff all the time. And the real trick becomes how you go back through this stuff and, and present it in a way that you could do something with it. You know what I mean? Yeah. So like the, it was really

Neil:

Neither, neither of them actually ended up figuring out how to turn it off. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>, you know, I mean, some artists eventually get to a place like, you know, Alice Monroe is still alive and she's been very publicly and said, I'm, I'm done writing now. Yeah. You know, I mean, I think I've had enough of that,

Austin:

But you know, it's like, it's like, it's interesting though, because no, nothing anyone says about Thoreau is wrong. You know, it's not, it's not that they're wrong. They just miss the point. I mean like, what is also really interesting to me is, you know, I consider myself, I, I, I consider myself a feminist and I consider myself a very passionate, I read, I read a lot of women. I make a point to read a lot of women. What is really interesting to me is when feminists come at Thoreau or people who think they're being feminists come at Thoreau, these years, whatever, because actually some of the great champions of Thoreau have been these feminist superheroes, like Virginia Woolf or Rebecca Solnit, you know, these people that like got, you know, or Gandhi, you know, but you know, like these or Martin Luther King or whatever, these people who

Neil:

These, all people have been influenced.

Austin:

Yeah. To all people that have read Thoreau. And so when people try to comment Thoreau from this like modern contemporary perspective where they're like, wow, his mom did his laundry and he never really left home. He's just some privileged white guy and whatever. It's like, it's really hilarious to me. Cuz when you think about what he was doing at the time, the stones, it took to kind of like, you know, to, to, to make that kind. I just find him deeply relatable. And maybe that's cuz I'm like a I'm I am who I am, but for me it's like, I just, I just love him. And I also love that he's kind of a prick, you know, people are always like, oh he's so it's interesting. Cuz if you read the diary, he's like when he is young, it's kind of unbecoming. Like when you meet people, when you meet young people who are kind of cranky, it's like, what are you cranky about?

Austin:

You've got the body of a 17 year old and you're free and you can do whatever you want. What are you cranky about? Thoreau grows into his crankiness. As, and as he ages, his crankyness gets more like earned and, and deeper. And I love that about him. But he's like this guy that really taught me, I'd say the primary thing, you know, there's a couple of things I learned from Thoreau like the one is you go out and walk and then you come back and write about it. That's basic. That's just a great for a writer. You go out in the world, you have a little adventure and you come back and write about it. Whatever you thought about you take notes, come back and write about. The other thing I learned is try. I don't wanna curse. Try, try fucking reading someone before you have an opinion about them.

Austin:

Yeah. Like this, this is bad. This is we're at a moment now in the culture where it's just like, people have opinions about people that they don't even know anything about. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> and, and it's not, I'm not like it's just that point. It's which, why don't you try reading someone before you make these generalization, you know, before you get into this. So if you want to drive me crazy and everyone knows this now like mention Thoreau's laundry. Like I just, it just drives me up. It drives me insane because it's just, it's just really missing the point. And I mean, there's a lot other things. I think it is an American it's really, you know, there's a Thoreauvian economics too. That's really interesting. I mean he, I mean, one of his great lines is beware of endeavors that require new clothing. You know, he, he, what Thoreau writes about is that all labor has a cost. There's a cost to work. It costs you something to work. Like you get money from working, but it costs you to work. And that's like another one of his points. He just like has a, he's a great, you know, he's some of the great American philosophers.

Neil:

The, the walking thing is so interesting that you and I are both big fans of these long walks. I have a, I did a YouTube video once called the life-changing magic of the five hour walk and, and you know, he would go out for a long walk every afternoon, equipped with an array of instruments, his hat for specimen, collecting, a heavy book to press plants, a spy glass to watch birds, his walking stick, to take measurements and small scraps of paper for jotting down notes. What are your ingredients for a good walk?

Austin:

Oh, I'm much simpler. I mean, I, I actually don't walk with anything other than my iPhone.

Neil:

Well, that's an interesting thing right there on the phone.

Austin:

People are sort of like, oh, you don't bring your notebook with me. I'm like, no, cuz it's too much bulk. It's like the iPhone is there for pictures. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> cause I love taking pictures. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> and the notes app on the iPhone, I think is one of the most underrated tools.

Neil:

Say more about that

Austin:

Period. Why? Because if you have iCloud set up. Yes. Every I'm a Mac guy. So I have all Mac stuff like any other nerd and like everything I type on my phone is immediately goes up in the cloud and it's there at my computer when I sit down. Right. So it's just like this ultimate notebook thing that's searchable and whatever. But so that's

Neil:

How do you not get distracted? I mean, when I take my phone with me on walk, so I try not to take my phone with me or I leave it an airplane mode off in my backpack. I find that I end up slipping into you also tweet 10 to 15 times a day should be said. Like you're also pretty active online at the same time.

Austin:

I don't really, I mean, for one thing, I walk with another person, I walk with Meg. So like I don't really, you're

Neil:

Not like texting,

Austin:

I'm not texting people. No. I mean, it's also discipline. I just don't like, I don't know sometimes I'll, I don't worry about distraction as much as I used to cuz I have these systems in my life that make sure that I get things done. I'm just not that much of a, I've kind of trained myself in a way that I don't really have to worry about that much. I'm not that compulsive about social media and Twitter, like I used to be. So I just don't worry about it.

Neil:

Cause I see you as someone who's just online so much more than me. I not mean that compulsively, but just like I'm trying to get social media out of my life completely. That would be my goal. My end goal on social media would be not to have it.

Austin:

Well, I mean I use social media in a very particular way and a as a public notebook, what I do is I use it as a, it's a research tool. What I do is I post things and then I see how people respond to them. If there's anything interesting, it's like throwing, it's like fishing. It's like throwing out a bait or something. It's like a lure. See if you can learn something. I mean, of course it's also a marketing tool. It's like, Hey, I'm still here kind of thing. But one of the things I use social media so much for is that it's an open notebook and then I go back to it. I don't think people realize if you read my newsletter on Friday, mm-hmm <affirmative> most of that comes straight from the Twitter feed. Right. Because I collect things all week and if it's good enough to tweet, it's probably might make a good point in the newsletter.

Austin:

So I'm using, I'm using Twitter, like a diary or a notebook. Right. And that's a different form of using social media than, you know, having your hootsuite set to yeah, yeah. Pimp out your book, every whatever, you know. So like for me, you know, I, I'm still interested in the back and forth of social media in a sense, but for me it's just like a really convenient way to, it's a really convenient way to keep track of what you're paying attention to. And one of the things about like social media is that you have to sort of

craft it. You kind of have to have a point. So in the, in the, there has to be like kind of a point to a tweet for me. So like you craft it, you edit it, you like get it, you know, and it might only take you 10 or 50 seconds, but like you kind of craft the thought and in the, in the act of crafting the thought in that you're gonna have someone listen to it.

Austin:

That's what act of writing. Mm. I think one of the things for me is that I don't see, I've never been someone who felt like Twitter was little writing and the books were big writing. Mm. I was like that. I don't think that way for me, small writing could lead to a great, I've had great insights from single tweets and someone responding to it, you know? So for, to, for me, I'm a very, I think part of the thing is, is I use social media the way that is it should that you're, you're just like hanging out in a coffee shop and you're like, what about this thing? And people are like, oh no, that's stupid. All right.

Neil:

Then you move on the next,

Austin:

Have you read this thing? Well, you're obviously missing this, you know, or whatever, but yeah, it's, it's a, it's a public notebook. That's how I use it. That's how the people I really look up to on social media use it. It's like a writer's open notebook

Neil:

Exa okay, exactly. Age 1837, Thoreau's third ever entry in the, in the so he's 20 years old, third ever entry reads. Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another. The Oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind, a rich virgin mold, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest. So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of my future growth as I live now so shall I reap. I thought I would ask how you think about that decaying and growth within yourself?

Austin:

Well, I mean, I don't know by myself, but I mean, one of the things that Thoreau figures out really quickly, which much to his, you know, much to his good use is that nature provides you almost all of the metaphors you need for talking about any kind of life. I mean, you know what, hi, he's part of the writer's Robin Kimmer writes about this really well in Braiding Sweetgrass. She says, you know, she's a metaphor ager in the sense that she's looking for me, you know, as a writer, you're looking for metaphors all the time and nature just ends up being like a rich one. But this process of like decay and life and cycles and stuff, it's just so antithetical to the way we talk in modern life, because the, now I think we're getting a little bit better, but, you know, especially in the self-help area, you know, like Tim Ferriss is paying for this right now. Like Tim, Tim, it's interesting to watch. Tim's a guy that got very famous. I don't know Tim personally, but Tim's a guy that got very,

Neil:

He is a fellow resident here. Yeah.

Austin:

He lives around here somewhere. Tim is a guy that got very popular, helping people, people try to figure out how optimize themselves. Mm-Hmm

Neil:

<Affirmative> the four hour work week, 2007

Austin:

Yeah. Like optimization becoming in perfect life, hacking, you know, life hacking all that life,

Neil:

Lifestyle design.

Austin:

Yeah. And that sort of assumes that. And now it's interesting watching him kind of go he's growing and developing and dealing with that and like what the repercussions of that are. And, and so that's kind of interesting to me from afar to see that kind of

Neil:

What's happening,

Austin:

What what's happening to him. Yeah.

Neil:

Yeah. When you, when you say, I

Austin:

Just think he's going deeper and discovering that it's not about being like a robot efficient mm-hmm <affirmative> like ultimate dude, you know, he's just figuring out that that's like a very, like, that's one way of looking at the world. That's very Western mm-hmm <affirmative> and very like

Neil:

Productivity capitalists

Austin:

In a sense mm-hmm, <affirmative>, you know, this idea that you can optimize things for maximum efficiency

Neil:

Virtual assistant everything that you don't want to do

Austin:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So, you know

Neil:

Okay.

Austin:

But what nature, you know, using nature as a metaphor, it's just like you realize that things are much more nonlinear and cyclical than, than they're presented to you. Like, think about America, you know, the America you

Neil:

Posted about the calendar, the, the circle calendar. I remember you posting about.

Austin:

So, well, I just think like, this is another way that Thoreau is kind of pushing back against America, is that he's he, and when I say America, I mean the United States he's really like, even then there's this myth of progress, you know, that we're forward, we're going forward. Like, and even he can see that that's like a dead end, you know, this, this notion of forward motion, no matter what, it's just like, it's just, there's nothing in nature that works that way. There's just literally nothing in nature that works that way. This doesn't happen. So it's unnatural, you know? And so he, I think he's starting to see the roots of a system that's gonna burn itself out, you know, and I, so, but he gets to that place by observing, you know, observing his environment and the fun thing about, I, you know, again, people get hung up on the wilderness thing. It's not, they went to live in the wilderness. He just went far enough away from town that he could like observe things and not have people nattering in his ear all day. You know what I mean.

Neil:

Yeah, yeah, yeah,

Austin:

So, yeah.

Neil:

Yeah. It's interesting about you know, one thing we both connect over is the moon. This podcast publishes on the lunar cycle. Right.

Austin:

Which I think is very cool.

Neil:

Yeah. It all comes out on clever segment of every new moon in full moon. I always say to people, I don't trust the gregorian calendar, the Pope came up with this 500 years ago. It presumes like time is linear. And the thing I was in be a second goes, I've seen you post about these idea of circle calendars and, you know, just getting back into the seasons and nature being round, as opposed to like numerically based. Anyway, it's just, it's been wonderful for me cuz of the first couple years of the podcast here, I am looking at the sky a lot more and you know, at first it's anxiety provoking, I'm like that moon's pretty full and I haven't recorded the next <laugh> podcast. I got my I've just put my calendar up in the sky, but then it becomes very relieving because it's just so that thing's been there for 4 billion years.

Neil:

We've been using it as a way to count time for 35,000 years. You can presume that much time in the future. So then it just relieves you of any pressure that you feel about this moment. You know, one of the things I do at my house is I collected 10 rocks from a beach on my 40th birthday. And I keep 'em on the counter in our bedroom, four of the rocks, I'm 42 are forward. And the other six, I hope I'm gonna live 10 decades are backwards. And in my mind, every 10 years I move one rock forward. And the reason I like that little touchstone literally in my bedroom, especially, is cuz before I go to bed, I find I often get anxious. But now when I look at that little rock thing, I'm like, man, this is just what a small part of the 10 years is this little thing. Yeah. You know, I'm not gonna move this route for eight more years,

Austin:

Deep time, deep

Neil:

Time, the long now project, that idea of the 10,000 year clock and stuff like that. Yeah.

Austin:

Well, I mean, you know, the tension of life and this is kind of, you know, one of my, one of the projects I'm working on is, is an idea that when we talk about tensions in life, we usually talk about them in terms of you wanna resolve the tension. My theory is that the creative work comes out of a tension being, you know, the, the tensions of life is that's, that's the very stuff of life. And I, I use the metaphor of a guitar string play.

Neil:

I just, I was just thinking that's so funny. You said that.

Austin:

So if you play guitar, you know that a string is it's in between two poles, you know, it's, it's wound around two, you can make a guitar by just having two posts, they're stationary and then you wrap a wire or string or whatever around it. If you don't tighten the string enough, it'll just buzz. It won't make any noise at all. If you tighten it too much, it snaps. So really make tuning a guitar and getting music out of a out of tension is about the right tension, the proper tension. And so the ultimate tension of life is you're trying to live as if you might have 10 decades, but also that today might be it. Yeah, that's a, that's a fundamental tension of life. Yeah. And it's nothing to resolve. You can't resolve it. It's unresolvable, you know, it's in the tension that the meaning and purpose of life comes out of that tension. And so I would like to, you know, one of the projects I'm working on right now, it might be a book I don't know for sure is. I think there are particular creative tensions that in our culture have been you, I use the word culture. I just mean in our, whatever

Neil:

The sea we swim in

Austin:

In. Yeah. What we do. Mm-Hmm, <affirmative> what we talk about. We act as if these tensions are gonna get resolved. And in my, my position is it's the very tension that makes give

Neil:

Us an example of one.

Austin:

Of course, that I've said that it's like what? Like starting and finishing. Yeah. Something like that. Yeah. That impulse to, when do you know, you're beginning and ending.

Neil:

It's even nice. What you're talking about now in this project. Ah, I'm working on something now. I don't know I if it's gonna be a book

Neil:

Sitting in it, doing it, moving it around, but

Austin:

You know, like an interesting one of my favorites is well, the other thing you could do is when people say there are two kinds of people in the world, you can say, actually those are just two tensions. So there was a, there's a art critic named Dave Hicky who said, you're either a pirate or you're a farmer. A farmer finds a little plot and just tills it and just cultivates it and tills it. And it's the same plot. And he just kind of does his thing and gets the best yield he can get out of it. A pirate goes out and seals the sea and has wild time brings back all kinds of booty. You know? So he was talking about like different kinds of artists and, and makers. Some people have a plot and they cultivate it. And then other people that are going all around, borrowing and stealing and whatever, for me, they're not two types of people.

Austin:

It's two ways of being. There's times when you need to be the farmer, you need to cultivate what you have and work it and develop your crop. Yeah. And then there's times you need to hit the high seas, find new varieties and new plants and stuff and bring 'em back. You know, there there's like a master and commander, there's a botanist on board, you know, Charles Darwin, he went on a ship and like he was a botanist. He brings all these specimens back, you know? So it's like, just these, there are these, there are these, the ideas that it's, it's an ancient idea. It's Heraclytus' idea that there's a harmony of opposites. That there's a that, that the world is created by. And it's in a lot of the world religions, you know, yin and yang. Yeah. Good and evil. Yeah. You know

Neil:

Susan Cain's new book Bittersweet.

Austin:

Yes. Mm-hmm. <Affirmative> so like this idea though, I think you can teach people. Well, my, my theory is that this is just a completely different metaphor that will help people feel better about what they're dealing with, because there's a great Victor Frankl quote. He says, it's not, "the purpose of life is not a tensionless state," he uses that word tension a lot in that in that quote that people like to quote "it's to find a meaning or a purpose", basically, you know, so, but, but the tension, my, my point is that creative people in particular are often feel pulled in between forces. And a lot of that creative energy comes

from them, grappling with these kind of opposing forces and, and finding a way to make that tension sing.

Neil:

I love that. I love that for so many reasons. I also feel like in this world, we're so, you know, zero in ones are powering almost everything that we see do. This is a spectrum, the push exactly. Or

Austin:

A vibration or a yeah,

Neil:

It's, it's gray. You know, everything ends up being zero one that means black or white. That means an algorithm feeds you a piece of content. You're dictated to you know, everything is categorized and everything has, you know a label and this is right wing and this is left wing. And you know, this is trying to break through that. And it's very difficult to do. We're trying our best to do it with the show, but it's a more difficult place to play and more difficult place to sit in. And it's a more difficult place to wrestle with because you also have to make yourself open to the, you mentioned earlier about books requiring work well to play with tension requires you gotta show up. You can't just passively sit on the couch, watching Netflix. You gotta like mm-hmm. If you're listened to this, you're your brain is clicking and on fire just like mine is right now because listening to you is provoking so many ideas on my own head while listening to you, you know? Yeah.

Austin:

I just feel, and this again, I might be giving away the fact of a Gemini. I just feel, I constantly feel pulled between forces. There's a, I was trying to explain someone the other day

Neil:

Here comes Veronica. She's like what you guys have been talking about

Austin:

The hell out of here.

Neil:

Let me give you, let me give you a credit card please. And and this has been, this has been, by the way, we've enjoyed this guacamole for like an hour. It's changed colors in the sun. It's gone brown. Then we, then we pick it away and it turns green and we pull it out. And do you want anything else, want another taco or something? And those chicken enchiladas were unbelievable. The red and the green. Thank you. You're in the podcast. You're talking you're here.

Veronica:

Thank you for coming

Neil:

Mi Madres all the time.

Austin:

Mi Madre's all day

Neil:

What's the address here?

Veronica:

2201 Mainer road, Austin, Texas.

Neil:

Okay. We're gonna send people here when they listen

Neil:

<Laugh> and we are gonna, this conversation could go on and on and on. You had given us a masterclass on curiosity, on creativity, on the artist life on, on thinking like an artist, as well as stealing, like an artist. Austin, can we close this off with a few quick, fast money, round questions, lightning round questions. We're gonna go quick here. Preferred format, hard cover paperback, audio, or E

Austin:

Again, book different contexts. I like paperbacks for the pool. I love hardbacks for collecting. Like

Neil:

I picturing you like lying in like a, like a, one of those round inflatable things. A lot reading. Yeah, yeah,

Austin:

Yeah. Yeah. Nice. I mean like, cuz I mean part of the writer's job is to read and I quickly realized, wait a minute, I'm I can do this decadently. Like I have this pool because we put this pool and I was like, I can come here and work and it could be like decadent work.

Neil:

Have you ever heard Quentin Tarantino talk about how he writes all of his movies. He writes a scene by the pool. Yeah. Sits in the pool for an hour. Thinking about it goes and writes. A scene comes back to the pool. The pool is like a big ingredient.

Austin:

Well, he has that scene in Once Upon Time in Hollywood where like Leo DiCaprio has his like, you know,

Neil:

Re setting his lines in

Austin:

There. Yeah. And so, you know, so

Neil:

Paperback for the pool, we can remember that

Austin:

Paperback for the pool, hard back usually for like collectible stuff. If I want audiobooks very rare for me that I do an audio book. Sometimes if someone really recommends an audio book, but I don't like to listen to stuff and I'm, I like to have my senses open. I, and if I'm gonna listen to something, I like to listen to podcast, cuz I think podcasts are like easy ways to kind of like get to know an author quickly. And like whether I might like the book

Neil:

And I'm similar to you on audio, but I take flack for it cuz there's a lot of people that are, oh,

Austin:

People love audio books. Well for one thing, people have commutes.

Neil:

Yeah.

Austin:

Yeah. And so the commute's a big deal. A lot of people like stationary bike or they're cooking. My wife listens to a lot of stuff cuz she cooks and listens to audio books. So, but audiobooks, you really aren't. That's not the way I read. I mean, I'm, I'm a very like I can't pause and highlight and underline and stuff. And then ebook for fiction at night before I go to bed.

Neil:

Oh, why? Why, so why ebook before a bed

Austin:

Cause the Kindle has and yeah, I use a Kindle paper away. It has a different kind of light than your phone. Couple of things. One, you don't have to have a light on Uhhuh. I, and I like the, the screen has a different kind of light. I forget what kind of light it is, but it's a different than your phone. It's easier to go to sleep. Yeah.

Neil:

It's not, it's not bright in your, it's not the type of light that prevents you from producing melatonin overnight. Right? It's like E ink, I think it's called or some version of that. How do you organize your books on your bookshelf?

Austin:

Barely

Neil:

Purposely that way tsundoku

Austin:

Yeah. I mean, one of the problems is I don't really have a studio right now, so my, my books just take over most of the house. So there's just books everywhere. We're not

Neil:

Do you have any idea? How many books you have? Are you one of these thousands and thousands of books.

Austin:

I don't even know how many books I wouldn't want to. I don't. I just don't think that way about I, yeah. I mean we probably have,

Neil:

We just interviewed Doug, the book seller on the show at 500,000 books.

Austin:

Not that many. Thank God.

Neil:

<Laugh>

Austin:

But yeah, too many.

Neil:

What is your book lending policy?

Austin:

Never. I never lend a book to anyone. If I'm gonna give someone a book, I buy it for 'em because if you lend a book, you're never gonna see it again. I mean, people, people I've heard so many people, I gave a friend Steal Like An Artist. I never saw it again. So I had to buy another car. I was like, great. You know, but like, yeah, I'd never let

Neil:

Dan Pink has a joke in his keynote speech. I've had a chance to see a couple times. He's like, you know, here's my book, da da, you don't gotta, you don't go to read it. Don't don't feel like you need to read it, but you do. I'd write, I'd love. I'd love for you to buy it. You know, he always makes that joke. He's

Austin:

I mean, as the joke about authors is they really don't care. If you read their book, they just want you to buy it. <Laugh>

Neil:

But there's a standard comical

Austin:

That says like standard, just

Neil:

Put it on YouTube, put my thing on YouTube and then just leave. It just don't touch it.

Austin:

I also, I have to say like books as gifts, I'm more wary of these days. Like I, what I don't want book to be is an obligation. I think it's really bad for him to give someone a book and then say, did you read that book I gave

Neil:

You? Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Austin:

People send me books all the time and I try to remind people like you send me the book cuz you want me to look at it, but like I might not read it right away. I might read it in three years, but honestly that's when you want me. I mean, I could, you know, so it's it's I reading is very personal for me. It's very, it should be.

Neil:

It is

Austin:

For everybody. Yeah. So I, I just, I, yeah.

Neil:

Okay. Do you have a white whale book or a book you have been chasing the longest

Austin:

To read and

Neil:

Any and any and any meta meta metaphorical sense?

Austin:

I would like to read some of the great classics. Like I'd love to read Don Quixote. I'd love to read Tristram Shandy. The white, the big one I'm gonna attempt next is I read Ian McGilchrist The Master and his Emissary, which is about right left hemisphere in the brain. Oh, interesting. And read that a couple of years ago. Loved it, I guess, a really influential on Lynda actually that book. And I, his next book is out. It's called The Matter of Things it's 1400 pages and two 700 page hard covers. How

Neil:

Do you have the

Austin:

Time to do that?

Neil:

How do you carve it out for everyone that's listening? That's always like, I don't have time. I don't have time. I, I, are you one of these people? Like our mutual friend, Ryan, Holly, that's like, you know, it's your job? It's your homework? Like, are you one of these people or are you just squeaking in pages here and there throughout the day day, but you're also very online. You're very digital. You're

Austin:

I'm not as disciplined as Ryan. I don't know many people who are really for me writing it, it kind of has to be contextual. So like I try to match reading to like a time of day, right? So like I read at the kitchen table when I'm eating. And then I read in the pool after I get the kids from school. And then I read at night before I go to bed. And those are like my big reading times. And otherwise I don't really read that much outside those times, but

Neil:

They add up

Austin:

Add up

Neil:

57% of Americans read zero books in the past year. Well,

Austin:

That makes sense.

Neil:

Sense. 57%. So if you read, you know,

Austin:

That's been,

Neil:

If you could read two pages a day, you read three books a year. That's still the way I had. That's the time you study 2018.

Austin:

I mean, I, I read that statistic when I was pretty young and I, and that's something I say to writers all the time. I say, you know, you kind of understand everybody watches, TV. I mean, statistically, you pick this medium, you're literally half of your country doesn't mess with this medium.

Neil:

The only thing worse is poetry.

Austin:

Well, yeah,

Neil:

<Laugh>

Austin:

No, I mean there's no, poetry's really instructive though

Neil:

I mean, in terms of size of commercial audience,

Austin:

I mean, poetry's really instructive though, cuz poets, there's never really been any money in poetry. So the lives of the poets are always real interesting cuz they have to figure out how to exist or what to do. And there's always a lot of shenanigans, you know, there's someone like Roka, who's like sleeping with all these different women to try to stay, you know? I mean, and then there's someone like William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens or you know, you could basically 20th century poetry is day jobs, you know, even T.S. Eliot up until a certain point. So

Neil:

I always, even, even Walt Whitman. Yeah.

Austin:

I, I always,

Neil:

There was a reason that he has the first ever blurb on leaves of grass cuz he had to market the hell out of it.

Austin:

Well, and he made up his own. I mean he reviewed his own book. That's what I mean. Yeah. So like the lives of the poets are really instructive. Cuz poetry is like, it's so impossible. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> a poet's life is almost like, I don't know. Poets are really interesting to me. I mean that's what I wanted to do with younger

Neil:

Stand up comedy is kinda like that a little bit. Yeah. Until you make it, then all you do is try to make sure you don't feel like you made it so you can

Austin:

Still be good at it. So you can still like find material.

Neil:

It's like Pete Holmes since Sarah Silverman talking about how you gotta take the bus. Yeah. You know that kinda stuff.

Austin:

Well I, yeah, I, so that's something that came, this comes full circle. The guy, the guy I got in a fight with the other day about the importance of travel and he was saying, well, you know, if you go to a resort or a cruise, you you're wasting your time. You need to be like, you know, you need to be like renting a Airbnb in Mexico city, you know, live in the real world or whatever. I said, you know, most people, most Americans, if they wanted to live in the real world, they should take the bus on the other side of town. That's the real world. Like you learn more and he's like, well, those people don't have as much to teach you as people in other cultures. I'm like, au contraire, sir. Like, cuz when you see some dude who barely walk, he's getting on the bus to go to the grocery store. You think there's nothing to learn from that guy. You know? So it's like stuff like that. I've always been, I think all Americans should be forced to take public transportation once a week. It would be really good for them. Their politics would change. They would be more grateful for what they have.

Neil:

It's true. We're all incubating ourselves and Ubers. Yeah. And we're all becoming the solo and, and if you get in and you talk to the Uber driver and they talk to you, that's a bonus. Cuz usually you're both listening to your own thing. You get in they're on the phone. You're on the phone. Yeah, sure. You know, it's like a misconnection. Yeah. You know? Well the close, oh one more and then the closing question. What's your favorite bookstore? Living or dead?

Austin:

Favorite bookstore. Ooh. What is my favorite bookstore? I mean, I have a lot of bookstores I love in town. I mean at this point it's probably, this is, I don't know. I, I gotta say I love libraries more than bookstores. I, I don't, I don't feel, I mean bookstores. I love 'em. I, they were very close to me. My heart will always first and foremost be at the library because the library is really where I started my reading life. And that's

Neil:

You came outta college. You were a reference librarian in Ohio.

Austin:

Yeah. And but, but even as a little kid, that's where books came from in the beginning, they came from like the public library and they came from the bookmobile. I was actually a person that missed independent bookstores for a long time because I grew up in a rural area. So bookstores were the Walden books at the mall? Yeah,

Neil:

Yeah, yeah. Me too.

Austin:

And then when I went to school, it was like Amazon kind of came in play. There was a college bookstore in Amazon basically. I didn't really step foot in an indie bookstore until I started going to Mac's Backs, which is around the corner for me. They do

Neil:

They do overlap with high income neighborhoods in general.

Austin:

So bookstores. Right? Like

Neil:

You're in big cities. The Bronx has two independent bookstores. Manhattan has 82. Yeah. Same population.

Austin:

I mean probably my favorite bookstore in the world is Quimby's in Chicago, which is the comic book shop.

Neil:

Tell me more. I don't know it.

Austin:

I haven't been there in years. So

Neil:

Qumby'si is a comic shop.

Austin:

Well, so Quimby's is a, is, is a comics focused bookstore in Chicago and it's a wonderful place. And I, that was a

Neil:

What a rare breed now. Eh, the comics focus bookstore. Yeah.

Austin:

Yeah. I don't.

Neil:

We have The Beguiling in Toronto

Austin:

Yeah. You have some actually actually, well Montreal has some really see it's interesting cuz like in Canada there's the French like Montreal has that French influence where they're super into comics and like in France, I don't know if you know this, but like in France, cartoonists are gods like cartoonists, like here cartoonists is like one of the lowest life forms, you know like cartoonists are all American cartoonists are freaks and they're all like kind of outcasts or whatever in France, like comic there's a reason R Crumb lives there. I mean, but like in France and in Belgium cartoonists, from what I understand, they're really treated

Neil:

There. Elevated

Austin:

Art form. Yeah. Huh. So the bande dessinée or whatever they, however you say it,

Neil:

I love one that you find itself out like that that's valued differently in other places like the idea of like a calligrapher, right. Or someone that's in

Austin:

In Montreal, you could get some great comics because there's that French influence and that like there are

Neil:

Drawn & quarterly is there.

Austin:

Well Drawn & Quarterly there. And I think they're, I do think they're the greatest publisher in the, in North America.

Neil:

And they publish, they publish this book.

Austin:

Yeah, I think they, every book they do is gorgeous. They send me I'm on their list now, which I could not be happier. Oh my gosh. There's a, there's a, I don't know if you've ever seen the movie Love Actually. Yeah. Yeah. But Billy Max's

Neil:

One of my wife's favorite favorite movies.

Austin:

He says, kids don't buy drugs, become a pop star and they give them to you for free. I always make that joke when I open up my, my mail for galleys, you know, kids don't buy books, become an author and

they send them to you for free <laugh> you know, that kind of a book seller cuz then you know, the book sellers get advanced copies. But yeah, I, I would say library. I mean like my, one of my, the thing that makes me one of the things that makes me the proudest of the, the time I felt really proud to be in Austinite was when the public library opened downtown, which was maybe five years ago.

Neil:

Well that's one of the first times we met in person. Right. Because I think it was Lance Lester, the collage artist. Right. You have the thing of a collage artists. Yep. We saw a documentary together on the, those, the roof of the art gallery. Right. And you had told me that what, I think what propagated, a lot of people's interest was they outfitted the whole library in his art.

Austin:

Yeah, I think so. I think that's what happened. Yeah. Yeah. But that was sort of like the mayor called it, our civic cathedral. And that, that was the first time I actually felt. Cause I've always very, been very agnostic about Austin, the place and the person I'm not in me. Yeah. And then an evangelist for the place. I mean it's hot, it's getting crowded and it's expensive now. But that was the first time I felt real civic pride. I feel more now that, but that was like a turning point for me, cuz that was the first time the city did something that I really cared about.

Neil:

I like that. Yeah. So we have dovetailed the favorite bookstore question into the Austin public library, which is beautiful. Yeah. Now to close off this currently two hour and 19 minute conversation on this hot, hot patio with the, our water cups now drained

Austin:

93,

Neil:

Just lemon rinds at the bottom of them, the guacamole is scraped and brown. The grackles are still hunting for every crumb they can get around us. You guys can hear the music in the background. This has been a wonderful conversation about intention and beauty and art and creativity and curiosity and curation to close us off Austin Kleon could you give one piece of hard fought wisdom to everybody listening out there who aspires to deepening their artistic intentions? I'm gonna keep it purposely broad instead of saying a writer or an artist, you know, people out there that are listening to you right now thinking, Hmm. I wanna do a little bit more of that. What's one piece of wisdom. You'd leave us with to close off this conversation today.

Austin:

I mean write the book you wanna read, which I think is a message from a lot of authors. You can write what you think the world wants and then you can write what you know, but that rarely pays off actually like a lot of times, you know my book keep, you mentioned, Keep Going. Yes. Keep Going was a book. I was like, the world needs this.

Neil:

2017, right?

Austin:

2019.

Neil:

Oh 2019. Okay.

Austin:

I, this is, this is the book the world needs, this is it. It was the book I needed to read for sure. But it was a book I felt very, I was like this, is' it, man. This would hit. This is like, and it did fine. It did fine. But it did not have the

Neil:

Gretchen Rubin says didn't find its audience. That's what she always,

Austin:

Well, I don't know if it didn't find its audience as much as it just didn't make the splash that I thought it would. And so like I'll never, I, I don't regret writing that book at all because I'm just saying that what you feel sure of is the thing that's <laugh> might not work. And the thing that you think is like easy or comes naturally and you, you know, everyone who's worked online knows this, the stuff that takes you like five seconds to do it goes viral and the stuff you kill yourself and you feel like is a real passion project or whatever. It's like, it, it barely. So I guess my, I, it barely makes a dent. I guess my advice I'm gonna change my advice actually in midstream. And I'm gonna say stay open to the possibility that you might be the worst judge of your own work.

Austin:

You know, Andy Warhol said, I don't, it doesn't matter if it's good or bad that's for other people to, you know, you can't take anything Warhol says at face value, but there is a sense in which the, the, the art is, if we go back to that idea, that's about energy. You put the energy, you can into the work, but then it takes the energy of other people to unlock it. And that energy might not be there. Or it might not be there for a hundred years, you know, cuz there are a lot of books that people died, nobody read 'em and then someone found them later and they became these big books. So I would say, you know, just it's the old boring advice, make lots of stuff and put it in the world and see what happens,

Neil:

Austin Kleon thank you so much for coming on three books. I really appreciate it.

Austin:

This was really fun. Thank you.