

**Gina**

I really wanted a gas fireplace that I could flick with a switch <laugh>. Well,

**Neil**

Well perfect for moments

**Gina**

For moments like this, for moments like this.

**Neil**

So we should probably start by saying just congratulations. I mean, not only do you have a book coming out, but you have a book coming out. You both have a book coming out. You both are already published. Authors, you've co-written six historical fiction books.

**Leslie**

Make sure you say who you're pointing to

**Neil**

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Gina <laugh> has, has written six historical fiction books. AJ has written zero historical fiction books. I'm right, that's correct. He's written, he's written one book on ai, but did you have anything before that? Lots of papers.

**Ajay**

Lots of papers

**Gina**

Two books now on AI. This is his second book.

**Neil**

This is your second book on a, which I have right here. So, um, we, we, the listener, are in a bookstore. We happen to see your book on the front table. We're gonna either of you, first, you happen to be the book seller. Give us the 32nd spiel on each of your books. It's also nice for listener to hear how different these books really are from each other. So who wants to go first? Gina or aj? Tell us about your books, which, when this comes out, it's gonna be right around the time. So if you're listening to this, a few days before this came out, depending on the lunar calendar or a few days after, it's when these books are available. So these books are available now. Gina, why don't you tell us about yours first?

**Gina**

Yeah, and it's, I, I kind of laugh because I live in the past and Ajay lives in the future

**Neil**

<laugh>, we noticed that that was something we were talking about.

**Gina**

It's interesting. But they're quite, of course, they're quite relevant and related. Uh, so my book is coming out on December 13th. It's called *The Virgins of Venice*. It's my first solo historical novel. It is about, uh, when you were a, in the noble class of Venice, and you were a young girl. Yeah. You had two paths in life that your father decided for you. You either got married or you became a nun. And so I thought it'd be interesting to, uh, follow the paths of two sisters who had these decisions made for them and how they would deal with and react to it. And we're talking teenage girls now.

**Neil**

Okay, So you're on, we're on the eve of your very first solo debut of historical fiction, the *Virgins of Venice* taking place about 500 years ago.

**Gina**

1509

**Neil**

1509 specifically, yes. In a convent In Venice

**Gina**

1509 specifically because there was a war that broke out that year. So the Pope at the time was Pope Julius II. You might know him as the guy who hired Michael Angelo to paint the Sistine Chapel.

**Neil**

Okay Right. right

**Gina**

Right, right. So, but he was so, he was

**Neil**

These types of little da data points are really helpfu

**Gina**

Yeah, yeah. So he was an amazing patron of the, uh, arts. He basically was transforming Rome, which was a backwater at that point. Venice was far superior to Rome at that point. And so he was transforming Venice, uh, Rome into a beautiful, you know, place full of art. And you got the, um, the, the St. Peters Basilicas being rebuilt into what we eventually, to what we now know it today. He started that essentially. And, um, he, of course, popes at that time were kind of like kings, and he wanted territory, and he was also known as the warrior pope. So he decided to wage war. And it was very complicated. All the different powers of Europe were involved. But he decided with France against Venice, they invaded Venetian territory, which is not just the city of Venice, but also kind of northern Italy, the Veneto. And in May of 1509, Venice for the first time, lost a major battle on their soil, and the city flipped out. They were really upset that this happened. There was worries that Venice would be invaded, which had never happened. Um, and so, uh, this is the backdrop. And the other thing that the pope did was he, um, excommunicated the city. And when you excommunicate in the Catholic Church

**Neil**

What does that mean excommunicated?

**Gina**

It means they are not allowed to receive sacraments. So there's seven sacraments in, um, the Catholic church and it's baptism, marriage anointing,

**Neil**

No sacraments.

**Gina**

The, there's one sacrament penance, which is, you can confess yourself. But you can't, matrimony is a sacrament baptism. When you have a baby, you gotta baptize the baby or also go to limbo, or eventually hell if they're never baptized. Um, and so this puts pressure and, and haste to the my papa who wants his daughters to be settled before the, uh, excommunication comes down.

**Neil**

Wow. Okay. That's fascinating. Wow. What a interesting slice of history. Not that long ago, but, you know, relatively invisible to most of us, myself included. Like, I just don't know anything about these wars and these major turns events. We'll get more into that. Sure. And Ajay, your book doesn't come out on December 13th, what is it? December, the

**Ajay**

November 15th.

**Neil**

November 15th. Let's go a month in advance. Okay. What's it called? What's it about? I'm in a bookstore. Should I, what's it about? Tell me about the book.

**Ajay**

Well, Gina just told you about her warrior prop. Uh, so I'm gonna, my warrior is gonna be, uh, Travis Kelnick, the, uh, founder of Uber. And, uh, my book's about artificial intelligence is called Power and Prediction. And, um, the essence is, so the, the key, the key, uh, capability of, of ai, it's AI's basically computational statistics. And it's good at making very high fidelity predictions. And, um, and this book is a response to our first book, which is called Prediction Machines. Uh, and in Prediction Machines, we sort of laid out a map of how we thought AI was gonna change the world. And it did change a few things, but much of what we had anticipated, uh, hasn't happened. And so that raised a question of why, like, what's, what's taking so long? And the, the, the essence of the book is, okay, we've discovered that there are effectively two types of AI applications, what we call point solutions, of which there are many.

**Ajay**

So, um, when you use Netflix and it gives you a recommendation or, or, or, um, you go to buy something on Amazon. And, and Amazon recommends things they think you can buy, that's an AI that's out of the millions of, of SKUs they have in their inventory. You know, they're picking out these 10 to recommend to you, uh, when you go to open your, you know, your phone and it recognizes your face and unlocks

your iPhone. That's an AI that's doing that. Um, but there are so many things that AI has yet to transform. And the question is why? That's, that's the question of the book. And the, the punchline is because for many of these transformations, the prediction from the AI is one piece of the puzzle. And the other pieces that we had underestimated how hard they were to put together, um, turned out to be pretty hard.

**Ajay**

And so, um, a canary in the coal mine in terms of what's coming, uh, we think of as Uber. So let me give you just summarize. The point here is, is if Uber or if, uh, the AI that, uh, underlines a key puzzle piece of Uber, which is the navigational ai, that's the thing that, uh, you know, like ways or Google Maps or something that tells you to get from A to B,

**Neil**

it just tells you how to go,

**Ajay**

It tells you how to go. It basically predicts the best route. Between two places. So just to give you a sense, because we we're also used to that now we forget, like if you wanted to drive a taxi in the city of London before these navigational AIs came around, you had to go to school for three years to learn what's called the knowledge.

**Ajay**

And it's a knowledge. And you would spend your first year studying maps. Yeah. Your second year on mopeds, driving around the city of London, third year maps in mopeds. And at the end of that, you take an exam and the exam would have questions like, it's four o'clock on a Thursday afternoon, and you have to go from Buckingham Palace to the Royal Botanical Gardens. What's the best route? And you have to, you know, so

**Neil**

I've heard about this test. Yeah.

**Leslie**

So that was a real thing?

**Ajay**

That was a thing.

**Neil**

Maybe it still is.

**Ajay**

It is, it is still a thing.

**Leslie**

You're absolutely right to bring that back to mind though, right? Because we're just so used to that all the technology that guides us from point A to B, that that seems archaic.

**Ajay**

Exactly. And so if that, if the inventor of that had first come to, you know, I run this thing called the Creative Destruction Lab, which is a thing for start, you know, for startups. And, and some inventor come and say, Hey, we, we created this thing. It's called a navigational AI, and it will help. Um, you know, it'll give you a predict what's the best route between two points. The mentors in our program would've probably said, oh, that's, that seems really cool. You should license that to taxi companies, because in, you know, people who drive for taxis, there's some really good drivers, there's some mediocre drivers. This will help make the mediocre drivers as good as the excellent drivers. And, uh, and had they done that, you know, some taxi companies would've bought it, some wouldn't. Uh, you and I would've never heard of that technology.

**Ajay**

If you go to the early days of Uber and all the things they had to do to get this business started, uh, you know, they bought thousands and thousands of iPhones to give to drivers so that they could, you know, try this, uh, application. Um, and they had to break all kinds of rules. Uh, I don't know if you, for example, you know, Seattle and Vancouver, and in this city, Toronto, there's been all kinds of, uh, you know, pushback for, and, and, uh, sometimes on the, in the grey zone, sometimes outright breaking rules in order to get Uber off the ground.

**Ajay**

What they ended up doing instead of the point solution, which was let's give a tool to taxi drivers to take the medium ones to, to, to great. Instead they made it so that you and I could have a person we'd never met who has had zero training in the city of Toronto, pull up in front of our house and we'll climb into their car and trust they're gonna get us to the place.

**Leslie**

Oh my gosh.

**Ajay**

And that lit up a whole new transportation system. It took billions and billions of dollars of underutilized assets, the cars in our driveways that were not being used and put them into play. Uh, transforming the, you know, the, the, the transportation systems of many medium and large size cities, um, in North America and, and some other countries. And that is what we call a system solution. So point solution would be just take the prediction tool and drop it in an existing system, like licensing it to taxi companies.

**Ajay**

System solution is, wait a minute, that prediction tool can unlock a whole new way of solving the problem. Now, Uber did it because they had this warrior pope CEO who was willing to steamroll over everybody in order to bring the system to life.

**Neil**

Travis, Kalanick.

**Ajay**

Yeah. Right. But we are, you know, watching these AI in other industries. My, my co-authors and I, uh, recently along with a professor named Catherine Tucker, who's at MIT. Uh, we recently hosted a conference where we brought in experts from around the world who were working on AI and health. And that conference was both, uh, inspiring and depressing. Was inspiring because they, so many people presented work of AIs that could outperform medical professionals in many different areas of diagnostics, lowering the cost, making this stuff very accessible for places that can't afford to have people there. So that's what I was excited about.

**Ajay**

It was depressing cuz almost none of it's been implemented. And the reasons because of the, the systems, like the regulatory systems, the, the incentives for hospitals and doctors and insurers and all the, it's, there are too many barriers to getting, like, they don't have a Travis Kalanick, a warrior pope to just kick down the walls and, and bring it into, uh, implementation. And so this book is about that. It's about the system change. So the first book was about, you know, just the AI itself. And this one is, okay, the AIs are like a catalyst, but, but many, in many implementations, they need a system wide change. We've seen a canary in the coal mine with Uber, uh, but there's so many others to do.

**Leslie**

Wow. My gosh, I have so many questions. Is there, like, can I ask one?

**Neil**

Yea. Ask as many as you want.

**Leslie**

Is there, I don't know how to say this, but like, is there a barrier of ethics in, in that? Like, is there a reason that transportation would be, uh, a way that we would accept that stranger at our door and the AI, you know, taking over that industry, whereas in education or health, we are emotionally still so connected to people doing the job that even though there hasn't been this Travis, is that his name?

**Neil**

Yeah.

**Leslie**

There hasn't been a Travis in education, let's say, or health, your example. Is it potentially because our moral compass wouldn't allow that type of leader to take over both the leader himself and also the people to follow him. Do you know what I mean?

**Ajay**

Yeah. Um, you know, it's hard to say. It's a great question because there are so many people in the healthcare system that say, Hey, this needs to change. Uh, I mean, the four of us live in a city where even just on bus stops, you know, there are advertisements, um, from, uh, the, you know, College of Physicians and from nurses Yeah. And all these different groups saying we need a radical change. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, the heads of hospitals saying, we need radical change. We've just come out of covid. Everybody's saying that doctors and nurses are burnt out. We need a radical change. Um, but there's still just so much inertia Yeah. That it's very hard to change. But there are also a lot of AI raises a lot of ethical questions. And we can get into those, uh, you know, if you're interested. But I think like the, at a high level, just your, your meta point is, um, there seems to be a lot of desire for change, but you know, the system is so rigid. And I think one of the parallels between our books is that is, uh, you know, Gina's is in a, in this rigid historical system where a lot of the resistance is starting to mount, uh, to that rigidity mm-hmm. <affirmative> and our book is about Um, this new technology that sort of plops down on planet earth, uh, largely originating from University of Toronto, and, and the world has this rigidity, uh, some of it good and some of it bad to prevent it from, you know, uh, flourishing. Mm-hmm.

**Neil**

Okay. I'm in the bookstore. I've just picked up a copy of the Virgins of Venice by Gina. Did I say your last name? Buonaguro?

**Gina**

Buonaguro

**Neil**

Buonaguro and Ajay Agrawal's AI's Power and Prediction.

**Ajay**

And, you know, you're probably the only person on the planet who will buy both of those books together.

**Neil**

Well, that's what I'm, I'm thinking like, I mean, I'm, but no, not after this conversation, because now we've understood that these people, these are coming from the same house, these two different books.

**Gina**

And I wanna point out, if you're on Amazon and we put, you put our books together, it's actually bad for both of us because it's gonna totally mess up their algorithm that will recommend other books. And so The Virgins, my books will be recommended next to Ajay's buyers, and it'll be, why is this here? And his book will be recommended to my book.

**Neil**

I was really careful though, my model to say I'm in a bookstore. No offense, Amazon, I,

**Gina**

Fair enough.

**Neil**

I I wouldn't, I I wouldn't. We we we're living in downtown Toronto. There's so many bookstores around here.

**Gina**

It's true. It's true.

**Neil**

Um, you listened to chapter 99 with Doug, Doug, uh, Doug Miller.

**Gina**

Yes. I did

**Neil**

Doug Miller books. Right. So, we've got so many books like this. Um, so speaking of, you have formative books to your relationship and you were kind enough to give it some a thought and to give us these books that we could talk about today. And I wanna jump into them, of course, keep the conversation going about your books, but about other things as well, including, we're gonna start, this is a big one to take off the board, everybody. It is indeed Harry Potter, not just one, not just two, all seven Harry Potter's, one to seven by JK Rowling, published by Bloomsbury Publishing.

**Neil**

Look, everyone's got different covers for these. I brought some of mine over, which are the, I stay away from those movie covers. Looks like you did too. You got the hard covers here without the jackets piled up on the floor. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 from Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone in 1997, all the way up to Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows in 2007. JK Rowling, of course, is the author born 1965 in England. She's now known as an author and philanthropist. Uh, Harry Potter series has sold over 500 million copies, been translated into over 70 language and spawned a global media franchise that you are no doubt familiar with. What's it about? A young wizard, Harry Potter, and his friends Hermione and Ron Ron, all of whom are students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The main arc concerns Harry's struggle against Lord Voldemort. He who should not be named. File this under 8 2 3.914 for 20th century English fiction. Ajay and Gina, please tell us about your relationship with the Harry Potter series.

**Gina**



Okay. The reason we all have different covers to is some of our books were bought in the US and some were bought in Canada, different covers.

**Neil**

There was that famous title change, right? They went from the Philosopher Stone,

**Gina**

Yes that's right

**Neil**

To Sorcerer's Stone

**Gina**

The English one. Yeah. Yeah.

**Neil**

So Leslie's pressing the button on the fireplaces.

**Gina**

Leslie's too hot. No problem. It is hot. It gets, it works <laugh>. Um, so when we got married in the year 2000, we invited these fra grad school friends of Ajay's. We were living in Boston at the time, got married in New Jersey, and their names are Quang and Ceto, and they're Singaporean, and now they live in Australia. And they gave us the first three books of Harry Potter.

**Neil**

Wow.

**Ajay**

Wedding,

**Gina**

As our wedding gift.

**Neil**

Wow. Presumably because that was all that was out so far.

**Gina**

Yes. Right. 2000 that would've been Yeah, the first, the first three books. So

**Ajay**

And they were graduate students. That's probably all they could afford <laugh>.

**Gina**

Shout out to Quang Ceto. Um, anyway, so we go on our honeymoon and we, for our honeymoon, we went to Vermont and we took a little road trip through Vermont, and we, I remember getting to this little hotel or bed and breakfast or something on Lake Champlain. And Ajay was exhausted. And he, there was one day where he literally slept the whole day.

**Ajay**

And I never sleep during the day <laugh>.

**Gina**

And I was like, I'll take this time to crack open the first of the Harry Potter books. So I remember sitting in a hammock

**Ajay**

And you just gotta keep in mind that at this point, probably none of your friends had heard about Harry Potter. Like in the sense it was not a thing.

**Neil**

Yeah

**Gina**

Especially in our age group. Right. We're not the kids. We were in our twenties. Twenties. Right.

**Neil**

Ajay makes a good point. Till the books got really big and thick. There was talk of the movie. You're right, the first two or three books, they were relatively under the radar.

**Ajay**

So when they gave us these books as our wedding gift, I had never heard of them.

**Neil**

Yeah, of course. Year 2000. 22 years ago.

**Gina**

I literally, I think read the, I might have read two books that day or something, you know, because the first book actually only takes a couple hours. Three. And I just sat in the hammock and read these books and I was

**Neil**

And your new husband is nowhere to be found. He's asleep,

**Gina**

Totally hooked. And then we kind of

**Ajay**

Not a foreshadowing <laugh>. Not a foreshadowing <laugh>.

**Gina**

So we go, we go home, we resume our lives. He never reads the books because

**Ajay**

It's not really my genre.

**Gina**

It's not really his thing. He doesn't read a lot of fiction in general. Actually,

**Leslie**

I haven't read any Harry Potter, I will confess

**Neil**

And I've read them all, waited until midnight when they came out. So we've got two different, we got both sides of the listenership represented, the other seven and a half billion represented by Leslie.

**Gina**

<laugh>. So fast forward to 2001 a j I was mentioning that before we started recording that. When a j was a professor, I was, I was joining him on a lot of his trips to conferences so we could travel. So he had a conference in,

**Neil**

Where was he teaching at this? Was he at Queens?

**Gina**

He had just started, Queens just started,

**Neil**

Which is where we met back in 2001. Okay, got it.

**Gina**

So we, he had a trip to Ireland, to Dublin. He had a conference. So I went with him and we decided to make a holiday out of it. And we took a two week driving tour of Ireland. And so we, after, I can't remember if the conference at the beginning of the end, but anyway, we left. We got, we were in Dublin, we left Dublin, and we literally kind of circumnavigated Ireland. We went up to Belfast and like over the west, and then Galway on the slide. And then we went down to the ring of Kerry and then we kind of loop back to Dublin. So we had a couple days in, we were in Belfast and we had a rental car, and this was 2001 and there was no, you know, i music, iTunes, and like, there was not even a tape tape deck in this little rental car.

**Gina**

And all we could get were like Irish farm reports on the radio. Like, it was really not that interesting. And so we went, we were in Belfast, we're like, we should get, I think it had a tape deck, right? So we, we, like, we should get some, some book on tape or something to listen to. So it was a BBC store in Belfast. We go in and there's Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone.

**Neil**

Right. And on tape?

**Gina**

On tape. And so I was like, let's get this. You haven't heard it yet. It's really good. He's like, all right. So anyway, we start listening to it. He is immediately hooked. Here we are in Ireland, all these castles. And like, it's so similar right. To the English country side and the accents and everything. And so he is just mesmerized as we're driving through Ireland and Northern Ireland listening to these books. So at that point, he got hooked. And then what we did was we started buying them on tape or CD as they came out. So, uh, we would go, whenever we go on a driving trip, we'd pop it in. So that's how he got up to date on the first few books was on audio. Actually, yeah. So then why don't you take over the story.

**Ajay**

So once I caught up, then we became like you, and we were sort of, you know, the minute it would be released, we would get, we would get copies of the book. And, uh, there was one year when we were living Kingston, uh, at Queens where one of our mutual friends, uh, Mark Bush, he had a son named Zach, who was like, right.

**Gina**

He was eight or 10 at the time.

**Ajay**

So the age. And, and so we insisted that when the movie, the first movie came up, we, we, we were gonna host a Harry Potter party. She dressed up as McGonigal. I was Dumbledore <laugh>. And, and we invite all the kids and they all,

**Gina**

He made me go search around for, uh, um, dry ice, dry ice so we could make a cauldron.

**Neil**

Oh, wow.

**Ajay**

<laugh>. And so it became a thing for us. Um, and, and then, uh, later, uh, when, when we had our first child, uh, we would, I would read her, uh, the next book, uh, while she was breastfeeding and, you know, all the

**Gina**

Yeah, because our, yeah. So the, the books always came out, I think in July or around then. And so our daughter was about a month old. And I'm sitting there,

**Neil**

I can tell which one it is cause I have all the pub dates here. What year was

**Gina**

2005. She was born

**Neil**

Right. And 2005 was book six, the Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince. And then 2007 was the last one, Deathly Hallows.

**Ajay**

Okay. So the last one, we, we were reading the last book and we, I can't remember why we had

**Gina**

No, I I, so we, um, we knew the last book was coming out, but in August, a dear friend of ours was getting married in Guernsey, which is one of the channel islands between England and France. And so we knew we were gonna be in London. And Ajay said, we have got to read the book and get to the point where we read the end of it together at King's Cross Station. In London. So we kinda traded the book back and forth. I don't know why we didn't buy two copies. We had one copy we were trading. He's like,

**Leslie**

So much more romantic

**Gina**

Read up to this point, read up to that point. Oh, and I, I was dropping off our daughter to stay with my parents, so I flew separately and we met there and we're both like, maybe, I don't know, a hundred or 200 pages from the end. And we go to Kings Cross and we sit down. This was before they put the little, the little platform, nine and three quarters. But we went between, they actually, now it's like a tourist site, but at the time, I, I'm not sure it was there yet, or it was, it was very modest.

**Neil**

For those, but don't know, have read the books Platform nine and three quarters at Kings Cross Station is where like, they enter the invisible train station to go to, to go to Hogwarts. It was a special place in the book.

**Gina**

A special place. I think there was the little cart there.

**Neil**

Did you, did you succeed in the, this goal that he had? Yes. Like, so you were finishing the book together on the same pages, flipping it after?

**Gina**

Well we read it aloud. We read the, the last, I don't know, a hundred pages aloud in King's Cross Station,

**Neil**

Hundred pages. Oh, that's a long time.

**Gina**

Maybe. I don't know. I I could be misremembering how many pages, but,

**Neil**

But you were there for a while?

**Gina**

The last few chapters. Yeah, yeah,

**Ajay**

A hundred pages is right.

**Neil**

Wow. What, what can, what, what made you want do that?

**Ajay**

You know, this book had become really entwined with our marriage because, you know, it, starting from that wedding gift and then through us driving around Ireland together, uh, and then through the birth of our first child, you know, the books just kept coming out. And, um, and then we would later read them to our children. Our children both have read them multiple times, like you as we read them to our children, and then they went back and reread them themselves. And often we will draw, you know, the reason we picked it for one of our three is we still draw from it all the time. Often character references, like somebody, um, for example, maybe they're a Severus. And, and the thing about, for example, Severus, was that, you know, you can't judge a book by its cover. And he's, you know, this, this, uh, character in the story. For those who haven't read it, who seems like he's on the dark side.

**Neil**

Do you want to know all this?

**Leslie**

Well, honestly, I've never wanted to read Harry Potter as much as I do right now. <laugh>. This is the best

**Neil**

Don't, don't go all the way to the end of his character arc here

**Ajay**

Okay. All right then. I won't.

**Gina**

He's a complicated character. Complicated. Very complicated.

**Ajay**

And a lot of them are, and, and look, you know, with all due respect to my friends who work in the press, there's a character, Rita Skeeter who writes,

**Gina**

She's the, the journalist. The reporter.

**Ajay**

And you know, I, and I've even said to a couple of, of my friends who are, who are, you know, write for various things, um, that I feel like I have to be somewhat careful what I say, because there's a little reader, Skeeter in most journalists.

**Neil**

Including this one on this show. This is journalism, looking for a scoop. Good tape, <laugh>. That's what it's all about. Um,

**Gina**

And then of course, there's Peter Pettigrew. Do you have a, do you have a Peter Pettigrew for a friend?

**Neil**

Oh, that's interesting.

**Gina**

Or do you have Sirius Black for a friend?

**Neil**

Oh yeah. I love Sirius. Yeah. Love Sirius Black. This is interesting too. And, and so this is what made you want to finish the book on such a sort of notable place to finish it at Kings Cross Station together, because you had been so entwined with the relationship.

**Ajay**

Yeah.

**Neil**

Did you do that in other parts of your life? The, the idea of, uh, kind of, kind of commemoration or

**Gina**

Oh, yeah. I think also Ajay's a very creative person and he, and a theatrical person. And so he, he likes things that really have a flourish to them. And that's kind of how, how he is about various things. So I'm not That's totally his kind of thing.

**Neil**

I know that to be true because in 2001, when he entered our com 4 0 1 business strategy class, the capstone course of Queen School of Business in fourth year, and it was his first job I learned today. I mean, he flew into the room, <laugh>, like every other teacher stood at the front of the class and professed, they lectured, he bounced around. He was cold calling. It was a dynamic and engaging theatrical, I never thought of, but that's exactly what it was.

**Leslie**

I think a big part of why you've inspired Neil so much and why you've continued, you know, this relationship, you kind of share that, that love of life and maybe the, the joy for some performance elements in it too.

**Neil**

Well what's interesting about Harry Potter too is that you've given these books kind of before they got super, super big. And now I just said in the, in the overview, they've sold 500 million copies you both have as a time of recording books coming out. How do you measure success of your books? How do you

**Gina**

I have to sell 500 million <laugh>,

**Leslie**

That would be a success.

**Neil**

<laugh>. Well, how do you think about that word as it applies to your, your endeavor? Or is it irrelevant now that it's written? I can't, I I would bet it's not. So how do you think?

**Gina**

Yeah, I mean, you're an author too. You want your book to be read by the right people. Uh, you know, obviously, and you know, again, there might be not many overlap in terms of our readers, but like, I want, there's a whole fanatical historical fiction readership out there that are always talking about different good books. And I wanna, I want, there's some amazing authors out there, and I, I wrote the book so that it felt hopefully a little contemporary too, so that people could relate to it. Now, you know, a teenage girl in 1509, I'm not sure how different she was from a teenage girl in 2022. And so I wanted to have that feeling. Uh, so I think a book that people read, people wanna do book clubs. I don't know if it's, I don't have a number for sales.

**Neil**

How do you get, how do you get, how do you get, you don't have a number, book clubs, the historical fiction community. Yeah. Um, but can I just ask for a lot of people listening who are aspiring writers, how, how do you get from passion and interest in writing? And I know you started 20 years ago to



having your first, this is your debut solo book. Was that journey one of constantly writing and shopping your script and finding a litera, that whole process? Or was there something that you did that people could learn from those that might be looking to become a published author?

**Gina**

I mean, my co-author and I always used to say, luck comes to the prepared. You know, it's, they're, you know, you hear those overnight successes, they're never overnight successes. They've been really working hard probably for many years. It's a rare overnight success that's truly that. Um, so, you know, when I moved to Kingston, I wanted, I couldn't

**Neil**

Because you guys, you met in grad school residence in 1986 at UBC. You were doing your Master's in English literature, right?

**Gina**

That's right.

**Neil**

And Ajay was doing his PhD in

**Gina**

Business Economics.

**Neil**

Economics, okay. I just painted business. Yeah. You were in the same grad school residence, you moved to Kingston 2000? No,

**Gina**

No we first moved to Boston.

**Neil**

Okay. Go down to Boston. He was at

**Gina**

He was doing his PhD research at, in, at MIT

**Neil**

Oh, at MIT Yeah.

**Gina**

Right. So we lived there and then he got his first job at Queens. And so we moved to Kingston. I'm American. And so originally I couldn't work, so I said, ah, I've always wanted to write the great American novel. I'll write the Great American Canadian novel. I'm gonna do it, you know, I'm finally gonna do it,

and I'll, I can't work. So, um, so I, I ended up meeting my co-author in a class, and, and we kind of, at first started having a little writer's group as a way to, we would just meet before this French class that we took.

**Neil**

And that's an important piece, though. There's a community element.

**Gina**

Yeah. A lot of people have writers groups mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, or someone that they can be a sounding board too. And also that gives you deadlines and, you know, I need to bring a, write a certain number of pages. So I think, I think Ajay also works well. And he has two co-authors for his book. So in a way, he has his own little writer's group. Yeah. Um, so he also is quite familiar with co-authorship. Um, anyway, so, so then for us, we decided to, I had an idea for a book. She built on it so much. I said, Hey, you wanna write it together? And that was our first book, the Sidewalk Artist, which actually I was gonna give a copy to Leslie if she wanted to.

**Neil**

That's great.

**Leslie**

Oh, thank you. So nice. And that's about the artist, Raphael.

**Neil**

And how do you get from the, uh, writers group writing, writing to the publishing?

**Gina**

Yeah, so then that's, so yeah, so we wrote a manuscript, we got some editorial feedback, we revised it, then we started shopping for an agent. And that

**Neil**

Material feedback, is that like, uh,

**Gina**

We, we had people read it, friends and trusted people. We also hired, we hired an editor.

**Neil**

Oh, you hired an editor. So hire a freelance editor. That's a smart move. That's then you started shopping the book.

**Gina**

To agents. Okay. And that we, um, went through a lot of agents, and then, uh, we moved to Toronto Uhuh. And one day I get this note under the door, Hey neighbor, I'm gonna be building, renovating my kitchen. Can we park our car behind your house?

**Neil**

Okay.

**Gina**

Uh, from David McFarland. David McFarland is a big Canadian writer, and he is my neighbor. And so he a j being a J and <laugh> being not the normal person, he goes, oh, rather than renting him a spot, let's do a barter where he introduces you

**Leslie**

<laugh>. Amazing.

**Neil**

That's smart

**Gina**

So, um, David McFarland very nicely said, there's a new agent at my agency. How about I guy give it to him? And then, you know, and then it's up to him. So then later I found out that my agent had a sta he was a new agent. He was a, he was an experienced editor who had become an agent. And he, John, his name's John Pierce, he's wonderful. And, um, he had a stack of manuscripts and his wife, ours was on top, and his wife started reading it. She said, John, you gotta read this one. And he, then he accepted our book, and he has been my agent ever since.

**Leslie**

As they say, I must interject here, behind every powerful man there is an even more powerful woman. There we go. <laugh>.

**Neil**

Yeah. There's some stories that Les

**Leslie**

There are some stories there

**Neil**

But, so what was the amount of time between when you first had the idea to write the book and started putting pen to paper? Yeah. And your first book getting published?

**Gina**

Uh, that would've been 5 years

**Neil**

So five years of the writing, five of the community of the editorial,

**Gina**

Shopping it around

**Neil**

Getting, looking for agents, some of whom you didn't hear back from probably.

**Gina**

That took a year. Oh, not tons of them. I didn't hear back from.

**Neil**

Until some guy slips a note under your door, <laugh>.

**Leslie**

It's a good story of perseverance. That's why, kind of what you're trying to get at.

**Neil**

That's exactly what I'm saying. Five years, you know, listen to

**Leslie**

Stick to it. If you have a lot of people

**Neil**

You're into it

**Gina**

If you get, if you give up, you, you can't give up too easily

**Neil**

And so success is define, you've given some elements, you've given some, you know, it'd be nice to be mentioned in certain groups and so on. Ajay what about for you, how you define success for this book? First book comes out, uh, was it three years ago?

**Ajay**

2018

**Neil**

Four years ago. Okay. Does very well. When Harvard Business School presses best selling books of the year, objectively, extrinsically, you're on a bunch of different best seller lists. The book sells enough copies that you are asked for a sequel, or you propose a sequel and they say, yes. Now this is coming. How do you define success?

**Ajay**

Um, we, we write for, I would say three audiences. First one is students, our students. And so do they learn, like, do they learn from the book? Um, one of the most gratifying things from, uh, prediction machines was how many students emailed and, and continue to send notes, uh, or post things on

Twitter that, um, this book, uh, got them inspired into working in this, in this field. Uh, so that's definitely very gratifying. And probably our primary audience

**Neil**

Kinda like textbook almost.

**Ajay**

No, not, um, well, we, we didn't wanna write a textbook. Um,

**Neil**

And all, all three of you professors at university?

**Ajay**

Yeah, we're all three. We're all three. Uh, at, at University of Toronto, at the Rotman School

**Neil**

Rotman School of Business is one of the world's top ranked business schools. For those that don't know, three professors at Robin writing them for their students, but it's not a textbook. Right.

**Ajay**

Right. And so, um, then the second audience are practitioners. And so those are people that are working in companies that, um, are exploring the role that AI can play in their, in their companies. Uh, and so some of them are on the technology side, some of them are on the business side, um, as well as governments. Uh, so quite a few people in, in, uh, government are interested in AI. And so they're reading, I would say that's audience. Uh, number two is the, is practitioners. And so what's success for us with them is do they find it useful? Uh, you know, in, in, uh, and then the third are, uh, what I would call the AI experts. And for them, we really cared that people who deeply know the technology and what's happening at the frontier, read our book and find it, um, <affirmative> credible. Like, in other words, it's, it's very tempting when you are writing things for a lay audience. It's easy to say things that are, um, exciting.

**Neil**

I do it all the time.

**Ajay**

Uh, and, and I feel, it felt like, like, like we wanna make sure that that audience doesn't feel like we lean too far over our skis.

**Neil**

Right. Oh, interesting.

Ajay ([00:37:02](#)):

Um, and so that, you know, they feel like, yeah. Yeah. That they can relate to this book.

**Neil**

We've lost more questions on this topic, but let's keep us moving forward and talk about your second most formative book, which I know kinda leans kind of maybe one way or the other. But let's just jump into Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingles Wilder, published in 1935 by Harper and Brothers. There are so many covers. The cover we have is just, do you have a cover here? I do, I do. Okay. Yours is like a, a, a horse and wagon, uh, drawing. These must be the original drawings going through a, a, a country field. The dog in the back, it's an open wagon. You can see ma and pa the front and the two girls staring at the back thought I thought there was three girls. Was there not?

**Gina**

There was a, there's a baby.

**Neil**

Okay. Illustrated by Garth Williams. Right. He's also, yes, he's

**Gina**

Yes. He's the original illustrator.

**Neil**

Also the illustrator of Charlotte's Web if I'm not wrong.

**Gina**

Yes, he did, he did do E B White's books as well.

**Neil**

Hey. Okay. Kudos for, for that getting nail that Laura Ingles Wilder are born 1867 in Wisconsin died 1957 in Missouri. An American writer, best known for the Little House on the Prairie Series. We've had one on the show already that was given to us way back in Chapter five by Gretchen Ruben. Uh, and that was Little House in The Big Woods, which I read and loved. What's going on? Pa decides to sell the log house, which is from that first book. And the family sets out for Indian Country a phrase we probably can't say anymore. They travel from Wisconsin to Kansas, and there finally pa builds her little house, their Little house on the Prairie. It's true, but I have to read the back of the book here. Sometimes farm life is difficult, even dangerous, but Laura and her family are kept busy and are happy with the promise of their new life on the prairie. File, this one under 8 1 3.52 for early 20th century fiction. Ajay and Gina, tell us about your relationship with Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingles Wilder.

**Gina**

So I'll start because I read all the Little House books when I was young. I was obsessed with them. I was obsessed with the TV series. I loved watching it, I loved reading it. I loved going in my backyard and pretending I was Laura. And I would like have these little play things by myself where I was out there, you know, being Little House on the Prairie <laugh>

**Neil**

This is like seventies New Jersey.

**Gina**

Yep.

**Neil**

This is a rough time and place.

**Gina**

Yeah. So probably, yeah, like maybe early eighties.

**Neil**

Yeah. Okay. Um, and, um, sorry, <laugh>.

**Gina**

That's okay.

**Neil**

Late eighties

**Gina**

<laugh>. And, um, so I love these books and maybe that now it's not too surprising given how much I love historical fiction that I actually love these books. So, okay. So then, you know, when I grow up, I don't really think about them. We have kids and we have a daughter first. And so we, you know, we're always looking for books to, to read to our kids. And Ajay starts reading the series to her Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie, and maybe a few more. And that's where I'll let him take over because that's, I mean, he, you can say what your relationship was before that, but I think that's when it really ramped up.

**Ajay**

So this is a great book to read with your kids. Um, and there's adventure and there's like exploring various themes, sometimes tough themes like alcoholism and betrayal and death,

**Gina**

And even bringing up, you know, quote unquote Indian Country. There's a scene in Little House in the Prairie where she's essentially watching, I think a part of the Trail of Tears. Uh, in the book. You, you actually see the

**Neil**

What's the Trail of Tears?

**Gina**

The Trail of Tears, um, happened in, I, I believe they were in what's now known as Kansas, um, area. And, and I believe, I believe The Trail of Tears was the one of the nations, I think it's the Cherokee though, don't quote me on that, where they were forced from their land and made to go onto a reservation and they literally walked. And there's a scene in

**Neil**

I see,

**Leslie**

I remember that

**Gina**

walked past their, from the, from their house

**Neil**

Leslie read this book when she was young as well

**Gina**

Yeah. And, and she and Laura as a little girl is watching them and, and sort of stunned that, that she sees this happening. Yeah.

**Neil**

Yeah. I remember it being quite dramatic and scary.

**Neil**

And is it the variety of themes that was why you say it's great to read with their, with kids?

**Ajay**

Yeah. There's themes, but it's also in a family context. So, you know, everyone can relate. Like ma can relate to ma and pa can relate to pa and the, and the, and the kids. And there's a sense of adventure and in some sense, sort of what we would call today, entrepreneur, they're settling the west. Yeah. And, and so, um, you know, as my area, I focus on innovation of as a professor, economics of innovation and entrepreneurship. And there's not a lot of entrepreneurship that kind of appeals to kids and family, but this was it. Like this was, uh, the whole family kind of being able to get into a story. And everyone relate to a character, um, and relate to the, you know, like the kids fighting with each other over stuff and, and, but, but in such a different environment than what they're used to.

**Ajay**

That it was fascinating for all of, and frankly for myself. You know, when, when, when, uh, we first got this house in Toronto, um, we at some point set off on a mission to build a little, uh, shed in the back. And, and we had a guy building this, uh, who was coming in from Barry. And, and he was an excellent master craftsman. And he, and he had, you know, a huge beard. He looked like someone from the Little House on the Prairie. Um, but he was so slow <laugh>, he was really slow. And so eventually, like we



were four months into this, this was just a shed. And it was like four months into the project and he wasn't cheap. And so, you know, Gina says, you gotta go out there and try and, you know, like speed things along a bit. And so, you know, he would, he, he would sit me down and say like, okay, the most important thing is remember measure twice, cut once <laugh>. And that sounds like trivial. But for me, I was like a big lesson learned. And, and, uh, but it was, it was like my little house in the prairie. I was sitting like building this thing and it's up on the roof, putting in the shingles. And, and, um, and so the story, that book and the series of books became a, a thing that we would all look forward to doing at the end of the day is like sitting down. We

**Neil**

We all? So it wasn't just two people reading?

**Ajay**

And, and, and my daughter.

**Gina**

And eventually

**Neil**

And you were there too though?

**Gina**

Uh, sometimes I think it was there. And then we started the, watching the old series. We got them on DVD and we started watching the series together.

**Neil**

You read it with your older or your, or your younger or both?

**Ajay**

We started with the older and then eventually,

**Gina**

I think we did read some of them with, with the younger one, like Farmer Boy.

**Neil**

Yeah.

**Gina**

So he can maybe relate to that a little bit more. Um,

**Neil**

I just found it's hard to get boys into these books. I've tried and failed myself. So Farmer Boy I've tried and they're just like, give me Captain Underpants. I can't get <laugh>, can't get the, I can't get into this.

**Ajay**

Timing, timing is everything. Timing knows everything.

**Gina**

Timing is everything.

**Ajay**

Like I remember trying Harry Potter and it was a complete flop. And then we tried it a couple years later and yeah. Everybody was into it.

**Leslie**

We, we've had some challenges in, in reading out loud with our eldest because he wants to read so fast. And so, um, he is such an avid reader that reading chapter and then coming back the next night and reading it with mom and dad is too slow. He wants to like power through and read. And that, that's, it's actually kind of sad. I even feel like some some grief coming up for me as we're talking about that because I, I read aloud to him a lot. And then he just took off, like his first book that he ever read, he would not read any early readers. His first book that he ever read was one of those magic tree Treehouse books. Because it was like, I think my mom was reading to him and she read him a chapter or two and then, uh, he said, I want, you know, please read another chapter. And she said, no, I'm done for the Night Goodnight. And he's like, oh fine. And he grabbed the book and picked it up and read. And we didn't know he knew how to read. Like it was just like, and he finished the whole chapter book that night. So he goes so fast that sometimes Yeah. Anyways,

**Neil**

It's a sacred moment in a family of the reading,

**Leslie**

It is a really sacred moment. We have to figure out how to carve it out.

**Gina**

Yeah. And I found with our older daughter, we read, we read longer, and then the younger one, we lost the tradition of reading together when he was younger. And I, I do feel, I feel like I missed that. Sometimes now it's, we'll just read, like be in bed and we'll read our own stuff, but just together. And that's and

**Leslie**

That's nice. Yeah.

**Gina**

Um, but it's true. It happens sometimes a little too fast.

**Leslie**

Yeah. Anyway, I mean, you're right there. You, you proved that it's possible to read even as two adults, cuz you read Harry Potter together even, um, significant part. So there can also be that, a creative ways to do that. I guess

**Neil**

Little House on The Prairie is about a prairie. It's about a very rural setting. We are sitting in your home in downtown Toronto. We also live in downtown Toronto. We live in urban settings. I know you have the little shed in the backyard. Well, what are we sacrifice by this increased urbanization that's happening around the world? What is missing, uh, in that kind of way of living? You know, we sometimes Leslie more than me says we should. I just want them

**Leslie**

I just want to pick them up and move to a far.

**Neil**

She wants to move to a farm. She wants to get out of the city. And it does seem like the world is bifurcating, if that's the right word. There's more urbanization. But there's also like a lot of sacrifice by living in these buzzy busy environments that are seemingly always on. You're surrounded by endless lights and noise and there's something, uh, like aspirational about this way of living. And how do you think about folding that into the upbringing you're giving to your kids and to your own self? How do we as people in society think about having more quiet and more space in general in this life? How do you think about these things?

**Ajay**

Two things. One is you use the word aspirational or inspirational referring to the setting of Little House on the Prairie. And then you also use the word bifurcation. And I think that's a thing. Like, in other words, I think that there's an inc I believe that, uh, we all have a mental model of how the world works. Everyone's got a mental model and the reason we can communicate and like, we just met you tonight for the first time, but we can relate on so many things because we have so many commonalities in our mental model of how the world works. And I think those mental models become increasingly different between people living in like the, the, the buzzy downtown urban centers and the, and the other, uh, like more rural places. Um, and I think, you know, that somewhat but not, not perfectly lines up with red states, blue states. Um,

**Neil**

We went to Newfoundland this summer, it felt like going into the past.

**Ajay**

<affirmative>. Yeah.

**Gina**

Also, I think we can romanticize, um, rural places more, but I think they can be hard places to live. Like Newfoundland has a huge doctor shortage. It's becoming this little towns are full of just old people. Like the young people don't wanna live there cuz there's no jobs. Um, and you know, I think it's easy to be

like, oh, I'd love to have a little like hideaway in Newfoundland, but maybe in practice these things are, are harder.

**Neil**

There's a separation though, right? Like there's what I think what you're saying.

**Gina**

Well. Yeah.

**Leslie**

Do you take breaks from technology at all?

**Gina**

Not enough.

**Leslie**

Like do you, do you feel the need to distance yourself from technology?

**Ajay**

So I will tell you that, um, Neil used to be my student. Okay. And

**Leslie**

And still is, I would argue

**Ajay**

And well, I would argue it then in that case it goes both ways because like I read his books,

**Gina**

The student has become the master.

**Ajay**

Gina mentioned that. Uh, I, I don't listen to a lot of podcast, any podcasts. Um, but I'm a reader and I enjoy a lot of his books and I learn a lot from Neil mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and, and one day I was walking down our street and I bumped into him. He was just walking along and, uh, and halfway through our conversation he whipped out his binoculars and started <laugh> like looking, like pointing out some birds.

**Leslie**

That sounds like him

**Ajay**

Okay. And then the most interesting thing happened that like seared into my brain is the thing I'll never forget. He said to me, I'm gonna go, I'm just, he said, I think I'm gonna go see a movie. Do you want to come? And it was like, this was like 11 o'clock on a, on like a Wednesday morning <laugh>. And I thought

to myself, what, what is he on <laugh>? Like, I am, I am I come outta the house, I'm racing out to get a coffee to come back and get to back to work and here's Neil. Just, you know, and he, and and then I thought to myself afterwards, I know what he's doing. It's one of those, you know, those

**Neil**

Untouchable days

**Gina**

Untouchable days

**Ajay**

He's on an untouchable day. So, and I was reading about the untouchable days and, and you know, it goes to your question, Leslie, about turning the technology off. And so I started thinking to myself, you know, I gotta try that. I gotta try those untouchable days and, and like shut off email and shut off all the stuff because it, and I've, and I've, and I've started doing it in parts of days where I get like multiple hours. Um, and I, and I realize for example, when I'm on a long flight and I don't have, I get so much done. Yeah.

**Leslie**

Yeah. Or your ideas start to flow in a way that they can't when you get interrupted.

**Ajay**

And you just go so much deeper because you get one and another and you're not getting it interrupted and you go. And so a couple times now I've actually created an untouchable day and I walk around thinking maybe I'll bump a Neil <laugh>. Like if I come into him, I'll be able to go to a movie on that day.

**Leslie**

Oh my God.

**Ajay**

But the chance of my day and his day. And I can't email him and say, Hey, I'm gonna do my untouchable date cuz then it's not untouchable. Like, you can't

**Ajay**

You can't do that. Right? Cause then it becomes a movie date and that's not untouchable. So I thought, okay, it's gotta happen randomly and we both have to happen on the same day and, and we have to bump into each other on while we're on untouchable date. It's probably never gonna happen. Well,

**Leslie**

Well it just, it comes back to, in a way, like what we were talking about before with your book, and obviously, you know, you're well aware of the excitement with all of this AI technology and then also

some of the depressing elements of it, both in the not moving towards it and potentially some of, i, I dunno, I would assume the cost of some of those

**Ajay**

Huge,

**Leslie**

Those AI technologies. Um, and, and, and yet I'm gonna try to draw big connection here. You're both very motivated for your, for yourselves, for like, you know, you're very aware of the fact that you're get this one fly through space a hundred years if you're lucky to be on this planet, and you might as well do the things really be like crossing all those t's and dotting all those i's of the historical check of Venice, because that's what you'd love.

**Leslie**

And, and so like, help me out here, Neil, but like, I'm, I'm kind of just feeling that there's, there's gotta be some desire in you somehow to protect really is the word that comes to mind, um, yourselves and this one life that you have as we do move forward with technology and lose some of that like human heart empathy, um, like connection in the family. And I, and I know that you're doing it well because you're talking about, you know, reading with your children and having, you have a clearly a very deeply connected marriage and travel and all these things, so you're not letting yourselves like, roll away with how fast technology and organization can make us fly through life and not even notice, notice what's happening. Um, so there's gotta be something there. And I guess, I don't know if I'm really asking a question, but I'm trying to like untangle because I see you as two people that are living very deeply intentional, aware lives. And I, I'm scared of AI, like I'm scared of, of moving too far away from, um, a life that is about,

**Neil**

We feel the addiction of ourselves,

**Leslie**

Quiet family time

**Neil**

With a lot of the algorithms and, you know, we can feel ourselves, I feel myself doing things that I wouldn't have chosen to do otherwise because of technology all the time.

**Leslie**

Or, you know, you talk about like the system. So, so I'm a teacher, like, you know, I'm okay with calling an Uber because that's a, an algorithm that can be smarter than how a person can drive me from one place to another. And there's cost savings and you don't need to do the training and all of that. But like, it terrifies me thinking about breaking apart the system of a school because there's so much happening in that building of a school where children are connecting and empathizing. And so, so yeah. Could we educate kids how to read and write faster using ai? Probably they could sit at home in their room. They

could, they could be that by themselves. They could have an iPad that would be really darn smart at figuring out exactly what's missing in terms of how they learn how to read. But all the other things would fall away.

**Ajay**

You know, one of the things that I think, um, we've learned with AI, many people focus on how powerful AIs, uh, can be. Um, and an example for example is, um, the algorithms that people point to as having influenced the election, uh, and Cambridge Analytica and all of that, um, the US election, uh, that delivered us, uh, President Trump. But, but another way to look at it is they've revealed how easy it is to manipulate our brains. In other words, I'm not so sure that the, the, that the way to look at all this is as wow how powerful this technology is. It's wow, we way overestimated how clever we are as a species. All right. And we're actually pretty simple minded. We're so simple minded that the ai, effectively just computational statistics can figure out how to push our buttons. And, you know, anyone who has a young boy or girl, but even more so boys, it seems, uh, can see how easy it is for game developers to just kind of hit the dopamine button uhhuh and get your kids addicted to video games. Um, and so,

**Gina**

Speaking of which, I'm gonna get our son off the video games,

**Ajay**

I think, uh, I think that, you know, we've, we've really got a sense of, um, that we are a species that is far more simple minded than we thought. And with like, in other words, between 2012 and 2022, this, this past decade where, where there's been a rise in this capability's been characterized as deep learning and reinforcement in machines, that we've been able to really fine tune how we can trigger dopamine response and just get people to do all kinds of stuff.

**Neil**

Social media, same thing.

**Ajay**

Yep. Exactly. Um, and so A) I think we've learned about ourselves. B) I think you know, your point, Leslie, about turning off the machines. Um, there's no question. And the people who are at the frontier, they're like, you know, in the biography of Steve Jobs, one of the most interesting things I found in there was how he restricted his kids from using devices.

**Neil**

Absolutely. And it's not just him, it's almost all tech leaders. I mean, the, the one of our friend mutual friends has, is, you know, works at Apple and his daughter's the last one in the class to get a cell phone. He, he's just well aware of like the powers of it. And there is, seems to me, it seems to me, and maybe it's just the circles I hang out with, but there seems to be more and more people that are kind of opting out of,

**Leslie**

And we have consciously, we have to consciously

**Neil**

Getting, getting away from the smartphone, getting away from the, that's what my untouchable are about. It's, it's being absent enough technology to let, let things fester and, and, and fold into my mind more organically.

**Leslie**

This like, thoughts kind of coming to me just as we speak. But, you know, um, it used to be with like bullying that we would try to make the bully less strong, you know, like we would, we would discourage the bully from being so powerful. And now the more progressive thinking on how to address bullying is to like, of course we have to stop the, the bully, but we really need to focus most of our energy on building up the victim, right? Making them strong and confident enough and supported and resourced enough that they can stop that bully when it comes in the next shape or form. And so I am excited about how we can do that for our kids, because let's call technology the bully. We have our children, these like vulnerable beings with this very powerful force of AI. Just actually tonight, I haven't even told you this yet, Neil, but our six year old was in the bath, and he said to me, uh, you know what, mommy, I used to think that my memories were like videos and you know, that they were pictures and videos and that, that I was watching pictures of videos.

**Leslie**

And I said to him, you know what, it's actually the other way around. The people who've made technology have tried to make it as strong as your amazing brain that has its own ability to pull back a memory and watch that memory over and over again, but it's your brain that's more powerful. Not the, it's not that your brain is not as cool as a phone, it's that a phone is trying to be even partly as amazing as your brain, you know? And I feel like that's

**Ajay**

None of which is as powerful as pensive. <laugh>. Sorry, that's Harry Potter

**Gina**

Harry Potter reference

**Leslie**

Oh, really? Oh man. I've fallen flat on me

**Gina**

And in defense of my son, he was not playing video games anymore. He was reading the Lord of the Rings on kobo.

**Leslie**

Oh. You're so proud.

**Neil**

That's very nice. And how apropos



**Leslie**

Yeah, I just think there's, you know, we have to, as, as technology gets stronger and stronger and more and more powerful, we also need to think of how we going to stay strong as a human, human race

**Neil**

You mention kids, you know, Jonathan h uh, NYU professor had mentioned

**Gina**

Coddling of the American Mind

**Neil**

Coddling of the American Mind. Wrote the cover story in the Atlantic this year called How Social Media is Fracturing the Mortar of Society. And one point he makes, which I think is a powerful point, is why is the age for all social media 12 that came up, they came up with that age in 1999 before social, before cell phones were even a thing. And he's like, at least change it to 16.

**Gina**

Yeah. It is way too young.

**Neil**

At least, at least change to an age where your brain's a little bit more developed.

**Gina**

And we know the human brain doesn't finish developing until actually age 25. Not that I'm saying people need to wait until 25

**Neil**

No, I know, but there's this thing

**Leslie**

Well, and can put age limits on anything, but it's kind of like, you know, abstinence is also not the way to teach sex ed. You know? So it, it's, it's, you can't just say you can't

**Gina**

Abstinence only.

**Leslie**

Yeah, exactly. Like, you know, you have to, Neil and I have this ongoing friendly debate because he's like, our children will never have iPhones. They will never have

**Neil**

I always say they're not, you're not getting a phone until you're 18. I just say that factually all the time.

**Leslie**

I think we need to teach them how to live in a

**Gina**

Yeah. That's,

**Leslie**

World that has this much technology

**Neil**

Devices that are designed

**Gina**

We, uh, we have this ongoing fight because I put these controls on the, on my son's laptop, and now he started this new school and they're using, it's all Google Classroom a lot. He's on a lot. And so I, you know, he says no one else, no other parent, you know, make puts this on there and it limits what websites I can go to. And I'm like, yeah, they're dumb. They should be putting this on there, these laptops and phones, because if you just give your kid unfettered access to the internet,

**Leslie**

It's terrifying.

**Gina**

I mean, it is an amazing tool and it is an evil thing at the exact same time.

**Ajay**

You know, Leslie, just, uh, on your point about education, I think there's no putting the genie back in the bottle. Uh, and these computational statistics that we've, uh, characterized as artificial intelligence, uh, are being infused into everything. And at some level, I think that institutions like yours are triply more important than they were before. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, because, you know, like I say, my, my, my interpretation of what happened with Cambridge Analytica and everything after that was, wow. That was our wake up call of how easy we are to manipulate mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so where are we going to develop those skills that you described the, like, to strengthen you and, you know, the, um, one thing where, you know, word, you mentioned that I have mixed feelings about when you said, well, we have to make sure the kids are resourced enough, and you said amongst a few other things. And then you mentioned the author of Coddling of the American Mind, and I feel like if I had to pick a camp, it's, it's the, it's the anti coddling camp.

**Leslie**

Right.

**Ajay**

Like, in other words, I think that the call to arms we need for schools is to really help kids develop their critical thinking skills. Challenging stuff, getting tough, um, you know,

**Neil**

Fact checking, truth finding

**Ajay**

All the stuff.

**Neil**

Trust. What do you trust? How do you trust it?

**Leslie**

Problem solving

**Ajay**

And be suspicious of machines. Like, like all the stuff that, that, you know, that, that, um, like really rely like learn to build a confidence and trust in your instinct, in your, in your mind. And your, and your, your, you know, how to develop social relationships. Um, there's the, uh, uh, what's his name? Uh, who wrote Clara and the Sun.

**Neil**

Yeah. Ishiguro.

**Ajay**

Ishiguro. You know, there's a scene in that book where the kids have to be taken to like a kind of a party where the parents are there to learn how to interact with each other. You know, like 12 and 14, 15 year old kids because they've, they're so used to working independently, they've lost the muscle mm-hmm. <affirmative> of how to socialize with other kids mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

**Neil**

And it's, and they're very awkward.

**Ajay**

They're so awkward.

**Neil**

As, as people are today. And we're, we're way more awkward now than we were 10, 20 years go

**Leslie**

We're trying to teach our kids how to watch TV together.

**Neil**

Everyone used to

**Leslie**

Honestly, like, they don't know how to watch TV together because

**Neil**

Everyone's got their own screen.

**Leslie**

They wanna be on their own screen. Right. And they wanna have headphones on, and they wanna be in Netflix instead of like, what I would do for like TVO on a TV above the fireplace, you know, like that. Going back to that.

**Neil**

I do find that there's a huge awkwardness skyrocketing, and Jonathan Haidt quotes thoughts about like, even just first dates, ages are like way later, sex, age, age people are having sex way later. Like, there's all these skyrocketing things that are showing up.

**Gina**

And skyrocketing, anxiety, depression, and it can all be pretty much tied almost perfectly with the rise of social media and, and smartphones.

**Leslie**

It's,

**Neil**

But the genie can't go back on the bottle. So now what do we do from the technology's perspective?

**Ajay**

Well, I think, you know, the things I see read you writing, uh, amongst others, um, you know, is from, from, from the, the range of things I've seen in terms of developing the muscle of using it as a tool, but not letting it take over.

**Gina**

Gretchen Rubin has that quote, technology is a, a bad master, but a good servant.

**Ajay**

And so, you know,

**Neil**

Turning your phone from a push device to a pull device.

**Ajay**

I interpret a number of the things that that, that you've written, um, in terms of carving out time, turning the machine off. And other things that aren't even explicitly about turning the machine off, but imply the machine is off like Rose, rose thorn bud. Yeah. Is, you know, that's become a thing we do at, at, at dinnertime. Um, because, and it's probably, I would say three times a week, I have to ask one of the kids, put your phone away, please. Like, bring the phone to the dinner table.

**Neil**

Yeah. Device free dinners is a whole thing.

**Ajay**

And so, um, you know, create, and look, every i, every family or in every person has to find their own thing mm-hmm. <affirmative>, like, you know, uh, but I know it's fashionable these days to to say a sentence like the one I just said, which is Oh yeah. Everyone's got, everyone's a snowflake. You all got your own thing. The other extreme of that is like the, you know, the Chinese government that says no, like, there's a law regarding how many hours a students are allowed to spend playing video games.

**Neil**

Really? I didn't know that

**Ajay**

That. And it's, and it's a very simple

**Gina**

Something like an hour and a half a day for the entire country.

**Neil**

Well, how do they know if you're breaking it though? They know.

**Gina**

They know, they know

**Ajay**

Well, they create incentives for people to divulge when other people are,

**Gina**

I think it actually has to do with how they turn the internet on and off or something. It's something behind.

**Ajay**

And so the, you know, the, the point is that you can go from one extreme where everyone, you know, do what's right for you to an environment where, no, this is not about what's right for you. This is, you know, in other words, we know what's right for you. And, and so think about all the people that read your books and have to sort of do those struggles on their own to get to a place where, uh, you know, they're shutting. Like, in other words, they have to kind of resist temptation shut off their machine for, for some, as opposed to an environment where especially for kids, someone just does it for them.. And says, like in your case, were you saying like, no phone?

**Neil**

Well, my kids are very young, though. It hasn't gotten the pressure point. Their, their peers don't have them yet.

**Leslie**

But you're suggesting that we should develop the, the muscle in children to learn how to regulate themselves with technologies.

**Ajay**

I'm saying, look, I, I, I don't, I don't know the right answers. Not my area of expertise, but I, but it's not obvious to me that I think there's definitely building the muscle, but also it's not obvious to me that people making their own choices about everything is necessarily

**Leslie**

And there are recommendations. Like, you go to the pediatrician and they actually do tell you that it's recommended that children spend less than whatever it is. And I don't even know. But I think there is a recommendation.

**Neil**

Two or three hours a day probably

**Leslie**

Yeah. I think it's no more than an hour of screen. A day under six, and then, you know, it's probably two hours from six to 12 or whatever it is.

**Neil**

Speaking of the, uh, dystopian Orwellian society that we were talking about, may we now transition to Animal Farm by the one and only George Orwell, who was born originally as Eric Arthur Blair. This book was published in 1945 by Secker and Warburg cover is red with the outline of a large pink pig. Napoleon coming in from the right. The words, "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others", is embedded within the pig in a white scroll type font. This is one of many covers, or while it was born in 1903, and India died, sadly only in 1950 in London. He's an English novelist, essays journalist and critic, best known for his allegorical, novella Animal Farm and his dystopian novel, 1984, which is where the adjective Orwellian was originally born. What's it about? For those that haven't read it? You gotta read it. It's a wonderful book. It's only 90 pages. A farm is taken over by its overworked, mistreated animals with flaming idealism and stirring slogans. They set out to create a paradise, maybe like the Chinese government of progress, justice, equality. Then the stage is now set for one of the most

telling satirical fables ever penned. A razor edged fairy tale for grownups that records the evolution from revolution against tyranny to a totalitarianism that is just as terrible. File this under 8 2, 3 .912 for 20 century British fiction. Again, Ajay Gina, tell us about your relationship with Animal Farm by George Orwell?

**Ajay**

So Jean and I met, um, at a graduate residence in the tip of Point Gray in Vancouver, uh, called Green College. And the, um, college motto is ideas and friendship. And one of the great, um, joys of living in Green College is there's a, a dining room called, uh, the Great Hall. And we would go there for breakfast and dinners, and you would sit, there were just very long tables, uh, three very

**Gina**

Very Harry Potter esque

**Ajay**

Three very long tables. And so depending on what time you arrived at the dining hall, you would go in, get your dinner, and then go and find a seat, and you would sit with sort of whoever happened to have showed up the same time as you, because the tables were just very long, just sat down with whatever's the next available seat. And it was an environment for having, uh, discussions about things. And the, the more controversial, the more fun the discussion. And so,

**Gina**

At least in the 1990s

**Ajay**

Yeah. And so we really, you know, I think we both really enjoyed, um, just challenging ideas. And we were in a, in a community where that's where everyone did. And, you know, you'd be sitting there, it'd be a physicist sitting beside an English literature major, sitting beside a music student. And, and that's how it would go. And, um, and the thing that would kind of get us both our backs up is when we would run into a scenario where some kind of ideology was trumping critical thinking and, and, you know, just challenging ideas. And whenever that would happen, I would lean over to Gina and say, four legs good, two legs bad.

**Neil**

Mmmm, which is a slogan from the book

**Ajay**

Slogan from the book. It's when, um, the animals are uniting against the farmers to, you know, to to, to, um, expel the farmer from the farm. And they would rally the troops, uh, by saying four legs, good, two legs bad, uh, which would bring the, an the, and then they made exceptions for wings and feathers and things, um, to, to unite the animals. Then. And that made sense. There was nothing, there was no, there was no sort of ideology around it originally. But then as you know, time progresses in the story, uh, the pigs start taking over and becoming like the human farmers. And every time the other animals would question anything, they would shut down the questioning by reminding them four legs good, two legs bad, and they would all start chanting four legs, good, two legs bad, and then forget that they actually

had a critical question mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so it was a, it was a technique used to stop critical thinking. And I would say, you know, this was sort of a, a, you know, a way that we would amuse ourselves early in our marriage. And unfortunately, it's become a way that we, um, it's, it's less amusing these days where

**Neil**

You see it everywhere

**Ajay**

Where we see it everywhere. And it's like, wow. Uh, ideology has just, uh, shut down critical thinking in so many important parts of society.

**Neil**

Absolutely.

**Ajay**

And sometimes I turn to Gina and say, you know, have we changed? Or like, is the world gone crazy or what?

**Neil**

The world's gone crazy.

**Ajay**

And so, um, this is a, this is a story where I would say it's played less of a role in the earlier part of our marriage. And it's, and it's, you know, if you gotta sort of think of the, the, you know, Google query counts in our conversations, this one's gone way up because now we're finding ourselves four legs good, two legs bad, all over the place,

**Neil**

To the point where Brazilian president Bolsonaro's supporters at his original, you know, uh, campaign winning election that were chanting Facebook cuz of the Facebook ads that converted the massive populace towards voting for him. You know, there's a lot of that happening where we, we are, we're, we're in a world now where there's just too much, there's too much to keep track of too many people to, there's too wide, it's too, we have to, our brains naturally, you know, distill things down to black or white. We have to, we have to buy into slogans and promises, and it's the only way we can sort things. Otherwise it's overwhelming. You either exit or you go to, you go to some sort of sorting tool. I mean, it seems that way. So nuance and complexity and long form conversations are becoming scarer.

**Gina**

Well, just conversation in person conversations are becoming scarer, you know, to even have a conversation like we're having, you know, we had this, this idea a few years ago, we've never implemented of having what we call these salon dinners where we would invite people around our dining table, like all different parts of our lives just to kind of get them talking. We should maybe resurrect that idea, but because we're all hiding behind our screens Right. And we don't even know the art of conversation anymore. I think there's a lot of people who don't know.



**Ajay**

And I, and I would say there's two things here. One is the, you know, the simplification, uh, which I think Neil, you were, you were, you were sort of leaning on the simplifications, you know, things are complicated. So we simplify them to black or white. Yeah.

**Neil**

Yeah. Even just red state, blue state, right wing, left wing, all these things are just two options of everything.

**Ajay**

Right now. Four legs good, two legs bad is actually more than that. Four legs good, two legs bad, has to do with, um, an ideology where you don't question, like, in other words, where you shut down critical questions mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So as the pigs start, for example, moving into the farmer's house mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and they start, um, you know, taking more than their share of the food. And the other animal question, well, wait a minute, that's not like we were, we were all in this together. This is, and then they would start chanting four legs good, two legs bad. And, and stop them asking the questions. Yes. And, uh,

**Leslie**

Uh it's like steam-rolling over someone's thinking

**Ajay**

Pardon-me

**Leslie**

It's steam-rolling over someone

**Ajay**

Right. And so if you think about, you know, I would equate this more to what we think of as cancel culture mm-hmm. <affirmative>, which is, you know, not being, not creating space for critical debate or discussion. Um,

**Gina**

Which can happen on both the right and the left.

**Ajay**

Which can happen on both sides.

**Gina**

Yeah for sure.

**Ajay**

Um, but

**Neil**

So what's the antidote to that?

**Ajay**

Well, in our view, it is encouraging critical thinking. In other words, every time you come to a place where, um, somebody or an institution is setting, shutting down a conversation, um, that, that in our view raises a flag for, hey, like, this is, there's something going on here, um, that probably requires a thoughtful, um, mediator to try and pull out both sides rather than shutting, you know, shutting it down.

**Gina**

And also trying to, I think, make our kids as aware of this dynamic that's going on as possible and hopeful. Hopefully it's, it's here teaching them that.

**Neil**

Yeah, very difficult. Uh, algorithms are proven to make us more radical because they of course are feeding us what is most clickworthy. That hence to be things that the fringe of, we were attracted to things that are it,

**Leslie**

But it's why the, the problem solving critical thinking that teachers need to be working on in schools is even more important.

**Neil**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Leslie**

It's, it's why we need to be engaging in those real conversations to keep the critical thinking going, to invite it to support that, the growth of those muscles in our children and in, in ourselves too.

**Ajay**

Yeah. And you know, we keep coming back to, to this, and I don't think it's, I don't think it's an accident. Like I think that this, these early childhood education and, and like elementary school, uh, probably right through to, to high school, um, is, it's important for reasons that are different than when our school system was invented. In other words, originally it was largely there to kind of give, fill people's head with a set of facts to go out and work in factories.

**Gina**

And teach them to read and do basic arithmetic.

**Ajay**

Right. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and probably some of those, like, like learning some of those skills are less important. Some of them are less important because they have new tools and things that they can,

like, you know, memorizing certain things is probably less important than it was before. But those critical thinking skills

**Leslie**

Are more important

**Ajay**

Are, are so, are so important.

**Leslie**

And that potentially what I'm hearing from you is that, sorry to go to go back to the education example, but that AI could actually alleviate and lift off some of the work of those more mundane tasks that are sometimes done in schools to leave space for educators to be really spending their time and intention on engaging the much more complicated dimensional human only work.

**Gina**

But one thing that kind of ties in all three of the books is one of the thing, and technology and all these things that we've been talking about is I feel there is a real, um, let's call it bullying of the family. And it is something I, I, because you know, there's a great book there and it's called, it's called Keep Your Kids Close. Do you know this book?

**Leslie**

Alfie Khan?

**Neil**

Is that Dr. Gabor Maté?

**Gina**

I think it's Gabor Maté

**Leslie**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Neil**

He wrote that with somebody else and I just interviewed him a week ago.

**Gina**

Oh, cool. Um, so, so anyway, this book, I remember reading it maybe five years ago or more where it's like, you know, your kids are always looking to their peers, but they need you as like a guiding light as the parent. And now because of technology, their peers are not just the kids at school and on the block they can be literally around the world.

**Neil**

Absolutely. It's the YouTuber.

**Gina**

And you need to hold onto your kids even, and I don't mean you have to be like this strict authoritarian parent, but like, you have to hold on, you have to make

**Leslie**

Gordon Neufeld

**Gina**

Gordon Neufeld, that's it. That's it. Gordon Neufeld and, um,

**Neil**

With Gabor Maté

**Leslie**

Yes.

**Gina**

Okay. So they, it was, they were co-authors. Co-authors. There we go. Another theme. And so, uh, anyway, so I feel like that, I don't think people realize the extent of, of, of that there are, that there are cracks that are happening in the family, and we have to, we're gonna have to fight back against that to keep families close.

**Neil**

And it's interesting how you define family too. Cuz another thing Gabor says is that the humans weren't meant to be raised in nuclear families.

**Gina**

Yes. And I, I don't mean necessarily nuclear family though, to a large extent I do, but yes, grandparents, I mean, you were telling us about the lovely involvement that your, the grandparents have with your kids mm-hmm. <affirmative> same with, with our kids' grandparents

**Leslie**

Even those dinners like you were talking about. Right. Like in, I think in that book they talk about like including kids in the parents' interactions, right? So if you were to do that beautiful dinner of having people around for conversation, wouldn't it be great? Like your kids have been in and out of the room tonight for, uh, kids to be Right. Involved in those conversations. And that actually is part of the family too. The village of all these other adults. These kids being around

**Neil**

A lot of these gestures that we're leaning towards in general, like time with your kids, reading with your kids, playing rose, rose, thorn, bud at dinner. I mean, they, they do sound a lot like privileged things. Like you, you, you have to have time and space and resources that create time and space in order to do all

these things that require more time and space to be together, to get, it's another example, don't you think of you got, there's, there's an, there's bit of an elitist ness.

**Gina**

Yeah. But even, and that's true. Especially

**Neil**

If you, you have to, you have to have the space to have time to have be together and,

**Gina**

And if you're working three jobs or something that obviously, but you know, you Yes. And that, you know, that I think it, it's a problem you hear about like the Oh,

**Neil**

I get that criticism a lot with a lot of things I advise. They're like, well, we don't have the ability to do that kind of stuff.

**Gina**

But it could be the grandparent that's there watching that's home with the kids when they come home from school.

**Leslie**

I also would argue that sometimes like some of those silos that are forming and cracks in the family are happening in the most wealthiest parts.

**Gina**

Well, that's true.

**Leslie**

I actually think we're now looking to more of these collectivist societies and you know, you go into, even in Toronto and inner city schools, people from all over the world, and like, it smells like all different types of food. And yes, people are really stretched for this like, leisure time to read with their kids. But there is much more the feeling of like being looking out for each other's kids and kids and adults interacting together and sharing food as a family. And I think sometimes in, in privileged families, there's actually some emptiness on connection.

**Gina**

We watched a movie earlier this year called Belfast, which is by Kenneth Branagh. And it was about his childhood growing up in Belfast.

**Neil**

Which is where you listened to, uh, Harry Potter.

**Gina**

Which is where we started listening to Harry Potter. That's right. And it was a black and white movie, and we watched it with the kids and it's, it took place maybe in the sixties during the height of the troubles between Protestants and Catholics. And the kids are like, no black and white movie <laugh>. But anyway, we watched it, and it's on this street in Belfast where there's a mixture of Protestants and Catholics and the violence that happens as the, as as fissures the society fissures. And our son, you know what he noticed? He's like, look at all those kids on the street playing.

**Leslie**

Right. Exactly.

**Neil**

Yeah

**Gina**

He noticed that. And that there were all the different mothers and parent and grandparents and stuff who would be like, Hey Bobby, you know, your mom's looking for you. It's time to go home. It's time for dinner. Or like, they give 'em a smack because they were misbehaving or they stole something from the corner store or whatever. And so even though that

**Neil**

Community, uh, uh, tent poles in society are also is that famous, but Bowling Alone, uh, you know, which is about community kind of devolving as there's not the Elk Club and the, and the as many church groups and many people signing up for the PTA. So you have less places, Third Places, there's another book. You have less places where there can be more people raising your kids and there's less people playing on the street. I mean, I used to have to, when I was driving around, I used to like always be stopping for kids playing road hockey on the street. Like, where's the kids playing? They're taking Kumon math classes somewhere. <laugh>, you know,

**Leslie**

They're at home playing video games by themselves.

**Gina**

It's true. And it, you know, I actually felt like our street had this beautiful kid street culture for quite a while that got ruined by the pandemic. But there was that, that all these little guys and gals were just out there running around and it's a kind of quiet street. And they'd meet and they'd play and they'd shoot Nerf darts at them and mm-hmm. <affirmative>, maybe we can get that back but

**Neil**

Yeah. And one of the ways to get it back and to make these things priorities is by talking about them and recognizing them and discussing them and prioritizing them. And we have, I think, done a great job of doing that tonight through the, the sort of thread lines of your books. I, I think it might be, since this is about books, I got some closing fast money around questions.

**Gina**

I know these questions

**Neil**

You know the questions and you know what's coming. I, I'm happy for both of you to answer them or just one, whichever you like. First question is hardcover paperback audio or e?

**Ajay**

Paperback.

**Gina**

I would say

**Neil**

Not tape

**Gina**

<laugh>, not books on cassette tape. Um, I would say paperback, except when I travel and I love my kobo when I travel.

**Neil**

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Kobo for international listeners is a Canadian originally equivalent of a Kindle, an anagram of the Word book.

**Gina**

Oh, I didn't know that. Okay. And e-reader only, no other functions on the e-reader.

**Neil**

Right. Single task.

**Gina**

Dedicated. And actually a couple years ago, uh, we got our kids Kobos, you know, e-reader only. And, um, my, particularly with our son, he re he, we get it from the library books from the library mostly. Sometimes he buy books, but he is like constantly reading. Like he, that thing is taking a beating and, uh, to the point where he actually, he clearly prefers reading on an eReader at his age. Which is interesting because he started Lord of the Rings, as I was mentioning on paper. And he's like, do you mind if I buy this book on Kobo? Because I think I'd prefer reading it on there. I was like, all right, it's Lord of the Rings. Sure. I'll pay for that. And he's, and then he is flying through it. Yeah. So it's interesting that <laugh>, maybe that's the, that's the technology part, but he is reading Lord of the Rings, so I can't complain about that.

**Neil**

Um, how do you organize the books on your bookshelf?

**Gina**

Not well enough because we couldn't find Animal Farm. I looked everywhere.

**Ajay**

I organize by, uh, topic area. So for example, I have like international economics on one side, or technology

**Neil**

Like microeconomics somewhere else, macroeconomics elsewhere,

**Gina**

Almost Dewey decimal

**Neil**

Bolivian economics elsewhere

**Gina**

Neil's a Dewey decimal fan

**Neil**

It's very similar to that. Just putting 'em in sub categories. What is your book lending policy?

**Gina**

Yeah. Well, we, I lend to close friends.

**Neil**

<laugh>. Yeah. So you could determine your relationship with Gina, but whether or not she lets you take your book or

**Gina**

Oh, no, no. <laugh> obviously not with Ajay <laugh>. Just a few friends.

**Neil**

Do you have duplicate books? Do you have books that you both,

**Gina**

Just a couple.

**Neil**

Have you merged bookshelves?



**Ajay**

Oh yeah.

**Gina**

Yeah. Mm.

**Neil**

Okay. We're not there yet in our relationship.

**Leslie**

We have a thing about not merging our books

**Neil**

We don't have a, well, it, it was originally you cuz I was very put off by the fact that you didn't wanna merge our books.

**Leslie**

I really, I really should have just given in on that one because now I have this tiny little nook. Your bookshelves have taken over.

**Neil**

I know, not I'm, I'm begging

**Leslie**

Not fair at all.

**Neil**

I'm begging for more, more bookshelves now.

**Leslie**

I should have just said that they were all of our books.

**Neil**

Um, do you have a favorite bookstore living or dead?

**Ajay**

I don't get to visit it very often, but Powell Books

**Gina**

In Oregon,

**Ajay**

Portland in Portland.

**Gina**

And I would say Elliot Bay books in Seattle. Beautiful bookstore.

**Neil**

So you guys both have West Coast books here. Powell Books is the largest bookstore in the US by square footage.

**Ajay**

Is that right? Is that still true?

**Neil**

I think it is. Yeah. Like Strand is number two, in New York. I think Powells is the biggest bookstore.

**Ajay**

I just love getting lost in Powells,

**Gina**

Which you haven't done in a very long time.

**Ajay**

I haven't done that in a while. Here I like, um, I like that one. Well there's the one at BMV, but I like, um, indigo at, um,

**Gina**

Oh, Bay and Bloor

**Ajay**

Um,

**Neil**

Similar feeling of getting lost in the stacks.

**Ajay**

Yeah.

**Gina**

Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and this is not a bookstore, but I was thinking about this question cuz I knew it would be coming and um, this summer we were in Oxford and there's a paper store, paper pens, Inc. That kind of stuff. it's called Scriptum. And it was just so Harry Potter. It was just this amazing little store that my daughter and I went into and we just fell in love with it and we're like, we could just stay here forever and buy notebooks. <laugh>.

**Leslie**

Oh my gosh. Perfect for the writer.

**Neil**

Yeah. And what is it about Elliot Bay?

**Gina**

Uh, I lived in Seattle for about a year and it's, uh, I assume it's still open. It's in Pioneer Square.

**Neil**

I've heard the story a lot, but no one's ever said it on the show, so. Okay. Yeah. What is it about that bookstore?

**Gina**

I don't know. It was just like a, a reader's bookstore that was like, um, it was a lot of wooden shelves and it just had a cozy atmosphere. And maybe it was also the time in my life. Like I'd go after work and go to that bookstore.

**Neil**

After work is a key point. I am pushing the owners and operators of bookstores in this city post pandemic. I'm like, what's up at 7:00 PM used to be midnight? We gotta push those hours back cuz there's something about who you meet in a late night bookstore. I always find those the most interesting people. Mm. You know. And then the very final piece of advice, you are both writers, you both have published books, you have your a published book coming out this year, and you have previous ones in your, in your oeuvre. Uh, so for people listening that are writers or aspiring writers, what is a final piece of hard fought wisdom you would give to somebody who's looking to write or publish their own book?

**Ajay**

Okay, I guess I'll go first on this one. Okay. Um, I find for me, presenting the ideas in the book, um, so right from when I start thinking about the book, uh, with my co-authors, we'll start drafting ideas and I will start, I'll do it in classes. I will do it in, you know, various lectures I give both on the campus and outside. Um, and in conversations like this, um, you know, when we're with dinner with friends and things and it's a way of, um, developing the ideas, see like, you know, people will react. Sometimes you'll just do something and you'll describe something and it will just resonate. And then you say, okay, like that, that idea, uh, is clean. Like it makes sense. People, it connects with people and other ones you'll try. That doesn't, it's not, it's not being communicated correctly. And so, um, and so for me now, it's got to the point where as we write a book, I will encourage my co-authors to pause it so I can, and then I will offer a free course and teach the full book.

**Neil**

Wow

**Ajay**

And then I come back and they don't like it cuz they say like, they knew what happened the first time. They said, you know, you blew up the book. Um, and we went and sort of redrafted a lot, a lot of the book after doing that. Now, not everyone can set up to be able to teach a course in their book, but, but I think at least for me, being able to, you don't have to do the whole book. You can just take a chapter, like a key, you know, one key idea and, uh, and try and communicate it in the way that you have in the book and see whether it resonates.

**Neil**

Yeah. Test it first.

**Leslie**

So do you have it written and then present it, or you present it and then write it down?

**Ajay**

Uh, usually I have it draft written and it's not like I'll go to a dinner thinking, oh, I'm gonna practice a book. <laugh>. But, you know, something will happen and someone will say something and then I'll just do a thing. And then, uh, you know, I feel like that's, that's a muscle that, that, um, I've developed at some to some extent now where, where I can get a good sense of how something's going to land in a book after, after presenting a few times.

**Leslie**

I ask because I can imagine writing the presentation, but not the chapter. So I'm curious if that would ever be an avenue. Someone like me is not as much a writer.

**Ajay**

You could, like, I, and, and I've and I've done that a few times where I will start with the presentation. Yeah. And, and I'll present something. And if I feel like it doesn't really, or if I, if I don't feel excited by it, then I'll think, well, there's no point in me writing that because, you know, it's not that interesting. Yeah. Even I'm not that interesting <laugh>. Um, but

**Neil**

That's a good point. You feel your own enthusiasm for it as you present presented right there. Yeah.

**Ajay**

And, and, and also

**Neil**

In your own clarity.

**Ajay**

I can clarify it much better in my mind when I'm preparing to explain it to someone else.

**Leslie**

Yes, yes.

**Ajay**

Um, and I mean, you give so many talks, you must, you, you, you must

**Neil**

It's the same theory at Tim Ferris says is that, you know, write the book as if you're writing an email to someone to the point where you might even wanna write it in a composed email. This is nonfiction though. You're talking, you know, he and you were talking about Yeah. But you know, you put it in the idea that you're presenting it to someone and it forces it outta your brain in a clearer way. Yeah. You know, this is why Twitter sometimes is very attractive for writers, although it's, you know, maybe the death of our attention spans. It does constantly force you to trim to 280 characters. Which typically if you're writing and you get it to a 280, you like it better. <laugh> you like it better. It's more concise, it's clearer it because you kept editing it until it got small enough. You know, Gina Fiction writers.

**Gina**

Yeah. So historical fiction, you gotta do the research. Gotta do the research. But I would say

**Neil**

Not with Google.

**Gina**

Not just with Google. You could do a little bit with Google. But yeah, I, I I go to a lot of academic articles and books and even trans translated, I don't know, Venetian, middle aged Venetian. But um, yeah, so things in translation, primary sources that have been translated. Um, but I would say in addition to that is probably resonates with your untouchable days. Cuz I was thinking when is, when do I get my best ideas? And it's when I go for a walk mm-hmm. <affirmative> or go for a long drive.

**Neil**

Interesting

**Gina**

And especially with drives, I've lately been during the pandemic, was driving down nine hours to New Jersey by myself. And I'd sit there and my mind would just wander. Yeah. And I'd get these incredible breakthrough ideas. So, um, so having,

**Neil**

That ole three bs of creativity for the, for the researchers. bed, bath, bed bath and, and bus I used to say

**Gina**

Yeah, there you go. You know, so walking and driving,

**Neil**

Walking and driving and creating space for ideas, coming up. Creating space, creating connection, creating conversation. Um, this conversation has been a delight. It has been 21 years since I first met

Ajay as my professor, as my electric professor of com 4 0 1 at Queens School of Business. And to speak to you both on the eve, although as, as this, as this episode, as this chapter drops, uh, Ajay's book, Power and Prediction, the Disruptive Economics of Artificial Intelligence by Ajay Agrawal and Joshua, do I say Gans or Gaines?

**Ajay**

Gans

**Neil**

Gans and Abby Goldfarb will be out in mid-November. And the Virgins of Venice by Gina. And I don't wanna keep butchering your last name.

**Ajay**

Buonaguro

**Neil**

Buonaguro. I said it wrong again, <laugh>. Um, it's coming out and a week from now on December the 13th, 2022. These books, as we've just heard, connect in many ways. Um, thank you both so much for coming on three books. It's been a real joy having this conversation.

**Leslie**

So great talking to you guys tonight. Thank you.

**Gina**

Thank you for giving us this opportunity.

**Ajay**

Yeah. Thank you, Leslie. Thank you Neil.