

## Wonderful! 248: Nicely Nicely Podcast

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[Intro Music Plays]

**Rachel:** Hi, this is Rachel McElroy.

**Griffin:** Hello, this is Griffin McElroy!

**Rachel:** And this is *Wonderful!*

**Griffin:** Beep, beep, beep! That's a... that's a horn sound. We are on... We are driving the bus. The bus has two drivers' wheels on it.

**Rachel:** Yes.

**Griffin:** Rachel and I are sharing.

**Rachel:** Okay.

**Griffin:** You all are on the bus. You... its free. The bus is free.

**Rachel:** [suspiciously] Okay...

**Griffin:** Lot of buses they do tokens, they do swipecards, Apple Pay. Not on this bus.

It's free, you hop on you can ride it as long as you want, but after usually about 35 to 40 minutes it does come to a dead stop for a week.

**Rachel:** And don't let the pigeon drive the bus.

**Griffin:** Do not... [fake angrily] Oh my god, this... Can we talk about this? This is a—

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** This is *Wonderful!* A show where we talk about things we like, things we're into. Can we talk about this pigeon though?

**Rachel:** This pigeon is very convincing.

**Griffin:** It's very- Listen, if I weren't a dad—

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** A daddy.

**Rachel:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Griffin:** And this pigeon tried to put his game on me?

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Do we sound like, completely out of our gourds for people who don't know about...?

**Rachel:** Oh for sure. I can't imagine that people—

**Griffin:** ... Mo Willems' body of work?

**Rachel:** ... people know Mo Willems if they don't have children. But—

**Griffin:** Maybe.

**Rachel:** I don't know. Maybe.

**Griffin:** [mumbling] There's a children's author named Mo Williams; he has a book about these pigeons.

**Rachel:** Willems. Willems.

**Griffin:** Willems. That's what I said, I just stumbled through it really fast because I was trying to sound like a cool guy.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** Mo Willems writes about this pigeon and the pigeon either does wanna do something he shouldn't do...

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Or doesn't wanna do something he should do.

**Rachel:** Exactly. What a great summation.

**Griffin:** Thank you, yeah. It's great.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** One time he finds a hot dog and a little duck tries to get it from him.

It's, it's, it's heartbreaking stuff. But that's not what we're here to talk about, although I do appreciate Mo Willems' whole body of work.

**Rachel:** [laughs] Uh-huh.

**Griffin:** It's just a delight. *Knuffle Bunny*? Fucking forget about it. *Knuffle Bunny* fucks me up every time I read it.

**Rachel:** It's beautiful.

**Griffin:** But this is *Wonderful!*, a show where we talk about things that are good.

**Rachel:** Why are we both driving the bus? Wha- How did that come to you?

**Griffin:** I couldn't... Well... Okay, which one of... If it was going to be one of us, right? I don't wanna—

**Rachel:** Well, I'm just wondering how the bus even got brought into the equation.

**Griffin:** I think I was thinking about our show as a journey.

**Rachel:** Ah. [laughs] Now that's reality television talk you're doing right now. [laughs]

**Griffin:** I noticed last week that there was some talk among the Wonderheads out there—

**Rachel:** Ooh, I like that.

**Griffin:** About the sort of delirious state that—

**Rachel:** Oh.

**Griffin:** ... we, but mostly I, was approaching—

**Rachel:** Mostly you.

**Griffin:** ... the episode with. And I would like to publicly announce that our fortunes have not reversed.

**Rachel:** [laughs ruefully] No.

**Griffin:** They have, if anything, gotten much worse. Sleep is a... Sleep is an unobtainable, a precious golden dew, that... the taste of which I have forgotten.

I have entered into a sort of circadian cycle now that I didn't know was sustainable.

**Rachel:** Let me offer you a perspective that I have.

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** That helps tremendously.

**Griffin:** I can't wait, I need anything.

**Rachel:** So, middle of the night I feel like everything is terrible.

**Griffin:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Rachel:** And I'm terrified and panicked and I feel like there is some huge problem that needs to be addressed.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** And then I wake up, and I'm so relieved that the night is over—

**Griffin:** [singing softly] The sun'll come out, tomorrow.

**Rachel:** [laughs] That I'm like, "Oh I don't have to deal with that. It's daytime now."

**Griffin:** Yeah, I just have to deal with the extreme mental, physical, emotional exhaustion from the psychic wounds this like 2 foot tall—

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** ... organism can... can do to me, a big strong man. He's... he's so little. He's so little. And... but... but the wounds, the psychic wounds he inflicts upon me are out- Are... They so far outscale him...

**Rachel:** What is making it, I think, uniquely troublesome is that Henry was also a poor sleeper.

But at this age he had started to become very consistent, you know? He was still waking up, but it was about the same time for the same duration every night.

**Griffin:** Loved that. Loved that.

**Rachel:** And so it was like—

**Griffin:** That became Daddy's anime time.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** He would wake up, and I'd be like, "I have nothing to do for the next hour. I'm going to... I've already watched—"

**Rachel:** Well, and it wouldn't even take an hour. I'm talking about at this age.

**Griffin:** At this age. Okay.

**Rachel:** At this age it was like 10 minutes and then he was like, "Oh, okay maybe I should sleep."

**Griffin:** Yeah, god that was so fucking choice.

**Rachel:** Gus is... he's a rowdy boy.

**Griffin:** And I know in the future our boys are gonna listen to our show...

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** And Gus is gonna feel really self-conscious, and I just wanna say, buddy, good. Like good.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** [laughs] No. It's... I mean, that's parenting. This too shall pass.

Do you have any Small Wonders?

**Rachel:** Oh man. I appreciate that you always allow me to go first.

**Griffin:** Well, you need to... You know what it is? You're not fast enough—

**Rachel:** I know!

**Griffin:** ... at jumping in.

**Rachel:** No, I think it's—

**Griffin:** No, no, no. With asking me for the Small Wonder.

**Rachel:** Yeah, that's true.

**Griffin:** That's—

**Rachel:** I feel like it is a courtesy that you afford me, and I like that.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Okay, I've got one.

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** Just in that stalling that I just did.

**Griffin:** Alright.

**Rachel:** When you are taking like a ride share or a taxi and the driver tells you that they have lived in the city you are in for a very long time—

**Griffin:** Love. That. Shit.

**Rachel:** ... and then start giving you like a little history and trivia.

**Griffin:** So good.

**Rachel:** I, unsurprisingly, am not comfortable speaking with strangers in a situation where I am trapped, typically.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** But when somebody just kind of wants to share their journey with you?

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** And give you some comfort in their ability to get you from one place to another, I love it. I'm on board.

**Griffin:** Mine is I got my bike.

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** I ordered an electric cargo bike, the Tern S8i... Um... H? I think it's... I get the different models confused but it's... it's a nice bike.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** And I've successfully gotten our child to school on it a couple times now. And whenever I run past other parents who are also biking their kids to school, there's like a cool 'lil—

**Rachel:** Do you do a little nod?

**Griffin:** A little nod.

**Rachel:** Aw, that's great.

**Griffin:** A little nod. And also, we biked past one of Henry's classmates who was walking, and he was like, "Hi Henry M.!"

And Henry said, "My dad's bike's got a jet engine on it!"

**Rachel:** [laughs hard]

**Griffin:** And... it doesn't. And what was really funny is that we were going up a pretty steep hill and moving at about the speed of smell.

**Rachel:** [laughing] So you very slowly passed him.

**Griffin:** Very, very slowly passed him, while my son in the back almost mocking me, "Look at this jet!"

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** I go first this week.

**Rachel:** Okay. Please do.

**Griffin:** You know what I'm going to talk about.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Last night Lin was kind enough to take us and some buds to the Kennedy Center production of *Guys and Dolls* and it was off of the chains.

It was so far removed from the chains that the chains had become sort of an abstract memory.

**Rachel:** I... Listeners to the show will know that Griffin has an extensive connection to musical theatre. I do not.

**Griffin:** No.

**Rachel:** At all.

**Griffin:** No.

**Rachel:** Not through any real choice of my own, I just didn't grow up with a father that was in productions regularly.

**Griffin:** No.

**Rachel:** Or ever. Uh, so... [laughs]

**Griffin:** [laughing] Your dad, he would grace the...

**Rachel:** Occasionally.

**Griffin:** He would tickle those boards every once in a while.

**Rachel:** But you know, he was in the chorus.

**Griffin:** Right, sure.

**Rachel:** Yeah, so I had never seen *Guys and Dolls* before.

**Griffin:** And what a fuckin' way to see *Guys and Dolls*!

**Rachel:** Right?

**Griffin:** This cast, y'all...

**Rachel:** Now I can never see it again.

**Griffin:** Out of sight! Philippa Soo, Steven Pasquale, James Iglehart, Kevin Chamberlin, the OG Horton from *Seussical the Musical*—

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** ... really brought things very full circle for me.

**Rachel:** So you didn't... At what point did you realize? Like, were you...?

**Griffin:** As soon as he started singing.

**Rachel:** Oh really?

**Griffin:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, for sure. Rachel Dratch was in it as Big Julie, outrageous... Like so fucking funny. So fun. Best ever. If you've never seen the show, like Rachel before last night—

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** ... it is just this bonkers upbeat musical about gamblers who are also shitty boyfriends. And every song in the musical—

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** ... goes so hard.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Like there is not... There's not a throwaway number in the whole thing.

**Rachel:** It reminded me a little bit, and this is again my limited glossary that I'm working with, but *Anything Goes*?

**Griffin:** Yeah, for sure.

**Rachel:** You know, kind of a similar like fun—

**Griffin:** Was that a Frank Loesser...?

**Rachel:** I don't know, but it was—

**Griffin:** [sing-song voice] I do not know why I am asking you.

**Rachel:** Yeah. It is like a similar fun time energy where everybody on stage is having an incredible time and you are really enjoying watching them.

**Griffin:** Uh, no. that was Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse. So, anyway, *Guys and Dolls* has like a few intertwining plots all happening around this one floating craps game.

But toward the end of the second act you get the climax of the show.

All of the gamblers who you get to know in this musical have been dragooned into going to a City Mission prayer meeting because they lost a bet to Sky Masterson, who is one of the two sort of big leads of the show. I guess one of the four big leads of the show.

**Rachel:** And this... The musical is taking place in like...?

**Griffin:** Nineteen... You know—

**Rachel:** New York.

**Griffin:** ... forties New York, yeah.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** So the gamblers are all here and they're at the City Mission and the missionaries are trying to get them to confess their sins. And none of the gamblers like really know what they're doing.

And this scene is kind of like... You know, it is... It is not necessarily this like incredibly plot-heavy sort of moment.

**Rachel:** No, it feels a little bit like a... like an improv sketch, almost. Like a premise.

**Griffin:** They just kind of... They kind of plop in, at the end of the show. And it's very long, it's a very long scene.

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** And a couple of the leads are not even in it. Like Sky Masterson dips in is like, "Here's the dudes! Bye-eee!"

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** And then he's not in the scene anymore. I don't think Adelaide's in the scene at all.

So like, it is a weird... There's a concept in musical theatre called the Eleven O'clock number, and it is typically toward the end of the second act.

And it is kind of where the... one of the protagonists has a realization that helps them complete... Like an epiphany, that helps them complete their hero's journey, right?

And there's so many examples of it throughout musical theatre.

In *Guys and Dolls* that number is called, "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" and it is not performed by one of the leads.

It is performed by a character named Nicely-Nicely Johnson, who is played by Kevin Chamberlin, the OG Horton.

And he is not a lead character, really. He is not... Like he is a secondary—

**Rachel:** He's in it a lot.

**Griffin:** He's in it a lot, but he is like a secondary, comic relief sort of almost like Greek chorus character, who is just very unassuming, goofy dude.

And they pressure him to stand up in front of the City Mission prayer meeting and sing a song.

And this song is like... again, no lead character's like, "Oh no! I've made a terrible mistake! I love her and I must chase her to..."

It's not that.

**Rachel:** No.

**Griffin:** It's, "I had this fucking wild dream about gambling on a boat to heaven."

And everybody gets into it, and I feel like Frank Loesser, who wrote the musical, must have just like written this song and been like, "Well, okay. This doesn't tie up any threads and it doesn't..."

There's no like, moment of gigantic fulfillment that happens here..."

**Rachel:** Yeah. Nothing is building to this. [laughs]

**Griffin:** Nothing is building to this. Nicely-Nicely Johnson doesn't have this arc that culminates in his like salvation.

He is this very unassuming character who then stands up and fucking destroys.

**Rachel:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Griffin:** With the best number in the show. It is the show stopping number. And it is such an unusual choice for that.

**Rachel:** I'm so glad that I got to see it, because Griffin had for a long time told me about like the virtues of this song. And I mean, it's a great song. Like I couldn't object to that.

But I didn't feel the power of it until I saw—

**Griffin:** Until you see a whole—

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Like, chorus of people like, getting into it.

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** So I want to play a little bit from the 1992 revival of *Guys and Dolls*, which is the version I grew up with. We got Nathan Lane in the mix.

**Rachel:** Oooh!

**Griffin:** We got J.K. Simmons in the mix.

**Rachel:** Woah!

**Griffin:** He's one of the Greek chorus guys. Peter Fucking Gallagher as Sky Masterson.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** So Walter Bobbie plays Nicely-Nicely Johnson, who sings here. So here's a little bit of "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" if you've never heard it before.

**Walter Bobbie:** [singing] I dreamed last night, I got on the boat to heaven, and by some chance I had brought my dice along! And there I stood, and I hollered "Someone fade me!", but the passengers they knew right from wrong! For the people all said, "Sit down! Sit down, you're rockin' the boat."

**Chorus:** [singing] The people all said, "Sit down! Sit down, you're rockin' the boat!"

**Walter Bobbie:** [singing] And the devil will pull you under— [fades out]

**Griffin:** It's just perfect. It's chaotic and it's fun. And the ending of *Guys and Dolls* is like kind of weird and abrupt.

Immediately after this Adelaide and Sarah, the two sort of female leads for the show get up and sing a song called "Marry a Man Today", which is kind of like their moment of epiphany.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** And then you like cut to a reprise of the *Guys and Dolls* number, "Only Doing it for Some Doll," and then the show's over.

**Rachel:** Yeah. [laughs] I always... I have always felt that way about musicals, honestly. Like they always end in a way that feels abrupt to me.

**Griffin:** Yes.

**Rachel:** And I don't know if that's like the nature of the beast? Like you have to kind of shut it down at some point—

**Griffin:** Right.

**Rachel:** ... and it's always gonna feel abrupt. Or if I just happen to have seen a lot of 'em that end that way. [laughs]

**Griffin:** Right. I just... This song rules, objectively. Divorced from the narrative or like its place in the rest of *Guys and Dolls*, like it's a great song. It is a very, very fun song like in every way.

But then in the show, it's so- I can't stop thinking about it after seeing it last night. Because like, Sky Masterson isn't even there. It is not a vital song. It is not an-

If you removed the song from the musical, then the narrative of the musical would still... would still arguably work, right?

**Rachel:** Yeah, it's true. Yeah.

**Griffin:** So despite the fact that it is just sort of this secondary comic relief character who stands up and has this moment of absolute brilliance, which I adore in any form of fiction whatsoever, it is...

Instead it's like a thematic Eleven O'clock number, where it's like 'Yeah, all these gamblers are shitheads. They are garbage people and here they are singing about like, how they are...'

They have had this moment of like holy redemption in a dream universe. Like—

**Rachel:** Right before it started, and I didn't know it was coming at this point, Griffin looked over at me excitedly and I was like, "Why is- Ohh, it's about to happen." [laughs]

**Griffin:** "Oh, it's about to pop off. It... *Guys and Dolls* is such a... It's such a like... It's such a fun musical. It is breezy and light and the music is so good.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** And after they finish the song, in most productions that I have seen, they finish the song and it's just this big, [singing] "You're rockin' the boat!"

And then everybody like loses their mind, like stand up, standing ovation.

And then immediately after they just do the end of the song again, immediately after. It's not a reprise, it's not... it's like a weird like post-script like coda thing.

And then people are like, 'Yeah I'll clap again for that!'

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** I'm obsessed with this song. I love it when unassuming characters do big things and like Nicely-Nicely Johnson is the blueprint for that.

Also my dad destroyed this shit when Huntington Outdoor Theatre put it on—

**Rachel:** I can't even imagine.

**Griffin:** ... in the late 90s. It's almost like Frank Loesser sort of like saw through a time portal and like saw my dad and was like, "Oh wow! I gotta really give this dude—"

**Rachel:** I wish... I bet—

**Griffin:** "... something to chew on."

**Rachel:** I bet that's on tape somewhere, knowing...

**Griffin:** It's gotta be on tape somewhere.

**Rachel:** Yeah, I would love to see that.

**Griffin:** I would... I would absolutely love to see that.

Anyway best song, best song in the show.

**Rachel:** Oh, I don't know if I'd go...

**Griffin:** Oh really?

**Rachel:** ... If I'd say that.

I like... I really love the song that the grandpa sings to his daughter.

**Griffin:** Oh yeah.

**Rachel:** So like, beautiful.

**Griffin:** It is very, very be- [singing] "Licorice tooth!"

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** That's all I remember.

**Rachel:** [laughing] Yeah, okay.

**Griffin:** It doesn't go hard, I need it to go hard. It's a great song, it's pretty, right?

**Rachel:** That's true, yeah.

**Griffin:** I need it to go real hard.

**Rachel:** I guess yeah, it's not... It's not a banger.

**Griffin:** You gotta hear Peter Gallagher bust out, [singing like Peter Gallagher] "They call you Lady Luck!" Like...

**Rachel:** [laughing] I can't... Well, I can imagine, actually.

**Griffin:** You can imagine it!

**Rachel:** That's the thing.

**Griffin:** You watch *The O.C.*, you know.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Anyway that's "Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat."

I will say as a fun sidebar, Don Henley did a fucking godawful sort of fun free loosely reggae-inspired cover of the song that moves at about 8 beats per minute —

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** ... that I saw in a karaoke book once, and I was like "Fuck yeah! They got "Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat"!"

And I got up on the microphone and just heard like, [imitates slow reggae beat] and was like, "There's been a mistake, get me off this stage! I can't!"

**Rachel:** [laughing]

**Griffin:** Anyway, can I steal you away?

**Rachel:** Yes.

**Griffin:** Thank you.

[ad break, *Home Improvement* theme plays]

**Griffin:** Got a couple Tumble Boys here and I would love to read the first one.

It is for Laurel, and it is from Beth who says, "Hi, Angel. I just wanted to interrupt your peace to tell you that I love you. You make me happier than I ever knew possible and I am so lucky that I get to be your person.

"Thank you for making me laugh and holding me when I cry and most important thank you for loving me. Oh, and happy birthday or happy anniversary, maybe, hopefully. I adore you."

You should really figure out which one is the birthday and which one's the anniversary. Unless... you got married on a birthday or started dating on a birthday.

**Rachel:** Yeah. I love these little sweet nothings that we get.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** It makes me feel like I'm a guest at their wedding, you know?

**Griffin:** It makes me feel like I'm a guest at the wedding. I'm glad you're here or else I would feel like some sort of weirdo voyeur.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** You know what I mean? Like the fact that you're here and we get to share this sort of... this remote, proxy love together makes me feel a lot more comfortable about—

**Rachel:** Oh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. You're not peeping?

**Griffin:** ... the whole thing. Yeah. I mean... Yeah.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Do you wanna read the other one?

**Rachel:** Yes! This is for Future Tey; it is from Past Tey.

"Dear Future Tey. I hope by now things are less buckwild. If not, embrace chaos. But seriously, I'm so proud of how far you've come with the voices of the McElroys in your ears along the way.

"Hope your 30th is as emo as you want, in the eyeliner Fallout Boy kind of way.

"Keep chasing those Small Wonders and scritch the boys for me.

"Love five ever, Past Tey."

**Griffin:** Strong, powerful message I really hope things have calmed down. I don't know about on a global scale, but maybe if you sort of like zoom in things have gotten a bit more chill for Tey.

But I also wonder if we will ever have a Jumbotron from the future to the past.

**Rachel:** [laughs] Interesting.

**Griffin:** You know?

**Rachel:** I like that.

**Griffin:** Just a fu... I don't know what that would look like.

**Rachel:** Like don't... Don't eat that donut in November 2022.

**Griffin:** What... You just... That's in the future, hun. That's in the future.

**Rachel:** Oh. Oh.

**Griffin:** But also now I'm sca- Now I'm not gonna eat any donuts next months because of your prophecy.

**Rachel:** November. November. It's October. We're fine.

**Griffin:** Yeah, I know I'm saying next month I can't have any donuts.

**Rachel:** Oh yeah. Yeah, you shouldn't.

**Griffin:** Because of your dire warn- Oh, damn it.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

[ad break]

**Rachel:** Okay, Griffin?

**Griffin:** Yes!

**Rachel:** You wanna know what I'm talking about this week?

**Griffin:** I can wager a guess.

**Rachel:** See, so here's the thing. You see me holding this book of poetry—

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** ... and you think it's a Poetry Corner.

**Griffin:** Oh dang, wait, what?

**Rachel:** It's more like a Poetry Hallway. [laughs]

**Griffin:** [incredulous] A Poetry Hallway?

**Rachel:** Here we go, I'm buildin' a house, guys. We're walkin' out of the corner and down the hall.

Because this week I am talking about translation.

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** Yes.

**Griffin:** Okay, so this is like... a pathway we are walking between corners.

**Rachel:** I will... I will read part of a poem from a poet, but this is not a segment about said poet.

**Griffin:** So don't even think about vibing with it at home, like you do with Rachel's Poetry Corner.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** You save that for the next Rachel's Poetry Corner 'cause we'll know if you vibe with it.

**Rachel:** I will also say I do not need a theme song for the Poetry Hallway, so don't... don't stress about that.

**Griffin:** Okay. [singing to the tune of "Highway to Hell"] "We're in the hallway to poems!"

**Rachel:** [laughs] That's pretty high energy. As you know I don't really bring that kind of hype, typically, to my segments.

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** So I feel like now anything I do is going to be down from there.

**Griffin:** Sure. I can do more of it, if you want, inspired by AC/DC's "Highway to Hell", if you want.

**Rachel:** No.

**Griffin:** I can do it if you want.

**Rachel:** I know you can. I have no doubt.

Okay, so translation. This is such a name-droppy episode, but—

**Griffin:** I know.

**Rachel:** [laughs] We were talking to Lin last night and he was talking about *Hamilton* in Germany, and he was talking about how he had oversight over the translation and that they would send him...

You know, obviously he's not fluent in German but they would send him kind of side-by-side—

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Here's what it is German, here's the translation, here's the original text.

**Griffin:** Rips so hard in German. I don't know if you saw any of the clips—

**Rachel:** No, I haven't listened to it.

**Griffin:** ... but aw, man, it slaps. It's good.

**Rachel:** But that made me think about translation. I made the mistake in graduate school of signing up for this like, French poetry seminar. [laughing] It was a real peer pressure situation.

**Griffin:** [laughs] I know how it is. Some of your friends start translating French poetry and then they're like, "Hey, you wanna try this? You wanna try this shit Rachel?"

**Rachel:** [laughs] I took French in high school and then before, maybe seven years pass, and I only took like four years of French.

**Griffin:** Which, the foreign language centers in your brain really like ferment and...

**Rachel:** I never got past the like, "This is how you say this noun. This is the day of the week. This is how you count."

Like I never got into real—

**Griffin:** That's most poems though, right?

**Rachel:** [laughs] So we had to like, identify a poet and read their work in the original French and then talk about it.

And it had to be kind of an understudied piece of- I mean it was... I was over my head, it was very embarrassing.

And that's when I really realized, like how impossible translation is. [laughs]

**Griffin:** Yeah, yeah man.

**Rachel:** Specifically poetry, for a lot of reasons. I mean you're dealing with what can often be like a very strict structure, like you know a sonnet or a haiku where there has to be a set number of syllables per line.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** There's also a lot of metaphor, you know? Like multiple meanings and expressions, and then there's a lot of interpretation and you know the length and...

I mean it's just... It's impossible.

And so I kind of looked into it a little bit and I'm, again I don't have a lot of expertise in this area, but obviously it was incredibly important.

Because if you think about it, with most artists, they are inspired by the work of other artists.

And particularly with translation, you wouldn't have the opportunity to be inspired by some like seminal works if you hadn't—

**Griffin:** If you can't understand, yeah.

**Rachel:** Yeah, if you hadn't seen the translation.

A lot of this started in the, you know, early translating Latin and that influence on Italian and French poetry.

In the 19th and 20th century, this is where you start to see like Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Eliot, T.S. Eliot, was translating a lot of their poetry.

Ezra Pound was translating a lot of Chinese and Japanese poetry. And then Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, these are all like famous poets.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Like these are not translators first and foremost, these are poets that were looking like across, you know, Europe.

And you see a lot of like Spanish poems and poets and Rilke, who I've talked about from Germany.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** All of it like, tremendously influential. And so I wanted to just use Google Translate.

**Griffin:** Oh no!

**Rachel:** And compare it to, like, the translation that was printed in a book.

**Griffin:** That's interesting. This is a fun game.

**Rachel:** But I didn't want to do a whole poem because I wanted to kind of dig into one.

So I picked Neruda.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Pablo Neruda, which is what Griffin saw me walk in with, and he's like, "Oh, are you talking about Pablo Neruda?"

And I was like, "Haha! No! Tricked ya!" [laughs]

**Griffin:** Rachel does this thing sometimes where she runs really fast with both of her arms behind her back and she calls it a "Neruda run" and I'm... I don't think she knows... I don't think she... I haven't had- I haven't like, had the courage to correct her on it.

**Rachel:** I would like to say that that is a joke a small percentage of our listeners will get, but...

**Griffin:** Oh no, actually I've engineered- No, no, no, baby, I've been engineering that joke—

**Rachel:** [cackles]

**Griffin:** ... for four years, knowing that it would tactically strike basically every one of our listeners.

**Rachel:** Okay. Can I...?

**Griffin:** Yes, please.

**Rachel:** Okay, so I'm not gonna read it in Spanish, I'm just... Because I can't speak Spanish. But I'm going to read the Google translation and the actual published translation.

And just part of this poem, that in English is called "Girl Gardening."

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** I'm not reading the whole poem.

Do you have a preference or a suggestion as to whether I read Google Translate or the published poem first?

**Griffin:** I would say the published poem first.

**Rachel:** Okay. that's a good idea.

**Griffin:** And then Google Translate.

**Rachel:** Okay. Let me figure out... where to stop...

**Griffin:** Who translated Pablo Neruda, for this section?

**Rachel:** So this is Ben Bellet. It's an addition-

Actually, it was interesting, when I was reading about translation and I was like troubleshooting and curious about kind of what the issues were, this edition that I have actually just omits pieces of poems.

**Griffin:** [quizzically] Huh.

**Rachel:** So there is a poem that I was looking at, I was reading this article in the Guardian and somebody wrote about this translation and talked about how there is a particular poem that they were all reading in a group, like him in some other people.

And there was a whole canto eliminated from the poem in this edition. It's "The Heights of Machu Picchu", it's like a 12-poem sequence.

**Griffin:** Hell yeah.

**Rachel:** And they just like left out almost half of it in this edition.

And so there's like a real like... Because they were sitting all together reading different editions, and it was like, "Oh, I only have half that poem."

So clearly like, this may not be the best edition to read from, but I think it's still—

**Griffin:** It's gotta be better than Google Translate though.

**Rachel:** Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I think... This is... This is the power of Neruda. Like, Google Translate is still gorgeous.

**Griffin:** Yeah, okay.

**Rachel:** Okay. So, "Girl Gardening." And this is not the whole poem.

**Griffin:** And this is the...?

**Rachel:** This is, I'm reading it from—

**Griffin:** Ben Bellet version?

**Rachel:** Yeah. I'm reading it from the published translation.

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** And another... Just one more piece. Pablo Neruda writes like the sexiest, horniest poems ever.

**Griffin:** It's horny, horny, horny on main, nonstop 24/7 Boner City.

**Rachel:** [laughs] [reading poem, Bellet translation]

"Yes, I knew that your hands were a blossoming clove in the silvery lily/Your notable way with a furrow and the flowering marl."

"But when I saw you delve deeper, dig under to uncouple the cobble and limber the roots/ I knew in a moment, little husbandman, your heartbeats were earthen no less than your hands/ That there you were, shaping a thing that was always your own/ Touching the drench of those doorways through which whirl the seeds."

**Griffin:** Whew.

**Rachel:** Okay, so that's just... That's part of the poem.

**Griffin:** I'm gettin' sweaty over here.

**Rachel:** [laughs] Google Translate, in the Spanish version, the title is directly, "Ode to the Gardener".

**Griffin:** Okay.

**Rachel:** Which, because there's no masculine and feminine in English, at least in the traditional way.

**Griffin:** Huh. Yeah, sure.

**Rachel:** They had to call it, "Girl Gardening" in the book, just to be like, "Hey, a there's... this... the lady."

**Griffin:** Right.

**Rachel:** "This is about a lady."

Okay, so here is the Google Translate version, "Yes, I knew that your hands were the flowery wallflower, the silver lily/ You had something to do with the soil, with the flowering of the earth/ But when I saw you dig, dig, remove pebbles and handle roots/ I suddenly knew, my farmer, that not only your hands but your heart were from the land/ That you were doing your own things, knocking on damp doors where seeds circulate."

[laughs] I almost like that one better.

**Griffin:** [shocked] I almost like that one much better!

**Rachel:** I really like that. "Knocking on damp doors where seeds circulate"?

**Griffin:** [simultaneously "where seeds circulate"?

**Rachel:** Whereas this one says, "touching the drench of those doorways through which whirl the seeds."

**Griffin:** I mean that's... that's evocative and powerful as well.

**Rachel:** And maybe this speaks to the power of Google Translate, like maybe like, you could put anything in there? [laughs]

**Griffin:** [laughs] No, I mean you can't... For the many reasons you outlined, you can't just plug rhyme and meter into a computer and then the computer...

Although, I don't know man. Fucking AI art is getting so bonkers out there.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** And I mean I guess a lot of that is it pulling from different deep clouds of art data that exists. Man, I don't know. I'm out of my depth—

**Rachel:** [laughing] I know.

**Griffin:** ...in a couple of different fields talking about this right now, but that was shocking to me.

**Rachel:** Yeah, no.

**Griffin:** I really... I broke my own rule and vibed with that in a big, big way, Google Translate.

**Rachel:** [laughs] I was reading like an NPR story from 2018 where they spoke with an award-winning literary translator, Aaron Coleman, who talks about translation and just gives some examples.

And he translates a work by Catherine Hulshof and he notes specifically, like in the poem he's translating, in Spanish, "tiempo" means both time and weather.

And then Coleman said, "We don't have that opportunity for metaphor in English, so I did 'days' instead of 'time' in order to get at weather and also the passage of time."

Like that's just like—

**Griffin:** Yeah, sure.

**Rachel:** ...a little example of like...

**Griffin:** But do you know what this reminds me of is art restoration, right?

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** Like obviously it's a different thing, but we used to watch those Baumgartner art restoration videos in which he would sort of emphatically talk about the restore-

And obviously, like, art restoration and translation are two different fields entirely.

But he would talk about how like, it is not his place to change the original sort of vision of the painting.

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** And that is so fascinating to me because if you are translating a poem and you have to adjust metaphor or rhyme or meter or change the words—

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** ... just so it still sounds good? Like, you cannot help but kind of get a hand on the ball in a way.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** That's really- And I'm not saying that it is without virtue because of that, because obviously it's essential work.

But then when a computer is doing that, are you all of a sudden dealing with a completely unbiased sort of voice, right?

That's not like, "Ooh, I bet I, the translator, knows what it's gonna- This is gonna sound way, way, better." Like...

**Rachel:** Yeah, I think... It's interesting, right? Because everybody looks at or reads like a piece of art or listens to it differently.

**Griffin:** Right.

**Rachel:** Like that is part of your experience of it, is you are bringing different interpretation.

But with translation you are kind of guiding the hand a little bit.

**Griffin:** A little, yeah.

**Rachel:** Because you are making choices, potentially against or in opposition to, what the poet's intent was.

**Griffin:** And obviously like, it is a question of the... I'm... The good translators, I imagine do not take the ball and run with it as much?

**Rachel:** Yeah, yeah.

**Griffin:** But yeah, this is really fascinating.

**Rachel:** Yeah. It's... To me, I imagine it's incredibly rewarding and like an enjoyable exercise to do. But I would be so frozen, just terrified, you know? And constantly second guessing.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Of like, you know, is this the right direction? Am I losing something?

Like, did I make a choice that is going to totally change the experience for the reader and not help them kind of get what the original intent was? I don't know.

It is something that I can't even imagine attempting. Not just because I don't have the language proficiency.

**Griffin:** Yeah, sure.

**Rachel:** But because like, you have to make decisions.

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Like the very nature of it is you saying like, "This is what we're going with."

**Griffin:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** And the second anybody came up to me and be like, "You know, did you...?"

I'd be like, "I don't know, I'm sorry!"

**Griffin:** "No no! Please, I don't know!" That's awesome.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Thank you.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** Thank you for the gift of this segment, I'll be thinking about this for a while today.

**Rachel:** The Poetry Hallway.

**Griffin:** The Poetry Hallway.

Thank you to bo en and Augustus for the use of our theme song, "Money Won't Pay", you can find a link to that in the episode description.

And thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network.

Go to [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org), check out all the great shows that they have on [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org).

If you never lishen[sic]... lishened[sic]...

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** If you never lishened[sic] to *Mission to Zyxx* they just wrapped up the series back in... I think in last month, in September. Very special show. Very funny and cool sci-fi—

**Rachel:** Yeah!

**Griffin:** ... sort of space opera, that if you've never listened to, I encourage you to give it a shot, today.

**Rachel:** Oh, yeah! And speaking of which there's a new arc of the...

**Griffin:** *Of The Adventure Zone!*

**Rachel:** *Adventure Zone*, that is led by one Justin McElroy.

**Griffin:** Justin McElroy is DMing *Adventure Zone* this season, it's called *Steeplechase*, it takes place in a sort of Disney World-inspired super corporate—

**Rachel:** Yes.

**Griffin:** ... place. And we are thieves in it. And we do crime and we play *Blades in the Dark* and it's so fucking fun.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** And I bet you're going to love it. I think you should go listen to it. There's a couple episodes up, I think, by the time you're listening to this.

But that's it. We're done. We're done with it.

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Griffin:** We're done with it. We finished it, we did it. We didn't know if we were going to do it, but we did it.

**Rachel:** Now get outta here!

**Griffin:** Now get the... Now you get the hell outta here!

I really don't even wanna pretend...

**Rachel:** I know, what if we ended—

**Griffin:** ... to wield that.

**Rachel:** What if we ended [laughs] every episode with that?

**Griffin:** Yeah, what if our whole thing was like, "We talk about things that are nice, things are good, things we're into. But get the hell out of my office!"

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** But we cry also while we do it 'cause we know that like we're pushing them away.

**Rachel:** Yeah, but like in order to grow they have to leave.

**Griffin:** They have to leave.

**Rachel:** [laughs]

**Griffin:** I... I like this.

**Rachel:** [laughing] Get the hell out of here!

[Outro, theme music plays]

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