

Wynne Leon (00:06)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that takes a deep dive into collaboration.

I'm Wynne Leon, and in this episode, award-winning playwright Jack Canfora and I are with author Maxine Rosaler. Maxine's book of short stories, *The Missing Kidney*, was released in May of this year and picked by Oprah's Daily as one of the best summer reads of 2025. This is a fantastic book with stories told over decades. Many have been published in literary journals.

and are collected here in this delightful collection. Maxine tells us about the book and her love of delving into character. In this incredible book of stories set in the New York City of the 1970s and 80s, she talks about the city as a character in and of itself. Maxine tells us about how her time as a reporter helped tone her writing.

and she gives us a preview of the two novels she's writing now.

She tells us why she prefers writing short stories instead of novels and how sometimes you have to let things bake for a while before you're ready to write about them. This is a great episode with the best short story writer you've never heard of as Kirkus Reviews dubbed Maxine. We know you'll love it.

See you

Maxine Rosaler (01:55)

Hi there. Hi, Wynne and Jack. Okay, hi, fine. How are you?

Wynne Leon (01:57)

How are you?

We are so glad to be with you today because we love your writing. Just even in the 10 minutes we've spent warming up for this, just fascinating to talk to you. So we're delighted to talk to you. And you just released your book, *The Missing Kidney*, May 2025, right? 14 short stories. Can you give us an elevator pitch for this collection?

Maxine Rosaler (02:21)

Yes, yes.

I can't really exactly give an elevator pitch, but I can tell you that I wrote these stories over period of 40 years, okay? they fall into like different categories. My writing is very character-based, so I'm very interested in character, and I love quirky characters. So I would say that every story is very character-based and about a quirky character.

A lot of the stories are autobiographical or about people I know. And some of them just occur to me. And those actually are the easiest ones to write. People think that if you write autobiographical stories, you just record what you did. It's not true at all because you have to twist yourself around and change things. But the stories that come most easily to me are the ones that I just make up. So there are just a few of them in there. The baby.

The one I really love is man on the sidewalk grieving. Sometimes a gesture will just like with the baby that story occurred to me because this, I saw this baby who just been adopted who was petting himself and that seems so tragic to me and interesting. a lot of the stories though I wrote a very long time ago and...

And they really include a lot of stuff about New York that's no longer here. Like the peep shows on 42nd Street, the prostitutes and the drug dealers staking out corners in the East Village and ~ in Times Square, the filthy subways, the graffiti covered subways, the subways that were always breaking down, that were rarely air conditioned. So there's a lot of that in the story. So I really love describing the city.

I love the city. I've always loved the city. And since I've been here, it's certainly changed a lot. And yet somehow it lives, which is really amazing. Because I think the city is the people and the character of the people and the eccentricity of the people, the characters on the street. And that's what I like to draw into my writing is I always love to observe people and write about them.

And so every now and then I'll find someone and I'll just jot it down or I'll be on the subway and some pregnant woman will be there who's announcing that today is her birthday or someone will be talking about Jesus and you're all damned. So that's the city for you. So although all my favorite restaurants are gone, there are hardly any bookstores left.

I still love the city. and I don't know, it's a miracle that it survived.

Wynne Leon (05:07)

you write about is New York City of the 70s and the 80s. that fair?

Maxine Rosaler (05:11)

Yes,

most of the stories are there and then a few of them occurred to me much later on. A lot of my stories have themes, I find that I'm very connected to certain themes like denial is a very big theme of mine. And somehow I always like to find the tragic and the comic in life. And I feel like if there's not tragedy,

And if there's not, if the two aren't combined, if there's not something tragic, and I feel this way about people too, if there's not something tragic and deep about a person, but also something to sort of relieve the tragedy in absurdity or comic relief, then I'm just not interested. And that's how I feel about writers too. Like I feel like it's very hard for me to read a writer who doesn't combine those two elements, which I consider a big shortcoming of mine as a reader.

Jack Canfora (06:02)

That's interesting. What would you it's interesting that, know, some of these have been gestating for 40 years. Had you attempted to write them earlier? Because sometimes in my experience, sometimes I've read a couple of times, I've tried to do something and I've realized on some level it's not ready yet. You know, it needs to it needs to, you know, it's not soup yet. You know, it needs to, you know, to simmer for a while in the back.

Maxine Rosaler (06:27)

That

is hell. Okay, that's really hell. And I have to say that I know one thing that you were interested in talking to me about is what I'm working on now. So I'm just gonna jump all over the place if you don't Yeah, and you know, I find that whenever I speak to another writer, like we'll always start off with one subject, go on tangents and an hour later, we're back to square one, right?

Wynne Leon (06:36)

Great, absolutely.

Maxine Rosaler (06:48)

So anyway, so I find that this story, this novel I'm working on now, didn't have a take on the character until very recently. It actually is based on my life. A lot of my writing is autobiographical, and it's based on a relationship I had with an older man years ago. And it always made me nauseous to think about him. And I didn't know what it was about him that appealed to me.

So finally, I realized that it was the tragedy in his life that appealed to me. So this novel, if I want me to tell you about it. Yeah, please do. It's about, ~ you know, it's sort of a coming of age novel, so it's based very much on me. But again, autobiographical writing can be such a deceptive thing because you can make yourself anything you want. You can reveal truths about yourself that aren't truths.

or you could hide truths about yourself. So it's really all up to you what you do. So with this novel, I realized that what attracted me to him was really the tragedy in his life. What happened was he was driving his car with his son in the back in the front seat and it toppled into a ravine and he crippled his son for life. And somehow that made him, it sounds terrible maybe, but

It made him interesting to me. And also I'm sort of excessively compassionate, so I kind of wanted to help. I feel like, you another thing about my stories is that I really believe in the goodness of people. And I really hate the badness in people. So I would say that I'm very much driven by love and hate, extreme emotions. And that's what really drives me to write. But yes, sometimes you

just don't know what you're going to do. And with this character, it took me a long time to get a hold on him.

Wynne Leon (08:41)

And so is it therapeutic then? Because you said it made you nauseous to think about him. And now you've... therapeutic? Yeah, so is it therapeutic to sort of...

Maxine Rosaler (08:51)

I don't know, you I often think about that because like, for example, like my novel, I wrote another novel called Queen for a Day, which is based on my experience as the mother of a child with autism. It's based on other mothers, right? And I always like to plumb the depths of myself and other people. Now, is it therapeutic? I don't know. I really don't know. I can't say that it is or it isn't. I'd say in some respects it is.

Sometimes I can take, can write about something that happened and I can take part of that feeling and put it on the page, right? But it always lives within me. So I think that there's a certain degree of

therapeutic, you know, they're certainly therapeutic. And I find like writing itself is extremely therapeutic because for me it's really the only way

I can find peace of mind. I'm very, have a lot of anxiety and it really wasn't until I started writing that I found peace of mind. And for years, I always had stories running around in my head. I mean, I was always writing for a living because I always learned to earn a living as a journalist or something, doing something like that.

And so I was honing my craft, but I wasn't doing what I wanted to do. And then I, and I often thought, well, I wasted all that time not writing, you know, although I have all these stories running around my head, but I realized that the reason maybe that I wasn't really writing was because I hadn't found my voice because as soon as I sat down to write, I had my voice I do find that sometimes of course, you know, you'll know this.

Like as a writer, sometimes you'll write things that just completely repulse you, right? Like you just can't believe you wrote it. And there's less of that that happens now. And who knows, maybe I was avoiding that.

Wynne Leon (10:45)

And it's, I find that same thing about writing, which is

You know, you get to change that perspective. You get to flip it around. You get to see it backwards if you spend the time writing about it.

Maxine Rosaler (10:56)

Yes, that's exactly what it is. And it's really writing is all about finding your angle. If you have a fix on your character, usually it's kind of smooth sailing, although you hit a lot of obstacles along the way. Yeah, but it's true. You have to get your angle. And for me, again, I always have to distance myself from myself. And that's how I use irony.

to distance myself from myself because I can be very mushy and gushy and it's really revolting. My husband is also a writer, so we edit each other. We really do need editors. You were saying that, Jack, before, right? And he gets rid of all the mush and gush and he goes on forever. He writes historical novels and he goes on forever, so I get rid of that. So we really do need editors. Well, we need the right editors.

~

Jack Canfora (11:51)

You need a sympathetic but disciplined editor, tough editor.

Maxine Rosaler (11:56)

Yes, yes, and sometimes you'll get bad advice and you have to always know when to take, you are the ultimate arbiter of what you're going to be doing. And I've made mistakes sometimes going with people who give me bad advice, but usually I end up getting what I want. It really wasn't until I met my husband,

that I, it was kind of funny because the first, when I met my husband, I'd finally sat down to write my first short story, which was hospitality, which is in the collection, right? Which is based on, which is the novel that I'm writing now is based on that character, those characters. And it's funny, like he came into my life and all of a sudden I'd written my first short story and he was going to look at my story and he was thinking, and he's a,

look at this. is like this is our office. He reads all the time. Yeah, right. Yeah. He built them when we moved to the apartment and a friend of mine said that's the last thing he's gonna ever do. And you're right. The apartment. But

Jack Canfora (12:47)

Yeah, very jealous of your bookcases.

Yeah,

but quit while you're ahead, you know

Maxine Rosaler (13:02)

Yeah, right.

Exactly. So, know, and he really he was looking at my stories. And he he loved my writing. And then from then on, he was working as a temp typist because he didn't want to do anything that would interfere with his writing. And so he would type up my stories at work and call me up with tears in his eye, you with all choked up about things that I wrote. So it was wonderful. was all I ever needed. Really is affirmation because people have said to me like,

How could you go on for so long? You mind you, I had a lot of stories published in literary quarterlies I didn't get my first book published. My first fiction book published until I was 67. And it was really all I ever needed was my husband because I respect him so much to, you know, for some people support. And if you're a writer, you just have to write. It's just what you need to do. It's not about how, how you

about success at all. It's all about your drive and your need.

Wynne Leon (14:02)

Right,

right. Well, you mentioned hospitality and one of my favorite lines is, comes from that. my life like a bagel had no center. had always been indiscriminate in my choice of lovers in suitability being my major criteria.

Maxine Rosaler (14:20)

That's true. You know, and in the novel that I'm writing now, the first line used to be about how men used to follow me down the street, the sidewalks of the city with their briefcases and their, you know, their suits and their ties and their business cards. And I always avoided men like that. I always avoided the men that other women wanted.

I guess I've always was looking for character. And for some reason I had a very prejudiced view of anyone who lived the straight life, which is not such a great way, you know, wasn't so smart of me, but that's why I always picked out weird people. know, and again, it's in my nature to look for characters because I like quirkiness. And I, you know, again, all the characters I write about are quirky.

Wynne Leon (15:13)

Hmm. Interesting. How is working as a journalist? How did that shape your writing as a writer of fiction?

Maxine Rosaler (15:23)

Okay, well I would say that basically I'd say working as a journalist and you know, I did a lot of, I always worked as a writer of one sort or another. And I think basically it just honed my craft. got me, it really developed my facility as a writer. So I I have no trouble forming sentences When I was a reporter for a community newspaper, for example,

I would always look for the human interest stories. So I was always attracted to that. So I guess I got practice on my own writing about people. never took a writing course. I would be afraid to take a writing course. I really would. You know, I hated, go on.

Jack Canfora (16:09)

No, just wondering why.

Maxine Rosaler (16:10)

I just never occurred to me to do it. I have friends who teach writing and they always say you can't teach writing. And I, it just never occurred to me to take a writing course. The way I learned to write really, I just started writing. But then in terms of, you know, I'd already honed my craft as a

as a writer, I'm particular about prose styles. I can't read any writers who don't have prose styles that appeal to me. But I actually learned how to craft myself as a fiction writer by reading my favorite writers, John Cheever, who I absolutely love. I love him. has such depth and he has such a sense of irony. And Flannery O'Connor. I was just wild about her.

you know, her sense, you know, her depth and her sense of the absurd. So I basically, sometimes I would just be working on a story and, you know, I'm just going to show you how, you know, some of my writing techniques, if anyone's interested. And so I would, you know, I would go read the story and then I'd have a pen pencil by my bed because I always read in bed. And then

And I'd have the story that I was writing in the back of my mind. then something that one of those writers would say would spark something in me and I would write something of my own. Somehow or however, I never sound derivative. There's one line in one of my stories that's in this collection. It's in Zeldie Hamlish where there's a scene where the woman is visiting someone in a nursing home.

Her father's old lover in nursing home and she hears a man talking to calls, you know, the calls, come on baby, you know, light up, light up. And I just felt like that was John Cheeverish So, but I, that, but I do, so that's really how I've learned how to write. ~ And, ~ and it's just been a blessing for me. I don't know what I'll do if I can't write because I, I need it.

Some people will say, how do you have the discipline to write? And how could you have gone on so long without getting a book published? It's what I need to do. I do it for myself. And of course, I always do it with a reader in mind, but it's what I need to do.

Wynne Leon (18:31)

Mm-hmm. Yeah. You talk about your husband's encouragement, but you've also gotten some pretty great press and feedback on the missing kidney. To quote from the New York Times book review, brimming with scrappy characters navigating life in New York in the 70s and the 80s, both a kaleidoscope period piece and a timeless exploration of the complexities of human relationships.

Maxine Rosaler (18:59)

Yeah, that was great.

Wynne Leon (19:01)

Yeah, you also were picked by Oprah's Daily as one of the best summer reads of 2025. Do you have a favorite piece of feedback?

Maxine Rosaler (19:10)

Well, of course, being said, being anointed by Kirkus Reviews is the best short story writer you've never heard of. That was nice. It was like a kind of backhanded compliment, but I thought it was very generous. It was great getting those that that kind of feedback and those kind of reviews. The Missing Kidney got great reviews also.

But these books don't really do very well. Not many people read literary fiction, but I think maybe they're afraid of it. But I always write to entertain and to, you know, for fun. And again, can't, I'm a very easy writer to read, maybe because I'm not an easy reader. I'm really not a, I'm not that great a reader.

And of course, it's so gratifying to me. I mean, there was this guy on Goodreads who wrote this review. He said, I now replaced him, replaced his favorite short story writer, So that was nice.

How invested am I in success? Not really that invested, but I'm invested in doing the best work I can. That's really what I'm about. mean, that sounds kind of, does that sound vainglorious? Maybe it does, but it's the truth.

Jack Canfora (20:21)

Well, it's the only thing you can control, The only thing you can control, ultimately, how well you do something, is the effort you put in. The other things are external and don't necessarily have a lot to do with you. All you can control is your effort.

Maxine Rosaler (20:24)

I'm sorry, say that again.

Yes, it's true. And a lot of writers waste a lot of time on worrying about that. And I'm very confident about the quality of my work. And I don't really waste time worrying about success. Although, of course, I do expect

success. I think everyone does in some way or another, but it's not what I hunger for the most.

Wynne Leon (21:10)

Do you guys have to educate me since I'm not a New Yorker? You you write about New York in the 70s and the 80s and you've talked a little bit about how it's changed because it really is sort of a character in your books. How is it grown up? How's New York changed in the last?

Maxine Rosaler (21:26)

Well, New York has changed tremendously. ~ It used to be I used to have all these wonderful places I used to want. You love to go to all these restaurants. They used to be bookstores. There was a lot of old stuff in New York. Old stuff. And I've always liked old stuff. And a lot of that has been replaced. there are hardly any bookstores left. There are really hardly any bookstores. I'm surprised.

I mean, The Strand is, this is kind of funny. Okay, so The Strand, which is just about the only, you one of the very few independent bookstores left in the city. And they had me come in to sign some books, right? And I found my book in the historical. Now, how do you think that made me feel? ~ Well, I refuse to give, I refuse to.

Maxine Rosaler (22:18)

feel old, okay? I feel like anyone in their 70s, and that's hard to believe. I don't think anyone can ever believe how old they are. I think, but that I asked, I did ask them to change that. So that's one thing. So I loved the old New York thing.

Jack Canfora (22:36)

That's where my books are stored in the bookstore. Excuse me? That's where my books are stored at the Strand. really?

Maxine Rosaler (22:44)

I love the idea of people just kind of having revelations and revealing their innermost darkest thoughts ~ without even knowing it. Because I think so much of us hide from the darkness within us. And I think that just to be a human being in this world, you have to...

be in denial and you have to be hiding from truth, right? But every now and then it hits you in the face. And that's one of the things I like writing about. And I did that with a story too, Mari Grace, that was based on a woman I was friends with. And she was this incredible optimist. She just thought everything was great, everything was great. And this story is pretty much true to life. I mean, although I always make stuff up.

And it turned out her life was really hell. had a boyfriend, her husband who was a slime bucket. He was horrible. And the character, the character I base on myself is kind of, is really sick of herself. She wants to learn something different. So she's going on to this very, this kind of ridiculously optimistic woman and she's believing in her optimism. And slowly but surely,

she comes to see this woman's optimism is really all about denial because her life is really hell. And then I'm gonna blow the ending of this story And then she runs into this woman maybe a year

or two later and the woman is still putting on this false face, false front about how everything is great. And she talks about her husband and her husband left her for a younger woman.

And then the woman, the me character, glances her unwittingly, she unwittingly reveals herself, her true self, and you just sort of see her face and you see the despair. So I love that. love, I guess, know, it's funny to talk to you, I'm sort of thinking about what themes do I have in my stories. And,

You know, people, you know, then there are people who worship false gods, right? I really I have a thing about that, too, like in A Stroke of Luck, which was one of my first published stories. It was published in the Southern Review. And that was great. ~ And it also got some sort of honors and stuff. And that was based on a man, a very naive man, a naive young man who embraced all the materialistic values of of his peers.

And then in the end you just sort of see that he's just worshipping false God. I do find that I do have themes running through all my stories, themes that I like to explore. And I do believe in truth. I do believe in goodness. I do believe in love. I hate evil. I hate...

I hate lying. So I managed to embrace these, I managed to get it all out in my stories. I feel. Because in real life, I'm not confrontational at all.

Jack Canfora (26:02)

Do you find that ~ you said you talk about, you have certain themes in your writing. Are you conscious of them when you start writing that I'm gonna explore this theme or do you find that they develop on their own and there's a commonality to your work that you're not conscious of when you're doing it?

Maxine Rosaler (26:19)

No, they definitely develop on their own. think that the reason I'm attracted to writing, I feel like so much, first of all, the best writing, as any writer knows, takes place in the unconscious mind. It's just basically your unconscious mind dictating to your fingers. so lots of times I don't really consciously know what I'm doing or consciously think that.

In fact, my husband will often say, well, look what you did here. Look what you did there. I said, what? I did that. I didn't know I did that. And often I do some of my best writing when I'm swimming. I swim a lot. sometimes I'll just sort of set myself an assignment and just thought that

Jack Canfora (27:00)

Paper must get wet though. Yeah it does.

Maxine Rosaler (27:04)

But you know, and then I always have to try to remember, well, am I going to remember this? And I usually do.

Wynne Leon (27:09)

Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm.

Yeah. That's interesting because for me, I guess it's a little bit more tactile for me. It's hard for me to write in my head. I can think about ideas, but really the dialogue, or in your case, the prose and dialogue, I need to be writing that in order for that to happen.

Maxine Rosaler (27:31)

Well, of course, when it comes to the writing, that's a whole different story.

Wynne Leon (27:34)

Yeah, yeah.

You're saying your ideas sometimes you work you work

Maxine Rosaler (27:39)

The ideas and then often I will come up with first lines or phrases which I often will forget. But I can say that no, of course, it's the writing and the biggest pleasure, think, I don't know how you feel about this, but it's such a pleasure to really mold your sentences to really, ~ know, after the thing is finished, to go and really craft it and

And then you feel like a master of what you're doing. You know what you're doing. And it's a wonderful feeling. The worst feeling is facing the void. That is unbearable. And I think every writer faces that.

Wynne Leon (28:22)

Jack has a phrase about calibrating sentences, which I love that phrase because I think that describes what you're talking about. ~

Maxine Rosaler (28:31)

yeah, it's wonderful. It's just like massaging the words and you know, I've always been in love with words. love, I'm in love with words and finding the right word and I write, and for me writing is very musical. I really, like lots of times my husband, for example, will edit something. you're repeating yourself so much. Well, I like repeating myself because it fits in with the rhythms of my sentences. Yeah.

Jack Canfora (28:58)

Well, from a craft perspective, talk to me about how you approach short stories versus novels. Like, when do you know, this is a novel story, or this is a short story? And how do you approach it?

Maxine Rosaler (29:12)

Okay, well, with Queen for a Day which was a novel and stories. Originally, what I did was I wrote it. I wrote a bunch of short stories, right? And then I decided to make it a novel in stories. So with that in mind, I went back to all those stories and somehow linked them together and created a chronology that would work as a novel.

Before that, I was always a short story writer. I never thought I could write a novel. And I don't think I ever want to write another novel again, because I find writing a novel, have to write things. Short stories are like poetry.

So you really can really get to, can really, they're very concise and they really cut to the quick. A novel is more drawn out.

Jack Canfora (30:06)

Do you do any outlining or do you just sort of like wait for the discoveries as you're writing?

Maxine Rosaler (30:11)

Well, sometimes I outline, sometimes I definitely outline, and sometimes I don't. And sometimes I like to know where I'm going, and sometimes I don't.

Wynne Leon (30:20)

Hehehehe

Maxine Rosaler (30:22)

kid and some. ~

Wynne Leon (30:24)

Waiting for that flow state, right?

Maxine Rosaler (30:26)

yes. Yes, really. The unco- it's really amazing. You really have to tap into the unconscious because once- so this is the way it works, okay? The unconscious mind is what creates. The conscious mind is what molds. so that's where your craft comes in. So it's the- there's the craft versus the creation. And the creation has to just jump forth from you.

and flow from out of your unconscious onto the keyboard. I used to love writing in longhand and I always used to write with pencils and yellow pads, but now I write right on the computer.

Wynne Leon (31:09)

Yeah. Well, Maxine, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about your book, The Missing Kidney, and your short stories and all of the work that you've done over your incredible career. So thank you so much for your time.

Maxine Rosaler (31:23)

Well, thank you. such a pleasure to meet both of you and such a pleasure talking to you. I love talking about this stuff. Okay. Okay. care. ~ Thank you so much. Okay. Bye bye.

Wynne Leon (31:30)

It's so fun. ~

you

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