

Wynne Leon (00:02)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that celebrates how we inspire others by sharing their stories.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, I sit down with social psychologist, writer and editor Anne Beall to explore the ideas behind her book, *The Compassionate Writer*. Anne shares her journey from researcher to founder of the Chicago Story Press Literary Magazine and offers a clear, compelling elevator pitch for her transformative approach to writing with compassion.

We dive into the four pillars of compassionate writing, compassion for ourselves, for others, for the reader, and throughout the writing process, and discuss how these practices can elevate both the storytelling and personal growth, and also breaks down the thoughtful structure of her book, which blends explanation, real-world examples, practical exercises, and guided visualizations to help writers deepen their craft.

You'll hear and reflect on her unique superpower of seeing stories from a fresh perspective, how her background shaped that lens, and why it can both be an asset and a challenge. We also explore her other works, including *Cinderella Didn't Live Happily Ever After*, and talk about the impact of fairy tales and how reframing their messages can empower us. If you're looking for inspiration, creative insight,

or tools to become a more mindful and empathetic writer. This conversation is packed with value. It's a rich, energizing episode you won't want to miss. I know you'll love it.

Anne Beall (01:59)

you

Hey there, Wynne, how are you?

Wynne Leon (02:17)

I'm great, I'm so excited to talk to you because you had me nodding my head constantly as I read *The Compassionate Writer*. Like, in fact, I was taking so many notes that I was averaging one per page. you know, was that confluence of writing, psychology, and meditation, and was so powerful. I had to remind myself to slow down, otherwise my notes were going to be as long as the book.

Anne Beall (02:45)

I'm so glad it resonated with you. That just makes me so happy.

Wynne Leon (02:48)

So, so good. So, you have such an interesting background. You have PhD in social psychology. You're a writer and editor and you founded a literary journal. Tell us your story.

Anne Beall (03:03)

Yes, so I think that I have a tendency to do a lot of different things because I get bored easily. you know people said you know specialize in one thing and ~ no I don't want to. But if you actually look at everything that I do I'm really interested in people. I'm really interested in people's stories. I'm really interested in understanding sort of a deeper meaning behind things, behind my own life, behind other people's lives.

I'm really interested in just kind of figuring out individual people and the world that we live in. So that's really what's the thread that goes through all my work. It's what I study, it's what I write about, it's the literary journal where we publish creative nonfiction and understand stories about people's lives. That's really the thread.

Wynne Leon (03:48)

Yeah, that's pretty amazing. you started out getting your PhD in social psychology and then and so you probably were writing along the way.

Anne Beall (03:58)

I was actually, was, I actually have always been writing ever since I was child. I wrote short stories and stuff, fictional things. And then I got my PhD in social psychology, but I decided not to go into academia. I went into the business world and I ended up having a very successful business career. owned my own company, but I continued to write all along the time that I was in business. I actually wrote a book.

that ended up being really influential in terms of helping my business be successful. That was strategic market research. And that book continues to sell to this day actually. But I also wrote lots of other things, books about animals and the bond we have with animals and what meaning they bring to our lives. I wrote about reading body language and I wrote a lot of things about myself and my own life. So that's...

Wynne Leon (04:30)

Which book was that?

Anne Beall (04:52)

When I sold my business in 2024, I actually started the Chicago Story Press Literary Journal. I had started the press in 2020 and we were publishing anthologies, were collections of true stories about people's lives. And I edited those stories. But I started the Literary Journal in 2024 because I had retired and I really wanted to have an online journal that anyone could access that had no paywall that people could share with their friends. I published in this journal.

And so that's what I started doing in 2024 after I sold the business. And that journal was actually voted among the top 20 most popular literary magazines of all time. Wow. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (05:36)

What a great trajectory and story. We're here to talk about your latest book, which is The Compassionate Writer. Can you us the elevator pitch for that book?

Anne Beall (05:48)

For sure. So the elevator pitch is that for a long time I wanted to be a better writer and I was always worried about grammar and I was always worried about, you know, tenses and I got worried about, you know, all the things about writing that are very technical in nature. And I realized actually that the thing that really moves writing along is the story.

And great stories are ones in which we have compassion for the people within them, whether that's ourselves, if we write about ourselves, or it's for the characters we write about if they're fiction, or if we write about our lives, it's compassion for the people who play a role in our lives. And those are the stories that really are effective because they're real. Those are real people with real flaws, and that's reality. That's the world we live in. And so compassion really opened up, for me, a greater understanding of how to write

better because I could see much more nuance. could see much more than the black and the white. I could see really the gray and that is I think what really moved my writing forward so much and I started to share these learnings with other writers and they really thought that they resonate.

Wynne Leon (07:00)

Yeah,

and I can say that that's true, just as a reader feeling that. So you mentioned four areas of compassion. Ourselves, compassion for others, for the reader, and in the writing process. And your explanations, I thought, were so helpful. I'm going to quote you from page 53, where you write,

If a scene or memory feels more like revenge writing than storytelling, consider deleting it. Sometimes leaving certain details out or reframing them with more empathy can make your story stronger, not weaker.

Anne Beall (07:43)

Yes.

Wynne Leon (07:44)

Can you more about that compassion in all those areas?

Anne Beall (07:49)

Because yeah, so compassion for ourselves, you know, if you're a writer and you write, you know, about your, your life, compassion for yourself means really looking back on the past and looking at it with a lens of empathy or compassion and saying to yourself, okay, I did that. I regret it, you know, and what else was going on for me at the time? What was, what were the beliefs I had? What were the influences that were shaping my behavior? What were the things that I, you know,

was affected by maybe in my history. so having compassion for yourself, you know, when you write memoir is really important because we tend to, when we write memoir, we write ourselves as either the villain or we write ourselves as the hero. You know, and it's like, you're neither, you're neither of those things. You're a person, you're a real person. You did some great stuff. You did some not so great stuff. You live in this world. And so let's see the good stuff and the bad stuff and let's see it through a different lens.

understand why you made that mistake. What are all the things that led to that? Or what's, let's understand maybe some of the things that led you to act in a way that you're really proud of, but what are the other forces that were at play? It's not just you being rah rah rah, the best ever. So that's about, you know, compassion for yourself. When you write about yourself, compassion for other people is a lot of the same. Now you are a part of that person's life. And I write about my mother quite a bit in the book and how I didn't have a lot of compassion for her.

and how I tended to be really disappointed in her. But looking back and seeing where she has her own history. She grew up in a very troubled, dysfunctional home. She grew up very poor. She really didn't think that she could get the education she needed. She couldn't make a living in the way that she wanted to. She saw marriage as her out from a pretty poverty-stricken lifestyle. And so when I look at her behavior, can say, she wasn't a great mother.

did a lot of things that were problematic. But if I look at her in a bigger picture and say, you know, this is a woman who had very little confidence, who saw marriage as the only way to kind of get where she wanted to go, I can start to have some compassion for her and realize that some of her behavior, although not excusable, and we can never excuse people and say, well, because X, Y, and Z, they still hurt you. They still do things to you that hurt, but you don't excuse it, but you see it in a broader perspective.

Wynne Leon (10:12)

And you do such a good job giving the example of writing about your mother. mean, and there's a lot of different things to illustrate with this, but with the Mink coat story.

Anne Beall (10:22)

Yeah, my mother had a Mink coat and I was really unhappy about the fact that my stepfather had given her this Mink coat and my father was a professor and she had left my father for this man who was a business person and he gave her this Mink coat and it was like over the top and I saw this as just terrible and you know, ~ it's all about his wealth and I didn't really like that it was such an indication and symbol for a value system I didn't agree with.

And I also saw it as also a rejection of my sister and me in some ways and sort of ~ embracing this new lifestyle. And for me, it was all about me. But as I saw this over the course of her lifetime, I realized that this was actually a symbol of hope. This is a symbol that she could have security, that she could be warm, that she was loved, that

she could count on him. And that's what it really was for her. And it was also a way for her to feel good about herself, to wear it in public and think people were envious.

And of course, I only saw that after she died, which made me feel very sad.

Wynne Leon (11:24)

Yeah, but you know and then as you wrote about it, I mean just uncovering those

learnings and healing for yourself. I mean, it's just a great illustration of exactly what you're teaching in this book.

Anne Beall (11:39)

Yeah, and it's really important because I have to have compassion for myself when I look back on that. For the child that I was, for the sadness I had about my parents' divorce and my mother's kind of moving into a different lifestyle. But I also have to have compassion for her. And those are two examples where I think I do understand both perspectives and readily believe they make a difference. In terms of compassion for the reader,

Compassion for the reader is really about feeling that you can create characters that are real enough that they can feel seen on the page. And who doesn't want to be seen? And when you show yourself as a vulnerable person who makes mistakes and who does great things and some not so great things and all the things that led to those things, you let the reader feel like they can see themselves on the page. They understand maybe some of their regrets. They understand some of their life experiences. ~

And it's also about having compassion for the reader in terms of making a story clear, making it understandable, making it something that's, you know, engaging for the reader and that doesn't make them feel stupid or like, I don't get this, I'm confused. That's not fun for the reader.

Wynne Leon (12:52)

And I would say too, making sure it's a little bit of respect as well as compassion, making sure it's worth their time.

Anne Beall (12:59)

Yeah. And I think, you know, if you're writing about groups that you don't know well, you know, I'm a white middle-class woman, you know, can I really write about an African American man who's in his teens? I probably can't do that all that well. So I need to maybe go talk to some folks who are, you know, in that group. And I need to understand some of what that life perspective is. Because if I write about that person, you know, if an African American man in his teen picks up that book,

I want him to feel seen and that I didn't portray him stereotypically, which is what I think we do a lot of times when we write about groups we don't know well. And the last piece

is the compassion for the writing process, which is a little bit about compassion for yourself as a writer. And so that's a little bit about sort of being gentle with yourself. Writing can be very hard. As I mentioned, I wrote a piece today about how writing is very hard when things are tumultuous around us and when...

You know, there's a lot going on that's very stressful in our lives. And there's a lot going on right now that's very stressful. And so, you know, I have to have some sense of empathy for myself. If I have a hard time sitting down and writing, what is that really about? And so we need to kind of be sensitive to what are we feeling and thinking and what are the blocks in place? And are we having trouble writing? Is there an inner critic that like, you know, someone in the back of my mind saying, Hey, you don't know how to write. You don't know what's going on.

And kind of being gentle with myself and say, okay, maybe this isn't the day that I should be writing. Or maybe I need to just sit down and just see what comes out. But just being gentle and understanding writing is hard. You know, getting lots of rejections, which we all get as writers. That's something we have to deal with. You have to be resilient and you have to not take rejections personally. And you have to understand when you query a hundred agents and you get no response.

That's very realistic and doesn't mean that you're a poor writer and doesn't mean that you don't have something important to say. So it's a writing process. think we have to be gentle, but we also have to be very forgiving and empathetic because it's hard.

Wynne Leon (15:03)

Yeah. Well, I love how you sort of help us see, know, you name a couple of effects like the actor observer effect where when we see ourselves doing something, it's because of the circumstances. I didn't have choice, but if you see if somebody else doing it, you think it's because of their character. So things like that and the self-serving bias, which is similar. I love how

The way that you reframe it helps us, you know, sort of counterbalance our own biases.

Anne Beall (15:39)

sure. There's so many things that work. I you I think I mentioned ~ the sense that, for example, let's say you query 100 agents or 50 or whatever, ~ and you get no positive response, you can start to say, ~ I don't have anything valuable. But you don't understand that, you know, agents respond to less than 1 % of what they actually receive. Right. You know, literary magazines, in general have less than 1 % acceptance rates.

So, you know, it's really hard. It's easy for you to be the center of the universe and to think that something is going on that isn't actually going on. Right. And yes, I try and think about a lot of psychological principles that are at play because, you know,

different kinds of effects like the actor observer effect and things like that, you know, they are at play and we don't even know that we're affected by these types of biases.

Wynne Leon (16:37)

Right. see it in my kids, although I have young kids that are six and 10. See it in them and how they tell the stories all the time. You know, it just.

Anne Beall (16:47)

Yeah,

we always see other people's... Yeah, we always see other people's behaviors as due to their personality, but we see our behaviors due to our circumstance. I couldn't help it. I had no choice. And that's another problem because again, when we're writing about ourselves, we tend to say, it's because I'm such a great person and that happened because that person's, you know, such a terrible person. And it's like, or no, this happened, a bad thing happened to me because of the circumstance.

know and I couldn't help it but that person did something bad because they're a bad person and of course that's not correct.

Wynne Leon (17:20)

Well, and going with that story leaves so much depth out of it, right? And so that's what I love. And so you provide some exercises, which I think is an act of compassion in and of itself, but you provide some exercises for writers, like the Why ladder, to help build that depth and understanding. And each chapter includes the explanation, examples, exercises, and guided.

visualizations. Tell us how you came to that format.

Anne Beall (17:51)

So I came to that format because I think different people have different ways of learning. so lots of writers say, we want prompts. We want prompts. I want prompts. Give me a prompt. And so I do have prompts in there to help you write. But I also have exercises to give you a sense of here's this concept and here's how you would use it. And so that's a different way of learning.

~ I also give examples. So some people learn when they see something, ~ now I understand that. And I see how I would apply that to my own writing. And then my last thing is the guided visualizations, which is very different for a craft book, very odd and different. And some of my reviewers are like, yeah, I'm not really used to this. I'm not sure about this. But it's actually one of the things that people respond very positively to because sometimes instead of

getting in front of a piece of paper or doing exercise. You just need to go into your head and relax. Take a journey. Think about it. Go to Writer's Haven and visit the guru who can help you understand why are you having writers block And that's this kind of stuff.

Not everybody learns that way, but it's a very different way of engaging with the concept. And it sometimes is very illuminating for people. It's certainly been very, very helpful from my perspective.

Wynne Leon (19:11)

Yeah, Well as somebody who meditates I loved it. I think the mountain of wisdom is one of my favorite of your visualization exercises I think it's just a different way to as you said access that depth and wisdom and and You know step back from the piece of paper and and see it bigger. I really enjoyed it You've published eight nonfiction books

including Cinderella Didn't Live Happily Ever After, which I think is the book that I was first introduced to you from.

You have a talent for seeing things in a different light. Would you consider that one of your superpowers?

Anne Beall (19:55)

consider it one of my greatest strengths and of my greatest weaknesses.

Wynne Leon (19:59)

How's that? Say more about that!

Anne Beall (20:03)

I definitely do see things differently than most people see them. ~ And so that is a great gift to me because I actually, you know, I came from a family where my father was born in Canada, but my family regarded themselves as English. My father always regarded himself as an outsider to the society. And so he tended to see the world in front of him as like perplexing and interesting, which is probably part of the reason I'm a psychologist. ~

My mother was born in a very impoverished situation in the deep south and ended up moving north. So she has a different perspective on society, of course. And then I had all these relatives living around the world. My grandfather lived in Taiwan. My grandmother lived in England. my aunt lived in Amsterdam. And we lived in New Zealand when I was a child for like a year. And so my perspective is very different.

not very mainstream. yeah, I do have kind of a different take on things. And I think that's great. However, sometimes I find in terms of a weakness, you know, I remember when I used to take standardized tests, I would look at the four options and I'd say, well, in this circumstance, that could actually be the case. And in this circumstance, this would be a totally different, you know, all four answers are completely reasonable.

My mind doesn't work like other people's minds.

Exactly. So and sometimes when I, you know, give my perspective on things, people say, ~ I hadn't thought of that before. And so, you know, what seems so obvious to me

is maybe not so obvious to other people. So ~ strength and weakness, I would say, is most of our attributes are.

Wynne Leon (21:49)

That's That's true. Well, I loved, you know, thinking I was just thinking back to

Anne Beall (21:57)

Cinderella Didn't Live

Wynne Leon (21:58)

Yeah, what I was was fascinated about is you know how you unpack these and and did research on them and I'm thinking of you know the the Scenario that you paint why? Royalty marry non royalty or and vice versa and how you unpack that and said in the situations where I found it it was 28 men that married into royalty non

and 22 women who married into royalty. Yeah, I think was surprising to me that it was more men that married into royalty. Yeah. But they did it for different reasons. Like it was because they had done something because they were brave but whereas women who got married into royalty was just because of how they looked.

Anne Beall (22:46)

just because of their appearance, right? In fact, in some fairy tales, in the Grimm's fairy tales, the king would see the peasant woman and literally just propose on the spot. In some cases, she couldn't speak. She was mute and he proposed on

Wynne Leon (22:56)

You

Anne Beall (23:04)

So you know, yeah, and the other interesting thing I always thought from that research that we did was ~ that powerful men were always good in fairy tales and powerful women were almost always evil. And so we have some really strong kind of, ~ you know, messages here about, you know, good and evil and who's good and who's evil. So. Right.

Wynne Leon (23:27)

Right, right. you know, given that my kids are young, I think about fairy tales because it is what they, we do listen to them. ~ And I think one of my favorite quotes that you sort of made me rethink, because of your ~ interesting perspective, is from Neil Gaiman. ~ You know, fairy tales are more than true, true. Not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.

Anne Beall (23:54)

Exactly.

Wynne Leon (23:55)

Yeah. And so we do listen to them. And one of my favorite ones for my daughter was the paper bag princess. I don't know if you're familiar with that story. It's a modern one where, you know, there's a princess, she's engaged to, somebody in her kingdom and he gets taken by a dragon. And the dragon burns down the whole castle.

Anne Beall (24:04)
not.

Wynne Leon (24:19)
And so she has nothing to wear, but she finds the paper bag and she puts it on and she goes to save the prince who is completely, ~ kind of worthless at helping. And she's really smart and she out foxes the dragon and she gets the, she saves the prince and he's like, why are you wearing a paper bag? And she's like, all right, I've saved you. I'm done. We're not getting married. ~

Anne Beall (24:46)
I love it.

Wynne Leon (24:49)
Anyway, it is a good twist and reading your work where you engage and help us think through that lens is just fascinating. ~

Anne Beall (24:50)
Good twist.

fairy tales. I'll be honest, I absolutely love them. mean, I just think we need to look carefully at sort of what they're saying under the surface. Right. And I like the Paper Bag Princess

Wynne Leon (25:10)
Yeah, it's a good one. So tell me what's next on your creative agenda.

Anne Beall (25:15)
my goodness, so many things I want to do in so little time. ~ Well, I've actually been writing a piece of fiction these days where a woman gets dropped into fairy tales, the traditional fairy tales. Things don't go exactly as we expect them to go. So that's one of the things I've been working on. And then the other thing I've been working on is this whole notion of, as I think you may know, I wrote a couple of books called, one is called

Embracing Self-Compassion Meditation Journeys for Self-Kindness and then Embracing Calm: Meditation Journeys for ~ Inner Peace. both of those tend to get read quite a bit. So I'm kind of wondering whether I want to do another embracing because I think people need to feel calm. And in these books, you're the actual ~ protagonist. So you go on these different journeys where you go to the fairy castle or whatever. So I'm kind of thinking about something like that.

Wynne Leon (26:08)

What a great combination of some of your already published... Yeah, that's wonderful. I love it. Is there anything that I haven't asked that I should be asking about The Compassionate Writer?

Anne Beall (26:24)

No, think that one of the things that people say, and I'll be curious if you agree with this, but one of the things people say is they feel the tone and the way it's written feels very conversational and it feels like I'm speaking to them, that they don't feel put off. It's not an instruction book of you need to do this or you need to do that, that it feels that the tone itself is compassionate. Is that true? Did you find that?

Wynne Leon (26:50)

Yeah,

do think that that's true. think, yeah, conversational, yes, it felt relatable and applicable because...

while you were imparting some very good explanations and exercises and writing prompts and you have all this incredible experience, you were providing the examples from your own writing and that made it feel accessible, I guess probably would be the word that I like most about it.

Anne Beall (27:23)

We are all very complicated creatures.

Wynne Leon (27:26)

I

know. I'm fascinated. Yes. You did a ~ wonderful job of that. And thank you so much for taking the time to come on and talk about your work.

Anne Beall (27:38)

Thank

you so much for reading the book and thank you so much for this lovely conversation. You really made my whole day.

Wynne Leon (27:43)

~ nice to hear. Thank you, Anne.

you

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Anne Beall (28:09)
you