

Wynne Leon (00:02)

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

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode I'm with author and educator Andrea Simon and we're talking about her wonderful book, *Did You Live the Life You Wanted?* We talk about perspective, regret, and the meaning of life. She tells us why she chose to write this as a novel and how the course she taught about how to write about family plays into her writing. There are so many fantastic female friendships and characters in this book.

that spans 50 years. Andrea talks about how she asked men and women if they lived the life they wanted and what she learned differs when women and men answer that question. We talk about the meaning of life and how writing plays into that. Andrea's incredible experience as an educator and facilitator shines through as we dig into the depth of life and how we share it. This is a great episode full of perspective and wisdom.

with a thoughtful guest. I know you'll love it.

Andrea Simon (01:18)

you

Wynne Leon (01:19)

you

Andrea Simon (01:24)

you

Wynne Leon (01:31)

Hey Andrea!

Andrea Simon (01:33)

Hi, how are you?

Wynne Leon (01:34)

I'm doing so well and I'm so excited for this conversation about your incredible novel, *Did You Have the Life You Wanted?*

Andrea Simon (01:45)

And thank you. I'm excited to talk to you about it.

Wynne Leon (01:47)

Yeah,

it has so much depth and interesting ~ aspects to it, but you've really covered the genres. You've published five books. You've done novels, memoir, historical fiction, anthology. And so I'm wondering if you can give us the elevator pitch for Did You Have the Life You Wanted? And tell us why it was you thought that writing this as a novel was the right...

genre.

Andrea Simon (02:15)

Right. Well, the elevator has, ~ is very slow. It has a lot of floors. I would say, did you have the life you wanted? It spans 50 years from 1968 onward. And it's basically at least half of it takes place in the 1970s in New York's Greenwich Village, ~ where the protagonist Anita, who had a similar life to me, lived there during very turbulent times.

when the gay rights movement was beginning, when the feminists, women had a new wave of interests and women were forming consciousness raising groups. There was Attica, there was ~ the Vietnam War, of course. And so it was a time of great turbulence. And ~ I spotlight the friendships of females during this formative time. And then look back again as an older person at these times of

how Anita formed her, especially her occupation and how she did not always do what she wanted to do and how she tried to correct that over the years.

Wynne Leon (03:24)

Right? Right?

Andrea Simon (03:26)

Elevator, you're at your floor.

Wynne Leon (03:30)

And as you said, there's some parallels to your life here, but this is a novel.

Andrea Simon (03:35)

Now, as you mentioned, every book I've done is quite different, know, the, Bashert the first one was, is a memoir and history based on the Holocaust and family members and what happened to them. And then I did a historical novel, gleaned from the material that I received from the first book. And then my third book was also sort of historical novel and all had a lot of,

basis in my own life, but some are more true than others. You know, I went from the memoir where they were real people, and then I went to this current book, which people who know me think it's me, but it really is a conglomeration. Some characters are fictionalized, some are combinations of people, but a lot of the events ~ happened in real life, and certainly the historical events.

I tried to capture as realistically as possible. So every one of my books has an element of history and it has the element of personal personality. And I would say this was more novelistic even though people think it's a memoir because I wanted to get more into the interiority of the main character, what she was thinking, how she saw life. And that's hard to do.

if you're writing the truth, because who really knows what people said, you know? You have to make up some of it. And I felt that was too constrictive to be totally truthful. And I also didn't want to write every little thing that happened in my life. I wanted to highlight the more instructive things and then new things started happening. So I wanted to open myself up to that possibility. So that's why I call that a novel.

Wynne Leon (05:26)  
Yeah.

Andrea Simon (05:27)  
Yeah. Maybe it's the notabiographically influenced not.

Wynne Leon (05:30)  
Right, right. And that's probably true of so many of the novels we read, right? It's hard to get away from that. I, one of the, you taught writing at the City College of New York. And one of the questions that I saw, and maybe it was in relation with this book or a different one, was that you can answer was, you know, how to write about your family and still have them talk to you afterwards.

Andrea Simon (05:55)  
That was a course I taught. That was a course I taught. They were two, well this is not the city college, but afterwards I started teaching online adults and not that the city college students weren't adults, but they were growing different. And so these were more people with years of life to them. And one was, because people have been asking me how to write about

their relatives and they're afraid to and they don't want to offend anybody and all that stuff. So I had this one course, how to write about your family and still have them talk to you. And then that led to the next course, which was how to write about your mom without guilt. And that that course, happened during the COVID and the women who, they're all women who signed up for it. And they were all over the country, including one woman from Australia.

Wynne Leon (06:33)  
Yeah.

Andrea Simon (06:46)

And we started talking about our mothers and within five minutes people were crying. mean, was just, it became very emotional. And after the course ended, nobody wanted to leave. We felt so tied to each other that we said, okay, we'll continue to meet. I won't be the teacher. I'll just be a member. And we'll talk about other things. Although the mothers kept coming back into the conversation. And so we ended up.

producing an anthology of our best essays and I was the editor and contributor of that one too so and that subject that you asked you know came up all the time how do i write about this i don't really want to offend my mother i mean many people's mothers were dead but still you don't want to upset that and you know I I always say you know don't use if you if you if you want to say something sensitively

and don't really want to offend someone who's alive, you change the name, you change the physical characteristics, you change the occupation, and you hope that you treat that person with respect and dignity. And I've never had anybody really complain to me about what I've written about them, except my mother, who is now dead, but when I wrote this book about growing up in the Catskill Mountains for the summer times, which I did,

And it was, you know, more autobiographical than some of the other things I wrote. And I said to her, if you read this, I don't want to hear any criticism. And she said, okay. And she promised. I knew she wouldn't keep to it, but anyway, at the end of a few days of nervous tension, she said, I have one complaint. And I said, all right, what is it? She said, why did you name the mother Estelle? My own name is so much better.

So, you know, I tell that story to people and they laugh because every, some people really have laughed at when, you write about them.

Wynne Leon (08:50)

Yeah. And what did you answer her?

Andrea Simon (08:52)

She was right. I said, I didn't want you to be angry that I wrote about you. She was right that her name was better. No, I was happy that that was the only thing she found. She was kind of proud to be in the book in a sort of weird way. So really, mean, the bottom line is you should write, I think, to please yourself. And if you have things that are sensitive that you want to write about,

Wynne Leon (09:03)

Right, right, right.

Andrea Simon (09:22)

Just get them out and try and get I mean you worry about offending people afterwards, you know I forgot who it was that somebody once said if you're worried about writing about

people who did terrible things to you Just think they shouldn't have done terrible things in the first place

Wynne Leon (09:38)

and I think your point about respect and dignity is such a good one. I mean, it's something that I've heard again and again is the more that, and I think it makes us better writers when we can do that. When we can understand from our characters or the people who influence this from their point of view, we can create a a better, fuller picture of that person.

Andrea Simon (10:03)

And it's also what's your motivation when you're writing is your motivation to get back at people who did bad things to you, or is your motivation to try and understand why this person did what they did, and understand the characters relation or reaction to that person. And if you operate from that point of view, I think you can possibly offend people unless they just

have their own psychological issues and really has nothing to do with what you're doing. I mean, in other words, I don't really worry about it the way I used to.

Wynne Leon (10:38)

That's good. That's a great piece of advice. So your book, Did You Have a Life that You Wanted, won the Pencraft Award for Literary Excellence as the best book for fiction in the women category. ~ you think that there's a difference between how men and women answer the question, Did You Have a Life You Wanted?

Andrea Simon (10:54)

Yeah

Yes, I asked a lot of people that question when I was writing this book, ~ men and women. I definitely think there's a difference. I think especially when older women of my generation, many of them did not go, I'm talking about occupations now. Many of them did not go into jobs that they really wanted to do. And I was asked in college what I wanted to major in and I named all these creative fields that the counselor said to me,

Become a teacher. That's the only thing you can do. You're a woman, you know, they didn't say that to men. So I think in general, men had more options and maybe some of them, you know, needed for financial reasons, didn't do what they wanted to do. But in general, men were happier with their life choices than women. And I also think that again, this is so generalized. They're less introspective about things like

examining their lives. mean, their sense of regret is maybe I didn't go to visit my mother enough or I didn't go to that place or whatever it is. It's not necessarily as fundamental as

it is to the women that I asked. And some women that I asked, I was shocked, said, I don't really think that way. I can't really answer that question. I had the life that I had.

And then a few people were quite upset by that question. They thought, well, I do regret that I didn't do these things. And I certainly didn't write it to upset people. basically want people to be aware of that and try to rectify it.

Wynne Leon (12:47)

Right. That's so interesting. mean, the whole point about men having more freedom and more agency in choosing how that life flowed is is such a fascinating study of

Andrea Simon (13:02)

Yeah, it is. is. Of course it varies, know, different generations will look at different things. My daughter's generation, she's in her 40s, they had much more choices than I ever had, but a lot of their choices now are dependent on the funding of the government. And they don't, they're not able to pursue a lot of things that they wanted to do. So you may have more choices, but you can't really predict what's gonna happen along the way.

of choosing something and letting that thing stay where it is. Look at even the writing world. Nothing has really changed, stayed the same. It's totally different. I mean, I was a photographer for many years and I was doing black and white pictures in the dark room and in whole of the dark ages. you know, I mean, who would spend eight hours with your hands on chemicals anymore? No one would have known that then.

Wynne Leon (13:55)

Right. Well, and and I love your website because it has so many of your beautiful photos and the traveling you've done and it's just great and we'll put the your website address in the show notes. But not only that, it seems like photos have changed just because I mean, I it was expensive to take a picture and develop it back in the day. And now we can take 10 pictures of the same thing to get the one that we want.

Andrea Simon (14:22)

Yeah, but it's

a different way of taking pictures. I mean, I'm comparing it to being a professional photographer, but now we just take pictures. We don't really think that it's a great composition. We're not, you know, we're not looking at the lighting. We're not looking to make a statement. We're not looking. I mean, it's not to say we don't do that occasionally, but it's more of a device to record, to post and to share. In my day, you took pictures if you went on a trip, that kind of stuff.

but you were interested in focusing. You were interested in light, even if you weren't a photographer, you were interested in composing something that said something. unfortunately, many of us have albums and albums of photographs, and we don't know

what to do with them. But things change and technology changes what we do. The trick is to try and find

something that responds to the technological change, but you could keep your own creative way of looking at things and bend to that, adapt to it as much as you can. That I find difficult.

Wynne Leon (15:34)

Because it takes that flexibility to adapt as all the structures and process and technology does,

Andrea Simon (15:50)

It's a and something has to be there for you to adapt to. I mean, the old days you wrote an essay, you send it to two or three magazines and you were lucky if somebody answered you, but still now what do you do? There's so many out there. How do you approach it? But it shouldn't say that you shouldn't be writing and maybe in a way you have more options. You just have to figure a different way of presenting it. And that takes it. That's hard.

Wynne Leon (16:20)

Yeah, but I love how you came back to the core of you still should be writing. You should be taking photographs and maybe still thinking about that composition and lighting and.  
~

Andrea Simon (16:32)

Well, I'm

very, I'm very interested in young people learning those crafts in the sort of old fashioned way. I'm not saying they have to be stuck in that, but to be slower about it, you know, and not do everything digitally, maybe take a pad and pencil or a good pen. And it's a different way of learning, different way of thinking about things. And believe me, I am guilty of not doing that.

as much as I should. But I remember all the joy of doing it, you know, and when you're writing, I remember one of the first things I ever wrote seriously, and I was writing with a pen in a journal, and an emotional thing happened, and I dug my pen into the paper, and I literally ripped it because I got so carried away with it. I can't imagine doing that now. But you know, this really...

is a challenge to their teachers of creative writing or other creative pursuits to ignite that enthusiasm in writers and find a way that they can best express themselves and slow down a little, you know, to appreciate what the craft is and what you're trying to do and not just vomiting things, you know.

Wynne Leon (17:49)

Right, right. Well, and I think one of the ways that, you know, we do slow down is with our friends. And you have so many rich female characters and friendships in this book. You know, there's Anita, of course, but there's her mom and Denise and Cindy and, they

They're Yeah, so tell us, how do you think our female friendships helped create the life we wanted?

Andrea Simon (18:15)

Well, I just look at my own life. You know, when I was a young girl growing up in Brooklyn, I had two best friends who were twins, identical twins, and we used to spend the entire day outside unsupervised, and we called ourselves the super triplets, and we ran around terrorizing, you know, people with our chalks or whatever it was on roller skates, and we're still friends to this day.

You know, and when we get together, we did like we're three years old, but it's a very supportive thing. throughout my life through high school, through college, I made friends that I still friendly with. ~ through as Anita, she made friends at her work situation. She made friends in the consciousness raising group and they remained a great source of ~ support for her throughout her life. And she lost them.

people through depth, through moving and all that as we all do. But I think when you're a younger person, you're more social. When you're older, ~ you don't reach out as much unless you join things. But I mean, also you meet people through, if you have children through their activities. And when you're older, you don't have that. So you have to always find new ways or you have to find friends that you're still like after all these years.

Wynne Leon (19:38)

Yes, right, right, It reminds me of comment about Anita and losing people. mean, it reminds me of some ~ wonderful couple of lines that you have. You don't get to be our age without scars. And I certainly had a body full of them. Psychological scars, internal scars were impossible to see. If only there was an MRI that recorded our eroded self images and repressed hurts. If so, would we have believed such proof?

Andrea Simon (20:09)

Well, we should look at our scars with pride, really, at this point. I've got a lot of them. I mean, visible one. And I feel it for myself that I'm a survivor. I'm proud of that fact. Not always, but now that I'm looking back, I think that I got those scars, honestly.

Wynne Leon (20:37)

I love that I got those scars honestly. ~ that's powerful So there's so much legacy and perspective in in this book. Did you have the life you wanted? did your perspective on Your life changes you wrote it your view of meaning



Andrea Simon (20:57)

Yes. I think as a, for me personally, and this Anita went through this too, I always ~ wanted to go back to school and to see if I was such a terrible student as I remember, because I was too busy in the 1970s burning my bra, whatever it was. So I went to school when I was 65 and I got my MFA and I found out that I was a good student.

Wynne Leon (21:16)

Thanks.

Andrea Simon (21:25)

which is like shocking to me. But of course I was taking what I wanted to take and that I had the respect of the people around me because I was probably older than most of the teachers, you know? So I got a different, I went there in my mind as a young person, forgetting that I had a whole history.

And yet I learned that I did have something to give. And what I did learn was that I actually love teaching, which was something that I rejected my whole life. So I tried to portray that with Anita because I thought it was important to show that maybe she didn't ~ correct everything that she was regretful for.

but she managed to find other things that took that place. I mean, you might say to yourself as an older person, I should have done this, I should have done that, I should have done this. But really, as an older person, you probably don't wanna do all those things. You think you do. So find something else that gives you another perspective. And that I learned through writing this and asking so many people that question. And it was important for me to find other people

Wynne Leon (22:37)

Yeah.

Andrea Simon (22:41)

my age who went through similar things and to see how they responded. And I was surprised, I have to say, how few women in particular said I didn't have the life I wanted. Most of them were much more pragmatic about it. They had children, they had responsibilities, they did this, they did that. And they weren't necessarily doing what they wanted, but as retired people, they were happier in a way.

because they were doing things without having to take care of somebody else. Well, that didn't last long because you always have to take care of somebody. But I mean, there were a few people who said, as Cindy says in the book, when more she thought about it, she realized she didn't have the life she wanted. And that was very upsetting to her.

Wynne Leon (23:34)

Yeah. Well, it's so interesting to me what you just said there about going back to school and learning that you did like teaching. I mean, if that's the only thing presented to you as a young person and, and, you know, I don't want to infer too much, but you you reject it out of hand because it's like, what, that's the only thing that you're telling me that I'm doing. And then to come back to it and realize it was something that was meaningful to you. That's so fascinating.

Andrea Simon (24:01)

And also I was able as an older person to teach the way I wanted to teach. If I was teaching in a school system in New York City as a 25 year old, they would give you, you have to teach this, you have to teach that. They would give you their own schedule and their own, and you wouldn't be able to really necessarily teach the way you wanted to. And I don't think I would have enjoyed that. So as an older person, I designed the curriculum.

Wynne Leon (24:24)

So.

Andrea Simon (24:29)

I did prompt writing with them. I had a lifetime of experience of writing to draw from, which I wouldn't have had as a younger person. So it's hard to tell. You never know what would have happened if you did things at a younger age. But I look at my parents as I needed to look at my parents and see two people that did not have the life that they wanted. That they were two intelligent people who

who were very much victims of their own times. And I know for myself, I always said, I don't want to die with regret, you know? And that was my major impetus in writing this book, to show a character who felt that way, but tried to rectify it.

Wynne Leon (25:13)

Yeah. Well, I love that because you've just not only talked about regret, but talked about rectifying things in a way that's current with the age. And who you are. And who you are. Who you've become. So it's not going back and replacing this thing from the past. It's going back and filling a want or desire. But respectfully of who you are at the time.

Andrea Simon (25:43)

Allowing yourself also to do some of these things. think as women, we're taught that we really can't do that much for ourselves. We have to take care of our children or our husband or our mothers or whatever it is. And it was selfish of us to do what we want to do. So as an older person, I just said, well, I had done all those things already. It's time for me to do what I want to do. And it's hard to do that, really. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (26:11)

Right. Especially after a lifetime of practice. Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your book. Did You Have the Life You wanted? It is such a thoughtful and thought provoking book.

Thank you. you. conversation about it, which brings out so much of the goodness, both in your writing and just in talking with you.

Andrea Simon (26:15)

Yeah.

you too. Thank you. really appreciate it.

Wynne Leon (26:36)

Thanks for your time.

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Andrea Simon (27:00)

you