

@Risk: Fictional Meltdowns with Emily St. John Mandel

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Jodi: Hey, I'm Jodi Butts. Welcome to @Risk, brought to you by Interac.

Whether they involve toddlers or nuclear power plants, meltdowns reveal so much about our dependencies, our vulnerabilities, and our character. This is in part why Emily St. John Mandel's two most recent novels draws in so deeply and leave us thinking about them long after we've put them down.

Station Eleven follows the survivors of a flu pandemic. It was a finalist for a National Book Award and the Pen Faulkner Award. It won the 2015 Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Toronto Book Award, and the Morning News Tournament of Books, and it's been translated into 31 languages. *The Glass Hotel*, a 2020 Giller prize finalist, zeroes in on the choices of the perpetrators and victims of a Ponzi scheme.

I hope you enjoy my and Emily's exploration of the risks we choose and the ones that choose us, both real and fictional.

Thank you for joining me Emily, and welcome to @Risk.

Emily: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jodi: So Emily, tell us what draws you creatively to risk management failures, to meltdowns?

Emily: I think that I've developed a reputation as being the sort of disaster artist. I would say it kind of varies book by book. So the two books that come up when this topic comes up are my two most recent, *Station Eleven*, which follows the aftermath of a catastrophic pandemic, and then *The Glass Hotel* which is about economic collapse essentially.

And I would say with the first of those books, *Station Eleven*, really the project was that I wanted to write about a post-technological world. So it was less about wanting to write about a collapse and more about wanting to write about what the world is like 20 years later. But of course if that's your premise, you've got into the world somehow. So there is inevitably a disaster in there, but yeah, I would say that wasn't my primary interest.

With *The Glass Hotel*, I guess I was more interested in writing about this catastrophic failure. I was really looking at the novel as historical fiction. I was fascinated by Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, which of course imploded in December 2008. And although

every character in the book is fictional, the central crime is more or less the same. So yeah, I was just really interested in the fallout from that.

What I will say though is kind of a general, almost more technical than creative note for fiction writing is that if you can place your characters in the midst of a catastrophe, or as you might put it a failure of risk management, that is an inherently dramatic situation and it's really easy to launch a gripping plot out of that. So I see that as a reason why authors take that approach in general.

Jodi: In those challenging circumstances when things you relied on are no longer reliable, they bring out character, right?

Emily: Exactly, yeah. It's such a cliché to say there's no test of character like hardship, but it happens to be true. So yeah, you see that both in fiction and in life I would say.

Jodi: The other thing I also thought about was in many ways *The Glass Hotel* and *Station Eleven* were about the risks of being an artist. The potential for violence, the risk of being forgotten, the financial risks...

Emily: Right.

Jodi: ...except for Paul. Paul in *The Glass Hotel* against all odds, right, is the artist who finds his moment. What were you trying to say about the life of an artist?

Emily: Right, so there's a lot to unpack there. Something that is hard to express without sounding really self-deprecating is that I think there's an incredible element of randomness in artistic success. And I say that not to put down any of my own books. I absolutely stand behind them. But I'm aware at all times that there are any number of books published in the same year as *Station Eleven* and then *The Glass Hotel* which were at least as good. It just didn't sell as many copies and didn't get the same kind of recognition.

And you really see that quite clearly in literary awards where, this probably goes without saying, but a different awards jury, which is to say a different five people, it's always about five people for all of these juries, a different five people would have picked a completely different long list and a completely different short list and a completely different winner.

So I don't know. I guess with having Paul be the one character who, you know, there's no way of saying that he deserves it in any way. There's no kind of moral component to it at all. He's kind of objectively awful. But yeah, you're right. He is the one who experiences artistic success.

I suppose it's some commentary on just the randomness of it. It's not the best person who is the most successful, it's not even the best artist. It's not always the most talented. It's the person whose work is in front of the right people at the right time, so there's just incredible luck involved in all of that.

And then to go to the earlier part of your question about the financial perils I suppose of being an artist, I went to school for contemporary dance. And that was a great preparation for being a writer. Because if you think that a writing career is precarious, if I blow out my knee, I'll still be a writer. But dancers can't always say the same thing. It's just a much higher risk career, I would say. So yeah, I think that was really good preparation.

And I think the reality is we'll all be forgotten. That's kind of part of the human condition. And I think most artists will not make enough money to do art full-time, and you just kind of have to... I think you just kind of have to accept that.

Jodi: Yeah, and of course there's also the risk of being misinterpreted, right? There's not winning the prize, and then there's your work getting misinterpreted into something that you didn't intend it to be.

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. And I suppose the ultimate horror story in that regard is Nietzsche. And I'm by no means an expert on his work, but I think it was his sister who bent his work into this sort of horribly anti-Semitic interpretation that he never intended. So that's kind of a nightmare scenario.

But the question of interpretation is kind of interesting because I do sometimes read reviews of my work where the conclusion they drew is not actually necessarily what I intended. And I'm kind of fine with that. I mean, so far it hasn't been some sort of like horrible Nietzschean awful misinterpretation. But you'll come across sentences like, "Mandel's project is clearly X." I'm like, huh, okay. I guess I could see that. So yeah, I think everyone kind of reads a different book, because of course you bring your own experiences to it.

Jodi: Oh, absolutely. When I picked up *Station Eleven* because someone recommended it to me, because they knew I had worked at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, they were like you must be into this. And I'm like well, not in real life but yes for fiction.

Emily: You're like not so much. Were you there during SARS?

Jodi: Yes, at the tail end of SARS and then through H1N1.

Emily: Right, okay.

Jodi: It continues to be something that I think about quite a lot. But in addition, *Station Eleven*, when the lockdown first happened, I had two memories of that book that really kind of haunted me through the initial period. One was when the plane stopped flying. It was a punch in the gut because it reminded me of course of La Guardia.

Emily: Right, okay.

Jodi: But the other thing, the more profound thing, and quite frankly the kind of concern that still haunts me to a certain extent to this day is everything happens pretty rapidly in *Station Eleven*. The Georgia Flu rips through the population with such efficiency, and then civilization and all the services that go along with that, they slightly more slowly dropped off as the population dwindled. And sometimes in my darker more fearful moments, I always ask myself is this happening right now?

Emily: Right.

Jodi: Like as each business closes, are we not having a less rapid loss of civilization? Is it more like the earth's orbit, where you don't realize you're spinning but nevertheless we're spinning and we are losing things?

Emily: Right, yeah. There's something to that. I'm afraid that what we have culturally is this kind of drift toward I guess what I would call monoculture. Where the businesses that fail, they're the small businesses that maybe bring a little more creativity and nimbleness to the marketplace. And you're left with the Amazons, the, yeah, the huge businesses that can survive this event and become your go-to store for literally everything. So, yeah there's a real loss of this interestingness in the retail world. It's kind of sad to see.

Jodi: Yeah, I think we will lose some of that diversity. Now whether it comes back at another time or even better, who knows. We just have to live our lives and see what happens. Have you found it difficult to create during this period? I'm not sure what your particular lockdown situation is right now, but is it conducive to creating?

Emily: Right, my lockdown situation is incredibly fortunate, I feel hugely privileged. so I'm in New York City, which is not necessarily a hugely privileged situation, but so we locked down pretty hard in early March. And at first that was really difficult because our daughter at the time had recently turned four, and that's an age that does not take easily to Zoom preschool to put it mildly.

But on the other hand, my husband and I were both able to do our jobs from home which is an incredible privilege. And so we made it work, we juggled back and forth. And then in the summer we entered a pod with one other family, which I'm sure most people listening to this are familiar with the concept. But a pod, it's basically a closed group of people who agree on the risks that they're taking.

So in our pod, we're never indoors with other people and, not like the grocery store, but like you wouldn't have friends over and we wear masks in public. So yeah, so we entered a pod with another family. Really, if I'm being honest, to share their nanny. It worked out really well for both of us. So yeah, a pod with one family and a shared nanny. And then we invited a third family into the pod quite recently, which that family has a couple of kids around my daughter's age. So I feel better about that just for socialization.

So yeah, it's three families plus a shared nanny who lives alone and drives her own car to work. And it's fine, I feel incredibly fortunate to have this set up. But to go to your to the earlier part of your question about whether it's been difficult to work. It was in the beginning.

So the spring in New York City was just apocalyptic, it was crazy. We were all locked down. There was a period in early April when around 700 people were dying just in New York City every single day. So what that... The soundscape of that, that means constant ambulance sirens. So at any given moment there was this feeling of it's not a question of whether I can hear a siren, it's how many sirens at the same time. And I found it really difficult to work in those conditions during those months.

But I think a sort of both great and awful aspect of, what to call it, of human nature is that you really can get used to anything. So it's gotten easier. Also the situation in New York has gotten much better. So yeah, I had a hard time working in the spring but by summer I was writing again.

Jodi: Yeah, that's one of the essential I guess tenets of risk, that when something first comes it's new and it's strange and our reactions to it, we're kind of on high alert. But with time, almost anything we can kind of become... We just become less fearful of it.

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. Cases are spiking in New York City, we're definitely in our second wave. And it's just much less scary because we know how to live under lockdown.

Jodi: So in terms of living the United States, you wrote a really beautiful piece for the National Endowment for the Humanities about your book tour with *Station Eleven* as part of the Michigan Reads program. And you talked about that there's sort of certain difficulties in adopting to life in the United States as a Canadian. And how have your thoughts on those difficulties change through the Trump era and then through the extreme situation of a pandemic in the Trump era?

Emily: Right, so what I was talking about at the time I wrote the piece, which was about 2015, the two things that always tripped me up about American culture, and just for context I lived in Canada until I was 22. I was born and raised there. So I've been in the United States for most of my adult life at this point. But I will never get used to the health care situation or gun culture.

And the gun culture thing, I should say, it's very geographically specific. Something I love about New York City is that like guns are just not really a thing, like people don't own guns as a matter of course. But of course, that's not true in other parts of the country, including Michigan where I traveled so much around the time I wrote that piece. So yeah, my experience in Michigan is I saw a guy walk into the diner where I was eating lunch with a handgun in his belt. And because I wasn't raised in gun culture, my first thought was we're all going to die. That's actually a pretty normal

occurrence in an open carry state as Michigan is. So yeah, that's a cultural sort of hiccup that I that I used to run into all the time.

I think that the situation of living in the United States was really beautifully summed up by a fellow Canadian author, Omar El Akkad. And he wrote a wonderful novel a few years ago called *American War*, which I highly recommend by the way, it's a great book. I interviewed him at a bookstore in Brooklyn and we got to talking about the condition of being a Canadian living in the United States.

And what we have in common is that we both feel incredible gratitude for the opportunities we've had in this country, there is a lot of opportunity here. But what Omar said about it, he said the thing with the United States is there's no ceiling and there's no floor. And that just resonated with me so much, and I think it's something that's kind of been exposed to the world with the COVID situation, which is that there's just no floor here. Americans are kind of on their own in a way I feel that Canadians maybe aren't.

It's a much more, I guess a much more individualistic society. There's just a lot of kind of winging it and hustling and trying to get by. And that's just been so terribly exposed by the pandemic. I mean I would say terribly exacerbated by the Trump administration, which very clearly has never had a plan.

So the situation we're dealing with in New York City at the moment is schools are about to close because numbers are spiking. It would make more sense morally and epidemiologically to end indoor dining. But here's the thing, if you close the restaurants and people are out of work, it's not like there's a national plan to pay their rent for the next few months during another lockdown. So it's this terrible balancing act and it costs lives. The situation here is so much worse than it needed to be in terms of the COVID mortality rate.

Jodi: I was speaking with a public health expert, and I think another kind of part of it, and as Canadians sometimes we just have to remind ourselves, Canada has its challenges. But they can just never be at the scale of the United States. It's just a difference in population, that's a fact.

And so you close down schools and all of a sudden like kids don't have breakfast. And yes that's a policy choice, so the experience is different in Canada. You can close schools and fewer children will, or more children will still have options to access food because we've organized ourselves differently. But no matter what, it's just that scale is just so hard to comprehend as a Canadian.

Emily: Yeah absolutely, it's extraordinary.

Jodi: Yeah. I wanted to talk to you about if anyone has ever asked you to kind of opine on a pandemic, given that you wrote *Station Eleven*. There's another great Canadian- or another great book written by a Canadian called *Songs for the End of the World* and

it too follows a virus, and it's the virus ARAMIS, and it's written by Saleema Nawaz. And the character Owen Grant, who is not a very likable character let me just say, but he wrote this book like that was about sort of how to survive a pandemic. And it was a work of fiction, and he finds himself in this world on CNN opining about pandemics. And I thought that was really interesting, right?

Emily: Oh my god, I have to read that. That's been my life the last few months. I just wrote that down. Yeah, I get asked about pandemics a lot as you might imagine. When I first started... So *The Glass Hotel* came out at the end of March. And for about a week I was like, I was telling my publicist like please tell them I don't want to talk about pandemics. Because I was really worried about giving the impression of profiting off of a pandemic, like using it to move units, which is pretty distasteful. But I held on to that stance for like six days, and then it was just all anyone wanted to talk about and I surrendered and it's fine.

Yeah, so the pandemic in *Station Eleven* is not particularly scientifically plausible. That's a flu with something like a 99 mortality rate that kills really quickly. And in reality, of course, an illness that deadly and that fast would burn itself out before it could really cause that much damage. So I think that the things that I didn't really expect about living through a real pandemic is, you know, in all my research about pandemics it had never really occurred to me that there's kind of an in-between state.

And what I mean by that is that I'd thought of pandemics as being kind of a modern... Sorry, kind of a binary condition, like an on-off switch. Like you're in a pandemic or not in a pandemic. And I really found myself kind of unprepared and flummoxed at the beginning of the pandemic.

So from the middle of February onward, we kind of knew what was coming, but there was this weird kind of ambiguity about it. It's like we were kind of in a pandemic but kind of not. We maybe stopped hugging our friends when we saw them, but we still took our kids to school and went grocery shopping in person. That kind of thing. So there's this weird ambiguity that I hadn't really anticipated.

And I felt it again kind of, not quite at the other end of a pandemic, because now of course in New York City we're going into the second wave. But over the summer, cases here were really low. Even through September, there were maybe 250 cases a day for a while, very few deaths. So all of a sudden it was very reasonable to continue to be in this kind of lockdown pod as I was with these three families, but it was also not unreasonable to send your kids to school, which a lot of my friends have done. So yeah, the weird kind of ambiguity was something that I wasn't prepared for.

And then I think another thing that hadn't really occurred to me was that a pandemic like this one with such a low mortality rate could cause such incredible upheaval and chaos. But in retrospect, the Georgia Flu didn't need to have a 99 mortality rate. Like 10 would have done it. So that was surprising to me. I wouldn't have anticipated that.

Jodi: Yeah, it's funny. I was remarking to my husband sort of at the start of the pandemic. So just like post lockdown, people are like, "Oh, let's go out to eat." And I'm like, it always reminds me when I was a kid, I would watch war movies and they would go to a restaurant and have dinner. I'm like, I was like as a kid, I'd be like people went to restaurants like during a war? Like really, that happened? But it's kind of happening now.

Emily: Yeah, it's true, except now it's crazier than during the war. The waiter won't move silently from table to table in the restaurant, but in the pandemic it absolutely well.

Jodi: Yeah, the attributes of COVID-19 are particularly insidious, right? Like it takes advantage like most viruses of our desire to be social and to gather. But because of how long it takes for symptoms to onset, and the fact that there is a much smaller number of people who kind of remain asymptomatic, it's a much more covert actor than something like Ebola, right?

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. And the way that the early symptoms mimic the common cold is pretty insidious, I have to say. We've shut down our pod three times because somebody had the sniffles. You get a COVID test, you wait a couple of days, you get cleared, you mingle again. And it's ultra traumatic every time.

And then also what makes risk management so difficult is just you could get COVID and have symptoms no worse than the common cold, that could be the whole thing. Or you could die. So it's like it makes it really hard to make any kind of a determination about what risks are reasonable.

Jodi: Yeah, absolutely. So I want to ask about your tour for *The Glass Hotel*. You mentioned earlier that that the book was released kind of at a sort of tragic point of lockdown in the pandemic. You called your tour for *Station Eleven* the Year of Numbered Rooms. What would you call this tour?

Emily: The Weeks of Zoom Calls? Yeah, *Station Eleven* was 114 events in seven countries over a year and a half, it was epic. And then actually I kept on doing paid lectures and on stage conversations for *Station Eleven* under the umbrella of the Big Read program run by the National Endowment for the Arts down here. So I was still traveling for *Station Eleven* right up until the pandemic. I canceled a lecture on March 12th.

So yes, I did so much traveling for *Station Eleven*. And for *The Glass Hotel* I had a 25 city tour on the calendar, it was going to be another sort of epic tour. But yeah, we canceled most of the tour, my publicist and I, I guess like the second week of March. We're like okay, this just isn't happening. Let's cancel through the middle of April, which in retrospect I don't know what we thought would be different by the middle of April. But no one knew anything.

Jodi: I was gonna say, we all did. We all did.

Emily: Yeah, exactly. So yeah it was just this process of dismantling this really complicated tour kind of one country and one city at a time. So the way it played out was for a period of I want to say about three weeks or so I would have these Zoom events almost every night and then interviews during the day.

And I have to say it was way less weird than I expected. I thought it would be this kind of alienating impersonal thing talking to people on my computer. But a, you can get used to anything, and b, it was actually really nice having that human connection during the most hardcore period of lockdown when I wasn't even really leaving my house and terrace.

And yeah, and I have to say also it's such a huge privilege to be able to tour. But that doesn't mean it's easy to be away from the people you love. So that was actually a silver lining to the pandemic, was that instead of being out on the road for seven weeks away from my four-year-old, I got to put her to bed and then go do a Zoom call. So that was nice.

Jodi: Vincent's grandmother gives her a camera after her mother dies in a suspicious drowning incident. And she says to her, and of course I'm paraphrasing, but that sometimes it's nice to use the camera lens to create a distance between yourself and the world. I sometimes think Zoom is a little bit like that.

Emily: Right, definitely. Yeah, I like how in Zoom calls you have this window into a person's home but only the tidiest most like together part of a person's home. Like the rest of it is probably total chaos. Yeah, you just get the zoom background.

Jodi: Well, unless people wander in or your dog. Those are some of my most favorite kind of pandemic incidents when people share them on Twitter, because they're just so human, right?

Emily: Absolutely, yeah. My daughter was crashing every single one of my events during my book tour, and I kind of loved it. It was really nice having her there.

Jodi: It is, right, it's like you're human, right, you're an author but you're a mother.

Emily: Exactly. We did have to make a rule though that she was only allowed to crash my events once per event. Because I think she, yeah, she crashed my Toronto Public Library event five times. After that I was like okay, we need to tone this down a little bit.

Jodi: It's really bringing home that bring your whole self to work.

Emily: Yeah, exactly.

Jodi: I want to talk to you a little bit about borders. Obviously in *Station Eleven* borders just become meaningless. Without enough population nobody really cares to respect

national borders and obviously you also need governments to really give them meaning.

But borders kind of disappear in *The Glass Hotel* too, because you talk about how your characters kind of move through the kingdom of money. And that's not really a nation-state, right it's just based on wealth.

Emily: Yeah, exactly, something of a state of mind. Yeah, my idea with a kingdom of money, so just to back up a little bit for some context I was raised in a very working-class environment. And to be clear, I have no complaints. I have a great family who loves books. But there was really no money. So I feel like that has meant a very different experience, especially I would say in early adulthood than people I know who've maybe come from much more financially stable backgrounds.

So at this point I feel like most of the people I know grew up middle class or upper middle class. And it seems to me that they have such different expectations or understandings of the way the world works and what they might expect of the world that it's almost like they're from a different country in a way that doesn't really have anything to do with the US Canada border.

So I was thinking about that, the way that different socioeconomic strata can feel like completely different countries just in terms of your experience of a place. And maybe one way to illustrate the kingdom of money, the idea of that, is by anecdote.

So last October a year ago, back in the sort of lost world when we got on airplanes, I went out to Los Angeles for a couple of times for a screenwriting project. And because of my epic *Station Eleven* tour I have an incredible number of miles on Delta Airlines. So a couple of times I used those miles to upgrade to first class for the trip back from Los Angeles to New York.

And what that meant in practical terms was that my flight would take off from LAX at 10:30pm. I would recline my seat to 180 degrees and pull up a down comforter and take a very pleasant nap and then wake up as the plane was landing in New York City in the early morning. And there was something about the frictionlessness of that experience that made the distance kind of unconvincing. And I remember having this disorienting feeling. Like you can't tell me that those are 3,000 miles apart. Like come on, that was like the same kind of seamless thing.

And I kind of thought of the experience of living with extreme wealth of being like that. That friction is just kind of removed in a way that I think would make you feel like you were moving through one continuous country. Whether it was London or New York or Dubai, just this sort of this world with a lot of comfort and beauty and ease.

Jodi: And certainly COVID-19 among other things have shown, I think, has been a bit of another proof point for the kingdom of money. In some ways it's flabbergasting, but

Donald Trump survived COVID-19. A house friend of mine said if he actually had it. He won't even accept it.

Emily: Right. The writer Damien Barr, he lives in Scotland I believe, or he lives in the UK but he's from Scotland. He's an acquaintance of mine. He had this wonderful quote about it that went viral on Twitter, I'm going to paraphrase because I don't remember the exact wording. But it was something like we're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat. Some of us have luxury super yachts, some of us just have the one oar.

Which I think was a really elegant way of putting it, where on one end of the spectrum there are single parents drowning between the demands of managing their child's Zoom education and suddenly having to become teachers and also doing their own full-time jobs from home. And it's just this impossible juggling act that a lot of people are doing.

On the other end of the spectrum there are people living in massive houses with live-in nannies and live-in tutors and everything's very smooth. So yeah, it's absolutely exacerbated those divides.

Jodi: A friend reminded me to reread the opening scene of *The Tempest* because, right, there's obviously the shipwreck that leads to the encounter with Prospero. But the whole discussion in that opening scene is about how to take care of the king, and the different reactions of the sailors. And I was like oh wow, I'd never thought of it that way but it really kind of breathed new life into that opening scene.

Emily: Yeah, that's really interesting. I'll have to look at that again.

Jodi: Yeah, I did too. I had to like kind of go back and reread it. I was like oh wow, okay. I have to ask this just as a fan. Was there any part when you were writing *The Glass Hotel* did you think of it at all as a companion to *Station Eleven*?

Emily: I suppose it is in the sense that a couple of characters migrate from one book to the other. But I really see those books as taking place in parallel universes. So I want people to read *The Glass Hotel* secure in the assurance that the flu isn't coming. It's not like the years right before the *Station Eleven* pandemic, it's kind of a different world. But yeah, I think they might be interesting to read side by side because it is kind of... Yeah, they're kind of different reflections on the same people.

Jodi: Well, the first time I read it, I approached it as nothing but a standalone book. It was a beautiful summer day here and I curled up with it and I just read it from beginning to end. And I was so delighted to see Miranda, like I felt kind of a sense of relief. I was like oh, Miranda gets a better end. This is so good.

Emily: Yeah, it's nice to imagine that alternate universe where it turns out okay for the fictional characters.

Jodi: And then in preparation for speaking with you today, I read both books again and of course circumstance drives our thinking so often. But it did strike me, it's like yes survival is insufficient. It almost seemed like in some ways *Glass Hotel* is a bit of a proof point for that.

Emily: Right, that's interesting. Yeah in *The Glass Hotel*, Vincent's video habit, I don't know what else to call it, she's this video artist who does these kinds of impressionistic five-minute videos. It's kind of an act that has to do with appreciating beauty, I think, yeah it heightens her experience of the world.

And it was interesting, we were talking a moment ago about the way a fictional pandemic might or might not prepare a person for the real thing. It has been really nice, I have to say, to see people turn into books during a real pandemic. So I kind of thought of that Star Trek line, survival is insufficient, when I started going to the website of my favorite independent bookstore and there was a little note that said due to the volume of orders, your shipment might be delayed. It was like that's wonderful, oh good. Like yeah, I'm glad I'm not the only one who's turning to art at the moment.

Jodi: In a review of *The Glass Hotel* by Ruth Franklin, it appeared in the Atlantic, she had this wonderful line. She was talking about all the different sort of the primary universe that the characters occupy. But many of the characters kind of think about alternatives for themselves. And she wrote sometimes we choose to plunge into a different world, and sometimes a different world chooses us. And I thought that's pretty profound and for sure, for sure something I take away from *Glass Hotel*.

Emily: And that's something to take away from our current moment in the pandemic. I was just... I was kind of thinking about this the other day. I was out for a walk with my daughter, we were taking this epic hike to get to her favorite playground, and you have a lot of time to think on long walks.

And what I was thinking about is that really up until the pandemic, I traveled all the time. And it was just this life of airports and hotel rooms and meeting new people and delivering the lecture and going back to the hotel and back to the airport. And it just never occurred to me that that would end, and that there would be a life where I barely leave my neighborhood. And if I leave my neighborhood, it's usually on foot.

Yeah, we've all been chosen by this strange new world that we wouldn't have imagined even nine months ago.

Jodi: Yes and I think in many ways, just to bring the conversation back to risk a little bit, I think that is the lesson of risk too. Like optimally you actually choose the risks you take on. You choose to be an artist, you choose to go skydiving, whatever those risks may be. But of course we don't always get to choose the risks we encounter.

Emily: Yeah absolutely. But then of course the sort of the other side of that is that you choose the risks within this kind of broader framework of risk. This is something I've

been thinking about today because my daughter's nanny who we share with another family, she came down with cold symptoms 48 hours ago. And of course that kind of brings up all of the risks, sort of the thinking about risk that we've been dealing with for months where it's kind of risky to be in a pod with 11 people, which is the total number of children and adults who I associate with. But they're also kind of what's saving my sanity during the pandemic.

So yeah, making those calculations. Well, is it actually safe to be with any other people? And of course the answer is any number of other people, it exponentially increases your risk. But you have to make that trade-off for your kid to be socialized and to retain some semblance of sanity in 2020. Yeah, these are the equations we're all dealing with. And she tested negative by the way.

Jodi: Oh good. Yeah, we've been through a couple of tests ourselves. So I have two kids and so and we have people who sometimes come into the house too. So it's the little micro decisions that I think are quite exhausting.

So when people talk about pandemic fatigue, and I think this is a lesson of risk too, trying to remember like okay, well what is our purpose? Our purpose in life isn't to not get COVID. Our purpose is something else. And so that's why it can make sense to send your kids to school or join a pod.

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. And so much depends on the individual. My daughter was really happy to be home with us when school ended, which kind of surprised me because she also loved school. But anecdotally I've heard about other kids who were really not doing well, like their mental health was really suffering from being away from school. And if I had one of those kids, absolutely I'd send her back. I feel lucky that I didn't have to.

Jodi: Two pieces of art I often think about at the beginning of the pandemic, and by the way this caused me to kind of take a step back and reassess, but the movie that haunted me was *The Others*, stars Nicole Kidman. It's a horror film, but in the movie her children suffer from a condition where they're allergic to sunlight. So she's covered, right, so she's constantly...

Emily: I was just thinking of that movie, it's so great.

Jodi: It's so great, but it's so haunting, the constant closing and locking of the doors. And I just... There was a point where I was scrubbing our doorknobs and I was like okay; I've just got to take a step back here.

Emily: Yeah, I know, I know. And it becomes so claustrophobic in that movie, the darkness and little pools of lamplight and closed doors and shut in rooms. And yeah, there's absolutely a parallel there to pandemic life. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic where we just didn't know that much about how it spread. So yeah, your

saying that reminded me it's been months since I washed down the doorknobs with alcohol. But that used to be a daily routine.

Jodi: Yeah exactly. And then the other piece that I often think about in a variety of contexts, and I won't be able to recall the whole poem, but the William Carlos Williams poem *So Much Depends on a Red Wheelbarrow*. And there are so many red wheelbarrows, and some of them have been taken away and some of them continue to be the fulcrum that so much rests on.

Emily: Yeah, absolutely.

Jodi: Thank you so much for speaking with me. Thank you so much for sharing your insights about your books and for sharing your books with the world. I'm super grateful to have had this opportunity to speak with you Emily.

Emily: Well thank you. I enjoyed it so much. Thanks for interviewing me.