

Recall This Book 38

June, 2020

Beth Blum

John Plotz:

Hello and welcome to Recall This Book. Help! Yes. You heard me, right. I need somebody, not just anybody. Today, we're diving into the fascinating world of self-help. So alert listeners may recall that our very first episode, which was theoretically about minimalism ended up in the magical world of tidying up with Marie Kondo and other, even more eagle-eared listeners will recall references to the revival of stoicism under modern day guises, often name-checked by way of Adam Smith and Hannah Arendt. But today in the studio with me, I'm happy to have a real expert, not a self-help guru, but a guru of self-help, Harvard English, professor Beth Blum. Hello, Beth.

Beth Blum:

Hello.

JP:

She recently published a terrific history of the genre, which is called *The Self-Help Compulsion: Searching For Advice in Modern Literature*. And we turned to her today, not just to learn about the research on the relationship between canonical literature and self-help, but also to trace the amazing mutability of self-help over the last century as we moved from Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to books with titles like, helped me Beth, is it *Girl Stop Apologizing*?

BB:

Girl, Stop Apologizing.

JP:

And *The Gentle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*. We're allowed to say that.

BB:

The subtle art--

JP:

The subtle art.. Thank you. We're allowed to say *subtle* and *gentle*. In other words, books in which self-help seems to be less about influencing others than it does about pushing them away, the sort of self-help as *leaning out* as it were. And then we will end, as we always do with Recallable Books where we talk about other books that are related to our topic that you might also want to dive into if you found our topic of interest. So Beth, thanks. It is great to have you today.

BB:

Thank you so much for inviting me.

JP:

Can I ask you to begin by talking about how you came to self-help as a topic?

BB:

Sure. Um, well, the truth of the matter is I came to self-help as a topic, my mother was always sending me self-help books. I usually would just throw them away, put them on a shelf and never look at them. But then she--

JP:

What kind of titles did they have, the ones your mom sent?

BB:

Well, *Don't Sweat The Small Stuff* was one I definitely remember, you know, things of that ilk.

JP:

Is that a book about self-control?

BB:

This is about worrying and I think it'll actually be relevant to our conversation because in many ways it's a kind of precursor of a lot of the *not giving a crap* kind of rhetoric you see in contemporary self-help. So responding, I think, to a rise in anxiety and worry as a kind of social phenomenon. Um, but one, one book she sent me--

JP:

But wasn't the title of that, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff: And It's All Small Stuff*?

BB:

It's all small stuff. Precisely. Richard Carlson in the nineties. Yeah. Yeah. But one book she sent me was one that I was sort of intrigued by and didn't throw away, but actually opened. And that was Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. And I was an undergraduate at the time reading Proust, um, in my literary courses. And so, so this really intrigued me because it seems so counterintuitive. And obviously that counterintuitive idea that Proust would have practical advice was something that Alain de Botton was really exploiting in his book. But, but that's what first kind of drew me to this topic and made me interested in the question of the relation between the literary and self-help. And so the book is really offering a new history of self-help, seen through the lens of the literary. So self-help is a phenomenon that's been heavily discussed by historians, economists sociologists, but literary scholars haven't really weighed in on the phenomenon.

And I think that's a mistake. I think that as specialists in the kind of meaning and circulation of texts, literary scholars would have a lot to contribute to conversations about the kind of appeal of self help and its history and the way it's tied to the circulation of print. This is what kind of drew me to the, to the project and part of what my kind of literary research and perspective enabled me to see was the existence of a really vast and very diffused archive of self-help ephemera that was emerging before the kind of usual starting point that we date self-help's origin as, as being so emerging really in the early 20th century, the late 19th century. And you have at that

time a flourishing of small magazines, periodicals pamphlets, also books, lectures, mail order courses, all under this rubric of this phenomenon known as New Thought Philosophy. And this is really the earliest kind of self-help movement I think.

JP:

But isn't--what is Samuel Smiles' book called?

BB:

Yes, so prior to this, you do have a Victorian culture of self help or self culture as it's often discussed. And my book is actually beginning with the publication of Samuel Smiles' *Self Help*, one of the first books to really use that term in its title, although other books were also using the term. But he really coined it. And, and that's where my investigation officially begins because you can see a lot, from a literary perspective, I think about self-help's appeal and the kind of work that it's doing by looking at Smiles' text, and in particular, the way it's kind of quoting and decontextualizing literary works and the way it's being received around the world. But I think--in terms of the kind of what we think of today, when we think of self-help, so positive visualization, and kind of you can use your mind to get all of the wealth and health and success you've ever desired--that kind of discourse is really, um, a descendant of New Thought philosophy, which was this kind of early 20th century philosophy, very New Agey pre-New Age. Um, so I give some of this prehistory just to say that Dale Carnegie is not really the, kind of the origin point that we typically imagine him to be. He was really embodying many of the kinds of philosophies and ideas that were percolating at the time and in the decades prior to that. But he, he came onto the scene and really seemed to capture the energies of this New Thought movement. And he was very influenced by it. So he read a lot of Orison Swett Marden. He read a lot of these New Thought pamphlets describing the power of positivity and visualization and the like. And he managed to package it for salesmen and people struggling to climb the corporate ladder in a way that audiences found really appealing. So actually the New York public library just did a study of its most circulating books in its history and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is the most circulating book, nonfiction book of their history.

JP:

So, Beth help me understand something. I hear what you're saying about the New Thought power of the inward power of the mind helping you, you know, channeling your psychic energy and all that. When I read Dale Carnegie, it seems like a classic what Riesman calls in *The Lonely Crowd*, it seems like a classic *other-directed* book. Like everything is about relationality, right? It's about how to connect with other people, you know, all the allegories or all the stories are like, nobody cares if you're an engineer, what matters, if you can manage people, what matters is, how do you make people call you by their first name? So that, how does that side of it, the other-directed side of it relate to what you're describing?

BB:

The whole argument of Carnegie is that it doesn't matter if you have the technical expertise, if you don't know how to be a people person, you don't know. So, so his book is really reflecting something that you see in the, the kind of self-help, more generally of the period in the decade before, which is actually what, um, Ernest Hemingway's uncle called, the quality, the necessity of *get-along-able-ness*. This kind of anxiety stemming from the realization of how much of our fates and our success, our kind of possibilities depend on our reputations and what other people think of us. So, so on the one hand, it's expressing a kind of social determinism in a way. But on the other hand, it's also suggesting more optimistically that there are things you can do to make yourself more get-along-able. So there's a kind of possibility of agency there at the same time as its symptomatic of a broader kind of deterministic view of the social.

JP:

Yeah. So mentioning *reputation management*, you're obviously thinking about parallels between like the 1920s and the 2020s, I guess we can now say. I hear that, but it, it also does Carnegie seems so unapologetically sure that life is defined by those sociable relations, you know, in a way that is different from, well, like the example that you gave about not worrying, like worry problems are problems that are interior to your own head, right? Carnegie's problems are not worry problems that are like, you know, do I get to invited to that party on Friday night?

BB:

Well, this is what's funny about Carnegie, so that's his reputation. And certainly that's the sense we get from *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, most famous book. But he also wrote a book called *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*.

JP:

No kidding!

BB:

Yeah. Published in the forties, 1945. Not as popular and not really interested in the kind of causality there, like could stressing out about how to win friends and influence people lead you to start worrying more and prevent your ability from living? So there's not a lot of sense that, of his own kind of complicity in this kind of worry epidemic. But there, he talks about how he himself has been beset by, or throughout much of his life in that book is actually a really interesting kind of precursor to a lot of this *learn how to not care* stuff.

JP:

So to navigate impressions, which is kind of like reputation management in a way, what relationship does that have to the concept of sincerity?

BB:

Well, *sincerity* is a very vexed term in Carnegie. Um, so one of the, one of the big charges against Carnegie was that he was, he was sort of endorsing flattery, obviously.

JP:

Definitely comes across that way. I read the first couple of chapters and, you know yeah. *Oleaginous* is a word that comes to mind.

BB:

And Marshall McLuhan, when he read, um, Carnegie was absolutely horrified and he actually wrote a piece about it that I don't think it's ever been published, but I talk about it a bit in my book. It's really interesting. And he couldn't believe that more people weren't totally outraged and scandalized by this philosophy.

JP:

Wait have you worked in the Marshall McLuhan archives or something like that?

BB:

They were very kind and they sent me....yeah, his writing is really cool. But the part that most upset him was this part where Carnegie's addressing the idea of sincerity and flattery. And he says, no, don't worry. I'm not recommending flattery. What I'm talking about is honest, sincere appreciation. And then he says, I'm not talking about a kind of a shortcut solution. What I'm talking about is a way of life. And so McLuhan, this was horrifying the idea that this was not only a kind of a business strategy, but a whole life philosophy or ethics.

JP:

It's not theatrical, it's performative. You actually have to kind of embody it and live it. It can't just be something you put on and then you say whatever the hell.

BB:

Cause then it would be insincere

JP:

And you have to be thoroughly committed to it. Right.

BB:

And so then there's the question of, can you, can you be sincere about your appreciation--expressing your appreciation for someone--while doing it for instrumental ends or transactional ends. Or is that a kind of contradiction or paradox? Yeah, so that's something that Carnegie's raising in his book. And the interesting thing about Carnegie as I've said is his techniques really work. I mean, I've given myself a week and said, *okay, try, you know, just to see what it would be like to try to implement some of these ideas*. Chiefly in terms of the idea of not trying to flatter people or influence them necessarily but if there's something somebody is doing that you admire or appreciate why not vocalize that, which is something that if you're kind of a more critical or grumpy person you might not necessarily automatically do. And so that, that aspect of it, which ultimately is what he's recommending is actually somewhat useful I think.

JP:

So, so speaking of which let's talk about the uptake of self-help sort of through the 20th century. So the story because I really want to get to this story of, you know, these kind of Neo-stoical texts of our own day, which call themselves self-help, but are about managing without the rest of the world: being able to hold the world at bay or stop apologizing. The story of the uptake of Carnegie: do you think it's the story of what, uh, I mean, triumphant American other-directedness like, how does it, how does it manifest itself?

BB:

I think it's an emphasis on people-pleasing on I think another kind of pivotal moment would be maybe Helen Gurley Brown *Having It All*. Um, so the idea of really, I mean, this is what the sociologist Micki McGee calls the *self belaborment* of self-help. So the idea that there's the individual has to do a lot of work at all times to kind of try to be hitting all of these boxes and pleasing all of these people and doing all these things right. And this creates a lot of pressure. A lot of it contributes to the kind of culture of stress and overwork and anxiety that I think a lot of the contemporary authors are reacting against. The way in the book that I described this more recent kind of turn in self-help away from other directedness and toward kind of self fulfillment and self affirmation is I describe it as a kind of *apathy prestige*. So there's a kind of valorizing of not caring and not doing, and this, I think definitely adopts a

different valence for men and for women. So and there are going to be exceptions to this, but, um, for men, I think the kind of interest of stoicism is particularly heightened for young men of a certain demographic who, you know, often people have discussed more generally the kind of neoclassicism of a lot of the kind of alt-right part of a sort of nostalgia for a kind of more patriarchal time. And so I--

JP:

So wait, so in that, in that analysis, stoicism is just one more example of kind of a residual like ancient Roman or 18th century kind of more manly virtue. That's one reading of that trend, but that sort of blurs together a whole bunch of older philosophical....

BB:

Yes, it does. And I think there's, there's a kind of a more specific way of accounting for the interest in stoicism that has to do with its actual content and, and practicality and advice and, that's not just reading it as purely symptomatic of, of this kind of political climate. But I do think that that is also a part of it. But in any case for women, I think the interest in apathy or in not caring comes from this history of this idea that I mentioned of having it all this kind of burden of being a kind of domestic goddess.

JP:

Bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan.

BB:

Exactly. And so you have a book like a Tiffany Dufu's *Drop the Ball: Achieving More by Doing Less*. Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing* is I think sort of as a work of a hybrid work of self-help that's contributing to that genre. And then you also have, um, Sarah Night's, um, *The Magic Art of Not Giving a Fuck*. So there's certainly an interest among women authors in using this new discourse to rid themselves of the baggage of a lot of the gendered history of, you know, what Hochschild called, like the emotional labor or emotion work of being a woman.

JP:

But they do so in other words, but so if I'm understanding you, then you basically are saying that these are just tonal differences, but underneath, if you're against emotional labor, that's a form of stoicism, isn't it? Or is it?

BB:

I think so. I mean, I think that, that the interest in stoicism sort of crosses gender lines and for instance, the author Elif Batuman is really interested in Epictetus and stoicism in a way that I find...So, I mean, and I'm interested in stoicism. So I don't think it can be divided purely along gender lines, but it's certainly true that in terms of stoicism the whole Neo-stoical movement received a huge push from Ryan Holiday and Tim Ferriss who are two kind of life hacker podcast bros.

JP:

Yeah. You sent me one of Tim Ferriss' videos. It's pretty hilarious.

BB:

Yeah, but they're tremendously popular and Ryan Holiday who's a friend of Ferriss probably has, has done the most to promote stoicism. He used to be a director of PR for American Apparel. Yeah. And then he turned to kind of, um, publishing these, these kind of calendars about stoicism with like a stoical quotation for every month and things like that.

JP:

Tim Ferriss is giving a Ted talk about stoicism and suddenly Dale Carnegie is resurrected and he is also giving a Ted talk: What would they have to say to each other? What would Dale Carnegie be like absolutely shocked and appalled that this is where self-help had gone or would he recognize it or?

BB:

Well, I certainly think that part of the appeal of, of stoicism today has to do with the way it presents an alternative to the positive thinking tradition. That Carnegie was very much endorsing. And so part of what's interesting to people about stoicism is the way it's making space for negative experiences. And part of, one of the exercises that Ferriss loves us, the *premeditatio malorum*. So this practice of imagining the worst that can arise and kind of doing that in order to purge yourself of your anxiety and fear—the power of negative thinking. So that would certainly run counter to the positive inclinations that you see in Carnegie. At the same time I do think that, as I said with Carnegie's kind of later work, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*. You see a recognition of the need to kind of engage in this personal inventory-taking that is something that stoicism advocates and a lot of these contemporary self-help gurus are also recommending.

JP:

I was wondering if you had thoughts about the significance of self-help as a book that people would still pick up in a bookstore versus Ted talks, YouTube videos, probably podcasts. Um, so do you have a thought about that, about self help, specificity of like what, you know, what medium you get it in and whether that's....?

BB:

I think self-help was actually made for the internet. I mean, so the decontextualized quotations, the kind of inspirational soundbites that you find even in Smiles have an ideal home online and in the world of memes and, and yeah, kind of a soundbite wisdom and the like, so.

JP:

Is there any tension between that and the notion of a self-help that is training you to like feel fortitude....

BB:

Yes. Okay. Yeah, absolutely.

JP:

I mean to be true to yourself and yet to be disseminated along the internet and...

BB:

Yeah, I mean, I think that the kind of the Victorian idea that discipline is good for you and difficulty is good for you is, is not something that you find in a lot of contemporary self out that tends to kind of skip over that work of sifting and sorting and kind of do it for you. So part of the kind of classical benefit of the Commonplace Book or something was that you are doing the work of kind of mining these texts and trying to pick out what's relevant and it's different for each person. What I find relevant in *Middlemarch* might be different than what you do or something.

JP:

Well, so Beth this might be a good time to turn to our Recallable Books, which is the moment at which if you're interested in this topic (and who is not interested in self help) then what other books would we send people off to read? Beth, what have you got?

BB:

So I'm going to recommend Epictetus' *Handbook*.

JP:

Um, wow, cool.

BB:

Yes. And this is because when people ask me what I read for self-help, the honest answer is when I'm really freaked out, I read Epictetus. And the argument of Epictetus is that you have to kind of learn to adjust your desires to the things that are in your control and let go of the things that are not in your control. So he has a kind of list and he goes through and tries to explain to you, these are the things that are in your control, and these are the things

that are outside of your control. And what's really interesting to me about that is that the things that he thinks are outside of your control and in your control are very different from the Carnegie version. So he says you can't control wealth, you can't control health, you can't control reputation, you can't control political power. All of this is outside of your control. What can you control? Your own virtue, your integrity, your soul, your preparedness for meeting whatever contingencies may arise. So when I teach Epictetus, the students always get really stuck on that. They can't believe that he would say that reputation is outside of your control. And it's so different from the Carnegie kind of belaborment.

JP:

What can I manage if not my reputation?

BB:

Exactly. But, but I think that it's actually really helpful to think about what are the things that are within our power to kind of adjust to, and what should we kind of let go.

JP:

So that's actually really great, Beth so you totally changed my mind because I was going to recommend Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* Is that, right? Which is, which is a lovely book. And I do recommend it, but you mentioned it already, so I'm done with that. But then I was going to mention, uh, then I was gonna recommend *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by Adam Smith, which I often rave about, because I think he has this weird notion of needing to have--he's interested in the imaginative capacity to sympathize with others, coupled with the necessity of kind of damping down your own emotions. So in a weird way, he's interested both in emotional attunement to others, as well as the disappearance of one's own emotions. So I like that. Yeah. So I think of that as like literally Neo stoical, like I think of it as trying to take the Stoics and do something different with it.

But the thing you said about the *fama* and, you know, reputation being the thing beyond your control made me think of the Conrad novel *Nostromo*, because I don't know if you remember that novel that Nostromo ("our man"), is that he is an old-style guy who lives and falls by his reputation in his community. And the story of the tragedy of Nostromo, and I mean, we're not going to go through the whole plot here, which I don't even really remember, but basically he's caught in a new world where he could be kind of enfolded in capitalism and pursue treasure. But his nature is to only want to be defined by what his standing is in the eyes of his community. And his tragedy is that he's caught between these two things. He can choose community, or he can choose wealth and possible triumph elsewhere. And he can't, he kind of can't make those ethical systems reconcile. So it's a really good way to think about like how much reputation-management is who you are.

BB:

Yes. Um, one of the things I love about Epictetus is he says, you know, basically for every, for every reward, there's a kind of price exacted. So he has an example where he says, Oh, well, you weren't invited to that party. Well, it's because you weren't willing to pay in the currency of flattery and kind of small talk, chit chatting outside the door of this person who was having the party. So it wasn't worth it to you actually. Yeah. Um, so it's kind of a reorienting of our values and our, uh, what were we willing to pay?

JP:

I think that's, I think that's incredibly helpful actually. Yeah. I like that. I feel like there's a, probably a way to bring Willa Cather in there as well. Cause I think like Cather is constantly aware of that moment of the intersection of different emotional economies. And actually, that's also a great connection since this, Beth, this conversation comes in the middle of our mini season on money. So in a way that connects us to the, it at least connects us to economic questions.

So I just want to say that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually by Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, and sound editing is by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticism or

suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly, or we're very easy to find via Brandeis or contact us via social media and our website. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please, please, please do consider writing a review or rating us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. And you may be interested in checking out past conversations with, for example, Quinn Slobodian on the rise of ethnonationalism, interviews with Cixin Liu, Zadie Smith, Samuel Delany, and Mike Leigh. And certainly look for the remaining episodes of our season on wealth and money with Peter Brown and Mark Blyth and we hope Thomas Piketty. So, Beth, thank you very much for coming.

BB:

Thank you, John.

JP:

And so from all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.