

STL Episode 6: DJ Lee

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SPEAKERS

DJ Lee, Amanda Reavey



Amanda Reavey 00:02

Hello, my name is Amanda Reavey. Welcome to The Stereotype Life, where we talk about mental health, disability, and access in higher education. We release new episodes every other Wednesday at 12pm Central. So please subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts, and visit www.stereotype.life for this episode's transcript and additional resources. Today, I am very glad to introduce DJ Lee. DJ Lee is Regents Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Washington State University. Her creative work includes over 30 nonfiction pieces in magazines and anthologies. She has published eight books on literature, history, and the environment, including the collection "The Land Speaks," published by Oxford in 2017, and the hybrid memoir "Remote: Finding Home in the Bitterroots," published this year by Oregon State. Lee is director of The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness History Project and a scholar fellow at The Black Earth Institute. So hi, DJ, thanks for being here today.



DJ Lee 01:09

Thank you for having me.



Amanda Reavey 01:11

Yeah, I'm so excited to talk about your book "Remote: Finding Home in the Bitterroots." A

tale of survival in a wilderness of mountains and ghosts, "Remote" is one woman's journey to learn the fate of a friend who has disappeared and to embrace her own family's troubled past in a vast, roadless landscape of Idaho in Montana. Like the surprise connections of a wild trail system, "Remote" is told in a nonlinear structure, engaging with dreams and apparitions, the familiar and the uncanny, and questions of history and memory. The book's twenty-eight black and white photographs act as a complimentary visual story. Which, I love narratives that kind of move in and out, which is a lot of what yours does. Because, as we know, memory isn't linear. So how would you expect to write a memoir in a linear fashion? I don't know.

 DJ Lee 02:08
Exactly. Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 02:11

So, because your book incorporates the wilderness and backpacking, along with your family history, I of course felt it only fitting to take your book on my own backpacking trip with my cousins last month, where you know, talked a lot about [sic]. We ended up talking a lot about our family stories too, because what else are you going to do? You know, you don't have a phone network or you're not watching TV. But I love how the wilderness both figuratively and literally traces your search for your family's history. And actually, what I love about wilderness too is like it really brings an authenticity to the work. So what prompted you to write this book and what was the process like?

 DJ Lee 02:54

Well, thank you, Amanda. First of all, I have to say, big gratitude for taking my book with you on a backpack. I know that backpacking is this calculus between weight and size and that I only allow myself one luxury item on every backpack. Sometimes it's a chair, sometimes it's deodorant, sometimes it's a book, and so the fact that you actually carried my book is, you know, it's a huge, huge deal as anyone who backpacks knows. So, what prompted me to write it is on my grandmother's deathbed in 1999, she gave me this box that was full of documents and letters and photographs about a place called The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, which I knew nothing about. I had heard the name here and there throughout my childhood. You know when you were a little kid and you sort of listened to the grown ups talk, I heard these words before, but I knew nothing about the wilderness. I'd grown up in Seattle, I lived in London for a while, lived in Calgary, really only lived in cities. My grandmother and I were really close. And also, I should say that I'm an archivist

and a historian by training. I'm a scholar. And so when I finally opened the box, which I didn't do for a while, because I think I was a little – you know, I'd spent so many years and archives all over the world Oxford, Cambridge, New York Public Library, everywhere. And so you know, I have this box and I'm like, this is like an archive. It's a family archive. And it just scared me. Because I knew, like as an archivist, I would be forced to follow this trail, and in fact, that's what has happened when I opened it. About five years after she passed, I opened the box and everything in the box – photographs, her diaries, newspaper articles, and, you know, just a lot of ephemera fell out. And I realized that she had lived there for twelve years with my grandfather in this wilderness area in the 1920s and 30s. And because I lived about two and a half to three hours from the boundary of the wilderness area (I live there now) it was just, it was a no brainer. I had to go investigate this place. And I did so over a period of about thirteen or fourteen years, and the book just came out of this desire to tell the story that I uncovered.



Amanda Reavey 06:02

It brings such a deeply personal element to the archive. Because sometimes we look at archives and go to museums and we see all these things and there's not always that deep emotional pull. So it can be hard to go through a family archive, I imagine.



DJ Lee 06:20

Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 06:24

You also mentioned "place," and I'm really interested in how "place" as archive, what "places" archive is for you.



DJ Lee 06:36

Ah, yeah, that's a really good question. Because all of my previous archival work had been mostly on writers and historical movements and specific writers like William Blake or historical movements like the slave trade. So, although place was important, it wasn't the subject of my archival work. What was interesting about the wilderness is that there's this really simplistic idea that wilderness is this untouched, pristine landscape. That is an idea, and I am not sure where it comes from, but anyone who spent any amount of time in a wilderness knows that it's not an unmodified landscape, that First Nations and indigenous people have been living on these lands for tens of thousands of years in some cases.

Animals lived up before that and modified it, and even most landscapes – not all, because some of its some landscape is too rugged for for human settlement – but a lot of landscape in the lower 48 states has also been lived on by early homesteaders or outlaws or farmers or, you know, all different kinds of people. Miners, fur trappers, people looking to, you know, live off the land and make a living. So, but when you first walk into these places, I mean, wilderness places are places where non-human nature is dominant. So they don't have the same fill as walking down a city street, but they do have histories and uncovering those histories is different from sitting in an archive in The British Library. So it's about talking to people. Some archival work, like a lot of the archives I found for this project, were in old [US] Forest Service stations, attics sometimes that were, you know, mice feces where I had to like, get on my mask and gloves. People's personal photo albums, some government documents. But they're spread far and wide. And then some of it is just imagination, you go there and you see a trail or a little grave marker and you have to build a story around the silence that's there.



Amanda Reavey 09:41

Oh, that's beautiful – building a story around the silence that's there, right? Because as humans we always want to make meaning, we want meaning, so we will create.



DJ Lee 09:50

Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 09:51

We don't know the story, and you kind of touch on this in your book. Like, if you don't know the story, you will create one. And then to find your grandmother Esther in that place through that box that you found, and that you said in the book that it included the manuscript, which is called "Memoirs," I think?



DJ Lee 10:17

Yeah, yeah.



Amanda Reavey 10:18

And it included this childhood story, songs, poems, and sketches. Do you consider that a hybrid memoir as well? Like, I mean, you call your memoir "Remote" a hybrid memoir. And

then what does that mean? Because it also seems like a spiritual experience. I'm going to say "spiritual" a lot with this book, for some reason, it's just like the first thing to my mind, but it also seems like a spiritual experience to your grandmother to write notebooks, to engage with dreams and apparitions. It's almost like you're writing your memoir alongside of – like, time doesn't exist and you writing your memoir alongside when she wrote hers.

D

DJ Lee 11:03

Yeah, that's such a great point, Amanda. Like, no one's really ever pointed that out before that her memoirs, I think it was a fifty-six page book and it was typewritten, double-spaced. But yeah, it had a little drawings, and songs, and poems, and anecdotes, and photos. So, that's so fascinating that she was putting together this hybrid work, you know, as my book ended up being a hybrid book because it has poetry, and photos – a lot of photos – and map map, and different kinds of writing forms, for sure. You know, when we were talking I was thinking that hybridity does in some ways, it's a spiritual form because it it's about associational thinking, which is especially in *The Selway-Bitterroot*, but also, I think, other lands where indigenous folk have, you know, still feel connected to – their worldview includes associational thinking much more than, you know, linear thinking like the western literate mind that's based on literacy. This orality is based on associational thinking, and I think a hybrid work is also that way. You know, it jumps like poetry, like lyricism, it jumps from – or memory as you say – from one association to another, instead of in a sort of chronology. At the same time, I do have to say that the first readers of the book before it was published were very confused about where I was in space and time. So I had to go back through and put some signposts in to let the reader know that, "Oh this happened before that," or "This happened after that." Because I think as readers in the western literary tradition, we still need that. The comfort of chronology even if it jumps around.



Amanda Reavey 13:40

Which is interesting because nature isn't boundaried, but we need that. That's almost like, "Is that why we created cities?" it's 'cause somehow we just are not comfortable in remoteness.

D

DJ Lee 13:55

That's a good point. Yeah, yeah. We need the grid, somehow, of a city. Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 14:04

That like proprioception or something, like we need to figure out our place in time and space. But nature and spirit aren't boundaries.



DJ Lee 14:16

No.



Amanda Reavey 14:17

And in a sense, I guess that hybrid memoir, by Esther, that having it in a box, and then you open it and just like, "Woah." I loved that moment in the book, I was like, "Yeah," that would just be like, "I don't know what to do," how do you even sort through an archive like that?



DJ Lee 14:38

It was odd. I mean, I had to check myself because I wanted to read so much meaning into every little thing. Like, as people who read the book will know my grandmother did not like my grandfather, and there was a photograph of him and the frame was all broken. So I'm like, did that just happen? Or did she break the frame? And so, I was trying to read more meaning, I think, into some of the objects in the box than was maybe there. And so when I was writing the memoir, I had to make sure that the objects or the writing really carried the weight of the meaning that I was trying to assign to them.



Amanda Reavey 15:30

That sounds hard. It's sounds hard, especially when it's so personal.



DJ Lee 15:35

Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 15:37

You did talk a bit about how Esther struggled with mental health. And, you know, Stereotype Life talks about mental health, disability, and access. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. Like, what were mental hospitals like back in the 1940s

and 50s?

D

DJ Lee 16:00

Yeah, and thanks for asking that, Amanda. I mean, my mother struggled with mental health and I also did for, you know, a major portion of my adult life. I don't so much anymore, but I did. And so that part of Esther's history, which I didn't also know much about and had to learn more about, was really important to me to find out for my own sake, and, you know, for future generations. I have a daughter now and she's in her early 30s, and she has children, you know, so I think it's something to know about in your family. I did some research on the Idaho State Hospital North where [Esther] was committed in the 50s. I mean, in the book, she went in and out of a few different mental hospitals, and she finally ended up in Idaho State Hospital North. I know that she was committed against her will. A judge ordered her to be there and she hated it. On her deathbed, she told my mom, that was like one of the last things she said to my mother before she died, which was, "He put me in a hospital and sent electricity through my brain." She had an uncommon number of electric shock treatments, all against her will. And so, I don't know for sure about current mental hospitals. I've only observed one in the last ten years like in person, but I don't know if they could give you electric shock against your will like that. That many treatments of it. So that was really hard for her. I know that my mother was not able to see her own mother for a number of years and she had to go visit, and from the descriptions my mother gave me, it was almost prison-like. I think it's interesting that I actually went to the mental hospital where she was for three years and tried to take some photographs of it. This is about 10 years ago when I was starting to work on it. A cop – this part's in the book too – a cop comes up and says, "You can't take pictures of this prison." Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 18:46

Wow.

D

DJ Lee 18:46

And then another cop came for backup, and I had my camera and they said "No." So the mental hospital where she was is now a women's prison. And there's big cyclone fencing. And to me it's significant that they could transition so easily from mental hospital to prison. On the other hand, I know that mental hospitals, psych wards, you know, there're not near as many beds as there used to be for people who are suffering. Because my grandmother wouldn't get out of bed. She was in very bad shape. And so, I mean, I don't

know if she would have gotten any treatment at all had there not been that system. So I go back and forth. I'm trying not to like demonize all mental hospitals because she did get better eventually, you know. So I just know that she did not want to be there and she did not want the treatment that she was given. And there was a lot of shame associated with it.



Amanda Reavey 20:07

So writing about it, how is that to move through – at least when I'm writing, and I'm trying to write through that shame, how was that? How was that experience?



DJ Lee 20:23

That was hard. I mean, my grandmother was gone by then, but she would never talk. She and I never discussed that herself, the two of us. I knew about it mainly from my mother. The only time my grandmother ever mentioned it was the last time I saw her and she said, "I'm nuts, my brain isn't right." And I knew what she was referring to, which was, she still had carried that shame with her all those years. You know, I felt kind of like I was betraying her maybe a little bit by writing about it. I mean, I'm not adverse to writing about my own struggles because they're mine. But at the same time, mental health issues are sometimes inherited, and I felt like I could bring it out in the open. The other thing is, is that while, you know, you're talking about archival work, what I learned is that so many people who were early people settling in that part of the country, in that wilderness, ended up in that same mental hospital so. So it was almost like that landscape either attracted people that might have had divergent thinking or it produced that, I don't know. But I don't really think of mental illness as an illness. I think of it as a divergent way of thinking, and in a lot of ways it's a gift if you can still function. You know, it allows you to see the world in a different way. And if you can [sic] accept the struggle along with the gift, I think it's not the worst thing.



Amanda Reavey 22:33

Well, that's heartening to hear. Because I don't know if you know this, I have bipolar disorder. So sometimes –



DJ Lee 22:40

I did.



Amanda Reavey 22:40

– yeah, so it helps with the creativity. I don't want to be – although that's kind of a stereotype too, right? But, it's both. They're both there, the divergent thinking. But I'm also attracted to the wilderness, and I don't know if it's because there's moments and bipolar disorder where it isn't boundaried and it's kind of ecstatic in a way. So, that interesting. Whether wilderness attracts or creates. Or both, maybe.



DJ Lee 23:22

Yeah, that's a really good point. But at the same time, with wilderness, you know, when you're out on a wild trail, the trail kind of circumscribes you. Unless you're bushwhacking, and that's like a whole thing, which is so difficult. You know, you have to be reading your GPS and it's kind of a different thing. But yeah, it's unboundaried, but at the same time, there's just that little trail that you can be on. And so [sic] space is very different, but yeah, that's a good point. And you know, the mind isn't boundaried, anybody's mind. We've just saw, most of us have just sort of accepted that that's how we have to function. But you're right, the wilderness just, you know, seems to be the place where it feels good.



Amanda Reavey 24:13

Yeah. And then there's that trail, whether it's created by a person or it's an animal trail, you know. And there's some kind of healing or connection there that makes you feel like you're part of something that's bigger than yourself. So I'd like to also talk about healing because what I love about being in the wilderness is that you have to work for everything. I've never worked for water, clean water, so hard in my life. But it's simple and complicated at the same time, and then you write that Esther's guiding principle is that, "Every person, animal, plant, rock and body of water, everything on Earth had a spirit life more real than the matter we could see in front of our faces. They asked her life too with no static place but zone in which spirits continued to evolve." So this juxtaposed with the description of The Selway-Bitterroots and even your friend, Connie's, description of it bring the spiritual life to the book. Can you comment on this? What is so beautiful and healing about the wilderness in nature?



DJ Lee 25:31

Well, you're so right, Amanda, about having to work for what you do. You know, you have to chop your wood or you have to, you know, go collect it. So before you can even get warm and have – you know, the sort of spirit of the campsite is usually the fire – you have to work for it. And you have to haul the water, you have to filter the water, you have to set

up your shelter, your bed, dress your own wounds, cook everything. Yeah, and it's – you know, it just makes you realize that the world that we live in now, the 21st century with all the technology and convenience, it actually takes us away from just those simple, almost mindful – you know, they're filled with mindfulness. Especially those simple tasks of taking care of ourselves and taking care of one another. They're so beautiful, but we don't get a chance to do that as much. You know, we don't have to grind our own coffee and stuff like [that]. So I think – you know, I think that there is something spiritual about that. You know, if you think of the Buddhist monks, they say chopping wood is the most spiritual – I forget what the saying is. But if you want to have if you want to have pure – get as spiritual as you can, you chop wood. So it's that just that dailiness. Esther did have a sense. You know, she was attracted to the Christian Science, which is like this huge abstraction. You know, it's just this very abstract religion. It's kind of linked to Emerson and Thoreau and the transcendentalists. But at the same time, she was very connected to the organic here and now. And so I think that she kind of combined those two spiritual traditions. And she did have a sense that the flora, the fauna, the rocks, all non-human nature had beingness. And I think like – how long were you out on the trail? Just this last time?



Amanda Reavey 27:57

Five days.



DJ Lee 27:59

Yeah, so it's almost like the second day, like the end of the second day, you start to shed the front country, right? You start to shed. You don't care about your cell phone, you could care less about whatever was super important, like two days before. It just vanishes. And I think that beingness of the more-than-human world, the natural world, the fact that all of those forms have souls and spirits is part of the healing. I mean, you can start to feel that, and there's this mutual respect and reciprocity that starts to infuse you when you're out like that, and I think that is tantamount to healing.



Amanda Reavey 28:56

And I think your friend Connie kind of had a similar guiding principle. So I did like that kind of parallel thought with Esther and Connie. Can you explain who Connie is and how she helped in terms of your search with finding your family history?



DJ Lee 29:24

Yeah, well, Connie was the Wilderness Ranger back at this place called Moose Creek. It's twenty-five miles into the wilderness and you can only get there by hiking or riding a horse or rafting down the river. And they do have a small airstrip, which my grandfather actually built for bush planes, so you can get in there that way. Connie was Wilderness Ranger there for a long time, and when I first went in there, she was the Wilderness Ranger. She was beloved by everyone and respected. She's like the quintessential wilderness woman. She was a teacher, as well in Iowa for many years before she became a Wilderness Ranger. So she was also the quintessential teacher and educator. So she was one of these people that I was in complete awe of, which says a lot because I don't really get infatuated and awestruck very often. Like, I've seen movie stars and stuff, and I'm like, "Okay, whatever." But I was totally awestruck with her, by her. So eventually she became my mentor. She helped me locate documents about my grandfather. She told me about the native people [sic] whose traditional homeland The Selway-Bitterroot is now part of. She was beloved by them. She taught me so much about hiking back there. I hiked with her, I went to visit her at her house. She was just so full of knowledge and goodwill and generosity. And she was originally in my book manuscript, and I had finished my book manuscript in something like 2015 or something. And I sent it out to a few agents and nobody was interested in it. So I just thought, "Okay, the book is probably not gonna, you know – maybe I'll pick it up some other time." Well, a couple years later, Oregon State University Press got interested in it, and I was almost finished with it. And the fall of 2018, October 2018, when I got word that Connie disappeared in The Selway-Bitterroot she was working, cooking for a group of hunters. And she went for a walk and disappeared, and there was a huge search and rescue operation for her. And her body still has not been found. Disappeared at a place called "Big Rock," which is about as deep into the wilderness as you can get. So that was really hard and horrible. But because of who she was in my book already, and, like you say, she was a sort of parallel figure to my grandmother and to my mother, I had to incorporate that part of her life and her passing into the earth and into the other world. Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 33:06

Yeah, I really loved the parallel stories and. Yeah, I don't know how to – it was perfect. I want to change tracks a little bit, because I also know per earlier conversations that you're in ombuds at your university and sometimes help students with mental health issues. So I'm wondering what is that work like? What are universities doing to help students with mental health issues? What could we do better as instructors? I'm also thinking about how access issues for students if they need the nature for healing purposes.



DJ Lee 33:57

Mm hmm. That's a great question, Amanda. I would say definitely provide them with all of the resources like on the first day on your syllabus. The very first day, like: here are the five places on campus if you are struggling at all with mental health issues. And I think saying mental health issues is the terminology that students use these days, so they'll know exactly. And then let them know, if you go to see a mental health counselor at the student center, that's completely confidential. If you go to the ombuds, that's confidential except we do have to report sexual assault and harassment and there's another little mandatory reporting if anyone is in imminent danger. Like in our town, we have alternatives to violence, is another mental health, which is not at the university but if students want to report off-campus. So, you just ask the Access Center usually too. So you just ask your university, what are the resources for the students and definitely provide that to them right up front. The other thing is that when students are struggling in your class, whether it's not turning in assignments or not coming to class – I mean, it might be different now with COVID or since a lot of us won't actually have physical classrooms. But before you do anything, contact them and ask them, "Is everything okay?" Because I've had students who really [struggled] with turning in things and you say, "Is everything okay?" and they eventually say, "no." And so then, you can direct them to these resources where people are trained to help them out. But mental health is a huge topic. I've noticed in my classes, I teach honors English freshmen and then I also teach creative writing at the third year level and then graduate courses. Every course, students are so – and you probably find that with your students too. They want to write about this. They want to talk about it.



Amanda Reavey 36:32

Yeah, definitely. And related, because I'm also thinking about [how] it takes a lot to ask for help. And I think in your in your book, you had that one hike where were you with your father and Myron, and you didn't want help. But what does that teach you about like asking for help? And how can students gather up the courage to ask for help?



DJ Lee 37:02

Yeah. I mean, that's a really good question. I mean, I think that having stories out there in your classes of people who did ask for help. I mean, in our university, a few years ago we had a great editor of the school newspaper who kept the topic in front of the students, kept it on the students' radar all the time. Like one student had – he was going to actually take his own life. And for some reason, a friend called almost well, it was about in kind of the nick of time. Then the friend and some other people went out to find him, and they found him before he'd done anything and that story about caring for one another, you

know, checking in, and it's okay to ask for help, it's okay to admit that you're not feeling great right now, and you need someone to help set things straight for you or just just someone to be with. Having that narrative out there in all kinds of forums, in your class, in the school newspaper, films, whatever, makes makes all of us realize that it's okay to ask for help.



Amanda Reavey 38:38

Like really being connected. It makes me think of how mushrooms in the wilderness and trees work together with – you know, the trees bring oxygen or sunlight to the mushrooms, and the mushroom bring the water to the tree roots, and we're all interconnected.



DJ Lee 39:04

That's so awesome. love that metaphor. That's so great. Yeah.



Amanda Reavey 39:12

Do you have any last things that you'd like to share or advice that you'd like to give?



DJ Lee 39:21

I just really appreciate you talking to me, Amanda. And I do think that now in these times when we're all staying at home a lot, that it's really important if you can get out to a natural space and take a walk once or twice a week. Even if it's a park, or like you did. You actually did a road trip up to the wilderness area with with people that you know don't have COVID, like they're your relatives that you see all the time and you guys all know. So, I know that most of the national parks and a lot of the wilderness, there's a few you have to call ahead of time to make sure but I would say, you know, being remote in your house can sometimes be really difficult. But being remote and out even at a natural landscape or a more wild landscape is really important. Right now, really important.



Amanda Reavey 40:36

I definitely, definitely agree with that. Thank you so much for taking time to do this interview with me. I really appreciate it.



DJ Lee 40:46

Thank you, Amanda. And yeah, good luck this year, teaching.



Amanda Reavey 40:52

Thank you. You too.



DJ Lee 40:53

Okay. Bye!



Amanda Reavey 40:58

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