

Samantha Rose Hill: (01:07)

This is “Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds”, a podcast co-produced by the Goethe-Institut and the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. I’m your host, Samantha Rose Hill.

[Music]

Hannah Arendt was a storyteller. Her first biographer Elizabeth Young-Bruehl once remarked that she was always quick to overlook the facts for the sake of a good story. Anybody who has dug through Hannah Arendt’s footnotes surely knows this to be true. For Arendt storytelling is a way of creating meaning from our experiences so that we can begin to understand the world. Like Penelope, she sat, laid smoking, day after day, weaving, and unweaving everything she thought. In this episode, I talk with fellow Hannah Arendt biographer, Ken Krimstein about the art of storytelling, digging through the archives for those gems, rich and strange, the color green, artistic judgment and ecstatic truth.

Ken Krimstein: (02:15)

You know, well, the amazing thing that vexes me as an artist and a maker and a fan is that how does truth seep into art and make it good? I mean, that’s just a question and I don’t even know if I don’t even know if that’s right, but I tend to think that that’s right in practice.

Samantha Rose Hill: (02:34)

It was a special pleasure for me to have this conversation with Ken, because he just might be the only other living person I know who has spent years carrying around all of Hannah Arendt’s life and work in his head, wrestling through the facts and details of her cinematic life. Trying to figure out a way to give form to this extraordinary political thinker. For Ken and myself, and we get into this a little, Arendt has been a mirror pushing us to continuously rethink the world anew and challenging us with one of her hardest concepts, *amor mundi*. How can we love the world and not just love the world, but create meaning in the world that we share together?

Ken Krimstein: (03:31)

If you’re in the business of making stories and you care. And you’re lucky enough to try and do what I’m doing, which is try and tell true stories. I think you have to have a gauge in your head that says, oh, that was getting too easy. That was, mm, you know, was it really like that? Uh, that seems a little fake, you know, uh, eh, people will lose people all of a sudden there, you always have to kind of be asking yourself, did I really take that to the limit of where it could be?

Samantha Rose Hill: (04:01)

Ken Krimstein is a cartoonist and the author of *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt*, which won the Bernard J. Brommel Award for Biography and Memoir. It was also a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. Please join me in welcoming Ken to think with Hannah Arendt about storytelling. [Music] Ken Krimstein welcome to Between Worlds.

Ken Krimstein: (04:42)

Hi, nice to be here. Thank you.

Samantha Rose Hill: (04:45)

Hi, it's nice to see you, Ken and it's nice to be talking with you in the early days of 2022. Now I wanna talk to you about storytelling. And when I was thinking about Arendt and, and storytelling, there's a quote that immediately came to mind from *Men in Dark Times* Arendt's essay on Isak Dinesen. And so I was just, I'd like to read it to you and then maybe just get, you know, you can talk about what this quote means to you and how you've engaged it.

"It's true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may even trust it to contain eventually by implication, that last word, which we expect from the day of judgment."

Ken Krimstein: (05:41)

Well, the first part of that quote, storytelling reveals meaning without actually defining it or without defining it. I think I, I painted that on the wall over my desk as I was working on my biography. I keep that in mind- uh, uh Hannah Arendt, I keep that in mind all the time, that quote is so important to me. And then the second part where, and I actually have to be honest, I haven't read the Dinesen one in such a long time it was nice to hear you do the end part of it because the rec-, I think she says reconciliation. [Samantha: Yes] And, you know, recently there's been a lot of stuff about the Bishop Desmond Tutu who passed away. And I heard some interviews with him and one of the big things, and you could argue maybe in a political sense, that Tutu was very Arendtian in terms of the reconciliation, and the way they dealt with that. Ah, you know hearing that in that quote reminds me that he said, when people told their stories, when people told their stories, this allowed this kind of public forgiveness that Arendt speaks of, and this this *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which is kind of a monumental example. So it's amazing how those two gigantic things came together in that quote, but that quote about storytelling revealing meaning without committing the error of defining it, it resonates, you know, as a storyteller, as a story maker so much because, you know, on a personal level, as both a reader, and as a writer, creator, that's the magic. I mean, I can't get completely thrilled about two plus two equals four. I mean, yeah. Okay. That's, it's all right, I guess. But, um, you know, Cinderella was this sort of good girl with these horrible stepmothers, or whatever stepsisters, and she put her foot, you know, in a glass slipper and this happened and that happened, and I can hear that story over and over and over again.

Samantha Rose Hill: (07:51)

You know, it's funny, I was reading *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky yesterday for the first time. I've never read it before, and there's this brilliant passage where he says, if we ever get to two plus two equals four, then there'll be no point left to living. We might as well just resign and lash ourselves for entertainment.

Ken Krimstein: (08:11)

Yeah, yes. I think because, you know, life is so much more uh complicated and and challenging and uh that's why this action, you know, the other thing, you know, story kind of recreates action at its best, and we experience it like we experience events and the best stories. We, you know, the ones that are told over and over and over again, whether it's, uh, Oedipus or, uh, Casablanca, you know, you, you, you, you can never figure it out

Samantha Rose Hill: (08:51)

As a storyteller, what drew you to Hannah Arendt?

Ken Krimstein: (08:56)

Great story. I mean, she had a great story. Part of my practice is that I learn about things as I write them. And that allows me to kind of re-express them, but I come with a certain amount of knowledge. So I had a certain amount of knowledge about Hannah Arendt, and it was sort of the main quotes, the main, you know, punchlines or whatever. But as I started to look into her biography, her life story, the events of her life, not surprisingly, well, or maybe surprisingly, cuz I don't know how she packed so much into one life and with so many people. I mean, and then it, it kind of impacted a lot of things that are my personal passions, uh, everything from sort of the Weimar culture that she was into when she moved to New York, the Cedar bar and you know, the different intelle- New York intellectuals.

Ken Krimstein: (09:49)

And, but yet she did everything in this sort of uh, you know, very, you know, I learned about it, but it's kind of like a very fiercely independent way, you know, kind of "whatever you got, I'm against it!" You know I mean, there was an attitude of contrariness or challenging. So I just thought the arc of her life was as interesting, well, the ideas are fascinating, but I was, I wanted to connect the life with the ideas. That's I think what story kind of does, at least that's what attracted me to her story.

Samantha Rose Hill: (10:24)

Mmhmm. I'm curious, you know, so we're both biographers of Arendt, but you you've also, you know, you draw her. You're an artist. I'm very curious what it's like aesthetically to engage in that process of physically bringing her to life, to connect the life with the story and the action and how you came to this imagistic portrayal of art, which I find so, you know, striking and, and beautiful. And I'm, I I'm curious about the green, cuz green seems like just the right color, but how did you, how did you end up here?

Ken Krimstein: (11:03)

Yeah. You know, again, thank you. I mean, first of all, when you were asking the question, it reminded me of another unfortunately recently passed icon, Steven Sondheim, who I believe in, *Sunday in the Park with George*, there's a song "I'm Finishing a Hat". And I related to that, cuz when you're a kid, I was always the kid that could draw in class, you know, and that was, people thought that was kind of a superpower. You know, I might, I might not have been able to throw the baseball, you know, anywhere near the, uh, where it was supposed to go, but I could draw and, and it was something quite magical about it. You know, finding how to, how to interpret,

Hannah Arendt's character, through line and make her a character. And then as she grew, that was challenging. But luckily she was an extremely striking looking woman, but I had to even simplify that and I had to find out how to do that and using cartoonist skills.

Ken Krimstein: (12:03)

So you'll note that I, you know, even when she's two years old, she has big bushy eyebrows. It's just so that we could know. So it was really, really thrilling. You know, even maybe before spoken language, there were pictograms, I'm not a real scholar of this. So, you know, we picture stories are something that we, that works. Pictures can be stories too. You know, it doesn't have to have words. So how did I come upon the color green? Well, part of it was professional utility. I love *Charlie Brown*. I think Charles Schultz was a genius, but Charlie Brown never aged. He was always the same age, always looked the same. Hannah Arendt in my book goes from being a little girl to an old lady, an old woman, or elderly, mature, whatever the correct term is, but she was always stunning looking, but you know, she ages and, and how do you make sure that the people know that she's the same, you know, all the time aside from a couple of those tricks. So I thought a color would be good to track her through it. And then what color, and again, when you're doing these things is you do, and I don't know if you came across this quote, but somewhere I read maybe in Weimar Germany, she favored wearing green. Really it came...

Samantha Rose Hill: (13:19)

Hans Jonas said that she was known as "the girl in the green dress".

Ken Krimstein: (13:23)

There you go. Thank you, Hans Jonas for that! [Laughter] Because that to me was like, why not? And then I started trying it and then this raised its own issues. First of all, I didn't, I really liked it cuz it felt fresh. And it's interesting, once I finished the book, Roz Chast, who's another New Yorker cartoonist, and she interviewed me when we had a, the launch of the book in New York. And when we were sitting in the back before we went out, the first thing she said to me is, she said, Really, Ken, green, green? And artists know that green is a notoriously difficult color to work with cuz it has a certain amount of ambiguity, but I just treated it as a hue and it just happened to work. But in my own cockeyed thought process, I thought, well, you know, Hannah Arendt, really one of the things she really likes is this pursuit of new or as she calls it natality, you know, new newness, very important. So I thought, oh, that's like green, you know, spring. And then it's quite interesting when I was doing a talk once to somebody, someone raised their hand and said, well, yeah, but think about it, green is the color of natality in plants, but it's the color of decay and flesh. That even completed it more. You know, if you just think about, yeah, that there's an, maybe an example of storytelling, revealing meaning without defining it, cuz it just kind of, it was felt, I felt it.

Samantha Rose Hill: (14:56)

Yeah. There are two poems that she writes that deal with color that I, I hadn't connected to this until now. One is the first time she returns, I think to France after the war and it begins, "Green, green, green." You know, and she's just marveling at the countryside.

Ken Krimstein: (15:18)

It reminds me of another thing when she escaped from Berlin, the course was through the green, the green mountains, uh, between Germany and Prague, the Erzgebirge, or whatever they call it. So yeah. Very interesting. Green, green, green.

Samantha Rose Hill: (15:34)

It's, it's interesting in a literary sense because women so often, at least to me, seem to be obsessed with the color blue. And for so long, historically, green and blue, uh, weren't even differentiated from one another. And so here we have this other striking hue, which is complicated and difficult and one that people do often avoid, but seems so perfect here for all of the reasons that you are, are talking about. It seems to reveal something, a different kind of melancholy that perhaps is, we could say is, is more green than blue in a way.

Ken Krimstein: (16:11)

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I like, personally I like blue. It's one of my favorite colors. Green, I'm not so sure about, but it seemed to work for her.

Samantha Rose Hill: (16:21)

So one of the things that I wanted to talk about since ,in part, because you know, we live in the age of "fake news" as they say now. There's a lovely essay by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt's first biographer, called "Storytelling." And she begins the essay by saying essentially that Arendt was always willing to sacrifice the facts, to tell a good story because first and foremost, she considered herself to be a storyteller. How do you manage the facts when you're creating meaning without committing the error of defining a story?

Ken Krimstein: (17:00)

Wow well, I'm jumping up and down and shouting hooray hooray, because uh even though I'm sitting down [Laughter] because uh a) I really liked uh Young-Breuhl's book a lot I thought it was great and I had not read that essay. But you know for some reason I love a lot of German art of a certain kind. One of my first great artistic awakenings, if you will, in terms of storytelling was going to see Werner Herzog's movie *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* at a local film screening place when I think I was in college or in high school, I'd become such a big, I guess you could say fan or follower of Werner Herzog, I just follow his work and there's an essay, well he made this, this Minneapolis declaration at the Walker Art Museum that has within it what he calls "ecstatic truth." And that is only, I'm sure it sounds much better in German, ecstasy is a German word we see a lot from German stuff, uh "Ekstase," whatever but um, ecstatic truth, and I dove into it a little bit deeper with Werner Herzog and it's interesting he says something quite similar, in one of his articles or something, somebody said oh you put a quote from uh, Pascal at the end of this movie and Pascal never said it and Herzog said, well, well he should have.

Ken Krimstein (18:33)

[Laughter] You know and um, I think what this, I think what this insight that they're talking about is anytime we tell a story, we're fabricating. There's an element of, [Samantha: Yeah] it's not our

immediate experience as a person. It's mediated, even if you stick a camera, I mean, I think Herzog's thing came out as a, uh, something against, you know, Verité Cinema. People thought, oh, if you just keep a camera on all the time, it'll tell the truth. You know, I think you acknowledge that you have to find that deeper level of truth that exists. And I [Samantha: Yeah] you know, the other thing is as this thing mushrooms, you know, Walter Benjamin and his stuff on the storyteller, that great essay where he talks about this guy, Leskov, and he takes the modern novel to task because the sort of what we might call, uh, high concept, Hollywood, three-act-screenwriting, or whatever you want to call it, can be an artifice. And he says, just go to the folk tales, go to the way people just told stories from time immemorial.

Samantha Rose Hill: (19:40)

I think there's quite a few things in there. And I love the idea of this Pascal quote at the end of the film that Pascal never said and putting it there because he, he should have said it. It really raises a question about the relationship between art and storytelling and politics today. And you, you're emphasizing a word Arendt loved: *poiesis*, this, to make. This activity of artifice in the world, actually making the world that we, that we live in. And the idea that truth is not perhaps necessarily what we think an immediate representation of reality is, or the demand to make art represent reality somehow one-to-one is not the truth in the way that we might like it to be, or, or want it to be.

Ken Krimstein: (20:39)

Yeah, I, I think it's *poiesis* and the danger is that people can fabricate stories that are very compelling that have no truth in them. And that makes it incumbent upon the person who listens to the story, or the critic, or the society to be able to have dialogue about it and say, that was fake, that was not right. They didn't think hard enough about it. It wasn't enough of a provocation. It was just ice cream with a cherry on top. And that's not what it was, what it's supposed to be. The sense of how engaged or how much should an artist uh, have to do with politics is always kind of a lightning rod, which is why I think I went back and reread her fabulous essay in *Men in Dark Times* about Bertholt Brecht. And I can read that thing over and over and over again for so many reasons.

Samantha Rose Hill: (21:46)

And it was a very controversial essay when it was published. There was the Brecht controversy that sprang up about it because Arendt was read as having forgiven Brecht for supporting Stalin.

Ken Krimstein: (22:00)

Oh, really? [Samantha: Yes.] See, I don't, I don't know the history of the publication of it. But in terms of reading it now a few times, I see it as she excoriates him. I think she just, I think it's the most, it's the most brutal takedown that you could ever do to anybody because basically she hits him where it hurts. She says, you became a hack. You started telling lies and your art started to suck.

Samantha Rose Hill: (22:27)

Yes. And his art, his poetry became too political. And the punishment was that he lost his talent, that he, he turned his work [Ken: Right] into something instrumental and it lost its beauty. I agree with you. It's, it's, you use the word, excoriating, [Laughter] and biting.

Ken Krimstein: (22:51)

Excoriating. I mean, I think it's vicious, I think it's brutal because, again, if you look at the way, Arendt is a, is a brilliant polemicist, I guess you could say, or storyteller, whatever you wanna call it. Because if you look at the structure of the, the essay, she builds this guy up, and builds him up, and builds him up, until he's almost lighter than air, I mean, and then she just, she sinks him.

Samantha Rose Hill: (23:21)

Well, she says that poets are accorded a special place in the realm of human affairs. They're not mere mortals. They're held to a higher standard of judgment.

Ken Krimstein: (23:31)

Right. All that is, all that is something to Johve?

Samantha Rose Hill: (23:34)

What is permitted to Johve.

Ken Krimstein: (23:35)

Yeah. And, and she says, that's not right. I mean, this guy has to be held to a higher standard. And I think he is definitely a tragic figure. And I think Hannah Arendt was enough of a realist, I guess, to understand that tragedy is part of life. Joy is part of life, but tragedy is part of life. And, you know, the amazing thing that vexes me as an artist and a maker and a fan is that how does truth seep into art and make it good? I mean, that's just a question and I don't even know if I don't even know if that's right, but I tend to think that that's right in practice.

Samantha Rose Hill: (24:32)

Well, I think it's raising a question about aesthetic education, I wanna say in a way, although I think the word judgment is, is probably better than education. Can the kind of art we engage in, the form, prepare us to judge in the way that Arendt talks about thinking and judgment? And I'm reminded of a quote from her notecards on Kant where she says, the opposite of the beautiful is not the ugly, but the useful, the good for. [Ken: Hmm] And she describes truth, truth-tellers as being outside the realm of politics.

Ken Krimstein: (25:14)

Yeah, it could be. I mean, I think because I think they, they bring experience to the public square, and I think it's individual. A truth teller who puts forth an individual experience, which can then become part of the dialogue that we all have. And I think maybe also, because she saw the really bad, the deleterious effects of propaganda in a very, very close up and the person who gets to define what, what reality is, changes it to suit them. That's different than

telling a truth about the world, which is sort of endlessly ambiguous. I think. I mean, it's the difference between the two plus two equals four and, and Cinderella, you know?

Samantha Rose Hill: (26:12)

One of the things I like about how Arendt treats truth is that she always modifies it. She always modifies the word truth. She doesn't talk about "the truth." It's mathematical truth, scientific truth, historical truth. I think I compiled a list of like 30 different kinds of "truths" that she describes that there is a, there's a sense of plurality there. But I wanna go back to the kind of work of storytelling and the kind of truths about the human condition that we can get to in a way through the work. You do a lot of work around biography. You tell the stories of others that have been lost or are in archives or have been kind of hidden. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that process of choosing to tell those stories? You know, maybe you've learned a bit about the human condition as it were.

Ken Krimstein: (27:12)

So, so a couple of a couple of things figure into that; one is that I think life stories, I think, Arendt, and, and she actually turned me onto this other German thinker, Delphi, who I know she read and I've looked at and they, they really privilege biography, or autobiography, life stories. And it's interesting if you think about Arendt's journey herself, one of her first major works is what you would call almost a personal biography of um, her great friend the German salon person Rahel...

Samantha Rose Hill: (27:46)

Rahel Varnhagen.

Ken Krimstein: (27:47)

Varnhagen, which was a huge, a huge connection. One of the things is that I don't need to know that Abraham Lincoln had a little beard and built a log cabin and was good at splitting logs and was tall. We all know that he's on a penny coin. I need to know parts about Abraham Lincoln, that I couldn't even imagine. *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, that book. He does ecstatic truth with Abraham Lincoln and that opens up some stuff. So when you're talking about lived lives, I feel like there are parts of our collective history that have just become, as I like to say, like the penny worn flat. And I wanna go back and find out what was really going on with uh, teenagers in Eastern Europe before the Second World War, not the sort of sanctioned, blah, blah, blah, that we all have in our minds, but a kind of connection. I wanted to find out what made Hannah Arendt embrace the break in tradition and have the courage to carry on. And I think if you're trying to define what gives somebody courage, that's not a two plus two equals four kind of a thing. That's a much more complicated story. My next book, just because I found out that nobody's ever written any biographies about Albert Einstein. I thought

Samantha Rose Hill: (29:07)

There are none? There are no biographies of Albert Einstein? [Samantha and Ken overalking each other.]

Ken Krimstein: (29:11)

Yeah. Never, never been, never been written. I'm trying to uncover an area of him that maybe hasn't made it into the public narrative. And narratives can change with time. But without lying, you know, based on a certain amount of facts, but also based on what was his day to day life like, and what was, what did it, you know, what did it matter? Another quote from Hannah Arendt that you know I just take with me all the time is that "man does not inhabit the world." You know, capital "M" man, not man. The one, you know, man, mankind, man, you know, "men do". And then I usually modify that to say, and women and children and dogs and cats. It's a world of specific actors, not this massive abstraction. And when you get to that, you get to stories.

Samantha Rose Hill: (30:07)

The way that you are describing this art of storytelling reminds me very much of Walter Benjamin, and specifically the metaphor that Arendt uses for Benjamin in her essay on him, which is the introduction to *Illuminations* about Pearl diving. That you have to dive through the wreckage of history to bring to the surface, those gems that might illuminate something about our contemporary moment, wresting them from the past.

Ken Krimstein: (30:39)

Yes. Our podcast audience cannot see me nodding my head furiously to that because I totally, totally believe in that. And that's why for myself, I love ephemera. And I love that whole notion that Benjamin talks about with the arcades. I was like, whoa, yeah, you gotta find that little busted little weird thing, you know, and that will explain, you know, that's the lynchpin and really good storytelling is about that. I mean, another thing that I've taught design and I've taught, you know, storytelling and writing and I like to say the specific is general and the general is meaningless. If you look at Charles Dickens, the specifics, like I was never, you know, a little poor kid living in London with all this soot and all that stuff, but the way he describes it, it's like, it means everything to me. But if he comes out and says like poverty was so bad. I'm like, next page!

Samantha Rose Hill: (31:42)

So the soot, um which is which so wonderful. You know one of the things that I'm thinking about is that truth, is representation and appearances. There's this great quote that Arendt puts at the top of the *Life of the Mind* by W H Auden and it's, "Does God ever judge us by appearances? I suspect he does." [Ken: No] It's hard not to think about our contemporary political context, which is very politically charged. And there seems to be almost a demand for this kind of plastic truth or the repetition of facts that lead to the creation of norms and less of an emphasis on this kind of ecstatic truth that might do this Benjaminian work of illumination. I guess I'm just wondering how you negotiate that when you decide which stories to tell or how you write these stories?

Ken Krimstein: (32:44)

There's a perception that people want easy, happy. And I think we do. Until we're about three years old, at which point we actually want complication, darkness. I have a little quip that I sometimes say about storytelling in reality is, life is not Disneyland. And nobody understood that

better actually in many ways than Walt Disney, because he went to the brothers Grimm and he went to many places. And where his things are most effective is where the dark side really comes out. So I think good art, or good stories, should make us feel uh, unsettled.

Samantha Rose Hill: (33:35)

And at the same time, we live in a culture that is oversaturated with darkness. I read some incredible statistic that by the time someone is, I think 18 years old, they'll have seen, I can't remember the exact number, but it's something like a hundred thousand murders on television. I mean, we're surrounded by violence and disaster and death all of the time. And one has to wonder what that's assuaging for, because it's not the same thing as what you are talking about.

Ken Krimstein: (34:07)

No, because you, you said it, we've seen a hundred thousand deaths on television, but see one in life and you'll never forget one instant about it. And we get immune to, you know, it's interesting earlier in the talk you brought up Isak Dinesen, of course, because of Arendt I had to start looking into some and I read "Sorrow Acre," which has been in every anthology book that I've ever seen, but I never actually bothered to read it. It's monumental. It presents a sadness, which, a slice of inevitability of life that you can't countenance. It's like cutting off a limb. That's how powerful it is. Now, is that a good thing? Maybe not, maybe so. I mean, I think I got to experience a part of life that I otherwise couldn't. And I think if you're in the business of making stories and you care, and you're lucky enough to try and do what I'm doing, which is trying to tell true stories, I think you have to have a gauge in your head that says, oh, that was getting too easy. That was, mm, you know, was it really like that? Uh, that seems a little fake. You know, I'll lose people all of a sudden there. You always have to kind of be asking yourself, did I really take that to the limit of where it could be?

Samantha Rose Hill: (35:31)

I think that you are describing very beautifully, the kind of inner compass and moral judgment in a way that so much of Arendt's work is about, especially when she's talking about the work of thinking and imagination and judgment. And can you talk a little bit about how you cultivate that inner compass, barometer, conversation, dialogue of the two in one when you're writing and making stories?

Ken Krimstein: (35:59)

Yeah, well, that's every artist, I think every writer has their own methods and their own tricks. And I think as you get more comfortable, maybe with more experience, you know, how to hold things sort of in advance, you don't, you don't judge 'em too quickly. You have to live within insecurity, I guess, or, you know, you have to just sort of believe, you know, I, I paint, I draw my, my dad used to take me and teach me painting and stuff like this. And I don't think you can fall in love with your work that much, you gotta like, hold it at a vance. And then, and then see. And sometimes, you know, and I learned this even when I was working you know in advertising and would make a commercial or something and sometimes somebody would walk in and say, what if we put the end in the middle, in the middle, at the end and blow it up. And when I was young I

was like, no, no, don't touch it! You know, we spent all this money! You know what? It's just there to mess up.

Samantha Rose Hill: (36:56)

It's there to mess up.

Ken Krimstein: (36:56)

Yeah. Well, Bashevis Singer had a great quote. He said, uh, the writer's best friend is the waste, wastepaper basket.

Samantha Rose Hill: (37:04)

That is certainly true. You brought up love. And one of the things that I really wrestled with while I was writing the biography of Arendt was falling out of love with her. I don't really talk about that often because when I talk in public people wanna hear, you know, how much I, you know, I'm *in love* with Arendt, but I had to really kind of fall out of love with her to write that book. The reward of storytelling is letting go, I think she says in that essay on Dinesen and I, I really felt like I, you know, suffered a loss in a way. Do you form attachments to the characters that you write about? Is there a kind of analogy there? Do you keep your critical distance? Do you allow yourself to, to fall in love with them?

Ken Krimstein: (37:55)

I do fall in love with them, otherwise I wouldn't wanna spend that much time with them. But I'm, I'm also married. And with all due respect to my wife, it isn't always flowers and you know, whatever. I had that same thing with Hannah Arendt when I was writing about her and I still wrestle with it because otherwise, I think it's interesting you mentioned it ear earlier, like then it becomes, maybe you didn't say this, but it sort of becomes like propaganda, hagiography. I don't wanna do that. And I don't think she would've approved. One thing that made it quite easy, to kind of be contrarian when I was writing about Hannah Arendt or go to places that were uncomfortable is that she kind of encourages you to do that. She doesn't wanna have acolytes and followers. She wants to make you think.

Samantha Rose Hill: (38:43)

Did she make you go any place uncomfortable?

Ken Krimstein: (38:45)

Oh there were many uncomfortable places. And I still have, I applaud like she, she clearly showed levels of, I mean, I think courage and also audacity and maybe pigheadedness that I could never countenance. I don't think I would. I don't know. Again, she raises the question. I don't know if I would sacrifice many of my closest friends for an idea. I don't know how many of us would today. I mean, here we are faced by the Buffets, and I don't mean Warren, of the Twitter-verse or whatever, the Instagram social thing. And I think it's making a lot of people, ooh, I don't wanna lose followers or whatever. You know, we go back to, I think we mentioned this before somebody had mentioned that one of her, her greatest talents was that she had a genius

for friendship. You think about somebody whose genius is for friendship basically sacrificing her friends for an idea? That's, that's brave, but you know, so, but

Samantha Rose Hill: (39:52)

Can you imagine doing that or is it, is it a mirror for?

Ken Krimstein: (39:57)

I can imagine it under certain experiences of extreme duress. Because I think that people, when they're faced with contingency sometimes can act in ways that they didn't know that they could. I mean, to me, that's what storytelling is about. But, um, I don't know if I'm, getting back, it so I think there were parts of Hannah and I think I tried to wrestle with some of her questions of identity and I think, you know, perhaps, you know, you never wanna speak for her, but I think she might say, you know, look, I'm not perfect, but I'm doing the best that I can. I'm throwing it down. You could say, I guess a lot of philosophers say that her, her thinking tends to meander a little bit. It, it isn't necessarily, uh, linear. And I think maybe that's kind of that storytelling ethos that you're talking about.

Samantha Rose Hill: (40:46)

No, she was, she was definitely more of a Penelope. I've been thinking about, I've been thinking about a passage from Aristotle from the end of the introduction to the *Ethics*, where he talks about the work of accounting. And he talks about how there's two meanings of the term. One is the mathematical account to take stock, to add everything up, which would be the kind of linear historiography. And the other is to tell a story and to give an account. And Arendt was definitely more of a, she, she described herself as a Penelope weaving night after night, and there's no end to the work of thinking, but I think this connects back to facts and ecstatic truth, you know, we can talk about sacrificing one's friends for an idea, but I think part of the trouble in our contemporary political environment is that it's it's so, so saturated, it's difficult to say what's worth fighting for. And I don't say that lightly because I think there's a lot of, a lot of things that I would put in that column that are worth fighting for today, but there's so much noise. [Ken: Yeah.] How do we begin to clear that clutter away to find what's essential?

Ken Krimstein: (42:11)

It sounds like a cliché to say it all comes down to education. Cuz again, I would love to blow that up. I wish that Arendt, but I wish she was the secretary of education or something. And she had all power because what would her pedagogy be? I think first of all, math [Samantha: Oh god] might go a little bit to the side, uh, but she'd teach about plurality, she'd teach about listening, she'd teach about, she'd teach about, um, getting outside of your comfort zone and, and she'd teach that there are no dangerous thoughts, thinking itself is a dangerous activity. And you know, I hate to say it, but you know, for thousands and thousands of generations, human beings have lived in a really, really, really tough physical and political surroundings. And you can't just push a button and say, oh no, that doesn't, that doesn't exist anymore. Yes. There is a lot of darkness in the world, there's tons of darkness in the world, but it becomes incumbent I think for audiences, I mean not audiences, societies to be able to know the difference. And how do you do that? Well, you know, I guess it starts young. Kids actually like truth.

Samantha Rose Hill: (43:31)

I think you are talking about aesthetic education that prepares people to think and prepares them to judge. And Arendt's notebooks in the 1960s, there are two pages of notes on the corporatization of Columbia University. I mean, I just left academia last year. I spent 14 years at three different universities teaching and I mean, we've witnessed the absolute corporatization of our universities where reading Moby Dick is supposed to be something instrumental that can help you get ahead in the advertising world or Wall Street or whatever it is that you decide to do. But the value of the experience of aesthetic experience, the *Ästhetische Erfahrungen* that can open us up and expand the imagination has been completely, it seems almost abandoned [Ken: Oh yeah] in colleges and universities today.

Ken Krimstein: (44:30)

Yeah. I, I don't know. I think higher education, and I just left, uh, myself, there you go. "The Great Resignation."

Samantha Rose Hill: (44:39)

Yes, we're a part of it.

Ken Krimstein: (44:40)

But I, you know, I, uh, I think it's gonna change. When I was teaching people and they'd say like, how can I learn how to become a better advertising copywriter? I'm like stop taking advertising classes and just take a, study Hamlet. Look at Macbeth. I probably learned more about advertising from a Shakespeare class that I had, I hate to say it than at any advertising class I ever took because it's about life. It's about truth.

Samantha Rose Hill: (45:09)

I often joke that when I, when I'm teaching Adorno or Benjamin, that studying critical theory, uh, teaches you either to be a critic of some sort or to go into advertising because, because once you start to understand the human condition a little bit, you know what, you know, what people have an appetite for.

Ken Krimstein: (45:29)

Yeah. I mean, I think Arendt, and I've heard her described a little bit as sort of a, a bit of an anthropologist. And I think that anthropology is kind of what, you know, the social or the, it's definitely the social space or the public space. But I do think to get back to storytelling, and I guess this is aesthetic. And I guess for me, it's just, I look at something like Hannah Arendt or the Beatles or El Greco or Frank Lloyd Wright, or whatever, you know, and I think, oh my God, how did somebody make that? Why, how, how can I, how can? That's for me, that's what motivates me. It's like, I'm kinda like if I see it, I want it, I wanna do it. I wanna figure it out. And I also am very process oriented in that, like, you know, the only way to do it is to do it and do it again and do it again and do it again. And a lot of people, again, they say like, why can't I just take a pill and have third grade? That's what we want now, this pill and you get third grade. No.

Samantha Rose Hill: (46:33)

Earlier you described, um, you know, thinking about getting in there and opening up and, and wanting to do it, you described finding those weird things, those kind of idiosyncratic things that really bring the story to life. What things, um, have you found lately? What have you been playing with?

Ken Krimstein: (46:54)

Oh gosh, lately. Um, oh boy. Well, I've been playing with um, what kind of an insurance executive was Franz Kafka. [Samantha laughing] And you wanna know something?

Samantha Rose Hill: (47:08)

Yes.

Ken Krimstein: (47:09)

Pretty good. Pretty good. As Larry David, pretty good. I read, um, a brief or something that he wrote to the [inaudible] toy manufacturers and it was great. I didn't realize that he also was a draftsman and he would it well, yeah, he did. Poor guy had to do pictures of like mangled hands and stuff. Cuz he worked for the workers' accident insurance company of Bohemia.

Samantha Rose Hill: (47:38)

Oh goodness.

Ken Krimstein: (47:39)

So that's kind of different.

Samantha Rose Hill: (47:42)

Did he bring the same level of artistry to his reports that he brought to his short stories?

Ken Krimstein: (47:51)

Hey may have brought, he would've been fired on the spot had he done that. He was wise enough to know, but he did, uh, according, at least according to this guy, Reinhold Strach or whatever it is, the, the guy who's written three 600 page books about his life. He did bring a sense of observation. And if you read Kafka, he's a great observer. He's a great observer. So yeah, I'm thinking about that. I'm thinking about what kind of patents did Albert Einstein have to deal with in the Bern patent office? So I'm trying to look at little known parts of these people. Because last time I checked people do like everything, like we're one consistent long thing, you know? So that's been kind of fun.

Samantha Rose Hill: (48:43)

That's wonderful. I'm excited to see what you do with Kafka. I think that's a perfect place to end Ken. I'm looking forward to your future collaboration with Werner Herzog on some kind of project around ecstatic truth. [Ken: Oh I only wish] I'm hungry for that and can only begin to imagine what it might entail. This was, this was lovely. Thank you for your work on Arendt. Thank you for your storytelling. And I hope I get to talk to you soon.

Ken Krimstein: (49:07)

Thanks a lot. I really appreciate the time

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:26)

Hannah Arendt, Between Worlds is a co-production of the Goethe-Institut and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. It was produced and edited by Lisa Bartfai. Music by Dylan Mattingly. And it was hosted by me Samantha Rose Hill. We have more episodes for you on thinking with Hannah Arendt now. Until next time.