

## Audio file

[HoTM Episode 108.m4a](#)

## Transcript

Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the Matter podcast, where we celebrate authors, storytellers and creators. I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, Vicky Atkinson and I are with best selling author Barbara Nickless. Barbara's fascinating resume includes roles as a technical writer, instructional designer, Raptor rehabilitator, piano teacher and performer, Swordfighter, and director of education for the country's largest public astronomical observatory. She shares her journey to becoming a best selling author of thrillers and how devastating losses, have led to new opportunities. Barbara also discusses how writing helps process experiences and how she has taught writing to combat veterans. We delve into her creative fuel that has led to 9 novels in 10 years and her whole hearted investment in research and writing which shines through in her character's internal growth. Join us as we explore the scenic and beautiful places that inspire Barbara's best selling novels. You won't want to miss this insightful and inspiring conversation. We know you'll love it. Hi, Barbara.

Barbara Nickless

Hi, how are you?

Wynne Leon

Doing great, great. In fact, we are thrilled that you have come to talk to us because we could talk about your characters and your books for days.

Barbara Nickless

Well, I'm thrilled to be here. So thank you so much for inviting me.

Wynne Leon

It's a pleasure. You have such an interesting path to becoming a writer, and I'm gonna quote from some some bio stuff that I found about you. In addition to your career as a technical writer and instructional designer. You worked as a Raptor rehabilitator. A piano teacher and performer and a sword fighter. You served as Director of Education for the country's largest public astronomical observatory and taught Beethoven to kids. Wow, that's amazing.

Barbara Nickless

And and you know.

Vicki Atkinson

That's for. You write books? Yeah, yeah.

Barbara Nickless

And I still haven't figured out what I want to. When I grow up.

Wynne Leon

Well, I tell you what. You have one of the most interesting pass to get in there.

Barbara Nickless

It's it's been strange, but a lot of fun tell.

Wynne Leon

That's how you became started writing.

Barbara Nickless

That goes actually all the way back to. I was. If that sounds crazy, I was in the hospital for my first eye surgery. Now had 7 with. At least two more to go so.

Speaker

Well.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah, all in one. You know, I keep it siloed there, but during that time, people were sending me good get well cards. And somehow I already knew I wanted to be a. So I flipped these cards over to the backs which were blank and then I would imitate my mom's handwriting. Then when she came to visit me, I would, I would tell her the. That I had written.

Vicki Atkinson

Oh.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah. So my mom thought that was.

Wynne Leon

Google.

Barbara Nickless

She you know, she really. She really wanted a Pulitzer Prize winning author in the in the family. She always had very high standards. But then I went. And did all this other stuff. Off and then ultimately, what kind of first my hand was the Waldo Canyon wildfire. And after we lost our home in 2012. It was a watershed moment for. It's like either either I get really serious about this writing thing. Mean. I've been dabbling with it. Never stopped writing. But it was time. Time to make it happen and and so I did so in the midst of of finding a new home and buying furniture and sheets and towels and dishes and all of that. I wrote my first. Novel full novel. And gosh, I don't even know how long and I had written a mystery because I thought there's a big market for mysteries. Love mysteries. If you have a dead body, people have to do something, right. So I always had characters that was having action to propel them through the story. That was tricky.

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

So so I had fun settling on a police procedural 'cause. I loved the science so. That's where it went.

Wynne Leon

That is. I mean, it's amazing when you that you get to those, those moments where life forces you to go on a different path and you're like, OK. I'm going to take up the. I mean that is just such a great. Inspiration.

Barbara Nickless

You know, I think there was a line in the Sound of Music that was something about when a when a door closes, a window opens and we have to keep looking for those windows because the doors are going to close.

Speaker

Yes.

Barbara Nickless

We don't have control over that, but we can find that window.

Wynne Leon

Yeah. Yeah, right. And and they aren't any fun when they do. Mean. I imagine losing everything in.

Barbara Nickless

No.

Wynne Leon

Wildfire is is.

Vicki Atkinson

Can't even imagine, yeah.

Barbara Nickless

It was, yeah. Yeah. Wow. Could have came out of it. Yeah.

Wynne Leon

Right, so you found your window. I you know.

Vicki Atkinson

What I think is so compelling, you know your bio. Just was smiling the whole. When was, you know, extolling all of your virtues. But the thing that just strikes me about all of that Barbara, and then, you know, reading. Your latest the drowning game is just the level of dedication and curiosity and the research. And kind of the immersion that it takes, you know, to tell a story and and you know, the book has so many elements that touch on your interests, you know, related to science. But there's so much intrigue and the characters are just delightful. But it's funny how the becoming of who we are. You know, it just gets richer overtime and and I can see how all of that finds its way into your writing. All that lived experience and then plus some the things that you you clearly dive in and learn about and then bring forward in this story which I think you know sometimes. Mystery writers there can be less, but you put so much heart and detail into it. I felt like I was learning things about topics that I would never have known anything about. Enjoyable, but also so educational too. About a part of the world that I feel ignorant about.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah. Well, no, thank you for that. I absolutely love research and when I was younger, this was before your time, probably those old. They were tomes by James Clavell.

Wynne Leon

No, we are.

Barbara Nickless

Well, now they've made a series about it on HBO, right? Showtime.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, yeah.

Barbara Nickless

And you always came away from those books, having learned so much. Was. It was sort of like the teaspoon of sugar with with the the medicine of history, although I don't really think of history as being medicine, but probably at that age I did that was that was homework versus fun.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

And I think that's. What inspired me to want? Do at least some of that in my own. Work and and plus I just love. I love learning about everything. Yeah.

Speaker

It's.

Barbara Nickless

There's really not much that would not catch my attention.

Speaker

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

And so with each book I've tried to pick some a some topic that I'm interested in. Or some social theme and then. I've tried to to learn something about the craft with each book and also to bring in a little bit of life experience.

Speaker

Mm.

Barbara Nickless

And Viki, you're right about as we go through life and we start to realize how little. Control we have over it and we come to terms with that. I think that's where internal growth happens and I love doing that with my. I love those moments of stepping up and improving what you've got inside, because I think we all have more than we realize.

Wynne Leon

Right. Yeah. Yeah. So. I in one promo that I saw for their Downing game, you asked these questions. What matters more? Your family or your country, you know, how do you choose? And and you're talking about that same growth and those same sliding glass. Door moments that you have for your characters that we see over and over again, whether it's, you know, the drowning game or the Eden Wilder series, or the Sidney Rose character. Mean there's just this invitation to bravery.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Wynne Leon

And it seems we just even it's you just said it so well. That internal growth.

Barbara Nickless

And I think we all face. I mean it's it's so much part of our journey that that when you're learning how to write fiction, there's there's Blake Snyder's beats. And he calls that the debate. You know this this challenge is set before the character. They or won't they step up? Or in the hero's journey, it's crossing the threshold.

Wynne Leon

Right.

Barbara Nickless

You cross that threshold, you can't go. But the thing with life is a lot of those thresholds are thrust upon us.

Speaker

We don't.

Barbara Nickless

We don't sign up for them and we don't really have a choice to.

Speaker

Mm.

Barbara Nickless

Whether or not to move forward, but in fiction you can. With that. What? What is this character really capable of?

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

I. In the drowning game. I put myself in audias shoes and thought what would I do and what would I have done in Nazi Germany or what would I have done in Rwanda? Am I the person that I really aspire to be? And what if my family was at? You know, it's easy to say, oh, I would have hidden a Jewish family in my home. But if you have children, it becomes that much trickier. So I know if I had been her, I would have run back to Seattle and hidden under the bed and. Make it all go away. I can do this, but we get to be more heroic in fiction and in growing up. Mm. My parents are from the South, which is. Is a lot of Southerners. I don't mean to to paint in a broad stroke, but I have a lot of family in the South and they're very conscious of what people think. And that was one of my mom's favorite phrases. Know if I stayed out with my boyfriend too long on the front porch and, oh, maybe gave me. Kiss, you know. Well, the neighbors think. So that there was that weirdest keep your skeletons in the closet. Also, they were really good people. My parents were good people. Had good values. Lived by those values and they really inspired me. It's. Concept I'm rambling on here, but it's a Brutus concept of right intent.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

So as long as we're coming from right intent, that's all we can ask of ourselves.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, but in the process of doing that you you mentioned Nadia, you know, sort of the the heroine, the protagonist, and she's so. She's so flawed in her own way that I think you you invite the reader to see male or female themselves in it because her struggle is it's, you know, what you and Wen have described is very real. You know, what do I want to? What do I need to do? Thinking about the greater good and what's right and it's it's not easy and it it

plays out and there's some, you know, brilliant complexity in your writing. The things that that you tease. And withhold and, you know, we don't want to give too much. But one of the things that I loved so much was her nickname, which is so good, so good, because little doses of familial humor, you know, quote also woven in about the family dynamics. So good.

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

Oh, thank you.

Vicki Atkinson

Oh. Can I can I? Can I say what her nickname is so her name is is, you know, Nadia Brenner. But her nickname is naughty. It's so perfect.

Barbara Nickless

Right, of course, sure.

Vicki Atkinson

It's so perfect. So I guess I have it asked. Did that come in a flash or did you know as you were developing the character that Nadia was going to be?

Barbara Nickless

Yeah.

Vicki Atkinson

Naughty to her dad.

Barbara Nickless

I didn't. It did come at a. That's a great way of putting. I was typing and suddenly her dad called her naughty and. Those are the things you're grateful for be with. There's so much you have to work really hard on, or at least I do.

Speaker

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless



Plotting does not come easy for me. So when those little moments happen, it's. You know it's. Like. OK, I'm. I'm going to have.

Wynne Leon

A glass of wine? Yes, absolutely.

Vicki Atkinson

It's like she was there with you or guy was with you. Who brought you Nadia? Was it Nadia?

Barbara Nickless

It must have been. It must have been guy. Letting you know that there was more than adea's past than I knew.

Vicki Atkinson

Love that.

Barbara Nickless

That's. That is such a joy in writing, as letting those characters reveal themselves to you where they come from, I don't know. I don't model my characters on real people, although I'm sure there's plenty in there that I'm not conscious of. But it's. Just one of those wonderful, magical things with the human brain that I love.

Vicki Atkinson

I love. They're hanging out with. You just need to invite them in, right?

Wynne Leon

Right.

Barbara Nickless

But right, except when they're, you know, outside your study on strike because they don't like what you've done.

Wynne Leon

Yeah, like.

Speaker

Here we.

Barbara Nickless

There are those days too.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, that's not good, right?

Wynne Leon

You must not have had many of those days because you've written like 4 crime novels and. This latest the spy thriller in four years. I mean that is an incredible pace.

Barbara Nickless

I. I don't deserve any credit for. It's my publisher and their and their idea of publishing. So my first book, blood on the tracks, which was named after the Bob Dylan album that came out.

Speaker

Hmm. What?

Barbara Nickless

Isn't this? I can't remember 2016 and I'm now working on my. Book so. Nine books in 10 years, or whatever it adds up to. And I remember having. Lunch and this wonderful French restaurant with my editor and the person called the author liaison, who handled a lot of things for us. And then the head of the imprint. And she leaned across the. And she said, Barbara, the one thing we need from you is a book a year because I was late. Was consistently. Consistently late. So I that's still an issue for me. And yet it keeps me going. So I guess I need the push.

Wynne Leon

Well, and given all the research you do, and that is an incredible rate.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah, I should. I should do a little less research. And more writing. My husband said the other day he. Why don't you write a? You don't have to do any research for.

Wynne Leon

Oh, how to do that? I don't have to do that. I mean, isn't that what we spend hours scrolling on our phones doing? Is research oh. You know I'm researching right now.

Barbara Nickless

Do you guys, do you guys get the notification from your phone on how much time you? That the daily average and you're just appalled.

Vicki Atkinson

This is where we hang our heads in shame, yes.

Speaker

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

But if it's research, I figure you get a pass.

Wynne Leon

Yes, absolutely I have. Know what's going on in the world.

Barbara Nickless

I'm not buying it. Wait.

Vicki Atkinson

No, but I guess I'm curious. What? You know what Wen had said and what you just described Barbara about kind of the pace. Is there a? Have you come up with a process that really works for you? I know every writer does something different about. Plot development and character through lines and do you use like a graphic? Do you have something big and visible in front of you, or what's your secret to doing that? I I get lost in my own details. Do you keep it all straight?

Barbara Nickless

Yeah, you're giving me way too much credit.

Vicki Atkinson

Oh. Oh no, I just read this.

Barbara Nickless

I have not figured out my process.

Vicki Atkinson

Not.

Speaker

Yet.

Vicki Atkinson

No, it's amazing.

Barbara Nickless

I don't know guys. I am still trying to figure it out. I have tried. Pantsing which is, you know, riding by the seat of your pants and or maybe a nicer term is discovery writing, which works wonderfully for some of my friends.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah.

Speaker

Yes.

Barbara Nickless

Write tremendous books and they don't know from one page to the. What's going to happen?

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

So you know, they're as surprised as the readers. There's like people. Jeffrey Deaver, who who spend. Did he say something like four months lying on the couch in the dark, plotting every single move and twist? And clearly? He would be a master at chess, right?

Speaker

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

Because he could always see so many moves ahead.

Wynne Leon

Right, right.

Barbara Nickless

I've tried that.

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

And that. It's just a mishmash. The thing I've settled on, I think that works best for me. Was was. I think it was El Doctoro who said all you have to do is think of it as driving from New York to LA at night. And you can only see as far as your headlights if that will get you eventually to LA, and you know, I do some detours. I don't mean to take.

Wynne Leon

Right.

Speaker

Yeah. OK.

Wynne Leon

Good.

Vicki Atkinson

Job.

Speaker

But that's.

Barbara Nickless

I I that's all I got.

Wynne Leon

Yeah. Well, and and it's. I mean 'cause, clearly what? What makes it work is you have to sit down and do it. However, you're going to do it. You just have to sit there and and and try and then it comes down.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah, therein lies the rub.

Wynne Leon

Right. But how do you balance with that schedule? I mean doing things like this, which is sort of marketing for your books and writing, and how do you how? You create that balance.

Barbara Nickless

It it's tough because it I think it comes from different parts. Your brain and. You do have to work to start compartmentalizing and and switching focus. So this morning I was. I was working. Was being. Or at least I hope I was. I'll find out the re read tomorrow and then switching for this conversation. But but things like this, you know, getting to talk to to people like you. Were chatting before this podcast started and and I was just enchanted with your story. And delighted and that really.

Speaker

It.

Barbara Nickless

It really adds something to the whole process, you know, to be able to connect with like minded people to get stimulated by conversation. I'll I'll go back this afternoon and I'll, I'll I'll be renewed. Thanks for that.

Wynne Leon

I think that's the nicest. Anybody's ever said to us, Vicky, for sure.

Speaker

Oh.

Vicki Atkinson

Oh my gosh. Yeah, that's a good thing we're recording.

Barbara Nickless

That's.

Wynne Leon

They're true.

Vicki Atkinson

Very good, I know. But all of that kind of begs the question, you know, for people to be achievers in the way that you are. You know, and creative, but also so thoughtful about. The craft and the. I mean, it's just it's it's very clear. That that you care about all of it, you know, it

just comes through in your writing. Just so beautiful on so many levels by having said. Of that. At the end of a day like today, you know when you've spent some time with us, but you're writing in the morning and getting back to it later. What makes a good writing day for? Like what? When you leave your space and you say you're done, is there something that you look for? To sort of characterize the effort that day to either push you forward, you know, with a little lift, you know, into the next day or push you forward a little harder because. You you goofed off with Vicki and. Too long, right?

Speaker

OK.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah, what an interesting question. I have been thinking about that.

Speaker

I.

Barbara Nickless

When something has made me excited for the work that day or or the work that's coming up, that's a good day for me and I always try to end, you know, Hemingway said. End in the middle of the sentence I think. Don't do that. But I have learned. That in order to overcome my fear of the blank screen the next morning, I need to know what my next scene is going to be about. At least. I'm going to get into it. I always have that.

Speaker

Mm hmm.

Barbara Nickless

The thing I'm learning my family has dealt with so many traumas and I'm sad to say it's not over. Still dealing with a lot and and at the end of the day all I can do. All I have control over is myself as as I mentioned earlier, and I want to be proud of myself. I want to feel like. I I gave it a good day's work that I worked hard. I was coming from the right place in my heart, which maybe sounds crazy for writing mystery novels, but but that's how I feel, and that maybe I've pushed my skill level a little bit and whatever craft thing I'm trying in the latest book. So yeah, I think. I think that's true for all of us right at the end of the day, we want to feel good about who we are in the world.

Wynne Leon

Well, and I. Love, I mean, because you have taught some incredible writing lessons. You know, we were reading a writer's digest article. You wrote and you talk about you're sort of that writing for resilience. How writing helps you recover. And one of the things you said in that is. That you work through your grief by helping your characters work through. Their. Powerful.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah. Writing is a process and and I mentioned in that article. I think that I teach writing creative writing to veterans and and most especially combat veterans. And letting them walk through their processes, whatever that looks. And for some of them, they don't want to write about their personal experience. But it can come out through the characters and what the characters have learned and how they've processed and. And yeah, there's a symbiotic relationship between. Creation and and experience and process that is just beautiful to see.

Wynne Leon

And talk about something to really be proud of. I'm not only the books that you've written, but the writing that you teach, so you have to tell us what's next on your what? What are you working on?

Speaker

Thanks Giselle.

Barbara Nickless

I was hoping to do another espionage novel, but I kind of have my niche with my publisher, which is crime cases involving a consultant who's kind of unusual.

Wynne Leon

Yeah.

Barbara Nickless

So I had the railroad cop in my first book. Had a forensic semiotician in my second series. And then and then I got to do my espionage and I'm hoping I get to go back to. But right now I've I've got my unusual consultant again. And all I'll say about him is he's known as the mythologist. And he's working with an FBI agent.

Wynne Leon

I love him. Owen.



Barbara Nickless

So we're back to serial killers. OK. And so of course I'm doing a ton of research on psychopathy, which is sort of alarming. You start looking around at people going.

Wynne Leon

Oh.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, but it's all research, right? Right. It. It is, but I love that and and I love the connection. Working with veterans and creative writing, and James Pennebaker and the opening up by writing it down, it's it's all that circuitous stuff that we do about. You know, being vulnerable, stretching a little bit, hoping for greater good for other. But in the end, I think often you know we're writing for ourselves about themes that matter and. Yeah, all of. So I I love that so good.

Barbara Nickless

Yeah. What was it, Joan Didion said. I I write so I know what I think.

Wynne Leon

Yes.

Barbara Nickless

So true Dell, so true.

Wynne Leon

Absolutely. And it's funny how you don't find out until you write it down.

Barbara Nickless

Isn't that amazing? It is.

Wynne Leon

Yeah, yeah.

Barbara Nickless

Do you guys journal?

Wynne Leon

Oh my God.

Barbara Nickless

Do either of you journal.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah. And then often we turn it into blog. So when and I are pretty forthcoming with a lot of personal details. And again it's, you know, we share this love of. Revealing self because it's that's the healing journey, you know, for different reasons so.

Wynne Leon

Umm.

Barbara Nickless

Oh, I can't wait to check out your blog. Yay.

Wynne Leon

Oh yeah.

Vicki Atkinson

Yeah, you'll you'll more know more than you ever wanted to know.

Wynne Leon

I'll send you some of my climbing posts. I think you'll like those stories.

Barbara Nickless

Yes, please do, yes.

Vicki Atkinson

Oh my goodness.

Barbara Nickless

And it'll all be grist for the mill.

Vicki Atkinson

Right, right.

Wynne Leon

So much good. Well, thank you so much for spending the time with us. Was an absolute honor and pleasure.

Vicki Atkinson

Indeed.

Barbara Nickless

Oh, the honor and pleasure is mine, guys. You so much.

Vicki Atkinson

Thank you.

Wynne Leon

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