TheWriteQuestionMINI_1128_AndrewLimbong

Note: THIS IS AN UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT.

Lauren Korn Hello and welcome to a mini episode of The Write Question, a radio program and podcast featuring authors from the American West and beyond. The Write Question is supported in part by members of Montana Public Radio and by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn speaking with NPR's Andrew Limbong, a reporter for NPRs Arts Desk, the host of NPR book of the day podcast, author of the NPR books newsletter, and a frequent host on LifeKit. We're talking today about NPR's 2026 Books We Love list, their annual list, a big list, usually between 300 and 400 titles, one that can be narrowed down by a number of mixed and matched filters in order to find your next read or to find the best gift for the readers you know this holiday season. Andrew, thank you so much for joining me today. It's good to see you. Welcome back to The Write Question.

Andrew Limbong Thanks for having me.

Lauren Korn One of these days, we'll chat outside of this Books We Love holiday window, but that's not today. Yo, hit me up, you know the number, come on. You know, you got the email. But it's not Today because Books We Love for 2026 is out in the world. I usually begin our conversations by asking about book trends. And I'm definitely curious about the trends you've seen this year, Andrew. But I'm also curious about your own reading trends. What did 2026 look like for you? What books did you gravitate towards? What kind of stories?

Andrew Limbong I think for me personally, it's one of those where it really clicked into place where the stuff I'm looking for are writers looking to craft a perfect sentence. Just you know, writers who you can tell are just in the muck of the Google doc or word doc or whatever the heck they're writing in and just like trying to craft something new, something beautiful, something true, something honest, something weird. About, you know. Using the same words that we all use right, but they're just trying to like find something in that I I think in a book especially like Like Lauren Graf's book brawler, right? Which is a short story collection She you know people might know her from like feats and furies her novels feats in furious or the vaster wilds This is a story collection. And so she has to be a little bit more economical, right every She's got to do a bigger bang for your buck sort of thing And you can just tell that she's really working on these sentences and they don't feel It doesn't mean to mean to say that they are feel overworked or overdone or like too purple That's not what I mean I mean is like you can tell that they're trying for beauty right and more than trying for more than just Plot or character or saying something didactic about like life or whatever. They are searching for something Not to be corny about it, but like true and beautiful. Um, and and I think that's what i'm looking for these days

Lauren Korn thinking about writers who are trying to make something beautiful, I can't help but think about the opposite or something like the opposite, which is not writers looking to make something ugly because I think that in that too, that can be beautiful. I'm actually thinking about AI and I'm wondering what conversations you in the book world over at NPR have been having about AI in books lately.

Andrew Limbong Yeah, it is interesting, especially the controversies over, you know, using AI, it's the Spider-Man meme of Spider-man putting on Spider-men. So using AI to detect AI writing. I think, especially when it comes to nonfiction, using generative AI to, to,

because I think some writers would argue that if I use AI as a research tool, right? If I use it, there are safe and responsible ways to use AI. And I buy that argument. I think if you're using it's impossible to not use AI if you have Google, right? You can't put it going to do things, not Google stuff. If you're if you are writing a nonfiction research book, that'd be okay. Shout out to DuckDuckGo, shout out to, I guess there are other search alternatives.

Lauren Korn Purely impossible, anyway.

Andrew Limbong Yeah, it'll be nearly impossible. And so I think the question is, where is that line between using AI and your own writing? I think this is something authors are grappling with, right, as they file like their lawsuits and as those lawsuits make their way through the courts. On the other hand, I think some publishers are opening their, you know, they're like AI curious, right? And they are sort of like, okay, if this is what sells, this is sells. You know, I'm just thinking about also how Like you can buy an AI-generated book at Barnes and Noble, right? And what does that mean for the art form? I'm not quite sure, but it'll be interesting to see what happens. Yeah.

Lauren Korn You mentioned Lauren Groff's Brawler, this short story collection. What other books did you champion as your 2026 picks this year, Andrew? And my personal favorites. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Andrew Limbong I really liked this book called The Brightness by Chad Harbach. I don't know if you're familiar with the book, The Art of Fielding that came out. Oh, I love.

Lauren Korn Oh, I loved it. Yeah, right. Yeah.

Andrew Limbong And so that book, for people who don't know, it takes place in this sort of like Midwestern college. It's about a college baseball player who's a star until he gets the yips and can't really play well anymore. This book returns to that same campus, but it has nothing to do with baseball. It is really about female friendship in a way that that in the art of fielding was about male friendship, but the brightness is about... It takes place 2015, 16, and it is about sexual abuse on college campuses and like how that it how like the Campus administration pays attention to or doesn't pay attention to those sort of issues it's about like that era of feminist blogs where if you know you if You pop off in the right way on like jezebel or xo jane that could get you invited onto tucker carlson You know and the sort of um attention economy pipeline that is again. It takes us in 2015 So it is it kind of predates our current uh experience with the internet right it is pre-tick tock It's pre-snapchat right like Instagram and Facebook don't work the same way that they do now But it is interesting to see the blueprints of how attention and and political action and all that stuff sort of works in that era And how it leads to now That said it has all this like sort of important stuff to chew on about like society and feminism and the internet and all That stuff it is a very well written and I kind of cringe at using this term because it's kind of a Salesman term, but it's a very cozy book It's a very, it's huge. It's like this thick. You can't tell if we're already, it it's big. Many inches thick, yes. Many inches, thick. And you can get just enveloped in his use of language. It is very, even though it's dealing with hard subjects, it feels very comforting and warm. It feels like an episode of Gilmore Girls, you know, it feels like you're like wrapped up in a blanket that while it's tackling these big issues.

Lauren Korn You're talking about the mid-2010s. There are a couple books on this list that sort of bring back the early 2000s, the 2010s, kind of back into the spotlight. I'm thinking Lena Dunham's Fame Sick. She kind of returned to pop culture this year in a big

way with her memoir. I also noticed, what was this, the book by Ryan Schreiber, Weird Era. This is the creator of Pitchfork, which was so big in that era. Um, are we having a nostalgic moment in literature, in pop culture? Are you as a reader having a bit of a nostalgic moment, are those things that you're gravitating towards?

Andrew Limbong Oh gosh. I hope not, cause I find nostalgia such a... Pfft. Dangerous dangerous thing to just get lost in your own sauce um, but I do think maybe as This is funny That you're asking this as i'm getting into arguments with all my friends about what middle ages is and what? Middle age and i'm like i'm 37. What is that times two? Am I gonna make it there? You know, maybe we're maybe i'm just like at middle age and I'm like looking back at like my youth or whatever um But I also do think planting the seeds for where we're at now like a lot of um that time in culture was a response to the post 9 11 era right you can you can talk like economically or culturally the the post-9 11 culture i i think like planted some of the seeds to you know what we're seeing now and i think looking back on that i don't know if it's nostalgic because it's not necessarily with like rose-colored glasses right it's maybe trying to take into account. Some responsibility that you shirked off before right like the the the pitch fork memoir weird era by ryan schreiber. Um That for for people for listeners who don't know pitch fork was a powerhouse in music criticism, right? This is a time where the the physical music magazine's power was dwindling and the rise of the website was coming up And it had the power to make or break bands, right you can make or brake certain careers And sometimes you use that power responsibly and in a funny way. And sometimes it use that power irresponsibly, right? And it like would derail well-meaning artists careers for no other reason than they thought it would be funny, right, to write a funny review. And it is a very stark look. It's a very honest look at like, listen, we thought we were just writing to be writers and writing to me funny, but like... And we weren't really thinking about like the ramifications of some of these reviews. And some of those writers have apologized to those artists like later on in life being like, sorry, that was crazy that I was what I was doing. And so I think it's like taking stock, taking responsibility at times for your younger self and like less like nostalgia, be like, oh, the good old days where we used to be mean on the internet.

Lauren Korn And understanding where one sits in the culture, right? Like I think that Ryan Schreiber, as you said, just was making this website, you know, he was obsessed with music and wanted to create this outlet. And yeah, there is a responsibility in knowing exactly what you're doing, even if it is fun, like music criticism. We are at time, Andrew, but I have one more question. What are your kiddos loving right now? What books are your kids loving? Or what are you loving as the person who's reading them books? Yeah, what are some kids books you can shout out?

Andrew Limbong Oh my goodness, um, I like this book, uh bored by felicity de sala. That is a book about this young kid who These kids love to be complaining about being bored. It's like bro you have The whole world in front of you. You don't gotta pay rent. You could be doing whatever bro. You can be What I would give to be in your position right now But you know this character she's like saying she's bored. She's bored she's board and then she just something clicks on in her imagination where she just starts imagining all these other people just doing things and finding access into the unbornness that is in her mind that I found in such an enlightening and fun way. There's another book called Billy and the Hole by Jessica Goik that is about this kid who... Finds a hole and the hole is asking him to like fill it with stuff and he has to go on all these adventures and fills with stuff it's a bit like the giving tree if you find the giving tree to be a toxic relationship this is a similarly like weirdly fun but weirdly toxic relationship about this kid and the whole and the holes like trying to get this kid to do like get more weirder and wackier stuff and each has the kid

ends up having the questions like, what am I doing? What's going on? What am I doing with this? I loved it. I think it spooked my kid out a little bit, but wow.

Lauren Korn Oh, wow.

Andrew Limbong But you know, that's that's not she she we couldn't even make it through Despicable Me the other day. She gets spooked out by a lot.

Lauren Korn Oh, sure. Oh, yeah

Andrew Limbong That's a that's a her thing that

Lauren Korn Not a not a kid thing. Yeah, Andrew. It's always a pleasure. Thanks so much. Happy holidays. Happy end of the year to you.

Andrew Limbong Yeah, you too.

Lauren Korn We'll talk next year.

Andrew Limbong Thanks a lot, hit me up whatever dude. Okay.

Lauren Korn I'll, I'll take you up on that.

Andrew Limbong Yeah, definitely. Bye. All right, see you.

Lauren Korn That was Andrew Limbong, a reporter for NPR's Arts Desk, the host of its Book of the Day podcast, author of its books newsletter, and a frequent host on LifeKit. Look for more information about Andrew and the 2026 Books We Love compilation at npr.org. To listen to this conversation again, to share it with friends, and to learn more about the books I loved this year, those on the Books We Loved list, go to mtpr. Org. You've been listening to a mini episode of The Write Question. This episode was produced by me, I'm your host, Lauren Korn. The artwork for The Write Question was designed by Molly Russell. Funding for The Write Question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation, encouraging communication on issues, trends, and values of importance to Montanans. We're also supported by a co-op of four independent bookstores, encouraging a lifetime of learning through storytelling and conversation. Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton, Montana. Montana Book Company in Helena, Fact and Fiction Books in Missoula, and Bookworks of Whitefish. A hat tip to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008. And thank you for listening. The Write Question is a production of Montana Public Radio.