



Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider

Episode 217

thesimplershow.com

Segment One

Tsh: [00:02](#) This is Simple; I'm Tsh Oxenreider.

[00:13](#) Hey friends! In this episode I am talking with my friend, Caroline Starr Rose, who is a children's book author. She's written six books. Her sixth one actually just came out and like we do here on the show every now and then, Caroline is sharing with us her good list—a thing, a habit, a work of art, and a philosophy that's making her life just a little bit sweeter. Plus she also talks about her new book, which is totally up fourth-grade Tsh's alley. In fact, it turns out we both read the same book when we were girls that served as part of the inspiration for her newest book, which is coincidentally Caroline's first time writing a nonfiction picture book. We'll get right into that but first a quick reminder to make sure you're signed up for my weekly email called Five Quick Things because it is the best way to make sure you never miss an episode of this show or of any of our weekly essays. Basically you get links to five things from the week I either created or loved plus occasional news you'd otherwise miss because I don't share it anywhere else. The emails can be read and under a minute because I hate inbox clutter just as much as you do. Go to Five Quick Things dot email to sign up for the free weekly email or just click on the links in the show notes of this episode already. Let's get right into it. Here is Caroline sharing with us her good list.

[01:32](#) Caroline, we do this thing here on the podcast where we talk about your good list for things big or small that are making little bits of your life a bit sweeter. Let's start off at the top, which is a thing. Anything you want, from a mug to an app, to a beauty product, whatever. What is the one thing in your life right now that is making your life better?

Caroline: This is going to sound funny because I'm probably the last person to discover this and it's also something I swore I would never ever do. But my thing is Snapchat.

Tsh: Really? Are you kidding?

Caroline: No, I am not. I have not.

Tsh: Oh my gosh. Tell me more.

Caroline: So for years, my boys have said, I have two boys. One is a freshman in college and one is a junior in high school. Mom, you've got to join Snapchat. We can send you pictures and this and that.

I thought, why in the world would I want to add one more social media obligation to my list, I have no interest at all. As I said, I've got one in college now and I miss seeing his face. We talk to him once a week and we'll text in this sort of thing. I've told him a few times, Noah, send me pictures of what campus is like and I wanna see how you're doing. And then I remembered Snapchat and actually one day while we were talking, on speaker phone and the whole family sitting on the couch and I look over and my younger boy is looking at his phone and is receiving a picture of my son as we're talking and I thought, you know what? I need to sign up. The only two people I am connected to are my boys and we are sending pictures back and forth and it is so fun and it's just delightful. Especially the child that I don't get to see on a regular basis at this point, it is ridiculous things and silly things and I get to see as big head of hair and it's really been a treat.

Tsh: [03:26](#) Tell me how it's different than just texting photos back and forth, which I know makes me sound like a grandma. I'm just curious because I don't know the difference.

Caroline: [03:32](#) It's so funny because I see you as tech savvy and I am like the dinosaur so that's hilarious that you say that. Honestly, here's the thing, half the time I have to call my younger kid over and like, how does this work again? The picture only lasts a moment. You can save it if you'd like to. You can add a little text with it or you can add some sort of image with it or of course the goofy filters with it, which I'm finding highly entertaining, which my boys have passed up since they were, like five years ago, they got over the filters. I take special pleasure in sending them ridiculous pictures of myself and getting them to say, mom, what the heck are you doing? It's just been really delightful.

Tsh: [04:21](#) That's very cool. When Snapchat first became a thing a few years ago, my nephew, who I want to say was maybe 13, 14, at the time said, if

you don't understand intuitively how to use Snapchat, then you're not the target audience for it. He wasn't saying that to despair to me, he was actually saying that they have said that because there's very few instructions out there on how to actually use it. I was talking about that and he said, well actually they have said if you don't get it then don't even worry about it because you're not their demographic. I was like, done. I'm not even gonna worry about it then.

Caroline: I'm so not the demographic.

Tsh: I love that you've embraced this to connect and bond with your kids, I think that's very cool, instead of writing it off, aw, that's what the kids do. To say, I mean I might roll my eyes at this or I might only use it for just connecting with those two guys. But the fact that you're doing it I think says a lot about you. That's very cool.

Caroline: [05:19](#) It's been really fun. When you've got one in college, you're trying to figure out these new sets of boundaries and I don't want to insert myself too much in his life. I remember at one point when I said, okay, I'm going to sign up for Snapchat. And a few days later he said, mom, we've got a streak going. We don't have to keep it if you don't want to. I'd love to keep it going if you're okay with that and if you don't know what that is after I think it's three days or three different, I think you have a 24 hour period to respond to somebody. If you send back a picture on that certain length of time, then you start this streak. My boys have hundreds and hundreds of days between them there where they've been communicating back and forth. It's just been really precious to have this silly little way to communicate with my boys that I didn't have two months ago.

Tsh: I love that. I love that they're doing that with each other. Is he close by or are we talking States away or what?

Caroline: Yes, states away. He's in Pennsylvania and we're in New Mexico. Two thousand miles.

Tsh: That is a whole other episode of talking about how it is to handle that stage because my oldest is a freshman in high school and I already feel the countdown ticking and I get that pit in my stomach when I think about her one day. I know it'll be a good thing. I know she'll be ready, but I can't even imagine what that is like. I'm sure you're learning a lot.

Caroline: [06:44](#) Yeah, it's all that. It is wonderful. I've been sad but beyond that my pride is overruling this sadness. He's doing beautifully. It's really great.

Tsh: I love that. That's very cool. Okay, well that is a great thing for the good list and you are officially the first person on the show who's ever mentioned Snapchat.

The second thing on our good list is a habit you've adopted. That can be anything from going to bed early, listening to a particular playlist while you're cooking dinner, listening to audio books you drive on your commute, whatever it is. What's a little habit you've adopted recently that's making your life better?

Caroline: This is one that I actually adopted at the beginning of the year and I'm really excited to talk to you about this. I read *Atomic Habits* at the end of last year, which I know that you read too, so we'll have to talk about that.

One of the things in that book, I'm a Gretchen Rubin upholder and one of the things that really registered with me as I read was this idea of making lists or keeping track of habits as a way to help build them. That to me just really clicked. I remember you saying you're a rebel, right?

Tsh: Yeah.

Caroline I remember you saying that one of the things in the book that really clicked for you was I'm the sort of person who, and then fill in the blank. Is that right?

Tsh: That's right. Yep. That's [inaudible] a habit with your identity.

Caroline: For me, that means nothing to me, but that's so cool how that works for someone else. This idea of keeping track really worked with my upholder personality. I downloaded a daily goal tracker and with anticipation of the New Year and I have been tracking since then three separate goals and it has been so fun.

My goals have been to drink eight ounces of water at least 300 days this year. To have no sweets and not no sugar because I mean, come on, I'm going to still have my sugar but a no sweets at least 300 days this year. Then this is goofy, jump rope at least 300 days this year. I's just been really cool to see it all play out. I've been using one of the Atomic Habit things is to habit stack. I'm filling my water at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

I'm jumping rope either at the end of my gym class or after I walk the dog. It just really has naturally become a part of my year.

Tsh: [09:24](#) Whenever you're talking about the tracker, is it similar to that idea he references with Seinfeld not breaking the chain?

Caroline: [09:30](#) Yes, with the exception that I have these essentially five days a month or 65 days in the year where I can have wiggle room.

Tsh: Yeah, that makes sense.

Caroline: I've got a little bubble chart where I fill things in and I have a different symbol for each habit and it's just the whole idea of progress. The small steps end up leading to real change. It's just satisfying to watch. I think as far as the water goes, that's been the one that's been the most intuitive. I've only missed 15 days this year. That's such a basic, physical need. I probably was semi-good at drinking the eight glasses before that, but this has really kept me, this is just becoming a really regular thing now just by making a little circle at the end of the day has made me really observant in the course of the entire day.

Tsh: [10:30](#) I think it's really cool to hear how the concept of Atomic Habits resonates with so many different types of people because at the core of it all, what it has to do with is really about making little bitty changes and that those little bitty changes are what build up to the longterm habits that we're after. It's that idea of what you do every day matters so much more than what you do every week or every month or year. It has to do with those little things. And yet we can all do it from different avenues. When you were saying the idea of making it part of your identity didn't resonate with you. I tried the breaking the chain concept for awhile and then I started feeling a little resentful at it because I wanted to look at that thing and say you're not the boss of me, which is such a rebel thing to say. It almost made me want to not do it because now it's this thing glaring at me and I wanted to show it that I could still have my head screwed on straight even if I broke it. Eventually that stopped working for me as well. It did for awhile. I can see how maybe if I set my own rules for it, because another big thing with rebels is if you create your own rules, you're more likely to follow them. I like how you have said 300 days as opposed to every day because then you're in a way tweaking it to make it work for you. I think most people are more likely to follow it whenever

you just adjust it instead of following some outside sources or at least someone with a personality like me. I think it's cool you've done that.

Caroline: For example, I'm a runner but I have dealt with plantar fasciitis for most of this year or I've been on vacation. There've been times like for example, I haven't been able to get off the couch because my foot has been in bad shape or I didn't take my jump rope with me when we went on a cruise over the summer. I built in these windows of time where I might not be practicing that habit on a daily basis or you go to the birthday party or you want the Starbucks coffee. I'm not going to eliminate these things from my life and entirely because I'm looking for a sustainable approach. Not something that is an intense change that is something that's only going to happen for 30 days or something along those lines.

Tsh: That is so smart. I love that. You basically built in your own humanity into it.

Caroline: That's a good way to describe it.

Segment Two

Tsh: We've got your thing and your habit. The third thing on our good list is a work of art. This is always my favorite one. Caroline, what is a movie or book or album or whatever right now that's just making your life sweeter.

Caroline: I have really gotten into listening to Tana French's novels through my libraries audio book program.

Tsh: I have not listened to any of her books.

Caroline: Have you read them?

Tsh: I have, it drove me crazy. I have my Kindle sync to my library and so I had it and I didn't get to finish the book because it auto sent back and then it put me back on the wait list. It was the book that was, gosh, three or four years ago. That one that was huge.

Caroline: [17:31](#) Probably the *The Secret Place*.

Tsh: It's got a tree on the front.

Caroline: They all have similar names. Maybe it wasn't as far away as I thought it was. It was another book that happened a few years ago. It doesn't

matter. It got auto sent back so I've been wanting to finish it up and I really love that kind of book. I really do. I think listening to that kind of book would be really interesting. Does it feel almost, I don't want to say scary, but like suspenseful?

Caroline: Yes. But I'm a person, I can't visually, there's things I can listen to and I can read that I have no desire to see. Do you know what I'm saying? I do not want to see a police procedural, psychological thriller on the screen, but I'm happy to read it. But what's so nice about listening, her books take place in Dublin. It's the Dublin murder squad. There are all these different accents to listen to, which is really, really intriguing. I have no desire to ever read her books now because the audio versions have been so interesting to me. What I really liked is mysteries have to be very precise. There really is no wiggle room as far as crafting the story. Everything that you are writing has purpose. It's very streamlined writing, which is very similar to what I do and children's literature. You need to get moving and stay moving. You don't have kind of the luxury of a long description and this sort of thing. There are some real parallels there. I love, a lot of times the classic mystery, there wasn't necessarily a lot of character development but her, there's this really rich character development within the murder squad itself.

The mystery is interesting and then the characters are really interesting. There's always some sort of, the detective that is the point of view character for the story and that changes. You'll see some characters that are minor characters in one book become the main character in the next, and you don't have to necessarily read them in order, which is really nice. That always frees me up because when there's a series you have to read them in order. I can't wait for this one.

Tsh: Is it not the same characters or are they the same?

Caroline: Some of them will be a minor character the next time through. There's some minor characters throughout that are always there, different people who have a different position within the department. But what's interesting is whoever's the main character for this particular book, the mystery that they're dealing with somehow deals also with their personal flaws as characters. There's something that they are personally working through as they also are dealing with the crime. That's just really well created storytelling.

Tsh: I love that too. That is apropos what you've said why books like hers are good and there's a few other, Clare Mackintosh is really good at writing mystery or police kind of work, but with a lot of character development. I love that kind of stuff.

Caroline: [20:47](#) I'm writing that down. I don't know her, Claire Mackintosh.

Tsh: The first book I read of hers a few years ago, *I See You*. Oh my gosh, it was so good. She is a former police detective actually turned novelist so her books are super accurate. Sometimes when you're like do they really talk like that? She has gone on record saying this is legit, and it's British. It's a slightly different from maybe what we're used to in terms of dialogue here in the States. But it's fantastic. Clare Mackintosh is good.

I wanted to bring up though, you mentioned just a few minutes ago that you're a children's book author and how that's different in terms of story development. I've actually wanted to ask you this before because your new book that just came out, *A Race Around the World*. Is this your sixth book?

Caroline: [21:35](#) This is my sixth book.

Tsh: [21:36](#) That's amazing. I'm looking at the list of your books and the bookmark you sent me and I want to ask about the book in particular, but just broadly, you've written a lot of different, I don't know if you'd call it variety, but lengths because you've written middle-grade novels and I almost want to call it epic poetry and the style of Homer because it's that kind, all the way to picture books. In this case it's another picture book and this is your first nonfiction. You are really great at writing a whole variety. You mentioned that it's hard to sometimes to be long winded or have chapters in chapters with character development because you don't have that space. What is the most challenging style for you to write and maybe which one is the most enjoyable for you?

Caroline: [22:21](#) Oh gosh, that is so hard. I will say the first thing that came to my mind is prose. I write verse novels. That's your Homeric epic. I love that. Homer and I hang out together. Verse novels, which would be poetry, stanzas instead of paragraphs and poems instead of chapters and then straight prose, which would be the standard chapter novel. And then picture books, which some have actually been poetry and some had been prose, a combination of the two. But switching from verse novels. I had written four, no three prose novels before I wrote my first verse novel.

Now that verse novel is the first book that ever saw the light of day as far as publication goes. That's where I really did my true learning because I sat with an editor, I sat actually under two editors with that book. That one on one process with an editor, to me it feels like an advanced degree that's designed just for you and it is such a rich learning experience. Honestly, after publishing two verse novels and then moving on, my third novel was written in prose. Even though I'd written three prose novels before, I didn't know really what I was doing. I feel like the easiest metaphor I could give to explain the challenge for me, I feel like a verse novel is almost a photo album. Each poem represents a photograph because it really captures one moment, it can be one scene, but even just one really quick glimpse of something. As you're flipping the pages of the photo album, you ultimately are building a story. That's the also what is happening with the verse novel.

As we have a photo, an individual photograph for a poem and a photo album for the verse novel, I feel like a prose novel is more along the lines of a movie. There was just so much space to fill with this moving image. I felt like I wasn't sure what to do with a chapter. I felt like I had to be really fast or I would lose somebody's interest. I remember my editor telling me, slow down, stay in the moment just like you would with the verse. Give us a real 360 as to where we are and what your character is feeling? Really immerse us in the moment. Yes, you want to keep your pace moving, but because there's more transition work for example in prose than you would with with the poetry.

Each scene is much longer and much more nuanced and detailed than what you would be doing with the prose. The difference between the two, that has been the hardest jump for me. But I have to tell you, I'm working right now on another prose novel and I'm really enjoying the deep immersion into this longer way to tell a story. There's another verse novel coming after this one too. It's been really an interesting difference and it's been fun because I feel really strongly when I begin, I know the form the book is going to take. I know this one will be a verse novel. This one will be prose. That is clear to me. The story itself wasn't necessarily clear, but I know the form that is going to be the best way to convey the story.

Tsh: That is interesting. I wouldn't have thought that before. You do such a wide variety of writing. Do you write for the same kid, you know what I

mean? Is the kid you have in mind that you're writing for different for different books or is it all this the same type?

Caroline: It is different. When I write novels, I'm writing for my fifth grade self. I'm sure you've heard this too, and you probably have the same sort of idea, but the more specific you can be, the more universal it becomes. When I'm writing picture books, I'm writing for the mother I was with the child in my lap.

[26:28](#) It's a more shared, a picture book is very much a shared experience and it's something that you want to be able to be read aloud. Now, of course, older novels are read aloud too but the quality that every word, and that's the similarity between the poetry and the picture book. Every word really packs a punch. Every word counts. As I look back at my new picture book, and I think, oh my gosh, I would cut that word now. Because I could make it a little more precise because just every word really has purpose and when the fewer words you're working with, to me at least as the author, the more glaring, having a word that's not necessarily needed.

Tsh: [27:16](#) I've been there before in a whole novel, so I can't even imagine what it would be like in a picture book where you're right, every single word holds a lot more weight because it just costs a lot more or is valued a lot more because there's fewer words. I would imagine.

I'm flipping through right now. I'm holding your book, *A Race Around the World*, and at the end you've got your author's note and you talk about I had a book about Nellie Bly while growing up. I did too. I was always fascinated about Nellie Bly and she was one of my earliest historic role models. Her having been a writer, I had always wanted to be a writer. I'm curious what book it was that you had? Do you remember?

Caroline: [27:58](#) Mine was called, I'm trying to remember the exact name. It was part of a series and they were called value books.

Tsh: Value books.

Caroline: You had the same?

Tsh: That was mine. Yep. I still have all of mine, they're on our bookshelves for our guests.

Caroline: I do too. I do too. That is really funny. That book fascinated me. There were parts to me that were scary because it talked about her undercover work at Blackwell Island, you recall? When she moved from Pittsburgh, she had done undercover work in Pittsburgh as a reporter, she was, for example, going into factories and writing exposes on the working conditions for working women. When she got to New York and approached the world, she did not have the newspaper, the New York World newspaper. She didn't have a job. She walked in and said, I want to work here and this is my idea. My idea is to go to this Island where there is an insane asylum and I will be embedded there and if you get me out, I will write an expose. She wasn't sure when they would come get her. For 10 days, there she was, which is an amazing story in and of itself. But that was scary when I looked at those pages in the book. I was fascinated with her.

Tsh: What compelled you to write this nonfiction book about her? In this true story about her going around the world racing.

Caroline: This was January, 2017. I turned in work on other projects. I was looking for a new picture book idea. I really like to, if I can bounce between a novel and a picture book because I feel like it stretches my muscles in different directions. A writer friend had a link, maybe it was on Facebook, about like 10 women from history everyone should know. I clicked through and there was Nellie and I remembered how intrigued I was with my Nellie book as a child. I thought, that's where I want to focus. I don't know what part of her life I'm going to write about. But most of the time I really don't know specifics. I find a place or I have a question and I just figure that a story will start to come to the surface as I start to dig.

I checked out a lot of books on Nellie Bly and started reading and there were quite a few children's books that covered all of her work as a reporter. A few talked about her famous race around the world. She was attempting to beat the fictional records set by a Jules Verne's fictional character Phileas Fogg in the book *Around the World in 80 Days*. That was published in 1873. People were just intrigued with not only this fictional adventure, but the pace of life. This is in the late 1880s, 1889 is when she took her race. The world was just new and exciting. These inventions like the telegraph and the telephone and electric lights and steamships and the world really became smaller because of this amazingly new technology. Nellie was really intrigued with this and so I wasn't sure exactly where I was going to focus my story. But the more I

started reading, I realized, and I did not know this before this time at all and I felt like I knew Nellie pretty well. There was another woman racing at the same time Nellie started her race. The same day that she started in the morning. This woman named Elizabeth started that night racing against Nellie. I was astounded to discover this and as I looked back through the picture books available already about Nellie, only a few touched on her race and none were exclusively about her race at least at that time. None were focused on this second woman, Elizabeth Bisland. I thought, my gosh, this is the story.

Tsh: Yeah, that's very cool. I remember hearing about the race, but I didn't know much about the other woman. It's very cool that you've got both of them featured here.

This is your first nonfiction, right?

Caroline: It is, yes.

Tsh: Was that a challenge?

Caroline: It was and I had no idea. This sounds really ridiculous. I had no idea I was writing nonfiction. I stumbled into it and I brought my draft, I meet with a critique group here in town. We have six members. One is actually in British Columbia, so she Skypes in, one is in Santa Fe and he drives down to Albuquerque and the rest of us are local and we meet twice a month. I remember sharing the story, this is a probably several drafts in and one member said to me, well, have you invented any scenes that are not historical in the story? And I said, no. She said, have you attributed any emotions to your characters that are not documented? And I said, no. She said, have you included any dialogue where you cannot again, is not documented? And I said, no, I've only included things that were mentioned specifically in journals that were spoken. She said, you're writing nonfiction. I said, are you kidding me? I don't know how to do that. She said, well, you're doing it. I think if I had gone in thinking I'm going to write nonfiction, it would have been much more intimidating because I've always seen nonfiction as I am the expert. Let me lead the way and show you all that I know. That to me feels really terrifying.

Tsh: [33:50](#) I think some of the best nonfiction writing does it in the form of storytelling. That's actually why I love memoir so much and why I love historic nonfiction. Because if it's done in a certain way, it feels almost like you're reading fiction because we learn best through storytelling. If

you've listened to this podcast, you've heard me say it a million times, we really do learn best through storytelling. Really, I think best, especially for kids, nonfiction writing out there really stays with us when it's done like you're reading a story and that's what your book is. That's very cool.

Caroline: Thank you. That means a lot.

Tsh: Yeah, it's very fun. We've gotten sidetracked just a little bit, but we are sticking to your good list. You talked to us about a work of art and that was Tana French French's audio books and so we're almost done here.

The fourth thing of our good list is a philosophy. This is a way of thinking. This is a bit of advice you got that is really stuck with you. It's wisdom from someone smart in your life. What is a philosophy right now that you are mulling about in your head that's really making your life better?

Caroline: [34:56](#) Well, I have to bring it back to Nellie Bly. This is a quote, I love quotes, I love collecting quotes and this one just has felt really apropos having my book come out last week and I had two book events this weekend. It's was a really a fun one to share. It is,

"Energy, rightly applied and directed, can accomplish anything."

As a writer, that's really satisfying because so often, I'm a former teacher and so if I were to measure, I also really like to measure things as you can tell from my daily tracking with habits. If I were to compare my teaching days and my writing days, it could really be discouraging. I get to work and teach six classes and grade 200 papers and attend a meeting. Sometimes in comparison, a writing day, I might write negative 11 words for the day. It can be kind of frustrating, but if I am to remember that continual daily laying down of energy as Nellie would say, can in the end bring about some tremendous change. That's a pretty exciting thing to be able to think this idea in January, 2017 led to a book that came out last week.

Tsh: [36:18](#) Let me make sure I've said it correctly, "Energy rightly applied and directed, can accomplish anything." Is that correct?

Caroline: Yes.

Tsh: And Nellie said that?

Caroline: Yes.

Tsh: That's very cool. That almost sounds like something you would hear some thought guru on Twitter in 2019 saying. That's so timeless. Because she's a 19th century journalist. One of the first women ever doing this in her field. That is so true. To me it comes full circle back to your Atomic Habits concepts because that's also what he talks about this idea of staying focused and a really great way to do that is to stay small. To keep your goals small, not big. A lot of it is just that little daily habit of plugging along and I think that's really fantastic and I love that you could apply that to the book that you just wrote about her. It's all very meta.

Caroline: [37:10](#) Exactly.

Tsh: Just to wrap up. You have told us about Snapchat, about your goal tracking, about Tana French audiobooks, and about the idea of applying, I guess applying and directing energy in order to accomplish stuff via Nellie Bly. That's very cool.

Caroline, thank you so, so much for this chat. I really, really appreciate not only you taking the time, but also the work you're doing. I love seeing all your books on our shelves. They're just so beautiful. Our kids really, really love them and keep it up. I'm so glad to hear you're doing two more because that makes me happy.

Caroline: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Tsh: [37:58](#) You can find Caroline at carolinestarrrose.com, that's star with two Rs as well as on Instagram @CarolineStarrRose. To keep up with me, I'm on Twitter @tsh and Instagram @tshoxenreider and of course, at theartofsimple.net where you can find my writing. Head to the show notes for this episode, number 217 at thesimpleshow.com where you can find all sorts of things, links to things we talked about, Caroline's latest book, where you can sign up for my weekly email called Five Quick Things and how you can become a patron and support the work it takes to create the show for just a few bucks a month. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle, Andrea Debbink and my furry intern, Ginny. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Tsh Oxenreider, and I'll catch you back here soon.