



**“Chernobyl, Life, and Other Disasters”
with Yevgenia Nayberg**

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read, where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast through their paper with Purpose Promise Boise paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:13] Community trauma, unfortunately, often happens in people's lives. Whether it comes through personal, political, man-made, or environmental circumstances, chances are that children will be exposed to some level of significant trauma at some point. As we know, how we talk to kids about trauma matters — and the positive relationships that parents and caregivers have with their children can often buffer the effects of that trauma and change those stressors from toxic to tolerable. A new graphic memoir beautifully and inspirationally draws upon the trauma of a young girl growing up in Ukraine in the 1980s, and how she grounded herself in love and art through this childhood full of uncertainty. Our guest today is Yevgenia Nayberg. She's an award-winning author and illustrator, painter, and stage designer. She's the author and illustrator of several picture books, including “I Hate Borscht!,” “Mona Lisa in New York,” and the illustrator of “A Visit to Moscow,” which was nominated for an Eisner Award. Born and raised in Kiev, Ukraine, she now lives in New York City. Her latest book is the graphic memoir “Chernobyl, Life, and Other Disasters.” Yevgenia, welcome to the show.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:02:26] Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:28] So, let's start with the title of the book. So, you know, children's books don't normally showcase nuclear disasters. What prompted you to write this?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:02:40] Well, I don't think it's necessarily a, you know, children's themed story. I don't really think about sort of middle-of-the-road children as I write. I just wanted to talk about my childhood — and since it coincided with the nuclear disaster, there we are. So, I didn't try to fit some sort of narrow frame of what is palatable for children. I think if it worked for me as a child, it should work for children now just as well.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:17] Yeah. It's very much, as you say, an autobiographical account of your childhood. Can you tell us a little bit, just high-level, about the arc of the story you tell and some of the key people that are in it?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:03:34] Well, it is a story of my family, mostly. It's a story of the relationship between my mom and myself — and some other family members come into play — some of my friends. So, it is about my childhood. I'm 11 years old, or I was rather. I was 11 years old at the time of the Chernobyl explosion and the story centers around my braid and how it had to be cut off because the hair trapped radiation or so we thought at the time, and I never really thought of it as anything metaphorical. I just thought of it as a fact. And then, as I started to think about it a little more, I realized that it's a really nice conceptual anchor for the story for many reasons — you know, becoming older, cutting your hair off for good, becoming an artist, shifting from childhood to adolescence, and so forth. So, it worked really well. I don't think I would have come up with something like this if it didn't happen in real life.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:43] Yeah. Certainly, the theme of growing out your hair, and how that was an ambition for you, and then having to cut it off was something that resonated throughout the story.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:04:53] Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:55] And you mentioned your mother. Can you say a little bit about her?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:05:00] Well, my mother is a visual artist and she was — and still is, I should say — a huge inspiration for me and I realized her. I thought she was the coolest person I've ever met. And of course, she was and

is — I kept saying “was” at the time of the book, but also is — a really complicated, interesting, edgy woman and artist. And I just wanted to show it. I didn't really want to create sort of, you know, really kind and really sweet mother figure character. I just wanted to show someone who I inspired to become, and I guess according to my children, kind of became. So yeah, a lot of it is really about her and her being a mother. And it also, I think, now made me look at my own motherhood very differently, as I was writing that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:56] There's so many layers of uncertainty in this book, especially as you tell it through the eyes of your 11-year-old self. There's your mother's relationships, the way that adults in your life talk about the government, and truth, and what the news is conveying, and so on — and then, also having to be apart from family at various times. Can you talk a bit about how writing and reading about uncertainty might be useful to helping children prepare for uncertainty? That's something that was in your head.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:06:37] Well, I think we all experience uncertainty. I didn't really think about the COVID epidemic at all. My editor said this is very relevant because that kind of uncertainty people felt in 2020. But also, I think we experience uncertainty all the time because we don't know for sure whether our relatives love us. Our friends respond to us the way we want to be seen. It doesn't matter whether we're adults or children. We always pretend to a certain degree to be someone else. So, I think you can look at it as a historical piece of nonfiction, but also I think it's almost impossible to write anything historical without really looking at it from the position of today. So, I see a lot of emotional parallels with what we're going through right now and the way we want to belong and the way we feel like outsiders. Every day, a lot of us do, children and adults alike.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:36] Yeah. There is. I think that parallel with the pandemic is indeed an apt one. Right? This broad societal upheaval — because you do reference some of the everyday things that were present in your life, right — that many 11 year olds would encounter. But then, suddenly, the Chernobyl disaster occurs. And it's like, “what can we do?” “What are we allowed to do?” “Where's the danger?” It does remind one of the pandemic in so many ways.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:08:08] But also a child is not really afraid. Children are not afraid the way adults are. And a lot of that is also excitement, because you get to do interesting things — like you get to be evacuated. And that could be maybe fun or maybe unknown, but it's not. It's not how adults feel. I think that was really important to me to show that a child thinks differently and perceives the world differently but also for adults to really understand —

for adults who read the book also to understand that humor in a book, because I think it's one of the biggest parts of the book.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:48] Yeah. The excitement you seem to experience at being evacuated and you and your mother having to — and your brother staying in Russia with relatives. There was the “oh, no, we're having to leave our home.” But there was also this whole experience that you seem to look forward to in some ways.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:09:10] Well, yes. I got to live with my cousin, which was interesting. I never lived with a girl before, so that was fun. It was interesting to travel to a different — well, at that time, Republic — different Soviet Republic. And suddenly, I realized that I'm a little different. We have different customs. We have different accents. That was really interesting. So, I think whatever new experience a child could have is always inspirational, exciting — even if it's a negative experience, it is still something that, you know, shifts you from what you already know.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:46] How do you think — you as now your adult self reflecting on your 11-year-old self — do you think there's messages that you would convey to, you know, children who might be experiencing fear or worries about their safety in a world where there's upheaval? Is there anything that you might convey there?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:10:08] Well, I really don't want to be didactic because I feel that once I start to speak from the position of adulthood, I become this teacher figure and I think it undermines the language of the book. I think the whole point is just to relate to the child and see that a child 50 years ago, from the other part of the world, is very similar to an American child who will most likely read this book. So, I really would rather not send a message. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:42] Well, as a note to our listeners, you have interesting views on teachers that you convey in the book — both positive and negative.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:10:51] So, that's true. That's true. But I had — some of my teachers were very unique, I should say, in what they said and what they did. I think even for the Soviet Union, it was not typical behavior.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:07] There's also a role, that you touch on, of religion. In a couple of pages, you mention about being a Jew growing up in Ukraine. Can you comment on that?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:11:18] Well, I don't think of a Jew as a religion. I think of it as an ethnicity and my family was a secular family. We were not religious, but of course anti-Semitism was a huge part of my life growing up — but it was not the focus of the book. So, there was no way to avoid it completely, but I wanted to show it in this very, everyday nonchalant way of how a child gets to experience it, rather than just creating this big traumatic element. So, I kind of made a list of things that were upsetting to me and made me an outsider, and being a Jew was one of those things. So, it just was one more thing that made me different, which of course was really annoying for a child because I really longed to belong and to be like everyone else. I wanted to be blonde and have long hair, and I wanted to be a Ukrainian. I didn't want to be a Jew. So, that was kind of a little unpleasant revelation that I had. And pretty much every Jewish child from the Soviet Union that I know, or now a grown person, has their own story like that. And it's never a fun story. It's always this weird way in which you learn that you're a Jew — usually from someone in the courtyard or a neighbor — and your parents are never prepared enough to have that big conversation with you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:46] Yeah, one of the key ways it played out. So, slight spoiler alert here for our listeners, right — so much of the book is about your quest to be admitted to a prestigious art school. And there was a quota, official or unofficial, that they would take a very small — like 1% of their student body was — could be Jews. So, there was a direct thing to something that you really were seeking in your career arc in your life.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:13:19] That's true and I thought about the ways I could handle that in a book. And, of course, I could have just gone through all the, you know, trauma my family went through and how many times my mother had to try to get into a school and the kind of questions she was asked at the exams that were different than other students. And then, I thought, “I'm just going to make it really simple and just say my whole family had to step it up.” My mom had to step it up. My uncle had to step it up, and it doesn't really tell you much — but for those in the know, it is very clear what it means. So, I wouldn't divert the focus of the book from what it really meant to talk about.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:03] Of course. You mentioned your mother and that, you know, you could have chosen to rewrite history in some ways, right — and make this very warm and fuzzy, you know, maternal figure and say, “well, you know, that's not really what she's like.” But she's a grounding presence for you at the moment when the first news started to hit about something having occurred at Chernobyl. How was their role in your life in terms of helping ground you and help you figure out like, “what are we supposed to do next?”

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:14:39] Well, she was a grounding figure, anyway. And when I said before that she wasn't that stereotypical, "kind, sweet" mother figure, it doesn't mean that she wasn't kind to me. It's just the way her delivery worked, maybe wasn't as what's expected from a children's book. But you just rely on your family. There is really not much you could do. I couldn't make my own choices and decide whether I should evacuate sooner or take precautionary measures. Nobody knew what was happening, and my mother was just as lost as everyone else. She wasn't a physicist. She didn't really know what it means. I think the whole point was that regular people didn't know what was happening at all. They didn't even know what happened in Chernobyl because on the radio it all sounded very mysterious, calming. So, I was just going with the flow —and, to some degree, my parents were as well.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:40] You also had — there was other family members around you that are perhaps not as major a character in the book as your mother but certainly helped you out in many ways. Can you talk a little bit about them?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:15:55] Well, there is, of course, my absent father and also my stepfather that are very different from each other, but in a way similar — because, you know, they all speak in their own kind of self-absorbed way that is not really relevant to me — to my, you know, character. And there is also my grandpa, who was a huge figure in my life, a doctor who also gave me this lecture on how to be a proper person and a good person. And I remember loving those lectures. And, you know, I touch on other family members — my grandma, who is sort of more of a traditional grandma figure — and of course, my little brother, who is just a toddler at that time. So, I couldn't give him a lot to say, but he was definitely there.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:46] Yeah. To your stepfather, I loved the almost glee with which you reported that it was thought that, you know, rugs would trap "radioactive dust" — so you had to get rid of this rug that he had loved — apparently, that you thought was terrible and you were glad to have an excuse for that.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:17:06] Yeah, we clashed quite a lot, and we clashed much more as I became a teenager, obviously. But even though I was little, I remember him moving in with his ugly furniture and kind of taking over my life, and my mom's life, and our relationship in many ways. Yeah. Again, this is not — you know, I try to view it as something rather funny than tragic — but of course, any story you can take in two different directions.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:34] So, yeah. And these are, I mean — these are stories of human relationships in just a backdrop that is different. Right?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:17:44] Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:45] Also, peppered throughout your book is — quite a few times where — you talk about just loving to read, including reading books that are in the Western canon that generally, you know, most 11 year olds aren't necessarily seeking out. Can you just talk a bit about the role reading played in your life?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:18:05] Well, in the beginning, I really didn't like to read at all, and my grandpa was forcing me to read. They wanted me to be fluent by the time I started first grade. But then, somehow quickly, I learned how to read. Ever since, I read whatever I could reach on the shelf. So, I would just grab whatever was home, whether I liked the title — like, for example, I read Sigmund Freud because I thought it was about interpretation of dreams, which it was, but not in the way that I understood it — and, you know, whatever was at home. I just read everything. So, I think it's a great approach. I don't censor my children and I always let them read whatever they wanted. And I think if there were things that I didn't understand — like, you know, Marx, which I also read at 11. “100 Years of Solitude” — that's right; I really loved it. I just loved it for the richness of the language. But there were a lot of things that were in the story that I missed and that was okay. It didn't matter. I reread it when I was 19 and it worked out.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:16] Yeah, and you know — often, we talk about ways to teach reading and, you know, get children to read, and become fluent readers, and so on. I loved the page in which you said — well, you know, another reading — and, you know, you had a teacher that was a little unusual, as you mentioned. But then, you said — I love this line — “without grandpa's supervision, somehow, I learned to read super fast in under two months” — like, something clicked for you and you wrote this: bold letters, “I love reading now.” And it just reminds me, I guess, that — you know, sometimes, we can't always predict what will work.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:19:56] Exactly. Also, I think, if we want a child to read a specific book, the best way to go forward is to just put it on the top shelf. Hide it. Let them know that this book is a “no-no,” and I guarantee this book will be read very quickly — and, you know, hopefully enjoy it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:17] There we go. Maybe our advertising for this podcast should be to tell people it's a secret and they're not allowed to listen.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:20:23] So, exactly. There you go.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:28] You said you retell your story like from your memories, and at the end of the book you write, “I remember everything.” Can you talk to us about how you pulled your memories in and then the memories of others and what's the role memory plays in trying to process, kind of, history and trauma?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:20:51] Well, I try not to think of this book as a trauma book. I don't think of myself as necessarily traumatized more than any regular person, but I'm really fascinated with the concept of memory in general. I think it's such a changing, developing thing — and I don't claim to be, you know, a perfect specialist on Chernobyl or that period of time. And that's pretty much what I say in the book. I draw from my memories, but are they exact or would I expect them to be exact? I don't really care. There were some things that I talked to my family about, and they have different memories of it — not different memories, but different angles of the same situations. But I didn't want to change them. I just wanted it to be my book and my angle. So, if I started really collecting actual facts or whatever other people thought were actual facts, I would just confuse my story more. Right? So, I'm very clear about that. I don't claim that this is a correct story. This is just my story or a little glimpse into how I remember those events. But I do remember many things in my family. So, when I say, “of course, it's tongue in cheek” that, you know, I'm great at remembering. I'm great at sort of collecting those memories that a lot of people in my family kind of discard or forget. I love them and I really enjoy them, and it really means a lot to me to keep those memories alive — especially for those who are no longer with me. I find it's my own personal quest in many ways to just keep them around a little longer.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:22:33] Yeah. No, I hear you. As I said earlier, it's a relational story. Right? It's a story about these relationships in your life and how they evolved, and changed, and played out. Absolutely. I'd like to close with a question about your process here of creating this, since you're both the author and illustrator in this. What came first — the pictures, or the words, or did they come out together?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:23:03] Everyone asks this about every book that I write and illustrate. I think the words come first. The idea comes first, but a lot of my words or my stories come from a visual place, because I do think visually — because I've been a visual artist and an illustrator for much longer than I have been an author — and I see a lot of things visually, but I need to have this story. I find it very grounding to have the story first and to find the precision in the language. I really enjoy that to get everything just right — especially in the case of this book, because I had to. You know, none of us spoke English. Obviously, none of that was happening in English and I wanted

to create the language that would reflect as closely as possible the language that I spoke, so it doesn't sound foreign or exotic. So, that was really a big part of the process but drawing is fun for me. It's really easy, especially something like a graphic novel, because you can really create that stereo effect with it. You can create so many things with visuals that you can't with words, and those things kind of have to run on two parallel tracks. So, that was really fun thing to do. Also, visually, you can slow things down and speed things up — which is something else you can do visually, but you can't really do with text alone. So, it was really an exciting way to play with it and kind of be in control of the story visually on top of what I wrote.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:42] Sure. I was kind of lingering over your style of depicting things visually and obviously all professionals — you know, things change over time and evolve. Is your style and your approach something that you settled into early on, or was it something that it took a while for you to find something that seemed to work for you?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:25:07] I never think about my style. I just draw the way I draw. I don't worry about style. I feel that if I were to worry about it, I would just stumble and fall. So, no. I just draw. I hope I'm becoming a little looser, a little more effortless. I think every artist dreams of that. I hope that happened to me. It's kind of hard to tell. People usually tell me I have a very distinct style. Is this true or not? I have no idea. I just let it be. It all happens naturally for me. I never worry about it for a second.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:45] Sure — might be something that others can see what they interpret in it. Right?

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:25:52] And that's great. I mean, once your book or whatever — a piece of art — is done, you know, it's up to people to judge it and decide what it means. You know, my job is done.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:04] Indeed. Well, thank you so much for this, this conversation and for this book. It was really just so riveting to kind of just experience part of your life, you know, kind of alongside you in a way — and to really get this glimpse into your life in a different part of the world from my own and to understand, you know, how this major world event kind of played out in the backdrop of the 11-year-old self that you were.

Yevgenia Nayberg: [00:26:34] Thank you so much.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:39] Welcome to the 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. I found myself wondering about other children's experiences of thinking about things like Chernobyl — and, believe it or not,

there's actually a lot of written work out there, including poetry. I thought I'd share part of a poem written by Darcy Dunnigan called "The Feeling of the World As a Bounded Whale Is the Mystical [The child affixes]." "The child affixes one of her little pictures to my refrigerator. She asks, 'Can you detect the radiation?' There is a house, one tree, and grass in dark slashes. A sun shining. Beneath, in her child letters, she has written Chernobyl. At kindergarten they must be having nuclear energy week. One could look at the picture and say everything is in order. 'No,' I say, 'I cannot see the radiation.' 'The radiation poison,' she says, 'sits inside the apple and the apple looks pretty.' Then singsongs, 'Bury the apple and bury the shovel that buried the apple and put the apple-burier person in a closet forever.' We are both thinking 'Then bury the burier.' Both thinking of her picture with no people. 'The poison sits inside the people and the people still look pretty,' she says. 'Still,' she says, 'sweetly, Away with them.'

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:01] And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read Podcast. Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports, coaches, and celebrates engaging in those language-rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and Early Relational Health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org/podcast to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our chief external Affairs officer. Special thanks to our communications manager, Niels Delmar Torres, and Communications Specialist Priscilla Takyi. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.