

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

with Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #27

Interview with Jennifer Michael Hecht, Author of *Doubt: A History*

Aired March 27, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

“So, if we want to know something about truth we’ve got to somehow stand still and get out of our brain’s habit of assumptions. And one way to do that is to just ask ourselves every time we think something whether the opposite might be true”

[music]

“When the exception pile gets bigger than the proof pile you need to turn away from the proof pile and figure out what the exception pile means.”

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This is Episode 27 of *Books and Ideas*, and I’m your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. My guest today is author Jennifer Michael Hecht. She is also an historian and a poet. Her unique background gives her a very interesting perspective on the role of science in our society.

Before I get into the interview I want to remind you to visit our website at booksandideas.com. There you will find Show Notes and links to previous episodes. You can also send me feedback at docartemis@gmail.com. I will be back after the interview with some closing comments and announcements.

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INTERVIEW

GC: Jennifer, it's great to have you on *Books and Ideas*.

JH: Thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

GC: Thanks. I thought maybe you might just start out by telling us a little bit about yourself.

JH: I started out as a poet, and that's what I wanted to do. And I knew there wasn't a great deal of money in it, so I thought I would be an historian as a day job. And I fell in love with the history of science and got my PhD in the history of science—still writing poetry. And I was an historian in a history department with tenure for about 14 years. Then the New School invited me to come teach poetry—sort of literature courses in poetry and philosophy is what I teach. And that's not a full-time job, so I do a lot of other writing.

I've written *Doubt: A History*, which is the book that I think has done the best. Then I had *The Happiness Myth*, which was a kind of skeptical eye on science itself. And where *Doubt* was a look at religious and philosophical doubt all over the world throughout history, *The Happiness Myth* was that kind of skeptical look at science, in some ways, to try to see our own moment in history with a little less temporal prejudice; with a little bit more of a sense of how we are just another turn on the kaleidoscopic wheel of culture, and so much of what we think

of as necessary and scientific is a little more fuzzy. But, yes, I have a couple poetry books out also and an academic history of science book.

GC: Is *The Happiness Myth* available in audio form?

JH: No. *Doubt* will be soon; and *The Happiness Myth* is available on Kindle.

GC: Yes, I have it on my Kindle, I just haven't quite actually read it yet.

JH: Yes. There tends to be a backlog.

GC: You sort of blew me out of the water, because the next question I was planning to ask you was about the unusual combination of skills of being a poet and an historian.

JH: Yes, it is very odd. I just loved words. And my father taught physics in college. He had his PhD and taught physics, and wrote textbooks at home. And I don't know, I just wanted to write poetry, but the idea of being a poetry teacher didn't appeal to me as much. I wanted to know a lot of stuff. I really wanted to know a lot of stuff. History seemed like the place you could sort of study everything and it was still part of your bailiwick. So, that was where I went.

I didn't expect to go to the history of science. I thought I'd write a least a sort of history of poetry; history of culture kind of stuff to go with the poetry. But Columbia, while I was there, just never hired an intellectual historian, or a cultural historian. They just kept interviewing people, but they didn't hire one. But they did have some great historians of science, and I was just completely seduced.

The methodology is awfully similar to poetry. You're kind of feeling around and trying to see what kind of connections you can make, and how you can understand what's really happening behind the symbols that you see of what

people say they're doing. It's true of anthropology, too. You kind of have to squint at what people are doing. And yes, in some ways the skills were similar. A lot of history is, sure, you're deciphering, but you're also just describing as an historian. But as an historian of science there's a lot of deciphering—it's all deciphering.

GC: Did you study any science when you were younger?

JH: Not very directly. As I said, my father was a physicist, so actually a lot came in that way. But no, I came to the history of science very much from thinking that I was going to take apart poems, and instead learning that this history of science was a way of taking apart—of analyzing—what it is we do; how we live our lives, in a way, and how we have in the past.

I was very influenced by Foucault. I know that's one of those words that makes people think that it's kind of gobbledegook. But really, as well as being a kind of a cryptic person, he did say a lot of very clear things about how we see things in particular types of patterns, and how we can use that to see farther. And I was very influenced. For instance, in his *History of Sex*, Foucault says that it's not the Victorians who were the most against sex ever. The 20th century talks about it so much less. The Victorians never shut up about it. Sure, they were saying no, but they were concentrating on it.

In his *Discipline and Punish* he talks about how we think of jailing someone as more civilized than, say, cutting off a finger, which seems barbaric. But if you were to ask a person today in America whether they would prefer 15-20 years of their lives or a pinkie, they might not side that way. There have been periods in time where nothing was more cruel and unusual than locking someone up. It seemed more merciful to chop them up a little. Foucault was able to—for me—most beautifully bring out how you really have to look at some things and see how they look when you flip them around a little bit. And that was the kind of

cultural excitement I was looking for. And I found it, as I said, in the history of science.

GC: So, do you think that coming to it as a poet and an historian you look at science differently than, say, a scientist would?

JH: There are a lot of different ways of looking at the question. But one way is just being an historian of science makes science look different, just because if you study this discipline you see how often it changes and how, basically, the closer you get to the human the more quickly it changes. So, human ideas change constantly, and any science of the human body is also going to change a lot. Every 10 years they have different ideas about what you should be doing to be healthy.

GC: Yes.

JH: So, the farther away from your body you get the longer these ideas tend to last, because culture ideas change fast and ideas about rocks change slowly. So, physics is going to hold up OK, chemistry is going to hold up OK; biology is already going to start to get a little fuzzy. You're going to start to realize, oh, yes, we've got a germ metaphor that looks like an army, and that's affecting the way we think about treatment. And when we come up with this new metaphor, that's more like building the immune system instead of how to stay away from the germs, these metaphors really impact our lives—you know, whether we're scrubbing the kids or feeding them vitamins—and they're metaphors.

That's what studying the history of science shows you: how these metaphors change, and how it's not just that the science will be different, but that the whole idea of thinking that way in the past becomes goofy. Even if it's not bad science, it just gets strange, because the metaphor gets changed. That doesn't mean anything about science should change its behavior. Science has to keep trying

and changing, and trying and changing. But when we report science, when we talk about science, every time someone says, ‘Scientists now know that...,’ I cringe. It’s very rare that it’s appropriate to say, ‘Scientists now know that...,’ or, ‘Scientists have found out...’

If you’re talking about the brain, for instance—which is something that I know you have a great deal of knowledge about the recent stuff that’s been going on—but it’s still our own picture of it. And even though there’s nothing wrong with the way people are looking at the brain and doing work on it now, there is a lot wrong with people saying, ‘Now we know that there’s this area that does this.’

No, we don’t know anything. Now, in our metaphor of thinking about things we’re seeing that if you imagine that this area of the brain lighting up means this, then we can say that a little of that happened. There’s so much assumption that goes in. Again, it’s fine. It’s just not so that we know the things we say we know. And to me it’s disturbing.

GC: Well, I can think of several examples that fit right with what you say. I mean we know, for example, that Freud’s metaphor of the brain was a hydraulic model. Right? The idea that if you had something that was repressed it was going to building up this pressure, and that at some point that was a bad thing, so if it wasn’t released it was going to come out somewhere.

JH: Right. That’s true. Yes.

GC: And now so many people are tied to this computer metaphor of the brain, which I think is very limiting. One of the themes that I tend to come back often to on my *Brain Science Podcast* is the fact that the mind is not a computer. And I oftentimes ask my guests to address that very metaphor and its limitations, because it’s clear to me that that metaphor is very much not only limiting, but a reflection of the time in which we happen to live.

JH: Right. Exactly so. Yes, the limiting aspect of it is real, and these metaphors do really affect what people will try to do; what people will imagine possible. That doesn't mean they're bad, it just means it really is a good idea to keep an eye on them and to verbalize them so that they don't kind of lead us around by the nose.

GC: And to be aware that we're using metaphors; which I think a lot of times we aren't.

JH: Absolutely. People don't even notice. Yes, certainly that germs one, people very often just think there's this army going on. The idea that the body's finding anything foreign and attacking it brings up all these sorts of problems when you then start to realize that there are bacteria that are good for your body, or that a baby is foreign to the body. There are all sorts of reasons why that's a metaphor that limits our understanding of things. They change under the force of new ideas.

But, yes, the Freudian one—the pressure—that's a good one to remember. Because I think a lot of what he was saying is right, but people forget that it's right but it's right as metaphor. That one may not be right as metaphor; but like the 'id', 'ego', and 'superego' is a very useful way to speak. But those things do not exist in the mind. There is no place to find them. And for sure, a century from now we won't be using those terms. We just won't. Terms like that just don't last more than a century.

GC: Yes, I was just interviewing the philosopher, Patricia Churchland, and she was saying that she felt that in terms of neuroscience we are sort of at the point where the molecular biologists were before DNA was discovered. And I think that's a good point, because with all this brain imaging—which you sort of alluded to—people are tending to get an exaggerated impression of what we actually know.

JH: And here's the biggest problem with that. This is a problem with all the sort of evolutionary just-so stories that people make up to explain, oh, this is why women like to buy shoes, or this is why – That's a silly one, but people are constantly trying to associate behaviors they see now with these indications of something that they see light up on a brain screen.

But what people forget is that we have been *Homo sapiens* for a long, long, long time. Think 100,000 years, and then think about how long – You know we've been wandering around for a long, long time—and all over Europe—before we even settled. And then we only settled around 10,000 years ago. And then history starts.

Most of history has been this huge long period where we don't know how people lived. I mean the whole period that we have of history, we know one thing for sure: that human beings have lived in extraordinarily different ways, with some consistent factors—some very consistent factors; the ways that we really do come together as couples and raise children, families stay together in certain kinds of ways—but beyond that there's so much variety.

And when we're making connections between what we think happened and what we think we are now, it is always unbelievably arrogant, because if you go back a hundred years you would be making different kinds of guesses about what women are, what men are, what this is, what that is, what economic needs are. And that stuff all gets rolled up into the assumptions, and then the assumptions get associated with the new science. The prejudices of our moment get enshrined in science and then we use the science to back up the prejudices of our moment; and it's an ugly scene to watch a bunch of scientists contributing to.

GC: Do you think the fact that scientists in general share our culture's general lack of appreciation for history and knowledge of history, does that contribute to this unrealistic view?

JH: Yes, it just does. For me it was only after I read a great deal of historical science—not writing about science, historical science: people of that moment, the original texts—and you hear a certain kind of certainty and a certain way of putting together the facts and the understanding. And the slight of hand that makes it acceptable for them to see the world as they see it, it just sounds so precisely the same. And I think when you have read some of that you get a little humility. You start to realize maybe—just maybe—we’re not the perfect end of everything, but in fact for the most part we’re just like every other historical moment just caught up in our own crazy nonsense culture.

And yes, there are these little lines of accumulated knowledge in certain fields, and in those places it’s glorious that we get to watch that get added to and added to. And I certainly believe that brain science is part of that. The only way we’re going to get to the next stage is by going through this stage and with as much confidence as possible.

And yet, realistically, to understand what we really know and what we’re doing, it does seem really important to at least open a couple of books and see what has gone on in the past, and check all this temporal prejudice that we’re the first people who know about science and so therefore we know how to live. Like how does that work? Yes, we can get to the moon. What does that have to do with the vast majority of the kinds of guesses that we make? It’s staggering how we have assigned ourselves the kind of end of history.

GC: Like you say, when you read what people have written in the past, they did exactly the same thing.

JH: Exactly. Exactly so.

GC: Right before Einstein somebody said physics was finished.

JH: Yes, right. ‘We’re all done; we’ve pretty much got it.’ Ecclesiastes was written—you know, we’re not exactly sure—but we think around 200 or 300 BCE. He was saying already, ‘Nothing new under the sun.’ It’s all over, and over, and over the same. And then when he tells you what the same is you’re like, oh, yes, that is the same: people hunting after fame, getting the fame, realizing it’s not worth much, palaces are built and empires come down, and new palaces are built. And it’s just, yup, that’s what goes on. Sure, there’s some difference here and there, and there’s some accumulation of knowledge, but every era has sort of seemed like, well, maybe we’re winding down now. And that should make us notice. We should just have just a little bit more humility in the way we talk and we would end up with less wasteful thought.

GC: Can you think of an example from the history of science that you think would help in terms of giving us a more realistic view of science? The principle you’re talking about applies to all aspects of human endeavor, but our focus is kind of on science. So, what about an example?

JH: Well, it’s tricky, because I have one example which is perhaps obvious, which is the brain science of chronometry of the late 19th century. You know phrenology was never really a science—there weren’t scientists doing that. But the chronometry of the late 19th, early 20th century was pretty well established in certain types of scientific places. It’s true, not really universities; and perhaps because it was radical. It tended to be a left-wing atheist kind of thing to be involved in because it did challenge the church in trying to figure out how the brain thought. So, it always was the atheist camp. And that, I think, is part of what kept it out of universities.

But there were museums, and there were labs, and there were anthropological stations all over the world that were full of skulls lining the walls. And these skulls are still in these anthropological institutions, but mostly sort of in the basement. The Smithsonian had tons of them—I mean hundreds and hundreds

of skulls. I'm talking hundreds of thousands of measurements of skulls, all with notation of whose skulls they were, and where they were, and where they lived, and how old they were.

And pretty much everybody knew that they didn't know what this stuff meant yet. They were trying to make some theories, but it was tough. There were some racists who made up stuff, but there were a lot of good people who were just measuring skulls, thinking this was good science and wanting to contribute to the eventual further understanding. They thought that the people of the world were going to mix up a lot and so we'd better do this now, while we have the chance to have these indigenous populations.

I cannot exaggerate. There are annexes of libraries with rooms full of shelves, and shelves, and shelves, and shelves of books—printed books listing all these numbers. And they're in the annexes now and falling apart—with that terrible late 19th century paper—because it means nothing. When the paradigm shifted to the point where we were no longer interested in skulls as a way of understanding the mind, all those numbers—no matter how good the measurements were, no matter how careful people were to get it all right—it's all nonsense now. And some people guessed it might be nonsense even while it was happening.

That's an example that is sort of an extreme one because it really did turn out to be this kind of hogwash, and by the end only people who were sort of fakes and cranks were really into it. There are other things that you can find in any scientific framework. Astronomy: Ptolemy's system had epicycles because the planets didn't end up in the right places when the earth is in the center.

GC: Right.

JH: So, you had to have these epicycles, where you had them rotating around their imagined orbit, to get the planet in the right place.

GC: All because they were convinced that the earth had to be at the center.

JH: Yes. So, you look up at the sky and it's not where it should be, so they figured it had to be rotating around its orbit, so they invented these epicycles. So, when we first start seeing the idea of the heliocentric system, what Copernicus draws out is circles. It's circles, but those are ellipses, so the system still doesn't work. It's only when Kepler makes the ellipses that the planets finally all know where they should be. So that even with the circular idea that the planets are going around the sun, they had to introduce epicycles again.

Which made them feel terrible—here we've got this new plan that's so much better, but the planets still aren't exactly where they should be. So, they made little epicycles. Nobody thought they were making anything up to cover a bad theory. They were trying to figure out how it worked. And that's why we have to keep searching and keep trying to describe and keep our confidence up, but we also have to remain a little humble and keep checking whether we're covering for something.

[music]

GC: Today's episode of *Books and Ideas* is sponsored by Audible.com. If you are new to Audible you can get a free audiobook download by going to audiblepodcast.com/booksandideas. I am currently listening to *Angels and Ages: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life*, by Adam Gopnik.

Let's get back to the interview.

[music]

GC: Jennifer, in your recent interview on *Point of Inquiry* you argued—I hope I'm not exaggerating by using the expression 'argued'—but you pointed out that

science is not the only way of knowing about or exploring the world. Would you like to talk a little bit about that?

JH: Yes, I'd like to. It's something I get asked about, and not always at times where I can really hold forth, so it would be good to say something. When I say that I mean that if you start thinking about the world from the point of view of yourself, your own little body sitting on this planet, and you think about your feelings and the people you love in your life, and you think about the size of the universe—the sheer immensity of the universe; billions of galaxies, billions of stars; it's insane, it's huge—and we're this tiny little thing on this tiny little planet on this tiny little dirt, and yet we have these huge feelings and our minds can contain that whole insanely huge universe: we can think about it.

Our minds and our feelings are a sort of endless immensity, and when I think about that endless immensity—that inner life that can conceive of all of this, and also wonder about consciousness itself, and also try to communicate that from this shell of a skull that we're each locked in, to try to make art, to play the violin, to push some clay around, to do what you can to somehow say to someone else this is how it is from inside here—so, once I'm thinking about that and thinking about different ways of getting my mind into a different kind of state, either through meditation or through poetry or through violin, I want to get into a state where I can experience that strange feeling of oneness that we all sometimes feel.

When I get into that place and I think of what scientists are doing, I see the scientists as a kind of very small little kind of function, picking out a description of the world that matches our sensory and logical data. It's a good job, and certainly in terms of the vaccinations and stuff, I want that. It's hard to say, because some of what science does is sheer poetry, and I don't want to excise it from the system. But I just want to say that when I think of the internal world and the bliss of what art can do, or music, and good words and good thoughts –

Now, there's the next question of whether I actually think that art and the aesthetic is a way towards truth—the kind of truth that science could be at all interested in—and I think that there, too, I actually have an affirmative answer. There are many times when I am reading Emily Dickinson that I feel she captures—sometimes in four lines, sometimes in eight lines; tiny little lines—she captures something that we know about our relationship to the world in terms of what is time and how do we fit in it, or what can the immensity of the world mean. Those questions are almost scientific questions, and I think Emily does it better than the scientific explanations that I see. We have to ask ourselves what we're really talking about. And sometimes numbers are a kind of abstract since we can't understand them anyway—so, a certain kind of bigness, and we use the number to imply that.

Like I said, I read science magazines, I'm very involved in science, I care a lot about science, and I like to be up to date on what people are doing. And a lot of it is a very slow piecing together of how the little puzzles of the world work. And I care a lot about that; but there's also to some degree a little bit of a 'so what'. It's funny, it's interesting; tell me more about how the snow crab mates. I want to know, I want to catalogue everything on earth.

It's an interesting way to proceed. No other period in time decided exactly to do it. It's a good project. I'm not against it. But it's not clear to me that cataloging what the snow crab is doing is adding to our knowledge of the world more than somebody who's writing about the overall situation of sharing a planet with a lot of other creatures and perhaps giving us a feel for that in a particular moment in a particular way.

I guess I do think that the aesthetic world is a powerful place of knowledge and that it gets thought of as something that's a little bit decorative. But I don't see it that way. I see artists as scratching their way to the truth using all the different knowledges they have and trying to say things that reflect what it is to be a

human being. Sometimes I'm hard-pressed to see why to savor certain types of scientific findings over the kinds of things that you can learn in consideration of what we already know.

GC: See if this analogy works for you. If you look at science, most scientists do seem to be getting into those little nooks and crannies and not really telling us what the big picture is, or not even necessarily seeing how their work relates to the big picture—unless we come up and we have somebody like a Feynman, or a Carl Sagan, or somebody like that. Couldn't you say the same thing about artists? I mean, the Emily Dickinsons of the world are also very rare.

JH: Right, sure. No, that's fair. It's not that we could do without any of them, it's that I am an atheist and I'm in conversation with the secularist world. In that secularist world I have found a replacement of religion with science. And that's reasonable. It works. It's good. I'm not against it. However, I think we'd do better to put art at the heart of the atheist movement. I know that science is a terrific way of combating religion, but I think religion is more like art at this point.

We know to believe science over religion, but in a lot of ways what we need to do is to become aware and enlightened about the way art can function for us in the ways that religion used to—or in the way that art always has. And I feel like the attachment to science as the only alternative to religion gets especially problematic when the scientists don't have the humility to speak with some care, or to educate themselves with some humanities. And so, you get this kind of half culture.

GC: It becomes very sterile, and not in a good way.

JH: Yes, it becomes very sterile, and it becomes a kind of half language. We know that old notion of there being two cultures. Well, if the scientific culture is

the only one in the atheist community, and we also notice that the atheist community has a sort of image problem with a kind of arrogance, a kind of anger and hostility, and also a kind of foolishness—the way all arrogance always is—and if we look up and say, well, so many of us are not that way, it's just that to brave enough to talk about atheism, you almost have to be a little obnoxious. You have to be a personality who can handle some negative commentary. Or, you have to try to play it real sweet; which is, I guess, part of the way I'm going.

But the point is, as atheists I think it would be a good idea if we looked at the more aesthetic, and also in some ways more nurturing, more – You know we've had some very loud and aggressive women on the science side of atheism too, so it's not fair to genderize this, but right now the sort of Four Horsemen of the Atheist movement, they've kind of been pronouncing the atheist movement very male lately. It sort of leaves room for this kind of notion of, well, how about thinking about a generative atheism that is just as strong and sure of what it wants to be—that there is no God, there's nothing magical, there's nothing mystical—and believe in a little bit of something I might call mystical, which is that the human experience to me is a little mystical.

The fact that we have consciousness; how can you define that without saying words that you would say with something mystical? It's just very strange that we come out of nowhere and into existence and then out again, and it turns out to be this weird place full of facts and feelings and it goes on for a long time. It's really strange. And I think that when you take drugs, or when you fast, or when you go through certain types of experiences—like when you're in grief or romantic love—there are things that put you into a state that is something else. And we're capable as human beings of saying, 'I want more of that. I want to feel. I want to feel strange. I want to feel at one with things.' Those kinds of feelings, throughout most of history we've gone to religion for that. But we don't have to go to religion.

In fact, I believe that we should go to religion. I think that the humanist movements that stay in the churches and temples may be the best idea—you get the tax break and the beautiful building—but you just don't go in there and lie; don't talk about God. And there are lots of those movements going on. Though I enjoy also the atheist movements that just say they don't want to deal with anything to do with religion, I do think people need ritual. I think even the people who meet in those atheist meetings, lots of them go to a lot of marriages in churches, maybe they get married in churches or temples themselves, they baptize their kids, they get their kids brisses; and the whole time they're doing it they're saying words that they don't believe. And that's tragic. It's tragic.

GC: Yes.

JH: I know it's hard to instill new ceremonies with real meaning, but we don't have to change the ceremonies very much. We just have to realize that all these feelings always came out of human beings, they didn't ever come down from the heavens. And so, we ought to be able to just do the same rituals but say things we really believe. And I think I've gone off on a little tangent, haven't I?

GC: That's OK. But, I think you're making a very good point that it seems like at least a certain segment of atheists—and they seem to be the ones that most people are hearing from—it's almost as if they want to throw the baby out with the bath water. They just assume that that part of being human is only associated with religion.

JH: Right.

GC: It's almost as if they're afraid to acknowledge that we do have needs for things like rituals.

JH: Yes. And what's wrong with that? What's so strange about it? We need rituals to get ourselves to fall asleep at night. We need rituals to convince

ourselves that we're bonded to this crazy person we met in a bar two years ago. I mean it's a lot to convince ourselves that someone we loved has passed, convince ourselves that we have managed to bring another human being into our circle. And to have people stand around that person and tell you they're going to help you take care of them by just being there, that's what rituals do for people. You know, it has to be done. We ought to be able to do it without having to lie.

GC: Yes, absolutely.

JH: And that's the problem.

GC: That gives me an opportunity to come back to your first book, *Doubt*. Reading your book really changed my life. And it did it in two ways. One was that it connected me with a whole line of people who I could relate to on a personal level. And I think this is very much like what you were just talking about, because this was a whole history of people that questioned the assumptions and truths of their time, and until I read your book I felt very lonely. I wasn't at all aware of the skeptical movement, and I didn't feel there was any choice other than either doing the lying trip or just being lonely. And I didn't want to do the lying trip.

JH: Right.

GC: And the second thing was, after I read your book I spent two years immersed in the history of Western philosophy, because to me *Doubt* was also about the history of philosophy. I'd only read Eastern philosophy. I'd read lots of Eastern philosophy. Before I read your book I'd read no Western philosophy, so it was a real education for me. So, I was wondering—you obviously spent a lot of time doing the research for this book—were you changed by the experience of writing the book?

JH: Profoundly. Yes, profoundly. I went into it with a very good sense of the history of the world in the West and a little bit in the East. I had been teaching history, and so you go over the history of it. You know? And I had it pretty well memorized. I knew most of the centuries and what went on. When you graduate with a PhD from history you don't necessarily know that—you know, you just concentrated on some little part and you learned research.

But here I had this historical story that I had been telling to undergraduates in a community college. I had really had to work hard to find ways to connect it to them. I wanted to tell this story in all these great ways I'd thought up to make it lively and to communicate it. So, I went in wanting to tell this story, and I also wanted to fill some holes that I'd allowed to sit there, to figure out how certain things happened.

One of the biggest ways I was changed was that I came out with more respect for religion than I went in with. For one thing, I was more a baby-with-the-bath-water person. I thought we didn't need any religion. I understood it, I had sympathy with it, but I thought we'd be better off if it was all just gone. And I also thought that people who believed were either childish or stupid. I just couldn't think of another choice. I just couldn't think of one. I didn't believe in God and I just couldn't think of one.

One of the reasons I wrote the book was to go back to the people who did believe who I also respected a great deal, and try to get them to tell me why they believed. Were they lying? So, I went back and I studied everybody. And I was surprised to find everybody who I respected who believed talking in just the same kind of mystical weird way I was talking a few moments ago.

Like Augustine, who's brilliant about time and about many things. He's a good philosopher. Why did he believe? Well, when you read what he says, he was a Platonist first, and then he was an Epicurean. He loved both of those, but he said

it was lonely searching towards truth without the friend that, when you go to Christianity you add this friend aspect, that there's someone traveling with you, that God is lifting you up. And that's pretty much all he believed about God. He didn't seem to believe that God was a God that thought very much about us. He didn't really make God into a personification.

When I went to Maimonides, here's this brilliant Jewish Renaissance philosopher saying so many brilliant things. He believed in God. So, I go and I look. And his negative theology is so extraordinary, so strange, so much just plain absurdist—it's absurdist. He says God cannot be known in any way—He's so far beyond us that He doesn't even exist in any way that we would understand existence. He says that many times. Think about what that says: that God doesn't exist in any way that we would understand existence.

He makes it clear that if you think God is in any way thinking about you or knowing you—God is so far beyond. So, what kind of a God are we left with? With a lot of the people who I thought believed in God or were on the fence, when I got closer what I saw was someone who did not feel politically like they had to make the choice the way right now in our history you kind of do. It means something to say you believe in God. It means something about what you think about the universe.

Spinoza said God is the world unfolding. Nothing else. Nothing in addition to the world unfolding. God didn't exactly make the world. He's not unfolding the world. He just is the world. Now, everyone throughout history has said, Spinoza, that's pantheism, and pantheism is atheism. And everybody's called Spinoza an atheist. But why didn't Spinoza call himself an atheist? He did get himself excommunicated from Judaism and he never tried to get back in that church or any other.

So, why didn't he just say there was no God, even in his private, private, private writings? Well, because he didn't feel that it was meaningful to get rid of that word, and he did believe that the universe unfolding and his consciousness showing up in the middle of it and then disappearing again was magical and mystical and incredible, and it was OK to call it God. But he didn't mean some thinking Daddy out there with a beard and rules.

Nowhere in the history of time has there been such a slippery word. What does this word 'God' mean? For many great believer-doubters through history it has meant something pretty metaphysically materialist but just adding in this strange aspect of our feelings and saying let's think about our feelings; let's talk about our feelings and our minds as real things. And once you start to do that you can call it whatever you want, but you are talking about something that isn't quite in the world of science or math. For some people they've been OK calling it God.

I wandered way off the topic. But the point was when I finished the book I said to myself, oh, there are people who say they believe in God because they have an appreciation for the absurdist situation that we're in—that we can know almost nothing; that our senses are so small in comparison to the size of the question that we really profoundly cannot know anything.

And if you get there and you stop and you say, so all I can do is try to get right with the universe, try to feel at one with it, try to stop feeling so nervous, try to let my birth and death come without anxiety, try to just be here while I'm here; how can I get right with the universe? Some people say, well at that point, since I can know nothing and I desperately want to get right with the universe, why not embrace this cockamamy idea of God as part of my process? And I didn't realize that a lot of people were doing that. And now I do.

I know that a lot of people through history have done it, and I know a lot of people who say that they are religious today when I talk to them—it's the liberal

progressive ones who are going to invite me to their temple or church in the first place—after I give my talk the rabbis and the priests are very often totally comfortable with this notion that we need a place for religion in society but maybe there's no God, and that's just fine. Maybe we just have to talk about the mystery, as long as we don't forget about this weird thing that we're conscious and mortal and we need to think about what that means. Because we're sort of programmed by evolution to build house, make babies, keep going.

GC: And we're also programmed to believe stuff.

JH: And to believe stuff so we can keep doing that. Exactly. Exactly so. So, if we want to know something about truth we've got to somehow stand still and get out of our brain's habit of assumptions. And one way to do that is to just ask ourselves every time we think something whether the opposite might be true. You know, to really fight for that opposite. And you can get a little work done on yourself, but it's tough.

[music]

GC: So, what motivated you to write *The Myth of Happiness*? Was that a total change of pace?

JH: No, that felt to me like my history of science education put through a few years of my own experience in the world and thinking. And really to me it was my history of science education in a book. I felt that my knowledge of history—especially once I'd finished *Doubt*—I knew about so many different ways of living. When you study several hundred years of several million people living under Confucianism, and there's no God there, and there is a whole lot less competition, and the highest value is given to certain gestures rather than money. And we're talking about millions of people, for centuries.

When you come back to the 21st century and you see everybody running on a treadmill, you say this is insane; this is an actual metaphor for hard work going nowhere. And we've built shrines to them in the center of all the towns. What the hell is going on here? In the middle of an energy crisis! I thought, every able-bodied man, woman, and child being constantly poked to get into a gym and run on, not just a treadmill, but an electric treadmill that actually draws power—I mean it's really an extraordinary thing.

And it took me awhile, but I looked at that and I saw ancient Sparta. Ancient Sparta was the most exercising culture in the whole history until us today—or maybe the fascists came up with it a little bit. But ancient Sparta, the Helots were their slaves. There were more Helots than Spartans, so the Spartans just exercised and exercised so they could keep the Helots under control to do all the heavy work. So, the men and women in Sparta exercised naked all the time, and that's what they were doing.

So, when we look at that we can see that the Spartans were trying to show off that they were strong even though they were at leisure. When we look at the tournament sports culture that arose in the United States before the Civil War, in the plantation South the men of plantation South didn't have to do any hard labor. There were the slaves for that. They invented what became American sports—these tournaments that they did. But they were marked off as leisure.

So, what are we doing now? Who goes to work and is allowed to come home in sweaty clothes? If you come home in sweaty clothes from work you're an immigrant or one of the lowest-level people in the society; maybe a teenager. If you are an adult, full citizen, you're supposed to come home in clean clothes to mark yourself off as upper class, and then you have a special bag of dirty clothes that you use as your gym clothes, where you take an escalator home so you stay clean, but then you go to a StairMaster. And there, marked off as leisure—

marked off as look what I'm doing, look how strong I am—we show the world our muscles.

Like children, we show the world our muscles. We don't see that we're doing it and pretend that it's for health, when there's no record whatsoever—not one tiny bit of evidence—that being well-muscled, like a gym body, has anything to do with health. If you don't exercise you will be less healthy than if you do exercise. That means taking walks, that means going for a bicycle ride. But gym bodies are about a certain thing.

And when you look at Sparta and you can tell what they're doing, and you look at the plantation South and you can see what they're doing, and then I see my own culture exercising like crazy even though we've automated our warfare and we've got machines and immigrants to do our heavy labor—so, we're doing what? We're showing ourselves something. And that is extraordinarily interesting. Especially when you really don't enjoy the gym. It really seems to me that when you start to see it in its correct form it starts to be laughable that it could make you feel guilty—especially when throughout history people have felt guilty for all sorts of culturally specific things.

In *The Happiness Myth* I show this idea of Fletcherizing. This guy, Fletcher, came up with this idea that you should chew your food at least 32 times each bite. And this was so well established in the culture. Henry James followed it, and William James followed it, and they gave lectures. I mean these were major people in American culture. There were books about etiquette, because at dinner parties no one was talking because they were all Fletcherizing. I mean this was a real serious thing.

So, for at least a couple of decades Americans felt guilty for not chewing their food enough. Now, can you imagine that that was one more thing you had to worry about? And I believe for certain that there are a few things that keep us up

nights worrying that are equally inane. And that I find emancipating, and wanted to tell other people. It was as simple as that. Especially I wanted to tell women. I felt women were really pushed around.

The beginning of *The Happiness Myth* talks about corsets and how evil and sexist we think they are, but how now instead of whalebone we want to see the girl's bone under her dress. That idea of having a tight corset, you know it never had anything to do with how big you were; so, everybody was supposed to be shaped like an hourglass, but at any size. And now you can be any shape you want, but you're not supposed to have any body fat. It's a fad.

And it works with so many different things. Not long ago people were proud if they hadn't had sex in five years. That was something for an individual—married or not—to be proud of for their health and for their mental state; and they should be proud because they were able to do it, and a lingering sense of religion. But mostly the health community said you should withhold as much as possible—you shouldn't have sex. And some of the health community said other things, but none of them said you should do it in the way that we do.

What do we do about sex that's crazy today? It seems to me that we're so good about it. We say whatever consenting adults want to do, and we sort of say we're not judging any particular behavior. And I thought about what we do in fact judge. You know, a woman says she hasn't had sex in three years, and everybody jumps. Right? Or a man says he hasn't had sex in three months, and everybody jumps—with psychiatrist's phone numbers and girls' phone numbers, or boys' phone numbers.

You're supposed to be doing it, and you're supposed to be doing it in a way that doesn't cause any attention. And that is a kind of strict rule we've imposed on ourselves. You're supposed to be doing it, but you're not supposed to be doing it

too much. You know, you're supposed to be doing it a couple of times a week, or a couple of times a month.

When you do the surveys, the same number of people who used to be allowed to not be having sex—a whole group of married couples, they didn't think after a certain point they had any sex. Well, there were priests, there were scholars, there were nuns, there were monks, there were just old librarians; there were whole groups of people that people just thought of as outside the sexual world. And now there's almost no one. The percentage that we imagine that is down to zero, but when you check the numbers it's the same numbers. There is still this large unstable percentage of people who only had sex once last year, or none. You know? And there it is.

You know, with drugs the same thing. Why is Prozac so different from opium? The way that women used Laudanum—which was wine and opium and some spices—just to sort of get through their day in the 19th century, how is that so different from Prozac? Why do we say ours is medicinal and theirs was recreational? On what basis? And I sort of conclude that it's driving cars. We had to favor a drug that doesn't make you fuzzy-headed. We declared fuzzy-headed as a sort of marker, or even happiness as a marker for an illicit drug, and clear-headedness and not changing your mood as a marker for a medicinal drug.

And it's not the other way around. It's not that medicinal ones are good and they don't do that fuzzy thing. It's that we chose it because you need to be able to drive a car, and exchange money, and a lot of things that a 19th century woman really wouldn't have to do. If you're drunk in a carriage of a horse and buggy, the horse will not run 60 miles an hour into a wall just because you're drunk. But a car will.

GC: Yes.

JH: And so, things sometimes change for reasons that are very strange. One more thing on that topic of *The Happiness Myth*: when I see the ways that people spend money trying to cure diseases—and of course that’s important—but then I look up and see that the vast majority of the deaths in America, especially of the younger people up to 40, is car crashes. So, we’re smooshing each other up. We built these roads, we built these metal containers, and we’re grinding each other into hamburger meat over here. And over here we’re worrying about death statistics. So, it’s just simply not convenient to stop driving cars or to change the way cars run.

Just looking at that, it shows me it’s cultural. It’s cultural what we decide is important. And culture leads. And science follows in a lot of ways. If no one has an interest in it, it’s not interesting, so it doesn’t get grant money and it doesn’t run on the front page. Nobody’s studying whether people with a big toe that’s smaller than the next one is smarter than if your big toe is larger. Nobody’s arguing; nobody studies that. But they do study whether black people are as smart as white people. Why? Because there’s interest. Prejudice is there. Money and ideas and all sorts of things are on that fault line. So, we take the cultural fault line first, and then we go around measuring it.

So, in all these different ways the very questions we ask – Why is so much science based on trying for longevity? I understand we all want to be healthy. But, my goodness, people have never lived so long as they live today, and never have we been so greedy for more. We think about it all the time, we talk about it all the time. No other culture has ever thought about it and talked about it so much. We should be living the life we have, here, now.

I’m not saying we should do unhealthy things. And a lot of capitalism and advanced industrialism has given us bad food to eat and situations where we don’t have to walk. So, sure, we have to notice that the old ways of being healthy are still important. And most of what science figures out is that the old ways of

being healthy are still important. Right? You should take a walk, you should eat some fruits and vegetables. But you know you can ask yourself, is that what we want all our investigative money going for? And I'm not saying no. But I am saying we don't ask the question, we don't notice that that's a question: that we could be studying which chocolate cake makes people happier for longer.

GC: Well, I think we're just about out of time. You're teaching writing and poetry at the New University now?

JH: The Graduate Center of the New School University. I teach a course called "Poets and Philosophy."

GC: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

JH: Yes, I do. Look around and see what people are writing in particular genres. Figure out what the genre is asking for. There's no point in writing five-page stories if everyone only publishes one-page or twelve-page stories. Pay attention to what your genre does. But then don't read it too much. Think, think, think for yourself. Think about it and only write something that you really, really believe. Wait until you're sure. I really think a kind of personal honesty is what makes you do enough research to get to the truth; to get to something new.

GC: What about aspiring historians?

JH: It's a similar thing. I tell people this. I figured out at some point, when you're doing research you come in with some kind of a story of what you think happened and you're going to try to do research about it. And you're going to find things that don't fit into your story. And that's OK. You put them in the exception pile. Now, the trick is, the magic is, to remember that when the exception pile gets bigger than the proof pile you need to turn away from the proof pile and figure out what the exception pile means.

And that's the difference between a bad historian—or a normal historian—and a really good historian. You have to know when to drop the thesis you're working on and say, 'Wait, if everything's pointing in a different direction, what is that direction?' And start talking about it, even if it means saying, 'Everything I was searching for turned out to be untrue, but this is what I found out.' You just have to keep being as honest as you can. Honesty will get you there. Just keep asking yourself, 'Do I really believe this? Do I really believe this?' And checking.

GC: Great. Jennifer, what's the current focus of your creative work?

JH: Well, I have a new poetry manuscript out at a couple of very nice publishers. I'm hoping that will work out. We'll see what happens. And right now I'm writing a new book. It's about what I'm calling the light bulb years: the period of the very late 19th century, but mostly the 20th century—the first couple of decades of the 20th century. They were an amazing time for atheism, and I think we just don't notice it because the Cold War sort of blocked it off from us. And I'm trying to revive it. I'm writing about five women and five men of the period.

GC: Well, you'll have to come back on when you get that book out.

JH: I'd be excited to.

GC: Do you have a website that my listeners could visit?

JH: Yes, I do have jennifermichaelhecht.com. I also keep up a sort of poetic blog that's called, "Dear Fonzi." I always thought Fonzi was a pretty stand-up guy, so I decided to write to him. But it's just sort of poetic musings. And I write on Wednesdays for *The Best American Poetry*. I blog for them on Wednesdays. I'm always doing new things on the web, so just put my name into Google and there you'll find me.

GC: Well, thanks so much for talking to me today. I've really enjoyed it.

JH: Thanks. I really enjoyed it too. Thanks a lot.

[music]

I want to thank Jennifer Michael Hecht for being my guest on this episode of *Books and Ideas*. I hope you found this interview thought provoking. I will be putting links to her website and her books in the Show Notes.

I would love to hear your feedback. The best place to exchange ideas is inside the *Brain Science Podcast* Discussion Forum where I have a section devoted to this podcast. Even if you're not the Discussion Forum type, I hope you will visit my website at gingercampbellmd.com. booksandideas.com will get you into the same website.

When you come to the website there are two things I would like you to do. First I hope you will take the time to do the new audience survey for *Books and Ideas*. But more importantly I hope you will explore the site and let me know what you think I can do to improve it. You can send me email at docartemis@gmail.com. Don't forget that your donations keep this podcast going. There is a tab at the top of the page on my website where you can learn more about how to support the show.

The next episode of the *Brain Science Podcast* will be out in two weeks, and I will be back with another episode of *Books and Ideas* on the fourth Friday of next month.

Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking to you again very soon.

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