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[00:00:00] **Annie Jones:** [00:00:00] Welcome to from the front porch, a conversational podcast about books, small business and life in the city.

An observer to my marriage would think I have made no effort to be a good or better wife or seeing me that night, that I must have set out to be this way and achieved it. After years of concentrated effort, they could not tell that for most of my adult life and all of my marriage. I have been trying to become the opposite of myself, Meg Mason, sorrow and bliss.

I'm Annie Jones, owner of the bookshelf and independent bookstore in beautiful downtown Thomasville, Georgia. And today I'm recapping the books I read in January.

[00:01:00] If you are wondering what books I read in December, they are the last books of 2020. I read actually so many books I really did love in December, but I did not do a December reading recap episode.

Instead, you are welcome to search the hashtag Annie Reads 2020, and you can see all the books I read in 2020 and my star ratings for them and that includes the books I read in December. I ended 2020 with about 118 books, I think because I weirdly never publicly reviewed *Beach Read*, which is a bummer because that book is great.

And I'm pleased with that number though. I had no intention of reaching that number. Uh, and it's funny to me a couple of years ago, if you've been a long-time listener of the podcast, you know, I tried to read a hundred books one year and it was pretty disastrous. And then 2020 happened. And I don't know, and I don't know what will happen in 2021, but I will tell you, my January was filled with really good reading and it felt like perhaps maybe more [00:02:00] in-depth reading.

I did read a couple of books that I absolutely flew through and we'll talk about those, but I wound up reading a lot of nonfiction or what felt like a lot of nonfiction for me, which is one of my reading intentions for 2021 so that feels good. All in all, a really nice reading month and I can't wait to share them with you.

First on my January list, the very first book that I believe I read, I don't know, January 2nd, maybe was *People We Meet on Vacation* by Emily Henry. Speaking of *Beach Read,* here we go.People We Meet on Vacation is Emily Henry's next much anticipated book. It comes out later this year, I believe on May 11th.

And I had seen this one already kind of popping up under, I think maybe Carrie Winfrey or some other authors I follow and I had an arc and I had no intention of reading it because as we have discussed, I like reading seasonally and this book definitely looks like a summer book, [00:03:00] but I don't know about you guys but my 2020 just ended, it just felt like I was crawling like a zombie toward the end of a finish line and I just needed something fun.

And I think I saw Carrie Winfrey post. I saw Kate who used to work at the Bookshelf and now is manager at Bookmarks, a bookstore in North Carolina, she posted about it and so I thought. Okay. I think I need something fun. And so I picked up my ARC of People We Meet on Vacation. This is definitely a, When Harry Met Sally influenced book. It stars the, for lack of a better term, uh, features maybe two people who really have always been friends, but very rarely have they felt maybe a romantic spark between them, although of course, romcom watchers and readers know that that often is not very true, at least in fiction.

And so, um, we get these two characters who kind of orbit each other for [00:04:00] years, and I loved this idea that they might not see each other during the year, but every summer they see each other and take a vacation together. Poppy is a travel writer and Alex is, you know, the opposite, like very, I don't know, wears a lot of khaki pants. And so Poppy and Alex orbit one another for years, they go on these vacations thanks to her kind of travel bug and then ultimately her job in travel. And then we realized something has happened.

The book kind of, I really love the timeline in the book. We go back and forth to past vacations. They've taken together and it's all building up to one vacation where something happened, something happened and their relationship hasn't been the same since. I also love when I romcom deals with something of maybe a little bit more depth or heft.

So in this book, we're dealing with some anxiety, some grief, some identity crises, and [00:05:00] I really liked that it added some heft to the book, but I also never felt bogged down by those issues. And I fell in love with Poppy and Alex and their unconventional relationship because they're so different from one another.

But clearly even at first, we can tell they definitely platonically love one another, whether or not they romantically love each other you'll have to, you'll have to read the book to find out. If you are wondering open door versus closed door, there are a couple of open door scenes. So just keep that in mind, but it felt very similar to Beach Read.

So if you read Beach Read and loved it and we're comfortable with that content, then you would certainly be comfortable with this. I think Emily Henry is going to from now on, be a must read for me. I just really enjoyed this book and I think rom coms, watching a romcom or the romcoms of Hollywood. I just don't feel like we're going to get those anytime soon.

I keep hoping, I think in 2018 we talked about a romcomnaissance, but I just don't, I don't know. I feel like that was very [00:06:00] brief and we don't get a lot of great romcoms visually, but we do get a lot of really great rom comes in writing. And so. I think Emily Henry is from now on going to be a mustard for me.

I really enjoyed this one. *People We Meet on Vacation* by Emily Henry out on May 11th. And I like that her books are paperback original. So I don't know if we're going to be going to the beach this summer. I don't know. I don't know what life looks like this summer, but I think this is a book that you could throw in a bag and take somewhere if we're going anywhere.

Okay. I then took quite the hiatus from reading on accident. And weirdly the next book I finished was *Culture Warlords*. This is a non-fiction book by journalist by Talia Lavin. She is a Jewish writer who went undercover on for lack of a better term, maybe alt-right or hate group rep websites, and did a lot of undercover work and this book is the result of her reporting.

This [00:07:00] book came out in 2020, and we'd had it on our shelves for awhile. And after the events of January 6th, one of my ways to cope I guess, was to try to arm myself with more information, which is very standard for me as a person. And so I saw this on our shelves and decided to give it a try.

I really appreciate this book. Um, I think I wound up giving it three and a half stars, um, because it is a very quick overview, um, which is what to be fair, what I wanted. I wasn't sure how deep I wanted to go, uh, in this world of hate groups and the dark web. So I really appreciated Levin's perspective and the fact that she did some undercover reporting was really helpful.

In that way it weirdly reminded me of if you ever saw the movie black Klansman, uh, the spike Lee movie, that is weirdly kind of what I was reminded of all while I was reading this book, because she's going undercover on these websites and pretending to be someone she is not and some of her [00:08:00] best writing is actually in the prologue to the book.

And although I enjoyed or appreciate it enjoyed is not the right word. I appreciated her reporting. What I really liked the most in terms of her writing style was her writing about the effects of her reporting on herself. And yeah. Just how being around hateful people and spending her time totally enmeshed in these kinds of hateful subgroups of our culture contributed to her, to her own mental health and attitudes.

And I appreciated that respectable because I think it gives you then some insight into what the minds of people who spend all day on these corners of the dark web, what they, what their mindset might be like. So I really appreciated that. She goes through different actually different histories of, uh, hate group websites and hate groups on the internet.

Uh, specifically she talks about white supremacist groups. She talks about antisemitic [00:09:00] groups. She talks about anti LGBTQ plus groups, and then kind of ties them all together. And I will be honest I've I read a lot of this book, like in snippets aloud to Jordan and I kept saying. Well, then January 6th wouldn't be surprising.

The things that happened wouldn't feel unprecedented or wouldn't feel surprising if I had read this book because there is a lot happening online and some of it I was familiar with a few years ago, there was a shooting in Tallahassee at a yoga studio and the gunman was an incel and so I had read about him and read about what his views and worldview was going leading up to that tragic event. And so I was familiar with some of this and also familiar, thanks to the work on Reply All, this great podcast about the internet and they have a couple of episodes about different corners of the dark web. And were it not for them I think I would have been totally unfamiliar.

This would have been totally new territory for me. So if you are looking [00:10:00] for maybe. A primer. I think reply all has a couple of great podcasts episodes, but if you want to dig a little deeper, I think Talia Levin's work is really good. And she does some really good reporting. Again, this is very much an overview, not necessarily a deep dive.

I think another comparable book on my list is *Antisocial*, which was a New York times notable book. Um, that's kind of what I would want to read next if I want to read more about this subject. For now, I feel like uh, Levin's work was really helpful to me in processing the events of January 6th. And perhaps it would be for you too, if that is of interest to you. Obviously dealing with very heavy subject matter so do with that what you will.

Okay. After Culture Warlords, I needed, this is gonna sound terrible. I didn't need something lighter as you'll soon. See, but I did need something that I could read quickly. Culture Warlords I did read in a weekend because I did not want to spend a ton of time enmeshed in that subject matter, but I wanted some quick [00:11:00] fictions.

So I picked up *The Push* by Ashley Audrain. This is finally starting to be everywhere I think online. I first heard of it from Jamie Golden of the Popcast. This is why I love listening to the Popcast because I get a movie and TV recommendations, but sometimes I also get a book that I haven't heard very much about.

The Push did sell at auction for like this exorbitant amount of money but weirdly I did not hear a ton about it directly from my publisher. Instead I heard about it from Jamie and now I have seen it kind of making the rounds on bookstagram. I loved this book. Um, it was a complete and utter page turner.

I have been waiting and I feel like occasionally maybe once a year, I'll get a book that gives me the same feelings that Gone Girl gives me. I know some of you are listening and you hated Gone Girl, and that's fine. You won't like The Push. Like, let me just tell you right now. Um, but the Push does for motherhood what Gone Girl did for marriage. So [00:12:00] and do with that, take that information with a grain of salt, because again, Gone Girl did not do good things for marriage. It just showed like the really kind of ugly underbelly of an unhealthy toxic marriage. And I think The Push does the same thing for motherhood.

So this is about a mom who has a beautiful baby girl and starts to wonder if there is something wrong with her daughter and this is unreliable narration at its finest. If that is not for you, then this is not for you. The entire book we wonder, is this the mom's issue or is she right? Like, is the mom dealing with something or does she have an intuition and is there something really wrong with her daughter? I would cross Gone Girl with Defending Jacob, and then you get The Push.

I think the writing is really good, which means I cannot wait to see more from Ashley Audrain. The story is propulsive. Like I did not want to put it down. I truly read it in one sitting, Olivia also read it in one [00:13:00] sitting. So if you're looking for like a book, you can read in pieces, parts, this is not for you because you will not want to, like, you will not want to put this book down.

You'll want to read it on a rainy day. It is intense. We did get friend of the store, our dear friend, Holly, who is a regular customer and a mom, but she graciously read this because Olivia and I were like, We don't have kids. We just need to know, can we sell this to moms? Like what kind of subject matter are we dealing with here?

And Holly was very gracious. There are look, there are some difficult to read passages, particularly dealing with child abuse and yeah dealing with the hardest parts of motherhood. So if that is something that leaves you tender than the push might not be for you, Holly, read it and loved it. Holly reads similarly to me and to Olivia for just for your references sake, but she really enjoyed it.

And I, I just did too. I, and I think this is an easy sell at the bookshop. I feel like there are a lot of different people we could recommend this to. Yes, we can recommend it to maybe [00:14:00] the domestic thriller readers, the suspense readers, but also readers who are gravitating toward books about feminism and motherhood and identity. I really, really like this book. It is *The Push* by Ashley Audrain. If you are looking for a page turner book to get you through a rainy day, this is it. Next up.

I read *Sorrow & Bliss* by Meg Mason. What I found about my reading life in January was that I was reading a lot of books at once. So, and that was for a couple of reasons. First of all, I was reading more non-fiction than usual. And so when I'm reading a nonfiction book, I am typically also reading a fiction. And the second reason I was reading a lot is because I was prepping for our winter literary lunch, where I was going to give an overview of the books I read or was interested in for January, February, and March.

So I was doing a lot of readings for that talk, basically it's a quarterly book talk that I give, I wanted to highlight my favorite upcoming titles of the winter. That meant I was reading lots of pieces, parts of books. So I was in the middle. I kid you [00:15:00] not of seven books, seven fiction titles. When I had the opportunity to watch a kind of panel conversation on some upcoming titles for one of our publishers and.

I just have to tell you, I was, it was the most delightful working moment because I was cooking in my kitchen and I had this webinar up in the background and I felt this is so weird, but I felt like I was in a big city. I felt like I was living the dream. Like I felt like I was in this big city and doing what I've always wanted to do.

And it was just very fun to be cooking dinner while listening to authors and their publicists and agents talk about great books. So while I was listening my ears perked up, because they began to talk about this book, Sorrow & Bliss by Meg Mason. Meg Mason is an Australian author. She was on the panel and I thought, well, I have an arc of that.

I pick that up as one of my seven books, maybe in the way they were talking about it. I'll tell you they referenced Fleabag. And so I was like, wait a minute. I literally left my stuff, cooking on the [00:16:00] stove and went to my giant stack of ARCS and found my copy of Sorrow and Bliss and started reading it and just devoured it over the next few days.

This is not for me, a one sit read. This was more just, I wanted to spend time with this character and with these people. The book centers around Martha, uh, our protagonist who is on the precipice is that the right word? She is about to embark on her 40th year and she functions as our narrator. This is not unreliable narration, like Ashley Audrains narration in The Push.

Instead, this is someone who we just can't tell something is going on in her brain, but we don't know what, and really, we can't tell if she knows either. And it is a book about her marriage, her relationship with her sister, her relationship with her mom. Right. I hadn't read a dysfunctional family book in a long time.

And this almost doesn't even feel like a dysfunctional family story because [00:17:00] Martha is very much the central character instead of the whole family really being main characters. But because of Martha's familial relationships, that's like the best genre description I can give you is that, um, I think this is really going to be billed for fans of Eleanor Ollifont and, and that is absolutely true, but it also just is deeply about a family.

Like martha's relationship with her husband, with her sister, with her mom, with her dad, the relationship she has with her dad is really sweet and heart-wrenching, and then weirdly this relationship she has with her aunt, her aunt's name is Winsome, which I found to be delightful. And Winsome kind of holds the family together in a way that you're not really expecting.

And so I just fell in love with these people. Yes. I fell in love with Martha, but I also just fell in love with the way she interacts with the world. And the way she interacts with the world is not always healthy or good. And she is trying to figure out where she belongs and where [00:18:00] she fits and what she wants. Some of what she uncovers and discovers about herself is gut wrenching. And some of what she discovers and uncovers will make you laugh out loud. Like I teared up and died laughing the entire time I was reading this book. I just thought it was so, Hmm.

I'm trying to think of the word, truly the publisher utilizing that Fleabag reference was so spot on because yes, at face value what I like about Fleabag is this relationship between Fleabag and the priest. I like the kind of romantic tension there, but really what I love about Fleabag is what fleabag has to say or discovers about faith, relationship, haircuts, like all these things.

And that is what is so great about Sorrow and Bliss. So I hesitate to even say it's dysfunctional family lit or it's quirky character lit you know, like, yeah, [00:19:00] like Eleanor Oliphant or Where'd you go Bernadette or something like that. I do think it will appeal to readers of those books, but there is so much happening here that I feel like I can't quite articulate or put my finger on.

I just love this book. It's my first five-star book of the year. I.,I just loved it. And I, again read it kind of over the span of several days and I was sad to see it end because I really liked these people and I wanted the best. I think that's what it was. I wanted the absolute best for Martha.

And you could just see her trying so hard and sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing and not quite knowing who she is. And then, and then figuring out who she is and, and yeah, or some revelations that she makes under the help of therapist under the guidance of her parents and the, you can just feel the wheels turning in Martha's brain and you're there, there for all of it.

And I, I just loved it. I love that, that look at this in depth, look at a character. I really loved. So. That book is called [00:20:00] *Sorrow & Bliss*. It is by Meg Mason. It comes out, oh my gosh, I want to be able to tell you on February 9th.

Okay. All right. I was reading those fiction books and after finishing Culture Warlords, I felt like it was a good time to dive into *Jesus and John Wayne*. This is a book by Kristen Kobes DuMez. I knew that I needed to read this. It was on my list of four non-fiction books to read in 2021. So if you're helping me keep track one and done, I checked number one off my list. Jesus and John Wayne was on my radar for many reasons.

This is a book we'd carried in the in the shop. I had heard murmurings about it on the internet by people I loved and trusted. So I finally decided to pick it up as part of my desire to read more nonfiction. It felt especially timely and I have so much to say about this book. It is a, essentially a 75 year [00:21:00] history of American evangelical Christianity, particularly white Christianity. I learned so much, I felt so much while reading this book, I felt sad. I felt angry. I felt distraught. Repentant, um, frustrated, concerned, all the things. I felt, all the things.

Here's what I really appreciated about this book at times. This book almost feels I do not want to say dry because this book is very interesting, but it is at its root, a history book. I learned so much about the evangelical Christian movement I had already learned and heard some things think too, thanks to podcasts. I had read or articles I had devoured this, gave this Enneagram five, a whole lot more information. Like. In depth [00:22:00] research and study. I can tell that Kristin DuMez did so much research and work.

You can tell it in her notes and her bibliography at the back of the book, there's a lot more and further reading that all of us could certainly be doing but she has done this work and encompassed all of it in this one book. So the book starts around the time of post-World war II, maybe entering the Vietnam era and then goes through, uh, the Trump years.

And again, through the lens of what is happening in evangelical, white evangelical Christianity. She talks a little bit about the history of the Black church, but this is mostly a look at white American Christianity. Again, many names I had heard of before James Dobson focus on the family. I'm trying to think so many other, so many other names.

We learn a little bit about the role Ronald Reagan played. We [00:23:00] learn about the role Nixon played. Like she really, I felt like I learned so much and it just was almost the perfect encapsulation of other learning I had done so podcasts listening. I'm thinking about the Netflix documentary Jordan and I watched about the family or the fellowship, just so many different things.

It felt like she covered it all in this book. So if you have not done a lot of your own research through podcasts or TV shows, I think this is like the perfect place to start because she covers so much of it. She covers purity culture, Josh Harris. She is doing a lot of work here for you. And you then in return, get to feel a lot of things.

I, I wish you could see my copy. It is so marked up. I think this would make a great book club or church group discussion because there is a lot to unpack preferably with other people. I basically forced this on Jordan. I feel like he would read it and then he, and I could discuss it together.

[00:24:00] For some background, you may be familiar. I am a Christian. I grew up with probably one foot in evangelical culture because I went to a Baptist school growing up and then one foot very much not in evangelical culture because I grew up Church of Christ, which was kind of this insular thing of its own.

And so not entirely evangelical, but very much, very much with one foot in that culture. Member of fellowship of Christian athletes, uh, like all like definitely raised my hand during an altar call. Like very familiar. A lot of that culture is very familiar to me. Um, while at the same time, some of it is very unfamiliar to me because it was not my particular church tradition.

So whether or not you are a Christian, I, I'm not sure if a non-Christian would appreciate or even need this book, but if you are a Christian or you grew up Christian, I do think and maybe you're looking for an explanation of why things appear to be the way that they are right now. I think this is so [00:25:00] helpful.

I kept looking at Jordan going, I wish I had read this four years ago or five years ago, because then I think I wouldn't have been so confused or hurt, or I think I would have already had a lot of the answers I've been looking for for the last four years. So again, I don't know that this book would be particularly helpful or of interest if you are not a Christian, it might be an anthropological study for you. If you were raised Christian or a currently a Christian practicing or not practicing, I think this is fascinating and important and very readable. I also, I listened to a good chunk of this and it was a good audio book as well.

So that has been one of my tactics for tackling nonfiction this year is to not be afraid to occasionally do the audio book. And so I did both. I listened to the audio book on Libra FM, and then I also read it because I very much needed to be writing things down. Like I marked up my copy quite a bit. I highly recommend this one, depending of course, on your [00:26:00] worldview and the questions you're currently maybe asking the answers you're seeking, but I really liked this. *Jesus and John Wayne* by Kristen Kobes DuMez.

Okay, next up in case you couldn't tell, I desperately needed something lighter. So immediately dove into by *Thwonk* by Joan Bauer . This is one of our, I want it that YA, uh, book club selections. This is our, for our young adult book club that we're embarking on for 2021. We are tackling young adult novels of the eighties and nineties, with what I hope is thoughtful nostalgia.

Thwonk is our first selection. It is case you can't tell by that weird autumn on a PSL I'm making that Thwonk is about a girl who meets Cupid. And basically she sees this cupid doll and it comes to life. It is silly and yet utterly delightful. I read this book for the first time as a teenager, Joan Bauer was one of my very favorite authors growing up.

I read her [00:27:00] books mostly in high school and absolutely adored every single one I ever read. Thwonk is a great fun kind of sort of romantic book for Valentine's day. Basically you have this young woman, AJ, who is this want to be photographer. She's a senior in high school and she falls in love so fast. And her parents are kind of warning her that she falls in love too quickly.

And she just dives kind of first into things and winds up, getting her heartbroken. She meets Cupid who quickly helps her to his regret, helps her kind of snag the dream guy and chaos ensues as you might have guessed. What I really like about this book and what I loved as an adult is AJ's relationship with her parents, particularly her dad, who is also a photographer and who is really trying to encourage AJ to go a different direction for college.

You get all that stuff that we all lived [00:28:00] through as seniors in high school, but it's made, I don't know, I just felt. It felt very nostalgic to me and very real to me, I know exactly what I felt like as a senior, trying to make major life decisions as an 18 year old. And so you very much feel that with AJ and her relationship with her dad in particular.

I also love that even though, yes, this is a book about Cupid and Valentine's day and a love story, that is really not what is happening here at all. AJ is learning a lot about herself and about growing up. And I think Joan Bauer handles it so very well. It's not what I would call your traditional romcom.

Although it does bring to mind movies like Can't Buy Me Love or something like that. Definitely has an eighties, nineties vibe. I think it was written in 1995. Very fun. I'm thrilled. We're going to get to talk about this in the first meeting of our book group. If you are late, that is okay. You do not have to be a part of this book club to still enjoy some of these books.

You'll be hearing me recap them throughout the year. [00:29:00] *Thwonk* by Joan Bauer is utterly delightful and would make for great February reading as well. So I finished Thwonk in one sitting and was not quite done with the romcom vibes. Like I still needed mor so I picked up *The Ex Talk* by Rachel Lynn Solomon.

This is a brand new book out a couple of weeks ago, set in Seattle very much, giving me Frasier Crane vibes. It is set at an NPR affiliate station. So if you have a heart for NPR and you love an Audie Cornish reference, we'll hear you go. It is a book about two kind of competing journalists. We've got Shea, a radio producer and Dominic, her younger master's degree, educated journalist, and he comes to his state to the station and turns Shea's world upside down.

They definitely compete kind of some Gilbert and Anne, but vibes and they really hate each other. It's just the reality of it. They [00:30:00] just really hate each other. And Shea comes up with this idea of a new show that could turn the station's luck around this NPR affiliate is not doing super well and they're racking their brains for something they can try.

She comes up with a show that would be almost like This American Life where it's both a radio show locally and also a podcast called The EX Talk where it's two exes talking about failed relationships. And of course they assign the role of hosts to both Shea and Dominic, despite the fact that they have never dated and they are not exes so the whole time, and this is why it makes a great romcom the whole time, we know something is going to fail here.

Something is going to go wrong here because they're lying. And so we go through the whole book, as a reader, know, almost with a sense of lightweight dread, knowing that this, this can't go well because they're deceiving the public. And there are some questionable, questionable media ethics at play here, but [00:31:00] it's still very fun and it's set in Seattle and in NPR and hate to love.

And at one point I, if I recall, there's even like, Oh no, we have to share a bed, which I have loved that trope since Who's The Boss. So there's a lot happening here. I will say, now, look, I read The Ec Talk more recently than The People We Meet On Vacation. This one feels a little more PG 13 and open door than The People We Meet On Vacation.

I could be wrong about that, cause it's been a minute, but I did blush my way through a couple of sections, like just a little few pages where I kind of skimmed. So. Uh, the rest of it was so delightful. It's just my regular kind of warning or proceed with caution if you are a closed door reader, but Shea and Dominic are so delightful that you're just kind of wrapped up in their story and I just skimmed through the parts that made me blush. So it is called *The Ex Talk* and it is very fun as the title certainly suggests.

So [00:32:00] those are the books I read in January. I am so curious what you might have read this month. I will post on the bookshelf Instagram so that you can comment there and kind of let us know so we can crowdsource reading ideas, but I had a really great reading month and I'm really excited that stuff with my reading intentions, I was able to accomplish in January.

I don't know what February holds, but it's nice to know I'm kind of ahead of the curve, my own curve that I set for my reading resolution. So I hope you guys are also tackling quietly and maybe tackling such an aggressive term, but I hope you are maybe meeting some of your own reading intentions and resolutions that you set at the start of the year.

from the front porch is a weekly podcast production of the bookshelf and independent bookstore in South Georgia. You can follow the bookshelf daily happenings on Instagram at bookshelf [00:33:00] T Ville. And all the books from today's episode can be purchased online through our store website, www dot bookshelf, thomasville.com.

If we'll transcript of today's episode can be found at, from the front porch podcast.com special thanks to Dylan and his team at studio D production for the transcript for sound and editing and for our theme music, which sets the perfect, warm, and friendly tone for our Thursday conversations this week, I'm reading at the edge of the height by Catherine Seligman.

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Just go to patrion.com forward slash. From the front porch, we are so grateful for you. And we look forward to meeting back here. [00:34:00] .