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MBS (00:00):

How far have you pushed yourself? I mean what's the most fragile edge of yourself that you've stumbled out towards? I mean if I'm thinking about me, well, there's the time I went caving, which is called potholing in the UK or spelunking, great word in North America, and kind of getting stuck right down in the darkness, kind of wedged between a narrow gap. That was an edge. Then there was a time I parachuted, just leaping out of a plane. That's definitely an edge, but really if I had to pick one time, it was the time I ran a marathon. I hadn't done any training. I was about 20 years at the time. I mean I came in last and I came in at the very limit of what I could've done and who I was. I mean I was [inaudible 00:00:46] running. It was so difficult. It was the edge, or at least I think it was my edge. I mean maybe, maybe I could've gone further and harder.



MBS ([01:01](#)):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them.

MBS ([01:11](#)):

Now Jenny Valentish has explored the edges, both the light and the dark, not only in her writing, but in the living of her life. She's the author of a new book, *Everything Harder Than Everyone Else*, but she's not just a book author.

Jenny ([01:27](#)):

I'm a journalist, which I think is one of the most privileged jobs you can possibly have. I mean you get to just hang out with the most interesting people and just learn whatever you want to learn really, and then share that information.

MBS ([01:40](#)):

So Jenny had an interesting start to journalism.

Jenny ([01:43](#)):

I started off by self-publishing a little magazine that kind of got me into trouble, but also got me on the radar and got me my first columns. I've always had a bit of a nose for getting into scrapes and then wondering, however, how could that have happened? But sometimes, you can capitalize on it. So I got some early jobs as the kind of cheeky, young upstart.

MBS ([02:07](#)):

How cheeky was Jenny? Well, the magazine she published was called *Slapper: The Groupies' Guide to Gropable Bands*. Hilarious. While she's often found herself in the musical genre of writing, she's also been about transcending genres and not getting fenced in.



Jenny ([02:24](#)):

I'm really interested in the idea of reinventing yourself, particularly after adversity like seizing the opportunity of a rock bottom or a necessary change to rebuild. So the first nonfiction book was about addiction and I talked about how quitting drugs, including alcohol, can be one of those rare transition opportunities we sometimes have thrust upon us like divorce or bankruptcy or redundancy or anything out of our control, but how that really shakes you out of your complacency. It's like a rip appears in your space time continuum, and you can choose to jump through it or not.

MBS ([03:11](#)):

Standing on the precipice of change, staring into the uncertainty of the future, excited, you're anxious, but actually, if you look over your shoulder, you can see the clues to what's ahead by what's in our past.

Jenny ([03:26](#)):

You have to really think back to what was really important to you when you were a kid. What made you happy? What lit you up inside? What were you good at? And often, they're things that have fallen by the wayside. Whether it was I was really active and I just wouldn't stop running, racing around everywhere or just creativity. So I think those are the things you not only hold onto, but really have to sort of encourage to take a greater role. And I mean the things you lose are the things that keep you awake at night really like the ... I mean shame I think is the main thing that holds us back in life and I think it's the main driver of addictive behaviors definitely.

MBS ([04:13](#)):

Shame's a big word. So I wanted to ask Jenny how she defined it.



Jenny ([04:17](#)):

Well, shame, I mean it's different to guilt, isn't it? 'Cause guilt is I've done something wrong and I really ought to be remorseful about it and fix that. Whereas shame is so much deeper and it's usually something that has even been put upon us.

MBS ([04:36](#)):

Yeah. It's like I am wrong, not I've done something wrong.

Jenny ([04:40](#)):

Yeah. But often shame is involved in things like, well, sexual abuse and rape, and things where you are not the person at fault, but it is a deeply shaming thing. And then often, you can sort of, then your behavior as you progress through life because you're very sort of hurt can be shameful, and so it's this accumulative kind of process. And I think to a degree, we all gather that, we all gather shame as we go, and it just holds us back so much. I think it's, as I said, I think it's the biggest driver of really self-destructive behavior.

MBS ([05:25](#)):

You sent through a little bio and the opening line I love, which is, and it shows you're a writer, I think it says, Jenny Valentish has been dancing around the void for decades, first in bars and then in boxing rings. What's the connection to shame and the void?

Jenny ([05:43](#)):

Mmm, well, perhaps death wish, perhaps the need to sort of heal yourself. I think the self-loathing that makes you want to curiously test how far you can push yourself in quite a negative way. But I mean with things like boxing and combat sports, I think that's a more productive way of exploring that, that's an active sport with rules and regulations and respect. So that's a more productive way than just getting wasted.



MBS ([06:31](#)):

It feels like I mean this conversation could go on for hours, but I'm curious to know what book you've chosen to read for us, Jenny?

Jenny ([06:40](#)):

I've actually chosen a very manly book, which might seem a bit odd at first. It's called the Hero's Body and it's by a journalist and author called William Giraldi, and it's about ... Well, it's in two parts, it's a memoir, but the first part is about when he was a young man and he was a competing bodybuilder, but it really taps into what I wanted to talk about, which is reinvention.

Jenny ([07:06](#)):

And particularly in my new book, *Everything Hard When Everyone Else*, I look at people who do these quite extreme pursuits. And one chapter is bodybuilding, and at first I had this perception of bodybuilders, like a lot of people might, which is, wow, that's a bit over the top, the kind of the rictus white grin and the posing pouch and all that kind of thing. The temptation is to just dismiss it as narcissism or body dysmorphia. But the more I actually looked into it and shadowed people, I thought, actually, this is a sport that attracts people who want to create some victory for themselves. Often, they've had a really chaotic upbringing. And if you think about it, bodybuilding is this pursuit, which is so regimented. It's all about sets and reps, and calculating macros and micros, and every aspect of your day.

MBS ([08:06](#)):

[Crosstalk 00:08:06] rules that you're talking about before.

Jenny ([08:07](#)):

Oh, yeah. So it brings order to chaos and it can also be really appealing to people like William who have had a real kind of loss of agency over their body when they were younger. So he had I think it was meningitis, but he had a really



serious illness. He was hospitalized for a long time. And he felt very weak and he felt sort of disempowered, I guess. And then when he was a little older, he found this sport, you literally use iron to gain a sense of strength and you can rebuild yourself however you want to so that's ... When we start with his book, he's training with his uncle for the first time.

MBS ([08:51](#)):

And did you just come across this book as part of the research for your new book or had it come into your life another way?

Jenny ([08:57](#)):

Yeah, I came across it for the research, and there was one thing he says, and I just thought, wow, it just floored me. He says, he said he wanted to ... He said, I want to make my own creation myth to renovate my pathetic vessel into a hero's body.

MBS ([09:19](#)):

Wow.

Jenny ([09:20](#)):

And I thought, yeah, that reminds me of one of my interviewees who said she needed to create victory for herself. I totally understand that.

MBS ([09:27](#)):

Right. I think you should jump in. This is going to be a great read. I'm sure of it.

Jenny ([09:34](#)):

My uncle and I didn't gab as we trained or in those brief rests between sets. This was battle, not frolic, but if we gabbed before and after, we gabbed of professional bodybuilders, those gods and heroes, self-made monuments, aberrations, the [Uber mentioned 00:00:09:53] among us, men superior to



the unmuscled rebel of the world, men with alien ways who puked and bled in search of Mount Olympus, men who shunned the wimpy Christian ideal that puts a pretty soul above the perfection of the physical form, men who were magnificent Greeks idolizing male beauty, believing that the bold exterior was an embodiment of the bold interior. Hercules, Achilles, Atlas, just look at them. Unholy [monks 00:10:28] of muscle, these men possess the brand of focus that has allowed ascetics to float free of their bodies, except that their focus necessitates a further filling of their bodies.

Jenny ([10:40](#)):

Bodies forged into outrageous art work, 3D anatomical charts startling enough to spook Andreas Vesalius, the father of anatomy. Part athlete, part artist, they have the training habits of the hell bent. Muscle tissue is their clay, their choreography. Triumphant Greco warriors whose no pain, no gain credo is Christic to its core, you must rove through hell to reach your heaven.

Jenny ([11:12](#)):

Every professional bodybuilder becomes a nutritionist and chemist, a ritualist and rebel. Masters of nature, they achieve their own apotheosis. To exist in that world of extremity is to leave the rest of us behind almost completely. Remember how Ovid begins his metamorphosis. My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind. Waiting in the checkout line at the supermarket, you've noticed them on magazine covers, Muscular Development and Flex. You've no doubt picked one from the rack and fanned through it while you waited to mock, I know, for the curiosity tickles a space in you much deeper than the nothingness of scorn.

Jenny ([11:59](#)):

The unexamined feeling is revulsion. You impulsively dislike the other worldly aesthetics of them, their suggestion of a heuristic tampering with nature, the vascularity, earthworms wriggling over striated muscle, and their terracotta



complexions, their scant workout garb, penile mounds in spandex, their stern faces, orgasmically determined, the imponderable mass of them. Everything looks as if it's about to erupt. Peer more closely at that curious spot in you, just below the mocking and scorn, and see if there isn't a dribble of respect for the discipline, the religious training and dieting habits required to obtain that eurhythmic muscle, the harmony of the whole neck to ankle machine.

Jenny ([12:52](#)):

When you're looking at the best pro bodybuilders in the world, you're looking at a balance of form only a handful of human beings will ever achieve. Peek at the world champion, Phil Heath and see how the linguistics of his body are closer to a poet's than an athlete's. No one, it's true, is born with those aesthetics and that's why you must think it freakish and wrong. But art isn't born either. Art is built. In his absurdist novel, *Body*, the inimitable Harry Crews christens bodybuilders the mysterious others, and the mad imaginings of a mad artist. Start thinking of these men as part artist, part athlete, and not as drug-stuffed showboats and you might start to feel a subduing of that scorn.

Jenny ([13:44](#)):

How poetic is that?

MBS ([13:46](#)):

Oh, he's a great writer. He's the man who ... Well, he's quoting Ovid so he's a man who likes literature and he likes literature. He's a very vivid writer.

Jenny ([13:56](#)):

Yes, he is.

MBS ([13:59](#)):

I've got a ton of questions about this, Jenny, but I'm just curious to know what is it about this passage that particularly struck a chord for you?





Jenny ([14:07](#)):

Well, I mean I would say it's deliberately over the top and deliberately kind of triumphant in its tone, almost to the point of being obnoxious. But it's making the point that there is this kind of internal noble quest. There's this very profound thing that is powering these people to push themselves to this degree. And it does make you question well, what is it then? What lies beneath? What is it that is driving them? And that's what fascinates me.

MBS ([14:45](#)):

We've talked about the rules, and when you hear this, your opening sentences are about this kind of waging a war on the kind of the weaker, imperfect body. Is there a place for joy in reinvention or is it all about discipline and endurance and rules and regulation?

Jenny ([15:13](#)):

Yeah, it's funny because I have been on my own kind of quest, not as a bodybuilder, but as a fighter in Muay Thai, which is Thai kickboxing. And so by necessity, I've got stronger and stronger, and that feeling of power and self-reliance. It is actually a really joyful experience. I mean apart from anything else, it floods you after a 90-minute session with these chemicals that just put you on a real feel-good high. So yes, there is a joy, but having said that, quite a few of the people I interviewed for this book had a curious relationship with their body, like quite a dispassionate relationship. Almost like in the past perhaps ...

Jenny ([16:05](#)):

I tell you something as a little side note is quite common with bodybuilders, but of course, not across the board, something that is quite common is sexual abuse. So if you think about the fact that in the past, your body has been something that maybe you've tried to hammer into the ground with addiction or maybe you've tried to ... you've had an eating disorder to make yourself



appear smaller or, conversely, bigger to escape the gaze. By the time you've found the sport that uses your body in a different way, you still might have quite an odd relationship with it.

Jenny ([16:49](#)):

So the women I interviewed for my book, the female bodybuilders, coincidentally, as I shadowed them and found out more about them, they've both been sexually abused and I've found there's some really famous ones, too, like male bodybuilders who've had this past and it is just quite common, but it meant that they almost had the sense of wanting to reclaim their body like you work for me now.

Jenny ([17:16](#)):

And so when you compete, you have all these different coaches, you have dieticians and you have your strength coaches, and you're almost like a prize bull, you're almost like best in show.

MBS ([17:29](#)):

Right.

Jenny ([17:30](#)):

I mean the way that you and your coaches will talk about your body, it's all about-

MBS ([17:35](#)):

Maybe like outsourcing it to-

Jenny ([17:37](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.



MBS ([17:37](#)):

And objectifying it, so it's not part of you. It's a third point experiment that you and others are working on.

Jenny ([17:45](#)):

Exactly. Yeah, yeah. And they talk about carb loading and [morsel cutting 00:17:49], but almost as though you are talking about this inanimate object. So on the one hand, you've created this machine, like this victorious machine to make yourself feel invincible. But on the other hand, it's something that maybe there's a little bit of dissociation from.

MBS ([18:07](#)):

Do you find for you, Jenny, there's a place you can reach of satisfaction or are you always on a quest?

Jenny ([18:18](#)):

Oh, always, always on a quest. Everybody I interviewed for the book, I mean I call them natural born leg jigglers, but ...

MBS ([18:25](#)):

My goodness, I'm a leg juggler.

Jenny ([18:26](#)):

Yeah, jiggling right now. They're also goal-oriented, which on the one hand, that's great. It motivates you to do things and achieve things. But the paradox of being very goal oriented is goals have disappointment built into them 'cause you either achieve them and then, you're bereft and need a replacement or you don't, and then you're disappointed and berating yourself. So again, in the spirit of balance, you need to be ...



Jenny ([19:02](#)):

I was listening to this podcast with Professor Kieran Setiya. That's S-E-

MBS ([19:09](#)):

Oh.

Jenny ([19:09](#)):

Do you know who I mean?

MBS ([19:09](#)):

Yeah, I do. He's just said yes to coming on as a guest of the show.

Jenny ([19:12](#)):

Perfect.

MBS ([19:12](#)):

I think because I saw him quoted in The Guardian article that you wrote, No goals: why is it so hard to do something for enjoyment's sake, which I'd encourage people to Google that and see Jenny's writing in The Guardian as well. And I thought that the guy sounds really interesting. So I invited him onto the show. So he'll be a guest sometime in the future.

Jenny ([19:34](#)):

This will be a little plug then. So yeah, he wrote this book called *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*, but I heard him on a podcast talking about telic activities and atelic activities. And telic means goal-oriented, there's an end point, perhaps there's a bit of fanfare as well. It could be a race, it could be whatever, a book, whatever. Whereas atelic activities are things you do purely for enjoyment's sake, without fanfare, there's no end point. And maybe these are a simplistic way of looking at things that we do. But I looked at my life and I thought I really don't have anything that I do for enjoyment's sake, apart from



maybe take a stroll here and there. And I just can't bear to do anything without there being a reason and a purpose and say look what I did. Unfortunately, I'm one of those people who is a bit, you can't swim north if nobody saw it so I guess ... I can't remember what the question was actually, but-

MBS ([20:39](#)):

I can't remember either.

Jenny ([20:39](#)):

So good, I've done something just for what the atelic sake.

MBS ([20:45](#)):

Well, I think the question originally was is it always a quest or can you actually find a moment of satisfaction?

Jenny ([20:52](#)):

No.

MBS ([20:53](#)):

And what does satisfaction look like? Or is it just an endless running till you're dead?

Jenny ([20:59](#)):

Yes. I mean, I think satisfaction is the process, isn't it? As they say, it's the journey, not the destination. So writing this book, for instance, I really, really enjoyed every aspect of it. And at the same time, I was on this quest to have an amateur fight and I enjoyed all the training. And then as it happens, both the fight and handing the book in, like the week he went to the printer, happened the same week. And I was like, oh, this is going to be a crash because I've achieved both things. And you tie yourself to goals as well, you really tie your identity to them and you come to embody them. So once they're done, I have a



bit of an identity crisis, like well, who am I now? If I'm not Jenny, who does the thing?

MBS ([21:45](#)):

Yeah, which is [crosstalk 00:21:46].

Jenny ([21:46](#)):

So now I've got to find another thing.

MBS ([21:47](#)):

I also saw a brief article with Alex [Honnold 00:21:52] I think his name is, the guy who free soloed up that enormous mountain.

Jenny ([21:56](#)):

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MBS ([21:57](#)):

And he just said, "I'm at a loose end because that is the peak of my life."

Jenny ([22:03](#)):

Yes. Yeah.

MBS ([22:04](#)):

Nothing I do now can be better than that because it was the first and it was extraordinary, and it was a five-year quest to get it done or longer perhaps. And he is casting around going, "Look, I'm not quite sure what to do now."

Jenny ([22:21](#)):

When you hit the ceiling, yeah. I mean I interviewed a woman called Kayla Harrison, who got a gold at the Olympics twice for judo. And then, she just said she spiraled into what she calls Olympic depression, which is like, well, where do



you go from here? So she just changed the sport. And she was like, "I'll just do it for enjoyment," and then she nailed that sport. So she's kind of like at the top of that field as well so yeah, so but she was ...

Jenny ([22:52](#)):

A big thing with sports psychology at the moment, and sports psychology is like psychology on steroids, is the importance of broadening your sense of who you are so you are not just the thing that you do. So if you look at athletes' social media bios now, quite often I've noticed it won't just say their sport. It will say things like advocate and this and that, and just a whole list of things that they are, public speaker, that kind of thing.

MBS ([23:24](#)):

Yeah, yeah. As a way of saying I'm more to just my performance on a field-

Jenny ([23:28](#)):

Yeah, I think they've been told, I think I've been trained to do that, encouraged because otherwise, the drop, the crash when you are injured or you have to retire is just phenomenal.

MBS ([23:40](#)):

Well, let me ask you about, I mean your first amateur fight and the book in the same week, that's an intense week. How do you you celebrate?

Jenny ([24:00](#)):

After the fights, I mean I can't even describe the high. It's just manic. So you just talk rubbish and babble, and then you have a big crash, but generally speaking, there isn't really a pause to celebrate.



MBS ([24:25](#)):

That's what I'm kind of curious about because I'm not that great at celebrating moments. I've crossed the finish line. I'm like, yeah, but is that the finish line? What's the real finish line? Then I'm trying to learn how to stop and just notice the moment and celebrate the moment. And I'm wondering if you've learned anything along the way about how to do that?

Jenny ([24:47](#)):

No, especially I'm a person who's very novelty driven. So it's not my first book and so, there should've been a pause, like, okay, the manuscript's gone to the publisher, go out, celebrate with your friends, have champagne. I didn't do that. It was all kind of like yeah, done that before. So you're kind of thinking, okay, what next, what next, what next? But that is its own enjoyment so maybe that is a celebration.

MBS ([25:18](#)):

And what have you learned around managing the crash? Because I have that as well. So I'm asking for a friend, meaning I'm asking for myself. It's like have you got any wisdom you can share around how best to manage that hard moment where you're like, well, I've been working on that for three years and I'm over it now. So now what am I doing?

Jenny ([25:44](#)):

I was talking to some endurance athletes about this and because they can spend like a year planning a race, sometimes even designing their own. And then afterwards, can slump into depression and binge eating and this and that. And the only thing that gets them out of it is organizing the next one. Despite what I know, which is that that's not the best idea, that is my way forward, but I'm a bit more forgiving of myself now. So I know, for instance, like after the last book came out, I was pitching ideas so frantically at my agent and some of them were ridiculous. There's this famous Steve Coogan, Alan Partridge sketch





where he's pitching ideas to the head of the BBC and he's not impressed and just ... And Steve just gets more and more frantic, and the ideas getting more and more out there. So last time I was kind of doing that, and this time, I-

MBS ([26:38](#)):

Like you're Steve Coogan-

Jenny ([26:40](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([26:40](#)):

Nobody wants to go there.

Jenny ([26:42](#)):

So this time, I've said to myself, just have a period where you just let things percolate. There's no rush. You've done this before and you know that it could actually take a couple of years before an idea goes click and slots into place. So just don't panic. Don't panic.

MBS ([27:01](#)):

Actually, that's great. Don't panic.

Jenny ([27:04](#)):

Don't panic.

MBS ([27:06](#)):

I think I've probably, similar, having gone through various, climbed assorted mountains or maybe small hills, whatever, and gone, okay, now what? I've had enough people around me going, oh, so the way you're feeling now is the way you felt every other time after something like that. So this is just how you do it. And I'm like, oh yeah, I've got to keep remembering that this is just how I do it.



Jenny ([27:32](#)):

Yes, I think so.

MBS ([27:34](#)):

And it's part of the process, not a broken part of the process. It's just part of the process.

Jenny ([27:39](#)):

Yeah. You can think of it as just cycles. Okay, this is a cycle where things recede a bit and you just sort of just keep talking about the last project and coasting on that a bit, if you want, without just frantically ... I think probably everyone asks what your next thing's going to be.

MBS ([27:58](#)):

Well, how do you uncover what's next?

Jenny ([28:03](#)):

Well, usually, there's a spark from the last project, which I think wow, I need to look into that more. So, I mean I've got about four ideas that aren't just ... they're just not quite right, but they're all related to things I've learned in the last book, but I'm so into the whole kind of immersion journalism and journalist's science experiment kind of idea that it will definitely involve some kind of dabbing a toe in, whatever it is.

MBS ([28:37](#)):

Jenny, it's been a wonderful conversation. The question I love to ask at the end of all these conversations is this, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?



Jenny ([28:48](#)):

Yeah, you do ask that. So I should've thought of this. Well, one thing I noticed a lot with people that I interviewed that I just thought was so interesting was a lot of them were pressure testing themselves. So it's almost like the kind of concept of a vaccine. You have a small dose of something to protect you in the future. I felt like a lot of people, when I interviewed people who were doing like bare knuckle boxing and very violent death match wrestling and stuff, they were always wanting to test that they were strong enough. And it was people who'd had some reason to be fearful in the past. And I realized, well, that's kind of like what Freud would've called ... Well, it was basically called traumatic reenactment, but he called it repetition compulsion, but I thought, well, maybe that's true of a lot of athletes and a lot of us in general, we're always ... People who push themselves are actually just checking, just checking I can still handle the things that life has to throw at me.

MBS ([30:00](#)):

I've been thinking about where the edge is a lot over the last year or so. I mean on my desk is a bit of paper and there's a couple of lines on it, the final lines from a Rilke poem, a poem called The Man Watching. And the lines are this, "Winning does not tempt him. His growth is to be the deeply defeated by ever greater things."

MBS ([30:27](#)):

That statement is really the spiritual heart, the muse of my new book, [inaudible 00:30:31] coming out in January, 2022, by the way. But this conversation with Jenny has got me thinking about what's driving us to the edges, to be willing to take on the things that are scary and daunting and impossible and harder than everybody else? Are we running away from something or are we moving towards something essential? Is this a quest that enriches our life? I mean what's the price we might be paying for a relentless ambition and restlessness? Am I trying to increase control or are we surrendering to something greater than



ourselves? I mean these are big questions. I don't have the answers to these, but I feel like these are the questions to ask you, to ask me, ask ourselves as we claim our own ambitions.

MBS ([31:20](#)):

If you're interested in Jenny's work, you can find her on Twitter [@jennyvalentish](#) or on Instagram [@jennyvalentish\\_public](#) and her website, [jennyvalentish.com](#) as well. Thanks, of course, for listening. It is always delightful to have delightful people like you listen to the episodes. Three things you can do if you want. One is give the podcast a review on your podcast app. I always love that. I'm grateful for it. Secondly, recommend an episode to a friend of yours. It is a slow, hard growth. It's an edge to grow an audience, listen to a podcast, and really word of mouth is the best way. So if this episode has struck a chord for you, is there somebody in your life you'd like to recommend it to? And thirdly, if you want a little more, we have a free membership site called The Duke Humfrey's, named after my favorite library at Oxford. That's where you can find downloads. You can find transcripts of all the podcasts. You can find some unreleased episodes, totally free. You'll find that at [mbs.works](#) and find the podcast page and it will be there. Thanks for listening. You're awesome and you're doing great.