

Alexandra Petri:

During the Amy Coney Barrett hearings, I had the same thought. I'm like, am I being oppressed by virtue of not being a Supreme Court justice? I didn't realize this was an oppression that we were all suffering. Who knew?

Intro:

It's an old joke, but when an ardent man argues against two beautiful ladies like this, they're going to have the last word.

Intro:

She spoke, not elegantly, but with unmistakable clarity. She said, "I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks."

Melissa Murray:

Welcome back. This is a very special episode of Strict Scrutiny. We're your hosts. I'm Melissa Murray.

Leah Litman:

And I'm Leah Litman.

Melissa Murray:

This episode, we have something different in store for you. As a special holiday treat, a stocking stuffer if you will, we have as our guest the brilliant satirist and humorist Alexandra Petri, columnist at the Washington Post and author of *Nothing is Wrong and Here is Why*, a collection of essays that covers the surreality of the Trump administration.

Melissa Murray:

So welcome to the podcast, Alexandra.

Alexandra Petri:

Thank you for having me.

Melissa Murray:

We want you to tell us, to show us really, in a kind of Scrooge-like way how we can shed these tendencies, and actually laugh when we want to cry. So how is it that we can cover the surreal and laugh about the horrible as this administration winds down? And we have lots to ask you, but the first thing, it's just a basic thing. How do you do what you do? First, if you could tell us how you got into doing what you do, that would be really informative because as far as I can tell, every time I've sent a resume to the Washington Post, I've gotten no responses. So how did you land this incredible gig?

Alexandra Petri:

Well, I lucked out actually. I started by applying to intern at the Post a decade ago, literally over a decade, which is wild. I'm like the rare millennial who has only had one job for the past 10 years, which is just strange and alarming. No, so I applied to intern for the opinion section, and I wound up being the editorial intern, which is nifty because then you get to write all the editorials ... Not all of them, but

some of them, about topics like should we put a stop sign at this intersection, and what's going on with the internet and so forth. A broad range of topics, stops signs and the internet.

Alexandra Petri:

But I kept being like "I would like to write things with jokes in them under my own name." Ever so often I would do that, and they would let me. And then, gradually, I just refused to leave basically. They just continued not firing me, and continued letting me work, and suddenly I had a column. It's so sad because I get all these lovely emails-

Melissa Murray:

That's basically how tenure works in the [crosstalk 00:03:04]-

Alexandra Petri:

No, I get all these lovely emails from high school students, college students. "Give me career advice." I'm like, I wish I could. I know this is not how this usually happens. I'm very sorry.

Melissa Murray:

There's a lesson there. Be persistent, be authentic. You wanted to be your authentic self, and you were, and they liked it, and you just refused to leave. I think that's a model for lots of people.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, you've got to chain yourself to the door, and see what happens.

Melissa Murray:

I think it could've worked for some chiefs of staff at the White House if they just tried it. Could've worked.

Melissa Murray:

All right. So we have just general questions about this entire four years, where you've been unbelievably productive. You have actually been the Beyonce of newspaper writing, because you've taken the incredible lemons of this administration, and you've made fantastic lemonade out of it. So how did you do this?

Alexandra Petri:

Wow. I think we should stop after that compliment because it's all going to be downhill from ... Oh, man.

Melissa Murray:

We're starting it here. It's the Petri hive.

Alexandra Petri:

Oh, man.

Melissa Murray:

We're doing it. Okay. How did you do this?

Alexandra Petri:

I feel like the bonus and the downside of having a job where you have to pay attention to the news is, on the one hand, I'm the sort of person who would constantly be staring at a newspaper anyway, but since I'm like, well, it's my job to obsess over what's going on, I at least have a place where I can go and put the screams. I can just type them out, and they'll become a column. So it was nice to feel like I'm obliged to scream into the void. That's my job. That's what I have to do.

Alexandra Petri:

So the biggest problem for the past four years wasn't, oh, no, what am I going to write about today? It was like, how am I going to possibly write about the hundreds of things that are going on today, all of which are alarming, none of which are particularly funny, and plenty of which are deeply absurd? Because the things that you would normally write about back ...

Leah Litman:

In the before times?

Alexandra Petri:

In the before times when there was that whole week of tan suit news cycle, and everybody was like, "What about this tan suit?"

Melissa Murray:

I believe I call that the audacity of taupe. That...

Alexandra Petri:

That's great.

Melissa Murray:

Thank you.

Melissa Murray:

I feel so seen.

Leah Litman:

So we thought we would use your book, *Nothing is Wrong and Here is Why*, which is the collection of essays about the Trump administration to shine a light on how you can laugh about the truly terrible, horrible, no good, very bad things that are happening, and do so in a way that makes people appreciate exactly why they are no good, very bad and terrible.

Leah Litman:

So if you don't mind, I'm just going to run through some of my favorite essays from the book, and then watch you react uncomfortably as I pay you some compliments.

Alexandra Petri:

Love it. This is great.

Leah Litman:

So one of the essays that fell into this bucket for me was the Why Won't This Career Die piece, which isn't about the Trump administration, but is about #MeToo and the reemergence of men accused of misconduct. So you write, "She felt bad for the career. It was not the career's fault, the things the man had done. The career had been a source of joy." And it's just so brilliantly satirizes the idea that there is this disconnect and space between the person who did these bad things and their career.

Leah Litman:

And it also pokes at how women are described as killing the man's career when the career never dies, and I just love this because we have talked on this show about some judges who were accused of misconduct, and about how women who accuse them kill their careers and whatnot. And most recently, one of those men who resigned from the federal judiciary after being accused of misconduct, Judge Kozinski, had his writing featured in a book by another judge as the epitome of good legal writing, and is still featured at law firm events, and it's just wild to see this personification and anthropomorphization of these men's careers. And you just so perfectly capture so much of the insanity of this #MeToo process and the idea that #MeToo has gone too far.

Alexandra Petri:

I think you really hit on the fact that people tend to anthropomorphize these careers, where they're just always like, "But what about his career?" As though there's this poor, maybe furry creature somehow weak and vulnerable that this woman is going and really doing damage to. And they're like, "It's being given equal weight." She doesn't have the career that's distinct from herself. She gets to be a person that's like, no ... So it's like, what about her career? It's always like, "She's just doing this to advance herself," which is bizarre also.

Alexandra Petri:

Getting to deal with it as the horror formula as it was, because I feel like the center of a lot of horror stories and movies is this idea that you're in a reality where nobody believes what you're seeing. You're seeing something that nobody else is seeing, and it feels like that continual "am I detached from reality" when you're looking at a lot of this Me Too stuff when people are sitting there saying, "What about his career?" Like, "Oh, what a promising young man." He's like 53, and you're like this is not a promising young man. Also, he harmed someone with his actions. I think there should be some consequences for that.

Alexandra Petri:

I enjoyed getting to try to use that trope to explain why I thought that it was bad.

Leah Litman:

That is such a wonderful parallel between the idea of the horror movie, and you can't believe what is happening, and you look around at your friends, and you're like, is that insane? I think that's insane, right?

Melissa Murray:

Yeah.

Leah Litman:

Yeah.

Melissa Murray:

That's why we had to start this podcast is we were looking around, we're like this is insane, but everyone else is like, "It's fine." And then we got to the podcast, and we're like, okay, good, you think it's insane, too.

Leah Litman:

Right.

Alexandra Petri:

That's the best feeling in the world is making eye contact with somebody else and being like, oh, you're also seeing this. I'm not the only one seeing this. Yeah.

Melissa Murray:

Yeah. That's a whole faculty meeting right there. That's a faculty meeting.

Melissa Murray:

One of my favorite essays is ... This is perhaps the best title ever an essayist could offer, but Keep Scott Pruitt Moist is my particular favorite. And so I remember this when there was all this news coverage. It was, I guess, right at the beginning of the Trump administration when he, as you say in the book, nominated all the best people to be in his cabinet, and among them was Scott Pruitt, who was nominated to head the Environmental Protection Agency, and it came out that he was getting his staff to basically drive him around DC to the Ritz Carlton to collect bottles of lotion from the hotel. It was bananas. It was so mundane and trivial, but yet spoke volumes. And having now with four years of distance, it was almost like prescient. The lotion was the least of our worries, but yet encapsulated everything. The staffers on the hunt for the expensive lotion to keep Scott Pruitt moisturized.

Alexandra Petri:

No, I agree. I feel like the sad thing about that is two fold. A, that that was the minor scandal, but it was a scandal that weird is the third or fourth story. It's like he's driving around to have his staffers get him moisturizing lotion.

Melissa Murray:

Little lotions.

Alexandra Petri:

It was like, how good is that lotion even? I don't know. I feel like it's in a bottle and it smells nice. I don't know.

Melissa Murray:

It's so inefficient. Just order yourself a vat of cocoa butter if moisturizing is the issue. But it's this lotion. It's very specific that he wants this lotion.

Alexandra Petri:

No, exactly. It's like, clearly, moisturization is not first and foremost on his mind. So I'm like, I know what it is. He's a crustacean.

Alexandra Petri:

But the funny thing when I'm working on it, I'm like this will be good for whenever. This can go whenever. And then the day that, suddenly, he was quitting, and I'm like, oh my gosh, I've got to ... So literally either the day that he quit was when I posted it, or right after he quit it posted.

Melissa Murray:

That was the thing about this administration. You had to jump on it while you could.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah. You could've gone on vacation and missed Scaramucci's entire tenure.

Leah Litman:

Yeah. But also I kind of yearn for the days when the scandals of this administration were federal officials driving around, searching for Ritz Carlton moisturizer rather than trying to overturn an election. It's kind of making me nostalgic a little bit.

Melissa Murray:

But it was a slow build. It was a slow build, and you can see the through-line from the lotion to the election.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, no, it's like the whole boiling a frog thing, where it's like if we've accepted moisturizing Scott Pruitt, we can get from there to the Four Seasons Total Landscaping.

Leah Litman:

Right.

Melissa Murray:

Yeah.

Leah Litman:

We've actually tried to cover the election-related litigation that we were just alluding to, and do so in a lighthearted way because it is so absurd. And so we did dramatic readings of some of the most insane portions of these legal filings. Because it's funny, but also these people are trying to pull off a coup, and they would do it if they could. And you actually had a recent essay about this that was very much in line

with the book's Nothing is Wrong and Here is Why, where you say the people trying to overturn the election are very bad at it, and that's a reason why we can not worry.

Alexandra Petri:

It's difficult because if this were Veep, because everyone is always likening it to Veep, because it's like, well, in Veep, it's something you have to watch on your TV, and turn it off, and no one's affected by it, which is a thrilling feeling when you're watching something in government go terribly wrong because, in this case, it's like, oh, you're trying to overturn the election. Literally the votes of millions upon millions of people. And they're very bad at it. It's funny to watch, but as usual with the bubbling horror, it's like "but you can't drop that. It's got my family in it."

Alexandra Petri:

And so it's like it's hilarious but it's also deeply unfunny, because he's not thinking this is a hilarious joke that I'm playing that will clearly have no consequences. He's hoping it'll work.

Leah Litman:

Yeah.

Alexandra Petri:

Hoping something will happen.

Leah Litman:

And if it's a joke, all of the state level officials pitching this litigation, and the federal officials supporting it, they're not in on the joke, I guess?

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, no, it's the whole thing where the bully was like, "Oh, no, it's joking. Can't you take a joke?" After you've been bullied within an inch of your life.

Leah Litman:

After you've just been punched in the face, and it's like, "That was a good one."

Melissa Murray:

Another theme in the book that I think comes out really well in many of the essays is gender and the difficulties of being a woman in spaces where you're not expected to be or historically you haven't been. You talk about, in one essay, playing the woman card, reaping the rewards of the woman card, and you say "it entitles you to a sizable discount on your earnings wherever you go," which obviously is not the case. And then you talk about the way women are in particular circumstances, so famous quotes. Like you take these very famous quotes that we all should understand, and then you play them out again as if a woman were saying them. So, for example, "give me liberty or give me death," you say, "Dave, if I could, I just really feel like if we had liberty, it would be terrific. And the alternative would be awful, you know? It just strikes me that we should probably have liberty." And that's how the woman would say it.

Melissa Murray:

And these are dead on. I was just in a Zoom workshop with some young women academics, and almost every intervention was prefaced with, "I'm not an expert in this, but I thought ..." Like, "This may sound crazy, but I thought ..." And, finally, I put in the chat to one of them please stop discrediting yourself. You're either inviting people to discredit you, or just calling attention to something that no one would have identified to begin with. But what's going on here, and why do women do this? Do you see this in your own work? Is this something you're responding to in the newsroom, or just generally in society, the discrediting of women's thoughts? And women internalizing that, too.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, I think it's complicated because part of it is that when you start opening your mouth in a room, you're trying to achieve something, which is ideally the people in the room will listen to you. And so I don't think it's like, oh, women are bad and foolish for talking in this way, and they're undervaluing themselves. To a degree, it is that, because that's what it sounds like coming out of your mouth, but it's also they've realized that if they say things like they know stuff, then people get weirded out by that. Like if the response that they've gotten when they've been more assertive, I think, that leads people to say stuff ...

Alexandra Petri:

One of the biggest arguments my husband and I will have, just not really arguing but pointing out, is he'll just say something, he'll be like "That song is bad," and I'll be like, "I don't like that song." And that's the way we say exactly the same thought, but society is like "Your opinions are true" versus "That's what you think. Isn't that nice?" The way you present what you think changes ...

Alexandra Petri:

It's almost like I wonder if we wouldn't be better off if more men were like, "Maybe, Debra, I've got a thought, but I'm not actually an expert on this," and if everybody were just very clear about what are their thoughts and what are their true facts to which their scaffolding those thoughts. But it would also lead to a certain amount of inefficiency, so I feel like there's a middle ground to be located somewhere in there.

Leah Litman:

Yeah. I think that's right, and along the lines of women to get things done when they are talking, some of that is in reaction to a perceived felt need to make themselves seem less threatening to men, and so they can't couch their statements in terms of truth, fact, declarations. Because, otherwise, they would be perceived as bitchy, or aggressive, or whatever the term would be.

Melissa Murray:

This is the perennial problem, I think, that women of color experience. And Simone Sanders had this tweet yesterday when she noted that when she comes into the room with a low cut top, and she's curvy, and she's got her nails done, and she's wearing makeup, people don't expect her to be able to offer really trenchant analysis of these ideas. And she was like, "These nails are bedazzled, but my brain is not. This is all completely together."

Melissa Murray:



And so many women responded to this, and were like, "Yes." I think we have that in academia, too, Leah. The whole idea that if you like fashion, if you like clothing, you're somehow frivolous or not serious about ideas. In any event, it's such an interesting delicate balance that you have to thread between being likable on the one hand, being credible on the other, but not too credible because then you're unlikable. And you really capture it in that essay, where it's just like these are things women do. Give me liberty? Well, is liberty important? I think liberty would be good. What do you think about the liberty? [crosstalk 00:18:13]

Alexandra Petri:

There was a study once that said when people are trying to present themselves as less threatening, they try to really crank down the slider on their intelligence. And so I feel like it can also be part of that. I feel like maybe it's partially that people are trying to seem more approachable and less threatening. So it's weird how people calibrate themselves on the slider. It's like people have seen Queen's Gambit, speaking of, because I feel like the most enjoyable escapist element of that, other than the point where all of her ex-boyfriends got in a room together and were like, "Let's figure out how to do chess together" just amicably, which is like a dream, was just that she got to be in the world, and people were like, "Oh, yes. You're a lady? That's cool." But she could fashion. I'm just like, wow, this is the bizarro 60s I never knew I wanted.

Alexandra Petri:

And I think part of it also ... Somebody was saying the author was a man, and he never realized all the problems you would actually encounter in these scenarios, and so he just wrote what turned out to be an escapist fantasy. I'm like, honestly, maybe not wrong.

Melissa Murray:

Yeah. It was sort of Mad Men but without Don Draper trying to sleep with everyone and with chess.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, and being overwhelmed by her skill, and "Yeah, let's help get you ahead, and I will come and read chess books to you, and not make sexual advances unless you'd like me to." It's like, all right. Little things like that that I guess this author just took for granted.

Leah Litman:

So another theme in the book is how to cover reality when reality is surreal. So how do you satirize what is happening around you when that already feels insane? So one of those essays to me was actually about the Supreme Court, and specifically about the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, and the essay How Dare You Do This to Brett Kavanaugh. Which is about if Brett does not secure a lifetime appointment, this country will be in shambles. This is his birthright. Are you going to believe her, America, over him, America? This is oppression to be denied power over others, and part of what was so striking for me going back and reading this essay is that this idea that Brett Kavanaugh had been somehow egregiously wronged by airing the accusations of Dr. Blasey Ford actually came up as a justification that Republican senators used as a reason why they had to confirm Justice Amy Coney Barrett even while the election was underway and against Justice Ginsburg's wishes.

Leah Litman:

So, again, here, you are mocking what they are saying, but they're actually saying it. And it was just really wild for me to go back and revisit that essay for that reason.

Alexandra Petri:

It was funny because during the Amy Coney Barrett hearings, I had the same thought. I'm like, am I being oppressed by virtue of not being a Supreme Court Justice? I didn't realize this was an oppression that we were all suffering. Who knew?

Alexandra Petri:

But it is wild because yesterday's satire is today's genuine arguments being put forward in the course of a confirmation hearing, or on the Senate floor or whatnot. I think you see that also with a lot of the Bush era satire, with the Daily Show or the Colbert Report where it's like, oh, people are just saying these things now. You thought that maybe if you showed how if you heightened it to 11, it would just be completely absurd, it would shame people, and the answer is, no, they just decided to go for it.

Leah Litman:

Right. This is in some ways what we're saying about the Trump administration's response to the election, given that before the election occurred, President Trump was always saying "I'm not going to commit to a smooth transition of power. I won't accept the results of the election unless I win." And people were like, okay, but he doesn't actually mean that, and it was silly to worry about that. But then it turns out actually that was kind of true, and it's really wild to see that again just playing out before our eyes.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah. No, when people tell you they're not going to accept the results of the election, believe them.

Melissa Murray:

Can we go back to Brett Kavanaugh for another minute? There was another essay that was timed September 19th, 2018, although it does not mention Brett Kavanaugh by name, but it seems to be Kavanaugh adjacent in terms of timeline, and that was Some Interpersonal Verbs Conjugated by Gender. And so if I could do a dramatic reading for the listeners, because I thought this was both funny but also really poignant in its way, too. So this is the last part of the essay:

Melissa Murray:

"We cannot know what happened. She does not know what happened. He knows what happened. Nothing happens. Nothing happened. Something happened to her. He did nothing. This is how it always happens. This is how a thing he did becomes something that happened to her. This is how something he did becomes something that happens. This is how this keeps happening."

Melissa Murray:

I thought this was the most moving essay that captured the absurdity of the whole question who to believe, how did we talk about it. And then, of course, whether it's 10 years from now, 20 years from now, we're going to have this conversation again because this is how this keeps happening.

Alexandra Petri:

Words can be such a powerful tool for actually shedding light on what's happening, but they can equally work to disguise what's happening. And I think in the way we talk about Me Too and sexual assault, they are often used to obscure what happened because you get this very passive sentence construction in which people are able to hide all kinds of horrors, and you don't see the responsibility in the sentence being placed clearly on the active party there.

Alexandra Petri:

And so I thought it was as good a time as any to try to dive into the language, and be like let's at least make explicit what we're doing because sometimes if you can point out that there's a whole grammar for this, and we've just been talking around it in this very specific way, then at least people will get to see it the next time they do it, and it'll become less of a thing. I feel like there's other things that everyone always talks around, but enough people have started noticing that when you do the allusion, people are like, "Oh, wait a second. You're doing that thing again."

Alexandra Petri:

Remember a few years ago, maybe months ... I truly have no conception of time. It could be literally any point, but when everyone was always like, "Someone made a racially tinged remark." And it's like, what was in the remark? How tinged? I feel like people have gotten better at just being like, "That was a racist remark." It took some doing, and it still needs to take doing, but that particular evasive construction at least has gotten lampooned often.

Melissa Murray :

Well, probably because you wrote an essay about it.

Leah Litman:

Right.

Alexandra Petri:

No, not just me. Lots of people.

Leah Litman:

What to Call Racist Remarks Instead of Calling Them Racist Remarks, a very helpful field guide.

Melissa Murray:

Well, you gave a great list. "Racially tinged" was one of the options you could use for racist remarks when you don't want to actually call them racist remarks. You could also call them "very fine remarks," "heritage-loving remarks."

Leah Litman:

"Economically anxious remarks."

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah.

Leah Litman:

So one other essay that I wanted to highlight that's kind of at the intersection of the court, gender, and Justice Kavanaugh was also about the Kavanaugh hearing, but it was concerning a statement that Dr. Blasey Ford made, where she said, "I was wondering whether I would just be jumping in front of a train that was headed to where it was headed anyway, and that I would just be personally annihilated," and the essay was called It Was Very Difficult to Get the Train to Stop." And, here, the train is very, very urgent. It is moving a man's career forward, again gesturing at what we were talking about earlier. It's painful to watch a woman caught and turned in the gears of a man's progress, to watch the meeting for a name change into a thing that happened to her once.

Leah Litman:

And, again, this essay was also just interesting for me to revisit now, because now we are at a time where Justice Kavanaugh has become the median justice on the Supreme Court, and people just talk about him as the court's new median justice, and the person to whom you have to pitch your arguments if you want to have any reasonable prospect of success. And that's his story. It's become completely unmoored from what Dr. Blasey Ford experienced and still experience, and it's, again, just really wild to revisit what was a very significant event in many people's lives, including mine, just to see that testimony play out, and then now see Justice Kavanaugh on the court being treated as the court's new median justice.

Alexandra Petri:

And that was a very raw and emotional time for me as well, so I'm glad that we were both making eye contact, as it were, through the course of that. But, yeah, no, it is very strange. I think part of the advantage and disadvantage of writing daily is that you don't think how will the meaning of this have changed over the course of a few years? And so now, it's just like he has been able to get the meaning of his name to change to that median court justice, and he's able to keep going on, and how he's just a thing that is a fact. An unpleasant fact, but he's on the court, and you have to use the court. So it's a strange dynamic where things that shouldn't be the case are the case, but that's often a dynamic of the current administration, where you're just like, well, this is happening. The only way out is through, I guess.

Leah Litman:

Right. Like the train is truly not going to stop, and on the note of just making eye contact, on a personal note, your commentary was truly a lifesaver for me on this because at the time, I was visiting at another school on a Supreme Court litigation clinic, and the Blasey Ford hearings happened the week I started that job, and was giving an introduction to students about litigating at the Supreme Court, and trying to encourage them to pursue Supreme Court litigation. I just felt constantly like I was starting off on my back feet. I had no idea what to do, and so it was really wonderful to have your commentary at the time.

Alexandra Petri:

Aw, I appreciate that. Was it just a week? It felt like so much more than a week. It felt like, as usual, the dilation of time. But, yeah, I guess these watershed moments feel longer, and you have more memories clustered around them than you do for the days on which nothing happened.

Leah Litman:

Right.

Alexandra Petri:

Like what's usually happening,

Leah Litman:

Like pandemic time, I don't know. Days, weeks, months. I have no idea.

Melissa Murray:

It's all run together.

Leah Litman:

But I can remember discreet where I was, what I was thinking, what I was doing during that entire week of testimony.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah.

Melissa Murray:

Another theme in the book is crisis and how government officials respond to various crises, or don't respond, as the case might be. And there's one essay, Trump's Budget Makes Perfect Sense and Will Fix America and I Will Tell You Why. And here, you write, "But how will I survive on this budget, you may be wondering. I am a human child, not a costly fighter jet. You may not survive, but that is because you are soft and weak." And, again, that captures it. There are other crises that you opine about, one in which you imagine the Republicans as a large spider slowly devours them. If this were a crisis, something would be done by someone. A hero would emerge. If there were an occasion, I would be rising to it.

Melissa Murray:

And all of this seems tailor-made for this particular moment. We're in the middle of the pandemic, and we would like someone to come and rescue us from the spider that is slowly devouring us, but yet no hero has risen to the occasion.

Alexandra Petri:

It is funny because things like a pandemic or even the word coup, all of these things are ideas that at least I used to picture as, well, if something that alarming were going on, it would be very clearly labeled, and there would be flags and signs of all kinds, and you would turn on the TV and the TV would say, "We are in the midst of this very specific crisis, and the world is different now, and you can make heroic choices." And it, in fact, is another thing that you slide into. It slowly escalates. One day, Scott Pruitt is rubbing lotion on himself, and then the next day Rudy is running around from state to state spreading COVID and misinformation.

Alexandra Petri:

And so I do think you forget that it's usually just a Tuesday when this kind of thing is going on, and they're not saying, "Ah, yes, here is the choices." I feel like the advantage of storytelling and fiction is all

the choices are clearly labeled, and you know, oh, this is a turning point and this isn't. And, instead, it's just like, ah, well, we have to get through this week. But in the course of the week that you're just getting through, lives are being lost, and horrors are being perpetrated.

Alexandra Petri:

And, oh, look at my lovely passive sentence construction. See, now I'm noticing myself doing it.

Leah Litman:

Most of your essays are about politics, and the players who make up our national landscape. And you don't always or often write about the court, although a number of your essays about gun control laws or Justice Kavanaugh touch on topics that are in the Supreme Court wheelhouse. So why have you just focused more on our other governing institutions?

Alexandra Petri:

Just because there have been so much chaos concentrated in them. I know the court also has its chaos, but yet oversight ... That's judicial oversight.

Leah Litman:

I was just about to say it. What can we do to convince you to write about the Supreme Court more? We promise there is a lot of material to work with.

Alexandra Petri:

I almost feel bad because one of my friends ... As a person who lives in DC, I feel like, statistically, six of your friends are lawyers. You have to get a little card, and it's stamped, and it's like here are you lawyer friends. You now have six of them. Your friend Josh who didn't used to be lawyer is a lawyer now. Your friend, too, she used to be your funny friend and now she's a tax attorney. All right. Okay.

Alexandra Petri:

So all your friends get handed back to you and they're lawyers, and so I'm like, well-

Melissa Murray:

You say this as though it were bad. Lawyer friends are bad.

Alexandra Petri:

No, it's wonderful, but it also leads me to be like I'm an English major with a classics minor. That's not a law degree. That's something different.

Alexandra Petri:

But, then again, whenever I actually do wind up reading an opinion, I'm like, oh, this is absolutely as bananas as most parts of the government are.

Leah Litman:

Exactly.

Melissa Murray:

There's so much stuff here that relates to what you talk about. The oral arguments where Justice Sotomayor kept getting talked over, or the time where they skipped over Justice Briar altogether. That was a classic moment of just cacophony that you could've captured. We want you on this beat. Take your elbows and shove Robert Barnes out of the way, and just get in there. This is your moment. There's so much good stuff in here, right? Don't you think?

Alexandra Petri:

No, there's tons. You didn't even mention the mystery flush.

Leah Litman:

Exactly.

Melissa Murray:

Yes! Yes! Flushgate. We talked about Flushgate a lot.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, I know. I feel like there has been thorough coverage, but, yeah, just one of the many [crosstalk 00:33:13]-

Melissa Murray:

But not your coverage. Not your trenchant coverage. You could've brought a different slant to Flushgate, I think.

Leah Litman:

If only to entice you further on the interruptions that Melissa was mentioning, where the Chief Justice tried to call on Justice Sotomayor and Justice Alito just kept talking. We can play a clip for our listeners of that here.

Chief Justice:

Justice Sotomayor?

Justice Alito:

If I can move onto my second point, I want to give you six categories of people, and ask you to answer yes or no to the extent you can whether you think each of these people on each of these categories must be counted for apportionment purposes.

SG Barbara Underwood:

That person is a resident like any other undocumented person.

Chief Justice:

Justice Sotomayor? Justice Sotomayor?

Leah Litman:

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We polled our listeners about what this should be called. Should it be called "Samsplaining" or "Toxic Masculito," and are these acceptable puns according to the pun queen?

Alexandra Petri:

I like both of them. I feel like Masculito, there's a couple of syllables off there, but it also has a more judicial ring to it. So I think I like it.

Leah Litman:

Okay. Well, that's also what our listeners selected so they can feel extremely validated by their choices.

Melissa Murray:

So you also have a side hustle. In addition to you writing these columns for the Washington Post, you also host a weekly trivia hour for the Washington Post on Instagram, yes?

Alexandra Petri:

Well, I periodically guest-hosted. It only feels like an hour. It's theoretically just 15 minutes, but I do enjoy trivia very much.

Melissa Murray:

You like trivia, yes?

Alexandra Petri:

Yes. Yeah.

Melissa Murray:

How much?

Leah Litman:

That's the concession Melissa wanted.

Alexandra Petri:

A great deal.

Melissa Murray:

Same. I love trivia, and for the last two years, I have been wanting to incorporate into this podcast a Supreme Court trivia segment, and no one will let me do this. And the fact that you are here has finally given us an opportunity to do that. So would you like to play SCOTUS Trivia with us?

Alexandra Petri:

I'm scared but I'm ready, yes.

Melissa Murray:

You're ready, okay. I think you've got it. Okay. You're going to play against Leah.



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Alexandra Petri:

Oh, no. Well, come on. This is stacked.

Melissa Murray:

All right. All right, ready? Okay. Some are okay.

Leah Litman:

How about we both get to answer, and this is a team?

Melissa Murray:

Okay, be a team.

Leah Litman:

You ask the questions, we try to answer them, and our listeners see if they can answer the questions before we do. They can play along.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah, I'll say what I think the answer is, and then you'll say what the right answer is.

Melissa Murray:

We can do it however you ... I'm just so excited to finally get to do this because, literally, I've been waiting for two years. And notice Kate isn't even here. We had to get Kate out of the way for me to be able to do this. She's really been an obstacle to this.

Melissa Murray:

Okay. All right. Question number one, this person is the only president to also serve as Chief Justice of the United States.

Alexandra Petri:

Taft.

Melissa Murray:

Yes.

Alexandra Petri:

I knew that one.

Melissa Murray:

Okay. All right, so it was William Howard Taft is the only person to have served both as President and as Chief Justice of the United States.

Melissa Murray:

Second question, twist. Taft was the only person to serve as both president and Chief Justice, but he was not the only presidential candidate to also serve on the Supreme Court. What presidential hopeful was also a justice, even though he was never president?

Alexandra Petri:

Ooh.

Melissa Murray:

Plot twist, yes. Leah, do you know?

Leah Litman:

It's Field. I only know this from my Habeas paper. He was a presidential candidate, the author of Chae Chan Ping.

Melissa Murray:

No.

Leah Litman:

He was a candidate for the democratic nomination for President.

Melissa Murray:

Okay. So I actually needed someone who was the actual nominee, so that may be where we are having the problem. So the correct answer that I was seeking, although I understand Leah was really getting into the weeds here with her arcane knowledge of California electoral politics ... The correct answer that I was seeking was Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes. So he was -

Alexandra Petri:

Oh, Charles Evans Hughes. I've heard that name.

Leah Litman:

You knew that.

Melissa Murray:

You knew that. Here's another one. This one I think you probably can [crosstalk 00:37:38]-

Alexandra Petri:

He was really boring, I think.

Leah Litman:

Yes.

Alexandra Petri:

According to Alice Roosevelt, but she thought everyone was boring.

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Melissa Murray:

Well, when you're Alice Roosevelt, everyone is boring. Alice Roosevelt was getting things done.

Melissa Murray:

Okay. Who was the only justice to also serve as Secretary of State?

Alexandra Petri:

Marshall?

Melissa Murray:

Yes.

Leah Litman:

Yes.

Melissa Murray:

That was it. That was good. Good, good. John Marshall. That was good. Okay, here's another one. This is more arcane. Who are the only two justices to have been featured on American currency?

Alexandra Petri:

Salmon P. Chase? No, he wasn't a justice. Really? Really?

Leah Litman:

Yes, yes.

Alexandra Petri:

Salmon P. Chase.

Melissa Murray:

Yes, that was one. That was one. He was on the \$10,000 bill.

Alexandra Petri:

I knew that.

Leah Litman:

We had a \$10,000 bill?

Alexandra Petri:

Briefly, and it had Salmon P. Chase on it.

Melissa Murray:

That was it, and there's one more.

Leah Litman:

Marshall.

Melissa Murray:

Yes, on what bill?

Leah Litman:

God, I don't know.

Melissa Murray:

The \$500 bill.

Leah Litman:

Okay.

Alexandra Petri:

We had a \$500 bill?

Leah Litman:

Right? Exactly.

Melissa Murray:

These bills are no longer in circulation, but those are the only two justices to have ever been featured on American currency.

Alexandra Petri:

Hey, go team.

Melissa Murray:

Okay, this one is super easy. You were very good together. Which president threatened to pack the court with his chosen appointees?

Alexandra Petri:

FDR.

Melissa Murray:

Okay, that was easy. All right. Also easy, who was the first woman to be appointed to the court?

Alexandra Petri:

Sandra Day O'Connor.

Melissa Murray:

Perfect. Okay, now it gets harder. Who was the first justice whose swearing in ceremony was televised?

Alexandra Petri:  
Rehnquist?

Melissa Murray:  
Nope.

Alexandra Petri:  
Am I too late or too early?

Melissa Murray:  
Too early.

Leah Litman:  
I want to say it was Roberts or Sotomayor. No?

Alexandra Petri:  
Oh, wait-

Melissa Murray:  
It was Sonia Sotomayor on August 8th, 2009. It was the first one to be televised.

Leah Litman:  
I remembered the image of the Chief being sworn in on the Lincoln Bible that Taney used, so I guessed that, but I guess that wasn't actually televised. There were just pictures.

Melissa Murray:  
I just play the hits. I don't write the history. It's all fine.

Melissa Murray:  
Last question. There have been a number of current justices who have also clerked for the court. Elena Kagan, Brett Kavanaugh. But who is the only current justice to serve as a member of the Supreme Court alongside the justice for whom he clerked?

Alexandra Petri:  
Well, the "he" narrows it down.

Melissa Murray:  
Well, it is the Supreme Court.

Alexandra Petri:  
I'm going to say Alito, but I could be-

Leah Litman:

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Alito did not get a Supreme Court clerkship because, unfortunately, his charming personality did not win over any of the justices. It was Neil Gorsuch.

Melissa Murray:

We actually don't know that.

Alexandra Petri:

Oh.

Leah Litman:

Sorry, I had to fit that in. I had to fit that in.

Melissa Murray:

That is wild speculation. We don't actually know that.

Leah Litman:

I have no inside knowledge about why the Supreme Court justices did not hire Samuel Alito. I'm sure he was a super charming law student.

Melissa Murray:

You were very good at the Supreme Court trivia. This is very, very good. Some of these were really esoteric. I'm especially impressed about the Salmon P. Chase. You really pulled that out of your back pocket. It's all about the Salmons, baby. That was great. Good for you. Good for you.

Melissa Murray:

Whew.

Alexandra Petri:

Oh, man. Yeah, I'm emotionally exhausted but thrilled.

Melissa Murray:

You can use any of those on your WaPo trivia night if you want to.

Alexandra Petri:

Yeah. We should use all of those. I should also get back on trivia night. I think they were cycling away. I don't know what the deal is with it.

Leah Litman:

Well, this is a pandemic. The people need amusement.

Melissa Murray:

I've done the trivia night, and I've gotten a bunch of them right, and I never won anything.

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Alexandra Petri:

Oh, no.

Melissa Murray:

I know. I know. I'm just letting you know that. I actually got a bunch right on a number of occasions, like 100%.

Leah Litman:

Speaking of grievance campaigns and grievance being the tone of the movement. No, I'm just kidding.

Melissa Murray:

I won, and I was wronged.

Leah Litman:

This is oppression.

Melissa Murray:

I'm filing a case.

Leah Litman:

This is oppression, denying people Supreme Court seats.

Alexandra Petri:

No, you need to file with the Supreme Court, yeah.

Melissa Murray:

Melissa Corone is going to plead my case at hearing in Michigan, should I tell everyone?

Leah Litman:

I'm sure she'll do a great job.

Melissa Murray:

Melissa for Melissa, yep. All right.

Leah Litman:

So that's probably all we have time for, but thank you, Alexandra, so much for joining us.

Alexandra Petri:

Oh, this was a blast. Thank you for having me.

Melissa Murray:

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And your book, *Nothing is Wrong and Here is Why*, is available as the perfect holiday gift for all the Cassandras in your life. Show them that they are seen, that they are not alone. This is a great book, and it fits in a stocking. It actually literally fits in a stocking, so, yeah, you can get it-

Alexandra Petri:

An especially wide stocking, but yeah.

Leah Litman:

If a stocking is appropriately sized.

Alexandra Petri:

Exactly, yeah. It depends on the stocking.

Leah Litman:

Everyone should also of course check out Alexandra's columns in the Washington Post and catch her on Instagram when she is allowed to guest-host the Washington Post trivia night.

Alexandra Petri:

Yes.

Leah Litman:

Thank you to our producer Melody Rowell. Thank you to Eddie Cooper for making our music. And you can support the show by becoming a Glow subscriber at [glow.fm/strictscrutiny](https://glow.fm/strictscrutiny). Thank you, everyone.

Melissa Murray:

Happy holidays.

Alexandra Petri:

Happy holidays.