



## The Lit Review Podcast

## English Transcript

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**Guest/Topic:** Bill Ayers on *Demanding the Impossible: A Radical Manifesto*

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- Page May: Welcome to The Lit Review, a podcast sparked by a moment of urgency, recognizing mass political education as key for our liberation struggles. Every week, your hosts Page May and Monica Trinidad will chat with people we love and respect about relevant books for the movement, everything from history to theories around gender to sci-fi and beyond. We know that political study is not accessible for a variety of reasons. The high cost of books, academic jargon, the failures of our underfunded school systems, time barriers, et cetera. Our hope is that this podcast helps address some of those issues, making critical knowledge more accessible to the masses. Think Spark Notes in podcast form. I'm one of your hosts, Page May. Thanks for listening.
- Monica Trinidad: All right. Hello. We are here today with episode 28. Hey. So we're actually today sitting in Page May's apartment in this beautiful, gorgeous apartment I love. There's just books all around us and it's really beautiful. How you doing today, Page?
- Page May: I'm good. It was a hectic but beautiful morning. I'm actually really excited. Right now as we speak, we have this crew of young people and folks from BTGNC who are working together, young people from Assata's Daughters and BTGNC, who are doing a train takeover around the new No Cop Academy. And so they're out there spreading the good word, talking about this \$95 million cop school that Rahm wants to build, which is [inaudible 00:01:38] bogus. Yeah. So it was a little hectic getting that up and going, but I'm excited to check Twitter.
- Monica Trinidad: Yeah, people were like, "Wait, you're leaving us?" And we're like, "We're sorry. We have to record this podcast," but they're in good hands. And

BTGNC, that's Black Transgender Nonconforming Collective, along with Assata's Daughters, and Dyke March Chicago's actually going to join them as well, so it's powerful. We can't wait to check Twitter after this podcast. But I am super excited about who is with us today. This person was a professor at UIC when I was at UIC. Didn't have a class with him, but always was a big fan from afar. And actually, *Fugitive Days* was one of the first books I read when I became active in the anti-war movement against Iraq, when I was doing Campus Antiwar Network, and then I joined Students for Democratic Society in the re-launch. And Bernadine Dohrn was also a huge, huge figure for me, feminist figure, and somebody I aspired to be like. So this is just a really exciting podcast. So we're here today with Bill Ayers and he will be speaking about the book *Demand The Impossible, A Radical Manifesto*. And so Bill, how are you doing?

Bill Ayers: So nice to be with you. Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm just thrilled and I think your podcast is so needed and so important, so-

Monica Trinidad: Thank you.

Bill Ayers: ... I'm very honored to be a part of it.

Monica Trinidad: Thank you. So we like to start off the conversation with who you are, what do you do and why?

Bill Ayers: Okay. You've got my name and my name's Bill Ayers, and I'm a retired professor from the University of Illinois in Chicago. I've been retired for about seven years. I teach adjunct at a lot of places right now, DePaul University in Chicago. And I continue to write and speak and organize wherever and however I can. And frankly, one of the great things for me about this moment is that there's such a regeneration of movement, activity, and energy. And I've never felt that it went away. I don't buy the public relations, for example, about the sixties. I think the way people talk about the sixties is mainly myth and symbol, and it's partly to put a wet blanket over young activists today as if back in the day, we had the best demonstrations, the best music, the best sex. And I always want to say to people, "No, it's all still good."

And not only that, but nobody looked at their watch on December 31st, 1969 and said, "Oh no, it's almost over. Nobody lives by decades." But what I am witnessing is a regeneration of the centuries-old Black freedom movement. That is beyond thrilling. That's something that we all have to dive into and be excited about. And so there's that. Also, I think Undocumented and Unafraid, the queer movement is more militant and more energized than ever. We have a lot of work to do to connect these movements, to bring war into the conversation and so on. But I'm thrilled to be alive and active in this generation.

Page May: Thank you. I'm really excited. The beautiful thing about this book too is you wrote it. And so I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about what led you to write the book. And I'm going to slide in a two-part question. So what led you to write it and why did you name it what you named it?

Bill Ayers: Sure, thank you. I should also say, because Bernadine Dohrn is not here, but you evoked her in the beginning, just to give you a hint of who she is. We've been together for almost 50 years and fighting side by side. We've endured prison and a lot of other things together. We've raised three great kids and we have four grandkids together. But I get trolled a lot by the right wing. Last summer I got a whole packet of information in the mail from a right-winger, and it had a t-shirt that said... Had a picture of Welch's grape juice and my wanted poster from back 40 years ago. And under the Welch's grape juice, it said, good, free radical. And under my wanted poster, it said, bad, free radical.

Monica Trinidad: So you hung it up, right? 'Cause that's pretty-

Bill Ayers: So I gave that one to my son, Malik, and he's a teacher. He wears it to school. But then there was a bumper sticker in there and it said, "Bill Ayers and his wife should be in prison." And I showed it to Bernadine and she said, "His wife?" No objection to the prison part. It was just, "Don't call me his wife." So that's Bernadine. But the question, why did I write it and what is the significance of the title? I have thought for a long time that those of us who are progressive people and who are lifelong activists, who are committed to the cause, and that includes young people and older people, we are pretty sharp at naming what it is we're against. We're good at saying, we don't like this, or this is our critique of that. We're not as good at saying what we're fighting for, but you need to know what you're fighting for because it sustains you.

If you don't know what you're fighting for, first of all, you can go off the track tactically and strategically. But secondly, you can't sustain the energy unless you have a vision out there in front of you of what you're striving for. And I'll tell you, 30 years ago, the great South African revolutionary Albie Sachs and the Palestinian scholar and activist Rashid Khalidi sat in our living room and had a conversation about just this point. And Albie said that at the height of the war against apartheid, they would take the cadre and retreat and they would take 48 hours or 72 hours, and they would say, "What are we fighting for?" And they would spend two, three days discussing that. And he said, "The reason we did it, people would say, it's too urgent. We can't take time off." And Albi and the other leadership would say, "We must take time off because if we don't know what we're fighting for, we will do the wrong thing today and we won't have the energy to sustain into the world we want to build."

That's what motivated me. The idea that it may be utopian - I've often been accused of being a romantic or a utopian, and I plead guilty to a degree. I'm not utopian in the sense that I'm naive, but I am concerned about articulating a vision of what we want. And this book was an attempt to do that. What are we fighting for? And the title comes from a piece of graffiti that was all over France and the United States in 1968. And sometimes it's attributed to Che Guevara, but the graffiti was all over the walls. And it would say, be realistic, demand the impossible. And that's a nice way to think about it because why would you demand the possible? So why would you get into a debate about healthcare and say, "Oh, we're fighting for Obamacare?" We're not fighting for the troglodyte Republican idea of healthcare, nor are we fighting for Obamacare. We're fighting for universal healthcare for all as a human, not as a product to be sold at the marketplace.

That's what I was trying to do with this book is to say, come on, what do we really want? Let's get out of the frame that's given to us by the powerful, and let's reframe the issues and demand what we know is not only... And the irony is, of course, it's completely possible. That's why the title is interesting to me.

Monica Trinidad: So me and Page, like we just mentioned earlier, we're doing this No Cop Academy campaign with over 20 different organizations in the city. They keep endorsing every day. And we're demanding to basically defund the police. And to many people, they see that as impossible. They're like, no, there's no way that you can't have police. There's no way that you can just defund them like that. And so how does this book break down how you demand the impossible? And how does this book break down strategies, tactics? How do you figure out how what you're fighting for?

Bill Ayers: Well, one of the things that's so great about framing it in this demonstration that's going on as we speak is that it's a classic example of saying, okay, what is it that we want? We look at Rahm Emanuel, at our leadership in our city, and we see him closing 50 schools or 50 plus schools in the Black community, in the brown community. And we say, wait, that is intolerable. But meanwhile, and the whole myth about Chicago, Chicago's broke. And that's a myth. I like the slogan that the CTU came up with: broke on purpose. But the fact is that when the leadership, when the ruling class, when the political class wants something, they can find the money right now. So they couldn't afford to keep schools open, but they can afford millions and millions of dollars for a police academy.

So when we have positive vision that says, Stop the Cops, which is the title of one of the chapters in this book, Stop the Cops or abolition, Abolish the Prisons. Whenever I say something like this, and you all face

this every day in your organizing, somebody always says, "Well, I know it's cute to say that. It's clever, but it's not realistic." And I want to argue it's not only realistic, but it raises the deeper questions. So when you say defund the police, what you're partly raising is what would policing and public safety look like in a free and democratic society? We have an occupying force for police in this neighborhood where we're sitting. The police act as an occupying force when they stop young Black people on the streets and harass them, that leads sometimes to fatal confrontations. That's what we want to stop. And when we say, "Well, you got to have police," that's falling into a trap that's already laid for us.

So reframing by asking a question like what would policing and public safety look like in a free society with free people? What would that look like? So very quickly, just to go off this for one second and then come back to your question. I was in Greece about, I guess, five or six years ago. I was invited to speak at an anarchist convention. And of course when I got there, I immediately said, "Are you really anarchists? Because you're having a convention. That doesn't seem right." And we had a good time. But through mutual friends, I went out to an island five hours from Athens, where a man named Manolis Glezos had been the mayor. And I spent the day with Manolis. Manolis, you haven't heard his name, but he's quite famous in Greece. When he was 14 years old, he took the Nazi flag off the Acropolis during the occupation, the German occupation of Greece. He was hunted, his brother was killed. He spent a lot of time in prison. But he maintained his radical outlook on life, his revolutionary perspective.

And we spent the day together. He's in his mid-nineties. I read about him last month. He was arrested in front of the Greek parliament last month, so that's a lifetime commitment. But Manolis and I, when we were walking back to the boat. He said to me very earnestly, he said to me, "Bill, I think you have the same problem in the United States that we have here." And I said, "What is that?" And he said, "What prevents us from making a revolution is we don't think large enough. We don't think what we really want. What would it look like if we were really free? Not what they've given to us. Not phony little choices between tweedle dumb and tweedle dumber, but really something profoundly different."

And he said, "And frankly, I spend a lot of my time trying to give people a sense of confidence, because if you don't have the confidence you can change the world, and you feel, well, I know I want something better, but I guess I have to have a mayor. I have to have a chief of police." And he said to me, "Why do you need a chief of police? In a really free society, why would you think immediately I need..." And this gets us to prisons. Immediately people say... Well, if I say abolish the prisons, somebody will always say, "Well, what will you do with the really bad people?" And I

always say, "Who?" And somebody says, "John Wayne Gacy," or somebody like that. Some poster child. So I say, "Okay, I'll give you one prison cell. Who else? Okay, I'll give you Bush and Cheney. Now I'll give you Trump and Bannon. Who else?"

And the problem is we've gotten into a mindset that says people make mistakes or break the law or whatever, they must be punished, punishment must be caging. Then we got two and a half million people. And so if you start with the idea, we don't have to think in their terms. We can think in different terms. What would public safety be in a democracy? That's a profoundly different starting point. So let's take the cops or let's take prisons to start. When I talk to college students and get down this road of abolishing prisons, the first thing people say is this idea that somebody must be in jail. But then once we unpack that a little bit, I often say to people, "Well, let's think of a thousand alternatives to caging. Okay, I'll accept some of your critique. Now let's think of a thousand alternatives." And smart people sitting in a room, 10 smart people in a half hour can come up with a thousand alternatives to caging. That's where we begin.

And the interesting thing is just like with stopping the cops, it goes deep and it goes into questions, what would good education look like? What would it mean to have a mental healthcare system? What would it mean if healthcare were free and available to all? What would it mean if you had childcare And that was expected rather than some kind of privilege that you get if you're wealthy? And so on. What if decent housing was just an assumed bottom line? Then you get to the point where there are so many alternatives to prison and to policing that we can police ourselves, we can manage ourselves.

And the interesting thing also, just one last point on this, is that you go to a place like Detroit, which is popularized in the national media as a place in total collapse, which is a lie. You go into some of the poor communities in Detroit and they've developed ways to survive and take care of each other because the cops don't come, because public transportation doesn't exist, because they are food deserts. So how do they do it? Well, they do it because people aren't stupid, and left in themselves they can come up with a lot of alternatives to what we take to be just normal everyday life, which we should find unacceptable. So that's where I begin.

Page May:

So I really appreciate the work that this book is doing as someone who does talk to a lot of people about why I'm an abolitionist. And I've had that conversation many, many times where people just, they call it crazy, absurd. And I'm like, it's actually so impractical to me that you think that this is the best that we can do and that this is working. You are the one who's being unreasonable. And so I appreciate that you've created something that can help people think through these things because it is a

conversation that does require patience, I think, and people are owed that. But I'm wondering how do you, not necessarily the specific argument that you're making, but in your chapters, and I'm curious about what other issues you talk through as well, but do you just pose thoughtful questions or do you feel you need to lay out a history of how we got here? Do you feel you need to offer an alternative? What do you think is necessary to get people to take it seriously?

Bill Ayers:

Yeah, I want to go through that. But let me start with this notion of patience and impatience, because in a way, you've nailed something that I think every organizer has faced in his or her life, which is, yes, we need to be patient sometimes and we need to be deeply impatient other times. And it's that dialectic, working that out in a daily, weekly way is very, very complicated. I see this bumper sticker around now and then that says, if you're not pissed off, you're not paying attention. And I agree with that. If you pay attention - this has become popularized because of the murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville. She apparently, on her Facebook, her slogan was, if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. And I think that's true, but I want to add a bumper sticker that says, if you're only pissed off, you won't get to where you need to go.

You have to temper being pissed off with love and generosity and solidarity and community. And how you do that in a daily way is almost... I mean, it's excruciating. So yes, patience and impatience, a vision and hard work, all of that together, and working that out daily is the job of a radical, of an organizer. So the way that I've laid this out is the first thing, and I really do believe that this is a first requirement for radicals and for revolutionaries and for progressives, is the idea that we need to unleash our more radical imaginations. That is, we're we're not imaginative enough. And one of the things I love about you two, but also the movements that you participate in, is you're big believers in poetry, you're big believers in dance, you're big believers in love and art. And you're producers of those things. And I think that without that, we go off the track.

So I think our imaginations need to be unleashed and we need to get out of the box that we're put in. I think of education, which I've been a teacher all my life as well as an organizer. I think there are common edges to those two callings. But one thing that has always been true for me as a teacher is that you need to start where people are, but you also need to have one foot striving towards a world that is not yet. You have to challenge people to think differently and you have to challenge yourself. One of the great things about being a teacher or an organizer is you're always learning from your students or the other people. A certain approach to teaching and organizing sees that when you knock on a door, you assume a three dimensional creature is going to be there. You assume that this person has

a history, a mind, a body, a spirit, a dream, a hope. That somehow has to be taken into account. Teachers do the same thing. We start by seeing the students before us as full human beings.

So reframing the debate is like this. This is where I think I begin. So in teaching, every politician who gets to a microphone starts by saying, "We need to get the lazy, incompetent teachers out of the system." And as a parent and a grandparent, I listen to that, what am I going to say? "No, we need to keep the lazy, incompetent teacher there for my granddaughter." No, of course. You framed it, even though it's a false issue and a myth, you framed it and you won. If I get to the microphone first, I say, "Every kid deserves a caring, compassionate, intellectually curious, well-rested and well-paid teacher in the classroom." I win that debate. So our job in part as radicals is to reframe.

You were asking about how I laid this out. Each chapter begins with a Harper's index set of statistics about the issue. So the chapter on abolition begins with a prison complex index, and it talks about the rising rate of incarceration, the rank of metaphorical correctional supervision city by population in all US cities. The answer to that is second behind New York. I mean, that's how many people we have in prison. The rank of the US in incarcerated populations in the world, and you know this, but it's first. So you begin by saying, "Here's a little map of what is," and then you begin to explain it. And for me, that begins in this chapter on abolition by quoting the 13th Amendment of the Constitution, which you all know and maybe many of your listeners know. The 13th amendment basically says slavery is abolished except as punishment for crime.

Well, there's the loophole that led to the Black codes, that led to all the horror, the terror that took place following radical reconstruction in the south. And it's still going on. So we have abolition in the 1800s and we win. And then we have radical reconstruction, which was the most hopeful moment in American history in many, many ways. Things like W.B. Dubois pointed out that the public school is a negro invention. The idea that somehow it happened elsewhere. No, it happened in the South with ex-slaves, former enslaved people saying, "No, we want public education." And then you have the reaction to that and the terror of the latter part and the lynching regime and all that followed that. Then you have the civil rights movement, and that leads to Reagan and the reaction to that and mass incarceration and the bipartisan support for mass incarceration. Clinton and Reagan and Bush.

So we need to break that frame, so that's what I attempt to do. And then I try to offer solutions. What would a world look like if we didn't have prisons? What energy could be released if we did away with this billion-dollar industry and created alternatives in which we called on



people's strengths, will, intelligence? What would that world look like? And that's what I try to do.

Monica Trinidad: You started to break down the chapters a little bit. Can you keep going into that? What are some of the other chapters in this book?

Bill Ayers: In a funny way, each chapter is a bumper sticker. So the first chapter is called Possible Worlds, and that's where I make a plea for unleashing our imaginations. But then you have the substantive chapters. Chapter one, disarm. We Americans like to think that we're a peace-loving people. And all the patriotism that we're seeing rising up now is really a cover for the fact that not only are we not peace-loving, it's not really a very decent society. And in some ways, if everybody has some kind of tinny patriotism waved in front of their eyes, they can ignore the horrors that are going on. Not only white supremacy and war, but also their own lack of meaningful work, their own lack of schools that function. The human potential that's contained in this country is horrifying. So chapter one, disarm. Stop being a warrior nation. Stop being a spartan nation.

Chapter two, abolition. Do away with prisons. Chapter three, shoulders to the wheel. And that's about work and that's about rethinking work, not as some exploitative... And rethinking work and separating it from jobs. We're caught in a jobs economy. So listen to the news. Any day they'll talk about how many jobs were created or how many jobs were lost. A job is a job is a job. A prison guard is a job, a cop is a job, a blackjack dealer is a job. But that's not good work. That's not work that we need. And you need to separate and realize that the work of the world is endless. The decent, productive, important work we could be doing, rebuilding infrastructure, taking care of the youth, taking care of the elders, and on and on. That work is endless, but jobs are very limited. So we have to make that distinction, so I call that chapter Shoulders to the Wheel.

Jubilee is the next chapter, and Jubilee comes right out of the Bible. And the idea is forgive the debt. Just forgive the debt. We should not be in debt anymore. And the way you do it, you say you're not in debt anymore. Cancel the credit card debt. The interesting thing is, in my lifetime, one of the interesting things about a country like Cuba, when it liberated itself from imperialism, first thing it did was cancel the debt. Of course, what are we going to do? Hang ourselves onto this predatory monster that's been preying on us for all these years? Hell no. The debt's over. Puerto Rico has to cancel the debt and get out from under that. So that's called Jubilee.

Chapter five, stop the cops. Chapter six, universal healthcare for all. Chapter seven, teach freedom. Again, this idea that education should be a human right and we should rethink it as a human right, not as a product to

be sold at the marketplace like a laptop or a screwdriver. And then chapter eight is Love the Earth. And that's about environmental justice and the need to save the planet. If you mush those together, it's a program very similar to, for example, the Black Lives Matter program. It's very similar to the program that came out of Canada in the sense that it's a vision of a society that's post-capitalist, that's democratic, that's free and that is working on the important issues that we face as human beings, and as humanity, rather than struggling around the edges and the margins for little bits and crumbs off the table of this wealthy monster.

Let me go to Chicago for another minute because you all work on this, but here we are in the richest country in the world, the most warlike country that's ever existed, even though we don't like to think that. And one of the richest cities. My granddaughters, four years ago, going to a public school in Chicago, neighborhood school. They did away with the art teacher. Three years ago they did away with the music teacher. Two years ago they closed the library, and last year they had to bring their own toilet paper to school in the richest country in the world.

So what were they saying to the families and kids of this rich, bountiful city? They were saying, if you can get out, get out, because we have no respect for you. We have no concern about your wellbeing. We're going to starve you until you leave. And they're crushing public education, one of the last public institutions that exists. And we have to fight back. And we partly we do that by rejecting the bipartisan, Democrat and Republican idea that education is a product. It's not a product. It's a right. And as a right, we should demand it for all children.

Page May:

Okay, I have a lot of questions, but when you say demand the impossible, who do you think you are making the demand of? And is it as simple as, do you demand Rahm Emanuel da da da? I'll give a little bit of the thing I'm thinking through. And the thing I think through a lot is, when you reframe the problem, you often find that one of the immediate results of that is that you, I think, find that you are more powerful than what the system would have you believe day to day. When you open up what you're asking for and de-center the mayor or the government and what they're offering, it sometimes means that the community is able to meet some of those needs in different ways. And so that's what I'm getting at. And I don't think that it's a one or the other, but can you talk a little bit more about are we just demanding this from our elected officials or is this also a demand of ourselves in some way?

Bill Ayers:

I think, Page, that it's absolutely not a demand of the powerful. It's not a demand on the powerful. It's a demand on ourselves. And so I'm glad that you framed it that way, 'cause I know you think this way. And one of the problems that we have and one of the trick bags we get caught in all the

time is that we think that where power and change happens is at the top. And it's actually completely wrong. The way you just said it, that people come to understand that they have more power than they thought they had. As a teacher, as an organizer, I've always thought my main job isn't teaching a subject matter or isn't introducing a piece of literature. My main job is to reveal, through somehow creating an environment and creating a challenge, to reveal the agency that everybody already has.

And one of the ways I do that as a teacher is I say sometimes explicitly or implicitly, I can't teach you anything. The problem is that you can only teach yourself. And I can lay out lots of challenges and lots of nourishment on that. But the big lesson you have to take away is I have the agency. And this is hugely important because one of the things that the powerful do again and again is they attribute to themselves a sense of culture, history, agency. But the rest of us are written off by our statistical profiles: age, gender, income, neighborhood, zip code and all the rest of it. And that's not who we are. That's not how we have to think of ourselves. But we hear so often, you're a young Black woman living in a certain neighborhood, that becomes a definition that you have to break from by recognizing that you weigh more than that. You have agency that carries you way beyond that.

When I think about social change, the only thing I think about is fire from below. That is, if you take even a glance at history, Lyndon Johnson passed the most far-reaching civil rights legislation since reconstruction. He was a cracker from Texas. He was not part of the Black Freedom Movement. He responded to the Black Freedom movement. But if you go back and look, Martin Luther King wasn't asking for a meeting with Johnson. Johnson was asking for a meeting with Martin Luther King. And there's a reason: because fire was coming from below. And that's what brings about change. Yes, there was a politician there who was effective and responsive, but that would never have happened. He didn't have a change of heart. We act as if, today, if we could get the right candidate in with the right heart, if we could convince the person to change their mind, then everything would be better. Absolutely false. Franklin Roosevelt wasn't part of the labor movement, but he responded. Abraham Lincoln, most tellingly, not only never belonged to an abolitionist party, but you've probably never read his first inaugural address.

The second inaugural address is the one that's in the civics books and in the history books, because that one could have been written by Frederick Douglas. The first inaugural address, he basically genuflects in front of the slave owners and says, "I won't disrupt your enterprise." That's a stupid address. History rolled over that one. But do you think Lincoln just changed his heart? He changed his heart when Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman and John Brown did what they did and never let up. And

that's what changes the world. So our job is not to fall into the trick bag of saying if we could get the right mayoral candidate, if we could just get behind the right person for president, all would be well. That's just a false trap. And so we can't go that way. I think we demand of ourselves to rethink education, to rethink healthcare, to rethink policing and prisons and war. And when we demand that of ourselves and do the serious rethinking and build a movement that can carry that new thinking forward, that's when the world will change.

Monica Trinidad: I have so many questions. Who do you think is demanding the impossible right now in Chicago?

Bill Ayers: Well, I see it everywhere. And one of the things that commentators and talking heads and politicians, and especially the corrupted Democratic party, when they think about how to build a resistance, they think of themselves and they think of it in that very narrow frame. Democrats, Republicans. So the night of the election of Donald Trump, the Democratic leadership was all prognosticating and either they were saying, "Oh, it's a catastrophe. We've never been in a worse place in our lives," which is nonsense. They should try to think what slavery was like. Or they were saying, "Our problem was we didn't appeal to the white working class." That analysis came out right away from the Democrats. And what does it even mean? They're saying, "Oh, the white working class in Pennsylvania was aggrieved." Oh really? Was the Black working class doing great?

And what is the white working class anyway? How do you separate it? It's a white supremacist concept from the get go. So I get impatient with that. And I think that what we see in Chicago today, it's not like we're starting from zero again. The talking heads act like, what are we going to do about Trump? Where do we start? Where do we start? It's already started. It's been going on. So if you look at Chicago and you look at organizations like Black Lives Matter and Assata's Daughters and Ella's Daughters and B.Y.P.100. And you can just go across the board. Undocumented and Unafraid, Fight for 15. I mean, folks like us, we can't get to everything that's happening. So you had to come here and leave a demonstration that was happening over there. That's because there's activity bubbling from below and it's not always visible. You have to pay attention if you want to be a part of it. But it's always there.

And what's going on right now in Chicago is so exciting that I hardly have time to sleep. I feel like there's always another rally to attend, another street demonstration, another meeting because we're trying to get it right and we're responding to the action that's actually happening. So I think that we are in a more remarkable place than we would be. We can't get deflected into taking all this energy into the next election. And I worry

because I see that tendency. We can't get deflected into saying, "Well, there's nothing happening." And that's what the commentary says, but it's just not true. There's a lot happening and we need to get with it. We need to join it, but we also need to talk to each other across movements.

As many have said, we can't build single issue movements because we don't lead single issue lives. And that's a hugely important thing. We are many things. We're not identified as one thing, so let's make sure we reach out and talk to each other. So I started by saying we need to reframe each of these issues. But the other thing is we have to connect them. So I have to see the ways in which war and warming are connected. We have to see the ways in which scapegoating and white supremacy link to occupation and war. We have to make these connections. And this is going to be a moment of real forward motion. I think we're in it. And in some ways, the election of Trump, what it does for us is that it disrupts what would've been normal. It creates an abnormal situation.

So Bernie and I were going to the inauguration anyway, and we were certain that Clinton was going to win and we were part of a contingent that was going to go and build a peace ball. And we had our peace signs and what would've been normal life would've been the war mongering Hillary Clinton in the White House and us with our peace signs. And we would've all been normal and everything would've been normal. But then what happened is this maniac got elected and it disrupted us. And while I wouldn't wish that on anyone, and he did run a fascist campaign, the fact is we now have to rethink everything that's healthy for us. Let's rethink and let's not say, back to the Democrats. Let's hope Hillary wins. No, there's alternatives to the tweedle dumb, tweedle dumber world. We have to build those alternatives right here.

Monica Trinidad: And the chapters that you laid out for us really enforce what you're saying about how we don't live single issue lives. And something I like to talk about with authors when we have them on is what are some things that you wish you would've included in this book that you didn't?

Bill Ayers: Ah, so much, so much. I think that the world keeps turning and the world keeps growing and being more powerful and more information comes in. One of the things, to me, the rhythm of being an activist, but the rhythm of being even a moral person or a good resident, a good citizen, the rhythm always involves three things which are simple to say and excruciating to do. One is you have to pay attention. And I love your slogan, get woke, stay woke, however you all say it. But the idea that you have to pay attention, you have to open your eyes and then you have to be astonished. And sometimes we leave this out. In other words, you can't just open your eyes. You have to be shocked and surprised at both the beauty and the ecstasy that's everywhere around us. The human connections, the love, the

joy, the aesthetic, everything. And then you have to also be astonished at the unnecessary cruelty that we visit upon one another.

And you can't get used to it. You can't be so woke that you say, oh yeah, homeless kids, that's normal, or permanent war. Yeah, that's just the way it is. No, it is not the way it is. It's not the way it could be or should be. So you have to pay attention. And then you have to be astonished and you have to let yourself wake up every morning blown away by how beautiful things are and how absolutely excruciatingly terrible they are. Then you have to act, you have to do something, and then you have to doubt. And if we in the sixties and seventies made one mistake is that we forgot to doubt. That is, you act without guarantees. You don't know what your action is going to lead to. My entire life, I've been told, "Don't do that. It'll turn people off." I've been told that my whole life. So in some ways I stopped paying attention to it.

But you have to then evaluate your action by doubting. In other words, or rethinking. You could call it rethinking. So once you act, you have to say, what did I do? What did it accomplish? And I was told, for example, the first time I was arrested at a sit-in, I was told it would turn people off. If you go back and look at the polling numbers, when people sat in at lunch counters or went on those in interstate buses, now it's a hundred percent approval. Back then it was 20% approval. People said, "Oh, you're doing bad things for race relations." You act, but then you have to go back and say, and here's the criteria by which you doubt or rethink. You say, who did I educate and what did I learn?

If you didn't educate other people, then I don't care how you looked on the nightly news. That's irrelevant. I don't even care how many people you brought out. The question is, did you educate people around rethinking the issues and did I learn something so that my next time out I'm going to be more effective, more powerful, and so on? So in many ways, I wish that I knew two years ago when I started this, what I know now. I wish I'd read to Ta-Nehisi Coates. I'd read some of his stuff, but he hadn't written *Between the World and Me* and he hadn't written the current book. The whole thing is you have to open your eyes and keep taking things in. You can't be satisfied. And so I look at this, and I think for example, the environmental justice movement was very much in the works when I was doing this.

But I think now, I look at things like *Standing Rock*, which I didn't really know about. I didn't know about it the way they know about it. So I don't think informed enough by indigenous resistance in this book. I don't think I'm informed enough by feminism in this book. It's not that those things weren't there, it's just that I'm still trying to keep up and learn and be a part of things. So yeah, I would write a different book today. In fact, one of the

things that happened to me, I wrote my first book when I was 45 years old. I'm now 72 and I've written, I don't know, 20 books, but every time I write a book, it's funny that you said that because every time I write a book it's because I left something out of the last book.

And I always think, damn, I should say more. So I never think that I'm going to write the perfect thing, but I do want to be in the conversation. And part of being in the conversation is demand of yourself that you keep speaking, keep writing, keep listening. I'm a huge believer as a teacher that the basic pedagogical gesture for free people is dialogue. That is, speaking with the possibility of being heard, but equally important, listening with the possibility of being changed, maybe not a hundred percent, but a little learning stuff so that you can speak more powerfully next time around.

Page May:

All right, so I am convinced, I definitely want to read this book. Thank you for writing it and thank you for talking with us. Again, the book is Demand the Impossible, A Radical Manifesto by Bill Ayers from Haymarket. And so if you wouldn't mind, Bill, closing us out with a final word and a favorite passage from the book?

Bill Ayers:

I really appreciate what you're doing, and I think one of the things that as radicals and revolutionaries that we shouldn't forget is that we have to take a minute and read. We have to read and we have to study. It's not enough to be active and to be courageous. Those things are important, but you have to be thoughtful. And so I'm a huge believer in reading, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, I heard him once speaking to a group of young people who wanted to be writers, and they asked him what they should read and he said, "Read everything." And I thought that was a great response. I look around your house, Page and I say, yeah, you're a person who reads everything. That's what you should do. So I want us to be thoughtful. I want us to study. But your point in the beginning about our own agency and our own importance is huge to me.

I remember the great European revolutionary, Rosa Luxembourg at the turn of the last century. She was put in prison because she refused to support World War I, her own government in the imperialist war. And a friend of hers wrote her often. She has letters back and forth. A friend of hers wrote her and said, "Rosa, we're desperate without your leadership. We don't know what to do without you to lead us." And Luxembourg wrote back the most brilliant letter. It began by saying, "First of all, stop whining." And I think that's good advice. That's good advice for the left. Stop whining. What good does it do? Where is it going to take you? And it's just a waste of energy. And then she said, "But the other point is that my advice to you is that you need to be a mensch." It's Yiddish. You can Google it.

But then she says, "I can't define mensch for you, but a mensch is someone who loves her own life enough to enjoy a bottle of wine with friends, to enjoy a good dinner, to marvel at the sunrise, to take care of the children and the elders. But a mensch is also someone who loves the world enough to put her shoulder on history's wheel when history demands it." You work that out day to day. You work out how you will love your life and love the world, how you will be an activist and a decent person. Work that out collectively, work that out individually. And so that's my advice to everybody. Be a mensch. Demand the impossible and get busy. So let me read just one... You tell me. I'll read a little bit from this book, and it's from the beginning about the imagination.

And it begins, "What if? That simple, humble question might be the single spark that can ignite a massive prairie fire, provoking us to leap beyond personal speculation into the vortex of political struggle and social action. This is how it's always been. This is the world as we've always known it, but why is it so? Who benefits and who suffers? How do we get here and where do we really want to go? What if we took a radically different angle of regard and questioned the insistent dogma of common sense? What if we unleashed our wildest imaginations? The what if question might then blow open the spectrum of acceptable possibilities and take us down a rabbit hole or up into orbit onto one of life's restless and relentless journeys, exploring, experimenting, orbiting and spinning, inventing and adapting, struggling toward knowledge and enlightenment, freedom and liberation. Fighting to know more in order to do more.

"All's well says the town crier, making rounds through the village and lighting the lamps for the night. Perhaps it's simply a reassuring thought for the townspeople, or perhaps there's a more malevolent message the toxic propaganda that the status quo is inevitable and that there's no alternative to the way things are. The dissident, the artist, the agitator, the dreamer, and the activist respond, no, all is not well. The current moment is neither immutable nor inescapable. Its imperfections are cause for alarm. For the exploited and the oppressed, the status quo is an ongoing act of violence. Activists announce through their lives and their work that a new world is in the making. Get busy."

Page May: Thanks so much for listening to another episode of The Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about books for the movement.

Monica Trinidad: We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad...

Page May: ... and Page May.

Monica Trinidad: Two Chicago-based organizers.



Page May: Special shout out to The Lit Review's very own sponsor, the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership out of Kalamazoo College.

Monica Trinidad: Keep your eyes and ears open for another episode next Monday, same time, same place.

Page May: Want to hear about a specific book? Email us at [thelitreviewchicago@gmail.com](mailto:thelitreviewchicago@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook.

Monica Trinidad: And if you like this episode, give it a shout out on Twitter or Instagram. Our handle is [@LitReviewChi](https://twitter.com/LitReviewChi).

Page May: Keep reading.