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Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. You know how I feel today. I'm so happy to be with you, I am so happy to know you, and I'm so happy to be with you on a Friday. We love a Friday bonus episode. Y'all know it. This one is extra special to me.

Today you're in for a treat because we're talking about the brand new movie, *Surprised by Oxford*, with the author of the memoir that inspired it, Carolyn Weber. And yes, I'm making my acting debut, the sunrise and the sunset of my acting career in this movie. Let's go.

But before we dive in, I want you to know that you could actually win two free tickets to see *Surprised by Oxford*. Get this. We're giving away 100 tickets to see *Surprised by Oxford* in theaters on September 27th. 100 tickets, you guys.

All you have to do, make sure you're following *Surprised by Oxford* on Instagram and then like and share the post about the giveaway. We'll link to it in the show notes so you know which Instagram post. But it'll be very clear. And you'll be entered to win two tickets for *Surprised by Oxford* and a theater near you.

But listen, the film is playing nationwide for a limited time. So regardless, don't miss your chance to see my favorite book turned into a film in theaters on September 27th, you know, and maybe catch my cameo. Let's go. Go to *Surprised by Oxford* on Instagram now to win those tickets.

And today on the show, like I mentioned, I get to talk to my friend Dr. Carolyn Weber, who is the author of *Surprised by Oxford*. Y'all, when I tell you I fell in love with this book the first time I read it, and I think it is still a really beautiful read that you would enjoy as well as seeing the movie.

I cannot wait for you to hear Carolyn talk about writing it and now seeing it come to life on the big screen. It is a fascinating conversation. Carolyn's an award-winning author, professor, and international speaker who recently relocated here to Nashville, and is a professor at New College Franklin in Franklin, Tennessee.

Surprised by Oxford was her first memoir and one among other distinctions, The Grace Irwin Award, which is the largest award for Christian writing in Canada. You guys, I mean, I'm telling you this book. If you love Oxford and British culture, if you love C. S. Lewis, if you love a good love story, if you just love a great book that turns into a great movie, you're going to love *Surprised by Oxford*.

It's in theaters, again, September 27th but for a really limited time. So grab your tickets, go see the movie. You can go to surprisedbyoxford.movie to find out when and where it's playing near you. So here's my conversation with my friend, Carolyn Weber.

[00:02:47] <Music>

Annie: Carolyn Weber, welcome to That Sounds Fun.

Carolyn: Thank you so much for having me, Annie.

Annie: I am so thrilled. I mean, I know you know this. I kind of can't believe I get to talk to you. I cannot believe. I mean, when I met you a year and a half ago, I was not cool, Carolyn. I remember. I was so starstruck by you.

Carolyn: Oh, the feeling's mutual. I'm still not cool.

Annie: No, it's amazing. Okay, let's jump to the end of the story, and then we'll back up.

Carolyn: Okay.

Annie: You are the author of the memoir *Surprised by Oxford*. You're also the main character in a feature film that people can watch in theaters on Wednesday, September 27th. How weird is that?

Carolyn: It's very weird.

Annie: It have to be so weird.

Carolyn: Weirdly surreal to be a character in a film. It feels so strange to say. Oh, Rose Reid plays me. It's lovely she does. It's a huge upgrade.

Annie: She does a beautiful job.

Carolyn: She does a beautiful job. It's great to have a better version of me out there. But it is a very surreal thing.

Annie: So is Ryan Whitaker the one who got the whole thing started?

Carolyn: Mm-hmm.

Annie: So did he just call you? We y'all already friends? How does this go from your book exists for a decade and then someone calls your phone one day and says, "Can I make it into a movie?"

Carolyn: It was super crazy act of grace. So I was in Canada at the time. We'd moved back up to Canada to be with my parents. I'm in a supermarket with my boys wrestling in a cart like kids do in a shoppers cart, and I get this phone call from Ryan Whitaker and had no idea really who he was and said he wanted to make a film. I was like, "Okay, sure, whatever."

I'd been asked before a few times and had been through student ministries, and I just... the integrity of the film was really important to me, so I wasn't sure.

My agent called me back later and said, "You know, I think he's really got a lot of integrity and a lot of vision and this is who he is, and this is his work. This is his team. You should really just give him a shot." He called back and I listened again in check out buying groceries. I just really appreciated him from the start.

We had several conversations after that, and our friendship grew over the phone. I appreciated his vision, his other team members I was able to talk with. And then found out, completely accidentally, that his favorite professor ever was Greg Wilber, who had introduced him to film, had film nights at his house years and years ago, really planted that passion for film in his heart.

And Greg Wilber was a friend of mine through classical learning and education. We'd met through other conferences for years. So I actually have a picture of the three of us going out for dinner six, seven years ago at a conference in the States.

Annie: That is how long this journey has been?

Carolyn: Yes. And we didn't even know we all knew each other.

Annie: Six or seven years that you've been...?

Carolyn: Yeah, probably about that.

Annie: Oh my gosh, Carolyn.

Carolyn: So I would say it really heated up in the last five years, but Greg, Ryan and I were all then friends in that group. And Greg Wilber is the president of New College Franklin where I was invited to come teach in the Nashville area. So all of that is incredibly... I had no idea that they were all connected.

So Ryan did do the screenplay and Earnest adapted, worked really hard on it, did a beautiful job, checked in with me often, and was very thoughtful about it, and about the integrity of it and representing my family and people you love and care for.

And then COVID hit, so we thought that killed things, for sure. But actually, God really opened a lot of doors while we were filming and we got into places in England and Oxford that you can't normally get into at all, even without COVID restrictions. So it really accelerated towards the end in terms of filming and coming together.

Annie: I cannot believe it's been that long of a thing.

Carolyn: Yes, yeah. It was definitely before COVID where we started all of this.

Annie: So a lot of our friends listening might know this, but I'll tell a short version of story anyway. I was sent your book. It released in 2011, I was sent the manuscript in 2011 and fell in love. I mean, truly one of the best books I've ever read, one of the best memoirs. It was one of those that made me want to write memoirs because it's just-

Carolyn: Oh, that's kind of you.

Annie: ...so good. It was so good. What does it feel like? I cannot imagine this with my books. What does it feel like for someone who you really trust like Ryan? I mean, Ryan's incredibly gifted, but he did leave things out and had to shift some things to make it a movie that is-

Carolyn: Yeah, 400-page memoir.

Annie: Four hundred-page memoir, and the movie is an hour, fifty-seven. So how do you come to terms with that part as the author and the main character?

Carolyn: That's a great question. Coleridge once said, Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that the hardest part about art is selection, you know, what you leave out. You have to live with what's left out. And it is hard. It's wordy. It's a long memoir.

But he checked in with me on the various cuts and adjustments he was making to try and make the story speak to more modern audience perhaps, collapse a few characters just because of the length, and it's hard to track so many characters. And he had it down to actually something that was still, you know, three hours long and two and a half hours long. We kept sort of tucking. So there was tucks and changes even up to the last minute, which I understood.

And he had the creative license, he and his team, but they were very thoughtful about checking in with me about it, and eventually putting more of the focus on primarily the Oxford story rather than the preamble and that sort of thing. And I entirely understood why.

Annie: In the book and in the movie, I mean, you grew up with your mom and dad and then your dad goes to jail. Are your parents still living?

Carolyn: No. My father had passed away seven years ago. My mother is almost 90; she's still alive. And to clarify, my father was charged with fraud. He was very poor, Annie. He'd grown up going to school without shoes, you know, that sort of thing, a depression child, and was a self-made very wealthy man. And he happened to lose all that business primarily through eventually fraud and difficult things that he was into with real estate ventures and whatnot.

So the FBI equivalent, the Mounties, were all Canadian Mounties came to our home, all that sort of thing. Probably portrayed relatively gently in the film-

Annie: Really?

Carolyn: It was a very difficult process. So he didn't serve jail time but he was caught in the court system for quite some time and his life was absolutely dismantled and he lost. He had a nervous breakdown as a result, and then had some mental illness and was in and out of our lives after that. So my mom raised us as a single mom, essentially.

The film does, I think, a good job of pointing at that respectfully, but we were extremely poor. I had siblings I was helping to provide for my family. And it was a very, very complicated season. We all go through different things, but we had a lot of people through our homes, a lot of fear, and a lot of unseen sort of struggles and poverty.

Annie: So many of our friends listening hope to write a memoir or want to write a memoir. How do you handle... This is one of the things I get better at the more books I write. But I did not handle this as well at the beginning. How do you handle difficult family stories when you couldn't have known when you wrote *Surprised by Oxford* that it would ever be a film people would watch? I mean, you don't even have... I mean, I've seen the movie a couple of times. I don't think you have siblings in the movie.

Carolyn: Right. And that was a directorial decision towards the last minute actually just to streamline some things because it just gets too complicated to follow all the figures.

Annie: So what's it like for your family, and how do you do that well? How do you tell that well?

Carolyn: That's a really difficult question. I took that really, really seriously. I have a friend of mine, Tabitha, who is a beautiful person—one of those soul sisters that walked through me with the early edits. And she said, "Just write it from your heart and put that early transcript in a chest. It goes to the chest."

And then I think it was Anne Lamott who said at one point, "Write as though your parents are dead." But I couldn't do that. I think I wanted to write carefully and with respect, but also with the truth. At the time my father was alive, I did give him the transcript before I went to press. We were in touch, we had stayed in touch here and there. We were always close. But I didn't think, Annie, he would actually be mentally able to read it.

Annie: Wow.

Carolyn: He was virtually homeless in subsidized housing at that point, but he'd been homeless here and there. And he read it one night with a cup of coffee and reached out to me, and we talked. And it was not easy at the time. But for several months we've talked through a lot of things and it opened the doors to the really real, and a year or two later, he gave his life to Christ and we had a few years with him before he passed.

Annie: Carolyn!

Carolyn: So my youngest child is named for my dad.

Annie: I think the Anne Lamott quote of "Write like your parents are dead," I actually don't think that serves our stories very well. It removes the honor part of what we can honor. I've always found that quote to be unhelpful.

Carolyn: I understand what she's saying. It's very difficult, you know, because of how do we honor the people, perhaps at times that have very much hurt us or difficulties and complexities we don't understand. But we have to also answer for our own hearts before God. And that commandment to honor our parents doesn't mean we ignore the truth or we lie. But we have to think about, again, obedience and how that often feels like sacrifice. And at times it pays out in the future in ways we don't understand.

Annie: Yeah, that's right. I think it's really interesting... Honor your father and mother is not honoring your father and mother while they're living.

Carolyn: Yeah. There's lots of ways to honor and to think about how to be appropriate about testimony.

Annie: Teah. It is a hard part of the memoir life.

Carolyn: It is.

Annie: And I also have my point of view.

Carolyn: We all have our truth, sure.

Annie: So your siblings, my siblings, your cousins, my cousins, our parents, they all saw the same story through different Kaleidoscope lens.

Carolyn: Right.

Annie: But then your version of—and this might be true for *Surprised by Oxford*—your version of you and Kent meeting and you and Kent and all of that, he would have a whole different movie.

Carolyn: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think the golden rule applies as it always does, right? Do unto others as you would have done unto you. I would try to write about someone else as I would like to be written about. And if I can't then, change the identifying characteristic.

Annie: Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's exactly right. So Ryan calls you in the grocery store, he starts writing. So he is the one who turns your book into the screenplay. Is your husband reading along with you the whole way through at this point?

Carolyn: He is, yes. And bits and pieces. Although I talk a lot at him. So he usually gets the verbal. And he's like, "Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay, honey, have you used up your words at the other day?" But he understood the decisions and things. My husband is terribly introverted. So this is probably about as awful for him as can be imagined. But he's also very much about sharing the gospel and hopefully encouraging others.

You know, when I first wrote it as a memoir, Annie, I never anticipated. I was always an academic writer. So I was just writing really from a place of my heart between me and God, thinking about my unbelieving family and friends, what would I want to say with them, how would I write something with a foot in both worlds? I did it as my sabbatical project with three children under three and hiding in a closet writing on two-by-fours while he took the kids a lot to the beach or out. I just needed to write it. Even though I had been told not to write it or else I probably wouldn't get academic tenure at a secular place.

Annie: Oh, really? Why?

Carolyn: Which is why I waited until I had tenure. Because in secular academia, it's very complicated to write about your Christian faith or even identify yourself as a Christian.

Annie: I did not know that. So if you are teaching... because you aren't teaching seminary, you're teaching-

Carolyn: At this point, I'm teaching in a secular university. Mainstream. And I had been in many places. That would be the general unspoken rule, although sometimes spoken mentors take you aside or whatnot not to...

Annie: And is it just Christian faith, or is it if you're Jewish, if you're Hindu, if you're... don't talk about faith?

Carolyn: I would say it's primarily Christian faith.

Annie: Interesting.

Carolyn: You'd be amazed at some of the interviews I've had and jobs experiences.

Annie: In this? Oh, no, back then-

Carolyn: No, in secular places where I know things were said to me that would not have been said in interviews regarding other stripes of religions or they would have been sued. So there is an antagonistic approach, especially to Christians. It's really interesting.

There's various forms of persecution and no means is this on the same level as other brutal forms. But there is the subtle persecution that pushes particularly, I think, intellectuals and academics to the margin because they have to make a decision how they're going to play their game. I do know some that have remained very covert, you know, wise as serpents, innocent doves who have a very deep faith and they serve by keeping quiet, loving students, living with integrity. That's absolutely fine, too. But if you choose to be more outspoken or publish on your faith, there will be backlash.

Annie: So when this happens, when this book becomes a movie, does that damage your teaching career?

Carolyn: No, because I'm at this fantastic place.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Carolyn: I'm at New College Franklin, which is a wonderful, small, classical Christian community of spiritual formation. It's just a delight. It's icing on the cake. I'm not sure quite how it would go down at other places. I have relationships now with a lot of places, which helps. I think that helps Christians. If you can have relationships in which people know you do truly care for them, then it creates a space for conversation. But right off the get-go, it can be a fairly... usually it would be a check in a negative box for you prior to an interview.

Annie: Carolyn, I had no idea. Wow, I had no idea. Does the University of Oxford have thoughts about people making movies and telling stories about when they were there? I mean, people do it all the time.

Carolyn: People do it all the time.

Annie: I talk about University of Georgia all the time.

Carolyn: No. I think that they've been... I mean, they've been lovely. Plus a lot of my Christian professors and things and those that are still alive are very supportive there and excited. And I think a place like Oxford, not to over-idealize it, has its problems too, Annie, but I think there really is a tradition of lots of conversation and ideas. Maybe it's, you know, the idea that Lewis said, right? With the Persians they debated things twice, sober over and once drunk. I think the pub culture helps.

You can have a debate and a tutorial where you're responsible for your ideas because there's only a handful of you. And then you can go to the pub and have a few pints and everybody can debate again. There's kind of this jovial, interesting conversation about ideas. But people get quite their knickers in a knot, they associate disagreement with hatred — and that's a shame. It's lost the Aristotelian notion of entertaining many ideas without necessarily accepting any of them.

I think if we can bring more civility back into that conversation, like the Founding Fathers had, you know, those sort of things—I'm speaking as a Canadian here, but I have a great respect for the American tradition of having lots of conversations within freedoms—then it's a much more open table. And that's where Jesus met people too. He met them in all different ways and stripes where they were at.

Annie: I think if I would have read *Surprised by Oxford* or seen the movie before I picked a college, I think Oxford would have been very attractive to me based on this story. I mean, will you explain...? I mean, the classes are not big. There's five or six, seven people sitting in a professor's office, and that is your class?

Carolyn: Absolutely.

Annie: That is crazy. So is that what you do the whole four years?

Carolyn: Yes, that's what's called the Oxbridge system. So it's a tutorial-based system. My MPhil class, for instance, was a two-year program, and we had five students that were selected.

Annie: So you and four others did all your classes together?

Carolyn: We did our classes together. We might be in different... sometimes different tutorials. You know, there would be people that would dovetail in to take it for different reasons or different programs. Some might be a little bit bigger than others, some might be 10 or 20 people, because they're serving a course in class in something else.

Then there are large lectures that you can attend, and they're a little more public, or they would be for all students. But your own particular program would just consist of a handful of you that had been selected by those supervisors.

And then the supervisor does take great personal care in you. You know, really cares for you. So I also had this environment of meeting in their offices with tea or scotch but also going to their homes for dinner. They cared for the whole person. The provost of my college at St. Peter's held my engagement party because he knew I didn't have a father that was able to do it.

Annie: Wow. And you went on to be a professor at Oxford.

Carolyn: Yes.

Annie: So you switched from the student in the couch to that teacher behind the desk?

Carolyn: Yes. I taught visiting American students for a while. I was finishing my MPhil for some teaching experience and then-

Annie: What is Mphil?

Carolyn: An MPhil is a Master's of philosophy. So it's the master's program that prepares you for the doctorate. And then I did teach some courses before I moved to the States.

Annie: Wow. And you're—I mean, I want to read this—the first female dean of St. Peter's College at Oxford. I mean, you will forever be that. That is probably hung up on a

wall somewhere there, right? Will you tell us what that means for those of us like America? Anybody could be listening from anywhere in the world and not know what it means to be a female dean of one of the colleges of Oxford.

Carolyn: Well, it was a wonderful turn of events because when I arrived, Annie, at Oriel College is where I matriculated women had only been attending for a few years—it's hard for us to believe that—in the early 90s. And really the only college that historically had women was Somerville College. And women couldn't take their degrees until, you know, gosh, 1920s, 30s, something like that, at least. So a lot of the colleges did not have women until much later.

So my matriculation photo at Oriel, there's only a handful of us women, which has its pros and cons. But when I went to St. Peter's first as women's advisor, and then was teaching we were slightly smaller college. So usually there's a senior dean, a dean, and a junior dean. But we just had a senior dean and a dean. And the dean was in charge of a lot of the student relationships and overseeing students and things. And both were men. And our dean had to leave back for Scotland for a family situation. I stepped in temporarily and then they asked me to stay on permanently.

Annie: Wow. And the difference between Oxford and University of Georgia is when I was in Georgia, we had schools. Adderall School is where I went for all my education. But at Oxford, the colleges are within Oxford University.

Carolyn: Right.

Annie: But whatever one you enter in, you're staying there your whole educational career?

Carolyn: Not necessarily. It's a quirky thing, because I think as North Americans we arrived, and we think there's going to be a big campus. And that's when I looked for in these big gates that's in Oxford.

Annie: Yeah, that's right. Welcome.

Carolyn: All ye enter here and despair, you know, or whatever. And they're not. They're all these little colleges that are within a city. So there's a town-gown dichotomy. But what's really beautiful about them is that they're sort of hidden gems. So you can see them from some of the roads but over the walls and things like that. But when you do enter into the gates through the porter's lodge, it is like Narnia. You know, you go in and that opens into gardens and these beautiful libraries and quads that open way, way back.

So it's sort of these little cities within a city. It's like Russian dolls. You can walk right past and not know. You'll just see this old medieval door and have no idea that it opens into something massive. So it's sort of like that. But you will matriculate at a college, which means you're sort of a lifelong member of that college. But you can move from colleges for jobs or for research positions.

So that's what happened for me. I matriculated at Oriel, it'll always have a very special place in my heart. That's why I began my studies. But then I eventually moved to St. Peter's to be a women's advisor and then to teach and then to be the dean. And then at that point, I was looking at moving to New College for another position. So you can move among the colleges and you're part of the larger University of Oxford, but you have a home college.

And what's so lovely about your home colleges, they care for you forever. They're just wonderful. I think what's nice is you're not part of this huge juggernaut. You don't feel as anonymous that you're just in this sea awash. You can enjoy all the things at the larger university and the massive library, the bodily in, and all the different events and orchestras and concerts and things. And you can visit the different colleges, especially as friends. And all the colleges have their own library and their own pubs. But then you're also part of a little family that knows you well.

And the porter... you laugh in the film. But the porters are like that. They know everything about your lives. They know your mail. They sort your mail.

Annie: And they talk to you every time you walk in.

Carolyn: Oh, who are you dating now? Love. Oh, I don't know if I like him. Oh, you know, you came in a little late last night. It's really quite funny they know everything about you.

[00:23:21] <Music>

Sponsor: Okay, I am just whispering in here in the middle of this conversation. Do not forget to go follow *Surprised by Oxford* on Instagram and like and share the giveaway posts so you can try and win free tickets to see the movie. They're choosing winners on September 25th at 12:00 PM Eastern.

To enter, all you have to do is follow *Surprised by Oxford* on Instagram, then like, and share the post about the giveaway. There are 100 tickets. So don't miss your chance to win and head to the theater on September 27th to see *Surprised by Oxford*. Y'all are going to love it.

Okay, let's go back and keep chatting with Carolyn.

[00:23:57] <Music>

Annie: Is your doctorate in philosophy?

Carolyn: It's called a doctor to philosophy. It's in humanities. So any humanities, which for me was Romantic literature.

Annie: So I want us to talk about the movie. So my last question before we turn to the movie is to call on that part of your brain. Will you tell us... if you could say, what's one thing we could do to be better thinkers? I think, like you said, we live in a time where being a varied thinker is not as celebrated. People want you to think one thing and stay there. How do we work on being better thinkers?

Carolyn: Oh, that's such a great question. And that's a huge question because I teach logic and rhetoric and all the trivium in that to my students. But one of them is to read. I know that sounds so redundant. I'm not saying that in an elitist way or that you have to be just this massive biblio file, but to read. Because I do think, as I say to my kids, reading, if you can read anything, you can open yourself to any world and you can research anything. My grandfather used to say that to me in Hungarian. So you can find the answer to anything in a book.

Annie: Wow.

Carolyn: But weighing then a conversation between, you know, the book and yourself, or ideas in yourself, I think that's what, of course, what was so astounding about something like Revelation. Reading the Bible for yourself. So reading and thinking for yourself, sitting with something, asking... I'm a big believer in the Socratic method—asking yourself a lot of questions as you read and accept things, asking other people questions, being open to their stories, their input.

I think question starts with quest for a reason. So just being open to thinking about the adventure behind things as opposed to coming to things very, very closed-minded.

Annie: It's been interesting because I think as culture has gotten louder about don't ask questions about certain things and be very... this is what this says, and go and don't... I have found myself being more like, hold on, maybe if everyone's telling me not to ask questions, I want to ask more questions.

Carolyn: Right. Absolutely.

Annie: I think I felt in my early 20s more stuck with all my beliefs, and the world said, Ask questions. And I said, no, we don't ask questions. And the older I've gotten, the more I've pursued that, I think. And reading. I think you're right. I think reading is the trick of it all. Of reading people who we don't necessarily agree with or understand.

Carolyn: Mm-hmm.

Annie: Tell me if this resonates with how you teach your students or your experience. I think sometimes we don't want to read people we don't agree with because we are afraid their ideas will take over our brain. Right?

Carolyn: Right.

Annie: So talk about that for a second. How do we read people we don't agree with and learn what to take in?

Carolyn: Or how to be discerning readers, right?

Annie: Yes.

Carolyn: Well, I think the Lord's refrain in the New Testament of do not be afraid over and over and over again is good reason. Our God isn't fragile and He's not gonna shatter because we read something. It's not the books themselves that need to be censored. It's the idea that... what should we discard and what should we keep?

We're given so much information, Annie, so many facts and very little wisdom. So I think the idea of being open. Reading is a way of asking questions. You know, you're reading into someone's life or into someone's fictional character that they're exploring ideas or themes through, or even into historical facts and there's an inherent questioning in that.

I think the idea of being able to just sit and weigh things and make all our thoughts captive to Christ. And not a cultural ease, you know, not this kind of veneer of Christianity either, that we're going to sit with things and about what we think we should think, or how we think we should feel. There's so much more that we add to scripture and we add to Jesus that isn't there that comes from our fear too.

Fear is the great disabler. It's the mind-forged manacles, as Blake says, that keeps us trapped. But there's no fear in the truth, and there's no fear in Jesus. And bringing back to Him what we are reading in prayer and in contemplation and against scripture I think is very important.

- Annie:** Thank you. That helps me. I really appreciate that.
- Carolyn:** Well, I hope it helps because that's what I'm trying to do.
- Annie:** Yeah, it really, I mean-
- Carolyn:** I don't know but I'm trying.
- Annie:** Part of my job is I read everyone. I mean, everyone sits where you're sitting, I read all their books. And so trying to, even in my own life, not become a cornucopia that is unthoughtful.
- Carolyn:** Oh.
- Annie:** I'm very happy to become a thoughtful cornucopia of ideas. Just to swallow everything you're fed cornucopia, I don't want to be.
- Carolyn:** Absolutely.
- Annie:** And I want to put my phone down more and read more.
- Carolyn:** Yes, that is the goal.
- Annie:** Okay. Let's talk about the movie, Surprise by Oxford. You and I got to see the movie last week together with a bunch of our friends, and I got two reviews that I want to present to you because I think I would love for you to respond to them. They both liked it, so don't worry. Don't worry. Sorry. Sorry. I have not met a person that did not like it.
- Carolyn:** That's good.
- Annie:** One friend said, "That story of faith was beautiful, and I loved that there was a love story in it too." The other friend said, "That was totally a love story and then there was like a little faith in it."
- Carolyn:** Oh.
- Annie:** How fascinating! They were sitting in the same room and one of them saw it as a love story with a faith line and one of them saw it as a faith story with a love line. Is that happening? What do you think about that?
- Carolyn:** Well, that hearkens back exactly to what we were saying earlier if everybody sits in a different truth. But that doesn't take away from the truth that lie too deep for frost.

It is a romantic story. It is a story in which I did fall in love with my husband, but it's also a bigger story around falling in love with Christ and how He holds all those stories. And all our loves point to that.

So it would make sense that they would pick up on both and perhaps what their hearts are more in tuned for at the moment. Sometimes when we watch movies or read books, they speak to us very differently later, at different points.

Annie: You could have knocked me over with a feather when they both told me that-

Carolyn: That's so funny.

Annie: ...about two and a half minutes apart. I was like, Wow, y'all were in the same room and you walked out with the same two core ideas, but 70%, 30%; 30%, 70%. I thought it was fascinating.

Carolyn: That's so funny.

Annie: I know. I mean, it is so unique, Caroline, because the movie beautifully parallels your love for your husband, your love for God.

Carolyn: Mm.

Annie: So will you talk a little bit about... is Kent the reason you became a believer?

Carolyn: Oh, that's such a great question. No. I think he was the conduit. I think no one can be the reason why you become a believer. No one except Jesus. It's dangerous to conflate those two. The movie condensed it somewhat, but I'm very, very grateful that it did present truly how I was in love with him. I realized I loved Kent by the end of that first year. And I did go running after him in the rain.

Annie: I hope so.

Carolyn: In a dress.

Annie: That dress Rose has on is gorgeous.

Carolyn: I had more of a top shop. I was a student on a scholarship.

Annie: We know a shop top too. I love it.

Carolyn: You know what? It was. And I took my heels off.

Annie: But you really went running in the rain after him.

Carolyn: I did. I took the wrong road, so I didn't actually pursue the taxi. I went the wrong way, which is so metaphor for my life. So I went the wrong way and missed him completely. Actually, we were friends for about a couple years after that, just long distance. He was working in DC, I was in England.

So we always had an interesting connection, but we had two very different lives. I never thought I would even possibly see him again. So I think what that allowed, Annie, in a way was a great gift of pulling the threads apart to actually make sure it wasn't just him.

Annie: Wow.

Carolyn: I went to Bible study and had my own church and my own circle of friends and my own pursuit because no one else can fulfill that longing for us. Anything else, people included, are an idol. C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* presents even the idea of mother love, a woman who loves her son so much she can't imagine him being in hell. And that's such an idealistic love that we all really worship. But even that's a trap.

Anything that we put ahead of God is an idol and it's only going to disappoint us. And we're going to disappoint others too. So we have to have that first and foremost relationship. And when we're Christians we're married to Jesus first regardless of our status. All our decisions, our heart have to come before Him first. We're his beloved.

Marriage has only made me even more convinced of that. As much as we have the privilege of growing to know and be sanctified along someone else, it still is us the heft answer for our hearts. It's not us before God going, "Hey, what about the other guy?" Even in our friendships too-

Annie: And with your children, I imagine.

Carolyn: And our Children. Oh my gosh, children especially. I think I can see why Lewis chose that. You know, I used to struggle a lot with how can hell be hell with the people I love in it? And he addresses that in *The Great Divorce*. So dead on that it has to be our own decision before God. And that's the beauty and the individualism of it.

Annie: I sat with a friend yesterday, and she's not married and doesn't have kids yet. We talked about the pressure she feels about the people she loves in her life who aren't

believers yet. And I said to her, I think this is practice for when you do have a husband and kids because you also cannot control their faith.

Carolyn: No.

Annie: Just like you can't control your roommate's faith or your family's faith or your cousin's faith or your whoever's faith. And I said, I feel like you're just getting this practice of like the people I love desperately, I can only live in front of them. And I think Kent must have done that beautifully in real life. He certainly did it beautifully in the book and in the movie of "This is who I am and this is what I stand for and you're welcome to be in my life."

Carolyn: Absolutely. Absolutely. No, I think when someone walks their talk that really helps as Christians, but we're always gonna stumble. You know, we're always gonna misrepresent to somebody. But even if you have somebody represent the faith to you or you come through a great church wounding, you know, not to throw the baby out with the baptism water either.

Annie: That's cute.

Carolyn: Just because we're all flawed and fallible or there's sin doesn't mean that the truth doesn't endure. He wants our own personal relationship. You know, when I was thinking about the faith, Annie, it was so interesting. I thought, "Gosh, why doesn't anyone else know our thoughts? Like, why don't we walk around with this big thought bubble above our heads everyone else can't read?"

But now I realize how absolutely mortifying that would be. But only God and I know that. And that's such proof of grace for me that every thought we have can take us closer or farther away from Him. And that's all we can control. And sometimes we can't even control that. We just have to hand that over too. It's not about anyone else.

Annie: Our pastor taught on Sunday, and one of the things he said is Jesus said, "I'll make you fishers of men. Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." How many times have we heard that? Like a gazillion, right?

Carolyn: Mm-hmm.

Annie: And he says, "Notice who is doing the making." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's not me. It's not me to make myself a fisher."

Carolyn: Right.

- Annie:** In the end, I think what I'm learning, and your story tells me this in *Surprised by Oxford*, it tells me this, script tells me this, the grace of it all is we have very little control.
- Carolyn:** We have very little control. Mm-Hmm. Mm-Hmm.
- Annie:** We have a lot of choices and we make the best ones we can, our thought bubbles stay as true to God as possible, but He is the one that's making us.
- Carolyn:** Right. He's gonna fill our nets. We can hook people.
- Annie:** Talk about that with *Surprised by Oxford*. This is a tool that people can use to bring someone who may not believe everything they believe to a movie theater.
- Carolyn:** Right. I hope so. I mean, that's why I wrote the book was I wanted so badly to share the relevancy of faith, you know? Lewis also says people don't believe that their faith is relevant to their lives. I've had so many friends, Annie, that are not only not believers. I operated in that world. But then also friends of mine who did come from a family of faith or Catholic parents or whatever else, and they felt as they grew up it just wasn't relevant for them. They just didn't have any space for that in their lives. And how did my parents' faith have any relevancy to our culture today?
- Annie:** Right,
- Carolyn:** And that idea of entering into it and making it your own before God. And I really hope with this film that people can come of all stripes, you know, people can bring unbelieving friends, skeptical friends. Maybe they have a faith that they're questioning themselves. Maybe they're unsure about their faith or they're asking questions or they think that God can't withstand those questions, that it would encourage them to ask the questions or to ask them more deeply. But that any type of person could go.
- Annie, I think of my siblings, I think of my friends. Who could I bring into the theater with me? Because, you know, it is like Paul says before King Agrippa, "I wish that you had everything I had except these chains." It's that joy. It's not a heavy-handed wanting you to alter call film. There's a place for that too. There's a place for everything, you know.
- Annie:** Of course.
- Carolyn:** There's a place for the guy on the corner with the placard saying "The end is coming." That works. Sometimes it speaks to some people. But lots of different gifts, different voices, and wanting to have a conversation between those who

watch the film and their own soul or their friends that they sit with, that would be invitational.

Annie: It was one of my favorite things about it. When my two friends had those two responses, I went, everyone who walks in the theater, we have no idea how they're gonna walk out. Did they just see a faith story or did they just see a love story? Or did they just see an intellectual story? I mean, I've never been this close to a book that turned into a movie. Surprisingly neither of us have. I've never watched this before. So it's been so amazing to see the response. We also both got to be in the movie. You are a much better actress than I am.

Carolyn: I'm just a professor.

Annie: That's right.

Carolyn: We know how to act.

Annie: Talk about that. I mean, you literally got to stand... Tell the behind-the-scenes story of where you scene is in the film.

Carolyn: Well, Ryan came to me with the idea and it was such a beautiful inside joke. He mentioned it to me at first and I thought, "Oh my goodness." But he said, I would love for you to read these lines from Lewis about longing and how all joy reminds, because I know they were important lines to you at a C. S. Lewis meeting years ago. And it will be in the same room, in the same building, in the same location in which you attended before you were a believer the very first C. S. Lewis society meeting.

Annie: Wow.

Carolyn: And it was an incredible circle of grace to go back to that room and to say those same lines, now myself with a faith. And I remember when I first heard those lines walking back on the cobblestone streets at night back to my college really disturbed by them, unsure what to do by them. Because we've all felt fleeting joy and we've all felt immense sorrow and grief. And what do we do with holding those in the same hand?

So I think that's what goes back to this film is Ken Carp and I are joking about, you know, it's not really romance, it's not really faith. You know, how would you put it on Netflix, you know? It's got all these different facets and in a way we don't want to label it as such that would put it in a box. And I think it's a paradox film. There should be a paradox genre.

- Annie:** Yeah, yeah, Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's Right.
- Carolyn:** It's kind of all those things and facets that spin. And that's how I remember feeling when I was walking home from that talk. So being able to have a small part in that scene was really quite fun.
- Annie:** I loved it. I leaned over to my friend, I was like, "That's the author." I was like, "Look, she's in the movie, in the room." Do you have a favorite scene now that... How many times have you seen the movie, do you think?
- Carolyn:** Oh gosh, handful of times now because we saw it in different places when they were still adding color and sound and that sort of thing.
- Annie:** We saw it together one time when they were still working on it.
- Carolyn:** Early on. Right, right. So it's been really beautiful to see it all come together with the full soundtrack and that as well.
- Annie:** Blown away. I think my two times seeing it we're about what, a year and a half apart a year apart.
- Carolyn:** Me too. Me too.
- Annie:** I mean, it is different when you put music back there. And the music is beautiful.
- Annie:** Oh, it's beautiful.
- Carolyn:** Nick Fox's score is beautiful. I love his music.
- Annie:** Oh, it's beautiful.
- Carolyn:** And the cinematography, you feel like you've gone on vacation.
- Annie:** Do you have a favorite scene to see?
- Carolyn:** Oh my goodness. They're all so wonderful. I mean, I love the scenes of the Boland because my heart is there, but the librarian's a hoot. The librarian scene-
- Annie:** Oh.
- Carolyn:** It's just the hoot.
- Annie:** Both of them...

Carolyn: They're both great.

Annie: They're so good. Rose running in the rain is the one for me. I want that dress so bad. It is the most beautiful. Because that's like a movie scene that you really did. You really did that.

Carolyn: I did. I did.

Annie: So it just is that is my fa... But I also love when she first... she... you first get to Oxford and she's plunking her luggage everywhere. I think that is so-

Carolyn: There's no elevators at Oxford. There's no elevators.

Annie: Are there bricks in here? And you say, "No, it's just all books."

Carolyn: Books.

Annie: You flew a suitcase of books from Canada too.

Carolyn: And shoes. You have to have shoes.

Annie: Oh, it's beautiful, Carolyn. I'm so excited for people to get to see it and to see it in the theater next week. I mean, you and I saw it in a smaller theater last week, but I mean, we're seeing it on the big screen in the next week. I'm so excited.

Carolyn: Oh, thank you. Me too.

Annie: I can't wait. Is there anything we didn't say about the film that you want to make sure we say?

Carolyn: No. Just I think, yeah, it's just a beautiful experience. They've done a lovely adaptation. I'm very happy with it. I hope it lands with people softly and gently and memorably.

Annie: It has for me. Clearly.

Carolyn: I'm glad.

Annie: ...for the last... What's 23 minus 11? 12. For the last 12 years, this has been an important story to me. So thank you.

Carolyn: Well, 12 is a good number.

Annie: Yes, that's right. That's exactly right. Thank you so, so much, Carolyn. Okay. The last question we always ask.

Carolyn: Okay.

Annie: Because the show is called That Sounds Fun,—I can't believe I'm asking Carolyn Weber this—Dr. Carolyn Weber, tell me what sounds fun to you.

Carolyn: Oh my gosh. Contrary to Doctor, I am fun.

Annie: You're fun. Oh my gosh.

Carolyn: My teenage boys might beg to disagree. Fun is cool. But what is fun? Oh my goodness. Okay. Netflix and snacks are fun. Chocolate's always fun.

Annie: What are you watching on Netflix? Is there a show we should check out?

Carolyn: Oh, I know this is hilarious. My daughter and I are entirely... Well, for ages we were addicted to *The Great British Baking Show*.

Annie: Oh, sure, sure.

Carolyn: Which my boys got drawn into, which makes me laugh my head off.

Annie: I love it.

Carolyn: But we love *Rick Steves*, the travel show.

Annie: Yeah, of course.

Carolyn: So there's lots of different things we always watch. We're always watching. We love to watch movies, period pieces, and things like that. But we love to just go around the world and-

Annie: Via *Rick Steves*.

Carolyn: Yes. He's funny.

Annie: He's amazing.

Carolyn: He's so delightfully nerdy. My daughter and I have a crush on him. He's so nerdy and sweet.

- Annie:** He's so wonderful. He never brings enough underwear. I'm like, "I am not washing these every night, Rick Steves. I'll just bring a bigger carry-on." He's like, bring a fanny pack for two weeks. I'm like, Rick, it doesn't have to be like that. It doesn't have to be like that. Have you watched, now this is me making an assumption about you. So forgive me if I'm off.
- Carolyn:** I don't mind because I'm sure it's gracious.
- Annie:** It is. Of course it is. PBS is one of my favorite subscriptions that my mother pays for for me. And *All Creatures Great and Small*.
- Carolyn:** Oh yes. That's darling
- Annie:** It's wonderful.
- Carolyn:** I love PBS. I love all British shows.
- Annie:** Did y'all watch *Sanditon* too?
- Carolyn:** Yes.
- Annie:** *Sanditon* was a little spicy for PBS show in season one, but they were much calmer in season two. I genuinely wonder, could I cancel everything else except something to give me Sports and just live on PBS? I think I might be able to.
- Carolyn:** I think you could. I think you could-
- Annie:** There's so much.
- Carolyn:** In BritBox.
- Annie:** So BritBox, I need to get about because I think that's how I can watch *Repair Shop*.
- Carolyn:** Oh, okay.
- Annie:** Have you watched *Repair Shop*?
- Carolyn:** No, I have not. I've heard about it.
- Annie:** Oh, I think your family would live for *Repair Shop*.
- Carolyn:** I have heard about it. I'm dying too because I live for British tv. I love British Tv.

Annie: And they are bringing these old antiques. And it's true. These people bring these beautiful antiques from their family and they fix them.

Carolyn: Like the *Roadshow*. We would watch the *Antiques Roadshow*.

Annie: It is the *Antique Roadshow*, but the thing is broken-

Carolyn: Oh.

Annie: ...and it gets repaired.

Carolyn: Oh, that's even more beautiful and symbolic. That gives me great hope.

Annie: [inaudible 00:43:50] makes me cry.

Carolyn: As I get older, that gives me great hope.

Annie: That's right. I'm [inaudible 00:43:54] in my own body.

Carolyn: This antique can be prepared.

Annie: That's Right. And for some reason in the US we can only see one season, but in the uk it's constant. I wonder if BritBox is my trick.

Carolyn: Okay, we should check because it is really a hoot when you go there. Antique stores and that... they're serious business — antiques. Like people here sort of do it on the fly but it's really serious.

Annie: I mean, one of the best episodes—then I will tell you someone sent me illegally—does King Charles takes antique from Buckingham Palace and has them repaired. It's so cool.

Carolyn: Really?

Annie: It's so cool.

Carolyn: Wow.

Annie: I feel like y'all need to get about that show.

Carolyn: Wait for him to live on the edge.

- Annie:** I know, right? Don't be a public person and talk about it, King Charles. So it's awesome.
- Carolyn:** Maybe they threw it during an argument or something.
- Annie:** Yeah, that's right. That's right. Something went sideways and "I need you to fix this." It's beautiful.
- Carolyn:** "Now, and don't tell Camilla."
- Annie:** That's right. Well, Carol, I can't thank you enough for the work you do.
- Carolyn:** Oh, thank you.
- Annie:** I mean, this is not your only book you've written. I also loved *Sex in the City of God*. You and I've never really talked about that. I loved that book as well.
- Carolyn:** Thank you.
- Annie:** How many other books? What else is there? *Holy Is the Day: Living in the Gift of the Present*. Is it those three?
- Carolyn:** Yeah, there's those three. I've done a lot of other academic writing and I'm working on a few others with literature and faith.
- Annie:** Oh yes.
- Carolyn:** Those were sort of things on... Yeah, they were started on the side because I wanted to write about them from my faith, but actually, they're sort of faith as a way of being more central than you realized.
- Annie:** I'm telling you, when *Sex in the City of God* released, I could not get off my couch quick enough to get it.
- Carolyn:** Aw.
- Annie:** Because of my feelings for *Surprised by Oxford*, I was like, "She's got another one? Let's go." I just loved it. So you're truly-
- Carolyn:** The title was a bit racy, but we were going for the pun.
- Annie:** I loved it. I mean, you are truly one of the best writers I've ever read.

Carolyn: Oh, that's very, very gracious to say.

Annie: It is incredible. So to see it as a movie is so fun too. All right, next Wednesday, September 27th.

Carolyn: It's coming up.

Annie: It's happening.

Carolyn: Yeah.

[00:45:52] <Music>

Outro: Oh, you guys, isn't she bril...? I mean, brilliant. Like level 100 brilliant. And if you don't win tickets, no worries. Grab all your people anyway, and go see the movie next Wednesday. [Surprisedbyoxford.movie](#) has all the details on where it will be playing on September 27th. This is a great movie to see with your friends or a date night. I think you're gonna love it.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me, that's how you can find me. And don't forget you can find the That Sounds Fun Podcast on Instagram @thatsoundsfunpodcast.

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home do something that sounds fun to you. I'll do the same. And today what sounds fun to me, well, you know I love a Friday. And today I'm headed down to speak in Florida for the next two weekends, which I'm stoked about. And I am just... I just love it. I love it. I'm so happy to get to see y'all and hang out with y'all.

And all my speaking is always at [Anniefdowns.com](#). If you ever wanted to show up somewhere where I am, I'd love it. So y'all have a great weekend. We'll see you back here Monday, which get ready for the mind-blown emoji button, Dr. Scott McKnight is here with us on Monday. Y'all this is a good one. Okay, have a good weekend.