

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Episode 13: Mary Trump
My Grandfather Was A Sociopath
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Abby Disney: Hi all, I'm Abby Disney and this is a special bonus episode of All Ears. I'm well aware that we just posted an episode saying that it was our last of the first season and it really was. But what could be exciting enough to rouse us from our beach chairs and hammocks and other places of estivation?

Mary Trump, of course! I have wanted to talk to Mary since the first whispers of her book. We are after all two prime examples of what is probably the smallest demographic in the world. And I was not waiting until September to have this conversation. So welcome to this special episode of All Ears. At this point, you probably know a lot about Mary-- if you've heard it.

She's the niece of Donald Trump. She has written an awesome book, really truly it's a page turner *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* about what it was like to grow up in that spectacularly dysfunctional family and about how the very specific person that is our president got shaped by wealth by parenting, by patriarchy, by cruelty.

Now it won't be news to you that families are dysfunctional each in their own way but trust me when I tell you that when rich people are dysfunctional, wow, can they ever hurt each other in very special ways!

And Mary's extremely well-read, well-educated, a masters in English and a PhD in Clinical Psychology. And in her book, she brings a really disciplined and cool eye and all that intelligence to the big questions about how we got here. So welcome, Mary.

Mary Trump: Thanks, Abby. It's really good to be here.

Abby Disney: So, Mary, the subtitle of your book is how my family created the world's most dangerous man. Um, you know, I think wealthy families create dangerous men as a matter of course, frankly, I think that's just hardwired into the project. So maybe you can tell me why you think they created the world's most dangerous man.

Mary Trump: As a private citizen, Donald would only be dangerous to himself and those close to him. The reason he is the world's most dangerous man is because he has by virtue of his position enormous power at his disposal. And, you know, not just a, in terms of brute force like nuclear arsenal, but in terms of his ability to destroy alliances, we've built up over the decades to back out of hard-won treaties unilaterally to commit acts of Islamophobia, racism and homophobia with you know, through executive orders. That's, that's why.

Abby Disney: You know, I, I actually would push back on you a little bit. I think they do create dangerous men and they can be a menace even as private citizens, but they do conflate their money with their worth. And so therefore what they've got to say in terms of

persuading politicians, swaying elections, lobbying, and therefore it's already disproportionately weighted toward them to begin with, but it also gives them this sort of feeling of legitimacy in arrogating power that should really be left to the democracy.

Mary Trump: Yeah, no, that's, that's true. And you're right. He would have been dangerous in broader ways, but certainly wouldn't have been the most, you know, and that's just because he's somehow wormed his way into the oval office.

Abby Disney: One of the things I've always kind of thought is that the dynamics of wealth and losing your way with wealth are a lot like the dynamics of addiction. Um, and you know, they say with alcoholics, they say one is too many and two is never enough. So, talk to me about this dynamic and how it manifested in your family.

Mary Trump: Yeah, I, yeah, good catch. Cause clearly, money past a certain point is an addictive substance. And most people in my family, had, or have that addiction. And when you do have so much money, it becomes this self-perpetuating need to have more. Especially in a family in which, you know, money is the only currency standing in for other much more important things like respect, or acceptance or affection. You know, there's no way to fill the holes that are left by the lack of those things. So, the pursuit of money is. Both fruitless and compulsive.

Abby Disney: Yeah, and I mean, I think of it as, you know, you're living with everything you could possibly need and still living in an environment of scarcity.

Mary Trump: Yeah. And that was another weird thing about growing up in my family, not that I noticed it at the time, of course, because I was kid. But it's not like we grew up in material splendor. You know, I was extremely fortunate in terms of the schools I went to and the camps I went to and, you know, I didn't want for anything like clothes or shelter or, anything like that. However, you know, I grew up in Jamaica, Queens, which was a working class, lower middle-class neighborhood and a pretty shitty apartment, that, you know, was always in need of some kind of repair. Took the subway to school.

We didn't have chauffeur. I mean, I think both of my parents drove a Ford something, um, you know, no maids, no butlers. And again, that was perfectly fine with me. And I'm quite grateful that none of that was the case, but it was just remarkable the difference between how wealthy Donald seems and how kind of on the fringes of things, the rest of us were.

Abby Disney: Yeah. Yeah. Um, just in like two or three sentences, can you explain what happened to your father?

Mary Trump: He tried desperately to be the man my grandfather required him to be when that became, when it became clear, he couldn't do that. He struck out on his own to become a professional pilot, which should have been met with, you know, acclaim and respect. But he was tormented for that, dropped out and went back to work for my grandfather and then spent the rest of his life being completely humiliated by him.

Abby Disney: And that's what's so painful about reading this book. Your grandfather really set up Donald and your father against each other in a kind of sadistic way. He feels like a

sadist. And the thing is that siblings very often, they're a resource for each other in an environment of emotional scarcity. Can you talk about that and the effect on your father?

Mary Trump: Yeah, I mean, and there's no need to qualify my grandfather's sadism. He was a sadist. And I don't know that so much if he did set up my dad and Donald against each other, my dad wasn't taking the bait. You know, he was seven and a half years older. He never viewed Donald as competition. you know, by the time my grandfather had effectively marginalized my, my dad, Donald was just like getting out of college.

So, more importantly the other aspect of this family you pointed to is that the siblings were never unified. When we were living, you know, a five-minute drive away from each other, both in rather dire circumstances, they never reached out.

Abby Disney: Just for clarification. Maybe if you could go through the five siblings, that'd be great.

Mary Trump: Sure. Uh, Maryanne is the oldest of the Trump siblings. So, my aunt. And then my dad was the second oldest, but the crucially important oldest son, and namesake.

Abby Disney: I do know what that means.

Mary Trump: Yep. Fred Chris Trump Jr. And they were maybe a year and a half apart. And then three years later, Elizabeth, my Aunt Elizabeth came along. Another three or four years after that, uh, Donald and then a year and a half after that, my uncle Robert.

Abby Disney: Okay. Yeah. Right. In my family, the siblings and their sort of conspiratorial talk among themselves. I mean, 'cause that was something that actually helped me a lot, was just being able to whisper with my siblings about what mom and dad or whatever was going on. Did they ever do that?

Mary Trump: I don't know, but my guess would be absolutely not. They didn't even have that, you know, even in talking to my aunt, who's now in her eighties, over the last few years, she could only skirt around the issue of my grandfather and could never just come right out and say anything negative.

Abby Disney: Yeah, it sounds so lonely. And I do know that loneliness often comes with wealth and especially growing up in a wealthy family. Did you, did you feel that there was a kind of a loneliness at the core of everybody?

Mary Trump: Yeah, I think that's a good way of putting it, because they weren't just divided like against each other I think they were kind of separated from the rest of the world too, because they couldn't talk about what happened in the house and they were just sort of functionally different.

Abby Disney: Yeah. Do you think your grandfather was a sociopath?

Mary Trump: I have no doubt in my mind my grandfather was a sociopath. And even if I didn't have insight into things that happened when my dad and his siblings were younger or, you know, what happened when I was growing up, you know, a total stranger can look at

what happened just to my father and extrapolate backwards and understand that there was something deeply wrong and, something crucial missing from my grandfather.

Abby Disney: Your father was singled out because he was nice? I mean, is that truly, what settled Fred against him?

Mary Trump: I think it was a few things: Everything my grandfather considered weakness, which would be kindness, the ability to admit your mistakes, the ability to apologize, and also having interests outside of the family business. All of my, my dad checked off all of those boxes. So yeah, I think that is a big part of it. And he was extremely sensitive too.

Abby Disney: Yeah. He was a good guy, right?

Mary Trump: You know, it's, it's hard to, overestimate just how abused he was as a child psychologically. I mean, I haven't found any evidence to suggest that he was physically abused.

My grandfather wasn't really a physical person. Like, I mean the most contact I ever had with a man was a handshake. I'd never saw him hug anybody or anything. So, because as a sociopath my grandfather essentially used other people as extensions of himself, you know and my dad was kind of character logically not able to be that person, which on the one hand is a good thing. But on the other hand, is what got him destroyed.

So, it's not just that, that my grandfather abused him. My grandfather dismantled him, so it got to the point where really the only thing that mattered to my father was my grandfather's opinion. And the reason that's, well, that's tragic on its face, but it's also tragic because he was never literally nothing he could do after the age of 25 to get my grandfather's acceptance, approval or respect.

Abby Disney: And, and he became an alcoholic when did alcoholism appear on the scene?

Mary Trump: Yeah, well, you know, like a lot of, uh, disorders, psychiatric disorders that have a genetic component, if, as with schizophrenia, if a stressor, a big enough stressor doesn't come along, it just may lay dormant. But his drinking became out of control when he was working for TWA because it's not that my grandfather was mean to him, but there was, there was an end, endless onslaught of humiliation. And, being demeaned on an almost daily basis and yeah, you're not gonna, you're not gonna stop being an alcoholic if your family treats it like a failing of your moral character as opposed to a disease.

Marianne told me this story. My dad was very sick. It wasn't long before he died. He was living with my grandparents again. And just couldn't quite get back on his feet after he had open heart surgery, three years earlier, and she took him to rehab. She insisted he got to rehab, and he went reluctantly, which is, as you probably know the wrong circumstance in which to go to rehab. And when his 28 days or whatever was up, she took him right back to the house and she basically did the worst thing she could have done.

Abby Disney: And then, and then he goes on, I mean, this, this, I need some clarity about this: he died, not in your grandparent's home, but damn close to it, alone in an attic, 42 years old.

Mary Trump: Yeah. When he was 42, he lived in his bedroom, his childhood bedroom, which we called the cell because it was so small and grim, you know, he literally had a cot, uh, in his room, not an actual bed. So, um, I didn't know this until much later, but he'd been in, he'd been sick for like two or three weeks unable to get out of bed. Uh, and the day my grandparents finally bothered to get him medical help is the day he died because they let him get so sick.

Um, and my grandfather who had connections at two good hospitals, just called an ambulance who took my dad to the closest hospital, and I don't think anybody in my family had ever been there. And instead of accompanying him, they waited for the doctors to call them. And that, I guess, Donald found that boring. So, he and my aunt Elizabeth went to the movies.

Abby Disney: Oh my God.

Mary Trump: So, my dad died alone, which is, I mean, unspeakably awful, but it's also uh, now in the days of COVID when people are dying alone because of the, how valiantly contagious this disease is it's just not her bringing it back in a new awful way.

Abby Disney: It's, it's almost fruitless to talk about the things that you would never have done in this scenario because like, I don't, you know, not a one of them, and I'm lucky enough that my family wasn't quite this dysfunctional and there were values, but there's, there are these two things that you get deeply wired into you from the very beginning. And one is that you should be suspicious of everybody. But you should be loyal all the time in every way to the point of self-abnegation to us. Um, so, so were you kind of lead on this sort of like don't trust anybody kind of way?

Mary Trump: Yeah, that's a really interesting observation because that obviously is true for Donald and Robert. Um, my dad wasn't like that at all. And you know, he trusted everybody and I'm the same way, you know, and sometimes it's, it doesn't work out well, but I would rather be trusting than not.

Abby Disney: I love that you and I both made the same calculation. I just decided every so often things will be bad, and I'd much rather be trusting.

Mary Trump: Exactly. Cause otherwise, you know, your life is pretty narrow and cold.

Abby Disney: Yeah, I mean, well, let me, the suspicion thing is, is in many ways the source of that loneliness too, it's not just the loneliness is coming from inside the house. It's coming from outside the house because you've sort of been told you're different.

And so, no one else really understands you and everybody wants to get something from you. But you turn around and you wrote this book. And, you know, I'm just wondering how you're

processing that as a member of this family, given that you probably were told from very young that your job was to be loyal.

Mary Trump: Actually, they didn't consider me. So, I wasn't really told anything. You know, I was completely unimportant to them. So -- except as, you know, um, a way to keep up appearances, you know, get invited to everything and you always have to show up.

Abby Disney: Right. I mean, keeping up appearances is actually such a dumb thing, but it just drove my mother and father and, you know my mother in particular was like don't you dare get in the newspapers don't you dare drag our name through the mud and so forth. And it was -- it's been really hard for me personally to speak up in any way cause it's, it's going against some of my programming.

Mary Trump: But I think another crucial difference is that it was your parents kind of setting out those parameters for you and making those demands of you. Right? Whereas my parents were both loathed by my, my dad's family. So, uh, they were, they were constantly being maligned and left out in some ways and treated like--second class citizens is probably too good. You know, just treated so badly that it's, it's hard to describe in some ways. So, you know, I wasn't getting those messages from my parents, because as you say, like they were, my dad in particular was betrayed by his family every day of his life.

And that's what I, on some level, probably understood.

Abby Disney: Right. You know, Donald seems like he was the ultimate beneficiary of basically the cruelties of patriarchy because of course they passed over Maryanne.

Mary Trump: That's right. Yeah, because my grandfather basically ignored her and you know, she's a girl who cares?

Abby Disney: She seems like she was probably the most capable in the group, um, and then settled all that obligation onto Fred's shoulders. And I think it falls especially hard on the male sons, especially hard because I was always viewed as somebody who, whatever I did was sort of voluntary. Or, you know, extra. So, I, I was, I was always violating the rules, but my brothers had to fight against expectations that never went away. You know, you were always measured against your expectations. Um, I mean do you think Donald enjoyed that part of it and kind of fed the process of your father getting destroyed?

Mary Trump: Well, he definitely fed the process and as for whether or not he enjoyed it, I mean, he was, as you said, the beneficiary. So, Donald didn't have to run the gauntlet the way my dad did. So essentially my dad cleared the way for Donald. And by the time Donald stepped in, I mean, he was getting so much, uh, from my grandfather in terms of support and monetary compensation that, you know, by the time I was 12 or 13, like I bought into the whole thing that Donald was this extraordinarily wealthy self-made man. And I just found out fairly recently that every single penny Donald had every dime that he used to pay for his chauffeur, and his limousines and his offices and his expensive clothing came directly from my grandfather.

Abby Disney: Yeah.

Mary Trump: I don't think Donald suffered at all from the expectation. I mean, he suffered early on for sure. But I think the early suffering kind of turned him into the kind of person that my grandfather felt he could use to fill his own ambitions.

And I think though, that's why it's important to recognize, even though I didn't, you know, I used to think that for my grandfather money was really the only thing that mattered. And, uh, it turns out that that, that wasn't the case. Like he had ambitions outside of Brooklyn and Queens, but for various reasons, didn't have the resources internally to fulfill those ambitions.

But he had so much money that he could afford to fund Donald's losing career because what he wanted was the acclaim and the attention. And you know, he couldn't get it for himself. He would live vicariously through his completely unworthy son.

Because, you know, Donald was terrible at business. He, you know, he couldn't manage money. And I don't think my grandfather knew that right away, but he certainly knew it by the time Donald was going bankrupt in Atlantic city.

Abby Disney: I have to say Donald is the apotheosis of the white male. You know, failing upward, unearned confidence, arrogance, contempt for anybody weak. He even mansplains and man-spreads. Right?

Mary Trump: Exactly.

Abby Disney: So, the patriarchs, like Donald's and Fred. Um, I think the thing they fear most is death. And I think that they therefore are driven by this fear of death, which is why they named their sons after themselves. That's why they want their sons to control--it's just a way of getting to immortality. They want to be enshrined in the building or they want the best doctor and the best hospital. Why do you think the great equalizer scares wealthy men more than it scares regular people?

Mary Trump: Partially because they think they're better, you know, they exist on a higher plane and it wouldn't be fair for them to have to die like the rest of us peasants, you know?

But I think it's because they're so tied up in what they have, that, that's the only thing that gives the meaning and the idea of being without that freaks them out. And for my grandfather, you know, his empire, it was so important to him that his empire survive in perpetuity for that very reason. With Donald, I think it's more just the ego, but he has a certain fatalism that's disturbing in a different way.

Abby Disney: Can you just, can you elaborate?

Mary Trump: Yeah, you know, whereas for my grandfather, he wanted this thing he'd built to last forever as a stand in for him, Donald's take is you know, if I can't win then I'm going to tear it all down. I'm going to destroy everything and bring all of you with me.

Abby Disney: Do you think that especially the men in your family came to see themselves as not of the same species with everybody else?

Mary Trump: Oh, without doubt. They think they're better by virtue of the fact that they have money.

Abby Disney: So, they don't have money because they're better. They're better because they have money.

Mary Trump: Well, good point. It works both ways. They deserve it because they're better, but they're also better because they have it, which is why it would have been impossible for them, even though they were our trustees and they were the executors of my grandfather's will, who were the only beneficiaries. They could have done whatever they wanted.

They could have cut us in, they could have given us, you know, a significant amount that wasn't our full share. They literally couldn't do it because it would have made them worth less literally and figuratively.

Abby Disney: Right. Right. I've heard the criticism that, oh, you're just angry cause you didn't get any money. And I would like any person to put themselves in your shoes and know that your uncles and aunts had actively sought to strip you of something that was as much your right as anyone else's and not be angry.

Mary Trump: Yeah. And after my dad died, when I was 16 and they were supposed to be taking care of me, if not emotionally, which thank goodness they didn't, but it's like, you know, financially they were. So, they had a fiduciary responsibility to me, which they totally abdicated because it didn't benefit them. And look, the truth is it's been a really long time and I'm fine. But it doesn't mean that I'm still not entitled to it. And like, you're right, like say to anybody, okay somebody stole \$50,000 from you and got away with it. But now, you know you have an opportunity to get it back, but that makes you a selfish asshole.

Abby Disney: So, this is a question people ask me all the time, like, how did you become you? I mean, granted, they rejected you. So that would be a good way to start your escape. But even so a lot of people would keep coming back and keep coming back and then ingratiate themselves and all the rest of that. Like how did you have the good sense to escape?

Mary Trump: Yeah, I don't think it, I don't think it was anything I did intentionally. You know, both of my parents were, my dad was the black sheep, and my mother was universally reviled within my family. So, I felt, I certainly felt very protective of her. And things were much more complicated between me and my dad, but it put up a barrier between me and the rest of the family.

Also, I wasn't important to them thankfully, so they didn't focus any attention on me. I was also one generation removed from the worst of it. But you know, over time, maybe one of the top three most important things is that I develop the kinds of friendships that stood in for family.

Abby Disney: Yeah. I'm curious about your relationship with your family going forward. What's it going to be like?

Mary Trump: Non-existent and that's fair on both sides. I don't, I don't see any way, uh, to move beyond this because you know, we've really never moved beyond anything.

Abby Disney: Uh, yeah. Um, it's a train wreck, Mary. Um, thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate it.

Mary's book *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* is a runaway bestseller, so it doesn't need my endorsement, but it's a ripping great read.

So, go get a copy. And she's a great follow on Twitter. Are you just at Mary Trump?

Mary Trump: L Mary L Trump.

Abby Disney: Mary L. Trump. Hold strong, Mary. I know there's a lot of pressure on you right now, but you are crushing it.

Mary Trump: Thanks Abby. Really appreciate it. This is great.

Abby Disney: And this is the last you'll hear from me till the start of season two in the fall. So, enjoy and stay safe for the next month and a half.