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**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Across Europe and the Middle East, America's reputation can be a complicated mix of scorn and fear. Join us as Pulitzer Prize winner and *New York Times* journalist, Alissa Rubin, reflects on her decades-long career as a reporter and on the American image abroad, from Paris to Baghdad.

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Alissa Rubin, thank you so much for being here today.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Thank you very much for asking me.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** I've been thinking about your career, the arc of your career, since Brown really. I think you tell stories about real people. But then also tell a larger story, whether it's a woman who wants to be a suicide bomber, and a woman who can't go home because her family will kill her, and what that means about her society, and what that means about the geopolitical forces affecting her country. And I wonder-- you were a Classics minor and a Renaissance Studies major. And I just wonder if that training sort of helps you think about story or the human story differently.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** That's an interesting question. I think the thing it most gave me was a sense of a kind of oral history and tradition that is very deeply embedded in our Western society, but that is true also in not so Western societies.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** What do you mean?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** A kind of storytelling that is part of a longer, almost social or societal story. So that as you listen to someone from a war today in Iraq, you can almost make yourself hear back through the centuries, back through British invasions or colonial periods, back beyond that. This is in my mind, particularly right now, because I just was recently back in Iraq.

And I was in the Nineveh Plain, which is in the north of Iraq, and it's where the tablets which had the poem *Gilgamesh* were ultimately found I think in the 17th or 18th century. What we're

telling is always part of a much bigger story of a people, and a place, and each place holds many histories. And so I'm always very aware of that.

I go back over and over again to the beginning of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I think it should be required in every journalism school, because it has a description of what it was like when the plague descended. At one point, the bell-- they stopped ringing the bells, because there were so many dead that they cannot-- they can't just ring them all day and all night.

**CATHERINE** Oh, my god.

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And the smell of it, and the look of the pustules, and all of that. And that's-- when people asked me, well, what do you need to do when you're doing journalism, I always think you have to describe that as viscerally and clearly as you can. And so that is very much part of how I think about what I do, and also, the idea of original text.

I did my undergraduate thesis-- it was something that had not been-- that was letters from one Renaissance humanists to another which had not been previously translated from Latin into English. And it gave a little window on what life was like, and I think that's always what we're looking for, the original text. In our case, it's not text. It's going to the real person and finding out what they think, but it functions in a similar way as having a certain authenticity that you can't get with commentaries or secondary sources.

**CATHERINE** That's interesting that you say that, because I read your story about the murder of the woman,  
**LUTZ:** whose name is now escaping me.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Farkhunda.

**CATHERINE** Farkhunda. And then I clicked on another link and it was the video, and I didn't watch the video  
**LUTZ:** because I didn't need to. First of all, it was horrifyingly upsetting. But also, I had it all in my head from reading you.

But just to back up a little bit, how did you go from being a Renaissance Studies/Classics scholar at Brown to Modern European History, I believe at Columbia, to a newspaper writer?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, in bits and pieces, I guess, would be the answer. After I finished at Brown, I did not speak Italian. My work was all in Latin. And yet, one of the great themes and stories of the Renaissance is the development of the vernacular.

And so I thought, well, I did all the study of Italy, and I don't even speak Italian. I ought to go and learn it. So I enrolled in a language program and went to Italy. And I really fell in love with being overseas.

I just felt like I was awake all the time. You know when you're a little kid, if you ever go to a relative's house, how big it seems?

**CATHERINE** Yeah.

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Like going to-- for me, it was going to my grandmother's on Christmas vacation. And when I ultimately came home, I thought I need to find a job where I can live overseas. And then I thought, well, what I really like to do is write. So I need to find someone who will pay me to write overseas, and then I'll be able to make a living doing that.

I started to work in journalism then as a fact-checker for a publication in New York initially. And then I decided, well, you know, that wasn't such a good idea. And in fact, I want to go back to academia. And I was very lucky, and I got a Mellon fellowship in the humanities to go to graduate school. So that's when I went to Columbia, and I did my work in Modern European History.

And then I once again felt not terribly happy. And I thought I didn't want to live my life in a library, and I wasn't helping people. And so I finished my master's, and I got into the PhD program. But instead, I decided to take all my money and go to South Africa, and see if I really liked to be in a place where I didn't know anyone and tried to do some research on a topic. Because I thought, well, that's what you do if you're a foreign correspondent.

And it was really a transformative experience. I'd never seen anything like it. I felt just constantly filled with questions and learning all the time. And so after that, I knew that I was on the right track. But I had this problem, which was that I really didn't know a thing about journalism. Because I had read newspapers, of course, but I hadn't ever thought about how news got there. It was like milk-- it appears on the shelf.

**CATHERINE** How did you learn?

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, I just applied to newspapers. And after-- I think I applied to 45 papers without getting a

job. And eventually, a very kind man, who was the assistant managing editor of the *Charlotte Observer*, and he said, we just would not hire.

You have no experience. But there's another Knight Ridder paper which just lost a lot of its staff in a union fight, and maybe they would hire you. And that was where I ultimately got a first job.

**CATHERINE** And that was Wichita?

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And that was Wichita.

**CATHERINE** Oh, my gosh.

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And for me, that was like a foreign assignment. I was a New Yorker. I'm from a fairly long line of New Yorker.

I had been in Colorado once. I'd never been to California. I didn't own a car.

I hadn't been to a mall or a McDonald's. I grew up in New York before there were a lot of McDonald's. And so I went. And then I guess I have a penchant for falling in love with places, and I loved Kansas.

And I didn't expect to. But I ended up really liking it, and I stayed four years.

**CATHERINE** Wow.

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And then that helped me get to Washington. And then that, in turn, ultimately helped me get to a paper which had a foreign desk.

**CATHERINE** To the *LA Times*?

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Right.

**CATHERINE** You were sort of an autodidact in the--

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** In the journalism sense I suppose, yes.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Did you get better and better just by getting better and better? Or did you have a mentor? Did you just read other people whose stories you admired?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** The first person who inspired me was in my first journalism job. It was a man named Steve Brill, who started a publication called *American Lawyer*. In the period when I worked as his fact-checker, it was very early days. He was doing very bold stuff, and he had a very daring mind.

He asked questions and just sort of dared you to try to come up with the answer.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Wow.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And I was just a fact-checker. I wasn't anyone important. I wasn't writing stories, but I was around really brilliant journalists. And almost everyone really went on to remarkable journalism careers.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Wow.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** He really had a sense for smart reporting and rigorous reporting. And I think I liked that rigor, just like I liked Latin.

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**CATHERINE LUTZ:** I want to ask you about this notion of fake news that I'm afraid we're getting used to, which I hope we never do. I hope it's always shocking to us that that accusation can be made. When the President says, "fake news, fake news, fake news," is it enough that you know about the integrity of your work and your colleagues at the *Times*? Or do you feel that there's something that can be proven, or should be proven, or some answer to that?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** I guess I certainly don't take it personally in any way. I think that it is raising a lot of questions about standards and also judgment. And one of our real deficits in the electronic media age is that our capacity to both generate news and information-- because they're a little bit different, but related, and stories-- is so much faster than our ability to absorb it and evaluate it. And there has not been an effort socially and intellectually to teach people how to decide whether

something is more or less true, more true or less true, and that is what really needs to happen in this society.

I think that the *New York Times*, for instance, or a number of other publications, do extremely legitimate careful work. But it's based on criteria and standards that are not widely understood publicly, and that's our fault. And we need to teach people what those are at every level.

There's an old colleague of mine at from the *Los Angeles Times* who started something called the News Literacy Project, which is really fascinating. They go into schools and teach kids how to-- basically, how to evaluate what they read or see on the internet. How do you know something might be true or might be false? And I think it's this enormous explosion of information, and news stories, and no real understanding of how it's put together that has been really deleterious for the profession.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Well, and that leads me to another question, and that is social media. Has that changed how you report a story or how you are as a journalist?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Social media is a tool, and it's useful for journalism, as it is for many other things. And it is deceptive for journalism, as it is deceptive for many other things.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** How is it useful?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, it's very useful, because if you're trying to find somebody, you can put a note on Facebook.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** To the world.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** You can search Facebook for stuff. But it's also very useful for understanding the zeitgeist. And I need to know what people are interested in or what their assumptions are, and I might not know that. I might not talk to people like many of the people who are out there reading what I write. It's important for me to think and see the way they think, and then think about how I can help them see what I'm seeing.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** So it sometimes informs what you choose to write about or how you--

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, sometimes we literally write about what is appealing to people on social media. It has become one of many criteria to look at whether an idea has a certain currency. But at the same time, you can over rate it. You have to really bring a lot of critical faculties to figuring out how much attention you want to pay to it.

And certainly, I believe-- and I'm happy the *Times* believes-- that there are stories that don't get a lot of attention in the paper, but that we need to write anyway. Although, you have to have a certain number of readers to make it a going concern, so it's a balance between those two.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Right, it's tricky. It sounds tricky. I was thinking about your posting in Paris three years ago, and every--

**ALISSA RUBIN:** I started in 2013, yeah.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** And I was just thinking, in those few years so many things have happened. I didn't used to think of Paris as--

**ALISSA RUBIN:** No, Paris has become really a very busy European capital, and our bureau is really busy.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Yeah, when Paris attacks, the Brussels attacks--

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Right.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** --and Emmanuel Macron.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** And attacks, really, Nice--

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Oh, in Nice, yeah.

**ALISSA RUBIN:** You know, Nice, the [INAUDIBLE] attack that failed-- it goes on and on. There's a lot going on. And then Macron.

**CATHERINE LUTZ:** Yeah, Macron is--

**ALISSA RUBIN:** President Macron is a phenomenon, both in Europe and I think in the larger sort of Western-

oriented world.

**CATHERINE** How do the States look from where you sit in Paris?

**LUTZ:**

**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, certainly they're going in the opposite direction. And that's puzzling to me, both as an American and as a visiting European resident right now, because I don't really understand why the government right now sees the world so differently. But I'm an American, and we're often out of step with the world as a country.

**CATHERINE** One final question I have is, over the past decade of your reporting from Iraq, and  
**LUTZ:** Afghanistan, and Paris, have you noticed a change in how the US is perceived? I guess it depends on where you were in the world, but let's say the Middle East. Is there a difference in perception when there's an Obama in office, when there's a Bush in office?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** No, is the answer. If you look at American foreign policy in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, which are the two theaters I've spent the most time in, they've been remarkably consistent. Obama was very intent on getting out of the war in Iraq, and that was disapproved of, disliked, resented by the Iraqis, much as when George Bush got into the war there. It was disliked and disapproved of by a significant number of the Iraqis, though certainly a significant number welcomed it, both the plurality Shiites and the Kurds.

But America is-- it is really hard to come out on the winning side of people's hearts when part of what you do is bombing and shooting people. So you will help make some people happy, but you will almost always alienate others. And that's just the way war works, regrettably.

**CATHERINE** And given that that dim view exists, did that ever affect access or how you were treated as a  
**LUTZ:** journalist?

**ALISSA RUBIN:** No, I have to say everywhere I have worked has my lasting lifelong admiration for people really saying over and over again, I know you are not your government. And that's a very hard thing for them to say, because in their country, often the media and the government go hand-in-hand. But many people have actually I think begun to learn that. The people who always are suspicious of it actually are often people who aren't from the country themselves.

**CATHERINE** Alissa Rubin, thank you so much for being here today.

**LUTZ:**



**ALISSA RUBIN:** Well, thank you so much for inviting me.

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