

Anthony Comegna ([00:22](#)):

Oh my. Is this an exciting thing to say. This week on *Ideas in Progress*, Reason Magazine's, Nick Gillespie joins us. That's right. Do not adjust your sets. The Duke of Leather Jackets, the King of Weird Cultural References. And did you know this? A Ph.D. in English literature. Dr. Gillespie doesn't make a big deal about his degree, but I'm dying to know more about his time in academia. So here we are this week and next, it's Nick Gillespie on *Ideas in Progress*. All right, so Nick Gillespie, let's just start out with your how-I-became-an-academic story, because I listened to all the different Reason podcasts and a lot of other media with you in it and I'm not sure that I've ever actually heard you tell that story.

Nick Gillespie ([01:10](#)):

Are you joking? Because I feel like I talk about it all of the time, like to a point of embarrassment.

Anthony Comegna ([01:18](#)):

Well maybe I feel like I just haven't gotten a full enough explanation then.

Nick Gillespie ([01:22](#)):

Yeah, okay. Let's dial the clock back to 1985 which is when I graduated from Rutgers University, Rutgers College or Rutgers University with a B.A. in English and psychology. I worked as a journalist. I started out writing for some newspapers, stringing, freelancing and whatnot in New Jersey and in New York. I ended up lucking in through New York Times ads, when this was a thing, classified ads. I ended up getting jobs at a company that published teen magazines, movie magazines and music magazines. And I became a teen magazine editor and writer and a music journalist. I had always been into music and I was doing that for about three years. I would work, save money, go travel, come back, work, that type of thing. And there came a point in, I guess around 1988, where I was talking to a 10 year old teen star, who was going on about his latest project. And he said something along the lines of, "but what I really want to do is direct."

Nick Gillespie ([02:34](#)):

And I was like, okay, I got to get out of this world. This is killing me here. And I had also as an undergrad, but also as a young guy roaming around New York City mostly, I had written fiction, and I applied for graduate programs in creative writing, master's programs in creative writing. And I was accepted. Ultimately I took firm offers from, Oh God, I'm blanking on the name, it's the school in Boston that has a very good creative writing program and Jay Leno went to it, help me out here Anthony.

Anthony Comegna ([03:13](#)):

I have no idea.

Nick Gillespie ([03:16](#)):

Emerson, Emerson College. This is very good. You know, it's relatively early in the morning, but, so I was accepted at Emerson college and at Temple University in Philadelphia. And I had to push back my acceptance one year for a variety of reasons. And I ended up going to Temple University for an M.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing.

Nick Gillespie ([03:36](#)):

And I will tell you, having worked for three years and I was reading voraciously, I had always been a big reader, but I loved reading, I loved commercial culture and I wanted to be creative. And when I got to Temple, which is generally considered a ... the Creative Writing Program was very highly regarded, the general school, not so much. But I had a two year experience there that absolutely lit my brain on fire. I worked with a series of academics in the literature program. I ended up taking all of the creative writing courses, but I took enough credits basically to have a Master's in literature as well. And they were people who were at the cutting edge of things like postmodernism. This was 1988, as well as a guy named Robert Storey who was one of the first academics to seriously apply evolutionary psychology and sociobiology as it was known then, to literary and cultural studies.

Nick Gillespie (04:39):

And it was the most exhilarating intellectual experience of my life up to that point and since that point, if I'm being fully honest. I met my future wife, who is also my future ex-wife, Catherine Gillespie, who now teaches at Chapman university. She's a full professor working in Vernon Smith's Economic Center out there, the Adam Smith Institute. We met at Temple and we ended up jointly deciding to go on for PhDs and we went to the State University of New York at Buffalo where I was particularly interested in working with Leslie Fiedler, Mark Schechner and a couple of other people who were American scholars, scholars of American literature. So I went to Buffalo and I went through my coursework there, which was also exhilarating and deep. Buffalo had a program at the time, and it's still known for this, but as a kind of mavericky English department.

Nick Gillespie (05:39):

Leslie Fiedler is a guy who died years ago, but who along with Harold Bloom is one of the very biggest names or biggest influences in American literary and cultural studies. And Fiedler was a wild man. He loved going out onto the margins of society and finding interesting writing, interesting people, interesting things going on and reporting back. He's the ... and I don't know how deep in the weeds this is for your listeners, Howard Bloom is very much of a canon builder. He's a guy who, he was based at Yale and he was very establishment. He both worked through the establishment and then tried to create his own establishment. This is great literature. This is the creation of the West. This is why Shakespeare is perfect. Fiedler was much more kind of scrounging around the margins and [inaudible 00:06:28] great writer, a great thinker. He's the guy that I wanted to work with more than anyone at Buffalo, and I got a chance to do that.

Nick Gillespie (06:34):

While I was working on my dissertation, I had about half of it done, I came to the realization, and now we're talking about 1993, and this was a period in which the concept and the reality of political correctness really came into the forefront. And I don't want to trivialize this or simplify it, but what political correctness really stood for in my understanding was a kind of politicization of the academy that I believe started with the election of George H W Bush in 1988. Academics lost their minds because they were convinced that Reagan was an anomaly and that the country would go back to some kind of vaguely civilized reasoning after this brief interregnum. And when Bush got elected, they just lost it and they became much more desperate to kind of proselytize to students at all levels that we are, we need to be more serious about kind of being left wing and progressive and we need to take our country back. You heard that all the time.

Nick Gillespie (07:43):

So in any case with that as a backdrop, I realized I probably was not cut out for academia given my ideological leanings and my political and cultural leanings, which were very libertarian, very anti-conservative as well as anti left-wing. And I had always been reading Reason Magazine since I was in high school. My brother who also went to Rutgers, which is where Milton Friedman did his undergrad of all places, my brother discovered Reason in college and started mailing it back to me, and I read it and I subscribed to it from the time I was in high school through, till now I guess. And they advertised for an assistant editor job in their back pages. And I applied for that and got it.

Nick Gillespie ([08:33](#)):

And we moved. At the time I was married, my wife was pregnant with our first child, and we moved to LA for me to work at Reason while she finished her dissertation and had our child. And that's when I exited academia strictly. I'll come back to my intersections with it since then, which been profound. And my wife became a full-fledged tenure track academic and we can talk a little bit about where that took us. And then I finished my dissertation in 1996 on American literature in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Anthony Comegna ([09:12](#)):

Did you ever teach while you were in graduate school?

Nick Gillespie ([09:14](#)):

Yes, this is one of the things that I would say, and to be honest, I'm not sure how much it has changed, but I was told by everybody, and I come from a nonacademic background. I grew up lower middle class. My father didn't even graduate high school, much less college. My mother went to a business high school and was a bookkeeper who had trouble with long division. And I don't say that to mock them, I just say I came from a world in which nobody knew anything about higher education.

Nick Gillespie ([09:45](#)):

And I was told though, when I started applying to grad school for my teachers and I had done very well as an undergrad, I was ... graduated with high honors and all of this kind of stuff, and they said "you shouldn't go to a graduate school or a graduate program that won't pay you." And that was very sage advice. And because, and they said "it doesn't reflect whether you're a good person or even if you're very smart, but it does reflect the willingness of that institution to make a bet on you," which is what higher ed really is in a lot of ways.

Nick Gillespie ([10:15](#)):

And so both at Temple and at Buffalo I was a teaching assistant or I forget exactly the term, but I went to school, I got a free ride and I got a stipend and I taught at both places. Mostly composition, freshmen composition writing classes. At Buffalo, I also taught a few low level literature classes. And then since then I've also taught a couple of times. But yes, I taught both at the graduate student level and then as a visiting professor later.

Anthony Comegna ([10:53](#)):

Can you tell us a bit about your dissertation and the kind of research that you conducted for it?

Nick Gillespie ([10:58](#)):

Yeah, so it's called and ... oh my God, I prepared for this, but obviously not well enough. And I'm looking around my apartment now for the fake bound edition of my dissertation, but it was called Qualified Authority in American Literature, Participant Observers and Market Participants, or something like that. And it was ... when you do a dissertation, there are different ways of thinking about it. One is that this is, the summa of your great mind thinking at the age of 25 or 30 or whatever, and you're going to pour everything you know, your brilliance onto the page, or it's a series of, and I'm only really familiar with academia in literature departments for the most part from firsthand experience, or it's a series of job talks and job essays that you can give to get hired somewhere.

Nick Gillespie ([11:54](#)):

And I was counseled by my advisors and I think they were right about this too, create a dissertation that would allow you to apply for 19th and 20th century jobs in American literature. And so my dissertation was a study of various novels and writings in the 19th century and the 20th century, that foregrounded the character or the protagonist was a participant observer. And I basically looked at the ways in which that figure, which is a very American recurring motif in literature, the way that that reflected a variety of anxieties and kind of liberatory feelings towards market freedom, political freedom, cultural freedom, gender freedom, things like that.

Nick Gillespie ([12:44](#)):

And so to make it a little less abstract, I wrote about, for instance, Washington Irving, who was arguably the first professional writer in the United States, in the early Republican years, and hit the way his work is constantly using a participant observer to both assert authority, to say "I was there, I saw this happen." And then to undercut that. And I see that, I've read that in terms of, okay, what happens when we live in a world of markets where you have people who are telling you, "I have a cure for COVID-19 it works on everybody I know." And then somebody comes along and says, "that's an escaped mental patient," which is actually a story in one of Irving's stories.

Nick Gillespie ([13:30](#)):

And then in the 20th century, the best part of my dissertation was a reading of *The Great Gatsby*, which looked at it as a story about anxiety over the shift in the economic order of the country and the demographic order of the country. If you read *The Great Gatsby*, and I'll ruin it for people here, if you read *The Great Gatsby* as F Scott Fitzgerald insisted we do, as a love story between Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan, you're reading it wrong. And actually when you look around the edges of almost every scene there is a black person, an Italian, a Greek, an immigrant or a homosexual who was kind of coming into focus, and it freaks Nick Carraway the protagonist out. So much so that he leaves New York in the 1920s and retreats back to a Midwest that he identifies explicitly with social, racial and economic hierarchy and fixed order.

Anthony Comegna ([14:30](#)):

And now you mentioned that you encountered *Reason Magazine* from your brother in high school, right? Did you have any significant libertarian proclivities before that encounter with *Reason* or did it sort of reinforce and reinvigorate a new, well, did it reinforce any preexisting proclivities or did it sort of spark something genuinely new in your [inaudible 00:15:00]?

Nick Gillespie ([14:58](#)):

You know, I am a 56 years old, so you know, that is ancient history to me and I'm afraid that is shrouded in kind of ectopic miasma in my brain or something like that. It would be hard for me to disentangle all of that. What I would say is that I guess I first encountered Reason when it was being edited by Marty Zupan, a former president of IHS who left Reason and went on to that, and then it was edited by Virginia Postrel who was the person who hired me in late 1993.

Nick Gillespie ([15:30](#)):

What Reason did, it was a journalistically serious and intellectually serious magazine. I had never really encountered anything like that. In my house we had Time and Newsweek and US News and World Reports, and my parents had a lot of books around the house. But Reason was the first publication that I noticed, and it might have just been, I was the right age, that was serious about ideas and about economic, political and cultural trends and doing analysis. And it spoke to me, I don't know if it spoke to existing proclivities or it planted them in me, but its world view, which was one of looking at things analytically and seriously with a depth of knowledge and of reverence for learning, but also an interest in iconoclasm, it mixed that with kind of libertarian ideals of what the magazine still goes by, free minds and free markets, of individualism and an appreciation for the ways in which, people left, I wouldn't say left to their own devices, but given this fear of autonomy and freedom, come up with a lot of really interesting things.

Nick Gillespie ([16:42](#)):

And then it also, from a policy perspective, it told me a lot of things which I kind of understood to be true once I read them. And an early story, I forget when it came out, but I remember reading there, I grew up in New Jersey and New Jersey at some point in the seventies or eighties, implemented mandatory car insurance that you, in order to drive legally, you had to have car insurance. And as a result of that, and the idea was to reduce the rates of everybody by getting uninsured motorists off the roads, Reason wrote a piece that touched on that and pointed out that insurance rates had gone up once it became mandatory because then the state had to offer insurance at reduced rates to the very worst drivers, and force good drivers to pay for all of that through assigned risk pools and things like that and I was like, "ah, this is fascinating."

Nick Gillespie ([17:34](#)):

At some time also around then I, my parents were big Book of the Month Club fans, which was a great, I guess it still exists, but it was a great depression era in post World War Two institution for middlebrow uplift. You know, the Book of the Month Club, you would get a special selection that was a great history book or a novel or something important. If you didn't check the box of saying you didn't want it this year, my parents were very lazy, and so we had tons of Book of the Month Club books all over the place, including Free to Choose by Milton and Rose Friedman. And around the time that I encountered Reason, I also read that, and I was just amazed by an iconoclastic alternative history of the United States essentially. And so much of what I was being taught in school and on television and things like that.

Nick Gillespie ([18:25](#)):

And so at some point in high school I started considering myself libertarian with a small L. I did that throughout my college years and when I was working in New York as a journalist. And then when I got to graduate school in again, 1988, the term political correctness became popular due to a New York magazine story in 89 or 90, but this was the dawn of that era. And I started realizing that I was

libertarian, that it was a rich and diverse alternative intellectual history. And I started to get serious about being a libertarian thinker.

Anthony Comegna ([19:05](#)):

And so after grad school you get your Ph.D. You go work at Reason. What were some of your encounters, let's say with traditional academia thereafter?

Nick Gillespie ([19:18](#)):

So they were multiple. While my then wife was finishing her doctorate, we were living in LA and she went out on the job market and I also went out on the academic job market. This would have been around 1990, like 94, 95, because our goal was always to find a place where we could work together. And that was one of my reasons why I applied for the Reason job, was that when you looked at the job market in the mid to late nineties you know, for English professors, there were jobs out there. But it was kind of hard to think about us getting jobs in the same department or even in the same state or time zone. And so the Reason job was kind of a stop gap really. It would buy us time while she finished, and I did, I got a couple in, I guess it was 95 or so, I got a couple of calls for on campus interviews. I talked with my then editor who basically said, "Hey, we'll increase your pay. We want you to stay here."

Nick Gillespie ([20:23](#)):

I was doing work, Virginia Postrel who was the woman who hired me and is still a writer of significant note, she had hired me because I was bringing a kind of cultural dimension to a lot of the stuff that Reason was talking about that hadn't otherwise really been represented in the magazine. So she bought me off of my academic ambitions. I will say I also, I guess it was around 99 or 2000 when I became editor-in-chief of Reason, I did receive a tenure track offer from Miami University where my ex-wife was teaching English at the time. They had a journalism program that was run out of the English department and they were also interested in cultural studies, approaches to literature. And also in the late nineties I put together two special sessions for the Modern Language Association Annual Convention, which I drew on academics as well as public intellectuals, including a couple of people.

Nick Gillespie ([21:28](#)):

So I did a panel that was particularly well-received, that included Deirdre McCloskey, the University of Illinois at Chicago, Economist and Literature Professor and Law Professor I guess, called Non-Marxist Materialist Approaches to Literary and Cultural Studies, because that was the material or the kind of vein I was working was, looking at the ways in which people actually produce and consume culture.

Nick Gillespie ([21:56](#)):

How do we define what culture is? How do we produce it? Under what conditions do we consume it? And how do we imbue it with meaning? That field yields rich, rich responses from I think, from a libertarian or a more pro-capitalist mindset. But typically only Marxist academics would talk about it. So those are some of the ways in which I intersected with academia before becoming editor-in-chief. And then I think it was 2009 or 2008 at Miami university, excuse me, I taught a semester class on literary and cultural studies and new media for their interactive Media Studies Program. And with that I was in Oxford, Ohio when every other week, and I would have a traditional seminar that lasted three hours, talking about major texts and cultural studies and literary studies.

Nick Gillespie ([22:50](#)):

And then every other week I'd be in DC and I would bring in a political person or a person in new media, to talk to the class via this cookie contraption, which was kind of, it was like a video phone, which by the end of the course, even Skype had come out. So it was no longer relevant or needed, but so I did that as well.

Anthony Comegna (23:14):

Now I'm wondering there, it seems to me at least, that there is often a sort of a sneering attitude toward academics who don't end up teaching at a college or university. Basically, if you go to a conference and you say you do anything but teach at a traditional institution, you get this look like, "Oh poor you, you didn't make it." But that's totally, completely not true. And I think it really belies the extreme conservatism still inherent in the university system. And you know, most of these liberal professors don't even realize that their institution is literally medieval and ...

Nick Gillespie (23:58):

Yeah I know, it's very elitist and status driven and status conscious because it's not just are you, are you not in academia? But then if you're in academia, what kind of school are you in? And people are, in my experience, and I say that should I, my, my degrees, particularly my graduate degrees are from good but not great institutions. People are always looking to categorize you immediately so they can move on. People are looking to filter people out as quickly as possible. And you know, where you come from and what you do is the quickest way to do that. So I think there's a lot of snobbery and elitism in The Academy. And I'll say this because you know, some libertarians will say, "well, there's a reason for that. Brand reputation is a form of information and it transmits something of real value."

Nick Gillespie (24:47):

There's some truth to that, but there's also, it's not like the choice is either you have to sift through a million people or you have to pay attention to the handful of people in a room and say who's smarter or dumber. You know, individualism is a useful tool for going through academic work and figuring out what person is actually bringing something interesting and new to the game. Relying on these shorthands often leads to a very dull, conservative, reactionary kind of intellectual framework.

Anthony Comegna (25:24):

But yet I think you're a perfect example of someone who has very clearly put their degree to work in powerful and important ways. And given the situation right now, we might very well be in a position where there is no academic job market for the next year or two [crosstalk 00:25:45] Ph.D.'s who need to find work doing something. So I wonder if you could give some advice to those grad students.

Nick Gillespie (25:51):

Well, let me and I appreciate you saying that, but if my background comes through in my work, that's great because I don't think there's any question that my graduate school experience both, as you know, I have two masters, one from Temple and one from Buffalo and then a Ph.D. from Buffalo, there is no question that whatever intellectual acumen I have and kind of rigor and thoughtfulness, it really ... the graduate experience played a huge role in it. I do not think in order to be smart, you need to go to graduate school or accomplished or anything like that. But there is something really centrally unique and important to going to ... learning what is sometimes called a discourse community. When you go to a graduate school for literary studies, you are learning first off, you're learning much more broadly than you would as an undergrad or as an autodidact out there in the world.

Nick Gillespie ([26:48](#)):

But you're also engaging a community of ideas that have built up over generations, if not centuries. And it's really important if you want to know something. I'm a big believer in expertise and I don't pretend to have expertise in literary studies, certainly not the way I might have when I was fresh out of grad school. But that's important. And I would also add that I'm kind of a Ph.D. exceptionalist, that there is a vast difference. And of course there's always individual exceptions to this. There is something vastly different in the kind of quality of thought oftentimes between a person who has a master's and a person who has a Ph.D. That last mile. Like, I've met a lot of people over my life who are all but dissertation and they always are kind of minimizing, "Oh I was about to finish, but then I did other things and it didn't really matter."

Nick Gillespie ([27:42](#)):

Crossing that last mile is really difficult and it's not just that it's a hoop to go through. It forces you to really think about stuff, produce something and lay it on the line in a way that is ... Whether the idea is any good or not is secondary to the idea that it really forces, it creates you. It's a formative intellectual experience.

Nick Gillespie ([28:03](#)):

The other thing that I'll say about all of this is that what going to grad school did that affects my work. And then I'll get to the question about what do you do with a Ph.D. outside of academia, but that my old colleague and sometime collaborator, Veronique de Rugy, who's at the Mercatus Center, has a Ph.D. in economics, but she said, "You know, one of the things that people in the libertarian movement need is a methodology as much as an ideology." And that that's one of the other benefits from literary studies, literary and cultural studies. I learned various kinds of methodologies, of knowledge and of like looking for things, looking for connections and how to approach things.

Nick Gillespie ([28:46](#)):

It's not like that's the only way I do things, but having that kind of methodology is really, really helpful and you're only going to really get that in a graduate school setting. So I'm a big fan of grad school. I think, again, assuming that the economics have not changed that much, always go to places that will pay you rather than that will charge you to go because that's important. But that it's really very important that the graduate experience is structured and if you are ready for it and if you're at the right place at the right time, it just blows your mind or it blew my mind in a way that I'm so much better for.

Nick Gillespie ([29:25](#)):

You know, one of the other things, you know when people talk about the paucity and scarcity of academic jobs, they're not lying. But when I decided to go to grad school in the late eighties, I went to my professors at Rutgers to get recommendations and I'd been out of school for a couple of years. So I wasn't sure if they remembered me and most of them did. And a couple of them even gave me recommendations despite remembering me, but they said to me, "the job market is terrible. This is a dying field. Don't go into it." There is always a sense that academia is in decline or is about to crumble like the House of Usher in an Edgar Allen Poe story or something like that.

Nick Gillespie ([30:10](#)):



And that's always true. But it's also true if you're good at what you do, there are lots of opportunities. If you're a grad student and you write and publish a lot and go to conferences and are into your work, you will do very well in academia. There will always be a place for people who are productive and insightful. But if you don't like doing that, if you don't like researching and writing and discoursing, get out as soon as you can because otherwise you're going to be miserable.

Nick Gillespie ([30:39](#)):

The other thing that I've found, and this is particularly true after 30 years away, I had moved back to New York a couple of years ago and I had met a ton of people who went to very good programs, places like Columbia and NYU, The City College Graduate Center, who got a PhD in English, and then they're like, "well, there are no jobs," because they don't want to leave New York or Boston or Washington or San Francisco or LA; they won't work anywhere but two or three or four places in the country that everybody wants to work. And so they say there are no jobs in academia.

Nick Gillespie ([31:14](#)):

In fact, if you go where the jobs are, often in small remote places with punishing teaching loads and less than intellectually inquisitive student bodies. Take those jobs and write yourself out of that job and back into a more cosmopolitan urban center or a better school. I feel like a lot of people go into grad school thinking that they're going to get the job of their dreams in the city or the part of the country they want to live in, and it doesn't work like that. But there are jobs out there but you have to go to the jobs and then triumph there and either stay there or come back to the places that you want to be.

Anthony Comegna ([32:01](#)):

I cannot say how grateful we are that Nick Gillespie took time out of his near constant podcasting with Reason to join our little show here. It was immensely enjoyable to talk with him. I hope you all got as much out of it as I did and if you want more from Nick, be sure to check out the Reason. Interview with Nick Gillespie and the Reason Round Table Podcast. Both are top notch, fantastic and they're always the first things I play for the day. Join us for part two next week and keep the progress coming.