

Sidedoor Season 4, Episode 8: The Woman in the Frame

Justin O'Neill: Hello everyone. It's Sidedoor Producer, Justin O'Neill. Lizzie's out this week, so I'm here with a sad update. In this episode, we feature a conversation with legendary journalist, Cokie Roberts. Cokie passed away in the time, since we originally recorded our interview. Our heart goes out to all of Cokie's family, friends and people like us, who have admired her work for decades.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a Podcast from the Smithsonian with Support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Do I need to get my headphones?

Justin O'Neill: No.

Lizzie Peabody: No.

Kim Sajet: No? Okay.

Lizzie Peabody: Don't worry.

Kim Sajet: Because I have some.

Justin O'Neill: We'll record you...

Kim Sajet: Just saying.

[LAUGHTER]

Justin O'Neill: You can, if you want headphones!

Lizzie Peabody: You have headphones.

Kim Sajet: I have some. (Laughs) I do.

Lizzie Peabody: You are a bonified podcaster!

Kim Sajet: I know!

Lizzie Peabody: This is Kim Sajet, Director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, and also, a podcaster herself. She's the host of the National Portrait Gallery's

podcast, Portraits. Today, we're putting Kim in the guest chair to find out more about her new podcast. And while I had the Portrait Gallery's director in the room, I wanted to get one thing straight.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Kim, let's start basic.

Kim Sajat: Okay.

Lizzie Peabody: Really basic.

Kim Sajat: Really basic.

Lizzie Peabody: What is a portrait?

Kim Sajat: That's not so basic. It's actually kind of complicated.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh.

Kim Sajat: I think, for the point of the Portrait Gallery and certainly its collection, you know, we do begin with the idea of the human face. It helps that they are recognizable, but I think you could argue and I take a pretty expansive view of portraiture, is that it's also, it could be somebody's voice. It could be even the back of your hair or your head, even though, a smell, right, sometimes, when someone walks in the room.

Lizzie Peabody: Well, when I think of a portrait, I think of a painting. But I, I never even thought about how it could be a non-visual representation of a person.

Kim Sajat: Yeah. I mean, I even think going back 40,000 years where you had the first people sort of putting their hand prints on the side of a cave. There is this desire to actually put some kind of a physical representation of ourselves out there for other people to see.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm. So, it sounds like what you're saying is a portrait is really a representation of a specific human being.

Kim Sajat: Yes. I think that's a really nice way to put it.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Let's get a little more specific. So, tell us about the Portraits podcast.

Kim Sajat: We started thinking about how do we put the national in National Portrait Gallery, right? 325 million people across this country, and how do we have some kind of relationship with them and how do we tell the stories that are behind all these pictures? So, I'd like to think that this podcast will be about those stories and the people that we

think we know, but perhaps don't know and how we think about ourselves at this particular moment in time.

Lizzie Peabody: In each episode, Kim talks with a different artist, historian or other expert to tell the stories behind a portrait on the museum's walls. As Kim says:

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: It tells a much larger story.

Lizzie Peabody: Right, then what's just pictured...

Kim Sajet: Then what's just pictured.

Lizzie Peabody: ...in the individual.

Kim Sajet: And that is true of all portraiture.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Kim Sajet: There's always a story behind the story, which is another story, which is another story.

Lizzie Peabody: And on and on and on.

Kim Sajet: And on and on and on, in the circle of life.

[LAUGHTER]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, in a recent episode of Portraits, Kim spoke with Cokie Roberts about First Ladies. Cokie is a journalist, commentator, and the author of several best-selling books, including: "Ladies of Liberty," and "Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington from 1848 to 1868." She knows her stuff!

Kim Sajet: She has such a depth of knowledge and, you know, the first ladies, um, the founding mothers, is one of her specialties and so, she really knows what she's talking about.

Lizzie Peabody: A quick note that Kim and Cokie discuss four portraits in detail, and if you'd like a visual reference, and you can find links to the images in our episode description and on our website.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, Kim Sajet and Cokie Roberts share the stories behind the portraits of four fearless First Ladies, including one who brokered power in Washington for more than 40 years.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Welcome back! And welcome to this segment from Portraits, the podcast from the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, where Kim Sajet and Cokie Roberts talk First Ladies.

Kim Sajet: Cokie Roberts, welcome to Portraits. It's so lovely to have you.

Cokie Roberts: It's lovely to be here. Thank you.

Kim Sajet: So, we're going to have a little bit of a natter about first ladies and I will say that they're the most requested portraits outside of the President's, when people come to the museum. And...

Cokie Roberts: That's interesting.

Kim Sajet: Yeah. It is really interesting. Really, it's not till recently that people even knew who the first lady was. They didn't have a vision of what they looked like. Some people didn't even care. But one of the questions that I have is there is this perception that the reason that we care about first ladies today is that they have much more of a political voice. They do way more. They've got a cause, you know. They're sort of standing there next to their husbands still at this moment. Um, but back then, they didn't have to. They could be involved with running the White House and knitting and sewing. Is that true?

Cokie Roberts: No, not even close to being true. Uh, first ladies have been involved in politics from Martha Washington, on. Martha Washington went to war every winter of the American Revolution. Eight long years...

Kim Sajet: Wow.

Cokie Roberts: Of war. George Washington thought that she was absolutely essential to the troop morale and troop morale was always extremely iffy because the American troops, who went through periods where they were unpaid, unhoused, unclothed, and um, she would come. She would bring foodstuffs and cloth from Mount Vernon and she would be cheered into camp. "Lady Washington is here!" And she would then, um, sew with the soldiers, cook for the soldiers, nurse the soldiers, put on entertainments with the other officers' wives and just keep, keep morale going. And they adored her. And let's talk a little bit about this portrait over there because...

Kim Sajet: Yeah, I would love it. So, this is a portrait by Rembrandt Peale. It's called, "The Porthole Portrait." And she is for all of the fact that of course she is older, she has this really beautiful kind of hat on, lots of lace and failed bellows.

Cokie Roberts: I actually think her hat does her a great disservice.

Kim Sajet: Really?

Cokie Roberts: Yes. Um, all of the pictures ever that we have any memory of, she has on that hat. That mob cap, it was called.

Kim Sajet: Yes.

Cokie Roberts: And um, it just makes her look dowdy and she wasn't dowdy. She, she was funny. Um, she said things that were totally politically incorrect, you know, bad things about Thomas Jefferson. Um, and one time, she came in and saw that there was grease on her, on her wall and said it must have been a Democrat who did that.

[LAUGHTER]

Cokie Roberts: I mean, she was not this person. Think about it. While she was First Lady and having to create the role of First Lady, which was incredibly difficult because here we have just come through this revolution

Kim Sajet: Right.

Cokie Roberts: To get rid of a king and all of the courtliness of Europe. Uh, and so, it was a Republican with a small arm nation and she had to create this role where it was Republican enough to be accepted by the revolutionaries, but elegant and formal enough, so that Europe would take this pathetic little country huddled on the Atlantic, seriously. She had a lot of work to do and she felt confined by it. She wrote at one point to her niece, "They say I'm the finest lady in the land, but I feel more like the chief state prisoner."

Kim Sajet: Yes. But she did have help, right?

Cokie Roberts: Oh gosh, yes.

Kim Sajet: Well, one of the more, um, you know...

Cokie Roberts: She had enslaved people working for her.

Kim Sajet: Well, she had Oney Judge was one of them, I know. I mean there was a bit of drama right, when Oney ran away and how she didn't deal with it terribly well?

Cokie Roberts: No, because she couldn't get over it. Why would Oney run away? She didn't. She had absolutely no understanding of it. Oney Judge was an enslaved woman who had worked for Martha Washington for a very long time. And Martha thought she was devoted to her. As far as she was concerned, Oney had a wonderful life. And Oney

understood she was going to move back to Virginia and she would be back in her enslaved position. And so, she took off and Martha was very upset about it and tried to get George to go searching for her, which would have been very, uh, indiscreet and Oney was never found by Martha.

Kim Sajat: Interesting. And she actually came to the marriage to George as a very wealthy widow. She had 84 enslaved people at the time, belonging to her. They, um, actually were not freed until he died. Is that...

Cokie Roberts: No, they were not freed until she died. And I must say, uh, the estate, Mt. Vernon, has done a very good job...

Kim Sajat: Fantastic job. Yeah.

Cokie Roberts: In letting us know the lives and the contributions of the enslaved people.

Kim Sajat: So Cokie, this next portrait that's in the gallery by William Elwell. It's of 1848 and it's of Dolley Madison. Um, what do you see when you look at this?

Cokie Roberts: Well, when I look at this, I see a Dolley Madison, who is about to die, frankly. She was 80 years old in this portrait. She died the next year, but she still has a knowing, um, smile on her face and a look of great intelligence in her eyes. She's wearing one of her signature turbans. She started wearing them in the early 1800s, when they were stylish. When she was this age, when she was an old lady, she was poverty stricken. And um, so, she kept wearing all of her old clothes as a way of just sort of making a statement. She thought she was fooling people that way. But in fact, she didn't have any money to buy new clothes. So, the turban was something of a hallmark of Dolley Madison. She's wearing a black dress with a red shawl. So, the red shawl gives you some sense of, of style. Um, in her day, she was an extremely stylish woman. Uh, she wore the dresses of the Napoleonic era with the, the big, the low necklines and the bosom pushed up, uh, and then these sort of...

Kim Sajat: Empire style.

Cokie Roberts: Empire Style.

Kim Sajat: Yeah.

Cokie Roberts: Empire Style, right.

Kim Sajat: Yeah.

Cokie Roberts: And then you'll see around her neck, in this portrait of her as an old lady, um, little white sort of netting.

Kim Sajat: Hmm.

Cokie Roberts: And she would wear that to slightly cover her bosom, uh, to be slightly more modest.

Kim Sajet: It's kind of too bad that the Portrait Gallery has all of these, um, portraits of...

Cokie Roberts: Old ladies.

Kim Sajet: Portraits of old ladies.

Cokie Roberts: Right.

Kim Sajet: They're all old. Yeah. Where she was very stylish. Is it true that, you know, as, um, Martha Washington was considered the mother of the nation, that Dolley Madison was considered Queen Dolley?

Cokie Roberts: She was called Queen Dolley, um and was very much the, the absolute power of the city of Washington. Dolley Madison basically was First Lady of the United States of America for 50 years. She had her own seat in the House of Representatives. And I can actually make the case that she kept the country together at a time when it would, could have easily fallen apart. Uh, the kind of partisanship that we see today was rampant in the early 19th century, combined with vicious regionalism. And the country was way too young and way too fragile to be able to sustain it, without some help and the help came from Dolley Madison. And she made people come together in the fledgling town of Washington and come to her events and uh, sit down together, have some cider, have some wine and behave. And um, she kept them from really falling apart.

Kim Sajet: And is that because her husband James Madison, who was the fourth President of the United States, didn't have the sort of social grace or the pizzazz?

Cokie Roberts: No, it started even before that. Um, when Thomas Jefferson was president, he didn't have a wife. She had been dead for a long time, uh, but... And people talk about Dolley Madison as Thomas Jefferson's hostess and from time to time, she did host his events, but mainly, she had a whole separate power base at her house on F Street. And she um, was the person who made people come together, as I said, but also that then went on for decades. And so, Daniel Webster is said to have at one point said, uh, "There's no permanent power in Washington, other than Dolley Madison." So, she was, she was recognized in her time. And I think that's something very interesting. Um, when I went back to learn about these women, I was surprised to see how people at the time gave them credit for political power.

Kim Sajet: Interesting, because we just don't hear about it anymore.

Cokie Roberts: That's right.

Kim Sajet: They're seen as, in this case, the old ladies, old white ladies in the museum.

Cokie Roberts: Right. Exactly.

Kim Sajat: Yeah. Well, you know, she's much loved by art historians and you know why. Because the British were coming out, part of the War of 1812, but this happens two years later, in 1814. And um, she's left in the White House. Everyone's telling her "Leave... leave... leave." "The British are coming!" And uh, there's a Mr. Carroll, poor man, who's been given the job of getting Dolley out of the White House. Um, it's getting dangerous. And she writes, "Mr. Carroll is in a very bad humor with me because I insist on waiting until the large picture of General Washington is secured and requires to be unscrewed from the wall. The process is found to be too tedious for these perilous moments. And I've ordered the frame to be broken and the canvas taken out. It is done and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York for safekeeping." And it is in fact, um, a version of the Lansdowne portrait that is still in the East Room of the White House.

Cokie Roberts: So, think about recent history. Think about bringing down Saddam Hussein's, uh, statue. Uh, think about Lenin's statue. In any war situation, going after the leader the, the...

Kim Sajat: The symbolism.

Cokie Roberts: The symbolism of the nation is something that is very, uh, difficult to have happen to a nation. And she understood that. And so, what happened is the British then did come. They burned their way from the Capitol to the White House, came into the White House. She had prepared, her and her enslaved servants had prepared, dinner for President Madison and his cabinet. The British sat down, ate her dinner, drank her wine and stole her portrait. And so, they probably did unspeakable things to her portrait. But they did not have George Washington to be able to attack.

Kim Sajat: And we have no idea what that portrait looked like?

Cokie Roberts: No.

Kim Sajat: That's lost.

Cokie Roberts: Gone.

Kim Sajat: That's too bad.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I would never have guessed that Martha Washington was funny.

Kim Sajat: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: And I don't know how much of that is due to her hat.

Kim Sajet: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: But I think that I do think of her as this sort of dowdier, old woman and I, I wonder how much those physical representations factor into our collective memory of characters from long ago.

Kim Sajet: Susan Sontag said that when you take a picture of someone, it's actually a little death, right? You have frozen time and you'll never get that moment back. And it is just a snapshot of time.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: And a portrait is the same. It is just that moment. And a portrait is as contemporary and as fresh as the person standing in front of it, even if it had been made 300 years ago, right? Because you're bringing all of your background, your education and your baggage, and your, everything to your personality to that encounter. But it is only as the starting point.

So, as we like to say on the podcast, it's where art and history, biography and identity collide. And it is not just about that representation of a person, but then finding their story.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: When we come back, Kim and Cokie discuss portraits of two iconic 20th Century first ladies, who couldn't be more different.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Today on Sidedoor, we're featuring an episode of Portraits, the Podcast from the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery that explores art, history, biography and identity through the lens of, you guessed it, portraits. And Kim Sajet, who is the Portrait Gallery's Director and podcast host, says that no conversation about America's first ladies is complete without mention of Eleanor Roosevelt. We return to their podcast with Roosevelt's address to the nation as the United States entered World War II.

[MUSIC]

Eleanor Roosevelt: "You cannot escape anxiety. You cannot escape a clutch of fear at your heart and yet I hope that the certainty of what we have to meet will make you rise above these fears. We must go about our daily business."

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Roosevelt had a towering political presence as First Lady during the Depression and World War II and was instrumental in the drafting of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights. She was an approachable woman, ahead of her time. She even instituted all female press conferences. Let's get back to our conversation.

Kim Sajet: So Cokie, let's talk about this next First Lady and this portrait that was done in 1946. What do you see when you look at this?

Cokie Roberts: I see a woman looking at me so directly and so intelligently. I love this portrait! And it's entitled, "First Lady of the World." And I love that. That was a title given to her, by the way, by Harry Truman. And um, I think that you really have that sense of her, you have that sense of her, her determinedness. And at this point, she's at the United Nations. She was of course the author of, "The Human Rights Convention." She was an incredible human being and she was from childhood. She was involved in every imaginable do-good organization from the time she was a little girl.

Kim Sajet: She was going to change the world.

Cokie Roberts: And she did.

Kim Sajet: She did.

Cokie Roberts: Once they reached the White House, of course, President Roosevelt had Polio and could really not move around. And so, she became his eyes and ears and she went around the world, in the country, learning everything she could learn and coming back and telling them and they often disagreed and she often pushed him to places he didn't want to be, but, uh, she was never going to stop. And I think you get some sense of that in this portrait.

Kim Sajet: This is a fairly, um, painterly portrait in that you can really see the brush strokes. And indeed, Eleanor is looking directly out at you. I often call this the "power pose." She's got her hair up, which is now silver, into this lovely sort of curled bun and a, um, beautiful white shirt with a pendant. Um, I do think it's a very kindly portrait, but she is certainly scrutinizing you um, and you, you need to look back.

Cokie Roberts: The other thing I think about it is that I think she's prettier in this portrait than most of the pictures you see of her. Her eyes are so blue...

Kim Sajet: Yes!

Cokie Roberts: In the way they come across.

Kim Sajet: Sort of penetrating. Yeah.

Cokie Roberts: And they, they really give you a sense of her inner beauty.

Kim Sajet: You know what's sort of fascinating is that you talk about her as someone who had a lot of determination. She had a lot of courage. In fact, one of the quotes we

have of her is saying, "Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run, it's easier."

[LAUGHTER]

Kim Sajet: But she was actually kind of shy. She didn't like getting her portrait done, which was part of the problem that we had is that there aren't a lot around.

Cokie Roberts: But one thing is about other people and one thing is about yourself. And she could speak for other people. To be publicly advocating for someone else is much easier than saying, "Okay. Paint me."

Kim Sajet: Right. So, let's jump ahead to this next portrait, which I think is pretty dazzling. Um, Cokie, I hope you agree. This is a portrait done of Nancy Reagan and it is done in between 1984 and 1985 by Aaron Shikler.

Cokie Roberts: This is her Time magazine cover for the second Reagan inauguration. And as you see, the uh, the cut line is, "White House Co-star: Nancy Reagan's growing role." And that probably sent shivers down a lot of American spines.

Kim Sajet: Why?

Cokie Roberts: Because people are scared of First Ladies. They think that they have too much power. They don't want them to have power.

Kim Sajet: And there was a perception that Nancy got a little too involved sometimes.

Cokie Roberts: She was very involved.

Kim Sajet: That's true?

Cokie Roberts: Oh, absolutely! She fired the Chief of Staff. She hired and fired Cabinet. She was terribly involved in running that White House. And the reason people get nervous about that is because they didn't elect her. You know, they elected him and not her. And we, by the way, have absolutely no evidence that any First Lady has affected anybody's vote. So, not only did they not elect her, but they didn't even really think about her as they were casting their ballots. And there she is, no matter who she is, with the last word at night and the first word in the morning. An incredible influence and she not only was not elected, she can't be fired.

Kim Sajet: Yeah. One of her quotes said, "Did I ever give Ronnie advice? You bet I did." And then she goes on to say, "For eight years, I was sleeping with the President. And if that doesn't give you special access, I don't know what does."

Cokie Roberts: There you go!

[LAUGHTER]

Kim Sajat: No truer words were said.

Cokie Roberts: Now...

Kim Sajat: Now, I have to say for a woman who was actually 64 in this picture, she's looking fantastic!

Cokie Roberts: She was a very beautiful woman.

Kim Sajat: Can you describe it?

Cokie Roberts: Yes. This is Nancy Reagan, um, in her 60s, but looking considerably younger, with her hair done as it always was. Uh, she's wearing a red shirt dress, uh, with her hands kind of not quite in the pockets, but looking like they might almost be. And she is again looking directly at you, with a somewhat benign look, but you don't want to mess with her.

Kim Sajat: No.

Cokie Roberts: And um, the fact that she's in a shirt dress, I find just absolutely fascinating.

Kim Sajat: 'Cause that's very modern, right? Very contemporary?

Cokie Roberts: No, it's not that. It's that it's very simple and that it's very plain.

Kim Sajat: But it's the Reagan red. I discovered that this is a thing!

Cokie Roberts: Oh, the Reagan red was a thing. She told people that they couldn't wear red to the inauguration, so that she would be the only one in red. Uh, but she is wearing this red dress for this cover to try to look like a plain Jane for Americans, so she's not scaring them. Nancy Reagan was seen as a little bit too, uh, hoity toity for a lot of people. She, she hung out with Hollywood royalty as she did buy expensive things. She borrowed expensive things which some people found unsettling.

Kim Sajat: I think that's kind of smart though isn't it?

Cokie Roberts: It was considered somehow common.

Kim Sajat: Huh!

Cokie Roberts: Um, and, uh, so it's funny. She was both common and too regal at the same time.

Kim Sajet: It's a lose, lose.

Cokie Roberts: But that's what happens to First Ladies. You know, Martha Washington loved satins and silks, but when she went to New York to assume the job of First Lady, she wore homespun.

Kim Sajet: Yeah. So, if we just circle back again, there's been a whole lot of misconceptions about the First Lady. One of them is that really it's been the contemporary First Ladies, at least the 20th century First Ladies, that have become more involved in politics. Nancy Reagan certainly comes to fore, but in fact, the early First Ladies, the first mothers, were just as involved.

Cokie Roberts: Absolutely. You can go down them, one after another, and find that there was something where they were instrumental. Sarah Polk, the wife of James Polk, was the Cabinet Secretary. Um, and of course, Edith Wilson ran the government after Woodrow Wilson had his stroke. So, you, you just keep looking at them and the more you learn about each one of them, the more you understand how incredibly influential they were.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: And that adage, that behind every great man is a truly exceptional woman?

Cokie Roberts: Not all these men were great.

Kim Sajet: That is fabulous.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to learn more about the First Ladies of the White House through their portraits, you're in luck! The National Portrait Gallery is developing an exhibition called, "Every Eye is Upon Me," which will open in November 2020, and it's going to be pretty special.

Lizzie Peabody: It's not comprehensive.

Kim Sajet: It is comprehensive. Every First Lady will be in it. We're having major loans coming from other museums. We have big hopes that some of those, uh, pictures will come from the White House.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow!

Kim Sajet: So, you'll also see some portraits that just haven't been out in the public for a long, long time. So, it should be a really, really terrific exhibition.

Lizzie Peabody: That's very exciting!

Kim Sajet: It's very exciting!

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This has been such a pleasure. Thank you for talking with us about portraits and about the podcast. It's been a real joy.

Kim Sajet: Well, thank you so much! And I hope that everybody listens. It would be very self-affirming, if nothing else!

[LAUGHTER]

Lizzie Peabody: Kim says this season of Portraits is full of great stories, like Civil War spies, the truth about Pocahontas, and how a portrait can restore humanity. Subscribe to Portraits wherever you get your podcasts.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you like the show, leave us a review in Apple Podcasts and tell us why!

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Lizzie Peabody: Sidedoor is made possible with help from people like you. Your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq and Lara Koch. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks, of course, to Kim Sajet and Ruth Morris and to all the folks at the National Portrait Gallery who helped make this episode possible.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Sidegore is... (Laughs) Sidegore is made possible... (Clicking sounds).
That's good enough.