



Library podcast

Patrick deWitt discusses "French Exit" with Maria Semple

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[00:00:31] Good evening. Thank you all for being here tonight. I'm Stesha Brandon I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at The Seattle Public Library. As we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We would like to honor their elders past and present and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Patrick deWitt and Maria Semple presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our authors series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we are grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support.

[00:01:32] Yeah thank you.

[00:01:37] Without further ado I am delighted to introduce tonight's speakers. Patrick deWitt is the author of the critically acclaimed novels *Abolitions* and *Notes for a Novel*. The *Sisters Brothers* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and under major-domo minor DeWitt's novel *The Sisters Brothers* has recently been adapted into a film starring John C. Reilly and Joaquin Phoenix which will be released later this month to the general public. Patrick is going to talk with local writer Maria Semple. And one of our favorite favorite folks locally Maria is the author of several novels including the bestsellers *Where'd You Go Bernadette* and *Today Will Be Different* as well as this one is mine. Before writing fiction Maria wrote for television and her novel *Where'd You Go Bernadette* is also being adapted into a film starring Cate Blanchett and fun story. They filmed part of it here which was last summer. We've got to see Cate Blanchett. More importantly we got to hang out with Maria. So Patrick and Maria will be talking about Patrick's new book *French Exit* which has been getting rave reviews called a moving mother son caper. The book introduces us to Francis her son Malcolm and their cat who may or may not be the spirit of Francis's late husband and they escape Dire Straits or try to escape dire straits by heading to Paris. So without further ado please help me welcome Patrick deWitt and Maria Semple

[00:03:14] Thank you Sasha. Thanks everyone for being here.

[00:03:17] I am really happy to be here with Patrick My how we met in L.A. at the L.A. Times Book Festival when our first books.

[00:03:27] Right. And I feel like we share something in common and that we both wrote first novels that well I think yours did better than mine. Mine did really badly. How would you characterize a pollution's like.

[00:03:42] Well I think it did pretty bad. OK.

[00:03:46] Ok good. OK. He said it I didn't. All right I guess I did say first.

[00:03:49] But our book didn't do that well. I loved ablutions so much. I mean it's still we I always say this to you I will always be my favorite of your novels. And so then we went off after our failed novels and then wrote second novels that both hit you with the sisters brothers and me with where'd you go Bernadette. And so we kind of have a singing career. Yeah except that you've written an extra book which kind of sucks. You're on book 4 now right.

[00:04:25] You're more successful than I am. No

[00:04:29] I've been basking in my success. While you are busy writing an extra book but so what. But I feel like this book. I mean the thing is your books are so different and so. And we'll get to that in a second.

[00:04:43] But I love this book so much. We of course send each other early copies of our most recent book and this this book French checks a totally blew me away. It was so funny and so charming and I don't know who's gotten a chance to read it but it really is. Yeah it's crazy right. I mean it's so so charming it's so fun. And I will now force you to go read the first chapter. OK. Thank you.

[00:05:13] Ok thank you guys very much for coming up for this and you Maria for being here with me. I'm just going to start in the beginning. Maria wants me to read the first few pages. So there's very little to set up here this that we're seeing the primary characters Frances and Malcolm PRYCE and they've decided it's time to leave the party that they've been attending. Chapter 1. All good things must end said Francis price. She was a moneyed striking woman of 65 years using her hands into black calfskin and gloves on the steps of a brownstone in New York City's Upper East Side. Her son Malcolm 32 stood nearby looking his usual broody and unkempt self. It was late autumn dusk. The windows of the brownstone were lit.

[00:05:59] A piano sounded on the air a tasteful party was occurring Francis was explaining her early departure to a similarly wealthy though far less lovely individual.

[00:06:10] This the hostess. Her name does not matter. She was aggrieved. You're certain you have to go. She asked Is it really so bad as that. According to the veterinarian it's only a matter only a

matter of time Francis said. What a shame we were having such a lovely evening. Were you really the hostess asked hopefully such a lovely evening and I do hate to leave. But it sounds an actual emergency. And what can be done in the face of that. The hostess considered her answer. Nothing she said finally. A silence arrived to Frances's hor the hostess lunged and clung to her. I've always admired you so she whispered. Malcolm said Francis. Actually I'm sort of afraid of you is that very silly of me Malcolm. Malcolm Malcolm found the hostess pliable. He peeled away from his mother than she took the woman's hand in his and shook it. She watched her hand going up and down with an expression of puzzlement. She had two too many drinks and there was nothing in her stomach but a viscous Patay she returned to her home and Malcolm led Francis away down the steps to the sidewalk. They passed the waiting town car and sat on a bench 20 yards back from the brownstone. For there was no emergency no veterinarian and the cat that antique oddity called Small Frank was not on well so far as they knew.

[00:07:30] Francis lit a cigarette with her gold lighter. She like this later best due to its satisfying weight and the distinguished click it made at the moment of ignition. She aimed the glowing cherry at the hostess now visible in an upstairs window speaking with one of her guests. Frances shook her head. Born to bore she said. Malcolm was inspecting a framed photograph he'd stolen from the hostess's bedroom. She's just drunk he said hopefully she won't remember in the morning she'll send flowers if she does said Francis. She took up the photograph. Her recent studio portrait of the hostess her head was tilted back her mouth a jar of frantic happiness in her eyes. Frances ran her finger along the edge of the ornate frame is this Jade. She asked. I think it is said Malcolm very beautiful she said and handed it back to Malcolm. He opened the frame and removed the photo folding it in crisp quarters and dropping it into a trash can beside their bench. You returned the frame to his coat pocket and resumed his study of the party pointing out a late middle aged man with a cummerbund encased in casing a markedly round stomach. That man some type of ambassador he said. Yes said Francis.

[00:08:42] If those epaulettes could talk did you speak to his wife. Francis nodded. Men's teeth in a child's mouth. I had to look away. She flicked her cigarette into the street. Now what. Malcolm said a vagrant approached and stood before them. His eyes were bright with alcohol and he asked in a chirpy voice. Got anything to spare to night folks. Malcolm was leaning in to shoot the man when Francis caught his arm. It's possible that we do she said but may we ask what you need the money for. Oh you know. The man raised and dropped his arms. Just getting by. Could you please be more specific. She asked. I guess I'd like a little wine if you really want to know. He swayed in place and Frances asked him in a confiding voice is it possible you've already had something to drink tonight. I've got my edges smooth the man admitted. And what does that mean. Means I had a drink before. Now I'm thinking about another Francis appreciate the answer. What's your name Dan. May I call you Daniel. If that's what you want to do what's your preferred brand of wine. Daniel I'll drink anything wet ma'am but I do like three roses and how much for a bottle of three roses bottles five bucks a gallon Zait. He sure does it to say the gallon was the shrewd consumers choice. And what would you buy if I gave you twenty dollars. Twenty dollars said Dan and he whistled a puff of dry air for twenty dollars I could get two gallons of three roses and a weenie. He patted the pocket of his army coat. I already got my cigarettes.

[00:10:20] The 20 would set you up nicely then wouldn't it.

[00:10:22] Oh quite nicely and where would you bring it all back to your room. Dan squinted. He was realizing the scenario in his mind the weening idea on the spot. The wine and the cigarettes I'd take those into the park with me. That's where I sleep most nights in the park. Under where in the park she asked under a bush she said a particular Bush or Bush is a Bush in my experiment he said.

[00:10:46] Excuse me experience. Francis smiled sweetly at Dan. All right she said. So you lie under a bush in the park and you'd smoke your cigarettes and drink your red wine.

[00:10:56] Yeah he said. You look up at the stars. Why not. Francis said Would you really drink both gallons and a night. Yeah. Yes I surely would. Wouldn't you feel awful in the morning. That's what mornings are for ma'am.

[00:11:11] He'd spoken without comedic intent intent and Frances thought that Dan's mornings were probably wretched beyond her comprehension shifts sufficiently touched she opened her clutch and fished out twenty dollars. Dan received the bill shuddered from skull to toe then walked off out in a pain apparently painfully brisk pace a beat cop approached looking after Dan with malice.

[00:11:34] That guy wasn't bothering you too I hope. Who. Daniel said Francis. Not at all. He's a friend of ours. It seemed like he was putting the bait on you. Francis stared icily. Actually I was paying him back. I should have paid him back a long time ago. But Dan's been very patient with me. I thank God for the fact of a man like him. Not that it's any of your business. She held up the lighter and lit it click the flames stubby and blue bottomed was positioned between them as though defining a border a sense of isolation came over the Koppen he wandered away asking Saari small questions to himself. Francis turned to Malcolm and clapped her hands together communicating a job is done. Sentiment they disliked policemen. Indeed they disliked all figures of authority have you had enough. Asked Malcolm I've answered Francis walking to the town car she took up Malcolm's arm in her special loving creature manner home.

[00:12:31] She told the driver the grand multilevel apartment was dim and resembled a museum after hours. The cook had left them a roast in the oven. Malcolm plaited two portions in the eight in silence which was not the norm but they were both distracted by personal and happinesses Malcolm's worrying about Susan his fiance. He hadn't seen her in several days and the last time they'd spoken she had called him a rude and vulgar name. Francis's concern was existential. She lately had found herself mired in an eerie feeling as one standing with her back to the ocean. Small Frank elderly to the point of decrepitude clambered onto the table and sat before Francis. She and the cat stared at each other. Frances lit a cigarette and exhaled a column of smoke into his face. He winced and left the room. Malcolm said. What's tomorrow. Mr Baker insists on a meeting Francis answered. Mr. Baker was their financial adviser and had been the executor of the estate after the death of Francis's husband.

[00:13:32] Malcolm's father Franklin price what's the one asked Malcolm. You wouldn't say this was not technically a lie.

[00:13:41] Mr. Baker hadn't explicitly stated what that meeting was about. But Francis knew all too well when he wished to discuss whether he thought of it made her morose and she excused herself ascending the marble staircase to curry solace in a bath choked with miniature pearlescent bubbles. Afterwards she sat on the seats in the bathroom in her plush robe and her hair was down. Small Frank sleeping at her feet. She was speaking with Joan on the phone. Thanks

[00:14:17] As I hear that again. So much story is set up there I didn't kind of realize. I read it twice but there's so many themes. It's all kind of in that first section and how aware you of having done that is that something that you set out to do in the first chapter.

[00:14:36] Like set up the story or I do have an appreciation for authors who can set you up as quickly as possible. So in terms of physical description or you know you wondered how can you get to the heart of the matter as fast as humanly possible. But it occurs to me in reading that that it's in a weird way sort of a miniature version of the book itself. So I think you're right everything is there but that wasn't necessarily the goal so much as just to get it get it over with to rip the bandaid off and get the story get the story.

[00:15:07] Oh good. OK. Oh I like hearing that because I feel like you're a you're like a fancy writer and I like that fancy writers like that like the quick story because I do too.

[00:15:18] Well I think I've come to realize that I am a real escapist and I don't want to alienate the reader or I'm the type of reader who doesn't want to be alienated himself. You know I like inclusive writing. That's sort of a strange word to use but I just mean user friendly work. I always appreciate user friendly work and all mediums you know as if you were paintings or you're listening or you know movies or music or whatever. I appreciate the idea that the art is for all people not just specialists you know.

[00:15:53] Right. Totally and I teach some students here and I'm always saying you just. It's actually this is the most Qype you do this kind of quite literally. But I always say you almost want to be like the benevolent hostess who's just helping someone into your book easily because why not. You know you don't get points for the other thing you've got someone who puts your book down you know.

[00:16:17] And it's a trust that you can use later on in the book. I mean. Totally.

[00:16:23] Well yeah I mean I'm serious.

[00:16:25] You tricked these people into caring for these characters and then you can not in a nasty way necessarily but you know I don't hold their hand the whole way through.

[00:16:33] Right. No one really way. I mean that's the thing is that it is then you can do a change. Right. Right.

[00:16:38] I mean my the thing that I always go to was the fill up the glove scene in American Pastoral the Philip Roth he just is leading you along and then goes into 20 pages about the history of making gloves in new work. And you can't start a book with a history of lovemaking but it's like one of the most thrilling 20 pages in literature for me.

[00:16:59] But it's because he sets you up so beautifully if you establish trust or some sort of goodwill. It doesn't pay off because you can get away with with murder really.

[00:17:09] Yeah that's right. But with a lot of crazy tricks. So tell me the story of this book and how it came about and just the process of it. Tell us OK.

[00:17:19] It's a bit of a long story. I'll try to keep it down. But what happened is that after I wrote The Sisters Brothers I had an idea to write a novel about somebody like Bernie Madoff and the idea was that he grew up poor in New York and became obscenely wealthy and then was about to go to prison and the expatriates to Paris. So it's research this I went to New York several times and I moved to Paris for only four months but it was an open ended trip and I was there to research and experience Paris in a daily way.

[00:17:53] And the moment I began working on this book in earnest I had that nagging feeling which usually means that the book is not going to be completed or it's not going to be good enough to publish when it's done.

[00:18:03] I did abandon it and then I went on to write under majordomo Mieder instead which I started in Paris and then finished in the U.S.. But the book after under Major I sat down to work on what was going to be like the I thought of it as the third in a series of sort of historical novels it was going to be about an explorer or somebody like Magellan or Columbus. And I sat down to work on it and I had really come to writing that sort of antique vernacular. You can really say a lot of overtly poetic and you can get away with a lot that can be exploited.

[00:18:36] I'm just to stop you like not a lot of people can do that. No no no. What I'm saying is that you go you can write in an antique vernacular. I'm just saying OK you can write that into. Like ok you just want to just point that out. OK.

[00:18:49] So anyway I sat down to work on this book which which I was very excited about. And as soon as I got going on it which I didn't get very far into it I just had a real desire to work in a contemporary setting. And I didn't want to go back in time again and I didn't want to write in. This a poetic way anymore. And I started thinking about the character of Frances price I think it's been kicking around in my mind for a long time and all my other books have been very male centric and I just wanted to have a female protagonist and it's just a voice that's been there for a while and it's it's sort of I think a voice that a lot of us have especially if any of us possess a cynicism or you know we

all have. A nasty voice in our head. And I know I do. And I was really a relief to give you know to put a character behind this voice. And it started really well and it was a very simple book to write relatively speaking and it wasn't until after I was done or maybe I was three fourths done when I realized what I'd done which was I'd written the same Bernie Madoff type book. From the point of view of the auxillary characters but I was unaware of it for most of the writing of this book. So so it came about. I mean all this research that I've done writing about New York and Paris and all the stuff I was using it without really thinking about what I was doing which is a testament to something bad. That I wouldn't be that unaware of what I was doing well.

[00:20:16] Well that's something that I think is one of the rewards of what we've chosen to do is how deep into the process you can get and have no idea what you're doing. And then when you realize that it's it truly is. I think maybe the greatest pleasure of that you don't know you know the famous thing if you don't know what you're writing until you've written it. But it's really true like you think you're in control of it you're there and you're putting the words to out in your toiling yet at the same time you have no idea what you're doing.

[00:20:47] Yeah yeah. The subconscious comes into play I think once you're really clued into a book once you're really in it all sorts of things happen that you don't really realize until later or never at all. It's it's really common and for me to talk to somebody about a book I wrote years and years ago and I'll bring something up which is obvious. But it's like I'd never considered it before. So I love that aspect of it too.

[00:21:09] There's this whole mystery realm that comes along with working in the long form maybe it's the same for all artists but I think it might be connected to fiction writers or novelists in particular that sense of being lost in a pleasant way. It's like being lost but there's no menace. You know it's like I told you you know you're going to get there you know you're working on faith but you know you'll get there eventually and it almost always works when you almost always do so. I like that aspect of the work as well. Now that brings me to something that I don't know if you remember this but that it was

[00:21:45] I guess after we'd both written our first novels and maybe sisters brothers. I think maybe had not come out yet or is about to come out but we hung out at one point in Portland and that I was working on my second novel my follow up to this one is mine.

[00:22:03] And the book was this failure and I took it very personally and I thought oh I'm going to write a book that people like and I started writing this book about sisters who live in Colorado. When I was working and working and working and working on this book and we had talked at some point and you asked how the book was going and I said oh I'm working and struggling and I don't know the book. And then we saw each other in Portland maybe five months later and you said How's the book going. And I said I'm working I'm working I'm I'm struggling. And you said what for after you won. And I said the first draft and you said first drafts are for fun. If you're not having fun. Put that book down.

[00:22:44] You remember saying that. I don't. OK. Yeah. Well it was. You know it was.

[00:22:48] It was the best thing you did because I do and I've said this publicly many times I I feel like you're the fairy godfather of. Where'd you go Bernadette. Because I just put the book down on my palm. You know Patrick says I've got to have fun.

[00:23:04] And you said if you're not having fun there's something wrong with the first draft because I think it gets harder and more just like workman like as the draft Skylon but I really just thought what do you what would make me laugh and what would make me feel like I'm just like having a party. And I started where you go Bernadette. And so what I'm wondering is that you take your own advice. Do you feel like your first drafts are always really fun.

[00:23:29] Well a really fun is probably a mischaracterization because it is hard and it is lonely and there's negative aspects to it. I slowly feel very isolated a lot of the time but yeah generally speaking if I'm not keen to get to work I'm by nature I'm quitely I'm quite lazy so I'm looking for an excuse not to work. So if I am working every day because I want to and that that bodes well you know.

[00:23:58] And so the other side of that coin is that if I'm dreading it as I was with the Bernie Madoff sorrows and ask Zappos I was making myself work and I had kept saying well it's hard work. This is what work is what it's supposed to be. But

[00:24:11] At a certain point I think I gave myself the advice I gave you which is just like something's wrong something's going wrong here. And I've made a mistake and I finished a whole novel once and then just it never came out because there just wasn't any happiness in the book.

[00:24:28] I don't mean happy scenes I just mean there was no passion to it. There was no it was like a flat line book.

[00:24:33] You know Bruce Wagner I know he's a L.A. novelist as he once said something to me that I thought was really good which was if you're not having fun they're not going to have fun.

[00:24:44] Yeah definitely true. I think it's definitely true and we've all read books where we can probably tell you that the author hadn't had that much fun.

[00:24:52] And my heart goes out to these people but I think that there's something to be said for walking away even if it you know it burns deeply when you walk away from something you've put months or years into. But it's just for the best the world doesn't need any more boring books.

[00:25:06] Yeah I mean my book that I abandoned I mean I found it the minute I abandoned it it felt great because it's just that awful struggle is gone.

[00:25:14] Well that's the thing too is I always think if I'm making a mistake I'll know later and I can pick a back up. But I've never done that. And I don't even look back at you know what I mean I have no desire to return to these failed projects because the next thing is always so much more appealing and exciting.

[00:25:29] Totally now going talking about Francis who I love who's the mother. And then Malcolm is her son and their dialogue is insane.

[00:25:41] I mean there are passages that are so funny and so strange. Now you just referenced that Francis was you know bitter and dark and whatever. But I feel like when they go back and forth I don't want to say they're similar but I just what I'm getting at is that do you. Did you have internal rules about the differences between Francis and Malcolm particularly with the dialogue because they just like go crazy it's so fun and shocking. I mean it really is like I always think laughter is shocking and it was just I was laughing a lot because it was just like oh my god you didn't just write that sentence.

[00:26:20] I mean it was so in the zone and I'm wondering do you have internal rules for the difference between I don't I don't really tell you the truth and I think if you look at Sisters Brothers as well or under Major for that matter I mean basically it's one insane voice and it's just people using them as tools to bounce these ridiculous ideas around. And I'm happy you spreading dialogue. I've realized that when I have two game characters that can really spar you know that's when I'm that's when I'm I feel the best and with the crisis it was just right away. That's how it was. Know and so they do have a very similar voice I would say that the differences are the I think Francis is more arch and Malcolm is faster to quit. You know what I mean he's more he has less fighting them and Francis is filled with France's field of fight. So there's a difference in that way but the sentiment is very similar and I. But to me it's more that they speak the way families speak like you or somebody is home for Thanksgiving and the way that the grandmother speaks to the mother to the daughter on through the you know we all have our bit that we do. And so this is just a bit 250 pages of their bit.

[00:27:35] It's a great bit. So just to drop more names.

[00:27:41] It's one of the good things about me because it's I'm I'm pretty shameless about that. And you think think less of me.

[00:27:48] That's OK. No. So so so my my father's best friend was this novelist James Salter I'm sure you know Jim. Right. Erm I'm sorry. Yes your great great novelist. And when I started writing books I went and talked to him and I felt like from my first book to my second book I felt like I was going to be writing the same book.

[00:28:13] And I went to Jim and Jim said I'll just never just never forget just this gesture. He was at his house in Aspen and he said you can only write what's in here. You know when he always wrote kind of the same book over and over but you can only write what's in here now.

[00:28:29] After sisters brothers what you know came out and I read that and it seems so different from abortions. I said do you I feel like I'm writing the same book over and over and you're not writing the same book over and over and you remember what you said to me.

[00:28:50] You said I said I'm writing the exact same book. You remember. It was amazing because those two books couldn't be more different.

[00:28:58] And I thought oh he's not writing the same book over and over and you immediately said Oh yeah they're exactly the same book.

[00:29:03] And you remember why OK. Oh

[00:29:08] It's it's people have men who have issues with authority. OK. Remember that you said that you said that. But does that make sense that those books are kind of it's about as different as they seem right in the air. And it's not even I say you write the same book in quotes it's obviously wildly not the same book it was men who were unhappy in their positions in life. The men who hated their jobs immediately did their jobs. Sorry that's what you said. Yeah you're like oh yeah they're both just books about Manning hate their jobs. I was like oh my god I guess that's kind of true.

[00:29:41] It's a bit of a stretch but so so now that you have four books could you say that what you talk about that they don't like authority figures. Fred Francis Malcolm really rail against authority figures. So you feel like that's something that could be returned to a bunch of things and some of the things I'm aware that I'm doing and some of the things I'm not aware that I'm doing journalists are kind enough to tell me what I'm doing the same time

[00:30:07] Every time I put out a book. God bless them. Come on seriously. Diagrams. I can't believe that I mean you're like the only one. There's animals in each book.

[00:30:16] There's talk that there can be animals.

[00:30:21] Anyway I think that there are overarching themes to be sure. I think generally the similarity is just the tone.

[00:30:27] I think that the tones are quite similar I guess evolutions is off to the side but you think of the three books after that they're all but even ablutions I mean the way I relate to the world is through a humorous sort of half humorous half caustic lens of how I see us and myself and I think that it's all trained through that very particular lens. So I think it's recognize there's a recognizable voice there. But the backdrop is always at least so far has been pretty drastically different one from the next but I think of almost a set dressing. I don't think of it as that significantly different. I mean I've talked in the past about sisters brothers could have been in the Waar could have been a science fiction novel. It's almost happenstance that it was a western. I mean it's just like getting gussied up to play with your friends kind of thing it's it's it's a childish impulse that I see through. I don't know very much about wealthy people. These are very wealthy people in this book but I like the idea of you know a voyeuristically inhabiting this landscape for a while and making them how I want them to be. You know there probably aren't very many millionaires who are unkind to policemen. I mean or dislike authority figures. But anyway there's an overarching sensibility there. I think I do like to tell myself that I'm starting from scratch each time because there's this sense of being lost. We were talking about

earlier not really knowing I could have written another bar book after another but like I could have done that but I didn't want to do that because it seemed to me that it would lead to burn out.

[00:32:04] Are you aware going in that you want to write books that are so different. Because I don't know who here is familiar with all four books but they couldn't be further just that they're so totally different I mean there's the bar book that's like really gritty realism right.

[00:32:22] You've got the Western you've got the Eastern European kind of fantasy fairytale book and now you've got like Rich degenerates in modern day New York and Paris and so it like that. Do you feel like and I don't want to talk to you about your next because that's obnoxious but I guess what I'm saying is do you. Am I right to assume that you're going to do something completely different the next time or do you feel now you're like almost trapped like you have to do something different next time.

[00:32:52] I don't feel trapped at the book I have in mind is going to be different but it's going to be different more tonally I think in my mind it's going to be less overtly humorous which sounds when I say it aloud like a bad idea.

[00:33:08] I sorry I get why I didn't Gaspin to my my God. Well OK so I was actually going to ask you Do you think you're a comic novelist.

[00:33:18] Yeah I do. But it's been a process of acceptance.

[00:33:22] Me too I was I was always feeling like it minimize me or something.

[00:33:27] Well I was speaking with my friend Josh about this out front of the library starting out with the Bluefin's which is probably I guess the darkest book that I wrote but it is rooted I think in a specific kind of humor definitely in writing that book. I had I had the desire to to really sort of slay a reader not to beat him or her over the head unnecessarily but to really and this is thinking of books that I read like Thomas Bernard book or somebody like that somebody who just got you know and I wanted to do that and I really didn't want to sort of affect a reader powerfully. And yet I couldn't stop writing you know quippy dialogue and stuff like that and at a certain point I just threw my hands up and I think this is where I want to go so I have to allow this to happen. But there is a thing that I continue to deal with which is that people and I'm probably guilty of this as well. Think of humorous writing as secondary dramatically.

[00:34:21] And this is maddening and I think it's wrong to think it's wrong headed. I don't think it's true. And yet it still that sentiment still lingers in my mind.

[00:34:32] Well try being female comic novelist and then make people I mean I'm not saying that I have it bad but I'm just saying it's just an extra layer of that they don't take you seriously and you're like a woman who's funny. It's just kind of one less layer that they take here because I mean I think that all novel aside no even ones who.

[00:34:56] Well we won't name them but I mean friends of mine who I think write just crappy novels. They think they're writing really serious novels you know like everyone thinks they're right on my watch. Yeah. But they think they're writing really serious novels. I think we all are in it to write serious novels.

[00:35:14] You know I think that I don't think anyone it's it's so hard to write a novel I don't think anyone just thinks it's a lark. You're it takes so long and it's such a risk if the thing's going to come together at all and ever. And I think everyone you have to take it really seriously what you're doing.

[00:35:31] And so it is weird to be kind of then what when you put humor in it as a comic novelist they do kind of dismissive.

[00:35:40] Yeah but you know I think that it would sort of solve the problem for me was realizing that ultimately my favorite books are funny and oftentimes they're funny almost all the time they're funny and caustic or funny and tragic or whatever it is but humor exists in all of my favorite works of fiction. And so this is this is this is the salt I take solace in this.

[00:36:01] Totally I agree. If a book has no humor in it you very few books know it.

[00:36:07] There's very few books that I like that don't have humor. Yeah totally. There must be some examples but I can't really think of any off the top of my head.

[00:36:12] Yeah totally even if it's just something witty or wry or an irony narrative irony I think is also a dramatic irony can be really funny or often times when I say funny too I also just sort of mean I'm talking about a worldview or unique worldview.

[00:36:31] So somebody like Robert Walzer or somebody like this it's just like it's not that he's writing guy he's not a gag man. But his point of view is obscure and humorous in that it's completely unique to him and he's insane. And that's funny.

[00:36:46] You know you bring something up that my if we keep going back to talking about our first novels. But in my first novel I feel like I was trying to be taken seriously and trying to write like I feel like there's a I don't know that I forced it but I tried to be a little more kind of hard core and tough than I think I really am because this is my first novel and you want to be taken seriously and I feel like with my next two books I as I've grown in confidence I've let myself be funny or and I think that's Am I hearing that that's kind of the same thing with you. With the solutions.

[00:37:26] I think so. I mean I couldn't have written this book because of this trip I had on my shoulder. So it's only after I sort of established myself to myself as a writer. I have now I can write this book that is you know something like a Noel Coward players something I mean it's like it's bubbly. And people like you coming here with your book is really fun. And then they walk away and sort of like it's a complicated compliment thank you.

[00:37:54] You say cause that's amazing. If I mean like honestly how many books are fun. You know what I mean like I know I went with where'd you go Bernadette when people are so funny it's so funny.

[00:38:04] I had a real chip on my shoulder about that too I was like say it's like heavy or it's well written or any of that. But everyone is just I've never laughed so hard reading a book everyone would say that to me and then I just thought wait a second one if once in my life I could get a book that just made me laugh all the way through the way. Why did I put that person in my will.

[00:38:25] You know and so I'm like so I'm like OK fine just say my book to make you laugh.

[00:38:30] I'm cool with that but you know what I mean about it being it's kind of it's it's it's an interesting complement to receive. I did an interview yesterday and the book was compared to Jello and in a good way. The way. I read it in a day and maybe Jela. And. You know I I couldn't live with that. And I actually even appreciate it and I know that the person who was speaking meant it in the nicest way. And it's a compliment but it's a complicated problem.

[00:39:00] Yeah definitely. Now let's talk about because I think everyone is going hear about it about a movie coming out and about your SO. So just to back up a little bit you are a screenwriter as well.

[00:39:15] And you wrote a movie that came out that you were nominated for a Spirit Award right. Yeah yeah. So you know what you're doing in the biz and now you have this sisters brothers was optioned and it was made a new movie and now it's coming out. Trailers are in the theater are very exciting. Yeah. So tell us about that.

[00:39:35] Yeah. Before the book was published I think maybe even sold it was my my my friend Azal who directed the film of Terry that went up for the Spirit Award. He is pals with John McCain John Reilly John C. Reilly. This manuscript and John C. Reilly saw something cinematic in it and he optioned it and that was like nine years ago. And this is how long it's taken to get the movie made. And he's been really tenacious and incredible and his wife Alison is the producer and she's wonderful. You know it's a long story. It's a long period of time and I wasn't hugely involved. I was just sort of getting Catch-Up calls every six months or something like that for the last few years. But I come to see the film and I like it very much.

[00:40:25] I was reading there was a five minute standing ovation and really enjoying it.

[00:40:29] It just premiered in Venice and people are responding well to it.

[00:40:41] It's a real relief.

[00:40:42] You know it's a book that means a lot to me and I definitely was. You can't help but be fearful and everything is interpreted in this film. Nothing is as you hear it every word is it never lines up my experience. You know you hear your own work one way and everybody's interpreting the work

and they're making it their own they're not mimicking or catering to your desires. Unfortunately it's it's really weird it's strange it's really strange and it's it's it takes it takes time to digest that I'm still digesting the film I saw but I just know that by the end of it I felt relief and happiness and like pride in a way even though I didn't have much to do with it. So I feel very lucky about it all. I'm pleased.

[00:41:26] Yeah I saw a cut of the bird in that movie and it is really weird even having these great actors say your lines because it should make you happier than it does but it doesn't even make you happy.

[00:41:41] It's really weird right. I mean that's what I thought they did. Cate Blanchett is brilliant and she's wonderful and she's saying my lines verbatim and you.

[00:41:50] You're like it's even weird enough to be weird. It's just like this side of everything. Right.

[00:41:58] It's just kind of strange but not quite so strange you like that like you'd want to take that pill straight chill like enjoy that strangeness it's just I don't know.

[00:42:09] Like what did you Jar Jar.

[00:42:12] You know because it's as I say everything's interpreted and so another way to say that is is that everything is wrong you know. And you said. Yeah. And

[00:42:25] Please don't just quote me. Having said that one thing because it doesn't paint the full picture.

[00:42:29] But no no but it's it can be anything and everything in your head. I mean I was a TV writer.

[00:42:35] You know as you know before becoming a novelist and I always felt like the joke always went downhill from the original pitch like if I was in the rewrite room when we were there and I pitched a joke and everyone laughed and it was and it could be anybody but anyone pitched as a joke and it's funny that it can be anything just static because you're not an actor and you're not pretending to be an actor.

[00:43:03] But it's just that's it's kind of Platonic ideal for is the first time it comes out of your head and when you're a novelist that never leaves that realm. And I felt like that when I was working in TV you know a friend of mine a fellow TV writer a guy named Richard DE's said that a TV was just the great it found the middle. Better

[00:43:26] Than anything but a kind of great great writing a brought down and bad writing a brought up and it all kind of meets in the middle you know and and even in the end we had great actors great actors doing our stuff on Arrested Development or mad about you but every.

[00:43:42] No matter how much we loved it in the room even if you have the best actors say it I kind of like cry a little bit inside it just it always feels flat compared to in your mind. I think. And I just think the screenwriting that I've done and my experience with with with you know stage adaptation your film adaptation rather it brings me back to what I believe in my heart which is that this novel is the superior format not just over film or plays or whatever I just I'm

[00:44:18] A book person and this is this is this is the mode of communication that I think is the most acute the most revealing the most sensitive. I just prefer it while other formats and I think that's largely what I'm dealing with when I see an adaptation or something like that is just sort of you know just the book is the format for me to go novels right. Everybody I know I'm I

[00:44:48] Feel that way too about the form of the novel I know I love other things.

[00:44:52] I mean I don't watch TV really which I know which seems to have really taken the place of books which is really sad. You know everyone is all this bullshit quote me on that of just like oh it's the new novels it's not the new novels. You know like you don't need a new novel it's just everyone's just sitting there passively just just digesting all this empty calories for free.

[00:45:20] I think you know it's not like I don't want a job and everybody's so but but I feel like the by far the superior form is is the novel I think and I feel.

[00:45:35] Are you worried that people are not reading novels.

[00:45:39] I was talking about this earlier today and I was thinking of my sons 13 and I don't know why I was thinking of him because he's not particularly interested in books or writing but I was thinking when he comes of age the idea of you know I mean it was it was obscure and myself a group that I was interested in books however long that was yeah I clumsy way of saying that yes I am worried for her. I think the readerships are going and I don't think we're powerless to fight against it.

[00:46:09] And I remember it used to be just the most benign question that was Smalltalk which is what are you reading. And now the UK you really can't ask that question because it's almost like you're trying to embarrass someone or put them on the spot.

[00:46:22] But I think 20 years ago was just totally small talk like oh reading anything good now people just stared you blankly and start talking about some you know big little lies or something that they're watching on HBO or whatever and but I wonder I wish that we had some sort of data to work off but maybe it's just arrived at the point that it's out and it will just sustain maybe it won't go any further. But but what can we do.

[00:46:50] I know I will write and write enjoyable books French accent. Right. Right.

[00:46:55] Right enjoyable books with with pleasing openings which I think I swear like that's such a big deal to me I'm like really kind of maniacal about it because when I mean George is here my

boyfriend but I will just be reading a book in bed or just cursing them the first time. Just like what are they thinking like they're so lucky that I'm holding their book like what are the chances that something they wrote ended up in my hands and then they're just trying to grab me from page one like

[00:47:27] What's the plan here. You know and so I'm very much into the pleasing openings.

[00:47:31] Now let's take questions from the audience because we could just talk all day. OK.

[00:47:39] Yes input to repeat the question the question was We love the cover and I'm jumping on that question too. That's that's not the royal we. That is the way. It's an amazing cover.

[00:47:56] And I'm wondering how many did you see and what was the process of the process is generally the old the publisher will send you oftentimes one or two ideas and then oftentimes they'll be sort of a caveat of here's three different covers. We really like this first one and this is the one that we hope you'll like to kind of thing like they have a point of view and they've usually shown their sales department and there's all this sort of behind the curtain stuff that goes on. I've had experiences in the past of seeing certain covers where I just felt like really repelled.

[00:48:28] And this is terrible and I don't want this but I find you know we're talking about a middle ground. I find that they're respectful of the author's input. They want ideally for the author to love the cover. That's usually I think not the case I think. I think more often than not there is a compromise that's arrived at with this particular cover. I think this was I think the first one that they came up with and there was different colors. It was like these really really bright yellows and hard colors on the eyes. And so there was I liked the image very much. I was familiar with the artist's other work. He did some covers for New York Review of Books review rereleases of Kingsley Amis books and it just felt right it felt correct somehow.

[00:49:11] Lucky Jim he did. Oh yeah. Yeah.

[00:49:14] So I saw this and I asked for a bunch of different colors. And they sent me like seven or eight different color changes and then. They did the French led colors and the lettering. Anyway it happened fairly quickly and I like that very much so I'm happy to hear that you liked it as well. I think it's appropriate. Yes

[00:50:09] Right. So was a comment about the kind of that the death of the novel. Well you know it reminds me of said and this goes back to the comic novel thing because I'm not like on Twitter but I have just kind of a a fake or a fake account where I just kind of follow suit and follow people.

[00:50:27] And there's so much comedy on Twitter that it that it kind of scares me a little bit. I feel like what can I possibly write that's funnier than the firehose that people get every day for free. And what I've now come after kind of processing that I realize what they can't do is write a 300 page story with complex characters and surprises and that's what the novelist is right. It's warm.

[00:50:56] It's a very specific joy that hopefully people will just continue to create. You know I just was talking about that there are not. Lamenting that they've stopped teaching. I'm not really on topic but they've stopped he can writing crazy.

[00:51:09] I know. Yeah. Everybody just agree that we're not going to have handwriting anymore in art in our society.

[00:51:15] Yeah that's right. No and it's so interesting because we have our kids are the same age. And my daughter's writing isn't very good but she she's what she's 14. How old. Thirty thirty. Right. So. But. And I'm trying to remember what my writing was like because I think what if this is her adult writing this is scary. I just they don't know cursive. They don't know how to do cursive.

[00:51:40] My son's penmanship is horrific.

[00:51:43] We sound like real much. Yeah sorry about that. OK yes

[00:52:01] Yeah I guess so the question was that about Wes Anderson and if I feel like you feel a kinship.

[00:52:09] I you know it's been pointed out to me that a lot of people equate my work as being similar to his and I don't strongly disagree but I sort of mildly disagree.

[00:52:19] I do too. I get accused of that as well and I'm not a fan of that comparison which is interesting.

[00:52:25] I like that. I actually like it. OK. I like this. I actually like his work.

[00:52:30] And I go see the films in the theater and stuff like that. But there's something that I don't know there's something that's missing and it's not a it's not an apt comparison for me.

[00:52:41] But I like Iomega.

[00:52:43] I think he's kind of I think I think his stuff is essentially kind of cold and more about kind of the set dressing you know and I'm a fan of his work but I always like to think my my characters are kind of messy or sloppier right. Yeah yeah I would say that

[00:53:04] Yeah.

[00:53:04] And but but not to just be down on your question. But I but it's funny because when my paperback came out I mean that this is now I'm really going to sound like a bitch. Is that a guy from Time magazine says like you know Wes Anderson means something you know was going to be on the cover of my paperback and I said take that off I don't want Wes Anderson's name on my mom.

[00:53:25] Well what happened with that with a book of mine called Under majordomo minor which was sort of the storylines very similar to that grand Budapest hotel and.

[00:53:36] Oh right that's right because you had the European thing.

[00:53:39] Yeah. Now there's all kinds of similarities that were that were jarring so I understand why the comparison is made but I was reading a bunch of really specific stuff that influenced that book and I made a list of these authors at the back of the book thinking that this would be helpful to journalists or whomever.

[00:53:55] And it's like this list was just roundly ignored and a lot of people just said this is wonderful it's just like Wes Anderson.

[00:54:03] But what about these 15 authors that I know my lifetime defined who I'm actually copying and not copying. Yeah

[00:54:11] Yeah. Other questions.

[00:54:14] Yes thank you. I think so yeah.

[00:54:54] Yeah.

[00:54:56] Well it's also hard to tell being us you know because I definitely hear everything in my ear so specifically and I picture all my characters really really specifically and I don't picture them as actors you know. I mean they're all I could get a a police sketch artist to sketch out all my characters because I know exactly what they look like. I'm so specific to my mind about them and I know how these lines should be said. And it's not even that I'm like a control freak in my imagination it just. You're just in the flow and in the zone and that's how it comes out and it's just very strange to have it shifted into something else. That's the best way I think I can put it.

[00:55:43] Yeah. A thing happens where especially in a book tour I think that the work loses some of its luster just because you're looking at it every day and discussing it every day. So at the beginning of the tour it's really nice. By the end of it you just want to put it away because it feels dead in some way.

[00:55:57] But I've noticed that when you return to these books the life comes back to it. There's something about the format where it feels cast in amber in a way. You know what I mean. And this is part of why it's such an affection for the format is that it feels it just has the sense of it this is going to last. You know what I'm saying as opposed to you know you can't necessarily read it or scuse me watch a film over and over and over again. Some people do but I can't because the magic goes away. But I find that with a little bit of time passing and return to other people's books or my own books. And if it retains its life somehow.

[00:56:37] Do you really read your books have you had.

[00:56:40] No but I'm doing this thing where once a week I'm reading to some at a senior center down the street from my house in Portland and I read them a couple of different stories and things and then they found out about the movie which sisters brothers and they think they're just looking for like a what's it called when you go out altogether.

[00:57:00] Oh yeah they really are. They're always looking for a field trip that is so cute. So they're like the movie. Maybe you could read that book and then you go see the movie. Someone's got to write a little talk of the town piece about that well.

[00:57:11] So anyway we're reading them the book now for an hour a week and at the end of it after the tour we're going to go see the movie together and but fall other is really cute.

[00:57:21] But anyway I'm revisiting this work which I read bits and pieces over the years but I haven't sat down and I would never sit down and read one of my own books after publication and it's been really a strange experience because there's so much I can remember really vividly actually like penning the lines like actually you know the inspiration coming in. Remember the room I was in but didn't so much of it I just can't recall. I'm forgetting part 2. Oh and that's sort of surprising to revisit them but then also can't really remember what my motivation was and it hasn't been a negative experience at all it's been nice but it's also been just odd. You spend all your time doing this thing to the point that when you're done with the book you've memorized the book and you know it front to back and to sort to forget that and to return to it is an interesting experience.

[00:58:08] Yes.

[00:58:27] Right. So this is the question about the Francis and Malcolm price the protagonists the origins of their relationship. It did sort of occur in real time so I wrote the book sort of front to back. There wasn't a lot of planning I just sort of sat down and read a page or two a day. And their relationship evolves but it was quite specific from the start. The way that they see the world in the way that they view the world and their affection for one another was was there from the beginning. So it was pretty much died in. By the time I started I wasn't thinking of anyone's one specifically it's just more a voice I've been meaning to particularly Francis approach for a long time. It occurs to me that the you know as I'm I'm 43 now and my relationship with my parents is ongoing and what's happened as I've grown up or grown anyway grown older is that we've become friends we've become actual more peers and you put your parents on a pedestal when you're young and that's the way it's supposed to be I suppose. So many more of my friends just become separate from their parents and so that friendship never really gets a chance to take off. But I was thinking about my relationship with my folks and I was thinking well you know I haven't seen this represented very often in film or in fiction and I wanted to address that.

[00:59:52] So it's just an uncommon relationship that I wanted to talk about we just read this dialogue it's so funny.

[01:00:00] It's this you know just this mother some dialogue just to give you an idea.

[01:00:06] So this is they're on a cruise to Paris and they've separated to have their own private adventures. And this is the morning after Malcolm and Francis met in the morning and discuss their respective Oceanica exploits regarding the doctor and his cadavers. Francis had little to say she was more interested in Malcolm's relationship with Madeline the medium.

[01:00:31] So she asked. You made love to her. Well yes did you do a good job.

[01:00:38] Not a very good one no. You normally do a good job. Yes sometimes I do he said. I think the problem is that I don't care enough Francis said if you do one thing well it might as well be that I'm okay.

[01:00:52] Yeah that's.

[01:00:54] There's a hundred things like that in this book. It's insane. Yes. Yes. Two more questions. OK.

[01:01:02] Yes yes.

[01:01:12] For me it's usually the question was How many drafts How many drafts and how close is the original to the final. For me typically it's usually the first draft is usually pretty close for me to the end. I mean there's always rewriting them the editors get their licks in and everything but this book specifically was I keep describing them as well-behaved. It was just really tidy and cooperative from the start. And so the end of the first draft it was very similar to the to the to the published novel and it did go through I guess you know it gets even if there's small changes a couple changes per page or a chapter it gets significantly better with each little bit. You know you shave a little bit more off a bit more and just fine tuning it improves it considerably. But there is very little in terms of this is mostly sentence edits and stuff like that. Picking the right word fiddling with grammar and cutting you know. But at the heart of the book was intact. By the end of the first draft so there wasn't that much change in terms of it was just a bit sloppier I suppose is what I'm trying to say and I clean it up and there's probably four drafts five drafts. So it's sort of front to back sit there and like go over each page with a printed out copy and go over with a pen. That's exactly what I do. About four or five drafts any more than that and it's just you just want to get on with your life.

[01:02:31] You know what I'd say I'm about 80 percent there.

[01:02:35] Maybe in my first draft maybe less than you but because it's really cuts really I think you find you kind of over right. Not you know it's the weirdest thing.

[01:02:46] You don't think you're overwriting. You think you're far enough in your career not to overwrite. And there you are having overwritten.

[01:02:53] You know it's it's a right but better to overwrite than underweight. I'm dealing with a piece of work that I'm working on now and I've underwritten it and I can't seem to it's harder it's much harder to add than to subtract.

[01:03:04] I find it interesting. OK. One last question.

[01:03:08] Yes oh great the question had to do with has to do with Frances's fabulous voice and what a good job Patrick did writing a female protagonist and did you have to make any adjustments.

[01:03:42] Well it's funny. Thank you so much. I appreciate. I appreciate it. I was before I started this book. I had lunch with a with a with a novelist friend of mine a female novelist friend of mine and I expressed hesitation to really dive into a female character for fear of causing your friends or getting something wrong or you know I was just phobic of botching it somehow. And this is at the end of a very long and chatty lunch that she and I had had and she just pointed out that I was a foolish thing to be fearful of and she said think back on our conversation that we had over lunch. I wasn't speaking on behalf of women and you were not speaking on behalf of men and nothing that we said was gendered and just get over it and get to work.

[01:04:24] And it was really helpful and it was because I really you know you don't want do the wrong thing you don't want to mess up on this in this very public way.

[01:04:35] And the last thing the role of what you do is cause offence you know. So that but that just sort of gave me strength to give it a whirl and I found that she was absolutely right.

[01:04:45] So I'm glad that it worked for you. Thank you for coming everybody. Well the

[01:04:56] Thank you so much Maria thank you so much Patrick.

[01:05:03] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.