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>> Each year, thousands of booklovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its eighth year, this free event held on the National Mall Saturday, September 27th, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the festival in person, you can participate online. These podcasts with authors will be available through the Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest), and you can find a whole suite of other materials there as well.

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I now have the honor of talking with the well-known children's author, Jon Scieszka. In addition to authoring *The Stinky Cheese Man* and other *Fairly Stupid Fairytales*, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, and *Smash Crash*, which is part of his new *Trucktown Series* for young readers, Mr. Scieszka was recently named the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington. That position was created by the Library's Center for the Book, and the Children's Book Council, to raise national awareness of the importance of children's literature in fostering lifelong literacy and enriching the lives of young people. The recipient of several book award honors including the *Publisher's Weekly Cuffies Award*, and the *Caldecott honor*, Mr. Scieszka has also appeared on the *Martha Stewart Show* and *NPR's All Things Considered*. Mr. Scieszka, welcome to you. It's a pleasure to talk with you today.

>> Oh, thanks. Glad to be here.

>> We appreciate your time. Now, you started out your career as a teacher; what was it that motivated you, I guess, to shift gears and move into the realm of becoming an author?

>> Well, I had started earlier actually thinking about being an author, and in fact I always grew up loving reading and writing. And I actually came out here to New York -- where I live now, I grew up in Michigan -- but came out to New York just to get a master's in fiction writing at Columbia University, which then enabled me to paint apartments; it's not a particularly useful degree. But from there I went into elementary school teaching and that's where I realized I really, I found my audience there. I realized that's who I should be writing for.

>> Were there any authors or role models that you had growing up that helped inspire you?

>> Yeah, in fact, I think that's probably what really motivated me to become a writer, were those writers that just, I don't know, wrote the books that made me want to keep reading. So Dr. Seuss was certainly a huge influence; I distinctly remember reading *Green Eggs and Ham* -- or at least pretending I could -- or *To Think What You Saw on Mulberry Street*,

or, and P. D. Eastman was another writer who wrote *Go, Dog, Go*, which is one of my favorite books still.

>> And what was it about those stories that -- was there a particular genre, or was it the imagery, or the good story? What really sort of clicked with you when you were reading books?

>> You know, I, I think it was really the, the sense of humor, which I wasn't finding in the stuff we were reading as school. I mean, when I was going to school we were learning to read from kind of dreary textbooks and those Dick and Jane readers, which just seemed surreal to me. I mean, those didn't even seem like the real world. So when I, when I read this stuff about like *Green Eggs and Ham*, that's just like the, the craziest thing. Or *Go, Dog, Go* is the story of just a bunch of dogs driving around in cars and then they have a party up in a tree; like that to me was compelling. I wanted to find out what was going on in those stories.

>> Well, we're looking forward to welcoming you as the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature at the National Book Festival. Why do you think it's important to participate in the Book Festival as an author?

>> Oh, I think, well, as an author it's just a spectacular chance to meet up with your audience, and it's just this spot where just thousands of people come because there are so many authors. And in fact this year is just going to be extra spectacular because I'm going to be there as the ambassador, just kind of, I don't know, fulfilling my role, which is just to really brag about all the great things going on in children's books. So I'll just get to be there kind of showing off all the other great writers and illustrators that we have.

>> Now, I know that you were chosen as National Ambassador in part because you have a long history of advocating literacy and reading. Talk a little bit about that, if you would.

>> Yeah, you know what, that kind of came out of my experience of being a teacher and also growing up with five brothers. I started a literacy group called *Guys Read*, just to sort of study the problem of why boys were slipping and still are as readers, and not becoming readers. And it really was just kind of fascinating to me and the more I looked into it, I mean, part of the problem was no one had done any research on it. We just keep testing kids and realizing like, "Oh yeah, boys aren't doing well." But then when I got to really get into it, it was really, I don't know, kind of gratifying to find out that there are things we can do to motivate boys to be readers. And then the more I thought about it, what actually works to get boys reading works for almost every reader; they're just -- it's kind of a great way to connect with all kids.

>> Why -- from experience or knowledge -- why do you think there is a particular problem with a decline in boys reading in particular?

>> Well, it's a very knotty problem; it's got a lot of strange different strands of it being, you know, some cultural, some genetic, some just biological. I mean, I had -- since I grew up with all brothers, I just

expected, you know, the little guys in my second grade to be kind of running around bouncing off the walls sometimes. It's just kind of in the nature of how boys, I don't know, biologically grow up. They're not quite ready to be readers as early as girls are. Girls just have some advantages in how their brains mature and their nervous system that they can just sit down and actually focus on that challenge earlier than boys. So boys get caught in this weird loop of they're not successful as readers right away -- a lot of them -- and then it just becomes more of an issue because they don't want to be seen as not successful, and then so they don't read. And it's just it's kind of a death spiral then: then they don't read, and they get worse at reading.

>> Now, we always hear that reading is important and, and maybe there are some fairly obvious reasons, but why do you think reading is such an important skill for young people to develop and to foster later on in life?

>> Well, I'm a huge believer in how important reading is. I mean, and I think it is good for us to actually verbalize what that is. I think a lot of times people just assume, you know, everyone should be reader. I guess that's good and don't really wonder why, but I think it really gives you an insight into whole different worlds. And ultimately, I think it's the basis of our democracy. It sounds kind of gigantic, but I think that really is the heart of why reading is important. We want to make informed citizens, and to be an informed citizen, I think you have to be a reader.

>> Now, again, we mentioned you are the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. What are some of the goals that you hope to achieve? And since you're the first one in that role, maybe you can define the role? What is the national ambassador?

>> Well, it is kind of a nice part. That was an interesting, I don't know, kind of appealing feature when they first called me and said I could be the first one. So my first mission is -- I keep bugging Dr. Billings, Billington to give me a helicopter. Or a jet pack -- people have mentioned -- would be nice. And other kids have, have said like a tiara or a crown, would be good, a scepter.

>> Scepter, yeah.

>> But my mission is really just to tell people, I don't know, just kind of the importance of children's literature and the importance of getting kids to be readers.

>> And I've seen that you have sort of a number of tips or precepts that parents in particular can try to live by or try to keep in mind in getting kids interested in reading. Talk about some of those, if you would.

>> Well, those are those tips that grew out of my work with boys and reading. And what I like to tell parents -- and these are practical things that they can do -- the first thing is just to expand your definition of what you call reading. Don't limit it to just fiction, because not everyone is a fiction reader. Boys in particular are big fans

of non-fiction, humor, comics, graphic novels, audiobooks. That's reading, online, magazines. And second, I like to tell people to let the kids help in the choice; let them be part of that choosing of what they read. You might not love sharks and spiders and volcanoes, but maybe your little reader does. And so if we let them read what they really are motivated to want to read, then I think they have the reason to be readers.

>> And I've also seen that you I think try to get people to perhaps expand their acceptance of the role of other forms of media alongside reading, such as television and the internet; that's I think maybe a little bit, I don't know, I don't want to say counterintuitive, but certainly not what most or a lot of people seem to be advocating. Why is that?

>> No, I think you are right actually; that's a good word, that it is kind of counterintuitive where I think we do realize like what's taken the time away from kids reading is TV time and online time and video game time. But I like to, to I sort of take a broader view of it and realize like kids have grown up with these technologies in a way that we haven't as parents and adults. And I like the -- the distinction is like these kids are digital natives. They've always had a computer. Even say it's like a four-year-old today, they've grown up, they've always had a computer in the house. And there's always been like 50 channels they can scroll through. So I think we really need to embrace where we are now, like we're in the 21st century; these things are not going to disappear and we need to help kids become intelligent consumers of all these different media.

>> This is probably a good place for me to put in a plug for the Library of Congress. We've sponsored a Digital Natives Lecture Series, which a lot of people have found quite fascinating, talking about some of these things. And folks can find webcasts on loc.gov. Is it -- do you think it's something of a generational issue? I mean, is it that the technology has been changing so quickly and fundamentally that maybe there's a little bit of a fear of what the technology is doing, how it's changing the way we communicate?

>> Yeah, I think there's definitely that. And then that's completely natural, I mean, if you've grown up just, I don't know, kind of you would even be digesting those technologies or the whole debate now even, or to see what's happening with newspapers. Like I'm a big newspaper fan; I love holding a newspaper. But it's just like, no, I don't think that's the way of the future. There's so much online. But it is that kind of thing where I think people always kind of hold on to whatever technology that it was they grew up with. Maybe even going back to the ancient Greeks who sort of pooh-poohed it when they started writing things down. Saying like, "Oh, nobody memorizes like they used to."

>> So all this texting and instant messaging is not necessarily worse, maybe just different?

>> Yeah, I think that's a great description. Not worse, and not to put a value judgment on it, just say like kids' brains are being shaped in

different ways now. And they're capable of a lot of things that, I don't know, you and I probably aren't capable of.

>> Let's get back to your own writing a little bit. You have a, a book that came out in January, *Smash Crash*, which I mentioned earlier, part of your new *Trucktown Series*. Talk a little bit about the book and also about the series.

>> Well, that's a thing that kind of brings all those strands together we've been talking about of first like just connecting with kids in a way with books that they'll want to read. And that was the big idea. It kind of came out of my work with, with boys; and I thought, "Wouldn't it be fun if I could actually come up with a whole world of books where as soon as a kid started to get exposed to books at a young age, they'd find something that really excited them." So I thought, "Ah, that's what excited me and my five brothers: trucks." So I just made this whole world of 14 different characters -- all based on kids I worked with here in Brooklyn at a preschool -- just to kind of, I don't know, show kids like they could have fun with reading, like that this would be a reason to want to be readers. So now this thing is a gigantic program, and it's in -- we're working on making it really a multimedia project where there are going to be 50 books in the next three years and the beginning the first website is up at [trucktown.com](http://trucktown.com). And then there will be toys and animation, and everything kind of works together. It's that whole world of just telling stories in different ways.

>> Where do you get all these ideas from? Are they mostly based in your real-world experiences or in your own childhood?

>> Ah, I think it's kind of a combination. I get it certainly out of all the stuff I read; I just, I love reading just about anything. And so you can see a lot of my, say, fairytale spoof books just come out from twisting existing stories. I'm a big fan of that. But then the other great resource for me is having been a teacher for 10 years -- and a parent for longer -- is that I just get this sort of mine, mine those areas for, I don't know, just fun characters and the things that kids think.

>> Do you ever get ideas from the fans themselves? Have they ever thrown out something and said, "Well, why don't you write about this?"

>> Not, probably not as specific as that, but I just, I love to hear the reaction of kids. I was just reading -- it's another book I'm working on called *Knucklehead*, which is coming out in the fall, which is an autobiography of me growing up with all my crazy brothers -- and after I read a couple of stories about like, having our little brother eat cigarette butts, and tying our other brother up to a tree with my dad's ties, this little guy came up to me -- he was probably like all of six years old -- he said, "You're a lot like me. You're inappropriate." And I just, I don't know, that's the kind of thing that just inspires me to write more things.

>> What do you hear -- do you hear from parents? I mean, when, when they see a title like *Stinky Cheese Man*, are they able to get past the title?

>> Yeah, you know, I thought there would be a little more controversy -- and there was some, say, when Stinky Cheese Man first came out -- people thought I was kind of messing with sacred fairytales, but you know what, the overwhelming reaction was just kids were such fans of it. And parents and teachers themselves just had so much fun with it and really realized like kids can learn while they're being entertained that that just sort of, I don't know, it never really became a problem.

>> I'm always interested to find out a little bit about the writing process; sometimes authors will have a ritual, or maybe they'll have a little shack in back of the house that they'll retire to. How do you do your writing? Do you wake up in the middle of the night when an idea comes to you and write it down?

>> Yeah, you know, I don't have much of a real regular ritual. I think that came out of, I don't know, even growing up with five brothers, and then being a teacher, you just kind of grab whatever time you can. And when my first books, when I was working on those, my kids were still elementary school age, so I would usually go hide out in the library whenever I could to get a little quiet time. But otherwise I like to tell kids it's really about just finding any time and really making the effort to put your ideas on paper. So I do, I'm like a compulsive kind of note-taker and just always writing things down.

>> And if someone were to ask you for advice on perhaps pursuing that kind of a career path, what would you tell them? Did you have success immediately? Or did you have to kind of stick in there?

>> Yeah, in fact, when I go out and talk to kids in schools, I love to bring all the drafts of things that I work on. So even a book like *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, which is probably only seven or eight typewritten pages, has, you know, probably 10 or 15 different drafts that it went through drastic changes. So I love to describe to kids like how much work that it is and not just tell them like, "No, reading is fun, and writing is magic." And just to show them it's not so much magic, it's more like, like just showing up every day and digging a ditch.

>> And of course again we, we look forward to hearing from you on September 27th at the National Book Festival. What can we expect to hear from you? Will we hear readings, or do you typically like to interact more with folks?

>> You know, I really like to just sort of see who the audience is and then I usually use that as an opportunity to read new things that I have coming out. So I'm sure I'll be reading some new *Trucktown* that I've got going on. And definitely stuff from *Knucklehead*. And then even new projects that I'm not even sure what they are yet, just kind of test those out and see how they work on an audience.

>> Are there any ideas that are just sort of rattling around in the back of your head that you really need to get out, or maybe tackling a new genre in the future?

>>> You know, I'm very interested in this whole phenomena of really telling a story through a lot of different media, and I'm not sure exactly what that's going to be yet, but maybe I'll have some of that just to be telling stories that can live in books and online and who knows: in little paper dolls or something. No telling what might come out.

>> It seems kind of the wave of the future, I would imagine, that people are looking for those immersive multimedia experiences.

>> Yeah and kids themselves, I think, that's what really drives it. I got that from my audience who -- like the Trucktown things, which really are a little bit of everything -- when I read the stories to three- and four-year-olds, they want to know like, "Where's it on the computer? Where's the toy? Can I get the flippers?" Which I kind of like, the truck pajamas.

>> Well, Jon Scieszka, our first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, very much appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

>> No, my pleasure. And I'm looking forward to seeing everybody down in the mall there.

>> Well, we're looking forward to it, too. And once again, that is the National Book Festival coming up on Saturday, September 27th on the National Mall from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The event is free and [inaudible] public. If you would like more details as long, as well as a complete list of participating authors, visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

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