

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and life-long literacy at the National Book Festival, co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama and presented by the Library of Congress. Now in its 9th year, this free event held Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall in Washington, DC. will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person you can still participate online. These pre-recorded podcast interviews with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my pleasure to talk with Walter Mosley he is one of the most versatile and admired writers in America today. I think anybody who's a fan of crime novels and mysteries will certainly know this name. He's the author of more than 29 critically acclaimed books including the best-selling mystery series featuring "Easy Rawlins". "Devil in a Blue Dress", the first book of this series was the basis of a 1995 box office hit starring Denzel Washington. Mr. Mosley's works has been translated into 21 languages and includes literary fiction, science fiction, political monographs and a young adult novel. He's also the winner of numerous awards including an O. Henry Award, a Grammy, and the PEN America's Lifetime Achievement Award. Mr. Mosley thanks for joining us.

>> Thank you.

>> Appreciate it--let's start.

>> Great to be here.

>> Let's start with your new book. It's called "The Long Fall". What can you tell us about this?

>> Well, "The Long Fall" is a departure for me. I've--You know, a lot of the mysteries I've written have been period pieces about Los Angeles, Los Angeles from the '40, '50s, '60s up to the '70s and talking about a period of time which had gone undocumented. To a great degree I think that those books were kind of an obeisance I was paying to my father. And "The Long Fall" though is completely contemporary. It's a detective in New York City, current day who--whose issues are much more complex than a black man in the '50s and '60s would say. It's--Every step he takes, he's in a different world. He has to figure out who he is and what he is through every door he goes through. Whereas, Easy Rawlins and other detectives I wrote about, they knew who they were all the time in all places, in all ways. And so, it--to a great degree this new mystery series is about my life and the complexity of my world rather than my father's and his.

>> This character is Leonid McGill, correct?

>> Leonid McGill, that's right.

>> Yeah. And he is a bad guy turned good. What sort of challenges did you face in writing him?

>> Well, you know, he's actually a bad guy trying to turn good.

>> OK.

>> It's a very difficult thing once you've been bad as long as Leonid which means to say his entire life. To all of a sudden be on the right side. You know, his--he's stuck with so many people that he knows and so many things that he knows that come from a world of illegality either condoned or not by the government.

>> Now, you mentioned, of course, that there is at least some basis in your own life with this character. I'm always curious where the--I guess the autobiographical elements and the fictional elements diverged. Tell me a little bit about that.

>> Well, I don't produce anything autobiographical. I mean, I guess you can't help but every word you write is autobiographical in a way. It's only the autobiography of your imagination. But there's nothing, Leonid is nothing like me. What I said and I what I meant is this is about my world, not about me.

>> OK.

>> It's about America in the 21st Century.

>> OK.

>> A world that I look at everyday that I walk out into, you know, every time I leave my apartment. And so that's really what I'm trying to say. But as far as it being autobiographical I attempt very hard not to write about my life. I find too many people doing that, you know. There's a life I've lived that's so important everybody needs to know it. And I'm thinking, "Well, not really?" you know. Otherwise, I'd be doing something else I wouldn't have anytime to writing.

>> You mentioned your father, Leroy, and being at the Library of Congress. I was interested to learn that he was himself as school librarian. What sort of influences did he have on you especially in terms of your reading and your writing?

>> Well my father actually was a building supervisor, custodian at school, not a librarian, however, he was a big reader. And he always had me in the library studying and learning and reading. And my father's impact on me was gigantic. And like so many things in art, most of which is unconscious. Every once in a while, I'll come across a thing like I realized once after my third book that my father had told me a story that when he was a child he had written a western send it to a publisher in Chicago, you know, back in the '20s or maybe early, early '30s, and never heard from them. But a year later, he came across that story. You know the whole story, you know, 20, 30 pages in a magazine, almost not changed at all. And that my father really wanted to be a writer, but I had written three books before I had remembered that. And that certainly-- that was a big reason I became a writer and I didn't even know it.

>> Now you have a lot of different protagonist. And I have to say some really memorable names as well we talked about Leonid McGill but also Easy Rawlins, Socrates Fortlow, and the duo of Paris Minton and Fearless Jones, what sets them apart from each other?

>> Oh, you know--Well, you know, what sets them apart from each it's-- that's a really good question. It's very interesting. You know, when you know people, when people--when you know people very well, you'd begin to understand how different they are from each other, if you have five friends. Now, somebody could come from some other country, you know, from other part of the world, from other hemisphere and see those five people and think, "Well, you know, they're all exactly the same. There's nothing different about them. They all act the same way, respond the same way, do the same things." But once you get to know them, once you get inside their hearts and their minds and their idiosyncrasies, you begin to see how different they are. And of course as a writer that's what I do. The thing that's the most interesting to me is to discover character. These people all come from very, very different places. Even with [inaudible] Paris Minton and Fearless Jones. Fearless Jones is as his name describes, completely fearless. Paris on other hand is a coward. Their friendship becomes very interesting, you know, with that difference. Easy wants to be a middle class. Socrates Fortlow is a man who's committed rape and murder in his life. These actions define who they are. But bring them into a world where they have to know how to deal with the people like each other.

>> In the introduction I've mentioned a lot of the different genres that you crossed from mysteries to science fiction to young adult. Are there similarities between them? Are there differences or different challenges in writings some of those genres?

>> Well, there's difference. Every genre has a difference. You know, like for instance mysteries are really heavily plot written. You have to address the plot every five or six pages or so. You have to. A more literary novel, you may only come to the plot now and again because it's actually the story of character that carries you through completely. But, you know, all writing is writing. It's one word after another and sentences and paragraphs, you know, or maybe every once in a while in stanzas and lines. And so, I find that even though there are challenges in the end it's all the same.

>> Now, you worked early on as a computer programmer for several years. Was there sort of an "aha" moment that made you decide to change course?

>> Yeah. I guess there was, I had written a sentence on "Hot sticky days in southern Louisiana, the fire ants swarm." I wrote that, I was at work one Saturday and--at Mobil Oil. And I felt wow, that's a--that's a nice sentence, that--you know, that could be the beginning of a novel.

>> Yeah, I agree.

>> Maybe I should write and so, you know, I started writing and it worked.

>> Now, you're also a big comic book lover. And you teamed up with Marvel Comics to produce Maximum Fantastic Four which recreated the first issue of the Fantastic Four. What was it like working on that project?

>> Well, you know, that was a project of pure love. I mean, it was--I was a very much an editor on that. What I do, was I took every image, every picture drawn by Jack Kirby and blew it up to as large as size as I could and that's already gigantic book. So that one could experience a comic book the same way that kids do. You know, kids sipping so much more closely than adults do. And once it got to that size, I reexperienced that Fantastic Four number one as I had when I'd first seen it when I was a kid. I really--I really love doing that. You know, it was one of those--it was a great moment.

>> You wrote an article at News Week about America's obsession with crime. Given that a lot of your novels deal with solving crime. What is it about the subject that fascinates you? What have you think that's a popular genre?

>> Well, I think that crime is an interesting word. I think it's a word that doesn't actually cover everything that it means. I think that we all feel a great deal of social vulnerability either to ourselves, from our loved ones or from people that we don't know. How can we survive in this world where there are so many dangers? And how can we figure out where those dangers are coming from and how we can avoid them? I think that that's the big thing in American culture. But I think in all cultures that survival is figuring out what dangerous can happen from--at somebody else takes--both from an act that I take. If I do this, what will be the repercussions of it?

>> You're still very active in the struggle for social and literary equality and your work encompasses primarily African-American characters. You've even won an award that honors your work increasing racial understanding and appreciation. Are you consciously or intentionally trying to portray this kind of messages with your work in your life?

>> I don't know. That's--it's such a hard question to ask, you know, it's that, you know, that's true of Elie Wiesel or is it, you know, true of James Joyce or is it, you know, what I mean. You know, it's a hard question to ask. And as well a hard question to answer because it--my goal inside the work is to make these characters as much like everybody else in the world as possible. But there are people I know. I'm very aware that up until the '60s, black people were pretty much kept out of literature. But this is also true of many Hispanic members of the United States and Asian and Native American. And it's like a--you know, and seeing that we're so much a part of the story of America, the fabric of America that the story needs to be told from those points of view. And so that we can actually know where it is that we're living and what we're doing.

>> And you seem to take a very optimistic tact. You've said that this might be the golden age of black literature. Why do you think that?

>> Well, I think that it's possible for so many people to write today to tell so many different kinds of stories. And a lot of people make a mistake of wanting to be, you know, append the word great to literature, you know, great literature. And any group of people if their literature seen as great literature suffers because then you can't write fun literature. So, you know, you can't write great literature about, you know, romances or detective stories or, you know, science fiction, really wild fantasy stories. Some fiction is not great but the truth is you may have great fiction, and I think there's quite [inaudible] very wonderful writers. But the real greatness, the real wonder of the written word is people reading it. And the broader your pallet of literature, the more people you have read [phonetic] at and that's what's truly great. Not any individual book that exists.

>> Absolutely. In the introduction, I mentioned you won a Grammy that was for best liner notes for a Richard Pryor box set. Tell me a little bit about that project. And what's it like winning a Grammy?

>> It's so strange, you know. Some people call me up and said, you know, "We're coming out with this collection of Richard Pryor concerts, will you write an introduction?" I said sure and I just sat down and write a quote. You know I love Richard Pryor, I think he's a genius, honestly. And so I wrote this kind of over the top description of what I think Richard Pryor is and what he's done. And I sent it in. And that was it. And then, you know, two months later, they sent me a copy. You know, with the disc and I thought that was nice. And a few months later, they said, "You know, we've been nominated, you know, your lines have been nominated for Grammy." I don't even know that they gave Grammy for those. And so I went, but, you know, I didn't expect to win or anything. And so I sat there and when they named me I was really completely astounded. You know, because, you know, a lot of times you win awards inside your own work, your own bailiwick, you know, you have--you know, you write novels, but your friends write novels or people are trying to raise money or-- there're all kinds of reasons that you won awards that aren't necessarily because of the work particularly. And--Which, you know, nobody knows me in music world. So like of all the awards I won, that's the one I think, wow, I really won that award.

>> Well for an award that you didn't even know exist, and a Grammy has got to be a pretty prestigious one.

>> Well, I know the Grammy existed--

>> Well, sure. Yeah, Yeah--

>> --for liner notes.

>> I was interested to read that you once said that the character of Al Bundy from "Married...with Children", of all people, was a hero of yours. Was that tongue and cheek?

>> No, not at all. And I think I said it before I realized that that one of the creators of the show was black. But I'm so drawn to that show. I think that, you know, one of the problems with America culturally and

socially is that it's a great part of our nation's dysfunctional. We have dysfunctional families and dysfunctional relationships and people live in real poverty though they're--though everybody says they're middle class or working class or whatever. And "Married...with Children" really, really talk--that's the only thing it talks about. And whenever that shows on for, you know, whatever it is 18 minutes or 21 minutes or whatever it is. They talk about emotional dysfunctionality and poverty in America. And I think that's something that needs to be addressed.

>> One of my favorite things about the National Book Festival and really the heart of it is getting to see authors interact with their fans. And to me in particular the young people, what do you tell people who are interested in pursuing writing careers? What advice do you have?

>> We know it's really easy. It's a lot easier than if you want to be gymnastics or golf or, you know, war [inaudible]. It's kind of an easy thing. You just need a pencil and a piece of paper. And you write, really, you know, it's kind of wonderful. I often get asked that question on. And the answer is longer than you ever have time to give really. Which is why I wrote a book called, "This Year You Write Your Novel", which is this little 80-page book I wrote that explains everything I know about writing a novel in a year's time. I think honestly, anybody can do it. I don't know how good the book will or will not be. But I think anybody can do it and I think anybody can actually learn the things you need to know to write. And so I'm very supportive to people when they come up and they tell me they want to write. I say, "OK, fine. This is how you do it."

>> I think a lot of people would probably argue that what you do is every bit is challenging as being a gymnast.

>> Yeah, right. That's true. But, you know, there's a whole bunch of people that get out there--really just get out there to the bar and put their hands on it and that would be it.

>> Yeah.

>> With writing you could at least move the pencil a little bit.

>> Well, Walter Mosley before I let you go can you talk about any other projects or books that you have coming up?

>> Well, you know, I'm doing a play which I'm very excited about. Based on my book "The Tempest Tales", it's called "The Fall of Heaven" and I'm doing it at Cincinnati Playhouse. That makes me very happy. You know, working on this movie and that movie, we'll see "The Man in My Basement", this movie called "Yelling to the Sky". The one that I didn't want to say is I--this is the second time that I've been to this book festival. The first time I was there was on September 10th, 2001.

>> Yeah. Yeah.

>> It's like etched in my brain. I was there, you know, talking to--you know, to an audience, talking to other writers. And, you know, the next day, and I' woke up and it was a, you know, 9/11.

>> Well--

>> I've been there since then. I'm really looking forward to coming back.

>> And in, you know, many ways have changed the character not just of the book festival but the entire city. It's definitely different in terms of security and access. And, you know, we're pleased that people can still come down and see it and interact with people like you.

>> It's wonderful. I'm really looking forward to it.

>> Well, Walter Mosley, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

>> Well, thank you too.

>> And we'll be excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival that is Saturday--yeah, go ahead.

>> I'll be there.

>> All right. Saturday, September 26th. That's on the National Mall from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. If you want more details and the complete list of participating authors you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.