

>> 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 Library of Congress National Book Festival. Co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama. 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 participate online. These podcast interviews and other materials are available at the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor to talk with the award-winning author James Patterson. Mr. Patterson holds the New York Times bestseller list record with 46 titles overall. His popular thrillers have sold an estimated 150 million copies worldwide and include *Along Came a Spider* and *Kiss the Girls*, both adopted into future films. *Swimsuit* is among his latest releases. Mr. Patterson is also the recipient of several book awards including an Edgar and International Thriller of the Year award. He recently entered the world of young adult thriller writing with the *Maximum Ride* series and the book *Daniel X: Watch the Skies*, the latter which is due out in late August. Mr. Patterson has additionally launched the website *ReadKiddoRead* which is dedicated to turning kids into life-long readers. Mr. Patterson, thank you so much for your time.

>> Hi. It's good to talk to you.

>> Let's cover some of the basics. First of all, how did you decide to pursue a career in writing?

>> Well, I was working my way through college. I was an aid at a mental hospital and I had a lot of time at night. I started reading a lot and I started scribbling and I just loved it. And somebody said you're lucky if you find something you like to do. And then, it's a miracle, some people pay you to do it. So, I set out to see if anybody would pay me to do it.

>> OK. And what in particular about the genre of mysteries and thrillers did you find appealing?

>> Well, I had read *Ulysses* and I thought it was an unbelievably good book that I wasn't capable of writing. And I started looking around. I said, "Well, what kind of books might I be able to write realistically?" And mysteries and thrillers and why--I can--and one of the things with me is I hadn't read a lot of commercial fiction until my early 20's. And then I read *The Exorcist* and *Day of the Jackal* and I went, "You know, I might be able to write something like this." I like both of those and I thought I might be able to do something like that.

>> Now, what has inspired you to explore the world of young adult mystery writing? Is that just sort of a natural extension?

>> A lot of things and one thing was that, when I would go out on book tours, people would come up and go, "You know, you got my husband reading again. You got my wife reading. You got my kids reading." And when it was the kids, they would--sometimes, people have tears in their eyes because that's a big deal for people when the kids won't read. And I thought that

my style would work well with kids. And I have an 11-year-old so that's another piece of the puzzle and you know, getting him reading has been one of the tasks for my wife Sue and I.

>> One of the things I find interesting when I get to talk with authors is to learn a little bit about their writing style. I mean, is there a particular ritual? Is there a time of day? Are there--do you set aside time?

>> Well, like I said, going back to this notion, finding something you like and then somebody who'll pay it--pay you to do it, it's great. So, I love what I do. I work basically seven days a week. I usually write four to six hours a day. I write early in the morning and then I'll write again, you know, a little later in the late morning and then usually maybe from three to five or three to six something like that.

>> Now, talk a little if you would about the Maximum Ride series and Daniel X: Watch the Skies.

>> Well, these are the first two--Daniel X, actually there are two Daniel X's now. The first one was The Dangerous Days of Daniel X and then Watch the Skies is the second one.

>> OK.

>> They're books, you know, the publishers--so anybody from 10 to 110. So, they're people that like movies like Spiderman and thing likes that, you know, just kind of exciting. And, you know, nonstop, seem to like them a lot. But I wanted to write--I think the best the way to get kids reading is to give them books, you know, worthwhile books that they can't put down. So, that's what I wanted to do and I think to some extent I've succeeded with these two series. Maximum Ride, the narrator is a girl. She is a girl with wings. She was in a biotech lab, outlaw biotech lab and her name in the lab was Maximum. So, she didn't have a last name, but she kind of admired Sally Ride. So, she actually took Sally Ride's last name. So, her name is actually Maximum Ride. And Daniel X is a series that girls like, that boys love. My son Jack, when he read Daniel X, he said, Dad, you finally got one right." So, that was a high praise indeed for me.

>> What inspires you? I mean, where do you get ideas that's pretty fantastical stuff you're talking about actually?

>> You know, it's hard to really say. I mean, you read stuff in the papers. You see something when you're walking along the street. I have a huge folder of ideas. That's one of the reasons I do so many books. I've got literally hundreds of ideas for books. Not enough time to do all of them clearly. You know, with respect to Maximum Ride, the idea of flying has always fascinated me. I love flying stories. When I was growing up, Peter Pan used to be on the TV once a year with Mary Martin playing Peter Pan. But that was very stimulating. There was a book Birdy that I liked. Just the whole idea of, you know, we have this Peter playing and the idea of lifting off, the idea of freedom. I mean, that's what the books are really about. They're about--the Maximum Ride books are about two things

really. One is freedom and second is kids taking responsibility for their actions.

>> If we could talk about some of your other books as well in the time that we have. I wanted to ask about the Alex Cross series. And 14 installments, I believe. Is that what you're up to?

>> I don't know. I don't count them. I just write them.

>> Yeah.

>> Yes, somewhere in there 14, 15. You know, he's still interesting to me. I still don't know, you know, how his life is going to turn out. He is involved with a woman now which is good. He's got the two kids who are--three kids who are growing up. A grandmother who he still lives with, she's in 90's. So, it's an interesting family to me and one of the nice things about doing a series is you can, you know, my books always have a lot of pace. But when you're writing a series, you can continue to build the characterization. So, you have both pace and character development which is a lot of fun.

>> And how do you keep a character that fresh over that many books? How do you keep the inspiration?

>> Well, I think part of it is taking chances with the stories. I mean there was one story early on cat and mouse where in the middle of it, it appeared that Alex died. And another narrator took over for about a hundred pages. So, that was a big chance in terms of, you know, whether you would lose your readers right there. So, I have always been willing to take chances with the books, with the stories. So, people, you know, just don't know what to expect which I think is good. And as I said, Alex is, you know, continuous to grow, for me. I don't know, you know, what's he's going to do next.

>> In your Women's Murder Club series follows five detectives, female detectives in San Francisco.

>> Well, actually, there are four, they're not--

>> Four, OK.

>> One is a detective, one is a--

>> OK.

>> --medical examiner, one is a crime reporter and the other is an assistant district attorney. So, there are women and yeah, we somewhat lodge it. It's reasonable for them to get together and talk about cases other than, I'm sure if they would share everything with the journalist but--

>> Sure.

>> --but that's what brings them together and they're best friends on top of everything else.

>> Is there a challenge involved in telling stories from a female point of view?

>> No, I have trouble writing from the male point of view.

>> Are you serious?

>> Yeah, I grew up in a house full of women, mother, grandmother, three sisters, two female cats. I don't have any issue, Maximum Ride is a girl. I would have a harder time telling a Tom Clancy kind of a story from general's point of view. I don't quite know how generals think. But I don't have an issue imagining a woman character.

>> Now, we've only touched on actually, probably a couple of the genres that you've written in. And you really do sort of span the range crime thrillers, horror, romance. Are their writing similarities between them and are there differences and is one easier than the other perhaps?

>> Well, I love the young adult stuff. I think that--I think it's that, you know, this is the best books I've ever done. I think it feeds to my strength which is big imagination, anything goes. The hardest are the romances, Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas and Sundays at Tiffany's because I insist on a good pace to the books, page turning element. And that is necessarily a component of romances. So, those are the hardest for me. The nonfiction, the first nonfiction I did, Against Medical Advice was with a friend of mine about--It's actually, I think a very, very good book. That was challenging only because I wanted to get the story of his family down. And for it to be as emotional as it was in real life, which I think Hal Friedman and I did with that book.

>> Now, this is a question I'm sure you've heard hundreds of times. But it's what I always like to ask and it's how much do you draw from your real life, from your own personal experiences in the books that you write?

>> You know, almost nothing. I think Alex Cross has some similarities to me. He's a homebody basically, he's somewhat sensitive. I think he's good in a positive way with women. But other than that, you know almost nothing. Although I was in advertising at one point, so I learned a lot about serial killers there.

>> And mentioning Alex Cross again, a lot of those books take place in Washington DC. And as a Washingtonian, I guess I have my own views of why this is a good backdrop, but why do you choose Washington DC?

>> Well, I just love the idea that a lot of things you know, I mean, I'm not writing realism. And every once in a while, somebody will say about one of my books [phonetic], it's not very realistic. And I always think about somebody looking at a Chagall or a Picasso and tell me it's not very realistic. I don't mean for it to be, it's more operatic than realistic. But in Washington, you--I think somewhat realistically can,

you know, you've got politics, you've got all the, you know, the DEA, the FBI, I mean every--CIA, it's all in that area. So, a lot of things can happen and it's kind of believable. You don't have to stretch too much. You get like Tony Hillerman and you know out in some small country in New Mexico. You would think after about 12 books, he has killed everybody in the whole county, you know.

>> Let me ask about some of your other activities now if I could. I mentioned earlier the ReadKiddoRead website. Tell me a little bit about that and why the work that you're doing there is important?

>> Well, as I said earlier, I think that one of the best ways if not the best way to get kids reading is to give them books that they're going to love. That side is what we're trying to do, we have nothing but books that are going to turn kids on and make them readers for life. And it's very easy to use. It breaks down books, you know, zero to six and then transitional books and then page turners and then books that are harder but worth the effort. So, it's easy for a parent or grandparent or teacher or school librarian to go in there. And we have write-ups on all of the books, not reviews, just write-ups so you know the subject matter. A lot of interviews with writers ranging from Julie Andrews to Jeff Kinney and there's about a dozen or so interviews now. And then a blog for people to share their, you know, secrets that they have to getting their kids reading. A friend of mine, a very good father, single father, raised his two boys after his wife died. And he really--They're really nice boys, the way they've grown up. But he said, when we were talking about this, he said, "Gee, you know, it never occurred to me that it was my job to go out and get them books that were going to turn them on to reading." And I think a lot of parents don't think about that. A lot of grandparents, they're thinking what's going to happen in school. And it may happen in school but it may not happen in school. But I think it is the job of parents and grandparents. I think like it's a job of teachers and school librarians also to be looking for books that are going to kick their kids. You know, if we taught movies in school and it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, but we started with Ingmar Bergman movies, a lot of us would be going, I really don't like movies. And unfortunately, that's a little of what happens in some schools. Say, you know, it isn't that easy to learn how to read. It isn't necessarily a lot of fun to learn. And then, a lot of the stuff that fed kids initially is way below their intelligence level in terms of content. And then sometimes, it just starts getting a dollar than it needs to get---Jack, you know, my son. What we've done with Jack is four years ago, he was, you know, a good student but not really a great reader. And Sue and I went out to have a dozen books out for him. We said, "These are books you're going to like and you're going to read every day. You don't have to mow the lawn, but you do have to read for half an hour at least and as--or as much as you want." And the first time it was, "Do I have to?" By last summer, he read 12 books including *To Kill a Mockingbird* at 10. This summer, he's read another dozen or so including *Huckleberry Finn*, he's 11. And he reads everywhere, reads in the car, he reads at dinner, you know. So, he turned into a real good reader. And it's primarily most of the books that he's reading are books that he really likes. And the one book that--both summers that he really felt was crummy were the ones that were assigned at school. And I don't see any reason that schools

can't assign books that are both worthwhile and need to read. I mean you know, Reichhold Canvas [phonetic] is pretty cool, and that's a book you know, he'd be happy to read. And Huckleberry Finn and To Kill a Mocking-- there's a lot--there are a lot of terrific books out there that kids will also enjoy reading.

>> That's great, and let me ask you also about the James Patterson award.

>> That's why I'm coming to Washington.

>> Oh, really, tell us what--

>> I'm going to do the mystery thing and that's fine. But I'm really coming there because I'm so excited about getting kids reading. And I hope that, you know, everybody involved with the festival, all the way up to the top, you know, really can help to make that a real priority in this country. It certainly is, you know, much more so in England than it is here. But I think we can--we could do something about that. They'll be a lot easier to fix than health care.

>> Yeah, yeah. And what are the James Patterson awards?

>> Well, I do Page Turner Awards for anything from schools to libraries to bookstores. People are just about the joy of reading. And we've given out I don't know 750,000 dollars or something like that. It ranges from Washington University to University of Minnesota to book club in a woman's hair salon that did a lot--it really got a lot of people reading. So, it's people that have turned on a lot of people to reading.

>> Yeah. Well, we have reading promotion programs at the library, so we're definitely congratulatory of that. Well, James Patterson, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

>> You're welcome, I'm glad we got it done.

>> Yeah, and we are excited to hear more from you at the 2009 National Book Festival. That will be on Saturday September 26th on the National Mall from 10 AM to 5:30 PM, rain or shine. The event is free and--

>> Let's hope for shine.

>> Yes, hope for shine especially for those of you that have to be out there giving presentations. It is free and open to the public. And if you want more details and a complete list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Thank you so much for listening.