

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. For the past nine years, book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington DC to celebrate reading at the Library of Congress's National Book Festival. This year, the Library is proud to commemorate a decade of words and wonder at the tenth annual National Book Festival on September twenty fifth, 2010. President and Missus Obama are honorary chairs of the event, which provides DC locals and visitors from across the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators, and poets. The festival is free and open to the public. It's held between third and seventh streets from 10 am to 5 30 pm rain or shine. And joining me now is Ken Follett, the renowned author whose novels have topped best seller lists in the US as well as internationally. His latest work, Fall of Giants, comes out on September twenty eighth, just a few days after the National Book Festival. It's the first book of the Century Trilogy, a series that will chronicle twentieth century history through the stories of five families. While some have deemed the Century Trilogy to be Follett's most ambitious project to date, his prior work has been both prolific and wildly popular. He's perhaps most well known for his novel, Pillars of the Earth. Several of his books have been adapted for both the big and the small screens. Mister Follett, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

>> Thanks for having me on the show. It's great to be here.

>> And I'm excited to talk with you and we have a lot to discuss, so if I could just start out by asking about the Fall of Giants and the Century Trilogy. The series spans the twentieth century with Fall of Giants focusing on World War One and the Russian Revolution. What inspired you to build a series around historical events and why focus on the twentieth century?

>> Well, I was very thrilled by the reception for World Without End from readers and publishers and booksellers around the world, and I wanted to do another novel with the same kind of sweep and scope. But I didn't really want to do another medieval story immediately, you know. Three years spent writing about Middle Ages is enough for awhile. And besides, I didn't really think that people loved World Without End just because it was about the Middle Ages. I think they liked it because it's a long, meaty novel of a kind that isn't written very often nowadays that takes as its subject the whole society. And so World Without End was about medieval England in the throes of the Black Death and I thought well what could I write that, what could I write about that would be as dramatic and as sweeping as that and I thought of the twentieth century. It's the most dramatic and violent century in the history of the human race. And it's also the history of all of us. I lived through half of the twentieth century. Most of my readers will have, all of my readers will have lived through some of the twentieth century and our fathers and mothers and our grandparents and great grandparents lived through the rest. So in a way, it's the story of all of us. So I thought that, so that's what made me think I wonder if I could write something that would tell a story of all of us.

>> Now, we're the Library of Congress and we're a place for research and a lot of authors do research here. What kind of research goes into a novel, a trilogy, of this scope?

>> Well, of course the first thing to do is to read a great deal. And that's a pleasure. Most authors like doing research because it's so much easier than writing. And so I very much enjoy reading many, many history books about the First World War and the Russian Revolution and the third theme of *Fall of Giants*, which is feminism and the struggle of votes for women. I also use old maps. I find maps very helpful. I like to look at old photographs. I have a wonderful book called *Before the Revolution*, which consists of very good photographs of Saint Petersburg before the revolution. And I find it very helpful to look at, you know, the vehicles, the buses, the coats people wore, the hats people wore, the stores. All this kind of thing helps me to create atmosphere. But finally, and you know research is limited, and in the end I fall back on experts. All of my books are checked by experts before they're published. And in the case of *Fall of Giants*, I actually employed eight historians, believe it or not. Eight different history professors to read the first draft and check for errors.

>> You mention the themes of feminism and suffrage and it's been noted that a lot of your works include strong female characters. Do you agree with that and could you talk a little bit about how you develop those characters and what guides the choices you make about them?

>> Yes, it is often noted that there are strong female characters in my books. I don't, I, I'm not quite sure why people are surprised or think that that is in some way remarkable or noteworthy. Nobody asks me why I have strong male characters in my books. You need strong characters in popular novels because it's strong characters who do bold and risky things and get into trouble and that's where you get a story from. And I've long written about women as much as about men simply because it seems to come naturally to me. It's, it seems odd, I think, to, it would seem odd to write a novel that was just about men or mainly about men. Although in the past, many novels were like that. It, the women in my stories are strong and rebellious and feisty simply because it's that kind of person who makes an impact on the world and who creates drama. All through history there have been women who rebelled against the role that was imposed upon them by society. Before feminism was invented, you know, even in the Middle Ages and so on, there were women who simply didn't like what they were told about what they were, what they were supposed, how they were supposed to be and how they were supposed to act and the role they were supposed to play in society and they rebelled. And of course those were the people that it's fun to write about and to read about.

>> There is a fraternity, or I think you could say even sorority of very popular authors, but there's a much smaller subset of those who have gotten on the best seller lists around the world. Why do you think your stories, in particular, resonate so strongly across national borders?

>> Well, I think it has something to do with the fact that I'm not English. I come from Wales, a small country that was conquered by

England. And so I have never really subscribed to a kind of what seems to me to be a kind of gung ho patriotism. I've never really, I've never subscribed, you know, to the philosophy, my country right or wrong or my country is the greatest. Now for many British people, of course, think that Great Britain is the greatest country in the world, but as a Welshman, I clearly have ambivalent feelings about that sort of thing. So I come at this from a somewhat detached point of view and I think that detachment is part of, anyway, of what has enabled me to write stories that are enjoyed very much in the United States and in France and Germany, Spain and Italy, and so on. I sometimes wonder, I sell a lot of books in Brazil and I sometimes wonder, you know, what Brazilians make of stories such as *The Dangerous Fortune*, which is about a family of Victorian bankers in London or something like *A Place Called Freedom*, which is about Scottish coal miners. I ask myself I wonder what, I wonder what people for whom all these locations must be extraordinarily exotic. I wonder what they make of my books? But I suppose the answer is that the underlying passions of you know the fear and conflict and romance and so on are common to everybody.

>> Do you, when you begin writing, do you keep in mind sort of that international diversity and that international viewpoint, thinking about your audience, or does that just sort of come as an outgrowth of your writing?

>> I think it sort of comes to me naturally. I never, I never really, I never really reached, I never reached for an international audience in the sense of, you know, trying to have always have one American character and one German character and so on. As it happens in *Fall of Giants*, I do of course have the German, Russian, American, and British, but in my first successful book -- *Eye of the Needle*, for example -- was a huge best seller in the United States. There are no American characters in it and none of it takes place in America. Most of it takes place in Scotland. So I've never done that and I guess I sort of don't believe in it. I don't believe that the way to sell books to let's say a German audience is to put a German character in the story. I think people enjoy books and identify with characters for much, much more profound reasons than mere nationality.

>> *Eye of the Needle*, released in 1978. In many respects, your first big hit. How would you say that your earlier period in your writing career, how is that, how has your writing career changed, I guess I would ask, from those days until now?

>> Recently, Paul McCartney was asked how he felt when he heard, listened to the Beatles records and he said I listen to those songs and I think clever boy. [Laughter] And, you know, I look at, if I glance at something like *Eye of the Needle*, which I wrote when I was 28 years old -- I'm now 61. I wrote *Eye of the Needle* when I was 28 years old and I glance at it now and again and I must say I think clever boy. That was pretty damn good. It's of course, it's a relatively short book. It has quite a narrow focus. And in those days, I don't think I could have written something like *World Without End* or *Fall of Giants*, which requires, a book of that length and scope requires skills that I probably didn't have when I was 28. So I think I hope I've learned a lot. I'm still the same writer. I

still have the same attitudes. It's still the same kind of thing that seems to me exciting or romantic or scary or sexy. So I don't think, I don't think there's a big change, but I think inevitably you acquire skills when you do this kind of thing year after year. So I hope my books are, I hope the craftsmanship has improved and I hope I still have some of that youthful feistiness. [Laughter]

>> Now several of your works, many of them, including *Eye of the Needle*, have been made into films or television mini-series and I would also put on that list, at least partially, *The Key to Rebecca*, *Lie Down With Lions*, *On Wings of Angels*, and *The Pillars of the Earth*, which is due to be released in 2010. Why do you think your novels are particularly adaptable to either the big screen or the small screen?

>> Well, my work has been adapted for television much more than for the cinema. And I think that's because even my, even my relatively short books of about a hundred thousand words are quite heavily plotted. And perhaps too heavily plotted to be trimmed down to a two hour movie, whereas four hours of television, or six hours of television, or in the place of *The Pillars of the Earth*, eight hours of television, it gives the screenwriter a chance to benefit from a lot more of the plot that I have devised. So I think television is, has been a better visual vehicle for my work than the movies. Although of course writers have to have a Hollywood movie because, you know, you sell a lot of books whereas the television mini-series doesn't necessarily sell that many books. However, I'm not complaining. [Laughter] And some of the mini-series of my stories have been marvelous. *The Pillars of the Earth*, which was screened this year in July and August in the United States and is rolling out now. It's already been screened in Ireland and it's just been started in Spain. It is a terrific adaptation of *The Pillars of the Earth* with a good script by John Peele Meyer [assumed spelling], wonderful actors -- Ian McShane, Matthew Macfadyen, Hayley Atwell, Natalia Wornor, who's a wonderful German actress, and very beautifully directed, very exciting, very colorful, very full of action, and people in the United States who watched it have emailed me and said that they really enjoyed it.

>> How's it feel to watch your characters come to life through an actor's work, and are there times where you, you've looked at it and you've said, no, they just, they went totally off the rails on this one?

>> Well, it's, of course the author has mixed feelings about this because I know that the screenwriter's going to deconstruct my novel and rebuild it in a different way. He has to because he has to tell the story in pictures and I tell the story in words and it's very different. So I know that's going to happen and of course I'm nervous that he won't be as careful as I was to avoid illogicalities or boringness [inaudible]. So what is of course terribly nervous? As it happens, *The Pillars of the Earth* benefitted from an excellent script that I didn't have. I didn't even, I read it and I didn't even comment on it. There was nothing to say. It was great. As for the actors, of course when you see the actor, you immediately think oh no, he doesn't look like that because every reader, the author, like every reader has a picture of what the character looks like and it's never that actor, the actor they happen to choose. And sometimes it's almost perverse. You know, Pryor Phillip in *The*

Pillars of the Earth, is a fairly slight man. He's not a man of great physical stature. And he's played by Matthew Macfadyen, who's six foot five and extremely handsome. And that was a kind of a I was taken aback, but what happens with a good actor is that that feeling lasts a very short time. After about ten seconds, you forget the picture that you originally had of the character and the actor's face becomes the face of the character for readers and for the author. A good actor can do that in a very short time indeed.

>> Now, I was surprised to learn that The Pillars of the Earth was even adapted into a board game that was released 2007, 2008. Does it surprise you, the full range of ways that people like to experience and enjoy your stories?

>> Well, I'm very flattered by it. I think if, you know, if my story, I'm very flattered if my stories survive translation, for example. I think that's, I take that as a compliment to the underlying strength of the story. And if it makes a good movie or mini-series, the same thing. There was a very strong story I had that survived adaptation to another medium. I'm not sure I think that about a board game. I think that the board game is really, I mean it's a good board game. I played it before I sanctioned the whole thing and enjoyed it very much. But it's essentially using a brand name, it's taking a brand name from literature and, as it were, sticking it onto a box containing something completely different. But there are many thousands of people who've enjoyed the book and who've bought the board game and have enjoyed the board game, so who am I to complain?

>> Now maybe to shift gears a little bit, I want to talk about your life outside of being a novelist, per se, and over the years you've become deeply involved in advocacy for literacy, supporting London organizations that are focused on the arts and the writing. Can you talk a little bit about your passion for those subjects and what inspires you to continue that?

>> Well, I think it's a natural thing for a writer. You know, somebody who can't read -- it strikes me as tragic that somebody can't read. Not just because he can't, you know, of course he or she won't be a customer, but that's not really the reason. It's much more that I personally have had such pleasure all my life from books and particularly from novels. I was able to read before I went to school. My mother taught me to read when I was four years old and I loved stories then and I love them nonetheless now. So the idea that there are people who actually can't read and can't have that pleasure seems tragic to me. And so I've been involved with various charities and with government projects. When the Tony Blair government was elected, we announced a national year of reading and I was chair of that. And we got the message across. I think we managed quite effectively to get the message across that it's important to read for pleasure because that increases your skills, just as it's important to do some sport and keep your body fit, it's important to read for pleasure and keep your literacy skills in good order. And we got that message across, I think, quite effectively. I'm also, for ten years I was president of a charity called Dyslexia Action, which helps dyslexic children. There are many children, in English speaking

countries, there are many children who have a particular difficulty in learning to read and we call it dyslexia. We don't understand where it comes from, but we know how to treat it. We do know how to teach dyslexic children and adults how to read and write. And the charity raises money to do this, to employ the experts who know how to teach dyslexic children to read and write. And so I was very happy to be the figurehead for that charity for ten years. I think it's, it makes a social difference too. I mean it's not just about reading for pleasure. People who have difficulty reading and writing are terribly disadvantaged in modern society. Fifty years ago, you know, when I was at school, many of my contemporaries left school at the age of 15 and the day after, you know, the day after, on their fifteenth birthday, instead of coming to school, they would go to the gate of the local factory and would get a job and many of them would work at that factory for the rest of their life. That sort of world has disappeared. There's hardly any work you can get in western society, in Europe or North America, that doesn't require you to do at least some reading and writing. And so it's a terrible disadvantage for people if they have great difficulties reading and writing.

>> Now before there was Ken Follett, the internationally best selling author, there was Ken Follett, the journalist. And I think I have to ask you the obligatory question about what kind of advice or insight could you give to aspiring fiction writers who might be following different career paths right now?

>> Well, I had, I don't know whether this applies to anybody else, but I had to learn to be a perfectionist. When I began, I thought well what people enjoy. I started out writing [inaudible] I thought what people enjoy. The exciting scenes. The chases, the fights, and the love scenes. And so I concentrated on those things and I thought to myself, the rest doesn't really matter and you don't have to worry too much about the characters. Well, on the landscape and all that sort of thing. Just focus on what excites people. And that was a terrible mistake, of course. I had to learn that an action scene is no good unless the reader cares about the people in it. So even if you're going to write a book that's going to focus on action scenes, you still have to create characters with whom the reader will identify. Probably characters that the reader will hate. But you've got to create characters and you've got to set, whatever is going to happen has got to be set in a realistic landscape that you're going to have to describe with all the resources at your disposal for description. We know that, you know, you may not want to write a book that's praised for its descriptive prose, but you've still got to do the descriptive prose. Otherwise the reader will have the feeling that the whole thing is a bit flimsy and a bit, and incompletely imagined. So, what I had to learn is that every aspect of the novel required my utmost ability, all of what I possessed in terms of intellect and imagination and determination. And, you know, the persistence to rewrite and so on. Every aspect of the novel required every ounce of my abilities, and even then it might only be halfway good.

>> Now before I let you go, I was also interested to learn that you have a passion for music and particularly the bass guitar, which you play in your band, Damn Right I Got The Blues. Is there a recording contract in your future?

>> No. No, I don't think so. The band consists of people who all have careers in some field other than music and nobody wants to be, none of us wants to be in show business. We do it just for fun. We play in a rehearsal studio every Monday night and then five or six times a year, we play at a venue or at a dance or at a wedding or at a birthday party. Usually for our friends, but sometimes for larger audiences. And I don't anticipate ever making any money, I don't want to make any money out of it. It would, that would put responsibility on my head that I don't want. At the moment. If I happen to play a bum note, nobody can complain. They can't say we paid you a thousand pounds to play that party and you played a bum note. If I play a bum note and somebody complains, I say well, you're not paying me. What do you expect? [Laughter]

>> Who are your musical influences?

>> Well, it started as a blues band. And the blues, I like all kinds of music. I like classical music and so on. But the music that moves me the most is the blues. It's funny, isn't it, because there's, in some ways the blues is more appreciated in Europe than it is in its home country. The, you know, when Willie Dixon and [inaudible] Walter and Muddy Waters, the first time they ever got paid any real money was when they came to Europe for, in the sixties, for what was called The American Folk Blues Festival. They were paid about ten times as much as they'd ever been paid before by all these long haired European schoolboys. And it's, there's a long tradition of Europeans loving the blues. And of course, we have produced some of the best exponents of blues guitar. Eric Clapton, for example. But, so it's the blues that I love. The band has become a bit of, a bit more, it plays a wider range of music now. We've been together for a long time and we go through changes. We have a singer. In the last few years, we've had a singer who loves soul music. So we now play some of that kind of music because she likes it so much. But the main thing is, you know, it's, we love the music and then when we play in public, we like to see people dance.

>> Well, Ken Follett, thank you so very much for your time today. Very much appreciate it. And

>> You're very welcome. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

>> and the new book, of course -- Fall of Giants -- once again, in bookstores September twenty eighth and we look forward to hearing you talk about that at the National Book Festival. That's once again September twenty fifth, 2010 on the National Mall in Washington DC. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.