

[Music]

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. 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 in person, you can still participate online. These podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest.

[Music]

It's now my honor to talk with a bestselling author, Peter Robinson. Mr. Robinson's most recent thriller, *Friend of the Devil*, is the 17th installment of the infamous Inspector Banks mysteries, and will no doubt keep readers on the edge of their seats. His novels consistently appear on the New York Times Bestseller list, are published in dozens of languages and have been distinguished by Publishers Weekly as a Best Book of the Year, as well as a Notable Book by the New York Times. Mr. Robinson is also the recipient of numerous other awards including an Anthony, Edgar and Macavity. Welcome, Mr. Robinson. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

>> Hello there.

>> We're absolutely delighted that you are joining us for the 2008 Book Festival. Why do you think it's important to participate?

>> Well, it's a great honor to be invited to something like that, and I think, you know, it's not just -- for me, it's certainly to get, I think, the message across that crime writing can be as good and interesting as any other kind of writing, rather than just pushing it off to the side as a sort of genre.

>> And how did you first get involved or intrigued in the idea of writing crime novels?

>> Well, I used to write poetry, and then I started reading a lot of crime novels. This was a few years ago, obviously. Mostly European: Georges Simenon, some Swedish writers, and also Raymond Chandler. And I liked their writing. I liked what they were doing with the crime stories. You know, there seemed to be sort of much more to them than I had imagined, not having read any. And it was a kind of challenge in there, and I thought, you know, "I've read so many, I just have to have a go."

>> Now, the Inspector Alan Banks series has received accolades not just from crime mystery fans themselves, but also the critics in general. You bring a basic human nature together with regular police work and have created this captivating series. Tell us, if you would, about Alan Banks and your relationship with him.

>> Well, I mean, it's been a long one, because the first book came out in 1987, which makes this the 21st anniversary. So you know, we've sort of grown old together, although he's aged at a slower rate than I have. You know, he's kind of any everyman figure. I mean, he's not a super detective like Sherlock Holmes, you know, but the books also about his life as well as the things that happen on his job. So it's like an ongoing saga, and I think that interests people a lot. I mean, each book is separate, but you know, each one is also part of a larger construction.

>> And how do you keep the series so interesting after 17 books, and how do you keep yourself so motivated?

>> Well, I think it's mostly down to Banks himself who, as he gets older, is becoming a more interesting character. He's become more melancholy, more introspective, more philosophical over the years as various things have happened in his life. You know, I always try to have some element of social common in the books without getting on a soapbox or anything, but you know, they do deal with social issues that tend to stem from the crimes. So you know, that's another way in which I can sort of do something different with each book.

>> Crime novels, of course, are a large and popular genre of fiction. How do you think you set yourself apart from the rest? How are you different?

>> Well, I think that I always do something a little different with every book, like perhaps introducing a separate story set in the past that connects with the present story. I probably spend a lot more time exploring the detectives in their life, his life outside the job, you know, so some purists would complain about that. But I think it's something that makes him stand out, that makes him different. There's not a great deal of violence in the books. Most of that takes place off-stage. And I have far more interest in the psychology and the motivation of the characters.

>> Now, what are the fundamentals of an intriguing crime novel? Is there a pattern or a mold, I guess? Are there prerequisites?

>> There isn't really. I mean, you know, there does need, I suppose, to be a crime and an investigation of that crime. And usually the crime's murder, because it's the one thing that can't really be restored or undone. So that's why we tend to write about murder. But the murder in itself is often symbolic of something else. You know, it's the reason why it happens that is certainly important to me as a writer. Not, you know, the fact of it in itself. So I'm not, you know, a CSI kind of writer. I need to know some of those details, but that's not what I'm writing about. I'm writing about, what was it about this person that resulted in him or her ending up dead?

>> You said you're not a CSI-type writer, but I would assume that some, on some level, you have to become somewhat familiar with police procedures after all these novels.

>> You do have to know some of it, and then there are people I can ask. But my procedure is more to play that down and to write the stories, and then ask the people who would know, "Look, can I get away with this?" You know. "Will this work without making me a laughingstock?"

>> Now, you have chosen England as the setting for the series. Is it just a matter of writing what you know, or is there more to it than that?

>> Oh, I think -- you know, when I first started writing the books, I'd been living in Canada for a very short while, and I couldn't pretend to know Canada more than I knew Yorkshire, where I'd grown up and spent my formative years. And Graham Greene once said something about the first 20 years of a writer's life giving him all he needed and the rest was details. And I've found there's some truth in that myself. And I think, you know, there's probably also a bit of nostalgia at that time, so writing about Yorkshire was a way of keeping in touch while I was far away.

>> Now, Joyce Carol Oates, who has also participated in the National Book Festival, was your tutor at the University of Windsor when you were studying English and creative writing. And this, of course, was before she herself became such a noted writer. Was there anything you learned from her that you apply in your own writing?

>> I think the main thing that I learned was not technical. I mean, Joyce was a great teacher meant for making you believe in yourself and believing in the importance of writing and reading. I remember she always used to have a table piled with books on the door to her office, and on the way out, she would encourage everyone to root through and find something. Often she would find a book for you and say, "You should read this." So you know, it was constantly feeding the writer, and that's what I remember about her most of all, more than any specific comments about any particular poems I wrote.

>> Do the two of you still keep in touch?

>> No, I haven't seen her for years. We appear to have followed each other around to various festivals and things and left messages. You know, "Say hello to Joyce," "Say hello to Peter." But we've not actually been in the same place for many years.

>> Now, many people consider you a crime and mystery legend and frequently you're compared to P. D. James or Ruth Rendell or other greats. Do you accept, do you buy those comparisons?

>> I'm very flattered, but both those writers I love very much. I think Ruth Rendell is a fine writer in any terms. You know, she doesn't just do crime or police. She does all kinds of things. P. D. James is a wonderful stylist. So I mean, I'm quite happy to be mentioned in the same breath, yeah.

>> You mentioned Raymond Chandler earlier. Who are some of your influences, particularly as you were growing up? Who did you read?

>> Well, I mean, when I was an adolescent, I used to read all the [inaudible] stories, like The Saint and James Bond, The Baron and [inaudible]. You know, and then for years, I mostly concentrated on poetry and other kinds of literature. So it was in my 30s when I really came back to crime fiction. And probably the biggest influence at that time was Simenon, and I think if anything, you know, Banks as a character is perhaps more in common with Maigret than with any contemporary British characters. And that's changed a little bit over the years, but I also -- Nicolas Freeling who wrote about Van der Valk, set in Amsterdam, I think was an early influence. Chandler, I just loved his writing. I mean, there's no way that I could write in that style. I wouldn't even try. But he was very inspiring as a writer.

>> And you also periodically teach a crime-writing class at the University of Toronto. Have you learned anything about crime-writing through the process of teaching? Or have you perhaps learned anything from your students?

>> Oh, yeah! I learn all the time from my students. And you know, it's often, it's what not to do. And probably the two biggest problems are, first of all, that some of them are very talented writers, but they're a little lazy or they don't make the time to write. So I tell them, you know, "If you want to be a writer, you have to write." And a lot of them just don't seem to get that. Also that they have to read. And the second thing is that people tend to put way too much information upfront when they're starting on a novel. One thing I learned was just to put off giving all the background stories until later. Just get into the story; leave the other stuff for later. And I learned all that, really, from working with students.

>> Can a person learn to write? I mean, is this like musical talent where someone can be born a prodigy, or can it really be taught?

>> I don't think it can be taught. I mean, I think there has to be some basic talent there. But you know, almost as much as that, there has to be some real desire, some real passion to be a writer. And that's what some of the people who had the talent lacked. And without both, you can't do it.

>> Now, your books also deal with the effects of crimes and crime victims, including the effects on families or friends, communities. Are you looking to provide some sort of social commentary or your own personal views on crime?

>> I think I'm looking at society through its crime. I mean, it's a slightly distorted mirror, but you know it's -- crime is one way of looking at the world we live in. Like for example The Wire, on television, takes that to sort of extremes. So yeah, I do think -- I would say without preaching and without standing on a soapbox, I don't think that the books deal with social problems. They don't advise people what to do. They don't put forward solutions. They just point out things and say, "Look," you know, "this is going on, and it may not be a good thing."

>> You said it was like a mirror. Now, as your own writing and career have evolved, would you say that that view has become a more positive one, or are you more jaundiced on how society is in terms of crime now?

>> Well, I think both Banks and I are getting more jaundiced as time goes on, but you know, I try not to let that come into the books too much. I mean, the *Friend of the Devil* is a dark story. The next book, *All the Colors of Darkness*, is really even darker, more in terms of Banks' life. You know, these things happen inevitably as you age. But the point is, he still does it, you know? He still goes out there and thinks he can make a difference, and I suppose as long as he thinks that, there haven't been enough.

>> Your books contain references to musical works, and your website even incorporates playlists that accompany some of your novels. This is a trend I noticed and I think others have noticed, at least, shared by some of today's other writers as well. How important is music in your writing process in creating your characters and plots?

>> Well, the playlists are kind of fun. I mean, they're almost an afterthought. But when I'm writing the book, the music that Banks listens to is often important. And you know, sometimes it's mood, and sometimes it's the time of day, and sometimes it comments on the action to some extent. And it's there, you know, almost always in the background. In my mind, it's kind of like a soundtrack to the story. So you know, I've spent a lot of time thinking about it. And also, you know, in terms of defining character, I think Banks often checks out people's CD collections, and it tells him a little bit about them when he finds out their musical tastes.

>> What kind of thing can you find out from someone, about someone from their music?

>> Well, I mean, for example, you can find out whether somebody is sort of the person to sort of flip from greatest hits to greatest hits, and I think at one point, Banks notices that somebody has a lot of the best bits of classical music, rather than the complete symphonies, you know? And Mozart's best movements. And you know, it tells him something about that person's life, perhaps. He or she is in a bit of a hurry and wants to absorb just the best and, you know, can't be bothered to sort of listen to the whole thing. So it gives him all kinds of clues to what people are like.

>> Well, what's next for Inspector Banks? Can you give us a little hint?

>> Well, the next one, which I think is coming out in February in the United States, is called *All the Colors of Darkness*. And it is really a difficult time for Banks. It begins with a, what looks like a murder-suicide, becomes more and more complicated and then actually becomes more and more personal in a way. So it's a difficult book to tell too much about without giving the spoilers. So I won't say much more than that.

>> Understood. And what's coming for you? Any new genres or series or new projects coming up?

>> Well, I'm going to work on a non-series book. It'll probably be a suspense novel, but it won't have much to do with the police. And I have another Banks book on the go now. And after that, I want to write this non-series book. After that, I don't know. It's nice to just be thinking one book ahead.

>> Well, Peter Robinson, we are very excited to see you at the National Book Festival. And what can your fans expect to hear from you then?

>> Well, I'm going to talk a little bit about why I can't say too much about the book. I mean, this whole thing about the reason I read and one of the pleasures I get out of reading is being surprised. And the more you say, the more you take that away. And some of the difficulties of, you know, talking about a long-running series, avoiding repeating yourself, avoiding giving too much away from previous books. So I don't -
- I only get about 15 minutes, so that's about as much as I can do.

>> Hmm. Well, Peter Robinson, we are excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival and we appreciate your time today.

>> Thank you. I'm looking forward to that.

>> And again, the National Book Festival is Saturday, September 27th on the National Mall in Washington from 10:00 AM to 5:30 PM, free and open to the public. For more details and the complete list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress in Washington, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

[Music]