

>> 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, on 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. This podcast with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). So now, my honor to talk with one of my favorite interviews to do and that is the children's author Jon Scieszka. He has a widely popular list of books that include *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, and *Robot Zot!*, which is due out little bit later this year. Mr. Scieszka's entertaining stories have been honored with the Publishers Weekly Cuffies awards and the Caldecott Honor. Mr. Scieszka is one of many authors participating in the *Exquisite Corpse Adventure* story. The story which premieres September 26th on the day of the festival is a collaborative effort with the Library of Congress, The National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance, and numerous writers. Each of whom are authoring chapters of this year-long story that will be featured on the library's new website--I'm sorry, [Read.gov](http://Read.gov). Mr. Scieszka also has yet a distinction of having been named the first National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in 2008 by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington. This 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 a life-long literacy and enriching the lives of young people. Mr. Scieszka, thank you so much. It's a pleasure to talk to you.

>> Wow. That was a great intro there. I think I'm getting tired just listening.

>> Well, you wrote it, you know?

>> I don't know. I guess I lived it.

>> Just terrific. I have to start out with the end of the introduction and ask you about your position as National Ambassador. I think everywhere I go or everywhere I've seen you at least, you're wearing a medal. Why is this position so important to you?

>> Oh, this has just been a spectacular honor. And then actually, it just turned out to be a wonderful thing too. We've been--had been kicking around the idea of forming like a Laureate position for kids writing for a couple years between the Library of Congress and some publishing people. And last year, it just all kind of came together and they asked me. And I just--at first, I asked them if they knew who they were talking too, maybe misdialed by accident. I was the guy who wrote *The Stinky Cheese Man*. But they said, "Oh, yeah. That's what we want. We need some pep out there." So, I've just been traveling around the country, you know, talking up kids' books and bragging about all the great books that are out there.

>> What are some of the interesting things or some of the more unusual things that you've done in that capacity?

>> Oh, well, the most entertaining thing is just all the stuff I get from kids.

>> Yeah.

>> Because this is a brand new position, we're kind of making it up as we go along. So, kids just completely take to it and they realize like, "Oh, this is a position with some pomp and circumstance." So, I've had kids give me sashes with "Ambassador" written on it. I think my favorite is the purple one with some nice gold puffy paint. A bunch of 5th graders wrote me an original ambassador fanfare which they played when I walked into the room. And it's written for kettle drums, xylophone, and trombone, just kind of an interesting combination of their instruments but it's just perfectly ambassadorial. So, I make sure to play that wherever I go.

>> Is there a step higher on the chain after ambassador like admiral or something?

>> No, I think ambassador is the highest.

>> Right.

>> That's what they told me. I'm in charge of everything.

>> All right. Well, I have to ask you also about before we get to your new book about the Exquisite Corpse, I have had the almost unique pleasure, I guess I could say in reading the first few chapters of the book that will start rolling out on September 26th. And of course, you wrote the very first chapter and without giving too much away. If you could just talk a little bit about that and why you're involved in that project?

>> Oh, that's another just really cool project. It's just--and we brought together this spectacular bunch of writers to all write one story together. And in fact, it kind of goes back to some--it was kind of an old form painters and artists and writers way back when. I actually fooled around with this form of one person starting a story or a painting, a drawing. And then, another artist, or writer continuing it and it's just kind of fun crazy way to tell a story. And when we decided we do this to benefit the Library of Congress and really bring attention to all the great stuff going on there. I just said, yes right away especially since I get to write the first part. And I know following me are great authors like Katherine Paterson and Kate DiCamillo, and Daniel Handler is also known as Lemony Snicket.

>> Yes.

>> And so, I get to write just this crazy, wild, first chapter where I just threw everything in there in the kitchen sink. Just to see what like other writers would do with it.

>> I was trying to picture--it almost seem like maybe you're sitting there with the doctor evil laugh or something with all the loose threads that you threw out there.

>> That's exactly what I was doing. I get to just throw in some evil clowns and bad guys and two meatballs and Star Wars lunch box missing its thermos. It just--and it got specifically strange. And whoever it gets the motorcycle, or the baby on the motorcycle, I think will be--the really, I'd like to see what happens with that.

>> Well, I was truly laughing out loud, that's just a wonderful chapter. And of course, it will be exclusively on read.gov and could possibly be taking some additional forms in the future. Let's turn to your new book, Robot Zot!, what is that book about?

>> Oh, that was a really fun collaboration. It grew out of the Trucktown books I had done. I worked with a bunch of illustrators who worked together on that, Dave Shannon, Loren Long, and Dave Gordon. And I just had so much fun with all those guys. And then, Dave Shannon and I just started talking about, we should do some--a book together. And I started just thinking about, I love the way Dave Shannon messes around with metal objects. So, I just started fooling around with the idea of a robot and some robot stories. So, I wrote up the story of an alien robot who comes to attack Earth and fight everybody. He's kind of a belligerent little guy. And he crash lands on Earth and he springs to fight the entire Earth army and there's this great moment where you turn the page. And the next page shows him in the middle of a kitchen on Earth and he's about three inches tall. He just doesn't know it. And he never finds it out. So, he's so completely mistaken that he thinks all of the kitchen appliances are earthlings.

>> That's great.

>> So, he does battle with the toaster. He beats up the coffee machine, he wrestled the vacuum cleaner. And eventually, he rescues who he thinks is just the most stunning queen of Earth. It turns out to be a little girl's cellphone. But don't tell him that. Then he rescues her and has to finally fight Earth's commander general, the guide dog. And that Dave Shannon paintings for this thing are just phenomenal.

>> Well now and you mentioned you of course worked with several different illustrators and artists. And I'm kind of curious, what are the dynamics of that? I mean how much give and take is there? I mean, are your words influenced by the pictures, or is it just sort of a literal interpretation?

>> You know what? I actually set that project up to be very dynamic and have a lot of give and take. Because for years I've worked, you know, with different illustrators. And Lane Smith a lot where I would write a story, give it to the illustrator. And just kind of let them do what they do, but I thought this would really be fun to go back and forth. And they kind of juggle everything like we really put this Trucktown thing together with an eye for it to be television and a toy and online. And

so, just kind of live all these places. And when we realize, we were doing like 50 books, we realized we couldn't ask one person to do all that. So, we kind of did it like the same way they make a movie, you get a bunch of artists. And they design the characters. So, these guys actually came up to New York. We worked together. We actually dressed up in overalls like we're in a garage and worked together in the Simon and Schuster conference room which they turned into a garage. And it was great 'cause that really cone the characters. And I could describe each one of them and I would kind of take off on stuff that the illustrators had done.

>> Yeah. I read that you like nursery rhymes and fairly tales, why is that?

>> Oh, I love nursery rhymes and fairly takes, I think those are just proven themselves to be the ultimate stories for kids. And because they stayed around just for thousands of years and they're just kind of like, kind of these well-worn narrative that have been kind of tweaked over the years. And they just--They get kind of more and more essential. I just love that they've passed down for so long. Something that like the Grimm Brothers collected or just in the spoken nursery rhymes, who knows how long those have been around. So, I love kind of bringing those to a contemporary audience. And in fact, that's what I did with the latest Trucktown book is Truckery Rhymes. It's thinly described nursery rhymes. Or if you're a truck, you would probably tell him like Truckery Rhyme.

>> Now, your body of work, I mean, it's--it almost seems like your imagination is limitless. How do you keep it going?

>> I don't know. You know what? I never really even think about that too much. I think I'm blessed to have been working with kids for so long. I just--I get to kind of think along like them. In fact like I just got back from a tour where I spent a week going and talking to kindergarteners and first graders, we had to just--that's a mind-blowing experience. I think maybe that's what happens. It's, I just--the kindergarteners and first graders rub off on me. Those guys always got something going on.

>> Are there elements I guess of what a successful young people's book would be or I guess sort of a recipe for a successful book for young people?

>> No, you know what? In fact that's some of what I tell people as the ambassador. I like to try to get people to really expand their notion of what a--well beyond even what a successful book is. Like beyond what reading is what we might define reading to be. 'Cause you might just think of that as a story book but you know what? It's also like a great nonfiction book. Like there's this great book just about spiders now or another guy who's writing about prehistoric sharks, like what a spectacular book that is. But if you're in the mood for a funny book, you probably wouldn't like that. So, you'd probably like a funny book. So, I'm really trying to get people to really zero in on what kids are interested in, what that individual kid is interested in. That's a great book for that kid.

>> You obviously spend a lot of your time encouraging young people to read and to read more.

>> Yeah.

>> Why is that important?

>> Oh, you know what? I think it's just--it's this--I thought about that a lot and it's just this deep, deep kind of fundamental activity I think that helps us understand the subject deeply and makes us good citizens. I mean it's kind of appropriate that the big book festival that we have is in the nation's capital. It's like what makes us a democratic society is informed citizens and I think we have truly informed citizens if they're readers. And it's also you know, I like to kind of get kids started on not with something that heavy handed or something that's such an assignment. But just to get them started with books they like. Or maybe that they might even start with laughing at, 'cause that's the way I got started. My mom and dad read me stuff like Go, dog. Go! and Green Eggs and Ham and just these--all these funny books. I just laughed and wanted to find out more.

>> Now, I guess maybe a slight departure for you was something called Guys Write for Guys Read, what is that?

>> That was actually an outgrowth publication that kind to supported a web-based literacy initiative that I started called Guys Read about seven or eight years ago now. And it's a literacy campaign just to help get boys reading. Because my experience, I have a daughter and a son and I grew up with five brothers. And then, I went into this kind of really almost all women's world of elementary school teaching and children's publishing. And I just found boys weren't connecting with reading. Then I started looking into things man and those statistics are just terrible. Like boys have been dropping in reading for the last 25 years. And that's--it's getting worst, I mean we're at this point now where we're seeing these effects like enrollment in college is 60/40 female to male and it's just boys checking out of reading. So, I wanted to find a way just to, like call attention to this problem for starters which is great. Now, I think people are aware of it. And the second step then is to get people to look at what we're making kids read and how we're teaching reading. 'Cause I know boys are just different and I think I learned that growing up with a bunch of brothers.

>> Yeah. Now, you started out your careers as a teacher. What motivated you to shift gears and go into the literary world?

>> You know, it's kind of continuation. It just took me that long to figure out where my audience was. 'Cause I actually went to school--I came out--I grew up in Michigan, got a master's and was fooling around with going into premed, thinking about applying to medical schools but I thought that was a little too gross. And I actually ended up coming out here to New York where I went and got a master's in fiction writing which then enabled me to paint apartments everywhere 'cause you can't do much with a fiction writing degree.

>> Yeah.

>> And I was always writing for adults, just thinking I'd like to write kind of weird short stories. And I then ended up started teaching and taught for a couple years before it's finally dawned on me like, "Oh, here's my audience, they're right in front of me, they're a lot shorter than I thought," but every bit is smart and funny and crazy. And I just started writing for my second and third graders.

>> Now, when you came to the 2008 festival, you brought with you a book called Knucklehead. And you did several readings from that. I found very, very entertaining so just--I just wanted to give you a chance to plug it, just tell us a little bit about what that book is about.

>> Oh, that was so much fun to do. And I didn't get kicked out of the town which is--'cause I did read that the First Lady Laura Bush and her husband. And give them an inscribed copy.

>> I'm trying to remember which setting you actually read the crossing streams story but.

>> It was in the--at the Black Tie event, over at the Black Tie dinner. And everyone is in their tuxes and fancy outfits, I thought that was perfect. And actually, everyone got such a kick out of it, 'cause Knucklehead is just the collective stories of me growing up with my five brothers. And the title comes from, what my dad use to affectionately call us, so I think it's like sort of a group collective noun. Like what are all you knuckleheads doing or who is the knuckle head who put the army man in the toaster? And so, it's just stories of like growing up with my crazy brothers, all illustrated with pictures from my scrapbook which were just hysterical good fun to go riffling through.

>> Well, Jon Scieszka, we certainly are looking forward to hearing more from you. Before I let you go, what's coming up next for you?

>> I got a couple of things, a bunch more Trucktown stuff and we're actually working on the TV now which is kind of exciting. And I'm also working on a project for kind of older kids like fourth, fifth graders called Spaceheadz. And it's a cool combined program. Kind of in a way like a 39 Clues where it's books online. And they really ask kids to be part of the storytelling. They have to be Spaceheadz to really figure things out and help save the world.

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

>> Oh my pleasure and I can't wait to get out there in the mall and make some more trouble.

>> Well, and we can't wait either. We'll get to see you at the National Book Festival, that's Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall from 10 AM to 5:30 PM, the even as always is free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors, you can visit

[www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond.  
Thank you so much for listening.