

>> 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 lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival, honorary co-chairs in 2009, 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 the festival in person, you can still participate online. These podcasts with all well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). It's now my pleasure to talk with a breakout author, David Wroblewski. Mr. Wroblewski is widely known for his first novel, "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle". It's a New York Times Bestseller that retells Shakespeare's "Hamlet" through young man born mute who communicates with others via his own self-created sign and body language. Edgar Sawtelle has been recognized as an Oprah Winfrey Book Club Selection, Amazon's Best Book of the Month for June 2008, and the Los Angeles Times Book Price Finalist. Mr. Wroblewski, thank you so much for talking with us.

>> Happy to be here. Thank you.

>> All right, thank you. First of all, let's talk about your book. Tell me about "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle". Where did you get the idea for this?

>> It comes from a number of sources. Partly, it was a way for me to revisit Wisconsin where I grew up and to take a look at that place from a distance of many years. I'm almost 49 or almost 50 actually at this point, years of old and I haven't lived in Wisconsin for a while. And I wanted to sort of look back on it. So it was a chance to do that. It's also a chance for me to think about something that's been very important in my life which is my relationship with God and why that has felt so central to my life and so profound.

>> And what is that connection? I know you have a dog and a cat currently, is that right?

>> Yeah. Yeah. Well, I grew up--my folks when I was a kid, probably from about the time of I was 5 years old until I was 10, my folks raised dogs on a farm that we lived on. In fact, it's a farm that I lived on my whole life. They had moved there as a result of--a kind of bohemian move on my parents' part. They had lived in Milwaukee or the suburbs all their lives. And at one point or another they--said that they wanted to try being dairy farmers and living in the country and they moved to Central Wisconsin. They didn't know anybody there. They bought a farm and land and they tried being dairy farmers which lasted about 18 months. They tried it and sailed very quickly and my father went back to work in town in a machine shop, but we had a--but they loved living on a farm and we had a--so we had this big barn. We had about 90 acres field and forest and he gave my mother a chance to do something that she's always wanted to do which is [inaudible]. So I grew up around dogs.

>> Yeah.

>> And they're--I think they're sort of part of the bedrock of my imagination.

>> How did you develop the character of Edgar? I guess it's obligatory to ask how much of it is based on you or maybe someone that you know.

>> I don't know anybody that's like Edgar in the sense of somebody who's mute and is a sort of--on the one hand sort of language prodigy and on the other hand mute. Those qualities came out by combining a couple of different experiences that I've had as well as my interest in language. I was in research labs a lot during my other career as a software developer. And particularly, a lot on projects to do natural language analysis and to teach computers to understand English. And as a result, I've worked around a lot of language and gotten a sort of folk education linguistics and one of the things that I was very interested in and it does [inaudible] my interest with dogs is that moment in time in our lives when language--when we turn into sort of language sponges and all of a sudden, we're absorbing words that get so fast that the people around us almost can't keep up. And I wondered well, what it would be like for someone who was particularly gifted with language but mute. What would they absorb differently if they were around dogs a lot? And how would they understand the world differently? And so, that was--in a way, that was sort of the premise [inaudible], and the premise for Edgar's character obviously.

>> Yeah. Is there anything that you hope that we can learn from Edgar? I mean, maybe even learn about ourselves?

>> You know, I resist the idea that a novel is a tool for learning about anything. I--you know, I think that the purpose of a novel is to give us just a kind of second life that we live over days or weeks, or if you read it slowly as I do, months. But we're sort of living in parallel with our ordinary life and we begin to see connections. But because it's lived in parallel and because it takes [inaudible] over a long period of time, the thing that one person takes away and the connections that they make can be so different from another person's connections that to me it feels impossible and almost against the art form to try and condense that into one set of lesson.

>> So the experience is an end in itself?

>> Absolutely. I mean, I feel like I have lived many lives because I've read novels. And I don't myself feel a need to justify any further than that.

>> Now you worked for a decade on this book, is that correct?

>> Well, give or take, you know. It depends on how you count. My earliest notes on the story are dated from 1993. So--And it was published in 2008. So, in terms of elapsed time, 15 years but there was a lot of turn during that time as I was trying to understand how to write a novel. I ended up going back to school to study in a MSA program to work with actual novelists to answer some very basic questions I had about how to make one

of these things and so on. And so, I say 10 years as a sort of rough average.

>> So what is the process? You come up with an outline and then get a draft fairly quickly and a lot of revisions. How do you--What's your process?

>> My process was--well first of all, there were some basic piece parts of [inaudible] that were sort of handed to me one afternoon from wherever ideas come from. That involves combining this old story of "Hamlet" and actually the stories that preceded "Hamlet" and letting that play out in this place that I knew, which was the farm I grew up on and having the stakes somehow involve dogs and our experience with dogs and so on. So, there was that initial impulse which I mainly had an emotional reaction to. It wasn't a very detailed thing, but it came along with one other element and that was the idea of structuring the stories like a five-act play. And the other three elements had been in my mind at various points before, but it wasn't until the addition of treating it in sort of five formal acts that all of a sudden I felt like I could sit down and get started. And I felt like on that--the day that that happened, I felt like I understood more or less what each of those five acts were even if I didn't understand anything about what was happening inside the act in detail. I did have feelings about--and a very strong sense about how each act would feel as you read it. So, after that, it became a process of experimentation and exploration in floundering around frankly to understand how best to achieve that sort of initial impulse.

>> Now obviously a project you worked on so long I would assume it's a labor of love. How does it feel to come out on the other end and have it be received so warmly and frankly, with such critical acclaim?

>> It's surreal. It's only the single word that captures it best. I absolutely did not believe that this now is going to be published and in fact, there was a moment when I had to choose between taking a new job that had been offered to me, very exciting, engrossing job that was going to eat up all my time or sitting still and waiting to see if the book was going to sell and I had a discussion with my agent, actually it's the very first time I met her face-to-face to see what she thought the prospects were and she said, "I'm absolutely sure--" this was in early November of 2006, she said, "I'm absolutely sure I'm going to be able to find a place for this book by the end of the year." And I listened to her and I thought about it and I went home and I told Kimberly, "I'm taking the job, the book is never going to sell." And two weeks later, she called me and said the publishing [inaudible] interested in buying it and ultimately went to Harper Collins. So when I--sort of just a post answer of certainty, that this book was only a book from me and a few of my friends and it was a very personal vision that was still idiosyncratic that no one would be interested in publishing it and in contrast that was what actually happened. I think I'm still trying to reconcile it to experience it. Obviously, I'm thrilled by it. But sometimes, it's just a little surprising to me that so many people have read this book.

>> Is being selected for the Oprah Book Club something like winning the lottery, I would think so.

>> Oh, absolutely, yes. No questions. It's very exciting, very much fun and of course, it involves a lot of chance to talk to readers through the book club because they do a really great job of running discussion groups and doing question and answer with the author over the course of the month that the book is selected, so that was actually the most fun for me was these great questions that would come through and I would essentially have to sort of write up answers and maybe get posted on the website.

>> Now, you mentioned earlier your background in computers and I think software developer and novelists seems like two very different sides of the brain, what was that transition like for you?

>> I don't experience it as using different parts of the brain and I know a lot of people have this impression that when you're making software, you're doing something that's sort of coldly analytical that, you know, you're pointing out your [inaudible] every five minutes to check things. But in fact, making software is very, very much like making fiction and there's a lot of what I call habits of mine that transfer. So for instance--I mean, the way I think of complex computer programs is like--is that it's most like a piece of kinetic sculpture and if you're going to make it, you have to be able to visualize it, it's moving, it's in three dimension, it sort of has--it's a machine that's working and doing things and you have to have some love for visualizing the way complicated things move in your mind and those--and you learn over time to get better and better at that when you work with software and I think that's something that is exactly analogous to putting together a complicated story. So that's at least one point of commonality between them, but there's many other people who work in software are always dealing with metaphor. It's just--it's work that is soaked in metaphor. There's no--you can't even pick up a program, a listing of a program without essentially encountering on the very first line a metaphor for what's happening and in fact, most people who write software think of them primarily as a story told to another programmer who will exist down the line somewhere. It only secondarily has something to be executed on a computer. So all these things are--mean for me that the process of writing fiction even though, it looks in the outside very differently from the inside and somebody who likes to make things, it feels very much the same.

>> Now I know that photography is also a passion of yours, how does telling a story in words differ from I guess telling a story in pictures?

>> Well, it's true. I do love photography, although I started writing--I started taking photographs because I read some advice once that Flannery O'Connor wrote that said that all writers should take up painting because it would improve their power of observation. And I thought I was--that was a hopeless task for me. But I felt, well maybe I could take pictures even though I've never interested in it. And I particularly started on black and white photography because I never understood what it was about black and white photography. Why wouldn't you always prefer to take pictures in color? And so I just--I took a year and said, all I'm going to do is expose a thousand negatives. I don't care if I make a single print. But maybe I'll learn something if I do that. And by the time that

year was up, I was in love with the process of doing that. It doesn't feel the same as making a picture--or as making a story at all. It's an entirely different craft and I'm absolutely a hobbyist and an amateur and actually not very good at it at all. But it does have this quality which I think is insane and that is your job is to go around in a three dimensional world with 360 degrees of view around you in every--on every aspect and fit--somehow fit something into a rectangle which is just a few degrees of--you know, of view on all that and somehow make it artificially represent or evoke a larger world. So, it's a very artificial thing to do. And I respond to it on that level of finding this very limited scene that somehow creates a whole world.

>> Your story, your background really I think kind of amazing. What kind of advice would you offer to especially young people who are maybe interested in following your footsteps?

>> Well, if my experience is any guide, one thing to--is to learn how to make something else besides [inaudible] and transfer the lessons we learned in that realm into the writing [inaudible]. And I don't think it actually matters much what that might be as long as it's a--as long as it is a craft, as long as it involves deeply engaging some materials and trying to make something that's complicated enough that once you get into the middle of it, you don't know what's going to come out the other end. Because what you learned from that process is to trust the half-made thing. This is very important, to trust the thing when it's not in its final form but it's got enough shape and enough substance to it to start to resist the front act and say, I'm going to be good at this, I'm not going to be good at that. I don't know what you had in mind for me, but if you want me to be good at that, then you're going to have to start over. And if you want to go with what I'm turning out to be good at, let's go here. And if you're willing to learn that kind of--that ability to sort of read the thing when it's not complete, I think it will inform your writing in a really good way.

>> Before I let you go, I have to ask what's next for you? Any future novels or other projects?

>> I am at work on a novel, a new novel right now and I'm in a stage that is just before what I just described, which is that stage where you're still assembling things and it hasn't had a chance to sort of wake up and push back yet. So, which I always find to be the hardest part of any project, so--but it's enjoyable and I'm there everyday, loving away.

>> David Wroblewski, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Thank you very much.

>> And we're looking forward to hearing even more from you at the National Book Festival. That's on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall in Washington, DC from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Rain or shine. It's 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). This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Thank you so much for listening.