

>> [Music] 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 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 in Washington Saturday September 27th 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. These podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor to talk with the best-selling author Louis Bayard. As a critically acclaimed novelist, reviewer and journalist Mr. Bayard has written for publications including the New York Times, the Washington Post, Salon.com and Nerve.com. Among his five novels are the Edgar Award Nominated *The Pale Blue Eye* and *Mr. Timothy*, named as a New York Times notable book and one of People Magazine's Ten Best Books of 2003. Mr. Bayard's latest work, *The Black Tower*, is due out August 26th, and welcome to you sir. It's a pleasure to talk with you today.

>> Pleasure to be here.

>> Tell us a little bit about what your fans can expect to hear from you at the National Book Festival on September 27th.

>> They can expect to hear me blathering about probably I'll be talking about *The Black Tower*, which is my newest book mostly. It concerns a real life French Detective named [inaudible]. [Inaudible] is really the first detective, the first modern detective. He was an escaped convict who became a police spy and worked his way up the chain of command and eventually founded the [inaudible], which is the Parisian Plain Clothes Force. He was a very famous figure in his day. He wrote best-selling memoirs and hung around with famous writers like [inaudible] and [inaudible] and was the inspiration for both [inaudible] in *Les Miserables*, and is still I think the archetype today. He was the first to use ballistics, he was the first to use plain clothes officers to infiltrate, to go undercover, he was a master of disguise and surveillance. So about the example the [inaudible] sets you don't have [inaudible], which is Poe's first character. You don't have the Sherlock Holmes isn't quite the same person. He really was the, setting the template in the early 19th century. So I just thought since very few Americans know about his it would be fun to build a historical novel around him and see what happens.

>> What it is about the genre of historical thrillers that appeals to you?

>> Well I like the thriller, the mystery thriller because it's a great way of getting characters in motion. Sometimes literally in motion because they're sometimes running for their lives, and I like the challenge of writing historical novels because it's a great way to bring people into history without making them feel like they're having a history lesson. You can bring them into a new world without, you know, boring them with facts or just mere facts or you know making them take

pop quizzes, making it an enjoyable experience, and of course it gives me an excuse to do research at the Library of Congress where I actually have a study shelf. I live five blocks from the Library so I'm happy to do a shout out to them because they're really a major player in my research efforts.

>> Well we appreciate the plug, thank you. In Pale Blue Eye you weave Edgar Allen Poe into your story, literally making him one of the characters. How do you stay true to fact while also incorporating fiction?

>> That's a really good question. I basically I try to learn as much as a can about Poe as he was in that period. He was still quite a young man. We was at West Point as you said and I read his letters, I read contemporary accounts of him and but then I feel free to imagine my own Poe, you know, informed by the history but also coming out of my own imaginative projection of him. It's a kind of interesting crevice between fact and fiction, but Poe himself is such an interesting character that he really almost begs to be at the centerpiece of fiction himself.

>> Now when you wrote Mr. Timothy you talked about collaborating with Charles Dickens. What do you mean by that?

>> Well what I mean in the most basic sense is I took a character from Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol, Tiny Tim, and reimagined him as a young man in the London underworld and built a story around a creation of Charles Dickens, so recreating him in the same process but also I saw a kind of bridge between the original Tiny Tim and modern day, and so Dickens was very much my collaborator and very much the author who had the greatest influence on me. I saw the book as homage to him even though it took the character in a rather different direction than Christmas Carol did.

>> How do you strike that balance? How do you bring that fresh perspective while also staying true to a character that's so well-known for decades?

>> I think you have to duck in the other direction and that was my first impulse with Tiny Tim. I actually wrote about Tiny Tim because I never particularly cared for that character among all the Dickens cosmology, Tiny Tim was the one that didn't convince me and I began to wonder what is it that Dickens didn't tell us about him. So I thought well let's scrape away all the sentiment, all the incrustations of familiarity that have built around him and take away things like his limp, I'm sorry his crutch because that's too easy a source of sentiment and make him a grown-up so we take away that dewy innocence and then see what's left and that was really the mystery thriller [inaudible] really grew out of that original impulse.

>> Where do you get your story ideas? Are there inspirational threads that run throughout your work?

>> I get my ideas really from reading. I think of my books really as books that read other books so they're ways, the last two books in

particular, the Pale Blue Eye and Mr. Timothy, were ways of repaying a debt in a sense. I've already mentioned by debt to Dickens but of course anybody who writes in the mystery format has a huge debt to Edgar Allen Poe. He was the first to write detective fiction in really any language. He's still the one whose shaping our efforts today, we're just walking in his footsteps, so they really come out of my experiences, my pleasures as a reader.

>> Are you a fan of Arthur Conan Doyle?

>> I sure am, I sure am, and Arthur Conan Doyle, in fact one of my seminal reading experiences as a child was *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. There was that marvelous line Mr. Holmes, the prince of a gigantic hound, you know? I still remember the thrill that that line sent through me. So yes, I've been reading detective novels since I was a kid and enjoying them very much and it doesn't get much better than the Holmes stories.

>> You touched earlier on visiting the Library of Congress. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your approach to your writing, in particular your research and your methodology.

>> I basically just immerse myself as much as I can in any given period. I start with the original sources. I read literature that's written around that time. I thought it was particularly helpful to read accounts of foreigners because the past as a foreign [inaudible] as well and foreigners have the same perspective that we do. They're going there to find things out. And then I learn as much as I can over a few months but I also give myself room to invent and embroider where necessary. I'm not a historian so I don't feel the need to have you know everything be 100 percent historically vetted but I do want to create a feeling of [inaudible] so the reader feels convinced that he or she is walking in this time, is walking on these streets, is seeing things as they might have looked.

>> Are there any time periods that you haven't covered yet that you want to or maybe might like to cover in future books?

>> Wow you know I've been sticking mostly in the 19th century. I really haven't declared any time period off limits, in fact my next book, the book I'm working on now, I haven't started writing it yet but it's probably going to be set partly in the Elizabethan England but also have a modern day component, so I really like the challenge of moving around in different eras, you know? I never really wanted to write a series because I like going back to the well each time and finding a new place, a new time that I can educate myself about; that's one of the real pleasures of writing these books is that I get to educate myself in the process.

>> Clearly you have an affinity for classics and their authors. Is it by design that you are trying to get people to be familiar with classics and these authors or is that just a byproduct of your work?

>> That would be a lovely effect if that were the case. I mean I'd love for people to read say the *Pale Blue Eye* and go back to read Poe and see

how really dark and strange and often terrifying he still is. He's a very powerful writer even today. Or to go back to Dickens work, that would be a lovely effect, but I'm treating these texts as texts that we already know at least culturally. These are texts that we've really absorbed into our cultural DNA, so the books I write are kind of commentaries on them, but yes to the extent that they drive people back to the original sources that is, that would be wonderful.

>> What do you think it is about those books that makes them classics and so enduring over time?

>> You know it's really hard to identify I think what makes a book live on. I think it's the people on the page seem to walk and breathe. They have a life that just transcends the page. I think when Dickens was writing A Christmas Carol for instance, he was working at an amazing level of inspiration. He wrote it very quickly. I think he probably understood how special it was as he was writing it, and in fact if you read some of this other Christmas novels they're not nearly as inspired. Every bit as didactic but nowhere near as entrancing as A Christmas Carol. There's just some amazing confluence of a writer finding the right material, imagining his way into the situation and creating something that we'll still be reading 200 years from now. It doesn't happen to most of us unfortunately. Most of us, few of us, very few of us will be read after we're dead, but you always do cherish the ones that live on.

>> Now I mentioned that you are also a book reviewer. Between that life I guess and being a novelist, are there any challenges between juggling the two and I suppose a natural connection might be that as an author you're hoping for good reviews of your own books.

>> Yes and you worry too that you're building up a karmic debt by every bad review you write about somebody else will have to be taken out of your hide at some point down the line. I find them actually complimentary tasks, I really do. I love the challenge of looking at someone else's work and trying to figure out what makes it work or what makes it doesn't work. I do know that as somebody who is subject to reviews I don't, I make a point of not writing gratuitously spiteful reviews. I really believe there's a role to be played with constructive engagement and rather than the kind of flame throwing by which some critics have made their name. I prefer to help rather than hinder, which doesn't mean I'm not honest about my reaction, but I'm not going to spend 1000 words trashing, pointlessly trashing something. I'd much rather read a good book in the first place. Life is too short to spend it on bad books. As a reviewer for Salon.com I find I'm able to pick a lot of the titles I review, which means I get to avoid, you know, the pieces that I wouldn't want to read anyway.

>> Does writing come easy to you? I mean do you experience writer's block?

>> I can't afford to experience writer's block. I have a mortgage to pay, I've got two kids I'm raising so that's not a luxury I can afford. And I say that only half facetiously. To me writing is a craft but it's also my profession, so I sit down every day and I just start writing. I'm not

sure that I really believe in writer's block per se. I think if a writer is experiencing that it may just be the idea itself doesn't work, but I find just the act of putting words on paper almost inevitably generate some more words and then it goes from there.

>> What do you enjoy about writing? Is it, is it all pleasure or, you know, it is a way to pay the bills as you say.

>> Well I mean it's a wonderful way to pay the bills and I'm very fortunate that I get paid to do this, to make up stories. There's not many better jobs than that, but yes it's certainly hard work. It's not like some muse descends and camps in your brain and spews out sentences for you. It's a labor and it takes me two years to write each book but it's also, it's labor that really that uses the full extent of my inner resources, you know, emotions, thoughts and feelings and perceptions and memories, all these things get plumbed in a very powerful way, and there's nothing like holding the book in your hand after it's all done, you know, seeing it between covers and thinking wow, I actually wrote this thing. It's still an extraordinary feeling after you know five times it's happened now.

>> What advice do you offer to people who are considering following in your own footsteps?

>> Well think very hard about it I guess but to me the desire to write is its own insanity. I mean it's not a rational decision. It's not something; it's not like choosing a career in law or a career in accounting. I don't mean to demean those professions but writing is something that generally people are compelled to do and if you're meant to be a writer then you're probably already doing it. I find in D.C. for instance there are people who will identify themselves as writers who actually haven't written anything. They just sort of think it's something they're going to do when they get down to it, when they get around to it, maybe when they retire, maybe down the road, but the people I know who've really made a go of it are the ones who find the time because it's that important to them. They carve out, they're get up an hour early, stay up an hour late, something because I think this is what they mean to be doing.

>> You care to give us a glimpse about what might be coming up for you next?

>> Let's see, well the Black Tower, as you mentioned, is coming out in August and the book I'm working on now, as I mentioned, is partly set in Elizabethan England and it's based, it's about the School of Night, which is a group of Elizabethan intellectuals who included Walter Raleigh and Christopher Marlow who were rumored to be dabbling in various dark arts and atheism and were perhaps satirized by Shakespeare in one of his plays. There's still no definitive evidence that these people met at this school but they were individually and cumulatively very interesting and of course that name, which was attached to them by Shakespeare, the School of Night, is so evocative for me that it's really the first of my books that came about from a name. A lot, all the others have really come about through looking at a particular character but School of Night just

was something at the end reverberating in my head and it's still reverberating now. We'll see what comes out of it.

>> Before we let you go I have to ask why you think it's important to participate in the National Book Festival in particular?

>> Well I think it's wonderful to make a statement as a nation if you will about the importance of books and I live in Washington D.C. so I can testify to the fact, I go down there myself, you know, not just when I'm one of the authors but I go down there myself to hear what other authors have to say, to hear what they've been working on and it's really inspiring to see the thousands of people who are crowding on the mall and bringing their kids in many cases just because they love books. We get used to thinking about books as a minority art form and maybe they are but this is a very powerful testament that words on a page still mean something to a lot of people, and whenever you can make that statement it's all the more powerful for it.

>> Well Louis Bayard we appreciate your time and your insights today.

>> Thank you.

>> And of course we will be able to hear more from you at the National Book Festival that is Saturday September 27th on the National Mall in Washington D.C. from 10 am to 5 pm. Of course it's always free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of the participating authors, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress in Washington this is Matt Raymond, thank you for listening.

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