

10.1 Extreme Circumstances, Extreme Reactions: Aaron Gwyn and Sean McCann (JP)

Transcript

John Plotz

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*. I'm John Plotz, the founder and fossil host, still somehow up here on the shelf for season 10, along with this season's hosts and co-producers, Emily Hyde and Chris Holmes. So as loyal listeners will recall, the podcast involves a novelist in conversation with an admiring scholar. I guess maybe not always admiring, but in this case, certainly admiring scholar.

Sean McCann

I'm an admirer.

JP

Okay, good. Glad that's out of the way. Today, we're honored to bring you Aaron Gwyn in conversation with my colleague and beloved friend, Sean McCann, Professor of the Humanities at Wesleyan, Kenan Professor of the Humanities at Wesleyan, longtime editor of *Post-45*, acknowledged maven of 20th century literature. His rangy scholarly work, and he has an incredible range of articles, includes two monographs, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* from 2008, and *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* from Duke in 2000. And Sean, I'm very glad to be Zooming with you today.

SM

I'm very grateful to be here. And I'm very grateful that you're joining us, Aaron.

Aaron Gwyn

Honored, honored that you would ask.

JP

So the two of us are here today to speak with Aaron Gwyn, Associate Professor of English at UNC Charlotte, whose published work includes the story collection *Dog on the Cross* and four

novels, *The World Beneath*, *Wynne's War*, which I was just listening to on audio. I love that book. And more recently, two wonderful linked historical novels, *All God's Children*, which won the 2020 Oklahoma Book Award, and *The Cannibal Owl*, praised by *The New York Times* for its "starkly poetic storytelling," which I totally agree with, and so much more. So, Aaron, yeah, as Sean says, welcome. We're so glad to have you. And we were hoping you might actually want to begin by reading to us out of *Cannibal Owl*, just to set the mood.

AG

Sure. I'll just give a little taste of a couple of pages. This is the very beginning of the book.

"They lived within earshot of the slap and sigh of that muddy river. Their home was a dugout among the black oak and cedar. Bailey would run his traps before dawn each morning, carrying Levi in a pine-frame papoose. By the time Levi was three he was toddling beside his father through the forests and swirling mists. They trapped beaver. They trapped badger and raccoon, selling the pelts downriver at Le Harpe's trading post, though the Frenchmen, by that point, had been gone a hundred years. The post was a two-room cabin separated by a dogtrot. For years, it had been the only settlement in the region. Then, in 1820, Little Rock was surveyed. 1821, the town became the capital of Arkansas territory and the Pulaski County seat. Levi's father said the country was settling up. Soon, there would be more trappers than game.

His mother had died of milk-sick the previous year. To Levi, her passing was like the passing of the moon: she was gleaming; she was gone. The fever that burned through her seemed to make her brighter for a spell. Her face shone like a jewel. Then she was laid out in a cherry wood box with coins over her eyelids as men filed past, holding their hats.

Later, Levi would wonder if this woman in his memory was the flesh-mother who'd born him into the world, or the story-mother his father talked about—a figure painted on the sailcloth of his skull—and he came to believe Susanna English would return to him someday, just as the moon climbed back into the sky after its absence."

SM

Oh, wow. Thank you, Aaron. That is a very powerful opening to a novel. And it works beautifully, I think, to set up everything that's coming in the story of Levi English. And I'm hoping you just tell us more about why you want to tell his story and about the challenges and rewards of doing it, I guess. And let me just say for our listeners, if they're not familiar with the story, and please correct me if I'm getting any of this wrong, Aaron. The novel tells of a real historical person, Levi English, who was a boy in the Arkansas Territory in the 1820s and 1830s. He loses his parents. He's adopted into a Comanche tribe at one point. He is raised among Comanche. Later in his life, he returns to Anglo society and becomes a founding figure in Texas history, an important person in developing Texas. And your novel focuses almost entirely on his time with the Comanche, right, and then the rest of his life is kind of an afterthought. And the novel ends with this very powerful concluding scene where we see Levi at his death, thinking back to his youth.

AG

Levi English was a man who founded Carrizo Springs, Texas. And he had been many things over the course of his life. He had been in a ranging company, Texas Rangers. He'd been commissioner of Atascosa County. But earlier on in life, as we were talking about, he was born in Arkansas Territory. So outside the United States, but in the province of its territorial holdings. And then he gets taken to Texas after his father is killed. And then his son, Bud, says that one summer he ran away and he went to live with the Comanche. And there's nothing about his time with the Comanche. And so that's where the kind of imaginative and research into the Comanche people had to come in.

SM

Can you tell us more about what the challenges and the rewards of doing that kind of historical writing are? And let me just preface it by saying, if you don't mind, Aaron, that your first several books are set in the contemporary United States. They're set in Oklahoma and Afghanistan. They present, I think, very vivid pictures of a world that is not often treated in literary fiction, I would say. And they are very accomplished at the task of realist narrative, the dialogue, the characters, the settings. They're all very vividly rendered. And it seems like you kind of made a departure with *All God's Children* and this novel in turning to the past. And I'm curious about what's the motive? What are the challenges? What are the rewards?

AG

That's a great question. I had written *Wynne's War*, which is about U.S. Special Forces doing horseback operations in Afghanistan, which is something that we did and something we continue to do in other countries. We do it in South America at the present moment, and Colombia specifically. And so I decided I wanted to write a Western, a present-day Western but set in Afghanistan. Right? And then my literary agent at the time said, like, have you considered just writing a Western? [laughter] You know, for your next book? He was like, you know, you write about horses. He liked the way I wrote about large animals. And I grew up on a ranch. I grew up on a farm with horses and cows and everything. So I began to do research and nothing was really kind of grabbing me, grabbing my imagination. And then I ran up on Robert Lemmons's story. And at that point, almost as soon as I started reading about Lemmons, I started writing, just writing pages. And it was – I had three books out at that point, and I thought, oh, okay, I'll just read a little bit and I'll write this stuff. Everyone knows it. And then I realized I knew nothing about the stuff I'm writing about, right? I thought I had a pretty good command of 19th century American history. And I grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, and good grief. I didn't know which plants grew at what time of the year. I didn't know what cowboys actually did other than stuff I'd gotten from movies, which is almost all completely made up. And so then I read about 200 books, one after another, on 19th century America, Texas specifically, biographies of men like Sam Houston, and just one thing after another. And I realized that to do the kind of writing I wanted to do, I had to read histories until I began to spot errors in them, right? And

that's a kind of point for me that I've discovered is if you become familiar enough with your subject to where you go, okay, S.C. Gwynne says this thing about Jack Coffee Hayes, but T.R. Fehrenbach says this thing, and these dates don't match up. And it's only important in that as a writer, it gives you the confidence to throw yourself into the space, because you feel like you have some footing, right? Whereas before, you know, I started off with this kind of arrogant notion, I knew this stuff, I realized I knew nothing. And then, like, the way I'm kind of constructed, and I think a lot of writers are constructed, the moment that I start off with this arrogant notion, I'll just go write about these people, I come to the understanding I know nothing, and then I completely throw myself into the research. So, you know, I did all the stuff that—I really hate hearing novelists talk this way, because it sounds dramatic and grandiose—but, I did all the stuff that I needed to do, I learned how—I grew up shooting compound bows and that, but I learned how to shoot a recurve bow, I started making bows, not very good ones, but I learned how to make bows. I started, you know, talking to my Comanche friends. I started doing everything I could to create kind of sense memory and sensation. I bought all the firearms, or replicas of the firearms that are in *Cannibal Owl* and *All God's Children*, I learned how to use them, I learned how they malfunction, I learned their history, and I'm not saying writers need to do that. I'm saying that, in whatever world you're throwing yourself into, as a fiction writer, the more you can create that sensory data for yourself, where this world you're entering into doesn't feel like the ideal, it feels more commonplace, and it feels real, and by real, I mean it has, it leaves a sensory impression.

SM

It's got texture.

AG

That's right. I love Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. I think it's a masterpiece, I think it's one of the three great American novels that people are always trying to find. McCarthy makes a conscious choice in *Blood Meridian* to frame only the violence.

SM

Yeah, it sure does.

AG

And it completely works, right? That book would be diminished if the camera panned out a little bit and showed you something else, right? So it's a world of apocalyptic, biblical violence.

SM

Brutality, yeah.

AG

Yeah, the truth is that that was never Texas. There's plenty of violence, there's plenty of massacres, but there's also extraordinary kindness. There's community, there's belonging. And a lot of the Anglo settlers who moved there, they were Scots-Irish hill people for the most part, but they also loved to dance. They also loved a gathering. They also loved to have—

SM

Before the Baptists come, right?

AG

Before the Baptists come, right! [laughter] So, I'm interested in that fuller picture.

SM

You know, you mentioned frontier, and of course the various conflicts that are taking place on the frontier, and the inevitable displacement and conquest of Native Americans, and how this is all in the background of your fiction. And there's a way in which Levi is a version of a classic character in American literature. My colleague, Richard Slotkin, who has written brilliant books about this history and mythology—

AG

Absolutely. Absolutely.

SM

Yeah. He calls this figure “the man who knows Indians.”

AG

Yes.

SM

The Anglo character who has become familiar with the ways of Native Americans, and frequently is better skilled at them than the Natives who have taught them those qualities. And the implication of that character, of course, stretches back to Daniel Boone, to Fenimore Cooper.

AG

Natty Bumppo is that figure, right?

SM

Natty Bumppo, the classic. That's right. And in Natty Bumppo, there's often a kind of tragic atmosphere around that character because the freedom of the frontier is bound to go away. The world that he has known is going to disappear. But the usual implication is that that character in some way symbolizes the legitimacy of white possession of the territory of North America. It was bound to happen. Usually it was just that it happened. It points—it was fateful, and it points toward a future that is in some ways legitimized or justified by the experience of this character. Sometimes the implication is, well, this character must be savage and destroying Native Americans that he has learned from. Sometimes there's an implication that it's ugly and pathological in some ways, like *The Searchers*. But, you know, usually there's a suggestion, like, it has to happen. It's right that it happens. But am I wrong to say that with Levi that you're telling a slightly different story?

AG

I think I am. I think that there are two ways in which Native Americans are written about and portrayed in stories that bother me personally. I'm not saying other people – other people should be whatever they are, but—that bothered me personally. The first way is the way of old Hollywood where anyone who was, you know, Comanche or Chippewa or whatever, you know, indigenous tribe are portrayed as savages, you know, and godless and all the other kind of stuff, right? So we obviously recoil from that. Now, the opposite, I think, is equally a problem where all Native Americans are noble and, you know, as if these aren't complex human beings with their own material culture and their own, you know, divisions with other tribes and their own conquest. But in other ways, in other words, that they're thoroughly human and imbued with all the good and the bad that other human beings have. So I wanted to situate Levi as this kind of interloper and wanting very badly to belong to something. And then, I think we know this experience is doomed for Levi, in part because we know the Comanche, as they existed in the 19th century, were doomed. They'd be forced onto the reservation at Fort Sill and all the depredations. And so I think when you are a person in Levi's situation, and you make the choices he makes, you end up with a demon. And whether you want to talk about demons metaphorically, whether you want to talk about demons metaphysically or psychologically, it kind of amounts to the same thing in terms of the suffering. And so I'm very interested in the idea of the violence of the West resulting in a kind of possession. And a large part of the conquest by Americans takes place post-Civil War. I don't think it's lost on any historians that these men who saw the kind of carnage that people saw in the Civil War, Cold Harbor, 8,000 Union dead in 15 minutes, and Shiloh, 26,000 casualties in 24 hours. Like that kind of—it's almost unimaginable, that kind of unimaginable suffering that the men who saw that, many of them, North and South, went West after the war was over. Because they couldn't sit still!

SM

Bringing the technology of the war with them too, like bringing the Gatwick gun. Sam Colt's revolver.

AG

Sam Colt's famous revolver, right? Which no one wanted, by the way, until Jack Coffee Hayes in 1844 liberated a crate of those Paterson revolvers from the Texas Navy. Up until then, no one saw the utility in a gun that you could fire five times without reloading.

SM

Yeah.

AG

Right?

SM

It's good for fighting Indians.

AG

Yep. Close-quarter combat.

JP

I've been sitting here racking my brains trying to figure out what your other two novels are, and I think I'm just going to ask you what your other two novels are besides *Blood Meridian*, but I was thinking when you said that, the idea of possession, I was thinking about Mark Twain and even *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, you know, that vision of bringing the barbed wire and the electrified fence and the machine gun that, you know, even if you're going back to Arthurian—you can create as imaginary and bucolic a space as you want, but you bring your own weapons of death with you.

AG

Yeah, for me, the three that, when I think about the great American novel everyone's looking for, I think of *Moby-Dick*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Blood Meridian*. Those are the three that always come to mind. I think Toni Morrison's *Beloved* obviously gets there for a lot of people and is a brilliant masterpiece of a book. I'm not personally the biggest fan of Thomas Pynchon, but I think he's a genius, and I think *Gravity's Rainbow* certainly has many of the characteristics of a great American novel. Even though Pynchon's humor isn't quite to my taste, that part is a subjective observation on my part, and he's very, very skilled.

JP

Can we stick with *Beloved* for a minute, because it gets at—I mean, Sean, I've been turning your question about “why history?” over, around in my mind, that question of—because, you know, Pynchon is writing about his own century anyway, and Melville is certainly writing about an industry that he knew well.

AG

That's right.

JP

But Morrison does the same thing you do, which is that she looks back to this formative mid-19th century moment to try to figure out something.

SM

There's a scene, too, I'm curious whether you were thinking about this, but there's a scene in *All God's Children* where you kind of rewrite a classic scene from *Beloved*. The scene where Cecilia's in the attic of the barn looking down on the cotton gin.

AG

Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I haven't made that connection, but that's a great connection. I also, I'm indebted to Morrison's, I mean, she said things later in her life, kind of objectively about *Beloved*, that I'd rather not know, because, you know, one of the tensions of *Beloved* is, *is this ghost real? or is this ghost psychological or projection?* or whatever it happens to be. And I think that's one of the main tensions of the book. But....you fall down in that first chapter of *Beloved*, and these things are happening, and these people are having this experience, and it ultimately doesn't matter whether the ghost is real or not, because the people are haunted. And that was instructive for the turn Levi takes.

SM

Ah, so he's kind of haunted by the *Mupitsi* [ie. The Cannibal Owl] and the memory of his experience.

AG

Yeah, and I think because I grew up in rural Oklahoma, I grew up in a Pentecostal family in a Pentecostal church, and because I saw and experienced religious ecstasy in its, like, Greek connotation, possession, I, you know, saw a lot of that. It's much easier for me to believe that

people in extreme circumstances have extreme reactions and extremity of feeling and consequence.

SM

It's a really striking feature to me of your whole body of work, the, I guess, the seriousness with which you take and depict the kind of spiritual experiences, the religious convictions, the longings and frustrations that your characters have. Your fiction is very spiritually informed, I would say.

AG

Thank you for saying that. I think it grows out of my personal belief that, whether a person is a believer or isn't a believer, I would hope that we can agree that belief and religion and faith plays an enormous role in a lot of people, millions and millions of people's lives. And has played an enormous role, an outsized role, in the American psyche, and is always balanced against our love of vice. I mean, Americans love vice. Does anyone love our vices more than Americans? And also, you know, there's the puritanical strain of, we're going to be fit and perfect and everything's going to be logical. And then, there's this thing in the woods calling to us, which is represented by the freedom of the Comanche. Or something like Sam Houston's experience—Sam Houston didn't have a particularly bad childhood. He just began to run away from home, and kind of sleep over with the Cherokee on this island. Right. And they adopted him. I mean, he was their son. He became The Raven. And that for me, Sam Houston is a far more interesting and foundational figure in my imagination, than . . . Martin Van Buren, or someone like that.

JP

I love that we talked about McCarthy and the importance of Fenimore Cooper, but can I ask you about a few other writers I thought of? I also, like Sean, I really love your writing and I love the way you move in the present and in history. So I thought about a few other writers who also, it seems to me, move in really interesting ways between writing about the contemporary world and the past. And if you had thoughts about any of them, one is Larry McMurtry. One is Charles Portis. And then the other is, yeah, I thought you might. Yeah, I mean, there's a *True Grit* quality that comes through. It's amazing. And then the other is John Williams. I don't know if you thought about him.

AG

I went to John Williams University. I did my PhD in the creative writing program founded at the University of Denver.

JP

Denver. Wow.

AG

Not only am I a fan of Williams, I'm an enormous John Williams defender. I'm periodically defending *Stoner* on Twitter, which is a book that has—

JP

The most loved and most hated novel.

AG

It's incredible. It's incredible. Like people I love and respect, I'll see on there, and they'll be like, what is this thing? How do people love this? And then there'll be people in the replies. You don't get it. He's a genius. But, *Butcher's Crossing*, of course—

JP

Yeah, that's what I was thinking more.

AG

Yeah. *Butcher's Crossing*. I think it's a tremendous book and he did something from book to book, he does something so different. And I really admire that about him, that he'll write *Stoner* and then he'll write *Butcher's Crossing*, and then he'll write *Augustus*.

JP

Which won the National Book Award, I think, or a Pulitzer.

AG

Yeah. And he moves in that really bizarre way. I haven't read enough McMurtry to make any kind of—I've started *Lonesome Dove* about 10 different times and I get a little tripped up, don't yell at me. Too many people who I respect adore McMurtry and I'm going to sit down and give it a good go. So, but I love Portis, and in particular, I love *True Grit*. He's a ventriloquist at his best. And that voice—

JP

Yeah.

AG

—for that girl is so incredible.

JP

Yeah. Like Mark Twain. It's not comedy. It's humor. It's the humor of the voice.

AG

Oh my gosh. And everything that happens, that book, and there are many extraordinary things, it's all so credible. And he sells it with that voice. And another thing I appreciate—the seams of his research don't show. So, you know, he's clearly done all the reading. He understands where everything is and why it's—but he doesn't do these self-conscious things to trot out the details, to let you know how smart he is. They're fully incorporated into his fictional world. And so, I mean, there's a great scene where Cogburn and the Texas Ranger argue about—

SM

LaBoeuf.

AG

LaBoeuf! [laughter] They argue about William Quantrill. And that's not explained. If you don't know who William Quantrill is, or you don't know about “Bloody Bill” Anderson, if you don't know about that stuff that goes over your head.

SM

Cogburn is a veteran of Quantrill's Raiders, right?

AG

Yeah. Yeah. And LaBoeuf said, you know, “I was in the army of Northern Virginia and I don't have to hang my head when I say it,” but when he badmouths Quantrill, he's crossed a line with Cogburn. But at no point does the narrator say, oh, “I would later learn that Quantrill would . . .” no, it's just, she doesn't really understand all of what's going on. And the reader may or may not understand, but we're looking on and she's reporting what these guys say. I mean, it's so good.

SM

You know, Aaron, in two ways that I hadn't thought about the connection before, but in two ways that reminds me of a lot of your fiction, I guess. I suppose I'm repeating myself, but the kind of

ambivalence of heroic character is great in that novel. In that, you know this backstory of Rooster Cogburn, you know he was forged by his experience in a terrorist army, basically.

AG

That's right.

SM

And yet he is also a heroic kind of figure and saves Maddie, et cetera.

AG

Yeah.

SM

And, I guess the historical context of his formation seems comparable to me, to what you show in the formation of your characters. And what I'm thinking of are the various, for lack of a better word, villains or antagonists who show up in your novels, who are, like the protagonist, people of sometimes extraordinary abilities, but they're damaged characters and they've been damaged, it looks like, in most cases, by their experience of empire that then in some way they have been tools of, or victims of imperial conquest.

AG

Oh yeah. I'm just, I'm friends with too many veterans, all of whose service I respect, even though I was opposed to the Iraq war. And I don't see that we got anything good from it. And I see that we got a lot of bad things from it, but, you know, my buddies were in horrible combat and many of them did very brave things. And they're brave to be over there in the first place. And I still honor that, even though the larger thing, which I see is not their fault, I see it's the fault of the policymakers—but you know, those things have left their marks, and their experience with the things that they saw and the things they had to do stays with them their entire lives.

SM

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, you show that so vividly in kind of small and large ways, you know, I'm thinking about a character from your very first novel that the Hickson character and then the characters like Juan and McClusky in *All God's Children* that—they share a kind of profile, I think.

AG

Yeah. The thing that I admire about McCarthy is his—he's got these villains who don't seem to be troubled by emotion, which is another way of saying they're not fully human.

SM

Yeah. They're psychopaths. Yeah.

AG

They're psychopaths and like, to speak of Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh outside of the context of the book.

SM

Yeah.

AG

They begin to sort of crumble.

SM

Right.

AG

But inside the context of their stories, they're completely credible. They're entrancing, they're horrifying, they're mesmerizing, you know, all the things. They're philosophical. My experience with truly bad people has not been that they're philosophers. [laughter] My experience is that most of the truly bad people I've been around, have been through horror and when you learn their backstory, so to speak, it's no surprise that they are the way they are. I mean, it's like, yeah, if you do these things to this person, they end up this way.

SM

Yeah.

AG

So the judge doesn't seem to have a history. It's impossible to think of Anton Chigurh at the drive-in theater on a date when he was 17.

SM

Right. Yeah.

AG

They come from another place. And I admire that, but I don't think I'll ever be able to create that kind of a villain because of the things I believe about people.

JP

I was just going to ask, Sean, if you maybe had a final question before we turned for home with the signature question.

SM

Well, I could keep going forever.

JP

Clearly. As you should.

SM

So, my apologies to you both if this is too long and leading of a question. But the other thing that you reminded me of in referring to *True Grit* is my impression that running throughout your fiction, there's a kind of decline and fall story. Duncan Lammons puts this most concretely, I guess, in *All God's Children*, Cecilia has that perception of the world of machines in the future. Levi in *Cannibal Owl* is on his deathbed. And the implication is that everything that has happened after his experience with the Comanches has been kind of worthless and even squalid. And in a kind of still larger sense, my impression is that when you write about the past, you are able to describe these grand events and a kind of freedom for your characters, as you say. And when you write about your characters in the present, their lives are so constrained, there's such severe limits on what they can do and how they can act and how they can think. And my impression is that you're kind of drawn to a story of a kind of decline and fall, that there was possibility, there was hope, there was a chance for something. It didn't pan out.

AG

I believe that. And people are always yelling at me for not being more politically minded. And I don't quite know what they mean. I think they mean for not watching MSNBC and getting upset at everything I see on there, which if you do that, that's fine. It's just not my thing. And maybe my attitude is more cynical, but I think that America steps off a cliff into the abyss in 1876 and it just completely one domino after another falls and it falls within a few months. I mean, the efforts at Reconstruction are summarily abandoned—they just give up! It's just like, *let's do all this stuff. Let's make the Freedmen's Bureau*. And then let's just, ah, forget it. So that's the last full

year of Grant's presidency. Wild Bill Hickok is assassinated in Deadwood, the Comanche are run into the agency, 1874, the Sioux Lakota, they're run into the agency. 1876, barbed wire allows people to inexpensively fence off the West. So all this freedom of movement, all this freedom of motion is completely corralled almost overnight because a guy figures out how to create inexpensive fencing. So, constraint is the right way to say it. I think the lives of Americans became constrained and set on grooves into this industrialized technocracy we live in now. And by the way, I don't know how you get out of that. I have no ideas about that. I think it's firmly entrenched and I'm aware I'm speaking into a microphone, talking into a computer, right? Like, I mean, we're in the—

SM

You do sound like Thomas Pynchon. [laughter]

JP

Well, this actually seems like a good setup for the segue to our final question, Aaron, which is that every *Novel Dialogue* season has a signature question. And the one for this season, which I hope you've had a chance to think about, is who was your favorite teacher and why?

AG

Well, that's a very easy question for me to answer because I had a really singular experience. I didn't really do well in high school because I didn't go very much. I just wanted to play guitar and chase girls that didn't love me and run from ones who did. And I didn't really see how you could do much of that in a seat. So I had to start off at community college because that's the only place that would take me. I didn't really have much interest in being in a college of any kind, but the first class, my first day of that first semester, a man walked into the Comp 1 room named Robert Hill and Robert, that was his first semester and first class he taught there. And he was in his fifties and he had been a rock musician. He was a brilliant, brilliant, brilliant drummer. And he was in one of these bands that has opened for everyone, but never quite makes it. I mean, they were always on the edge of, on the verge, of this great success. And like so many bands with tons of talent, they never made it across the threshold. So, in that Comp 1 class, I was struck that, wow, here's this guy who is talking about writing, but he likes *Pink Floyd* and he's got a Jimi Hendrix poster on the wall of his office. And, you know, things that were important to me when I was 17, 18 years old were important to him at 50. And so for the first assignment—and no one in school was like, oh, you write really well, you should think about writing. So the first assignment, the personal essay, I handed in the essay and when I got it back, there was like a two page letter, and it said—he called everyone Mr. or Mrs. or Ms. right. And it said, Mr. Gwyn, you fooled me quite a bit actually. And he says, I predict that one day you will earn a fair living with a pen. And someone, he might as well told me I'm going to be an astronaut. No one was predicting that I was going to earn much of anything, at that point in my life. But he saw, whatever it is I've become, he saw that thing in germ in that four page, you know, freshman Comp essay. And he said, come see me. And so I went to his office and—and I now realized

that he worried that I'd plagiarized the essay because maybe he thought that a freshman couldn't have produced it or whatever he thought. But after we talked a little bit and he was satisfied, no, I had written it. And then he just began to, he just said, ignore the syllabus, just start, just start writing stuff for me. And so I'd just write things and give them to him. Maybe poems, they'd be stories, they'd be whatever. And I took, you know, all the classes I could before I went off to a four-year college from Robert and we became great friends afterward and up until his death. He's a brilliant man, like maybe the funniest guy I've ever met. One of the most talented drummers I've ever played with. I am just a really deeply compassionate human being who was passionate about literature and passionate about words. And it was, I would not be where I am today if it weren't for him. There's no question about it.

SM

That's great.

JP

Hey, Aaron, do you want to shout out the name of your community college?

AG

Yeah, I believe they've changed the name, the name to Seminole State College. It was Seminole Junior College, but like a number of junior colleges, they kind of wanted to get away from the junior college name, Seminole State College, go Trojans, a wonderful school there in Seminole, a great nursing program, which is what I had enrolled as, I thought, well, I'll go be a nurse. You know, it only takes two years and I didn't know I was going to end up with all these letters after my name. But yeah, when I was around Robert and I saw him in his office hours or I'd catch him outside and we'd smoke and talk about Jimi Hendrix or Edward Van Halen or, you know, whatever. And he was conversant on pretty much everything, you know, history and politics and religion. I mean, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant guy. I was like, oh, I want to do that. Like, I don't know how you got here, but I want to do what you do. But, you know, he would always push me about my writing. He was like, you know, you have a gift and you really ought to be pursuing it. And there was no one else saying that to me, which, I mean, I forget, I've been a professor here at UNCC for 22 years now. And I think as a professor, maybe you guys have experienced this, you become a little bit inured to the effect that you can have on students' lives by just encouraging them or, or seeing something they do well. And I have to remind myself of that because I'm so far from it. But if I think back to what Robert Hill did for me and means to me, I can summon it up.

JP

Well, that's awesome. So Aaron, I don't know you, I imagine you're that kind of teacher, but Sean, I know, and I can guarantee he is because, you know, he comes to visit me at Brandeis and people walk up to him who've seen him lecture at his university who just want to say, so, so

yeah, I love the idea of the person who's pushy and also conversant, you know, being able to be in conversation about things that matter to you when you're young. So that's great. Thank you.

AG

Charismatic and passionate and a deeply, deeply humane, good guy, just a good dude who was as smart as anyone I've ever met, as smart as the people who taught me when I was in my doctoral program, you know, or smarter. But he had toured around the country with a band for 20 years and was 50 years old. He had a PhD from the University of Tulsa. So he's like, I'll just go teach Comp somewhere. And thank God for him. Thank God.

JP

Yeah. Great story. Well, so Aaron, Sean, I just want to conclude by thanking you both so much for this. Oh my gosh. It's a complete pleasure. A complete pleasure. I really enjoyed it.

SM

Thank you so much for being here, Aaron.

AG

And thank you guys.

SM

Glad you met Robert Hill.

JP

I just want to wrap things up. If you guys don't mind. I just want to quickly thank the Society for Novel Studies and the Ric Edelman College of Communication, Humanities & Social Sciences at Rowan University for sponsoring the podcast and acknowledge support from our partner *Public Books*. As you know, if you listen, Beck Daly is our amazing production intern. Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. So please subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. Novelists from past seasons include Chang-rae Lee, Orhan Pamuk, Helen Garner, Sigrid Nunez, Caryl Phillips, and lots more. And more conversations coming your way this season. So from all of us, thank you so much for listening.