

Neil

Okay, I just pressed record. Hi, Steve.

Steve

Hi. How are you?

Neil

I'm great. It's a treat and a pleasure and an honor to be talking to my favorite novelist in the world. I, I was in a bookstore in Toronto where you briefly lived down on Queen Street called Type Bookstore in 2013. I was about to go on my honeymoon, and I knew it had to be a good one. It's the honeymoon had to be honeymoon worthy. The, uh, book seller, who I remember her name still, cuz she was so thoughtful about this project, to find me a book for my honeymoon Kana. She spent probably two hours with me picking 25 to 30 novels off the shelves. Thoughtfully. I read the first five pages of each, and the first five pages of A Fraction of the Whole were just like, nothing I'd ever read. Torrid, blistering, uh, hilarious. I, I I this, so you accompanied me and my wife <laugh> for three weeks through Southeast Asia. And it is, it, it, this is still to this day my favorite novel. And thank you so much for the incredible three books.

Steve

No worries. And you, um, you made it through the honeymoon.

Neil

Yeah. <laugh>

Steve

Together?

Neil

Yeah. Imagine it was like, uh, yeah, we read the book that was into the book so much that we didn't, uh, yeah. We just spent time together. The honeymoon went great. She told me on the flight home she was pregnant. Um, and so now, today flash forward, we've got, we've got, uh, our son was born nine months to the day after our wedding.

Steve

Okay. So nine, nine years old.

Neil

Yeah. Yeah. Eight. He's eight and a half.

Steve

Eight and a half. Mm-hmm.

Neil

So, uh, you know, your sentences pulse. They crackle, they, there's something about the way you write sentences. I thought it might be fun to start, before we get into your three most formative book, Steve, to just for me to just play back to you some of my favorite sentences and for you to offer a reflection on them. If these are something that you think, or maybe it's a character and you disagree with it, if you could expand elucidate, you know, know, just open these up for us, if you don't mind.

Steve

Sure. I, I hope I remem I, I hope I remember the sentences that you picked out.

Neil

And I'm not even gonna tell you which, which of your books they're from because they're, they're mixed up. Um, first quote, when you have poor intuition, everything is counterintuitive.

Steve

Yeah. Well, look, that, I mean, that makes sense to me because we, we, you know, part of like the, I guess the hubris or arrogance is, you know, of that we have is we, you know, trust in yourself. Why should you trust in yourself? Um, you know, it's like, uh, trust your intuition, your instincts. The, the instincts that kind of have led me astray in the past. The instincts that tell me, oh yeah, why don't you eat half this tub of ice cream standing at the fridge? <laugh>

Neil

<laugh>.

Steve

Why should I, you know, why should I trust me of all people?

Neil

Well then how, how destabilizing is it though, to not be able to trust yourself? I mean, don't we? If we can't trust our own thoughts, then what?

Steve

Yeah, it's a hit miss. You just have to be, you know, you have to sort of just be as, you know, just keep a healthy skepticism, you know? And, and I guess it's sort of about cognitive biases and, you know, and, you know, just keeping your eye know what your blind spots are and, you know, anyway, that's, that's,

Neil

I like that. I like that it's about cognitive biases. How about this one? We are desperate to be diagnosed, but don't want to be classified.

Steve

Yeah, it's true. We want to be understood, but as soon as somebody labels us and you know, and puts a label on us, we would kind of, I guess, struggle against it. Um, yeah, I think it's wanting to be seen. It's, it's like someone who says, you know, I, I feel seen and I always think, well, you are seen, but maybe not in the way that you think you're seen <laugh>, um, <laugh>, you know, likes, like, when somebody tells

you their dream and you realize and you're like, do you realize you've just, you know, shown me something that I don't know if you've realized, you've shown me. Um, oh,

Neil

Oh interesting.

Steve

Yeah. Uh, yeah, I think, I think it's, I think it's that, I think it's the, the need to be seen, but also the, the feeling that, um, if we are really seen, we won't like the category that puts us in.

Neil

Ah-huh <affirmative>. Ah-huh <affirmative>. I can still relate to this cuz you know, in my kind of non-fiction world, we're often told to put, um, uh, uh, like self-evaluation tests on our website, like the Myers-Brigg example. You know, everybody wants to know what they are. E N T I , E N T J. But if you, soon as you try to group people into like a category, as you say, we, we rail against that, I don't wanna be known as shy, or I can, I can be whatever I want.

Steve

Exactly.

Neil

So you put your thumb on it, right? With that one Si quick sentence. Um, how about this one? This is a longer quote. No, the most insidious betrayals are done merely by leaving the life jacket hanging in your closet while you lie to yourself that it's probably not the drowning man's size.

Steve

Uh, yeah, I think, yeah. I mean, I guess the point of that is that most of the kind of evil that we do, or the most of the negative things we put out into the world is just indifference, is the fact is just not, you know, not helping people when we could. Um, it's, it's, yeah. And, and I think that's probably the worst thing we do every day is, you know, is not a, not an act, not a, not a negative act per se, but just the lack of a positive one.

Neil

Right. Right. Okay. I can't resist. Here's a few more. Uh, going to bed with a new woman is like having to learn a whole new operating system on the first day of work with the boss breathing down your neck.

Steve

Look, that one's just self-explanatory. <laugh>.

Neil

Thank you. Totally relate. Um, how about this one? Because humans deny their own mortality to such an extent, they become meaning machines. I can never be sure when something supernatural or religious in nature occurs that I did not manufacture my connection to it out of desperation to believe in my own specialness.

Steve

Yeah. Well, like the look that's at the very heart of my first book, you know, the about the fear of death and, you know, and, and the fact that we have this unconscious fear of death and it's that fear that makes us kind of a danger to ourselves and other people because it acts us, it makes us act in sort of crazy ways. And, um, yeah. And so in, you know, in the, in the book. Yeah. But if you have an awareness of that, I, I think that's what happens, um, when you, when you learn something about yourself and then you have an awareness of that knowledge, um, and then it could sort of keeps doubling up on itself. And, and you, you never know where it ends and where it begins and whether you can trust yourself or whether you can't. Um, and whether, if you believe that, you know, that, um, this fear of death sort of co makes us into these meaning machines that create meaning, then when you do experience meaning, you know, what is it, what does it mean?

Neil

That's true. Yeah. Uh, I, I'm not gonna go through them just for the sake of time, but I've got a whole other page of quotes that I've pulled out that I just love from your, your books. Greyhound Thin, uh, riddled with breasts. Uh, she moved like windblown leaves the future is some kind of newfangled yesterday. And one of my favorites that I've written, these are just what people know. I've written out the quotes cuz I just love them so much. A failed entrepreneur is a loser, whereas a failed artist is an artist no matter what.

Steve

Yeah. That's <laugh>.

Neil

Maybe you're talking about me and you both. I mean, I, I love, I like, I hold, I hold that one close as I come up on a, on a, on a book launch. I'm like, well, you know what, I'm an artist either way.

Steve

<laugh>. Yeah.

Neil

We'll go with that. Um, Steve, I have had a lot of fun spending time with you. Your words, your books, and now your three most formative books, one of which I read when we met at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto six years ago. Cuz you told me to read it. I wondered, I have them in front, front of me here. Do you have a, uh, an order that you preferred, um, to talk about them or is there the one that you read earlier in your life?

Steve

Yeah, the, probably the first one. I definitely, the first one I read was, um, A Hero of Our Time.

Neil

Okay.

Steve

Is that one

Neil

If it's okay with you. Yep. I just couldn't get a copy in in time. But I've gone through in detail online, but A Hero Of Our Time. I'm gonna let the listener feel like they're holding it in a bookstore. And then I'm gonna ask you to tell us about your relationship with him. A Hero Of Our Time by Mikhail Lermontov, if I said that right. L e r m o N t o v. Written and published in 1840 in Russian by Ilia Glazunov and Company, of course, many English editions and translations over the year, including the most pop popular one, which is the Penguin Classics. The one from 1966. Cover a dark, gray and black on the bottom band, dominated by a portrait of a young man with a somber expression with a small, neat mustache and what looks like full military garb. The author's name is in all caps in orange, and the title is in a neat cursive white across the bottom. Lermontov was born in Moscow in 1814, died in 1841 in Caucasus, the Russian Empire. He's a Russian romantic writer, poet, and painters sometimes called the poet of the Caucasus up there with Pushkin. What's this book about? Hmm. Well, basically it recounts the adventures of this military officer Pechorin during his travels in the Caucasus. Uh, and now that I've said that word three times, am I saying it right? Caucasus?

Steve

Yeah. Yeah. But I think the character, or in my mind the character's name, and maybe, I mean, yeah, I'm wrong, but I think it's Pechorin, but maybe it's not.

Neil

Pechorin. No, I'm, I'm sure I am sure I am wrong. Pechorin. So what happens is, there's abductions, there's duals, there's sexual intrigues. A hear over time looks backwards to the tales of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, so beloved by the Russian Society in the 1820s and thirties. And the protagonist Pechorin is an archetypal Russian anti-hero. Worth pausing on that word cause I know you indulge in anti heroism a lot. Um, this novel looks forward to make to, to the subsequent glories and passions of Russian literature that it helped make possible. Dewey Decimal heads can follow this under 891.733 for Russian fiction from 1800s. Steve, please tell us about your relationship with A Hero of Our Time by Mikhail Lermontov.

Steve

Yeah, I mean, I was thinking, cuz when I, you asked to pick three books and three books that were like, um, had an impact on, on my writing life. Um, yeah, so this is a really important book for me because, so when I finished university, I did a communications and arts communications degree at Newcastle, um, in Australia. And I had had a good time at university. Uh, but I, I, I felt when I'd finished, um, I I didn't really connect with the theoretical or like, you know, I made, I I made videos and I did some practical stuff at university. Um, I, I made it in video production. Um, I remember I didn't do a lot of the reading, uh, for some reason. Uh,

Neil

Is this, is this the, like late nineties timeframe?

Steve

Yeah, no, this is kind of early, mid, mid nineties. Let's, let's say mid- nineties. Um, yeah, I remember I did a co a course where the very first philosophy they assigned was, um, was like about phenomenology and Merleau Ponty and Derrida. And when you, when you've never read any philosophy no, like Aristotle or

Plato or even Bertrand Russell to suddenly go into like phenomenology, it just made no sense to me. Um, and I remember...

Neil

I don't even know what phenomenology is.

Steve

Don't worry about it, <laugh>, that, that's all I have to say. Um, but I remember finishing uni and then thinking, oh, I wish I'd done literature. I, you know, I wish I'd, and so I went, I remember one day I went, I guess this was sort of pre-Google because it's in, it's an insane thing to do now. I went to the University of Sydney, or the University of New South Wales, can't remember which one. And, and I went to the Russian Literature department, um, and I, and the head of the department, and I just kind of made the appointment with him and went in there and I said, look, I can't re-enroll in university, but I would love a reading list.

Steve

And, and I remember him, his attitude. I, I remember thinking, oh, he's probably gonna be thinking this is great, like someone just interested in his field. But he was, seemed very confused as to why I was there. But he did give me a reading list of the, of, you know, what he assigns the students who were studying Russian literature. And the first book on the list was Pushkin. And I remember looking at that and thinking, well, that's a poem. I'm not ready for that. Um, and the second book on the list was A Hero of Our Time, um, by Lermontov. And, um, that book I think is responsible for the way, for the structure of my novels, um, certainly for A Fraction of the Whole and Quicksand because it tells the way that it, it's about one, it's about one person, you know, it's a, it's a character study.

Steve

And, um, you know, in my novels there really are about a, about a, about a character, about a person. And it really opened up for me the way that you can, um, you know, explore a character in a kind of non-traditional, non-linear fashion. So in, in, uh, A Hero of Our Time, we have this nameless narrator who meets a man on the train, and this man's name is Maxim, um, Maxim Maximytch. And they're just kind of bored on the train. And so Maxim tells just to, tells a story about this guy that he used to know Pechorin. And he does, and he tells this little, first of all, it's a, he starts telling him about the type of person he was, and then he tells him this long story about the time and kidnapped a woman and made her fall in love with him. And then it's, it's, it's uh, it's kind of like a short story, like a little novella about, uh, about, um, Pechorin and this woman Bella.

Steve

And then, uh, they arrive at their destination on the train and the character Maxim actually meets Pechorin, who he hasn't seen in many years. And the narrator is witnessing this, and Maxim is so excited because they were very close and Pechorin just treats him rudely. And it's, it's a very upsetting scene. Um, and he gives Pechorin, gives him his diaries, and then sort of wanders off as if to die. Uh, and then the next chapter is Pechorin 's Diaries. And then we have another insight into, and it's this whole other long story, um, called Princess Mary. Uh, and that that is also is kind of like a novella, um, where you now we're right inside for Pechorin 's head. And, you know, he's this kind of, yeah, he, he is an anti-hero.

He's sort of bored and listless, and he goes to this kind of spa and he ends up duelling and manipulating, and he's just a really interesting character.

Steve

Um, and I can't quite remember, there's two other stories in the book where you see them from a, from other points of view, um, where you see Pechorin from other points of view, um, and in other situations. Um, and so the whole book is a portrait of this guy, but you've seen him from like five different angles, um, from the inside, from the outside, um, in relation to another character, which is an, which is a great way to, to, um, basically explore a character. Um, you see him as sort of as a friend and as a husband and, you know, as a lover. And, um, you see him at different stages of his life. Um, and it's a pretty slim novel. Um, not that I, I certainly never learned that, uh, you know, the, uh, the skill of writing slim novels, but, um,

Neil

<laugh>.

Steve

But yeah. And so, as you probably know, so my novels, you know, I, I do the same with my books in that, you know, there's sort of diary entries or, you know, a a or in A Fraction of a Whole. There's also sort of a failed, you know, an incomplete autobiography. Um, there's, you know, views from the other character. In Quicksand I use court transcripts and, um, yeah, all those, you know, police interviews I like using. Um, I learned from that book that, you know, there are many ways into a story. Um, and I think it's not only just that there are not other ways. I like having each of those ways be, um, complete in their own way. Like, like, so I mean, writing A Fraction of the Whole. And, um, Quicksand, I, I really was writing a series of, of short stories and novellas that are linked that, um, but are so enmeshed. It, it is, it is a novel, but, um mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But I do try to make each chapter and each section its own thing.

Neil

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Okay. I have lots of questions here. First of all, what compelled you to do this in the first place? The pursuing of a reading list of the Russians? Well, how did you navigate to even that, that point,

Steve

Um, Woody Allen?

Neil

Cause you, you have a, you have a eclectic taste in, in literature. Um, yeah. How did you come to that?

Steve

I would blame Woody Allen for that because, um, it, I mean, another formative book for me were Woody Allen's collections of prose pieces that he wrote for the New Yorker. There's a book, ah, the first one's called Without Feathers and Side Effects. And so I read those, I came across those, I think in uni, uh, while I was still at university. So when I was about 19. Um, and you know, you, you read them cuz they're funny and, but they are, you know, it, it's sort of, it takes a little while, but you realize, um, that

they are all parodies in some way of 19th century Russian and French literature and sort of mid-century kind of, or early to mid 20th century surrealism and existentialism. Um, and so, you know, there's sort of the letters that Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, but transposed as if they were dentists.

Steve

Um, there are, you know, there's kind of versions of Sartre. There's versions like a Nausea, but there's a lot of reference to Russian literature, um, which I read that probably in, in conjunction with watching, uh, Love and Death, his film, um, his film, which is all basically a, a parody of, of 19th century Russian literature. Um, right. And so I was kind of just drawn to understand what he was referencing. Um, I knew that he was referencing Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Um, I certainly had never, um, and, and then, I mean the, the, the third book on that list before you get to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy after, Lermantov was Gogol. And, uh, I don't know if you've ever read Nikolai Gogol, but like, it reads like Woody Allen. It's

Neil

The nose, right?

Steve

Yeah, The Nose. And

Neil

I think I read the, I think I read The Nose in the George Saunders book. A Swim in the Pond in in the Rain.

Steve

Okay. Well there was this other story, I'm not gonna get the names right, but it was, um, how Ivans someone quarreled with i with another Ivan, how these two Ivans quarreled. And it was such absurd humor. I had never realized that, you know, cuz I always thought classic literature has a serious, I just thought it was, it must be serious, but it's so silly and so funny. Um, yeah. And so basically was

Neil

The Nose, The Nose that should be said is about like literally a guy opening up a sandwich or slicing a loaf of bread and there's an actual nose in there trying to get rid of it. And then the police arrest him for littering and just goes on from there. It's a bizarre Yeah. Dream kind of thing.

Steve

And the nose is walking around, right. <laugh> <laugh>, I kinda, yeah, it's, uh, it's very strange. So yeah, no, so basically I think, you know, my kind of interest in Woody Allen and his pros basically put me onto it.

Neil

So you mentioned that you, you have written your books, wonderful books, you know, can't recommend them enough. So big part of this conversation is I want people to go out and read. Here Goes Nothing and Quicksand and A Fraction of the Whole, like, I, I like want more people to read your stuff, like get, you know, um, I know you've been nominated for the Man Booker and all, but it just seems to me that when I say, do you know the Steve Toltz book, most people just in general, the numbers of people in the world, they don't Right. They don't know anybody on average. So, but this is a me saying, please read

your stuff. So you, you say, okay, little, you know, you write lids, little novellas and you write things from different perspectives. But I'd love to just dive a little deeper into process, if you don't mind, Steve. How do you write your books? How do you write them? How do you write your books?

Steve

Well, I still write by hand. Um, so yeah, I, I basically fill notebooks, um, these kind of notebooks. Uh,

Neil

Okay. He's holding up a notebook for people that are on audio that looks like about a hundred page of blank blank paper?

Steve

Yeah. I mean lines paper. But, and then when I've, then I type it up and when I finish typing it up, I like put a line through it so I know that I've typed it up cuz um, yeah, it's quite funny that you can, you know, the, the, my I I write in such a way that when the worst has happened, like I lost one of my, I left one of the notebooks on a plane once, like a full notebook, which would've been, you know, a couple of months work of, of, of writing. Um, there's no getting it back. Can't, you know, just like I I you just have, I have no idea what I've written after I've written it, um, until that process of, um, of it being typed up. I mean now I, I save some time cuz it used to be very laborious to type up, uh, the notes. Um, but now there's like, dictation software is good enough voice recognition software that I can just read it out. Um, so that makes the process a bit faster.

Neil

So what, what happens before the notebook though? You don't just start writing and you're on page one of the book. Do you or do you?

Steve

Yeah, I mean, I'm like, you mean, what do you mean? Sorry.

Neil

So are you, uh, doing cue cards to map a a, a plot across a wall? Oh,

Steve

Oh No. Nothing like that. No, no. I am just <laugh>. Yeah, I kind of just do it in my mind. Like I have, like, sometimes I will, um, you know, I'll write a little, a little point by point beat sheet kind of thing of what I want, of what I think will happen. But I do just generally have an idea and, and start writing and, and,

Neil

And you, and do you know where the story is going? Or do you find out as you write?

Steve

I often know where the story is going. I never know how I'm gonna get there. So it's sort of like having an end point. Like I have a beginning point and an end point, but I have no idea what the journey is. Um, and so that is the process. Um, yeah, and I, it's

Neil

Interesting too. Yeah.

Steve

No, no, sorry. I was just gonna say, and, and what I, I will often write the beginning. Um, and the beginning will sometimes end up being the middle. So yeah, the beginnings, you know, I, like I used to say for when I was writing Quicksand, I think I spent three years on page one. Um, and all of those page ones are in the book at different, at different places. So there were like, I didn't know know whether, yeah. So I I, it wasn't a waste of time writing all those page ones cuz they're all in there somewhere. There's probably about 50 page ones in that book at different locations.

Neil

The, and the page one you ended up with, here's the first sentence of Quicksand for people down at the foamy shore shoreline where small tight waves explode against black rocks, a lifeguard with feet wedged in the wet and vaguely tangerine sand stands shirtless, like a magnificent sea Jesus

Steve

<laugh>.

Neil

So I'm in awe of, of your writing process and what comes out of it. Now, why are you clinging to handwritten here? There's gotta be, there's gotta be a reason for that.

Steve

Yeah. That's an important reason. Well, one, it's habit because when I started writing this book, I was living in Barcelona and I don't think I had a laptop. I, I think I just didn't have a computer at that stage. So that was probably, I might have, but, um, it certainly wasn't one that I could like carry around. And I, I, my other part of my process, which sounds insane, is that I write in two hour blocks mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but I need, I need those blocks to be in different locations, so mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I, you know, will write maybe two hours at a cafe, then two hours in a library, but two hours, you know, on a bench in a, in a, in a, at a beach or in, when I lived in Paris, I used to write in, in this, uh, in this cemetery in the cemetery of Mont Marmartre.

Steve

Um, yeah, I just like to move around. And, um, so in certainly in those years, like moving around with a notebook was just easier mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and then not only that, um, I, yeah, um, for me writing and thinking on the page, it's like, like I have like a visceral connection to the written word. The handwritten word. Um, and, um, that's sort of the way it comes out. Like, I can't, um, like I'm surprised by the sentences I'm writing. It's like there's an unconscious part of my, of my mind that is doing the writing. I'm directing it. But, um, I'm also my first reader because I'm like a split millisecond behind. Um, and so yeah, it's sort of my, it's like my hand is <laugh>, my hand is creating, and I'm kind of watching

Neil

George Saunders talks about that too. We had him as our guest in chapter 75 of this show. He did pick a Russian as well, A Chekhov.

Steve

Oh yeah.

Neil

Okay. Um, and, uh, he talks about, you know, releasing yourself to the subconscious as you write. And for someone like me who is not as good at that, what do you do to prime yourself or to get yourself into that mental or subconscious state? What, what are the ingredients or habits that allow for that to happen?

Steve

Um, well I think it's just, I mean, luckily, you know, it is, I do have just kind of, I think handwriting does. Um, yeah, I think, I think writing by hand does help that process because, um, or, or it does for me because, um, there is something about it. It feels like it's a very physical act, um, the act of writing. But for me, I only need to write, you know, to read, you know, like a lot of writers don't read while they write cuz they don't want to be influenced. But I actually welcome the influence. I feel that like, I'm on, in sort of a, you know, a feedback loop with writers and I, I can't read, I can't really write without having read because I get, I like to get excited by the art form. Um, and the, the downside of that is I can't read without wanting to write.

Steve

So in periods, uh, where I have other jobs and I just cannot find the time to write, I, I can't read anymore in those periods because if I read one, all it takes is reading one beautifully crafted sentence for me to like, have a very strong desire to pick up a pen and write. Hmm. Um, so yeah, so it, it's a, so that's basically what inspires me. I just, it takes literally one second. I just have to pick up any book that I love, read one sentence and I'm fired up to write. Um, and then, yeah, I guess, I guess getting into trying to get into a flow state that definitely kind of loosens up the subconscious in, into

Neil

How, how do you do that?

Steve

I just start to write the thing that I'm trying to write and then not, you know, I certainly don't worry if what I'm writing is absolute crap. Um, which, you know, like yeah. Which definitely I don't, um, I would say 10% of what I write ends up in the book. That's probably, I don't know. I mean, and, and I cut a lot out. Um, so, you know, I always have a file on my computer on my desktop called Junkyard. And so, which I, I will, you know, put all the chopped up bits that didn't make it in the book. And by every, by the end of each book, those, those documents are sort of 600 pages long.

Neil

Lots of more questions about writing and process, and we're gonna dive into some of them through another one of your formative books. Do you have a preference, uh, if we go to Cel Celine or John Fante next?

Steve

Um, not really. We'll go to go John Fante.

Neil

Okay. John Fante. This is the book that I read when you told me to read it six years ago. And I, um, think very, very fondly of this. So let me introduce it to our viewers and our listeners now. This book is Ask The Dust by John Fante, F A N T E, published in 1939 by Stackpole Sons. Um, I've gotta cover that. It's almost looks like a, a sepia tinged portrait of like an old Hollywood. There's like a white cinder building with a big palm tree in front of it. Ask the dust in black kind of impact font against a yellow ribbon, John Fante and a white impact font against a, a dark yellow ribbon underneath. It says, with an introduction by Charles Bukowski. And it also has in a red burst. Now a major motion picture. There is one blurb at the top of the cover.

Neil

It says either the work of John Fante is unknown to you, or it is unforgettable. He was not the kind of writer to leave room in between. At the back, at the top it says, Fante was my God by Charles Bukowski. Ask The Dust is a virtuoso performance by an influential, influential master of the 20th century American novel. It is the story of Arturo Bandini, a young writer in 1930s LA who falls hard for the elusive mocking unstable Camilla Camilla Lopez, a Mexican waitress struggling to survive. He perseveres until at last, his first novel is published. But the bright light of success is extinguished when Camilla has the nervous breakdown and disappears, dot dot dot and Bandini forever rejects the writer's life he fought so hard to maintain. John Fante began writing in 1929, published his first short story in 1932. Um, he died May 8th, 1983 at the age of 74. File this one under 8 1 3.52 for 20th century North American fiction. Steve, please tell us about your, your relationship with Ask the Dust by John Fante.

Steve

Yeah, this book is, yeah, one of my favorite books. And it's, yeah, it had a, a, a really big influence on me because I dunno, when I read it, I think I always like early twenties when I read this book. Maybe 23, 24. Um, and it seems to me that until I read this novel, I had never known that you could put poetry in prose. Like, I'd never read sentences like this. Like, there's, there's a very, there's like a, a little moment early on in the book where he describes Los Angeles as a sad flower in the sand. Um, and then there's another, you know, there are just a few sentences that's really like jolted me as a, as a, you know, just inner story. Um, and there's another bit where there's a woman and, you know, he says that like her mouth looks like it was dug out with raw fingernails and her old child's eyes swim in, in blood written like mad sonnets. Um, and this is pre Beats and I hadn't, you know, and I, I mean, I had read the Beats, so I guess I had had experienced that, but maybe I'd read them too young. Um,

Neil

When you say the Beats, you mean Charles Bukowski and, uh,

Steve

I mean, Kerouac, I hadn't written

Neil

Jack Kerouac On the Road and stuff like that

Steve

Exactly like that, which, which do have some of that in, but like, um,

Neil

Those are forties, fifties. And this was 1930s, right?

Steve

Yeah, exactly. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and so yeah, so the, the poetry of it certainly, um, struck me, but also I think the voice of the character was one, like I, um, other than maybe Catcher in the Rye, which again, I I read very young. Um, this book was the first book that just had a voice that just, I felt so captured by. Um, that yeah, it really influenced, I mean, we'll talk about Celine, but yeah. The, but um, I feel like the voice definitely influenced Jasper Dean in the, in, uh, the book. He's also, John Fante also wrote, yeah, John Frante also wrote, um, books, um, a number of other novels and short stories of when he was a of, of, of, um, about when he was a child. Um, and yeah. And also the other reason he was very influential is that, um, I know I was, when I read a, an author that I love, you know, I I want to know what they loved, I want to know how they became the writer that they were.

Steve

And, um, and Fante sent me both forward and back in time. So he sent me forward to Bukowski who, uh, as you said, wrote the, um, I mean the, the version I read was, was a Black Sparrow Press, um, oh, book version, which is, um, what, who Bukowski was published by. And they just, they don't, they don't make them anymore, that it still exists in a form. But the original, the way that the originals were printed was just, just, yeah, I don't know how to describe it, but it was, is a, is a very beautiful object. Um, and Bukowski did the forward for the book. Um, and so I'd never heard of Bukowski when I, um, had read John Fante. So I, and so that sent me forward to Bukowski, but it also sent me back, um, to someone who became, uh, who is probably, you know, in my top three authors, um, the Norwegian, uh, author, Knut Hamsun. Um

Neil

Is this the author of Pornograph?

Steve

No that's all right. That's, Gombrowicz. He's a poll, um, a Polish writer, uh, Knut Hamsun. He's from Norway. He, he, especially his first three books, um, miss, um, Hunger, Pan and Mysteries, um, in fact, there is a line, there's a, there's a line in Pan, which has the phrase Ask the Dust in it. Mm-hmm. And that's, that's where Fante got the title, um, of his book. He was so influenced. Um, and again, it's this, I mean, Hamsun was a, was I guess a contemporary of Dostoevsky. So they were writing more or less at the same time. Um, and, um, Hamsun has a, um, has a way of writing that is very much about the war that could of the warring selves, um, in, in a mine, but it's also kind of pantheistic in terms of his kind of love of nature.

Steve

Um, and yeah, he's just one of my favorite writers. I, I, I love him so much. And, and, and so yeah, so I got that from, from Fante. Um, and, you know, mysteries was one of Henry Miller's favorite novel, so, you know, it it becomes like a bit of a family tree. Yeah. Um, you know, and Henry Miller, you know, goes, connects to Celine and, and sort of, so, you know, um, yeah, that's how all these writers relate to each other. So that was another Fante kind of gift to me was, Knut Hamsun. I mean, Hamson ultimately, like Celine fell out of, you know, had a, had a fall from grace because he won the Nobel Prize for

literature. Um, and then he gave that Nobel Prize to Herman Goerring as a gi as a birthday gift, uh, because he was sympathetic to the Nazis. Um, and so he became a disgrace in his own country. Um, and they, you know, the, the, the Norwegians sort of didn't know what to do with him because he is their greatest writer. Um, but yeah, he, he was an old man.

Neil

He got canceled. He got, he got canceled early.

Steve

He got canceled, and they sort of, I think they ended up putting him in an, an insane asylum, uh, for a little while. And lately they've rehabilitated him. Um, but yeah, I would recommend those three books very much. Yeah. Hunger, Mysteries and Pan.

Neil

And the first phrase I think you mentioned with Ask the Dust's voice, right? It was the voice. It was the voice. How do you define voice? How does an author develop or discover their voice?

Steve

Yeah, that's a, that's a really hard one actually. I, I, I feel, I mean, it's sort of, I define it by the way that the character sort of thinks, you know, articulates themselves on the page. And, um, I, I would, I would define it, I guess also practically by, if you put this character in a scene, you know how that character responds, you know, uniquely as opposed to how any other character would, would respond. You, you should be able to pick up at your character and put them anywhere, uh, in, in any situation, and be able to write that from their unique and particular point of view. Um, and it's also like, you know, how they would philosophically interact with the world, what they would, what, how they would react, what they would think of whatever is happening. Um, yeah, I mean, how a writer develops voice, I have no idea.

Steve

Like, I, I just, I I, I couldn't give, you know, any advice as to that because, um, you know, it's usually, uh, voice is usually an alter ego of a character, like, you know, Arturo Bandini, the char, you know, is John Fante's alter ego. And, and he, and there's a quartet of books, uh, featuring Bandini, uh, Wait Until Spring Bandini, which was the first one, Ask The Dust as the second, actually, there was another one called The Road to Los Angeles, which I think was, had been written first, but published third. And then later in his life, he had some bad luck. Uh, John Fante, uh, you know, he had diabetes and went blind. That's, that's also, but also he, his, he had bad luck with his book because his book had poor sales. And I don't know if this is true, um, but it was sort of published in Germany. And, um, his publisher was sued by Hitler. I, you know, at the time. And, uh, yeah, it was, there was a long, there was some something, something to do with Hitler and, and, and, and Mein Kampf. And like, there was a, there was, there was a whole controversy that, um, that set Bandini, you know, Fante's publisher out of business. Um, that might be an apocryphal story, which I can't quite remember.

Neil

No, it's okay. And Bandini wanted to be a writer, right? In the book, you know, his debut novel comes out. Um, you wanted to be a writer. You did it through many jobs in many cities. I, I think I have a note here from, um, you know, your, your Wikipedia profile, which of course is, you know, you gotta always take the grain of salt, but I had it written down every, where is it here? Prior to his literary, literary

career, Steve Toltz lived in Montreal, Vancouver, New York City, Barcelona, and Paris. Various working as a cameraman, telemarketer, security guard, private investigator, English teacher, and screenwriter. So I'm assuming, is that right? I'm I getting that correct first of all?

Steve

Yeah, yeah. That's, that's correct.

Neil

Yeah. So, and then your debut novel comes out *A Fraction of the Whole*, it's shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. You can't think of a bigger prize, really, I guess, I guess the Pulitzer you mentioned, you know, um, *Wall Street Journal* says, this is a riotously funny first novel by Australian Steve Toltz. It's harder to ignore than a crate of puppies, twice as playful and just about as messy. So my question is, in this story, the main guy published the debut novel. So did you, you did so in your early thirties, if I have it right? Yeah. And I think you're famous for saying you took no other writing input leading up to that you didn't, you didn't commit, you didn't have a writer friend, you didn't hang up in a writer pub. You, you didn't have writing classes. Right. So, and then this thing comes out and it's a huge hit. You didn't get sued by Hitler, but you know, you got pretty public here. So talk to me about how you keep your head kind of before and after. And when I say before, I mean the sounds like at least a decade where you're alone. Yeah. With this document that you don't know if it's anything. And then after where you're kind of buried under heaps of praise.

Steve

Yeah. I mean, the before part, um, yeah, I remember I'd been writing for about a year before I was like, I felt confident, um, in what, in what I had. Um, yeah, it's true. It's a weird thing to write such a big book without showing anyone a single page <laugh>. And it's true that I'd ne, you know, I just never met a writer. I didn't do In Australia, we don't really have MFAs, which is a big part of the kind of North American writing kind of landscape. Um, we might now, but not when I was doing, when I was coming up. Um, so I'd never met a writer, so I'd never, yeah. Um, got into that bid. I'd never hopped anything or didn't write short stories, you know, you know, or I just wasn't in any literary community.

Neil

Your peers were, were security guards, private investigators, telemarketers.

Steve

Exactly. There you go. <laugh>. Um, and living in different countries. So, um, yeah. And so, but when the book comes out, you know, you're sort of, it doesn't affect, it's, yeah, that's always a question. I feel like that's a little bit in the minds of other people more than it is in reality. Um, a and perhaps it is, it is a, is a component of having lived so long, you know, to get to 30 without having succeeded in anything means you're kind of, you know, I'd also spent my twenties making short films and, and writing screenplays that went nowhere. So I was kind of like used to failure. Um, and so if you want to be, you know, if you want to become a novelist, you just sort of have to like be a loser for a while. And I, and so I was kind of quite used to that, um, position in life, <laugh>. Uh, so, but having,

Neil

What do you mean by that? I have to be a loser for a while?

Steve

Well,

Neil

You mean because you have to just deal with the constant daily rejection of it. Nothing you're making succeeding in any way for so long, is that what you're talking about?

Steve

Yeah. And you know, nothing, you know, I didn't have a backup career, so I was doing all those things. Like, I was like, I mean, telemarketing is a job that you do when you have no skills. And you know, like you turn up in a city and you know, you can answer an ad and become a telemarketer, you know, you're answering phones or you're, you know, you're calling up cold calling people out of the phone book in like dingy offices. Um, I was also, I don't know if it's there in that list that you're at, I can't remember, but I was also a TV extra for a, for a long time, which is a job. It's

Neil

Not in the list.

Steve

Well, that's a job where all you need, your only qualifications are in like a human face. That's,

Neil

Yeah exactly. Are you in a, in a body?

Steve

Yeah. That's all you need. And you know, they're affectionately known as, you know, warm props, um, in the TV film business. So, you know, so the, doing those kind of jobs and then writing a novel, which takes years and no one's ever seen. And what are you doing? I, I'm just kind of writing something and I don't know, I guess having lived for a decade, having to sustain myself with my own self-belief in my writing, in my ability. And of course you have to be wrong for a while before you're right, because, well, you have, you are, you're, it takes a while for talent to catch up with ambition. Cause you know, cuz of the, I guess that, you know, that 10,000 hours thing is more or less right. Um, so, you know, you have to say,

Neil

But that belief in your, but but that belief in yourself that you just mentioned for 10 years, you're working odd jobs in odd cities. Your telemarketers, your stand, you're a warm prop. And yet somehow there's some fire inside you that said, I'm onto something here like you, cuz I'm, I'm ta talking a little bit on behalf of the number of emails and letters I get from people saying, you know, the issue is that they quit. Right? You didn't quit.

Steve

Well that, yeah, that is the issue.

Neil

Then what, what prevented you from not quitting so long?

Steve

Oh, that's easy. Fear of the alternative. So quitting would mean, what would, what would that have meant for me? It would've meant taking another career of and, and doing another job full-time that I wasn't suited to, didn't like, didn't want to do. Um, and so this was something I knew I enjoyed and wanted to make my life doing, and I just had to make it work. And when I look back to the, the, you know, the, my early writings, they weren't, they weren't good. There's no way they were good. The first, at least first 10 years of writing wasn't, there wasn't anything good there. I mean, there, there are bits that ended up sort of persisting and I definitely, the odd sentence here or there or, um, but yeah, so not quitting is key. Cuz if I had, you know, if I had looked at the writing that I had when I was sort of 25, 26, 27 and gone, this isn't good enough, I'm not good enough, then that, that would've, that's where it would've ended. Um, but I had to push through until I became good enough, um, until the writing got better. And that, that, well

Neil

Well it's interesting, this fear of the alternative.

Steve

Yeah. And that then, I mean, that's

Neil

What about now? You're a successful writer now. The, now what's the alternative?

Steve

<laugh>? Well, I mean the, you still have to, yeah, I mean successful writer, but I still have to work, you know, and do other things. Cuz if I was a faster writer, you know, putting out one, I was thinking re yeah, I, when I was 16, I worked at, at McDonald's, that's not in there, uh, McDonald's, uh, you know, and I was making, you know, \$4 an hour I think at the time. And I remember being, I remember even six at 16 thinking \$4 an hour. That's shit. Um, but I knew I wouldn't, I'm 16 years old. I'm at the beginning of my work life. It's all gonna be uphill from here. Um, but then, you know, I became a novelist and you know, if you, the hourly, the, you know, being a novelist, the hourly wage of a novelist puts a sweatshop to shame really, because <laugh>, you know, you have to

Neil

<laugh>

Steve

Over seven years, you know,

Neil

The hourly wage of a novelist put the switch up to shame.

Steve

Yeah. So, you know, you continue. And I guess what I want, what I, yeah, to get back to your original question, the idea about, you know, what does it mean for the writer to have praise? Nothing. I mean, it's, it's, it's again, like better than the alternative is, is something that I feel like you can, can answer most questions or the other answer is compared to what it's sort of like you get praise compared to not having praise or your book did really well. Um, you know, that that must be stressful compared to it not doing well. That would be stressful too. Um, so it doesn't affect what you write next. It doesn't affect you in any way other than That's nice.

Neil

Well, that's amazing. There's, I I am massively affected by praise and criticism, <laugh> hugely. I'm, I'm in awe of the sense of self that you have that just tethers your own self-worth to, to what you think as opposed to what others think. That's not a place that I think a lot of people get to very easily. And maybe you just were like that, but that's I'm jealous of that.

Steve

Yeah, maybe I was. I mean, there's yes. Like it's, you know, it's getting praise or getting criticism. Yeah. They do sort of bounce off me. I mean, I mean the yes, the advantages, the criticism doesn't, you know, unless there's something I agree with, you know, um, there is a line in my new book, uh, Here Goes Nothing, which says, um, the character says, I never minded insults, because they're like, um, you know, they're, they're, they're, they're amusing. If they aren't true, and they're a free life lesson, if they are, um,

Neil

Yes, I underlined that quote.

Steve

Yeah and I do feel

Neil

Amusing if there aren't true and, and a, a free life lesson if they are.

Steve

Yeah. And I feel that way about criticism. Um, like nothing really bothers me about it. Other than sometimes, you know, you read a bad review and you go, well, the practical repercussions, it's like, oh, well that's gonna dissuade a few people from reading my book. I mean, that, that bums me out, you know, that. But it doesn't, you know, if I, but if I agree with some of the notes, I'm like, I'm also that's fair. I feel like whatever I am, whatever my, whatever heights I reach, I, I feel know, I feel like I'm a, I'm a, I'm a bit of a mess. So it's sort of, it's, you know, everything's a little bit flawed and I'm okay with that.

Neil

I feel like I'm a bit of a mess. What do you mean?

Steve

Well, I just mean as a, I feel like, um, yeah, my, my books are, you know, there's a there's a flaw in everything and I, and I'm, I'm okay with that. They're just sort of like, they're not, they're not little jewels of perfection. Yeah. They're, you know, like writing

Neil

A and they don't pretend to be

Steve

Yeah. I mean that, but that's, that's a, that's what happens. Um, I mean, I wish I had it off of hands. Bolaño has a good, I if you know, if you like the, um, Chilean writer Roberto Bolano?

Neil

No, I don't know. Oh, oh, I think I have, um, the Savage Detectives right behind me.

Steve

Yeah that's my favorite of his. I guess that's the first one that I read. Um, that was a really huge book for me. Um, yeah, he

Neil

He has a quote,

Steve

Yeah. He has a quote about, I, I, I'm not gonna remember it, but about, but it's about these kind of, you know, these big novels that when you, when you go after the big, the big novel, it, it's always gonna be a mess. There's no, there's no way that it's not.

Neil

Speaking of big novels that may or may not be a big mess. Let's transition now to Journey to the End of the Night by Celine published originally in French's, Voyage Au Bout de la Nuit first published like a lot of your favorite books are Steve, in 1932 in France. Translation, translated to English in 1952 by New Directions. There's lots of different covers. My cover is like this black cover with a cream colored scribble, pencil, crown drawing. Um, it says Celine across the top journal to the end of the night, down the left side. And it's like a, almost like a scribble skeleton with a, a horse's head and like an oil painting on the top. Louis Ferdinand Celine was a French novelist, polemicist, if I said that right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, which is, I think I looked it up like a professional arguer and a physician who lived from 1894 to 1961.

Neil

What is this book about? Louis Ferdinand Celine's revulsion and anger and what he considered the idiocy and hypocrisy of society explodes from nearly every page of this novel filled with slang, obscenities, and written in a raw colloquial language, Journey to the End of the Night, is a literary symphony of violence, cruelty, and obscene nihilism. The book shocked critics when it was first published in France book, quickly became a success with the reading public in Europe and later in America. This is a story of an improbable, yet convincingly described travels of the petite bourgeois and largely autobiographical anti-hero. There it is again, Bardimu from the trenches of World War I to the

African jungle to New York to a Ford assembly line in Detroit, and finally to a failed doctor in Paris. This book takes readers by the scruff and hurdles them to word the novels inevitable, sad conclusion. File this one under 8 43.91 for 20th century French literature. Steve, please tell us about your relationship with the big, messy novel, *Journey to the End of the Night* by Celine?

Steve

Yeah, this is one of those books I, in fact, a lot of books for me because I didn't study literature and writing and I was sort of just finding my own way. Um, it's crazy to me now how many sort of great and famous novels I discovered by just picking them off the bookshelf, uh, in a, in a bookstore, um, going, I've never heard of this. Um, I like the cover. Um, and this was one of those ones where I'm like, oh, what's this? I, you know, I never heard of him. And it really, this is the book. If I pick one book that I wish I'd have written, um, this would be this book. Um, it is, yeah, like it is one of the greatest novels of the 20th century. Um, again, it's a voice-driven novel. Um, without this book, it's hard to imagine Henry Miller or Bukowski or Kurt Vonnegut.

Steve

Um, he is, um, yeah, the, you know, I remember reading it and early on, I think there's, again, the poetry of it, it's, um, sort of struck me. Um, it is a picaresque novel, meaning that you just sort of, um, which my novels can be accused of is sort of like, it's just, it's one thing after another. Like, you know, the character.

Neil

What, did you say picaresque?

Steve

Yeah. Picaresque is a, just a, a term

Neil

Not picturesque?

Steve

No, not picturesque. Picaresque. Um

Neil

huh. How do you spell that?

Steve

It's, uh, P i c a r A S Q U E, I think picaresque.

Neil

Yeah, yeah, picaresque

Steve

It's a term that, that describes like a literary term that describes the type of novels. 19, there were some 19th century novels like that where it's just a character wandering and, and it's, it's sort of like a, it's a, it's a succession of in, of incidents.

Steve

So in, in, in this book, the character begins where he's sitting in a French cafe in Paris arguing with his friend about, um, how disgusting the French are. And you know, how, how, and, and then, uh, um, a I guess some soldiers walk by and on a whim, the main character just like says, well, I'm gonna join them, and then he follows them. Um, and then he just sort of walks with them into the barracks, and then they close the doors behind him, and then suddenly he's in World War I. Um, and then, you know, you have, he's fi then he's fighting in the French countryside, fighting the Germans. Um, and then he sort of comes back to Paris, um, gets on a boat to Africa, um, has a stint in Africa, um, then goes to New York, has a stint in New York, goes back to Paris, like it, and, you know, then, then he has this, yes, his time on the, in Detroit at the, at the Ford production line, goes back to Paris to become a doctor.

Steve

Um, and so it just follows the adventure of his adventures. And it's, um, yeah, his voice especially like it, you know, talk about influence in, certainly in my, in my novel, A Fraction of the Whole is hard to imagine that what, who Martin Dean would've become had I not read this book. Um, because

Neil

He's one of the best characters I've ever read. Martin Dean.

Steve

Thank you.

Neil

Um, it's an incredible character.

Steve

Um, yeah, I mean, there was a, certainly there's, I guess there's three parts to Martin Dean. There's the philosopher character, there's the, there's, um, yeah, there's the kind of the me element of him. And then there's the kind of, I guess the cynic character, the, the character that, that sees, um, through the, the hypo, the hypocrisy of everything around him. And, and that definitely is something that I was influenced from, from, from Celine.

Steve

Um, just the, the, I guess the muscular prose, the kind of explosive, you know, a lot of people find this book really depressing and nihilistic, but I find it funny and very, um, humanistic. Um, I think he's disgusted at, at, at kind of human nature, um, which people find really dark and pessimistic and awful and nihilistic. I see it as kind of this kind of desperation for, of kind of wanting there to be more beauty and, and seeing it when it is appreciating, when it's, when it is. Um, and he has this kind of love

Yeah. It's kind of a love or hate relationship with, with, with human nature. And he is a doctor, so he is, goes around helping people. Um, and there's another character in the book called Robinson, who he kind of meets at odd times through the story, um mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, and yeah, it's just a book that I lived with. Um, and I, you know, I would, yeah, I carried it with me when I couldn't carry the whole book cuz I had so many books. I just tore it and had a section of it. Um, oh,

Neil

It's funny. I've done that too. Yes. I remember I was finishing, uh, Freedom or The Corrections and I was going to on the Caribbean trip, and I used to cut the last a hundred pages cause I couldn't fit in my suitcase.

Steve

Yeah, I do that sometimes. It's, you know, it's fine. It's, it's just, I guess it's like acerbic poetic. Um, and I guess it's the first time that I, like, I believed this character existed so much, um, that it feels very raw and real, and yet it has crazy flights of imagination. Um, that, um, and it's the, and his descriptions are, um, yeah, just incredibly honest. Uh, yeah, his incredibly honest, psychologically acute, poetic, real, and yeah, they're just, um, he's just a writer that I, you know, tremendously admire and, and you know, again, a writer, you know, if, if you're one of those people who can't separate the artist and the art, he, um, also got taken down from being, uh, you know, I'm Jewish and, you know, and so it doesn't phase me, but he was taken down from being a virulent anti-Semite.

Steve

Um, he did write separately these kind of pamphlets, which were very anti-Jewish. Um, but luckily he manages to keep his anti-Semitism, whatever it was out of his art. So they're, they're, it's not evident in his books. He doesn't infuse the books with them, um, which is lucky. Um, but I mean, most ex, like, there's a Yeah, very excitingly. There was a, uh, so what happened to him was he was arrested and, um, everything was taken and sued and everything was taken away from him, including a manuscript that was only recently uncovered. And it was so, uh, uh, you know, a new book is about to come out from him in, from the period of him in his prime. So I think even after his second book was called Death on the Installment Plan.

Neil

Yeah. So he, he lived 1894 to 1961.

Steve

Right. So, um, there's a book from the thirties that is about to be translated. Um, and then, so it's very controversial in France because they do have, you know, again, like Hamsun like a mixed relationship. It's like, what do you do with this guy who is one of France's, probably the, probably the 20th century's greatest writer from France, but, you know, horrible anti-Semite. Uh, it doesn't phase me in the least as a, you know, because because I, I sincerely believe in the, in the rarity of this kind of thing, you know, people who are, who are influenced seem to believe that artists are interchangeable. It's like, well, you take this one out, we can, we can just celebrate another artist who isn't an anti-Semite. Like, there aren't that many <laugh>, you know, examples, you know, there aren't that many masterpieces. Um, and we can't afford to lose them, so we just have to sit with the fact that he might have been an unpleasant person.

Neil

Hmm. Yeah, it's interesting. I'm in, I'm into birding. I've gotten into birding during the pandemic as a lot of people have. And as you get into birding, you know, these names and figures kind of come up Autobon, and, and then as you get into them, you start looking them up, you know, a lot of 'em sound like terrible people and Yes. You know, uh, uh, and, and, and you, you get, you hit, you're hit with this feeling of, uh, do I follow the person's work, these beautiful paintings of birds that were so formative to the development of, uh, ornithology, or do I find out the per, I've always just aired on the side of Yeah, like, you, you, you follow the art, you know, not the person behind the art. And oftentimes you can't see it. And oftentimes the glimpse you can see is through some kind of crazy funhouse mirror. I know that the version of me that people might perceive from whatever on the internet isn't me. So, yeah. Yeah. I'm always just, just trying to give people the benefit of the doubt on whatever it is, you know, that they have. Plus, I, I do think this might be controversial, but I think everyone's got wild and crazy thoughts not to forgive somebody for, for at, you know, atrocious uh, uh, beliefs or whatever. But you know, who you're looking back a hundred years ago.

Steve

Exactly.

Neil

Yeah. You know? Yeah.

Steve

Yeah, it's this sort of sickness of presentism as well where, where people are judged by the, you know, by the standards of 20, you know, the standards of 2022 aren't even the same standards of 2017, you know?

Neil

Well, that's the thing

Steve

Let alone 1917,

Neil

I used words on this show, this podcast that started in 2018 that I listened to now, and I'm like, oh my gosh, I can't, I can't believe I said that, or I presumed a certain pro now, or whatever it was. Right. Yeah. Like, it's, you know, but you can't, you can't. Yeah. A presentism is a, it's a wonderful, wonderful word. Um, y so quickly, all three of your books are between 90 and 180 years old, and I think I've heard you at the Australian Writers Festival say you consciously don't read anything current. I don't know if that's true. You don't read anything new?

Steve

I don't read much current. I, I, it's not that I don't read anything current. I, um, but I don't read that. I, I, I, yeah, I basically, if you want, um, yeah, because yeah, I, I'm aware of how many books a person can read within their lifetime, you know, and it's a, it's a shockingly limited number compared to the number

of books that are out there. And so there's no reason if you, if you want, you can just leap from masterpiece to masterpiece because, um, you know, there's books have been so, so it just happens that, that those books, um, have been around for longer to more guarantee you, like, if, you know, 10 books come out, you know, out of, out of all the books that come out this year, you know, how many are likely to be masterpieces? Not many. Um, no. And so, but also, you know, I mean, I don't necessarily go back to the 19th century. I mean, you know, I, I'm not done with the 1970s yet, or mm-hmm. <affirmative> or the, you know, or the 19, you know mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So books from the 1970s, which still stand up, you know, I definitely don't just read classics, but, um, I definitely don't ex I don't experiment with, um, too much with, with what comes out, like, you know, this week.

Neil

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. I mean, that's one of the goals we have of this show is to, by talking to people who are alive and asking them what is most formative to them, hopefully to find books that kind of have stood the test of time and gone through history. David Mitchell in chapter 58 of the show said, if there's a book in print today that's over a hundred years old, it's for a very good reason.

Steve

Yeah, I totally agree with that.

Neil

Um, now you are living with your 10 year old son. Um, how do you raise a reader today?

Steve

Um, well, I'm also sort of try to, I guess the most important thing is that you make your child see reading as a pleasure. That has to be the pleasure principle has to be the number one. They have to love reading. And so it really doesn't matter. Like, I'm not trying to force classics on him because, um, I mean, I have done a little bit, you know, about, you know, but a classic in children's literature is, you know, Roald Dahl mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, yeah, you know, or CS Lewis or something like that. But, um, but I try to find books, which I think he will love. And I, yeah, I do kind of curate. I always have books in the cupboard for him that I'm, that I'm like, you know, I can't wait. I'm sort of waiting for him to like, get old enough to read Hitchhiker's Guide, which I think is about a year's time, um, which was a really big book for me. But, um, yeah, so,

Neil

Well, we don't often have Man Booker shortlisted novelists on the program who have 10 year old sons, and I've got little boys that are a little bit younger than yours. Can you give us a few, a little handful of the Steve Toltz curated children's literature special?

Steve

Sure. <laugh>, well, my son really loves funny books, so, um, he really loved, and, and the, these are books that you might know there in like North America, cuz I, I didn't hear them. Um, I hadn't heard of them. The guy who wrote the book Holes, which he really loved,

Neil

Louis Sacher, who's been on, who's been on our show.

Steve

Okay. So his sideways stories like, yeah, he really loved those books.

Neil

Um, Sideways Stories from Wayside School and the three Sequels. Yeah. Yeah. Those are wonderful.

Steve

Yeah. When he was younger, he liked this guy named Stephen Pastis, wrote these books. Timmy Failure, he likes those.

Neil

Um, Timmy Failure. Okay. Don't know those.

Steve

Yeah, they're, um, but they might be a bit younger, like for seven year olds. Um,

Neil

But there's no such thing as too young, too old.

Steve

That's true.

Neil

No book shame. No book guilt. I mean, these are books I'm gonna pick up <laugh>. Yeah. I mean, I mean, I lo I still love the Sideways Stories from Wayside School today at age 43.

Steve

One of my, they're fantastic.

Neil

Um, keep going. Keep I'd love, keep

Steve

Yeah. He just, I just got him a Holocaust novel by an Australian Jewish writer called Once

Neil

Once?

Steve

Yeah. And then every chapter starts with the word Once. And, um, yeah, he adored that. He, he cried in that book. It's the first time he is ever cried in a book. Um,

Neil

What's, do you know you don't know the author?

Steve

Yeah. Um, it's okay. Um, his name is Morris Gleitzman.

Neil

Okay, great. Australian books are wonderful to get because this is what, you know, somehow books still, you know, in general, uh, there's more Canadian books on the bookshelves and American where I shop, um, the Iron Man by Ted Hughes is one that's kind of, of this ilk that I throw in there for, for your son if you don't have it already.

Steve

No, don't have that one. Um, yeah, it's sort of hard now because we've moved from the US recently back to Australia, and all my 43 boxes of books are still on transit, you know, in transit on the ocean somewhere, uh, on their way here. Um, so I don't have the books to look at, um, to, to remember what, uh,

Neil

You must feel kind of, uh, like you've left part of yourself crawling across the Indian Ocean.

Steve

Yeah. It's, you know, it's always weird to start again and, um, oh, but I'll tell you this series for kids that had a really big impact on my son, it's this series of, they're like graphic motivational quotes that have been, um, it's called, it's a series called Zen Pencils.

Neil

Hmm. Z E N?

Steve

Yeah, Z E N e uh, yeah, Zen Pencils.

Neil

Zen pencils. Don't know it.

Steve

Um, have li like little speeches, um, you know, whether it's by Nelson Mandela or Gandhi or, um, you know, or artists from artists. And then they've been made into little comics. Um, my son kind of lived with that book for a year and I, I feel like, wow. I feel like it really seeped into him. <laugh>. Uh, so I would really recommend those books. I've like bought them for heaps of people as gifts. They're just fantastic. I, I think are anything, there are three of, there are three of them. There's Zen Pencils, a sequel to that, and then another book, which is just on the creative struggle. Um, yeah. I I love those. Yeah. For kids and adults.

Neil

Ans are you, are you doing anything consciously on, on screen time to, to encourage reading,

Steve

Um, on well,

Neil

Like, do you let him watch tv?

Steve

Oh, yeah. Um, I do let him watch tv. Um, I don't let him watch YouTube. That's the, uh, that's a thing. Obviously not from, you know, my childhood, but, um, I, well actually that's not true. There are, there are, there are historical channels that I let him watch on, uh, on YouTube, but, you know, I've, I know a lot of kids who are lost down this rabbit hole of YouTube and I, I think it's, yeah, there's the, there's a lot of shit in there. And also they get really used to watching things that last for like four to seven minutes. And I, I don't think that's, yeah, I don't think that's a healthy thing, but, you know. Yeah. I, I I'm a lover of story and, you know, there's a lot of, so TV is another, you know, another place where narrative lives and I'm fully on board with that.

Steve

Um, I have a ki I have a iPad with a Kindle app and I let him like read comics on Kindle. Um, cuz Kindle Unlimited has just access to like, loads of comics. Um, and you know, reading is reading and like, I remember when I was a kid, my parents encouraged me, you know, reading Peanuts or whatever was, um, Calvin and Hobbes was huge, you know, for me and for, for my son. Um, and so yeah, getting your child to become a reader, just like, as I said again, like whatever allows them to know that sitting down with a book or a comic or anything with, you know, something and, and reading as pleasure, then if they do that they'll have that their whole lives. Yeah. Um, and I think that for, boy, you have boys.

Neil

Yes.

Steve

So I think for boys in the same way that like, um, you know, Twitter and, you know, online, like, I feel like Twitter and a lot of on Facebook and reading articles that takes away from adults reading time. I think that video games is the thing that takes away from like, I don't think TV takes away from, from reading, but video games, they're, they're unli the unlimited nature of them, um, that takes away from, from reading mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So I think with boys you have to be kind of careful there.

Neil

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Uh, yeah. Well we're, we're trying our best. We have keeping books in every room. Well, we certainly close off the night with lots of books and we are, uh, you know, trying to let them see us read, you know, that's a thing. That's kind of a big one. But this is really helpful. And as we close off this conversation, Steve, discussing and unpacking and getting into your writing process and your own books through your three most formative books, um, I'd love to just close things off with a few fast money round questions if you have time for it?

Steve

Sure.

Neil

Uh, hard cover paperback audio or e?

Steve

Paperback. I don't like hard covers. Um, I don't really like, I do have books on my e-reader, um, you know, my kind of Kindle app, but that's a, a process of like, from, from moving around so much. I bought my favorite books so many times in so many different countries. I just, yeah, I keep them, um, digitally as well, but I prefer to read paperbacks.

Neil

Nice. Number two. When the 40, when the, the 43 boxes arrive, how do you organize your books on your bookshelf?

Steve

Well, I don't even have any bookshelves, so they're gonna be stacked up in, in on the floors. Uh, I, um, in this, in this new place for a while at least. Um, I don't really organize them, I just, yeah, it's just a, it's just a mess. I just try to keep them in neat stacks.

Neil

Nice. Um, is there anything you would, or what's one thing you would change about the publishing or book industry?

Steve

Anything I would change about the publishing or book industry? Well, the publishing industry is in love with debuts. Debuts. Like they just, you know, to the extent that second and third, fourth novels, you know, you, it's just, they just are interested in the bright new thing. Um, so yeah, I mean, if I could change that, I would, I would, um, encourage the industry that reviews and everything to just kind of stick with, with authors and, and, and not worry about whether it's an authors first.

Neil

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, why is that, by the way?

Steve

The shiny new thing? I don't know.

Neil

Yeah, yeah. Human nature. Yeah. I, I worked at Walmart for 10 years and there was a quote on the walls that said, newness is the lifeblood of retail.

Steve

Oh God. It's how depressing <laugh>

Neil

<laugh> because you feel the commercial. Yeah. Okay. What is your favorite bookstore living or dead?

Steve ([01:25:25](#)):

My favorite bookstore, gosh. Um, I mean, I really love the Shakespeare and Co Bookstore in Paris when I lived there. That was really, really a great one. Um, my favorite ones, you know, of course are those kind of big cavernous ones. There was one called Gould's Gould's Bookstore in Sydney. Um, I'm not even sure if it's still there in, um, which, which is in Glebe in Sydney, um, which is just, was a, was a complete mess. You just wander through the stacks. Um, but, but my other favorite, favorite ones are kind of small ones that are just so incredibly well curated. Um, there was one on Avenue A in New York, um, God, I can't remember what it was called, Mast Books, I think. Um, there's a bookstore in Los Angeles called Alias Books in Atwater Village, which every novel it feels like they really, they really made a conscious decision to not have anything other than, you know, a particular style of, of, of book. Um, and every, everything's just very well curated. So, so yeah. I like that in a bookstore.

Neil

Thank you. And to close off this wonderful conversation you've given us a lot to think about, to chew on, to reflect on, is there, and a lot of people listening to this, just so you know, three books is by and for book lovers, writers, makers, sellers, and librarians. Um, is there one final hard fought piece of advice or piece of wisdom that you would leave as a final breadcrumb for all the other aspiring writers listening to this right now?

Steve

Yeah, I think, yeah, ignore your contemporaries and just, just never stop reading. Never stop reading. And I mean, this is, we're in a bit of a, we're in a tricky age where, uh, you know, an addictive, an addictive force has been pressed upon us and we have to fight, you know, the, the, yeah. Deep focus is the coin of the realm, I would say. And that is the thing that is being lost and chipped away at. And you have to fight to get your focus back. And, um, so yeah, put your technology away in another room and read.

Neil

Deep focus is the coin of the realm. If you are with us, uh, in between an hour and a half and two hours deep into this conversation, you have it. So keep it shiny and keep nurturing it. Thank you Steve, so much for coming on three books. It's a real honor and pleasure. Thank you so much.

Steve

Thanks. It was really fun. Thanks.