

Miciah Pendarvis (Interviewer) (00:01)

OK, my first question—since your previous fiction and essays have all been short, what was the biggest challenge in writing a novel?

Steve Almond (00:14)

Well, this is the sixth novel I've written, but it's the first one that wasn't really terrible. And the reason is because two things, I think. The first is that in the past, I was super interested in having written a novel and not really as interested in the story I was writing about. So this time, I finally got way more interested in the characters and what they were dealing with than I did before. So that's the central thing that I feel like clicked for me. Also, with stories, the setup is a lot smaller. Like, OK, I need to build one ramp for one moment that matters for one character. If I bring that off well, then the story will be successful. Novels are insane. You're dealing with an ensemble cast of characters, and all of their fates have to intersect, and they have to be colliding with one another and escalating the stakes and tension and changing the trajectory of each person's particular fate. And that's very hard to balance it if you think about it like that. But if you think about it as like, oh, what's going to happen when Lorena talks with Miss Stalwart, then reveals the secret that she's been guarding, then it becomes less intimidating and more like, oh, I'm fascinated to find out what happens when these things explode into view. So I started to get there. I mean, there's just so much plot packed into this thing. I was much more interested in what was going to happen with the characters than, oh my God, I'm writing a novel. I've got to have this complicated architecture. It started to feel like, OK, I can do this because I've got to figure out how Lorena is going to get through this terrible situation. What's going to happen to her older brother who ends up getting arrested? What's going to happen with the mom? I started thinking about the fate of the characters rather than, I don't know what, like, the technical parts of writing a novel. And then before I knew it, it was like a whole grown-up novel that wasn't terrible. And then when I edited it, I could see like, OK, this is not great, but it has the possibility of getting much better in revision.

MP (02:38)

It's kind of like the content is the most important part, not necessarily the form that the content takes.

SA (02:52)

I wouldn't even say the content because that sounds weird in advertising, but what I would say is I was just very interested in the characters and very curious about them. It's more like, what's going to happen with this guy? What's going to happen with Lorena? What's going to happen with Martha Stalwart? What's going to happen with these people? And once you're interested in that, I'm not thinking, oh my God, how to write a novel. I'm thinking like, oh, what's going to happen? There's a much more basic curiosity.

MP (03:29)

The novel is set in Ronald Reagan-era California...

SA (3:34)

Before you were even born!

MP (3:35)

Before I was even born. But we're still dealing with the repercussions of that time. What position are you taking on that? What do you want readers to take from it? And also, how do you think that commentary on that time can be applied to the world that we're living in now?

SA (03:57)

Yeah, well, these are good questions, but this is a social novel, right? The social novel is interested in how big systems of power operate on individuals. So, Dickens was interested in the social novel. *Les Mis* is a social novel. Hugo's novels in the American tradition. It's people like Mark Twain, and Huckleberry Finn is a social novel. What you want to avoid is the author's points that he or she or they want to make. That's not really why you write a social novel. You write a social novel because you're interested in how power through all of human history has warped people's incentives and then you just want to examine it in a particular time period. Knowing that I'm writing about the Reagan era because I grew up then, because I remember it. I remember Reagan getting shot. I remember Nancy Reagan running around with her astrology belief system, like determining the presidential schedule. And that's easy to kind of flatten out into, like, a silly, crazy thing. But actually, the more I wrote—I was talking about being curious about characters—well Nancy Reagan is a point of view character in this novel. And while at the beginning I was like, how can I show what a crazy superstitious ditz this woman is? By the end of it, I was like, hey, Nancy Reagan loved her husband. She believed that he was destined to change the course of American history. She saw him get shot, or she didn't see it, but he gets shot three or four months into his term. And like any loving partner, she's traumatized by it. She's trying to figure out how am I going to keep my husband safe. And even though she does a lot of destructive things, for me, the joy of writing the novel was realizing Nancy Reagan has her own stake in the story. In the best social novels, you don't feel like there are victims and villains. You feel like everybody is acted upon by the system, and it creates these incentives for them to behave sometimes in ways that are destructive and sometimes they're redemptive, but it's bigger than them. And for me, part of the reason that I was interested in Reagan is I feel like that was the moment where what we think of as law and order politics was really important.

And so Reagan came to power in California by threatening to bust the heads of college students and communists and people who are protesting on college campuses. And after he got shot, he even more radically formed the idea, which a lot of people agree with (I don't) that there's people who are either born evil or they're not. It doesn't have to do with the social conditions that they grew up in. And a psychiatrist or a social worker isn't going to help matters. It's like they're just certain people who are dangerous. And then there are certain people who have to be protected from the dangerous people, and those people are rich people and white people, basically. And that's all coded language, but that's basically kind of how he believed the world worked. And if you can draw a line from that set of beliefs to officers of the state in our time, taking traumatized Central American families and tearing them apart because you somehow believe that they're criminals rather than people who are traumatized, who are trying to buy into the American dream. So it's very clear that I was trying to trace back a lot of these sort of white supremacist and clearly almost eugenic ideas or worldviews. But in the novel, I don't want it to be, like, rhetorical puppetry where I'm saying, see how evil Reagan was? I want the reader to realize that this is the way that systems of power have always operated, and they've become more obvious to us because now you see these 18-month-old, a two-year-old or three-year-old kid being taken away from his parent, his guardian because what? Because we've decided that they're an invading force or a danger or somehow that they're going to take jobs or somehow endanger Americans. And to me that mindset is

something that didn't just spring up overnight. We're just seeing a much more extreme version of it. I hope the novel isn't trying to make some grand point versus getting the reader to sort of sympathize with all the characters and realize that even the ones who are behaving destructively are telling themselves a story that justifies their behavior. Nobody's like I want to rip families apart at the border. An ICE agent has to buy into an idea that he or she is the last line of defense, and that a nation has to have laws and borders. Whatever the stories they end up telling themselves, nobody is the villain.

MP (09:27)

Conflicting ideology?

SA (09:29)

Yeah, but it's also that people want to view themselves as behaving in a noble way. People kind of attach the ideology in order to justify how you behave. Nobody says, yes, I just have all this sort of embedded racism. I am callous and cruel and therefore I'm going to carry out these draconian policies. Nobody said that. The Nazis didn't say that. They constructed a story that made their actions necessary. If you're in conflict with a friend of yours and you say something cruel or inconsiderate, you don't say, "Well, I'm the mean person." You say, I had to stand up for myself and I had to put that person in their place. Right? But I wrote the book, the first couple of hundred pages, and the 2016 election happened, and I kind of went off in another direction because I was distracted. When I came back to it in 2019, I could much more clearly see that I was writing about the present, even though it was set in '81. That Reagan speech that he gives about how there are people who are inherently evil and we have to protect society from them. That sounded to me exactly like the president saying, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts." It's the same mindset. Like, there are these inherently evil people and we have to use the powers of the state to protect the innocent, law abiding, rich white people. I also wanted to write about a time before the Internet and before screen addiction and the pervasive presence of these things.

MP (11:21)

And to avoid doing the awkward cell phone thing in stories, that's the worst. How do you convey a text message in a way that's not cliché, you know?

SA (11:31)

Well, there are certain stories that do it well, like I thought that story, "Cat Person."

MP (11:34)

Yes! In the New Yorker. That was fantastic.

SA (11:38)

So that was somebody who managed to convey that there is something very profound happening in communication, even if it's mediated by screens. There's like a whole real emotional content to it. But by

and large, I just remember people interacting in person without any screens around. And that actually makes scenes much more pleasurable. Lorena, my central character, can't just use GPS. She needs to go off and figure it out, use her industry, her curiosity or intellect to figure out how to solve problems that technology now can solve for her. Like that. And, well, that's not as much fun. That doesn't test my character. And the same thing is true of all these interactions. In this book, everybody's got all these secrets, and that's the charge of it. It's like they've got secrets they keep from each other, and they've also got these secrets that they kind of have admitted to themselves. And when they collide in person, they can't text one another or they can't ghost each other. They have to be face to face, and those secrets start coming out. That's what you want as a writer, for everybody to be in a lot of danger.

MP (12:57)

I'm going to switch gears and talk about a different one of your books.

SA (12:58)

OK.

MP (13:03)

I really like how you write about music and about sentimentality, because I think that they are inherently intertwined. In *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* you said, "It's about who you are when you listen to the music and who you wish to be and the way a particular song can bridge that gap, can make you feel the abrupt thrill of absolute faith." I have a string of questions about this. And I think kind of what you said about characters telling themselves their stories, I think that kind of can go into this. First, what musician or band first gave you this feeling? What was the first song, the first band that you remember being like, I want to remember how I am right now?

SA (13:57)

Well, I mean, probably what leaps to mind and I'm not sure if it's exactly responsive, but the story that is told is, when I was two, maybe younger than that, and I Want to Hold Your Hand came on stereo, I reached out and wanted to grab my mom's hand. Maybe that's language recognition happening, but that's a pretty profound thing for me to be like, yeah, okay, that song just put that idea in my head. But when I was a kid, vinyl was not like the cool, retro thing. It was the thing. I can remember this album that was very important to me. It's called *Songs in the Key of Life*. It's this double album by Stevie Wonder. It has "Sir Duke," and it has "I Wish," it has "Ebony Eyes," and it has "Village Ghetto Land." It's beautiful. And I just remember sitting with that record, playing it over and over, flipping the record, listening to it with the album in my lap, looking at the lyrics. That was a record that had some moments that were very joyful, but it was very sad. I remember listening to this song "Village Ghetto Land" and there's a description in it of a kid having to eat, I think, dog food. And I remember having this very intense feeling of like, oh, I'm actually quite lucky in my life. There are families that are in a lot more difficulty, who are worried about much more elemental stuff. Probably in a weird way, a little bit where this book, *All the Secrets of the World* came from, because the social novel is also interested in investigating people whose lives generally aren't written about because their concerns are so much more elemental. They're trying to get secure housing

and food and be able to pay the bills. And novels usually are about people who are trying to seek actualization or like, work out their relationship or deal with their messy family situations, which are also really important. And I don't want to pooh-pooh those subjects, but it's different than characters like in the book were undocumented. If they make a wrong move, they got a much slimmer margin for error. They can be deported if they have a bad outcome with the police officer. So, I think that feeling of sitting there with that album was a moment of realizing, wow, the world is a bigger and tougher place. And I've got my little pocket that I'm safely in. But I was pretty sobered by that. I remember listening to "Goat's Head Soup" and tripping out on that album, which has like, a goat floating in some soup. It has a bunch of beautiful, kind of sad, Rolling Stone songs. And I listened to the Beatles a ton. I remember listening to them and feeling like you feel when you're listening to music, which is like a temporary moment of euphoria to me. Anyway, that's what listening to music provides. Like, you suddenly are able to kind of connect the wires on your emotions so that you feel much more purely than you usually allow yourself. And sometimes, not often, but sometimes I'll have these moments of complete euphoria where, like, all my doubt and anxiety evaporates. I don't know if you have this experience, you've just listened to a particular song and you just are like, oh, OK, the bad stuff is still there. But also, this song is totally making me feel joy. Let me just be here for a while without ruining it, without thinking about some dark thought. So I remember feeling that a lot. I think that my family was sweet and basically good people, but not very emotionally communicative. And so, music was like a place where I could go to feel deeply without mouthing it up too much. I'm trying to think of other albums that I listen to. There's other stuff that was just terrible and cheesy.

MP (18:25)

Have you read that? There's a book called... Celine Dion is on the cover. It's Modern Philosophy. It's about love songs. Oh, my gosh. It's really interesting because it talks about how in music there was this wave of separation that happened. Like when alternative music started coming out, and there was this superiority feeling. But the book talks about how there's something you can find in Celine Dion and in love songs and how those meager lyrics allow you to sort of put yourself in and be in the moment and sort of almost paint your life onto them when you listen to them.

SA (19:04)

Right.

MP (19:05)

So you're welcome to talk about cheesy music.

SA (19:08)

Yeah, well, no, I mean, that's the thing. There is a certain school of thought. I was a music critic, and there was a certain feeling of like, just being snarky. Like being really snarky about music that's like poppy music, Celine Dion's an example. I kind of have fun poking fun at Toto, but also "Africa." Yeah. I love that record and the way it makes me feel. I love it and I totally respond to it. And I love how music kind of gets around the critic. The critic is always trying to be above the music, examining it, rather than just being in

the music. And most fans, most people who are just listening to music, that's what they want. They just want to be in the feeling of a song and they want to sing along. They don't give a shit that the words are cheesy, which in fact, they like that. And fuck you for looking down your nose at it. Now, I didn't realize that *Rock and Roll Can Save Your Life* was going to be reviewed by music critics. And this idea of like, hey, you're the problem. You snotty cynical critics. A lot of them weren't kind when they wrote about the book.

MP (20:29)

What was the worst review you got? I know you like talking about bad reviews. I read your email series responding to reviews about your book *Against Football*.

SA (20:38)

Yeah, I got some bad reviews. I think the worst review was a review in the New York Times that was basically written by a guy who really loved being a music critic and the feeling of, like, "I am the arbiter of what is good and what is cheesy." And I just wish that they found somebody who loves Celine Dion to do the review, you know what I mean? Somebody who's just like, "I get what this guy is saying." I don't think anybody was mean, like in a super cruel way. There's always people on Amazon or on Goodreads who sense that you have this or that political or moral agenda. And if they disagree with it, they'll be like, "This guy's a fucking communist asshole." I'm so used to that. It's almost a compliment. But the review in the Times was some music critic. And it was like, that's just not the guy I want reviewing my book. He's this guy who worships the band The Velvet Underground, right? And the Velvet Underground has wonderful songs, but they're kind of one of those bands that critics love and sort of exalt.

MP (21:59)

Like Big Star.

SA (22:00)

Yeah, you know, Pavement, I don't think Big Star. I think of them as having...

MP (22:06)

Oh, they're great. They're like the Byrds, kind of.

SA (22:07)

Yeah, they have like, big poppy melodies. You used the word sentimental, but sentimental makes it sound like the emotion is manipulative or false. And music, your emotional response to it is genuine, even if the lyrics are cheesy. Like, what's happening in your body physiologically is you're just responding to it in a very genuine way and nobody can really—I think this is what pisses off critics about that book—my point is, like, there's no use, even. There's no point to music criticism because all you're doing is shitting on somebody's joy. I wrote this snotty write-up of this Metallica song, and I remember my wife saying, "I love that song. I love that song. That song helped me get through a lot of rough times. And your poking fun at

how dopey and sophomore the lyrics are is just missing the point.” So I just took that out of the book. I was like, you’re right. Let me actually write about how important that song was to you, to make the point that critics are just coming at music in a way that’s totally unlike fans, just people who are loving music.

MP (23:23)

I don’t want to use the word “sentimentality,” because I think that you’re right. It is kind of manipulative. But do you think that the way that we listen to music and idealize the people that are singing it, the people who are writing it, the sweaty napkin from the person on stage, or the set list, do you think that when it comes to writing, did you ever have that moment with an author or feel that way about a text? Kind of like you wanted to live in that story forever? And what was that?

SA (24:06)

Well, I wrote a whole book about my favorite novel, which was not something that was going to make very much money. Like, oh, a nonfiction book about an obscure novel. What a great marketing plan.

MP (24:19)

What book was it?

SA (24:21)

It’s a book called *Stoner*. And my book is called *William Stoner and the Battle for the Inner Life*. So it’s this little book that I wrote about having read and reread the novel *Stoner* by John Williams, which is not about pot. It’s this quiet book about this college professor and, by external standards, his very small life, but in fact, what’s happening inside him, just like everyone, is huge and tumultuous. And it’s just making the point. And I always love this. It’s not really about the life that you’re leading. That’s not what matters. It might matter to an obituary writer. It might matter to your ego or to people’s regard for you if you ever were going to be quote, unquote famous. What really matters is, like, how much attention you pay to your life and how much attention an author pays to their characters. And this novel is basically every moment where this guy’s life changes in a really dramatic way, falls in love, realizes what he’s meant to do in life, betrays himself, gets into horrible conflicts. Every moment that really matters, there’s this exquisite attention paid, and it’s completely gripping. Like, the most gripping thing you’ve ever read.

My heart is racing. And I’ve read it over and over again. And like, your favorite novels or your favorite books, every time you read them, it’s a different book. It’s a different book because you’re different and your inner life is activated in a different way. So when I first read it, this book was about falling under the spell of literature. A few years later, when I read it, it was about what it’s like to get into conflicts and being fused. And then later it was about teaching and the holiness of teaching and trying to transmit your love for something to students. And then it was about marriage and how brutal and beautiful and just exhausting that is to try to be in a marriage. And then it was about being a parent, and then it was about death. Like every time I’ve read it, it’s about something else because I’m somebody else. But every time I want to go back in. You have a favorite book. I’m certain, right? What is it?

MP (26:46)

I love Donna Tartt. I love A Secret History. I could read that book again and again. I don't know. I love, gosh, that Brett Easton Ellis novel..

SA (27:04)

Less Than Zero?

MP (27:07)

The Laws of Attraction. I don't know. I feel like I seep in to the consciousness and the characters.

SA (27:17)

It's like you take a little vacation from your own stuff. It's activating stuff.

MP (27:21)

But it's like a neighbor, right? There's this idea. And I actually, I don't have this on my list of questions, but since we're talking, I was thinking about this, and it kind of goes into what you're saying about the riveting-ness of reading something and how you project yourself onto it, which has kind of been the theme of this conversation. But there's an idea that when you read fiction, it's kind of like when you're a kid and your dad scares you and you play like the scare game runs around the corner and you feel like almost invigorated by that, even though you know what's coming, in a way. Do you think that the experience of reading fiction or even prose, nonfiction, essays, memoirs, do you think that that experience is in a way you projecting yourself onto the character and feeling what's coming next? Or do you think it's something else? Do you think it's more complicated than that?

SA (28:14)

No, I think it is. Like you could compare it also to listening to a song and you're like, oh, I love this part. Here comes the chorus. And that's where people, I think, get confused by they think, "Oh, it's only interesting if it's happening for the first time or if it's a surprise, if you don't know what's coming." Bullshit. People *want* to know, like, I love reading Stoner and being like, "Oh here's the part where this is going to happen. Oh, here's the part where this next thing is going to happen." And it's the feeling of wanting to... It's just like you were describing, the kid knows that their dad's going to scare them and they're really excited for it. Kids will read the same book fucking a hundred times. Because for them, it's like getting on the same ride. This is the moment where my stomach is going to drop. This is the moment where I feel safe again and that's the pleasure of rereading. And good books have many layers so that you sort of experience different parts of the book more intensely. If you're a married person or you have kids, then you read Stoner differently after that experience. You aren't saying, "Oh, that's what it must be like." You're saying, "Shit, yeah, that is what it's like for me." Or, "I worry that it's going to be like that." So, I have the feeling that it's about trying to experience a particular thing and looking forward to it and being excited to get to that part of the novel or that part of the song. And this is contrary to what I think a lot of

people get hung up on, which is somehow that your job is to always be completely original and give the reader or the audience some experience they've never had. Nonsense. Like, look at your iTunes or Spotify. You'll listen to the same song a hundred times over a particular summer for the pleasure of getting to the part where it's the beautiful chorus or the bridge. It's so sad and makes you feel a certain way that you can't feel otherwise, but it's in there, like waiting, looking for a way out. So, I think it's very much about almost like ritual. People needing a way to feel certain things that are really hard to access. But they have these magical songs or texts or even forms of play like you're describing with the dad that give you that extra feeling that make you feel more alive than you normally do, where you're kind of keeping your feelings more muzzled because it's disruptive if you start feeling too much.

MP (31:08)

And do you think in writing, especially in writing your novel, because you were talking about how you were sort of chasing that curiosity you had about your characters. Do you think that in a way, it's sort of a similar thing, almost like in the process of writing, you're chasing that or trying to untangle something?

SA (31:29)

What you're hoping is that a character will do something that you weren't expecting. For me anyway, what I was hoping is: okay, I know this character wants something, but I also know that this character might not get it, and they're going to have to work for it. I don't know if they're going to get it or not.

MP (32:40)

So, you're hoping that a character will do something that you aren't expecting. And what does that look like? What does it look like when a character does something that you're not expecting?

SA (32:44)

Well, at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist kind of gets assigned to do the science fair project with a rich classmate, and goes to her house and is like, "Holy shit, look at this world." And her friend's father is a scientist. And he immediately recognizes that Lorena is really smart and that she's got a real good mind. And she's scientific. And he's driving her home, and she's already really excited because she knows that he sees that she's smart. And I think a lot of what people feel is that they want to be seen. They want to be recognized and seen. And there's a moment where he's dropping her off, and the door that she needs to get out of the car gets stuck. So, he reaches across to open it and his forearm brushes a little bit of skin on her belly. And there's this moment where something undeniably, like, libidinal and erotic and frightening and exciting happens. It's just like a second. Just a second. But I didn't know that was going to happen, and I didn't know that he was going to have that reaction. They don't end up... It's not like they suddenly get into a sexual relationship, but they're both aware of something very dangerous and disruptive that's just happened. And that latent energy hangs around. And then, because she's brave and because she really wants to spend time with him, they develop a relationship that's mostly about her intellect and her interest in scorpions. Because he's a scorpologist. So, they have that in common. He sees that she's really brave and she's really smart. So he shows her how the scorpions glow. They end up within the context of the family kind of visiting. It gives her that attention that makes her seen. But that

leads to all kinds of terrible outcomes that, again, I wasn't anticipating, but there's sort of like one secret being revealed, instigates further secrets. And that's how, for me, how the novel gets written is you just start chasing those. When I was writing novels in the past, I was always pushing and pushing the characters through the scenes, pushing the characters. And in this one, I was chasing to try to keep up. And I think that's because the characters start acting on their own a little bit more, and they have desires. You don't know exactly how they're going to get what they want to get. And that's very exciting.