

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading the lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. In 2009, honorary chairs are President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year, this free event held Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall in Washington, DC will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the book festival in person, you can still participate online. These podcast interviews and other materials are available through the National Book Festival Website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor of talking with the well-known author George Pelecanos. Mr. Pelecanos has written 15 crime novels set in the Washington, DC area. His work has been honored with the International Crime Novel of the Year award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize as well as several foreign writing awards. Mr. Pelecanos has additionally published award-winning essays in Esquire, The New York Times, The Washington Post, GQ and many other publications. He's also the Emmy-nominated screen writer for the critically acclaimed HBO dramatic series, "The Wire." Mr. Pelecanos, thank you so much for your time.

>> My pleasure.

>> Tell me a little bit, let's just start with the basics, I suppose. How did you decide to pursue a career in writing, and in particular, what about the crime genre, I guess, appeals to you?

>> Well, I had taken a course in crime fiction at the University of Maryland when I was a senior, I guess back in 1980. And I got turned onto books. I hadn't been much of a book reader. I was actually a film major at Maryland University. And I wanted to make movies. But I knew that that was kind of an unrealistic goal. So having been turned on to these books, I decided to shift and made it my goal to write a novel. And when I say to write a novel, I mean that literally. I only wanted to write one book. My intention was to do a lot of reading when I was in my 20's. And when I had the confidence to write this book and then see it published and move on to something else. It's completely -- you know, it was pie in the sky. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know anybody in the business. I'd never even met a writer before. But what happened was is that in the writing of that book, I actually discovered that I really loved the process of it. And even before that book was published, I had begun writing my second novel and I changed my -- I sort of changed my goal. I decided that's what I wanted to do. I wanted writing novels to be my life's work.

>> Hmm.

>> So that's how that came about.

>> Okay. And when you were starting out, did you have any role models? Or were there authors that were particularly inspirational to you?

>> Well, my role model was really my dad, I think, first and foremost because of his work ethic and just that he showed me, as a boy, when I went to work for him when I was 11 years old. He showed me implicitly

that this is what a man does. He gets up every day. He goes to work. He takes care of his family and he tries to enjoy what he does. And oddly enough, even though we do two very different things -- my dad had a diner downtown DC -- I feel like I'm doing the same thing. He would get up in the morning and turn the key on his business. And I, too, have a business that I run out of my house here. And, you know, I got that from him. To move to somebody who was more famous, somebody that was a big inspiration for me was the singer/songwriter Curtis Mayfield. And I would say the reason for that is because did something very courageous through his art. And he spoke out about things that he believed in.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And he talked about solutions in a non-violent and in a very spiritual way. And I admired that very much.

>> Hmm. You mentioned DC, and of course that's where your books are set, in and around the Capital. I read that for your research that you have done midnight ride-alongs with the police. Tell me a little bit about that. Did you experience anything a little bit off beat or unusual?

>> Well, when you're out there all night doing the midnight shift, you see a lot of different things. The city is -- the city's kind of beautiful at night in those hours. And a lot of it is, you know, you come across some real crime, but you also come across things like, you know, trying to point people in the right direction, how to get home. The majority of the calls are domestic disputes. And most of it involves alcohol. So you might start it with alcohol. And it's just a different kind of feel when you're out there at night. I've since done work with the homicide division which is a much different kind of experience. You're working during the day, you're -- very methodical. And the people who are involved in that work are much different than patrol officers. But I have contacts on both sides of the law. I will frequently meet with people who are on the other side. And then the people who are in the middle, the prosecutors, the public defenders. And I try to, in that way, form a complete world.

>> So, do you actually go to prisons?

>> Yes.

>> Oh, wow.

>> I do that. I work in the -- I actually work in prisons. I teach -- I don't want to say teach because I'm not a regular teacher, but I do go out and speak and try to talk about books and turn people onto books. And with the message being that, you know, as an author, I'm no more special than anybody else. You know, I came from a working class background. I did this thing. I became -- kind of willed myself to become a writer. And that my message is, to these people, whether I'm working in adult prisons or juvenile prisons, is always life is not short as you always hear it is. Life is long. And when you stumble and you fall down, you know, you can be a different person later on in your life. And that's really what I'm trying to impart.

>> Hmm. And I would imagine that a lot of these experiences must provide fodder for your books.

>> Yeah. I'm always working, put it that way.

>> Well, before I get too far, I have to ask you about your latest book, "The Way Home." Tell us a little bit about that if you could.

>> Um, that actually grew out of my work in the juvenile prisons. And I just started wondering -- because I had full access to these places. I would be in a kid's cell while he was in class, let's say. And it's just a 6 by 9 space. There's a cot, there's a steel commode sitting in the middle of the floor, a window that you can't even see out of made of plexi-glass that's so dirty there's no light that even comes in. And I started thinking what's it like for a kid to be in prison? And what's it like for his parents? And how do they -- specifically how does a father and son, having been torn apart by this experience, how do they find their way back to each other? And that was the premise for the book. And it grew out of my everyday work.

>> Mm-hmm. Now, one of the ongoing themes in your work is the importance of family as a backdrop. Why is that so central in your books?

>> Well, I believe in it personally. And also, in my work with young people, whether it's in the DC public schools or out, you know, in places of incarceration, the kids that I've seen that have found trouble, I would say almost 100 percent of them had some kind of deficiency at home in their family life. Most specifically usually there's not a father around. And people that don't put importance on that or want to ignore it are just plain wrong. A child needs both a mother and a father around to make him whole. That's my strong belief. And if it can't be a father, it can be somebody who takes the place of the father in terms of a mentor or a coach, Big Brothers and Sisters, people of that nature. And there's heroes like that all over the city. And I try to write about those kinds of people in my books as much as I do the bad people because they tell the true story.

>> Now, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about "The Wire," of course praised as one of the most gripping and real-to-life dramas ever during its run on HBO. Is there a major difference for you between writing for the book and writing for the screen? Do you find one easier than the other, or more challenging?

>> Well, I prefer writing novels because it's all on me, you know? Whether if you like it or you don't like it, the guy to blame or credit is the name on the cover. You have to automatically -- you go into a situation with a television show and you're working with a hundred people. And in the writer's room, there's five or six people, and they all have different personalities. And coming from a novel-writing background, which is a very solitary existence, all of a sudden you're required to be very social. That's one difference. The other thing is that the mechanics, of course, in a screenplay are different than a novel. And once it gets into the process, there's so many filters that it

goes through, whether it's re-writing or just the actors, the cinematographer or the editing, the crew, all these things that can change what you did make that a much different experience for a writer. However, I do have to say that one thing you hardly ever hear a writer say is that -- or admit -- is that all of those people can make your work better, too. You know, they aren't always -- what you hear is the negative. You know, they ruined my work, that kind of thing. They can also elevate it. I've written scenes that I thought were pretty flat, and then the actors made it something more special than it was on the page. And so you have to give credit there, too.

>> And you're also working on a new series for HBO that is set in post-Katrina New Orleans. Tell us a little bit about that, if you would.

>> Well, it's not a crime show, but it is also created by David Simon from "The Wire" and Eric Overmyer, the playwright. And it is about people who have, after the storm, are trying to rebuild their lives there. And it's about why New Orleans is a city that, to this day, is a city worth saving, a city that we, America, in many ways abandoned. And our argument is that this is a city that we need to help because the people are worth it. And the majority of -- I would say the thrust of the show is on musicians. People that stayed there, people that came back and tried to gut it out, make a living, you know, in the clubs and also the Mardi Gras Indians and all these people, restaurateurs, chefs, bartenders, all these folks that tried to make it work. And I think it's going to be pretty exciting.

>> Now, you're also a big music and movie fan I understand. How important are they in your writing process or in creating your characters in your plots?

>> Well, when I'm writing a book, I'm very conscious of the fact that it's a novel and that I want it to read like a novel. So you won't see a screenplay in novel form come out of me. However, when I'm sitting at the desk, I'm you know, I'm hearing music in my head. I'm cutting. I'm seeing the scenes running behind my eyes. And so the, you know, admittedly, the movies were a big influence on me. They gave me my sense of story and narrative drive. And I was very lucky to grow up in a time, I was a kid in the '60s, I was a teenager in the '70s. In my opinion, that was the greatest period of American film. And I had a good education.

>> What kind of music and films do you like?

>> What kind of films do I like?

>> Yeah, generas or what kind of music, even?

>> Well, westerns are my favorite films to this day.

>> Hmm.

>> And music, I'm you know, a big fan of the funk and soul movement of the '70s. The punk rock movement and the hard rock of the '70s, also. And today carried on in that tradition, groups like Drive-By Truckers and you

know, some of the new Americana stuff that I like quite a bit like Richmond Fontaine and people like that. So, you know, pretty much all over the map. I listen to a lot of movie soundtracks to this day.

>> Now you mentioned earlier some of the speaking that you've done in prisons and elsewhere. Do you ever get approached by aspiring writers asking you for advice? And what kind of advice would you impart?

>> Two things, usually. I tell them to live a full life. You know, don't be in any hurry because this is the kind of career that -- it's not like being a movie star. You can be old and do this. And you don't have to be good-looking, either. So there's plenty of time. And it's very important to live a full life so that you have something to write about once you get down to it. You know, I didn't start writing until I was 31 years old. And I had already lived a very full life. And to this day I'm still writing about that former life of mine. The second piece of advice I have, very important, is read a lot. You will never become a good writer unless you read voraciously because it can't be taught in a classroom, in my opinion. It has to come from reading. And that's how you -- that's how it sinks in. That's how you get your own style.

>> Mm-hmm. And are there any other projects on the horizon for you besides the ones we've already talked about?

>> Well, I'm trying to get a movie version of "Shoedog," an old novel of mine off the ground. We hired the legendary director Walter Hill who's one of my favorites from my youth. And we're getting close on that. And then I worked for quite a while on a series called "The Pacific," which is, in a way it's the sequel to "Band of Brothers." It's produced by Mr. Spielberg and Mr. Hanks. It's the sequel to behind "Band of Brothers." And I got on that as an homage to my dad who was a marine and who fought in the Pacific in World War 2. And that comes on HBO next year, 2010.

>> Well, I'm looking forward to that. And we're certainly excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. George Pelecanos, thanks so much for your time.

>> I appreciate it.

>> And the National Book Festival is Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. It is free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.