



Library podcast

Marlon James discusses 'Black Leopard, Red Wolf'

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[00:00:36] Hi everybody. Nice to see you. I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library. And as we begin this evening I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that we're gathered on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to this evening's event with Marlon James presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company and Northwest African-American museum. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we're grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Tonight's program will be a talk by Marlon James followed by Audience Q&A. Now without further ado I am delighted to introduce Stacie Ford Bonnelle from our partner organization North has African-American museum. Stacie is going to talk a little bit about the museum and their wonderful work.

[00:01:31] So let's give her a round of applause.

[00:01:38] Thank you Sasha. Isn't it great to be out of the house. Oh my God. So my name is Stacie Ford Bonnelle. Now I'm the visitor services manager at the Northwest African-American museum. We're so proud to be in partnership with Seattle Public Library and Elliott Bay Books tonight.

[00:02:00] I went to personally invite you to visit NAAM. NAAM promotes the art history and culture of black folks in the northwest. So right now you can come to the museum and learn about the early beginnings of Seattle's most famous native son Jimi Hendrix.

[00:02:18] In our exhibit ball is love So it's a history about his family his life before he became the Jimi Hendrix and then you can explore you know utopian blackness with the visual dynamism of Kent. Born and raised Jeremy bell so there's lots to see and do. But really thank you so much. And just to let you know and just remember that February is Black History Month. But every month is Black History Month. So please come and visit Nam this month and every other month.

[00:02:54] Thank you. And here's Rick they thank you states.

[00:03:02] Stacey's thank you special. My name is not stick. If I was doing the Estes here on behalf of everyone at L.A. Bay I'm delighted also be here tonight. We are delighted to have Marlin James here and Stacy's coming up getting out the house. There is certainly some exchange of information you know e-mails about the weather and things and somewhere in there was that if one person was to be fazed by the sale whether it's Marlin James who though he is from Jamaica has been living and teaching for many years in Minnesota. So the snow isn't quite the thing hit to him but he's you know just us but things have eased that way and we are delighted to hit he's here tonight. The second week really going with this extraordinary new novel Black Leopard Red Wolf. It's a book that sets you off its assets. Anyone who off who reads it into this deeply immersive world I can. Their books you can read from with a certain distance as you read them. There's a you know the narrative whatever it is lets you sort of keep it keeps somewhat removed and you can put the book down and go about the other things. This book gets into you and it's written from deeply informed places I mean clearly he's done a lot of reading and a lot of work and probably. I'm not the one that knows about movies and other some of the other sources of this storytelling but there's so many things that pull you in. And in this story of a narrator by a central character name tracker and another central character named leopard who are central to this tale of a quest to find a boy and leads them to and through so much. And the reviews have come out trying to keep up with it all.

[00:04:56] It's got so much going on in it. And tonight will be a great pleasure to get to hear him read from it. Marlon James this is his fourth novel and even the arc of what's happened with his his work is telling his very first novel John Crow's Devil was a book that could not find a publisher literally. I mean do you think. I think his account is like 80 publishers turned it down. And what is one of the fine literary presses of Akashic in Brooklyn did take it on and Marlin and a friend of their own road trip that came to Seattle for that back a little more than a decade ago when that book came out. Since his second book The Book of Knight women he said he's been published by this publisher Riverhead for which he also came through with his 2014 novel A Brief History Of Seven Killings which would go on to win the 2015 Booker Prize. And tonight Black Leopard Red Wolf is the first book he's done since that and it's to say it's been anticipated is is an understatement. But what he's done in this book kind of exceeds even that you'll see as you read and begin and tonight get to hear him talk about it. And it is the first of a projected three books too so there's even more to look forward to. So Marlon will be up here to read and and talk and take questions. So we again for that Northwest African American museum for the Seattle Public Library Elliot Bay. Thank you all for being here tonight. And I'll ask you please join in welcoming one of the extraordinary writers at work today Marlon James.

[00:06:39] My first my first time to Seattle I was in. It was me and the writer novelist turned adult and cameraman what camera rented. And we actually drove of the West Coast my car and I think we got there. Got to Seattle in the night. I remember because we're listening to pavements Crooked Rain Crooked Rain not really well because it got stuck in a cassette deck. It was the only record

[00:07:04] We're listening to from L.A. straight to Vancouver.

[00:07:12] Thanks to the Northwest African American museum and thanks to Seattle Public Library and to Elliott Bay Books. I I never forgot Matt when I was on tour for brief history it was Monday night and it was raining and the audience was still packed and I realized rain is the U.S. noise to me. But still it was it was pretty it was pretty remarkable.

[00:07:34] Someone to read from this book and talk about us a little bit.

[00:07:40] I love Oh my. I was telling the audience today about how Riverhead is still very scared about big books.

[00:07:47] So they always do these things like this looks like a 300 page book when it's actually like six hundred and twenty pages.

[00:07:55] And this book you know this book again if you never heard it I heard this story before this book actually began out of a fight I had with a friend of mine and it was Merlin to those and tend to those in Nanak I remember and then announced the date announced a cast for the hobbit and I knew how this was going to go. I was going to argue about representation and inclusion. He was going to push back about political correctness. Going to be one big nasty fight that we'll both regret. And that's exactly what happened you guys and I can't believe this. The cast is so you know the cast is nothing but white guys and you know why are we having this discussion again it's 2010. And my friend's response was Well you know it's it's Lord of the Rings is based on British mythology and British history and sceptic myth and so on. And I said you know Lord of the Rings isn't real.

[00:08:57] And it's you can do what you want with it. If you words if the show if if the hobbit were to open and there was an Asian Hobbit nobody would have cared and then we get the argument kept going on and I say you know what. Keep your damn hobbit. Okay. So the words strung out and damn but I'm trying to behave myself tonight. I don't want people to get the idea that I do not like Lord Of The Rings because lotteries is such a huge influence. I actually had to run a spell check to make sure I didn't rip off too much of it. And there are lines there people are talking about they were too ambitious and it dug too deep. I make shit Helm's Deep. The only other person I think I copied more in this book was PJ Harvey.

[00:09:46] There are so many. PJ Harvey lurks in air of one where the character set is hard walking in a dress it's not easy. They all wear dress as PJ Harvey so I want to start read a few sections and talk about it a little bit. BEN No you know the basic the basic idea behind the story and the trilogy which is a slave trader hires a bunch of mercenaries to find a boy who's been missing for three years. And at the end the mission ends very badly and the boy is dead. Spoiler alert. It's the first line in the book. And the book is sort of a why done it. All three books will be way done it's it's. How did this happen. There are three witnesses and each witness testimony is a separate novel so as if Rashomon were three books and not only are the three characters telling the same story there is there won't be a book for where the author comes in and go what really happened was so the reader has so you read I have some work cut out for them for one the reader is going to have to decide which of these three books

is telling the truth because I'm not going to what I might sell. And so 20 years from now you know like Carly Simon selling the secret about who you're solving really is about.

[00:11:25] She auctioned it for like two million sounds about right anyway so this is how the book begins the child is dead.

[00:11:38] There is nothing left to know. I hear there is a queen in the South who kills the man who brings her bad news. So when I give word of the boy's death do I write my own death with it truth. Each lie is just as a crocodile eats the moon. And yet my witness is the same today as it will be tomorrow. No I did not kill him though I may have wanted him dead craved for it the way a glutton craves goat flesh.

[00:12:05] Oh to draw a bow and fire it through his black heart and watch it explode. Black blood and to watch his eyes for when they stop blinking when they look what stops seeing and to listen for His voice croaking and hear his chest heaving a death rattle saying look my wretched spirit leaves this most wretched of bodies and to smile at such tidings and dance at such a loss. Yes I glut out the conceit of it but no I did not kill him because you re in you Palmo.

[00:12:38] Not everything that I seeds should be spoken by the mouth this set is larger than the one before I smell the dried blood of executed men I hear their ghost still screaming your bread carries weevils and your water carries a piss of ten and two guards and the goat they fought for sport shall I give you a story I am just a man who some have called a wolf. The child is dead I know the old woman brings you different news.

[00:13:08] Call him murderer she says even though may only sorry that I did not kill her the red headed ones said the child's head was infested with devils if you believe in devils I believe in bad blood you look like a man who has never shed blood and yet blood sticks between your fingers a boy you circumcised a girl too small for your big look how that thrills you look at you I will give you a story it begins with a leopard and a witch Grand Inquisitor fetish priest no you will not call for the guards my moat might say too much before the club it shut regard yourself a man with two hundred clothes who delights in a patch of boy skin and the COO of a girl who should be no man's woman because that is what you seek is it not a doctor the thing that cannot be found in thirty sacks of gold or two hundred cows or two hundred wives something that you have lost.

[00:14:12] No it was taken from you that late you see it and you wanted not light from the sun or from the thunder got in the night sky but light with no blemish light in a boy who has no knowledge of woman a girl you bought for marriage not because you need a way for you have two hundred goes but away if you can tear open because you search for it in holes black holes wet holes underground holes for the light the vampires look for and you will have it you will dress it up in ceremony circumcision for the boy consummation for the girl and when they shed blood and spit and sperm and piss you leave it all on your skin to go to the Iroquois tree and use any hole you can find the child is dead and so is everyone I walk for days through swarms of flies in the blood swamp and skin slicing rocks and assault plains through day and night I walked as far so as Omar Aurora and did not care

men detained me as a beggar took me for a thief tortured me as a traitor and when news of the dead child reached your kingdom arrested me as a murderer did you know there were five men in my cell.

[00:15:25] Four nights ago a scarf around my neck belongs to the only man who left on two feet. He might even see from his right eye again. One day the other four make record as I have said it all men say night is a fool.

[00:15:41] It will not judge. But whatever comes it will not warn. The first came from my bed. I woke up to my own death rattle and it was a man crushing my throat shorter than an ogre but taller than a horse smelt like he butchered a goat grabbed me by the neck and hoisted me up in the air while the other men kept quiet. I tried to pull his fingers with a devil was in his grip kicking his chest was kicking Stone. He held me up passive admiring a precious jewel. I need him in the jaw so hard his teeth slices tongue. He dropped me in a charge for his balls like a bull.

[00:16:18] He fell and grabbed his knife razor sharp and cut his throat. The second grabbed from my arms but I was naked and slippery. The knife my knife and rammed it between his ribs and hurt his heart. Pop. The third man dance with his feet and face like a knight flay whistling like a mosquito made a fish that did then stuck two fingers out like a rabbit ears jabbed his left hand quick and pulled the whole thing out. He screamed watched him bawl on the floor searching for his eye I forgot the other two men the fat one behind me he swung I ducked he tripped he fell I jumped I grabbed the rock that was my pillow and bashed his head until his face smelled fleshy the last man was a boy he cried.

[00:17:04] He was too shaken to beg for his life I told him to be a man in his next life for his less than a worm in this one and flung the knife right between right into his neck his blood hit the floor before his knees and let the half blind man live because we need stores in order to live don't we priest inquisitor I don't know what to call you but these are not your man good then you have no debt song to sing to their widows you have come for a story and I am moved to talk so the gods of smile on both of us now move on stunned the silent funny enough is not the last reference to testicles tonight read another section. Here we go so tracker goes on this mission and he he is joined by a kind of nun Fellowship which I swear was not based on fellowship of the Rings founder of the ring rather Okies slightly and among the companions he ends up with is a ridiculously smart Buffalo whose name is Buffalo this is all the leopard's name is leopard.

[00:18:28] You can see I was very imaginative with these names. So this is the scene.

[00:18:35] This is kind of the scene where where tracker meets Buffalo who would go on to become one of his great companions in this journey and at this point they're in a city called Congo or which was based on a city that's still around called Jenny. And Jenny was really interesting Jenny goes back hundreds and hundreds of years and Jenny back in the medieval time was one of the rare cities in the world with plumbing just as though Benin City was one of those rare cities with with street lights Benin City of course is a fantastic city that the British burned to the ground and then took all the to call the treasures back to the British Museum.

[00:19:18] So you know what my favorite scene in Black Panther is am I take it all off your hands the big irony is that killing monger end up man who writes that a book so which I never get tired of saying kill monger about the book anyway flying outside my window was a flag off the Black Sparrow Hawk man returned to Congo or disturbed no one.

[00:19:43] My waking earn it and a sun caught nobody. So I went outside the flag flew two hundred maybe three hundred paces away at the top of a tower in a sent off the Nimba quarter flapping wild as if the wind was furious with it Black Sparrow Hawk seven wings mercenaries.

[00:20:01] The sun was hiding behind clouds fat with rain it was near the season so I went outside in the courtyard putting up the few shrubs from the dirt stood a buffalo male brown black body longer than one and a half of me lying flat.

[00:20:19] Chapter Twelve horns already fused into a crown and dipping downward to curve back up like a grand hairstyle. Except I have seen a buffalo kill three hunters and rip alone in two. So I give this buffalo wide space as I walk into that walk to the archway. He looked up and moved right to work right into my way. I remembered again I needed new hatchets. None at either hatchet or a knife could win against him. I did not smell urine. I was not stepping into his boundary. The buffalo did not snort and did not kick his hooves in the dirt but stared at me from my feet all the way up to my neck then dome then up then down then up and slowly annoying me Buffalo's cannot laugh but I would swear to the gods that he did one thing you should have seen before.

[00:21:10] Tracker has no clothes.

[00:21:12] He just ripped off this curtain and he's wearing our curtain and the buffalo realize he's wearing our curtain buffaloes cannot laugh.

[00:21:20] But I would swear to the gods that he did. Then he shook his head. More than a nod. A rough swing left then right then right and left again. I stepped aside and walked but he stepped it right in the way. I moved to the other side and so did he. He looked up and down again and again and I would swear I would again swear to the gods demons and river spirits that he laughed. He came in closer and step back once. If you wanted to kill me I would have been walking with ancestors already. He came closer. Hooked his horn in the curtain I wore and pulled it off making me spin on fall. I curse the buffalo but did not grab the curtain. Besides it was early morning. Who would see me. And if anyone did see me I could claim that I was robbed by bandits as I had been in a river ten paces past the hour. I looked back and saw the buffalo followed me here is truth. The buffalo was the greatest of companions in Conger or even as all women slept. So the only sin you observed in Congo or even all women slept late. So the only souls on a street were those who never slept. Pam when drunkards and a my Sukhumi or fools falling down more than they got up my eye jumped over to their side. Each time we passed one of them looking at them looking at a near naked man walking alongside a buffalo. Not the way some walked with dogs but whole men walked with men. A man flat on his back in the road turned source jumped up and ran right into a wall. The river had flooded the banks four

nights before we came and Conger was an island again for four moons. I mark my chest and legs with river clay and a buffalo lying in the grass and grazing knotted up and down. I paint I pointed around my left sorry I painted on my left day up to my here and dumped my cheekbone.

[00:23:15] Where are you from.

[00:23:16] Good Buffalo he turned his head west then pointed with his horns up and down west by the bookie river. He shook his head beyond in a savanna. Is there a good water to be to be had there. Buffalo. He shook his head. Is that why you roam. Or is there another reason. He nodded. Yes. Where you call up on bad at fucking which he shook his head. Where you call upon by sug Allen. He nodded. Yes.

[00:23:45] It's not one for rudeness when we were dead.

[00:23:49] He looked up and snorted but did I mean not dead. I mean when Sutherland was of the man we were dead. She must have phoned others are you one of her others. He nodded Yes and already you have sharp thoughts about how I should dress.

[00:24:04] I must say you are a particular Buffalo he went off into the bush his tail whipping flies. I heard a man's heavy footsteps through the grass 50 paces away and sat by the Baron's my feet in a river he moved closer.

[00:24:20] I pulled my dagger but did not turn to Rome. The cold irony of a blade touch my right shoulder.

[00:24:27] Nasty Boy. How are you to manage the things. He asked. Managing them fine. I said and mocking his tongue. Your loss. You look like his soul. That behold me look. Well partner. You're trotting Robin here at no robes on your person like him mad. Are you a boy lover or a father figure or what.

[00:24:48] I just wash in my foot in the river. So you're looking for the boy love quarter. Just washing my foot in the river for the boiler was squatted. That be it. We are no. Hold that Bradley. We has no boil of us cause our own here.

[00:25:05] You sure you're talking true cause last time I mean the boil over a squatter. My eyes peep your father and your grandfather he slapped a set of my head with his club. Get up he said. At least he wasn't about to slay me without a fight on his back. He strapped two axes shorter than me by almost the head but in a white bottom and black top of a seven wing my first thought was that ignores anger and ask why does seven things assemble since not even the ways Sutherland knows he. Then some said something to me in a thicker voice than before. That's what we're going to hear. Men like you. The wink this wink said What do you want me to send your head to by Faucher you're wrong. How am I wrong about me being the boy fucker. Most times is the boys who fuck me. Hark. But there is this one best in many a moon so tight. Believe you me at this stuff I can't come to ease that hole.

[00:26:05] Then I ate the corn meat chop off your bolo first. Then your head. Then throw the rest of you in the river. How you like that and when your parts flow down the river. People will say look look up on the boy forecast sugar rolling down in a river.

[00:26:21] Don't drink from the river lest you become a boy for car to shot me with those axes I've been looking for ironies failures as such forbear what Caddyshack blacksmith. Or did you steal them from a butcher's wife drop the knife. I looked at this man not taller than a boy. Confusing stoat with muscular and dashing shit on my quiet morning at drop the dagger in one in my hand and the one strapped to my leg. I would love to greet this son and bid it goodbye without killing a man. I said there are some people above the sand sea who have a feast every year where they leave us space empty for a ghost. A man who was once alive he laughed pointing a gun pointed the club at me with his left hand and pulling an axe with his right. Then he dropped the club and pulled out the left axe maybe me should be doing the killing for your mad tongue and not your perverse ways. He with his axes in front of me swinging and swirling them. But I did not move the mercenaries that forward just as a word of something hit the back of his neck onto a donkey. He said he swung around just as the Buffalo snorted again and nose juice hit the warrior in the face eye to eye with the buffalo he jumped but before he could swing an axe the buffalo scooped up the warrior with his horns and threw him off fire into the grass. One axe landed in the field the other came straight at me about bones staff. I curse the buffalo. It was some time before the Warriors Sato shook his head. Rose to his feet and staggered off and the buffalo rushed him again you took your time. I could have made bread.

[00:28:05] He tried it off and slapped me with his tail as he passed and laughed and picked up my new axes and I read a little bit more tracker tells the bulk of this of this story.

[00:28:18] But every now and then he talks he gives witness of what another person telling a story and what those characters is the witch saga lines.

[00:28:28] She is the moon witch and she's she stringent and 15 years old and she and a lot of ways.

[00:28:35] She plays a very very interesting role in this mission and this is a scene of one of her past life. When she was on a fortress called menthol and manifests of fortunes I kind of based on Tigre which is in Ethiopia. And these fortresses serve a certain purpose from afar you'd never tell that their fortresses they look like just the mountain and that's deliberate so that you'd never know there's a building there. So when you you're coming closely you see steps that you see windows and so on and a fortress like Tigre. There are parts of it where the only way you can get there is if by claiming straps. Let us stress that a throw down. So if you're not fit enough to climb the straps you're never gonna make it to that fortress. So but the other thing that these fortress is the purpose they serve was that if a person became king that's probably where Jesus and all their relatives. So that nobody can challenge him for the kingdom.

[00:29:30] So if I become king the first person I'm banishing to fortunes is my brother and my sister so month is a fortress of sort of reclusive and banished woman whatever no one can figure out how to to organize a conjugal visit. So this is one of them and Sutherland is telling the story.

[00:29:54] Let us make this quick the water got his seal and know all.

[00:30:01] I am a priest serving in a temporary worker D shoe when I go down to the steps that lead to the river and up jump Bunchy when she is what we call a mommy water or a river mama or hear a mermaid no fear come over me.

[00:30:18] The West Sea chef a fish deal blackjack pitch.

[00:30:22] She sent me two months with nothing but my leather dress one sandal and a mark from the whole set whack a d shoe. The princess Lisa's solo take to her room and play the kora at sunset and talk to no one in the divine sisterhood. No one have power or class or rank.

[00:30:40] So her royal blood don't mean nothing but all the sisters in need to be alone. Word was that she walked the lands at night under moonlight to whisper to the goddess of justice and girl children. How much she hates her after a year. As I walked to the secret halls to pour libations she pointed at me and say What is your use to bring into royal purpose meets Princess. Nothing about my purpose is Royal and I am no princess. She say two moons and she moved me to her side woman as equal but knowing she's a royal. Two Moons after that at telling her that the water goddess of greater purpose for her three moons more and she believed me after I saw someone do to lift me off the grown and above her head. No not believe me. She believed that something more bitter her life than a childless widow seeing prayers store goddess. She hates. No not belief. For she said belief will get people around her killed. I said to her. No man mysteries or a belief in love can do that. Accept it. Return it. Cherish it but never believe love can do anything other than love.

[00:31:55] The year didn't finish before Blanchette appeared to her in the last hot night of the year when nearly all the women one hundred and twenty and nine went to bathe in a waterfall with NIMS to tell her the truth about her lane and why she would be the one to restore it.

[00:32:11] We will send a man.

[00:32:12] It has all been arranged when she said look at my life all of it our own a whole ordered own art and arranged by men. No I must take that from woman came to you know nothing of sisterhood. You're just a pale echo of men. The true King would be a bastard. Did this water spread also fallen or ahead at birth.

[00:32:35] No you're most excellent. We have found a prince in calendar another one. They seem to be everywhere like lice. These Kingdom less princes of calendar a their prince make your chair legitimate.

[00:32:49] And when the true land of kings return he can claim before all large fuck all Lords all these kings call also come from the womb of woman. What is this that this man child from doing just as all of them man has done.

[00:33:03] Kill all men then rule them Princess rule them through him and leave this place. What if I like this place in see even a winds conspire against you. If it is your wish to stay then stay mistress. But as long as your brother is king plagues above the earth and below will visit even this place. No plague has visited so far. When is this pestilence taken place. Why not now. Maybe the gods give you time to prevent it. Your Excellence your tongue is too smooth. I do not fully trust it. Let me see this man at least he will come to you disguised as a eunuch. If he pleases you then we will find an elder who cares for our cause an elder. So we're doomed to be betrayed. Then she say no mysteries. I say I bring the prince from callin da. No man put down for ten months for one hundred years. But many eunuchs no other woman would ask the eunuch to lift his robes for the scar show horrendous nay the scars show horrendous knife graft. But at the grit and trends stand the big guard daughter from a land of the tallest woman in Assisi who grabbed the crotch and squeeze before I tell the springs this is what you do forget your great discomfort and do not betray your unease or they will kill you at the gate and not care that they kill a prince. Take your balls and feel for each. Then push them up out into the sack into your Bush take your Kong Kong and pull it hard between your legs until it touched near your bottom hole the Guard will feel your balls skin hanging on both sides of the King Kong and think you're a woman. She will not even look at your face the prince.

[00:34:57] Make it all the way to Alice's solo chamber before he remove veil and robe. Tall dark thick in hair brown eyes thick and dark in lips patterned scars of the brows and don't the both arms and many year younger than age all you know was that this is a crown princess and he will see title he will do.

[00:35:18] This is solo say I didn't think it was going that way did you.

[00:35:24] I did not have to find the elder seven moons and elder find me for Moon Gaurav finished the Ritz then sent a message on that are you a drum that only devote women could here for he play like a Devotional seeing he have words for the Princess and the tidings that may be good may be bad but will certainly be wise I ride horse seven days to meet him and tell him that his wish is prophecy it real what our son cannot be born a bastard we read back in another seven days me the elder Basil for my guru and a prince from calendar some of the sisters know some do not. Some no doubt whatever be taking place was of great importance others think new people come and violate the secret hymen of man though despite that for years upon years the fort was a place for men I asked some not to speak what was happening and I threatened others but as soon as that boy is born I know he not safe. The only place safe for him is them where do I tell the princess who will not lose a child again keep him here and you most soon certainly will lose him again for a sister done betray us I tell her and indeed it play True this sister she leave at night not to travel what would be ten and five these by foot but she go far enough to release a pigeon she said the pigeon free before our reach Ah but I get over it.

[00:36:58] She send them back to a mass there in Assisi then I slit her throat I go back and said to the princess no time Leave a message already on the way to court we take him to for good at night knowing would take it would take seven days and the princess leave with another set of wise woman loyal to the queen of the lingo the boys do it from one guru three months and live three moons and live like him own you know how to rest go stop there is about where you can clap if you want to applause you know researching and it's like a little bit and open up for questions one of the I went after the postscript to to may my fight over over the hobbit was that I went on a mission not to write what to read and uncovering all these African epics and all these stories which I didn't know some of which I've had an inkling about I mean I had grandparents who would tell us and then see stories but a lot is so when finding and as I felt no more so if I phone is the more the book almost started writing itself there were just so many interesting things simple things like African vampires like you know your western vampires or worse is like Dracula these

[00:38:28] African vampires aren't scared of daylight they have no problem going oh it's in blazing sun and killing yes. And you know it was this it's so interesting seeing how many homo absolutely different so much of this was in the West there are all these associations we put with night and with midnight and we saw on lichen in some of the cultures Midnight's is called the new one of the dead and that sets off a series of connotations for those of us in the West. None of which apply to that actual term because we think of midnight we think of the witching hour we think of witches we think of demons we think of evil. Whereas midnight simply meant that's when the ancestors show up. It's interesting how a few years ago there was a scientific research done on schizophrenia in lots of African and Asian territories and one of the things that was perplexing doctors is that didn't know how to treat African victims of schizophrenia because their voices were all positive it's like if you have your own personal cheerleading squad why would you want to get rid of them.

[00:39:47] Know they're not saying kill you kill yourself they're like you can do it.

[00:39:53] They could be annoying too but they had no idea how to treat it and what the reasons why that was so was because of the whole idea of the presence of the ancestors was always our own. So the notion of the dead is actually a quiet joyous time because chances are you probably think you're a grandparent your grandfather is cooler than your dad. I know my grandparents were super cool. They didn't have the resources they could tell us anything so a chance to hang out with them would have been fantastic. Whereas High Noon 12 Siskel at 12 noon would've gone. But High Noon was actually sometimes the scariest time of day high noon is when you head for the hills high noon is when you hit because all these monsters have no problem attacking you in daylight. They had no problem confronting you right in front of everybody and 7 an example.

[00:40:50] Even a simple thing like that inverted how how this story was told and how it was going to progress and how I kind of had to sort of you Westernize myself in order to tell this story but I'd open it up for some questions if you have any. We have some mikes I if you like shouting Don't shout. I repeated it until the man who was working.

[00:41:19] Should this guy's gone. How do I do research because you're so steeped in research man. Thank God for the Internet. You know I spent two years researching this and reading my research assistants spent two years researching it. Yeah it took me. I did this research for two years before I even wrote a line because I didn't start researching to write a book.

[00:41:42] I started researching because I wanted to know I want to know more. It's one thing to tell people keep your hobby but then I go but then what do I read. No.

[00:41:52] So that's how it started. A lot of it. I haven't been ever into the content since 2013.

[00:41:57] I haven't been there in like 5 what at a time like 5 years and I'm the last semester it was Abby Hutto and in Nigeria I haven't been there since then. But you know I was.

[00:42:11] The thing about researching the continent researching Africa and researching all the different countries in Africa is that almost every history book written in the written beyond the eighties is useless there as I read them for fun actually I read it for an unintentional comedy. I mean look at your reassess. Trying to write about it saw a lot of them. I just read for comedy so so a lot of

[00:42:39] I mean the majority of the content available research on African continent is thoroughly useless because it is written from that sort of if it's not colonial is most certainly Orientalist so a lot of it was trying to track don't work that's been done recently even as recently as 2010. People still regard the Great Zimbabwe as singular when there were dozens of Zimbabwe's in that territory and still call it vs Zimbabwe. I could see an African Stonehenge. So a lot of it was researched. A lot of research was cutting through the bull shit was reading between the research and see what was going on was not necessarily depending on the books but looking at their bibliography and read what they read because a lot of times I read their original sources and came to different conclusions.

[00:43:32] A lot of it was archaeological and anthropological digs so quite a few of it written in French. And just you know I love reading the boring stuff I'll read. I'll read tax records and I read ship logs and so on. I love geeking out on the boring boring stuff. And yeah. And also you know language and culture and so on.

[00:44:01] I do wear.

[00:44:03] Do I write books is I researched long enough that wouldn't actually start writing I can just move from beginning to end and don't necessarily have to stop and check facts. So yeah I spend I spent quite a bit on just doing that.

[00:44:16] Yeah. Yes I can you know. Yes. I thank you for coming and thank you for your work as well. I just had a question about your relationship with your past work. I read a long time ago Zadie Smith talking about getting wine drunk in an airport and grabbing a copy of her first book and being noxious trying to make her way through it. Yeah. And I wonder when you revisit some of your past

novels or even this one that's recently come back. Mm hmm. How you feel about the work itself and yourself as the author of that.

[00:44:53] Yeah man I am I'm pretty.

[00:44:55] You know I'm proud of all the work I've done but I'm kind of like Zadie I can't read it because I'm going to go I can't let go. I was reading my first novel at one point and I came across and what basically an idol I should have killed there's a line in it where I think somebody said the pass that hatred that is like the apostle had the puzzle had the hatred of Cain for the past the newly able I thought that was so cute. That is dumb as shit

[00:45:29] And it's there forever. So I don't read my stuff because I come across this like that and I got hold of that let that pass I. You know what I mean it's gonna be hard because I will have to read this one to reread it. I come to terms that it just puts it in perspective that of course I'd have written something differently now but I'm not that person. I wasn't that person I was a no then.

[00:45:56] So.

[00:45:59] So you know I still have this kind of I have to have a certain kind of respect for the 34 year old who wrote that because he was using all the resources he had. But yeah I argued or I read stuff and I cringe. The other thing is I read and see typos and I can't stand it. I remember I was reading somebody read a very very first draft of reef history and you're like I love all your unreliable narrators. I'm like there is no unreliable narrator in brief history. Those are typos as. I

[00:46:34] Say. I mean I just know using an unreliable narrator. So yeah it can be I guess. I seriously it can be pretty traumatic sometimes reading your old stuff.

[00:46:45] Yeah. Yes. I you.

[00:46:49] I'm most curious especially in your writing with this book about these characters that you've built and how they came to be so you kind of mentioned earlier you know like you were doing your research and then the book started writing itself. Yeah. When did these really important characters start to come to mind especially like this story revolving around the boy.

[00:47:11] It's a good question because I find that usually the hardest character for me to write is the main character and that's always been the problem with me and I think part of it is I'm figuring out the novel as I'm figuring out the character.

[00:47:27] Most of my novels tend to focus on a character what its first person where somebody is talking and what that character or that person is narrating But supporting characters a show up and that's the thing that's so great about it and they just have to be cool it's me for it. And every I've read Walter Mosley I like Easy Rawlins a lot but every time most shows up as a I want a book would just mouse even the movie. I mean it takes a lot to outshine Denzel Washington and Don Cheadle shows

up and I'm like I want to go with that guy because you know supporting characters is a result of our need for them which is they just show up and be so it's there because they have a specific purpose they tend to be easier for me and I tend to fall for them quicker. I fell hard for the leopard in this book and that's her mannerism. It's not his book. And then I get good but if it was that had been one hell of a story.

[00:48:35] It also but it forces me to have a certain discipline. It also forces me to really get into the core of what why is this guy the lead character.

[00:48:45] Why did he appear first and why is there a part of me that still thinks it's his story or in book on that woman her story. And that means getting to know Adam he is someone that you going on a date with your own character and and getting to know them and get to know the aspects of them my like and ask which I don't like and aspects about him I'm deeply conflicted about and that to me is when I know that's the character when I'm really conflicted about it and where at times enlightenment times I hate them. There are times when I'm really proud of them and at times I'm deeply ashamed of them and it's then I realize oh it's like trying to come to terms with somebody you know with you and it just snow getting to know them you don't like everything and you you you hear that just means the characters become more and more complicated. But it is a process and I haven't been in quite a few situations where I spent a considerable amount of time and realize it's not that person's book. It's this is this is this part of it is part of the process. It means that I have dozens of pages I don't use but that's also a part of the process to welcome thanks for being here.

[00:49:56] I have a question about accessibility and I mean you're telling a story and that's what you do you tell good stories I read. I've been in a book club for 20 years and we read a brief history of Seven Killings and my American brethren I went to high school in Jamaica my American brethren couldn't get past the language and with this story with this book it sounds like your sort of opening up making accessible this vast trove of stories as curious about your thoughts on and I loved. Did I say I loved history. I was curious to know what how that plays out in your thinking about what you do. It's funny because

[00:50:51] I always think I'm writing these these commercial blockbuster novels and there was a oh my I was so hard to get into it and so on. I think for me and for me as was said before and as I. This is exactly way I think that. If I'm going to read a world that you should commit to it. And I think for me it's something I've been just sort of diving in and it's okay being a little lost. It's okay. Drifting for a little bit in this book you're gonna be adrift quite a bit and yeah and deliberate. So I mean you can trust that the current would pull you back to me.

[00:51:32] Accessibility is tricky because I thought I was being accessible with all the stuff I write and it's still if somebody was inscrutable I think it's part of this thing where people say things like I couldn't relate to the characters so I don't relate to characters I have no interest in relating to Becky Sharp I have no interest in relating to a Frankenstein.

[00:51:56] It's just sort of.

[00:51:57] I think there's sometimes an idea that in literature the book must come and meet me when it's really we should go and meet in the book. It's I.

[00:52:12] I think a bogus. I hate the term difficult moves because I really don't think there is such a thing. But I think that a challenging book for a challenging book rewards the effort that is worth it. And I think I hope that the worlds I write that you know a rewards effort in a lot of ways fine of this maybe the most standard English book ever written.

[00:52:36] So my translators are really happy.

[00:52:40] But at the same time it's following language systems that are not English you know whether it's always some characters who the president the verbs are always present tense are there pronouns are always plural.

[00:52:54] Yeah. Africans are doing that a good 4000 years ago but congrats on finally joining the plural pronoun thing.

[00:53:02] It's it's you know it's I just think I've always I have never is never occurred to me that someone inferior should be more accessible. It always occurred to me I need to find the wavelength the ear to hear sound and the fury and it took me a while actually it took me I mean second hour and probably a third reading before I could figure out.

[00:53:28] So in a fury no it's so in this rewarding.

[00:53:31] So I think same thing with you know to a master and so on. I think I think we should probably you know recognize that some books some works of art are going to demand more. What I would bet that a lot of those books also have deeper rewards.

[00:53:50] Yes I like to think so. Now why would I recommend as a primary source.

[00:53:56] The problem with that is that there is no primary source. If there was that I've written the book in way crooked and for years. There are lots of secondary sources there is there are redacted files which don't mean to tell us anything if we don't want to get through it. You have to read the original source stuff. You have to do the boring stuff I did which is the reader the readers go through you know dozens of pages of boring files on trying to figure out whether redacted sentences or read some of the stuff.

[00:54:26] Gary Webb the journalism Gary Webb did even though he also fell prey to ethical issues.

[00:54:35] Reading some of the books that even Mako many wrote I struggled in the periphery or Philip Reggie's CIA Diary. But what what I'm getting at is that it's there is no one source and every

source is flawed. So you kind of have to read through everything and come to your own conclusions which is what I did.

[00:54:54] Yeah I I want to go back to your comment about how the hobbit was cast but are with a bunch of white guys because I think that we're in a really interesting sort of pop cultural moment around recognizing representation and diverse casting in feature films and I find it interesting that you know that the other big blockbuster with a minority lead Aqua Man with Jason Momoa was considered an unconventional casting because the the comic book character is historically white and blonde and blue eyed. So I'd like to hear your thoughts about what you're seeing in that sort of industry and setting and your thoughts on that but then part two is if you were to recast the hobbit who would you want to see as Bilbo Baggins

[00:55:50] Who I was as a hobbit proving who I. As a Hobbit I don't know where she would be.

[00:55:59] I just want Aquafina in everything. I just want her and everything. I don't care.

[00:56:06] Make her a queen. Well she's already a queen doesn't need that what I think it's it's I think with certainly with Hollywood and certainly when we're talking about these things is that I think too often we think the performance of diversity is diversity and that these that one thing is symbolic. We

[00:56:29] Have this kind of weird math where I would say you know I would say there are not enough people of color in Hollywood films and then somebody will go an Asian woman is in a miserable black it was a make drop like that.

[00:56:43] That doesn't add up. It's no. Those skills didn't just balance. Yeah it's I think we we hopefully you know films a Black Panther and TV shows like Luke Cage and TV shows a black lightning that far from just scene as some kind of reactionary thing. It's also it's realizing that maybe the film audience is actually quite far ahead of the film maker in terms of who and what we want to see and what exactly you know can you know can sell.

[00:57:18] It's interesting that in the UK I ran into a lot of issues with this book pretty most of the publishers didn't want to publish it there. The idea was you know it was too sci fi for the literary occurred into a literary from a safe macro that neither was read it which is what one publisher said that's what kiss my black ass. It's it's my worry about Hollywood is that Hollywood faces way too much on the token gesture.

[00:57:52] It's really not that big a deal that you gave. How do you marry an Oscar. It really isn't. It's not a milestone. It's a shame that you took that LA.

[00:58:02] And I it's it's. And I think too often we see the performance of it.

[00:58:07] And then finally we see this weird backlash as if we've accomplished something so let's go back inside the world now. Is that the whole notion of reverse racism. Say yeah you've got your film

free now we want to our rights back it's it's no it's not like that. But the thing is just gonna have to always be sort of police they think.

[00:58:24] I hate the word policed but it's something that we just have to always keep on top of and talk about because of if I'm just thinking of if black panther made 10 years ago the CIA guy would have been would have had second billing and it would have been about his process as he overcomes his CIA ness to help the poor nation of Wakanda and fall for the The Princess and then they walk off in the sunset oh and it would still be called Black Panther but it's a rambling answer are you saying that I think they have a lot of work to do and I think people should stop congratulating themselves for things they're supposed to do.

[00:59:12] We have time for two more questions two more. I'm good. OK. How do you go about. Writing about animals and writing animals. Yeah and how about how do you go about navigating animal perspectives and how do you get into the frame of mind to do it.

[00:59:31] Well the first thing is I had to do is read of how animals are in African folklore as a first thing before I even get into animal psychology and so on I had to do what I wanted.

[00:59:42] Again I really was trying to get rid of the western western views of a lot of these animals most eloquent effete animals in my book are shape shifters so they do become people but I didn't want him to just become you know basically superheroes are super villains.

[01:00:02] So there is a scene in it where a leopard some of this leopard as a lover who tracker really can't stand and a lover is a real kind of an idiot and leopard is still a cat. And what Libera says if you really want to turn them on just rub his belly. Have you ever tried to rob a cat smelly. I'm sure you have the scars to prove when you made that mistake. So the next day he shows up with leg wounds all over his skin and in reverse and leprosy. Can you believe he tried to touch my belly. So yeah there's there's a lot of fun stuff like that where I actually go into not as animals or plants as well like you know they go that trucker goes through a forest and all the plants are almost dying mostly because their roots don't touch each other their roots don't communicate. So it was a lot of that just getting in touch with that kind of of psychology.

[01:00:59] The other thing I'm very you know I had to really resist is the type of personality we tend to give animals and we write of what Africa brings a rhino why not. I wrote a fantastic essays nearly over 10 years ago no call how to write about Africa where he talks about how all the humans are one dimensional but make sure the animals are multidimensional characters full of personality and conflict. And I was very aware of that as you know as well.

[01:01:28] I didn't want to over. Over Steven overwrite them. What.

[01:01:32] Yeah just talk about like Black Panther Luke Cage and Black Lightning and it just makes me wonder if you have any ideas to kind of get into that superheroes genre at all. And it's again it was

just like the superhero John run. What about it. If you have any interest in like writing just kind of getting into what we love to write a superhero coming I think we love it.

[01:01:56] Well you know I mean my you know I get asked a lot about my background and find this in what I used to read. And the fact is I love it. The giants of fantasy I didn't read until I was an adult. I didn't read Lord of Rings or dune until I was I didn't do it until I was in my 30s and I read Lord of the Rings until I mean not much later than that I actually read them after I saw the film because I was going by what was available in Jamaica. So when I think of fantasy and I think enough super supernatural and so I think of comics you know or even comics like heavy metal and that type of families are so comics are a huge deal. You know I I've said at Reading X-Men X-Men is kind of like being an X-Men. You know I remember you know I'm in high school. I'm the nerd you know the nerd the art gay and I'm surrounded by these students who always have me do their work for them because I'm trying to get frame you know meet them be my friend Sam doing their arts exams for them and as soon as we're done our back on the street they go look at that faggot and I'm like I am I am upholding the people who hit me.

[01:03:05] I'm a flippin mutant as I am a don't write X-Men and it does resonate through it because I'm not here me.

[01:03:13] I am working with people I am saving people I hate it. I'm a flippin superhero. So comics resonated with me that way and I still read them.

[01:03:23] I still read them quite a bit. I was on Seth Meyers a couple weeks ago when a couple weeks ago and I said all we could talk about was comics.

[01:03:31] I didn't even hear the part where they run the credits and people think people think we're just fake talking we're actually talking.

[01:03:38] So you read Hellboy in Hell yet. I might do it anyways in all my life for Hellboy 2 retail and and so on. You were talking about black hammer and all of these comics so they're a huge part of my fantasy language because of that was just what you know that was just what was available. Thank you so much.

[01:03:59] For coming. Oh darling a round of applause. Thank you.

[01:04:06] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.