Title: 2015 Seattle Reads 'The Painter': Meet Author Peter Heller

Speaker 1:

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Chris:

I think you know this is the 17th year of Seattle Reads. 2015 marks a return to literary fiction, which is where we started all of those years ago. We have really loved our two years of nonfiction, but it's just been a real pleasure to read a novel together this year and for me to listen to readers reflect on those themes in the book.

Peter Heller is an award-winning adventure writer, the author of four works of nonfiction. He's really well known amongst those readers. He made a living with this adventure writing all the while wanting to write fiction since he was 11 and a librarian put Hemingway in his hands. So his first novel, The Dog Stars, was published in 2012 and of course, became just this enormous bestseller. I got to meet Peter three years ago, I guess, one of these pre-publication dinners where publisher introduces forthcoming books and authors to booksellers and librarians. I mean, I've just said I was just knocked over by that voice of Hig and Peter's writing and have been a fan ever since. I did get to read an advanced copy of The Painter and I emailed him and he answered me from Paonia in Jim's cabin. So with that, please help me welcome the wonderful writer and friend, Peter Heller, to the Seattle Public Library.

Peter Heller:

Thank you, Chris, for that wonderful introduction and thanks Francesca, the Northeast Branch, the Seattle Library District. So, it is a huge honor to be chosen by Seattle to come read here. You guys are the reading capital of the universe. I don't doubt there's some alien planet and some parallel whatever solar system that reads like you guys read. It's really, really special to be picked. I can't tell you what it means to a writer to be chosen for this and get this kind of attention, careful and sometimes critical attention. I'm going to read to you guys at some point a little bit. I'm just going to read like a page and a half so you can hear the voice that... I won't read to music probably. You can hear the voice that Jim spoke this book to me. I think that's kind of fun, and I'm going to tell you how the book got written.

I don't think we get read to enough as adults. My favorite thing when I was a kid, one of my very, very favorite things was when my dad used to read to me before I went to sleep and he did it a lot most nights. He started me on poetry. He had an instinct I think for that. He had me reading, or he would read to me E.E. Cummings when I was six, which you think is like grounds for social services, some of those poems. I was lucky I didn't understand them. But I still remember Buffalo Bill's defunct used to

ride a silver watersmooth stallion and break one, two, three, four, five pigeons, just like that. Jesus, he was a handsome man. I didn't really get it, but I loved the sound of it.

When I was like eight or nine, he had me on Yates and I still remember Prayer for my Daughter. "I've walked and prayed for this young child an hour and heard the sea wind scream upon the tower and under the arches of the bridge and scream and the elms above the flooded stream." Think of that. I mean, the music of it, it just slayed me in a way that Gilligan's Island really wasn't or Get Smart or whatever I was watching on TV. I'm old enough to remember those.

I wanted to be a poet. Then when I was 11, as Chris said, I grew up in Brooklyn Heights and I went to a little school and it had a little library and it had a not-so-little librarian who I had a huge crush on. Her name was Annie Bosworth and she was English, and I would have married her on the spot for how she said my name. She said, "Peter, are you looking for something to read?" and I was like... A great librarian, they know. They just know. If they've followed your development since you were five and just like a great bookseller, they've helped you along and they know what you're ready for. She walked me over to the fiction shells and she pulled out Hemingway's In Our Time, that slim little volume of early stories, mostly Nick Adams stories up in Michigan with those incredible vignettes in between them.

I took it home, and imagine like an 11-year-old kid opening that up in New York City. I mean, my eyes, my jaw must have hit the floor. I was like, "I want to do that. I want to hop off a train, a slow-moving train in upper Michigan and a burned out forest and have a big backpack and walk through grass that was wetting my pant legs with dew and make camp by the big two-hearted river and make cowboy coffee." I didn't know what that was, but it sounded awesome. I didn't want to burn my tongue just like Nick didn't. I wanted to, like in the end of something, have a girlfriend that could row and fish like a man and then break up with her because Nick did. I never understood why he did that. Why did he do that? She was so awesome. Because men are mostly idiots and I think mostly he did it because then in the three-day blow, the next story he wanted to go with his buddy in the cabin and drink whiskey and complain about it, right? I mean, that's what guys do when they do something stupid.

Most of all though, I wanted to write like this guy was writing about everything. I mean, the pros. When you read writing that you love in a way you can't even describe, it comes through not your head, but someplace else, maybe your skin or your heart. I mean, I don't know where it comes in, but I wanted to do that. So, I started doing what every kid should do when he wants to be a great American writer. I read the dictionary. Can you imagine when you're 12 years old by yourself? I put words up on the wall that I didn't know the way I heard Jack London did. I copied out poems and stories.

I went to a good college and I was an English major. They didn't tell me at the English department at Dartmouth that you can't make a living being a poet or a short story writer, and I think they should have told me that, don't you? It was kind of mean to those guys. I got out of school and I was like, "Man, I got to get a job." I got a really good job as a pizza deliverer and in Boulder, my buddy said, "Come out and share a house." So I did that. I was teaching kayaking and then another friend said, "Why don't you combine your interests? You love to paddle and you're writing short stories and poems all the time. Why don't you write for Outside Magazine?"

When you're young and dumb, you don't know what you can't do. So, I looked up the 800 number. I called and the receptionist picked up and I said... I had a magazine and it had the masthead and I just picked a name that sounded nice, a senior editor. I said, "Is Laura Hohnhold there, please?" She said,

"Just a minute." And she picked up. Then I was like, "Oh my God." I started talking really fast and I said, "Hey, I published a story in Harper's," which was sort of true. "I kayak Class V and I think you should..." I mean, it was in the reading section in front, that little section in Harper's. It was a reprinted story for my college journal. So it was in there, but it wasn't like some big story. I said, "I think you guys should send me on this expedition to Tibet." And she actually did.

I realized later that it was because I was expendable. They didn't have a writer that could kayak Class V that they didn't care about. As it happened, a guy died on the first day and he died in my arms in a log jam and he was on his honeymoon, and I came back in shock. It's a whole story. I won't tell it to you, but it was an odd way to start. It launched this career in adventure writing, which I loved. I loved going to wild places with people who were really committed, but I was joyfully diverted. I mean, it was what I wanted to do since I was little was write like Hemingway. Then as my reading deepened, there's other people that I wanted to write like much more than that.

About three and a half, I guess going on four years now, I thought I had nine months out ahead that I wouldn't have to take a story. I was writing for Business Week at then and they were paying really well, and I thought it's time. All the nonfiction, I always knew the ending and I always knew what was going to happen next because it happened. I wanted the surprise in my writing again, the thrill that you get when you're paddling and you're on a river that hasn't been described and you come around a corner and you don't know what's there. I mean, it could be a pool with a cougar drinking or just a cloud of mayflies that are back lit or a waterfall, or if you're in the right river, it could be five guys with bows and arrows who aren't happy to see you at all. But I love being scared and I love the shock and the awe and the thrill.

So, I didn't know if you were allowed to just start with the first line and not know, and I didn't want to plot it. I didn't know if the federal fiction police would come and just knock, bust down my door. So I called my best buddy in high school was Carlton Cuse and he's the showrunner for Lost and the producer. He ran like all these writers and he knows about structure and stuff, but I called him and I said... He didn't seem that smart in high school, go figure, but he really was. I called him up and I said, "Hey, Carltony, do you know any novels? I mean, you've written with a bunch in different projects. Do you know any that just start with a first line and don't have a clue?" And he didn't even hesitate. He said, "Oh, yeah, man, Stephen King, I've worked with him, he often starts with a first line and doesn't have any idea and just write, that's a voice and the voice is a character, the character's in a place and there's a situation because there's always a situation and he writes into the story."

Then he says something that really surprised me. He said, "Elmore Leonard, I've worked with him." Rest in peace. What a wonderful writer. All those tightly plotted crime novels in South Florida get shorty. I mean, imagine, he said he starts with a first line sometimes. That's just some guy talking. So it gave me permission and I wrote... I went to my coffee shop and I wrote, "I keep the beast running. I keep the hundred..." The beast ended up being an airplane. "I keep the hundred low led on tap. I foresee attacks." A few lines later, "My name is Hig, one name. Big Hig, if you need another. If I ever woke up crying in the middle of a dream, and I'm not saying I did, it's because the trout are gone, everyone." As soon as he said that, I just thought, "Okay, I'm listening. Tell me. Tell it."

For seven months, it was like a guy was on the other side of a campfire on an October night with a wind blowing the flames around and he was telling me what happened to him a few years before. It was the

most thrilling thing I've ever experienced, hands down, all the stuff that I did. I finished it and I was so... I mean, it sounds funny, but I mean, I was so moved by the story and it didn't feel like it was my story. It was his story. I thought, you know that feeling you get when you like hit a ... If you play pool, like even before the balls collide, you know it's going in the pocket, or if you play basketball or whatever it is. I just knew that people would love the book and I thought, "I don't need the pressure. I mean, I want to write a second novel. I've heard about second novel syndrome and sophomore effort and all that. I don't need that. I better get started. I mean, it's like 10 months until the book gets published and I better get cracking."

So, I sat down and I wrote. I started with this voice and it was this artist. I wrote for a few days and then I was like, "Oh, crap, this sounds a lot like my buddy. This Jim Stegner sounds a lot like my buddy Jim Wagner in Taos." Then I decided, "Nah, it's not him, no way," because the liability issues would just be too difficult. I mean, he's still alive. So, I kept writing, and then three weeks into it, I was like, "It's him, really is him. I've got to call him." So I called up Jim and I said, "Hey, Jim, I'm writing this novel. It's about an expressionist artist in Taos, New Mexico." He's like, "Oh, cool, that sounds neat." I said, "Yeah. And he shot a guy in a bar just like you did for making a comment about his kid."

There was a silence and then I said, "Yeah, and he was a little high and to the left, just like you. He spent a year in Santa Fe State just like you did and he was pardoned by the governor just like you. In fact, he looks a lot like you. I mean, he's tall. He's broad shoulder. He's got a salt and pepper beard. He wears his cap cocked on his head with the flies stuck in it. His clothes are all paint spattered, and they call him Hemingway down at the river just like you. He just loves to fly fish just like you. His palette is a lot like yours, I mean, the colors he uses and the paintings that he paints are strikingly similar. In fact, that painting that I love so much that won the continuing housing crisis of the fish swallowing all those houses, I put it in the book yesterday." There was this sort of silence and then I heard, "Oh, that sounds fun. That sounds incredible. Keep me posted." So, phew.

I wrote the book and I sent it to him. An author gets... It's sort of this tradition where you get when they do the hardback, you get the first two copies. Well, that's what they tell you. I sent him one right away. I remember I was on tour, my beginning of the tour, I was in Portland, I was on the tarmac and the plane and the phone rang and it said Jim Wagner. I was like, "Hey." He said, "Oh, I just read the book. Oh, I love it. It's incredible." He said, "I'm wandering around my house wondering if I killed a guy," which, I mean, that's really a compliment. Anyway, so that worked out.

I think what I'd like to do is I'm going to read you a page and a half just so you can hear it in the voice that I did and then I think we'll just open it up to questions. By the way, it's really cool to read to a group where most everybody has read the book. I mean, usually you're reading at a bookstore or whatever and nobody's read it. I mean, that's fun too, but this is the scene you remember when he's fishing with Alce. It's the first time she catches a fish. He's remembering that, but he has just encountered Dell beating a horse almost to death and he intervened and fought with him and saved the horse.

So, who hasn't read the book? Okay. So the book is about an expressionist painter from Taos. His life falls apart. A bad thing happens, and I won't tell you what it is, and he moves up to Western Colorado and he's getting his life back together. He starts painting again. His wife had left and he had stopped painting, but he finds a model he can work with. He's painting. He's painting himself for a lot of money. He's pretty famous. He loves to fly fish. He's going one afternoon up his favorite creek. There's a horse

trailer blocking the road on the dirt road and there's an outfitter loading little strawberry road and the mare is balking and she won't load and this guy starts to beat her to death. He intervenes. He saves the horse and he kills the guy basically. He does it not right then, but... So the book is about what happens to his life and his art after this murder.

"I stood on the ramada and tried to shake off the pressure of Dell's body pressing me into the cold, wet of the ditch, the sound of his grunt. I smoked the cigar down to the root, crushed it on a flagstone, lit another, the smell of rain. What I'd noticed was that here in the wind shadow of the mountain, it often smelled like rain. It might be raining up on the ridge. I might see the veils and rags of rain hanging down out of the scudding clouds. I might see shrouds of rain hauled over the country the way a fishing boat might drag a net, but no rain here, a spatter maybe, then nothing. Virga, that's what it was called. Alce told me that once, came home from school one day and told me rain that falls and never hits the ground. 'Come on, I'll show you,' she said.

"I told her we might as well go fishing while we're at it. It was the first afternoon she ever caught a fish. I don't know how old she was, little. She was small for her age. She pointed up at the veils over the west rim, the water in the pool smooth without a drop. "Virga," I gave her a thumbs up and threw a caddis for her and let it drift and gave her the rod, and as soon as she touched it, the trout hit and almost pulled it out of her small hands. 'Oh, God. Oh, God,' I yelled. "Way to go. Keep the tip up like that. Yeah.' She was holding the rod straight up with all her strength and it was all she could do and she was in hysterics, laughing as much from shock as anything. Her hair was blowing across her face and the jerking rod was shaking the counterweight of her body and the fish was whizzing out the line.

"I wanted her to catch it herself. I was almost as panicked as she was. I had an idea. 'Run backwards,' I yelled. 'Try and hold around the line. Yeah, like that. Slow it down. Go. Run up the bank.' It was odd that she could even shift her grip. She ran half backwards, half sideways, trying to hold the rod high like a broad sword, ran up into the dried stocks of mullein the willows and the fish came with her up onto the rocks and was flopping, whacking the stones, a big brown. God, big. She dropped the rod and ran like a puma down over the stones and pounced both hands. The trout got away from her and she chased it, bent double, trying to wrangle it, landing on it again with both hands. It squirted out like a watermelon seed, slipped over the rock. She was after it. I was laughing, yelling and laughing.

"She got to it and grasped it and then fell on it, covering it with her whole body like a punt returner covering the ball, screaming with glee, laughing and crying too. I reached under her and I picked up the heavy fish and thwacked it on a rock, and it was finally still and he colors dulled the way they do and then she burst into tears. Her print dress stained with fish slime and algae and blood. She was inconsolable, not for her clothes, for the fish. All the way home, I held her in one arm as I drove and told her about the spirit of the trout, how he was probably swimming now among the stars and would be happy to feed her and her mother and father tonight and how proud I was of her. And I was surprised when a few days later she wanted to go out with me again and that's when I bought her a seven-and-a-half-foot four weight and began to teach her to cast."

Yeah, let's do some questions, then I can tell you more about process and stuff. Don't be shy. No question is too outrageous. You can't be worse than... I did a book club in Milwaukee that was in a bar and it was a hundred people that were all drunk and they got pretty rowdy.

Speaker 4:

Hi, thanks a lot. I listened to the book on CD and I'm curious how that works. First of all, I love the book. It was just brilliant, but I'm curious how that works. Do you work with the person who does the reading of the book? I'm always curious that the person who's doing the reading is doing it accurately, et cetera.

Peter Heller:

Yeah. Yeah, that's a great question. This was really cool. So when I wrote The Dog Stars, the arm of Random House that does the audio, the director sent my wife and I three tapes of auditions and one was clearly it. I mean, the others kind of sound like Marlowe. They were like noir voices. I didn't get... But this guy really had the heart and he had Hig, I thought, so we just suggested that we thought that this guy would be good and they ended up picking him up. I don't know. But then they send emails and they call and they ask pronunciations and stuff for certain things just to make sure that they get it right.

A few weeks later, I got this neat email from the director who said that he'd never been... He did this. This was his job. He did hundreds of these and he said he'd never been so moved hardly ever, and that they kept having to stop because the actor was overcome and that it was just a very special experience for both of them. So I thought that was really cool. Then The Painter was published and they used the same guy. Then the different producer, when that was done, wrote this email and it was so cool. It was like he said, "The headset is hung up. The soundboard is turned off."

It was like he was so moved by... He said that they kept having to stop because in these scenes, like with Alce, his daughter, and stuff, the actor was so overcome that they just had to stop and restart again. I felt so honored by that. It was so cool. I mean, these guys are just doing it for a job and they... So I haven't listened to them straight through. I've listened to just little bits, but I love that actor. I think he's a wonderful reader. I thought about some authors do it themselves and I just thought, "Just let the pros do it." So I'm glad I did.

Chris:

Toni Morrison is one who narrates her own books because she wants them to be the voice that she heard when she wrote.

Peter Heller:

Yeah. It might be fun one day to do one.

Speaker 5:

I haven't finished the book yet, but I'm enjoying it very much. What interested me when I first opened it was the style, the way it was written. You usually open up a book and there's a page of writing. Here you have sentences, spaces. Occasionally, you have a few pages, no real chapters per se, and it took me a while to get accustomed to that. Was that your intention or was it the publisher's intention? Also, he's very obsessed with Alce. Since I haven't finished the whole book, I wondered if that carries on throughout to the end or do I have to finish reading it?

Peter Heller:

You have to finish reading it. But yes, it does. So I stumbled on that. I mean, first of all, the white space, it makes the book longer and you don't have to write as many pages. It's like a term paper. I stumbled on that style of breaking it up when I wrote The Dog Stars. There were a few books that made a deep impression on me. One was by Coetzee or Coetzee, the South African writer who wrote a book called Into the Heart of the Country and it was numbered paragraphs basically. Well, some were a page lump, some were just a few lines, but they were these distilled prose poems and they were the long soliloquy of a young woman in the Veld who was pretty crazy and I just thought... They were numbered. Each one was numbered. I just thought the compression that he got by having these shorter sections was very interesting to me and the distillation. I saw it as sort of like a mosaic rather than the flowing the way we usually...

Then Peter Matthiessen did something similar to that in Far Tortuga, which is about... It's about these fishermen in the Caribbean. He'll have like these blocks of description and blocks of dialogue, which he doesn't attribute. You just get used to... You read it and you get into the cadence and then he'll have like a poem and an asterisk and then another piece of description. I just thought it was marvelous. I thought it occurred to me that the way we experience reality is more like sort of mosaic than some coherent flow of narrative the way most novels are written. Hig also in The Dog Stars is so fragmented. I mean, he's so traumatized. I mean, this is a guy that lost everything. It's supposed to pop up to novel. It's nine years after super flu kills almost everybody. It just seemed apt and it seemed in a post-apocalyptic world, it seemed appropriate to get rid of quotation marks and a lot of the attributions and stuff because the world is really stark.

So, I did that and I liked it so much that when I wrote The Painter, I just found myself naturally falling into that, and it became my way of portraying the reality of this character and I like it. I was very interested that when I went to... The Dog Stars was published in like 19 languages or 20 now. When we went to Germany for the launch, the Germans got rid of all the white space. The Polish publishers kept it all and thought it was really cool, but they warned me. They said, "By the way, you're going to Frankfurt after Warsaw. Those Germans, they got rid of all the space." It was like, "You could tell that there were still some ancient grudge." Yeah, they just couldn't take it. So, good question.

Speaker 6:

Well, I really like the different facets of compassion you explored in the book. It was like a prison looking at all these different ways that you brought compassion in, so thank you for doing that. This is kind of like a twilight zone existential question and it's how do you feel about placing your characters in violent situations? So for example, is there any sense that because your books continue to be read and it exists as a story in a book, that those characters remain trapped in that violent act?

Peter Heller:

Wow. This is like the beginning of a Stephen King novel.

Speaker 6:

[inaudible 00:30:55].

Peter Heller:

Yeah, really. Well, let's see. Okay. I love putting my characters in violent situations. I mean, I must love it because they keep getting into them. I think it's very interesting to put characters under pressure and you have to, and in the worlds that I've created, the pressure leads to violence often. Jim Wagner, my friend, who was my fishing buddy for nine years in the North Fork Valley, where the book starts, he came up through a rough and tumble, a group of artists that actually existed. They came up in the 70s in Taos that they were brawlers and they were drinkers and they were lovers and they spent a lot of time in jail, and they produced amazing art. They were really prolific.

Once Jim asked me, he said, "Hey, do you want me to teach you how to fight with a chain?" I was like, "No, I'm good. I have a 357 if I need it." But he's a very gentle person, by the way. I mean, you will never meet a more generous, sweet, and gentle man than Jim Wagner, but he went through that period. I feel like with Hig, they got through the violent part. I left Hig sleeping out under the stars, sort of reconnected, loving his life again, which was so cool for me. I've left him there and I don't know if he's going to start talking again, but he might. Jim, I feel like there was a catharsis at the end of the book somehow and that somehow his life is going to lead to more, be more connected with other people.

I think Jason, I don't want to ruin this for you guys who haven't read it, but I think he gives him an incredible gift at the end. There's a moment of grace. I mean, I love this character, Jason, because he has this certain kind of self-taught through rough circumstances, grace, and he extends it to Jim. When he says, "You go teach art to orphans," he's giving Jim an opportunity to really stretch in ways he hasn't before and to connect and give to other people, and I thought that was wonderful. So I felt good about where I left everybody. Yeah. Thanks for that.

Speaker 7:

I have a little different take on the ending, which is that seems pretty clear to me that he is not in control of his emotions very well, and that's fairly clear. As someone who studied brain physiology, I see this as an inherent part of who he is and who his brain is. I was left at the end of the book with the feeling that he should have gone to prison and that he's going to wreak havoc in the future. So I'm just giving you a different take on the ending. It was very, very different for me.

Peter Heller:

Yeah, I appreciate that. It could. I mean, I have to look at the real man because the real man didn't kill anybody, but he didn't kill anybody by accident. I mean, he shot a guy in a bar, just like in the prologue. He got in some pretty bad fights and stuff. Then he made some changes and I can't talk about him, but he made some changes in his life, very radical changes. For decades, he's just been a very gentle, sort of a mentor and stuff. So I wonder if people, if you take stuff like drugs and alcohol out of lives and stuff like that, I wonder... I think people can redeem themselves in ways that are surprising, but I mean, I appreciate that. I think we are hardwired in certain ways, and I think maybe the courage and commitment and of the effort to overcome that can be remarkable and a real testament to character. So, appreciate it though. Yeah.

Speaker 8:

Yeah. I'm back to the ending. I didn't feel that he should have gone to jail, but Jason, I felt he's always going to be watching him. I mean, that's what you wrote at the end. So there's always this kind of edgy thing that he's always going to be watched by Jason. I thought that Jason should have given him more redemption because he saved Jason in the flash flood. So I didn't see that come in. I just felt like Jason's always going to be over him.

Peter Heller:

Yeah, I don't know. I mean, probably. God is always watching us in some ways, whatever that is. Yeah, I don't know. It's interesting. I mean, it's a pickle, for sure. Jim got himself into it and now he's going to have to live a good life and we'll see. But I have this fantasy. I love the character of Jason. I mean, I really loved that guy by the end.

When I wrote the end, I wasn't not expecting that whole story to come out about his uncles, and the realization that he came to that if he killed Jim and hurt him and killed him, that it would perpetuate, that it would be worse for him. It was this karmic thing and that he would perpetuate this violence that... I mean, Jim started it by shooting the guy and I mean, by killing the guy with the rock. I mean, he just realized it had to stop, which I thought was so cool. I didn't expect that. I really didn't. So I really liked Jason a lot. I had this fantasy that they would like one day have Thanksgiving together, but I don't think that's going to happen. I don't know.

Speaker 9:

I haven't read your book, but I look forward to reading it. The reason I came tonight was I read the article in the newspaper and it said that your first love was poetry. So I was wondering what you had to say about that and how that leads you in your narrative writing.

Peter Heller:

What happened is because I read so much poetry when I was younger and I loved it so much and... I've written it all my life. I still write poetry. I have a poem in Poetry in February that's three voices at once and experimenting with that. But when I came to fiction, what that did for me was it made me more interested in the music of the language than in the story.

So when I started with the first line saying The Dog Stars, and it happened in The Painter too, I wrote the first line and I just followed the language into the story rather than the other way around, which I think is the way a lot of people must write their novels. I mean, I think a lot of people have ideas and have stories in their heads they'd like to tell and they let the language serve that, but I was sort of the other way around. I followed the language through the story. My favorite writers, my favorite fiction writers are the ones that are lyrical and that it feels like reading poems when you read the prose. So yeah, I just try and do that. I just love the sound of... I love music. Good question. Yeah.

Speaker 10:

Hang on. We had a pretty lively discussion in this room about your book this morning. It was great thoughts.

Peter Heller:

That's the energy I can feel.

Speaker 10:

Well, it's still here and there were differing viewpoints on the ending, but one of the questions one of the people brought up was when the little horse that Dell mistreated and abused, did you mean that? One lady said she thought that was a parallel to Alce and was that intentional on your part or did it just kind of...

Peter Heller:

No, but it's only because writers love to talk about after the fact what they intended to do. Mostly, I don't believe them. I mean, I didn't really intend anything, which is the strangest thing. I mean, I really did try and listen to the voice, which is odd, but I know there's a lot of subconscious work going on. And because I've written tons and tons of magazine stories and nonfiction books and everything, it's sort of like the way I would think of it as like riding a mountain horse.

If you've ever ridden like an outfitter's horse who knows the terrain, you give the horse its head because he knows how to get up the ridge way better. Yeah, way better than you, right? But he's also a horse and his brain is this big or whatever it is and yours... And you went to school and everything and he wants to go down in that gully sometimes and you know that's not a good idea. So you go, "Dandy, I just don't think that's a good idea." You just nudge him over this way and get him back going again and then you give him his head again.

It's sort of like that with the fiction. I mean, it's like you're making these little decisions you don't even realize you're making because you start writing and you go, you think, "That's a cul-de-sac. That's a distraction. That's not going to work out. " You just kind of nudge it over here and then you just let the voice rip again. So it's not like you're really channeling, but it feels like it because of his subconscious. After this encounter with the horse, I realized right away that Jim triggered because he couldn't protect Alce and that he was so... That encounter had so much heat for him and was so... Yeah. I mean, he triggered and it's sort of like... Then Wheezy said it, the big fat police officer, he said, "Sometimes we..." What did he say? He says, "Yeah, and sometimes we don't kill the right person," or something like that. Remember that line where... He gets him. He gets why he did that, why he killed Dell. So, interesting. Yeah.

Speaker 11:

Yeah, I read your book too, and I think that you've definitely got a poetic mind and a way of writing. I really, really appreciated your book. I was telling everybody about it. She was talking about Dell. The second time when he does hit Dell, this is all by accident because he's fly-fishing at night and he runs into him and there's a group of them and they're talking... I think I remember this right. They're talking

about younger women and how they like to partake and whatever and have their way with them. Did you intend that to be another kind of... Because of his daughter?

Peter Heller:

Yeah, it's the way it worked out. He triggered again. I mean, he triggered again. It's just like he can't get away from it. I mean, he can't get away from his grief about Alce and the abuse and the exploitation and the violence that's out in the world. It drives him mad. I don't think he went up there by accident. I mean, that's the thing. I mean, remember he decides not to go over the black... Or he goes over the black bridge and he goes the long way around because he doesn't want to be seen. Then he says he turns off his lights because they like to get the night vision to see, but he turns off his lights and he drives slowly so he's not making noise. I think he doesn't know it, but I think he's stalking Dell.

Speaker 11:

Subconscious. Yeah.

Peter Heller:

Yeah. It's just like as he was doing that, I mean, I'm writing it along and I'm like, "Wow, something's going to happen." It raised the hair on the back of my neck.

Speaker 11:

I thought you were very, very masterful at these kind of things and keeping it subconscious. As I was reading it, I was connecting things. Then when I think back there, there was some symbolism. Okay. As far as endings, I don't wonder about, when I read a book, what the guy's going to do. Is he going to be... You know what I mean? I think you tied it up very well and we all go on. It's kind of like life itself. You've got to know what life has in store for... You don't. You don't know when you're going to die exactly. You don't know. So it's one of those things that it is what it is, so I don't worry about... But I think you tied it up really, really good with Jason and with him. I would choose to believe that he's going to be very cognizant of different things.

What I sense with Stegner is that he's got this heart and that he's been through a lot of stuff. He has this cavalier thing, kind of, that he would like you to believe, but he's thinking about all this stuff, "What I've done, I've killed these guys," and one of them was really weird. It was kind of like I shot a gun and we got into saying that it hit him. So I think that this is what I'm thinking of the book. I just thought it was great and I loved the character and I think basically you tied it up really well.

Peter Heller:

Thanks. Everybody, did you hear that, you guys? So yeah, I mean, I thought that was really well put. Very articulate young man. Thanks for that. Everybody needs backup in their corner. I have to tell you guys, so the thing about writing without a plan... So I just want to tell you a quick story because it's so marvelous about different methods and stuff. When I wrote The Dog Stars, it was like a felt channel and I was writing. I'd go to the coffee shop every day and I'd listen and I'd say, "Don't think, don't think, just listen," and he would start telling me. Sad things would happen and I would just start crying in the

coffee shop. I mean, I would have tears dripping off my chin hitting the table and I know people were looking at me like, "That poor son of a bitch, he's like going through a bad divorce or something," and then I'd be laughing out loud and I'd be going, "It was really fun."

I really was like, "Don't think, don't think." At the end of the year, the Denver Post gave me a Top Thinker Award for Colorado for not thinking for seven months. It's a little plaque and it's the Rodin statue, The Thinker with a cowboy hat on it because it's Denver. All it's good for now is it's at home when I do something stupid, my wife picks up and goes, "Top thinker." So I'm writing The Painter and I told you I leapt right into it. I started and I was going along and I had this voice and I started to write it away. I started to think about stuff. I'm thinking, "Hmm. Okay. He kills this guy, Dell. Should Dell have a brother, I mean, bent on vengeance?"

So I called my editor, Jenny Jackson, who's this wonderful editor at Knopf, and I called her and I said, "Hey, Jenny, should he have a brother?" She goes, "Yeah, man, of course." So I wrote the brother and then I started thinking, "Well, he's got this commission to do these twins in Santa Fe. Should he go? When should he go?" I started blocking it out and thinking about it. Then I started thinking, "I'm thinking about it. I mean, I didn't think about the last one at all and that worked out, so this can't be good."

I'm in Paonia, which we have a little place there. If you search on the New York Times, Adobe Paonia or whatever, Peter Heller, you'll see the house that I imagined as Jim's house. So, I was in town and they have a little coffee shop, tiny little coffee shop. They have like two espresso machines in the whole town and one is in this shop. The coffee shop is about this big and there's a table in the middle, and you're going to meet anyone who's in there. Guess who was in there? Paolo Bacigalupi, the great science fiction writer. I mean, this guy wrote Ship Breakers, Windup Girl, all these big books, one big book after another. He's won Hugo Awards.

So we started talking as writers talk and I was telling him about this quandary I was in. He got this little smile. He's younger than me, but it was sort of like, he said, "Sit down, son. I got to tell you a story." He said, "I wrote one short story that I completely channeled Fugue State. I woke up, sent it in and won a big award and I love it. Second story, I engineered the whole thing. I designed the characters to interact a certain way in every scene. I plotted every minute of the story beforehand. I sent it off and won a big award and I love it. Now when I hold them both up, I can't tell the difference. I love them both." He leaned forward and he said, "Your job is just to make sure it doesn't suck."

I was like, "The whole creative burden, it just lifted off my shoulders." It was like, "Oh, that's something I can do probably, make sure it doesn't suck. I might be able to pull that off." What he was basically saying was, "Rely on your craft. Look, you've been doing this a long time. You've written a lot of stories. At the end, just bush hog out the stuff that's the bad stuff, tighten up the slow stuff, move stuff around, add a little bit if you need to, just make sure it's not terrible. You'll be fine." It was like such a relief. It was like, "Okay. Got it." So as I went through the book more than the previous novel, I was blocking things a little bit more like, "Okay. Is Jason going to..." But then I would just let it rip. So it was this sort of give and take of authorial control. I can't tell that I love them both.

So anyway, I thought that was interesting. It was consoling the idea that every story might have a different method. I just finished a novel a few months ago that started with a concept. Who knew? It was like, okay, what happens if a guy gets swept away on a paddleboard in Penobscot Bay and he wakes up and it doesn't look quite like Penobscot Bay, but it sort of does? He has to go island to island

to get home and he doesn't know if his wife's alive. That started as a concept because I started hearing people saying, well, I'm a Western writer and I love that. That's cool, but I'm not really a Western writer. I thought, "How far East can I go?" And Maine seemed pretty good.

Speaker 12:

What does it mean to be Westerner? What is [inaudible 00:50:58]?

Peter Heller:

Yeah. Why is the character named Stegner, she asked, and what does it mean to be a Western writer? So I thought of the name Stegner because it rhymed with Wagner, but then I realized it was such a great name because it's a tip of the hat to the Dean of Western literature. I mean, this is one of my favorite short story writers ever, especially the short stories. I think he's magnificent.

I think what it means to be a Western writer in some ways is, yes, there is a difference in culture, for sure, in the West. When I spend time in the East, I spend a few weeks and I get out of DIA, I swear. I mean, I grew up in the East. I spent 10 years in Vermont. I went to high school and college in New England. I grew up in New York City. I mean, I feel very at home there. But I go there and I get out of DIA and all of a sudden it's just like my spirit just lifts. My heart opens. I feel like anything's possible again. I feel like I knew that I was claustrophobic back there, not just because there's all these trees and all these people, but because I think class is more important out there and where you went to school and everybody's going so fast.

I think everybody's half crazy out there beyond the 100th Meridian, the other direction. So I think being a Western writer has a lot to do with being rooted in the landscape. I think in Western writing, the landscape is as much a character as anybody else, and I love that. I love that because I think we are deeply connected to nature as much as we deny it, try and deny it. So, thanks for that.

Speaker 12:

[inaudible 00:52:43].

Peter Heller:

Oh, I'm not. I mean, I say that, it's like I just think it's important. I mean, if I could write South American novels and get away with it, I would, just because I think it's fun to be on your toes and stretch and try different stuff. So, that's all I mean. Yeah.

Speaker 13:

First of all, I'd like to say it didn't suck. It was really enjoyable.

Peter Heller:

Thanks. I should be in the back of the cover.

Speaker 13:

I just wanted to ask a question about the girlfriend, the kind of bimbo girlfriend who went to RISD for a year. I thought it was a really interesting place to have her come from. And then also the way you described paintings. Well, you had him describe paintings. I thought it was just beautiful.

Peter Heller:

Thank you.

Speaker 13:

I mean, I've had an opportunity to try to do that myself and I know how hard it is, and so I really appreciated it. I just wondered if you could comment on the painterly side of things and whether RISD actually has something that's part of your past. I had a son who went to Brown and spent time there and that's why I know it myself, but any comment? Thank you.

Peter Heller:

Yeah. So, I don't paint, but a lot of my family paints. My mom was a painter, a trained painter. She was a sculptor all her life. My dad paints. His wife paints. My grandmother was a wonderful painter, my uncle. Then I spent nine years around Jim Wagner. I saw him every few days. What I loved about watching him work, by the way, I thought this and I've never been... I can't replicate this as a writer because we work differently, but Jim's art was so integrated into his life, I mean, throughout his whole life. The picket fence around his house in Hotchkiss was... He'd take a bandsaw and he'd cut out these fish and then he'd paint them. So every picket was an open mouth of a fish. He'd make these bird houses because he loved birds and there were like angels flying over them and hearts and fish, these wooden contraptions and he'd paint.

I'd come over and he'd be painting and they'd say, "Oh, let's have a cigar." He had smoked those little cheroots like he does. I didn't smoke, but I'd join them because they smelled good. So we'd smoke and then he'd say, "You hungry?" He'd make up a little meal of peppers and eggs and then he might just a minute and he'd go and he'd finish something painting. Then we'd go fishing and then he'd come back and he'd paint a little more. It was just so natural to his life. It was so neat, this current that ran through his life of art. It wasn't like, "I'm going to sit down and I'm going to work so many hours a day or I'm going to write." But he was so prolific because it just... One thing about him is that when he approached the canvas, he never knew what he was going to paint unless he was doing a commission, which I thought was so cool because it's the way I wanted to write.

He would make a palette that suited his mood and then he would just get to a canvas whatever size and he'd just start going. There'd be clouds and then there'd be a chicken. There's a lot of chickens, a freight train or a nude or whatever. So I just thought that was wonderful. I think that painting appealed to me, or I think that if it feels authentic, and I have to tell you that some of the funnest, most exciting emails I get on the book are from painters who say, "It resonated with me. It rang true for me." I love that. I got a guy, a wonderful L.A. painter sent me Horse and Cow the other day, this incredible oil of a horse on a cliff looking over and the crow is on his back, but it was his version of Horse and Crow and I was like so moved by that. He sent me his study and then he did a big painting. So I think there's

analogies between writing and painting and I think maybe that's where I'm drawing on, and also watching Jim paint, but I think it's neat. Yeah.

So, let's see. Let's do one more question because I know somebody has a volcanic question. I know we haven't tamped down the rebellion in here. Yes. Oh, it's not out. No, I finished it a few months ago and I'm actually going to sit on it for like six months. I'm partway through another one now. That one said, it's very surreal. I mean, it's really different and I want to let it sort of marinate for a minute and come back and see if it's okay. But it's called Three Kinds of Water, which I think is a nice title, Three Kinds of Water. Yeah. Okay. One more.

Speaker 14:

Okay. One more. I just wondered, in your travels, do you see a difference in the reaction between male readers and female readers to your book?

Peter Heller:

Well, that is a really good question. One thing that's cool is I would say that the emails I get are half and half divided, which is very cool. I mean, it's not like it's just men reading The Painter because it's not like a guy book, so that's really cool. I got one from a Coast Guard, a woman in the Coast Guard in Maine, who's a rescue swimmer for... She's training to be a rescue swimmer. Isn't that cool? She really loved it. But I think, I don't know, I had a woman tell me that she thought my women characters were shallow and weak and just sex objects, and I said that I respected her opinion. What am I going to say? I mean, I don't know. I hope that's not true.

So, a PhD class at... I think it was Stony Brook, did The Dog Stars and most of the students were women and they did PhD. They did not thesis, but they did papers on the book that were very positive. So these were critical thinkers, so that made me happy. I mean, they didn't come down hard on me. So yeah, I don't know. I mean, I hope that my woman characters are full-fledged. It's tough. It's hard as a man to write women that are right, so we just do the best we can. It's a loaded question, man. It's a good...

Speaker 14:

It's a sincere question.

Peter Heller:

No, I know. I know. It's totally sincere.

Speaker 14:

Thanks.

Peter Heller:

Thank you. Thanks a lot for coming, you guys. It's been a pleasure.

Chris:

Thank you. Book signing is at the back.

Speaker 1:

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