



Library podcast

Thomas Olde Heuvelt in conversation with Robin Hobb

00:00:00 Misha

You all for coming out tonight. My name is Misha Stone. She/her and I'm a Reader Services Librarian here at The Seattle Public Library. Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that The Seattle Public Library is on Indigenous land. These are the traditional unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Duwamish people. This event is sponsored by The Seattle Public Library Foundation author series sponsor Gary Kunis, the media sponsor of Seattle Times and presented in partnership with the University Bookstore. Thank you, Dwayne and Milo, for being here tonight. I am just utterly pleased tonight to have these two authors. Hex and Echo are some of my favorite horror novels, and Assassin's Apprentice and The Wizard of the Pigeons are among my favorite fantasy books. Thomas Olde Heuvelt is an international bestselling author and broke through with HEX. The lauded novel was published in over twenty-five countries around the world and is currently in development for TV by Gary Dauberman and James Wan. Since then, his work has been sold in more than 25 countries. The widely praised 'ECHO' recently appeared in the US and the rights for Orakel have also been sold worldwide. In 2015, he was the first Dutch author to win a Hugo Award. He lives in The Netherlands and the south of France and is an avid mountaineer. And if you haven't read Echo yet, you'll know why. That is a major detail to know. Thomas Olde Heuvelt will read from Echo and also talk with Robin tonight about his forthcoming book, which is set in the Pacific Northwest. Robin Hobb was born in California, but grew up in Alaska. It was there that she learned to love the forest and the wilderness. She has lived most of her life in the Pacific Northwest and currently resides in Tacoma, Washington. She is the author of the five critically acclaimed fantasy series the Rain Wilds Chronicles, Dragon Keeper, the Soldier Son Trilogy, the Tawny Man Trilogy, the Live Ship Traders trilogy and the Farseer trilogy under the name Megan Lynn Holmes. She is the author of The Wizard of the Pigeons, WinSingers and Clovenhoops. The Inheritance, a collection of stories, was published under both names. Her short fiction has won the Asimov's Readers Award, and she has been a finalist for both the Nebula and the Hugo Awards. Join me in welcoming Thomas and Robin tonight.

00:02:32 Thomas

Thank you. And thank you for coming on. It's good to be back in. Oh, there we go. You are. Thank you. It's good to be back in Seattle. I was here last time in 2016 during my tour for Hex.

00:02:48 Robin

It was a lot different, wasn't it? I mean, we hung out at the Seattle Center. We had a good time.

00:02:53 Thomas

Yes, yeah.

00:02:53 Robin

We always have a good time.

00:02:56 Thomas

We go back a long time.

00:02:57 Robin

Yes. I met you at was it, Elf Fantasy Fair?

00:03:01 Thomas

It was Elf Fantasy Fair in the Netherlands.

00:03:03 Robin

You had just created the very first book trailer that I had ever seen.

00:03:08 Thomas

Yeah.

00:03:08 Robin

And I was with Ralph (inaudible) he was very impressed with you as young writer, so anybody who could impress Ralph I knew was going to impress me.

00:03:16 Thomas

Yeah, I remember. I think it was...

00:03:20 Robin

You were just a punk kid.

00:03:21 Thomas

Yeah, I was very young and so were you.

00:03:26 Robin

The years have gone by.

00:03:31 Thomas

We thought, wouldn't it be cool to because back then people really made book trailers. And you've probably seen book trailers most sucked, right? Most crap the images put together. Because of course, you have no visuals when you write a book. But we created this kind of cinematic kind of trailer for a book that came out. I think it was my third book in the Netherlands, the first one with a major publisher. It's not translated, which is in the Netherlands. So we had a bunch of friends who

had like an amateur film studio. We just made this whole cinematic trailer and we put it on a big screen at the convention where I met Robin for the first time. And yeah, I remember we were standing next to each other signing. Right. And a lot of people were drawn in by the trailer.

00:04:23 Robin

I think it was brilliant. It really introduced me to what was to come in terms of writers becoming much more of a force in promoting their own books and in engaging social media. It's changed so much since the beginning of my career, where if I got two letters sent to me via the publisher after a book was published, I thought, wow, that's a pretty good reaction. And now it's Instagram and Twitter.

00:04:56 Thomas

You still get letters, though?

00:04:58 Robin

No, handwritten letters. I'll get email occasionally, but mostly all on the social media now. It's been a real ground swell of change.

00:05:10 Thomas

I have a couple of hardboiled fans in the Netherlands who keep sending me like, handwritten letters because they did that with the first book and they've been doing it with every book since. And it's just fun when people make an effort. Right?

00:05:23 Robin

I still love handwritten letters. And I go out of my way to buy really cool postal stamps. This time. I saw the pony cars, the Mustangs and so on. That's my current set. But I've had Harry Potter and I've had Big Bird. I love postage stamps, too.

00:05:44 Thomas

That's good.

00:05:45 Robin

But I've got you cornered here. So I'm going to ask you some questions, obviously, about your mountaineering experience, because it comes across so clearly in the book that you absolutely know what you're talking about. So I was going to ask you about the scariest experience you've ever had and if it keyed in at all to the horror elements.

00:06:08 Thomas

Oh, yeah. I used to be a very ambitious mountaineer. Like, I wanted to climb all the 4000 meters summits in the Alps. I'm from Europe, so the Alps is where you go to climb mountains. And in the Netherlands, we don't have mountains. I technically live on a hill. It's literally the only hill we have in the Netherlands. I think the altitude is like 200ft or something. That's seriously as high as you can get it in Netherlands. So you go to Switzerland, or you go to northern Italy or you go to France. And they have spectacular mountains. They're much like the Canadian Rockies, I guess. They're snowcapped.

There are lots of glaciers like the Alaskan mountains. And I used to be very ambitious. Like, I wanted to go to Peru, I wanted to go to Alaska to climb mountains. Nowadays, not so much anymore, because writing Echo made me more aware of the stuff that actually goes wrong when you're in the mountains. I had a couple of near misses. The thing is, when you're on the mountains, you need to be really aware of your own capability, your own borders, what you can manage as a person. But at the same time, there are risks that you can just cannot calculate. Right? The weather, you can look at the predictions, but still it can suddenly change rapidly. Rocks falling down, you just cannot predict. I once was climbing an ice face in Swiss elves with my climbing buddy. And the thing with glaciers is, if you're crossing a glacier, you need to be off the glacier before the sun hits it. Because if the sun hits a glacier, the snow bridges that go for the (inaudible), they get weaker and weaker and they don't really support your weight anymore, which means you fall through it. And the thing is, if you fall into a glacier, if you're lucky, it's deep enough that you'll be guilt instantly. If you're not lucky enough, you'll be stuck between walls of ice and you slowly but surely melt deeper and deeper into it. And you won't freeze through that, but you'll suffocate because the walls are pressing. It's just a horrible thing. So there's one thing that can go wrong that didn't go wrong. So we were crossing this glacier and there were three ice faces one west, one south and one west. And we were climbing one on the west from the eastern wall. A lot of icefall had come down. So avalanches. So the thing is, again, you need to be, you know, you cross that before the sun hits the wall because otherwise the sun melts the ice and falls down on you. So we did everything right. We went in the middle of the night, 01:00 A.m. Crossed the glacier. We're in the wall.

00:09:13 Robin

Isn't it dark?

00:09:15 Thomas

It's hideously dark.

00:09:19 Robin

Is there like headlights or something.

00:09:21 Thomas

You got, like, hat torches. Yeah, but there's literally nothing fun about it. It's freezing, it's dark. You're getting sick because you're not in your natural rhythm of taking food and sleeping and waking. So it's nasty in all sorts of ways. I really don't know why we do this to each other or to ourselves basically. But still we do. And we hit the ice wall at like 04:00 a.m. And 15 minutes later, we hear this high whistling sound and then this really low thud, and then the entire ice cliff on the east just came tumbling down on the glacier. And it was like you've seen in the picture with these billowing clouds of white and just falling down, covering our tracks, where we've just been, like 15 minutes ago. And that's just the kind of thing that makes you because I was standing with my ice axis and my crampons in the ice and I was like okay, we cannot go back anymore. And then you just have to plow through and it's like 3000ft of sheer ice face because the way back is just closed off.

00:10:37 Robin

And this is fun?

00:10:39 Thomas

It is not. The thing is though, when the sun comes up and all these mountains and snow and ice is turned into this glow of yellow and pink and orange and purple that makes it worth it. It's so beautiful when you're in a place where nobody else goes, where you're on top of the world. You see the entire world behind you. You see the cloud coverage behind you. It's just like a (inaudible) landscape and then you remember why you do it.

00:11:08 Robin

Oh, I see.

00:11:09 Thomas

But definitely when you talk about sliding and falling into a curve as and having the ice slowly melt so you go down and you suffocate. The elements of the horror of what could go wrong are definitely always there. They are always there and I mean crevasses are one thing. Then there's also, for instance, lightning storms. I was trapped on a mountain once in northern Italy, a very rocky mountain on a ridge. And they predicted that a thunderstorm would come in the next day. It was a day early. We were on the mountain. We were on a radio show in the Richard, the highest point of the mountain basically. And we could see it come in. But then at that point you just trap. You cannot go anywhere anymore. The thing is, when you climb you have a lot of metal in your body like carabineers or bolts or whatever. And I heard about this phenomenon once, but I never experienced it before. We heard this really weird crackling sound like it started buzzing and at some point I realized what it was. It's because the air gets charged with electricity. You become this human lightning rod, basically and you attract the lightning. So again, we did everything right. We buried all our metal beneath the rope and beneath the backpacks and just hit ourselves against the wall below the ridge with 20 yards below the ridge and then let it pass. But it came over and really lightning hit the ridge. There was a rolling lightning coming down the ridge like 20 yards above us. It was really creepy. Again, I'm not making the best commercial for my community. The thing is it's a horror novel.

00:13:10 Robin

Yeah, it definitely is. It definitely is. Earlier you mentioned that when I first met you in the book making the book trailer, that was actually your third published book. It only exists in Dutch still.

00:13:25 Thomas

Yeah.

00:13:26 Robin

So how old were you? When did you start writing and why did you start writing?

00:13:32 Thomas

I think I was eight years old when I started writing my first stories. I was ten years old when I finished my first. I still remember because what's called Christmas Carol 1993, and it was dedicated to my

grandmother, who had a birthday on first Christmas Day. And it was a story where my sister and I it was a science fictional kind of second coming story. My sister and I were like, moved to Bethlehem in the year 3000, and we had to prevent the coming of the Antichrist, which turned out to be my sister and my grandma loved it. (laughter)

00:14:17 Thomas

I mean, I love genre fiction, man. I don't know. I want to know that for you as well. So but the reason I started writing is because I was brought up with a lot of storytellers. My grandfather, my uncle, they used to tell me stories before bedtime and he told me the good stuff. Like, my grandfather always made up stories, rolled out kind of stories, the kind of children's stories that are kind of not really suitable for children being accurate. And my uncle always told me existing stories. He learned in my heart and told me, like, world I was The Witches or Bram Stoker's Dracula when I was eight, or the entire Lord of the Rings saga when I was nine. And I was frightened by it as a child because he was a silhouette. He lived in Amsterdam and I lived in the east of the Netherlands, and we spent a lot of weekends there because my father had died when I was really young. So to be a bit easier on my mom, we spent a lot of weekends in Amsterdam and he'd sit on the bed in the darkest silhouette and he'd tell us stories and they were always really frightening, especially The Witches. I remember. You probably know The Witches, right?

00:15:35 Robin

Roald Dahl, the pointy shoes.

00:15:37 Thomas

The pointy shoes and the gloves that people wear because they have claws. And then it was winter and then so women on the street were wearing gloves. So I trusted nobody anymore. The thing is though, because my father had died, I, as a child, visualized death as something that lived in our attic, like something that was alive and I could come down to get my sister, get me if I make too much noise on the stairs. And having these storytellers in my life, I've seen found that the only way to deal with these kinds of feelings was by telling my own creepy stories. And that's what I started doing and that's what I did ever since.

00:16:22 Robin

I think it's interesting that your sister was the antichrist in your first Finnish story.

00:16:28 Thomas

She really was.

00:16:31 Robin

But your protagonist in Echo has a very special relationship with his sister, as I remember. Is that reflective at all?

00:16:40 Thomas

I have a really good bond with my sister. I make fun of her all the time. I used to when I was a kid. I still do, but we never in a fight. We're really close together. And it's a really beautiful brother sister bond. And Echo as well. I think that's through her.

00:16:57 Robin

Yeah. I think it's interesting though, where the horror elements have come from, the idea that death lives in your attic. For the longest time, I firmly believed I was afraid of the dark because the dark was not just the lights being turned off, dark was something else. And so when you're in your room at night and it fills up with the dark, that's a lot more than the lights being turned off.

00:17:25 Thomas

Oh, yeah, definitely.

00:17:27 Robin

But I didn't turn to writing horror. I wrote fantasy. A lot less scary stuff than what you write.

00:17:35 Thomas

But was that still something that you write about that as well then, when you were young?

00:17:42 Robin

Not so much. I think the very first story I ever completed, I was like seven maybe, and I was writing still with the big pencils that they used to give us on the really the pencil paper that had like splinters in it. It was so coarse. And it was a Halloween story. Okay. Because Halloween not very scary though. No, I was not thinking of scary stuff.

00:18:08 Thomas

That said, it thing is, every now and then when you're young, life just opens doors and there's something really scary behind it. Literally what happened to me when I was nine years old in an endless we have this tradition that you have to sell stamps for charity. So you go door by door as a kid and you sell stamp. Do you have something like that in America as well?

00:18:37 Robin

So you're like selling postage stamps?

00:18:41 Thomas

I guess selling like Scouts cookies or something would be similar. It is similar. It supports your organization or something like that.

00:18:49 Robin

Selling the world's finest chocolate or Christmas card.

00:18:56 Thomas

Yeah. So every kid in the Netherlands does that when you're nine years old. So I went door by door with my stamps, and I remember I rang this doorbell, was like an apartment complex in my hometown. And basically the first floor gallery rang a doorbell. This lady opens up, evoking Carrie, I assume, as Stephen King. That's what she looked like. She had a white night gown on, it was covered in blood, and she probably expected there to be a doctor or an ambulance or anything. I don't know what happened to her. What I remembered that she looked very ill. So it either was like a very runny, bleeding nose with a lot of high fever or it was a case of home violence or she had an accident. I really just don't know. But she was just standing there looking at me, and I looked back and I have my stance. I was raised pretty politely, so I couldn't just run. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. But she didn't say anything. And so at some point, I tried to recollect my voice. And I remember the thing I said was, oh, you don't look too good today. You know what? I'll come back another day. And then I ran. But of course, I didn't dare tell my mum. Somehow these kind of experiences, when you go through them, you don't dare tell your parents when they're really scary because fear is such a personal, emotional thing. But I went to bed, and that night she was standing at my bed, of course, and the next night again, and every nightmare she was coming back. And I never knew what happened to her, how she ended up. I hope she's well. But it's that thing that life just opens the door and there's something horrible behind it and that you have to deal with and cope with yourself. That's what made me write these kind of stories.

00:21:09 Robin

I think I led a very sheltered childhood. I remember trick or treating in people who deliberately do like wonderfully scary things. But it's Halloween night and you expect your neighbors to be kind of doing wonderfully scary things. Nothing like that. No. So there you are. That's the divide between fantasy and horror, I think.

00:21:36 Thomas

What made you decide to write fantasy, then?

00:21:40 Robin

I think the watershed event for me, as it is for a lot of fantasy writers of my age, was *The Lord of the Rings*. I read it at exactly the right age to read it. I was a young teenager and I had never read anything like it. And I've read a lot of other stuff that was fantastic. I'd read a lot of Fritzliber's *Fafford* in *The Gray Mouser* and I've read *Conan* and *Tarzan* and all kinds of things like that. But *The Lord of the Rings*, this was a very real world with all of this happening, and everything that happened was so significant. And the characters, you had to really care about them. They weren't throwaways. And it wasn't like the *Conan* stories. I always knew that *Conan* was going to survive at the end and go on. You didn't have that safety belt with *The Lord of the Rings*. And I remember closing the books and thinking, that's what I want to write, but I don't think I'll ever write anything that's wonderful. And then, of course, immediately rereading the whole thing because I looked and looked and I couldn't find anything similar. But I was in Fairbanks, Alaska, at the time, and we didn't have this whole library, and the public library was quite a walk. But simply because it was such a standalone experience, I had known since I was small, but I wanted to be a writer. But that was the moment when I said, and I want to write fantasy.

00:23:24 Thomas

All right, and then... what I'm most curious... because Tolkien inspired you, but your work is still very different from Tolkien. In Tolkien's world, he lived between the wars, right? So he brought his own experience for World War I and then leading up to World War II. In it, he was bitten by a spider in South Africa, and that came back as Shelob. I always am interested to hear from writers what is uniquely you in your fantasy when you write, what defines a true Robin Hobb fantasy in your own words?

00:24:17 Robin

I think I always have more questions than I do answers.

00:24:21 Thomas

All right.

00:24:22 Robin

So when I write a story, sometimes it has a big question in it, and I don't necessarily have the answer to that question, but I will explore what could be the answer in a story, and then sometimes in the next one that I write, I have the same question, but I try a different answer. So in the story, it's the Farther trilogy. There's a whole lot of, what is your duty to your family? What is your duty to yourself? What is honor? Those kinds of questions are all through the Foreseeable trilogy. So exploring questions that I have no really solid answer to is a big part of the writing. I think every writer experiences that, where you start telling a story, and you get closer and closer to the end, and sometimes you don't really know what the end is. And I don't know if this is true for you, but you write an ending, and then you think about it and say, is that really the ending? And what I used to do is put it away and let it cool for two or three weeks and come back and read it. And sometimes you say, no, that's not the ending. And so you say, well, shift it. So instead of doing this, they do that. And where does that take you? So a lot of writing is done for myself, just to see where it might go and when I'm happy with it, then send it off to the editors. My editor in the US really loves it if I have an outline. But in almost every case, when I was finished writing, I could take that outline and write that book.

00:26:14 Thomas

You don't want to bind it out to that, right?

00:26:16 Robin

No, I think you can talk a book to death if you tell all your friends about the books you're writing and what's going on, then suddenly it's not fun, and you have to make something else happen. Or if you have a really detailed outline, which some editors like, I always felt like I already wrote that I'm going to write something different, or you suddenly realize that you were steering the character, and the character wouldn't really do what was convenient to the plot. They're going to do something totally different and go off the outline. And now you either have to follow the character or drag them back kicking and screaming to what they wouldn't really have done is themselves. It's a real process.

00:27:05 Thomas

I relate to that. Recently, I had to write an audio original for a different publisher than my regular publisher, and they asked me to bring in an outline, and I said, oh, I don't know what I'm going to write when I get there. And if they just didn't understand the process, I guess we'll write a word in that way.

00:27:29 Robin

But in school, when I was growing up, I'm 70, so my experience at school and how things were taught is very different from probably most of you. But I was told, Always have an outline. You can't really write anything solid without an outline. And, oh, the tediousness of the Roman Numerals and the capital letters and the small letters, and then the tiny, and I just dreaded those assignments. Outline what happened in this chapter, and you've read the book, and you've enjoyed it, and by the end of the outline, you never want to read that writer again. But I think it's interesting that you don't always know where the story is going. You just write it as it comes along. Did you know the ending to Echo?

00:28:23 Thomas

No. I was worried. I was worried reading it. There's no way that he can wrap this up. Yeah. At some point when you've read a couple of books, echoes my six, I think, and I've read two more. One is now already translated, and we'll be out here next year. And another one I just finished in Dutch, and we'll be out in the Netherlands in November for both of them. Like three weeks before my deadline, I called up my publisher saying, Help. I have no idea where it's going to go. But at some point after a couple of books, there's a certain faith that things will fall into place, and usually it does, but they're still always Titanic. Right?

00:29:13 Robin

Have you ever had an editor, helped you find the ending of the book?

00:29:16 Thomas

Not so much an editor. I have a couple of people that I like to brainstorm with, like a couple of really good friends, and it's then that I like to call when I'm really stuck. And some writers like to have this really immersive experience when they write. Don't want to share the story, don't want to tell anyone. I'm a bit like that. But there's a couple of confidants, if you will, that I like to share in the process because they really help me whenever I need something practical. Okay. I need my characters to go from A to B, and it needs to be in a creative way because this and that and there. So how can we do that? And they just give me ideas, and I'll play with them. And together, when we let a bit of humor lose on it, then we'll find something but the endings.

00:30:10 Thomas

Stephen King once said that stories are like fossils in the ground, that they already exist, that you only have to dig them up because they are already there. It's kind of like that there.

00:30:21 Robin

I agree.

00:30:21 Thomas

Sometimes it feels so much like it was already there, but I just had to discover it. Does that relate to you?

00:30:30 Thomas

For me, it feels like there's this current, like a very strong river, and once you are in the current, if you go with where the story is taking you, then it works. If you're looking at your word count and your page numbers and saying, I got to wrap this up in another 25 pages, and then you're trying to force it to the end, it doesn't like that, and the story doesn't come up well, you end up rewriting it. I have one editor that I've been with for a long time, Jane Johnson in the UK. And she's been all through some of the Linholm books and then all through the Robin Hobb books. And she's helpful to me because she will sometimes tell me, you have to go back and rewrite that whole chapter because you didn't really want to say what horrible thing happened, and you stood past it, and so now you have to go back and rewrite it. And in the Far Sea or Trilogy, when Fitz is in Regal's Dungeon, I did not want to write those scenes, and Jane said, no, you have to, because you owe it to the reader. I worked like that with her. But as far as my deal with my husband is, he does not read anything I've ever written because he's so much inside the walls that any criticism from him would just that would be the end of it. The story would be broken, and I wouldn't be able to go on...

00:32:04 Thomas

You think so, yeah?

00:32:07 Speaker 1

We've had that agreement now for we've been married 51 years. He's never read a word that... He doesn't read anything I write. He likes books about things with titles like super tanker and manuals for generators and things like that, and, you know, judo techniques. And he has a lot of interest, but he's not really into those kind of stories.

00:32:37 Thomas

No, my boyfriend doesn't read my books because he's just scared of horror. Anything horror. Oracle the title of the book that will be out next year. If you google, you can find a cover online, the Dutch cover. It's done beautifully with big letters Oracle and then there's this figure that stands in the waist, and there's this darkshaped figure with this hoodie on. And my publisher in the Netherlands, they made life sized cardboard cut outs of that figure for bookstore, so they displayed them in like 200 bookstores all over the country, and they were pretty. Creepy. And a lot of bookstore owners told me that they were putting the thing just behind a pillar or just in front of the door toilets and just to scare each other, to scare customers and all that. And it gave me an idea to do the same thing at home. We live in the woods and our house is our house is mostly made of glass so it gets dark out there, right inside it's light, but then the walls are mirrored. Basically. My boyfriend went to the bathroom and we just put it right in front of the door around the corner. Get out. He just kept his joke. Every time you see the freaking thing for a split second you think it's a live person who's standing there. It's really freaky. So no, he has not read my books. I think there's a dunker side to you that even I know about.

00:34:28 Robin

Oh dear. I don't think I've ever done anything like that. No.

00:34:36 Speaker 1

I'm always fascinated by what writers is. Why I ask you that question. What makes you distinguishably you in a sense? Sometimes I teach writing masterclasses in the Netherlands and I think a lot about what good stories are. And I think as a writer you need to start looking for what is typically your story, what makes your story unique from what else is out there. Right. I remember in my formative years as a writer, I always thought a lot of these writers have such good backstories. Like Roalda, for instance, who was in a boarding school in the UK and a lot of people who hated children there, so they hit them with sticks and that's the world he grew up in. So that they have the kind of backstory for the witches or for Matilda or any of the others. And Stephen King who grew up in poverty and rural Maine and it clearly speaks in his world where he gets his stories from. Whereas I was just a regular kid from the Netherlands and always felt like I didn't really have an interesting story to tell. But then I kind of started using it to my advantage, I guess, because I wanted to. OK, what can I, as a Dutch person, bring to horror stories? What can I bring it to scary stories? Because the Netherlands is not really a scary country. It's kind of boring in a sense. To live in the Netherlands is a good thing because everything is taken care of very practically, but geographically is boring completely. Like I said, I live on the only hill in the country and there isn't a lot of religion, there isn't a lot of superstition, there's none of that. So we're very down to earth people and I think wouldn't that be cool to experiment with that in scary stories? So that's when I started writing stories where people deal with the supernatural in the most down to Earth ways. And that's what made Hex a fresh story, I think, because I remember I wrote a concept for it for a friend of mine who was a filmmaker, and I was forming the book, and I wanted to discuss it with him just to see if there was something there. And he shut it down. He shut it down completely because he hated it and rightly so because it was basically a haunted town story and it was his witch with a stitched device and there was all of that, but other than that, it was just a regular kind of freaky ghost story, basically. And then we were trying to shoot on the idea and then making some fun about it and then we came up, okay, what if we treated in a very Dutch way, what if these people aren't actually scared of the witch, but what if they're used to it? What if she's like the Townsville, the supernatural Townsville, where whenever she pops up in your bathroom, regular people just run and scream. But Dutch people, they hang a dish cloth over a face and take a shower.

00:38:06 Robin

No more spoilers.

00:38:09 Thomas

Not too much spoilers. Most of the people have read Hex probably.

00:38:13 Robin

Yeah, you really need hex is a fascinating way of looking at... what if there is something going on in your town or your environment and you become so inured to it that you do. You throw a towel over it and it could be like a metaphor for so many things going on, you know, if you wanted to get all symbolic with it. But it's a fascinating idea because you think about it. And then it made me start

thinking, okay, so what is so American that I don't even see it? That I would just say, oh, but that's how it is. Yes, there's a guy living under the bridge and yeah, well, that's how it is. And the things like that, the things that we routinely come to accept that even when I was a kid growing up, it would have been like, what? And how the world has changed so much. What we accept and how we deal with it in a survivalist way to get by, we have to deal with this really scary concept or this really sad thing. But to me, the Hex really spoke to me for that reason. It was a very scary book, but it also made me stop and think about a lot of things.

00:39:49 Speaker 1

That's the thing. A lot of people well, Hex is a bit like deceiving in a way, because it starts out in a very funny way, but like what I said, with which in very practical manners, right? But still, people are genuinely afraid of that figure with the stitched up eyes, just standing at your bed for nights on end and just watching you. I mean, she cannot see anything. You know, she's watching you. And I've toured a lot of places for Hex. I went to South America, north America, China and Taiwan. All over Europe and wherever I went, people are generally afraid of the same things. It's that invasion of your personal space by some unknown force that whatever culture you're coming from, we all fear that. And then there is, of course, the other thing that I guess makes me... me, the fear of the fear of losing loved ones, like important theme in Hex, also an Echo. And that also goes back to, of course, my own father's death when I was a kid.

00:41:06 Robin

It's just interesting sometimes to think about what shapes you're writing and what you bring to it. And a lot of times I think that writers, we often don't realize how much we're revealing about ourselves until a reader comes up to you and says to me, you're fascinated with blood? And I'm going, well, you know everything about me. Well, not everything, but a good portion. If you have a drop of my blood, you can tell all kinds of things about me and things that I have finally noticed cropping up in my stories over and over are blood and all the information in it and memories and the intersection between blood and memory because your blood remembers all your ancestry. Oh, yeah. But I do think that we don't necessarily realize how much of ourselves we're revealing to our readers and in the topics we return to over and over and over again.

00:42:22 Thomas

Yeah. So are you working now on anything?

00:42:28 Robin

I am, but I can't talk it to death because it's still I've got almost I've got 100 pages.

00:42:37 Thomas

Okay.

00:42:38 Robin

And I finally said to my editor, I have 100 pages. And I had just two weeks before, pitched her a completely different book. And she said, oh, yeah, but I remember were you working on something

else? And I said, oh, yeah, it just kind of fell apart. So I took the pages of the one that had fallen apart and I looked at it and I thought, oh, no, I didn't fall apart. I just need to do this. And this I have this terrible habit. I cannot read something without editing it as I read it, and all of a sudden I just hit the right point and it took off. And then I had to write to Jane and say, that's good. Maybe I am writing this other book that we talked about like, four years ago.

00:43:33 Thomas

Good for you. Great.

00:43:34 Robin

How many books ideas do you have going at one time? How many have just book ideas, books that you want to write?

00:43:44 Thomas

I think four, one of which is a book that I wanted to write for probably ten years already. And I just have the coolest opening ever, and I have no idea what to do with it, but it's so awesome. And I actually wrote the opening of the book already, and it's great. It's very funny and it's spectacular and weird. I have no idea what to do with it.

00:44:13 Robin

All right. Whenever I'm working on a book and I come to a hard part, a part I don't really want to write because maybe it's a little bit boring to me, or maybe it's a little bit too sad, or maybe I don't quite know how to handle it. All of a sudden this really shiny, bright other book idea will pop up. Why don't you write me? I'm so much easier, and it's going to be more fun. And the lovely thing about writing with a computer now as opposed to a typewriter is I can open a file and give it a name and put that idea in it and then separate map. Now you're safe and I'm shutting the file and I'm doing my work.

00:44:50 Thomas

Yeah, the thing about that idea is not even a horror story. I'm not even sure it's probably a mix between it's a romance. No, it's not romance. No, it's probably a mix between, like mythological fantasy, humor, contemporary literature. It's been like the Anansi Boys by Neil Gaiman. Fantastic book. That kind of tone, a light humoristic kind of tone and an awesome story in it. That's what I'd like to compare it with. But it's very different and also very different, what I usually do, but I will finish it at some day. But I also have three more ideas for creepy books. Yes,

00:45:39 Robin

I don't know how many, and at 70 I'm looking and saying, it takes me a year to write a book. How many more of these can I write? And I'm booking and there's too many. Yes. So it's pick and choose time.

00:45:56 Thomas

It's a fantastic experience yesterday, because the past seven months I finished a new novel. It's called November, and that sits here in the Pacific Northwest before, like I said, just briefly, but what I

do when I mean, my book said in the real world and of course the invasion supernatural, but failed to real world. And so for months on end, you live in this specific place, a specific town on Google Earth if it's far away and you know everything about it and you know the whole area. And then I go through the street view and then everywhere. And yesterday I visited all the locations from the new book. It's here, up in the snow Colombia forest near the town of Carnation. Sounds familiar. Okay, you probably all know here. It's partly Seattle, partly all the cities around it, but mostly up there. And then there's a nonexistent town up there and it's called Lockhaven in the book. And it's up in the hills. And even, you know, in the book people get Vietnamese take out from Sam's. Noodle town all the time, and I ate there yesterday. It's just awesome. Places are real. But I can tell you a little bit about the book, very excited about it because it's coming out in the Netherlands in a couple of weeks. It's my deal with the devil kind of story. My Bowskin back kind of story. There's this town called Lockhaven and there's a street, it's called Bird Street and a couple of houses there. And if you look around, you'd see that these people are doing really well. They have five families, big houses, but not only Enriches, but also they're all doing exactly what they need to do. They have a lot of faith, a lot of good fortune in life. They have all of perfect children, all very talented, all prodigies and talented in different ways. They're doing a little bit too well, if you will. Right? And that's, of course, because they have some sort of deal with the devil. Not literally, I won't spoil that part, but they do have a lot of good fortune. But it means that every November it changes around. They have to experience the opposite of it. So they get a lot of ill fortune, they get a lot of bad luck, they get a lot of accidents, mental confusion. Nothing too bad as long as you make the second commission happen. And that is that someone needs to die in the woods behind their homes every November. Not necessarily one of them, but someone. So it needs to be sacrificed. But these people are normal people like you and me. They just don't want to take someone up there and kill them. So they go look for people who want to die anyway, like people who are terminally ill and want to commit to euthanasia, which is not really allowed in the United States. So that no one has to die unnecessarily, if you will. So ethically, it's kind of dicey, but that's how they try to make it work in this book. The creepy thing about it is that what I heard from my editor and from the readers and really use Reddit now in the Netherlands, that in every step of the way that makes you wonder, as a reader, would I go with this? Would I allow myself to do this still for my own benefit or for the benefit of my children or my family? And each time it goes further and further and further until it gets completely murky what is ethically okay and what is not. And it gets really dark on the human level in that way. And that ball sets up here in the hills. Really excited about it. It's really an awesome book, I think.

00:50:20 Robin

And it's just coming out in the US?

00:50:22 Thomas

Yes, it will be probably a year and a half, maybe two, because there's a book in between called Oracle.

00:50:29 Robin

Oracle.

00:50:30 Thomas

This one tends to be translated I'll sit very soon. Yeah, let's do that. Let's do some questions.

00:50:37 Speaker 1

I have a question. My question is for you, which is we get the Antichrist (inaudible)...

00:50:48 Robin

A special Christmas chapbook.

00:50:51 Speaker 1

And I was also going to ask about working with a translator, which I think must be a really interesting experience for you because obviously your English is very good. Is it odd reading someone else's translation of your work and thinking, like, would I have done that? Or like, wow, that's a really great phrase, or something.

00:51:11 Thomas

Yeah, about the story, likely so. I recently found out my grandmother died, like, five years ago and she always kept that story in a scrapbook. And so we recently found it, and I have it now. It's really funny.

00:51:31 Robin

Does your sister think it's funny?

00:51:33 Thomas

Yeah, very much so, actually. So if there's some kind of special occasion, I might translate it at some point and get it over here. And that goes into your second question. I have written original fiction in English, but very rarely. So I write naturally in Dutch because it just comes easier for me. I wrote the new ending for Hex because I rewrote the ending when I read the translation. I wrote that directly in English. And then there's a short story. It's called Do You Know How the Story Goes? It's up on tor.com. I wrote that first in English. I don't know, I just somehow don't feel comfortable enough to try directly to write English. Maybe I should just try it because it saves a lot of hassle. Echo is translated really well, I think. There are two narrators in the book both have very different voices. One is a Dutch journalist, and the other one, they say, American linguistics student living in the Netherlands. So very distinct, different voices. He's done really well. I think (inaudible) is his name. What I usually do, how the process goes is a translator translates the book and then I go over it to put my own voice in it. So it's a very thorough edit. It's very time consuming. Often. For instance, recently I got the translation for Oracle. I didn't really like what the translator did there because it lacked a lot of... English is compared to Dutch, especially a very tight, very snappy language. And the tighter you can write, the better it often is. And the translation lack that. So you have to do a lot of work on it. I'm actually working on it right now. But it's an interesting process because, like what you said, sometimes you think, hey, that's an awesome thing that the translator did there. And sometimes you go, like, I would say this a bit differently, which is okay.

00:53:55 Speaker 2

I have a question. So I like visiting the locations from different books. You just mentioned Carnation. You mentioned Sam's Noodles. Is there anywhere else you'd recommend readers go when the book comes out?

00:54:05 Thomas

When the book comes out, I can make the whole list there. Yeah, definitely. I tried to go up to the actual place of Lockhaven for November, but it's in the hills. It's east of Carnation, and they locked all these roads to it. I tried from every single corner. I tried to get them to all his gates, and they're blocking. And it says, it's a private area. You cannot go there. So I don't know what they're hiding there. Probably trees. A lot of trees. Yes. I can definitely give you a whole list of places, but it's the entire town of Carnation. It's like the Toll Middle School. It's the Cedar Crest High in Duval. All these places take part in the book. But once it's out there, drop me a note. Drop me a note and I can make a tour for you.

00:55:16 Speaker 3

How much input do you get for the production of your books? Like the sunset version, the artwork is just really unique in your narrators for your audio books. How much input do you get with that stuff once you've written your book?

00:55:32 Thomas

When they are different art forms, I tend to let other artists do their work. For instance, some top edition that you refer, it's a limited edition of Hex. It's coming out, I think, next year. They're beautiful. The sun top edition. Do you know them?

00:55:52 Robin

I haven't seen them.

00:55:53 Thomas

They're a Californian publisher. They publish really beautiful limited edition. So there's like a thousand copy artist edition that has artwork done by a Dutch artist, actually. Then there's like a numbered tuna 50 copy edition, which is this discovery that has peacock feathers all laid in it, and the peacock plays a role in the book. I won't spoil that. And then there's the lettered 26 copy edition made from goatskin, and they're stitched up and all that. They're really thematically done well. I just let the publishers do that stuff because they know what they're doing. I can also with narrators, they sometimes ask me what I prefer. I think for Echo, they have different narratives for both voices. Right? And then also yeah, exactly, because both narrators are guys. And then there's a couple of chapters, one from the beginning, and then later on there's a psychologist who narrates the story. They're both from a female's voice because they're written that way. So I think it's clever. And they ask me that kind of stuff, but then they know it's bringing the right people. Basically. I like to have influence. I like to have probably more influence than good for me. But on the other hand, you just want to give it away to people. Do you mingle with that a lot?

00:57:38 Robin

Not really. In terms of audiobooks, I haven't really had much interaction with narrators, except that there are some who are very send me a list of names often and say, would you create a pronunciation guide, or would you actually do a recording of how you say those names with translators? I love my translators, and I know several of them very well. Arnold and I, my French translator, have been friends for years and years, and he is so meticulous. I will toss off the name of some plant and he will come back with a list of, okay, here we are. Here's the Latin names. And you've used a common name. Which of these plants is it and then I will give it the correct French name. He is so meticulous, and I really love working with him. Translators, they're like treasures. I mean, a good translator can help you reach an audience you would never otherwise reach. And so I treasure them and my friendships with them. And I've been fortunate enough to meet a number of them for art. John Howe and I became a very sneaky friendship because I would actually send him chapters of the books, and he would say, I don't like your sword. Can we change your sword to this? And then he puts the sword he wants on the cover. So it's wonderful to work with people, and I always think you have to leave room for the other person's creativity, whether it's cover art or translator or Dark Horse is bringing out graphic novels of the Farthier trilogy, and that the first issue will come out in December. And looking at the art that I've seen and Jody Hauser has done the script, and she has been so meticulous. I recognize the dialogue, but it's really fun to work with somebody and respect their creativity and what they're bringing to it and realizing that once you open the door and let somebody else in, they have a place in the world that you've created that should belong to them.

01:00:25 Thomas

Often it doesn't make sense to be too strongly about something because, for instance, with cover art, what works in one country might not work at all in a different country. Right. Dwayneze just showed me a copy of the UK edition of Echo, which is completely different from the green one that you see. There much more how do you say that? This one speaks out a lot in the UK. Is more immersive in a sense. And then recently, it was published in Poland, and they put a very different color on it that

01:01:03 Thomas

I might not pick myself. But that works in their market because it apparently sells really well. So publishers know what they're doing and make sense often.

01:01:13 Robin

When I first began writing, one of the German publishers was just recycling artwork for cover art, and it was kind of had something to do with the book, but not really. But this was a cover. They had they had rights to it, and they were putting it on the paperback, and that was kind of an interesting experience. I once had a story published in a magazine called SF World. It's in China. It's huge printing, but I don't speak or read Chinese. They printed my name on it, so I technically knew that it was my story, but that's the only thing that I could recognize. And then they commissioned artwork for it, and I didn't really recognize the artwork as far as the stories. So I just hope that they got the right story. A lot of it, you take on faith, you trust that your editors have your best interest and are doing things for you because they love your story.

01:02:16 Thomas

Anyone else has a question?

01:02:18 Speaker 4

So this is specifically for Robin Hobb. I think you can't so I started reading Robin Hobb when I was a young teen, very long time ago. I have been rereading the (inaudible) for my whole life. And I've noticed as I've gotten older, I feel and think about the characters differently as I age and things happen and I experience new things, specifically with like I remember as a young kid really rooting for Malta. And then as I got older, I'm like, oh my gosh, what was I thinking? So as time passes and you write different stories and time, yes, you experience different things. Do you find that your feelings and thoughts about your characters change over time or because you've come up with them, you're pretty solid in how you think about them?

01:03:07 Robin

I think my experience with Fitz was the most interesting was because as Fitz ages in the early books where he is narrating it and he's absolutely certain that he's making the correct decisions and then when he's an older person and he looks back and he's going, ah, man, why did I do that? I think we all do that. We look back and say, why did I drop that class? Why didn't I soldier through on that? Why on earth did I date that person? So I think that we always have that... because I spent so many years with Fitz and the fool. Definitely they grew up and they changed. And many, many years ago, Fritz, Libraries, Fafford and the Great, and I was mispronounced his name, Stafford and the Gray mouse for stories were very important to me. And there was a story he wrote in which something, the Falls Fafford that will forever change that character. And I was so outraged by it that I wrote him a letter saying, I don't understand. I understand that Fafford is actually based on you and you've done this thing to your character. How could you do that? And I got back this wonderful letter, very cramped handwriting saying if the character doesn't grow and change, if the end of the story is always a reset to the beginning, what's the point of writing the story? You have to give challenges to your characters so that they continue to grow and change. And I think I've wandered way off the topic of what the question was, but that was a significant piece of writing advice for me. I think that Jane and I were very different from each other. And I don't know if we had met in any other circumstances, if we would have had this relationship and friendship of many, many years. My mother was British. She was from Norfolk, from Norwich. And so a lot of my vocabulary, my way of writing and thinking is English rather than 100% American. And some of my attitudes are more English than an American. And I think that that is one place where Jane and I mesh very well. She is a writer. She's an extraordinary writer. And I am so glad to see her books finally meeting with the well-deserved success that they should have been getting all along. I'm always scared that if she becomes too successful as a writer, she'll stop wanting to edit my books. But I also have this strong feeling that if Jane retires and said, I'm not going to edit anymore, I think it would be hard for me to write. Certain editors are writing for them. I'm writing this book for Jane. Recently, an editorial friend, Gardner de Suisse, passed away, and he had accepted many of my stories for anthologies and when he was working as an editor for the magazine. And there's this story that I was writing, and when he died, it was like, oh, I was writing this story for Gardner, and now if I finish it, what will I do with it? Nobody's going to get it the way Gardner would get it. And so that story is kind of still sitting on the computer,

and I'll probably finish it someday and try sending it off and see if another editor gets it the way Gardner. But it's a hole in my life. I miss him. I smile when I think about him because he was such an amazing editor. But, yeah, it's a strange relationship you built up over the years with your editors and your agents and your other writing people. I think you and I have a very bizarre friendship. Yeah, because it's hyphenated. I'll see Thomas for a few hours tonight, and then maybe in three or four years I'll see them again. But it's likely take up too far, too, right where it left off. Because we've met in Poland, we've met in Holland States a couple of times, but you get these odd writing friendships, especially with a lot of the big science fiction and fantasy conventions. There are people that I am I only see at conventions, and so I have them just in this little box. I'll see so and so at a convention. How long have I known you, Dwayne?

01:08:23 Dwayne

(inaudible)

01:08:28 Robin

Me, too. So this is Dwayne. He's my bookseller, and he's been selecting books for not only me and my offspring, but now my grandchildren. They go into the bookstore and even the grandchildren that are not biologically related to me, the ones we picked up along the way by marriage. Oliver thinks Dwayne is amazing, but he says, Stop this. I can't always hear understand what he's saying, but he thinks Dwayne will find the perfect book for him. And the scary part is Dwayne does. So the friendships you make along the way that are so long-lasting in writing are just incredible. Do you have a bookseller in Holland? You have a bookseller in the Netherlands that is...

01:09:19 Thomas

Definitely, I mean, so Hex in the Netherlands sets in a real town, not a fiction town like Black Spring in the United States version of the book. Because I relocated the book to the American setting when it was translated. But the original sets in the Netherlands and the store in that town there are about 3000 people living in the town and there's this really tiny, small little bookstore like Spark Post Office part like supply store and part bookstore. They sold over 20 copies of the book in that one single store and that one single town partly because everyone in town basically has read the book by now became quite well known in the Netherlands. And then because a lot of tourists come in to see this part from the book, to actually see where it all takes place, and they buy extra copies and all that, and then when tourists come in who don't know the book, then they referred to it takes place years pick up the book so I have a good relationship with it. And then in the city next door, basically where I grew up with like 10 miles away from that little village where the book sets, there's a major bookstore. And that's why I did my first ever book event when I was a kid, when I was 18 years old, published my first novel. And dating, because they are so close to the area of the book they sold thousands and thousands of copies of Hex alone. And then the other books they of course also plug. There's a couple, but I try to... booksellers are very important. I mean, they bring our stories to use readers, right? So they're golden. And then when the Pandemic came in, the Netherlands Oracle came out. The book will be out next year. Here. I took the effort to go to 150 bookstores all over the country to sign their stock, to sign preorders, to record vehicle clips, because there was a campaign in the Netherlands by locally support your local bookstore worked very well because bookstores actually did

really well throughout the pandemic. Luckily enough, because they all had to close for a long time. But it was nice for me to get out of the house for a change. Again, the roads were empty, basically. But to support the booksellers and for them to sell a lot of books that way. I try to invest a lot in my relationship with booksellers. And then book people are just so nice wherever you go, whenever you have conventions, like what you said librarians. Yeah, there's so many nice people in this world.

01:12:17 Robin

I actually have this little rolodex at home and if I have a question about a horse's harness there is somebody I can look up and phone and say okay, the regular riding horse has died. There's nothing left but this big battle horse. Can you take a saddle off a small riding horse and put it on a big horse? What happens? What do you have to do? And that person will know.

01:12:43 Thomas

Yeah.

01:12:43 Robin

And I thought that was unique to me. I thought, wow, I've got this really cool rolodex of my experts. And then many years ago Stephen Bruce and I were writing a story and together we were sitting in Minneapolis in his office. I had flown out there, we were finishing it up and basically we wanted one of the characters to get shot and for it to do a lot more damage than it would look like it had done it's. Two or three in the morning Steve phones up a friend who happens to be a medical professional and says OK, we really want this to do this bullet is going to do a lot of damage. How do we do it? And the fellow on the phone thinks for a while and he says okay, it hits a bone so it looks like there's just an entry room but it travels up the bone and then it goes into the torso and it bounces around in there and it does all kinds of terrible things. And I was going wow, so cool. Okay, we've got it. But for Steve to just I know some people ask and at two in the morning he calls this guy up. And the wonderful thing is those people in that rolodex, I would never call them at two in the morning but I bet that if I did they would still oh yeah, I know how to solve that problem in the story. Those are the wonderful people you meet along the way.

01:14:11 Thomas

Oh yeah. And even when you do research, even the people that you don't know, as soon as they know that they're providing information for creative projects people love to talk about what they do. Obviously. I was writing a story in the Netherlands we have this thing where in June is the month where the literary organizations, the bookstore plug thriller, crime and horror, which is great. And each year one well known thriller author is invited to write a gift book for the bookstore. So there's a huge print run, about 4000 copies and anyone who's in a bookstore spending €20 or something, they get that as a gift book. So it's a novella. A couple of years ago I was invited to write it for them and I wrote this novella. It's called Dolores Dolly Baby Doll about a mother who loses her baby and in her grief, technically what she does it's kind of gruesome. It's a horror story. Technically what she does is she digs up a baby, a recently deceased baby from another family nearby and takes care of it as if it's her own. And all the while in the imagination that is actually a child that is alive, kindness alive. In a sense it's kind of in that in your imagination anyway, in order to do that you need to preserve it and it's

kind of get smelly and it gets the case and all that stuff. It's kind of nasty. A lot of people were kind of shocked by it because they usually invite crime writers to do this kind of stuff, and their stores are kind of mild. Mine wasn't, so I don't really know how to preserve that body. So what I did was I looked up online okay. Like that body embalmer, basically, I just looked them up in yellow pages, and it was this lady in a town in north of the Netherlands, and I called her up and I said, hey, I'm writing a creepy book, and this is about a woman preserving a dead baby. How do I do that? And how can I get all these flies and not making me look like I'm committing a crime? She elaborate for a full hour about all the graphic details and all the nasty stuff and all the little bugs where they go out and all that stuff and out of our own experience because people like to.

01:17:04 Robin

Now I have to ask, has it been translated into English?

01:17:08 Thomas

Not yet. It's going to come out in Brazil next year, like some crazy stuff in Brazil. I think it will be out in English at some point.

01:17:26 Robin

When are we coming back from the US?

01:17:29 Speaker 1

When I'll be back in the US. Hopefully next year with a much longer to it. This is a very brief visit. I was invited to the Vancouver writers fest this week, so I'll be going to Vancouver tomorrow, which is lovely. Just across the street.

01:17:49 Robin

Really?

01:17:49 Speaker 1

Yeah. And my agent is from Vancouver, so here again, and it will be very nice. And I went to LA. Before here for some film stuff that I officially cannot talk about yet, but exciting stuff in the works. But hopefully next year when Oracle is out, we fall next year, and then the paperback for Echo will be there as well. Then I'll do a much more thorough tour of the entire country.


01:18:16 Robin

Okay. I'm hoping my life settles down and we'll get to the day to go explore, take you up to Mount Rainier.

01:18:23 Thomas

Yeah. Great. Well, when you come back to the Netherlands? Probably more question for me than for you.

01:18:33 Robin



Wow. I've slowed down a lot, and when I think about getting on an airplane for an international flight, I'm not sure if I'm going back to Europe. That's a real challenge now. It is a long trip. You got to come over here.

01:18:48 Robin

Yeah, I'll come here more often.

01:18:50 Thomas

Okay. There you go. It's all fixed now. All right, well, thank you so much. Thank you.

01:18:59 Robin

Thank you for being here.

01:19:07 Thomas

Thank you.

