

# Libro.fm Podcast

## Episode 19 - Interview with James McBride

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Karen Farmer:

Hi, welcome to the Libro.fm Podcast, the monthly series where we talk to authors, narrators, booksellers, and more. I'm Karen.

Craig Silva:

And I'm Craig. On today's episode, we had the absolute honor of sitting down with one of the most prolific American authors of the last 30 years, James McBride.

Karen Farmer:

What an amazing-

Craig Silva:

Author of *Deacon King Kong*, *The Color of Water*, and more recently, *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*.

Karen Farmer:

Was thinking about it.

Craig Silva:

I feel like when we were like, "Oh, okay, bye James," and hung up. We both were just like...

Karen Farmer:

It's so good.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, it was amazing.

Karen Farmer:

James is absolutely phenomenal. Our conversation covered so much ground. I got a lot of good writing pro tips that I've already been implementing a few of. I'll tell you what they are at the end-

Craig Silva:

Nice.

Karen Farmer:

After the interview.

Craig Silva:

A little teaser.

Karen Farmer:

Yeah. But I can't handle how much I enjoyed meeting him and speaking to him, and how much I loved his new book that we talk about, *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*.

Craig Silva:

Yes. It was amazing, but also slightly intimidating.

Karen Farmer:

Yeah.

Craig Silva:

When we were doing our preparations for the podcast, I was looking at photos and watching some videos and I was like, "Oh, here's James being interviewed by Oprah. Oh, here's James hanging out with Obama. Oh, here's James playing in a band with Stephen King." And I had to be like, "Hi, my name's Craig. Nice to meet you. I have a podcast." So it was a little hard act to follow.

Karen Farmer:

We were a little in over our head, but he was so gracious with us and he treated us as if we were Oprah. It was like it was the same thing, which was really nice.

Craig Silva:

Are we not Oprah?

Karen Farmer:

We are not.

Craig Silva:

Remember when we were writing the lightning round questions and one of the questions I wanted to ask was, who was a better interviewer, Oprah or Karen and I? And you would not let me ask it. You struck it from the record.

Karen Farmer:

I'm not in a place for hard truth right now.

Craig Silva:

All right. Well without further ado, why don't we let the podcast get rolling and as always, we will stick around at the end to talk a little bit more about our experience, what we're listening to, and what episodes are coming up. If you do not follow the podcast yet, please do. If you do already, thank you. Please rate, review, subscribe, tell a friend, and if you're not a Libro member yet, you can get two audiobooks when you sign up if you use the code, LIBROPODCAST.

Karen Farmer:

All right, everyone, enjoy the interview.

Craig Silva:

So welcome to the podcast, James. We could not be more excited that you're here and able to make time to sit down with Karen and I to discuss your writing and more.

James McBride:

Well, thank you. Nice to meet you.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome. Yeah, we're honored to talk to you in general, but especially thank you for making time. We know you have kind of a big week next week with the new novel coming out. We've got a lot of questions about that, but before we kind of jump into those, we'd love for you to introduce yourself for our listeners and just share a little bit more about who you are and what you've been up to.

James McBride:

My name is James McBride. I'm a writer of books and erstwhile composer of music, and my newest book is called *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*. Essentially, it's about equality. I mean, we can talk about the specifics of what the plot involves, but essentially that's what the book is about. It's about the desire for people to live in a community where equality exists. I mean, it's not a lecture book, it's not a textbook. It's a novel and characters do things and so forth, but at bottom, that's what the book is about.

Craig Silva:

Well, first off, congratulations on the upcoming release. At the time of recording, it comes out in just a couple of days on August 8th, I believe. Like you said, *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, and Karen and I were both lucky enough to receive an early copy to prepare for chatting with you. So we've both been reading it and loving it. For folks who are not as lucky as Karen and I to receive an early copy, we'd love if you could tell us a little bit more about the premise and what people can expect when it comes out in a few days.

James McBride:

Essentially, the book is about a Jewish couple named Moshe and Chona Ludlow, who find themselves trapped in a little bit of a dilemma. One of the people, the couple that worked with them, a Black couple, they have a nephew who's 12-years-old and he's deaf. And the state wants to take him away and put him in a insane asylum. This takes place in 1936 in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. And Chona decides to hide the boy from the state until this couple can ship him down to South Carolina where they have relatives.

So the book is all draped around this whole business of this Jewish couple in a small town in an antisemitic situation, find themselves kind of falling in love. This woman, falling in love with this little boy who she took in because she knows all of her customers. She runs a grocery store called *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*. So the kid ends up working in the store and the book is based around the whole business of the state trying to find the kid and her and the Black community around her, doing what they can to prevent that from happening.

And then the fallout from that as the plot rolls out. And during that time, we learn a lot of things about what life in small town America was like for people who lived in the less than sweet part of town because they... Both Chona and her customers live in a section town called Chicken Hill. Chicken Hill, there is a real Pottstown, there is a real Chicken Hill. But this is a novel, just so that the people of Pottstown don't get mad.

But look, small-town America in 1935, 1940 was not the Mayberry of the Andy Griffith Show, where everyone was happy-go-lucky and the boys were boys and girls were girls, and men were men and women were women, and all that other puff and smoke that's part of the American mythology. There was a lot that went on that people really didn't know about and paid attention to.

So you're just trying to show, at least I'm just trying to show, how people managed to get along in community and how they learned to accept differences without making up too big a deal of it. So that's what it's about.

Craig Silva:

You sort of alluded to it in what you were just talking about with the premise. There's so much history in this book and a lot of specificity around location and all the different

cultures that are represented in it. How much research did you have to do? How much research did this book require and how did you go about that?

James McBride:

Years of research. I started researching this, but probably in 2008.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, wow.

James McBride:

When I was writing *The Good Lord Bird*. It's just a full-time job. I went to Norristown State Hospital. I spent several months in and out of that place. The people, they were kind enough to let me in and I got to know a lot of the people who worked there, the people who ran at the administrative, social workers, psychologists, doctors.

I even met, even saw some of the patients and actually chatted with a couple of the patients. I mean, the writing of the book didn't take... I wrote the book over the summer, but the research took years because 90% of what you come up with when you research something, you don't use. You're just using that small 10% that really tell the story. At a certain point, this book pushes into this whole business of the marbles.

Like Chona gives out a marble and then there's a green one and there's a blue one, and the kids play with and dah, dah, dah. The small stuff. The smaller your story, the better it is. So to do a book like this, you have to really research. If you want to write a book that people are going to read, because you know? You don't want to write a boring book that... How many writers I've met that's just so interesting and nice and they tell funny jokes and then you read their books. It's just really boring.

Part of the reason is because, well, I can't tell you why. I can only say that you just shouldn't tell every joke you know. And if you tell that joke one time, you can't use it again. So yeah, I've been doing this a long time now and learning to write with economy and cutting the fat out of your stuff, and learning to not to fall in love with your ideas, and not fall in love with your words, is something that takes a lot of experience.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome. Thank you so much for that. That's great advice for the writers out there listening. I started reading this, the paper copy that we received and I really quickly was like, "I have to hear the audiobook for this." It seems to me like this must have been the Everest of narration jobs because there is such a breadth of personas and age ranges and emotion in this book.

I really quickly fell in love with Dominic Hoffman, who is the narrator of this book. I think he did an amazing job, and Craig and I saw that he's narrated other work that you've put

out in the audio format. So we wanted to ask you a little bit about what it's like working with Dominic and why you choose to keep working with the same narrator?

James McBride:

Well, you stay with the horse you rode in on. I mean, he narrated a couple of other books that I did. I've never met him, but every time it comes up, they ask me if I want to narrate my own books. The answer's always no. But I always wonder if he's available because he's so good. And one of the good things about him is that he really works hard on pronunciation. He asks a lot of questions about characters and he really studied...

Obviously, he's a very talented actor and he realizes that the good book readers, people like... The good book actors are people who study not just the book and the plot, but they study the characters because characters are, you know? That's where the show begins. I always prefer him because I know he's going to do a great job. I've never met him. I've never shaken his hand or her hand, whatever, however he or she refers to him as herself, whatever. But that's a person with a lot of talent.

Karen Farmer:

That's amazing. I was wondering if you... It just felt so fluid. The audiobook just felt like an absolute extension of the paper copy I was holding and so I was just assuming that you knew this person really well and were sitting in the recording booth like workshopping with him.

James McBride:

No, no. I mean, look, an artist that knows his or her business will just do it. You see it in auditions and in music all the time. If they just know what they're doing, they come in, the baton falls, the anvil drops. Whatever it is, they just hit and when it's done, they put their hat on and leave. And he's one of those kinds of people who obviously has a respect and...

Look, any artist who knows their craft has to be a deeply well-read person. You can't write books without reading a lot of books. You can't play music without having listened to lots of music. You can't paint pictures without having gone to museums. Your life as a writer and as a person who deals in storytelling, it means that you are a sponge, a seed for information.

So everywhere I go, I carry a notebook and a piece of paper, a notebook and a pencil, and I'm always writing down what I hear and I fill up these little memo books with stuff all the time, every day.

Craig Silva:

Thank you for sharing that. So you were about to be very busy. I saw that you're going on tour for *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*. It looks like you're heading all across the

country, tons of different states. I'm sure this is old hat for you at this point. Like you said, you've been in the game for a long time, but I assume it's got to be a lot of work, but also very rewarding to get to meet fans and interact with them. Can you tell us what your tours look like and what fans should expect in the coming weeks and months?

James McBride:

Well, that's a good question. I mean, I normally just chat when I appear somewhere. I don't read from the book very much. I chat about the motivation behind the book and why I wrote it and I try to... I'm not really looking forward to traveling across America right now for a lot of reasons. For one, I've done it a lot, but this is part of the life. When you choose the life, that's what you choose.

I've traveled a lot as a musician anyway, so I'm used to traveling. You know that you... It's a little different now. When I first started writing books from 35 years ago, however long it was, country was a lot different. People were... They just were a little different. They weren't as afraid and they weren't challenged by so many things that exist now.

On the other hand, it means that my job as a writer is even more important because writers, all writers, and I'm not just talking about myself, but people who write books that eight people read, and people who write books that haven't been read yet, and young writers who want to write books. They're all beacons of light.

And every one of those beacons needs... They all need batteries. They all need to be charged. They all need a place to shine and they all need to come together in a place where they feel like their comfort, where there's comfort, and there's community. And so when I appear in a place or where I show up in the town, or a bookstore and a [inaudible 00:15:07], wherever it is. I'm aware that there are young people and some not so young people, who are interested in not just what I've written, but interested in writing themselves.

And it's important that they get some sort of encouragement and some sort of knowledge that they are not alone because we are under attack. Books are under attack. This whole business of banning books is just... That's unacceptable. And in that regard, we have to be strong and say, "Well, that ain't going to happen. Look, you're not going to ban books. You can try." Nothing's going to prevent a librarian from taking a book and slipping.

They'll say, "Yes. Oh, sure. Okay, well, we'll go." Nothing's going to stop a librarian, a true librarian from making a good book known to someone. They ain't going to do it. I mean, they'll say they will, but they ain't going to. So in that regard, when I travel around, I'm aware that we live in a country now, where anyone can pull out a [inaudible 00:16:09] or AK40, whatever it is. And just shoot the room up and that's the end of it.

And so in that regard, some of us will fall, but all of us will not. And in that regard, this book that I've written and all of the books that I've written, and all the books that people like me write, and there are many of us, are really about freedom of speech and about real freedom of speech, not just smoke and puff and cake ice, and these people toss

around, this poison toxic stuff. So I guess that's a long answer to your question, but you know?

Craig Silva:

It's totally fine. I had a question later in our little script here. I wanted your opinion on this, so maybe we can just kind of jump into that a little bit more now actually. I read in an interview that you did with NPR, I believe, that you went to public schools and you're a firm believer in their importance as an institution in this country. Given the uptick in book bannings and attacks on curriculum across this country, what place do you think authors have? What role do they have to play in this fight for an inclusive and fact-based education?

James McBride:

Oh, I mean, we're part of the... We're one of the bigger cranks. These words are... Look, I mean, people use words in all kinds of ways, inclusivity and woke, and all this other. Some of this stuff is just toxic stuff. And as a writer, you have to learn to just put, to filter out a lot of this stuff, and deal with the real things that count, which are love, family, community, truth, honesty.

So you can't really legislate morality. You can't legislate what's right in someone's heart. If their heart is not right, then there's nothing you can do for them other than you can show them the way. But at a certain point, you just have to gently shove them aside and say, "I'm going to drive the bus now and if you don't like it, too bad. You can get off." Writers over the centuries have died trying to show what the truth is.

And that has happened in the past and it will certainly happen in the future, but it's not going to stop the truth from showing itself. My name is just a group of letters grouped together and someone else can take a group of letters and group them together and call them anything they want, and then assign their meaning to it. But a true writer and a true reader of literature understands when there's honesty in the room and when there's honesty on the page. And that's why I think I make a living writing books.

Karen Farmer:

I have a couple of questions related to that and these are from quotes that Craig and I came across while we were preparing for this. One of them, you're talking about learning from failure. It was in a beautiful video that I think is on your website and you kind of talk about it, not just with your writing work, but also with music and creative endeavors in general.

You mentioned specifically a couple of books you've written that haven't been published and a collection of short stories that you seem fairly adamant about not wanting to see the light of day. And so I wanted to ask you, as a writer, as someone who's trying to take the lens off of things and be this positive force, what is that kind of decision-making mechanism for you to say, "I've put a ton of time and love and energy into this thing, but



I'm going to move on to the next thing." And to use your words to say, "I'm comfortable with a failure and moving on."

James McBride:

If I'm bored with it or if I don't care or if I find myself asking, "Why should I care?" Then it's probably not worth showing to anybody. Generally at my level or given my experience now, if the character's not kicking around in my head while I'm riding the subway, driving a car or something, it's probably not working.

You can tell, when you read pulp fiction or books that you see at the airport, not all airports, but if you go to a pharmacy or something, you read and you pick up a book. The writer has forced the story onto the page and they're just shoving the thing from the top to bottom, and they're just checking boxes. She fell in love with him, but he had freckles, which she didn't like. And so she moved on. I mean it, they're just shoving the story. The character's not moving from room to room.

See, there's always a deeper story that you're trying to tell. In the case of this book, *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, the deeper story is really about equality and about really, the love of a man that I once worked for who was just extraordinary and the children that he mentored and cared for, these disabled children. I'm talking about a camp I worked at when I was in college and I never forgot that experience.

That's really what powered the book because I always said to myself, "If I could just find a way to show a little bit of that magic that he did, it would just really work." But it had to fall into this whole framework of this Jewish couple who'd taken this Black kid and the Black community kind of finds out. Then there's other people from different walks of life, Italians and Irish, and they're all kind of mixed in.

But the pot works, the stew works because the ingredient really is love and equality, and how that stuff is not really all a bunch of happy-go-lucky stuff, but it works. It's like a car. Car works when there's snow and it works when there's heat because the ingredients make the car go, especially if it's an electric car.

If I'm bored by it or I feel like the story is being forced along, I just drop it. I mean, when I wrote this book, I wrote several chapters that were all about this camp. I had one chapter after another and they just weren't any good. I just felt like this looks like a book where you have to force yourself to keep reading. You kind of care a little bit, but not too much. What else? What does he do next? This is no good. So I just discarded it.

Craig Silva:

What does that editing process look like? If you took the time to write multiple chapters, obviously, you cared about the characters and the story during the writing process. Is it you working with your editor or is it just, you go back and read the pages and just, it's not working so you take it out?

James McBride:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, when I have [inaudible 00:23:00], it's clean. I don't work with any editor. I just keep... Real simple. You wake up in the morning and you look at it and you're not interested, you don't want to shove any further because what you do is you do many drafts. When you're doing the first draft, you're cutting trail. And if the process of cutting trail is boring, then the book is boring. But if the process of cutting trail is a journey that even you are not really sure of, then you know you're onto something.

I mean, this book started many different iterations, many different ways. Entry point is always tricky business. Where do you drop into a story and where do you leave it? And so the entry point in this story was extremely difficult to find and I tried a lot of different approaches. So the one that worked was really, I mean, it was chapter five or six in one of the early drafts with this Jewish theater owner who donated the land for this camp, meets his wife.

I realized that at a certain point, that these are the only pages that have life and so I just discarded the rest and just dealt with the pages that had life. And that really rolled into Chona and Nate and Addie. That was really the entry point into the story. The entry point into a story is crucial.

If you're writing a story about a boat, what part of that journey are you going to start? Are you going to start at the end and then go back, or are you going to start in the middle? Start at the beginning? Is the beginning when the boat was being made? [inaudible 00:24:54] the beginning when the boat was leaving port? Was the beginning when the boat was an idea of some...

I mean, it all, it just depends. The smaller your bite, the bigger your story. I mean, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a story about a guy who just got a job on a boat. Now you could do that as a ten-second TikTok video, find yourself famous for 10 seconds, or you could sit down and figure out how to make it to a really, really great story about humanity. And that involves research.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, I love the entry point. You mentioned you were kind of struggling finding the right entry point for this book and I feel like it was perfect, talking about her medical issues and her disability and their business getting off the ground. It was like, you're immediately hooked. I was 20 pages in and just like, "Well, here we go." So I think you picked the right one for sure.

James McBride:

Well, I hope so. I mean, that was all organic. It all just rolled out because Moshe and Chona were strong characters and they had a strong story. It had a strong backstory. They were a Jewish couple who owned a grocery store in a small town and he was running a theater and he was trying not to make waves, and she didn't care about that.

She was the magic one. And her magic and her ability to see beyond where she was, is what powered the book. And in real life, that's what happens as well. It's the far thinking

ones, the ones who think ahead of us, who we later look back and say, "Oh, my God, they really did." I mean, not to get too much into politics, but the guy who's running the country now is a far thinking individual. He's too old, blah, blah, blah.

Look, put him on a walker and let him keep doing what he's doing because he sees beyond what we see. Now, I'm not a politician and I don't care how you vote. Your voting is your business, but I know how I'm going to vote and how I'd like to vote. I want people who can see tomorrow, who say, "These are the obstacles ahead." I don't want a lot of smoke and puff about how great we are and all this other bullshit. That's for somebody else.

So in books, when characters are strong, they see what other people don't. And Chona, for all her faults and flaws, and she had many. She didn't follow the precepts of Jewish life the way she should have. She broke a lot of... She talked up in the synagogue when she shouldn't have. She was a piece of work, but she saw the wider picture. And those who see the wider picture can take a story a long way.

In *Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*, Chona and Nate and to some degree, Isaac, Moshe's cousin, are people who could see far, they see ahead. They say, "This is what the land's going to look like. This is what the mountain is. I see the mountain ahead. Other people don't, but I do." And those are the kind of people that you can heave a story into the future. So in 500 pages deep, they can take you. And that's why novels are just like real life. In some ways, better.

Karen Farmer:

I wonder if what you're talking about ties to this other quote I wanted to ask you about. We found this quote where you said, "You have to emphasize the positive, otherwise why write about people at all?" And that resonated with both of us so much and it's very apparent that that's important to you in *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store*. We were wondering if you could just say a little bit more about why that's become so important to your writing and how that's evolved over time.

James McBride:

I like people. I don't want to write about somebody who's shooting somebody all the time or is always sick or just pathologically pitiful and just staggering through life, not sure whether she should jump out the window or take her son to lunch. I mean, I'm not the kind of guy who can do that kind of stuff. I mean, I suppose I could, but I don't want to... I want someone who's going to inspire me because I'm inspired by people.

I mean, I'm inspired by people who I don't even agree with politically. And some of them are my friends. I like them. I don't like how they vote. Would I like them still? And they're funny, they tell jokes, and we have fun. We fix cars together and stuff. I mean, if you like people and you think the best of people, and you know that people are doing their best, it's hard not to put them in your books.

Look, we have to try to create a situation where we just say, "You know what? I made a mistake and I'm sorry." And then it's all good. I try not to hold people to account for the world that they happen to step into because we all make mistakes. We all say the wrong thing. We use the wrong pronoun now. I mean all kinds of stuff. I mean, who cares? As long as your heart is good, you got to learn to let stuff go and keep the good stuff. Otherwise, you're just going to be mad all the time.

So I filter out a lot of that stuff in my life. I like people who tell jokes and are funny. Really, honestly, I don't care how... I mean, I don't care how they vote. I hope their people lose, but I got a lot of friends who I can call at 2:00 in the morning, they'll show up. Now if you mentioned politics, they'll get all bugged out, but after a while that goes away and they go back to who they really are. It's just how I've lived and how people in my life have lived.

Karen Farmer:

Well, on that note, we're going to move into a segment that Craig and I have called the Lightning Round, where we have a series of... I don't know, Craig, six questions, something like that?

Craig Silva:

Yeah.

Karen Farmer:

Where we're just going to rapid fire them at you. Don't have to think too much about them. These are a little sillier, but if you're game, we'll get started.

James McBride:

All right. Let's go.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, I have the first one. What's the best nickname you've ever had?

James McBride:

Cudi.

Karen Farmer:

Ooh. How did you end up with that nickname?

James McBride:

I used to work with a singer who used to call me Cudi, which was kind of short for cousin. And then musicians that I got to know through her called me Cudi, and some of them still call me Cudi.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome.

James McBride:

I mean, I've had several nicknames, but that's the one... I suppose my favorite. I don't know. The most recent.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. Speaking of music, who's your favorite jazz musician of all time?

James McBride:

Oh, it changes, but it's probably got to be John Coltrane because I have a connection to him. My father and John Coltrane were from the same town in North Carolina. My mother's buried in the same cemetery as John Coltrane's mother. My father and John Coltrane went to the same high school and I've been a big fan of Coltrane. Wonderful storyteller.

Craig Silva:

I don't know, have to listen to A Love Supreme right after this interview.

James McBride:

Not a bad choice.

Karen Farmer:

Do you collect anything? And if so, what do you collect?

James McBride:

I used to collect typewriters, but I got tired of that because it was so heavy to move around. That's the main thing. I don't really collect much of anything else.

Karen Farmer:

[inaudible 00:32:53].

Craig Silva:

While I'm preparing for this podcast, I saw a lot of photos where you're wearing a bow tie. So my question is, bow tie or neck tie?

James McBride:

Bow tie. Absolutely.

Craig Silva:

I saw a lot of photos with a lot of different bow ties. Speaking of collecting things, how many bow ties do you think you own?

James McBride:

Well, I've owned up to 20, but I'm down to four or five. I was touring at one point and we all had bow ties, and I stopped touring and I just would leave them places. They're expensive though. Yeah, but I prefer bow ties.

Karen Farmer:

Okay. Last Lightning Round question. What is something that you're always recommending to other people?

James McBride:

*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer, a book.

Karen Farmer:

Ooh.

James McBride:

William Shirer, I think it's S-H-E. I forgot how to spell his name, but that book is... That's a profoundly great book. I mean, he wrote that book when he was on the outs with CBS. He was a correspondent for CBS News.

Everybody talks about Edwin Murrow and they named schools and stuff, but William Shirer, who wrote *The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich*, happened to be in Germany before World War II broke out, and he saw the rise and the fall of the Third Reich.

And his book is really relevant to now because you see the rise and fall, you see how Hitler came to power, and then you watch how it pings into today. And you have a whole... You see how important it's to pay attention to what's going on in this country right now.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you you so much for that recommendation. Awesome. I'm going to go get that immediately after this.

James McBride:

Yeah.

Karen Farmer:

One last question that we have for you before we kind of start wrapping things up here. We typically do something that we call Instagram Storytime, in which we go through your social media and find a photo or a tidbit that we wanted to ask you more questions about. And I think, Craig, you are going to take this one away this week.

Craig Silva:

So I did take a look at your Instagram and I found a video that I was very interested in, but then I also saw a photo of you in an all black suit with a white bow tie standing with your hands clasped in front of you, standing next to President Obama. I had to skip Instagram and go off script with this one. And I would just love to hear what that experience was like because the photo is amazing.

Karen Farmer:

It's so good.

Craig Silva:

For folks who haven't seen this photo, it was in 2016 and you were winning the National Humanities Medal, being presented with it from Obama.

James McBride:

Man, that was so cool. Well, first of all, to be honest with you, somebody runs my Instagram page for me. I'm just [inaudible 00:35:41].

Craig Silva:

Well, good thing we skipped it then.

James McBride:

No, that's all right. I mean, I know they put stuff on it, but I'm not really that big an internet person, in part because I'm trying to keep my own ideas. I don't really want to know what somebody else is thinking. But yeah, that was great, meeting President Obama. He was fantastic.

I mean, it was just surreal. The White House and all that. The band played and he was very... I mean, look, we didn't have a deep conversation. "Mr. [inaudible 00:36:11], do

you like basketball?" No, I mean there was nothing to... There were a lot of us there. Mel, not Mel Gibson, but Mel Brooks was there and Terry Gross was there. I sat next to Terry Gross.

Craig Silva:

That's pretty cool.

James McBride:

Great. It was great. And he said to me three words. He said, "I appreciate you." That's it. So I was a big joke with my siblings because I'd go over and they'd say, "Hey James, come here. Come here. Get over here. I appreciate you." It was nice. It was very nice. I was very proud. I wish my mother had seen it, but I've met several presidents. I met both George Bush, Senior and Junior. They were wonderful people. Barbara Bush, I just... Laura Bush. I like all them Bushes. I don't care. If that insults you, too bad. They're wonderful people.

I met President Joe Biden at a funeral of a colleague of mine, a great writer named Richard Ben Cramer. Now President Biden was Vice President and he came and he spoke. I mean, he wasn't [inaudible 00:37:21]. He just came because he respected the... And he spoke wonderfully. It was just great. Man, he's a great guy. He's a great president. I don't care if people disagree with me or not. You know?

Craig Silva:

Yeah.

James McBride:

My job is to tell the truth and I'm so glad he's helped put this place back together.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that story. It's just as amazing as I had hoped it had been. So yeah, I mean, what an amazing experience.

Karen Farmer:

Well, James, before we let you go, one of our very important questions, the one we want to follow up with here. Do you have anything you're reading right now and enjoying that you can recommend to us and our listeners?

James McBride:

Yeah, yeah. I'm reading a book by a guy named Matthieu. It's Picard or Ricard. It's called *Happiness*. It's easy to find. He was like a French scientist or some sort of gene research or something. He quit it all and became a, I suppose you could say he became



a Buddhist. I really like this guy. I like what he has to say about happiness and about religion and about... Look, I'm not a Buddhist and I'm not against religion. I grew up in the church. I have great respect for all religions, but they all say essentially the same thing. The best parts of them say the same thing.

And this guy, he kind of summarizes it in ways that I think are healthy. And you don't have to be a Buddhist, you don't have to... It doesn't matter what your religion is. There's a lot to be gained from it. I think that's a great book in terms of self-fulfillment and finding ways to understand what happiness is really. And I think for people in our society, because we're so disconnected, we don't talk to each other anymore.

Everyone goes to a Starbucks and they open their computer and they start typing away. What's the point of going to have coffee if you can't say hi to the people? I mean, what's the point of going to a pharmacy when you're getting your meds, whatever. And then you go to a machine and you're clicking. I mean, if you want to be creative and follow the great American legacy of creativity, which is really what this country is all about. I mean, free speech is only part of that. Creativity is what created the better parts of this country. If you want that, you have to go out and you have to talk to people.

You have to participate. I participate. I still work with my church after all these years. I still go to projects every weekend. And some of it's frustrating, but some of it is just... You can't find it by typing and Googling it. I have students at NYU. I teach there and the students, they Google stuff and they think they know it. You can't learn anything by Googling it. Better to go to the library, get out a few books, talk to people. You have to connect to people. If you want to be a successful writer, just get in the room. You don't have to say anything, but just get in the room. Just be in the room and watch. Do what I do. Bring a little notebook around and write down what you see.

When you have to write about a plumber, you'll know... *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* has this whole business about the well. At the end, there's a whole business about the well, and they got to get into this well and deal with it. And the well, the pipe burst open and the water's coming up, and how are they going to make... I don't know anything about wells. So I talked to a plumber about a well. Then I talked to another plumber, like a builder about a well, and he started using language and I learned the language. Now if you need a well built, call me. Call me. I'll make you a well, all right. You won't be well, but [inaudible 00:41:08].

Craig Silva:

I'm picturing you calling a plumber to your house and he's like, "What do you need to fixed?" And you're like, "No, no, no, nothing. I just want to talk to you for a little bit. Just want to pick your brain."

Karen Farmer:

Want to talk wells.

James McBride:

You don't do that. No, that's too expensive. No, you figure out... Maybe you call for something else and then give them a soda and then you talk to people. I mean, I talk to people. I take the subway, the bus, I'm still around. Even though, like I said, my politics are probably progressive or left or moderate, but I got plenty of right-winger friends, and they know a lot. I mean, they have a lot to... I've learned a lot from them, including decency and goodness. If there is judgment, there is no journey, both in books and in life. You can't judge people. At a certain point you have to say, "Okay, my way is the highway." At a certain point. But that point should come a long way off because sometimes you are not right. And there's that, too.

Craig Silva:

James, we could not thank you enough for spending the last 45 minutes with us. I feel like I'm going to go into my day with a much more positive outlook. I'm going to go to the Starbucks downstairs and not take my phone out. So I really appreciate the time and energy, and just your words over the last hour. Wishing you the best of luck on the tour. I hope it's not too trying and that you get to meet lots of great, people and I'm sure the book will do well. Congratulations again.

James McBride:

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate, it's very nice to meet young people like yourself. You make me feel hopeful for tomorrow. We [inaudible 00:42:51] a very good job of leaving... We've left you a lot to work with, but on the other hand, you have a lot to work with, so in terms of your ability and curiosity and thirst for betterness. It's a pleasure to meet you and well, there it is.

Karen Farmer:

In the words of Terry Gross, James, we appreciate you.

James McBride:

No, that was Obama. That was Obama.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, that was-

Craig Silva:

Oh, yeah.

Karen Farmer:

Oh.

James McBride:

Well, I want you two to know something now. I'm just really, I mean, I appreciate you. No. All right. Thanks a lot.

Craig Silva:

Nice to meet you, too. Bye.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you, James.

James McBride:

All right. Take it easy.

Craig Silva:

Well, everyone, thank you so much for listening to that interview. I hope you enjoyed it. I know Karen and I were obsessed with this one. We talked about it the second we hung up. I feel like my nerves were tingling. It felt so good.

Karen Farmer:

I'm still riding on the high of him calling us nice young people. That was one of the best compliments ever and I just love him.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. It was fun to get to talk to somebody who's won an award from Obama and ask him, bow ties or neck ties?

Karen Farmer:

Yeah. Well, but also, to hear his Obama impression at the end. I love that.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, it was pretty good.

Karen Farmer:

I appreciate you. I've been saying that a lot since we've talked to James.

Craig Silva:

Oh, man.

Karen Farmer:

Well, Craig, dare I ask you what you're reading? Can you go first this week?

Craig Silva:

Sure.

Karen Farmer:

Great.

Craig Silva:

So if you listened to our last episode, we interviewed Nadia who runs The StoryGraph. And one of our questions was, have you ever reread a book? Because some people do, some people don't. She said, "You know, I never used to reread books, but I recently reread my first reread and it was *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt." I think we were like, "Oh my God, what a great book to reread." Everyone on the Libro team has reread that book probably. So I picked it up and I reread it again.

Karen Farmer:

Yes. I love it.

Craig Silva:

Inspired by Nadia, I had spent the past couple of weeks rereading *The Secret History* and the return to Hampden College and the world of collegiate murder was a very fun escape after some more intense or whatever books that we've been reading for the podcast or whatever. So it was a nice little escape.

Karen Farmer:

I was going to make the joke and say, "Spoilers," but then I knew you would say, "You know it's about a murder from the first sentence of the book."

Craig Silva:

Yeah, yeah. It literally says, "Chapter one, Bunny was dead to begin with." That's Dickens, that's *A Christmas Carol*, I guess.

Karen Farmer:

So reread was just as delightful as the first time through?

Craig Silva:

Yeah, definitely. I brought it all over. I read it in a beer garden, just everywhere. I read it, brought it... It was with me every place I went. So it was a lovely little escape and I love that book, and it's fun.

Karen Farmer:

That's great.

Craig Silva:

You're a fan of this book, yes?

Karen Farmer:

Oh, big time. Yeah, absolutely. Who's your favorite character?

Craig Silva:

Definitely not Bunny. I wasn't that sad at his passing, pretty annoying. Maybe Henry. Honestly. Yeah. Fun character. Julian is fun. The professor. He's very quirky.

Karen Farmer:

Henry is also my answer. Big Henry fan.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. Richard's pretty annoying.

Karen Farmer:

He serves his purpose in the book as the kind of normal dude who's been thrust into a strange situation.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, yeah.

Karen Farmer:

He's like Ishmael-

Craig Silva:

I also just like how calculated and kind of schemey Henry is. It's a fun character.

Karen Farmer:

Yeah.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. Now I want to reread it again.

Karen Farmer:

You should wait a year.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. It's insanely long. I think on audio it's 22 hours or something. It's pretty long. Yeah. I forgot how many pages. It's got to be over 500, but it's a long one.

Karen Farmer:

That woman I love, that I've talked about on the podcast before, VE Schwab and I talked about her, Liberty Hardy, who breeds hundreds of books every year and has a newsletter every week about what she's reading and enjoying. She actually does an annual rereading of *The Secret History* and I look forward to hearing her talk about that every year.

Craig Silva:

It's amazing.

Karen Farmer:

So you can join her.

Craig Silva:

I love it. I am going to read the other Donna Tartt books. I believe there's two other novels. I haven't read either. I know that one of them, *The Goldfinch*, is that right? Is one of your favorites, right?

Karen Farmer:

Yes. I love *Goldfinch*.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. Maybe that's what I'll do next.

Karen Farmer:

Yay. I can't wait to hear what you think.

Craig Silva:

I will let you know on the podcast. And with that, I would love to know what you are currently reading.

Karen Farmer:

You're going to be happy to hear this. I just read one of Jen Beagin's books. So folks who have been listening for a while, may remember that when *Big Swiss* came out earlier this year, I believe, Craig and I both excitedly read that and both really, really enjoyed it. And I loved the author's writing style so much that I've been dying to read more of her work. When I went to the library recently, it happened to be there on the shelf and I was super excited. So I just read her book which is called, *Pretend I'm Dead*, and it's about a cleaning woman. That's a very high level synopsis.

Craig Silva:

The end. That's the [inaudible 00:48:22]. You open up the jacket, that's all it says.

Karen Farmer:

Yes. It's about a young woman. She's 24. Her name's Mona. She's a cleaning woman. She falls in love with a man who has some very severe addiction problems and then it kind of sets her on this strange journey across the United States, meeting a very odd cast of characters that resonate a lot with the parts that we liked about *Big Swiss*.

Craig Silva:

Nice.

Karen Farmer:

It's a really quick read. I think I read it in a day or two, but really, really loved it. And so now I've started, I'm actually holding it because I'm not very far in, but it's called, *Gone to the Wolves* by John Wray. I'm holding it up. I know Craig, you've seen this, but the cover is just so cool. It looks like a metal album and the letters are in this sort of holographic vinyl. It's very glimmery in the light.

This book is about three people. I think it kind of follows them through their lives. Three friends that meet in high school that are really into the metal music scene, like the underground metal music scene. They're in South Florida and get into all kinds of high jinks. They grow up together. It sounds like there's a lot in store for me. I see in the description that we're going to get into some doomsday cults of the 80s and things like that, so I'm ready.

Craig Silva:

Love a doomsday cult. That sounds amazing. I mean, that book falls into that category. I want to say that when we were at Book Catapult, we both looked at that book in, because the cover is just striking. Like you said, it's black with hologram silvery letters and it looks like a black metal album or something. You'll have to let me know how it is.

Karen Farmer:

I'm really enjoying it so far. I haven't been able to put it down. I've also gotten the audiobook so I can switch back and forth, and the audiobook is very compelling as well.

Craig Silva:

Nice. Well, I say this every episode, but when we're done recording, to The Booksmith I go.

Karen Farmer:

Tell them hello.

Craig Silva:

I'll try to get books that are actually out as opposed to when I always go in there and ask for books. They're like, "That doesn't come out for five months." So hopefully, both these books are out and you're not setting me up for failure.

Karen Farmer:

I'm holding it in my hand. It can confirm that it exists.

Craig Silva:

So? You may have got an advanced copy and you're just trying to trick me.

Karen Farmer:

No, this one's from the library. I had a great library haul this past weekend.

Craig Silva:

You do love a library.

Karen Farmer:

It's the best. Thank you, public libraries.

Craig Silva:

Yes. Well, thank you for letting me know what you were reading. And for listeners, we are super excited about our next couple episodes. We teased one of them. At the end of the last episode, we chatted with Danny Caine, who owns and works at Raven Book Store and wrote *How to Resist Amazon and Why*. So that episode will be coming out after the James one, after this one, after this one that's out that you're listening to. It's not out at the time of recording because we're not-

Karen Farmer:



It gets very confusing for us. We're like, "What day is it supposed to be?"

Craig Silva:

Yeah, we're not live streaming this outro right now. Yeah. And after that, we just had the opportunity to talk with Kelsey Norris, who has a debut book coming out, a collection of short stories called, *House Gone Quiet*, that Karen and I have both been reading and absolutely loving. And we thoroughly enjoyed the interview and we can't wait for you to hear it.

Karen Farmer:

Yes. All kinds of good stuff coming up. Thank you so much for listening. Thanks for coming back to hear our new adventures. If you haven't yet, please rate, review and subscribe. Please tell a friend. And if you haven't signed up for Libro.fm membership, you can use the code, LIBROPODCAST, and you will get two audiobook credits for your first month instead of just one.

Craig Silva:

And as always, thank you for listening.