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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, and welcome to *The CARC Podcast*. I'm Chris Davis, the Associate Director and the host of the Career and Academic Resource Center podcast. Today it's my great pleasure to be speaking to renowned writer Andre Debus III. Andre grew up in mill towns on the Merrimack River along the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border. He began writing fiction at age 22.

He is the author of eight books, three of which were *New York Times* best sellers, *Gone So Long*, *House of Sand and Fog*, a number one *New York Times* best seller, *The Garden of Last Days*, and his memoir, *Townie*, a number four *New York Times* best seller and a *New York Times* editors choice.

Dirty Love, a collection of four short novellas published in 2013, was chosen as a notable book and editors choice from the *New York Times*, a notable fiction from the *Washington Post*, and a Kirkus Star best book of 2013.

His other titles include *The Cage Keeper and Other Stories* and *Bluesman*, as well as his forthcoming novel, *Such Kindness*, which will be published in the summer of 2023, and a collection of personal essays *Ghost Dogs*, which will be published in 2024.

Andre's work has been included in *The Best American Essays* and *The Best Spiritual Writing* anthologies. He's been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Magazine Award for Fiction, two Pushcart Prizes, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in literature, and his books have been published in over 25 languages.

Andre, it's a great pleasure to have you here with me today.

ANDRE DUBUS Well, it's great to meet you, sir.

III:

CHRIS DAVIS: It's good to meet you too, Andre. I really appreciate this. I'll start -- there are so many things I could ask you about, but one that just stood out to me because again, I finished reading *Townie* again earlier today.

I saw a reference to -- you had done an interview where you talked about it as an accidental memoir.

ANDRE DUBUS Yeah.

III:

CHRIS DAVIS: I think you said that it had started out as an essay about your son playing baseball, and then it kind of morphed into what it came to be. Is that something that has ever occurred to you in your other writing, where you start out thinking you'll write about something, and then it goes in a very different direction? Was it limited to just that experience?

ANDRE DUBUS Chris, I think it's 100% of the time, maybe 95%. It's the majority of the time where I will start out with an idea of where I would like -- not know what I would like to write, but an area that I would like to explore.

III:

And so often -- I don't know when I look back, I -- look, let me just say the thing that excites me most about creative writing, and having done it all my adult life, I have not lost one whit of enthusiasm for it, is what excites me most is the unknown, is stepping into the unknown with words.

And I've talked a lot about this in interviews, but I still don't change my mind on this. I think the most valuable fuel at least for me for exploring a human situation, whether it's an accidental memoir, which *Townie* is, or a novel, say, is curiosity and bewilderment.

So yeah, I was setting out to write the essay, but the essay was supposed to be -- I felt like it might be funny because as you know from hearing that other interview, you know my two sons were playing baseball when they were little, and they were natural athletes. And I noticed right around age eight or nine, he got very competitive with the coaches. The kids didn't care.

And I jumped in to coach, except I forgot I didn't know how to play baseball because I never really played and never really watched, and I was 40 years old. Anyway, I thought I would write about this guy who didn't know what he was doing.

But two and a half, three years later and 500 pages later, I wrote what I was doing as a kid instead of playing organized sports, and that's moving two or three times a year for cheaper rent with our single mom and my three siblings, and living in tough neighborhoods, and getting beaten up quite regularly because I was the new kid, and I wore glasses and used adverbs in daily speech.

And *Townie* came, but I have to say, Chris, I was trying to find a way to write *Townie* for years. Not a memoir. I don't exaggerate when I say that I spent three years, three years each for a total of nine years, writing as fiction what ultimately came as *Townie*, which is growing up in a mill town in the '70s with Vietnam limping to a finish.

And seems like there were a lot of absent fathers and a lot of drug and alcohol use and a lot of violence. And that was my time as a kid, and I finally found a way in from the back door, through this essay, where I wanted to write about baseball and my sons.

CHRIS DAVIS: So am I correct in thinking, was that the toughest book you ever wrote or the longest it took to write something?

ANDRE DUBUS III: No, no, I mean that came fast, two to three years. My novels take me five years. No, but it was the toughest in that -- well, look I was turning 50. I was heading towards 50 when I wrote *Townie*.

And so I was farther enough along in my own life that I was really probably psychically prepared to share my flaws. But I wasn't prepared to shine a light on my family's privacy, and that was the biggest challenge with that book. That was the hardest part.

CHRIS DAVIS: So you have written shorter pieces of fiction. You've written many novel-length books. You have obviously written a memoir. You have in 2024, I think, a collection of essays coming out. Essays are a different format. Is there a favorite of these types of writing?

ANDRE DUBUS III: I must be drawn to the novel more than anything because that's the form I've worked on the most all these years, Chris. But right now, I'm getting close to finishing a novella that feels like it wants to be around 100 pages.

And I really love the novella form, but I have to say, I have a new novel coming out in June, and I put it aside for months in the revision process and worked on some short stories.

And god, I love, I love beginning a piece of fiction where you can sense the ending not far away. In the very opening paragraphs, I can sense the whole thing's already on the plate.

But with a novel -- Sue Miller the novelist, the great novelist, has a wonderful line about novels. She said writing a novel is like knitting an Argyle sock the size of a football field. I just love that. You just don't know where you are.

And I think I like that feeling the most. It's a nice relief to feel the whole thing inside you when you begin a short story, but I just love that feeling of knowing I'm setting off on a long voyage. I don't know if I'll make it to the other side, but here we go, boys.

CHRIS DAVIS: So Andre, you've been writing, you've been writing professionally for four decades now, since the 1980s. I wanted to ask you how you think your writing has changed or evolved over the years?

ANDRE DUBUS III: That's a great question. You know, I don't know if it has. Well, I think it has, but I am not entirely aware of how it has. I want to share a story about my father. My father was a great short story writer of the same name.

And I remember when I first started writing in my 20s, I heard him give a -- I was at a reading he gave, and he read his story, "The Fat Girl," which, if you haven't read it, you're in for a treat. It's a beautiful short story.

But for the first time I was reading like a writer, an apprentice writer. And afterwards we're having a beer, and I said, Dad, you know, that device where you have her when she's flying from Paris look out at America from the plane window, and this and that. And the old man said, yeah, I was reading a lot of John Cheever then. I need to remember what I knew then.

And I do think that this whole -- so I've been a self-employed -- well, I haven't had to do carpentry for a living for many years, but for about 20 years, I was a self-employed carpenter. And the more decks I built, the better deck guy I was. The more roofs I did, the better roof, et cetera.

But with writing, there's just something about it. I talk to my students about this where I'm getting ready to start something new. Maybe it's a novel, maybe it's a short story, who knows. And it's as if I pick up my hammer and I go, what's a hammer? What does it do again?

There's something about -- and if you look at the word author, it's a word I didn't like for years because it just sounds elitist to me. Oh, he's an author, she's an author. Well, that's nice.

I like the word writer better because it seems to capture more accurately what Hemingway called "the sweet labor." But now I like it, and I've liked it for years, the word author because I looked it up, and it actually means -- you may know this -- the originator or beginner of something.

And that takes a lot of nerve, and many of us are authors all day long in certain aspects of life. But this is a long-winded way of saying I don't know if I've gotten better. I do know I've gotten -- you know what I've gotten better at? I've gotten better at it not going well.

I was talking to a really celebrated writer last week in Florida about the writing life, and we both reported the same thing, that early in our writing years, if we had a bad writing session or if something just didn't work, it would hurt how we felt about ourselves.

We would really -- it would really depress us. We'd really feel -- we'd get down on ourselves as total human beings. I don't do that anymore, and I haven't for years, and I think I've gotten better at that.

And I think when a writer has been writing as many years as I, and many writers have, you get used to it just not going well often, and you make peace with it and just know that's part of the process.

So I've gotten better at that. I think I've also -- I'll say one more thing. I think I've gotten better at the use of abstract language, and I think I've gotten more comfortable with knowing that I prefer deeply character-driven stories, and I'm OK with that.

CHRIS DAVIS: That segues into what I wanted to ask you about. One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is that we have a large and growing creative writing and literature program.

And so one of the passages that I was going to ask you about today, you had mentioned, speaking of your father, you had given an example of how he would latch onto phrases or interesting things that he heard and then incorporate them into his writing.

You mentioned that he did that with something you had said. It turned out to be the opening line of one of his stories, "The Pretty Girl." Is that something that has ever happened to you in your writing?

ANDRE DUBUS III: Oh, yeah, I think writers are vultures, you know. Oh, my god, I'll steal whatever I can from my loved ones if it is good material. I've got a collection of stories called "Dirty Love," and one of those stories is based on a friend's divorce and the situation around it.

And it's not them, it is not him, it's not his ex-wife. But there is a situation in there that I found really unique and interesting about how they were trying to resolve things, and I just explored it fictionally.

And some readers will read it and say, well, you just stole my life. Well, no, I didn't mean to. I took your situation and explored it. I'll hear a line that I can't not use. I mean, I won't plagiarize, but you'll see a dirty bumper sticker or a --

Well, I'll share one with you that I saw up in Maine last summer that think is incredible, and I can't. No, I can't, I can't use it. You know what? I was about to share it with you, but it's in the thing I'm working on now, and I'm afraid to jinx it. So now I'm going to shut my mouth and not --

But no, I think that writers -- I mean, we get our material from where we get it. Certainly the last thing I want to do is exploit someone's privacy or hurt anyone's feelings, but when it's fiction, you can do all sorts of work to protect people's privacy.

CHRIS DAVIS: I completely hear you, and I mean, yeah, it's not even details of people's lives, but in that example it's turns of phrase or a sentence that--

ANDRE DUBUS III: I mean, that story, I'll share it with your listeners if they're not going to read that memoir *Townie*. But I was a student at University of Texas at Austin, and I was working out at a power gym. I was into weights for years, still am all these years later.

And on the bumper sticker of a very competitive, huge bodybuilder was, "I don't know how I feel till I hold that steel". And I just thought that was great, and, of course, I identified with it as somewhat addicted to weight training.

And I was talking to my old man in a phone booth with a beer in my hand because we even -- phone booth, remember that, phone booths? And I told him that line, and he said, hold it, wait.

When he comes back, I said, you just went and got a piece of paper and a pen, didn't you? He said, yeah. And you're right, that's the opening lines to his beautiful novella, *The Pretty Girl*. Ticks me off a little bit. Said, hey, that was -- I was the one excited about that, but I wasn't [AUDIO OUT]

CHRIS DAVIS: So also you teach writing in addition to being a writer. And as I mentioned, we have a lot of creative writing students, and there are two things that I think, from what I hear, they ask their writing teachers quite frequently.

One of them is, how do I start out becoming a published writer? And that's one of the things. You've been a writer, published writer, for many decades now. I'm sure you have been a firsthand witness to how the publishing industry, how that field, has changed so much.

That's one thing, and the other thing is also I'm curious to hear if there are consistent things that you see your students struggling with that you wish that they would learn more easily.

ANDRE DUBUS III: I would say with the first one about how do I go about publishing, in my experience, too many people are asking that question too soon. And my first two cents of advice is just write the best thing you can possibly write.

The heart of creative writing is revision. The writer Paul Engle, who used to run the Writers' Workshop in Iowa, said writing is rewriting what you've already rewritten.

When I was starting out in the '80s, I took a bus, Greyhound bus, from Haverhill, Massachusetts, to Times Square in New York City, went to a phone booth, grabbed the big fat Yellow Pages, wrote down the names of about 15 or 20 literary agents, got back on the bus, and took it back, four hours back home.

Now, Google. And so I recommend that they subscribe to *Poets & Writers* magazine. I think it's a wonderful resource for young writers. They've got the names of agents in the back who will look at unsolicited manuscripts. There are all these great interviews with writers with some helpful ideas about the writing life.

But you know, my answer here segues into your second question about some of the biggest stumbling blocks that I see in young and not so young writers. Look, the digital train has left the station. I think we're living in a fraught time.

I'm very grateful that I can sit and have this interview with you in our respective homes with our gadgets, but I don't own an iPhone. I've never sent a text. I've never been on social media. I've never seen an emoji or a meme. I don't carry a phone with me. I have a flip phone I keep in my truck, and I only use it when I need to make a call, and then I hang up.

Why do I tell you that? I have seen, not just in young people, not just in undergraduate age people, but older people, too, I think one of the downsides of this thing, it's cast us all in a trance. It's addicted us, and it's made us all the curators of the "Museum of Me."

We've all become consciously -- I mean toxically self-conscious, and I've seen it affect creative writing. Too many writers, young or old, are prematurely anticipating somebody reading what they're writing.

And what I find myself saying is, look, you should write as if -- every day you should write as if you're going to get executed in the morning. Just write as openly and nakedly and honestly and well as you can each day, and let go.

Isak Dinesen said famously she writes every day without hope and without despair. So there's a lot -- there's too much control going on. There's too much self-consciousness going on. I blame the digital world to a large degree, but it's also natural.

And look, there's a wonderful line from Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel Prize-winning writer from South Africa, and she said, look -- well, no, she didn't say anything. It was the line in one of her novels where one character has an insight as to what sincerity has, a middle-aged woman having coffee with her friend. And the insight is, oh, sincerity is never having an idea of oneself.

So what I see across the board is that people are too much, young writers especially, are too wrapped up in how they will appear to others while they write, and it strangles their baby. And so what I try to get them to do is just to surrender to the moment, to surrender to their curiosity.

There's a great line from Rumi, "Sell your cleverness and purchase bewilderment." And so both my answers to your questions, your great questions, are actually tied together in that way, I think.

CHRIS DAVIS: So what you're saying essentially is there's a lot of self-censorship going on with writing students?

ANDRE DUBUS Yes.

III:

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah.

ANDRE DUBUS And it's understandable on a human level. I don't judge them one bit, by the way. I totally get it. But often,

III: therefore, the writing is too safe, too careful, often just that -- too safe, too careful, too polite, too appropriate, or it's the opposite, working too hard to sound like a renegade and a rebel and a punker. And I just aged myself with that reference.

I sound post-postmodern. I don't know what it is now. Well, there's a wonderful line from Phillip Lopate. I believe it was Lopate in an essay about if you're going to write about yourself, he said, "By all means you must avoid the stench of the ego."

And I think that's a great way to live a life. Let's try to find a way to avoid the stench of the ego. Let's do that always. Blaise Pascal said famously, "Anything written to please the author is worthless."

Now, that's not to suggest we can't enjoy ourselves. I certainly love writing. I did it for a few hours today because I love it, and I feel like I'd die a little bit if I don't write.

But I think what he's saying is just because you want to write about A doesn't mean A wants to be written by you right now. You'll notice your attention is going to B, so let it take you to B. It's the main thing I try to teach in classes, I find, and it's simple, but it's not easy.

CHRIS DAVIS: I think I might know the answer to this, but I want to ask because I do ask with the other writers that I've spoken to, who have said that in their burgeoning writer days, they were particularly helped or coached or mentored by-- in one case, one person I spoke to said it was the literary editor, Jean Stein.

Other people have said other figures in their lives. Would it be fair to say that your father played that role in your writing career?

ANDRE DUBUS III: No, no, in fact, he did not. And having read *Townie*, I'm sure you know this. I did not go to him with my work, I think partly because I didn't want that relationship with him.

He moved out when I was 9 or 10, and when I began writing in my early, mid 20s, I didn't want him for some teacher. I wanted him to be my dad. I will say late in my father's life -- we didn't know it was late in his life. As you know, he died suddenly at age 62, and I was 39.

But I would call him and say, hey, Pop, I just read this line of dialogue, and there's a guy pointing a gun at a bartender's face, and the bartender is saying, "I don't know nothing, I didn't do it," and one other complete sentence, all divided by commas. I said, what the hell is that? He said, well, son, it's called a comma splice. And that's like one of the only times we actually had shop talk.

Honestly -- I'm trying to be really honest here -- I don't feel I had any mentors until I met my current editor, with whom I've been working for 24 years. She's younger than I am. She's not a writer herself, although she could be if she wanted to.

She came along with my third novel, which is the one that took off, *House of Sand and Fog*. And I wouldn't say she's a writing mentor, but I've learned more about writing by the rigorous, terrifyingly unbending whip she's put on me to go deeper or really make the work better. But I was writing 20 years before she came along, so maybe she's just more of a colleague. I don't know.

CHRIS DAVIS: No, thanks for, thanks for saying that. And I think it's quite clear from *Townie* that, if I recall correctly, one of the passages that struck me is, I think, one of the first times you're talking about your writing process where, if I'm recalling this correctly, you were on your way to train for boxing.

And you kind of were compelled to stay in the apartment you were living in at the time that evening and just put pen to paper, make some tea, and write. So you definitely convey that writing kind of came from within you.

ANDRE DUBUS III: It did. It surprised me. I had no idea. And also, I'd done the psychic math. Well, there's already a writer in my family. We have the same name, so I must be something else. And so it was a lovely surprise that --

I mean, really that night, and of course, I really slow down for that in the book, but that's -- you know, look, people can have, of course, their own beliefs about anything. It's hard-- I don't believe that there's a God who knows my name and loves me, but I do believe in the divine. I believe in mystery.

I believe there's something quite beautiful in and around us at all times, we human beings. And on that night, something I can only call divine had me sit down, grab a piece of paper and a pencil, and I started to write a scene.

And I have been writing five to six days a week since that night, which is, I dare say, 40 years ago, for the feeling it gave me. And the feeling it gave me was one, after I put down my pencil, I never felt more awake or alive or authentically in my skin and I never felt so much like me.

CHRIS DAVIS: One more question. I can't help but ask this. I'm just, I'm curious. Being a writer for so many years, and I'm sure someone who's protective of his work, how did you feel about your work, your book, *House of Sand and Fog* being adapted by other writers?

I don't know if you had any role in that adaptation, but was that a joyful experience? Was it an interesting experience for you?

ANDRE DUBUS III: It was joyfully fraught because I am protective of my work. Not that I hold my work up high, but you feel parental about your work, and you want whatever integrity you tried to give it or find in it to not be smashed.

Hollywood's not known for making art. It's known for trying to make money. But the director of that movie, Vadim Perelman, who's from Ukraine, we just hit it off, and I trusted his intelligence completely.

And we became friends, and he would send me every working draft, and he would let me give notes. And he offered me the opportunity to write it, but I didn't want to write it because I was working on another novel.

But I did feel protective, and we argued about some of the -- the ending, the ending was so different from in the movie in the book, but he convinced me that in the film it would not work the way hopefully it worked in the book.

And ultimately I agreed with him, so much so that I went on the film tour with him and the actors, and it was really quite an experience. Look, I am never going to complain about my wonderfully successful novel being made into a big Hollywood movie. It beats hanging Sheetrock.

CHRIS DAVIS: I'm very much looking forward to your novel that's coming out this summer.

ANDRE DUBUS III: Thank you.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah, I'm thrilled to read that. It's been such a pleasure talking to you. I really appreciate it.

ANDRE DUBUS III: Chris, thank you. It's been a pleasure for me, too.

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