

[THEME MUSIC]

CHRIS DAVIS: Hello and welcome to the *CARC Podcast*. I'm Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center and the host of the *CARC Podcast*.

It's my great pleasure to be speaking to Chris Bohjalian today. Chris is the number one *New York Times* bestselling author of 24 books. His work has been translated into 35 languages and become three movies and an Emmy-nominated TV series. He's also a playwright and screenwriter.

His books have been chosen as best books of the year by *The Washington Post*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Book Page*, and *Salon*. His awards include the Walter Cerf Medal for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts, the ANCA Freedom Award for his work educating Americans about the Armenian Genocide, the ANCA Arts and Letters Award for *The Sandcastle Girls*, as well as the Saint Mesrob Mashdots Medal, the New England Society Book Award for *The Knight Strangers*, the New England Book Award, Russia's Soglasie Award for *The Sandcastle Girls*, a Boston Public Library Literary Light, a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for *Trans-Sister Radio*, a Best Lifestyle column for *Idyll Banter* from the Vermont Press Association.

His novel, *Midwives*, was the number one *New York Times* bestseller, a selection of Oprah's Book Club, and the New England Booksellers Association Discovery Pick. He is a fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences. Chris has written for a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*.

Chris graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude from Amherst College. He lives in Vermont with his wife, the photographer Victoria Blewer. Chris, thank you so much for being here with me today.

CHRIS It's great to be here. Thanks for having me on.

BOHJALIAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah, I would love to ask you some questions about your work and just to have a conversation with you about your perspective on your writing, your writing process. So is there anything you'd like to start with before we begin?

CHRIS As a matter of fact, yes, my voice. Some of you listening may have heard me before and you're thinking, oh, the
BOHJALIAN: poor guy. He has laryngitis.

I don't. This is my new voice. Thank you, COVID. I got COVID in March of 2020. And this is a rare long-haul side effect. But I'm fine.

I've got a wonderful voice therapist in New York City, a former special forces commander from another country. And we've been working together a while. And the first day we worked together was about eight hours.

And she said to me at the end of the day, "Chris Bohjalian, I need to tell you something. You say this loss of your voice is somatic reaction to grief. Well, I need to tell you, you do not know grief."

I did my homework on you. On August 12, 1973, you are the little boy playing the Little League Baseball in Connecticut. Me, I watched my beloved fiancé go into battle, where he is killed. And what did I do? I went into battle right behind him. No, you do not know grief.

Also, I've watched so much video of you. I watched video of you before you lose voice, after you lose voice. And you are big ham, even when you are all Grandpa Simpson all the time, ugh, ugh, ugh. I am going to listen to you because you have interesting things to say. So get over yourself."

Now, she has heard me mimic her. And she knows that I mimic her because I often have better voice clarity when I mimic other people. It's a weird side effect. So there is my voice. Now we can talk about writing.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, it's interesting that you say that. Just to start off with something informal related to that, as I told you, I happened to read *The Red Lotus* over the weekend. And I couldn't help but be struck by the irony of the fact that-- I won't go into a synopsis of the plot, but on the last page of the book, you talk about a burgeoning pandemic and the CDC making efforts to stop it. And if I'm not mistaken, the book was published in March 2020. Is that correct?

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: March 17. Yep, it was Friday, March 13 that we canceled the book tour. Here my big concern on Thursday the 12th had been, I have no voice. Little did I know that my voice was never going to come back in 2020.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's a good opportunity to ask you one of the first questions I wanted to, which is that that's an example of-- perhaps we might call it a thriller. Maybe *The Flight Attendant* could be in that category as well. You've written books that are historical fiction, historical suspense, character studies, a variety of different types of stories.

When you're starting out with an idea for a book or you're starting out writing a book, do you start with the idea of this is a story that I'm going to tell in this genre? Or are there other factors that come into your mind before that? Or is that even a factor?

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: First of all, I never want to write the same book twice. Secondly, you're right. My books do bounce around among historical fiction, literary fiction, thrillers. But even my thrillers are real slow burns. Even my thrillers do not fall into the tradition of short chapters, heavy on plot, focus less on deep dive into characters.

I mean, *The Flight Attendant* and *The Red Lotus*, yes, they're thrillers, but they are very, very slow burns. And, in fact, I view *The Flight Attendant* as a character study of a really damaged person, a blackout drunk with unbelievable demons, who happens to be a flight attendant, who wakes up in Dubai next to a dead body and deeply troubled and worried that she may have killed him.

But it is very Alfred Hitchcock-y. So if you've seen the TV series, you know that the brilliant thing that the showrunner, Steve Yockey, did was think Hitchcock. And all my books begin like that-- no outline, no idea what genre they're in, just a premise.

So, for example, my most recent book, *The Lioness*, again, a thriller and more of a thriller than *The Flight Attendant* or *The Red Lotus*, but still not a traditional thriller by any stretch. But *The Lioness* begins with a really vague premise. Hollywood's biggest star in 1964 finally gets married and decides to go on a honeymoon safari and bring her entire entourage with her into the Serengeti, where, not a spoiler, it all goes to hell fast when they're abducted by Russian mercenaries on the way to the Congo.

But even in the confines of a thriller, every chapter loses, by design, a certain amount of narrative momentum to take a deep dive into character. Why is this character doing this when confronted without a gun by a lioness? Why does this character do this when suddenly looking into the gun barrel held by a Russian mercenary?

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah, thank you for answering that. I was curious. I saw an excerpt of an interview you had done several years back, where you had talked about I think what was the genesis of *The Guestroom*. And I was quite intrigued by that. I know that writers are inspired by so many things in real life and also through their creativity. So it's always interesting to hear where inspiration comes from.

The next question I wanted to ask you is you've been writing professionally for--

CHRIS --ever.

BOHJALIAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: I was going to say, close to three decades, perhaps? Shorter or longer?

CHRIS More, more, more.

BOHJALIAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes, yes.

CHRIS Yeah, I started writing when dinosaurs ruled the Earth.

BOHJALIAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you still love the same things about writing that you did when you began writing?

CHRIS I do. But my writing has changed. I think that's worth talking about, how my writing's changed. When I started writing, there was no internet. And we watched television and movies very, very differently.

BOHJALIAN:

I started writing in an era when you would take a novel, whether it was a doorstop or a shorter book, and essentially cloister yourself on an island. And you'd be reading that book. And that would be your entertainment for a couple of days or a week or whatever.

At some point around 2009 or 2010, I fell in love with what at the time was called premium cable, prestreaming television-- *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Americans*, now programs like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Succession*. And it affected my writing and, I think, in a good way. And I want to talk about that at the same style that I want to talk about the internet.

We all know that our attention spans are different. The only time now that I will read a book for two straight hours without interruption, and I do this three or four times a week, is in the bath without my phone. Otherwise, when I'm reading in bed, I'll read a chapter and then go to my phone. I'll read a chapter and I'll scroll.

So we have these two related technological changes that affect me as a reader and as a writer. My books now are about character. But they are far more likely to begin with a bang. They are far more likely to begin with the sort of craziness we see in television programs, whether it's *Succession* or *Euphoria* or *The White Lotus*.

I would not have written a book like *The Lioness* 20 years ago in quite this same structure. I would not have had the massive amounts of interstitial pages.

In a book set in 1662, *Hour of the Witch*, which was published in 2021, if I had written that book in 2010 -- I mean, I love novels like *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, *Anna Karenina*, *Les Miserables*. But when we think of *Les Mis*, we go right to the candlesticks and the bishop. And the fact that is like page 100 in the novel.

I mean, in *Les Miserables*, we've got 40 pages on the sewers of Paris. And I would never write a book like that now because I know that we read differently. And we don't want 40 pages on the sewers of Paris. Likewise, if you're going to begin with Jean Valjean stealing the candlesticks the way the musical and the movies do, that makes more sense in 2023 than it did in 2005 or 1860.

CHRIS DAVIS: It's funny that you say that because earlier today I was leading a webinar with an academic coach at the university. And one of the students, one of the questions the students asked, which comes up all the time now, which you touched on very concisely, is how do I avoid digital distractions? It's just so unavoidable in whatever work that we're doing. Yes.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: OK, I write on a computer or a laptop. But I always turn off the Wi-Fi when I'm writing. So I'm not tempted. I schedule my social network posts for the morning the night before so I'm not tempted to do that. And I try to stay off Twitter in the morning, not simply because it is so toxic, but it is so easy to go down that wormhole of news, especially these days because there is so much news out there.

Every 50 or so pages that I've written on the computer I'll print out. And then I will go to another room in the house, the dining room, the kitchen, with a fountain pen. And I will spend the next two or three days editing them by hand.

And I do that because I'm not distracted by the internet and because writing with a fountain pen and writing longhand forces me to edit slowly. Fountain pens are messy. And to really find that right synonym, whether it's Burgundy, claret, and that's important to just sort of detox from the internet.

CHRIS DAVIS: Chris, I also wanted to ask you, since you mentioned it just now, and especially, to be consistent, I was speaking to Andre Dubus two weeks ago today, actually.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: Isn't he great?

CHRIS DAVIS: He is.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: *House of Sand and Fog* is such a fantastic novel. His most recent novel is such a treasure.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mhm. Yeah, and he has a new one coming out later this year. But I asked him the same question I'm going to ask you because you're both writers who have had your works adapted into other mediums. As a writer, when your work is being adapted by -- I don't know if you had a role to play in, for example, *The Flight Attendant*. I know you've had other work adapted.

But what's that like for you? Is that something that you're relatively comfortable with, other people adapting your work and perhaps changing it? What do you feel about that?

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: I understand that television and movies are very different from novels. I've always tried to do my due diligence when a project is optioned on the team to make sure that I'm comfortable with them as artists because they are going to make changes. And I've been really fortunate. I've been grateful for the movies. I've been grateful for the TV series. And I understand that they need to make changes for the medium. And yeah, I'm completely fine with that.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I know you do many book talks. You have done--

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: With this voice. It's a trip.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, you're a trooper. I know you're still very active in that capacity. I've watched many recent interviews with you lately.

But over the years, you've done book tours and book talks. And you've spoken to a lot of people. I am sure these kind of questions come up. But we have a large and ever-growing creative writing and literature graduate program. And we have a lot of students who are now writers or who would like to have their work published.

I guess I'll ask you as kind of a two-part question, what advice do you have for writers, given that the publishing landscape has changed so much in the last 10, 20, 30 years? And also, are there consistent, I think, obstacles or challenges that you think young writers deal with across the board that if you had the opportunity would say, hey, young writers, hey, student writers, these are some of the roadblocks that you're going to face in the technical part of writing that you could tell them? Because that's something that always comes up when I hear from our creative writing students.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: Yeah. First of all, when you can, write every day. Your schedule won't always allow for that. But when you can, you want to write every day, and if possible at the same time.

When I graduated from college, my first job was in advertising. I didn't get an MFA. I went right to work. But every day before going to work, I wrote from 5:00 AM to 7:00 AM seven days a week and Monday and Tuesday nights after work.

And I still start writing about 6:00 in the morning. And I still write seven days a week. I mean, I even write on holidays. I write Easter morning. I write Christmas morning. I literally write every day. And I do that because, first of all, I love to write. Other than hanging around with my wife and daughter and my dog, there's nothing I love more than writing.

But writing every day does a few things. When you write every day, you begin -- and this is what I do -- by rewriting the last 200 or 300 or 400 words I wrote the day before. And this is editing. So you're making it better.

Secondly, you're becoming reacquainted with the material. And third, rather like an airplane on a runway, you're gaining momentum as you write. So as you're typing or writing by longhand, whatever you do, you are that plane on the runway going faster and faster and faster until you have velocity. And then you lift off. Then you can go, go.

Oh, forgive me. And we want to talk about how writing has changed.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: What are the different obstacles? First of all, I think writing is in a great, great place. And it's in a great place because the canon is changing. And the places to write are changing. And the opportunities to write different kind of books are evolving in ways that I had never imagined.

I just finished a 15,000-word quasi novella, quasi short story for a platform that didn't exist 30 years ago. And I had a great time writing this entirely stream of consciousness, second-person fever dream, which is great fun. And there would have been no venue for this in 1989, the year my first novel was published, because in 1989, you either wrote novels or you wrote 5,000-word short stories for literary journals or *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic*. There was no place for this other kind of story.

But there's still opportunities to write short stories. And gosh knows the novel, either in the long form or the short form, is thriving. I mean, my gosh, I love the work of Sally Rooney, these brilliant, 50,000-word novels, which are just fantastic. At the same time, I still love, love doorstops of novels.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you, Chris. I appreciate that. And the answer may be no, but is there an individual who has been a mentor or an inspiration for your writing over the years, earlier in your career? Or is there anyone who had a teacher, an editor, someone who played the role of some kind of mentorship or a trusted someone to bounce ideas off of? Is there anyone who had played a role like that for you?

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: Yes. I'm going to tell you two people, the good and the bad. First, the good. I was really, really blessed to fall madly in love with my soulmate when I was 18 years old. So my girlfriend since I was 18, then my wife-- we even got married right out of college-- has read every word I've written.

And her criticism is always so smart. I mean, she even said to me when she was particularly hard on one manuscript and I must not have been taking it well, she said, "Wouldn't you rather hear it from me than *The New York Times*?" This Victoria Blewer. She's read at least 3.6 million words that I've written. And she always had faith in me.

I mean, when I was in my early 30s, one month we had to sell all our dining room furniture so he'd have health insurance. Another month, we had to sell our living room furniture so we could pay the mortgage. But, I mean, she never lost faith that this was madness. She always thought we'd be fine. And we were.

And here's the bad or also the good, but the different. I've never taken a creative writing course but not for want of trying. When I was a sophomore, I really wanted to be in a creative writing course because the writer-in-residence was fantastic my wife. My mother revered this woman's work.

And to determine who would be in the class, you had to submit a short story before the December holidays. Then she would read it over the break and let if you were among the few, the proud, the chosen. So I submitted a short story, went home.

And then in early January, here was a note from her at my campus PO box. And you know in Massachusetts in early January, the sun sets about 1:00 in the afternoon. And I went to college in the Berkshires. And I was summoned to see her about 4:30 in the afternoon.

So it's dark. And it's cold. And I go to the brick monolith that houses the English Department at my alma mater. And there she is. And she sees me in the doorway. And she says, "Ah, you must be Chris. I'm not going to try to pronounce your last name."

And she beckons me to sit down. And I do. And in my memory, her desk is the size of a putting green. And I see my short story in front of her. And she sees that I see it. And she slides it across the desk as if it's roadkill.

And she says, "Well, Chris, I'm not going to try to pronounce your last name. I have three words for you." And I know this is not going to be good. She says, "Be a banker."

So I did not take a creative writing course. But I took two things away from that I never, ever lost sight of. The first is that short story I submitted was probably terrible. And I probably wasn't ready to be in that course.

But it nevertheless put a real fire in my belly to try to get better and, as we would say now, to show the haters they were wrong. And ever since then, I've always had a reasonably thick skin most of the time about criticism while understanding that the first draft is never the last draft. My books go through a lot of drafts, even now.

And it's important to as a writer hear what people are telling me about my work. But as a teacher, whenever I'm asked, to understand that my words have a power that I might not realize. And what I say might matter to the recipient a lot more than I realize and to be kind and cautious and thoughtful.

CHRIS DAVIS: Very wise words. Thank you. Thank you, Chris, so much. I appreciate it. And it was such a pleasure to talk to you.

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: Oh, I loved speaking with you, too. Your questions were fantastic. I celebrate all your young writers, all your aspiring writers, and wish them all the best. And I hope they have so much fun, to not feel pressure, to just savor writing those sentences.

[THEME MUSIC]

CHRIS DAVIS: You have been listening to the *CARC Podcast*, a podcast of the Career and Academic Resource Center.