



WSIRN Episode 186: Finding the book that feels like it was written just for you
Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Lamar Giles

[00:00:00]

LAMAR: And the thing I say is first of all, I enjoy his writing, no matter what you say, you can't-you can't talk bad to me about Stephen King. [BOTH LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 186. Welcome to the show that's dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader: What should I read next?

We don't get bossy on this show: What we WILL do here is give you the information you need to choose your next read. Every week we'll talk all things books and reading and do a little literary matchmaking with one guest.

Today, author Lamar Giles is joining me to chat about his two great literary loves: children's books, and... horror novelist Stephen King. If you don't think those two things go together, Lamar is prepared to talk you into changing your mind... and maybe about more than just that. Get ready for a great chat about transcending stereotypes, how books can impress self-worth on young readers, great novels where the setting becomes a character in its own right, and so so much more.

Let's get to it!

Lamar, welcome to the show.

LAMAR: Thank you for having me.

ANNE: If Wikipedia is correct, I understand those are dicey words, we'll see what happens next, you have a wulvel connection.

LAMAR: I do, but I have a Wikipedia page?!

[00:01:15]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] You do!

LAMAR: I do?

ANNE: You do.

LAMAR: Oh, wow. I've made it. [LAUGHS] I didn't know that. But yeah, I do-

ANNE: I want to sing the Mary Tyler Moore song right here.

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] Yeah. I'm part of the faculty for the Spalding University low-res MFA program, which is in Louisville, Kentucky.

ANNE: It is. I am in Louisville, Kentucky, so it's like five miles down the road. We have previous guests who have been part of that program. There are so many great authors that are a part of that program either as faculty or students, and I feel like I keep meeting more of them. You're one of how many people involved?

LAMAR: I don't know the exact count, but I would say at least a dozen writers are a part of the faculty for that program, and I'm probably being conservative just because I don't know. But yes, lot of great writers involved.

ANNE: Crystal Wilkinson was at a Kentucky author event-

LAMAR: Yes.

ANNE: She was amazing.

LAMAR: Yeah, she is.

ANNE: And Silas House of course and Lennon Michalski. So in what capacity are you involved in that program?

LAMAR: Well I teach in the writing for children and young adult segment of the program, and so typically each semester, I will mentor anywhere from two to four writers as they work on their semester projects, whatever that may be. I'll also attend residency either for a day or so just to give a lecture or I have been there for the full ten days and I will run workshops as well as lecture. It varies dependent on my availability, which has been a little bit shakier in the last year or so.

[00:02:44]

ANNE: Well, according to your Wikipedia page, [LAMAR LAUGHS] no, I'm just kidding. I know that you have a lot going on in a whole lot of different aspects of the writing life.

LAMAR: I do. I do. The biggest things that happen is I had two books come out this spring. My novel *Spin* on January 29th and my novel *The Last Last-Day-of-Summer* on April 2nd, and that's the first time I've had two books come out in such close proximity. And so I've pretty much been on the road since the beginning of the year. I'm going to Philadelphia tomorrow matter of fact. So it's been a fairly busy spring.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Fairly. Now how did that end up happening because that is unusual to have two books come out so close together.

LAMAR: Well, I think it's a result of the fact that I don't publish with just a single publisher. I've worked with four of the big major houses in publishing. Each of those books that came out this year, one is from a different publisher than the other, and so they had schedules that they have locked in, that they want to keep, so it really doesn't matter [LAUGHS] that I have another book coming out from someone else. They need to hit their schedules, so it just ended up the way it is.

ANNE: And they're very different books.

LAMAR: They are.

ANNE: So what has that been like discussing and touring for two books that are judging by outside appearances, very different? Now you may see similar themes in your work that make you go, eh, middle grade isn't that different from YA.

LAMAR: I would say they're vastly different. [ANNE LAUGHS] So I think you're right. They're vastly different and the idea of touring to promote two separate books, the schedule's been heavy, but keeping them in separate silos hasn't because typically if I'm doing an event for *Spin*, then I'm just talking about *Spin*. You know? If I do an event for *Last Last-Day*, then I'm just talking about that. They don't tend to intersect unless I get to a general book festival where we're all there for different reasons and someone wants to talk about both.

ANNE: Not every author writes in different genres, but you've written in many different genres and are hoping to write in more. And like all across the age spectrum.

LAMAR: I became a reader at a very young age. My mom insisted on her children having books around all the time and so I went through picture books to chapter books to middle grade when I was growing up, but that's where some of those books would've fell, and then I jumped right into adult books. And so I was a passionate reader across the entire age spectrum and now that I

have a voice and foot in the door of publishing, I would like to contribute to each of those age groups that I remember loving to read, you know?

[00:05:13]

ANNE: I do. I do and that makes a lot of sense to me except so few authors do it. Why do you think that is?

LAMAR: It is complicated. Sometimes you may not always have a publisher who'll want to support that sort of range and I mean, I've been fortunate enough where I do have a publisher who wants me to do middle grade for them and I have publishers who want me to do YA. And I think if I could to start to understand the form and write a great picture book, I think I have enough contacts where there would be someone who'd want to publish it.

ANNE: Mm-hmm.

LAMAR: So, I mean, I think it's a matter of I've diversified my career in a sense where I have the opportunity to go to different people if I want to do different stuff.

ANNE: I suspect that one of the reasons that adult authors don't want to write, say, middle grade is they just never want to revisit middle school in any way shape or form. [LAMAR LAUGHS] What kind of young Lamar do you have in your head, in your heart, when you write a book like *The Last Last-Day-of-Summer*?

LAMAR: I can remember being that age and it was right around that age where I still loved to read and I was starting to explore writing, and I can remember just like the guys in my neighborhood sorta peeling away from reading. It wasn't cool anymore. There was almost anger towards it, and I didn't understand it back then and I got my fair share of teasing about still being a book guy for as long as I was.

ANNE: Ohh.

LAMAR: I recognize in adulthood that at least part of that had to be that the books that we grew up reading, that were pushed upon us, did not feature characters that looked like the people where I live. I'm talking about African-American kids. Part of my purpose in revisiting middle school to write these middle grade books is that I'm hoping to provide the sort of books that I had trouble finding at that age, and maybe they're the sorta books that keep some of those kids from peeling away from reading. Because they recognize these boys, Otto and Sheed, or the girls in the book, Wiki and Leen, look like us and they do fantastic things and it's okay to keep reading them.

So that's at least part of my motivation for doing the work I do.

[00:07:09]

ANNE: If you're listening to the show, you're a person who believes in the value and power of books and reading and to think that kids anywhere wouldn't continue reading because they literally didn't see it as part of their identity is ... I'm-I'm glad you're doing what you do 'cause what a terrible reason to lose readers.

LAMAR: Yeah. It's something I've been passionate about for a long time. Now that I have a place in the industry, I know that I can at least contribute my voice and you know, I also helped found an organization called We Need Diverse Books.

ANNE: I was going to say, we can't go on without talking about We Need Diverse Books.

LAMAR: Yeah, yeah. So you know, with that organization, there's a bunch of us with similar stories who are working to make sure that any child who is marginalized and who couldn't see themselves in stories have the opportunity to do so.

ANNE: I feel like -- I hope this is true for everybody, I don't want to say that I take We Need Diverse Books for granted, but I feel like it's such an established part of the landscape now that I just ... It feels like it's been there for a long time, but it hasn't been forever. When did you all found that organization?

LAMAR: 2014. So it'll be five years last month. From the time the hashtag started, which we built upon to eventually form the nonprofit. So it's been five years. I didn't even think about it. That's amazing.

ANNE: That's a big anniversary.

LAMAR: It is. It is. I think we will probably do some celebrating at the ALA conference this year. I guess it's been so much a part of my daily life that I never really thought about it much. That time passed away, it did.

ANNE: Is five years long enough from your view to see progress being made on that front in publishing?

LAMAR: I think there's been some changes, some good changes. The easiest thing you can look at is comparing a 2014 New York Times Bestseller List to a 2019 New York Times Bestseller List, and I think you'll see that, you know, what a lot of times, there's a lot more representation on the list these days than in the days prior to 2014. And that's not just us. I mean, and I'm always careful to point this out. We hit at a time ... It was a perfect intersection of timing and technology. So social media really helped, but there were so many other people doing this work before We Need Diverse Books came along.

But yeah, so there have been some changes and we're working on programming to help continue to make big changes because I think the next big thing that needs to happen is changing the publishing houses themselves. Whether that's more diverse representation at the editorial stage, the marketing stage, more diverse agents, and so we have some programs in place to try to encourage up and comers to look in those directions.

[00:09:40]

ANNE: And something else I hear you're saying -- If you can look at a bestseller list and see that progress is being made, is that where we as readers choose to spend our bookish attention and our book dollars really matters.

LAMAR: This is true. I'll say this, I don't think the readers have ever really been the problem. I think the biggest issue we've had is that the industry itself, for a long time didn't see value in having a variety of diverse voices. I think a lot of times publishers rested on their laurels. If they had one Black writer, they felt they were good. if they had one LGBTQ writer, they felt they had that base covered. And it's just, that's a standard that other writers don't get held to. It's not ... You'll never see, you know, we have-we have enough blond writers. [ANNE LAUGHS] Like they ... Nobody-nobody judges that way for anybody else, you know?

And so it-it is important where readers spend their dollars, but I think readers have to be able to discover the books. They have to be available to them. They have to be visible in places the readers go, and that's still a problem.

ANNE: Okay, so imagine me as a reader sitting in my living room reading my book in Kentucky. What can I do to make a difference?

LAMAR: If you recognize there's a hole somewhere, and I say this a lot to teachers who would tell me that they teaching at a school that has maybe a high Latinx population and they want to know what they can do to help, and I will say well one thing you can do is a quick Google search to see what sort of Latinx books are out there. And if you go to the We Need Diverse Books website, DiverseBooks.org, there are resources that may help you find a site that has a list of that sort. And I was like the biggest thing you can do is either recommend a book to a young person or buy that book yourself and put it in their hand, and say, hey, this is a book you may have been looking for. I think that's like a really simple way that every single person can help if they feel they recognize a, for a lack of a better term, diversity hole in their life. I think it's just a simple thing. The reader is so appreciative when you put that great book in their hand.

ANNE: That is a real thing and I can feel us all nodding along like yes. I want a fellow reader to come up to me and say hey, I think this might be a book you're looking for.

LAMAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:11:50]

ANNE: So, Lamar, we know that in middle school you kept reading and you're kinda teased for it because your friends aren't reading, but you must have fallen hard to be such a strong reader at such an early age. What got you hooked?

LAMAR: That would be my mom. My mom was a factory worker. She's retired now. But my home town is a factory town so many, many people in town worked at these various plants. It's very hard work if you've never been to one of those plants. Good jobs, people were happy to have them, but my mom was like I want my kids to have more opportunities than the factory. And she always felt that reading was at least one part of the foundation to help that happen. And so from a very early age, she was just adamant about us having books and it became this thing where like, if we asked for toys, she was like nah, that's birthday stuff or holiday stuff. But if we asked for books, she never turned us down, and that just became a thing where I think we were partially greedy. We were like okay, we can get this thing from Mom all the time. [ANNE LAUGHS] So let's get a bunch of books.

But the plan worked. We enjoyed reading. We always asked for the next thing. I remember one tradition that is sorta still intact to this day is my mom buying me the new Stephen King book every year because he tended to publish in the fall around my birthday. I-I-I credit my mom for all of it because she was the one who made sure books were important.

I'll be honest, as a teenager, I probably fell off a little bit because I didn't want to be teased. I didn't want to be the-the oddball in the neighborhood. And so I got away from it for a little while, but it took discovering someone like Walter Dean Myers to bring me back and say hey, okay, this is something that I used to love and reading about characters that are sorta like me helps me love it again.

ANNE: So Walter Dean Myers brought you back.

LAMAR: Yeah, *Fallen Angels*. And-and it wasn't so much the character in that book was very much like me 'cause this was a kid going off to the Vietnam War. That wasn't like my life at all, but it was just like it was a Black guy. And he was the lead. He was the hero of the book, and that was just super exciting because before that, the only time I think I remember seeing that or having a book recommended to me by librarians it was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Roots*, both by Alex Haley. [BOTH LAUGH]

So, it was just interesting to see someone my age be the lead of the book. And from there, the Internet was just starting to become a thing. So that's how old I am. I was there at the dawn of Internet in homes. And when the Internet became a thing, it became easier to find work that I wanted to work that also represented people I knew. And I came across writers like Steven Barnes, Tananarive Due, Eric Jerome Dickey, Black writers who were writing like contemporary stuff. It was adult stuff, but I still devoured it.

[00:14:39]

ANNE: Lamar, there's a question I want to ask you.

LAMAR: Sure.

ANNE: Sometimes I see people complain about the move for diversity and representation in publishing and what they say is, books are supposed to be windows, they don't have to be mirrors. I think a book can be a window, and I really value that, but some of my most powerful reading experiences as an adult, but especially as a child, have been because it's been a mirror. But you're coming at this with a different background and a different perspective than I am. Could you talk a little bit about how it's important that a book be both, but especially that a book be a mirror?

LAMAR: Certainly. I mean, and I'll say this, I've heard that criticism plenty over the years.

ANNE: I figured you had.

LAMAR: It tends to come from people who I think have always had the mirror. So it's always funny to me to hear that person say something like that because they have likely not experienced a time where they couldn't find a book that was also a mirror, but it's a window for me, you know? It's a window for the kids in my neighborhood.

It suddenly becomes a problem if that gets flipped where you're telling them a window into my life is just as important as the mirror to yours. There's always going to be critics who push back. There's going to be contriurians. There's going to be people who absolutely do not want anything to do with the mission I have made my own and that the other members of We Need Diverse Books has made their own. And I remember being in the very first panel we have ever did as an organization at BookCon back in 2014. I told this to a standing room only crowd, ignore those people. If they don't want to listen to what you're saying, they don't want to value your experience as a human when you say you want to see yourself in these stories, we move on. We don't waste time trying to convince them because this isn't a thing that should be hard to convince anybody of. If you don't want to be convinced, I wish you well, I'm moving on who I can help.

ANNE: I really appreciate you sharing that in your own words. Thank you. Knowing how important reading is to you and knowing of the experience you have of putting books on the shelves, I can't wait to hear about what you choose to read.

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] Well, my reading is vast and varied. And I should preface this with I was a judge for the National Book Award last year.

ANNE: I know!

[00:16:49]

LAMAR: Yeah.

ANNE: What was that like?

LAMAR: So I can only talk about so much of it. We had to sign NDAs about what we could discuss-

ANNE: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR: But the obvious part is we had to read a lot of books. Honestly I think that broke something in me. I had to read so many books in such a short period of time that it messed with my recall a little bit. It's very hard for me to name books and authors that I'm reading lately without pulling up like my phone or what ... Or looking at my-my Kindle account or my Audible account. So I-I-I lead with that. If I stumble over titles and authors, but as far as what I like to read, it-it changes because I love nonfiction, so any given time I might hear a topic and want to read about it. Like Elizabeth Holmes and her company or I may stumble across an author where their book is so good, I want to read the next book.

And that recently happened with Taylor Jenkins Reid, *Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. I stumbled upon that somehow, I don't even know how. Tore through that and immediately wanted to read *Daisy Jones and The Six*, which I actually grabbed the audiobook for and the audiobook's fantastic. It's a full cast production. I highly recommend.

It-it can be stuff publishers send me because they want me to blurb it or it could be stuff my wife has stumbled across. She's like, you gotta read this too, and so it just becomes like very random, but if I enjoy the book, it'll usually lead to something else.

ANNE: It'll usually lead to something else, do you mean that you're going to rabbit trail your way to a tangential read?

LAMAR: Absolutely. I tend to do that. Just finished *Daisy Jones and The Six*, so now I'm like, I kinda want to read more music-based books. I'm thinking about revisiting *Visit From The Goon Squad*. Do you remember that one? It's a short story collection in one-

ANNE: Oh, Lamar. [LAMAR LAUGHS] I've only read half of that one. I think there's still a bookmark in my home someplace that marks the place I left off. So I hear you saying I should go back, especially if I enjoy *Daisy Jones*.

LAMAR: I enjoyed that one a lot and I'm going to gamble, I mess up names right now, but I think that's Jennifer Egan's book.

ANNE: [WHISPERS] It is.

[00:18:48]

LAMAR: Okay, I got it right. But, yeah, it'll be stuff like that. So I read *Daisy Jones and The Six* and now I want to read more music books, and it goes that way for me. I really want to read some scary stuff. [ANNE LAUGHS] 'Cause I grew up a horror guy-

ANNE: Yeah.

LAMAR: Obviously wanted to be Stephen King when I was a kid. I love to stumble across some new scary stuff because I haven't read in that genre in a while.

ANNE: Well I have a podcast episode for you.

LAMAR: Okay.

ANNE: On What Should I Read Next episode 176, aptly titled something about books in the freezer, I talked to Mallory O'Meara, who is a huuuge horror fan. So we talked about all the books that she loves that I'm kinda mostly terrified by. Oh, you know what? We talked about *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* with her, too.

LAMAR: Oh, wow. Okay.

ANNE: But we talked about books like *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. We talked about *Experimental Film* by Gemma Files. We talked about *The Terror* by Dan Simmons. Books that I ... See, Lamar, I'm basically a big chicken, like the Stephen King books I've read [LAMAR LAUGHS] are the ones that aren't, like I loved *11/22/63*.

LAMAR: Yes, it's fantastic.

ANNE: And *On Writing* and I really want to read *The Stand* and I think I can do it. But I'm never reading *It*. That's just not happening.

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] I read *It* when I was 11 years old. It was-

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Oh, did your mother buy it for you?

LAMAR: Yes. And this was, I-I got the paperback from our local grocery store because we didn't have a bookstore at the time. And so I got that paperback from the local grocery store and tore through it in about a week. It was terrifying. It was. But I think that's honestly the book that sorta sold me on, I'm going to try to be a writer. Because I didn't understand how this man could make me feel actual fear with words.

ANNE: Just words on the page.

[00:20:30]

LAMAR: Words on a page. Oh, I just thought about another book that I'm really looking forward to. It just came out today, *The Fire On High* by Elizabeth Acevedo.

ANNE: Oh, yes! It's on my list.

LAMAR: Yeah.

ANNE: I've heard such great things.

LAMAR: It's out today, but I'm not going to buy it today because I'm going to Philadelphia tomorrow and I think she's doing an event in Philadelphia so I'm going to try to go and get a copy then.

ANNE: That's a great way to do it. Make her publisher glad that they sent her on tour.

LAMAR: Exactly.

ANNE: And will you get to meet her in person? Or just follow behind her and get a signed copy?

LAMAR: I've met her several times actually because I was a National Book Award judge, you know, she won the award last year. So I was at the ceremony. That was my first time meeting her and got to see her accept the award. And then since, I've seen her at many different events.

ANNE: Just another perk besides getting to read all the books.

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] Absolutely. I get to see all the cool writers.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] You know you're totally one of them, Lamar.

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] I don't feel that way. It's funny because people say stuff like that, and I just ... It-it ... Your own perception of yourself is-is never I think what the public sees when you're a public person, and so I just always still feel like book nerd Lamar from Hopewell High School. [ANNE LAUGHS] So, yeah. When I'm in venues and I'm with these superstar writers, I'm just, I feel just like the same book kid I was back then. Like I'm in awe.

ANNE: Do you think that most people who do write the books that we as readers enjoy reading think of themselves the same way? The same book nerd they've always been except now they're supposed to wear nicer clothes.

[00:21:55]

LAMAR: Yeah. I would imagine. I can say like I'm good friends with many writers who are popular and people know their names, and the conversations we've had, I mean, I think people would just be surprised at how normal the conversation is. Like this, when you hear people talk about diva personalities with singers and actors, I have found the book community to not be that. Like everyone I think has their own same insecurities. I'm talking about the superstars. I talk to them and it just feels like we all are sorta amazed that this our job now.

ANNE: I like that about the book world.

ANNE: Readers, I know that as a listener of this show you're someone who loves learning, exploring new places and ideas through the books you read.

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Readers, we are big Kopari fans at my house. We have sensitive skin in our gene pool around here, and it's been great to find a deodorant that doesn't give us rashes, and that actually works.

Well now I want to let you know that they've got a new deodorant scent called Driftwood, and it's the first Charcoal Deodorant from Kopari!

You know about the Original Coconut deodorant, the Beach and Gardenia scents, and the Fragrance-Free version. Kopari's new Driftwood scent smells like sandalwood and cedarwood, with middle notes of zesty clove. It's also made with activated charcoal, which works to draw out sweat and toxins and absorb odor-causing bacteria—exactly what you'd want in a deodorant.

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[00:25:27]

ANNE: All right. Well, Lamar, you know how this works. You're going to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you're reading now, and then I'm going to attempt to recommend three books for the man who's probably read everything that you may enjoy reading next. Tell me about the first book that you love.

LAMAR: I will go with *Horton Hears A Who!* by Dr. Seuss.

ANNE: No one has ever chosen a Dr. Seuss book before as a favorite.

LAMAR: Really?

ANNE: This is a big moment.

LAMAR: I'm happy to be the first.

It's a book that just appealed to all of what will become my sensibilities. It's-it's-it's a fantasy. You got talking animals. There's a little bit of terror involved if you think about it from the Who's perspective. [ANNE LAUGHS] You know, I mean, think about it.

[00:26:07]

ANNE: Yes!

LAMAR: If you're a Who, it's like the apocalypse. People have laughed when I said stuff like this before, but I'm like if you take it from their perspective, it's the end of the world and Horton is the God that can save them. That's a little darker than probably what Dr. Seuss intended, but that's the way I took it.

And then you got the humor of everybody Horton runs into that don't believe him.

ANNE: Lamar, what's another book you love?

LAMAR: Another book I love ... We were just talking about it, so I'm going to bring it back up. I'm going to go with *It* by Stephen King.

ANNE: Scary.

LAMAR: Yeah.

ANNE: Okay. So because words can take you places, even though they're just black squiggles on a page.

LAMAR: It terrified me ... And I could not understand ... Like to that point, I read books that were supposed to be scary, like they had horror elements, and I could just brush them off. But *It* was a book that stuck with me. Like I could barely sleep that week I was tearing through it. So it was like magic. Like how does this guy do this? And that's something I've been chasing pretty much ever since. I want to be able to make people feel stuff just by the way I arrange words.

Not for nothing, the fact that there was a Black boy in the book, Mike Hanlon, the historian of the loser's club who became the town librarian who made the sacrifice to stay behind and look out for the monster. That spoke to me as well. It was a really gratifying to see the Black guy be heroic in that situation. There are things I wanted for him that he shunned to be the lighthouse keeper. And that always resonated with me.

ANNE: I didn't know that about that book.

[00:27:33]

LAMAR: Oh, yeah. I could go on a longer rant here. There's the It film. I don't really care for the Mike Hanlon depiction in that film and the second part, it's coming up, but I will not use up all our time going off about that. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Okay, so also what I hear you saying though is you couldn't put it down.

LAMAR: No. I mean, I was terrified but also wanted to know what happened next. And It is a large book. It's almost 1100 pages, and I've probably over the years have gone through three or four copies rereading it and destroying the spine and having to buy another one. I might have a copy here now that has tape on it. I just always come back to it as my first introduction to terror on the page. The magic doesn't go away. I mean here's the funny part, I talk about the paperbacks, I think I have that book in every format. I have a digital copy and I have the audiobook. So it just depends. I probably revisit it once every other year or so. It's not a yearly read for me even though Stephen King's *On Writing* is a yearly read.

ANNE: Okay. Now today, not Lamar the 11-year-old, but Lamar the grown up, you're now an author yourself. What does Stephen King do really well in that book?

LAMAR: I think he does setting and nostalgia well. Like the-the-the 1950s scenes ... I was not born on the '50s ... My-my mom was born in the year that Pennywise troubles the losers. Yet, I feel very grounded in that time and in the town of Derry. And I think everyone's recognized this about King's work over the years, he's very good at depicting the personality of a town. Particularly when that town has dark secrets.

ANNE: The personality of a town.

LAMAR: And if you really want to track a line from that to my own work, I think you can see a lot of that in *The Last Last-Day-of-Summer* with the town of Fry and Logan County as a whole. Definitely nothing as dark as It. This is a middle grade book.

ANNE: Right.

LAMAR: I would say it's probably more in line with Duckburg from the DuckTales TV series. [ANNE LAUGHS] But there's a seed of the way King writes Derry or Castle Rock in how I depict a town in my novel.

ANNE: So how do you depict the personality of a town? I'm just thinking about the little bit I know about Stephen King's worldbuilding, but I never thought of it like that before.

LAMAR: Well, to me, it's like what does the populace cosign on? Like what do the town's people as a group accept and enforce? In Derry, it's pretty much a coball of people who have come to accept children are going to go missing and be murdered and we're not going to make that big of deal of it. It goes into some of the racist roots of the town. The explanation is the creature hasn't affected the town with its malice, but it's also like maybe these people like malice a little bit? Particularly in the off years when the monster is not terrorizing us and things are going well, maybe these children are sacrifices for our own wealth and good being? And so that's the personality of Derry as I read it. And Derry's propped up in a few of King's books, and it's never a nice place to be.

As far as Fry in my book, I think what people are cosigning on is just we live in a strange place where strange things happen, but we all look out for each other and we all still like each other.

[00:30:45]

ANNE: Interesting. My husband read two of the, I mean, I think King calls them novellas, but anybody else would call them novels. [LAMAR LAUGHS] But it's-it's the series about the seasons that has *Shawshank Redemption* in it?

LAMAR: Oh, yeah. *Different Seasons*, so *Shawshank*, *The Body*.

ANNE: Those are the two he said that he loved the most.

LAMAR: Yeah. *Apt Pupil* is in that one. I don't remember what the fourth one is, but yes, I-I know what you're talking about. I think those are all Castle Rock stories.

ANNE: The way he was describing them ... First of all, what you're saying, I'm thinking this sounds very familiar [LAUGHS] from my dinner table this week, but made me think maybe I might be a chicken, but I could maybe read those.

LAMAR: Oh, yeah. I think you'd be totally fine reading *Rita Hayworth and The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Body*. I've actually seen them break *The Body* out into its own hardcover now. I saw it at Target yesterday.

ANNE: Really?

LAMAR: And it's in the young adult section, which I guess is appropriate.

ANNE: Really? Stephen King is endlessly fascinating to me.

LAMAR: I mean obviously one of my favorite writers growing up. People-people used to ask me why and it's funny 'cause I've been in this situation where I might have a King book with me, and someone will ask me why I'm reading it like they're judging me like you know, you could read better stuff. And I've always bucked against that. And the thing I say is first of all, I enjoy his

writing no matter what you say, you can't-you can't talk bad to me about Stephen King. [ANNE LAUGHS] There's certainly things I can critique and I think he does better than other things, but the thing I always say is you got to understand, I grew up in a factory town that didn't have a bookstore. And when I wanted to own books, the place I had to get books from was my local grocery store, and do you know whose books were always in the Safeway at Hopewell, Virginia? Stephen King's. That to me talks about again discoverability and visibility. Also Danielle Steele, but I like King better than Steele. [ANNE LAUGHS] You know? I'm sorry. I'm getting on my Stephen King tangent. I apologize.

[00:32:28]

ANNE: You know, everybody's got to have a soapbox, Lamar. What are you going to choose to round out your favorites list? This is just a moment in time, so no pressure.

LAMAR: Sure, sure, sure. I wanna go back to a picture book and I'm going to say *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg.

ANNE: A classic! But not one of the most well known ones from Chris Van Allsburg, so tell us about it.

LAMAR: This is a thing that Stephen King might be partially responsible for because I wasn't totally familiar with that book as a young child. The thing that exposed me to it was Stephen King short story collection *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*. Because he's got a story in there, I think it's called *The House on Maple Street*, I could be messing that title up. But it's based on an illustration from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*.

ANNE: Really?

LAMAR: Yeah, they even got the illustration in *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*. When I read the note on that, and it was a very enjoyable story, I was like I want to see what this book looks like. And when I found it, I was actually angry that I didn't know about it before. Because those illustrations with the title and that one caption, you could spin infinite stories from that. It just opened up like something in my head, like wow. I mean, and the thing is, I never really wrote a story based on a *Harris Burdick* illustration, but now that I'm talking about it, I'm tempted to try.

ANNE: Readers would read that.

LAMAR: I think it would be fun. I have a copy of that on my bookshelf. I can see it from here. I have other stuff I have to finish, I'm on the hook for a deadline I've missed. [ANNE LAUGHS] But now that I'm talking about it again, I sorta want to revisit it.

ANNE: Do you know which illustration you would choose?

LAMAR: I don't. I seem to remember there being one, I think there was like a girl who had this mysterious lump under her sheet. I'm hoping I'm not mixing that up with something else I saw. But that comes to mind first.

[00:34:10]

ANNE: If you decide to embark on that project, we want to know all about it. Lamar, tell me about a book that wasn't right for you.

LAMAR: *The Catcher In The Rye*.

ANNE: Ooh, tell me more.

LAMAR: It was presented to me in high school. It might've been one of those class assignments where you had to read it and I didn't. I got the CliffNotes. [ANNE LAUGHS] It was one of those things where the voice just didn't connect with me. And over the years, I've met many people who love it and praise it, and I've probably have tried to read that book five different times. I have a copy on my shelf right now. For whatever reason I can't make it past the first ten pages. It's one of those things I think where I'm not opposed to an unlikable narrator, but they're unlikable narrators I want to spend time with and then there are those I don't and that's one of the ones I don't.

ANNE: So it's not a world you really want to be in.

LAMAR: No, it just ... And again I'm not one of those people who are like, I need to really relate to this narrator because I read across the board, but it's something about that voice that felt so whiny and off-putting to me. And I never could get past those first few pages. I don't, like I said, I got CliffNotes in high school. I don't even remember those. I don't mean to disrespect this classic work, but you know, we all have our kryptonite, right?

ANNE: Right, and something that I feel we talk about all the time here is a book can be well done and not be for you.

LAMAR: Exactly.

ANNE: The craft could be good and you can just not want to read it, and you're not in high school anymore so that's okay.

LAMAR: Yeah, that's the beauty of it. [ANNE LAUGHS] I don't have-I don't have to go find CliffNotes anymore.

ANNE: Exactly. You don't need to pretend you've read it and just leave that alone. And we know what you're reading now, which is basically stuff all over the place. What do you find rewarding about reading broadly to the extent that you do?

LAMAR: You know, because writing is my profession, a lot of time it's admiring what someone can pull off in a genre or on a topic I'm not familiar with. So I tell you one that I read many years ago that ended up inspiring a piece of my own work. I read a nonfiction book called *Inside WISECT* which was written by a man named Gerald Shur who is essentially the inventor of Witness Protection program.

He just told these fascinating stories about the missteps they made when they first started trying to relocate witnesses and giving them new identities.

[00:36:16]

ANNE: I-I want to read that immediately.

LAMAR: Yeah, it was a great book and it inspired my first young adult novel *Fake ID*. One story in particular where they took a criminal, he was going to testify against his organization and they moved him somewhere out of like New York to somewhere like Iowa. Thing is, they gave him a new identity and left him. Like they left him for a like a month or two. Just thinking he'd be okay, and when they came back, he pretty much started a new criminal organization in this small town. So he sorta infected the town with his background. And they still needed him alive, so they had to move him again to somewhere else. And it just occurred to me like what would it be like to be that guy's kid? And that's essentially my novel *Fake ID*.

ANNE: Yeah, that sounds like an amazing premise. Lamar, I get the impression that when it comes to you and the books you are writing, that ideas are not the scarce resource.

LAMAR: Oh, no. I probably have more ideas than I could ever write. What I have trouble with now is being on the road and being productive. [LAUGHS] That's why I'm behind on a deadline right now. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's just a matter of maintaining my energy and being able to get into a rythme when I'm going ten places in a month, you know?

ANNE: I do. So you're on deadline, so that has a clarifying way of focusing your attention at least.

LAMAR: Yes.

ANNE: How do you decide what to write next? Because not only are you juggling different ideas, but also different audiences you could be writing for.

LAMAR: There's a practical direction to what I write now because it's my job and so what tends to get written is the thing I have pitched that someone wants to buy. That's taking care of through say this year. I'm contracted to turn in a sequel to *The Last Last-Day-of-Summer*. I'm contracted to do another book for HarperCollins, hopefully it'll be a sequel to *Fake ID*.

So, those sort of things clarify the direction, but I'm getting very close to the point where I've finished out my current contracts. So then it'll become conversations again about okay, maybe I have three ideas. Publisher A, would you be interested in one of these? And then it becomes, if they're on board, because I have to make money and I have to pay bills, then that's the book that gets written.

[00:38:22]

ANNE: Ahh. See, everybody wants to hear of the behind-the-scenes of the glamorous writing life and that's exactly how it goes.

LAMAR: I joke all the time that my landlord has the toughest deadlines out there. [ANNE LAUGHS] It's very different when it's your job. Before I was writing full-time, it just probably what felt coolest at the moment. There was a time where *Fake ID* felt like the coolest idea I had and it was a good thing I wrote it because that was the first book I sold.

ANNE: Well I look forward to seeing what rises to the top in the future.

LAMAR: Thank you. Thank.

ANNE: Hiring is hard, y'all. Crafting a good job description, interviewing to find competence and cultural fit, oh—and finding those candidates to begin with.

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ANNE: So when we talk about what you may enjoy reading next, I'm going to focus on the fact that you want to write a picture book. You want something scary.

[00:40:11]

LAMAR: Yes.

ANNE: And your interests are broad and varied. Also good worldbuilding and storytelling I think would not go amiss.

LAMAR: Oh, always appreciate it.

ANNE: The books you loved were *Horton Hears A Who!*, which does have a frightening element that may go over our heads if we read it just a silly children's story. *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg with its black and white illustrations, and *It* by Stephen King, in which the setting itself is practically a character.

LAMAR: Oh, yes.

ANNE: Okay we're going to start with the picture book. I'm thinking of *Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall. Do you know this one? Came out a couple of years ago.

LAMAR: I don't, but I'm writing it down. I will be picking it up.

ANNE: This is definitely not a horror story. But you know what, it is pretty terrifying to poor Jabari. So this is set at a community pool. This is a great read for summer. It's the beginning of the summer and Jabari has decided with his family, that this is going to be the year that he jumps off the high dive. But of course, he gets up there in front of his dad and his siblings and the whole neighborhood and it's kinda terrifying.

So this is a sweet story. It's fun. But it's also very much about overcoming fear and I think when many readers see the cover, they're going to be like [LAUGHS] that is is the cutest little boy. And the high dive illustration just says summer to me and I need to pick this up immediately. And if I don't have a four-year-old in my life to read it to, I'm going to read it myself and enjoy it. But I think that can be a good addition to your picture book shelf.

LAMAR: I'm going to get it and hopefully I can read it sometime with my nephew.

ANNE: How old is he?

LAMAR: Five.

ANNE: You want to write a picture book and you have a five-year-old nephew in your life, well done. [LAMAR LAUGHS]

For another illustrated collection that's scary. Actually from an author better known for his adult works. Do you know the collection *Literally Disturbed* by Ben Winters?

[00:42:04]

LAMAR: I don't know it.

ANNE: This makes me so happy, Lamar.

LAMAR: Did Ben Winters write *Underground Airline*?

ANNE: Uh-huh and more recently *Golden State*.

LAMAR: Yes.

ANNE: I mean, he's best known for dystopian novels with really interesting catchy, oh-I-want-to-find-out-what-that-looks-like premises. This is a poetry collection and it has a lot of similarities to the Chris Van Allsburg book. These are scary stories. I mean, this is the kind of thing you pick up if you're a member of the younger set, maybe like third to sixth grade, but you like the scary books or it's Halloween time. This is going to be pulled off the shelves of the school library.

And it is scary. Like these are reminiscent of Poe, but they have just enough of a sense of humor to keep it from being overwhelming for young readers. Also they're in rhythm, which makes it a little bit singsongy, which I think makes it a little bit gentler. But it also makes it super easy to memorize, so you can get a terrifying poem caught in your head. 30 poems, black cats, monsters ... You mentioned monsters a couple of times. The typical scary kind of topics, but there's also some real life situations that may be frightening to ... I was going to say children, but really readers of all ages, like if you think you just have a cold, but maybe it's something more, that could send a 40-year-old down a mental spiral just as easily as a four-year-old.

And, oh, we just went on a family hike this weekend. Being the chicken that I am, I wouldn't have necessarily have wanted to read his poem Hiking before that [LAMAR LAUGHS] even though we did go in the sunshine. But this book also has wonderful black and white illustrations. They're by Adam Watkins, so not only do you get the experience the poetry, but you get more senses involved and it's really ... I think this might be at home on your shelf.

LAMAR: I will definitely get it. Thank you.

ANNE: I'm not going to recommend an adult horror book for you, but I do think that episode with Mallory O'Meara about books in the freezer and other horror stories, I think that may have good

recommendations for you 'cause you and Mallory both like those really scary books. But you have a just out middle grade novel, so maybe another author that I personally really like that I imagine is in your wheel of familiarity is Kekla Magoon who I think many-

[00:44:12]

LAMAR: Oh, yeah.

ANNE: May know from her 2014 book *How It Went Down*. That's a book we talked about before on *What Should I Read Next*, but she has a middle grade novel that is a funny and heartwarming and such a delightful reading experience. It came out last fall. It's called *The Season of Styx Malone*. Is this one you've read?

LAMAR: Yes.

ANNE: Oh. Was it right for you?

LAMAR: It was right. Thank you for that. [ANNE LAUGHS] This is definitely a great recommendation.

ANNE: Two brothers, small Indiana town outside Indianapolis whose life becomes a lot more interesting when a foster child named Styx Malone comes to town and really turns their world upside down. And they could not be more happy about it.

LAMAR: That is an excellent synopsis.

ANNE: Okay, what about *Cilla Lee-Jenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire* by Susan Tan?

LAMAR: I don't know that one.

ANNE: Oh, that makes me happy. Readers who are maybe your age and my age may find this reminiscent of *Ramona Quimby*. There's a girl who's sweet and funny and charming and the people around her may find her obnoxious sometimes, but you want to pat her on the head and take her home with you. Unless she's like squeezing all the toothpaste into your sink.

So this is about an eight-year-old girl who's dying to be an author and she knows she has it in her and she needs to do it. She needs to find literary success immediately because her parents are having a new baby and she's afraid everybody's going to forget all about her. So as we talked about how authors are so, you know, important [LAUGHS] serious air quotes there, she wants to put her mark on the world so that she doesn't get edged out by this new arrival.

What I like here is we have a budding author who loves to read, loves to write, is finding her identity in something that we as readers really relate to. This is towards the younger end of the middle grade range, but it's still solidly in that section of the bookstore or the library. It's

contemporary and it's realistic and Cilla has a caucasian mother, a Chinese father, which is complicated enough, especially with a baby on the way. But then you throw in the grandparents who are from another era and have different expectations and you try to have a happy, congenial family life there, that can be a lot to deal with and Cilla is eight, which means she's coming to understand what it means to be biracial and what it means to be Chinese and what it means to be caucasian. You're watching her figure these things out, what these things mean for her broader life, but also what it means to find her very specific identity as a writer, as a sister, as a daughter, as a member of this family. So that's not a horror story, but you're a writer, you're a reader.

[00:46:47]

LAMAR: [LAUGHS] Nah, this recommendation sounds fantastic. I'll definitely will look for this.

ANNE: So, Lamar, of the books we talked about, *Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall, *Literally Disturbed* by Ben Winters, and then *Cilla Lee-Jenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire* by Susan Tan. Of those titles, which one do you think you'll read next?

LAMAR: I think I'll probably go for *Jabari Jumps* first. Simply because it sounds like something that I really want to share with my nephew and so I'm always anxious to find those good books, so I'm ready when I see him again. And I may see him within the next week or so.

ANNE: Well hearing you say that puts a big smile on my face and also makes me want to pick it up immediately myself. Lamar, thank you so much for talking books with me today. This has been a pleasure.

LAMAR: Thank you for having me. This has been such a fun talk.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Lamar, and I'd love to hear what YOU think he should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/186 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today. You can discover more about Lamar's books at www.lamargiles.com, that's Lamar L-A-M-A-R Giles G-I-L-E-S dot com. Follow him on Twitter @LRGiles, and of course, check out that surprise Wikipedia page...

Next week, guest Hannah Christmas shares about the interesting way she enjoys bringing books to life, how having a baby changed her reading life forever, the changes she wants to make after tracking her books geographically, and more. Here's a sneak peek:

[00:48:21]

HANNAH: I was just kinda looking at this map that we have on our wall, thinking about how when people travel, they tend to check off the places on a map just to say where they've been

and I thought, well why don't I just do that? Why don't I get a map and color in the places that I visit through my books?

After I started thinking about that, I thought, well, books I read don't really take place in a lot of different places. The settings are all kinda concentrated, it seems, in America and mostly New York or big cities or they take place in Europe and like, well really it's just England it seems. [BOTH LAUGH] There's not-not a lot of like new places that I've been to in my books even, so I've been trying to find diversity in that. And that's when I tried organizing them geographically [LAUGHS] then to kinda get a better picture of what I'm missing, and that was really eye opening for me.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

[00:49:18]

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Thanks to the people who make this show happen! What Should I Read Next is produced by Brenna Frederick, with sound design by Kellen Pechacek.

Readers, that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening. And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "Ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading." Happy reading, everyone.