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MBS ([00:00](#)):

If you listen to this podcast, my bet is it's because you, like me, are a reader. You love a good book, and if you're lucky, and if the gods have been with you, you've loved them all your life because someone somehow introduced the power of stories to you.

MBS ([00:20](#)):

My parents both read to me when I was young, but the real gateway drug for me was my dad making up stories. Sir Michael, that was me of course, Sir Nigel and Sir Angus, my two brothers. We set out for grand adventures. We'd always win. I think it really drew on dad's background as an English man growing up in Oxford, so there was all sorts of medieval stories coming out, but it was fabulous, and as a reader, I followed the conventional path.



MBS ([00:48](#)):

I started with kids' books and then moved on to what would be called YA now, and then I remember being allowed into the adult section of the library. In the grownup sense, not in the triple X sense, and then diving into literature in high school, and then I went and did a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in literature when I was at university.

MBS ([01:12](#)):

But in some ways I've regressed. In recent years in so many ways actually. I've regressed in recent years, but somebody who is happily child-free, I read a lot of YA, young adult literature. In part it's because my wife trained as a YA librarian, so she's always finding great books, but also just because they're great books. Their stories, their plots, they pull you in, they open your world, it's an exciting read.

MBS ([01:41](#)):

But it takes a certain gift to write a book that's brilliant for children and young adults and old people. Grownups like me. The very best of these books I think are wise, and they're timeless, and they're fearless.

MBS ([01:59](#)):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. David A. Robertson is one of those people who can write for young people. He can really write for young people.

MBS ([02:18](#)):

He's won numerous awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award, which is Canada's most prestigious literary award, the McNally Robinson best



book for young people's award, and the indigenous writer of the year award at the High Plains Book Awards, but it's actually not easy to pin down his genre.

David ([02:37](#)):

I've gotten now into just writing about beauty of culture and cultural connection and all of those things, and so I've really challenged myself to write in different forms and genres, so I've written all the way from picture books, to fantasy, to murder mystery, to nonfiction, to graphic novel, all over the place just cause I want to reach a wide readership, and I'm still trekking along so far.

MBS ([03:04](#)):

Do you remember the first significant thing that you created? I do. I was at primary school. I would have been about 10, and I just got swept up in telling a story, I think based on Sir Walter Raleigh, the famous English buccaneer/pirate. I was 10, but David started even earlier. His first memory was from when he was 8.

David ([03:29](#)):

Yeah, they were poems. I've always loved poetry, and it was this collection of poems that I wrote literally in the back of my grade three classroom in the closet, and I liked writing alone and in the dark, so I just went back into the closet, shut the door, and I started writing these silly poems, but there is... I still have it, and when I read it over, I can see that I was skilled at it.

MBS ([04:01](#)):

That same little boy who wrote in a dark closet came to love Philippa Pearce's book, *Tom's Midnight Garden*. It is a classic from the 1950s, and so it's got a bit of a different vibe from the more modern type of YA literature.



David ([04:18](#)):

I don't know, I feel like it had a little more patience, a part of it. I feel like it had a little more patience with the story, it wasn't so go, go, go. I feel like the writing was just so fluid and poetic, so refined, and not that there's not literature today, that's refined and poetic, but I just love the cadence of it, and it extends to adult literature too. I've always loved Hemingway and Salinger, and those writers have really influenced me as well.

MBS ([04:52](#)):

Part of what I loved about this conversation with David honestly is his love of literature. Whether it's classic Hemingway or it's modern fantasy, but one of the things that is foundational to David's work across the genres, is not just his love of reading. It's also his first nation Cree heritage. So I asked David how that shapes his experience and his writing.

David ([05:14](#)):

I think it's just ingrained in what I do and how I do it. I feel like I've always had this affinity for stories and this ability to tell good stories and I think just to know how stories progress properly, and so... And we're a culture of storytellers, and we have done it for thousands of years, and that's how we pass down knowledge and tradition and values and beliefs and whether or not I grew up in those traditions, and I grew up urban, so I didn't, but I think it's ingrained the fabric of who I am, and so I think it's spoken through me without me really realizing it, but certainly those traditions that I've learned, those stories, those legends, all those and the style too, has really... It's something that's grown inside me as well. As much as I have this subconscious draw towards stories, but it's also something that I've really ingrained and... The Bear Grounds and The Great Bear are adaptations of indigenous star stories.



David ([06:32](#)):

And so it's this infusion of star stories and Narnia and Tom's Midnight Garden and all of these things, and so, yeah. It's been a huge influence in my work and it always will be. It's like a part of who I am, and it's part of who I am as a writer too.

MBS ([06:50](#)):

There's a quote I love David. "Inspiration is when your past suddenly makes sense", and it's that interweaving of all these things where you're like, "Oh, it's a dash of CS Lewis hanging out in the gardens of Oxford. That's some of the Cree background under the stars," all of that comes into something amazing. You're going to read from Tom's Midnight Garden, which you've already introduced to us as your favorite book. How did you choose what pages to read?

David ([07:22](#)):

Well, it's a portal story too really, and so I just thought I really have to read where he discovers the portal. So there's always this really transformative moment in the story, and same with Narnia when they go to the wardrobe, and they keep going and going, and then they find themselves in Narnia. It's always this part where now merged fantasy with reality, and I love that... And then finding the realism in that fantasy, I think, is really interesting.

David ([07:55](#)):

So, yeah. So I just chose when Tom... The clock strikes 13, and he's going down to investigate why the hell is it... He didn't say hell, but he's, "Why is the clock striking 13?" So he goes to investigate, and then he can't see it properly, so it's like, "I'm going to open the door to let in some moonlight," and then he finds that, "Oh, wait this is a totally other time in the world," so yeah. I chose that because I just love the discovery part of these stories.



MBS ([08:24](#)):

That's fantastic. Well, let me introduce you. So David A. Robertson, prolific Canadian author, reading from Tom's Midnight Garden by Philippa Pearce, published in 1958. David, over to you.

David ([08:36](#)):

All right. So this is the beginning of chapter three, called By Moonlight.

David ([08:45](#)):

This was a real expedition. Tom put on his bedroom slippers, but decided against his dressing-gown: after all, it was summer. He closed his bedroom door carefully behind him, so that it should not bang in his absence. Outside the front door of the flat, he took off one of the slippers; he laid it on the floor against the door jamb and then closed the door onto it, as onto a wedge. That would keep the door open for his return.

David ([09:12](#)):

The lights on the first-floor landing and in the hall were turned out, for the tenants were all in bed and sleep, and Mrs. Bartholomew was asleep and dreaming. The only illumination was a sideways shaft of moonlight through the long window part way up the stairs. Tom felt his way downstairs and into the hall.

David ([09:31](#)):

Here, he was checked. He could find the grandfather clock- a tall and ancient figure of black in the lesser blackness- but he was unable to read its face. If he opened its dial-door and felt until he found the position of the clock-hands, then his sense of touch would tell him the time. He fumbled first at one side of the door, then at the other; but there seemed no catch- no way in. He



remembered how the pendulum-case door had not yielded to him either, on that first day. Both must be kept locked.

David ([10:03](#)):

Hurry! Hurry! The house seemed to whisper around him. The hour is passing... passing...

David ([10:09](#)):

Tom turned from the clock to feel for the electrical-light switch. Where had it been? His fingers swept the walls in vain: nowhere. Light- light: that was what he needed! And the only light was the moonbeam that glanced sideways through the stairway window and spent itself at once and uselessly on the wall by the window-sill.

David ([10:31](#)):

Tom studied the moonbeam, with an idea growing in his mind. From the direction in which the moonbeam came, he saw that the moon must be shining at the back of the house. Very well, then, if he opened the door at the far end of the hall- at the back of the house, that is- he would let that moonlight in. With luck, there might be enough light for him to read the clock-face.

David ([10:54](#)):

He moved down the hall to the door at its far end. It was a door he had never seen opened- the Kitsons used the door at the front. They said that the door at the back was only a less convenient way to the street, through a back-yard- a strip of paving where dustbins were kept and where the tenants of the ground-floor back flat garaged their car under a tarpaulin.

David ([11:16](#)):

Never having had the occasion to use the door, Tom had no idea how it might be secured at night. If there were locked, and the key kept elsewhere... But it was



not locked, he found; only bolted. He drew the bolt, and, very slowly, to make no sound, turned the door-knob.

David ([11:34](#)):

Hurry! Whispered to house and the grandfather clock at the heart of it beat an anxious tick, tick.

David ([11:40](#)):

Tom opened the door wide and let in the moonlight. It flooded in, as bright as daylight- the white daylight that comes before the full rising of the sun. The illumination was perfect, but tom did not at once turn to see what it showed him on the clock-face. Instead, he took a step forward on to the doorstep. He was staring, at first in surprise, then with indignation, at what he saw outside. That they should have deceived him- lied to him- like this! They had said, "It's not worth your while going out at the back, Tom." So carelessly they had described it: "A sort of back-yard, very poky, with rubbish bins. Really, there's nothing to see."

David ([12:24](#)):

Nothing... Only this: a great lawn where flower-beds bloomed a towering fir-tree, and thick, beetle-browed yews that humped their shapes down two sides of the lawn; on the third side, to the right, the greenhouse almost the size of a real house; from each corner of the lawn, a path that twisted away to some other depths of the garden, with other trees.

MBS ([12:54](#)):

Fantastic. Oh my goodness. You're taking me right back to remembering to reading Narnia for the first time and what it means to push through the furs and the cupboard, and then suddenly they feel cold and they're like, "What the hell? What's going on here? And there's a similar revelation like that. It's amazing.



David ([13:10](#)):

And the time she takes to get him there, it's just this patience and build-up and how confidently that rises tension to when the revelatory moment happens. The payoff is pretty cool.

MBS ([13:31](#)):

Yeah. I love that line around the clock ticking. So you feel that building anxiety around literally the time is ticking away here. What's about to happen?

David ([13:42](#)):

Exactly. Animating the house too, right? Hurry, hurry. No, I love that. Yeah. It's so cool.

MBS ([13:50](#)):

Oh, there's a lot of questions I want to ask you about this. Maybe this one. Has there been a moment for you, David, where it's felt like a threshold moment? Where you've heard the call and stepped across the threshold? Has there been a similar transformative moment for you?

David ([14:10](#)):

Well, I think I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge my picture book. My first picture book. *When We Were Alone*, it was... I really wouldn't be here without that book in the position that I am today. I was doing good work before, but *When We Were Alone* has really been a Seminole text and this path to reconciliation in Canada, and it's... With all humility it's a very important book to teach kids about residential school history, and it's used across Canada and over the world, and so that really gave me the opportunity to... And in the end, the motivation to tell stories that matter and to really realize that I have a platform to educate and to tell these stories and to take that seriously and to entertain



people, but to also work to create change, and so it afforded me a lot of opportunities.

David ([15:23](#)):

It won the Governor General's Award, and it did very well, and yeah, it brought me to Penguin Random House. It allowed me to do [inaudible 00:15:34], got me to Harper Collins to do my memoir, and so now I have a bunch of books coming up in the next couple of years that I don't think I would have been able to do without it. So, that was my watershed moment where it... I don't know. In gaming terms or whatever, it's leveled me up, I guess.

MBS ([15:58](#)):

Exactly. You've got the thing, and then suddenly you've been promoted three levels. Congratulations. That's great.

David ([16:03](#)):

Yeah, exactly.

MBS ([16:07](#)):

Can you tell us about writing that book? Did you have the idea and just go this is it, and it flowed, or was it... How do you... Canada's just going through this revelation at the moment of the unmarked graves of indigenous children, and I think, what is it, 1700 young people whose fates we don't know, and it's another moment of facing a horrible darkness around that. I'm just wondering how you look at those stories and decide that there's a book to be written here and a story to be told.

David ([16:46](#)):

Well, I've written about residential schools before. I'd written about them in my graphic novels. So briefly in the [inaudible 00:16:56] in seven generations, but it was... And I'm an intergenerational survivor. So my grandmother attended



residential school, Norway House, and my auntie died at one of the schools, and she's in a grave somewhere. We don't know where she is, and decades ago, my dad told my mom as they were driving through Brandon where there used to be a residential school that... There's kids all through that campground, and there is.

David ([17:31](#)):

So somebody we've known about for a long time, and so when the truth and reconciliation commission sent out the calls to action, one of the things that said was we need to be teaching this history as early as kindergarten, and teachers... We've asked a lot of them, they have a very hard job, and I've dedicated my work to giving resources to teachers to use in the classroom.

David ([17:56](#)):

And I thought, kindergarten teachers do not have support to teach this history. It's hard. It's really hard to do properly, to not traumatize children, and so I said I need to write a book that will give them support and so that was the impetus for *When We Were Alone*, and then it was just really channeling the story of my grandmother and other children who didn't survive and children who did survive and just trying to honor their experience and to do it in a way that was age appropriate, but that would be as powerful as I could make it and educate as many people as possible.

David ([18:37](#)):

So that's where *When We Were Alone* came from, and honestly for everything that book has done, I wrote it in a day. I wrote it very quickly because I don't think I was writing it. I really don't. I mean, I wrote it, but I really honestly feel like I had these children that were inspiring and motivating me and I just wanted to do them justice. I just wanted to honor their memory and honor them, and so *When We Were Alone* came out and really not a lot changed from the first manuscript to when it was published, and yeah.



David ([19:15](#)):

That's where it came from. It just came from this moment where I just was like, "This needs to be out in the world, and teachers need this and parents need it," and so I just said, "If no one's going to do it, I'll do it," and then I wrote it.

MBS ([19:29](#)):

That's wonderful, and I love that story, which is not common of that combination of something that arrives in a rush, and it's not that there wasn't a thing leading up to that, but there was a catalyst that just went this has to happen, and the story has been waiting to be written. So here it is. That's powerful.

David ([19:54](#)):

Yeah. There's other writers that I felt really... They've made me believe that it was possible because there's other books that were out there that were doing that work with older kids, like Fatty Legs and Shi Shi Etko and Shin-chi's Canoe, and I thought, well, we can do this for kids. It's possible, just we haven't done it for the younger kids yet, the really young kids. So their work really paved the way for me to be able to feel like I could do *When We Were Alone*.

MBS ([20:31](#)):

David, the other thing I noticed in the pages you read from *Tom's Midnight Garden*, and we talked about it, is this sense of building tension and time and your clock striking 13. I'm wondering how... I wonder what your relationship with time is like. As a writer, the need to nurture a story and to write and rewrite and also a mission that you have, which is to get stories out into the world, and I'm just wondering how you navigate that.



David ([21:15](#)):

I think I've always been a patient intricate writer. I'm very deliberate. I've always wanted to make sure that I take the time to let the story unfold in its own time, to let it happen, to not rush things forward to just... Almost like I'm just observing it, and I think if you write strong characters and you have a strong idea of where your story is going, you can just sit back and just allow for things to unfold, allow your characters to lead you, and so I think that's in all of my prose, is this... And I think that's almost like an old time sensibility. I feel like I've always...

David ([22:07](#)):

It's interesting, my first prose book, *The Evolution of Alice*, which is my only adult book that's fiction, is... When I wrote it, and I was reading a lot of Salinger and Hemingway, my editor got it the first time, the first draft, and he's like this, "Oh, this reads a lot like Salinger, David," and so I realized that, and then that's when I really realized that the stuff that we read really influences what we write.

MBS ([22:31](#)):

Right.

David ([22:32](#)):

How much we love it, it seeps its way into our own prose, our own work, and so I've been a very deliberate reader too because I read very intentionally to inspire what I'm working on, so yeah, and then I think it's just having... It's also realizing that creating change in the work that I have is going to take a long time, and so it's also being patient in that way.

David ([23:01](#)):

So my dad used to say, "If we're doing work in the right way, or if we're doing work properly, we're not going to see the fruits of that work in our lifetime."



MBS ([23:14](#)):

Right.

David ([23:14](#)):

It's going to take a long time to create change, so you need to be patient with the process and realize that you're not going to see the results of what you've done really in your lifetime because it takes... As long as the trauma has been occurring, it takes that long to heal from it.

David ([23:34](#)):

So, I've also been mindful of the fact that, *When We Were Alone*, for example, the impact of that book, I won't really ever see the full impact because as that knowledge, as that education is passed down through the next few generations and those kids who now will be great, great grandchildren, for example, they grew up and be leaders. They'll be the leaders, the ones making decisions for this country.

David ([24:06](#)):

That's something I won't be around for, but yeah, so I keep that in mind with my work as well, and so I think all of it... I think, again, it all involves this balance and patience and just trying to write the best stories possible, and in doing that, make sure that I'm reading the right stories as well, and so reading is also a big part of my writing practice, and I don't know if that answers your question, but that's how roundabout... The kind of expansive...

MBS ([24:43](#)):

I want to ask you about how you deliberately route, how you curate reading, but before I ask that, what is the change that you're dreaming of? What do you hope for in that future that you and I won't see?



David ([25:00](#)):

Well, I think for me, it's very simply, I don't want an indigenous kid to be followed around the store. I don't want an indigenous girl to be murdered. I don't want there to be racism against indigenous people. I don't want there to be racists against BIPOC people. I don't want there to be prejudice against the LGBTQI community. I want us to... I think the end goal is to live in a society where we value each other, where we respect one another for our differences, where we recognize our similarities in our huge shared humanity and where people just can live safely, and they can achieve what in Cree is called Mino-pimatisiwin, which is the good life, and I'm not so naive as to think that my work alone will contribute to that, but I think that if everybody does their part and figures out what their part can be to achieve that, then if we're all doing that, then I think we can get there.

David ([26:15](#)):

So I think part of it is realizing that my work can contribute in some small way, but then also that my public work, public speaking, presentations, and I have a bit of a platform, not a huge one, but that if I do that work on social media, that work as well as part of my writing as well because if I do media, or if I do a school presentation, if I work with teachers, that's also in mind. So that's the end goal. I know it's an ambitious goal, but if we don't have ambitious goals, then what are we going to achieve?

MBS ([26:53](#)):

I agree. David, who... One of the hypotheses that I have around, in my language, taking on a worthy goal, doing something as important as this is that it's really hard to do it alone. You need a band of people around you. If you're drawing on some native American wisdom, I think of calling in the directions near the king, the warrior, the lover, the magician, different types of wisdoms. I'm wondering



how you think about who you have around you to help you continue on this journey to make this journey.

David ([27:38](#)):

Well, I have a very tight circle, and at the front of it are my wife and my children. My wife really makes everything possible that I do. She's a superhero, and I think that my kids as well. It's like a microcosm of what I want for all children. I want the same for my kids, right? So they're definitely a big inspiration to me, and they motivate me, and I think I've been able to form a really strong circle of literary friends that I think are really important to me, and Cherie Dimaline is one who's a very dear friend of mine, who wrote *The Marrow Thieves*. Katherena Vermette is a good friend of mine who wrote *The Break*, and Richard Van Camp, and so within that indigenous lip community, I think is very strong.

David ([28:38](#)):

And then within the wider literary community, people like JL Richardson is a big inspiration to me and a friend, and so I think that I have that ability to either just lean on the people around me or just to just reach out and just text a friend and... So I have a very small, but very...

MBS ([29:07](#)):

Small, but mighty.

David ([29:08](#)):

Yeah, I think it's important. Nothing is achieved on its own, and writing is a very solitary experience, but you can't do it without having that wide net of support, and I have a pretty good support circle.

MBS ([29:26](#)):

That's great. Unlike Salinger, who was notorious lady alone and removed. How do you figure out what to read? There's so much. There's so good reading out



there, and you've spoken about the importance of your reading to be a writer. How do you curate, how do you find what to read next?

David ([29:51](#)):

So I've always said that I want to read books that are better than me. I want to read writers that are better than me. I want to read books that are better than what I've written before. So I choose the best stuff because I want to be the best. I think if you don't, then I think that... You don't work at something to be the second best. I don't think I am at all, but I think if you don't work towards that... And I think if you're not being inspired by and learning from the best, then you're not going to be the best, or you're not going to do your best work. So what I do is I look for what books are the best in that genre. What can I learn from those?

David ([30:42](#)):

And then what am I writing and what should I be reading to write my best in that genre and that form that I'm working on right then. So I look at those two things. It's like, "Am I writing a picture book? Then I need to be reading picture books, and then what is the best picture book in the kind of picture book I'm trying to write? What is this?"

David ([31:05](#)):

So, I have a picture book coming out with Penguin next summer, and it's called, *A Song That Called Them Home*, and it was very heavily influenced by *Outside Over There* by Maurice Sendak. So, when I was reading that picture book, I was like, "I'm going to read *Outside Over There* a bunch of times," cause I want to be influenced by it cause that's one of the best picture books ever. To me anyway.

David ([31:30](#)):

So, I read that a bunch of times and other Sendak works, and then I wrote my book. So same with *The Great Bear*, and *the Beron Grounds for the Mesilla*



Sega, with Great Bear, I'd reread, Tom's Midnight Garden a couple of times, and then for the Baron Grounds, I read the whole Narnia series over again because I wanted to draw on those very excellent, rich works, and so, yeah. So I choose what I read very deliberately, and that's what's in my mind when I do it.

MBS ([32:07](#)):

Yeah. Perfect. David, it's been a wonderful conversation. I really appreciate you sharing the influences and your commitment and your ambitions as well. The question I tend to finish with is a big one, which is simply what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

David ([32:28](#)):

Oh my goodness. I don't know. I've had a really good time talking with you, and I think that as much as I write with a specific goal, and I have that inspiration or motivation to do that work, so it's not just to entertain it's to educate, I feel like we need to also as readers, have that similar goal in what we digest because books bring us together. Stories bring us together. They create community, and I think the question is what kind of community do we want to create, and what kind of world do we want to be living in? And stories, I think, play a huge role in determining what kind of country we want this to be. What kind of world we want this to be because they teach us, they guide us, they inspire us, they bring us together, and I think that...

David ([33:28](#)):

So I think on the other end of it, the reader is something that I think almost more about than anybody else because of the power of story, and when I read too, I think that's probably a part of what I choose to read as well, so I think I've recognized over the course of my career, I guess, just simply the power of story and how important books are and always will be, and the community that it creates and the community that we become a part of because of it. I just love this world that I live in. This literature world.



MBS ([34:12](#)):

I get that. You do.

MBS ([34:19](#)):

The poet Muriel Rukeyser said, "The world is made of stories, not atoms." Now, the first time I heard that I went, "Well, yes, stories for sure but it's also made of atoms," but actually, if you remember my podcast interview with Sarah Hendrickx, and if not, I'd encourage you to hear that, you might remember this quote from the physicist Carlo Rovelli, that the world is more like a kiss than a stone.

MBS ([34:44](#)):

So we have a physicist saying actually the world is more made through its interaction rather than through objects. So, it turns out, even physicists are saying that the world is made of stories, not atoms. So I do appreciate the deeper story, the deepest story, perhaps, that David seeks to tell in his work. [inaudible 00:35:08] is planting for current and future generations. He said it really clearly. I just want to say it again because I think it matters so much.

MBS ([35:16](#)):

It is a world beyond racism, and what that means specifically, is a world where indigenous and BIPOC and also LGBTQ+ people are seen, not as other, but as us. If you want to check out David's work, you can find it at his website, darobertson.ca. That's the Canadian ending of our website. D a R O B E R T S O n.ca.

MBS ([35:43](#)):

He's on Instagram as well. David Robertson Writer, and he's on Twitter in a shortened name Dave Alex Roberts. So [@davealexroberts](#). Thank you for listening. It's always such a delight to have you being part of this to introduce



you to wonderful people like David and others. If David's conversation with me, struck a chord, please pass it on to somebody who might be interested in it.

MBS ([36:07](#)):

The best way, my favorite way for this podcast to grow is by word of mouth, and you can really help me with that. If you'll move to review the podcast on your favorite podcast app, that's wonderful as well. Thank you, and there's always an invitation to join us at the Duke Humphreys, the free membership site at [MBS.works](#). You're awesome, and you're doing great.