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

My first job out of university was with a company that specialized in innovation. It was there that I really started to understand how creativity flourishes only when there are restraints.

([00:13](#)):

Here's an example. We were hired by Kellogg's to help do something new for cornflakes, that iconic brand, but we weren't allowed to change the product, and we weren't allowed to change the packaging, and we weren't allowed to change the marketing. There is nothing else. I can't quite remember what we did invent, but I do remember realizing I needed to figure out the rules so I could decide what rules needed to be broken. It got really into the nitty gritty around what is up for negotiation.



[\(00:51\)](#):

I know you're not inventing cornflakes, but, whatever your situation, there's actually liberation in understanding what rules need to be followed. So often, those rules are fewer than you realize, and what rules can be twisted, and inverted, and played with. I'm wondering, how might you more joyfully break a few rules?

[\(01:15\)](#):

A welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. It's the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that's moved them, a book that has shaped them. Most of my guests on this podcast are authors, but not many of them. In fact, so far, none of them are the bestselling author in their home country.

[\(01:34\)](#):

Iceland is a country where reading is still held to be a precious thing. In fact, every Christmas Eve, there's a tradition. It translates as the Christmas book flood, where books are given out in that evening, and the night before Christmas is spent reading. I love that.

[NEW\_PARAGRAPH]Andri Snær Magnason is one of Iceland's best selling and most prolific authors. He's written across almost every genre including film, and, of course, he's quite self deprecating about his success.

Andri [\(02:06\)](#):

I've never had a proper job, so I've been writing for more than 25 years. What year is it now? Yeah. 27 years since my first book came out, actually.

MBS [\(02:15\)](#):

As an author, I might disagree with that. I think it is a proper job. I'm trying to make it a proper job for me.



[\(02:22\)](#):

One of Andri's first books was a book of poetry, and it was based in a supermarket. You can probably guess how well that went down.

Andri [\(02:32\)](#):

It was actually a bestseller, so I never needed to take any loans for my university studies. I bought an apartment for poetry profit, so I can't claim any struggling.

MBS [\(02:44\)](#):

That is a great and unexpected success story. Despite being a writer for close to three decades, this writer's life isn't where Andri originally saw himself.

Andri [\(02:56\)](#):

There was one thing that I promised when I was a kid, that I would never work indoors. I was a fervent skier, and had an outdoor job gardening. I was like, "I'm never going to be indoors."

MBS [\(03:08\)](#):

Andri's life is one of reinvention. That's why I introduced this whole interview talking about conflicts. He's not a big brand cereal, of course. He's more like Proteus, changing shape, and format, and genre.

Andri [\(03:24\)](#):

My first book was poetry, based in a Icelandic supermarket. Consumer poetry. Then my next book was a children's book. Then I did sci-fi, LoveStar, which children can't understand, and is full of stuff that is not for children. Then I did nonfiction.

[\(03:43\)](#):

It's both, as an author, you're shaped by your society and you're shaped, maybe, by the books that you read. My great inspirations were poetry, and they were



children's books, and they were Kurt Vonnegut. Maybe, like Kurt Vonnegut ... He would both do some children's material, and lots of his most beautiful writing is nonfiction. Then it's science fiction. Also Orwell's. He would make Animal Farm, which would be a children's parable, then 1984, but then he would also do Coming Up for Air.

[\(04:20\)](#):

I think you're maybe shaped by the authors that you maybe admire during a certain age. I think it's also just one thing to maybe escape comparison to your older self. Then, many artists in Iceland that I admire the most have actually done exactly this. They're very good at something. Maybe some of the poets of the 20th century had mastered the rhyme or the verse and become a national poet, but then that writer just slashed it and become a modernist, completely betrayed his audience and his expectations. I thought, as an artist, you always have to push your limits and try to reach out of your comfort zone.

MBS [\(05:07\)](#):

Right. I'm wondering whether you find your topic and then find a form to fit the topic, or whether you find a form and then find what will fill that form.

Andri [\(05:23\)](#):

It's hard to say. It kind of comes simultaneously. Actually, sometimes it is the same theme filtered through sci-fi, through a children's parable, and through nonfiction. Three of my books, they were rotating about, maybe, similar thoughts, similar worries, or similar things.

[\(05:50\)](#):

But, then again, you're very shaped by your own society. In 2002 to 2006, Iceland was going haywire. Everything was going completely out of control. There were forces trying to destroy much of the highlands of Iceland, but we were becoming super rich. Our banking system was expanding.



MBS ([06:09](#)):

That didn't last that long, but ...

Andri ([06:12](#)):

At that moment, I was like, "Do we really need sci-fi now?" Basically every other businessman was having sci-fi in his own PowerPoint presentations about the future of his company. So there I thought, "Okay. We don't need sci-fi, we need somebody just to get grips on reality." What is reality? What is economy? What is ... Just, basically, ground ourselves.

([06:36](#)):

There I had made a successful sci-fi novel, but as a next book, I felt, "Okay. I'm not going to make sci-fi, I'm going to make reality." But you can still write nonfiction as magic realism. That is, you can still contain poetry, and magic, and wonder within nonfiction.

MBS ([06:57](#)):

Love that.

Andri ([06:58](#)):

It doesn't have to be dry journalism.

MBS ([07:00](#)):

No. I wrote my master's thesis on magic realism. I love that. Before we had this conversation, you sent me a photograph of the book you were considering. I know on your short list was a *Hundred Years of Solitude*, which is one of the definitive, or the ur-book of magic realism. I love that you're mentioning it here.

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

I think those were the books of my era when I was growing up, and the reasons why I wanted to become a writer. My pile must have appealed to you.



MBS ([07:33](#)):

It did.

Andri ([07:34](#)):

Because there was very-

MBS ([07:35](#)):

You're probably a similar age. I'm like, "I know a lot of these books," and they were instrumental for me.

Andri ([07:42](#)):

I just came from Colombia, where Marquez wrote his book.

MBS ([07:47](#)):

That's right. I was dipping into one of your recent books, *On Time and Water*. You talk about the challenge of getting a grip on the environmental crisis, and the enormity of it. You go, "Numbers don't do it, but perhaps stories are a way of understanding what's going on." I'm wondering if you remember the first story that showed up in your life.

Andri ([08:15](#)):

In my entire life, but not-

MBS ([08:17](#)):

Yeah. What's one of the very first stories that you heard, and started shaping you as a writer, and a reader, and a listener?

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

I think maybe my first story, and actually one of my first memories, was a traffic accident, or a car rolled over when I was ... I wasn't three yet. I was two years and ten months, or something. We had an accident where a Bronco SUV, or what



you call it, basically bumped around and went three turns on a gravel road. The whole family, basically, was tossed out of the car. It's strange that that was a story that I was often telling, because suddenly I had something to say. I had experienced something.

[NEW\_PARAGRAPH]I was trying to recall this, because ... I have no kids, and you would always expect something like this to be a trauma. But I didn't really experience it as a trauma. It was terrible, of course. I really feel sorry for my dad when I think of it, having his whole family and his pregnant wife, everybody, thrown out of the car. My mother broke her neck, so she could have been one millimeter from paralyzation. Nobody badly hurt, but very close to something dramatic.

[\(09:41\)](#):

I remember this was a story that I started to tell, and then I moved to America straight away. I was three. There, I suddenly could tell stories about another place. I understood that I was from a different place, and I could tell stories about that. A place that, at that time, before internet, was even more exotic. Most people did not know that Iceland existed, so I had to claim that I was from a place that people didn't even know existed. I think some of the storytelling comes from some, maybe, experience, and then also from moving from one place to another and starting to be able to tell these stories.

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

Then, actually, the stories in Time and Water are some of my oldest stories. When the boys in class were saying, "My father is stronger than your father," I said, "My grandmother is stronger than your father." Bragging about my grandmother was something that I started very early.

MBS [\(10:31\)](#):

Love that.



Andri ([10:51](#)):

Actually, also, the other story in the book ... Because, I recall, when I lived in America, my grandfather operated on the shah of Iran. I was in the car listening to the radio on my way to a Burger King birthday party. I remember also that Burger King himself didn't show up, which was ...

MBS ([11:13](#)):

Disappointing.

Andri ([11:15](#)):

But I remember hearing that story in the radio, about my grandfather operating on shah of Iran. Then the uprising, the Ayatollah Khomeini ... No, the taking over of the embassy four days later. I felt this very early connection to big events in the world.

([11:35](#)):

Then his son was this crocodile uncle. He had a crocodile in his bedroom, and a boa constrictor in his bedroom. That was also a story that I would tell, and the story of my grandmother on the honeymoon on the glacier. Actually, it's a good question, because, actually, *On Time and Water* is a pile of my earliest core stories that I wanted to tell at some moment, but I wasn't ever sure of what format or what channel. Suddenly they all started to make sense in a cycle of climate change.

MBS ([12:10](#)):

That's amazing. I love the magic realist taste of those, and the flavor of those. You're like, "I've got a crocodile and a boa constrictor in my bedroom." It feels very Gabriel Garcia Marquez.





Andri ([12:23](#)):

Yeah. I think that's what I felt, also, was that ... Not that I'm claiming that my family is different or more to tell about, but I would say every child would think it was something to say if your uncle had a boa constrictor in his bedroom.

MBS ([12:41](#)):

I would think so too.

Andri ([12:42](#)):

As a teenager, and a crocodile. [inaudible 00:12:45] We would get to feed him mice, the boa constrictor, and watch him, or her, swallow it. Then the boa constrictor would have a swim with us in the swimming pool, because ...

MBS ([12:56](#)):

That's great.

Andri ([12:57](#)):

My grandfather was rather rich, because I think a surgeon at that time in the '70s was one of the most highest paid professions before the stock market and the internet made richer people. Surgeons and pop stars, those were the people that had money.

MBS ([13:17](#)):

Hey. It's Michael. I'm here from the future. You're going to get that joke in just a minute. Look, we had a tech snafu when we were recording this, so the audio quality dips a little bit, but keep listening. The interview is brilliant. It starts by me asking Andri what book he decided to read for us.

Andri ([13:37](#)):

I had lots of books to select from. I have a big pile. One of them was Garcia Marquez, and I had something from Kurt Vonnegut. I had a book of poems or



artwork by Katie Patterson. I chose this one here. This is one of my early influences, Einstein's-

MBS ([14:00](#)):

Alan Lightman, Einstein's Dreams. I have not heard of this, so I'm excited to hear more about it. How did it come into your life?

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

I think actually a cousin of mine was talking about it. He's a science buff. It came out '93, when I was 20. He's working for Google somewhere in San Francisco. He's a real science nerd. Normally he wasn't talking about books, but he was talking about this book.

([14:24](#)):

Then a few other people spoke of them, and I think my father bought it for me. Maybe one of the books that ... I wasn't so keen on reading English. This was maybe one of the first English books after I was rediscovering English after living there as a kid.

([14:46](#)):

Einstein's Dreams is a book about time. It may be just an example of how your output and influence can maybe come 30 years after the input. It's a book of short stories of all sorts of versions of time, and the world, and worlds of time. It's a very charming book. Very poetic, scientific, philosophical, and deeply influential on me as a young writer.

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

How did you decide what two pages to read? Because it's one thing to have to choose from your books, and then you have to pick the two pages that you think sum up the book in some way. How did you select what to read?



Andri ([15:34](#)):

It also makes sense in this program, because it's almost like poetry. Each chapter is kind of a standalone, and each page contains thoughts and ideas.

MBS ([15:46](#)):

Beautiful.

Andri ([15:47](#)):

I could open it at anywhere, actually. Shall I read for you?

MBS ([15:53](#)):

Yes, please.

Andri ([15:55](#)):

Einstein's Dreams by Alan Lightman, 16th of April 1905.

([16:07](#)):

In this world, time is like a flow of water, occasionally displaced by a bit of debris, a passing breeze. Now and then, some cosmic disturbance will cause a rivulet of time to turn away from the mainstream, to make connection backstream. When this happens, birds, soil, people caught in the branching tributary find themselves suddenly carried to the past.

([16:34](#)):

Persons who have been transported back in time are easy to identify. They wear dark, indistinct clothing and walk on their toes, trying not to make a single sound, trying not to bend a single blade of grass. For they fear that any change they make in the past could have drastic consequences for the future.

([16:55](#)):

Just now, for example, such a person is crouching in the shadows of the arcade, at number 19 Kramgasse. An odd place for a traveler from the future, but there she is. Pedestrians pass, stare, and walk on. She huddles in the corner, and



quickly creeps across the street and cowers in another darkened spot, at number 22. She is terrified that she will kick up dust, just as a Peter Klausen is making his way to the apothecary on Spitalgasse this afternoon of 16 April 1905.

[\(17:34\)](#):

Klausen is something of a dandy and hates to have his clothes sullied. If dust messes his clothes, he will stop and painstakingly brush them off, regardless of waiting appointments. If Klausen is sufficiently delayed, he may not buy the ointment for his wife who has been complaining of leg aches for weeks.

[\(17:54\)](#):

In that case, Klausen's wife, in a bad humor, may decide not to make the trip to Lake Geneva. If she does not go to Lake Geneva on the 23rd of June 1905, she will not meet a Catherine d'Epina walking on the jetty of the east shore and will not introduce Mademoiselle d'Epina to her son Richard. In turn, Richard and Catherine will not marry on the 17th of December 1908, will not give birth to Frederick on the 8th of July 1912, and Friedrich Klausen will not be father to Hans Klausen on the 22nd of August 1838. Without Hans Klausen, the European Union of 1979 will never occur.

MBS [\(17:54\)](#):

That's great.

Andri [\(18:46\)](#):

For me, I was in a science branch in school, and I had decided that I was not going to take that path. I had sacrificed my youth for learning all sorts of math equations and science that I was kind of regretting to have learned without going to use that as a profession as an engineer, or chemist, or a doctor because I was heading for literature. But there I saw, "No, maybe I didn't really waste my time, maybe."

[\(19:18\)](#):



Actually, learning math, I found out, and how to make these physics equations, and even the Einstein's equations, helped me also in writing because it teaches you ... I think sometimes, if you study history, you can become completely lost in nuances. Details and nuances. Everything has to be so bulky in nuances and details, but science was so ruthless, and just exciting.

MBS ([19:59](#)):

That's a great word.

Andri ([20:02](#)):

I'm just going to make an equation where I imagine the world is an infinitely small ball in a vacuum on light speed, and then, from that super simplicity, I will make an equation that explains the universe. I would claim some of my writing to be learning from that, that is, by super stripping away all sorts of external stuff.

([20:33](#)):

My book, *The Story of the Blue Planet*, which is a parable about wild children living on a planet, trying to explain the essence of many things. I think I learned lots from science and math the beauty of simplicity, which comes close to poetry, also. I have never liked Dostoyevski, or something like ... I've never had patience to read long, bulky stories.

MBS ([21:02](#)):

War and Peace, where you're like, "Could you just make it a hundred pages, not a thousand pages?"

Andri ([21:07](#)):

Yeah. These endless pages of ... Why didn't they just make a story where he compressed everything into an infinite ball in a vacuum, so I could finish it in light speed and get the understanding? Poetry, mythology, and math, and



physics taught me to appreciate scarcity, simplicity, and try not to overstretch things.

MBS ([21:43](#)):

I love that. There's a saying in North America. It comes from, actually, one of the Supreme Court justices in the States. He says, "I don't care for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give anything for simplicity on the other side of complexity." I love that in that sense of ... You can't just write something that's simple, you have to write something that is elegant and resilient, but has also burned away the excess so that you have something essential that is left.

Andri ([22:18](#)):

Yeah. That's what I feel is ... I actually think it's, in a world that is full of material, that you should respect your reader's time. That it is one of your roles, is to not to waste his time, like I was a TV series trying to keep you hanging for 12 seasons. I stress that my role is more like trying to change your perspective in a short ...

([22:54](#)):

But, then, a book is still long form, also. Like an article in a newspaper, or a Facebook status, or a news item of 30 seconds or two minutes, or even a long form thing in a New Yorkers, I feel like the book is still a form that can help you travel through an arch of thought. You can build up language, a world, that you can build up an arch of thought. Almost like when you were installing a new system into your computer in the old days, you needed nine discs to ...

MBS ([22:54](#)):

Put it in, take it out. Put it in, take it out.

Andri ([22:54](#)):

Put it ... Yeah.



MBS ([23:47](#)):

Put it in, take it out. Yeah.

Andri ([23:51](#)):

I feel like a book is still a form that can do this, and has the space where you dive into a person's mind. You can bring people to places where other media just can't do.

MBS ([24:13](#)):

Andri, I'm curious to know what ... The passage you read was about time, and about a traveler from the future being careful about not to do anything to change anything. Because if you change one, single thing, the chaos effect of butterfly flapping its wing sets up a hurricane in Brazil, as the metaphor went. But it also feels that we are, ourselves, travelers from the future. Everything we do at the moment changes the future for us.

([24:49](#)):

I'm just curious to know what you're hoping for in terms of how people navigate the present and the future. Because, as you say, even though your books are in different formats, they all have a heartbeat at the center which is about the concern of our glaciers melting, our environment changing, our oceans becoming more acidic. What do you hope for, you think, about people traveling forward?

Andri ([25:24](#)):

I think all my books have been drawn to quite big themes. In my sci-fi novel, it was love, death, and God.

MBS ([25:39](#)):

Tick, tick, and tick.



Andri ([25:42](#)):

The little things. Then, in the Blue Planet, which is basically about what it means to live on a planet. Then, in Time and Water, it's basically updating, taking all the modern science of where we're heading, and trying to process that emotionally in stories, trying to understand and grasp the scale of this.

([26:12](#)):

The ambitions are, of course, almost megalomaniac. They're very old-fashionedly sincere. That is, they're not cynical. That is, in a very sincere belief that literature and stories are a tool of, in a democratic society, my contribution to people's understanding. Me using my time and hopefully talent to ... My obligations or my duties are to address these things.

([26:46](#)):

It was nothing less than updating our cultural feeling of time, which is ... Because, I think, our generation was raised with the year 2000 almost like a roof over our head. I think most of the people that were in Glasgow, if you ask them, "Do you agree that 1970 was 30 years ago?" They will say, "Yes, of course." "Recalculate." They would be like, "Oh, my God, it's 50 years ago." I will be like, "Yes, you're born 1970. You know how old you are."

MBS ([27:19](#)):

Exactly.

Andri ([27:20](#)):

But this bizarre connection of the date of time, our body time, our cultural time, the time that we have left, the impact in time that we have in terms of nature as 8 billion human beings next week, I think. I think that most of our generation still thinks that, when somebody says 2050, that we still, in a very strange way, feel like that is 50 years into the future. That we have plenty of time to react to and change. While-





MBS ([28:02](#)):

It's interesting.

Andri ([28:05](#)):

But, then, it's always speculative fiction. How do you connect to 2100? A good example, Blade Runner takes place 2019, which was 20 years past the most distant future that we could imagine. That was even stretching culturally. We were also born with 1984 as a future.

MBS ([28:28](#)):

That's right.

Andri ([28:31](#)):

My goal was to take 2100, how can I make that intimate? How can I make it urgent? How can I make it relevant? How can I reclaim it from dystopia and maybe science, and culturally inhabit that time within writing what I call pancake sci-fi? That it's because it's not what bullshit Metaverse has created and what kind of avatar you have become in your cyberspace 80 years from now, it is about, who's your family? Who's your friend? Who's your neighbor? Who is sharing this earth with you? What species?

([29:13](#)):

If you can have pancakes with your grandmother, just like I was having pancakes with my grandmother, and the world is relatively sane and safe, and we have peace with each other and other species, then we have succeeded. That is utopia. Of course, we'll have lots of nuances. I was thinking, "I can't connect to 2100, but I can connect to 1920, the time of my grandmother," which is the same distance into the past as into the future.

MBS ([29:47](#)):

As it is into the future. Yeah.



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

In a special way, I can just work my grandmother over the axis of this year into the future. Then I found my granddaughter, which will be a mirror image, maybe, of my grandmother. Instead of writing about some kind of cyborg Metaverse granddaughter in a flying car, I just wanted to make a ... She'll just be a human that will hopefully be loved, and will love somebody. The people she will love the most, they will still be alive in the year 2170, maybe.

([30:29](#)):

If you ask my grandmother, "Are 100 years a long time or short time?" She will tell me it's a short time. I feel like the 1940s were yesterday. In a very bizarre way, how we perceive time, the lived time or the unlived time, is from, feels like, eternity and irrelevant, to being like a flash.

MBS ([30:58](#)):

Right. They're both true at the same time.

Andri ([31:00](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([31:02](#)):

Andri, this has been such a wonderful conversation. Thank you. Is there anything that needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between us?

Andri ([31:15](#)):

I'm like Castro. I can talk for three hours. No-

MBS ([31:15](#)):

I wish I had three hours.



Andri ([31:23](#)):

I think we've covered quite a lot. You put out some new stories and perspectives.

MBS ([31:35](#)):

Thank you.

([31:35](#)):

This conversation for me was about resistance. The resistance, the underground resistance, like in World War II. First of all, resistance to your own tired, predictable story about yourself, and connected resistance to what the world's story about you might be. I loved it when Andri said, "As an artist, you always have to push your limits and try to reach out of your comfort zone, do something that you don't really know how to do." I think, really, that we're all artists.

([32:09](#)):

I'm always curious about the gap between the person I am today and the next best future version of me. On the one hand, I still feel like the person I was 30 years ago. I move a little slower, but it feels a continuous thing. I'm still that person. But, on the other hand, I know that I'm not. I've left versions of myself behind. It's one thing, and, actually, honestly, not a very interesting thing, to be thinking about how to innovate cornflakes. But it's a far more fascinating thing to embrace, to wrestle with how you are innovating around yourself.

([32:48](#)):

If you enjoyed the conversation, I don't have other Icelandic authors yet that I can point to as part of 2 Pages with MBS, but I've got a couple of interviews to suggest with you. One is Jenny Valentish, who, that episode's called How to Reinvent Yourself. She does that. She actually goes out and goes, "This is how I'm exploring something that's on the edge of society," really, and who she is as a way of better knowing who she is today. Also, the interview with A.J. Jacobs.



He is a guy who always takes it to eleven. He literally wrote a book called How to Live Biblically, where he literally lived for a year following, literally, the Bible. It's a great read. He's very funny, as well.

[\(33:33\)](#):

For more on Andri, you can look at his website, [andrimagnason.com](http://andrimagnason.com). I'll spell that for you. It's in the show notes, but I'll spell it for you.

A-N-D-R-I-M-A-G-N-A-S-O-N.com.

[\(33:47\)](#):

I think that just leads me to say thank you for the reviews you're leaving. I appreciate that. If you haven't done that yet, that would be a very kind gift to me, a nice comment, a few stars. That all helps the algorithms, the famous algorithms, figure out that we're a podcast worth listening to. If you liked this interview in particular, perhaps there's somebody in your life who you could reference it to. The best way podcasts grow is by word of mouth, no doubt.

[\(34:15\)](#):

Thank you. You're awesome, and you're doing great.