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

It's one of the great existential questions, are you living for 70 years, or are you living the same year 70 times? Writers and creators face it too, "Am I writing many books? Or am I writing the same book many times?" The, "Best answer," seems obvious, do variety, don't live the same year 70 times. But I'm not sure the answer is always clear cut.

([00:28](#)):

Malcolm Gladwell made popular a study, that showed the difference between Picasso and Cezanne. Picasso had many phases, blue, pink, cubist, and more. Cezanne painted a bowl of apples, and then the Mont Sainte-Victoire, and then another bowl of apples, and then another Mont Sainte-Victoire. And Cezanne and Picasso, they're both pretty great artists, as deep and as wide, and it's an eternal rhythm.



[\(00:59\)](#):

Welcome to Two Pages With MBS, 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. Now, Geoff Dyer is a writer, a real writer. He's the award-winning author of four novels, as well as numerous non-fiction titles on D.H. Lawrence, on understanding photography, on yoga. And there's more, I'll tell you about those in a moment. But when he attended university, he wanted to learn how to write, but options were limited.

Geoff [\(01:31\)](#):

There weren't any creative writing options available. You just did English. That is to say you read everything from Beowulf through to Beckett, in chronological order practically.

MBS [\(01:44\)](#):

Beowulf to Beckett, that's a pretty solid foundation. And I've actually read Beowulf and I've read Beckett. But boy, there's a whole lot of stuff in the middle I haven't read. I've got some gaps. And honestly, not just the middle. Beckett's worked post World War Two, and let's face it the 1970s were already half a century ago. So if you love reading, you want to keep going, you don't want to stop at Beckett. And that was the same for Geoff as well.

Geoff [\(02:12\)](#):

I was reading books as soon as they came out in paperback. And then I was so up-to-date, that I was getting impatient to read the hardbacks. And also as I read reviews of the books, I started to think, "God, actually I know quite a lot about this. I'd like to write some book reviews."

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

He started small at the alternative London magazine City Limits. And then these book reviews grew longer, and more nuanced, and actually like his reading



began to diversify. And then there was this moment, that moment when Geoff decided to write the books, not just read or review them.

Geoff ([02:47](#)):

That makes it sound straightforward. But I think the unusual thing about my trajectory, my lack of trajectory really, is that the books have been so different to each other, both in terms of subject matter and form. That has really been almost an object lesson in how not to have a career. I mean, this is really how not to build up a brand identity.

MBS ([03:14](#)):

I've already mentioned D.H. Lawrence, and photography, and yoga. Add to that subject list aviation, a Beowulf adaption, the art of appearing, and wait there's more.

Geoff ([03:27](#)):

I'd write one book which appealed to a certain sector of the population. So I wrote a book about jazz. And then I had a sort of following among jazzers. But then I think the next book was a book about the First World war, which was really of interest to very few of the people who'd read the jazz book.

MBS ([03:46](#)):

I'd say.

Geoff ([03:47](#)):

And then I just continued like that, shedding whatever audience I'd built up from the previous book. Until at about book number seven, there was this realization, "Well, these books are all so different, but they've got this strange thing in common. They're all by this one person." Whereupon then a sort of brand, an identity, something cohesive about the books did begin to become apparent.



MBS ([04:16](#)):

What do you feel is at the heart of that brand identity?

Geoff ([04:21](#)):

Yeah. That's a great question. I think in a way, I've just continued being what I was at university. I've ended up being a perpetual student.

MBS ([04:33](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([04:34](#)):

That is to say, there's been a subject that I've been passionate about. And I've been interested in trying to find out why it was that a given thing moved me so much? Why did I love jazz so much? What was it about it? And since I know nothing about music, writing the book about jazz was a way of finding out about it.

([04:58](#)):

And then skipping ahead a few years, I was very interested in photography. So I decided that a way of learning, really getting to grips with the tradition, the history of photography was to write a book about it. Because I'm absolutely convinced that there's no better way of learning about a subject, than writing a book about it.

MBS ([04:58](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([05:16](#)):

And I've just continued like that. But the key thing is that whereas one's education, or certainly the educational process I was part of, tended towards greater and greater specialism.



MBS ([05:30](#)):

Right.

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

So I did something like eight O-levels, three A-levels, then I did English at university. And at that point, I jumped ship. I was not going to embark on the real specialism of a PhD. I found that my interests from about the age of 22 onwards, instead of narrowing we're becoming wider and wider. So I felt like at some point I developed this thing that, "Oh, well. Yeah, this writing life is a way of enabling you to continue pursuing your interests in a very haphazard, amateurish way." And certainly something which was without any kind of specialism.

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

Yeah. I lived in a house once at Oxford where there were 15 people doing PhDs, and the mantra there was, knowing more and more about less and less until you knew everything about nothing.

Geoff ([06:28](#)):

That's a brilliant summing up, Michael.

MBS ([06:30](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([06:31](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

MBS ([06:33](#)):

I know your love of photography, and your learned expertise around how to look at a photograph. I'm wondering how that visual discipline has influenced how you think about writing?



Geoff ([06:51](#)):

Yeah. Do you know, the first way in which I used photographs really was when writing the jazz book. And there's a lot of photographs of jazz musicians. And at that point, I think I was using these pictures, because it's quite an obvious thing really. A photograph depicts a split second.

MBS ([07:13](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([07:15](#)):

And it has no narrative ability. As Garry Winogrand the photographer said, "A photograph has no narrative ability." But it has such enormous narrative potential. So that split second as it were, you look to the left of the frame, and you might get a suggestion of what may have happened in the seconds or minutes leading up to the moment when the photograph was taken.

MBS ([07:15](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([07:40](#)):

And you go off to the right of the photograph, and there's a suggestion of what might be about to happen. So right from the start, I was using photographs, first of all I was looking at them entirely of what they depicted, not who they were by, that was an understanding that came later, as just something so saturated in narrative potential.

([08:07](#)):

And of course, then you're into the realm of writing. Of thinking, "Okay, after this, what then?" It's a form, it's my particular version of page turning-ness.



MBS ([08:21](#)):

Right. Right.

Geoff ([08:22](#)):

And then only later did I realize... I can give a concrete example of this. When I was young, I was obsessed with D.H. Lawrence, about whom I wrote a crazy book later on. And I had this picture on my bedroom wall, in the same way that years later somebody would've had a picture of David Beckham, or Beyoncé, or something on there. I had this picture of D.H. Lawrence on my bedroom wall.

MBS ([08:47](#)):

Okay.

Geoff ([08:47](#)):

And that's what it was, it was a picture of D.H. Lawrence. Only many years later did I realize that this picture wasn't just a picture of D.H. Lawrence, it was also a picture by Edward Weston, who is every bit as important in the history of photography, as Lawrence is in the history of the novel. So then these things that I'd been looking at became doubly important.

MBS ([08:47](#)):

Mm-hmm.

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

And it seems to me that's a crucial question about how you approach photography. Is it a question of what of? Or is it who by? And to put it crudely, that's the question I deal with in my history of photography, The Ongoing Moment.

MBS ([09:26](#)):

What have you had to unlearn to become a better writer?



Geoff ([09:32](#)):

Yeah. Another great question. One of the big influences on me was John Berger. And I think we'll probably end up coming back to him later in the conversation. So all I'll say for now is that Berger is a great writer, a wonderful person. But also I think it's fair to say, a fairly humorless one. And I think it took me quite a while to not escape from, but to leave that behind. And I really feel now at the age of 64, in the last 15 years, I've become a really funny writer.

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

Right.

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

So escaping from this idea, not of seriousness, because I want to be a serious writer too. But escaping from this opposition between funny and serious. And it seems to me you can be funny and serious at the same time.

MBS ([10:26](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([10:26](#)):

So escaping from that false distinction was important. And also, I think quite early on, this was an easy thing to escape from. From really any desire to write anything, freeing myself from any urge to be some sort of academic, really. And this idea of developing a personal voice. And people say about my books that I feature in them a lot. And sometimes I do, I'm there as a participant, this lanky figure, and there's lots of slapstick like that.

([11:09](#)):

But I think increasingly what's important is not my physical manifestation in the book, but this idea of my consciousness, which is manifest both at the big level of my take on the world, but also at the most microscopic level, at the level of



syntax and sentences. And the idea that you can really saturate a book with your individual consciousness.

[\(11:33\)](#):

And it's a note that I make to myself in the notebooks that I keep while I'm writing a book, as a way of encouraging myself. I'm always saying, "Remember, write the book that only you can write."

MBS [\(11:50\)](#):

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. We talk about as writers, finding our voice, and finding that tone, and that way of dancing with words and structure that feels like a unique expression. And sometimes people collapse that into the phrase of being authentic.

Geoff [\(12:11\)](#):

Mm-hmm.

MBS [\(12:11\)](#):

But it always feels to me a very learned experience, to get back to some sense of distinct expression of who you are. I'm wondering how you walk the line between a learned discipline, and an expression essence of who you are?

Geoff [\(12:32\)](#):

Yeah. Yeah. You've put it so well yourself. This idea of authenticity is famously loaded. And when one talks about going to a restaurant, where they serve authentic food from this or that part of the world. And that can be nice, but I'm quite happy with totally inauthentic versions of whatever cuisine it was. And sometimes that represents an improvement.

MBS [\(12:59\)](#):

Yes. Prefer it? Yeah, exactly.



Geoff ([13:00](#)):

Yeah. In my case I think I've, as it were, ended up being a very original writer. There's only one of me, a source of great relief to some readers. Now, how did I become this very original writer? By being incredibly susceptible to influences, really.

MBS ([13:00](#)):

Right. I love that.

Geoff ([13:18](#)):

So when I was in my love that early 20s, I'd be absorbing, I'd be enthralled to Roland Barthes one week, Joseph Brodsky the next.

MBS ([13:18](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([13:28](#)):

And I'd try really hard to write like Roland Barthes. But it was funny, it never quite worked. There was always this residue of me, when I was trying to write Roland Barthes. Anyway, and it's not like those influences stopped at the age of 25, whereupon I'd stopped trying to be other people and became like myself. I can think of more recent influences, Rebecca West, Annie Dillard.

MBS ([13:55](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([13:55](#)):

And the thing is, this thing of absorbing your influences is constant. But the way that you end up with an original voice, it seems to me, is by virtue of both the sum total of your influences, and crucially your failure to adequately imitate them. And we can think of, I became conscious of this in jazz, where so often in



the trumpet people would end up with their distinctive sound. A distinctive sound is so important in jazz, and that distinctive sound would invariably emerge from somebody's inability to adequately emulate whoever their hero was.

MBS ([14:40](#)):

Right. Right. That's a wonderful way of putting it. I've never thought of it like that before. Geoff, what book have you chosen for us?

Geoff ([14:47](#)):

Yeah. I was so delighted to be invited on this show. And the book I've chosen is a book by somebody, Raymond Williams, who means an enormous amount to me. And I've chosen his book, *The Country and the City*.

MBS ([15:05](#)):

Perfect. How did this book come into your life?

Geoff ([15:09](#)):

I did English at Oxford.

MBS ([15:13](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([15:13](#)):

I was born in 1958, grew up in a house without books. And then, I don't know, I think I probably do need to give a bit of background to this. But in Britain, in England at that time there was this crucial life defining thing that happened when you were 11. You took the 11-plus, this exam. And the purpose of this was really to ensure a supply of workers to the factories, people who, they'd go on to secondary school and then just get ready for apprenticeships or whatever it was.



(15:50):

So at the age of 11, that's the thing that determines your life. But part of that deal was that if you pass the 11-plus, a percentage of people would go to a grammar school where the academic educational expectations were much higher. And it happened that in my town, there was a famously good grammar school. Anyway, the age of 11, I passed the 11-plus. And unlike so many of my friends who went on to the secondary school, I go onto this grammar school. And once I was at that grammar school, I just basically rode this educational escalator.

MBS (16:33):

Right.

Geoff (16:33):

And nearly everyone went on to do O-levels. I did a lot. And then there were A-levels, and A-level results are what determine whether you go to university.

MBS (16:48):

Right. Your O-levels are at 16 or so?

Geoff (16:51):

That's right.

MBS (16:51):

And your A-levels are at 18 or so, as your final fling of the high school thing, before heading off to university?

Geoff (16:57):

Exactly that. Yeah. And two things going on, one, I'd become a sort of good student. But also ``, that's a classic story, due to the influence of a wonderful teacher at school I fell in love with reading, and literature, and all of this kind of



stuff. Anyway, so went on, did A-levels. And I always want to boast about this, because it remains my greatest achievement. At the age of 18, I got three grade A A-levels.

MBS ([17:25](#)):

Well done.

Geoff ([17:27](#)):

And here am I nearly 65, and that's the only thing I've got to boast about. It's really quite pitiful.

MBS ([17:32](#)):

Oh, no. You peak at 18, it's a bit of a long road after having your greatest success behind you.

Geoff ([17:32](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([17:37](#)):

But still, you've lived a good life nonetheless.

Geoff ([17:39](#)):

You'd think I'd be invited on chat shows more to talk about that. Anyway, from my school, I think 80% of people went to university. But there was an additional thing, there was a really strong Oxbridge thing at this school. So I ended up going to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. And did English there.

([18:03](#)):

And left Corpus Christi, Oxford with two feelings. One, I was absolutely finished with academia, well, for reasons we might go on to discuss. And also feeling that I'd read everything. But I only felt I'd read everything, because I had such an inadequate sense of what everything meant.



MBS ([18:23](#)):

Right. Right.

Geoff ([18:24](#)):

And then there followed this period of just really intense intellectual development, really. I should say, this is the early 1980s, a period of mass unemployment in Britain.

MBS ([18:42](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([18:42](#)):

And I left Oxford knowing exactly what I wanted to do, unlike some people who just leave university and drift. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, which was to sign on the dole to get unemployment.

MBS ([18:54](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([18:54](#)):

And lest that make me sound like some sort of hopeless sponger, it needs to be said, generationally, that was a completely respectable option.

MBS ([19:05](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([19:05](#)):

I think that singer Roland Gift has said, "You've got to understand Britain in the 1980s, the dole supported a whole generation of would be artists, dancers, writers," this kind of stuff. And it was during this period of living on the dole, that



I came across a whole other kind of writing. The writing of John Berger is very important to me.

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

Yeah.

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

And also this writer, Raymond Williams, who was, my God, he was a professor at Cambridge. But what he did was expand my sense of that English literary tradition, which I'd read my way through very diligently. And provided a way of linking it up with a larger understanding of to use the title of his first book, Culture and Society, and politics.

MBS ([19:58](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([19:58](#)):

And this was more than just as it were, a new take on the curriculum. It was also a real revelation for me. Because this is something which might make me sound really stupid, or it might just sound extraordinary. I'd grown up in this working class world, where we had almost no contact with middle class people, except doctors who we were semi frightened of, and teachers, ditto.

([20:30](#)):

And then I thought I was just passing exams and liking reading. And then reading Raymond Williams just made me understand the process that I'd been through, that there was much more to it than passing exams and literature. And I only really understood this process, I think, from about the age of 23 onwards. And really, I can't overestimate the extent to which I owed so much, I learned a lot about subjects from Raymond Williams, but also, it's like he'd enabled me to understand my own autobiography.



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

That's amazing. Well, I'm excited to hear what you're going to read from us. What two pages did you choose? How did you figure out what to read?

Geoff ([21:22](#)):

Oh, it was a very easy choice.

MBS ([21:24](#)):

Okay.

Geoff ([21:24](#)):

It was a very easy choice in one way, in that this is for me one of the most moving passages of literature that I know. And I was quite happy to as it were, expand the idea of literature from just fiction or poetry to include nonfiction.

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

Brilliant.

Geoff ([21:44](#)):

And on the other hand, it's quite a difficult passage to read, because I'll have to exercise great self-control to read it without crying. I find it so intensely moving. And it's from roundabout the middle of the book. It's a chapter called Enclosures, Commons, and Communities. And it's a passage which is really central to Williams' motivation in writing this book. Where like all of us, he was struck by the undoubted beauty of those famous English country houses, those stately homes, that we're so familiar with in literature and TV from *Brideshead Revisited* to *Downton Abbey*, this kind of stuff.

MBS ([22:30](#)):

Yeah.



Geoff ([22:30](#)):

And he was also considering the poetic responses to these undoubtedly beautiful houses. And he's famously a polemical writer, but he's never a reductive one. So in this passage, he examines what these houses mean, what they look like, without ever wanting to come up with some mad line of, "Tear them all down and build a block of council flats instead," that would be mad.

([23:04](#)):

So it's the way that he's able to try to reconcile both his love of and appreciation of these people, and an understanding of what these country houses mean. These country houses, by the way, which are so often seen as some essence of England. The country house idea has been one of Britain's most successful exports, in that people love these series like Downton Abbey. And they come to England to see these places in large measure.

MBS ([23:39](#)):

Geoff, it's a perfect setup. I'm excited to hear the two pages. Over to you.

Geoff ([23:49](#)):

"They had been there indeed, from periods of direct military rule and occupation. But they had settled into a more social order. And it was in the 18th century most visibly, that these strong points of a class spread in a close network over so much of Britain, with subsidiary effects on attitudes to landscape and to nature that we shall come to notice."

"But consider directly their social effect. Some of them had been there for centuries, visible triumphs over the ruin and labor of others. But the extraordinary phase of extension, rebuilding, and enlarging which occurred in the 18th century, represents a spectacular increase in the rate of exploitation."

"A good deal of it, of course, the profit of trade and of colonial exploitation. Much of it however, the higher surplus value of a new and more efficient mode of production. It's fashionable to admire these extraordinarily numerous houses,



the extended manors, the neoclassical mansions that lie so close in rural Britain. People still pass from village to village, guidebook in hand to see the next and yet the next example. To look at the stones and the furniture."

"But stand at any point and look at that land. Look at what those fields, those streams, those woods even today produce. Think it through as labor, and see how long and systematic the exploitation and seizure must have been to rear that many houses on that scale. See by contrast what any ancient isolated farm in uncounted generations of labor has managed to become, by the efforts of any single real family, however prolonged. And then turn and look at what these other families, these systematic owners have accumulated and arrogantly declared."

"It isn't only that you know looking at the land and then at the house, how much robbery and fraud there must have been for so long, to produce that degree of disparity, that barbarous disproportion of scale. The working farms and cottages are so small beside them, what men really raise by their own efforts, or by such portion that is left to them in the ordinary scale of human achievement."

"What these great houses do is to break the scale by an act of will, corresponding to their real and systematic exploitation of others. But look at the sites, the facades, the defining avenues and walls, the great iron gates, and the guardian lodges. These were chosen for more than the effect from the inside out, where so many admirers, too many of them writers have stood and shared the view, finding its prospect delightful."

"They were chosen also you now see, for the other effect, from the outside looking in. A visible stamping of power, of displayed wealth and command, the social disproportion, which was meant to impress and overawe. Much of the real profit of a more modern agriculture went not into productive investment, but into that explicit social declaration. A mutually competitive, but still uniform exposition at every turn of an established and commanding class power."

"To stand in that shadow even today, is to know what many generations of countrymen bitterly learned and were consciously taught, that these were the



families, this the shape of the society. And when you then think of community, you will see modern community only in the welcome signs of some partial reclamation. The houses return to some general use as a hospital or agricultural college."

"But you are just as likely to see the old kinds of power still declared in the surviving exploiters and in their modern relations, the corporate country house, the industrial seat, the ruling class school. Physically they are there, the explicit forms of the long class society. But turn for a moment elsewhere, to the villages that escaped their immediate presence, to the edges, the old commons still preserved in place names, to the hamlets where control was remote."

"It can make some difference as you go about every day, to be out of sight of that explicit command. And this is so I do not doubt in many surviving precarious communities, the dispersed settlements of the west, or some of the close villages of the east and midlands, where no immediate house has so outgrown its neighbors that it's visibly altered the scale. It makes a real difference that in day-to-day relations, those other people and their commanding statements in stone are absent, or at least some welcome distance away."

"In some places still, an effective community of a local kind can survive in older terms. Where small freeholders, tenants, craftsmen, and laborers can succeed in being neighbors first and social classes only second. This must never be idealized, for at the points of decision, now as then, the class realities usually show through. But in many intervals, many periods of settlement, there is a kindness, a mutuality that still manages to flow. It is a matter of degree, as it was in the villages before and after enclosure."

"When the pressure of a system is great and is increasing, it matters to find a breathing space, a fortunate distance from the immediate and visible controls. What was drastically reduced by enclosures was just such a breathing space, a marginal day-to-day independence for many thousands of people."



"It is right to mourn that loss, but we must also look at it plainly. What happened was not so much enclosure the method, but the more visible establishment of a long developing system which had taken, and was to take several other forms. The many miles of new fences and walls, the new paper rights, were the formal declaration of where the power now lay. The economic system of landlord, tenant, and laborer, which had been extending its hold since the 16th century, was now an explicit and assertive control. Community to survive, had then to change its terms."

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

Geoff, thank you. Geoff, you've just read a piece that covers colonialism and class in a profound way. What's so moving about this passage for you?

Geoff ([31:37](#)):

One of the famous strengths of Raymond Williams, is that he refuses ever to simplify things. So I think built into the prose is this endless piling on of qualifications, and ever-increasing complexity. But I think what's important for me, is that he takes this timeless essence of England that we often feel, and historicizes it really.

MBS ([32:13](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([32:14](#)):

And I think at times there's a really simple message in here. That wonderful sentence, very short sentence by his standards when he says, "But think it through as labor."

MBS ([32:26](#)):

Uh-huh.



Geoff ([32:27](#)):

How did these places, these beautiful places come into existence? And what effect did they have on the communities around them?

MBS ([32:40](#)):

How did this book and this passage change your relationship to the society you were in?

Geoff ([32:47](#)):

Yeah. Do you know, it's fair to say there was a lot of this about in the 1970s and 1980s? A writer that I've mentioned John Berger, who was very important to me, you'll remember that in the first episode of Ways of Seeing his BBC series-

MBS ([33:06](#)):

[inaudible 00:33:06].

Geoff ([33:06](#)):

... he looks at various paintings, and he cuts out a part of a famous painting. And in another episode, he slaps some graffiti on that famous painting by Thomas Gainsborough of Mr. And Mrs. Andrew in their lovely country seat, as it were. And he just slaps on this bit of graffiti. The graffiti is saying, "Private property. Trespassers keep out." So there was a lot of this kind of thing going on. And I think the crucial thing for me, was this enlargement of my understanding of literature, to see it as part a larger part of the culture and of politics.

MBS ([34:00](#)):

What's the question I want to ask you, Geoff? There's something about how do you hold your relationship with the labor of your work now? Because so much of this is around the exploitation of anonymous workers. And what your passage meant to me was going, "What is my relationship to the capitalist system? And am I exploited? Or am I an exploiter?"



Geoff ([34:29](#)):

Mm-hmm.

MBS ([34:30](#)):

I'm curious to know how you think about your labor in a sense?

Geoff ([34:33](#)):

Yeah. Well, and I can't claim to be exploited at all. But then equally, nor do I think I'm exploiting anyone. One of the nice things, I think, it seems to me about the writing life is that it's ethically a pretty clean way to earn your money.

MBS ([34:53](#)):

True.

Geoff ([34:56](#)):

It's a form actually of being self-sufficient in a way, I think.

MBS ([34:56](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([35:03](#)):

But I would say also, that the writing life is full of surprises. And if you asked me to list some of the writers who'd meant the most to me, they would be obviously political writers, like Raymond Williams crucially, John Berger. These are the homegrown ones, as it were, E.P. Thompson.

([35:24](#)):

And then we can enlarge it to the Europeans like Camus, or whatever. And I should have mentioned George Orwell.



MBS ([35:32](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([35:32](#)):

And then what about my writing life, in terms of my political engagement? Well, I've ended up being an incredibly apolitical, somewhat solipsistic writer, it seems to me. And I think in a way, my admiration for this kind of writing has only increased, because it's so contrary to the kind of writer that I've ended up being. I'm tempted to say through no fault of my own.

MBS ([36:03](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([36:03](#)):

Because it seems to me one is, it's surprising how little control you end up having over the arc of your writing life.

MBS ([36:03](#)):

Yeah.

Geoff ([36:14](#)):

I think another thing though that I would say about that Raymond Williams passage is of course, he's writing from within the university. And it's literary criticism. But also there's such a distinctive voice there. We were talking about voice earlier, and there's quite a cadential, there's a real resonance to it.

MBS ([36:41](#)):

Mm-hmm.



Geoff ([36:42](#)):

So I think it's as much as the content of what Williams is saying, there's some beautiful quality to the voice on the page.

MBS ([36:53](#)):

One of the things you do as well as being a writer, is you're the writer in residence at USC.

Geoff ([36:57](#)):

Mm-hmm.

MBS ([36:59](#)):

I'm wondering what you feel the most important lesson is, you strive to teach your students?

Geoff ([37:06](#)):

Yeah. It's two really simple ones. One, I think I'm one of the most conservative teachers there. And I'm always banging onto them about how in writing, expression, it can't happen unless you have a full thorough command of all the things of grammar. That has to be the foundation on which writing is built.

([37:40](#)):

And it's a real contrast to the days when I was a student, when there were no writing classes. So there's a great demand for doing creative writing for self-expression. So people want to know, the students of course, "How do I become a writer?" And my very, very traditional response to this is, "There's only one way you become a writer, and it's to become a reader. You just read, and read, and read."

MBS ([38:10](#)):

Mm-hmm.



Geoff ([38:14](#)):

And that's something which I'm always encouraging. I think some students in my classes are put off by the way that they think they're signing up to do a class of writing, and what they're getting is a great list of books to be read.

MBS ([38:31](#)):

To get through? Yeah.

Geoff ([38:31](#)):

And I think also, there's this really important thing for me, where when I was at university, because I had this experience of falling in love with literature at school had been so important to me, and my teacher was so wonderful. And then when I went to university I realized that doing English, which I loved, I loved reading Wordsworth, and Shelley, and Shakespeare, and Dickens, and all this kind of stuff. Doing English at university meant, "Oh, doing criticism."

MBS ([38:59](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([38:59](#)):

It meant reading critics about these writers. And whereas it was fun reading Dickens, it was kind of boring reading a lot of this academic criticism.

MBS ([39:10](#)):

The modern feminist interpretation of Dickens has its own-

Geoff ([39:13](#)):

Yeah. Actually back then there wasn't any of that.

MBS ([39:17](#)):

Oh, yeah. Okay.



Geoff ([39:18](#)):

It was boring in a more boring way, if you like.

MBS ([39:21](#)):

Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Geoff ([39:22](#)):

And then some years later, I came across this notion which was articulated by George Steiner, where he says, "Actually, the tradition of any art form adds up to a syllabus of enacted criticism." So in many ways, some of the examples he gives, he says, "In many ways Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* is an essay on *Middlemarch*." Or he talks about the way that *Anna Karenina* is an essay on Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*.

MBS ([39:52](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([39:52](#)):

So what I've liked the idea of doing, is trying to shrink the gap between the writing and the commentary on it. And it's really striking how, to paraphrase Steiner, how there is this... Well, another phrase of his, he talks about the way that the tradition of any art form he says, "Is a syllabus of enacted criticism."

MBS ([39:52](#)):

Right.

Geoff ([40:17](#)):

So I'm always trying to get the students to read other writers on people who've gone before. As opposed to something which is very, very prevalent now, this anonymous, or impersonal, let's say, academic responses to writing.



MBS ([40:34](#)):

Right. And I think if my memory serves me, George Steiner was really one of the very first people who did a comparative literature PhD, broke across genres?

Geoff ([40:45](#)):

Yeah, he certainly did. Yes. Yeah. And he never lets you forget that he can speak six or seven languages. He loves quoting some German word, and then, "How can I translate this? Well, the English simply will not do."

MBS ([41:04](#)):

Geoff, it's been a very rich conversation with you. Thank you. I'm wondering, as a final question, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said between us?

Geoff ([41:14](#)):

Oh. Yeah. I think I would like to reaffirm Raymond Williams' importance. I think he's not much read these days. And if he is read, he's read still very much within the academy.

MBS ([41:32](#)):

Mm-hmm.

Geoff ([41:32](#)):

And so, I would like to make a case for Williams still as a vital living presence. And I was reading from *The Country and the City*, but the best place to start without question for anyone interested in Raymond Williams is his first book, *Culture and Society*. Which I think will be as eyeopening for anyone reading it today, as it was for me when I read it after leaving university in the early 1980s.

MBS ([42:08](#)):

I think Geoff's comment about how he became an original writer is profound, by being incredibly susceptible to influences. Now, as soon as he said that I realized



that was true for me as well. I'd read an author, and not every author but the ones that I loved, and immediately I wish I was able to write like that.

[\(42:29\)](#):

Just in the last few months, I've reread John Green's *Anthropocene Reviewed*. I'm reading Martha Wells and her *Murderbot Diaries* series, which is fantastic. Peter Carey, Australian author, his book *Amnesia*. And Emily Watson's new translation of *The Iliad*. Now, I appreciate that's a pretty eclectic list.

[\(42:50\)](#):

There's a reason I do a podcast about books, I love reading. But the truth is when I read John Green, and Peter Carey, and Martha Wells, and Emily Watson, well, I want to be able to write all of them. I want to be able to think all of them. I want to know what they know.

[\(43:07\)](#):

When I'm thinking about my next project, I'm just taking my best guess as to whether it's the worthy goal I want to pursue, whether it's something thrilling, and important, and daunting. I don't worry too much about is this original, or different, or the same? What matters to me and perhaps to you too, is to keep my mind and heart open to the world, to seek out the edges, to find new things to puzzle about and marvel over. To nurture my curiosity, so I can keep rediscovering my ignorance.

[\(43:37\)](#):

If you enjoyed this conversation with Geoffrey, I've got a couple of other pods that you might like to dip into. Number 28, *How to Resist Conformity*, Julie Lythcott-Haims, a wonderful person. And number 42, *Nichola Raihani, Cooperation and Competition*. And she read *The Origin of the Species*, so there's an influence for you.

[\(43:58\)](#):

If you want to find out more about Geoffrey's work, geoffdyer.com is his website. He's got a good British spelling of Geoff, G-E-O-F-F, D-Y-E-R.com. All



the books are there, and you'll find out more about him as well. Thank you for listening. Thank you for loving it. Thank you for passing the word on. I appreciate all of that. You're awesome, and you're doing great.