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JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: At The Rabbit Room, we're always saying that art nourishes community and community nourishes art. Here's another way to say the same thing. We can all be allies in bringing good, beautiful, true things into the world. One way you can be an ally with the musicians and writers and artists whose work you care about is to leave a review. It helps other people find and benefit from the work that has meant something to you. And if you want to leave a review for this podcast... well, that'll be okay too.

(THEME MUSIC)

JR: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

Sam Smith, or S.D. Smith, is the author of *The Green Ember* series. Families are eagerly awaiting the release of *Embers End*, the last book in that series. There's a lot to love about Sam Smith. He's wise, and he's just a lot fun to be around. One of the things I appreciate about Sam is his workman-like approach to writing. "Writing," he says, "is an ordinary calling, rooted in love and service." Yes, and amen.

(SKYPE RINGING SOUND)

Sam Smith: Harvard Business School, can I help you?

JR: Yes, I made a huuuuuge donation last year, and I'd like to know, ah, where that uh... which building it is that got — that you put my name on.

SS: We put your name under all the buildings, and your children, free tuition.

JR: Great, I'm glad we had this little talk.

SS: Do I sound okay? Is this audio okay? Clear?

JR: Yes, you sound really smart. Sam Smith! I'm so glad that you're on The Habit podcast today!

SS: Thank you! It's the first time someone's been happy about me being on The Habit before. It sounds very nefarious but I'm delighted.

JR: [laughs] It does, doesn't it... The Habit...

SS: Don't tell my grandma that I'm on The Habit! [JR laughs] I'm glad that you're glad.

JR: Yeah, what kind of euphemism is that?

SS: Remember ol' Sam, he was doing pretty good, then he got on The Habit.

[both laughing]

JR: Um... anyway! I've heard you say before writing is an ordinary calling rooted in love and service. I'm gonna talk about that because I think that's a great way to put it.

SS: Well good! I can't wait to hear you talk about it! [JR laughs] It sounds... I'm excited to hear your insights.

JR: You know, I... I had you on the podcast for you to give the insights...

SS: Oh...

JR: I'm just a — it's been a long day for me. I'm just gonna listen.

SS: Okay, I'm sorry. I had it totally backwards! I'm like — I'm totally unprepared for the habit that I'm on. [laughs] It sounds so much more fun, like in high school. The peer pressure made it sound like it was gonna be so much cooler.

JR: [laughs] Everybody's doing it! Um... an ordinary calling. Storytelling is an ordinary calling. Why do you say that?

SS: Yeah. Well... so I think it's a little bit of... correction. I hope it's not an over-correction. There's some nuance involved in the conversation around it. But basically, I think — at least, my idea maybe growing up about what artists were or writers, authors, movie people, directors, musicians, that sort of thing — was to maybe think of it as one of an elite jobs. And if you were really special you could be in one of these elite celebrity jobs! And, uh, I think you know there's some kind of truth to that, obviously. I'm not sure how helpful it is in a lot of ways. But fundamentally, for me as a Christian, that rubs against sort of — that rubs against the doctrine of vocation in a lot of ways.

And one way it's kind of faithful, that sort of idea of thinking that our calling can be special, our calling can be unique and different from others, and that's like, of course! That kind of jives with Paul's description of what the body of Christ, family of believers is like. But it doesn't jive on the side of like — you know, this idea of sort of being an elite person who other people gather are supposed to gather around and worship them.

So I think it is both special and ordinary at the same time. I think it's ordinary in that it's like all the other vocations that people are called to, in that I think almost every kind of vocation anyway, for a Christian I believe, is supposed to be rooted in love and service. It's not about fame and self-expression. I think fame can happen to whatever degree, and we can talk about whether or not that will be very fulfilling or not. But um... Self expression I think is not evil — I think, we do it a lot, we do it in different ways — but I don't know, it's not super, um, generous of an activity?

Generally speaking, unless it's helping us become — sort of writing in a journal every day or writing a poem every day that we're not sharing with anyone. That's fine. It could be good for us and build us up to a way so we're stronger in order to help and serve others.

But particularly storytelling itself I think is such a — it is — it harmonizes so well with, I think, the idea of Christian vocation because it involves two people. It's like cooking for kids, in my opinion. It's how I think of my job. Is like, I'm cooking for kids and I wanna do a good job, because it's not just about me expressing myself in the kitchen. That might happen, but really the end result is them eating, and I wanna see the smiles. So it's about love and service more than it's about fame and — self-expression doesn't really do it for me. Love and service feels like a home base.

JR: Yeah. Um, ordinary... you put that in terms of a corrective, and I think that's great. You also are aware of — because I've heard you talk about it before — on the one hand it's important to pay attention to the ordinariness of that calling. And yet, there is something — it is a little bit like a magic trick. I think that's a way I've heard you put it before. That writing is a little bit like a magic trick.

SS: Yeah, it does feel like that, too. So yeah, the sort of fundamental ways of thinking about writing, to me — if I'm communicating with like especially young writers, I'm trying to think of myself — I feel like a lot of us get into writing because we are in touch with the magical side of it, the sort of miraculous part of it. I do think upon further investigation a lot of vocations are rooted in what would feel very magical if they weren't so, um, seemingly ordinary.

You know, I kind of believe the sort of — you know, when Chesterton talks about the rivers in fairytales run with wine so that we can remember in the real world they run with water. And it's kind of just as miraculous but we look at it in a little bit of a different way, and we suddenly can actually see what's real. So but, as far as storytelling, yeah! I mean, it is absolutely amazing to me, it blows my mind that me, little country boy from West

Virginia that I've written these stories that were intended for my kid, and they are literally on every continent of the earth being read. I have a friend that put them, that sent them to a friend of hers at a research station in Antarctica, and they're in this library there. And I've heard from people in China and in Africa and South America — you know, all over the place.

So that is, it blows my mind that there are people whose first language isn't English often — my books have not translated yet — but people from all different kind of cultures, people I'll never meet, people all over the world, reading little symbols on a page and sort of seeing in their minds something similar to an image that I've seen, that I've shared with my kids first. That feels magical to me. There are people who explain it better than me, but I think it is wonderful! I think it also is — since we're created beings — I feel like it's this act of sub-creation that Tolkien talks about that comes out of us in this really mysterious way.

I don't know if you have this experience — I know you're a writer, a writing teacher — but I think it's hard to sort of pin down why or when the sort of the magic happens in it. And there's a lot of things you can kind of control, but there's a moment — there are moments, there are episodes, there are seasons where you're like "How did that happen?" And that can happen in love between two people, that can happen in sports, in a lot of different, kind of dramatic things [JR chuckles] um, you know where you're just like, "Holy cow! What just happened there!" And it feels transporting or whatever.

JR: That has never happened in sports for me.

SS: [laughs]

JR: No that's not true! One time I threw somebody out at home plate —

SS: Oooh.

JR: From right field.

SS: Yeah, you know the feeling.

JR: And that felt like magic, cause I don't think I could ever do that again. The person was really slow, I will say that, and they should have never... you know gone past third? Nevertheless.

SS: That's already better than *The Charlatan's Boy* right there!

JR: [laughs]

SS: No, that's — no, it is. There are moments. There are people who watch sports. Even just watching sports, there's some kind of — some glory associated with it in some ways, and you kind of have to really buy into the narrative. But there are really actual human beings. Sometimes they're unpaid college kids doing things that bring literally millions of people — like, make them breathless. They do things. Athletes do things that are, oh my goodness, you see this little bit of glory.

Anyway, I just feel like writing can be like that sometimes. There's this alchemy involved with it that I think is hard to scientifically diagnose, and it feels a little bit beyond our comprehension. And I love that about it. So holding onto that with one hand and saying, "Yes! It's magical, it's incredible, it's a miracle, and I'm so glad to be a part of it, and I feel like a wizard!" I think all of that is good. That's just good. Hold onto that as long as you can, but at the same time, with the other hand, hold onto the fact that it's an ordinary vocation that's rooted in love and service. And it doesn't make you better than the plumber, the pastor, the teacher. And it doesn't make you superior.

And if you're looking to it to elevate you in that sense, to make you a celebrity, then I think — one, it's a terrible plan and you're gonna be disappointed.

JR: [laughs] It's probably not gonna work.

SS: It's probably not gonna work. And when it does work, it's not gonna satisfy. Because I think we're made to be in a community. Not of equals. I'm not a big fan... I think equality is kind of boring in a sense. I think equality of like, justice and before the law and that kind of thing is good, and there's a certain kind of equity that obviously we should embrace — but I think everyone being the same is dumb and boring. Particularly for storytellers. So, I don't want to be all the same. I don't wanna be as grand as a king, I don't wanna be — I'm not, that's not — we're not all made for the same kind of vocations or whatever.

One of my best friends here is a stump grinder. Like, that's his job. He has a business called Stump King, and he's like, he's like the greatest guy. You know, he just dropped off a bunch of wood at my house. He doesn't read books all the time. He's not — he's the most generous, beautiful man. I wanna be like him. I learn so much from him. I love being with him. I don't feel superior to him at all. Actually I feel inferior to him when I'm holding the flashlight while he's doing some kind complicated thing to fix my water line, and uh, we're both in the mud together.

I just feel like, if we're looking — people who are aspiring writers, writers of any kind looking for that as a way of being coming a lord over your fellow man — I just don't think that's the ticket. You know, I think holding these things in some kind of nuance — not balance always, but just holding them both together at the same time, will save us a lot of trouble. And actually, if that bums you out —

JR: [chuckles]

SS: Um, you know what I mean? If hearing that second part bums you out, then what are you doing it for? You're probably gonna burn out anyway like super fast because that other thing is like, you know... it's not gonna be fulfilling, and it's probably not even possible. I don't know if that makes sense.

JR: Well, and the... paying attention to the ordinariness of the calling and sitting down and tending to your business... that's actually the only route to the magical part. You can't skip to the magical part. You can't say, "I think I'll just — I'll do the wizardy parts of this." It just doesn't work!

SS: Which is where you get the name of your podcast, right?

JR: Yeah.

SS: And that's such a gift to people too. That's part of what saying, talking about that to young writers — trying to think about that myself — it is a gift to know. What you're signing up for when you wanna be a writer is it's a bunch of — it's a lot of hard work! And it's not particularly glamorous. It's not — it's challenging. I think you love it, and there are times of loving it a lot, but there are times where it's just kind of showing up.

We have these sort of special terms. And I've heard Seth Godin talk about this some, and others maybe too. But you know we have this special term for us because we're such a sweet little sensitive kind of group. We have writer's block. And I don't wanna make — people don't get teacher's block, and you don't get all those other kind of blocks. You don't get stump grinder's block. You just have to go do it! And I think — so we value authenticity and we value all these things, but we don't always, you know — most professions, most vocations, you kinda want somebody that shows up and has some predictability. And I know there are some ways in which some of the so-called creative vocation has some differences, and I'll acknowledge that. But I do think, like you're saying, to demystify it a little bit, you know... if you don't write, there's nothing there.

And again, if it's all about you, then you do want it to just come out magically, like you're a genius and it just flows out in these brilliant two weeks of — or two days of brilliance. But really, it's hard! And you just show up, and those are the people who produce and they work hard and they make things happen. And it's kind of lying to the young creative people to just say, "Oh, it's gonna be so easy." And it's not very generous.

JR: Well, I do think the best parts, the best work that writers do is, um... it's kind of like you don't have control of that magic, that best? Which is all the more reason to tend to what you do have control over. You know, the habit. So, yeah.

SS: And that's another way that it's like sports, or like a lot of other vocations. Like Michael Jordan, like you see him — I don't know if he's still famous now — you see somebody who's just gliding through the air and making the winning shot or whatever, but you didn't get to see the eight million hours of jump shots and the gym and the showing up every day and traveling all the time. You don't see that. We just see the moments of glory and that's... but there's so much work behind it. So many thousands of hours behind it. And I think we should just embrace that and like, let people know that's what it's like.

JR: You've already been... we've sort of been talking around this idea, but maybe I'd like to speak to it a little more directly, and that is the idea of identity in writing? The ways that um, that we find our identity in writing, and the ways that we can't possibly find our identity in writing.

SS: Yeah, I think that's a lot of what we've been talking about. It feels right around this subject of if it's crucial to my identity to be worshipped and loved. Then that's — I think that's in all of us. We all kinda want that. We crave attention, and I don't think that's gonna go away, because even if you're successful or not, I don't think that necessarily goes away. But even if you just have a little bit of positive feedback, I think you start to realize how insufficient the praise of man is.

But, so yeah, I think it's really important to think about. So again, if you're talking about storytelling particularly — which is the kind of writing I do mostly — it is, I feel like, my identity. I feel like I have to know who I am, and I have to know that I am a lovingly created, loving creator, and that I am a... I'm a servant. And my heart for my readers has to start with love. I think as far as, related to that vocation, I have to think about myself as a

servant instead of a celebrity.

And it doesn't mean you can't... I think actually... well, can I tell a little story about myself?

JR: Please do.

SS: My childhood? Before I got on The Habit, uh...

JR: [laughs]

SS: Back when I was... so when I was 16, I lived in South Africa. I was a missionary kid, and my parents — I loved music, and I really loved, like, singer songwriter kinda people. My parents got me a guitar, and all I wanted to do was write. I always wanted to write, even when I was young. I always wanted to make up my own games. When there were Legos, I never wanted to build the things you were supposed to build. I always wanted to build my own things, you know, and I always wanted to make my own deal. Like when we would all make paper airplanes, I wanted to make my own sort of attack squadron with these colors and I was sort of — I was always kind of doing world building. As a child I didn't really read very much, but I think I was always sort of haunted by this vocation of storytelling.

So that was always part of it, and I always wanted to write. I always wanted to share things. So when I was really into music as a teenager, my parents bought me this guitar. It was a horrible guitar. It was called a Teasy guitar? I don't know if you've ever heard of it?

JR: [laughs] I have never heard of a Teasy guitar. It sounds made up.

SS: I've never seen another one. There might be something in the name there. But uh... so I got this guitar, and I was writing some really horrible songs. And I would, sometimes I would sing them for my parents or something or somebody in the family. And we'd have guests over and

mom would be like uh, “Why don’t you sing one of your songs?” You know, she’s trying to brag on me or whatever.

And so, I would get on the, okay, “I don’t want to. I don’t want to.” “Oh come on, come on.” You know that kind of thing. And part of me really wanted to, but so, I would get out there with a guitar, and I’d sort of strum along, and be playing my songs and singing really softly... and people are kind of craning their necks, turning their ears, cupping their ears, like... what’s happening here? And then it would be over and they’d be like, “I think it was good. I couldn’t hear you very well...”

JR: [laughs]

SS: And the story I told myself the whole time was that I’m, um — I said about myself to myself — I said, “Self! You are shy and humble!” And that was sort of what I thought. I’m just a kind of shy guy, and I’m kind of humble, and I don’t really wanna toot my own horn. But what I’ve found, as a — I don’t know when I discovered this. Maybe quite a bit later, just looking back. I wasn’t shy and humble. I was proud and afraid. And um, I think so much about what we think of as humility which would be like not naming or not saying, “No, I did write something, and here it is. And I want to share it with you. I want to give it to you because I think it’s good.” I would’ve thought of that as being like proud, and whereas now I think that’s actually... it takes almost more humility to do that. It takes bravery and it takes a kind of like saying no to a sort of incessant fear in me.

So anyway, I just wanna say that being reluctant is not necessarily a sign of humility. And being, sometimes — and so, for me, service and loving — especially kids, when you’re writing for kids. Which you know this, that feels really... it feels like a good reason to be brave. And so, I don’t know. I don’t know exactly how to do that.

So for me, my own story was um, the books that I have written have been as a direct result of stories I’ve told my kids, and I’ve been really tied up with that. But it’s those kids, and it’s like, it’s loving them and sort of

praying for them and caring about them and thinking like, what are they — you know, not just like what do they need as if I'm gonna give them exactly what they want — but loving them, and loving them through it. And that's been a — that's been more of a — I don't know, I feel like I find my identity in this vocation, in that. And that's probably not where you're wanting to go. You're probably wanting to go deeper than this, but just — as a writer I wanna love those people. So that requires a kind of boldness, a kind of bravery, a kind of getting over myself and not just going — not just giving into sort of my introversion, that kind of thing. But stepping up and showing up.

JR: And understanding that you have something to give that nobody else can give. Which is — there's nothing arrogant about that. It's just acknowledging a fact.

SS: Yeah.

JR: That... I'm not, that's not to say that I've got something to give that's better than anybody else to give. It's just I've got something different. And unique.

SS: I think mine is better, probably.... [laughs]

JR: Okay. [laughs]

SS: No, no I'm fully convinced that's not the case. But yeah, you're exactly — I feel that way. I do feel that way. And part of thinking about that, thinking about all that lately, in light of sort of the masters like Tolkien and some of the others, that can be so intimidating, hah. But you know, I just... I'm more and more coming around to the belief that J.R.R. Tolkien can't write like me, poor guy. And that's okay.

JR: And your stump grinder friend... I don't know if he's the best stump grinder in the world or not, but he has something to bring to the people of his community.

SS: Yeah. All the time.

JR: And it doesn't matter if he's the best stump grinder in the world or not.

SS: Yeah. Right. Yeah, I don't even know how you would figure out who the best... I know we wanna do that. And it's funny. Like I, I make a joke about how I'm an award losing author because I've literally lost every literary award that's ever been given out. I haven't won. So I'm fully a big loser on that. But it is funny how we kinda want to figure it out. And I get that. I get that we're kinda committed to these hierarchies. And it feels like actors are the worst at it. They're just dying to give each other awards every other week. But it does feel like there's something about that in us, and I don't know how we even... yeah. Comparison is not... not the best.

JR: Yeah. Well, and I think the category that I find really helpful — and I think I got this from *The War of Art*, I don't know where — maybe Steven Pressfield got it from someone else — but to stop thinking in terms of hierarchy and start thinking in terms of territory. That you've got a little patch of ground that's yours to tend, that nobody else can tend. It's just yours. And it doesn't — whether the person at the patch of ground that's adjacent to yours is better or worse, doesn't really matter too much one way or another. You've got your patch of ground, and you do what you can with it.

SS: Hmm. That is good. I'm gonna start listening to *The Habit* now!

JR: Yeah, you really should.

SS: So far this is the first one I've listened to, and I'm listening to it right now as we say it. But, nah, I'm just kidding. No, that's wonderful. I love that. That's... I'm taking that with me.

JR: Good. I'm glad I could help.

SS: So are we done here? Are we done?

JR: [laughs] Yeah, yeah, I've got at least two questions to go. You are coming to the end of a series of books! I assume at this point, as of the recording this conversation, you are done writing *Ember's End*. Is that true? Are you done writing?

SS: That is true. You know, it's still being edited, that kind of thing. People will be shocked to hear that there is editing that does go on, but that does happen. But it's mostly in the bag.

JR: Tell me about that. So how many years ago did you write *The Green Ember*?

SS: *The Green Ember* came out in 2015, the beginning of 2015. So it's not been that long ago in dog years... but uh... don't dogs live basically the same amount of years that we do? Is that it? I don't get it. I don't understand that. I've heard somebody say it, I don't remember who it was. Maybe it was a comedian. But um, yeah, in rabbit years, it was only five years ago or so. And uh.... yeah! I don't remember when I wrote it, probably the year before, the year and a half before I wrote that.

JR: That's okay. That's not terribly interesting. The question is —

SS: I can get the dates JR if that's what it's about!

JR: [laughs] I can put it in the show notes if you insist.

SS: [laughs]

JR: The question is, um... how do you feel about coming to the end of this thing that's been a pretty important part of your life for about four or five years — five years.

SS: Yeah, and actually if you go back, it's probably the ten years before that. It was an important part of my life cause that's where it started, about uh...

JR: I already gave you an opportunity to tell us when you began writing this and you said five years ago.

SS: Okay, well so if you'd let me finish, I mean, dadgone... uh, this is hard hitting journalism. I didn't realize we were coming into that.

JR: It is! [laughs] Hard hitting journalism.

SS: Just a second! Didn't you say a second ago that you — you want pin me down.

JR: Expect to be hearing from the impeachment committee any day now.

SS: Okay, wonderful. Um, so... the story really started before that with stories I told my kids, I told my daughter, you know eighty yards from where we are on a porch is where the stories began. So it's been a really important part of our family life for a long time. And sort of just sharing with the world part has been the last five years. But before that it was just our stuff, our stories. You know, we saw rabbits hopping around the yard, and I started telling her a story about it. She was just a little toddler, and now she's driving, she's sixteen, so... it's been a... it has been a really important part of our life.

I think, uhhh... going back to sports for a second, like I love soccer, and I love watching — it's funny, because creative people, nerds that listen to this probably don't care about sports, and I keep like trying to bring sports into this so badly, and they're like, more and more people are tuning out. It's like they're dropping by the hundreds. Um, But one of my favorite, my favorite soccer team is called the Liverpool Football Club, and their manager, he — they talked about like, what did you feel when your team scores a goal in an important game? And he's like, I think people are

expecting to feel euphoria, but mostly relief is what I feel?

I feel a little bit — I feel a lot of that. I do feel gladness. But you can probably relate to this, there's not — it's not ever done as far as, like there's no — I will be glad to like see the book, and it's done, but it's almost like because I'm more than just a brilliant author who sits off and writes these things and everybody else does everything. No, I have a small business that I'm running all the time. My brother and I work together, and we kind of do everything, along with our brother-in-law.

So it's like a small, little — so we're like always going. It's like one thing stops and another thing gets — so it almost feels like I'm in the middle. Going back to sports, I feel like we're in the middle of the game, and it's like, yeah, we scored, but now we have to get back on defense and you can't stop. So part of me is like I can't stop going, and that's probably good because I can't sit around indulging and smoking my pipe and thinking about oh my goodness, what about this. Maybe at some point I'll be able to do that.

I do feel relief, because I wanted to finish this series. And I think a lot of people — the reactions have been mixed, but it feels like a lot of my audience is like happy that there's a new book but sad that it's the end. And I kind of get that, but also, I love the idea of trying to end something well, a whole lot. There's so many either shows or movie series or book series that I'm just like, man... maybe when I was younger I felt differently, like I wish this would go on forever — especially as I get older I have less tolerance for people stretching things out beyond — I just wanted to do that so bad. I wanted to finish. I wanted people to be happy, and feel like oh, that was the end. And that was an end. That was a real end. And uh, I can remember being really frustrated at that show *Lost*... did you ever watch that show?

JR: I didn't watch that show, but everybody I know who watched it was really frustrated.

SS: Yeah, it was a genuinely terrible ending. And it was a good show, I thought, in a lot of ways. But I'm just frustrated by that sort of thing, and I just want to get — I actually had this idea that I wanted to live long enough to write it. I didn't want something to happen, to like lose my powers or whatever. My family will be fine, they'll be okay without me. But if I can finish this book...

I almost feel like because there's a beginning, middle, and sort of an end to the series, that I have something to kind of leave no matter what else I do. Hopefully people will receive it well and they'll enjoy it. If that's the case then I'll feel happy. So I feel relief that I got to do it. That's a big emotion. That's pretty much all I can feel right now.

JR: Do you have any sense of what you're gonna write after *The Green Ember* series is over?

SS: Yeah. I do. I have a bunch of ideas, uhhh.... yeah. There are more books to be written in that world.

JR: In that world?

SS: I've written some... yeah. There's a lot of opportunity to go back, into the side. I've started one side story series that started out with *The Last Archer*. I followed a side character that happened at the same time as *The Green Ember* and then I've just written a sequel to that. And I think there will be at least one more of those, is my hope, and it'll be kind of like a little trilogy. And I've got the same thing with these *Tales of Old Natalia*. It's like a century or so before the events of *The Green Ember*. And I've got two of those written so I'll probably do another one of those. So I've got that.

JR: Okay, gotcha. So you're staying in that world.

SS: Well, at some point, yeah, I don't know when. But then I've got a bunch of other ideas. Actually, I wanna write a book — well, I am writing a book, I should say, here and there, as I can — about similar stuff that we're

talking about, actually. A book called *Make Believe*, which is about making and, sort of— you know, “believe” is kind of the identity stuff, and the “make” is for some of the practical things. So there’s like the 10,000 foot view, and then there’s like the down on the ground view, and I’m kind of back and forth. Got some stuff about that. I don’t know when — I’m working on that. That might be out there at some point too.

JR: That’s great. You should also write a book about sports analogies.

SS: Mmm. Mmm. Yes. I will do that.

JR: Alright, last question, Sam.

SS: Wow!

JR: Yeah, it’s flown by, I know. I get this a lot.

SS: [laughs]

JR: Who are the writers who make you want to write?

SS: Umm... the writers who make me want to write. I don’t want to answer that question. I wanna answer a better question. [JR laughs] Like, let’s just for instance say we’ve got a better host and a better podcast.

JR: Okay, yeah.

SS: The people who blow me away are the people who make me not wanna write? [laughs] Do you ever have that feeling? Like, after I read *Paradise Lost*, I was like why did anyone ever write anything after this? I don’t know — do you love *Paradise Lost*?

JR: Oh, I love *Paradise Lost*. I got a PhD in Milton.

SS: I know, I know! Actually, while we were talking, I was thinking like man! You are the perfect person to talk about sort of... I don't know, sort of the modesty of storytelling? Because you have this great learning of sort of the history of English literature, and you write like uh, swamp adventures? And I love that. I love that person a lot. Yeah, it feels very generous.

JR: I just like swamp stories.

SS: [laughs] But uh, so... the people who blow me away, right. And I guess it's kind of... it is the same thing. But I do have that question, after I read like, um — I love *A Tale of Two Cities* an awful lot. So Dickens. I love *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It's one of my favorite stories. So Dumas or that other guy who they say may have written that or helped him with that.

JR: I don't know that little story.

SS: Yeah, that's the rumor. That's a rumor going around.

JR: Okay.

SS: That. Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*.

JR: Oh, man, what a book.

SS: Yeah... and of course I lived really close to where that book was set in Africa.

JR: Is Ndotsheni... is that a real place? Did he make up town names or village names?

SS: So it's in KwaZulu Natal, it's in this sort of region. I don't know if it's an actual place. But I mean, I can see it because I've seen paces like it and close to it. But that's my understanding. I don't know but I'm sure we could find out. But those books are books that made me like... they kind

of arrested me? Have arrested me? Some of them are more grand and more massive in element. But those books in particular I'm thinking of are times when I read, and when I was done, I did think, like, what's the point of writing anything? Because we don't need anything else. I really felt that. I remember feeling that really strongly after *Paradise Lost*, like wow, people dared to try to write after this! So that just kind of blew me away.

And I guess in the end realizing what we talked about either. That I don't need to be — thank goodness — I don't need to be Milton, I don't need to be Tolkien or Paton. I can be Sam Smith. And that's what my little plot of the earth — that's what my territory needs, I guess.

JR: Yeah. That's right! That's true. Alright, man. I really appreciate you. We recorded a podcast episode for my little homegrown podcast a year or so ago, and it was not salvageable. The audio was not salvageable. So I really appreciate you doing this again.

SS: That's my pleasure. I look forward to our third try whenever you find out what's wrong with this one!

JR: [laughs] No, I've got trained professionals on the case now. We've got Drew Miller, and people like... well, Drew Miller. There's nobody else like Drew Miller, so it's just Drew.

SS: Well, you'd impress me if you said Steve Miller, but I mean...

JR: [laughs] Yeah, right.

SS: [laughs]

JR: Alright, thanks Sam!

SS: My pleasure. It was an honor to be here. I wish I would've heard more from you. But um...

JR: Well, start a podcast and ask me to be a guest.

SS: Okay.

JR: Alright.

SS: Alright.

JR: See ya.

SS: I'm getting off The Habit now.

JR: [laughs] Kicking the habit!

SS: Yep! [laughs]

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville. Special shout-out as well to The Arcadian Wild for allowing us to use their delightful song "Finch in the Pantry" as part of this podcast. Check out their album of the same name for more excellent music.

JR: The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

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