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(THEME MUSIC)

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

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JR: Harrison Scott Key is a memoirist and humorist… that is to say, a writer of humorous memoirs, and a professor at English at the Savannah College of Art and Design. He's one of the funniest writers out there, as you'll see if you read his memoir *The World's Largest Man*, or his columns for the Oxford American. His most recent book is *Congratulations, Who Are You Again? Southern Living* put Harrison on their list of the 50 Best Dressed Southerners, a fact that seems especially perplexing if you've ever seen a picture of him wearing clothes.

Harrison Scott Key, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast. I appreciate you making time for us.

HARRISON SCOTT KEY: Man, I'm happy to be here! This is *very* exciting. I think I've known about this for a long time, and we've been talking about this for a long time, so glad we're doing it.

JR: It's finally happening. Uhh, you are a memoirist.

HSK: Yes, that is one thing I am.

JR: Um, why do you use such a pretentious and Frenchy word to describe yourself?

HSK: Because I want people to hate me.

JR: [laughs] Yeah, okay. Is it working?

HSK: Well, I don't know, they hated me before. Now they really hate me!

JR: [laughs]

HSK: Ummm… I, you know… writing is — I mean, it's all these choices about what you call yourself and how you're categorized — has as much to do with marketing as with reality.

JR: Yeah, right.

HSK: You know, I'm a memoirist because I've written two memoirs, so I think that probably is acceptable and totally fine. But you know, you always get worried, like, well if you're a memoirist, uh why… will they ever let you write a novel? And if they do…

JR: Who…

HSK: And when I say "they," it's like the gatekeepers, your agent, your editor. You know. Then, are they wanting it — do they want — I mean, like my agent, she was like…

Like, I'm working on a third book now. And it's kind of memoiric, I mean, it's autobiographical, but it's not about me. It's not about a life journey I've gone on or anything. But I'm a character in it, because it's really hard for me not to be a character in anything I write, because that's just my… that's my M.O. I'm processing whatever has happened. And so it just seems — I mean, every writer has to find [clears throat] excuse me, every writer has to find their way into telling a story. And mine has always been, "Listen to this thing I did!" You know…

JR: Yeah.

HSK: Um, which I mean is absolutely the mark of an egomaniac.

JR: [laughs]

HSK: And that's totally fine. I'm… it's… I'm more entertaining than most egomaniacs, so I can. But you know like, my agent is like, "Please don't write another memoir! Pleaaaase don't!" I'm like, "But I'm a memoirist. That's what all the podcast interviewers are telling me." She's like, "Well, just…"

JR: [laughs]

HSK: So you know I've — I've also written a screenplay, but I don't think anybody's gonna call me a screenwriter. I mean, people call me humorist. And I used to look down on that, because it sounds like… I don't wanna be like Lewis Grizzard. I don't wanna be that guy. You know, but then Lewis Grizzard and Jerry Clower have made a lot of money, so you know, I don't wanna put that down either.

But you wanna keep — really, you just wanna have a name — really, you just wanna be a writer and an author. But whatever they call you, they gotta put you somewhere in the bookstore. And if people, you know — if they put me in the local authors section, and then I'm introduced as a local author, like that's fine too. It's whatever works.

JR: I have — for whatever reason, the word "memoir," um, bothers me. Again probably because it sounds so Frenchy.

HSK: Yes…

JR: But I've tried calling it things like memory because… I assume "memoir" is just French for memory, I think.

HSK: Yes, it is.

JR: But for whatever reason, that doesn't quite work.

HSK: [laughs] I'm going to the memory section of the bookstore. I'll be back in a few minutes.

JR: [laughs]

HSK: No, that's not pretentious at all! No, I think, you know, creative nonfiction is probably… you know, people ask me what I write. That's usually my answer. I say I write funny stories. At least mostly funny. Most of them are things that happened to me. So creative nonfiction feels like a better, slightly… that's more like a species and not a genus of what it is. Cause I do write… you know, I've written travel things. I'm still a character in it. I wouldn't call it memoir, but I've written travel stories. I've written things that are, uhh… almost newsy type articles. Like, let me tell you about this thing. So it's not really a life journey, but I'm talking as Harrison. And so, you know, I tell people that I write mostly creative nonfiction, but "creative nonfictionist" is not a word, you know?

JR: [laughs] Yeah right. So… I've read both of your published memoirs, by the way. I loved them, thought they were great.

HSK: Thank you.

JR: I wanna hear about what you wrote before you sort of found your legs. You know… would you be willing to talk about it a little bit? Some of your bad memoir before your good memoir?

HSK: Oh absolutely. Um… I mean, it's all terrible. That's why you haven't read it. If it was good you would've read it.

JR: [laughs] Yeah, right.

HSK: I mean, telling your story… it's *so* hard, man! It is so hard to figure out… to step outside of yourself and your own ego and your own experience and figure out a way to tell your story in a way connects with other people. So you're just naturally gonna claw and scrap at it. And you know it's like… I mean… I tell people, I tell students especially who wanna write, like, think about your first 2 or 3 times you kissed somebody? It probably makes you wince a little bit. When you think about what you probably did…

JR: [laughs]

HSK: Like, I mean… I stuck my tongue so far down this girl's throat, I… at one point I thought she was making sounds of pleasure…

JR: [laughs harder]

HSK: I think she was… I think I was killing her! And maybe this was in eighth or ninth grade. So that's what it's — thinking back to some of those things I wrote before I published my first book is definitely that same feeling. You know, like, ugh, I was just grasping, looking through a glass darkly a little bit. You know like — and I'll give you an example of what that means specifically.

So, let's take — cause I still have the notebooks of some of the things I wrote before I was starting to get things published. I did publish, I don't know… a lot of things before I got an agent and really started working on my first book. So I had some, quote, "good things that are out there" that haven't been included. But my first attempts at memoir, um — or at least first really dedicated, committed, earnest attempts — were in, between 2003 and 2009.

JR: Okay.

HSK: That's when I was really learning my voice. Um, I really started

writing what ultimately became my first book *The World's Largest Man* — I really started writing that from 2010 or 11 to 2014. I was trying to write it before, but I didn't quite get there. For example, I've got this notebook in my closet that has an early version of some of the stories that ended up in *The World's Largest Man*. And the problem with them was that they lacked a sufficient awareness of what was really happening in the story.

JR: Hmm.

HSK: So, there's a, um… [clears throat] they tell you, um — I think this is a Vivian Gornick trope. She's a memoirist as well. The idea of when you're writing memoir, you have to distinguish between the scene and the story. Or between — a better way of staying this is you have to distinguish between the anecdote that you're describing, the thing that happened, and then the real transformation that happened as a result of this anecdote.

JR: Huh…

HSK: Like, when I look back at those older memoirs that I wrote — memoir essays and things — I was just trying to tell a funny anecdote. I was trying to describe the time I killed my first deer, or trying to describe the time that I, you know, was duck hunting and dropped my gun into the water and how this resulted in basically my ruining Christmas for my entire family.

And so when I — if you're just focused on the anecdote, that's like the kind of thing you tell around the campfire or sitting on the front porch. Like, "Let me tell you about this thing." It's an interesting story. It has a lot of twists and turns. It's usually funny or surprising. But you're not gonna go *too* deep into what it really meant. So, in those early memoirs, that's all I was doing. I was saying, like, "Well this one time, this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened, and isn't that *crazy*?"

JR: I always said that anecdotes… they're liable to say anything, but what

they always say is, “What a world is this?”

HSK: That’s exactly right. Just like, “Isn’t that crazy?” You know, it’s the kind of thing that we would tell around the dinner table, like you know, that my father would end it with, “Ain’t that sumthin’? Ain’t that sumthin’?”

JR: [laughs] Yeah.

HSK: [Southern accent] “Takes all kinds.” Or, “It’s always sum—” You know, he would talk about, you know, his truck blowing up, then end it with, “It’s always sumthin’, ain’t it?” And I’m like, I guess?

JR: [laughs]

HSK: I’ve never had a truck blow up, but I guess in your world, that happens. So yeah, an anecdote is like an odd — it’s the kind of thing that you have told more than once, because it’s an “ain’t that something” kind of story. But a memoir is something *very* similar but *very* different from that. And that — figuring that out is the *key* to writing great memoir, I think. And when I’m teaching it, it’s the key, because what you really — to really figure out what it means…

So, first of all, you know it’s a good anecdote worthy of consideration because you’ve told it multiple times. There’s something in your heart and in your mind that tells you this story describes a fundamental truth of the human experience. I must share it with people, whether it’s silly or funny.

You know it’s like, there was one Christmas — Christmas of 1996, I slept in a small burro trailer between a fireworks tent and a brothel, um, because I was the manager of the fireworks stand. And I carried a pistol and a shotgun around, and I sold bottle rockets to hoodlums and johns and prostitutes and men on the way home from work. And, like… that’s an anecdote. Like, I can tell that story sitting on the porch, and if I’m really feeling it, I can really draw it out for 10 or 15 minutes.

JR: Yeah.

HSK: But you know, when you're telling an anecdote, if it gets too serious, it ruins the anecdote, right?

JR: Right.

HSK: Like, the listeners are just like — are like, "Whoooooa we're just talking about how life is crazy! You can't be talking about your relationship with your grandfather and how that resulted in your, you know, becoming a homosexual and your leaving your wife!" So like, a memoir takes that anecdote and says, "Why?"

JR: Mmhmm.

HSK: Why were you operating a fireworks stand at Christmas? You couldn't even go home. Why did you choo— so then it's like, ohhhhh, I chose, to op — I was a senior in college — I chose to operate that fireworks stand for some pretty basic reasons. I needed some money, and I didn't wanna work during the school year, because I was in a play that required a lot of work and rehearsal and things, so I thought this is a great way to make, you know, 1500 dollars in two weeks, which was a lot of money to me in 1996. It's still a lot of money.

JR: Yeah, right.

HSK: But the real reason is, I think I was trying to say, "I don't wanna be with my family right now."

JR: Yeah.

HSK: That there's something about — like I knew my father would want me to hunt. I knew my mom would want me to cut my hair. I knew that questions about my changing theology and my changing beliefs about the

world would become the topic of conversation. So a memoir goes deeper and asks those questions that animate the anecdote. They're already there when you tell the story, but they're under the surface. A memoir really looks like why that happened. Who you are now vs. who you were when the anecdote happened. How it changed you, how you're different now. So maybe this is really a story about Christmas. Maybe it's not a story about a fireworks stand at all. Whereas when I just tell the anecdote, it's a fireworks stand anecdote. Does that make sense?

JR: Yeah, sure! And I think it was Eudora Welty who said think… you know, think about what you don't know and what you do know?

HSK: [chuckles] Yes.

JR: And I think that's — I think that's how you get from — that's one way to get from the anecdote to the underlying story that you're talking about, you know?

HSK: And you don't think about those things consciously a lot. And the therapist or the person in therapy, the memoirist, the novelist *do* think about those things.

JR: Yeah. I often give writing students an assignment of basically writing an anecdote. And then they think the assignment's done, and then I sit 'em down and say, "Now I want you to talk — I want you to think about what you *don't* know about that story." Because you tell these stories over and over again, and you think you know 'em, and in the process you *stop* even thinking about what — you close off the possibility of even thinking about what they mean unless you really try to… to do that. To do that work. And that sounds like what you're talking about here. Somehow really digging into all these things I somehow took for granted about that story. How do I get to the next? Where they fit?

HSK: That's a good… I mean, that's a good assignment. You know, that "what do you not know?" Because that's where the questions come from.

You know, why did I do that? Why did that happen? I mean, that's what a good therapist, can — and I hate — I used to hate that link between therapy and memoir, but there's very much the link. Because the link is about interrogating why the heck your life is the way it is right now. And it can — you can often — you know it's usually, come up with a hypothesis and not necessarily a completely provable theory about why your life is the way that it is.

JR: Mmhm. Yeah.

HSK: You're always hedging. You're always like, "I *think* that's why I did that. I think that's why my mom…" Like, I realized — don't worry, I'm not gonna let my mom listen to this. Um, I *think*… I was talking to my mom, and… I think that she, um, on some level feels… like, so she asked me all that.

So, we went to see *The Nutcracker* with, um, my wife and daughters and my mom, and I saw *The Nutcracker a* few days ago. And, um, after it was over, my mom turns to me — she's insane — she turns to me and goes, [Southern accent] "Why didn't you ever learn to dance like that?"

JR: [laughs]

HSK: And I thought… my wife looked at my mom like she had asked if she could be a unicorn for Halloween…

JR: [still laughing]

HSK: She like looked at her, and I was like… I said, "Mom. I don't know what is wrong with you right now, but, wha… why would…."

JR: [laughing]

HSK: What makes her think that I wished I could've become a ballet dancer? I mean, it's one thing to say, like, if she knows I play the drums,

and if we saw a great drummer and she goes, “Do you regret not choosing that as a career?” Like, I get that! But… *ballet*?

And so for the rest of the day I kept, I would ask — I’d stop and go, “Mom, why didn’t you ever teach me to play the hammered dulcimer when I was younger?” And she kind of looked at me funny, and then a few minutes later, “Mom, why didn’t you ever let me dig a well in the backyard?” And she’s like, [Southern accent] “Why are you saying that?”

And so here, here’s the point. I actually think that my mother feels guilt for not, um… seeing my creative side more clearly when I was younger, and letting my dad sort of run roughshod over my life? Which of course, if you read the books, you know that story. And I think that she feels, I think those questions are her way of saying, “I wish I had found… I wish you hadn’t been 25 before you realized you should be doing something creative for a living. And so, that’s what memoir does. Memoir says, “Why is she always doing that?”

JR: Yeah…

HSK: The anecdotalist is the stand-up comedian, right? They’re telling the funny thing, and letting the truth of it just kind of exist, quietly, invisibly.

JR: Mmhm.

HSK: But the memoirist goes one step further and goes, I think my mom is doing that because she has guilt. Maybe she doesn’t. My mom is perfectly free when she reads — if I wrote that in a story, or if she listens to this podcast — she’s perfectly free to take me aside (or at the dinner table in front of everybody) and say, “Why did you say that? I don’t think that’s why I’m doing it at all. And that’s okay. The memoirist has to be okay with other people contesting their hypothesis about the family or about their experience. And as long as you’re comfortable with that, you can write whatever you wanna write as long as you think it’s a sound hypothesis.

JR: Yeah, that's great. And she can write her own memoir if she wants to.

HSK: You know, I've told her that she should, and nobody would buy it or read it, but I would support her in that life goal.

JR: [laughs]

HSK: [laughs] Just kidding. I'm just kidding.

JR: Uhhh… yeah, but this connection between memoir, and um, therapy really is interesting. And anecdote is kind of a middle ground between… it's not memoir. It's sort of the raw material for… well, if we're putting it in terms of therapy, I mean, it's raw material for, um… for the counselor or the therapist to say, "Tell me more about that."

HSK: Yes…

JR: Um, you know… I know my wife and I went to marriage counseling for a little while, and um… and one of the issues that came up is why am I always trying to tell anecdotes instead of talking about my feelings or whatever. And the counselor… he used a phrase that I've used on a regular basis ever since. He says — he told my wife, "These are sad stories told for laughs."

HSK: Mmhmm..

JR: Which I thought about all the time while I was reading *The World's Largest Man*, by the way. These are sad stories told for laughs.

HSK: [chuckles] That would be a good subtitle.

JR: [chuckles] Yeah, right…

HSK: It's very true.

JR: I did a series of interviews for The Rabbit Room website in which I would talk to performers — mostly performers or artists of various kinds — about their most spectacular humiliations.

HSK: Mm, yes.

JR: And the — it was called Sad Stories Told for Laughs. But, you're a humorist. Um, you're interested in — you tell funny stories in a way that sort of… that's shooting for, umm… some truth just beyond a funny story.

HSK: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's kind of you to say. I mean, it's definitely something I've tried to do. I didn't, I wasn't always trying to do that. I didn't really understand…

I mean, I think I would've. I took an aesthetics class in college. I understood that, you know, that truth was something good to want out of art. Maybe not… maybe not propositional truth. At least, not that sort of propositional truth that can be disputed, you know. And I mean, a higher… sort of propositional. A hyper-propositional truth maybe. But I think I always knew that, but as an actual person trying to write stories, I really just wanted to make people laugh. I didn't get that the truth is why people were laughing, and that the sadness was why people were laughing.

JR: Huh.

HSK: You know, I mean, I think every anecdote is a sad story. Every. Anecdote. Ever. Told. Is. A sad. Story. Even the ones that seem, um… like funny party stories that you tell. Even *that's* a sad story. Like, everything is rooted in some sort of like… life really screws you up every once in a while, doesn't it? Ain't that just like life, just like you said earlier. I mean, that's *sad*. The idea is that like, you know… bad things happen, listen to this one bad thing that happened. It was hilarious! Because it happened to somebody else!

You know, and so… I think every anecdote is a sad story. Especially when there's truth there. The truth is like — even if it's a happy story about your happy Christmas in 1985, you're sad because it's gone! You're sad because that was, I don't know, 80 years ago. I can't do math. It was a long time ago! [chuckles]

JR: [laughs]

HSK: So I do think every story is a sad story, but when I first started writing, I was just trying to make stories funny. I didn't realize that yet. I think my heart knew it. I think my heart knew that truth was in sadness and comedy was embedded in that somewhere, but my medulla oblongata did not know — I'm sorry — my cerebellum did not know it. And as I'm writing these funny stories, like this earlier memoir stuff I told you about, I thought, something's flat here. Something's missing.

JR: Yeah.

HSK: And I'm like, oh, it's not funny because it's not sad yet.

JR: Wow, okay. That's…

HSK: And I can make it funny if I figure out why this makes me so sad. And then when I figured that out, then it really started — it really comes alive. It's a weird dance though. Cause if you're just thinking, "Let's make it funny," it won't be funny. And if you're just thinking, "Let's make it sad," it probably will be sad and nobody will read it. And so you have — so, it's this weird dance. But then once I realized, oh, a story is about truth, and that's what… otherwise, it's just stand-up comedy.

I mean, I could do stand-up comedy. I could leave my wife and children and move to Atlanta and do that and probably have a sitcom within five years. Like, I could totally do that! But I like my family, and I'm not gonna leave 'em, and so writing stories that get to truth somehow feels much more meaningful to me, umm… than just telling anecdotes, just being

funny.

JR: Mmhmm.

HSK: You know, I do think some of my — even some of the stories in *The World's Largest Man*, I read some of that and think, "Wow, it took me a long time to get to the real stuff in that story." You can tell, like, that I… snorted some horse or something… it was just *really* trying to be funny. And I wince a little bit when I read some of those stories, but I do think they're very funny.

JR: Yeah. They are funny. Um… in your second book *Congratulations, Who are You Again?* — did I get that title right?

HSK: You did.

JR: Um… describing sort of the memoir you were writing before you figured out how to do it. You said — I'm reading here — "It was a derivative work of nonfiction that was such a poor representation of memory and history that it seemed to cheapen everything that mattered from my past." I wanna hear more about that. In what way did your — did those early attempts, earlier attempts, cheapen the stories you were… I mean, maybe that's what you've already been talking about.

HSK: Yeah, I think it's exactly what we've been talking about. That I… I was taking the most memorable anecdotes of my life, many of which I have told in different forms. Whether I was like — you know, I was in a performance studies — I was in several performance studies classes where we wrote monologues about our past or whatever, and we would perform them for the other grad students. So I was taking these stories that I had done lots of different things with. When I did stand-up comedy for a short period, I told some of these stories. When I wrote monologues, I told these stories. So I was taking these stories, and I was just writing them down for laughs. I was just writing them down to be like *this* crazy thing happened, and then *this* crazy thing happened. But when I'm not

there…

I mean, if I'm telling this story in front of 5 or 10 people, you know, I'm pretty animated, I do funny voices. You know, my facial expressions, my physicality — I'm fairly good at capturing the attention of most everybody in an audience. There's always a lot of people who don't wanna hear me talk and would love me to shut up, but that's in any group. That's all I was trying to do. But then I realized when I'm writing a story, I'm not there to do the funny voices, to enchant, to get loud and get quiet and be a, you know, preacher at a revival. I was really trying hard to put all that into words.

And what happened was, the thing that quote "cheapened everything about my past" is that it was just like a clown show. It was a total burlesque of anything resembling truth. It was just trying to be silly and zany. Like, every moment that could be funny, every possible description that could be funny I would highlight. And I totally ignored what my dad was trying to teach me in that story, or what lessons I actually pulled out of my own experience from that. And so, when I went back to… when I really broke through and figured out my voice, I realized I could still make it funny and I can still say true things. And that's when it really clicked for me.

JR: Yeah. [pause] Um… I… sometimes when I read stories that students have written, you know, two different — I mean, lots of different things happen — but here are two things that happen. One is that somebody will just write a quiet little story about something that's not especially funny and it's not especially earth-shattering, and they're self-conscious because it's neither funny nor earth-shattering. But it turns out that the very fact that they wrote it at all dignifies the moment.The fact that they let a small moment be a small moment and didn't feel the need to inflate it or exaggerate it or whatever. It just feels like you just dignified this moment by acknowledging — just by telling it straight.

And then on the other hand, I get… the flip side of that is the students who

feel like I've got to ratchet this up with hyperbole or whatever, and it just feels like you undignified this moment by not telling the truth about it.

HSK: Mmhmm. I think that's true. I mean, I… you know, I guess it really depends on the tone of the student and how they describe things. For example, I am naturally a ridiculous person. That's how I talk. I mean, that's, you know, when you and I were just talking, that's how I think, and that's how my mind works. And so for me… um… [pause] when I take the story and try to make it sound writerly… and make it sound maybe even simple… that can, for me, that can undignify it. Because it doesn't sound like Harrison.

JR: Yep.

HSK: It doesn't sound like me. You know, like when I gave my father's eulogy, it was *really* funny! It may have been the funniest thing I have ever delivered for an audience.

JR: [laughs]

HSK: It was so sad. By the end of it, I was *bawling*. And everybody was crying except for my children who were like, "*What* is happening right now?" But it was so… it was *so* funny. So for me, it's like… it's not that I'm making it funny externally.

JR: Right.

HSK: I'm not artificially making it funny. Like, if I tell a story funny in a way that *Harrison* is funny, then that's… I'm actually giving you the truth. I'm giving you here's how it felt to be that. But I have written — I totally hear what you're saying too, because I wrote a couple of things that ended up in the first book that were just… every now and then, I will kind of take off the pressure — and I think the more I've written, the better I've gotten at it — of you don't have to be funny. You don't have to — you're not earning the favor of a live audience who might walk out at any moment.

JR: Yeah.

HSK: You are writing for a reader. They bought your frickin' book or somebody gave it to them. They are sitting down and reading it. You can calm. Down. A little bit. *Harrison*.

JR: [laughs]

HSK: Just tell — just say what happened. And maybe you can go back and maybe you make it a little funnier, or maybe you quiet it down or make it a little louder. But there was a moment, umm… there were a couple of moments in the first book where I said stop trying to be funny. Just say what happened. And if you say what happened really stoically, it might actually sound funny!

JR: Yeah.

HSK: And so… I think that Charles Portis is excellent at that.

JR: Oh man, I love that guy.

HSK: He's my, you know… my favorite living novelist. He's still with us, and his work is so… I love his work so much, because it's so, um… [pause] He just describes things how they are. And I've tried to do that more and more the older I've gotten.

JR: Yeah. Alright. Well, we're getting close to the end of our time, but I always end with this question. Who are the writers who make you want to write?

HSK: Well, I've said Portis, and he's definitely one. Because what I like about him is not just his sense of humor, but he's writing stuff that's very Southern and it feels Southern, But it also feels very universal. It's not

cornpone. It's not clichéd. You know, I love that he tells a story that's a Southern story, but it takes place, you know, in the 70s of Little Rock and central America. Like, that's great. So I love the freshness of that.

Um… who else? [sigh] You know, it's really… and of course, you know, Flannery O'Connor is a favorite. I haven't read… I haven't read her novels or her short stories in probably 2 or 3 years. I go back to them every now and then. Um, I'm a big fan of Lewis Nordan?

JR: I don't know Lewis Nordan.

HSK: Oh man… you gotta listen. You've gotta read *Wolf Whistle*.

JR: Okay.

HSK: Which is this really funny and sad story… it's essentially a fictionalization of the murder of Emmett Till.

JR: Really.

HSK: And… but it is so *weird* and funny. it's funny because the tangential characters are… just so pathetically sad? Um, and the main character who's murdered, like… his ghost narrates part of it?

JR: Really?

HSK: And there are like… there are turkey buzzards who date back to the Civil War? Who are still, like… there's still like a colony of them who are still alive, and they have a memory? It's so weeeeiiiird. And interesting. Um… and it's very funny. There are passages in it that are like just heartbreakingly funny. And to do that in a novel that fictionalizes one of the great tragedies of American history, uhh, is so strange, and that's what I love about it. Like, that's ballsy. That is soooo amazing. And not just that, but like, a white guy from Mississippi was the one who wrote it? Like, how? That gives me a lot of hope for upsetting — for hurting people's

feelings. That's just, his most well-known work is *Wolf Whistle*.

Definitely Flannery O'Connor. You know, I love… I just love Shakespeare still for the plots, and how complex and how keyed in it is for what it means to be a human.

What am I reading lately? I'm reading, uhh… I just read *The Natural*? Bernard Malamund's book for the first time. And I thought it was really funny.

JR: Really? I've never heard of it.

HSK: Even though it's — I think it's kind of a sad movie. I've never seen the movie, but it's a very funny book and I *loved* it. I'm reading, um… a *totally* disgusting book right now called *The Fermata* by Nicholas Baker. Uh, and it's really funny, but kind of… it's kind of sleazy. And I like… it's weird. It would be really fun to teach because you could have students debating, like, is this ethical what the character's doing and whatnot?

Um, but I don't really have… I mean, I read something every month that makes me wish I had written it. But like I said, I love Portis, I love Nordan, I love Flannery O'Connor. Um, but on some level those are probably fairly predictable answers, being from the South and being a white guy and being a believer. Totally predictable. But I love getting — anything that I read that casts a spell over me and makes me stop thinking that I'm reading a book and just puts me into the mind of a character? Man, I love it. I hope I'm… I will do that long after I stop writing.

JR: It's like getting extra life.

HSK: It is! It sure is.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: Alright, well, Harrison, thank you so much for being here. This has

been a lot of fun.

HSK: Thanks, man. I appreciate your questions.

JR: Hope we can talk again soon.

HSK: Let's do it!

JR: Alright.

(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 Jess Ray for letting us use her song "Too Good" as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)

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