

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

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

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** At the end of every episode of this podcast, I ask my guests, "Which writers make you want to write?" Charles Portis is a name that has come up several times. His novels, especially *True Grit* and *The Dog of the South*, certainly make me want to write. Roy Blount once said, "Charles Portis could be Cormac McCarthy if he wanted to, but he'd rather be funny." I don't suppose there could be a better summation of what I love about Charles Portis.

Mr. Portis died on February 17, 2020, two weeks before the release date of this episode. My friend David Kern loves Charles Portis as much as I do, so I called him to reminisce. David Kern runs the Circe Institute's podcast network, and hosts the Close Reads podcast, the Daily Poem podcast, and Libromania, a podcast for the book-obsessed. I commend those podcasts to you. A slightly edited version of this conversation is being posted as an episode over at Libromania.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** David Kern, I'm so glad we're having some time to talk about Charles Portis.

**DAVID KERN:** Yeah, likewise. I can't imagine that there are many writers who would be more fun to just, you know... just talk about and celebrate and spend some time with.

**JR:** Yeah, I know. I have to admit, I didn't realize Charles Portis was still alive until a couple months before he died.

**DK:** Mm. I had researched him in the last year for something, and so I knew that he was alive, but I didn't know that he was in poor health. I mean, he was old, so it's not surprising.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** But I... it's also not surprising that we didn't know that because he's very private.

**JR:** Yeah, right. That's right. He'd been private his whole writing life, and then I guess he'd been in a memory care facility or something for a few years before he was in hospice for a couple of years?

**DK:** It seems like he wasn't private though in the way that uh... say, J.D. Salinger was where he was truly reclusive? I think he was... he just valued not being in the public eye.

**JR:** Right.

**DK:** 'Cause everything you read about him in eulogies and the stories in The New York Times and local Arkansas newspapers seems like he was a very jovial guy. If you were his friend, he was a delight to be around. Which isn't surprising given his books. He just didn't care about the... all the stuff that goes with being, you know, a celebrated literary figure.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. I understand he liked to work on his cars and things like that. He was a very regular guy.

**DK:** That makes him... something very endearing about him in that way. That's what makes his... comes across... that personality, point of view comes through in his work too.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. And of course, he had a career as a journalist in New York City that he just sort of threw overboard and moved back to Arkansas, uh,

to write fiction. Which I think is really interesting.

**DK:** It's kind of a Wendell Berry thing about him.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. Um... when... (pause) So, Charles Portis of course, um, wrote *True Grit*. That's his best known novel. I guess he wrote five novels. Is that right? So it started with *Norwood*, then *True Grit*... and then the three...

**DK:** Yep. Then *Dog of the South*.

**JR:** Yeah, the three that involve flimflam men, *Dog of the South*.

**DK:** (laughs)

**JR:** Then *Masters of Atlantis* and *Gringos*.

**DK:** Yeah.

**JR:** And neither you nor I have read *Gringos*, so we need to do that.

**DK:** Yeah, no that was 1990.

**JR:** Wow.

**DK:** Which I didn't re— I thought it was actually earlier, but it was in the 90s.

**JR:** Huh.

**DK:** And then he didn't write anything for... the last thirty years of his life. Well. Nothing— no significant novels.

**JR:** Right. How did you get started reading Charles Portis?

**DK:** That's a great question. Umm... I think... probably through seeing the original *True Grit* movie, and then discovering this is a book, and then going to read *True Grit*. Probably sometime in high school I read it for the first time. But I didn't read all his other stuff until much later. I don't think I really— I mean, I love Western stories, so *True Grit* was the first one I turned to. But I didn't read... I think *Norwood* was the second one, and I think I read that maybe ten years ago?

**JR:** Uh huh.

**DK:** Something like that. And then I kind of dove into all of his, you know — well, I guess not *Gringos*. But I've since re-read *True Grit* multiple times. And *Dog of the South*.

**JR:** I know, I love that book. And you know the audiobook with Donna Tartt?

**DK:** Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**JR:** So good.

**DK:** Yeah. It's great. His books make for *great* audio books. *The Dog of the South* audio book is fantastic, the one that's on Audible. I don't know if you've heard that one.

**JR:** I haven't, no.

**DK:** It's great.

**JR:** (pause) Um, I... in my podcast, I always ask people, "Who are the writers who make you wanna write?" And for me the answer to that question is Charles Portis more than anybody. And when I read that guy, I'm like, "I want to go do this." Not that I feel like I *can* do it as well as he

can do it.

**DK:** (chuckles)

**JR:** But it makes me wanna try. You know?

**DK:** Yeah. Yeah.

**JR:** Matter of fact, so, you've said it was about ten years ago when you started reading his stuff. That's about when I started reading it. Um... my friend Andrew Peterson read *Dog of the South*, and he said as he read it, he thought that's the kind of thing I would be into. And I think I'd already written *The Charlatan*—

**DK:** Well, that was a compliment! (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, I know, isn't it?

**DK:** (laughs)

**JR:** And so he gave me a copy of *Dog of the South*, and I was like good grief, where has this been all my life, you know? 'Cause I knew the *True Grit* movie, but had not read the book...

**DK:** Yeah.

**JR:** But yeah. I um... the... (pause) I think because Charles Portis is so interested in charlatans, and that's just one of my — one of my literary interests is charlatans and, um, just flimflam artists in general, you know? I love caper movies and all that kind of stuff.

**DK:** Oh yeah, yeah. Well, we could do a whole podcast on just great caper movies.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah!

**DK:** It's interesting that you suggest — you talk about capers. Because I was thinking while listening to *Dog of the South* again how in his books there's always this sort of road journey, road story going on at the core. Whether it's in *True Grit* and they're off looking for, you know, someone who killed Mattie Ross' father, whatever it is...

**JR:** Right.

**DK:** But at the same time... (pause) Although in *True Grit* there are some gunfights and things like that, sort of not a lot actually happens in his books, except that it's people discovering new things from their point of view. So like in *Dog of the South*... kind of not a lot happens. He just kind of wanders from one place to another. And he sort of — for people who don't know — he's trying to chase down his wife and her ex-husband who have run away in his car...

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** And he ends up in Belize. He goes down through Mexico, and along the way he picks up and runs into all these strange characters. And... (laughs) it's just he just kind of runs into one person after another, and he just sees the world through his point of view. So we feel like things are happening because we're experiencing some new thing or some new character through the point of view of this person whose worldview if you will is so uniquely uh... colored by Portis.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** And so it feels like things are happening, even though almost nothing is happening. So it's got that caper vibe to it... but it's really not. They're not really capers, except that the characters are just sort of wandering around from one thing to the next.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, I love what you're saying about the point of view and the voice. These characters' voices are so strong, and they are, uh... well, here's a question. Do you see his narrators... there's something — what's the word? "Portesian"? Whatever the adjective of Portis is — about these these narrators. And there's this interesting naïveté on one hand about how the world works. I guess Norwood is, that's third person, but it's third person close. Very close third person in Norwood. And... (pause) so these characters feel very much like Portis characters. Would you say they feel, um... distinct from one another, or do they kind of run together for you? And we're gonna count both the sort of main characters and these sort of ancillary characters that pop in.

**DK:** That's a great question. I think when you read a Portis book, it feels like a Portis book. But I don't think that's the same thing as the characters feeling like Portis types, if that makes sense. Like, I think Mattie Ross, from the first line of the book, is a distinct character in all of literature.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** You know, there aren't a lot of... even young, sort of young women characters who are coming of age and going through something tough, there's nobody else that's quite like her. Um... and so I... I think that Norwood is very distinct. And I think part of it is that Portis has the ability to use language, um... in unique ways.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**DK:** For each character. Like, he understands how to make characters talk in a way that is both "Portesian" as you've said, but also unique to that person. So the language— you know, the sort of King James, the commitment to the King James language that Mattie Ross has?

**JR:** Mmhm.

**DK:** Is both Portesian, but also different than the way the character in *The*

*Dog of the South* speaks, or the way Norwood speaks in Norwood.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** So it's kind of both. I think that's one of the things that makes people love all of his books. That makes his whole canon beloved instead of being an author who wrote one beloved book. Which, if he had just written *True Grit* and that was the only thing people cared about, he'd still be memorable.

**JR:** Yeah. One thing I love about *True Grit* — so, I love both of the movies, and I especially love the Coen Brothers movie —

**DK:** Yeah, I think it's funnier.

**JR:** Um, yeah. And it feels truer to the spirit of the book. Although, I was reading in his obituary — his sort of memorial that this family wrote — that they were a little bit snide about the movies. It was funny. You know. But anyway. One thing — and as much as I love those movies, there was one thing about the book that the movies couldn't do. Um, or certainly didn't do, and I don't think they really could have done. And that is as you're reading the book, this voice... you know, this fourteen year old girl talking the way she talks seems so... almost other worldly. You know, as you said, this sort of King James, no contractions way of talking that she has, very stilted. And I think what you miss in the movies is this is being told by an old woman.

So when old Mattie Ross is telling what young Mattie Ross said... in the movie, it's just young Mattie Ross talking like an old lady. And in the book, it's an old lady remembering and narrating the story. And you're always conscious — at least, I feel, I know I am — that this is an old lady telling the story. And I'm wanting to take everything with just a little grain of salt that you can't do in a movie where it's being told directly, or portrayed directly.

**DK:** Yeah, in the book, he kind of makes you... you can kind of question whether she's remembering things correctly.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**DK:** You know, you can kind of doubt her, whether she's gotten all the details right, or if the legend of it has kind of grown in her own mind. She's probably told the story forty times, a hundred times, before it became the version that's in the book. And so Portis kind of plays with that. But yeah, I don't know how you could possibly do that in a movie, unless you actually tell it multiple times. Kind of play with the details and change things subtly from place to place. Maybe that's why the Coen Brothers went and did an anthology of Western stories. (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, right. This idea of the reader passing judgment on — you know, having to decide how much of this is true and how much is not true — that's another big thing in Portis' canon. You know? I've been reading back through *The Masters of Atlantis*, and that um... I can't... (pause) You know, that's third person too. I was talking about narrators, but I think everything except for *True Grit* is — nope, *Dog of the South* is first person.

**DK:** Yeah, *Dog of the South* is first, yeah.

**JR:** Anyway. Yeah. Where was I going with that? Oh, the idea — especially in *Masters of Atlantis*, where we've got this very naive point of view char — well, you know, the um, uh... now I can't remember his name. The uh... Jimmerson. Mr. Jimmerson.

**DK:** Yeah. Lamar?

**JR:** Yeah, Lamar Jimmerson, who founds this um, this uh, secret order, basically on a big mistake in his naiveté.

**DK:** (laughs)

**JR:** And his misunderstanding of what's going on around him is just so... it's just so delightful. And the way it puts the reader in the position to pass judgment on these things that the narrator, or not the narrator, but they're being presented to us, where we know more about the situation than the main character does is just one of my favoriting things that happens in Portis. And you know, even in *Norwood*, he's this babe in the woods that keeps getting suckered by people.

**DK:** Yeah, it seems like there's this sort of, um... the question of like justice is sort of at the core of his stories. In this sense that characters are always going through things and feeling like they're... they're victims of something.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** Like the scheme of the universe or something.

**JR:** Yeah!

**DK:** And in some ways, you know, like Mattie Ross was victim to a crime.

**JR:** Sure.

**DK:** And she feels like she wants to pursue that. And so it seems like in that first book, he has this big question of justice at work. And then in subsequent works, like *Dog of the South*... like I said, the guys *wife*—

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** — who he's *not* great to, runs away with her ex-husband in his car, and he chases her down because he gets the bill from the credit card company that shows all the places they went. And so he feels like he has to go, you know, solve this problem and right the wrong that's been done

to him.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** But really, you know, the degree to which it's a real injustice that's been done to these characters is always a little bit in question, but they are so committed to the idea that an injustice has been done to them.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** That I think there's a lot of humor in that, and that Portis is writing in a very tongue-in-cheek way about the degree to which his characters are actually seeing the world as it really is.

**JR:** Yeah, Norwood making this trip to New York City to retrieve 70 dollars.

**DK:** (chuckles) Yeah. He is *very* committed to it.

**JR:** (laughs) And he did give it to a flimflam man, you know. Before it's over.

**DK:** (laughs) Yeah, how would you rate — so, of these four that are considered his best ones, what order would you put them in?

**JR:** Uhh...

**DK:** In in terms of their quality.

**JR:** Yeah, *True Grit* is just so incredibly good. I don't know, between *True Grit* and *Dog of the South*... those are, to me, easily the top two.

**DK:** I agree, yeah.

**JR:** Um, but I don't know, I don't know which one... it kinda depends what

day it is. I would say that, um... I think probably *True Grit* is the better book. *Dog of the South* is slightly more to my taste than *True Grit*.

**DK:** 'Cause of the humor?

**JR:** Yeah, it's just um... (pause) And it's not that — *True Grit* is very much to my taste too. It's just that that narrator... he's just so ridiculous.

**DK:** Yeah. (laughs)

**JR:** The fact that he thinks he's Hernando DeSoto because he's tracking the people's credit card bills, you know, through Mexico, through Central America. It's just... it's so ridiculous, and his sense of... and I guess...

**DK:** That's the common thing though, right? They have this sense of self-worth that is far greater than it should be.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** All of his characters.

**JR:** Yeah. Would you say that's true of Mattie Ross in *True Grit*?

**DK:** (long pause) I think she at least has a greater sense of her of her own capacity.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** She believes that she can do things she's not capable of. Although, I wonder if, uh... (pause) You know, I was thinking of, I was comparing Symes, in *Dog of South*.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** Who our character runs up against and winds up on the road with. And I was thinking about him in comparison to... I'm drawing a blank right now, uh... (pause) *True Grit!* What's the guy's name?

**JR:** (pause) ... which guy?

**DK:** Cogburn! Rooster Cogburn!

**JR:** Rooster Cogburn.

**DK:** I don't know, only one of the most important literary characters ever, and I just drew a blank on a podcast.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** Um, but I was thinking about the way... it might not seem obvious, but Symes and Cogburn are not... (pause, tapping on mic) There's a lot of similarities between them.

**JR:** Huh!

**DK:** Like, Symes's a little more ridiculous in terms of the things he says, and he's very committed to this one writer who just writes self-help books for business people.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** He acts like he, you know, he says he makes Shakespeare look bad. Not in so many words that I can't say on this podcast.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** But, you know, Cogburn himself is kind of... he's a little bit... washed-up is maybe, the...

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** He's capable. But he also, you know, probably thinks a little more highly of himself than he should. He proves more heroic than, uh, than Symes does perhaps.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** So I wonder... do you think that Portis, despite the humor in his later books, that there is a sort of, um... (pause) You know, there's maybe a romanticism at the core of *True Grit* that has given way to a sort of cynicism in the other books, *despite* their humor??

**JR:** Huh.

**DK:** Like is there a cynicism at the core of the humor that he has in his later books?

**JR:** That's an interesting question. And I feel like in *True Grit*, there is... while we have characters that are a little skewed, they're still in the realm of... (pause) You know, we've got Mattie Ross, whose sense of justice is a little over-developed, but it's still an actual wrong that she's going to avenge. And Rooster Cogburn is... he's ridiculous, and yet, as you said, exceedingly capable in a way that I'm not sure any of the other ancillary characters are capable in the way Rooster Cogburn is.

**DK:** Yeah, and I guess that's why I wonder if there's like a cynicism. Because it seems like in *True Grit*, he's at least participating in the tradition of Western stories with his own perspective, right? So he kind of tweaks it in the way that Charles Portis would, in a Portesian way.

**JR:** Right.

**DK:** But then it seems like in the other stories, there's really not as many... you mentioned off-air that it kind of functions in the John Kennedy Toole realm? *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** And his other books are much more of a *Confederacy of Dunces* sort of tone to them. Where the characters, you know... are they anywhere near as capable and profound as they think they are? No, they're not really.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah.

**DK:** So is that cynicism? Or is that just the way... does he see the world that way and then able to look at it and laugh? You know, Portis? I guess you'd have to talk to him to find out. But it seems like that. Maybe cynicism's the wrong world.

**JR:** I... I guess I'm resistant to the world "cynicism," but maybe only because I don't like people I like being called cynical. You know what I'm saying?

**DK:** (laughs) Yeah. Yeah.

**JR:** I mean... but you may be right...

**DK:** Maybe *more* cynical than *True Grit* is what I'm trying... maybe that's the better way of saying it. I don't know.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. It's almost like all those other books are a, um... a caricature of *True Grit*, almost a parody of *True Grit*. Um...

**DK:** Hmm.

**JR:** Although, *Norwood* was actually before *True Grit*...

**DK:** Oh, true. True.

**JR:** But the idea of somebody leaving Arkansas to go find... to insist on jus— because they have an over-developed sense of justice. That's what happens in... well, I guess in *Norwood*, he's not leaving Arkansas, but he's leaving a town that's very close to Arkansas. You know, Ralph, Texas, which is close to Texarkana.

And then, um, *Dog of the South*, right? It is this over-developed sense of justice, which... (pause) In both... in *Norwood*, that's never— it does feel cynical. It feels like a fool's errand the whole time. In *True Grit*— not *True Grit*— in *Dog of the South*, it feels like maybe, by the time it's over... it kind of feels like maybe that trip was worth making.

I don't know. How do you feel about *Norwood*? Do you feel like that trip was worth making?

**DK:** (pause) I feel like the trip I read in the book was definitely worth making. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** You mean, like does he learn something, or does he accomplish what he set out to accomplish? What do you mean by "worth making"?

**JR:** I don't know, I think *Norwood*... when you're getting into that book, it's like too bad that guy didn't just keep his job and stay home.

**DK:** Oh, right, right.

**JR:** Whereas, *Dog of the South*... we've got a man who... it feels like he does learn and change. His perspective on his wife, for instance. That

book in the end doesn't feel terribly cynical to me.

**DK:** Yeah. That's fair. Yeah, that makes sense. I guess when I was talking about cynicism, I guess I was trying to... like I said, I guess I was thinking about the difference between the secondary characters.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** Between what we get in Cogburn in *True Grit*, who, as we said, is capable, although kind of ridiculous. But then, in these other stories, there's nobody who's quite as capable... even the narrators, nobody is quite as capable as Mattie Ross.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** Although, they are... what's-his-name in *Dog of the South* is good with cars.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. Let's talk about flimflam, flimflammy a little bit!

**DK:** Yeah, let's do it.

**JR:** Um, cause I... I love stories about flamflam men and that kind o thing, and so Charles Portis has got plenty of that.

**DK:** (chuckles)

**JR:** And one thing I love about a flimflam story is that a flimflammer or charlatan... that person is a storyteller, is a purveyor of fiction. But that fiction always requires participation by the audience.

**DK:** Huh.

**JR:** Typically. A good flimflam artist suggests ideas that then the audience

has to fill in the blanks. So often a good flimflam artist isn't directly lying, or they don't... I mean, a lot of the falsehood that's generated is generated on the part of the audience, right? The audience who is greedy or fearful or whatever. As the flimflammers make suggestions, the audience then fills in the blanks. And there's something about the fact that I... um, when the charlatan, you know, pretends some sort of, I don't know, mock humility. You know, I would never put myself forward, I would never wanna take your money, or whatever, and the person says, "No, here take my money!" That's how flimflammy works. And I think there's really interesting parallels there between more respectable kinds of storytelling.

**DK:** Maybe the follow up to *The Charlatan's Boy* should be called *The Flimflam — The Flimflammer*. (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, maybe so. (laughs)

**DK:** So, what character would you say is most representative of this? Or which book do you think most captures this flimflam idea that appeals to you in his work?

**JR:** Well, certainly in *Masters of Atlantis*, you know those... oh... Popper. Austin Popper is very much a flimflammer. I mean, the whole story is launched by a flimflammer who convinces Lamar Jimmerson that, you know, he's the representative of Atlantis. You know, that he has this book. And then everything unspools from this misunderstanding. That is to say Mr. Jimmerson takes that story and the — not even a skeleton of a story that's provided by a man who really just tries to get his hotel room paid for or a few meals — and then he spins that into a whole, you know, secret society.

**DK:** Gnomon Society! Or however you pronounce that.

**JR:** Yeah. And then um, the uh... there's *The World's Smallest Perfect Man* in *Norwood*? (laughs)

**DK:** (laughs) That phrase itself says *everything*. (laughs)

**JR:** Isn't it? The World's Smallest Perfect Man is sort of Portis in a nutshell.

**DK:** Yeah... as if there's... like, who is The World's Largest Perfect Man? (laughs) He raises these questions, these like... as you said, he raises these gaps—

**JR:** Yes!

**DK:** You start thinking about it, and the implication is there's supposed to be a counter to the thing that he says.

**JR:** (laughs) Yes.

**DK:** Like there's supposed to be a Largest Perfect Man, and then you think about it and realize how ridiculous it is, and there's just so much humor. Like the punchline of— it's a joke in four words or whatever.

**JR:** I know, it's amazing. And I think that's what I love so much about what he does. The suggestiveness of the way he can, in four words, sort of spin this whole, um... you know, he doesn't tell us much about— actually, he ends up telling us a good bit about The World's Smallest Perfect Man. But um...

**DK:** (laughs)

**JR:** But just that phrase fires up the imagination.

**DK:** Yeah, exactly.

**JR:** But it let's me do the work as a reader. It lets me do a lot of work. And that is so important in making a story believable. Is giving the reader something to do. So to provide the reader with some raw material, and by

that I'm really talking about sensory input, that then their judgment can go to work on. And so you know, not so much telling them what to think so much as giving them opportunities to think, to then use their own judgment. And that's what Portis is such a genius at.

**DK:** This is one of the reasons... what you're describing, I think, is one of the reasons why the first line of *True Grit* is so interesting.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** Mattie Ross says — do you mind if I read the first sentence?

**JR:** Please do.

**DK:** She says, "People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the wintertime to avenge her father's blood, but it did not seem so strange then. Although, I will say it did not happen every day."

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** There's like, the sentence kind of goes on and on in a Mattie Ross sort of way. And then you think you get to the end — "it did not seem so strange then" — you know, that's a good sentence, right? That's fine. It's humorous, even up to that point. But then when he adds the clause, "Although, I will say it did not happen every day," it changes the whole sense of humor. The trajectory of the book is completely different because of that clause, because it asks us, as readers, to do some work. It allows that. It fires our imaginations, because we begin to think not just about her, but about the whole world differently. We understand her in a different way. It changes the nature of the adventure. It adds some humor to it. So, you know, in just a few words, the whole experience of the book changes. And that's not something that every writer is capable of doing, and I think partly because not every writer is capable of recognizing the affect of words like that.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**DK:** Like, it takes a certain giftedness to — even if it's an instinct, maybe that's all it is — it takes a certain instinct to recognize that an extra clause there changes the nature of the book and invites the reader in in a way it wouldn't, in a way the book wouldn't do without that thing.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** So.

**JR:** Um... yeah. So you're suggesting there's nothing to learn there except Portis is brilliant and we are less brilliant?

**DK:** (laughs) That we are less brilliant? Well, I think if that's not clear after reading two paragraphs of *True Grit*, then maybe we're just characters in a Charles Portis novel.

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah. Um...

**DK:** There's lots to learn there though! Just from a craft perspective.

**JR:** So... one thing I love... so building from that opening of *True Grit*... there are a couple other things going on in that first opening sentence. Including the idea that it says people don't give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could go out and avenge her father's death. She's putting this almost impossible scenario out there. It's almost like the thesis statement of an essay.

**DK:** Yeah.

**JR:** I'm going to prove this thing that you don't think — that you don't agree with. And then she sets about and does it in the course of the book,

which I think is just so... and again that is very Charles Portis. To create these *wild* situations, and then somehow convince you that oh, okay. I can see how maybe that could happen that way.

**DK:** Yeah, exactly. Well, it's like you said, in *Norwood*, he goes off for 70 bucks. Or even the concept of, in the 70s, tracking down your wife and her ex-husband in your car because you got a bill from the credit card company. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah. And I think the question always in... I don't know people who don't like Charles Portis. Like, people either don't know him or they love him, it seems to me. And yet you can— it's interesting to see which of his books people like less and like more. And I think the ones that I like less are the ones where I don't quite believe. Like, it gets a little too wild, and I can't quite believe it.

**DK:** Do you feel the same way about Walker Percy?

**JR:** Yes.

**DK:** Because there's a couple of books for me that are like that. Is it, um... what's the one with the telescope? Um...

**JR:** I don't know the difference between them, because they all sound alike to me. *The Last Gentleman* and the... and the... they all sound alike.

**DK:** I think it might be *Lancelot*. But there's a couple of his books where it gets a little extreme.

**JR:** Yes. Yes.

**DK:** Scenarios, to where it kind of takes me out of the story a little bit.

**JR:** So the reason I put *Dog of the South* and *True Grit* at the top of my list

is those books feel to me like they expand my idea of what... how wild and crazy this world we live in is. And then in a book like *Masters of Atlantis*, I sort of feel like, you know, you've kind of over... like this is just a little beyond my threshold. This feels like you're spinning a hilarious tale of something that I just can't buy at all.

And I love it. And insofar as I am willing to suspend my disbelief, it's like, this is fun. But I'm not even suspending my disbelief very much for, like... like I said, in *True Grit*, that first sentence requires a suspension of disbelief. You know, the idea that fourteen-year-old girl can go out and avenge her father's death. But then the book demonstrates to me that, no, this feels like something that could happen in the world God made.

**DK:** Mmm.

**JR:** And in *Masters of Atlantis*, it feels like... by the time it's over, it feels like we're no longer in the world God made. We're in some crazy world. And by the way, that threshold is different for different people, in terms of what's too wild and wacky. So, some people... I mean, I'm not one of the people who love... oh shoot, what's that Douglas Adams— *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*?

**DK:** Yeah.

**JR:** I mean, people love that book! For me, it's like, this just doesn't— it doesn't feel like it's telling me anything about the world I live in.

**DK:** Do you think it's because— it's something where it just kind of toes the line of, uh... not being clear about what it wants to be genre-wise?

**JR:** It's not even that. It's... I mean, that's also something that's annoying.

**DK:** (laughs)

**JR:** But it really is where does, um... yeah. For me, it's a matter of, does

this... you know, stories about Florida expand my notions of what reality... (laughs) I mean, I'm talking about news stories from Florida. Florida Man thing.

**DK:** (laughs) Yeah.

**JR:** Charles Portis at his best feels like really good Florida Man stories. And Charles Portis at his not-best to me, in my judgement, is when he goes beyond... (pause) Things start happening that are too wacky even for the state of Florida.

**DK:** (laughs) Too wacky even for the state of— too wacky even for a Charles Portis story.

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah, right.

**DK:** Do you think he backed himself into a corner though, in a sense? Like, he created... you know, first he does *Norwood*, then he does *True Grit*, then he does *Dog of the South*. And at that point either he backed himself into a corner, or he just personally wanted to keep going, in terms of the eccentricities of his characters in the world?

**JR:** Yeah, and maybe it's just a matter of his threshold was different from my threshold. Which is fine.

**DK:** Well, yeah. You know, I would love to know what was his favorite of his books.

**JR:** Yeah. (pause) Yeah, I'd like to know too. (pause) So you mentioned — we need to wrap it up here in a minute — but you mentioned Walker Percy. And I'm surprised at how long it took Walker Percy to come up in this conversation. Because in that theory of that, um... for a while there were people — I never knew how seriously people took this idea, but that *Confederacy of Dunces* was actually written by Walker Percy under a pseudonym. Do you know, do people ever take that theory seriously?

**DK:** Well, it's a great theory, and I could theoretically see it maybe being possible. It would also explain why he championed it so much.

**JR:** Right.

**DK:** But, I mean, we know about John Kennedy Toole though, so.

**JR:** Yeah. But anyway, the idea... sometimes when I'm reading Walker Percy, I see passages that I think actually, I can see how somebody could think this writer wrote *A Confederacy of Dunces*. And it feels to me like Charles Portis lives in that overlap where Walker Percy and John Kennedy Toole, you know... well, where they overlap.

**DK:** It's a Venn diagram!

**JR:** Yeah. In the Venn diagram, there's that overlap where you can make the case, you can possibly believe that Walker Percy wrote *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and that's where Charles Portis lives.

**DK:** Is it a Southern thing? Like a Southern sense of humor thing, you think?

**JR:** I don't know. Because it's not like... there are lots of Southern funny people who don't feel like... I mean, part of it is this idea, it is Southern. Specifically, that patrician, Southern, well-educated but still... distinctly Southern, but also really well-educated. And then in the case of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, our main character there is, he's participating in that tradition in a off-kilter way, right? He's certainly not patrician. He's not... is he well-educated? Or is he just sort of this autodidact, you know? He certainly was— he was a graduate student. He made it that far— anyway. I don't wanna get into that. So, I don't know if that's a question, but the floor is now open for discussion.

**DK:** Well, I do think the character in *The Dog of the South* — although less, perhaps, of a jerk directly than the character in *Confederacy of Dunces* — they're not unlike one another, in terms of their sort of not really seeing the world for what it is. And that's kind of what drives the action of the story. They sort of see reality through a lens that is... not true. And so that's where the humor comes from. That's where it sort of asks a lot of the reader because you have to suspend your disbelief, and then also you have to decide whether this person is appealing, like whether he's worth rooting for.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** I think if you don't like those books, then it's because you don't feel like those characters are worth rooting for. So I think that... (pause) I think that um... (pause) There's this famous blurb from Roy Blount, Jr. — I don't know if you've heard this. I think it's on the back of *True Grit*. "Charles Portis could have been Cormac McCarthy, but he wanted to be funny."

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah.

**DK:** In some ways, I think that's a more interesting comparison, or a more accurate comparison than, um... like, if you took the Venn diagram of Charles Portis' work, there'd be the part of it that's Cormac McCarthy, and then there's the part of it that's John Kennedy Toole, Walker Percy part of it. And I'd be curious to know which parts of those Venn Diagrams go together.

**JR:** (laughs)

**DK:** Is there any of the Cormac McCarthy part that is also in the Walker Percy / John Kennedy Toole part? Because... but it just speaks to, you know, we can talk about Charles Portis in comparison to Walker Percy and John Kennedy Toole, and we can compare him to Cormac McCarthy, and we can compare him to, you know, I see Flannery O'Connor in him sometimes. I wouldn't be surprised if Charles Portis read an O'Connor

story once a week, right?

**JR:** Right.

**DK:** And in some ways you can see Mark Twain, right? So if you look at someone like Charles Portis who, for whatever reason, is not so well known, but his Venn Diagram captures all of these incredible voices that have been not just great Southern writers, but great writers for any region. Great American voices. Like, it just goes to show how great of a writer Charles Portis was, and it makes it even more mystifying that he's not — that he is the greatest unknown writer in America.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** Because none of those comparisons feel — whether it's Twain or John Kennedy Toole or Walker Percy or Cormac McCarthy — you don't look at any of those comparisons and say, "Oh, that's nonsense." You know, the case can be made, and it's a reasonable case. And there's not that many writers who can share that many Venn Diagrams with that many different writers.

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah. Well, I think that's a great place to wrap up, with that insight. Well, I'm glad you mentioned Cormac McCarthy, 'cause that's exactly right. Um, okay. I always like to ask what writers make you wanna write. I'm gonna ask you in what ways has Charles Portis made you want to write? (pause) Or has he?

**DK:** Oh no, he definitely does. Um... (pause) I think he... there's a sort of... I don't know if it's voice exactly. But there's a sort of energy to his writing. And I don't mean energy in the sense that like... there's an electricity to his writing that seems to come so easily, right? It seems like the words just rolled onto the page. Like there wasn't any effort into whatever was delivered onto his typewriter paper. But you know that that wasn't true, because that's not the way writing works. And in some ways that electricity or energy is motivating.

**JR:** Yeah.

**DK:** Because I read it and I wanna figure out what is it that does that, because sometimes it's hard to put your finger on it. Is it that he had such a pure sense of voice, or that he knew how to string sentences together, or was it that his imagination was able to see the world in such a unique way. And there's always this... with writers like that for me, it's this search for what it was about them that produced that "making it look easy" sense about it.

Because I know it wasn't easy, but he got to that place because he had a certain set of skills. And there was a certain instinct and a natural skill combined with hard work. So when I sit down to write, having read Charles Portis, it's kind of like a search for how he did that. And I know I'm not gonna make it, but can I try to put my finger on something like that? Can I approximate whatever it was that he was doing in my own search for it, like in my own work. Writers like him make me wanna do that work, if that makes sense.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah, yeah...

**DK:** I wanna do the work that sometimes other writers don't... I might like their books or their stories, but it's more like an escape. But with writers like this, it's the escape, but it's also the motivation to put in the hours. To hit the keys and put some blood, sweat, and tears into it.

**JR:** Yeah. That's great. Alright, man...

**DK:** Yeah, thanks for having me!

**JR:** Well, I'm glad we got to do this. And here's to Charles Portis.

**DK:** Cheers! (laughs)

**JR:** Cheers! Alright, see you.

**DK:** Thank you.

**JR:** Talk soon.

**DK:** Alright, bye.

(THEME MUSIC)

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