

TURNER:

Welcome to Wisconsin Law in Action. Our remotely recorded podcast where we discuss new and forthcoming scholarship with University of Wisconsin Law School professors. I'm your host, Kris Turner. And my guest today is Professor Steven Wright, co-director of the Wisconsin Innocence Project. In addition to his position in the law school, where he has also taught criminal law, and appellate advocacy, Professor Wright also lectures in the Creative Writing Program. Why do I bring that up? It's because Professor Wright is here to discuss his debut novel, *The Coyotes of Carthage*, which was published earlier this year, and has been getting rave reviews ever since. Professor Wright, thank you for taking the time to join the podcast.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Thank you for having me. I appreciate the opportunity to share the novel. And of course, an opportunity to reach out to the law community, especially, the students who I haven't been able to see in quite a while, and who I miss a lot.

TURNER:

Same with me. I miss seeing their faces every day. Before we discuss your novel, first, let's hear about your background in both the legal, and creative writing fields.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Sure. So, I was one of those people who was a little bit uncertain when I went to law school. I didn't completely know what I wanted to do. I had an idea that I wanted to be a writer, but I think, the more I talked to people, and especially, when I got the input of my family, the law felt like it was a lot more certain path, that you can find a job as a lawyer, but you may not be able to find a job as a writer. So, I went to law school, I went to Washington University in St. Louis. And it was a great experience. I met some people there who not only changed the way that I think, and look about the law, but I met some friends who continue to be very dear and important to me even to today.

PROF. WRIGHT:

But like I said, during law school, I was the guy who basically took classes just based upon what interested me, not necessarily towards any specific goal. And so, when I was in my third year, preparing to graduate, I really didn't have a very good vision for what I was going to do. And fortunately, my professor who taught conflicts of law pulled me aside, and said, "You have some decent grades, you've done okay. Why don't you think about clerking?" And so, I didn't even know what that meant. I didn't even know what a clerk did, but all I knew is I had to write a cover letter, and get some letters of recommendations, and get some transcripts together.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And I was very fortunate to clerk for a judge in the United States Courts of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, Judge Smith, who's now the chief of the Eighth. I mean, it was a transformative experience, working in that chambers. I think it's fair to say, serves as the foundation of my understanding of both the federal courts, and the role of courts in our society, and both the limits and the power of appellate courts. And so, after that experience, I was very fortunate that I was hired as an honors attorney for the United States Department of Justice doing voting rights.

PROF. WRIGHT:

It's always hard to say when voting rights isn't particularly important, but I was there during the surge of voter ID. I was there during the surge of The Tea Party. I was there during the surge of re-districting. And so, you got to learn and see a lot about politics. Like I said, I had always wanted to be a writer. And so, something that happened is while I was at the Department of Justice, just by chance the campus of John Hopkins University was like two blocks away. And I was literally just walking past one day, and they were advertising. They had an open house for their writing program.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, I went in, and I learned a lot, and I remembered how much I missed writing, how much I miss creative writing, and writing fiction in particular. And so, I would work at the DOJ in the day, and then at night I would go to Hopkins, and I would study writing. And so, at the end of that Hopkins experience, it just so happened that it was around 2012. I think Governor Romney had secured the Republican nomination, and we knew it was going to be Governor Romney against president Obama. I thought it was a good time just to step aside. There was a lull in the election process, so, my cases could be easily transferred to other people. And I wanted to pursue writing.

PROF. WRIGHT:

So, that's why I came to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which as I'm sure you know has a pretty prestigious program. It's often ranked in the top five programs of the country. And I got to work with some extraordinary writers, Judy Mitchell, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Ron Kuka, Lori Moore, Linda Berry. And as strong as that influence was when I worked with Judge Smith in shaping my understanding of the law in the federal courts, that experience here at the University of Wisconsin, and the MFA program shaped my understanding of what is good writing, what is good storytelling. Why we tell certain stories, and why we don't tell others. And so, when I graduated that program, I was working on the novel, and I was fortunate enough to get a job at the law school with the Innocence Project.

TURNER:

And we're happy to have you here. It's been great working with you over the past ... What is it now? Five, six years [crosstalk 00:04:59]-

PROF. WRIGHT:

Exactly. Yeah. I think we're about to hit our six year anniversary any day now. So, it's been very exciting.

TURNER:

That's just amazing to hear the different career twists and turns that everyone takes, and how important that these moments in time appear to be to everybody. And that's just what happened to you.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Yeah, my life has largely been a series of just coincidences and happenstance to be perfectly honest. I would not have clerked if my conflicts of law professor hadn't pulled me aside and said, "Hey, I think you'd be competitive." Right? And so, I did. I applied to the U.S. Department of Justice Honors Program on a whim. But you're right, just walking past Hopkins at that time ended up being ... It's those type of twists that, actually, when you read them in fiction, you wouldn't believe them. Right? I listen to myself and I think like I'm a literary equivalent of Forrest Gump, and I just happen to be in the right place at the right time.

PROF. WRIGHT:

But that experience also very much shapes the way that I engage with students. I tell them, "A lot of the things that will go feed into your success might very well be out of your control." And so, when the students start getting really worked up, and really, "Oh my God, I need to take these six classes." And, "Oh my God, I need to do law review, and moot court, and the clinic, and take these doctrinal classes because I want to graduate early." Sometimes I just remind them that bait plays as big of a hand sometimes as planning.

TURNER:

On top of it all, I think you now have a good title for your autobiography, thanks to that answer, coincidences and happenstances.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Well, there you go.

TURNER:

You just give me a cut of 10% of your bio, we'll call it even. So, moving onto your book, what inspired you to write *The Coyotes of Carthage*?

PROF. WRIGHT:

Like I said, I was here at the University of Wisconsin in the MFA program. And for anybody who knows anything about MFA programs, the unit of pedagogy, the way that we learn to write stories, and read stories is often the short story. We don't spend a lot of time engaging with the novel in most programs. And so, part of what happens, part of the natural evolution, I think of every MFA student is they start writing stories, and they start getting longer, and longer, and longer, and more complicated.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, I was at a point where I was three semesters in, so somewhere around January, 2014, and I knew that I wanted to at least flex and try a novel. And so, I was talking to my mentors, the people that I mentioned in the writing program, Ron Kuka, Judy Mitchell, Jesse Lee Kercheval, Linda Berry, Lori Moore. And all of them very much had a lot of the same advice, which is, write a novel that only you can write. Write a novel that brings your unique perspective to the table, which is good advice for everyone. And so, I looked around, and I wondered, "What could I offer that perhaps most fiction writers couldn't?"

PROF. WRIGHT:

And I fell back on my experience at the Department of Justice in voting rights. And so, I started drafting that first chapter probably in January, 2012. And it took a long time to figure out. First chapters, I think for many writers are often very difficult because they have to do so much, right? They have to introduce the characters, they have to set the tone, they have to set the voice. They have to engage the plot. And so, there was a lot of writing, and polishing, and rewriting, and re-polishing for that. And so, over time, I started to invest more of my experience, not only with voting rights, but with criminal law. And that was the formula that gave birth to *The Coyotes of Carthage*.

TURNER:

What kind of parallels do you see between writing fiction and writing legal briefs or writing academic pieces? If any.

PROF. WRIGHT:

So, I think there's a lot. I mean, I'm largely influenced once again by my experience as a clerk. And I can remember reading briefs that were just horrible. And they're often horrible for different reasons, right? So, sometimes they have too much jargon. Sometimes they're just poorly edited and written. A lot of briefs I feel sometimes very much struggle to articulate what their point is. They get close, but they can't find the precise language to articulate what they're appealing, or what the problem was. Right?

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, a lot of tools that you learn in an MFA program, I think end up being transferrable. And one of them of course is precision of language saying what you mean and meaning what you say. There's also some other things that need to be said about keeping the reader's attention. I appreciate that, here in Wisconsin, the judges on the court of appeal, some of whom I've gotten to know, they only have one clerk. And so, they're reading two, three, four sets of briefs every day, five, six days a week, 52 weeks a year.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, part of what you hear from many of the judges when they come to visit, or when I talk to them is that they like brief that just get to the point, that say, "These are the important facts. These are the important cases you need to know. This is the logic of our argument." Right? And in some ways, novels and short stories work in the same way, right? You have to decide what is important, what am I going to share, and how am I going to share it? I think people often say things like, "Learning how to write fiction is important because you need to learn to build sympathy for the clients, then you need to build sympathy for the character."

PROF. WRIGHT:

I tend to disagree with that analysis. I think judges aren't your usual audience. Every judge I know, especially, one who's been an appellate judge for more than two or three years is pretty hardened against any type of sympathetic argument. But the elements of making the brief readable, making the brief interesting, making the brief engageable, I think are skills that I picked up in my creative writing classes.

TURNER:

Is there any set way you go about creative writing or writing fiction?

PROF. WRIGHT:

So, writing fiction, at any given moment, I have several what we call craft elements in our mind. And when we talk about craft elements, we're talking about characters, and setting, and plots, and voice. And they're like free floating atoms in my head. And every once in a while, they will come together, and there's the big bang of it, right? Like the right character that you've been thinking about meets with the right plot, meets with the right voice. And so, all of a sudden, it just sort of smashes. And then you say, "Oh my goodness, I've got an idea for a book." And when that happens, you just can't keep me away from a computer, not necessarily that I'm going to write the entire story, but all of a sudden, the outline of it becomes clear.

PROF. WRIGHT:

All of a sudden, I know, "Okay, this is what this story is about." Right? I think almost every writer has the story of starting too early. You think you got the novel, you think you've got the idea, you start writing, maybe you get 1,000 words in, and then you recognize, there's no story here. Like, yeah, he's an interesting guy, but he's basically sitting at a dinner table for two hours, and nobody wants to read that. Right? And so, part of what I have tried to get better at over the years is just recognizing when you should sit down, and when you should stop.

TURNER:

That sounds like it would take years to come to that conclusion, to say, "All right, this is a thread worth pursuing, or a rabbit hole worth going down, or I have a guy sitting at a dinner table for two hours with no story to tell." That might sound easy to say on our podcast here, but it sounds like something that does take time as a writer to get to that point.

PROF. WRIGHT:

No, it takes a lot of skill, but the funny thing is, in some ways, it also is one of those skills that ends up being transferrable to a appellate advocacy oftentimes, right? So, one of the great pleasures of working at the law school is obviously working with students. And, I mean, I know it's cliché, but our students really are the best in the world. They're smart, and they're earnest, and they're hardworking, and they love to be there. But sometimes the hardest part about teaching the students is teaching them that not everything is appealable. That they might see an injustice in the record, that they might see something that really upset them. Something that strikes at the heart of their very sense of just procedural fairness.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And then you tell them, "You're really worked up about this. I know you want to write a brief about this." But then they go, and they sit down, and they can't find any case law to sustain it, or they can't quite articulate in the statement of facts why what they're concerned about was so unjust, right? And in some ways, it's the same problem, right? You're sitting down, ready to write. You're eager to write. You're excited to write, but you don't really have anything to write, right? The brief won't write, the story won't write.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, part of what we try to do is we try to teach the students, "Don't try to write a brief where you're alleging clear error the entire time." Right? "Try to write a brief that engages issues of law." This perceived unfairness, this judge may have said something that the judge probably shouldn't have said, but the Supreme Court isn't going to overturn a murder conviction based upon this perceived slide. Right? And so, when I work with students, I often try to talk with them a great deal before we actually sit down to write, right?

PROF. WRIGHT:

Not only do we do outlines, but we just try to put into words what they want to put onto the page. And I think the same thing holds true of fiction. So, many times, even when I'm teaching creative writing, students have a great idea, but then when you sit down, and you try to outline, or you put it into words, it just doesn't work.

TURNER:

Right. They're maybe trying to write a story that's too broad, they're fired up for an argument, or for a story, but it's just everything is in clear error. It's got to be more specific than that. Or my story is a very broad sprawling one. Well, you got to make that story so people can understand it in some way.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And once again, that was an experience that I learned clerking. The judge that I clerked for ... I think it's fair to say that the Eighth Circuit tends to be a little bit more conservative than the other courts. And so, I would read arguments, and I would read things that would really get underneath my skin, especially, some of the sentencing cases, especially, some of the immigration cases. And you would just look at them, and say, "This is just wrong." And what sometimes I think is, particularly, frustrating to appellate clerks is your Circuit has already pretty much defined their position on it. But another Circuit, the Ninth Circuit, or the Sixth Circuit, or the DC Circuit has also decided, and decided in another way, right?

PROF. WRIGHT:

And then you're like, "This poor guy, or this poor person is subject to the sentence or this immigration proceeding or whatever, just because he or she was in the wrong state." And so, you just have to learn to accept those constraints as part of your storytelling or as part of your appellate brief writing.

TURNER:

So, what was the most difficult part of writing this novel?

PROF. WRIGHT:

I know it's going to sound silly, but literally writing the novel. The novel is about 320 pages, which is about 80,000 words. The original novel was about 150,000 words. It was twice as long. And I shared it with some of my mentors, and my readers, and it was unanimous that they enjoyed it, but it was just too long. It just needed to be slashed. So, I had to cut, basically, a 600-page novel into a 320-page novel. Yeah, I try to be fairly disciplined in my writing. I would say for about four, four and a half years, I wrote every night for about two hours, at least six days a week. I normally took Sundays off. But I think that ended up being a part of the challenge.

PROF. WRIGHT:

One of the unique challenges I think that life threw at you is, I was writing this novel ... I was very lucky to receive my position at the law school four or five months after I graduated from the MFA program. It wasn't too long at all. And I was completely unprepared for the darkness that was going to enter your life. Right? Innocence cases are just full of trauma. Somebody has been hurt. A victim has been sexually assaulted, murdered, battered, whatever. And that person suffered some real pain. Obviously, their life was destabilized. Their community might've been destabilized. Their family was definitely destabilized. Then you add onto it, the extra indignity that the wrong person may have gone to jail for it. And that too has its own type of injury, a destabilization of that person's life, of their family, their community.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, the novel sometimes gets described as a satire. I don't know if I would say it's a satire, but I do admit there's a lot of humor in it. But there was a period for three or four months when I first started working at the Wisconsin Innocence Project, where there was no humor in my life. It was just those cases. And so, the pages, when I sat down to write were tremendously dark, they were just, unforgivingly, depressing. And I recognized that that wasn't the book that I wanted this to be. It wasn't

really the person that I wanted to be. And so, part of what I had to learn to do was to separate the cases from the subconscious part of your mind that engages in creativity to help you produce a novel. And that took a lot of time.

TURNER:

That sounds very difficult. Because I feel like even when you're writing creatively, you're drawing from real life in many ways. I'd have to say that's a pretty safe bet. And what you knew at the time was reflected in the writing a very dark, serious matter. And I agree with you, I don't know if I would call it a satire. My read of it wasn't as a satire, but it had humorous parts to it. It read to me as more of a stinging judgment on the current state of affairs in some ways, which rolls into my next question about how the novel made me mad in many ways. And I think that was your intent. I don't think it would make you mad by saying that I was mad at some of the instances in the story. So, does writing a story with an ending that readers may not like, purposefully so make your process more difficult?

PROF. WRIGHT:

Yeah, I mean, that's a good question. The novel, first and foremost, is designed to engage, and to some degree to entertain, right? I wanted people to read it. I wanted for people who like books to want to read it. And I want people who use books as an alternative to say Netflix, or Amazon Prime, or television to consider that this might be as worthy of their time as anything else, right? Books are obviously a huge investment. They're several movies worth in terms of time. And so, that was the primary goal. The second goal was to educate people about the importance of dark money, and the importance of local elections. And so, those really were my primary drivers. And so, I think I was able to keep that balancing act for most of the book.

PROF. WRIGHT:

The greatest debate that I see online these days about the book is the ending. The majority of the people I think liked it, but then they're just like, "Steve, that ending didn't work for me." And I can respect that. But, from my point of view, I was trying to wrap up a book that had an enormously complex plot, an enormously, in my opinion, complex character. When we meet Dre, not only is he still suffering from some trauma from his previous incarceration, his brother is on his death bed. His fiancée has left him. He's alienated his boss. He's alienated his friends, he's about to get fired. And now he's being sent to a rural community in South Carolina where he may be the only black person from the House.

TURNER:

He's in a very tough spot.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Yeah. He's in a tough spot. So, I didn't anticipate that the ending at any point would be able to wrap up all those things. And so, then the question becomes, how many of those things do you end up wrapping up? And I think, reasonable people can agree and disagree on whether I got that number right.

TURNER:

And I will add in that I found that the book was definitely worth two or three movies worth of my time. You definitely hit the mark. It was entertaining, and informative, especially, with the Citizens United

backgrounds to just fill in a little bit about the dark money aspect, I think was very helpful to see how it would work on the ground in a what would be a usual local election, in some ways.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Well, thank you. One of the things that I don't know people always appreciate, or at least they probably did not appreciate as much before the pandemic, is how important our local elections are. Obviously, now, we're seeing it more than ever, right? Especially, here in Wisconsin, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court says that pandemic decisions have to be made on the local level. We're starting to learn more that who you elect for county manager, or county clerk, or county sheriff could have huge implications for the life of individual citizens.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And likewise, we're learning from the Black Lives Matter, and the murder of Mr. Floyd, that who you elect to be your judge, and your district attorney, and your sheriff, also matter tremendously. And so, I started writing the book in 2014, and like I said, it was largely based upon my experience at the Department of Justice. A lot of our cases in the Department of Justice are very local. Yes, we do occasionally statewide suits, or statewide discrimination suits, but most of the time the problems with elections are at your local county level.

PROF. WRIGHT:

So, we would go into these counties and figure out why democracy had just broken down. Why was it acting in the small pocket, or the small bubble in a manner that was inconsistent with our constitutional norms and vision? And there's oftentimes lots of different reasons. Sometimes the county just doesn't have the money to pull off a good election. Sometimes it's explicit discrimination. Sometimes it's implicit discrimination. A lot of times more and more, I think people are more willing to accept partisanship as an element of why perhaps one group isn't being included in our elections.

PROF. WRIGHT:

But one of the things that I learned is that most local elections aren't paid attention to. People can run for local county office on a 1,000, \$2,000 budget. I can't tell you the number of librarians who ran for school board, who stowed away \$50 from their paycheck every month, and then ran at the end of the election cycle with \$2,500 or whatever, just so that they could buy yard signs. And just so they could have a barbecue right before election day to get people out to vote.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, we have these offices, we know that people don't vote in them. We know that they can be tremendously powerful. We know that they often are contested. And then the question becomes, what happens if somebody with a lot of money comes in? What if a Walmart, or an Amazon, or some type of corporation comes in, and they're willing to use a fraction of a million dollars, or sometimes multiple million dollars to ensure that their policy is advanced? I think most people see that, and they would agree that's not a fair fight. And so, my book tried to illustrate from the perspective of the bully what that fair fight might look like.

TURNER:

And just to expand on the synopsis of the plot a little bit, in case any of the listeners out there haven't read the book, briefly. Dre, who we mentioned, previously, is working, basically, for one of these

corporations in rural South Carolina to try and swing the election their way so they can purchase some public lands, it will be sold to them at a relatively cheap cost where they can develop, and do their own thing. And Dre gets into some arguably dirty tactics to do so as we get in there. And as Professor Wright mentioned, he's at a very dark point in his life. So, a lot of things going on with him, personally, as a character, and writ large in the campaign itself, which the book shines a great light on it, makes very entertaining story. But I need to know, who was your favorite character to write, and who was your least favorite?

PROF. WRIGHT:

So, the book is written from Dre's perspective, right? And so, Dre, is always in your head. The story is Dre's story. He's in every single chapter on every single page. Like it follows Dre. So, Dre sort of becomes your second self in some ways. But my favorite character was probably Brendan. Brendan is his sidekick who helps him work these elections. And I've been fairly open, especially, with my students. And Brendan was largely inspired by my students here at the University of Wisconsin. Right? Brendan's in his early 20s, he's smart. He's well-educated, he wants to do good in the world. He's earnest, he's hardworking, he's loyal, but he still has a lot to learn about the world. He still needs just the experience that comes with age.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, there are a couple of lines from Brendan in there that I've told my students I just completely took from conversations with them. Like I warn my students regularly, "Oh, that's a good line. That's going in a book." They laugh as if I'm joking, but I'm sure the ones who read it will recognize, "Oh my God, I told that to Professor Wright, or Steve, and now it's in a book."

TURNER:

Be careful what you say to an author, you never know what they'll put in a book.

PROF. WRIGHT:

There's no copyrighting a conversation. Right? So, yeah, the most difficult character to write, I don't know if I would say that I had a difficult character to write. There are certain moments in the book that stand out, that break your heart. I tend to believe that novels sometimes suffer if the writer becomes either too fond or too angry at one characters. And so, I think readers tend to forgive fondness. I suspect that people will read this book and see that I was very fond of Brendan. But if you're mad at a character, all you ever want to do is just stop on that character. Right? You have the power of God, and the ability to bring about karmic wrath upon any character. And then that sometimes just has the backwards effect of-

TURNER:

It takes you out of a story.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Exactly, takes you out of the story. And it has the backwards effect of making the person you hate sometimes feel like you're being unfair to them. So, the character that I wouldn't necessarily say I was angry at or broken heart is there's a woman Ms. [Boshares 00:29:18] in the book. And I think she sometimes reflects an ambivalence that we see a lot of in politics, right? So, she knows what Dre is

doing is wrong. She knows that in particular, Dre has a strategy that is harming people that she loves, and people that are a big part of her life, but she remained silent.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And she has a lot of personal reasons, and they may be fair reasons to remain silent. But I think we see a lot in society, people who just sit on the fence when they see things are wrong, even under their lens or their definition of what is wrong. And sometimes I think the rest of us get frustrated with those individuals. And so, I would probably put Ms. Boshares in that category.

TURNER:

Ms. Boshares felt like a very realistic character to me for that exact reason. You could feel that you would know these people at some place, or you've read about them in other ways. That's why I enjoy reading about her and her obvious conflict that she felt in a situation where she had a personal stake, and a financial stake that were at odds [inaudible 00:30:28] situation. And that felt very real to me because everyone knows someone or has been in a situation like that. And that really helped flush out her character and the story in and of itself.

TURNER:

Another thing I need to know, we had already set up this podcast ahead of time, and I was reading the book, finishing up. And towards the very end, Dre, makes a mention of how he finds podcast to be more like [inaudible 00:30:52]. So, I need to know if you think Dre would enjoy this, our podcast, this discussion.

PROF. WRIGHT:

He probably would. I mean, I think about Dre every so often whenever I do anything. That's just what happens when you live in them. Yeah. I think the line is what Dre thinks that podcasts are the ramblings of narcissist, something like that. One of the things about writing a book is that there are lines in there that even as I say, now, that tickles me. But when you're writing it alone at your desk, and I literally wrote the book right behind me the entire time, you never know whether it's going to connect, right? You never know whether the edgy joke is going to be offensive rather than funny. You never know whether people are just going to roll their eyes.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, there's a couple lines every once in a while. And that one has been pointed out by a couple I think of the interviews I've done, especially, for the podcasters. But yes, I think he normally thinks that podcasts are probably the ravings of narcissists.

TURNER:

It's hard to disagree with him, to be honest.

PROF. WRIGHT:

It's hard to disagree with that. Right? And in all fairness, a novel is a raving of a narcissist, right? Like I'm going to demand three hours of your time, so I can slap you around about dark money and politics.

TURNER:

Hey, I agreed to it, and I stuck with it. So, I was an agreeable participant. And [inaudible 00:32:18].

PROF. WRIGHT:

Thank you. And I'm glad you enjoyed it.

TURNER:

Going back to Brendan really quickly. He felt like a very audience surrogate character to me in some ways, where it was a nice introduction for those that may not be as familiar with dark money or the way that sometimes elections can turn ugly on the inside, that the outside may not be seen as much, which I really appreciate it because even though I work in the law school, and because I have a passing understanding of election law and things, that to see it portrayed in that light was really helpful to me through that character.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Yeah. That's definitely I think part of Brendan's primary role, right? Is to stand in the shoes of the reader, and ask the questions that perhaps ... Some of the questions are technical, like what is a PAC? Or how does the money work? But some of the questions are moral. Should we be doing this? Is this the right thing to do? Shouldn't we be trying to fight the type of demagoguery that Dre ends up adopting? Brendan also plays a second important role, which is an acknowledgement that not everyone will particularly like Dre, but there'll be a large number of readers who just fundamentally oppose both his background as well as his current life, which he admits is to help corporations buy elections. And I know that, for some readers, Dre is very hard to swallow, but it's hard not to love Brendan.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, I think when you balance the two of them out together and see ... When I slashed the book in half, we lost a lot of Brendan's backstory, or at least, Brendan still has a backstory, but I don't think it's quite as rich as it would have been. But what stayed, and perhaps I think what ended up being amplified was the relationship between Dre and Brendan. I think, just as a sheer percentage of the book, the two of them together either joking around, or playing around, or arguing, or the full dynamic of their relationship, I think it comes through much stronger.

TURNER:

And that felt very important to me because it was in fact, through the book, Dre's real, only personal connection, and he still held in many ways. And that helped. As you said, Dre, may not be the favorite character of many readers, but that helped make him more personable, and more understandable in many ways, especially, since we're spending the entire book, as you said, in Dre's head, in many ways. So, if you're along for the ride, you need something to say, "Oh, this is not a character that's entirely disgusting to follow along with the entire way."

TURNER:

So, that really helped the book a lot. I do want to go back to, you mentioned cutting the book in half, basically, in the editing process. And I just wanted to say that I feel your pain on that. That had to be very difficult. Just some of the writings I've had to do, or I tend to do the same thing where I will just write, and I'll say, "Okay, I'm going to write, and get it down. And then edit down to what I want to get to." And I always think that's the easiest way, and it is just so painful getting to editing process. So, I'm

impressed that the final product came out so fully formed still. And maybe I'll get to read some of the deleted scenes, so to speak, at some point.

PROF. WRIGHT:

When I first gave it to my friends, people who I absolute love, and trust, and would take their advice even if it conflicted with my own, it hurt a little bit. And it hurt a little bit because the book took about four years to write. And so, when they said cut in half, I literally thought I overwrote by two years. And so, it wasn't just the word count, I was like, "Oh my God, I wasted two years of my life writing this book that ... " And so, it hurt a little bit on that level. I will say that it has been fortunate, we've been very fortunate that we sold the TV rights, and that they want to use some of the stuff that didn't make it into the book to appear. So, we may end up seeing some of that. But yeah, at that time when I had to cut, and I had to cut over like four months, it was hard.

TURNER:

Well, I'm tuning in for the TV rights [inaudible 00:36:38] shows. That's awesome. Congratulations. I hadn't heard that before. It's [crosstalk 00:36:42].

PROF. WRIGHT:

Thank you, I appreciate.

TURNER:

What do you hope readers will take away from the novel? You mentioned this in passing, but I want to dig in a little bit more.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Yeah. I mean, I think now more than ever, it's a reminder that we need to pay attention to participate in local elections. We see time and time again, that the federal government can't solve all of our solutions, and shouldn't solve all of our solutions. And many times the states struggle to solve our problems. I think people disagree about whether this federal government, or this state government in particular can do it, but regardless of where you stay on that, your judges, your district attorneys, your sheriffs are still being elected, and they're still determining what our criminal justice system has looked like.

PROF. WRIGHT:

And so, therefore, if you care about black lives matters, or you're saying, all lives matter, or whatever you're saying, your local elected officials are acting upon their communities will. And so, being involved in local elections I think is really important. And so, I hope that the book reminds people that local elections are important, that local elected officials wielded a lot of power. And that local elections are, especially, fragile because nobody votes in them, and they're susceptible to dark money. And that sometimes the races are uncontested.

TURNER:

Where can listeners find out more about your creative writing or your legal work?

PROF. WRIGHT:

Oh, so, that's a good question. So, I am on Twitter, which I think was a requirement of my contract. So, I'm @stevenwright on Twitter. Also, I've written essays for a couple of places like CrimeReads, and the New York Review of Books. And I think I have a couple of short stories coming out pretty soon, which we'll be announcing I think on Twitter. So-

TURNER:

Great. We'll at you on Twitter once we get this published as well, to get this to the [crosstalk 00:38:46] as well.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Thanks.

TURNER:

Sign of the times that Twitter is where we do everything here.

PROF. WRIGHT:

It is.

TURNER:

And of course, we'll link out to the publisher's website where you can find *Coyotes of Carthage*. I read it over the course of three short nights, and enjoyed it immensely. Again, congratulations on your excellent book, Professor Wright, and thank you again for joining the podcast.

PROF. WRIGHT:

Thank you for having me. And also, just as a reminder, I appreciate everyone who has been supportive, and those of you who plan to buy the book. But your local, independent bookstores are great places, and they're still open, and operating. And they're trying to survive like many small businesses throughout the pandemic. So, I want to give them a shout out, but also if you have an opportunity to visit one or to buy the book there, I think that would be great.

TURNER:

And in addition, I'm very confident that the independent booksellers will ship it right to your door, if you order it from them online, or on the phone. Take this librarian's recommendation. I've read many, many, many books, and this one is certainly worth your time. Again, we've been speaking with Professor Steven Wright about his new novel *Coyotes of Carthage*. This is our first foray into the creative writing world, but be sure to check out our growing archive. I've spoken with UW Law faculty about topics ranging from corporate directorships, to intellectual property, to child support debt.

TURNER:

You can find our full archive at wilawinaction.law.wisc.edu. We're a monthly podcast. You should have subscribed to our podcast in either Stitcher or the iTunes store, or just listen to all of them on our website, wilawinaction.law.wisc.edu. Thank you again for listening. And until next time, happy researching.