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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** I want to start a little bit about it. One of my friends told me we all have something in common, but we never know what it is until we kind of talk to people. But you and I have something in common. Any idea? Nope. Same high school.

[00:00:13] **Speaker 2** Madison West.

[00:00:13] **Speaker 1** Madison West. No kidding.

[00:00:15] **Speaker 2** Were you there?

[00:00:16] **Speaker 1** I was there from 1982. 82. Okay. Yeah. I ended up having to switch schools, and I graduated from East High. But. But. But West is pretty much my home because a lot of those folks in West were people that I went to elementary and middle school with.

[00:00:29] **Speaker 2** And what elementary school?

[00:00:31] **Speaker 1** My gosh.

[00:00:33] **Speaker 2** I went to Randolph.

[00:00:33] **Speaker 1** I went to John Miller.

[00:00:35] **Speaker 2** Okay.

[00:00:36] **Speaker 1** I was at Jefferson briefly. You know, the mom moved around a lot.

[00:00:40] **Speaker 2** Yeah. Well, go, regions, go. Yeah.

[00:00:43] **Speaker 1** And of course, we have the journalism, you know, in common as well.

[00:00:47] **Speaker 2** Yeah. We've asked for the roll, and we are rolling. Stand by.

[00:00:51] **Speaker 1** Okay. I thought we were already there. We could do all that over again. David Maraniss, welcome to In Focus.

[00:01:02] **Speaker 2** Thanks, Murph. Great to be with you.

[00:01:04] **Speaker 1** It's good to see you. I know we've worked on putting this together here over the last couple of months, so I appreciate you making time. And a lot of us have something in common. One of my friends said it to me years ago. Do you know what you and I have in common? I don't. We both went to the same high school.

[00:01:17] **Speaker 2** Madison, West.

[00:01:18] **Speaker 1** Madison, West region. I'm a region from 80 to 82. I was there, all right.

[00:01:23] **Speaker 2** I was a lot older than you, but 67. I graduated in 67.

[00:01:28] **Speaker 1** Okay. Just a tad before I go there. But, you know, as we get older, it all kind of comes to the same finish, right? Yep. Yeah. Good stuff. I love to get a little bit to talk a little bit, but just journalism for you. How did you find journalism? How did you fall into journalism?

[00:01:44] **Speaker 2** Well, I was the dumb kid in my family. My mother and my three siblings were all scholars. My dad was a newspaper man, and luckily I followed him into that profession. He eventually became the editor of the Capital Times here in Madison. So I grew up, you know, going to the old captains building and loving everything about it, you know, the linoleum floors with the cigaret butts on it and the, you know, the the pneumatic tube sending the stories to the back room. All of that stuff was sort of what I grew up with. Long gone now, but that's what drew me to journalism.

[00:02:22] **Speaker 1** So like in high school, you did, you know, early on that that was okay.

[00:02:26] **Speaker 2** So I thought I was going to be shortstop for the Milwaukee Braves, but that that dream faded fast.

[00:02:33] **Speaker 1** And those kind of things we thought we'd be doing right.

[00:02:37] **Speaker 2** Yeah, but but I did know that I loved writing. And the wonderful thing about it is something that I loved that I could do, you know? So it just fell in place for me.

[00:02:49] **Speaker 1** What do you like about everything?

[00:02:51] **Speaker 2** I love I mean, I'm a nonfiction writer, so a journalist and a and a writer of nonfiction books. And I love the process of meeting people, of going places, finding out the cultural geography of a place, why people are the way they are. I love all of that research, and then writing itself is a joy for me. I for some reason I don't tend to get writer's block, and if I do, it's only because I haven't really done the research right.

[00:03:17] **Speaker 1** Me to get you on board here at PBS's Wisconsin. Now, you mentioned nonfiction being your genre. Why nonfiction and not fiction?

[00:03:27] **Speaker 2** Well, it's something I could do. I tried to write a novel once, you know, like 35 years ago, and it was pathetic. But but I love the the the real I love to I write in a way that's novelistic, but it's all it's all totally rooted. In fact, I love to tell stories, but I need I need the gist of fact to do to do it right. And it seems, you know, I mean, there are a lot of I mean, novels are wonderful, but it's not what I do. And I tend to read nonfiction more because I want to learn more about the real world. Not to say that you can't do that from great fiction as well, but it's just sort of my it's my genre. It's what I do, rooted in journalism, rooted in the search for truth. So, you know, that's what led me there.

[00:04:14] **Speaker 1** Yeah. I heard you mentioned, too, that you kind of describe yourself as a journalist slash historian. Why is that?

[00:04:20] **Speaker 2** Well, my books are our history. You know, whether they're about politicians or a city of Detroit or about sports figures, what I'm doing is using some place or some person to illuminate history. And that's, you know, so I'm a member of a fellow of the Society of American Historians. I love history. And so my journalism led me in that direction.

[00:04:49] **Speaker 1** And one of the things we talk about brands and branding, you know, we think of Nike just do it the W, the ultimate driving machine. What's your brand, What's your mission statement about who you are as a as a writer?

[00:05:04] **Speaker 2** Boy, I, I try to avoid brands I let because what I try to do is develop a voice that's universal enough that I can write about anything. So I'm I'm not a snarky writer. I'm not looking for a specific niche. I'm trying to look at the whole world. So I would say if I have a brand, it's go there and search for the truth.

[00:05:26] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And speaking of writing about everything you've seen, like you have, I mean, lots of things on politics. You've written things on sports, the Olympics. Yeah. How do you choose your subjects? How do you how do you go there?

[00:05:40] **Speaker 2** I choose the subjects by things that I'm obsessed with. I'll spend 3 or 4 years on each book. I'm not going to do it. It's something that I don't really care about. So luckily, I've been able to find enough subjects that that draw me to it. So, for instance, the sports books I've written three and all become four. Books about sports figures. Vince Lombardi, the great football coach of the Green Bay Packers, Roberto Clemente, the beautiful ballplayer. And Jim Thorpe, the Native American all around athlete. So they're all great athletes, but or sports figures. But that's not why I wrote about them. I wrote about them because there's something in each story that illuminates American history. With Lombardi, it's not just leadership, but sort of the American obsession, mythology of competition and success in American life, what it takes and what it costs. With Clemente, not just this beautiful ballplayer, but a way to write about that rare athlete who was growing as a human being, as his talents, as he was getting older. So that his motto was, if you have a chance to help others and fail to do so, you're wasting your time on this earth. And that's how he tried to live his life and how he died, you know, delivering humanitarian aid to Nicaragua after an earthquake in 1972 with Jim Thorpe, you know, arguably the greatest athlete in history, somebody who did things that no one else has ever done. But I wrote about it as a way to illuminate the Native American experience. He was a Native American from Indian territory of what became Oklahoma.

[00:07:15] **Speaker 1** And how many books do you have under your belt now?

[00:07:17] **Speaker 2** I have 13 going on 14.

[00:07:20] **Speaker 1** 13 going on 14. Yeah. And I'll ask you the question that people ask when they have a lot of kids or few kids. Which one is your favorite? Do we have a favorite?

[00:07:28] **Speaker 2** Well, I every book has meant something else important to me, so I'm not going to say that I have a favorite. But I will say that the two that have the most deeply psychological impact on me and the people I wrote about were they marched into sunlight, my book on the Vietnam War and my personal, more personal book, A Good American Family, about my father of dealing with the McCarthy era and the Red Scare.

[00:08:01] **Speaker 1** Yeah, you got your chops covering politics. That's what you when you Pulitzer?

[00:08:06] **Speaker 2** Yes. I mean, I've been at The Washington Post for 47 years. Wow. I started there as a kid, you know, And over the many decades there, I've mostly covered politics. Not entirely, but politics. Not in the sense of the horse race. I'm not interested really in that either. I mean, personally, I am a man who wins. But as a writer, I'm more interested in the the sociological forces that shape America and the forces that shape individual politicians. So that's why that's what led me to the biographies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, for instance.

[00:08:43] **Speaker 1** When you've written about Al Gore as well.

[00:08:45] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I did. That was a little different. I mean, I would say of my 13 books, that one was really rooted in my journalism at The Washington Post. So I spent maybe a year on that one as opposed to 3 or 4 years. And it came out before the election that he didn't become president. So, you know, a little bit of a different story.

[00:09:05] **Speaker 1** But do you see yourself potentially writing about, you know, the president, Kamala, Kamala or President Trump?

[00:09:16] **Speaker 2** I can never write about Trump. I don't find him interesting. I find everything around him interesting. But he's a one dimensional human being, and I'm not interested in that. So I never write about him. Kamala, I, I wrote one piece based at the convention in Chicago on sort of her early roots in Berkeley, which I found fascinating. I don't know if I write a book about her, but I it's it's a possibility.

[00:09:44] **Speaker 1** Yeah. I want to talk a little bit about your Wisconsin life in terms of what, if any, impact that that had on how you write and how you tell your stories.

[00:09:55] **Speaker 2** I think absolutely it does. First of all, because Madison in the Capital Times saved my family. My father was hounded by the by the House un-American Activities Committee. And we were sort of you know, he was blacklisted. We got to Madison in 1957, and the Capital Times hired him. And that saved us. So I've always felt that this city is a is a in that newspaper, a place of of a sort of a welcoming the other, quote.

[00:10:29] **Speaker 1** Unquote, jujitsu. I've been a teen during that time.

[00:10:31] **Speaker 2** Where I was I was eight years old when we won. So 3 to 8. And then furthermore, if you look at the Wisconsin idea and the statement of sifting and winnowing in the search for truth, that's always resonated with me. And the motto of the Capital Times, I mean, you can never live up to great mottos, but there's something to strive for. So the motto of the Times was Give the people the truth and the freedom to do. Discuss it and I will go well. So I've always sort of been rooted in trying to find the truth. And I think that Wisconsin, the Wisconsin idea, the sifting and winnowing and the capital types all greatly influenced my career in life.

[00:11:13] **Speaker 1** I've heard you talk about truth, trust. Things that are kind of front and center these days, especially politically.

[00:11:22] **Speaker 2** Yeah.

[00:11:23] **Speaker 1** What does it take to get trust? What do you have to do to earn it?

[00:11:29] **Speaker 2** Well, in my case, my my whole the way I work as a reporter, journalist, author is to not play games with people, not try to manipulate them, tell them exactly what I'm looking for, and that I will be honest with them about what I'm finding. So I've often told the story involving my book on Vietnam, which was dealt with the protest here at Wisconsin, the Dao protest against Dow Chemical Company in a battle in Vietnam where there was a horrible ambush and 60 men were killed and many wounded out of a battalion of 140. And one of the key figures in that was a company commander named Clark Welch, who fought valiantly, tried to talk his superiors out of walking into this ambush, but afterwards was so discouraged and demoralized that he basically was hiding in the hills of Colorado for decades afterwards, fearful that some loved one of one of his boys, as he called them, would say, you're responsible for his death when he wasn't. So he finally agreed to meet with me after after a couple of years of my research, he was one of the last key people. And when we met in a hotel in Denver, he sat down and said, David, I'll talk to you if you promise to be good to my boys. And I said to him straight up, I can't make that promise. If I make that promise and find something else, I'll either be betraying you if I report it or betraying the truth if I don't. And he got up the table and said, No, you got to promise to be good to my boys. And I repeated again to Colonel Welch, What I can promise you is that I will not play games, that I'll try to search for the truth. But again, I can't betray the truth. Are you? If I make that promise. And he finally agreed and understood what I was saying. And that built a level of trust for the rest of my research for that book, where he gave me 60 letters that he wrote on Vietnam. He went to Vietnam with me. And it's all based on just being straightforward with people and not trying to manipulate them.

[00:13:48] **Speaker 1** Is there a lot of tension when you're trying to get there?

[00:13:51] **Speaker 2** There can't be sure, But I try to ease that tension again by not being confrontational, but being honest.

[00:14:02] **Speaker 1** And how does it affect the story when you finally tell that story?

[00:14:05] **Speaker 2** Well, I hope it gets closer to the reality. It's certainly in this case, but because of some other factors, too, had a very profound psychological effect on me as well as on the soldiers I wrote about, because I finally wrote the truth for them. And that really was important to them. The American government had lied about the battle, said that it was a victory for the United States, that it wasn't an ambush. They made up a body count. And the soldiers who endured it to survive knew that the government was lying. But it wasn't until I reported it many decades later that they finally felt sort of whole about what had happened. But in doing that, in talking to 40 or 50 of those survivors, I carried the baggage of what they had endured as well. So it had an impact on me.

[00:14:58] **Speaker 1** It brings me to an interesting question about the trauma of being a journalist and the storytelling I know for that project. You went to Vietnam. You took a lot of the folks that were involved in the story there, and I imagine that had to be some emotional, you know, trauma that had to come with that. How do you see that? Well, back then, I don't even know if the word trauma even existed in terms of how we see it today.

[00:15:22] **Speaker 2** I mean, several of the soldiers I dealt with did suffer from it. Some did. I mean, it's not a universal thing that.

[00:15:28] **Speaker 1** What do they do to you as a journalist? Being up close to all that?

[00:15:32] **Speaker 2** Yeah, it did. And, you know, I've covered a. As a journalist, you sort of get, I don't want to say inured to trauma, but you certainly deal with it a lot. I mean, I, I covered 911 for the Post. You know, I spent a month and a half up in New York City. During that, I covered the Virginia Tech shooting for The Washington Post. So I've dealt with a lot of of men. S trauma. But. But in those cases, even though I really would deeply this is spending years with these men. And so that was a different level of trauma that I was, you know, both sort of taking some of their trauma onto my shoulders, helping them out. But in the end, I think that what released it for me was that I saw that I actually accomplished something for these guys, that they felt they came together based around my book and they felt that I told the truth finally, and that helped them. Sadly, many of them have died since the book came out 20 years ago. A lot of them, you might say, too, too soon from, ironically, the chemicals that the United States dumped, the Vietnam, the Agent Orange, you know, had gave them bladder cancers that they may not have gotten otherwise. And it was the students of Wisconsin from these very different worlds, you know, and the soldiers certainly didn't like the protesters for the most part. But the protesters were protesting against Dow Chemical Company, the makers of Agent Orange, which ended up killing a lot of these soldiers. Wow.

[00:17:15] **Speaker 1** And you bring up protest. I read that this that projects started with you going to your first protest when you were here at the University of Wisconsin. I'm curious to get your perspective on how you see protests then. You know, in the antiwar movement compared to the protests we see now that are going on about the war in the Middle East.

[00:17:37] **Speaker 2** Yeah, some similarities and some differences. The major similarity is the idealistic motivation of the protesters, whether they're whether they fully understand the situation or not. They're motivated by trying to prevent something death basically from happening. I mean, you know, it was a death in Vietnam. Death in Gaza. Right. And the horrors of that. And so the idealistic. Inspiration to to get to a place of peace. But in Vietnam, it was more direct because every male of my age possibly could fight in that war, whether we were drafted or we had to decide what to do. Go to Canada, go to prison, join the ROTC, enlist. But affected every one of us because of the draft. It affected our girlfriends and parents and everyone else. This war in Gaza is one level removed from that. So every every movement is a combination of self-interest and idealism. And in this one, with the exception of of Arabs, Arab Americans who have relatives in Gaza. There's no self-interest, really, except for the idealism could be there, but it also can can go in in dangerous directions. You know, peaceful protest is wonderful. Anti-Semitism is not You can hate Netanyahu and not hate Israel or the Jewish people. And so I think, you know, it's very complicated in the Middle East is complicated in a way almost, that nothing else in our world is in it. That's why it's been so unresolved and so difficult for so long.

[00:19:36] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And in a broader sense, do you feel like protesting makes a difference?

[00:19:45] **Speaker 2** Well, it's certainly that's a great question. It makes a difference in different ways. It makes a difference to the people who are doing it. It changes their lives. Often, whether it moves governments or not is even in Vietnam. That's a good question because, you know, there's this protest, for instance, Dow happened in 1967 and the war went on for another seven years. Right. Until. So but, you know, on the other hand, you can look at protests that did make a huge difference. The civil rights movement certainly changed America. We still have problems. But boy, did that, you know, it changed the laws. Eventually, the the the Congress did did vote to get out of Vietnam, you know, didn't stop the funding. But it took a long time. And I'm not sure that the protests themselves were the only factor in that. Yeah.

[00:20:44] **Speaker 1** And for someone who's been writing as long as you have been, I'd be curious to know what you think makes a good story.

[00:20:52] **Speaker 2** Well. I mean, I try to look at it like, the whole world's a good story. You just got to find it. You know, every human being has a good story. Every city has a story. Every every, you know. So I'm not some that I prefer to others. But but but I don't like I don't like journalists who are cynical and saying, this is the same old story because it's never the same old story. There's always something new. You can find.

[00:21:26] **Speaker 1** Its perspective, right?

[00:21:27] **Speaker 2** Yeah, it is.

[00:21:28] **Speaker 1** Looking at things a little differently, maybe.

[00:21:30] **Speaker 2** Looking at things differently and opening your eyes to the possibilities.

[00:21:35] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Bear with me as I switch pages. Your question has never come in the order that you think they're going.

[00:21:50] **Speaker 2** To come in. Right? I know.

[00:21:55] **Speaker 1** I love to ask you a little bit about your influences in terms of what what has influenced you as a writer. Sure.

[00:22:02] **Speaker 2** Well, first of all, my father, who was an old school journalist, who was a really good writer and had an ability to write in a way that was accessible but never wrote down to people. So it's intelligent but accessible. And so he was my first influence. And, you know, the truth is that because of the dynamics of my family and I really was the dumb kid in the family, my two older siblings both got 1600 as it and went to Harvard and Swarthmore. And my younger sister was a classical pianist. So I was really in that group, the one, you know, sort of the screw up.

[00:22:45] **Speaker 1** I think it's a as a note here that a that a dumb person can write 15 books that should inspire us all.

[00:22:53] **Speaker 2** So in any case, when I was 15 years old, I'll never forget this. I was walking into the Capitol Times with my dad and he introduced me to someone and said, This is Dave, my youngest son. He's going to be the best writer of all of us. I don't know why he said it, but it stuck. And so that little bit of inspiration was I mean, that's not the only reason, but that's what got me going. And so forever grateful for him saying that one at a time when I was not, you know, I thought I could do anything.

[00:23:28] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And so let's say now you've got an idea for a project you want to do. What's your process from that point?

[00:23:36] **Speaker 2** Well, it's about a year and a half just of research. So so my next book is on Jack Johnson, the Boxer who was Muhammad Ali 100 years before Ali. And it's sort of it fills out what became a quartet, Lombardi, Clemente, Thorpe, Johnson. And he takes it in a different direction. But it's again, it's American history. I mean, you know, there were riots all over the country when he won the heavyweight crown. The government went after him and convicted him on violating the Mann Act, transporting white women across state lines. He went into exile for eight years. James Earl Jones played Jack Johnson on Broadway in the Great White Hope. You know, it has a lot of Miles Davis wrote an album called Jack Johnson. You know, it has a lot of afterlife to it as well. So right now, I've got several archives on my way back to Washington. We'll stop in Notre Dame, which for some reason has the greatest boxing archive in the country. Wow. The papers of Net Fleisher, who wrote who was the Ring magazine owner. And also just other great stuff. So and I've been at the National Archives a lot in Washington because there's a huge FBI file on Jack Johnson, and it's all there. I filed a Freedom of Information Act request for all of the documents related to his pardon, which came a hundred years later. And so it's about a year and a half of all of this research. He died in 1946, so there's no one around that I can interview about him except for other historians or boxing experts who have looked at his fights and stuff like that. And, you know, I don't even like boxing. I, I grew up a block from the field house here in Madison where the University of Wisconsin had a terrific boxing team in the 50s and early into about 60 or 61 when they got rid of it because one of the Charlie Moore, a boxer on the UW team, was killed in the ring or, you know, knocked unconscious and died a day later. And that affected me profoundly. So, you know, so I'm not a boxing fan per say, but I see that I can use this boxer as a way to illuminate American history. So a year and a half of just research go there as part of my philosophy.

[00:26:21] **Speaker 1** So for him, where would that be?

[00:26:23] **Speaker 2** Well, he was born in Galveston. He grew up in Galveston, Texas. Spent his childhood there through, by the way, the great Galveston flood and hurricane of 1900 when the largest natural disaster in American history. He was there for that. Then he spent most of his adult life in Chicago. That's where he's. Buried. That's where the government went after him. Then he was in exile in Paris, in Barcelona. Not bad places for me to have to go. And lost his title. He wanted in Australia in 1908. Lost it in Havana, Cuba, in 1915. So I'll probably go there as well.

[00:27:12] **Speaker 1** Now, without getting too deep into the story, because you've got me, you've got me on the hook now. What was he, the target? Why was he the target of government?

[00:27:20] **Speaker 2** Because he just basically said, I don't care what white society thinks. He said, you know, he dated white women. He drove fast cars. He was fearless, proud, big black, everything that threatened the white supremacy of this country.

[00:27:40] **Speaker 1** In what time period are we talking here? Well, just for those that don't know.

[00:27:43] **Speaker 2** Basically 1900 in 1920, 19, 20. He is when he came out of exile and went to Leavenworth for a year, served in prison. Well, but is is brilliance as a boxer was about 1908 to 1915.

[00:28:03] **Speaker 1** So you've done a year and a half research, You've gone to visit, you've pulled all different things you can find. Now you get to the writing part. How long does that take?

[00:28:13] **Speaker 2** That takes another year and a half at least. But but while I'm writing, I'm also still reporting. Because it's only when you start writing that, or only when I start writing that I see where the holes are and what I want to fill in. So I never stop researching. But the writing starts about a year and a half in or two years and then takes another year and a half or two years.

[00:28:36] **Speaker 1** And I read your wife is your first editor.

[00:28:39] **Speaker 2** Yes, she is.

[00:28:41] **Speaker 1** How does that work? It's funny. I don't like that. Get rid of it.

[00:28:44] **Speaker 2** Well, no. There's a very sexist sort of trope that goes along with this, which is my wife Linda, who's really good editor, will say, David, I don't get this part. And I will say something awful like, Well, that's because. I don't even want to say it, but basically I'll say that's because you're too stupid to get it. But that's a joke because every time I'll go back and change it the way she suggests.

[00:29:16] **Speaker 1** You do not say that. That's that's three Hot Pockets for two weeks or something like that.

[00:29:22] **Speaker 2** Well, yeah, I don't say that in part because I don't even have to. We just sort of know what it's like a kabuki play over. But. But the truth is, it's very helpful.

[00:29:35] **Speaker 1** Yeah. I was going to ask you, why does it take so long to write a book? But I think I kind of know that now when it comes to writing, anything in particular would drive me crazy.

[00:29:51] **Speaker 2** You know, the only things that drive me crazy are the little things like the technology of my computer and the printer and stuff like that. You know, I'm a techno idiot.

[00:30:00] **Speaker 1** Well, you probably came up on a typewriter.

[00:30:02] **Speaker 2** I did? Yeah.

[00:30:04] **Speaker 1** Then you went to a word processor?

[00:30:06] **Speaker 2** Yeah, for a typewriter. Electric typewriter. When I started the post, I had this huge, tubed wreath there made by Raytheon, you know, And there was a first sort of.

[00:30:18] **Speaker 1** I love these back in my day stories.

[00:30:22] **Speaker 2** And then there was something where you you know, I can remember some kind of a machine or roll it out for you or just a lot of stupid stuff.

[00:30:32] **Speaker 1** So does that mean you've evolved to where now you're dictating them through a headset?

[00:30:36] **Speaker 2** No.

[00:30:37] **Speaker 1** You still get. You still. Get down to the keys.

[00:30:40] **Speaker 2** Yeah. And a matter of fact, it's funny. We have a house in Washington, and my daughter was there for something, and we were here, and she asked if she could use my computer. And she got to the to the keyboard and said, Dad, none of the letters are there any more because I type so much, you can't even see what the letters are. But I'm a you know, I'm a quirky typist. I could do it by without looking, but she can tell it's hilarious.

[00:31:07] **Speaker 1** I know for me, when I write, there's something about well, I personally like to write by hand because there's something about that connection to that pen in that paper that kind of gets into my, as I say, soul and spirit that helps me connect to what I'm doing, what.

[00:31:27] **Speaker 2** I do with that. And so, I mean, I have a several steps to the process. When I'm organizing the chapters, I'll take out these big sort of. Art notebooks and use them to figure out what what I call the Stations of the cross of that chapter and where I can find it in my material. And then I will usually write out by hand the leads the first page of something, because they obviously feel it. And then then when I have the combination of that written and what I see is where the chapter will go, then I go to the computer.

[00:32:10] **Speaker 1** Yeah. So I started on my memoir, and this wouldn't be the first time that I've started on my memoir. I'm a good chapter into the process. What is it that makes it so difficult for us folks to write our story, I guess.

[00:32:29] **Speaker 2** Most writers get in the way of getting their own way. And I've always there was a phrase. I've used to myself, which is David, stop writing. In other words, just tell the story. You get out of your way. You know, even when you do that, writing will come, but it will be forced. So, you know, it just that's that's how I overcome whatever block I might have. Just to remember, that chronology is your friend and get out of the way.

[00:33:08] **Speaker 1** That be your advice to the folks that are out there that were like, Right.

[00:33:11] **Speaker 2** Yep.

[00:33:13] **Speaker 1** Just do it. Get it done. Don't think of that.

[00:33:15] **Speaker 2** Well, you have to think about it, but don't overthink it.

[00:33:18] **Speaker 1** Right.

[00:33:18] **Speaker 2** And don't think that you have to do any flourishes. Those will come naturally. Just. Just use your normal language.

[00:33:29] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And since you've been at this a while now, do you do you get a sense that you're running out of time to to tell stories and.

[00:33:39] **Speaker 2** Well, I mean, she's that's kind of a tough question. I have getting older.

[00:33:45] **Speaker 1** I do hear it in focus of questions. Okay.

[00:33:47] **Speaker 2** So my answer will be, what I love about what I do is that I think I can do it for my whole life. So that's it. So, yeah, I mean, I obviously will run out of time.

[00:34:04] **Speaker 1** We all will.

[00:34:05] **Speaker 2** We all will. But I don't think I'll run out of stories.

[00:34:09] **Speaker 1** What haven't you gotten to?

[00:34:12] **Speaker 2** Well, I haven't got I haven't written a full biography of a woman. I almost wrote one about Billie Jean King, but she wanted to control the story and I couldn't allow. I mean, that's not the way I do things. And I don't know. I mean, I don't I'm deep into Jack Jones and I haven't thought about what comes next, but something will.

[00:34:37] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Writing superpower. Do you have one?

[00:34:46] **Speaker 2** I think if I have a superpower, it is what I said, which is for some reason I don't get writer's block. I love to write. As long as I have the material. And, you know, I was trained as a newspaper guy. So I love to write on deadline. I mean, you know, even though I, I mostly just write books now, I came back this year to the Post to cover both conventions, and I came up with my own ideas and, well, you know, they wanted me to write a story about Bill Clinton because I'd written a biography of him. I said, No, I'm sick of Clinton. I don't really want to write about it again. But then I was in Chicago and I was it was a what a beautiful morning. And I was sitting down by the Chicago River on an Adirondack chair, just chilling for after a long night. And the lead of a story about Clinton came to me. So that's my superpower. Things come to me in my subconscious. Often I'll resolve issues of writing in my sleep. This time I was just sitting there looking at the river and a lead came to me because it was a sunny morning and I was thinking about, you know, Clinton as an old lion lounging in the sun, you know, And that's sort of where he is now in his life. So I wrote the story. Yeah.

[00:36:06] **Speaker 1** What are your thoughts about. I and how it's affecting writing and.

[00:36:12] **Speaker 2** Gosh. Well, you know, I also teach at Vanderbilt a political biography course every other year. And I'm worried about a I for a lot of reasons. One is on the Internet now. The first search thing will be something generated by a I. You know, if you want to search any of the subjects that I write about, I'll come up first. Secondly so it's it's. You know, I don't really like anything about it, except that I think that I, for some purposes, like for medicine and science, might be incredibly helpful. But for writing. Man No. No, thanks.

[00:36:58] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And do you think, like, we're just staring at our phones too much and that sort of thing too? Does that have an impact on storytelling and people's ability to tell stories?

[00:37:07] **Speaker 2** Certainly. Well, it has an impact on how they tell stories. And I'm the the patients of people, you know. Everybody wants something in little tidbits now, whether it's tick tock or whatever. But I don't know. I don't think you can stop that.

[00:37:27] **Speaker 1** Are you doing that, David? You got there. Tick tock.

[00:37:31] **Speaker 2** Tick tock. I, I keep trying to get off of x Twitter because of my distaste for the owner of that particular social media. But it's a good place to curate news since I don't post there much. But yeah. And Facebook I'm on. And that's a largely benign way to keep in contact with friends and people. But my wife would say, get off the damn phone.

[00:38:05] **Speaker 1** And get the writing.

[00:38:06] **Speaker 2** Or talk to her. So, yeah, I mean, I think I think that addiction is universal. And. You know, not so great. Yeah.

[00:38:20] **Speaker 1** I was going to ask you about your maturity as a writer in terms of how do you think you've evolved over the years? How have you changed as a writer over the years and are you still evolving?

[00:38:32] **Speaker 2** I hope so. I mean, I want to evolve, you know, constantly. I mean, the more you read, the more you know, then the more, you know, in life, the richer your understanding of the human experience is. So I think that both in terms of the knowledge base and the writing. Yeah, I think, you know, I mean, I, I look at some of my early journalism headwinds, but I look at my first book, the biography of Bill Clinton and don't wince. So I don't know. You know, I think I think by I was in my mid-forties when I wrote my first book. I had learned all of the fundamentals. I knew what I was doing and I was ready for it. I always sort of compare that with Vince Lombardi, you know, who talks about freedom through discipline. And he was in the vineyards for 20 years before he got his shot to be a head coach in Little Green Bay. And he was ready and he was brilliant. What do you know? You know, for those that short period of time, ten years in the Green Bay. But so I felt that I'd spent enough time learning the fundamentals that I had, the freedom from then on to do what I wanted.

[00:39:47] **Speaker 1** What have you learned about yourself from writing about the people that you've written about?

[00:39:52] **Speaker 2** Well, I'd say I you know, one way I can answer that is when I was writing the biographies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama in particular, there was a lot of mythology built up around them that they had propagated largely because they'd heard it from their parents and grandparents and so on. And that's what we all do. And it was only after sort of studying that that I decided I was probably a lot of mythology around my own family. And that's what I went back to do, the story of my father. And in doing that story about my father, I understood more about myself. I understood what my motivations were. I mean, my dad, you know, was hounded by the House un-American Activities Committee. The head of that committee was a racist from Georgia. My father had been the commander of an all black unit in World War Two. He had a very deep sense of racial justice, and he inculcated that in his children. And so I sort of had a deeper understanding of why I am the way I am through that story.

[00:41:00] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Now, have you ever had to step away from a story because you got too close or you had to remove yourself because you were couldn't be impartial, that sort of thing.

[00:41:15] **Speaker 2** I'm starting to feel that way right now. I don't think I could write directly about Donald Trump. Because of.

[00:41:24] **Speaker 1** That, because of her own beliefs or just.

[00:41:28] **Speaker 2** About combination of my political beliefs and my fears of what will happen to our democracy. I can write about other things around that, but I don't really want to write about him. I don't feel that I can do it.

[00:41:43] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And not you. And you just step away from that. I guess I.

[00:41:46] **Speaker 2** Have. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I even covered the Republican convention without writing about him. So, yeah.

[00:41:54] **Speaker 1** And what's your thoughts on the future, these young folks that are coming up? Are we in good hands? Yes or no?

[00:41:59] **Speaker 2** Yes, definitely. I love I love this generation. I mean, I have two granddaughters who are. Woods in college woods, a junior in high school. And their fabulous. And they're smarter than we were. They're more idealistic, more committed. And you know, I just the only my only concern is the world we left them with, not with them.

[00:42:21] **Speaker 1** Yeah. And what are you telling them when it comes to storytelling and what they need to focus on?

[00:42:27] **Speaker 2** Just what I tell everybody else. You know, tell the story and search for the truth.

[00:42:33] **Speaker 1** Yeah. David Munis, thank you for joining us on In Focus today.

[00:42:37] **Speaker 2** Great to talk with you, Merv.

[00:42:39] **Speaker 1** Great conversation and I really enjoyed that. Good stuff, man.

[00:42:45] **Speaker 2** Yeah. How are you feeling? I'm feeling like that was a great conversation.

[00:42:48] **Speaker 1** It was a great conversation. And that's the whole idea. Try to make it a conversation without too much being right.