

# Christian Nationalism is Reshaping Fertility Rights, and Books Dominate at the Oscars



An Alabama Supreme Court ruling on frozen embryos threatens fertility treatments across the state. On this week's On the Media, hear how a particular branch of Christian nationalism influenced one justice's decision. Plus, how film adaptations of books have come to dominate our screens.

1. Matthew D. Taylor [[@TaylorMatthewD](#)], senior scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, & Jewish Studies, on how a particular strain of Christian Nationalism, once on the fringe of America's religious landscape, is slowly emerging as a political force. [Listen](#).

2. Alexander Manshel [[@XanderManshel](#)], assistant professor of English at McGill University and author of *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon*, on how literary prizes have changed over the last few decades, and how much they actually matter. [Listen](#).

3. Cord Jefferson [[@cordjefferson](#)], writer and director of the new film *American Fiction*, on his movie's critique of Hollywood and the process of adapting a novel for the screen. [Listen](#).

[music]

**News clip:** Bombshell ruling from the Alabama Supreme Court that frozen embryos can be considered children.

**Brooke Gladstone:** This week, we learned about a fringe Christian sect that greatly influenced that decision and others like it. From WNYC in New York, this is *On the Media*. I'm Brooke Gladstone. Also on this week's show, several of this year's Oscar nominations were for movies adapted from prizewinning books, but the power of literary prizes doesn't stop there.

**Alexander Manshel:** Even a high-profile book is taught zero times in a university classroom, but it ends up on as many as 15 syllabi when it wins.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Plus, Cord Jefferson, now up for an Oscar for *American Fiction*, left journalism for Hollywood because he was sick of being pigeonholed as the Black correspondent, but.

**Cord Jefferson:** It wasn't long before people were coming to me and saying, "Do you want to write this movie about a Black person being killed by the police?" "Do you want to write this movie about a slave?"

**Brooke Gladstone:** It's all coming up after this.

[music]

**Brooke Gladstone:** From WNYC in New York. This is *On the Media*. I'm Brooke Gladstone. Last week, reproductive healthcare took another hit from a gavel.

**News clip:** Bombshell ruling from the Alabama Supreme Court that frozen embryos can be considered children. The state's largest hospital now says it will pause IVF treatments, leaving couples with fertility problems with nowhere to go.

**Brooke Gladstone:** By Thursday, two additional IVF clinics in Alabama pause their treatments in fear of retaliation.

**News clip:** This is so much like everything we've been reading about post-jobs, right? Doctors feeling intimidated, a culture on a climate of chaos for providers, folks not being able to get the care that they need when they need it.

**Brooke Gladstone:** A climate of chaos. An apt description for our post-Roe v. Wade world, where reproductive rights are defended court by court, state by state, but what made the Alabama decision unique was the particular legal weapon wielded by the chief justice in his concurring opinion.

**News clip:** Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Parker quoted the Bible and the Alabama Constitution, section 36, which argues that each person was made, he said, in God's image, that even before birth, all human beings bear the image of God, and their lives cannot be destroyed without effacing His glory.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Parker's allegiance to Christian fundamentalism has been on display since his election to the court in 2004. In fact, several of the chief justice's writings in past cases were used as crucial scaffolding for the arguments that successfully overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, but Parker's preferred brand of Christian fundamentalism mostly flies under the radar. He subscribes to the charismatic evangelical Christian leadership networks known as the New Apostolic Reformation, or the NAR a term coined in 1996.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** It centered around a seminary professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. His name was C. Peter Wagner.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Matthew D. Taylor is a scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, and he spent a lot of time tracing how the NAR, once on the fringe of Americans' religious, landscape, slowly emerged as a political force.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Wagner was fascinated with the world that today scholars would call the independent charismatic sector of Christianity.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Give us the religious meaning of the word charismatic.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** The term charismatic derives, at least in this modern usage, from the New Testament, from Christian scriptures, where there's a lot of talk about the spiritual gifts, the gifts that are given through the Holy Spirit to Christians, or at least to the members of the early church, they wouldn't have necessarily called themselves Christians. This idea is that our mundane life can be suffused with these supernatural manifestations, these giftings from God that are meant to exhort and uplift the church, to serve the church community. To be charismatic in Christianity is to seek those supernatural power from the Holy Spirit.

**Brooke Gladstone:** How would that manifest itself? Are we talking about, like, faith healing?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Yes, absolutely. Faith healing would be considered one manifestation of a spiritual gift. Things like prophecy and prophecy, as in modern prophecy, people who identify today as prophets, who share these prophecies with other people, even miraculous manifestations that occur in worship, miracles that have, at least for these folks, no other explanation must be derived from the Holy Spirit.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Wagner was fascinated with how these nondenominational charismatic Christian movements were growing like gangbusters in the '70s, but if you bring it into the third millennium, you've observed that they became increasingly politicized.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Yes. Wagner's central idea in the New Apostolic Reformation is that in the 21st century, God is going to commission new apostles and prophets to lead the global church into revival. If you think back to the New Testament, the apostles are the original disciples of Jesus. They found the Christian church in conventional Christian theology, and the prophets are characters who hear directly from God and speak the words of God. The idea is, and Wagner even said that in the year 2001, we begin the second apostolic age.

The first apostolic age was the era of the early church. He believed that starting in 2001, God was unleashing those gifts again and that new apostles and prophets and Wagner thought of himself as one of these apostles would transform the global church, but then over time, this movement became more and more politicized, more and more interested not just in reforming the church, but in transforming society.

**Brooke Gladstone:** And adopted an aggressive paradigm of Christian thought known as dominion theology.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Yes, dominion theology. The concept was coined by a group of radical Calvinist theologians called the Christian reconstructionists in the 1960s and 1970s, these ideas were very influential in the rise of the religious right in the 1980s. It was this aggressive style of Christian theology that said Christians need to fulfill what they would talk about as the dominion mandate, take dominion over societies, and rule in the name of Christ. The main vehicle for this idea in NAR circles is something called the Seven Mountain Mandate that became a charismatic rebranding of these Calvinist dominion theology ideas that Wagner and his cohort mixed together into the Seven Mountain Mandate.

**Brooke Gladstone:** In fact, Justice Parker referred to the Seven Mountain Mandate in an interview he did with an NAR profit named Johnny Enlow and it was published the same day as the court's decision that embryos count as people. The Seven Mountain Mandate means that you have to go into the institutions of government, and what else?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** The seven mountains are family, religion, education, government, arts and entertainment, media, and business or commerce. The idea is, if you divide up society into these seven spheres is sometimes language that you'll hear used as well. The idea is that those mountains, those spheres of society, are either ruled over by demonic forces or by the kingdom of God. The goal for Christians is to rise to the top of each of the seven mountains in every society and to displace the demonic powers through spiritual warfare, through prophecy, and take over, conquer the mountains, and then let Christian influence flow down from the top.

If you think about conventional religious right mobilization, it has tended to filter or channel conservative Christian indignation into democratic means. This is a vanguard move. This is not a grassroots change society. This is take over positions of power in society and govern from the top down.

**Brooke Gladstone:** As a practical matter as well as a moral and spiritual one. They can't be very hot on the Constitution or of the idea of the United States as a secular state.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** They are definitely not in favor of the separation of church and state. They'll often say, "Well, you can't separate church and state because the government is one of the mountains." They would affirm many parts of the Constitution, but their interpretation of the First Amendment would not allow for a real separation of church and state.

**Brooke Gladstone:** I don't know how you follow the Constitution while knocking away one of its fundamental principles.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Well, in my forthcoming book, I argue that actually, it was the NAR leaders who were the central orchestrators for Christians to show up in Washington DC on January 6th and protest against what they believed was the stealing of the election, but again, this was not appealing to constitutional principles. They believed that they were engaging in spiritual warfare against demons stealing the election.

**Brooke Gladstone:** How much of this rhetoric is metaphorical? Are we talking about real demons? When they talk about picking up weapons, are they talking about real weapons?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** They would say it's not metaphorical. They believe the demons are real, but they would say they are only talking about spiritual warfare. Now, the challenge is, if you go and listen to their rhetoric, it is incredibly violent, and they are pointing at actual people. They're pointing at the democratic party, pointing at disloyal Republicans as they view them and saying, "Those people are not actually responsible for their actions because they are being orchestrated by demons, and we need to fight the demons."

This literal demonization of their enemies is one of the major contributing factors to the chaos on January 6th. Because they are pointing at them and saying, "That building is infested with demons, we need to fight the demons." It's only a matter of time if you keep doing that before someone says, "Yes, we need to fight against those people." The NAR leaders are careful. They know where the line is between truly irresponsible speech that could get you in legal trouble. None of them have been prosecuted or even faced any legal consequences for their role in January 6th. They know what is protected by free speech and they walk right up to that line, but they're always careful not to cross it.

**Brooke Gladstone:** What are your thoughts on Parker's decision regarding the embryos? Charles Blow writing in the *Times* the headline says, "Parker's ruling shows our slide towards theocracy isn't just about abortion, but about the subjugation of women."

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Well, the NAR and really the independent charismatic world are distinct among American evangelicals. In that they are very much in favor of women leading in the church. Where many forms of Christian nationalism are deeply patriarchal. This is actually a style of Christian nationalism that is more inclusive of female leaders. That said, the NAR leaders have some of the most extreme anti-abortion positions I've ever encountered. I say that as somebody who grew up evangelical, has anti-abortion activists in my extended family. These folks are truly at the far end of the spectrum.

In fact, for many NAR leaders, when they talk about abortion, they don't talk about it in policy terms. They don't talk about it as needing to balance between the rights of a woman's to have bodily autonomy and the rights of a fetus for life. That's not the conventional anti-abortion argument. They would say that abortion is a form of child sacrifice that empowers these demonic principalities and powers to hold control over the United States.

At that point, there's no negotiation. There's no compromise, there's no like, "Oh, well, let's meet in the middle and say let's have a 16 week ban." They are abortion abolitionists. What we see in Tom Parker's ruling is more or less that rationale, using theology and Bible references to back that up and then pointing to his own belief in the Seven Mountains and saying, "This is why I did it."

**Brooke Gladstone:** You suggested that the NAR could be set apart from mainstream evangelicals. I know evangelicalism is a huge umbrella term, in the fact that it is more welcoming in some ways to women. How does it distinguish itself from evangelicals writ large?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** The NAR leaders view everything through these lens of spiritual warfare. Where many evangelicals, even many Christian nationalist evangelicals tend to think to be a Christian nationalist, is to be concerned about the boundaries of the United States, the history of the United States, and trying to Christianize United States. When I talk about the NAR as a form of Christian supremacy, there's a transnational dimension to that Christian supremacy. They're not only concerned with the US. In fact, many of these NAR leaders are constantly traveling overseas. Many of the networks that are attached to the NAR in Brazil helped to mobilize Christians for the Brazilia capital riot that happened just about a year ago. There's a transnational dimension to this as well, that is not merely concerned with making America great again. Their intent is to see a global revival and a global takeover of societies using paradigms like the Seven Mountains.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Why do you think that the NAR has pretty much escaped the media spotlight?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** I talked to a lot of reporters about this and we're all in agreement. This stuff is very hard to write about. If you have 2,000 or even 3,000 words, how do you get from C. Peter Wagner, apostles and prophets, spiritual warfare, Seven Mountains, January 6th, and then finally you get to the story that you actually want to write about? It's very hard to encapsulate all of this because it feels so foreign to most of us who are mainstream news consumers.

**Brooke Gladstone:** The environment is foreign, but it seems that their pronouncements are pretty straightforward.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Yes, and the NAR leaders are celebrities. There is an entire world of charismatic media, of charisma news, of television channels that are devoted to prophecy. YouTube prophets. Social media is infused throughout with all these charismatic leaders, and yet most of us aren't paying attention to that world. When it breaks into our world through somebody like Tom Parker, we're

shocked by it. For people in that world, these are people that they are tracking and following all the time. These are the prophets that they are listening to.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Now that we know who they are, what role do you think they'll be playing in the rest of this campaign?

**Matthew D. Taylor:** The NAR leaders were the most effective Christian propagandists for Donald Trump's election lies in 2020. I expect that what we will see in 2024 will look a lot like what we saw in 2020. Rolling out of spiritual warfare campaigns, manifestations of these things. If Donald Trump wins, then they will celebrate jubilantly. If Donald Trump loses and I expect Donald Trump will not accept losing, then they will back him up, and they will use prophecies, and they'll use spiritual warfare, and they will mobilize Christians to show up and protest and we could very well see another January 6th.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Matthew, thank you very much.

**Matthew D. Taylor:** Thank you, Brooke.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Matthew D. Taylor is a scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Baltimore. He's also the author of the forthcoming book, *The Violent Take It by Force. The Christian Movement that is threatening our democracy*. Coming up, who really cares about book awards? Turns out, Hollywood. This is *On The Media*.

[music]

**Brooke Gladstone:** This is *On The Media*. I'm Brooke Gladstone. In a couple of weeks, the final red carpet of the season will be rolled out for the Academy Awards. If you know where to look, you'll see that the ceremony and the films it honors is shaped by another less glitzy award circuit in the publishing industry. Several Oscar favorites are adapted for much-celebrated books like *Oppenheimer*, inspired by a Pulitzer Prize-winning history published in 2005 by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin.

[video excerpt]

**Male Speaker:** You are the man who gave them the power to destroy themselves and the world is not prepared.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* was based on a nonfiction national book award finalist, written by journalist David Grand back in 2017.

**Movie clip:** They call it the Flower Moon when tiny flowers spread over the Black Jack Hills and the prairies. There are many, so many.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Novels also cast a long shadow on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science. The new adaptation of *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize and national book award-winning novel, has collected a string of nominations this season.

[video excerpt]

**Movie clip:** Celie is coming to Memphis with us. It's time she saw more of this world.

**Movie clip:** [chuckles] I'd die before I let that happen.

**Movie clip:** Good. That's just a gone-away present Imma need.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Then there's the film, *American Fiction*, based on Percival Everett's 2001 novel, *Erasure*. According to Alexander Manshel, assistant professor of English at McGill University, the influence of prize-winning novels extends to TV too.

**Alexander Manshel:** In the last few years alone, we've seen a number of prize-winning novels or even novels that have just been shortlisted for a major literary award being adapted to Prestige TV and to film. I'm thinking here of books like *The Underground Railroad*, which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer by Colson Whitehead. A Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. More recently, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, which won the Pulitzer.

**Movie clip:** I know that broadcasting could get me executed, but I will not be silenced. I hope you'll tune in again tomorrow.

**Alexander Manshel:** This is one of those things where the production companies and the streamers themselves look not only at the sales that have already occurred, but at things like prestige as denoted by literary awards to signal not only what people are interested in, but what is taken to be literary. Part of the way that Prestige TV gets its prestige is by borrowing the literary prestige from novels like these.

**Brooke Gladstone:** With Melanie Walsh, Manshel wrote a piece for the magazine, public books titled, *What 35 Years of Data Can Tell Us About Who Will Win The National Book Award*. He says these prizes actually matter a lot.

**Alexander Manshel:** Even just finalists for these prizes are more likely to be read, taught, and studied, and the ones that win get an even bigger boost.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Here, Manshel cites a study he co-wrote with Laura B. McGrath and J.D. Porter called, *Who Cares About Literary Prizes?*

**Alexander Manshel:** We looked at hundreds of high-profile 21st-century novels and we found that the number of Good Reads ratings, which is a proxy for readership, jumps from 48,000 for a book that is not even shortlisted to 98,000 for a book that wins. The same is true on university syllabi. The average book, even a high-profile book is taught a grand total of zero times in a university classroom, but it ends up on as many as 15 syllabi on average when it wins.

**Brooke Gladstone:** What about sales?

**Alexander Manshel:** We don't have good publicly available data on sales, so we have to use these other proxies for readership to figure that out. Of course, sales don't always tell us about what people are actually reading. If you take the time to leave a good reads rating or review, or to study it over a week in a course, that's far more engagement than, as we can all relate to, buying a book and never actually cracking the spine.

**Brooke Gladstone:** I'm reminded of a story back in 1985 when the great Michael Kinsley, then editor of the New Republic, put coupons for \$5 in the back of 70 copies of a couple of Washington doorstops. Unsurprisingly, no one ever claimed the \$5 because they never got that far.

**Alexander Manshel:** [laughs] I love this. Brooke, I have a bunch of friends who live in New York City, and if I had a dime for every one of them that has a copy of Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*, somewhere in their apartment I'd be a wealthy man.

**Brooke Gladstone:** People love to talk about prizes, especially when there's an upset. Tell me about the most objected-to award decision of the past half-century, The National Book Award of 1987.

**Alexander Manshel:** As I argue in my book, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the single most celebrated contemporary American novel. It's among the most widely read, written about, and admired works of the last half-century. In 1987, *Beloved* was nominated for the National Book Award, but it was ultimately passed over in favor of Larry Heinemann's Vietnam War novel *Paco's Story*. Jonathan Yardley wrote in *The Washington Post*, "You couldn't have cut the collective astonishment with a machete. That's how startled were the assembled Illuminati. Truman over Dewey was nothing as to Heinemann over Morrison. Then over at *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani opened her review with just two words, "What happened?"

**Brooke Gladstone:** The rumor was that the sole Black judge on the judging panel was a vote against *Beloved*.

**Alexander Manshel:** This was the rumor at the time that it was a split decision, the result of a two-to-one vote. Now there were three at that time, judges, on the National Book Award jury, the critic Richard Eder and the Novelists, Hilma Wolitzer and Gloria Naylor, who is the judge you're referring to. Wolitzer was later quoted as saying it was an agonizing decision. Eder had on the one hand, given *Paco's Story* a positive review in *The LA Times* where he worked, and he had only written a short piece on *Beloved* as part of a larger article, but Naylor, the only Black judge on the jury, was rumored to have voted against *Beloved*.

After *Beloved* was passed over for the National Book Award, a group of 50 Black writers, critics, and scholars took out an open letter in *The New York Times* to protest the decision by the prize. One of the signatories of that letter, June Jordan, ultimately withdrew a creative writing fellowship for Gloria Naylor. She said that it would be "embarrassing and morally elliptical" for Naylor to take up that position, but still, we have to say in the room where literary history is being made, very little is known.

**Brooke Gladstone:** What did you learn in your research about the juries that decide which books will win the big prizes?

**Alexander Manshel:** Because we can never know for sure exactly what happens in the room, we wanted to figure out at least who was there. We drew on 35 years of data and one of the first things we found is just how much influence is held by a very small number of people.

**Brooke Gladstone:** How small?

**Alexander Manshel:** Well, over the last 35 years, for example, when it comes to the Pulitzer Prize, just five people have made up more than 20% of all the jurors. If you add another five names to that list, it's more than a third of all jurors. These people are mostly professional reviewers. Gail Caldwell at the Boston Globe, Richard Eder at *The LA Times*, Marie Arana at *The Washington Post*, these people have judged the Pulitzer four, six, even seven times over the past 35 years. Eder is a particularly interesting example because he was on the National Book Award jury that ultimately passed over Toni Morrison for the 1987 award, but less than a year later, he was on the Pulitzer jury that ultimately resulted in Morrison getting the award for the same book.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Let's move on to how the prizes have changed over the years. In 2023, the jury for the National Book Award was the most diverse ever, and its shortlist has been among the most diverse too.

**Alexander Manshel:** Absolutely. To put this in perspective, in the few years after Morrison's *Beloved* was published, the late 1980s, only around 15% of judges for these prizes were people of color. In 16 of the last 35 years, the nominating jury for the Pulitzer did not include a single person of color. If we skip ahead to the last few years, people of color have made up more than half of the juries for both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award.



**Brooke Gladstone:** Should we assume that the more judges of color are appointed, the more there'll be authors of color winning prizes?

**Alexander Manshel:** Both of those things have occurred over the past several decades except, here's where things get interesting, on the scale of the individual year, a more diverse jury doesn't necessarily yield a more diverse group of finalists. We found two different things. One is that there is not as close a correlation between the jury's demographics and the shortlist demographics, but there is a tighter correlation between the diversity of the jury and who ultimately wins.

It's true, we found that when the jury was composed only of white judges, they selected a white winner every single time. We also found that there was a correlation between more and more judges of color and the likelihood that that jury would select a writer of color as their winner. If there is a Black or Asian American writer named a finalist for these awards, there is about half the time not a Black or Asian American judge on the committee. It's not a simple exercise in identification.

Part of what we're seeing in this data is when you're sitting in a room that reminds you that your perspective is just one of many perspectives, that leads to a wider variety of writers being celebrated by the prizes. It's important to have a diverse group of jurors, not just because they are somehow automatically going to select a diverse group of winners, but because there is a wide variety of literary taste in this country, and there is a great diversity of readers.

**Brooke Gladstone:** You have the dynamics in the jury room, people looking around and realizing that there are a variety of perspectives to take into consideration. Anything else going on in that jury room?

**Alexander Manshel:** Their social dynamics matter, where they went to school, where they got their MFA, who publishes them, if they have an agent in common, if they have a longstanding literary rivalry with another writer, even another writer who looks or writes like them, all of these could affect the decision making of the jury. That gold or silver seal on the front of the book covers over these much more complex dynamics that are happening in the back room.

**Brooke Gladstone:** In your article, you referred to Perceval Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*, which makes some caustic observations regarding the group dynamics of literary prize juries. The main character is a Black writer and educator named Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, whose [unintelligible 00:28:42] involves very literary, oft-called unreadable works and he can't sell his books, but he's become aware of this book *We's Lives In Da Ghetto* by a woman who visited some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days and decided to write a book about the complete Black experience. In the end, he decides to write a parody called *My Pafology* with an F.

[video excerpt]

**Arthur:** We sold a book?

**Monk:** No.

**Female Speaker 1:** We believe Mr. Lee has written the bestseller.

**Monk:** It's a joke.

**Arthur:** The most lucrative joke you've ever told.

**Brooke Gladstone:** That's from the film adaptation, *American Fiction*. He's just horrified at the success. No one sees it as a parody, and he is now serving on a panel of the National Book Awards.

**Alexander Manshel:** Part of the reason why Monk agrees to be on this award jury in the first place is he says, "I detested awards, but as I complained endlessly about the direction of American letters when presented with an opportunity to affect it, how could I say no?" When he gets there, what he finds is that the other judges don't really care much for his opinion, and one of the works he's asked to judge is *My Pafology*. He says this book is offensive. It's racist. It speaks to the most base stereotypes about African Americans. One of the white judges on the committee says, "I should think as an African American, you'd be happy to see one of your own people get an award like this. I would think you'd be happy to have the story of your people so vividly portrayed."

**Brooke Gladstone:** When Everett was the only Black judge for the National Book Awards. I think it was in '97, the finalists were entirely white, and the winner was *Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier's tragic love story about a Confederate soldier and a Southern landowner. Do we know if that prize was unanimous?

**Alexander Manshel:** The proof is in the pudding of the novel that he wrote after the fact. Obviously, it's not entirely autobiographical, but if we look at Percival Everett's career, he is a writer who has written brilliant and at times esoteric novels and has only recently attained larger literary fame and the kind of advances and adaptations that his rival novelist in *Erasure* has gotten.

**Brooke Gladstone:** He has won a lot of literary prizes and was a finalist for both the Pulitzer and the Booker prizes, but finalist, not winner. Many writers of color have observed that selling books often demands writing about trauma, centering that experience, what do you think?

**Alexander Manshel:** As I write about in my book, the great majority of Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous writers who have won major literary prizes over the last several decades, have done so for writing about historical trauma. Part of the work that these prizes do is, they can confirm our expectations about what is literary, or they can completely upend it. All it takes is one particularly independent group of jurors to make a call that completely sends the literary world for a spiral. Sometimes that is a scandal, and sometimes that is a first step in changing the way we think about what is literary.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Thanks very much, Alexander.

**Alexander Manshel:** It's my pleasure.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Alexander Manshel is the author of *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon*. Coming up, we pick up the story with the writer and director of *American Fiction* Cord Jefferson. This is *On the Media*.

[music]

**Brooke Gladstone:** This is *On the Media*, I'm Brooke Gladstone. This week writer and director Cord Jefferson won a BAFTA for American fiction. His screenplay adaptation of Percival Everett's aforementioned novel. It stars Jeffrey Wright and has collected five Oscar nominations altogether. Wright plays the frustrated writer offended by being pigeonholed by publishers and booksellers.

[video excerpt]

**Monk:** Yes, wait a minute. Why are these books here?

**Ned:** I'm not sure. I would imagine that this author, Ellison, is Black.

**Monk:** That's me. Ellison. He is me and he and I are Black.

**Ned:** Oh, bingo.

**Monk:** No bingo, Ned. These books have nothing to do with African American studies. They're just literature. The blackest thing about this one is the ink.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Then he comes across that blockbuster travesty "*We's Lives In Da Ghetto*."

**Sintara:** Too few books were about my people. Where's our representation?

**Moderator:** Would you read an excerpt?

**Sintara:** Yo, Sharonda. Girl, you be pregnant again?

**Brooke Gladstone:** Monk writes a parody that's pornographic on basically every level, largely out of moral indignation, but also because he needs the money to support his elderly mom who is drifting into dementia while navigating his strained relationship with his increasingly out-there plastic surgeon brother, played by Sterling K. Brown.

[video excerpt]

**Monk:** You gave her opioids to sleep?

**Clifford:** Yes. You ever seen a heroin addict? Those guys take naps standing up.

**Monk:** It's dangerous.

**Clifford:** Look, I'm keeping an eye on her. I'm a doctor.

**Monk:** So am I.

**Clifford:** Right. Maybe if we need to revive a sentence.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Cord Jefferson is no stranger to adaptations, having written one for a series like *Station Eleven*, based on a novel, and the Emmy award-winning show *Watchmen*, based on a graphic novel, but he started out as a journalist. Welcome to the show, Cord.

**Cord Jefferson:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Brooke Gladstone:** I was tickled to learn that one of your first forays into TV was on the Chris Hayes show in 2013.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes, there was a surf competition in Huntington Beach, white teenagers are smashing out storefronts and looting and turning over porta potties and fighting in the streets. I wrote a satirical piece for Gawker, where I was working at the time, about the problem of white-on-white crime. It was essentially just a send-up of what at that time Bill O'Reilly would say, in wake of Black teenagers doing the exact same thing.

**Cord Jefferson:** These young people are learning this kind of behavior in lacrosse camps. They're learning this kind of behavior at college spring break.

**Chris Hayes:** Here's my question to you. Do you have a personal problem with white people? Is this animus?

**Cord Jefferson:** My best friend is white. My mother is actually white. My prom date in high school was a white woman. She was very white actually, she used to ride horses and do that whole thing. I

have very deep roots in the white community.

**Brooke Gladstone:** You say they're learning the kinds of behavior, Ivy League fraternities for drug use and binge drinking or normalized behavior, leading to this white-on-white crime scourge.

**Cord Jefferson:** [laughs] That was fun. That's what got me my first TV job actually, because a showrunner for a TV show saw that clip of me on Chris Hayes. He said, "I think you're funny. Have you considered writing for television?" He hired me for my first gig based on that.

**Brooke Gladstone:** When you read *Erasure*, you said you felt the book was written for you. You related to the protagonist, Monk, who's a frustrated novelist who people overlooked because his work didn't conform to expectations of what a Black writer should produce. You articulated your own frustrations as a writer in a 2014 article for Medium, *The Racism Beat*. You wrote, "If you're Black and your beat is to offer your thoughts and opinions on the degradation of Black Americans, you'll never want for steady work. A steady mind is not guaranteed." What led you to that?

**Cord Jefferson:** I had reached this point in my career when it felt like on a weekly basis, people were coming to me and saying, "Do you want to write about Trayvon Martin being killed? Do you want to write about Mike Brown being killed?" It felt like my job had become this sort of revolving door of misery. What can I say about this that people haven't been saying for generations?

When I started working in film and television, it felt like great, this is the world of fiction, fantasy, I can write about anything that I want to write about. I can write about any Black person doing anything. It wasn't long before people were coming to me and saying, "Do you want to write this movie about a Black person being killed by the police? Do you want to write this movie about a gang member? Do you want to write this movie about a slave? It felt like, "Oh, even here, even in the world of fiction, there's still real rigid perspective as to what Black life looks like, as to what Black stories look like, and as to what Black creators can do." I was really taken aback by that.

**Brooke Gladstone:** How was your mind when you picked up *Erasure* in 2020?

**Cord Jefferson:** I don't think it's saying anything unique to say that I was in a low place in the year 2020, but besides COVID, I had suffered this really big professional failure that year where I had come very, very close to getting a TV show that I co-created on the air. So much so that we'd written the entire season, we started looking for where our production offices were going to be in New York, and then at the last minute, the network pulled the plug on it. This to me was like evidence that it was never going to happen for me.

I felt like I will have a creative life, I will be this journeyman TV writer who works on other people's TV shows, and that's fine. I'll make good money, I'll be allowed to be creative for the rest of my life, but I'll never have something that's my own. I was starting to feel that way because I've been working so hard, I hadn't had time to read for fun in a long time. I'd never heard of *Erasure*. I read a synopsis. I went bought it and devoured it immediately. As I was reading it, I got the wind in my creative sails again. 50 pages into it, I was thinking that I might want to adapt it into a screenplay, and about 100 pages into it, I started thinking that I might want to direct that screenplay once it was written.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Let's talk about the process of adapting the book. Did you know immediately how you wanted to make it your own? I understand you got the rights for free from the author.

**Cord Jefferson:** I was nervous to talk to him because I knew that he had apparently told people no in the past.

**Brooke Gladstone:** He's not shy apparently about doing that.

**Cord Jefferson:** I've never met somebody who cares less about anybody's outside opinion than Percival Everett. [chuckles] I think that there was somebody who tried to adapt Percival's first novel, and the first question in the first meeting to him was, "Do you mind if we make the protagonist white?" Apparently, Percival said, "I don't mind that, as long as literally every other character is Black."

[laughter]

**Cord Jefferson:** Then they said, "Well, we're not going to do that." He said, "Well, then this is not going to happen." That has left a bad taste in his mouth, and so he was reluctant to allow people any more adaptations, and he eventually later told me that he felt like I understood the spirit of *Erasure* and I understood the essence of what he was getting at. Yes, he gave me the rights for free for six months, and he said, "Go write a script and if anything comes of it, then you can pay me then", and that's what I did.

**Brooke Gladstone:** When you heard they were green-lighting the movie, you started crying.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes, I started crying in the meeting. Like I said, I had grown to believe that it wasn't going to happen for me. This is an industry where rejection is the norm. There's people out there who have been working far longer than I have who have never gotten anything made that they've written. I was overwhelmed. I couldn't believe that somebody was finally saying yes to me.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Did you consult much with Everett in the process? Did you have any fears when you showed him the film?

**Cord Jefferson:** Of course, it was a nightmare. There's a famous story about a French author named Boris Vian who had his book adapted and he went to the premier and 10 minutes into the film, he stood up and started shouting at the screen, and then he had a heart attack and died right there. That, of course, was my greatest fear, is that I'm going to show it to Percival and he is going to die. Fortunately, before he eventually signed off on the rights, then he asked to read the script and he read my script, and then he signed off on the rights to shoot the film.

Then when I was still editing, I brought him and his wife, who's another wonderful novelist, in, Danzy Senna is her name. Percival told me he really liked it. He's been a huge supporter of the project all along the way, but he's never had creative input, which I think is probably the best relationship you can have with an adaptor and an adoptee.

**Brooke Gladstone:** I loved your film and the book for the same reasons and for different ones too. We're going to try not to give any spoilers, but I want to try and bend myself into a pretzel in order to discuss some of the choices you made. I want to say that I thought the choices were brilliant.

**Cord Jefferson:** Thank you.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Monk writes his parody or satire that becomes *My Pafology* in response to a book that caricatures and plays up the degradations of Black urban life. Percival Everett is pretty unsparing about the author of that book. She, who grew up in Akron, Ohio, spent a few days with some distant family members in Harlem and then comes out with this blockbuster piece of cheesy exploitation proclaimed as Truth with a capital T. You are much kinder to the author of that novel, Sintara Golden, and she's played by Issa Rae in the movie.

[video excerpt]

**Monk:** I see the unrealized potential of Black people in this country.

**Sintara:** Potential is what people see when they think what's in front of them isn't good enough.

**Brooke Gladstone:** It's a more compassionate treatment overall than I think the book is to lots of people.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes. The book is very funny, but the lows of the book are far lower than the lows of the film. That was a conscious decision. I wanted to make a movie that felt inviting to a lot of different kinds of people.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Why did you want to give Sintara a say?

**Cord Jefferson:** Do you know the term talented tenth?

**Brooke Gladstone:** No.

**Cord Jefferson:** W. E. B. Du Bois, he didn't coin the term, but he used to write about it. Basic encapsulation is that 10% of Black people are going to be the ones who bring the other 90% out of their misery. It's like it's up to the talented tenth to be the salvation of all of Black people. I think a more contemporary equivalent would be pull up your pants and behave in front of white people. Respectability politics thing that we need great Black people to help the other ones who are not great. The thing that I didn't want this movie to ever do was to scold Black people. I never wanted it to be about respectability politics, never wanted it to scold Black art. That's something Jeffrey and I decided on very early. That's the first question that he asked me when he sat down was, "Is this some talented tenth thing that you're trying to do?"

**Brooke Gladstone:** He was worried that you wanted to make these people credits to their race.

**Cord Jefferson:** Exactly. To me, that told me that he was even more right for the job than I had thought because he's thinking about these things in the way that I'm thinking about these things. To me, one of the ways that we avoided doing that was to humanize Sintara, was to hear her side of the story, and to understand that actually, this wasn't some person who was leveraging other people's agony for treasure. This is somebody who, as she says, I'm just giving the market what it wants.

What I definitely don't want people to walk away thinking is that anybody associated with the film believes that movies about slavery, movies about inner city poverty, movies about drug dealers, that this movie is saying that that kind of art is not worthy of existing. In fact, I really like *12 Years a Slave*. I really like *Boyz n the Hood*.

**Brooke Gladstone:** It's a question of more stories, not less.

**Cord Jefferson:** Exactly. It's a question of why are the people with their hands on the purse strings so interested in green-lighting these kinds of stories over and over and over again, as opposed to why are artists on the ground level making art. They're making the art because they're making art within the parameters and institutions that have existed generations before they have.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Your film is so wonderfully meta because it is about a book which is about a book and it's adapted from a book, which makes it all the more dizzying that your film, which is so critical of the institutions that bestow prizes, have been swept up in an awards race of its own. What's that ride been like?

**Cord Jefferson:** We made this movie under no auspices. We made it with very little money and very little time relative to the movies that we are now in conversation with. It feels amazing. It certainly feels meta, but that was the intention. Percival's book is metatextual, and I felt like it was important for the movie to be metatextual. I think that's one of the things that's been very fun about it's seeing it all play out and I love it.

**Brooke Gladstone:** I noticed you didn't have nearly as much of Monk's novel in the film, but you did a great job of boiling it down except it wasn't nearly as offensive, which I guess was to avoid an X rating and to use the term differently.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes, exactly. [laughs]

**Brooke Gladstone:** Then there's the ending. It continues after the novel ends with a specific reference to Hollywood as opposed to the book world. Is there any way to explain without serious spoiling how and why you took it there or anything about that?

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes. This is a larger conversation than just the book world. This is a conversation that encompasses basically all aspects of culture.

**Brooke Gladstone:** The film industry obviously has been very receptive to the critique your film has offered up. I guess as long as it's about Hollywood it's okay.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes. Look, Hollywood is the most naval-gazing industry in the world, probably--

**Brooke Gladstone:** Except for media, maybe.

[laughter]

**Cord Jefferson:** Well, it's all the same these days.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Yes, you're right.

**Cord Jefferson:** I also think that Victor Hugo said that nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. I think that people are ready for something different.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Speaking of awards, in 2020, you won an Emmy for your work on *Watchman*. You even went viral for thanking your therapist in your acceptance speech.

**Cord Jefferson:** Thank you to my therapist Ian. I am a different man than I was two years ago. I love you. You have changed my life in many ways.

**Brooke Gladstone:** You've credited therapy with giving you the insight to depict a character like Monk. How so?

**Cord Jefferson:** Absolutely. There's two characters in the film that I empathize with very deeply, and that's Monk and Cliff.

[video excerpt]

**Monk:** Did you know dad had affairs?

**Clifford:** Oh, for sure.

**Monk:** Why did I have no idea? Why am I the last to know?

**Clifford:** Because you love them too much.

**Brooke Gladstone:** The reason I empathize with these guys so deeply is because up until very recently, I was similar to these men in that they had built up walls between themselves and the rest of the world. I grew up in a household that I think is similar to a lot of households that Black men grow up in. My father was present. My father coached my soccer team. My father helped me with my

homework. My father spent a lot of time with me, but he was not emotionally available. Anytime that it came time to talk about more intimate things and my feelings he didn't really know how to do that and wasn't accommodating in that way.

I grew up thinking that vulnerability was a weakness. I think it goes without saying that I had a severe anger management problem for a very long time in my life till I started really seeking therapy about it. Then I saw a therapist one time who said something that I think about all the time, which is she said, "Underneath anger, particularly for men, is pain or fear," and that men are not socialized to say, 'I feel afraid.' Men are not socialized to say, 'You hurt my feelings.' Instead, we raise our voices and we throw things and we throw temper tantrums.

I just understand those guys. Monk is just so deeply angry from the moment the movie starts, but the great thing that Jeffrey does, and what I wanted to make sure came through in the movie, is that you always see the pain that's underneath there. You see the hurt and you see that this rage is just coming from a place of impotence and insecurity and tragedy. To me, that was my life exactly up until about five or six years ago.

**Brooke Gladstone:** You said if you tried to make this movie six years ago, you don't think you would've been able to do it right.

**Cord Jefferson:** Yes. I wouldn't have been able to get past the surface. I wouldn't have been able to really understand, I think who this guy Monk was. I think that I would've made a film that was probably much more celebratory of Monk and probably considered Monk this crusading hero who is out to teach all the awful people the errors of their ways. To me, what therapy and the deep work on myself has done is just allowed me to understand human beings more. I think that every artist who's interested in the human condition, if you're not in therapy, then you are limiting your work in very, very, very major ways.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Thank you so much, Cord.

**Cord Jefferson:** Thank you. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you.

**Brooke Gladstone:** Same here. Cord Jefferson is the writer and director of the film, *American Fiction*. *On the Media* is produced by Eloise Blondiau, Molly Rosen, Rebecca Clark-Callender, and Candice Wang with help from Shaan Merchant. Katya Rogers is our executive producer. *On the Media* is a production of WNYC studios. Micah Loewinger will be back next week. I'm Brooke Gladstone.