Dan Seed:

Hello and welcome to Big Ideas. A podcast from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. I'm your host Dan Seed from the University School of Journalism and Mass Communication. We're joined, for this episode, by poet Cyrus Cassells, a professor in the Department of English here at Texas State, a 2019 Guggenheim fellow in the Creative Arts for Poetry and a 2020 inductee to the Texas Institute of Letters. Mr. Cassells is also a winner of the National Poetry Series, a Lambda Literary Award, a Lannan Literary Award, the William Carlos Williams award, and two Pushcart Prizes in addition to being a finalist for the Balcones Prize and the NAACP Image Award. Cyrus, thanks for joining us.

Cyrus Cassells:

Great to be here.

Dan Seed:

You're joining us from halfway across the world, across the country from Hawaii. And we'll get into that here in a little bit, because there's a reason that you're there and you're accomplishing some of your work while you're there as well, your next piece that you're doing, but I want to start with your background. What drew you to poetry as your life's work? How'd you get to this point?

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, I always was aware from early childhood that I wanted to be a writer and I just assumed that I would be a novelist. So the irony is that I didn't really write a novel until I was 16. I'm writing a second novel. So when I was about 16, I read Sylvia Plath's book Ariel, and it was the first poetry that I had read that excited me and I thought was very powerful. So I started writing poetry of my own. And of course it was greatly imitated because I was a teenager. My parents thought that poetry was something that depressed people wrote, because all the poets I was interested in were like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath had been suicide, so they thought it was a dangerous profession. And I had to move on to different, more upbeat subject matter before they're like, "Oh yeah, poetry can be about all sorts of things." It's not just about existential crises or terror, depression or grief. All great subjects, of course, but not the only subjects.

Dan Seed:

Yeah, not the only things. So at 16 and you start to get into poetry and, how do you evolve yourself as an artist to the point where there is a point where I'm sure it clicked like, oh I'm a poet.

Cyrus Cassells:

That actually took me quite a long time. I've had a very freakish career in the sense that I never went to graduate school because I won the National Poetry Series when I was 23 years old. So what happens was I ended up getting a degree. I studied acting at Stanford all four years and I could have easily had a double major in Drama, but I decided to get a degree in Film and Broadcasting because I had always an interest in the movies, right. So I was actually basically trained to be a film actor, and a film person. And then all of a sudden in the year after I got out of Stanford and I moved to San Francisco to begin teaching and working, I started writing a book of poems and then Al Young, who was the judge for the National Poetry Series, called me up one day and he said, "Well, I hear you've written a poetry book." And he said, "Can I see it?" I said, "Well, it's not really done." He said, "Well, you think you can get it done within three months or so?" I said, "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

Cyrus Cassells:

So I did get it done and... I wasn't totally done actually, but I sent it off to him. And then about a month, almost two months later, I saw him at a concert of a mutual friend of ours, he says, "Well, get ready because I chose your book." So, I get sort of tapped on the shoulder to become a poet publicly, before I was actually ready. There's actually 12 years between my first book and the second book. And it took me many years to accept that this was really going to be my vocation.

Cyrus Cassells:

I was still fairly keyed into the film stuff and the acting stuff here, but what it did allow me... Winning the National Poetry Series so early. And I think maybe I was the youngest winner ever in the history of their series, which began... I think 79 or 80. It gave me a lot of freedom in my twenties to travel. I went to Spain, I started doing translation work. When my book was published in the National Poetry Series, I moved from California to Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod to accept the fellowship there at the Fine Arts Work Center, which was organized by Stanley Kunitz and some other great writers. And our latest Nobel Louise Gluck was one of the first fellows in the Fine Arts Work Center and Stanley Kunitz was her mentor at Columbia. So I thought to myself, if people are going to take me seriously as a poet, I should more actively pursue the poetry.

Cyrus Cassells:

So the first thing I applied for was the Work Center and I got in and it's a seven month residency there in Cape Cod. And that did a lot in terms of moving me forward. I also had wonderful teachers at Stanford, Alan Shapiro. Who's a wonderful, wonderful poet. He's been a finalist for the Pulitzer prize, the national book award, was one of my teachers. Linda Gregerson, who's also a super accomplished poet who teaches in Ann Arbor, university of Michigan, was my tutor. So even though I was doing the acting and during the film, I won the Academy of American Poets Prize here at Stanford and John LaRue who just passed away recently, the pitching liner sort of took me under his wing and said, "Oh yeah, we need to encourage Cyrus." He and my other teachers connected me with Linda Gregerson and that was a great boon, to have a tutor who was a graduate student who went on to become such an important, significant American poet there, so...

Cyrus Cassells:

One of the things that happened to me in Provincetown was I met great poets, I had to introduce [Gali Conelle 00:06:03], I think I've never been more nervous in my life. And I got to sit at the table with some very significant writers. I actually had dinner with Gali Conelle, Phil Levine, Alan Dugan and Marilynne Robinson, who just published her latest Gilead book. And for years I was telling people how brilliant Marilynne Robinson was. I said she has the most brilliant conversations I've never met.

Cyrus Cassells:

So it took 25 years from about the time I met her, to her sort of Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Gilead. And then I was so pleased when she did a series of talks with Obama. I thought, that's it, she's like perfect person to do that here. So looking back at it now, it's amazing to me that I got a chance to sit at the table with these great poets. I also went to the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union with a group of writers. They went with the Edgar Doctorow and Frank Conroy. He used to run the Iowa Writers Workshop, and I was the youngest person in that group. So they saw something in me. They come and have me hang out with them, right?

Dan Seed:

Right. And I was to say all these luminaries that you're mentioning, and it seems like there might've been some reluctance maybe on your part initially, right. To go this way. It's almost like you said you were tapped on the shoulder?

Cyrus Cassells:

Yeah. It was like the Cinderella dynamic. I call it the Cinderella. So I was [inaudible 00:07:31] to be a poet, but what happened was I think about halfway through my seven month residency, the Work Center, I got writer's block and it lasted for a couple of years. And at the time I was too embarrassed to let anyone know. I just sort of like kept it as my secret. And I sing a lot in my studio there in Provincetown because I come from a very musical family. Both my brothers are accomplished singers and rock musicians. So, and then the other way I got out of not being able to write, was I started translating, Catalan poetry and speedly got interested in that. I have this crazy notion that I was going to just move to Barcelona and live there. I just began researching the literature. And I met David H Rosenthal, who was the main translator in Catalan literature into English. And he introduced me to people. So I've been a Catalan translator off and on for all those years.

Dan Seed:

But did you feel pressure as such a young writer that had come into this [crosstalk 00:08:35]?

Cyrus Cassells:

Yeah, I felt some pressure, but one of the things I realized was that my becoming a public poet coincided with my recognition that I wasn't so developed socially, I've been as straight A student, Stanford student, I've been the sort of prodigy person, but I didn't think I was that developed, actually. I was like, in other words, I was a school brain.

Dan Seed:

Right, sure.

Cyrus Cassells:

And then suddenly I found myself in a different part of the country having different experiences. I didn't feel like I was a kid, I just felt like, oh, I have a lot to learn in other areas of my life. I also learned that people didn't have to appreciate my poetry to know me or to like me or participate with me that it's sort of like an extra thing. I know when my first book came out, I wanted everybody to read. It's like, oh, you're not going to just stand [inaudible 00:09:28] really mad, unless you read my poetry. Now I'm like, eh, you know.

Dan Seed:

There's you and your work. Right. And so let's talk a little bit about your work. Reading up on your work, I've seen different reviews, different articles, written interviews with you, where people have described your work as everything. And again, these are quotes from articles. Your work has been described as spiritual, erotic, romantic, concerned with natural beauty, among other descriptions. How did you come to write poetry that, I don't want to say fits, but draws from these areas? Was it part of that natural progression and things that you just experienced and saw?

Cyrus Cassells:

I grew up in the military traveling a lot. I was born in Delaware, but I don't even remember, I was born at the Dover Air Force Base.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cyrus Cassells:

Which I didn't know until I was a grown man is actually the Atlantic Morgue. And then I lived in the Pacific Port Travis and it actually affected my childhood because I realized as I got older, that there was all this grief going around in the environment there at Travis, the bodies are coming from the Vietnam war and I didn't have any language to express that that was going on in the environment. I had to say the vague sadness about Vietnam. And I couldn't understand because my father wasn't... My father, wasn't in con... He did tour duty at various points, but he wasn't in combat duty. So I kept thinking, where's this feeling coming from?

Cyrus Cassells:

And then, I think I was reading Philip Roth, The Human Stain where it was, oh, you were there in that place of mourning and the place where the bodies came. That's why you have this sort of vague sense of sadness and tragedy in connection to the war there. And I was still a kid. I think it was in third grade. So my mother's from North Carolina, my father was from Detroit. So every summer, I was raised mostly in the Mojave Desert. And every summer my father would drive us in a blue Dodge station wagon, going across the whole country to get to North Carolina where I stayed with my grandparents. I grew up with a lot of travel. We also lived in Seattle and other places there. As an adult, I just began to travel. I traveled to Mexico when I was a teenager. I would say recently for the first time in Mexico city, since I was 17 to do a little bit of teaching.

Cyrus Cassells:

And it's actually becoming a new project about Frida Kahlo because, by chance I ended up staying next door to Frida Kahlo's blue house when Brent is a British film director. Her property used to be part of the Kahlo family property. So I thought to myself looking at Frida's garden for like five weeks, right before the pandemic. It was January early February. So now I'm fascinated about Frida Kahlo, I mean she's always been an interesting artist, but now I have something, I feel like something's bubbling up to say what it was like to have her aura there, because she was such an inspiring, unique distinctive person. In fact, it's the most visited place in Mexico City now. And it was up there, access accessible for me. Right.

Dan Seed:

And so what you're describing, it sounds like when some of us, we find something interesting, we crawl down the rabbit hole, right. Of research or reading. And for you, it sounds like that rabbit hole pops to the surface in a creative calling.

Cyrus Cassells:

That's definitely the way to describe it. And I think because I'm an actor, I just sort of embraced it and leap in. I don't think too much about it. So I'm actually going to be writing about Frida Kahlo's early life and her first relationship with her boyfriend Alejandro. And he was the one who was with her when she had their horrible accident that completely changed her life. I really related to that stage of her life. And, sort of fell into research about them, the stage before Diego, super famous muralist husband. Because Alexandra was also a fascinating man and became a great orator and the political activist there and was really responsible for sparking her interest in painting. She was actually studying to be a doctor when she was in a terrible accident that affected her life so much there. So yeah, I kind of fall into things.

Cyrus Cassells:

In terms of spirituality, I've always been interested in that. My latest published book is a series of poems, 12 poems that I wrote in a monastery, Christ [inaudible 00:13:55] Monastery in Northern New Mexico in Abiquiu, which is really famous as the home of Georgia O'Keeffe the great painter.

Dan Seed:

And I was just bringing that up. When you brought up Frida Kahlo that you were staying next to her house and here your book More Than Watchman at Daybreak, you're near Georgia O'Keeffe's ranch. And it feels like you're you get yourself in these places that have... There's meaning to them, but there's also inspiration.

Cyrus Cassells:

True. How I got to the monastery first was 10 years ago, I have stayed in a BNB in Santa Fe. And this woman said, asked me if I'd ever been to Christ in the Desert. I said, no, I don't know what it is. She says, "Oh it's my favorite place in the world. It's the most beautiful spot." And she said, "I want you to go." So she gave me a picnic basket and some food, and it's 12 miles down an unpaved road to get to the monastery. So when you first go [inaudible 00:14:51] you think you're never going to get there, because it's winding and you're just going around and around and around. And then you get here. I sort of fell in love with it. Like a lot of people, part of what's different about that area is it has these saffron... I call them saffron yellow. She calls them Naples yellow. Cliffs, like I've never seen anywhere else in the world.

Cyrus Cassells:

On the road to the monastery, lots of beautiful red rock, near Ghost Ranch, which is one of her places that she lived there. So I would go there over the years. I live part-time in Santa Fe and anytime I wanted to get lotion, I liked the lotion the monks made. [inaudible 00:15:26] And I thought it's time to go to get some more lotion from the monks. Little did I know that a friend of mine that I hadn't seen for years, like in 2011, became part of the monastery. I didn't know he had returned to the religious life. He'd been a monk when he was younger, but when I met him he was a lawyer in New York, very different world.

Dan Seed:

I was going to say that's quite a change.

Cyrus Cassells:

Oh yeah. Well, he's also an immigration lawyer. So Father [Bededex 00:15:51] is the one who invited me there. He came to a reading of mine in his house and said, "Oh, I want you to come." And so I started coming periodically. He offered me a hermitage to stay in right in. And the first one was close to where the novices were. And then later on, I was given a beautiful big hermitage by the Chama river, away from the monastery, so it was like a 15 minute walk to the monastery. So it was truly isolated. And it was the first time in my life where I was incommunicado. I couldn't... There was no phone, there was no internet. And it proved to be such a creative boon for me. When I arrived Christmas of 2017, I thought it was taking a break from poetry because my book, The Gospel, according to Wild Indigo was coming out the next month.

Cyrus Cassells:

I thought, well, I'm just going to take a break from poetry. But something about being in the desert was so powerful for me that I've been writing every day, ever since. I mean I just don't think I'm going to be stopping. So it really did trigger a very powerful creative surge in me. And while I was there in the desert, I made the decision to start doing reviewing films and TV, something I had done as an earlier journalist, but had given up when I started acting very seriously because I thought I wasn't supposed to critique my fellow actors. And in the desert, I was like, I don't care. I have a passion for movies. And that was a huge success because I'd done some poetry reviews for the Washington Spectator. And I said, well, can I do a movie review? And can I do that? So, I ended up getting nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for the reviews.

Cyrus Cassells:

So, and I kind of put that aside for now while I'm working on a novel, but that was like a wonderful thing. I'm like a... Film critic it's like a perfect job for me, because I have a degree in film [crosstalk 00:17:47] well I started acting when I was 12 years old. I was in a very serious youth theater. So people expected me to be an actor. I expected to be an actor. I had a lot of support, even from my parents, people go, "Oh, this is your gift," right? And I think it's still one of mine, but clearly writing is the main one.

Dan Seed:

Right. I was going to say, I think you've done pretty well with the writing. Right?

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, what you probably don't know is I did a lot of acting at Texas State. I played Frederick Douglas in a one man show that Dr. Sandra Mayo created. And I toured area schools, this was back in 2005. And I belong to the Austin Shakespeare in Austin. And I did a lot of acting mostly last decade. I did an August Wilson play Jitney. I got nominated for some acting awards. So it really is my second sort of best thing. It's just, I don't have time for it right now.

Dan Seed:

Yeah. I mean, you're very prolific with your writing. Of course.

Cyrus Cassells:

Yeah. Yeah. Last summer I completed three books at once. It's ridiculous, but true.

Dan Seed:

That makes everybody that wants to sit down and write their great American novel very envious.

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, these are poetry, but this novel I'm working on that.

Dan Seed:

Yeah. So clearly Cyrus, you're obviously a very creative individual, very creative person. To get not meta but to kind of look at things in our current situation, and you're in Hawaii now, you had relayed that you were previously in Oregon, there when the fire outbreak had happened. And then you ended up going to Hawaii as a result of that. But in the times that we live in where everything is crazy and chaotic, as a creative person with many outlets, your writing, your acting. How important is that kind of creativity, that kind of expression now in particular, in order to reach people with a message and how do you see your work in that regard, if you do?

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, when the pandemic began, I was on the Guggenheim fellowship. I was in San Francisco doing research. I had development leave in the fall and I was staying at the Healing Relative Foundation in Taos back in New Mexico in the fall. So, I look back on it now. And since San Francisco and Berkeley, we were the first cities sheltered in place. I wouldn't even know what it was, right. I was so lucky to have all of this travel going on before I had to shelter in place. And since San Francisco is the second densest city to New York city, it was intense to be sheltered there. I was sheltered there for four months.

Dan Seed:

Oh wow.

Cyrus Cassells:

Where my god-son invited me to come to Oregon since he was beginning a job managing an oncology clinic about an hour outside of Portland. So I had a lot of physical reading this summer. And so, the fires came and then the smoke was so intense for a couple of weeks that my family suggested to like evacuate because of my history of asthma, [inaudible 00:20:56].

Cyrus Cassells:

So in terms of the pandemic, I wrote a couple poems. I have a new book that's just gone to the typesetter. It's a very political book. It's not very much like my other books. It's kind of a record of this period in history, I guess. And it was spurred by the murder of my close friend and assistant's father in Houston in a stand-your-ground incident, where he was shot coming out of a post office. And I guess he had parked in a handicap parking space and this other man had a scuffle with him and shot him. And he died eventually after a couple of weeks. And because of the stand-your-ground law, he didn't have to spend any real serious jail time, but eventually the grand jury found him guilty because the forensic evidence was that there wasn't a scaffold. He just shot my friend's father through the mail.

Cyrus Cassells:

So this is something I sat on for a year. I thought, do I really want to say something? And then it happened to this other family in Florida. That's so much better now in case. And I thought, well, I think it's time to let people know that you were in the vicinity of this Houston situation, at least having someone close to me go through it. Because at first we were like, there was no surveillance. So it seems like my father has been shot and we didn't know what happened. And it was just a nightmare, such a nightmare. And I was actually overseas working again. And all I could do was ask a friend of mine, who's a journalist at Houston Chronicle to look into it. So they sent a reporter and did a beautiful story in the fall.

Cyrus Cassells:

This all happened in May when his father was shot here. So this new book, it's called The World That the Shooter Left Us, is about that incident and responding to that level of violence and critiquing the violence in our culture to a degree. It's also a lot about the border crisis and the detention and the child detention. It's a big book in four different parts, but I guess it's overtly political. But the reality is I wrote it last summer, not this past summer, but summer of 2019 in Spain in Italy. And it sounds like I wrote it this past summer, responding to what was going on. So now, and I wrote it in two months. I don't understand how he could write so much poetry. I didn't use all the poems I wrote last summer. I wrote about 40 poems in two months on top of the other two books that I completed.

Cyrus Cassells:

So somehow the three books allowed me to get out this very painful, challenging political poetry in top of everything. Unfortunately for me, my publicist said, "We want double them." So I got a double contract, but I could never have imagined.

Dan Seed:

Sure.

Cyrus Cassells:

Normally it takes me about three years to write a book of poems. So I have one book that took me two months, did some fiddling. One that took me, really more like nine months. And then the monastery book was longer than a couple of years or so going there and writing, and then figuring out what I wanted to say or express. Mostly it was about the beauty of the landscape and the sense of being among the monks. I'm not a Catholic, so it was such a rare opportunity to live among the monks so part of my thank you wish is to give them poetry readings, or help them with their poetry, and to create the book as a thank you for them. It's originally part of one of the other books. And they thought, "No, no, this needs to be its own book here."

Dan Seed:

Your travel that you've brought back. I mean, you're mentioning all these places that you've gone, all of these people that you've met. When you look back at all of the places you've been, I'm not going to ask you what your favorite is, but...

Cyrus Cassells:

I do have a favorite actually.

Dan Seed:

What is your favorite?

Cyrus Cassells:

Italy.

Dan Seed:

Italy. Okay. So...

Cyrus Cassells:

I lived in Italy for five years, it's still my favorite country.

Dan Seed:

Italy's... Okay, so this idea of traveling the world and experiencing different places, environments, people, cultures, could you have ever, in your wildest imagination growing up on an air force base in California and ever imagined that you would have had these experiences, how has that changed you?

Cyrus Cassells:

You know what? I could, because of my father and my Spanish teacher.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cyrus Cassells:

They kind of prepared me to be this world travel person. My Spanish teacher was my most impactful teacher in all of my education. And she was from Guadalajara and she's a big believer in culture. And with my dad, the older I got, I started traveling more and I would talk about a certain place. And then he would tell me, "Oh yeah, I was there. I was in Udine in Northern Italy. I stayed for a week." Like my father was in the Congo, he was in Greenland, he was everywhere.

Dan Seed:

Right.

Cyrus Cassells:

But I think by the time I was grown, he was really sort of tired of traveling. It was so much related to air force business or industry business. But they were all over. The more I traveled, the more I would say, "Hey, have you been to..." "Oh yeah, I've already been here." I think what's become clear to me, my father has been dead for 21 years. And my mother's for about 14. As I come from a super distinguished African-American family, it's just sort of crazy my family is just... Someone said, "Cyrus you're black-blue blood." But my uncle Bill was the president of the Tuskegee airmen.

Dan Seed:

Oh wow.

Cyrus Cassells:

He went to college with Jackie Robinson.

Dan Seed:

Wow.

Cyrus Cassells:

And his best friend was Nat King Cole. So I only found these things out at the funeral. On my mother's side, my uncle Claude was one of Dr. King's physicians. So my cousins grew up with Dr. King's children.

Dan Seed:

Oh wow.

Cyrus Cassells:

My cousin Claudia was one of the first people that Coretta hired for the King foundation. And on and on and on. Jacqueline Woodson who just got a MacArthur is my cousin. Stedman Graham, Oprah's partner, is my cousin. So I know why these people, people can't quite figure out what I am, but actually I come from this super rad, incredible African-American family.

Dan Seed:

That's absolutely incredible. Just, I mean, all the connection that you're mentioning-

Cyrus Cassells:

I found out when my father died in 1999, that he helped to desegregate West point. He, this is like 1950 or 51, he and six other black cadets, they refused to room with each other. So they stood outside of their rooms for hours. And finally, what did they call it, the big grass, relented there.

Dan Seed:

Right.

Cyrus Cassells:

So that's my stock. And that's a lot of trailblazing, brave bouts. So I think it was in me, I just had to find out more... I think what happens with a lot of families is that your parents try and keep you from the pain and the things that they went through. And since my parents came from that segregated world and I was like the first generation in the integrated world, I think they didn't want to burden me with some of the more painful episodes that they went through.

Cyrus Cassells:

But when your parents died, it's still kind of a puzzle. You're still putting together the pieces, right. So recently, one of the things I do is I'm the chair of the LA Times Book Prize in Poetry. And once we had this ceremony, I went to a party at USC. This man came up to me and I'm actually the third Cyrus, my father was Senior. So now, "Are you related to Cyrus consultant Detroit?" I said, "Yeah, that was my dad." He said, "Oh, your father was legendary. He was the smartest person ever in our school. And he went to West point. And when we were growing up, everyone said, 'well, maybe you too could be like Cyrus consults,'" I thought, wow okay.

Dan Seed:

Yeah.

Cyrus Cassells:

It was very humbling because I thought I was smarter than my own. Apparently it's partly genetic, maybe just a little bit. Right?

Dan Seed:

Yeah a little bit.

Cyrus Cassells:

My father used to tease me and call me serious because I was such a bookworm. But what I figured out was that my father was in graduate school in Seattle University of Washington, so he always had books around when I was just coming into consciousness. So I think that's where I got it from, because I was such a bookworm kid that, the company would come over and I'd still have a nose in a book.

Dan Seed:

Right.

Cyrus Cassells:

[inaudible 00:29:14] "Why are you reading Dickens when aunt so-and-so has come to call." I'm like, because it's so interesting. So my family is extraordinary, and my mother was all pretty literary too, and went to Howard University. So it's probably like the premier black school in the country and my relatives were Howard administrators, so I come from very trailblazing and educated stock. We were expected to deliver.

Dan Seed:

Right.

Cyrus Cassells:

[inaudible 00:29:45] My way I have, right? [inaudible 00:29:47] I delivered.

Dan Seed:

I think you have more than delivered. And I think that message that you just talked about reading and being surrounded by literature and exploring the world and all that, is so very important. And I think personally, I feel like a lot of us nowadays miss that because of the times that we live in the digital nature, the solitary nature, looking at screens constantly. And so...

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, I think you could be a world citizen and never leave your house, I think we're learning that here. But I have to say that I've always been kind of an old soul person in that sense I had such a powerful sense of history...

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cyrus Cassells:

And I related to world history so much. So I think that was also part of it too. And that allowed me permission to travel. I mean, that's why Rome is pretty much my favorite city, because I liked those layers of civilization.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Your current project that you're working on. Tell us a little bit about it. I know that we talked beforehand and it's a little different than the works that you've done previously.

Cyrus Cassells:

Well, as I said, I wanted to be a novelist from age eight or nine. So finally, a couple of years ago, I read a really big novel about a fictional Harlem Renaissance poet. I haven't sold it yet, but Charles Johnson, a really amazing national book award winning novelist, took a big chunk of the novel, which is set in Freedom Summer that the civil rights movement, for the Chicago Quarterly Review. So I'm going to get hopefully more intention for that. Since childhood, I've been really fascinated with Father Damian and wanting to write something about Father Damien. So when it came time for me to do a proposal for like development lead, I decided to focus on being here. And I've been trying for years, I've been coming to Hawaii for about 16 years, just on vacation to get to Molokai Yi, which was the site of the [inaudible 00:31:33] on the North shore of Makai, never successful.

Cyrus Cassells:

Finally, I enlisted a friend of mine and Father Damian was also his hero. So somehow going together seemed to make it happen. So I went on a tour spring break of 2009 and just sort of took it in, and hopefully in a respectful way, and then began doing research about leprosy. The big shock is that apparently 90 to 95% of the world is immune to leprosy. So when this was going on in the 19th century, they had no idea. They just thought it was this incredibly contagious thing.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cyrus Cassells:

Which may have been the case in terms of Hawaiian Islanders as being susceptible to quote "foreign diseases," because they were susceptible to all sorts of other things that were brought by the merchant ships there. So that kind of poignance to what had happened there at Kalaupapa. So, Father Damien was a Belgian priest who arrived, he actually, his brother got sick and he decided to take over for his brother. And it was his first time on the big island, and I asked him to come to Molokai. So a year after 1873, so he's one of the rare individuals who actually contracted leprosy and died. And he is now a Saint in the Catholic church as is the mother Marianne who followed him. They're both now saints in the Catholic church. So, I just have been pursuing that interest in him.

Cyrus Cassells:

So I took notes last year, and then nothing really happened until the [inaudible 00:33:10], when I was sequestered in San Francisco and then all these sort of characters arrived for me to consider. It's a novel, it's mostly fiction. It's a tricky thing to use historical figures and then have the rest of them not be historical figures. But that seems to be the case.

Cyrus Cassells:

So it centers around a young man whose father was a Naval officer whose mother dies from [inaudible 00:33:33]. And he decides to become a Catholic priest and to go to Molokai. He's a very spiritual character. And a lot of people are fascinated by him because he's like the handsomest person ever. It's sort of an erotic comedy in that level. And everyone's like falling in love with Father [Ellahue 00:33:50], right? When I was working on this project, and it's such a heavy project in terms of writing it during a pandemic about something akin to a pandemic. And the last parts of this new novel are set in the flu pandemic. So what I thought was a big multilayered novel was actually becoming a trilogy, where each pandemic gets its own focus.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cyrus Cassells:

So what was happening in San Francisco, I was writing about the AIDS pandemic and I was actually there as a young person, like I tell my students, I think you're not the first group of 20 somethings to be around of just sort of a pandemic, because that was true for me. It was right there in San Francisco. And my colleague, I worked for a publisher. It was one of the first people publicly talking about his AIDS diagnosis there. I remember walking down the street and hearing him talking about it on the stage in [inaudible 00:34:45] thinking, "Oh, that's why he hasn't been at work lately." So I really was right there at the start of the pandemic. And, so I'm writing about that as well. And then I started to write a little bit about what was happening in the 20th century. So that novel has to do with what happened in Northern Italy and what was happening in San Francisco. And links the characters from the other book. So I have this big project, and then the Hawaiian part just took off.

Cyrus Cassells:

I thought, this is so juicy and good to me and interesting with characters. The novel is called after Emily Dickinson, it's called the Going of the Inland Soul to See. And I chose the title because Father Damien grew up in a... His father was a corn merchant. So he's also a landlocked kid who ended up living in the Pacific. So it's about people who come to the Pacific, whether it's San Francisco, or Hawaii.

Dan Seed:

Right.

Cyrus Cassells:

And their kind of spiritual journey with it. So... And, it's very different from the other novel. This new novel is in the third person. The other novel has 10 different first person narrators. It's really a huge complicated thing. It's really more like Cloud Atlas, which is why I'm having a hard time selling it. But I'm very excited because the new novel, Going of the Inland Soul to See, it's just kind of flowed out of me. I think I'll have it done next year.

Dan Seed:

Well, Cyrus, I want to thank you so much for joining us.

Cyrus Cassells:

Sure.

Dan Seed:

Great interview. Very interesting. We look forward at your next work that as you said, you're working on now. And again, thank you. And thanks to our audience again for listening, we'll be back with another episode of Big Ideas next month. Until then stay healthy, stay safe, keep learning.

Speaker 3:

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