Life Stories
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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Reginald Dwayne Betts, Poet and Lawyer
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Interviewed by: Noah Remnick
Total Running Time: 29 minutes and 57 seconds

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
After nine years in prison, the judge told me, I'm under no illusion that sending you to prison will help. I think we asked the wrong questions. We ask how do we feel about violent crimes and nonviolent crimes, as opposed to how do we feel about the fact that we have a system where a judge sends a 16 year old kid to prison and says, I am under no illusion of sending you to prison? We'll help.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories
Reginald Dwayne Betts
Poet and Lawyer
A Voice For The Incarcerated

00:00:35:00
NOAH REMNICK:
You're writing and legal work is obviously deeply informed by your family and community. How would you describe the Maryland of your youth?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Oh man, I grew up in a black belt. Um, you know, it's so interesting to think about Suitland, Maryland and PG County, Maryland, and what it meant for me to be a 14 year old and a 15 year old, particularly because this is, you know, pre-Internet era. And this is really, you know, I was my whole life was circumscribed by the three, 4 or 5 mile radius between, um, where I grew up at and maybe as far out as, you know, Northern Virginia. And, um, it was not a landscape where we talked about poetry. We talked about Tupac, and we talked about biggie, and we talked about NAS. You know, it was a landscape that was dominated by by sound, about music. I mean, I used the piece to do backflips as a kid. I mean, I used to do like five, ten, 15 somersaults in a row. I think about, um, my childhood landscape. And I know that it was crime and it it was violence. I know that we're talking about the 80s and the war on drugs. Uh, I remember the moments where we would go outside the next day and see, um, the holes in the in the concrete and in a brick because, you know, it was a shooting the night before. I remember when the whole neighborhood was shut down because, um, it was a hostage situation. But those are the moments that defined my childhood. You know, the moments that defined my childhood. Uh, you know, learning what throwback takeaways it is. It is really, um, understanding what it meant to to see a whole neighborhood of people who had to, like, carry their clothes to the laundry mat, walk five, ten, 15 minutes to the laundry mat because the laundry in the neighborhood didn't work. Um, I learned a lot, you know, from the community where I came from. But maybe the thing that I learned most of all is, is now to think about it is, is the world can overwhelm you and you can believe that the world is just filled

with whatever your troubles are and sorrows and and you remember children who live in the same kind of world with those same troubles and those those same sorrows, but somehow they are able to move from day to day to day, not holding on to it, to the way we do. And so, um, maybe the best parts of me and the best parts of what I can do in the work that I try to do, um, come from the moments when I remember that.

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NOAH REMNICK:
What was your family life like?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
My mom was a, uh, um, single mom, so I was an only child. And, you know, I learned how to be by myself, which is which is useful. You know, my mom was going to work. I was in for second grade. My mom would be gone to work before I woke up in the morning. She would wake me up and make me, like, take a shower and get dressed and then let me go back to sleep. And then when she got to work, she would call me and wake me up a second time. And then I would like, really get ready for school. I would eat breakfast and then I would go, I would come home. She hasn't gotten back from work yet. Um, so I grew up in a house where I learned what it means to work hard. You know what I learned? What it means to actually like the duty of a parent. Um, or somebody told me it's not just enough to be successful. It's. You have to be successful and almost look effortless. This is why we love Roger Federer. You know, it's just something about the way he plays tennis, where it just looks like he's not working hard. And, um. And my mom, I think she taught me that

one of the responsibilities of a parent is to show your child from from whatever suffering you know, that they might be dealing with. And, um, and my mom did an amazing job in doing that.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Um, I think a little bit more about that carjacking that you took part in, that 16 that sent you to prison, what was going on in your life then that led to that moment, or is it still a mystery to you now?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I mean, it's not so much as a mystery. Um, but but you do have to understand that, like, anything anybody does is a is a is a is a product of within the realm of possibility for and so, you know, we say, well, why did you commit a carjacking instead of saying, how did that become a thing that was actually in the realm of possibility? And I can say it was the fact that, like two of my classmates got murdered and nobody talked about it. Um, they both got murdered by teenagers who then went to prison and tried as adults, and nobody talked about it. I can say that the first time I heard about a carjacking was when I was 12. I can say that the the second time I heard about a carjacking was, um, when I was in ninth grade and, and a classmate, you know, I, some friends tried to carjack somebody, and one of them ended up dead. Um, but the truth is that those weren't the things that that pushed me to do it. Those just gave me a landscape of what was possible. And honestly, up into the moment I picked up a gun and I committed to robbing somebody. I would have said it was an absurd idea. I would have said it was completely

outlandish. And the rest of the story ultimately doesn't make a lot of sense, because most people don't get caught after the first time they committed a crime. And so I might be telling you a very different story today. Had I not gotten caught the next day. But it was happenstance. It was. I'm at a friend's house with my good friend, my man Marcus, and people are broke and somebody is talking about getting some money. I'm gonna get it the best way I know how. And somebody says, like, you ain't gonna do nothing. If I had a pistol, I would. You wouldn't do nothing. You wouldn't do nothing. I'm out there with you. None of us have a gun. So this is all talk. It is. Somebody walks in a room. Oh, you know my cousin got a gun. Y'all ain't trying to do nothing. And now we in a car driving, you know, to Virginia to do something that's insane. And and, you know, I say all of that not as an excuse, but as as as how sometimes overwhelming it is to know that you can start a day, a morning, thinking that you're going to end with hopes of being on a baseball team. But you in driving away from a crime scene and, uh, you know, in some ways it's maybe good fortune that I got picked up the next day because it is so hard to live in a world when you put those kind of expectations for violence on yourself and in prison forced me to confront, like, all of the absurdity of it, you know, if you ever I mean, nobody call a parent, call your mom from a jail cell as a child, you know, and like, you can lie, you know, you can't say you at your cousin house. You know, it's just this one moment where as much as you want to lie, you got to admit the thing that. I never go make rain. And I remember coming to see me, actually, one of the first times she came to see me, and I had to tell her I did it. You know, I confessed to the police, so it's not as if I could act as if I didn't do it. Yeah. I mean, you know, you spend your whole life trying to redeem yourself from that moment. It probably hurt more and more than knowing. And I heard this, this, this, this, this couple I tried to

rob that, I, I put a, um, I waved a pistol in this man's face, and I know that devastated him. He might, like, wake up at night still thinking about that, hoping to. I hope he doesn't. You know, I hope he he, like, sees me on the news and says, is that ticket to carjacked me? I'm glad he's doing something meaningful with his life. I mean, I hope that's the story, but the truth is, the thing that truly devastates me is like everything that those folks feel, I could hear in my mom's voice. And you just work. I think, um, some of us, you know, we spent a whole life trying to work our way away from that moment that you can't ever say.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Based on your personal experience and scholarship, what does how we treat incarcerated men and women teach us about our country?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
You know, it's interesting. I mean, I think it teaches us a lot about our country, but it teaches us a lot about ourselves. We forget that, uh, when we incarcerate somebody, um, the state is doing it in our name. And I think that what it tells us is that we are willing to abide by all kinds of cruelty. Um, and we don't have to think it's justified if it makes it easier for us to, uh, to manage the lives that we want to live. If it makes it easier for us not to ask questions about, uh, why a particular thing happened. We're willing to. To not have a voice against a practice. And so I think what it tells us about our country is we're a country that's still struggling to live up completely to us ideals, and where people who are still struggling to live up completely to our own

individual ideals of what it means to be, um, a member of a community, what it means to care about those who have hurt each other. Um, those who've been hurt and those who just can't figure things out.

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NOAH REMNICK:
How do you prisons blunt personal identity and creativity?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I don't think prisons blunt personal identity and creativity at all. I was in a cell with a dude that made a tattoo gun out of the motor of a Walkman. Matter of fact, his cat once took two Walkman, neither of which had the capacity to record. He built a new Walkman out of those two. Apart from those two, they had a hidden compartment where you could turn a switch on and off. And when you turn the switch on, when you push play, it was a recording device and you're wondering, wait a minute. Who cares? You got a recording device, but you don't have a microphone. But you got headphones. And those headphones will be the microphone. I mean, we in a prison cell making mixtapes, you know, we like this dude. He had the schematics. For every every television, every Walkman, and every CD player that have been released in prison in the past 20 years. You know, I know dudes who paint murals. I know a kid who who wasn't locked up with me, but was locked up somewhere else, who did a 40 by 40, a 40 foot by 40 foot mural, um, a sort of two by two foot square sheet at a time. He mailed them out, and then when he came home, he couldn't see it until he came home. This cat named Jessie Crimes. He came home and then put it all together and saw it for the first

time with his audience. You know, I mean, I, I've seen people do wonderous and miraculous things. I know people who've written novels in prison. I mean, you know, so I don't think I know people who who became somebody in prison, I mean, somebody respected. So I don't know if I would say that prison blocks creativity. I would say that prison creates more challenges than you could imagine. But, um, but McGavin is born out of those challenges. You know, I think that that prison has at times, you know, at times given us an opportunity to be more than we were, would have ever been without it. And that is not to say that's not an advertisment for prison. That is that is an endorsement of that, like the undying, um, spirit of men and women and children who find themselves confronted with this, this question. It's like, can I be more than what I was? And I want to focus on that, because if we focus on the worst of what prison does to people, we might imagine that people who go into those places can only be the worst. And I don't think that's true.

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NOAH REMNICK:
What first drew you to poetry as a young man? What world? At a point in your life back then?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I expected to go home. It was my first time getting in trouble. I mean, why wouldn't I get a second chance? I was a 16 year old kid. Who. Who was. You know, in an honest society. I was a 16 year old kid who was the class treasurer. I had braces, right? I just really expected to go home. And when it just sent me to nine years in prison, I just remember being in a holding cell

asking myself, what do you become after nine years in a cell? I have wanted to be an engineer. I planned on going to Georgia Tech, being an engineer and a point guard for the team. I was going to have a growth spurt. That didn't happen. And, uh, and I knew I wasn't going to be an engineer now that I had nine years in prison. And I just said, I'm going to be a writer. I had no idea what it meant. I didn't even tell anybody because. Because you you say something as outlandish as that, and you start telling people, and they start discouraging you. So I just carried it around in my head with me, and I started to approach the world as if I was a writer. You know, I took writing in my journal seriously. I was like, this is the beginning of some book that'll happen later. And, and I wrote and I read and then I'm like, two years later, I'm in solitary confinement for six months. And, you know. 17 years old, in prison, in solitary confinement. It's no air conditioning. It's so hot back there. And, um. And books are contraband. What am I supposed to do with hours in a day? I heard a Duke call for a book. Oh, how is he? Who is he? Ask him for a book. And then I heard books flying across the concrete. I will hear it again couple days later, and I realized that they had set up a elaborate, you know, kind of underground library. Only rule was that if you had a book and somebody asked for it, you gave it to. It's our call for a book. And somebody slides dully around with the black poets under myself. And at first I'm thinking, what am I going to do with poetry? I mean, I'm 17, I'm in prison. I ain't got no love story to tell. And I get introduced on through that book to to Langston Hughes to to Club Mackay. I get introduced to Sonia Sanchez. To Lucille Clifton. And it radically changed my life. And the reason, honestly, I tell you this, the reason is because it was this cat named Etheridge Knight that was in the book, too. And Etheridge Knight had their time in prison and he was writing poems about prison. And so all of a sudden, I had this medium that I could write

about a whole world in 15 or 20 lines. You know, part of the reason why I never told anybody I wanted to be a writer, because I didn't know what that meant. That mean I want to like James Baldwin is writing these brilliant 50 page essays. It's like, I can't do that. And would a poem say it is that, uh, you could write a whole poem that's just capturing a moment and reading Etheridge Knight's poetry. What he said was that the things I was experiencing, um, desiring to teach myself Spanish because I heard a brother on a regular speaking Spanish, um, watching his kid jump from the top tier because he didn't want to get raped. Fights, cooking meals together. The hope, the desperation drove. Struggling with what landed us in prison. Cell was like. Like he was writing poems about all of it. And he was writing poems about this 16 year old kid that was in prison named Gerald. It was his piece called For Freckle Faced Gerald. And I'm reading this in the hall and I'm thinking, damn, I'm gonna be a poet. And it made sense. And then I took to it like a I got I'm obsessive compulsive, you know, I wrote a thousand poems over the next six months. I wrote so many poems. I said, you know, I'm gonna make a book. And I folded it all up and a stack like this, and it's sometimes three poems on a page. I mean, I was getting request forms and writing and poems and request forms, and I, I ripped up a sheet and I threaded the book, and I was like, this is my book. And, um, I still got it, though, you know, I still got it. I still got the poems from from that first winter that I said, I will be a poet, which which in itself is amazing, given how hard it is to keep track of things moving from prison to prison.

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NOAH REMNICK:

A lot of your work is about the afterlife of prison. How did the label of felon, uh, continue to follow you even after you release.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
All of the obvious ways? You know, it's hard to get a job sometimes. You can't rent an apartment. Um, they asked you when your college applications. I got denied a full tuition academic scholarship to Howard University. But in other ways. Two ways that are harder really to to talk about, you know, like the first time you tell somebody that you just met who you've come to love or you think you might come to love. So it's too early in a relationship for anybody to make a commitment. Yet if you don't say this thing. I remember telling my wife, I told on our second date, we're going to car. I was such a fool. You'd never get in a car with a woman and say, look, I got to tell you something. I should have did it out in public and be like, I wanted to talk to you about that, but I'm like, I got to tell you something. And she's probably looking like, what does this fool got to say to me? I liked him, too. He bought to mess everything up. And, um, I told her, I have, uh, you know, just came home from prison, and I served eight and a half years in prison, and. She went on a third date with me, so in a fourth and I proposed and she and I'm saying yes. So it worked out. But the thing is like is something that, that, that you don't just carry in a world is something that everybody who loves you carries in the world. And, and it's easy for me to reduce what it means to carry that in the world, to like, how would not give me a scholarship or this organization that give me a job or that organization not giving me a job or or me having to explain myself in front of these admissions officers. But that's not the thing. You know, the thing is, like, I know that, um, I made a decision when I was 16 that like my

children, if I'm fortunate enough to have grandchildren, my wife, my mom, like everybody who loves me, carries that with them. And it is no amount of success that, that, that makes, you know, you would just give it up. You would be like, I would rather not carry that thing I'm okay with, like just having a job and not having that particular story and not giving everybody else that particular story. But as the story I got, you know.

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NOAH REMNICK:
In your poem Essay on Reentry, you recall having to tell your son about your past. How exactly did you describe it to him?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Um, he was, uh, he was five, actually. It turns out it. You know, it turns out that simple explanations work for children. You know, it turns out. I mean, first he was five, so he he had no real interest in. And like, the Beatles. And and what I could see was that I had to tell them because I already told them. But it's never that just one conversation, you know, it's that first conversation, and then it's the second conversation, and then it's the third. And at this point, you know, my children know more about prison than probably most Americans. Um, they've heard me talk about my experiences more and more than really anybody else. And I think once you have a child, you create this understanding that the story never gets told once and every time, like, I hurt my kid and and I heard my my oldest son, he was he was they were talking about, um, I was talking about for Ferguson and, and he says something like, yeah, I just don't understand what it means to have a father that's been in jail.

And I realized that he carries around a can of knowledge that his classmates don't. And when, when the issues of the world come into their classroom and it's around, um, police violence and is around prison and is around crime, that that that's when that other part of where he knows, um, against the to me something and the question is always will it mean something that that that he can, um, gain insight from that, that he can feel, um, like it is not this burden that he, that he carries, but, um, but that's, that's for him, you know, I mean, it's literally not something that I could deal with. And so when I told his little brother for the first time, um, honestly, he was half sleep, you know, you just cried in my arms, uh, wanting to make sure that I was good for the night because I had been out, you know, hanging out with friends. Um, it was it was after I got sworn into the bar and we were sort of celebrating, and he just was waking up because more than any those things, you know, more than me being a lawyer, more than me being a poet, he wanted me to be his father. And that didn't come with the with the need even to tell him that piece of myself that we both knew I had to tell him.

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NOAH REMNICK:
So alongside your poetry, you somehow found the time to graduate from Yale Law School. What drew you to law school in the first place, and how did you find life at a place like you?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
With unemployment. Unemployment drew me to law school. I for real, you get that from all. Your debt is about going back to college again and again.

And, um. And I couldn't get a job, man, and I, I figured if I was going to be unemployed, I'd rather be unemployed. Ivy League trained attorney, you know. And, um, and I had honestly, like, I had took and I had taken a paralegal course while I was in prison. I had done all of this advocacy work, but I was struggling to find a job that would allow me to really support, um, help support my family and in law school just seem it just seemed like the right Hail Mary. And I applied and I got into a bunch of schools, and, um, I chose Yale, um, one because it was less. I chose Yale because it was less traffic that all the rest of the places, uh, where they're going to hate me when it hit it. Uh, but, uh, but I loved the school. You know, like, um, I got to be in a clinic in my first year. Um, you know, got to work in a public defender's office. I had great classmates. I mean, people that I cared a lot about. Um. Teachers that push me. So, um, I love my experience. And in, in in a way, I thought it would. I thought it would end as me being a public defender. I thought it was me, like, actively practicing law on a regular basis. But. It was hard. You know, I mean, it's just like, um. Watching people, your clients, and you watch them go to prison. I just couldn't deal with it. I couldn't deal with people on the front end of the system not having ability, not having an audience for their redemption. You know, because the only question at the beginning is if you go to prison and if so, for how long? And so I ended up not being able to do that. But I've been able to use my my law degree in different ways, and I'm really, really happy about that, whether it's doing some legal scholarship or doing some research or really represent people, um, on parole and on clemency and using my legal education as a foundation for the way I think about what it means to transform the system.

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NOAH REMNICK:
What did you learn about our criminal justice system from your work as a public defender?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It is as unforgiving and challenging. I was had a case where this kid robbed another kid, and the police had a photo of the guy who did it, and a mom wanted to see it. And at first she kept saying, let me see the photo. And a devil. Let me see the photo that I told you about hanging with those devils and a cop is like, I'm gonna go get the photo, and they go get to follow the photo. They get it. And he passed it to us. She says he could be my son. I mean, she said it like, so low under her breath that the police didn't even hear it. They say, see, I told you, that's that devil. They didn't hear her gasp when she looked at the photo and recognized that he could be her son. And I think I'm working in the public defender's office reminding me that that the system doesn't give most of us the opportunity to had a realization that this was my head. And I used to call her, you know, she wanted to talk to me. And we talked a long time, you know, before the case got settled in. And it ended up being settled without my client going to jail, you know, ended up being settled with with him having a felony conviction. But he didn't go to jail, and he could have easily, you know, got sentenced to five, six, seven years in prison. And I think part of the reason why I know a huge part of the reason why he didn't go to jail was because this woman recognized that he could have been her son, you know? So, um, the public defender's office taught me that it's not enough space in our system for us all to have that recognition.

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NOAH REMNICK:
How can we balance our instincts towards vengeance with the need for compassion and the knowledge that prisons are so violent and ineffective?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Prisons are violent. But it's not that prisons are just violent. And it's not that prisons are bad because they're violent is prisons deprive you of your ability to thrive in a world? And a question is, what do you oh, and what would be a better way for you to pay what you owe to society, to your victim, to your community? Is it just sitting in a box for five years? For six years? For seven years? I don't know if prison is even motivated by the need for vengeance. At least that is not what we articulate as the reason for prison. Like publicly. I think most people think when they say I'm for incarceration, they're thinking about vengeance. But the system is thinking about things like deterrence. They think about things like de Capacitacion. Right. They're not thinking about vengeance. Um, a prison sentence is not supposed to be motivated by vengeance. And so what happens is you got a you got a disconnect between what is motivating a lot of the people on a street who call for more people in prison. And what is motivating the prosecutors and the judges who make those decisions. And neither one of those groups is really thinking about what would it mean for people to actually pay what they own? What does it mean to articulate what it is that you owe? I mean, that's a profoundly, profoundly difficult question, and it's more challenging. And I think we, um, it's so challenging, in fact, that we ignore that question for other questions. And by we also mean me. You know, it is. It is a much more difficult question.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Do you believe that the institution of the prison can be reformed? Is it redeemable?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Do I believe the institution that the prison came before? Look, man, I know people in prison for murder. Know a lot of people in prison for murder. Um, if I believe that those people are redeemable, I think that any institution must have something of value that could be salvaged. Right. I think that, you know, when you talk to somebody who who has caused a community, who has caused, um, somebody they love profound pain, you know, who has committed the kinds of crimes that I was locked up for. I went to prison for carjacking. Um, I think that, you know, we struggle to live in a world who believes that we could be redeemed. And, um. And I think we recognize at least I recognize the need for some kind of system as, um, a counterbalance. Uh, that could be not a factor of despair and sorrow. Uh, but a place where you could go to to to create that pathway towards redemption.

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NOAH REMNICK:
Are you able to envision a world without prisons?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Uh, you know, I know a lot of people who have been shot. So I don't know. I think I would first want to envision a world without violence. You know, I wonder if we are asking the right question. Um, one of my favorite rappers got this, got this line. He says they want peace. Tell them dudes to bring my homie back. You know, like I got this nigga some other really difficult question. And this, this book I thought was deeply powerful was called the Rose by Louis Eldritch. This man, he kills his arm. He accidentally shoots the son of his. Of his sister in law. What do you do after that happens? And everybody, some people saying that he did it on purpose. It was an accident that he was drunk, that, you know, it was negligent, that he should go to prison. And some people say, no, of course it was an accident, but it doesn't matter. Like, what do you do? And and like the next scene in the book, him and his wife are taking their son to his sister in law is like, you know, he has a now and and maybe I just think that, um, the world without prisons is not as interesting a question because. Because that question doesn't make me weep, right? Marine Le Rose. And thinking about what it means to have, like, accidentally murdered a child. And then and then your response is to give your son to this family and your son is not. Two. You know, your son is old enough to understand what's going on, right? I think that, um. I want to ask different questions. Like, what does it mean to live in a world that likes violence? And what does it mean to profoundly figure out how to hold ourselves in account or to account for what we do? I think that that's a for me, that's a more substantial kind of question, and that's the question that keeps me up at night, because as a person that represent people, I know who who kill people. I mean, we walk into the parole hearing and that's that's really what we try to speak to. And most of what we say feels like foolish. You know, it's like it's nothing sometimes that we say that accounts for the dead body

that's in the room with us. And I think that is that is what we trying to deal with. You know, that is what we're trying to be able to walk into a room and tell somebody. But wait, it's not Jesse's not the worst thing he's ever done in his world. It's not just that. It's also this. And I figured out that this is. I mean, that's the golden ticket.

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