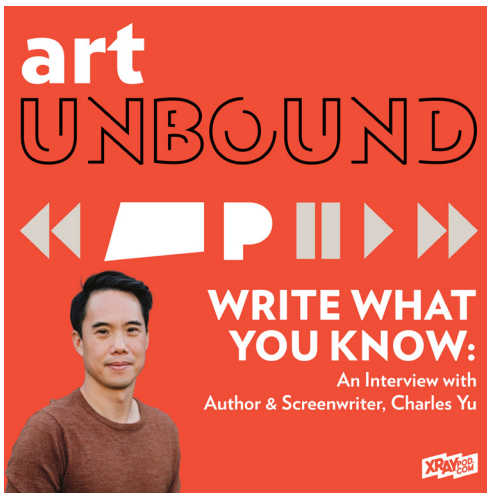


ART UNBOUND EPISODE 27 TRANSCRIPT



AMY DOTSON

This is Art Unbound, the official podcast for the Portland Art Museum and Northwest Film Center. My name is Amy Dotson, and I've been the Director of the Film Center for about a year and a half. As you can imagine, it's been a time of great change for us. The pandemic hit the states just as we kicked off the 43rd Portland International Film Festival. And as much as that was a big disappointment, it gave us opportunities to pivot to new ways of experiencing cinema. We offered new films for our audience to screen at home, we launched the Cinema Unbound Drive-In Theater at Zidell Yards, and we even had the great honor to be the sole U.S. partner for the Venice Biennale's VR Expanded experience. The pandemic also meant forming a stronger bond between the Film Center and the Portland Art Museum, part of which resulted in the rebrand of this podcast. This episode is actually the first to truly incorporate the Film Center and I can't imagine a better way to kick things off. This episode is exciting for some other reasons, too. The audio is taken from a Zoom happy hour that we did on November 20, which was a partnership with Literary Arts, a local community based nonprofit with a mission to engage readers, support writers, and inspire the next generation with great literature. What you were about to hear is a conversation I had with Charles Yu, a celebrated author and screenwriter, whose television credits include HBO's *Westworld* and FX's *Legion*. The day before we recorded this, his new novel, *Interior Chinatown*, was awarded the National Book Award in the fiction category. *Interior Chinatown* follows Willis Wu, an Asian-American actor who has become tired of being cast as a generic Asian man in the background, and longs to become something greater. Charles is an especially appropriate guest for our Zoom happy hour series because *Interior Chinatown* was written in screenplay format, which will likely make it easy to translate for his forthcoming Hulu series, which Charles will adapt himself. As always, we will include relevant links in this episode's description, as well as at nwfilm.org/podcast, where you will also be able to find a full episode transcript. And now, here's my conversation with Charles Yu. Charles, welcome. Tell us a little bit about your week.

CHARLES YU

It was a weird week, I went to the National Book Awards, which is about 10 feet from here. And that was pretty fun. I drank more champagne than I should have. Because I honestly didn't think there was a chance- like I was literally pouring my third glass right as they started the- to announce the fiction category, because I was like, This will be fun, and now in a few minutes, I'll have to explain to my kids like, how to try to be gracious when you're disappointed. And then Roxane Gay said that. And then I started crying and like you- they played, they put the cover of the book on for about 30 seconds while they read the citation. And what you couldn't hear I think was our- my whole house exploded in like disbelief. And I was just trying not to lose- I did lose it, but I was trying a little bit not to lose it. And then I realized, Oh, I have to say- my son actually was like, you have to say something. Where's your speech? I was like, I don't have a speech. You know, my wife a few minutes earlier had said, Oh, where's your speech? I was like, I there's no speech because that's not gonna happen. I was like, definitely, you know, like, if I could rank them, I was like, it's the fifth likeliest to win. And then they, of course, if I had written anything down, I wouldn't have won, right? So it's just like the law of the universe that- so then I start rambling. And then afterward, I realized with horror that I had not thanked my wife, my kids, or my parents. I have not been able to really fully enjoy it because it just- it's eating me alive.

And I'm like, Well, how do I make it up to them? I don't know. So there you go. If you if you're- next time you're up for an award, don't write a speech but at least write on your hand, "Remember to thank your family." That's like the only takeaway I have from the whole experience. But it was pretty fun.

AMY DOTSON

Well, congrats again. And maybe if you don't mind, I imagine some folks have read your work. And some folks are familiar with what you know what kind of writing you do, but maybe tell us a little bit about the novel that won and then also just you know what you do as a writer because you're very, you know, multifaceted working in television, working as a novelist, working on other projects. So maybe If you don't mind just familiarizing everybody with, with who you are and what you do.

CHARLES YU

Sure. And thank you all for coming. I'm really excited to be here. And this is just going to be the most fun I think cuz it's the end of the week and Thanksgiving is coming, and I've got a beer and yeah, I've, uh, I am a fiction writer first. But I've also started to write in TV. Before all of that, I was a lawyer for many years. And if we have any lawyers in the house today, but or recovering lawyers, that I did that for many years, and I was writing short stories, and then I started publishing books. And actually one of the first and earliest memories I have was getting to read at Powell's for my first novel, second book, How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe. And I remember walking into Powell's and seeing the book, you know, in the staff picks, and it was just, it was unreal. And having just a great experience there. My publisher put me up at the I think it's called the Portman Hotel. Is that a hotel somewhere in downtown?

AMY DOTSON

The Heathman? Does that sound familiar?

CHARLES YU

The Heathman. Yes. Which has this beautiful library, I get to sign books- like this is going to be magical, what a great experience this is. And I walk outside and I look and there's a theater there, I think that they do big events. So the night of my reading, I'm like walking to go get something to eat. And I see that night at the same time, as my reading Margaret Atwood in conversation with Ursula Le Guin, it's like, Okay, all right, this will be this, you know, they'll have to compete with me. But so that was, that was my introduction to Portland. Um, and I've been back a few times since most recently, I was just speaking with Tim Williams about it briefly. I got to go on a scout trip for an HBO show that I worked on, created by Alan Ball called Here and Now, which was set in Portland. And it was just this really special group of people, really great room, which of course means we got cancelled after one season. So I wrote on that show, I've written on Westworld. And for the past few years, I've been working on this book, which just came out in paperback, Interior Chinatown. And yeah, that and that's where I'm at, you know, it's, it's a weird thing to finally be done with a book and now also kind of be done with promoting it. And it's like, What am I supposed to do now? Other than apologize to my family for not thanking them, but I just kind of rambled? I'm not sure I answered your question. But I write books and TV, basically.

AMY DOTSON

You did a great job, and you didn't ramble, because a lot of what we do at the Northwest Film Center is this whole idea of cinema unbound. And so it's great to go see movies, it's great to be in your jammies and watch great TV. But we really encourage, whether it's the artists that we're working with, or audiences, to think about cinema in unbound ways. And I feel like you know, reading your script slash novel, I don't even know whether that's offensive to call it a script, but your whole novel is written in screenplay fashion. And so and then it kind of deconstructs and does such interesting things. Besides it being a beautiful story well told, you we're doing some pretty amazing things formally, where you were flipping the script of like, what is a screenplay? What is a character? What is a novel? How do I read this even, right? And I think that that's just so exciting. And so what we're trying to do here in Portland, but also kind of bring out to the larger world and connect with artists that are doing that, and I would love to hear, because I imagine, not just on this call, but out in our community, people really see themselves as multifaceted artists here in

Portland. And yet, you know, there's a lot of de siloing that still left for people to think about themselves as containing multitudes. And it sounds like at least a little bit, you're trying to crack that. So maybe talk a little bit, if you could, about how you thought up the structure, and why you chose the screenplay format down to the font- I needed. I read all the way and I was like, look at to point out the right font, and how then use that. Okay, I'm going to take that and put it into a novel. I think that that would be really helpful for for writers and just creative folks to hear about.

CHARLES YU

Yeah, yeah. Thanks. I love to be able to talk about it, especially with this group in this forum, because it is a place to I hope nerd out and I wrestled with a novel for years, trying to figure out what was the form of it, and I didn't have it. And so I actually wrote this book, at least three times and threw away a lot of pages. And I gave up a few times. And my wife was like, What are you doing? And so I went back to it. And when I kind of stumbled on to the beginnings of the book, which was, you know, the first lines of the book, which already kind of I had a main character and I had an arc, and is like, this is what- where this guy is, and this is what he wants. And if that doesn't happen to me very often where it feels like, Oh, I feel like now I can write this. But then the very next thought was, Oh, is this going to be a script? Could I really sustain that for a book? Will people want to read that? For a book? Will people want to read Courier font for a whole book? I did wrestle with that, because Pantheon, my publisher makes such beautiful books. And as much as I love Courier, and as much as it helped me in college, when I needed to pad my length for papers. I, you know, and I work in career for TV, but it's not the prettiest font. And so, I even thought about that I was like, but you're, you know, as you're kind of pointing out me, there was so much in not just the content, but kind of the de siloing. I love that term of like, just like the thought patterns, I think it like really freaked me out. Because I think what I was trying to do is write about immigration and race and assimilation. And family, really, I mean, it ultimately, it's a family story. But I felt like this was something where I was trying to write something that engaged in a larger conversation about race and America. I really got going after Trump got elected. And I think for many years, I couldn't find my way. And in early 2017, I just felt a new urgency to be like, what are you doing wasting your time? Like write something that means, you know, that is trying to mean something, and it felt more pointed and urgent. And so one of the blocks I had had for many years was that, I think I was trying to write something that felt weighty and important. And along with that, I think I was trying to write, you know, when you open a book, you expect to see dense blocks of prose for the most part. And that's just not how I work. You know, I mean, I used to write on legal pads, and, and jot notes down and I used to, you know, in college, I wrote poems, and I'm used to white space, I'm used to like moving around horizontally on the page, I think something about both the freedom of saying, okay, don't take yourself so seriously. Also, you have the conventions of a script to play with you have the dialogue you have the action lines, you have, you know, stage or essentially camera directions that you can give, like you have all of this fun you can play with, why not have more fun with it? And I think that that did kind of help free up my thinking. So I stopped trying so hard to write the novel and just figured out what I was doing.

AMY DOTSON

I also, you know, with the structure what's so interesting is you guys will hopefully read and find out. I mean, even the margins, right? Like talk about nerd out, I've read scripts for, I guess, a quarter century now, even though I still look 22 I that's what I did for a really long time. And so even just the margins of how it's placed on the paper, people say write what you know. And what struck me wasn't necessarily that you were writing what you knew, it was that all of that experience of being a lawyer, like you said, and working in television, and doing poetry and liking those interesting little parentheticals that we all read when we read screenplays saying INT: Chinatown, that you kind of wrote what you knew, but it was structural. And I hadn't seen that before, it kind of coming across in that way. And thought that was fascinating. You also use a lot of what you know, or what you like, or maybe just you know what you've experienced, through a lens of film, television, there's that beautiful sequence, where the young girl is coming out of an animated background. And part of that that kind of dancing and chanting sequence. Maybe talk a little bit about, you know, also how you were influenced because all of the stories that you were telling, all didn't fit in the same waterglass if you know what I mean, it was like you- there are scenes that are interlayered with others. There are sequences that trail off, and then there are ones that all build together into, you know, a very interesting box. So maybe talk a little bit about your influences and how you got to where you were you did.

CHARLES YU

Yeah, I like that, that they didn't fit the same waterglass it's really true. And I, I don't know if anyone's had this experience, but I always have a thing where I like certain pieces. And I spend a lot of time figuring out a superstructure that will allow me to not throw away any of the big pieces that I want. And sometimes it ends up that I'm like, I'm doing this wrong, you know, the tail's wagging the dog, I need to start I need to let go of one or more of these pieces, and then it snaps into place. And that happened a little bit with the book, but also sometimes that activity is actually important. You know, I think because it's such a hard thing because sometimes you should try at least for myself, I should be trying to tie them together because there's a reason why they're all there. And if I can find it, then, then they'll work and I think that happened with the part you're talking about, Amy, you know that there's the without spoiling it for anyone who hasn't gotten there yet, there's a character who gets into a very different part of the world at some point, and, like, very different. So, so what I have, you know, what I'm wrestling with for a long time there is, is this justifiable? You know, like, how can I- How can I bridge that gap? Or am I just trying to force this, you know, round peg, square hole, which way it is to go, I don't know, am I trying to force the peg into the wrong peg hole. But in this case, it actually did eventually work. I think, if it didn't work is too late. The book is published. But the reason why I tried so hard is that this new arena, where he comes in the Wi-llis comes into the character is very much an emotional center, you know, because at the center of this, there's a father-daughter story. And, and it's a lot of ways, it's about someone growing up and learning to be a parent and learning that the way that they see the world is very much not the only way to see the world. And so yeah, it was important to me to get that in there. And and it just took a long time to figure out how to how to do it right.

AMY DOTSON

Thank you for that. And I think, you know, one other thing that that fascinated me was that, obviously, you have to go back and forth as a writer between writing for television or writing for scripts. And I imagine you still write short stories, as well. And I think there's a lot of folks who would be interested in how do you do that, because there's, there's kind of two, two means of thought one is, wow, that's got to be so hard to ping pong back and forth. And then the other is, it's all writing. And you just have to figure out the best way to get your ideas out. And sometimes you're writing solo, and sometimes you're writing with an editor. And sometimes you're writing like you said, in a writers room with a team, maybe walk folks through just your process on that and how you're able to achieve that. Because I think a lot of folks would be interested in just hearing how you find this the strength, the time, the everything to kind of ping pong back and forth.

CHARLES YU

Yeah, as you were talking, I mainly think that that was a piece of something else- earlier question of yours. That I wanted to touch on, I think it was about, yeah, it was about sort of like the de siloing. And how playing with form and like how much, you know, I got excited about this idea in terms of like, the cross fertilization of like, you know, I think of fiction one way, I think of TV another way, but there's also just the time before anything takes on its shape when it's just kind of an idea without any, you know, husk or any what's the what's the right, it doesn't have its it hasn't given itself a shape yet, right? So I started out writing really, really weird experimental short stories. I don't know, I call them experimental. I think Kirk is called an experimental. So then I was like, Oh, I'm an experimental writer. Before I just thought I write really short, minimalist stories, where I'm like, what's the least amount of words I can say and then send this story to a magazine? But my very first published story was a series of physics problems that was actually a love story between A and B. They're like getting on trains and traveling 50 miles an hour. And so it was like those kinds of problems. And then it's sort of a love story. I wrote a story about basically as a kind of series of commercials for various things. You know, I've written stories in forms of screenplays, in forms of like a shareholder conference call. And so I was just writing this really out there stuff in terms of like, like, What's the weirdest form that you might be able to actually tell a story and have emotion and character? And I didn't think that anyone would like it or publish it. And then people started publishing the stories. And I thought, well, that's really neat. And I didn't think anyone would ever want to make a book out of it. But then Harcourt, you know, published my first collection. And I didn't think anyone want to read that. And I was right about that. Nobody read that book. But like I was encouraged. And so then I wrote a novel about time travel, that's really not about time travel is about a father and son. It's about memory. It's a

time machine powered by regret. And so it's very interior, it all basically takes place in a guy going back into his own memories. And, again, I was like, this is- it feels so personal and intimate. And somehow, I think by just leaning all the way into this weirdness, it attracted the attention of you know, some TV and film people, right? Like, after I wrote that time travel book, I, you know, started working with an agent for rights. And so in addition to trying to sell the rights to my books and stories, the agents there were very, like, encouraging and wanted me to start going on meetings. So I started going on these, you know, what they call general meetings that you've probably heard of, where basically you sit down, you're next to a development executive, and they give you a bottle of water, and you're like, they'd say, Tell me about yourself. And you do that, and then you leave, and you're like, what did I just do? And they'd never call you again? Like, send us any ideas. We're like, Okay, and then you think- so I did that a few times. And I send ideas and like, that's great. Thanks. And I didn't realize that they're not interested at all. And then a few years after doing that I got somehow on someone's radar to HBO. And that's how I got hired on Westworld. So I started doing that. And I had my own amazingly sort of like, blissful period where I was like, this is a dream job. And then I had a period of realizing, oh, I have no idea what I'm doing. I restarted a career that I don't know what to do. And I'm almost 40. And so that's been a whole nother thing. But I've already talked too long without actually getting to that part of it. So I'll just, I'll say that part.

AMY DOTSON

No, no, it's all good. And we want to hear all of it. Because you know that you're right. There's no party like a general meeting party, you've never been better hydrated than a day of general meetings in LA, like, all you do, General meet, bathroom, rinse, repeat, it's a trip. I think that's really helpful for people to hear, though, because, you know, one thing that I'll touch on is, I haven't read your whole canon at this point. But I have gone back and read some of your short stories, and obviously just read the the National Book Prize winning novel, and you really stand out. Right, like, I think that that's something we talk about a lot with, with folks that are just coming up. And folks that are also looking to pivot is, you know, you really have to have a point of view and really, you know, think about how to be the most you. And I think that you know, you've kind of crafted a distinctive style about who you are and what you're interested in and what you're interested in expressing in the world. And I think that that is so interesting for folks to hear that short stories and novels are a completely amazing way to then transition into the film and television world. And you don't hear it as often of folks from film and television kind of transitioning into to, you know, kind of literary arts, but I think they're one in the same. And so, if you don't mind, you know, you've also done quite a lot of television writing at this point. And I can only imagine that every room is different, every assignment is different. Every show runner is different. And and you know how, because one thing is to sit in your home or a safe place and write, another is to work collaboratively. So maybe touching on just how your writing or how you approach that kind of collaborative writing setting, especially like you said, when you're like, cool, and I'm starting over again, and Who are these people? And how does it work?

CHARLES YU

Yeah, it's definitely such a shock, right to go from sitting in a room alone and having complete control over what you're doing. And then, you know, two things really that one is that it, they call it a team sport, it is very much like, not just in terms of it's literally you're doing it real time with people. But I think the idea of like, how the ideas, it's not as if like, you pitch an idea, and that idea stays yours. And then you, you hold on to that little gem, you know, and then develop it. It's not like a track meet where people earn points for their team. And then you add them up. It's more like hockey or soccer, where you could have a midfielder who never scores, but they really contribute to the team. And it's very hard to quantify, well, maybe soccer people or football people would know. But for like a lay person, you're watching that going, Oh, that person is the connective tissue. And I can tell but so I guess what I had to learn really, that this activity that you do in a writers room is a really interesting, cool activity. It's probably not that different from like brainstorming in any number of other fields, you know, in that being part of a team at work. And so I guess, maybe working as a lawyer, you know, has some- had some effect because I had to work with teams all the time. But I got to really learn from people- Westworld was the first room I was in, which is a crazy thing because one that room went really long. It was like over 15 or 16 months that I was there for one season. That's long. It was nine episodes because they had already shot the pilot. And it was a hard show to write for, you know, because it they were trying to do- they were very

ambitious in form and substance and they were trying to do things I don't want to spoil it. But if someone hasn't seen Westworld season one, and is planning on watching it right away, but like, they're trying to do things that that really, if you had to use your brain so, so it was it was an outlier in a few ways. And, you know, I went through a period where I was like thrilled because the room is there, we were right next to the Warner Brothers lot, you know, they took us to lunch, we were on the lot for a little bit. They took us to like a shooting range, because it was again, you know, it shows that in the, in the West in Wild West. And it was like, Oh, this is a job, I can't believe this, this is amazing. And then we get in the room for a few months. And there's this blue sky period, where we're just throwing out ideas. Like, oh, I can do this. And I would pitch these incredibly dumb, like abstract ideas like, and at first, I didn't realize how bad my pitching was. And so I didn't know that I was doing a bad job. And then I then I had phase two, which was, oh, there's all this stuff going on in this room that I don't quite understand yet. You know, like, the other writers are pitching things, the show runners are actually rejecting those things. But it would be like, they would reject, like, literally, this was one thing. One of our show runners. He would, and I I'm not really supposed to, I guess spill secrets from the room. But it's not like, it's like he's the really brilliant and such a nice person. But like, He's so nice that actually when he rejects your pitch, he's like, that's cool. And I didn't realize for several months, that's cool means that's not good. Don't pitch that again. So I, I was like several steps behind the other writers. And they're like, no, not someone pitched that 10 minutes ago. So that took me a while to learn. And then I went through a period where I just was trying to finish because it was almost done. And I was like, Okay, I need to get out of here and process all that I've learned. So from there, I've gone into a bunch of different rooms. And they've all been very different. And there have been so many different styles like Alan Ball, who I worked for, created Six Feet Under and True Blood, is a really generous person, really would like- this is a guy who's like won an Oscar and won, you know, Emmys and you would write a draft and he would leave your stuff in there. So you like would see your writing on screen, which was amazing. Not all show runners do that. And he just ran such a warm and like encouraging environment in many ways. And yeah, I've worked in in quite a variety of places. I worked for another fiction writer who created a show called Lodge 49. And his name is Jim Gavin, he wrote a really good collection called Middle Men. If anyone has read short stories. He's been in Paris Review been in the New Yorker, and he had this really great show that ran for two seasons on AMC. That is hard to describe. But so yeah, I've been in quite a few environments. I just talked for like 15 minutes without really getting to the meat of what I was trying to say. But maybe I should take a breath here.

AMY DOTSON

It's all good. I think this is wonderful. I think this is the whole tone. This is not a formal setting and have some beer, we'll take a breath for a second, I will open it up to some questions. I know we've got one that I'm sure is a story in and of itself. But how did you go from majoring in molecular biology to short story writing and writing for TV? Was there a moment that something switched? Or was it always something that you were hoping to do?

CHARLES YU

Yeah, thank you for the question. I, well the switch was when I didn't get into medical school. And that was the world telling me that my services were not needed. And so then I went to law school, you know, partly because I didn't have any real, like skills. You know, I majored in bio, but I didn't intend in working in the field, intend on working in the field. So I thought, How can I delay reality for a while, but also, ultimately, I did want to have some financial security for myself and for my family. And you know, or not my family-family, but my parents, and I just thought, What's the responsible thing to do? Go to law school, there's reading, there's writing, it'll be sort of like something related to books. And so I did that. And then I actually practiced law for a really long time. So then I was writing books and working as a lawyer for over a decade for like, 13 years. And really, I had come to really enjoy the balance because I didn't have to rely on the writing for money and good thing because I couldn't but like, even still, like, I mean, when I switched from being a lawyer to Westworld, I had to do it because like my books wouldn't support a family. You know, like I write too slowly and I don't sell enough books. And so it's- writing and money have always been decoupled for me. And I think that's actually been quite a gift. Even though it brings its own pressures, right? Because then I have to like take time on nights and weekends to say, Okay, this is not my day job. I'm sorry that I now have to spend some hours away from you again. And sometimes honestly, the trade off doesn't totally feel worth it. But other times, it's like, well, I have to do this. Otherwise, I'm just going to be really grumpy.

AMY DOTSON

Fantastic. I think just going back to Interior Chinatown, it begs the question after we've kind of done this, this circuitous and wonderful conversation about being a multifaceted writer, is it something where you see this being translated into another medium? I would be fascinated, whether that's a movie or even an animated series, or some somewhere in between a series of music videos, who knows? Right? But I'd be curious if that was something either that you've thought about while you were writing it? Or whether you're thinking about it now of having it translated to something else?

CHARLES YU

Yeah. Thanks. I thought about it while I was writing it, but not with an eye towards like, ooh, how do I do this so that it won't get bought for- to be adapted, it was more like knowing that this is in this form. I was conscious of like, this is a book that's mimicking this form for its own purposes. But you can do things in fiction that you cannot ever do on screen, I think. And so I really just enjoyed the freedom after many years, not many, but a few years of like, working on scripts to go, Okay, this is a book, I don't have to think about whether or not this is producible or shootable. And then and yeah, I was, you know, in terms of adapting, and I am actually adapting this for Hulu, to be a series and I'm allowed to talk about that now as of pretty recently. I don't know how I'm going to do it. I hope no one from Hulu is listening to this. They know, they know, I don't know what I'm doing know, they know, they've been really generous and supportive. And I'm just in the process of basically trying to figure out, how do you do this? I mean, it even any regular adaptation, I think is difficult. But something like this that has the layer of it's a show within a show or it's like this, it's meta fiction. And how do you translate that from one medium to another, it's going to be challenging.

AMY DOTSON

That is so exciting. It's so funny you say that, I've- in the last week, I've read both your book and the the new David Sedaris anthology, and it was so funny, I found myself in both being like, how would I make this and what would I do? Oh, my gosh, this would be so hard. And for years, I felt like you know, it reminded me in some ways of Atlanta, in the way that it was constructed. And I know that's a little bit strange to say, but there was such a meta in both of those pieces, and that you never knew when you tuned in or when you came to the next section, kind of what you were going to get and yet you got it. And so I think I speak for all of us that we're so excited to see you unlock that and see what you can come up with. But it's interesting, I binge read both of your works and was just like, wow, I'm I'm using the term binge read, which I don't know, that I'm entirely comfortable with. But here we are. 2020!

CHARLES YU

I love it

CHARLES YU

Yeah, so Randall has a question here. Do you feel that we might be moving into more of a hybrid form of written narratives, blurring the line between screenplay and novels? And as we were saying, probably a million other things, too.

CHARLES YU

That's really interesting, Randall. Um, briefly, I do- I love Atlanta, it's terrible that I do it, because it's just a bad idea. But like, basically, if I go into pitch something I'm like, I always reference Atlanta. And of course everyone does, because it's brilliant. And, you know, like, and it probably is, like, I'm sure that people listening are just rolling their eyes like, Yeah, of course. Right? Like, it's like Atlanta. It's like, Fleabag. It's like, you know, it's brilliant, basically, is what you're saying. So, I don't know, that's, that's really interesting. And whether or not we're moving into a hybrid form, I think maybe because I think like, for instance, TV is already doing that, like, what is TV now, right? You watch this, you know, what, uh, how did this happen? You know, there's 500 things on, there's things where you're, you know, it's like, this is a tone poem, you know, like, oh, wow, this is a tone poem and I'm, you know, paying \$15 a month for that. No, but I'm watching this, you know, I love this. And, you know, we're watching The Queen's Gambit now, like, probably a lot of people are and I've just watched some incredible things over the last few years where, Atlanta is one of them,

where you just like how, how is this happening? And what exactly is this form? I wonder? Yeah, obviously, the migration between like, you know, written to visual is a much bigger gap to cross but, but it is interesting to think about, like, I think TV watchers, we're all getting really good at it, right? And we have been for a while. I remember that. I don't know if anyone else remembers Television Without Pity. Incredible recap site from a few years ago. For me, I think that was the first time I was like, oh, recapping is a thing like why would you want to just he read like a recap. But then they made it kind of into a form. Anyway, I bring that up only because I remember like when it felt like I had a grasp of what TV was. And then now I just don't. And I think that part of what's happened, too, is alongside of that explosion, there's another side industry of people that write really smart things about TV. And so I feel like all of that information is out there in the world. And it's it collectively gets metabolized by all of us. And so we get really good at watching things, right? to the point where you just watch something you're like, Oh, is this the trope where XYZ? Or is this the HBO episode nine thing where everything big happens? And like, I feel like, collectively, our learning curve has been incredible on how to consume stories this way. I think that in some ways might- you could see some fertilization or cross fertilization to writing that way, right? Because now that we think about stories in such a professional way, you know, not necessarily meta, but like, we're watching it, in a, such a conscious way that on some level, it feels like it has to affect writing. I mean, it did with my book for sure, so.

AMY DOTSON

Well, a great follow up question by Tim is speaking of recapping, did the many many recapping sites and theory sites on Westworld impact the writers room at all? Or were you guys in a cone- a dog cone, not a cone of shame, just a dog cone trying to be like la-la-la not listening. Like, how did it work?

CHARLES YU

That's a great question. I get to duck that question, because I was only on season one. And so we had the luxury of not- no one knew what was happening, you know, when I went into the room that it had been announced, and I think Anthony Hopkins was announced and some of the other major cast. Maybe just Anthony Hopkins, I actually don't know if it- how much and- but people knew there was this thing that was coming that it was based off, you know, this old Michael Crichton movie. And so for like, a couple of years, they toiled, and we toiled knowing, or hoping that people would go deep dive into this. But we had no idea. And so I was out of that room when the show started airing. I was in the Alan Ball room at that point. And I remember thinking, Oh, my God, like, it's what they thought and more like, I didn't realize how much the show runners I think probably on some level knew that they were building something that was so consumable the way people consume things now. So for the second and third seasons, I have to imagine that on some level, they are aware of how much people podcasted and recapped, and all that and analyzed and dissected everything. But luckily, I didn't have to be part of that. There's a kind of arms race, though, between the viewers and the makers on some level. I don't know that the showrunners of Westworld think that specifically, but I feel like that's sometimes where you're trying to one up, you know, it's like you know how good the audience is at figuring out what you're trying to do and where you're going with it. So if you're building a certain kind of show, the task is so much harder, because you have to stay ahead of a million people on Reddit, who are going to figure out what you're doing pretty quick, like instantly.

AMY DOTSON

I've got kind of a wild one for you. And then if we have another last question, we'll begin to wrap up. But you know, knowing that you have a taste for sci-fi and some other things, you know, we are an organization that is embedded in a Museum, right? And so we do a lot of work. And I personally do a lot of work in the new media space. And what we found is that, you know, new media is going all sorts of different places, but character and writing and figuring out how to tell a story where you're not manipulating time like you would in a screenplay, or even in a novel, but you're manipulating space. I'm speaking specifically even about like VR, for example, once you put your headset on, it's not that you're watching something and then feeling those emotions vicariously from what you're seeing on the screen or on the page. You're actually in the damn movie for lack of a better way to put it. You're in Westworld. You're in wherever and I would love to know if you've thought anything about writing or building characters and worlds in that way and if that excites you because again reading your work there's so much going on and so much that in the new

media world could be could benefit from the kind of things that you're you're doing and experimenting with.

CHARLES YU

That's a great question. I thought about it a little bit. I wasn't part of this but I know in Westworld for I think prior to airing season one and then some of the other stuff and later seasons, they've done some really cool stuff with like the website interactive stuff, it's almost becomes this paratextual. Not quite an ARG, but like a little bit of like, there's this thing in the real world that you can play along with. I have also had very preliminary kind of, you know, General Meeting-ish talks about, like, how would you write something interactive? Or, you know, would you consider this? For a while I was talking to a really cool VR company about trying to do a story I published in the New Yorker called Fable as a VR thing. I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, but I just said it, but I thought that'd be so- I don't think I was supposed to write it. Or maybe I was, but I don't know. So I spent a few brain cycles like, how would you do that? How would you take advantage of this? And basically, it broke my brain. So I, you know, I think it's hard enough writing in 2-D, let alone 4-D. But, I have to imagine that there, there will be at some point, the thing that shows everybody really, what are the possibilities. There probably are already like, when I went in for that meeting, I saw some things that people were creating. They weren't- they weren't games, they were stories told in that medium. And I, like there's emotional, there's psychological, there's even just straight physiological responses, you know, because you're really hijacking the hardware of the brain in a way. And I, you know, as a fiction writer, I want to say that a book can do that to you, as well, a film being in a dark theater, also an experience. I'm not, I don't think there's a hierarchy, because I think they're probably all very different experiences. But this will be another kind of thing. Like, oh, you know, this is not like being in the dark theater. This is not like being curled up with a book, this is something else.

AMY DOTSON

Well, it's good to know, you're open to it as well, because again, I think, hearing that you're using your talents in multiple ways is really, really exciting. Ben has a final question. And then if there's anything else that you know, now is the time or forever hold your pieces to put your stuff in the chat box. But Ben asks, Are you feeling hopeful about more diverse voices and writers coming to the stage in film and television, both in regards to new stories, but also how writers room might then be getting challenged?

CHARLES YU

I am, I'm feeling very hopeful about it. I've had the good luck to work in a bunch of rooms that I think were diverse in some ways, you know, and even when they weren't necessarily diverse, I think we're filled with people that were thoughtful, and were interested in different points of view and storied stories to tell and voices. So and that might be a somewhat limited subset of experience. You know, I work in this kind of, like, mostly drama, streamer slash cable world. So it's probably a little bit of a self selecting group. But the people I've met, and including also on a much wider level, like executives and producers that I've met, all seem genuinely interested, to me anyway. I mean, I could be gullible, but like, of hearing, like, what do you really- what is the authentic version? You know, almost to the point where sometimes I'm, sometimes I'll be saying what I think people want to hear, because, you know, and maybe by habit or fear, and people will be like, no, I, you know, like, I'll be reminded that actually, I think people aren't interested in genuinely interested in diversity in terms of like, points of view and story. So I feel really hopeful, hopeful in that regard.

AMY DOTSON

Well, Charles, thank you so much. After the week that you've had. And, you know, I hope that you get this weekend or maybe next week, it's kind of like a big birthday. I feel like if you win the National Book- you can celebrate for weeks, maybe months, maybe take the whole year. So you know, pick a Tuesday and bring balloons home for the kids, shower, the wife in champ- whatever. But like, we're just so honored to have you as part of the Literary Arts and PAM and Northwest Film Center partnership. We've been doing these, as I mentioned these happy hours for about eight months now. And I hope I'm not tootin' too much of your horn. But by far, this is my favorite one that we've done. So thank you for sharing and being so open, and so excited about the work you do. It's contagious. So we wish you so much luck and love as you continue to find your way through all of this new media, old media novel, amazing writing,

and we just thought, yeah, I can't believe that in the week that you've had, you took an hour to be with us. So thank you.

CHARLES YU

I mean, thank you, Amy. I was honored to be here and thanks so much. It was a lot of fun.

AMY DOTSON

Thank you for listening to Art Unbound. As always, please rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts. And be sure to check out nwfilm.org/podcast or your favorite podcast app to listen to past episodes. I'd like to thank Charles Yu for agreeing to join us and Literary Arts for being such supportive partners. For more information about literary arts, visit literary-arts.org. I'd also like to thank Tim Williams of Oregon Film for his continued support. If you are a filmmaker or curious about the organization, visit oregonfilm.org. And of course, be sure to visit nwfilm.org to learn more about what we do at the Co:Laboratory, our portal for classes, workshops and events. This podcast is produced and edited by Jon Richardson with music courtesy of the absurdly talented film composer Mark Orton.