

listenN: Today in Episode 13 I'm talking with novelist and award-winning screenwriter, Elan Mastai. Elan shares a story of how a movie changed the course of his life, the importance of getting out of your own way as a creative person, the difference of writing for screen and novel, and his book on life and relationships through the lens of time travel, and how getting the science right opened up all sorts of creative and exciting story possibilities.

listenN: Hi, Brian here in. Just before we jump into this episode, I wanted to take a second to comment on the audio. Elan was in LA and I was in Toronto and the internet goddesses... well, they were somewhere else. The audio from time to time goes a touch wonky, but bear with us. It does bounce back and your patients will be rewarded. Now, on with the episode.

listenN: Well, hello Elan. Thanks for being on listenN.

Elan Mastai: Thanks for having me.

listenN: Yeah, I'm really excited to talk to you. I think you have a very diverse background. But first and foremost, you and I share something in common. I was born in Powell River, British Columbia, but grew up in Vancouver, but I also moved to Toronto.

Elan Mastai: Oh yeah. Powell River, I've been there many times. I'm a really good friend of mine lived in Pearl River and they had a summer place on Savary Island off the coast, so I used to go up there every summer. In fact, in Powell River, I was introduced to the greatest treat of all time, which is soft serve ice cream mixed into a Slurpee. There was a place in Powell River and I can't remember what it's called, but they used to do that. I remember going up there one summer and this being introduced to me by my friend Matthew who lived up there and it blew my teenage mind.

listenN: Well, it's kind of like a root beer float, but on steroids, right? It's total sugar.

Elan Mastai: I mean, in a normal city, you'd have to visit at least two separate establishments to create such a thing while in Powell River, this mecca of summertime sweets, they would do it in the same shot.

listenN: That's what happens when you're in a small town up the coast with not a lot of access to other things. You have to compromise.

Elan Mastai: You start experimenting.

listenN: Exactly, multitasking. The reason why I want to bring up the move to Toronto concept is because a lot of people would say to me, you kind of went the wrong way. You don't really hear of many people going from Vancouver to Toronto. You hear people going the other way. I was curious, what was your journey? What brought you here to Toronto? How did you end up here?

Elan Mastai: Well, I've been kind of going back and forth actually for a number of years. What first brought me to Ontario was university. As you mentioned, I grew up in Vancouver. I was born in Vancouver and raised there, but I went to Queens University in Kingston. That was the first time that I kind of came up to Ontario.

Elan Mastai: In fact, I knew so little about Ontario growing up in Vancouver. I didn't actually even know Kingston was. For the first six weeks up until Thanksgiving, I actually thought Kingston was West of Toronto. I realized I had mixed it up with London, Ontario and trying to get to Toronto for Thanksgiving to visit some family, I suddenly realized I was actually East of Toronto. That was a big mistake. But I went to university at Queens, and then I came back to Vancouver and then I did my master's degree, in Montreal and then went back to Vancouver. There was a lot of back and forth for me.

Elan Mastai: Then finally, I ended up in Toronto in a longer term way because the woman I was dating, who's now my wife, got a job offer in Toronto, both working in film production in Vancouver. That brought us to Toronto for what turned out to be a much longer stay

listenN: Okay. Yeah. See, I came for the restaurant business. I was working in the restaurant business in Vancouver and I got offered an opportunity in Toronto. I came here for what I thought would be maybe two years and I then fell in love with the city and I haven't moved back. I still have all of my family in Vancouver. I do go back and forth, but I've made my home in Toronto, so we have something similar in that.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. My family is all still in Vancouver as well. It's a beautiful place to be from, I mean, to get to visit and see family, but also get to spend time in Vancouver. I always feel it's a real gift.

listenN: Yeah.

Elan Mastai: [inaudible].

listenN: Yeah. It is so beautiful there. You sit and you look at the Harbor and the mountains. Yeah, it's breathtaking. But anyways, that's nostalgia.

Elan Mastai: It's pretty interesting though, and I wonder how you feel about this. I really love Toronto. I think it's a vibrant, exciting, and just look at terrific place to live. It's interesting though because I feel like in the world there's two kinds of cities. There's cities which are set against a geographical backdrop like Vancouver where you have the ocean, and the mountains, and the forests, and anything that humans build seems kind of paltry, sort of puny compared to the grand juror of the geographical environment, whereas there's places like Toronto, and of course it's on Lake Ontario.

Elan Mastai: But on a day to day basis in Toronto, the biggest thing you see is human-made structures.

listenN: RIGHT.

Elan Mastai: New York, Chicago's like that, London's like that a lot of major world's cities are like that, where the dominant scale is human. I think about that a lot as a writer, that I grew up in a place where the dominant scale was geological, was geographical and how that affected me in the way I see the world. I have two kids who are growing up in Toronto and I try to get them in places as often as I can, where the scale is more geographic than, than manmade or human made.

listenN: That's a really interesting way to see it and I wonder if that is from a writer's perspective. In other words, do you see the world like that? You see it in shapes and how humans have interacted with it as opposed to just, "Oh, it's pretty."

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I think it actually on a really deep level, it really did affect the way I see the world. I have a tendency as interested as I am in the things that humans make, whether they're physical things like buildings or technology or the sort of the philosophies or ideologies that we create to give our life a sense of purpose or meaning. I have a tendency to see all those things as constructed, not natural and to really think about how everything that we have in our world is built easy when you get used to it to think of it as just being like a natural or inevitable part of our environment. But actually all these things are built and if they're built, they can also be taken apart.

listenN: Right, right, which takes me into the concept of a segue into your background as a screenwriter because I was reading an interview with yourself and you commented about how a screen play is more like a blueprint that people build on.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, well, this is the thing about the difference between screenwriting and novel writing. I mean, when you read a novel, you're reading the words that I or that other novelists have ever written. Your experience of the story is through the words that the author wrote, or is when you're watching a movie, you write a document, you write a screenplay, but you're not reading the screenplay. The words are then translated into a completely other artistic medium. They're translated into images and sounds, the cinematography, the editing, and of course more than anything, the performance is the actors.

Elan Mastai: An architect blueprint is a good metaphor, the score that a composer builds is then performed by an orchestra. You don't sit there in a theater or concert venue reading the score, right?

listenN: Right.

Elan Mastai: You listen to this. It's interesting in that way. As a screenwriter, I think you have to be very aware of the artifice and all the construction that goes into creating an experience that will hopefully be totally seamless for the viewer, right? When somebody is watching a movie you don't want them to see the scene, just the stitches or the kind of hard edges. You want them to just disappear into though into the world like it's a dream. But as a screenwriter, you're very, very aware of the construction because your contributions are only seen like in reflection.

listenN: Right. Explain to me your journey and learning how to become a screenwriter. How did that happen for you?

Elan Mastai: Well, I was really interested in writing from a young age, storytelling. I don't know. I think I just was one of those kids who just really... I loved the books. I also loved movies. I loved storytelling in general, but the idea of becoming a writer, making a living as a writer, seemed very, very far off. I wasn't sure how you do that. I tried to find kind of more "practical" ways of making a living, and I thought that writing would just be like a hobby that I would love, but that wouldn't necessarily be my main profession.

Elan Mastai: I explored a lot of different ways of working in and around the film world because I loved film as well. I did everything from working on set, like on movie sets. I edited educational videos and I directed like... I did some working commercials. I worked at film festivals, I wrote movie reviews, I taught at a university in film. I had all these kinds of things, but all the while I was writing and people seemed to really like what I was writing.

Elan Mastai: I kept getting opportunities to write stuff and when I would get up those opportunities, they would often lead to other opportunities. Even though I sort of thought of writing as a hobby that there would be very difficult to make a living doing, I kept getting a lot of positive feedback. Whenever I got the opportunities to write stuff, people would want me to write more stuff. I kind of just kept getting drawn back to writing and drawn back to writing. Eventually, it occurred to me, well, people seemed to actually be liking what I'm writing and why am I creating this personal op? Why am I saying, "Well, I'll never make a living as a writer. Why don't I let the world tell me that? Why don't I... If there's going to be this obstacle, why am I the one creating the obstacle?"

Elan Mastai: The world will provide more than enough obstacles to get in the way of following whatever your professional or creative dream is. Don't be the one that's also create obstacles, right? Just try writing and see how it goes. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out. But don't fail before you've even try. Don't decide you're going to fail before you've even try. I started taking it a little more seriously and trying to getting my stuff out there and I was really lucky. I got rewarded really quickly. The more and more I wrote, the more kind of professional opportunities came my way.

Elan Mastai: Within a few years, I was able to start supporting myself exclusively as a writer. It was an interesting thing. I mean, I'm very lucky there's a certain amount of being in the right place at the right time, having my stuff land on the right person's desk when they were looking for something that was similar to what I was doing. But at the same time, a lot of my early impediments were self-imposed, more like a perception of how impossible it would be. Don't even go down that road as opposed to what actually happened when I started trying it, which was that things happen for me relatively quickly.

listenN: Yeah, that's a very interesting concept for not just young people starting out in their careers, but anybody who's trying to find their way or their passion is the whole concept of... Yes, things are hard and you have to work hard. We all have to work hard, but it should still come relatively easily for you. Meaning that if you are aware of the signals that you're getting back, you will get positive feedback in the path that you should go down. I had a similar story to that. I was working, I never saw myself as a creative person. I was working in the restaurant business. I was working in the real estate business.

listenN: Then I started to take up photography and I started to notice that anytime I interacted with anybody in the photography world, they were just really nice to me. I'd go into the film lab and the people that worked there would smile and say, "hello." Then I dropped my film off and then I'd go off to my day job and people would treat me like crap. Then I'd go back to my hobby and I'd realize, "I don't know how I'm going to make money here, but I kind of like the people and the way I'm treated here." My passion just kept growing. That led to me becoming a creative person working in the advertising industry for 21 years.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, I feel that as well. I think when you actually are able to pursue this creative path, it's passionate, but you're like, "Of course, there's going to be obstacles, there's going to be an incredible amount of hard work, there's going to be frustrations." But when you find yourself doing the thing that you really care about, that you really love, it's easier to overcome those obstacles because it's in the world that you want to be in because you're going to face all those obstacles and frustrations even in a job that you hate to make it all worse because you actually don't like it or not necessarily a job you hate, but a job that you're just passionate about that isn't like meaningful and fulfilling about. Why not face those same obstacles and frustrations in an area that you're really loved?

listenN: Yeah, exactly. I love the way that you put that, just the whole concept of don't be your own obstacle.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I think that's a thing that a lot of young people have. I mean, frankly, grownups as well have to overcome because you're given all of these sort of preconceptions of what doing a creative job is. Of course, it's hard and it's not necessarily going to be immediately rewarding and you also have to get good at it. That is a huge thing because when you're starting out, you have all this idea

of what your stuff should feel like or look like or sound like and it's not going to be as good as all the things that you love and that inspire you. Your writing isn't going to be as good as the novelists or screenwriters or poets or whatever it is that inspire you to do it.

Elan Mastai: But also, you're not seeing their early work, right? You're seeing their fully fleshed out a finalized finished version of it. You're not being exposed to their like half-baked first draft. You're only being exposed to your half-baked first draft. There can be that frustration, so you have to really have your eye on the long term, getting better, working hard so that you can get to a place where your work if not as good as the people that inspire you, but getting closer and closer and that feeling that it's a muscle like running a marathon or swimming along distance. You can't just wake up one morning to run a marathon. You have to train. I think it's likewise with your creative endeavors. You have to actually apply yourself to get better.

Elan Mastai: In doing that, it's like when you're focused on your craft a lot of other things fall into place. I think a lot of people, especially in film, and TV, and the publishing industry focus on all the industry side of thing, getting an agent, getting a publisher. But when you focus on the craft, that's a part of it. You actually have control over. It's really hard to have control over whether a publisher is interested in you, whether the agent wants to represent you, whether you're getting hits on social media or whatever is your metric of success.

Elan Mastai: But if you focus on your craft, if you focus on waking up every day and trying to get to be just a fractionally better writer, that's actually a part of the process that is under your control.

listenN: I loved what you said you never get to see their early work. I mean, that is so wise, just to remember that because we've all seen that movie that made us want to be a filmmaker, we've all read the book or gone to the play or seen the painting or heard the music that makes people want to follow that path. But yeah, you don't get to see the early stuff and the early stuff will show you like, "Oh yeah, I can maybe do something similar to that."

Elan Mastai: Right.

listenN: I think of like when you go to the student film festivals at the art colleges and you'll see people at the beginning of their careers and they've made their little short film, that's a good place to start judging yourself if you're just a beginner trying to get into the film business is look at what people a couple of years more advanced than you as some more training than you are doing and then aspire to be that as opposed to the next Scorsese or something.

Elan Mastai: Well, that's the thing about film school. I went to Queens and I studied... I mean, I studied English as well as film. But I've said this to my professors years later, when you're in film school, just like when you're studying English or whatever

your area, when you're in film school, the only bad movies you see are the ones made by you and your friends, right? You're only watching masterpieces. They're not showing you crappy movies in film school. They're showing you the greatest movies of all time, and then you go out and make your little short films and their terrible compared to the greatest movies of all time.

Elan Mastai: In fact, every movie that you make or that your friends make, whatever the promise are total garbage compared to the masterpieces of the medium. I think actually, it can be really hard on young aspiring filmmakers. After film school, I worked as assistant programmer at a film festival where we would watch hundreds of submissions and the majority of them were terrible. That's okay. The majority of them would never be seen by anybody except a few unfortunate junior programmers. But it actually was probably the most inspiring thing for me. Not that, "Oh, these movies are terrible. I can do better than that." But like, "Oh, these people have gone out and made the movies. The movies aren't that great, but I can see what's wrong with that."

Elan Mastai: I'm watching them and I'm saying, "Okay, this doesn't work. This doesn't work. Oh, that was really interesting." They kind of got to an interesting place there, but then it fell apart over here by watching all these terrible failures. I mean, I'm not going to mention any of them because it's like obviously these are people who worked really hard, raised the money, spent the time, made the movies, finished them, submitted them to festivals. The movies didn't work out, but I actually learned a lot from watching those in a lot of ways. I learned a lot more about screenwriting and storytelling on film from watching hundreds of films that didn't work than I ever did watching like dozens of masterpieces in film schools.

Elan Mastai: I've joked with this, but sort of joking seriously with, well, my old film props. You should just show your students 50 terrible movies because that's going to make them feel like they can do it much more than showing them 50 masterpieces.

listenN: Or show them famous peoples' first work, right?

Elan Mastai: Right.

listenN: Low budget, not a lot of skill and talent yet, but a lot of passion and drive and show them that and say, "There's a straight line between this film and they won an Academy award for it. But that straight line is 15 years of hard work."

Elan Mastai: I mean, 15 if they're lucky. Again, let me say watching masterpieces is good too. You should do both. You should have the aspirational but also the functional of like, "Oh, this is what happens when it doesn't work. This is what happens when it does." To realize that, you're going to start in one place and you're going to go towards the horizon of creating work that truly works at all levels.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with novelist and screenwriter Elan Mastai, who was talking about the serendipity around the movie that changed the course of his life and the surprising encounter that allowed him to say thank you. On the note of inspirational movies, do you have your top two, three, one movies that you feel changed your life or motivated you in a big way?

Elan Mastai: A huge one for me is this film. It's a Taiwanese film called Yi Yi, written and directed by Edward Yang. It's called Yi Yi. I think the subtitle in English was a one and a two. This is a movie that when I heard about it... I mean, it just sounded terrible. I was like, "Why would I want to watch that?" It's like a two and a half hour family saga set in Taiwan. It just sounded like, "Well, why would I want to watch that? That sounds like so boring."

Elan Mastai: In fact, the only reason I watched it was I was working at the Toronto International Film Festival as an assistant, getting people's dry cleaning and doing their schedules and that kind of thing. It was the last night of the festival and I was sober and touted. All I wanted to do was go home and I was actually feeling a little like burnt out on movies because when you're working with your festival, there's all these incredible films, but what you're really seeing a lot of the time when you work there is just like the fast step, like how the sausage is made, how movies are bought and sold, the kind of the business side of it, and all the kind of deals and all the salespeople. It was kind of depressing and it made me sort of feel at this time at a young age, like, "I don't know. Maybe this isn't for me." It wasn't feeling creative. It was feeling like a job, like a sales conference.

Elan Mastai: I was actually so tired that I didn't think I could catch the subway home. I felt like I would fall asleep on the subway. I looked through the schedule and I looked for the most boring movie I could think of. I was like, "I'm just going to go to this movie, " because I had a path, which I barely used because I had been working at a festival. I'm going to go to the longest most boring movie I can find and I'm going to have a nap. That longest was boring movie was Yi Yi, a one to two the Taiwanese film.

Elan Mastai: I went to the movie theater and I was like, "I'm just going to settle in and sleep." The movie is brilliant. I mean it was just so mesmerizing, so funny, so thoughtful and insightful, so moving emotionally, so thrilling on a storytelling level. The idea that I could walk into this theater literally intending to sleep through the movie and just be transfixed by the story of this family that I shouldn't have any reason to care about. But because of the filmmaking technique, the storytelling world, and the passion of the filmmaker, I just loved it. It really saved movies for me. It made me love what you can do in cinema.

Elan Mastai: I went from a place of being literally exhausted to being so excited. I was so excited by the film that instead of going home to sleep on the last night of the festival, I had been invited to this party and I went to this party because I was

feeling great about movies and excited and I was full of energy. At that party, I met the woman who would become my wife.

listenN: Oh my gosh. Wow.

Elan Mastai: I think about films that are seminal to me and there's certainly films that I love, but no movie has like changed the course of my life more than Yi Yi.

listenN: Oh wow. That is such a great story. Have you ever been able to share that story with the filmmakers?

Elan Mastai: Actually, I have not the filmmaker because unfortunately he passed away. He died of cancer. But through weird circumstances, I was having dinner with Jackie Chan, the Hong Kong movie star. I don't know why I had to explain, everybody knows Jackie Chan. I was having dinner with Jackie Chan and there was this woman with him at the dinner and she was there and I got her name, but I didn't quite understand what she was doing there. It was because she was there considering working with Jackie on a biography or documentary about him. She seemed very nice, but I didn't have a huge opportunity to talk with her.

Elan Mastai: But then at one point, I think Jackie left the table and I just started talking with her and I discovered that she was Edward Yang's widow. She had been married to him and she was a close collaborator of his. She's actually in Yi Yi and she worked as a production designer. Anyways, this woman was actually his widow and I was able to tell her the story and it was really touching for her to know how much his film had that effect on me. It was really beautiful opportunity for me to be able to talk to this woman and tell her about how much his work meant to me and also her work because she was actually part of his films as well.

Elan Mastai: I think for her at the time, I feel like she was feeling like, "Oh, maybe his work... Because he passed away and he wasn't able to continue working, that maybe he wasn't having the same kind of effect that he could have. There's been a real criteria put on out all his movies and they're all available now. But I still feel like he's one of those filmmakers that hasn't really... because he passed away after making a couple really wonderful films, I really recommend seeking them out. Her name was Kai-Li Peng. I mean, still is Kai-Li Peng. Anyways, it was a lovely to talk to her about how important his works are, the work was for me. Yi Yi is wonderful film. I also recommend A Brighter Summer Day, and That Day on the Beach, and Taipei Story, all terrific films.

listenN: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing that. That is such a great story. It takes me into some questions I have around your screenwriting and I'm wondering, has the magic of that experience filtered into your storytelling? Have you made that movie of no boy goes to movie to sleep to meet the love of his life?

Elan Mastai: I mean, yes and no. When I write autobiographically I tend to write more like what the feeling is as opposed to specific, like telling that exact story on film or even in a novel. I tend to be like, "How did that feel? What's the fictional story that I can tell about that? Or what's a story where I can use that feeling?" I wrote this movie, *The F Word*, which was released in the US as *What If* and *The F Word* stars, Daniel Radcliffe and Zoe Kazan, Adam Driver, Mackenzie Davis, and Rafe Spall as directed by Mike Dowe. That is a movie about what happens when you meet somebody and you feel that sense of connection and it's just like a random encounter that changes the trajectory of your life.

Elan Mastai: That's a movie about what it feels like to meet somebody and just be drawn to them and have that immediate chemistry, that spark of connection, that feels so vivid and effervescent and how those kind of human connections change your life. It's something that I write about, I think a lot is the romantic connections and sort of more friendship connections, but how human connection and how that sort of spark of meeting somebody on the right circumstances can take you off in a totally different direction.

Elan Mastai: I'm kind of private about my personal life. I love writing and I love sharing these stories and I certainly use my own emotional material as fuel to tell stories about fictional characters. But I kind of like to keep my personal stories mine alone, me and the people who were intimate in my life. I mean, maybe in the future I'll get more comfortable with that, but there's something about a personal story that I just like them to be mine.

listenN: That's probably a very valid emotional response as an artist, right? You can use them as fuel for your creative process, but you don't need to expose them sort of thing to the world because that could change it.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, it's a really complicated... I think in our modern era, there's a lot of people whose art is based on almost literally kind of taking the material of their life and presenting it out to the world, whether in nonfiction or even as fiction. I know a lot of writers or filmmakers whose creative output is very much like a barely veiled expression of their real lives. I thought that I don't think that that's valid. It's just I worry about the effect on your personal life when you turn everything into material.

Elan Mastai: I think if you read my novel or watch a film that I wrote like *The F Word*, you will know me very, very well reading that book or from watching that movie. You will have a very strong understanding of who I am, what's meaningful to me, how I see the world. But it's not a memoir. The world view is very accurate to the way I see the world. The emotional tenor is very accurate to how I experience the world, how I feel life, but it's not an autobiography, right? It's not nonfiction. It's still fictionalized. That line between emotional or philosophical accuracy versus autobiographical expression is an important one for me to maintain.

listenN: To go back to The F Word movie, I'm just curious, why was it called, What If in the United States or elsewhere and then The F Word in Canada, right?

Elan Mastai: The F Word was the original title. I mean, we used to joke the dirtiest word in romance friends because it's sort of like a modern exploration of friendship, particularly male, female jumping where the line between being attracted to somebody as a friend versus something more or something romantic, how those lines get messy, the better you get to know somebody, and how the chemistry you feel with somebody can change your perspective and take you in a direction you never intended to go, and direction you may not even want to go.

Elan Mastai: When we sold the movie in the US, it's not that interesting a story. It's just the MPAA, the ratings board in the US said, "You basically can't release a movie called The F Word in America if you want to advertise it publicly. If you want to have posters on walls, if you want to have billboards, if you want to put it on the side of buses, you can't call a movie The F Word. Our distributor in the US decided to change the title so that they wouldn't run a foul of the MPAA. In Canada, our distributor, eOne in Canada just felt like that was ridiculous. They loved the title and they felt the very thing that scared the American Ratings Board was what they loved about it. They loved how edgy and provocative the title was. But that the movie itself is actually quite... there's sort of a sweetness and an emotional resonance to the film, but the title kind of gets your attention.

Elan Mastai: It was really like a cultural difference. In some countries we released the movie as The F word, other countries released it as What If, depending on their rating. We sort of ran into the linguistic periods of the American Ratings Board.

listenN: Yeah. Coming from the advertising world, I used to run into that all the time and even just in different regions, in different areas like between certain suppliers of let's say outdoor billboards, one would put something up and one would not. I'm going to ramble here a little bit because I'm going to tie in the concept of film festivals and then your film, because I went to a short film festival years and years and years ago when the only time you could see this kind of stuff was if you went to the blur cinema and spent that weekend watching a bunch of short films because there was no online. This is back in the '90s. I saw this, I think it was a Swedish film that was really low budget locked off camera, a woman in a kitchen with a big pot of boiling water like she's making pasta or lobsters or something.

listenN: Then there's steam and there's heat and there's this whole setup that something bad is going to happen with this hot water. She's going to hurt herself or something. Smoke detector goes off and she's waving a towel and she climbs up on the kitchen sink to wave the smoke detector and she falls out the window. That's the end of the movie. Everybody in the movie theater just sits there and feels like, "Oh my God, that was horrific." Then I watched your movie, I thought you did that so brilliantly. It was so funny.

listenN: The setup with the jalapeno in the eye and then the fact that he was the one that opened the window in the first place and then the way you summed it all up with... You said, if I remember twice, "Don't move." After Ben's fallen out the window is lying unconscious on the ground, she says, "Don't move." I just found that scene so well written and so funny. It was just such a juxtaposition of what I had seen in this other movie that left me feeling like I just witnessed the most horrible thing in the world to the humor. I see that scene as being a big part of you.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, I love that sequence in The F Word and I'm really proud of how I'm moving up the writing on it, but also how Mike directed at how the actors performed it, and even just in terms of the set we built and we all really loved that scene. I mean, when you watch it in the theater with an audience and get that kind of intense explosion of laugh. It's really, really rewarding. Yeah. I mean, for me, it's a couple of things. The movie's quite talky especially in the first 15, 20 minutes. I love funny, rich dialogue. I mean, the movie is full of that, but I also feel as an audience, you can get a little full up of it.

Elan Mastai: I wanted to create a sequence where you'd get a surprising physical explosion of laughter because I feel like these kind of tensions build up in a movie and if you can find ways of releasing them in surprising ways, you build number one, a lot of goodwill for the audience. It's also like you blow out that tension and you have a chance to fill the balloon back up again. There's a lot going on in that scene in terms of Daniel's character, Wallace meetings, through his shanties, boyfriend for the first time, her sister's there, which confuses him and throws a whole wrench into the dynamics and you have this really naughty four way kind of conversation happening.

Elan Mastai: When you suddenly build all this physical humor into it and be very, very careful... it was very carefully constructed but hopefully feels effortless, physical comedy of the moment. The audience doesn't see it coming, and so it's an even bigger explosion. Being able to build that sort of cinematically and structurally into the movie, it's one of the really fun things about storytelling because when you're watching with an audience and they're laughing at certain things or following certain things and you know that you have this surprise that they're never going to see coming. I mean, now if they watch the movie, they'll see it coming. Sorry, we just ruined that.

Elan Mastai: It's one of the fun things as a storyteller knowing you laid, I mean, a trap in a good way for the audience that they're going to get sucked into and be shocked and surprised and have this huge reaction. It's really, really rewarding and there's little things we did in that. Actually, it's interesting because we were at that set several times, we're actually very intentionally... That's one of the only sets that we really built because the movie's shot in a lot of natural locations. We just used real locations and took them over and dress them for the production. But we just used real environments. We actually built that set even though we use it for a bunch of different scenes exactly because of that window

scene, because we built it on a second floor. We designed the whole space and because we wanted you to be able to see out the window and to see literally that it really is the second floor of a building.

Elan Mastai: Because if it's a third or fourth floor, he's really badly injured. If it's a first floor, nothing's going to happen. It's not going to be a big deal. It had to be a second floor. We wanted the exact right amount of drop. When you're seeing out the window, when you don't even know where the scene is going on a visual level and a geographic level, you're registering the actual height. It's very subtle and it's a real Testament to the director Mike Dowse who understood that that even though you don't know where the scene is going, you are registering visually that you are actually on the second floor of the building. You see traffic go by outside all that stuff.

Elan Mastai: When it goes out the window, the fall feels much more real because we are in a real space. Those are the kind of things that you think about when you're making a film, how you're going to... and those things really enhance it. We built all these different parts of the room so that we could do the mechanics and because we had used real environments through the whole movie. Again, it's a subtle thing, but the audience absorbed all of these are real environments. Even though we're actually in one of the very few built environments, the rest of the movie has been in real environment, so you don't question it in that way.

Elan Mastai: These are all the little things that you do in a movie to make a sequence like that, which feels just like this big physical comic laugh. But you're doing all these subtle structural things to make sure that it has the largest impact possible.

listenN: Yeah. That's great to hear you explain it because for one, I thought it was very funny and very well done and you're right. You built up all this tension that you thought was going to be awkward tension between him, and Ben, and her sister. You thought everything else was going to happen other than what actually happens, so you're waiting for something else. Then I think that the other takeaway because as a person who's... I've done television commercials and I've worked in different creative elements where I'm always curious how people do stuff. What happened to me right away was I went, "I can't believe they got a location that was so perfect for that scene." Because I thought it was a real location.

Elan Mastai: I mean, it is a real location. We took over a building and then readdress the interior of the building. It's not like it was green screened or built in a movie studio. We just took over a building and made it look like an apartment. Because we had been using real apartments, real houses, real workplaces, real coffee shops, we were able to kind of conceal the artifice, but it's not like green-screen. It's real place.

listenN: That kind of stuff is super, super fun and it's rewarding to hear that it had that kind of impact on you. I'm happy to hear that. I'm just sort of riffing off the

lesson you said. I mean, there's a lot of expectations the audience might have going into a scene like that.

Elan Mastai: As a writer, I feel like my job is if you... whatever you are expecting happen, that can't happen because if that happens and it's not really like, "Why did we even give you the scene?" If the audience can guess how it's going to end from the beginning of the scene, then the scene doesn't work dramatically. It always has to surprise you. Sometimes you can play with that. You can give the audience or the reader a couple expected things. But to me, if you're giving them a few expected things, it's only because you're going to subvert or append those expectations. If you're not going to subvert or append those expectations, why even tell the story?

listenN: I saw a quote of you saying that you don't start writing till you know how something's going to end. Then when I think of romantic comedies, we almost all know how they're going end, right? The boy and the girl are going to get together almost in all of them at the end. Is that harder to write then? Because you're not surprising me at the end necessarily. How they get together, you're surprising me. Is the challenge as a screen writer when you're writing something like a romantic comedy? Is that so much harder than let's say a thriller or a horror show or whatever? Something where the ending can just be anything, like any twist and you're good and you're done.

Elan Mastai: Yes and no. Yes, absolutely. Because we typically know how romances work. Either the couple is going to end up together or they're not if it's sort of more of like a downbeat bittersweet ending. I try to think about what it's like when you experience it in life. You meet somebody and you fall in love and you develop a relationship and you get married and you have kids and you live a life together. That's an expected pattern. But when you're living it, it's not expected.

Elan Mastai: When you meet somebody for the first time and you're starting to get to know them, you don't know how this is going to turn out, right? I mean, a first kiss can be like the most boring thing on screen. But if it's happening to you, it's not boring. The first time you kiss somebody is never boring.

listenN: Right.

Elan Mastai: I think about what it feels like when you're inside the experience. My job as a writer, as a storyteller is to ideally put the audience, whether it's a reader or a viewer inside the character's perspective. What you're experiencing is the tensions, and the awkwardness, and the yearning, and the thrill of being inside that experience. I feel like if I can keep a handle on that, then I'm okay.

Elan Mastai: I mean, with The F Word, we tried to run the line where you're not necessarily sure, are you watching a movie, which is going to have a romantically happy ending? Or are you watching a movie that's going to be like one of those

bittersweet indie movies, like 500 Days of Summer where you actually have a downbeat, like bittersweet ending.

listenN: Right.

Elan Mastai: You try to maintain that tension through the film as much as possible. But yeah, I think in a romantic comedy, I think when they work really well, it's not about whether the ending is a big shock or surprise. It's about whether you fall in love with these characters, and you want to spend time with them, and you want them to get over whatever the obstacles that are in their way in order to find happiness at the end.

Elan Mastai: If there's a theme of the film, then you can't lie your way to happiness and that experience is what I want people to really follow. I mean, I knew how I wanted the movie to end, and so you work backwards and you make sure that all the things you're doing in this film, the pleasures of the movie aren't dependent in a romantic comedy. I think the pleasures of romantic comedy can't be dependent on the ending. Can't be like, "Oh, I'm going to be so shocked and surprised. You're blown away by the ending." The thriller, you can do that, right? If your thriller has incredible ending, great. But I think in a romantic comedy or in a lot of comedies, you have to make sure that the pleasures of the film are in the experience of the story, not in how it ends.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with novelist and screenwriter Elan Mastai who is discussing his book, All Our Wrong Todays and how it helps close the loop on the future we were supposed to have but didn't. I want to sort of transition into talking about your book and I know that you grew up as a big Sci-Fi lover. I do know that your grandfather had a big influence on you around legitimizing, I guess it is, the science behind Sci-Fi. Do you want to share a little bit of that story?

Elan Mastai: Sure. I mean, when I was growing up, my grandfather, my mother's father... We spent a lot of time with my grandparents and my grandfather who was a chemist, he was a big Sci-Fi fan and he had, I remember, this bookshelf in my grandparents' house, which was lined with all these old vintage science fiction paperbacks and all the older kind of anthologies from the '50s and '60s anthologies of science fiction, short stories. I loved them, but I particularly even found myself drawn as a kid to these garish painted covers with robots, and spaceman, and aliens, all these incredibly vivid images of the science fiction stories and the science fiction futures. I found that kind of stuff fascinating. It really captured my imagination.

Elan Mastai: But even as a kid, there was a contradiction there, like a tension there because a lot of these stories written in the '40s or '50s or '60s... I was as a kid in the '80s, some of these stories were set in what was the future for the authors in the '50s, but it was already the past for me. If you read Orwell's 1984 but you're reading it in 1985, you can say, "Well, that is not what 1984 was like." I was

really interested in that contradiction and I got more and more interested in it as I get older. What happened to the future that these writers and artists imagine? They sort of Jetsons like techno utopian future that seemed just around the corner in the postwar era. What happened to that?

Elan Mastai: Falling to the other point, my grandfather as a scientist, he was a huge Sci-Fi fan, but he used to get very frustrated because he felt that as much as he loved the stories, they always cheated the science. They always stick some kind of nonsense to make the story work. He always felt like the actual science, the real science, is super interesting. If they would just take the time to get to understand the real science, they could actually make their stories and not just more interesting but actually more tangible, more accurate, more real, and more meaningful.

Elan Mastai: I think those two things really fueled the idea behind my novel All Our Wrong Todays both in terms of wanting to explore what happened to the future we were supposed to have, but also we're trying to make sure that I was honoring the influence of my grandfather by getting the science as right as possible.

listenN: Now, was there a lot of pressure on you? Was there a point where you had to just stop and go, "Okay, I think I've got the science good enough?" Or were you always feeling the pressure to make it as perfect as possible?

Elan Mastai: I mean, I'm just interested in this stuff. My job as a writer is to understand this snap as well as I'm intellectually capable of understanding it. I do a lot of research, but it's not all in the book. You know what I mean? I'm the kind of person who might spend weeks trying to get to understand some sort of arcane scientific concept, but it's only going to be two sentences in the book. I don't expect the reader to have the same level of interest in this step as I do.

Elan Mastai: My job is just to make sure that the science feels accurate. When you read it, it makes sense. It feels true and that it serves the story because nobody needs a meta suddenly spend like 5,000 words explaining quantum physics to. But if you read it and it's accurate and when you feel it, it feels real, that's all that really matters. I might spend like, two or three weeks researching a topic, but it's only like three sentences or a paragraph in the book. To me, it's just what's important to tell the story. It's great when a physics professor emails me and says, "I read your book and I was really impressed with all the physics checks out." That makes me really happy. Or whatever the topic... Because for me, the scientific accuracy gets a lot of attention.

Elan Mastai: But to me, I want it to be historically accurate. I want it to be psychologically accurate. One of the first people I ever gave the novel to was a psychotherapist I know because I want to make sure that the characters made sense. I wanted her to read it just like you might get a physics professor to read it, to know if the physics of time travel makes sense, I want a psychologist to read it, to tell me if

the psychology makes sense. I want a historian to be able to read it and say, "Oh, these historical references totally check out."

Elan Mastai: To me, it's not just the science, it's everything, but definitely my grandfather's influence was a real spur to make sure that I was taking that step as seriously as possible while never get making it get in the way of the story.

listenN: Well, and I find this interesting connection where the Sci-Fi stories of the past you reading them after their shelf life so to speak and realizing that it didn't come true, made you go and write a Sci-Fi book explaining how that could happen while actually getting the science right enough that your book could potentially happen in the future, right?

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, that's what's fun about it for me to take the things that influence you. But to me, if you're just spitting out your influences, then that's why I do it. You want to provide a new spin on it. For people who don't know the book, I mean, All Our Wrong Today's, when the book starts, it's set in the present day, but it's like what people thought 2016, '17, '18, '19. Like what people thought the present day would be like from the perspective of the 1950s and '60s. Like what somebody in 1955 thought 2019 was going to look like. That's where the book starts, but that's not where it ends. Part of what I'm exploring as you mentioned, is like what happened to the future we were supposed to have, how did we end up with the world we're in today instead of that sort of dazzling techno utopian future that we imagined for ourselves.

Elan Mastai: While most of the book actually takes place in the real world, in the world we all live in, it explores that question of like, what happened, where did it all go wrong? My book provides what I hope is a very entertaining answer to what went wrong.

listenN: Well, I have to make a confession. I'm not a huge Sci-Fi fan. Not that I don't like it, I don't know why I never gravitated towards it. I'm the youngest of four, so my siblings were all into Star Trek and all that stuff growing up. I kind of moved over to Spider-Man. I wasn't a Superman fan. I was kind of more of a Spider-Man fan. I don't know if I was rebelling. I've read some Sci-Fi, but it's not a genre that I embrace. I might go more mysticism than science. But I found the way that you wrote your book with the short chapters and then the summary where you go in, I think it's on page 106 or something and you go in and you go like, "Summary of chapters one through 43," or whatever.

listenN: The fact that there's 43 chapters by 106 helps people understand how short the chapters are. But I found it so easy to get into the book and to learn the science and to understand and get pulled in, in a way that I hadn't really felt in other types of Sci-Fi books.

Elan Mastai: Right. Well, part of that is a reaction to... Oh, sorry, I cut you off. You were going to say something.

listenN: No, no, no, that's, that's totally fine. I was just going to say... I was curious about how you chose to write it like in these short chapters. Then as I said, the summary to me was kind of like, "Oh my God, I get it." Right?

Elan Mastai: I mean, that's good. That's great to hear and that's all intentional. I mean, part of it is I was really into Sci-Fi when I was younger, but then I drifted away from it for a long time. I think part of it was some of this stuff felt kind of childish to me. Not like childish, like there's not sophisticated mature or science fiction, but it was a thing that I was into when I was younger, and then I drifted off into other genres.

Elan Mastai: I mean, I like reading. I read all up and down through different genres, through different literary forms and I drifted over also into the film world. Science fiction was a thing that I had a huge amount of affection for, but I associated with my adolescence and my relationship with my grandfather. When I kind of revisited a lot of these ideas, when I was older, I was kind of approaching the genre from somebody that had stepped away from it for a long time but had a huge amount of affection and a deep reservoir of knowledge of it. I wanted to write a science fiction book that would work really well for science fiction fans. But if you've never picked up a science fiction book and all you know about Sci-Fi is what you've absorbed from the pop culture, it would still totally work for you.

Elan Mastai: I tried to approach these certain conventions of the genre with a fresh eye. I tried to approach them from the perspective of somebody that doesn't have a huge knowledge or even affection for the genre, so that the ideas that I'm exploring... You don't have to know anything about Sci-Fi to get into the mood because ultimately it's much, much more about this character's psychological and emotional journey and about the questions that he's asking and about the answers that he finds. It is about the sort of the rocket ships, and time travel, and flying cars, and all that kind of stuff.

Elan Mastai: To me, the science fiction, while I wanted to have a huge amount of affection for it and take it really seriously, it's really more a psychological study of his character and it becomes a frame through which we understand the story. In terms of the short chapters... and part of that is the short chapters. I wanted the book to be as welcoming as possible. I wanted to write a book where if you have only five minutes... Everybody lives a very busy lives. If you only have like five or 10 minutes in the morning or in the evening or on your commute to work, you can read a chapter or two in five or 10 minutes.

Elan Mastai: I love the idea that you can have a coherent storytelling experience with just like five or 10 minutes of your day. If you have a whole afternoon to sit and read like 30 chapters and that's great. I mean, I want you to read as much as possible and the best compliment I get from readers is when they tell me, "Oh I was reading it on the subway and I missed my stomp." Or, "I was only going to read for 20 minutes and I ended up staying up really late because I just had to find out what

happened next." That's my job as a storyteller is to keep you turning pages until it ruins your life.

Elan Mastai: But I want people who are really busy, whether you're like a mom juggling kids or somebody who has to commute to work every day or whatever's going on in your life, you can still have like a little story telling experience. It can be part of your life. I took that idea of having science fiction that works for Sci-Fi fans, but also works for somebody who's never read science fiction, having a book that's structured that you can read it, you can read a three-page chapter and that's it. Or you can spend the whole day reading the book. I like my work to be welcoming in that way.

listenN: I mean, that is a great overview of the book because that's exactly how it felt to me. I mean, you read it quickly because it was only a commitment for the next page or two for a chapter and you think, "Oh, I'll finish at the end of that chapter." But then, you got into it very, very easily I felt. I also love the fact that, as you said, it's about the personal character. It's about their emotions, their feelings, what they're thinking, what they're going through. Even though they live in this Sci-Fi world, they're not really a Sci-Fi kind of person. They're just a human, right?

Elan Mastai: That's part of the voice of the character too. I think one of the things that when looking back at these old stories for research, everybody's so excited about all the technology and it's all like the story stopped for 10 pages so they can explain how all the technology works. But that's not how we experience technology in the real world. I mean, I have a cell phone and my cell phone is... the cell phone I have in my pocket is this incredibly powerful super computer connected to this international network of information. It can do all this incredible stuff. The cell phone in my pocket would be the most powerful super computer on earth 30 years ago. But it's not like I walk around staring at it in awe or if I was writing a story set today, I have to spend 10 pages of my novel explaining how a cell phone works.

Elan Mastai: We're very blasé about the technology we have. I don't even know how this thing works, right? I mean, I have the cell phone and I use it every day, but it's not like I could really explain how the technology works. I wanted a narrator that had that perspective of what all the amazing technology in his world, right? It's not like when I drive to work in the morning, I have to explain to the reader how a combustion engine works, right?

listenN: Right.

Elan Mastai: I want a narrator who was not that impressed with all this technology because that is how we would be in the world. We're much more concerned about whether we have a good Wi-Fi signal than we are about the quantum physics behind a cell phone. That aspect of it to me, like a narrator who was funny, tongue in cheek, didn't take it all too seriously, was an important way to get into

this world in a way that I hoped that was going to appeal to readers and wasn't going to push out anybody that... there wasn't going to be a barrier to entry for anybody who isn't necessarily somebody who loves knowing how things work because he's going to really know how everything works.

Elan Mastai: He does his best to explain things when it's relevant to the story, but he's not super worried about explaining how every little thing works because you wouldn't do that in the real world.

listenN: Yeah. Now, that's a very good point. You had me when you introduced the concept because I'd never thought of this before, and I'm going to paraphrase it here, but something to do with the introduction of a new technology introduces the accident of that technology. Meaning, you invent the car, you've also invented the car crash. I just found that thinking fascinating. That just pulled me into the story in a way that I hadn't expected the concept of, "Yeah. We're constantly inventing this stuff that has consequences."

Elan Mastai: That's right. Typically speaking, the kind of people who design engineer introduced new technologies just by the very nature of how they tend to focus on all the things that are going to go right with technology, right? They don't focus on all the things that could go wrong. I'm fascinated by the idea of the accident, the unintended consequence every time, as you said, you introduced a new technology, you also introduced the accident of that technology. There's no such thing as a plane crash until you invent the plane.

Elan Mastai: I think there was a responsibility on the part of society, but specifically the people who are inventing, innovating, and developing new technologies to think about not just all the great things that could happen, but what can go wrong because inevitably every technology has its accident. Every technology has its crash, whether it's a steam ship or whether it's a cell phone. We've seen through social media, through the internet, through cellular technology, through smart phones the many ways that there are unintended consequences, whether they're on how a democratic election on the social connections between people on... Let me give you a very benign example.

Elan Mastai: Many of the weddings I've been to in the last few years are people who have met on dating apps, right? It's actually super interesting now how so many people meet on dating apps and they clearly work. I mean, I have very important people in my life who've met their spouses on dating apps. I have absolutely nothing. Again, I think there once was a time where people were a little uncomfortable about it, a little awkward, but now it's just like a very normal part of everyday society.

Elan Mastai: I say that in a nonjudgmental way, but it's really interesting because it used to be when you ask somebody the story of how they met, they had a big long story. I even earlier in this podcast talked about the story of how... the day I met my wife. But now everybody's story is the same. We met on a dating app. They

might have a story about where they met on their first date and how they came together. But how they met is... everybody has that same story. That's interesting. But more than that, I've been to these weddings lately where because they met in a dating app, there's absolutely no social overlap between these people.

Elan Mastai: When you go to the wedding, not a single person on the bride side knows a single person on the groom side. It used to be people met because of overlaps in their social circles, so there would be these connections between them, right? But now when you go to a wedding by two people who met on dating up, there's absolutely no overlap at all. Of course, once they come together, there's an overlap. But I had a friend who met his wife on dating app, had a wedding where nobody knew each other and then unfortunately it didn't work out and they divorced. I mean, the split between them was perfectly clean because there was no overlap. All of these things were just... I'm not saying it in a judgemental way. It's just interesting. What's the longterm consequences of all these marriages, the way these people have met?

Elan Mastai: It's just interesting to think of the longterm consequences of these things, right? It's really easy to project the positives of a technology. It's really hard to project the negatives of the technology and because life as lived is very unpredictable. I'm sure that the inventors of Facebook had no intention of disrupting the US election when they introduced their social media app. People go into these things with positive intentions. I mean, I'm sure they want to make a lot of money or they go into these things with positive intentions in life, has a way of making things a lot more complicated. I think that there's a responsibility to think about this stuff. As a storyteller, it's very rich. I love thinking about not just the accident of technology, but the accident of people.

Elan Mastai: Every person you meet has unintended consequences on your life and they may be very, very minor or they may be very, very major. When you take that idea of the accident and you apply it not just to technology but also to people, then you start to get into the stuff that makes storytelling work [inaudible 01:05:55].

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with novelist and screenwriter Elan Mastai who is sharing how trying to get the science right around time travel opened up all sorts of creative and exciting story possibilities. I want to talk a little bit about time travel because you have done your due diligence and dove into the science behind it in a way that a lot of other storytellers maybe have taken some liberties on. I think that you were referring to no one takes into account the astrodynamics of time travel. The fact that we are hurdling through time and it's not just about walking from one door to another door into a different time zone.

Elan Mastai: Yeah. I mean, it's something that I've always found really curious. We act like you can just walk through a door and because of time, but we know, of course that the earth is constantly moving, right? Even right now as we sit, if you're in a

room, it feels like you're not moving, but of course you're actually hurdling through space at hundreds of miles an hour. The earth is spinning, it's rotating around the sun, the sun is moving through the milky way. The milky way is moving through the universe. We're actually all moving at unimaginable speeds.

Elan Mastai: If you were to go back and time, three seconds, you'd be a mile away, right? The idea that you could go back in time even to... yes, if you were to go back in time to yesterday, you wouldn't be in the same place physically. You'd be in the vacuum of space. The earth would have already moved many tens of thousands of miles away. I liked the idea of exploring how time travel would work if you actually took astrodynamics seriously.

Elan Mastai: If you actually thought about the fact that the earth was constantly moving, how would time travel work? What was great about that was that... Again, for anybody who's listening to this it's not like I spend like 40 pages explaining this in a book. It's like three paragraphs. But to me what's really interesting about that is it takes the physics seriously, but it actually opened up all these really interesting storytelling possibilities because to create a model of time travel that took astrodynamics and orbital mechanic seriously required me to figure out all that stuff, which helped me work out the history of this world, this sort of alternate version of the world, what technology would have had to be in place, what discoveries would've had to be placed, who might've made those discoveries.

Elan Mastai: I was able to... By taking the physics seriously, it really opened up and added so much more texture to the world and evoked these characters who become, of course, what you read the book. Key parts of the story. Like my grandfather had said all those years ago, by taking the science seriously, I opened up all these really exciting storytelling possibilities, which I think are hopefully for the reader really fresh and unexpected. For me as a storyteller, we're really fresh and unexpected. By taking the science seriously, the story got so much more interesting.

listenN: Yeah, absolutely. I would agree and I would recommend everybody go and take your book and, and spend some time with it, All Our Wrong Todays, because it opens your eyes up to all sorts of interesting ways of seeing science, and the future, and life. It's also just a really good human story, right?

Elan Mastai: Yeah.

listenN: It's-

Elan Mastai: Thank you.

listenN: It's about how do you figure out your life and the future you want to live in. Yeah, I think there's so many layers to what... and that's the thing that's so great about books, right? You see a book on a bookshelf and you see a cover usually,

and you see a name and it just gets richer and richer and richer and richer as you start to investigate it or start to read it.

Elan Mastai: I hope so. I mean, that's the intention. I mean, I love exploring these sort of scientific and technical philosophical ideas. But ultimately, I'm telling stories about people and I think all those things are interesting if they provide expected way to talk about human relationships, how we find our people, how we find our place, how we find our purpose, what's meaningful to us. What do we mean when we say the future we're supposed to have? What kind of future do we want for ourselves? How do we define happiness? How do you as a person decide what really makes you happy? These are the questions that are eternal human questions and all this sort of, whether it's science fiction or time travel or physics, whatever. All this stuff is relevant to me as a storyteller because it provides an unexpected way to talk about deep emotional human truths.

Elan Mastai: I wouldn't expect anybody to read the book if it was just about how cool time travel is although time travel is cool and I love all that stuff. I'm trying to use these ideas to talk about what it means to be human, what it means to find your purpose and sense of meaning, what it means to be a son or a parent, what it means to be a husband or a spouse, what it means to find your place and find your people and how human connections in our lives are what actually give us the purpose and the meaning that make life worth living.

listenN: Yeah. I think you did that. Well, let me ask you this, and then we're going to sort of wrap it up here. You're talking about research, and science, and then human behavior, and storytelling. What's your writing like? How do you keep all of that in your head and together? What's the way you tackle it?

Elan Mastai: Well, I mean, I spend a lot of time thinking about the stories that I want to tell. I mean, I get a lot of ideas, but not every idea is worth spending a couple of years of your life writing a book or turning into a film. I spend more time just percolating on things, marinating on it. If there's an area that I think needs some research, I'll do some research. A lot of story ideas start... I'm just interested in some general area and I started researching about it and I start reading nonfiction about it and I start getting to understand how things really work in that area and story ideas kind of spark.

Elan Mastai: Once I've spent enough time that I feel like that story is going to be worth actually spending the time on it, then I spend a lot of time thinking and taking notes and observations until I feel like I have the whole story in place, in my head. My feeling is if I can't keep the whole story in my head, I can't expect the reader to. I think about it and I percolate on it and I take notes until I feel like I have the whole story in my head. Then I start to write and I'm very specific. I just try to write a little bit every day. I set myself a page or a word count and I just try to stick to that every day and I write that amount.

Elan Mastai: If things are going really well, maybe I'll write a little more, but I don't write less and I just do it every day. I make it as much a part of my life as making breakfast or brushing my teeth or having a shower, I write. I think that it's really easy to make writing as kind of mystical sort of thing. When the actual writing happens, the craft side of it, try to make it as normal in every day and unspectacular as possible because everyday I spend a certain amount of my day writing that amount of words and piece by piece you chip it together until you have a finished work. There's both this kind of grand cosmic thinking about things and researching and having ideas swirl around in my head. Then there's the actual just hard writing, which is a very, very matter of fact in everyday.

listenN: Do you find that your screen writing skill and expertise... do you think it helped you writing a novel or did it hinder or was there a connection between the two?

Elan Mastai: No, I think it helped a lot. I mean, look, every screenplay you've ever read is written in the exact same way. A movie is a historical Epic or horror film or comedy. All screenplays are written in the same style, they're written in the third person, they're written in the present tense. They have a sort of a very objective view of the character. You're not writing a lot of internal psychology because you're only describing the things on the page that you can actually shoot and act and that can be seen and experienced on screen.

Elan Mastai: It's a very lean writing style. You're trying to create an audio visual experience with the fewest words possible. Now, all of those things impacted me. I mean, what was great about writing a novel is I wasn't hindered by any of those like structural limitation. I could write the book however I wanted, but I still... that rigor of using the fewest words possible to create the most vivid, visual, and emotional experience. Even though a book is a lot longer than a screenplay, I try to never waste any words. Every word is there for a reason.

Elan Mastai: I think that discipline from screenwriting really helped as well as... Screenwriting is very... Even though you're writing words, you're writing a visual experience. As a writer, as a novelist, I'm always thinking like, "What do I want the reader to be picturing in their mind right now?" You're not going to go into a movie theater or turn on your television and experience the story. You're going to experience it on the page. But I still want to create a movie in your mind. What exactly do I want you to be seeing right now? Which is not to say that I want to be totalitarian and force your brain to only see what I want you to see. Part I think of the art of a novel is what do I be really specific about, and where do I want the reader to feel things in themselves?

Elan Mastai: I'll give you an example. I'm very sparing with character description. I want you to know through the dialogue, through the choices the character makes, through the things they think and the way they see the world. I want you to have a very, very clear sense of who they are. But I rarely give a lot of physical description unless it's important to the plot. The reason for that is I want you to imagine they look like whoever you want them to look like. I don't want to force

that on you. Unless there's a very specific plot point tied into some physical attributes, I like it when the reader filled that in themselves. It's fascinating to me when people have a very strong sense of what a character looks like because often that's coming from them, not me.

listenN: Right.

Elan Mastai: At the same time, my job is to make the character as vivid as possible so that your brain fills in the blanks. But that tension does from screenwriting. It's different as a screenwriter because eventually you're going to cast the movie and that character will look like whoever the actor is, right? But at the same time, it's a discipline that you develop as a screenwriter, which is to make the character feel very, very vivid, even though you don't know who they are going to be until until a casting director get into the game.

listenN: Right. That's an interesting segue into a question around, if this book was to become a movie, then you're taking your dystopian and utopian kind of things that you've created and you're making it real. How do you feel about that? How do you feel about the book becoming visual?

Elan Mastai: Well, I think it's a different way of telling the story. I mean, I've sold the movie rights and I adapted the book myself. I do a script and we're working on turning it into a film. We're still in the middle of that process, but it's just a different way of telling the story, just like you have less pages to tell the story and you're telling the story in a different way. You can convey all this stuff visually that you can't convey on the page. It's like you're approaching the character, and the themes, and the ideas of the book in a different medium. I'm comfortable in both media and it's just a different way of telling the story that's important to me.

listenN: That must be unique though. A lot of novelists are not screenwriters, so when their novels get option for movies, somebody else comes in and goes through that process and you're getting to do that on your own work.

Elan Mastai: That's right. Yeah.

listenN: You have the skill of doing that. That must be a very unique and also a gratifying experience.

Elan Mastai: It is. It is. It can be a challenge too. I mean, I understand the value of having somebody come in that isn't totally embedded in the story and having a bit of more of a mercenary attitude about what can stand, walk and go. But no, I feel really grateful that I'm unlucky because I have both skill-sets and that I'm able to shepherd the project from one version to another.

listenN: Yeah, that's really neat. Did writing your first novel... was there any feeling of, "I'm now a real writer," if you know what I mean? Was there-

Elan Mastai: I would say that perception would be more public than personal. Definitely, I think the public perceives novelists in a very different way than screenwriters. I mean, few people in the public, other than the most famous one even really knows screenwriters because you are concealed behind the actors and to a lesser extent the director, right? Film audiences experience a story through the actors. That is just the process, right? Whereas the relationship you have with a novelist is a much more intimate, you are reading the words that they wrote. It's like a form of emotional telepathy.

Elan Mastai: I think that there's just a much more direct... You're literally reading the words. I mean, I could write the greatest screenplay of all time and if the movie turned out to be crappy, you'd think it was a bad script, right? I have written films that did not turn out the way I hoped they would. I was lucky with *The F Word*. I'm really, really proud of that movie, but I've written other movies where the movie does not reflect my screenplay. If you read the novel, you might love it, you might hate it, you might fall somewhere in between, but you will know from reading it what you think of my writing. It's not so much that I didn't feel any different, but I understand that the perception is totally different because you experience it differently.

listenN: Yeah. That's a very good point. Elan, if people want to connect with you or check out your work, how can people get in touch with you?

Elan Mastai: Well, I mean, I have a website, elanmastai.com. There's information on there in terms of vocal work. I'm on a Twitter, [@elanmastai](https://twitter.com/elanmastai). Those are good ways. The websites are really good portal for finding my work. I mean, of course, I encourage people to read *All Our Wrong Todays*, which was published by Penguin Random House and *The F Word* if you're in Canada or *What If*, if you're in the US is available, all over the place. Netflix, iTunes, wherever, fine movies.

listenN: Yeah. I'm going to do our listeners a bit of a favor. I'm just going to spell that out. It's elanmastai.com is where you can see anything that we've talked about probably today or get connected with it. Then I just wanted to ask you about what you're doing these days. Is there anything of interest or anything that you can share?

Elan Mastai: I mean, mostly I'm working on a new novel. I'm in the middle of writing that and hopefully, going to be finishing in the next couple of months. That's been a big creative project. I'm also working on some film and television projects, a couple movies, and a TV show. I'm actually speaking to you from Los Angeles at the moment where I am. Yeah, I'm just pushing those forward, hopefully, some interesting stuff to announce that in the coming months. If you follow me on Twitter, [@elanmastai](https://twitter.com/elanmastai) or check out my website, you can hear about any of that kind of stuff.

listenN: Really cool. Well, I've really appreciated chatting with you today. I've enjoyed learning about your process and the way that you see the world. I really am

grateful for your time and taking the time on the other side of the continent to spend some time with us. Thank you so much.

Elan Mastai: My pleasure. Great talking with you.

listenN: All right, take care.

Elan Mastai: Cheers.

listenN: Well, that's another episode of listenN. Thanks for being. Please subscribe, leave comments or head on over to our website listennpod.com. That's listennpod.com where you'll find episode notes, links to anything that we talked about in this episode, and you can connect with us about being a guest on listenN.