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James Plath and "100 Greatest Literary Characters"

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Laura Kennedy: J Gatsby made the list. So did Hester Prynne, Huckleberry Finn and Harry Potter. Chances are, one of your favorites made the list of the 100 Greatest literary characters. The new book by IWU English Professor, James Plath and two co-authors, highlights those fictional characters who have captured the hearts and imaginations of readers. When publishers Roman and Littlefield approached Plath about compiling the book, he said he was excited and wanted to do it for the sheer joy of it. Then came shocking news.

James Plath: As soon as I heard about this as an opportunity from Roman and Littlefield, I thought this is a fun project. I've got to do it, and I signed on and shortly after I signed, I found out I have Lymphoma. And I was still gonna go ahead and power through but then after two years of chemo and treatments, I just – you know – the projects got pushed to the back burner and I couldn't keep up and so I recruited two of my colleagues, Kirk Curnutt and Gail Sinclair. I saw them at an American literature association conference in Boston and pulled them aside and said, "Hey, you wanna do this? This would be great fun." And they were like, "Yeah, that would be fun."

Laura Kennedy: Doing something like that by yourself choosing 100 would be certainly very exciting but do you think it actually improved the book to have two other voices chiming in and saying, hey let's consider this person or have you considered this character?

Plath: Oh, of course. And in a ideal world, 100 co-authors would have been preferred but then it would take 100 years to get that book out because there would be so much disagreement. I mean we have enough disagreement just among the three of us.

Kennedy: Well, what did you disagree about?

Plath: Just which character should or should not be included and it's tough narrowing things down. We were also very concerned about things like, Okay are we going for coverage? Are we going for a broad spectrum? Are we consciously trying to make this book about more than just 100 greatest characters? How do we define the 100 greatest? And so we consulted our editor. I've seen our editor at Roman and Littlefield, now I said, "How politically correct do we have to be?" And he said,

Kennedy: Oh, really?

Plath: Yeah, and he said, "you know what, as long as you set your parameters and set your margins, we're good with you doing whatever because we expect that any book like this is going to be controversial."

Kennedy: Let's talk about how you set those parameters. You were looking at a pop culture like Harry Potter, too.

Plath: Pop culture. Yeah. We eliminated things like plays because Roman and Littlefield hopes to get a volume separately on those and those characters. We didn't include comic books or graphic novels and we didn't include children's books. We did include young adult fiction. We did include pop culture, genre fiction, mysteries, westerns and so we do have a couple that kind of poke through and made our list.

Kennedy: So let's talk about the criteria for selection and how you set that.

Plath: Here's our justification. R. R. Boker – the company that compiles a running list of books and prints estimates that in any given year, there are approximately 43,000 fictional texts released whether short stories or novels. And that's been ongoing. Google estimates there is 130 million books that have been published just in modern history, and so it's virtually impossible to come up with a definitive collection of 100 greatest characters and once you accept that, now it's like, well how do we narrow this down to where it's no longer opinion, where it's no longer *well, let's just get the best of this type and maybe we have a weaker character*. We leaned heavily on the direction of time-honored reader favorites, prototypes and cultural influencers – characters that somehow become larger than life on the page and so, you know, we prioritize those that have somehow entered the public consciousness. The collective public consciousness. The ones that were influential models for others to follow. Ones that have been so popular with readers that they have become significant, memorable, even beloved. By narrowing it down that way and putting an emphasis on pop culture. We have a lot of characters in the book, for example, that – well, Sherlock Holmes is one who doesn't know who Sherlock Holmes is. However, who has read a Sherlock Holmes book. You know, here is quite a disparity and you get the same thing with who doesn't know who Captain Ahab is. Raise your hand if you've read Moby Dick … you know, so those characters have become so entrenched in pop culture that they have products named after them, they have illusions to all kinds of other books and so that's the direction we leaned – characters that were so big that have become so big that they are pop culture now. They are a part of culture.

Kennedy: Well, what are some of the characters that you selected? That you thought really had to be on this list.

Plath: I selected – yeah, I'm glad you asked that. The short answer is we each got 5 discretionary picks but those pics still had to be approved by the other two editors and I put forth – one of my favorites is Filbert Bono. I know you're making

Kennedy: I drew blank there

Plath: blank face and that's what most people will do. The reason I could justify and we could justify including him and not other very colorful characters is that they made a movie out of Powwow Highway by David Seels and Roger Ebert commented that it was probably one of the best characters he has ever seen in film and it's the same way in books, and so…

Kennedy: It's a faithful adaptation from the book.

Plath: It is. It really is. And because of Ebert's stamp of approval and the fact that we did have the film and it grew beyond just the initial publication, we were able to justify having a character that somehow burst those pages and became something more.

Kennedy: Were there any characters that were suggested that – I'm not suggesting it came to blows, but there was controversy with you and your co-authors, with Gail and Kerk, about whether we really must include this person and whether somebody else disagrees strongly. Were there any polite arguments?

Plath: Oh, of course. Yeah. We met in person to talk about our list and we probably argued for quite a long time and then we went back and forth over email. We had telephone conference calls. We – every time we'd go back to it, we'd get a list of more recommendations to go to. We would argue quite a bit. Sometimes the arguments would be over whether a character was indeed this significant one.

Kennedy: Who was controversial?

Plath: I don't know about controversial but we really, really, wanted to include an African author, or a Caribbean author and the more we looked at those books, the more we couldn't justify. Well it's not the character that makes this book magical, that makes this book magical, it's the circumstance, it's the language, it's something else. And there were other characters that didn't make the cut because it felt like the equivalent of a Hollywood movie that was an ensemble cast, no one character just stood out among the others. So does that mean they're all fantastic and deserve to be included? Sometimes. I mean we argued over which character to include from a certain book. Do you include Ahab or Moby, you know? And that turned out to be a little bit of a scuffle. Do you include Jake Barns or Lady Brett Ashley. And we went with Lady Bret and by god, Daisy Buchanan is a lovely character but Gatsby is the one that

Kennedy: You gotta go with Jay

Plath: You gotta go with Gatsby. He's the guy with the suits, the furniture, the shirts, yeah, the paints and the ties and everything and the shirts and yeah so those were the types of decisions we faced.

Kennedy: So I would presume you would have the usual suspects as we have J Gatsby and Hester Prin. But what were some surprises that delighted you that made the list?

Plath: Well, I think it was Mark Twain who said, "Classic is something nobody wants to read but everyone wants to have read."

Kennedy: God I love him.

Plath: And I'll admit that even though I'm an English Professor and I've been professing for 31 years, there are still many classics I didn't get around to reading. One of them was the Tin drum by Gunter Grass. And I was so mesmerized by the character of Asker that I thought, *wow, without this project I would not have been introduced to him,* and that's kind of the feeling we hope some of the readers will get as they scope out some of these choices, see a character and think, "Hah! Maybe I should read this book. "

Kennedy: but I think you'll also probably run into reactions of "Hey, why isn't my favorite on the list?" do you see this as actually the book might be a good launching pad for people to talk about their favorite characters?

Plath: we conclude our introduction by saying, "Let's be clear: these are our 100 greatest fictional characters and we understand perfectly that readers will agree with some choices and question others." That's okay. after all, isn't that part of the fun and the nature of such lists? So that's one reason we decided to just relax, come up with our list and think that yeah we hope that in an age when so many other things vie for people's attention, our list can spark a return to libraries and bookstores as much as it prompts debate or controversy.

Kennedy: That's James Plath, co-author of The 100 Greatest Literary Characters just released by Roman and Littlefield. I'm Laura Kennedy.