

Literary Conversation: Literature on Screen

June 12, 2023

Gwydion Suilebhan: Good evening. Good evening, everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's executive director. We are delighted to be here and to have you with us for the last event of our spring season. Most of you probably already know PEN/Faulkner, but in case some of you don't, we are a national literary organization that's best known for giving out the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story. We also bring visiting authors and donated books, and writing instruction into underserved schools in DC all at no cost to the schools to inspire the next generation of readers and writers. Of course we also hold public literary programs just like this one.

Our mission is to champion the breadth and power of fiction in America. We love to celebrate the fact that fiction continues to have a major influence on film and television. Tonight, we are very lucky to have with us two artists who really understand that influence. First, we have PEN/Faulkner board member, Lou Bayard, the author of 10 novels, including the one we'll be hearing about tonight, *The Pale Blue Eye*. His most recent book, *Jackie & Me*, was ranked by the Washington Post as one of the top novels of 2022, and several others have been national bestsellers, including *Courting Mr. Lincoln*, *Roosevelt's Beast*, *The School of Night*, *The Black Tower*, and *Mr. Timothy*. Great titles.

On the panel tonight with Lou is the visionary behind the Netflix adaptation of *The Pale Blue Eye*, Scott Cooper. Scott is a director, screenwriter, and producer whose very, very impressive credits include *Crazy Heart*, which earned three Academy Award nominations, as well as *Out of the Furnace* and *Hostiles*, among others. If that isn't awesome enough, his father actually took English classes from William Faulkner at the University of Virginia, so we like this guy.

Lastly, we are very lucky to have another PEN/Faulkner board member here to moderate tonight's conversation. Clay Smith is the literary director of the Library of Congress, which means that he's the one who curates the National Book Festival, who oversees the library literary ambassadorships, including the US Poet Laureate and the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. He, and this is the literary term, is extremely cool. With that, Clay, I'm going to turn it over to you.

Clay Smith: Thank you, Gwydion. Let's hope I'm extremely cool tonight. Thank you, Gwydion. Scott and Lou, you want to unmask yourselves and join.

Scott Cooper: Hello, Clay, and thank you, Gwydion.

Lou Bayard: Hello, everyone.

Scott: Lovely to be here, I have to say.

Clay: We'll leave some time for questions from the audience. Those go in the Q&A box. We'll try to get to every question, so be thinking what you want to ask, or

whatever I don't ask. I'll try to ask questions of Lou and Scott. We really want to cover the book and the film tonight. This whole thing started with a novel. Lou, I know the germ of this novel started when you were actually writing a previous novel, *Mr. Timothy*, which was your novel about Huntington as a grown man. Take us back to how the idea for this novel first came about.

Lou: Oh, it's so long ago, Clay. I don't know if I can go that-- It's so far back. It's many, many years. As you said, *Mr. Timothy* was my homage to Dickens, and the next book was my homage to Poe, who I think is not just a huge influence on me, but a huge influence on American literature. I had to find a way in to that and find a place that nobody else had found. Maybe because my dad was a West Point graduate himself, I realized that Poe had spent six feckless months at West Point as a cadet. I thought that would be a great way in to this guy to create, Scott and I both talked about this, the origin story of Edgar Allan Poe.

This is how he got started and this is-- and to prefigure all the works that would come out of that. It became, from there, a gothic mystery thriller set in these very, very dark Hudson Highlands. West Point in those days was the end of the world for a lot of America. The edge of civilization didn't extend much far beyond, so they would have been in the dark, literally at the dark a lot of time. I just thought that would be a great setting to create all the gothic thrills and chills that we get from Edgar Allan Poe.

Clay: I bet by this point we can assume our audience has either read the novel or seen the film, or both. There is, you're talking about the darkness, Lou, there is a really beautiful scene and scary scene in the film that was giving me *Barry Lyndon* vibes because it's just full of candles. I'm sure Scott and his cinematographer had to figure out how to light that. It seems very difficult. Scott, had you been pitched the novel to adapt it? Did you just come across it? How did you--

Scott: No. My father introduced the novel to me. As Gwydion mentioned, my father was taught English by Mr. Faulkner at the University of Virginia. As an English teacher, there was lots of literature in my house, lots of Poe. I grew up in Virginia, Poe spent his formative years in Virginia. After I had directed *Crazy Heart*, firstly, my mother, she kept asking me to come home because making films, it's not a proper vocation. I don't think it was until, believe it or not, I was at the Oscars with *Crazy Heart* that my mom thought, oh, this actually may work out well.

On one of my trips home, my father said-- he had just read a novel that he felt was so clever that places Young Poe at the center of a detective story, which, of course, he bequeathed to us. I read it just for pleasure because I loved Poe's work, and my father generally recommended great books to me. I was just so taken with it. I thought that it could be not only a whodunit, but it could be a father-son love story because, of course, Poe was an orphan. It could also serve as a Poe origin story. I think so many people have a very fixed idea of whom they think Poe was. Somebody who's dark and brooding.

I wanted to show Poe in his formative years as his worldview was becoming shaped by these events that Lou ultimately created. I wanted to upend that notion and show the young poet before he became the legend, and I wanted the events that take place in this narrative to shake who he would become. These events shaped his worldview. Of course, no murders took place at West Point in 1830 that I'm aware of,

but I think, as Lou did so beautifully, placing young Poe at the center of a murder investigation was an ingenious idea. Out of that came the film.

Clay: Great. Let's look at the first clip, meeting Poe, which really introduces us to the character and this great actor who--

Scott: It's Harry Melling, a young English actor.

[video playback begins]

Edgar Allan Poe: Oh. Pardon. Are you Augustus Landor?

Augustus Landor: [coughs] I am.

Poe: Unless I mistake, you've been tasked with solving a mystery surrounding Leroy Fry.

Augustus: That's so. What might I do for you?

Poe: It is incumbent upon me and the honor of this institution to divulge some of the conclusions which I have reached.

Augustus: Conclusions.

Poe: Regarding the late Mr. Fry.

Augustus: I'd be most interested.

Poe: The man you are looking for is a poet.

[video playback ends]

Clay: That's such a great scene both in the novel and in the film.

Lou: Harry is so good. He's just so good. Oh my God.

Clay: I think that everyone who-- I wish I had been like a fly on the wall during the casting because I just think everyone here is so perfectly cast.

Scott: Thank you.

Clay: The film is really notable in that way. I want to ask, Lou, you do something in the novel that is something that I think a novelist loves to do, which is that you're able to write from the perspective of a couple of different people, the Detective Landor and Poe, who we just met in that scene. The characters are so vivid in the book, partially because they're explaining themselves to the reader. For anyone who hasn't read the novel, it's written mostly in the form of notes and letters from these two characters.

That makes this really nice intimacy. It also makes it interesting to read for the reader because you get this one voice and you get another voice, and they seem like very distinct characters. It's an intimate relationship between those two men and the

reader because of the way that you structured the novel and the way that they talk to the reader. How did you try to replicate that kind of intimacy in the script?

Lou: I'll start with my end of it, which is I like the idea of multiple narrators because I think they cast doubt upon each other. The more narratives you have, the more a reader wonders who is telling the truth. I'll just go on to say that Poe for me-- this will sound so pointy-headed, but Landor for me was the Anglo-Saxon end of the language. Hard simple words that inevitably sound a little hard-boiled in the context. Poe was the other side of the spectrum, which is Latin. Only Poe would use a word like tintinnabulation, for instance. That was what guided me. That's a completely verbal-linguistic issue. It was up to Scott, and funneling it back to him to figure out how to reconcile those two things in the movie.

Clay: Scott, that word did not end up in the script.

[laughter]

Scott: No, it did not. Lou is such a clever writer. The voices just leapt off the page for me and they really spoke of a certain era and formality, and civility, which we're very lacking in today, with which characters interacted. Look, it's incredibly dangerous to make a film and place a young Poe at the center of the story. Because the first question is who's going to portray Poe with his warmth, his humor, his melancholy, playing his grief, but also a sense of fun. Because, again, as I mentioned earlier, we all have a very embedded notion of who Poe was as he met his maker in Baltimore Alley and through all of his works.

I wanted to up in that notion. Casting Harry Melling, who I'd seen in the Coen Brothers *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*. As soon as I had seen him playing this limbless performer, I said to Christian, Bale, that is, who's my closest pal and collaborator, who plays Augustus Landor, I said, "We've found our Poe." I asked Poe to audition, or Harry Melling to audition. We're in COVID, so he taped an audition where we first meet him in the tavern.

My instincts were right, because you needed a sense of warmth and a sense of humor, but you have two people who also have this kinship who rail against any sort of code or rigidity that we know West Point offers, and people who also like to imbibe. He's drawn by Poe's intellect, his keen observational skills, but also his sense of humor. That all comes across in that very, very short scene. Then, of course, in the subsequent scene and the rest of the film do we really get a sense of just how nuanced and rich, and rewarding a character Poe is that Lou created.

Clay: There's been actors in the US who've been able to make a living from doing these one-man-- like Hal Holbrook did the Mark Twain one-man show for so long. I was watching the film and I thought, he could play Poe for the rest of his life. He's just so excellent at it.

Scott: It's such a gift for an actor, I think. Not because I'm directing or I adapted Lou, but because the character is so rich and offers such a young actor so much range. Also a period picture and you're portraying someone that people know well. It's a double-edged sword. I think Harry Melling will always be associated with his part.

Lou: I think so too. He nailed that Tidewater accent, for instance. As soon as I heard him do it on set, I was like, oh, wow. He's got this. He's on it. Amazing.

Scott: Lovely actor and an even better person.

Clay: Let's look at him again in the heart as a symbol scene. We can ask a few more questions after.

[video playback begins]

Augustus: Tell me, how did you learn about Leroy Fry?

Poe: From Huntoon, of course. He's been spouting the news like the town crier. Perhaps someone might hang him before too long.

Augustus: You don't mean to imply that someone hanged Mr. Fry.

Poe: I don't mean to imply anything.

Augustus: Why do you think that the man who cut Leroy Fry's heart out was a poet?

Poe: The heart is a symbol, or it is nothing. Now, take away the symbol and what do you have? It's a fistful of muscle, of no more esthetic interest than a bladder. Now, to remove a man's heart is to traffic in symbol. Who better equipped for such labor than a poet?

Augustus: Awfully literal-minded poet, it would seem-

Poe: Oh, you cannot pretend that this act of savagery did not start all the literary resonances from the very crevices of your mind. [chuckles] Lord Suckling's charming song, "I pray thee, send me back my heart since I cannot have thine, or the Bible even. Create in me a clean heart, O God, a broken and contrite heart that will not despise."

Augustus: Then we might just as easily be seeking a religious maniac.

Poe: No. You see, I neglect to tell you that I am a poet myself, hence inclined to think as one.

Augustus: I don't get around to poetry much.

Poe: Why should you? You're an American.

Augustus: And you?

Poe: An artist. That is to say, without country.

[laughter]

What Mr. Landor.

Augustus: You've been a great help.

Poe: You want a second look at a cadet named Loughborough. In former days, Leroy Fry's roommate, until they had a falling out, the nature of which remains uncertain.

[video playback ends]

Lou: I didn't even know how to pronounce Loughborough until you guys did that.
[laughs]

Clay: We're also pronouncing Lu-roy instead of-- I grew up in the Texas--

Lou: Yes, Leroy. I suppose the Lee-roy, right?

Scott: They're both so good in that scene. You can see how a very hardened detective and the young poet was just brimming with life. It's really lovely.

Clay: Let's talk a little bit more about the adaptation, Scott, because Lou's novel is wonderful in so many ways. It has all these different voices, and the setting is so, so vivid. I don't know that cinematic is the first adjective that I would use to describe that novel because it's written in the form of these letters. It's a very literary novel. I was so intrigued when I saw the trailers on Netflix for the adaptation because I thought, that would be interesting to see. Yet just in that clip, we saw how you got in some really great literary references and you kept that in. Tell us about that, about--

Scott: It certainly isn't an easy novel to adapt, for the reasons that you just pointed out. Also because, Lou and I never really discussed this, but I think this could have probably been a limited series because it was so rich and there were more characters than in a two-hour time frame, you don't have enough time to explore. It's really about reduction, and it's about what is the essence of the story?

As I mentioned, it's not only a whodunit, but it's the father-son relationship for two people who are very alone in the world, as well as this Poe origin story, but you have such interesting characters. Lou writes incredible dialogue so that even when I would write things that wasn't in the novel, because he's so specific, it was almost my subconscious that was just taking it from where Lou left off. It wasn't a very difficult adaptation, and also because there's so much dialogue. There's more dialogue in this film than probably all of my movies.

Lou: I know. I remember you saying that.

Scott: I'm a very spare writer of dialogue because, one, dialogue is, I guess I should say more involved in television than in film. It's all about creating the essence of this narrative. The dialogue was so specific as were their mannerisms that Lou had written to the novel. I think actors very quickly said yes to me to play these parts because they were so rich. We know that in terms of the heart being a symbol, we know that Poe would often use the heart as a symbol to explore emotions and darker aspects of the human conditions.

Grief, despair, and madness. For him in our story, it represents the kind of deep emotional pain and longing felt by him after the loss of his mother and his father. I think it symbolizes, correct me if I'm wrong, Lou, but a sense of vulnerability and a kind of fragility of the human soul, the kind of precarious nature of human existence

and the fear of death, and the transient nature of life that really courses through our film.

Lou: I'll just add that words were Poe's medium. I think there's a reason so many words filtered into the movie, because that's how he expressed himself, and that's where he was most comfortable. Sorry, Scott. [laughs] A lot of words got sucked into there, but it worked out.

Scott: I think so.

Clay: We've heard about Harry Melling and how you found him, Scott. As I said earlier, just everybody in this film seems perfectly cast. Like Gillian Anderson, I wouldn't say she has a ton of screen time, but she just nails it. It's like Patricia Neal in *Hud*, where she doesn't have much screen time but such a great role. Tell us about the rest of the casting process. Was it easy?

Scott: Because the language is flooring and very specific, Shakespearean at times, I felt like English actors might be able to handle this very specific accents, because America was such a young country at the time, 1830. Because I make such American films that-- of course Christian Bale is English, he's Welsh. He's been in now three of my films. Of course he was always going to be Augustus Landor, actually as he aged into the character. I had seen all of these great English character actors over the years that I wanted to work with Toby Jones, who plays Dr. Marquis, or Timothy Spall who's been in six of Mike Lee's films, Simon McBurney.

Then of course these young actors. They all have such great faces that very quickly take you back to a certain era. Very, very quickly. I find that a lot of actors whom I admire have a touch too much modernity for them to fit into my period films. What I have to do is look at Timothy's Spall's great face, or Toby, or some of the other actors that we've cast, and we think immediately, wow. These actors just fit into this world, this landscape, and it's a tough landscape. It's a very coarse landscape. It's incredibly cold, as we were shooting, it's 10 below 0, 8 below 0 at times.

Lou: They look cold. They look authentically cold in the movie.

Scott: Yes. Casting was rather easy because I had all of these actors in my mind saying, wow, I would love to work with them one day. Then of course, once I started making this, this was my chance.

Clay: Did you tell Timothy Spall and Simon McBurney that they would have to wear mutton chops? Because that would've been a deal breaker for me.

Scott: Yes, of course. They grew them out. Because I gave them plenty of time and they all let their hair and their beards grow, and then I shaped them accordingly. Folks at West Point were incredibly helpful. Were involved in almost every step of the process in terms of authenticity, and provided me with lots of photographs from the era. Or actually there was of course no photographs, 1830, but an idea of what they would've been when photography was ultimately used. Then you mentioned *Barry Lyndon* earlier, that was a reference that my cinematographer watched quite a bit to light all of the interior scenes only with candlelight or oil lamps.

Clay: That's good. Lou, when you got the Poe inspiration, tell us a little bit about the research that you had to do. Scott, similar question for you. Were you just using the novel as an inspiration for the screenplay? Did you read bios of Poe or anything like that?

Scott: There's the Poe Museum, of course, in Richmond, Virginia, and there's lots of information on the World Wide Web. Lou was an incredible resource, I have to say. I probably collaborated with Lou more. Lou, have you had any of your other work adapted?

Lou: No. Optioned but not adapted. No.

Scott: As the other screenwriters were crafting, did you have as much communication with-- Because Lou almost read every draft that I wrote.

Lou: You did. Can I just say, that was one of the things that working with Scott, is that he showed me almost every draft that he wrote. It was a wonderful arrangement because Scott was doing all the heavy lifting of writing the screenplay, and he just tossed me drafts as they came, and invited-- I remember actually the first time you sent them, you said, "Tear it up." I think those were your instructions. That's how Scott works. He wants you to have at it.

Scott: Film is the most collaborative of art forms. Even as you write all the films that I direct, I have written. While a novel and a film of course are very different, Lou knew these characters certainly better than I did, even though I'd read the novel countless times by the time I started writing it. Also you get so close to it, you're almost snow-blind and you need someone-- Maybe probably should have had someone else, because Lou you're so snow-blind as well. You wrote it 10, 12 years ago.

Lou: That's the thing. I didn't even reread the book. I still haven't reread the book. I went semi virginal into that first draft.

Scott: That's fine.

Lou: First of all, I was so impressed by how faithful Scott was to the original, at least as I remembered it, and how dedicated he was to getting it right. I'm also a little envious that he had such cooperation from West Point, because I did not get that. I think that's the difference between Hollywood and the author. The author comes knocking on the history department, it's like, is there anyone who can show me around? Back when I went to West Point, there's no sign of Poe anywhere. He's not in the gift shop. As opposed to UVA, your father's alma mater where they make a shrine of his room. He stayed there no longer than he did at West Point, but West Point is like, "Okay."

Scott: I'm not sure if I told you this, Lou, but when the film debuted, someone from West Point sent me a photograph of a descendant of Poe with the last name of Poe holding up his laptop watching it.

Lou: Nice.

Clay: That's so good.

Lou: I love it.

Scott: That was really quite rewarding.

Lou: I love it.

Clay: As I said, I don't think we can have this conversation without talking about the setting because in the novel it's so, so vivid, and Lou takes the reader through the chronology by dating each of the letters from Augustus or Poe. Watching the film, Scott, it just was so wonderful to be in steamy, humid DC, and just immediately being taken to this wintry village aura. I guess I just want to ask you both to talk about what this setting has meant for you. Lou, you said you didn't really get cooperation from West Point, but you still persevered.

Lou: I was up there for sure. West Point is the most beautiful campus I've ever been to. It's right on the Hudson Highlands. It's stunning. It's absolutely stunning. Beautiful. As I said, that area was called World's End in those days because nobody got much further except to go up to Niagara Falls. I love the remoteness of it. I love the darkness of it. It had to be in winter, right, Scott? It had to be in winter because we don't want foliage, we don't want flowers.

Scott: Oh, no, no. Not if you're trying to recreate a gothic sensibility. I couldn't imagine shooting this as green and lush as it would've been. It would not have been the same film, and not nearly as atmospheric or moody. I would say, Clay, that authenticity in all of my films is really critical to my world-building. I don't want the audience to ever feel the artifice of movie making, and in period pieces in particular, I think it's more important than ever.

Too often in films, the costumes, the production design, the era impede the believability for the story. You realize that these are actors in costume, and you realize that they're on a sound stage. I never wanted that. I wanted it to be shot almost in black and white, but with just a little bit of color and removing any sense of filmmaking. It's a really handmade film. All the costumes were handmade.

Everything was done with this strong sense of creating this in minute detail with a very controlled pallet. What you want to do is create a world that someone won't question. When you're creating a gothic world around West Point and the architecture of the bare trees and the snowy landscape, and the very difficult landscapes, I think it all feeds into what we believe Poe's world would look like as we're reading it on the page, and certainly Lou' novel.

Clay: Is West Point where you actually shot it?

Scott: No, because West Point today is far-

Clay: It's too big.

Scott: -too big, expanded. I had to recreate West Point as a very small intimate college as it was in 1830. We used the same amount of cadets in the field that you would see at that time so that it felt more intimate. We shot in Western Pennsylvania, not terribly far from Lake Erie. We get, of course, that lake effect wind. Then of

course the finale, at which I won't spoil, but the river and the cliffs of course were shot at Storm King just south of West Point.

Clay: I love what you said, Scott, about authenticity, because I remember watching *Crazy Heart* and wanting to go get a glass of water because just the dust and the West. It felt really, really very real to me.

Scott: It's more difficult when you're making a film and people are watching them at home. Although this was in theaters for two or three weeks around the world before. There's so many distractions today; phones, dogs, kids, all these sorts of things at home. Which is why when you're in a darkened cinema with strangers and a big, big screen, makes a difference when you're watching a film.

Clay: It does. It's easy for the-- I'm sorry, go ahead.

Scott: You just give yourself over to the creation of this world.

Clay: That's a lot easier for the writer than the film director, because Lou could just make up stuff about West Point in 1830, but Scott, you had to get all the actors there and it probably was not cheap to shoot in winter up there.

Scott: No, no, no. It was not an inexpensive film to make. It seems like ever since *Crazy Heart*, which was my debut film, which is a small intimate drama, they've gotten larger and larger with each film. This kind of epic western hostiles that I made with Christian Bale is another one that was incredibly difficult to make.

Lou: You should mention your most famous extra, Scott. You had a famous extra in the tavern scene.

Scott: Oh, yes. Now Senator John Fetterman from Pennsylvania.

Clay: Oh, wow.

Scott: Who is a friend of mine and Christian's. When I made my second film, *Out of the Furnace*, I wrote it specifically for the town in which he was mayor, Braddock, Pennsylvania, which is outside of Pittsburgh. Another tough, tough film. He became someone that I stayed in touch with since that film. Christian and I had been supporters of his campaign. I think he's helped save democracy in the last election. Before he won his Senate seat, he was an extra in the tavern in *The Pale Blue Eye*.

Clay: That's good. Let's watch one more clip. Why don't we look at the long intervals clip and then talk about that? Everybody, while we're getting ready for the clip, you all can submit your questions via the Q&A box.

[video playback begins]

Lea Marquis: You do enjoy talking about God and death, don't you?

Poe: I do consider death to be poetry's most exalted theme. [chuckles]

[coughing]

Shall we?

Lea: A lovely spot.

Poe: Yes, it's my favorite.

Lea: How well it sits on you, morbidity. Suits you better than your uniform. The only one to match you is Artermus.

Poe: I've never seen him dwell in the realms of melancholy.

Lea: He does consent to visit our world for long intervals.

[video playback ends]

Scott: The lovely Lucy Boynton. Another great English actress.

Clay: She was great in this movie. This clip really makes me think about the twistedness of the book and the movie. We get led into thinking that Lucy is-- or, I'm sorry-

Scott: Lea.

Clay: -Lea, is maybe to blame for all of this. Then of course later on we learn something else entirely. What was it like for both of you to work on those dual levels? You know you have to lead the audience a certain way, but then you're going to twist it and take the audience in a new direction.

Scott: Lou?

Lou: I knew the ending. That was the first thing I knew when I read the book, was the ending. I knew where it could end up. I will bow out to my goddess, Agatha Christie because the ending was inspired by the *Mystery of Roger Ackroyd*? *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Something, I forget the exact title. Anyway, that may already be a spoiler for people who know that story. Anyway, I knew how I wanted it to turn out. It was just a question of how to get there and how to cover my tracks the whole way there. There are definitely some red herrings that go along the way.

Scott: For me and for Christian, and the rest of the cast and the crew, it was though we were making the film for two viewings. Your first viewing where you had no idea, but also in the second viewing, all of the breadcrumbs that lead you to the twist should all be there so that the audience doesn't feel cheated. You can see it in Christian's performance throughout the film. On a second viewing, I think many of those twists become much more, not glaringly obvious, but you see that in a particular moment, which for people who haven't seen it or haven't read the novel, I don't want to spoil, but I thought it was delicious.

I think everyone who sees the film and who hasn't read the novel, or even I would imagine after having read the novel, the reveal is gutting, divisive. Some people who really agree with it. Others who can't believe who is ultimately responsible for the murders. That's also what struck me after reading and thinking, my God, this has got

to be a film. We have to be incredibly careful in terms of how we speak about the film before the film comes out because you don't want people to know.

Clay: It's like Hitchcock asking people to not give away the ending.

Lou: Let go.

Clay: Let's see if we can talk about revenge without giving too much away. I know, Lou, that you did not write this novel during the Trump administration. You wrote it before that.

[laughter]

There's just such a fascinating way in which historical fiction-- The novel's set in the 1830s. I don't know of any work of historical fiction that doesn't in some way comment on the time in which it's published. We currently are looking at a presidential election landscape that seems partly built on the idea of revenge. There is something that happens in this story where someone turns on his or her own ideals, and it's a dark ending. I just wanted you all to talk about that a little bit. How do you think acting on revenge plays out for the person who enacts the revenge?

Scott: I'll quickly say that when I was selling the film to the press, talking about doing interviews, one could say that at its heart, this is a revenge film from someone, right? Not without saying who that is. Of course it's the father-son story, it's the Poe origin stories, but at its heart it's a film about revenge. I will say that there are countless people who've seen the film, who've commented, and even journalists who've commented about being torn about the ending.

Understanding the vengeful behavior from ultimately the person who committed these crimes, which we as Americans, I suppose it's Americans, we've had this morbid fascination with true crime or crime, seems like, and people really reveled in this, I think, revenge. People came to me and said, "I would have done the same thing," but when you really think about that, it certainly says a lot about human nature.

Lou: Which I love actually. I love that we're all implicated in this, that we can't just say, "Oh, they do that, but I don't do that." I think one of the good things about the movie is that it really forces us to think about, as Scott was saying, what we would do in these extreme situations. I don't think there's any way of knowing until we're caught in that and then suddenly we have to make decisions. That's certainly what one of the characters does in this.

Then another character has to make a decision as well. It's very fraught. I find the ending of the movie unbearably moving as Christian and Harry do it. It's a very moving thing, and all the other actors playing into it. It's wonderful to see that realized on the screen because I feel like it carries the full-- everything we're trying to do in the book is there in the screen. They're creating it in a different medium.

It's one thing to see your words come up from the page and get onto the screen, but to hear these marvelous actors inflect those words with all they do through the whole movie, I'm talking in the whole cast, it's really extraordinary. There's a line that Gillian

Anderson does. "Oh, I don't get your drift." She says, "I might be drifting to the other side of the Hudson River." The way she says it is just so wonderful. It's like, oh my God. It feels like a new line. Whatever is going on in the book is transformed in a wonderful way in the movie, including the theme of revenge.

Scott: Thank you, Lou.

Clay: We've got some really nice questions. I will ask them. Some of you all stole the questions I was going to ask so we'll just let you all ask them instead of me. Question for both Lou and Scott, what are some of your favorite book-to-movie adaptations?

Scott: Lou?

Lou: I have to go first? All right. I always said I always come back to *The Maltese Falcon*. I love that adaptation that we're going back in time. I love that adaptation because it's incredibly faithful to Dashiell Hammett's original, but it also works so beautifully as film. In both the movie and the book, there's not a lot of actual action. It's just people sitting around talking.

Yet it's unbearably tense and it's indelible because of the characters that Hammett created and then that were brought so vividly to life by Humphrey Bogart and all those other people. I will also add, to me, the sow's ear to silk purse adaptation is *Bridges of Madison County*, which was a book that I actually couldn't get through in its original incarnation. Clint Eastwood and I-- Scott, do you remember the screenwriter who worked on that?

Scott: Maybe Paul Attanasio? Is that right?

Lou: I'm not sure. Richard-- Anyway, they peel away all the crust of posturing and masculinity, and they made it something so simple and beautiful. Richard DeGravenese?

Scott: Maybe that's who it was. LaGravenese. Yes. Look, it's easy to say *Godfather* of course, or *A Clockwork Orange*. I think I would add maybe le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, if you haven't seen that, which is obtuse in all of the best ways, and I think beautifully rendered in a way that reminded me of the best qualities of the novel. I think I'm probably in the minority about *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, but it's, I think, incredibly well done. Of course, so is *Schindler's List*.

Lou: Yes, right?

Scott: Yes.

Clay: Frank says, "We so often hear negative stories from writers whose work is adapted for film. Scott, how common is it for a director or screenwriter to share so much of a working screenplay with the author of the source material, and why are you so open about it?"

Scott: I would say from many of my friends who have adapted works, they don't really have any relationship with the author, I think. Once they've decided to adapt it, they have no conversations with them until maybe the premiere. That's why I asked Lou, if you'd had anything that had been adapted, because people, at least here,

think that a film and a novel are so different that one work doesn't inform the other, but in this sense, I thought it was incredibly important to involve Lou as the creator of this material. I, of course, had my own ideas about Poe and how to structure it, and to make it cinematic, but I thought it was important that I involve Lou.

Lou: I say, we got along great. I can say that right, Scott?

Scott: Yes.

Lou: I feel like we got along great because I was ready to kill a lot of darlings, I feel like. It's like I was the one saying, "Get rid of this. Maybe the poem, that doesn't stay. I don't know." In the end, it was Scott who had to make the choices. It was just easy for me to say-- The poem was a challenge, wasn't it? I feel like it's a challenge to get a poem into a movie. Nobody wants to stay still and listen to somebody reading a poem.

Scott: Nobody wants to see films about writers because it's inherently uncinematic.

Lou: Exactly.

Scott: We [crosstalk] have a film about a poet, a writer, as well as a poem.

Lou: It's like, how do we do this? It works great in the trailer though. We use the poem in the trailer. It works just great.

Scott: Right.

Clay: Christie wants to know if the story is based on true events. Poe did go to the West Point, for one.

Lou: That is the only true event that it's based on. Also Sylvanus Thayer and Ethan Allen Hitchcock were real characters. I think I may have gotten the names of the cadets from original, I can't remember. That's about it. There were no cadets killed in the course of Sylvanus Thayer's time there.

Clay: Have you got any communications from Sylvanus Thayer in your dreams, shaking his fist at you?

Scott: I will say that interactions I've had with West Point since the film has been released have been nothing but positive. They really love the film, the cadets love it. The top brass have all embraced it. It was really a great experience, and I'm so thankful that they were as involved as they were and allowed me to make the film I wanted to make. We could have easily shot it at West Point, I think, if it looks like it did in 1830.

Lou: That's all gone. The old West Point is gone.

Scott: Unfortunately it's not, yes.

Clay: Let's see here. Christie again. She loved it. She wants it to be a series because there are enough threads and offshoots that she's interested to know more in particular about the daughter and who she was.

Scott: I think there's no question that there's enough material here for a series. In fact, I think it might even lend itself better to a limited series, if not because of a question there's so many great characters and threads that one could, I think, follow. The characters are also rich and well drawn, and I think incredibly interesting. Lou, what is your thought?

Lou: I think we've had Poe detective novels in the past, so I don't think that's a new thread. Certainly, Poe could carry on through life solving mysteries wherever he goes, including the mystery of his own death perhaps. Maybe that would be his final coup.

Scott: Then more backstory about Landor and his wife, and Landor with his first daughter, Maddie. I think spending more time with Lea and her brother, Artemus, getting to know the-- Of course when I read it, I thought it was Marquis but my dialect coach told me that the English at that time, call it Marquis. I think there's plenty off material if someone wanted to do that. In fact, I made a film about the gangster of Whitey Bulger in Boston and his brother for *Black Mass* with Johnny Depp and Benedict Cumberbatch, and that too was so rich and condensed, at least in a two-hour setting, that you could make it as a limited series. On two occasions, I've done a disservice.

Lou: Scott, would you want to do a limited series ever for some other property?

Scott: Yes. I have been asked to do it for many years. I think my attention span is best suited at the moment for a two-hour sitting, because I think that so often I find that limited series do run out of ideas and they become quite threadbare, and as opposed to being six or eight, they could have been four or five, but *Succession* sure did a great job. I would, with the right material for sure.

Clay: We've got a question for Lou from Sarah, who is a fan of yours, Lou, because--

Lou: Thanks, Sarah.

Clay: -she points out that in another book of yours, *Roosevelt's Beast*, there is another key character death. What is your thinking process behind creating the story of the demise of a key character?

Lou: Gosh, I'm just about the story. If death is involved-- I'll tell you what, in the original *Pale Blue Eye*, after the first draft, I had to get rid of a character because, as my editor pointed out, she was just there to keep me company. She wasn't serving any plot function at all, so she had to go. It was so much harder to get rid of a character than to kill a character because you have to literally scissor her out of every scene that she's in, reassign her dialogue. It was actually a bigger deal in some ways, whereas killing a character, I hate to say it, it just goes with a territory, especially gothic territory. Somebody's got to die in a gothic mystery thriller. Some people, mystery to begin with. Just part of the deal.

Clay: I'm so sorry that you were lonely and that you needed a character to keep you company.

Lou: [laughs] All I had was this little Poe action figure, which I gave to Harry after, actually. It was a lonely process, but it's okay. I got through.

Clay: What were you going to say, Scott?

Scott: You mentioned Gillian Anderson having a-- I was just thinking back to a series and how you have to cut things in a film. I guess it was Faulkner who said you have to kill your darling.

Lou: Yes, or somebody said that.

Scott: It was tough to cut some of Gillian Anderson's stuff as well. The problem, Clay, is because people have such short attention spans now, and that's because of the iPhone and social media where everyone has to have their information so quickly and instantaneously that you really no longer can be patient when viewing a movie. Although people do sit down and watch three or four hours of a show one sitting. When it comes to a movie, for some reason, people tend to want them to be shorter.

Cay: I think you're right. I think we could have a whole other event about-- because I remember when streaming really took off and there was a real fear in the publishing industry that *House of Cards* or these very character-rich long series over several series over several series-- *Succession* have replaced literature. That's what a novel does for you. You get deep into character. I think the novel is not dead.

Scott: Oh, please, God, no. When was the last time, though, you were in an airport and you saw someone reading a novel? Everyone's on their phones.

Clay: You're right. It has changed. It's changed how we watch and everything. I'm going to turn it over into one of our leaders from PEN/Faulkner, Caroline. She's going to say a few words, but I just want to say thanks to Scott and Lou for being here, and love talking to you.

Scott: Thanks, Clay. Great job. I really appreciated your asking me.

Lou: Me too. Thanks, guys.

Scott: It means a lot to me to be here.

Caroline Schreiber: All right. Thanks, Clay, and thank you to Scott and Lou for this conversation and this peek into the behind-the-scenes creative process for both of you. My name is Caroline Schreiber. I'm PEN/Faulkner's, director of Development. PEN/Faulkner, as Gwydion said, champions the breadth and power of American fiction through literary programs just like this one, educational programs for thousands of students in Washington DC, and of course our annual awards. We are a nonprofit organization, so we do rely on donations from readers and writers like you all who have joined us tonight to accomplish our mission.

If you're able to give, we hope that you'll do so today. We're taking a short programming break this summer to plan all of our activities for next year, but we hope you'll mark your calendars for the fall and join us for a fall garden party in September. We're gathering in DC on September 30th for a fun laid-back event. It'll

feature multiple writers making remarks, and a chance to mingle with the DC literary community. Tickets will go on sale later this summer.

You can sign up for our newsletter using the link in the chat so that you don't miss any announcements about that event. Finally, if you missed any of this year's other literary conversations, you can catch up with all of the recordings on our website. All of those conversations are available, and they're all free of charge. Thank you so much, again, to our panelists tonight, to our audience for joining us. Have a great summer, and we'll see you all again in the fall. Thank you.