How to Successfully Publish Fiction (with transcript)

Kermit Roosevelt III
*University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, krooseve@law.upenn.edu*

Kimberly McCreight

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Steve Barnes: Welcome to Case in Point, produced by the University of Pennsylvania Law School. I'm your host, Steve Barnes. In this episode, we'll be getting some key insights from novelists about how they've achieved success in writing and publishing fiction, and we'll also talk with them about their new novels. We're joined in the studio by Kermit Roosevelt, a professor here at Penn Law, who's new novel, Allegiance, is out this June from Regan Arts. Kermit's first novel, In the Shadow of the Law, was published in 2005. Joining us from New York is Kimberly McCreight, the New York Times best-selling author of Reconstructing Amelia, whose second novel, Where They Found Her, is published by Harper in April. Thank you both for joining us. So Kermit, first to you. Tell us about your new novel.

Kermit Roosevelt: Well, it's called Allegiance, and it's the story of a young man who goes to clerk at the Supreme Court and isn't quite prepared for what he finds there. Now in part, that's sort of a murder mystery, conspiracy, standard legal thriller kind of plot, but also a lot of it has a lot to do with the Japanese-American internment cases. So this is actually set in the Supreme Court during the Second World War. That's an issue that I wanted to look at because it's been addressed in fiction before, possibly not to the extent that it should have been, but it's generally been addressed from the perspective of the people who were actually sent to the camps. And what I wanted to do was to try to look at what it looked like from the other side. So here's a young guy. He wants to do the right thing. He loves his country. He trusts his government. And he gets into a situation where he's forced to start reexamining some of his most basic presuppositions about the way the country works.

Steve Barnes: What makes it a legal thriller?

Kermit Roosevelt: Well, that's an interesting question, what gets a book in the legal thriller category. Because in part you can have sort of a classic courtroom drama, or you can have a police procedural where there's a murder and the police are trying to unravel it. But I think nowadays, people are more interested actually in the affect of law of sort of our everyday lives, and a lot of books examine the role that law plays not in the extraordinary times when there's a murder or something, but as just sort of part of the fabric of our everyday lives. And those are getting called legal thrillers too.

Steve Barnes: Great. Fantastic. Now Kim, your new book is Where They Found Her. Could you tell us a little bit about that please?
Kimberly McCreight: Yeah, Where They Found Her is a – I would say it's probably a literary mystery. That's probably the category it falls into. It's narrated from the perspectives of three women. It's set in a university town in New Jersey called Ridgedale, New Jersey, a fictional town. The three main characters are a woman named Molly; who is a recent transplant to town; a woman named Barbara; and then a teenage girl named Sandy. The book opens with the body of a newborn being found in the woods near the university campus, and it's the story of what happened to the newborn and how it ended up there in the woods. And the truth about what happened really lies at the intersection of those three women's lives. So it's about what happened to the baby. It's also about – a lot about motherhood and about how the family you came from often goes on to define the family you have.

Steve Barnes: Great. So what inspired you to write it?

Kimberly McCreight: Where They Found Her?

Steve Barnes: Yes, please.

Kimberly McCreight: The initial spark for it really came from something I saw on television, eight or nine years ago, a story about a young teenage girl who was accused of having murdered her newborn and disposed of the body, like a lot of stories you see on the news. And at the time I was very pregnant when I saw the story, and I was really struck by it. Of course it was a terribly sad story, but I also felt a great deal of sympathy for that girl. At the time I had already had a child, one child and another one on the way, and I found motherhood very challenging. And so for me – and I really feel like I have all the advantages. I have education. We're financially secure. I have a partner. And so I really kind of felt that complex mix of emotions that I think in the end were really the spark for the story years ago.

Steve Barnes: Great. Now I'll pose that question to you please, Kermit. What inspired you to write Allegiance?

Kermit Roosevelt: Well it started with my editor from my first novel, In the Shadow of the Law, and what he said to me was, "For your second novel, I'd like something set in the Supreme Court," because that was something I had some experience with, having clerked there. And I was initially kind of resistant to the idea, because I didn't want people to think that I was trading on my experience there, clerking for Justice Suttor, and that I was revealing inside secrets of the Supreme Court. So I said this to my editor and he said, "Well, I
have a solution for that problem. Just set it ten years in the future, when all the justices are different." And I said, "That doesn't actually seem like a very good idea to me." Because either these fictional justices will resemble the real justices and then people will think I'm just doing this sort of _____, or I'll have to actually make up nine new justices and figure out what the legal issues will be ten years from now. And it just seemed like a lot of work.

But then my wife said, "Well, why don't you set it in the past?" And I thought, "Wait, that's a great idea." Because then I've got real historical justices and I can learn about them, and I can do research, and make it true to life. But I don't have to worry about people thinking that I'm spilling confidences about the modern court. So then I just started looking back through the courts history for eras and cases that I thought had resonance and relevance for contemporary events.

And I started writing this a while back, but basically in the aftermath of September 11th, and various national security measures that the government was taking, Guantanamo Detentions, things like that. And so looking back to an era where we had a state of war, concern about attacks inside the United States, suspicion of people who seemed different. And a time in which the government took all of these security measures about which people had serious doubts in the past and of course in the present even more so. And I thought, "That's a good era to set it in," because you've got a lot of the same dynamics and a lot of the same concerns.

**Steve Barnes:** Okay, great. So for folks who may not be that familiar with how the law works, your protagonist is a Supreme Court clerk. What is a law clerk?

**Kermit Roosevelt:** A law clerk is basically an assistant to a judge or in this case a justice. And it's someone who performs various tasks to help out the court, depending on what the justice wants them to do, but typically a clerk will discuss cases with the justice. A clerk will help decide which cases the court hears. A clerk might even draft opinions for the justice. So there's a lot of interest in the role of law clerks, and especially the extent to which they can influence the justices votes and the justices opinions. In the real world I think clerks don't necessarily have that much influence, with a few exceptions. In an effort to make things interesting, in my book, you've got a couple of cases where the clerks do play a significant role.
Steve Barnes: Great. Thank you, that was very helpful. Thank you. So let's talk a little bit please about how you wrote your novels. How did you do it? I mean, you're a full-time law professor. Just curious, how did you go through the process of writing a novel?

Kermit Roosevelt: Well, it was very different from my first novel and my second novel. And actually my first novel, I should say, was really my fourth novel. So I started out writing fiction in high school, basically, and I wrote a lot of short stories. They were semi-autobiographical short stories. And when I was in college I started moving on to longer things, and I wrote sort of a semi-autobiographical novel, which was very bad. And then between college and law school, I took a year off and I wrote another sort of semi-autobiographical novel, which was also pretty bad. And then during law school and during my clerkships, I wrote a third slightly less autobiographical novel, which was somewhat better, but I still couldn't find a publisher for it.

And then In the Shadow of the Law, which I wrote while I was working at a firm, was my fourth novel. And I was able to write that basically because I had a fair amount of experience writing at that point, and I had a fair amount of experience with rejection, so the stakes didn't seem particularly high to me. It was something that I was doing mostly because I enjoyed it. I was working at a firm. I was single. I had a girlfriend, but she also worked at a big firm. I actually had a teaching offer from Penn, so I was not concerned about billing an enormous number of hours. So my girlfriend was actually working longer hours than I was, and I took that extra time that I had, evenings and weekends basically, and I would try to write a couple of hours a day. And I actually got the first draft of In the Shadow of the Law written in about a year.

Steve Barnes: Just to follow up on that, did you have a story or plot concepts? Did you have chapter outlines? How do you work to write a novel?

Kermit Roosevelt: I generally outline in a pretty detailed fashion before I start writing. I mean, I'm always writing down phrases or ideas or scenes that seem interesting to me, and I don't always know exactly where they'll go in. But when I'm actually trying to create the project and figure out what it's going to look like, I try to get a pretty detailed outline. Now you know, different people work in different ways. What works for me doesn't necessarily work for everyone. And I wouldn't say that this is something people should do if it doesn't feel natural to them. But I feel pretty lost if I don't have a detailed outline.
Steve Barnes: Great. And Kim, for you, for Where They Found Her, what was your process like, please?

Kimberly McCreight: It's interesting to hear Kermit say that, because I think it's good to have a balance of the two opposite approaches, because I don't outline at all. And actually I can't – I don't think I'd be able. I really write from my first draft, and I think Kermit is quite right to say that everybody's process is their own. The key is to find a process for you that works, because everyone's is slightly different. My approach is to really start with the characters. I have a general spine, an idea.

In my first book, Reconstructing Amelia, there's a supposed suicide of a girl. I won't ruin what the end of the book is, but I knew how the book ended. So I have kind of that place, that spot on the wall to write to, and I had the structure. And then I really started with my characters. I let them drive it. That approach, which I've heard once called like the pantser, like fly by the seat of your pants approach, the downside of it of course is that your first drafts are an unholy mess, because you just basically are fumbling along to find your story and drafts. My first drafts end up usually being 100 pages over what they should be. My story is not worked out at all.

But once I have the whole thing there, then I start to take it apart. So it's really a process of going through draft after draft after draft to really finetune my story. At a certain point, probably in my second draft, I do start to keep what becomes a bit of a running outline. It's a list of just points. "Go back and make So-and-so nicer. Fix this whole here." I'll realize that there are plot wholes, et cetera. These books are mysteries, and so I certainly have plot points that I need to thread and tighten and all of that stuff. But that really comes later, because I start with the characters and just really let them kind of tell their own story a little bit. Although I'm not one of those people who claims to hear the voices in my head. But I really just follow the lead of the characters I've created.

Again, that means that kind of in my last draft often somebody who was a good guy will turn into a bad guy. Things can really get switched around in the end, and I think whatever approach you have, they all have value. It's a matter of where you're gonna do the work. I think what Kermit's describing, he front loads more of his work by doing the outline first. And I just abhor the work at the beginning and backload the work by doing it at the end through revision. So I think either approach works equally well. I think you just have to find something you're comfortable with.
Kermit Roosevelt: I was very surprised to hear that that's the way you write, and I assume it must require a lot of revision. Because *Reconstructing Amelia*, which I just read, is so intricately plotted and everything connects so beautifully. I think structurally it's just incredible the way you've got different clues laid down and different subplots advancing along different tracks. And I was thinking when I read this, "Oh, this must have been the product of an incredibly detailed outline." But I guess you could go back and do it in the revision process too, but you end up with something that's just so technically complex and so well put together. I'm really impressed that you can do it that way.

Steve Barnes: Your first novel, as he noted, very intricate plot, very well developed. How do you incorporate inspiration as you're writing while trying to keep track of these plots, subplots, and other developments in the story?

Kimberly McCreight: I certainly have moments of inspiration. I don't wait for these moments to come. I sit down and – I think the notion of waiting kind of for something to inspire you is a bit of a fallacy. If you're a working writer, you sit down and you write in the hours you have allotted and you just write. But I would say that oftentimes, I've come to accept that I won't always have the answer at that particular moment. I'll know something needs to happen and this is where my running outline – as I work, I'll have a line that says, "Fix" – whatever, or, "Figure out why you put that point there and how you're gonna close that loop."

And it is scary. It's a bit like walking on a tightrope where I'm like, "I have no idea how I'm going to fix that or figure that out." And then inevitably when I'm running or I'm in the shower or I'm doing something totally different, all of a sudden something will click and I will realize how something fits together. But again, I don't wait for that while I'm writing. I just kind of keep writing past it and put a place holder, put a note in the text and just keep going and know that eventually something's gonna fit in that spot. So I think it's a, I guess, push and pull between inspiration, craft, and just putting your butt in the chair and writing. And I think to have those things all fit together for you, they all have to work as one.

Steve Barnes: Kermit?

Kermit Roosevelt: In a sense, I would say it's all inspiration, because the ideas come to you. How else would you get ideas? Now I mean, sometimes you read about something and you think, "Oh, that's interesting. I could adapt this into a story." But that's still sort of inspiration. The
idea of the adaptation comes to you. So in a sense it's all inspiration. But I'd reiterate I think what Kim was saying about craft. I don't work – some people do work, but I think it's a small minority, in a way in which they just sit down with no ideas in their head, and then suddenly it all flows effortlessly out of them. And that's a certain kind of inspiration, but I think it's very rare. I think for most people, you've got some idea of what you want to do and you start writing and as you're writing more ideas come to you. And a lot of those ideas, when you're first writing, are bad ideas. But you write them down, because you have to get something down. And then you go through the revision process. You get more ideas about how to make it better and sharpen it and focus it and develop themes. But my experience and the practical advice that I would give to anyone writing is, you're not likely – it's possible, but you're not likely to get that far if you sit down with a totally blank mind and wait for everything to burst fully formed into your head. You've got to make yourself do it. It's sort of like walking a tightrope or crossing a bridge that you're building at the same time as you're crossing it. You have to overcome any sort of anxiety you have about starting out on this project even though you don't necessarily know how it's gonna finish.

Steve Barnes:

With that in mind Kim, very curious to hear what your approach to the work or your work ethic was leading up to getting *Reconstructing Amelia*, your first novel, published. Could you describe what your work schedule and ethic was like trying to get that novel written and then into publishers hands.

Kimberly McCreight:

Yeah well that, I think, I had a somewhat similar experience to Kermit in the sense that *Reconstructing Amelia* was not my first book. It was my fourth completed book. The first book I wrote when I was an associate at a big firm in Manhattan, a litigation associate. Although I had a bit of a different work experience than Kermit. I didn't have a job offer waiting, so I worked a lot of hours. I started that book while I was working as a lawyer. I then took a leave of absence for one year. My fiance got transferred to London, and so my plan was to write that book, finish that book during that year, my first book, and that was what I did. So I devoted myself full-time to writing that first book, and I wrote it probably in about four months, and then got an agent and came close to selling that book kind of within that year. Did not sell it and went back to work. Finished the second book in the mornings before work. I think I used to write 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. every day. But that book – I had an agent at that time, but that book, my agent proclaimed was
kind of unsellable. And in retrospect he was definitely right. It was a terrible book. So I ended up shelving that book.

And at that point I decided to leave the practice of law and give myself a decade trying to write. Got married, had a generous husband who was willing to kind of invest in this dream of mine and give me the decade to try to do it, which involved paying off hefty law school loans on his own while I did that. And so I had a ten-year clock that was ticking, and during that time, yes I wrote full-time for a couple years. I did end up having children after that, so I kind of balanced them with writing. We always paid for childcare. I always treated it as a job, as if it was paying a salary. So I completed two more books that way.

By the end of that process, I think I was on my fourth book, which was *Reconstructing Amelia*, but I, at that time, had started to look for a job, because I wasn't convinced I was going to sell a novel. I'd had another agent in the interim. I had another book that had gone unsold. Published a few short stories. That really wasn't enough for me. I knew I wanted a more fulfilling career. So as you know, Steve, started looking for jobs, including back at Penn Law.

And so the kind of crazy story is that while interviewing and getting a job offer at Penn Law to come back to work in the communications department, at that same time *Reconstructing Amelia* – my agent was in the market place trying to sell it. And the reason I finished that book was because I didn't find a job during that period of time. Didn't find a job that made sense for me at any rate, because I did not want to go back and practice. Anyway, so *Reconstructing Amelia* went to auction 48 hours after I got the job offer to return to Penn Law, and that was how that book sold. So it was a bit of luck kind of that the job process took me a long time and enabled me to finish that book.

*Steve Barnes:* Great. So if we could, let's step back a little bit, for both of you, but let's start with Kermit please. Why are you writing fiction?

*Kermit Roosevelt:* I'm writing fiction mostly because I like it. I love the experience of writing. I like the process of creating a world. I like putting sentences together. I like telling a story. I also like it because it gives me an opportunity to explore some different themes than I can in legal scholarship and also to explore some of the same themes but in a different way, and I hope maybe to reach a different audience.

*Steve Barnes:* What themes, for example?
Kermit Roosevelt: Well *Allegiance* is about questions of loyalty. It's about questions of identity. It's about empathy. It's about the extent to which we take seriously the interests and the concerns of people who are different from us. And you see a lot of that, of course, in Supreme Court jurisprudence. You see a lot of cases about equal protection and the rights of minorities and so on. But you don't get quite as vivid a presentation as I think you can through fiction. So that's my attempt to explore some sort of constitutional fundamental American ethos themes but in a different way.

Steve Barnes: Fantastic. And Kim, why do you write? Have you always wanted to be a professional writer and novelist?

Kimberly McCreight: I think I always dreamed of being a writer. I loved law school and I was very interested in legal issues too, which is how I ended up in law school. But I really write fiction and always have to find out why, why something happened. So I think I'm really inspired by things I see. Oftentimes they're nonfiction or on the news, et cetera, and wanting to – fiction is my way of working out answers to questions and things I have about the relationships between people and why situations unfold the way they do and things I'm scared about in my own life. So fiction is my opportunity to work those things out on the page.

Steve Barnes: So you're both lawyers. So Kim to you first please, how does the law inform your fiction, as a lawyer?

Kimberly McCreight: In a couple ways, I think that my characters are often lawyers or were lawyers, because it's a world I understand, meaning I know – whether it's my own experiences with different work or my friends. I understand what legal jobs are, so people you will find in my fiction, usually a character either is a lawyer or was lawyer, so that's a piece of it. But I also think that, for me, the rigors of having worked in a firm have really, really helped me, in addition to the rigors of law school. Just having that discipline and really being ruthless with editing and also with public speaking and things like that, they have come in handy once my books have been published. I really feel like the skills I gained, honestly, both as a practicing attorney and in law school have served me well for sure.

Steve Barnes: With you Kermit, it's a little bit more obvious, but what may be some of the more subtle ways the law informs your fiction?

Kermit Roosevelt: Well like Kim said, I tend to use it as a setting, because it's a setting that I'm familiar with and I feel like I can write about this
realistically. But I wouldn't use it as a setting if I didn't think that law and its role in American life were important and exciting and an area in which there's a lot of drama to be mined. So *In the Shadow of the Law* is about big firms and the evolution of firm culture and the moral dilemmas that associates in firms face. And I think that that's something people should know about. I think it's important. I think it's interesting.

*Allegiance* is about sort of deep legal constitutional questions, but one of the things that I always try to tell my constitutional law students actually is, you think about the constitutional law questions that the Supreme Court considers, and you might think about these as sort of arcane technical legal issues, where you're trying to figure out what the founders of America and the framers of the Constitution sought back in the 18th century. But actually once you start digging down into it, you find these are just really basic moral questions, and they're the kind of questions that we confront in our everyday lives too. So who is different? Who is similar to us? Who can be trusted? Whose interests matter? Who do we hurt in order to make ourselves feel safer? Those kinds of questions, they get presented in a particular way and in a pretty stark way in the legal context, but they're questions that infuse our everyday lives too.

**Steve Barnes:** So let's talk about the business of writing a book. You mentioned your editor. You mentioned going out and finding an agent. So a person writes a novel. They're ready to go seek out a publisher. How does someone get an agent? How does someone find a good agent? How do you move forward with these kinds of relationships and navigate the business? Kim please, if we could start with you.

**Kimberly McCreight:** Well I found an agent a couple of different ways. The first agent I had – first of all, I do think you need an agent. There are obviously different routes in publishing now. There's self-publishing, which is a really viable route, but wasn't actually a route for me back when I wrote my first book. It didn't even exist. But I do think that people should be aware that there can be pitfalls with pursuing that route, particularly if you then want to them try to get a traditional publisher for that book you've self-published. I think there's a lot of kind of urban legend about people getting traditional publishers after having self-published a novel, and I think that those stories are really the exception rather than the rule. So I think you have to enter that with caution. Think about what your end game is, but it's certainly a viable way to get your work in the world and get it read if that's your objective.
If you've like kind of a big six traditional publisher or a substantial independent publisher, really having an agent is, I think, the way to go. And you can get an agent in a lot of different ways. If you have been to law school or are a lawyer, I would certainly be in touch with your friends who are entertainment lawyers. That is how I got my first agent was through another Penn alum who is an entertainment lawyer and she had a lot of contacts with literary agents. They're not gonna get an agent for you, but they will put your book in the hands of an agent sometimes and get it read, which is half the battle sometimes.

But the agent I have now and actually the agent – I've had three agents. The one before that I got just through blind querying. There are great websites, like agentquery.com is one, where it lists all the agents according to what they specialize in, whether they're accepting queries from people. And a query letter is just kind of a simple cover letter that summarizes your work, and that's really your gateway is that letter. And that's really a marketing document, which is very different than writing a novel. That's your introduction to agents. Then they'll request personal novels and that's how you kind of secure an agent.

And then that agent has to go out and sell your book, which is the whole next stage. And then once you have an editor who is interested in your book, that editor has to sell the book in house to get an agreement to purchase the book. So it's a long road, and part of it is a numbers game, and I think you have to be cognizant when you're trying to get an agent or trying to get a publisher that you really do have to query broadly and really kind of put a lot of irons in the fire and followup in a lot of different directions, and don't get discouraged. It's a tough business and it can be a very long road. And as Kermit said and which is the case for me, you can write many books that go unpublished, and then ultimately have a great success with one. So sometimes negative feedback can be something you need to really to take on board and try to improve the work, but sometimes it can be a bit of a numbers game as well.

**Steve Barnes:** So just to probe something here. You mentioned that you sold your first book, *Reconstruction Amelia*, at auction. What is that?

**Kimberly McCreight:** An auction is when there are multiple publishing houses that are interested in a manuscript. Basically, they put forth bids. There's different ways to run them. There's, I don't know, best offer – I forget what the terms are. But there's different ways to run them. Your agent determines how to run them. But an auction is essentially when more than one publisher wants it, and so they're
bidding on a manuscript. That's a very lucky, lucky event and doesn't happen all the time. I feel like beyond fortunate that it happened with my book.

Again, I think it was a result of me having had so many books before that went unpublished. But yeah, so that's one. And there's also something called a pre-empt. A pre-empt is when a publisher will pay a premium for a book so that they get an exclusive look at it. And a pre-empt, kind of they pay to take it off the market, and that's another – you'll see that mentioned. But Publishers Marketplace is a great place. If you're interested in publishing a book, you should be on there looking at the deals that are out. I think being informed, and I think again, that's how being a lawyer helps you. I think that there's a business sense you have that this is a business. And I think being knowledgeable and being informed about it can only help you.

**Steve Barnes:** And Kermit, what was your experience like trying to find and agent and get published?

**Kermit Roosevelt:** Well I think, it was actually pretty similar to Kim's. My current agent I got as a result of blind queries and there's a lot of information available online. There are also books, but with so much stuff online, you probably don't even need them now. So you can identify agents who are interested in what you're writing, and you send them query letters. Agents are looking for clients. They get their clients frequently through these query letters, so they'll look at what you send them. A lot of the time, they say, "No." It's just sort of the arithmetic of it, because there are a lot of people making submission, so you should query widely. You only need one agent to say, "Yes," and then later on you only need one publisher to say, "Yes." And I think it is a good idea to have an agent, if you can.

Agents perform a gatekeeping function. People will take you a lot more seriously if you have an agent. If you're just sending in an unsolicited manuscript to a publisher, it's possible that it will get picked out of what they call the slush pile, but it's gonna have to go through a bunch of people before it gets to the person your agent could give it to directly. In my experience, you definitely do want an agent. They'll say no to you a fair amount. I had agents say no to me for every book I've written, but it helps you a lot when they say yes. If they say no, it's quite possible that that is not the book you want to start with. If I had gotten my first book published somehow, I probably would have gotten bad reviews and felt bad about the whole thing. So in some ways I think it was good for me
that I wrote three books that didn't get published and I had time to develop as a writer before I actually got the gatekeeper agent to say yes and take it to the publishers.

**Steve Barnes:** Kim, you mentioned one of the questions a writer should have about whether to try to seek a traditional publisher or do something like electronic self-publishing is question whether or not this is a good choice for them or a potential pitfall. With that, what are some of the other pitfalls new writers should consider or keep in mind?

**Kimberly McCreight:** Well I think the important thing again is to decide what your objectives are as a writer and what do you want out of it. Again, if you're talking self-publishing versus traditional publishing, is it gonna mean the most to you that people are reading your book and maybe you're getting feedback from a broader audience. Maybe that's your immediate goal. Or do you want to see the book in a book store? Is that more meaningful to you? I think the most important thing is to always focus on the work. Because in the end of the day, because publishing is a business that has so much uncertainty in it, and honestly that uncertainty, I'm sure Kermit will agree, just persists.

As you stay in the industry, you get a book published, is it going to be reviewed well? Is it going to sell well? Is your next book gonna be reviewed well and sell well? Really there's no certainty. It's not like getting a job at a firm and there's some slightly more clear trajectory there. You really want, I think, always to focus on the one thing you can control in writing which is the work, and really caring about the story you're telling and taking the time to tell a story that is meaningful to you. Yes, should you be cognizant of markets and of what is gonna maybe sell? Sure. I mean, I think that's always something good to keep in the back of your mind.

Certainly to keep in you mind how an audience, whether it's a writers group or a feedback partner, the kind of response you're getting to them, but I think in the end of the day, you've got to write a story that is meaningful to you, because that is really the only thing you have control over.

**Steve Barnes:** Kermit, potential pitfalls for writers?

**Kermit Roosevelt:** I would say the biggest mistake that an aspiring writer can make is to stop writing. People get discouraged. People think that this is something that's never gonna work out for them. If you stop, it's never gonna work out for you, so I would say don't give up. I think
it's more common than not that people don't succeed with their first attempt. And self-publishing does allow you a little bit of a way around that now, because even if you can't get a traditional publisher for the first things you write, you can self-publish. That might be helpful. That would get you more feedback. Probably it would get you a little bit more exposure. But the main thing that I would say is you've gotta just keep doing it.

Now that's a lot harder for some people and for other people depending on your circumstances, and I wouldn't necessarily say you've got to keep doing it because this is a good economic strategy and someday you're gonna be rich and famous because of your writing. If that's what you're writing for, it's probably not a smart choice. You would be better off going to law school. So I think if you're gonna be writing, you need to keep doing it, but you need to keep doing it because it's something you care about, because it's a story that's meaningful to you, as Kim said, and also because it's something that you enjoy doing.

I mean, I write. It's not my attempt at supporting my family. It's something that's important to me. It's something that gives me a great sense of satisfaction and self-actualization. And that's the reason that I do it. There are people who make a lot of money from writing, but it's just so chancy that that's not a good reason to go into it. You have to go into it because it's something that you really feel fulfilled doing.

Steve Barnes: Well that ties in perfectly. My next question is, what is the most gratifying or rewarding thing to you about being a novelist.

Kermit Roosevelt: Well, I love the experience of writing. That's something that I got with my first three unpublished novels, and there was some satisfaction in that, in thinking, "Here's a story that I told," and I put out what I wanted to do and I told it the way I wanted to. And I wrote these 15 clever sentences that I thought were great even though no one else liked them.

There's a whole different set of satisfactions that you get when something is published. Although there's also a whole different set of dangers, because you're gonna get bad reviews. If you're lucky, you won't get a lot of bad reviews in the newspapers, but you'll certainly get bad reviews on Amazon. You have to be able to take that. But on the plus side, there are good reviews. So it's incredibly gratifying to me to hear from someone who liked the book. And it's even more gratifying if they liked it for some of the reasons that I was trying to make people like it. If I feel like I was trying to
achieve some particular effect and I did, it got through to someone, that's really the best part of it.

*Steve Barnes:* Awesome. Kim?

*Kimberly McCreight:* I agree. I think hearing from people – I've gotten some amazing notes, after *Reconstructing Amelia*, from people who – the story was really meaningful to them, particularly teenagers who had connected with it. I think that is most meaningful. And I would agree that if you were trying to say something in your book or you meant something, to hear from a reader that they got what you were trying to say is really incredibly gratifying. And also when the story just comes together finally, there's a thing about, again, the art of it. When you were really struggling to make the pieces fit, and they finally do, and I think there's a moment where kind of inspiration and all that hard work really comes together. And that's incredibly gratifying.

*Steve Barnes:* Great. Thank you. So *Where They Found Her* is just about to be published. What's next for you?

*Kimberly McCreight:* I'm working on a young adult trilogy that is due out from Harper Teen in June 2016. So I'm actually kind of racing for my deadline for that, because believe it or not, if it comes out in June 2016, that means it needs to be done imminently. So the book – the trilogy is called the Outliers, and it really is speculative fiction about what would become of the world if women's intuition were actually a scientifically proven fact. So that's really – again, YA trilogy, but that's the speculative ground it covers.

*Steve Barnes:* Great. Fantastic. Kermit?

*Kermit Roosevelt:* Well, the book that I'm working on now is actually sort of a reaction to *Allegiance*. *So Allegiance*, it was historical fiction. I'd never written it before. And I found historical fiction very difficult to write, because rather than being able to just invent things with complete confidence and say, "That's the way my fictional world is," I felt like I had to stay very close to the facts. And so I did an enormous amount of research. And then I found that pretty constraining, because I could just make the characters do whatever I wanted. So my next book is sort of half autobiographical where I feel like I really know the details and I don't need to do any research. And then it's half fantasy, where I can say this is the way things happen. So it's actually sort of set in a law school which resembles Penn Law School.
Steve Barnes: My gosh.

Kermit Roosevelt: It's got fantasy elements which are rooted actually in the Bible. So it's sort of the truth about the stories in the Bible refracted through the present day in a law school.

Steve Barnes: So thank you both. You both have new novels. Kimberly McCreight, *Where They Found Her* is your new book. Kermit Roosevelt, *Allegiance* is your new novel. Thank you both for joining us. This has been a really wonderful and informative discussion. And thank you for joining us here at *Case in Point*.

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